



PRESIDENTIAL CHAOS

FRAT

WARS

SAXON JAMES

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Two houses. Two Presidents. One hell of a happy ending.

Zeke

Being president of a frat house means everything is on my shoulders.
Idiot brothers, epic pranks, a list of organizational duties long enough to
make my eyes bleed.

None of it fazes me.

But senior year is almost over, and I'm ready to take a step back.

Until the hazing rumors start.

I might not know where they're coming from, but I know they're total BS.
Now, instead of dialing back the stress, we've broken the number one rule on
the row: Don't get the dean's attention.

I need to find out who's driving the lies.

And all evidence points to one person.

Charles

I never wanted to become Kappa president.

The appointment was made easier, though, when none other than Zeke
Ariston took over Sigma house. I've always been ... drawn to him.

Fascinated.

And maybe a little attracted too.

Pity I've never been more than an afterthought to him.

But when rumors start to circulate about hazing and the sources lead back to
my house, it puts me square on Zeke's radar.

I want to help him get to the bottom of it all.

And with his attention finally on me, I want to tell him how I feel.

DEDICATION

This one is for Eden.

(She's basically one half frat dude in her own right so what better book for her?)

When I wasn't sure if anyone would even want to read about frat guys, she told me to shut up and get writing. These books are one hundred percent her fault.

She always believes in me—even when I don't.

Plus, I figured I should get around to dedicating one of these things to her eventually ;)

ZEKE

ONLY THREE MORE MONTHS FOR THIS SHITSHOW TO COME TO AN END.

Don't get me wrong—I love my brothers. I love college and my frat house and my classes, but after almost two straight years of having to be in charge and on the ball, I'm looking forward to having free time again.

Just ... three ... months.

The new Sigma Beta Psi president is going well. I've been training him over the last few months, and with finals coming up, it's time for me to take a baby step back. I'm still the sitting president, so I'm still in charge of this whole circus, but as long as nothing dramatic happens between now and graduation, he should be able to handle it.

I pull up in the driveway of our frat house, bracing myself to get out into the cold morning. You'd think after ten years of early swim practice, I'd be used to it by now, but the goddamn cold gets me every time.

Thank fuck swim season is over. Now, my training is *voluntary*. To stay in peak fitness. It would be hard to haul my ass out of bed so early every morning if I wasn't so single-mindedly focused on my goal.

The sun hasn't made it into the sky yet, but it's starting to lighten enough for me to see where I'm going. This morning's swim was slower than I'd like, but I'm still shredding my times from a few years ago, and it looks like qualifying for the Olympics next year should be achievable.

Last time I'd gone for the Olympic team, I was eighteen, and it was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Unfortunately, that's not how you go for gold,

and I'd been a second too slow to qualify, despite competing at an international level for years.

Next year is going to be my year.

College and the drinking and hookup culture will be behind me, and I'll be able to focus on the goal right at the top of my dream board.

I creep inside, careful not to draw the attention of anyone who might be awake, and dart into the hall leading to my bedroom. It's the only one on the ground floor and comes with its own private bathroom, which may or may not have been the selling point that made me try out for this gig in the first place.

Well, that, and I can date plan like a motherfucker. Spreadsheets, calendars, flowcharts—I'm your man. Nothing gets past me.

Usually. I've dropped the ball over the last few months, and it still doesn't sit right. Control issues? *Me?*

It's a good thing I hide it well.

Behind my laid-back persona is a punctual, anal-retentive overachiever who can't handle a loss.

Thank fuck I'm fun at parties.

Even though I showered in the locker room, I take another one at home so I can rub one out. The amount of jerking off I've been doing lately is goddamn ridiculous, and I swear my brothers are starting to take notice of the amount of time I spend in my room.

Studying, I call it.

Yeah, studying my cock.

I know I can go out and hook up like the others; I've done it plenty of times before. Freshman and sophomore years, I wasn't as crazy as the rest of my pledge group, but I had my fun. The last two years though ... I've been *busy*. All that pressure I've put myself under takes priority, but I'm also getting to a point where I can't find the energy to play the cheap hookup game. One-night stands have lost their charm, and talking to drunk people is starting to drive me nuts.

For a couple of months there, I'd had a no-strings someone I could text every time I needed to let off some steam, but with how full my schedule is, I can't remember the last time we met up. As hot as it was, it's probably a good thing it's over. The plan is to move over the summer to a training facility on the West Coast and spend the next year swimming like my life depends on it.

After the Olympics, I can give my right hand a rest and focus on finding someone to settle down with.

The extra arm muscle I'm working up can't hurt.

I'm onto a good thing.

A solo sex sesh now and then seems like an easy trade-off.

Even though my cock disagrees with me.

I'm hit with the image of large, warm hands on me, and want runs through my system. How long *has* it been since I last hooked up? Out of curiosity, I grab my phone and open the messages, scrolling back through our texts until I find the coded one I'm looking for.

Me: *Hush Hush 11:00*

Fucking *December*? I knew it had been a while, but over *three months* since I got my dick wet? It makes sense considering the last three months have been intense training and competing, but damn. I glance at my right hand, filled with renewed appreciation for the trooper.

I'm tempted to send another message and hope for the best, but after three months, is this even something we're still doing? Hell if I know. Besides, my schedule for the next week at least is tight.

Someone pounds on my door, and I hold in a groan as I check the time. Barely six and it's already starting.

Woo-fucking-hoo.

I lock my phone and toss it on the bed, disappointment hitting hard that there are no blow jobs in my immediate future, then go and see who the hell is around at this time.

Larken grins at me the second I get my door open. He looks like a meathead—shoulder-length black hair, thick neck, square jaw with a butt in his chin, but he's a total softie inside. He's going to make an excellent replacement.

"Mornin', prez."

"Hey." I leave the door open and hunt down a T-shirt.

Larken leans against the doorframe like always, almost as though he's afraid to step foot in here. I wish some of the other guys would take his lead. The number of times I've shared a bed with Robbie because the dickhead was too drunk to make it up the stairs ...

I shake off that thought. "Busy day?" I ask absently.

"A few rough classes, but I should be fine. Listen, I know you're supposed to meet with Rick later to go over the accounts, but any chance I

can do it?”

The excited note in his tone brings to mind a puppy wagging his tail. Was I ever that enthusiastic?

“I’m not gonna fight you over it,” I say.

“Awesome. I have your rundown from last month and love the spreadsheet you put together. It makes it so much more streamlined. But I was thinking, could we maybe build a contingency into it with the money that’s unallocated? That way, Nationals won’t question the extra and bump up our dues?”

Fuck dammit. Apparently, that was another oversight of mine. I force a smile, internally kicking myself at the obvious solution. “That’s a great idea, brother.”

“Really?” His face lights up.

Pipe down, Fido. I have the urge to pat his head. “Yeah. It’s smart.”

A relieved breath rushes out of him. “Thanks, Zeke.”

“Too easy.” And if he’s taking that meeting ... I can probably rearrange my afternoon and ... the disappointment makes way for premature excitement. “Since you’re taking point on that, I’ll probably be back late tonight. I have an assessment to turn in, so I’ll be able to use the extra time there.”

Larken chuckles. “You wouldn’t know the first thing about relaxing, would you?”

“I’ll relax when I’m dead.” Or, with any luck, after I’ve had my dick sucked.

Larken raps his knuckles against the doorframe. “Well, I’ll leave you to it.”

I nod, and he leaves, taking the whirlwind of excitement with him.

Maybe I’ve gotten jaded over the years or don’t have time to add that additional pep into my step, but I’m strangely okay with that. I know Larken is nervous about stepping on my toes, but the dude doesn’t have to worry when I’m ready to stand aside and let him go nuts. We all know the deal here. Executive positions are temporary.

Even if some of the brothers don’t want to acknowledge that yet.

I chuckle and grab my phone, returning to the messages I had open. My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I wonder whether I’m actually going to do this. Sure, whatever we had was never a regular thing, but I don’t think we went longer than a month between seeing each other. Maybe it’s over and

we've never discussed it. Maybe my text will go unanswered.

Or maybe ... maybe I'll get some much-needed relief.

I cover my face with one hand as I type out the message.

Me: *Hush Hush 11*

Then I wait. My heartbeat is loud in my ears, and I'm already regretting that it has to be so late when I'll be up at four for swim practice, but one late night isn't going to kill me. Blowing my load might actually make me not so sluggish.

A minute passes, then two. It never normally takes long to get a reply, and just as I'm about to curse myself for thinking this is still a thing, my phone lights up in my hand.

A thumbs-up.

Fucking A.

CHARLES

MY HANDS ARE SHAKING AS I PUSH OPEN THE DOOR TO HUSH HUSH AND pause. It's almost completely dark inside and, thankfully, silent. Out of all the times we've hooked up, we've only been unlucky twice, which is good odds considering Hush Hush is a well-known hookup location.

I'm deep in the basement of the Jeremiah building, in a forgotten storage room, and even though we've been here a fair few times before, it doesn't stop my pulse from kicking up that little bit faster.

The fear mixes with lust in a way that makes my cock way too hard.

I'm always here before him, and I cross to what I think of as *our* corner between some shelving and a wall. There's enough light in here that the shadows look creepy, but not enough for us to see each other's faces clearly. Just shadowy features, strangled gasps, and warm, smooth skin for me to replay every damn night while I'm strangling my dick.

I'd thought this was over. That we were going to keep going about our days pretending like this had never happened between us, and when I got his text this morning, I'd been groggy and half-asleep, so I've been checking my phone all day to make sure it was real.

Sure, over the last few months, I could have been the one to text him, but I'm never the one who instigates our booty calls. It's not that it's a rule—not like how we don't use each other's names—but I always knew if I started texting him when *I* wanted to hook up, he'd be getting messages every night.

So it was better to restrain that urge than let it override me.

Before we took on the executive roles we have within our fraternity houses, I'm not even sure *he* knew I existed. We didn't exchange a single word, but even as a pledge, he caught my attention.

Cool, calm, confident. The three C's that led me to my very clumsy offer to help him relieve tension last year. The words had just ... come out, but once I'd said them, there wasn't anything I could do but set my jaw and meet his eyes.

It was the first time I felt like he saw me. The familiar flutter in my chest exploded as he glanced around Deja Brew, then leaned in and said in that sexy, deep voice, "*Hush Hush, eleven o'clock. We'll ... I dunno. Pretend like we're strangers. And Charles, don't, ah, tell anyone. Okay?*"

I'd immediately agreed, and that was the night my fantasies came true.

I'm not someone who hooks up often, even though I'm not short on options, but after that first time with him, I knew nothing else would live up to it.

The door creaks, and a sliver of light fills the room before a shadow ducks inside and the door closes again. It could be anyone, but I know those footsteps, and as soon as he's close enough, I grab his shirt and tug him in.

"It's me," I say.

"Hey ..." I can picture the soft grin he's wearing by the way he says the word. It's light, welcome. Missing the layer of snark that comes with our frat meetings. "I wasn't sure you were, you know ... still interested."

"Oh, no. I'm fine. Totally good." I hate the way I turn into an idiot around him. "I didn't realize it had been so long." Like hell am I telling him how much I missed every one of those fourteen weeks I didn't get to have him like this.

"Neither did I. And with finals coming up, we probably won't be able to catch up again. My schedule is jam-packed."

"Mine too," I say to distract from how much that hurts. I don't like saying goodbye to anything, but to *him*? There are still a few months of frat duties for the two of us, but it's not the same thing. Here, it's just us. This is the version of him I like best. No armor, no bickering, only his fingertips lightly trailing over my cheeks.

I swoon at his touch and thank the world for forgotten storage closets stopping him from seeing the effect he has on me.

"So." He takes a step, pressing his body against mine and trapping my hands between us. "Last time, then."

My heart is going fucking crazy, and I wish that bastard would play it cool. But no, instead, my hands are starting to shake again. “Sounds like it.”

“Okay.” He grinds his hard cock into my thigh, and I swear my eyes roll back. “How are we doing this?”

I almost, *almost* ask him to touch me, just this once. But there’s a reason I’ve avoided it all this time. There is no way in hell I’ll be able to walk away so easily if he gets me off. “Why mess with a good thing?”

His soft laugh is all the encouragement I need. I nudge for him to pull back an inch so I can feel my way down his abs to the waistband of his pants.

Hot damn, he’s wearing sweats.

I cup him over the soft material, and my head falls back against the wall on a groan. I’ve missed this. The heat, the weight, the feel. He’s perfect in every way, and if this is the last time, I’m going to have to make it worthwhile.

“Little tease,” he growls in my ear, then drops his mouth to the dip between my neck and shoulder. He bites and nips, slightly rough chin scraping my throat as he sucks his way up to under my jaw. A shaky moan parts my lips, and he chuckles.

Then his hand closes over my cock.

I almost choke on my sudden inhale, and before he can do much more than squeeze, I drop to my knees, bringing his sweats down with me.

The phantom feel of his hand on me has me scrambling to work open my fly as I lean in and wrap my lips around him. The first salty taste on my tongue sends my brain fuzzy, and I know we’re supposed to be pretending as though we’re hooking up with a complete random, but even in the dark, I can picture him.

Zeke with his light brown hair and unwavering stare. I wish I knew what that stare looked like while I was on my knees for him, but even without ever having seen it, I know it would be intense enough to steal my breath.

I start to work over his cock. He’s so fucking hard, soft skin stretched taut, and I take my time licking and sucking and drawing out all the delicious noises he makes. Every time together is new and exciting.

“You’re so good at that,” he says, widening his stance and leaning forward.

My gaze flicks up to his shadowy form looming over me. He’s got one hand planted on the wall behind me, and I make out his other as it moves and settles on the back of my head.

Zeke—oops, no, I can't think of him like that down here—ah, *his* fingers tighten, taking control the way I desperately crave. His hips buck forward, and even though it's been a minute, he clearly hasn't forgotten my complete lack of deep-throating skills. His thrusts are shallow, fast, and each little hint of salt on my tongue tells me he's getting close.

Dammit.

No. It's been a while, but this can't end so soon.

I stroke myself as I pull off him and duck my head to lick his balls. They're pulled tight and ready for release, and even though he won't be able to see me, I know he's trying to. His head is tilted down, and my hair threaded through his fingers is starting to sting.

His hand leaves my hair and trails along the side of my face until he reaches my mouth. His thumb slides inside, hooks behind my teeth, and jerks my jaw down. "Open," he rasps.

I'm weak to resist him.

My mouth opens, and I'm equal parts embarrassed over how easily I complied and how desperate I am to taste him again.

He forces his cock inside with one thrust, hitting the back of my mouth but backing off before he triggers my gag reflex. His hand returns to my hair as he fucks my face, and all I can do is kneel there and take it.

Gladly.

Always.

My hand speeds up, jerking myself hard and fast, my mind playing images of what Zeke looks like standing over me. Those muscles ... his tats ... his parted pink lips.

"Oh, shit," he gasps, sinking into my mouth one last time as his cock jerks with his release. Bitter, salty cum floods my mouth, and I swallow it all, eyes rolling back as I get myself closer and closer.

Zeke gives my hair a tug, and I pull off, but instead of stopping there, he tugs again. "Come up here."

His words are so soft, I almost miss them. But I'm too close to stop now. Not with the way his voice hits me behind my ribs, sending shivers over my body. I press my face to his abs, feeling my orgasm creep closer, images of Zeke on a constant loop, doing filthy things to me.

"I-I'm close ..." I gasp as he gently strokes my hair. The action is so soft and sweet I can't stop the way I inhale him. Press closer. My thighs shake.

"I want to touch you," he says.

“Oh shit, *Zeke*.”

My cock throbs, and I’m barely quick enough to catch the cum. My brain has turned into goo, and when I stop coming, my forehead is resting on his hip, and I never want to move.

Zeke hauls me to my feet, and this is the part I love, almost more than the sex. When he kisses my hair and tells me how good it was.

Instead, he steps back.

My gut sinks.

“Thanks for that.” He clears his throat. “It was a good arrangement.”

Was.

Fuck.

“Ze—”

His palm closes over my mouth. “Don’t make this weird.” But judging by his tone, I already have. “Just two total *strangers* helping each other out. It’s been ... nice.”

Good? Nice?

My eyes close as he releases me, but I’m smart enough to hold back my whimper.

I said his *name*.

The air around me shifts as he moves for the door, and when he pulls it open, I get a quick flash of his features. Proof he was here.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

My words are eaten by the creak of the door closing behind him.

Fuck.

I guess that’s it, then.

ZEKE

I PULL UP IN THE DRIVEWAY LIKE I DO EVERY MORNING, BUT INSTEAD OF jumping straight out into the cold, my forehead connects with the steering wheel.

My times this morning were shithouse. Coach was quick to remind me that swimming is as much about being mentally prepared as physically, and all it takes is one bad swim and the Olympics is gone.

At least now I know that the night before the Olympic trials, I *shouldn't* go for an easy hookup that can turn complicated in a second flat.

I squeeze my eyes closed. I should have left it. Ignored the urge and come to terms with the fact we'd both moved on from ... whatever we had. The problem is it was perfect ... right up until the end.

Hearing Charles gasp my name as he came sucked the mystery out of our hookup and slammed me firmly back into reality. Before that, he'd been a soft mouth, a sexy voice, desperate need in a willing package. I'd been able to switch off the *who* and concentrate on the *what*.

We'd agreed on transactional, which worked. I compartmentalized, stopped it from falling into that realm of *more* when I have nothing I can offer beyond the next few months.

Then with one word, it was Charles there, and I haven't been able to shake the image since.

It was ... fuck, it really shouldn't have been so hot.

All night, I've been plagued with thoughts about what he would look like

on his knees for me. He's grown up knowing he's going to own the world one day, and he looks the part too. Dark-rimmed, hooded eyes, haughty expression, full upper lip, and cheekbones I want to take a bite out of. Knowing all that refined, upper-class perfection was trembling for me goes to my head.

I drag my ass from the car and go about my morning routine. I'm too tired to jerk off, can barely be fucked to find clean clothes, and the only reason I shave the line through my eyebrow is because it's growing back too much and I don't feel like *me* without it. It has nothing to do with my meeting later.

And having to face Charles.

I shake out my arms at the thought, still not sure how I'm going to play it. I'm ... Shit, I think I'm nervous. The anonymity about what we were doing might have been an illusion, but it meant being able to get shit done without all the awkwardness. I wonder if I can pass this meeting off to Larken?

The thought of Charles and Larken drinking coffee together and discussing the past week makes my jaw clench. The meetings don't rank highly when it comes to actual importance, but giving Charles a place to vent his frustrations has stopped him from going to the dean about us. It's something I *should* let Larken handle.

But ... well, I wouldn't want Charles to think I'm avoiding him.

Or for him to get irritated that I'm blowing off his "concerns."

Besides, Larken could never handle Charles, and I'd be a dick to subject him to it. Obviously.

Damn. I guess that means I'm going to have to suck it up and go.

My nerves over the meeting are more intense than they should be.

They remind me of the first time I went to meet Charles. His offer had caught me totally off guard, and even though he'd tried to laugh it off, I just ... couldn't. He's gorgeous—I'm not blind—and he was offering me the kind of experience I'd never let myself have before. Sex, with a man, and the best part was we were taking the emotions out of it. I could focus on my swimming career and not feel guilty about my intense swim team schedule leaving me with no time, while indulging that side of me I'd always shoved down and hidden. Yet here we are, six months later, and I still haven't had a chance to touch his dick, and now I can't get him out of my head.

The kitchen is blissfully empty as I make my breakfast. Yogurt, granola, and berries, with a side of cream-cheese-covered bagel to fill that gaping

hunger that never seems to leave. I take a seat at the small table we keep in here and begin my morning scour of social media.

I'll never tell my brothers this, but I *hate* social media. Most everyone in the house lives for the selfies and documenting all the dumb shit they do. But for me, social media means evidence, and evidence can be used against you.

Personally, I have to keep my image clean for if I do make it big one day.

Presidentially, every morning I'm holding my breath as I scroll through the platforms, praying I won't have to do damage control over some dumb Sigma shit.

And today, it looks like I've lucked out.

Fuck yes. I open the final app, which isn't one I worry about too often. The Dirt is a piece-of-shit site for Karens who want to whine about anything and everything. There's a group for West Haven, and my brothers have been on it for petty shit a handful of times: *to those stupid fraternity morons who got too drunk at La Piedra, your disruptiveness ruined my anniversary dinner or some frat dudes stole my gnome and took him around West Haven on a tourist trip. I'm worried he's been violated—how do I tell if they've filled him with drugs?*

I'd be willing to put money down that the majority of fraternity-based grievances can be traced back to Robbie and Chad. Names are never mentioned though, so other than a quick *pull your head in*, I don't have to worry much about those posts.

Well, until now.

I almost choke on my bagel when I read a heading in angry, bold caps.

SHUT DOWN SIGMA BETA PSI!

What the dick is this?

I try to swallow, but the more I read, the more I can feel an easy few months slipping away from me.

Affectionately called the "jock house," these seemingly loveable dumbasses have always been painted as positive beacons within the community on Greek Row. The rewards and accolades they've helped their respective teams bring to the school has meant some of their more questionable activities have gone unnoticed.

And while pranks, shenanigans, and general tomfoolery can be ignored, hazing cannot. If Dean Hutchins doesn't get a tighter leash on his pets, someone is going to end up hurt.

This isn't a wholesome brotherhood of athletes. These are dangerous men

doing sick, twisted things.

They need supervision. They need to be given parameters to operate under. And if those things fail, they need to be shut down.

Before it's too late.

What—and I cannot stress this e-goddamn-nough—the *fuck*?

I read over it a couple of times, breakfast long forgotten, as the message sinks in. *Hazing*? There's no way.

What in the ever-loving-frat-father-divinity *is* this? Apart from blatant fucking lies.

I force myself to cool it and try to think clearly when all I want to do is shoot off the handle. My heart is thumping with panic, but I remind myself it's being a dramatic SOB and needs to cool it and let me think.

This site is popular. Hugely. But not so much with the fraternity crowd. This post being made on here at all and not on Insta or something is weird to begin with, but then accusations about hazing? When we're all super careful?

There's no doubt about it: this feels personal.

The only thing keeping me calm is the reminder that it's unlikely to be seen by anyone at WHU, let alone the dean.

Everything will be okay.

That reminder doesn't help the spark of anger that shoots through me when I read it all again.

And then I focus in on one word.

Parameters.

No.

Fucking.

Way.

There's only one person I know who uses that word—anyone in this house would pick up on it, given how much shit we give him over it.

The same dude who had my dick in his mouth last night.

Charles fucking Levine.

CHARLES

I JOLT AWAKE AT THE SOUND OF A DOOR HITTING THE WALL AND SIT UP blinking in a tired haze. I'm expecting an emergency. Fire, maybe?

But there is no fire.

Instead, I seem to be hallucinating Zeke Ariston standing in the middle of my bedroom. My cock gives a twitch, and suddenly, I know exactly where the fire is. I hurry to check my sheets are covering me, then turn back to him, trying to get my usual annoyance in place.

It's too early though. And Zeke looks really, *really* good.

Oh. And angry.

Probably should have noticed that first.

"What the fuck, Chuck?"

My brain is scrambling to come up with a pithy retort, but internally, I'm swooning. I might never have wanted to become president of Rho Kappa Tau, but I can't deny it has its perks.

I should hate the pranks his house pulls on mine more than I do.

Although ... normally, *I'm* the one yelling at *him*.

Surely this isn't a delayed reaction to last night?

I cock my head. "What's going on here?"

He glowers and tosses me his phone, which I try—and fail—to catch without looking like a total moron in front of him. Not that he shouldn't know how cruelly uncoordinated I am by now.

His screen is open to a page on ... the Dirt? I try not to sigh at the

ridiculous, gossipy site. Why anyone would want to spend their time on there is beyond me.

I muster up my annoyance. “Really? You barge into my room at ...” My eyeballs almost shoot from my skull. “Six thirty in the morning to show me some stupid nonsense on a site that isn’t worth the bandwidth it takes to load it?”

He crosses his arms casually, looking down at me with that familiar, almost bored expression on his baby face. I’m not sure if he actually thinks I’m beneath him or if it’s a mask for something more, but my fantasies get creative with that look. So creative my flagpole problem hasn’t waned.

“I don’t know what you’re playing at,” he says in that slow, deep voice. “But it won’t work.”

Okay, *now* I’m actually annoyed. “What are you talking about?”

“The post.”

“Which post?”

He nods at his phone. “The one you’re holding in your hand.”

“What are you ...” I squeeze my eyes closed for a second to try and focus my vision and turn to whatever it is that’s brought Zeke to my room at—I stifle a moan—*six freaking thirty*. The more I read, the more alert I become, until I’m about ready to jump out of my bed and storm the damn row over these blatant lies.

“*Hazing?*” I practically shriek. “What the hell is this?”

“That’s what I was hoping you’d tell me.”

Realization slowly sinks in.

He thinks this was me?

Me being annoyed at him, totally acceptable. Because I never am for real, and I also know he finds me entertaining.

But *him* being annoyed with *me*? Over something I didn’t do? Unacceptable!

I throw off my covers and jump to my feet. “You better not be implying this was me.”

He cocks an eyebrow—the one with the line shaved through it, my weakness—but doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t need to. Whenever we’re together, he’s always cool as a fucking cucumber. It drives me crazy.

It turns me on.

“Seriously, that’s messed up.”

“About as messed up as you trying to get us shut down.” Zeke takes a

step closer, and I catch a hint of the body spray he uses. It's fresh, like a blast of cool air to my senses, but doesn't quite cover the permanent scent of chlorine that surrounds him. "Is this because of—" He cuts off, but his eyes flick up and lock on mine for a split second before he looks away.

He was going to mention our hookups. I know it. My pulse is dialed up to a thousand over the thought of him admitting everything we've shared together.

But he moves on. "It's not going to work. You know why?"

"Because I didn't do it?"

"Because first of all, only bored housewives and middle-class men with a Napoleon complex use this site, and second, you can ask whoever the hell you want, we don't haze. You can't pin something on us with no evidence, and if you think we're going to take this shit lying down, you obviously haven't learned anything about my brothers."

"Whoa, stop for a second." I hold up my hands, and he plucks his phone from my grip. "I don't know why you're assuming it was me, and after our long history working together, Zeke, frankly, I'm offended."

One corner of his full, pink lips kicks up. "*You're* offended?"

"Very, very offended."

"Interesting the effect that has on your body." Zeke's gaze drops and, to my horror, lands on my very erect cock.

Oh, goddamn forgot I was naked.

I will not give him the power here.

Ah ... anymore.

I snatch a pillow from my bed and shove it in front of my groin. "As I was saying!" Holy shit, my cheeks are getting hot. "You can't barge into a man's bedroom and start throwing around such wild accusations. I'll have you know ___"

"Parameters."

That one word, spoken with such confidence and meaning, makes me stall. But I don't understand. Does he want to set some? Because I can think of one very obvious boundary we could implement, but ... there's something about the way he's eyeing me that makes me think that isn't it. "I don't understand."

"You fucked up." Zeke shakes his phone. "'Parameters' is basically your go-to word, and you used it again in this. You outed yourself, dude. I thought Kappas were meant to be smart."

“That’s where this is coming from?” I don’t even know where to start. “You think I’m the only person in the world who uses that word?”

“Maybe not, but you’re the only frat brother who does.”

“Who says this is a frat brother at all?”

Zeke narrows his eyes. “Who else would give enough of a shit to post something like this?”

“You can’t actually believe it was me.”

“Why? Because you love me and my brothers so much?”

“Because ... because ...” Dammit, he’s got me there. In all fairness, I would be the most likely candidate. “It just wasn’t, okay?”

“Convincing.”

“You said it yourself. You can’t pin something on me with no evidence.”

“I have evidence. It might be flimsy, but it’s more than you have on the alleged hazing.”

“It *wasn’t me*.” I force myself to take a breath. “When one of us is under the microscope, we’re *all* under the microscope. No one on Greek Row is going to pull something like this because an accusation against one fraternity becomes a media nightmare where they villainize us all.” *Not to mention how hard-core in lust with you I am.*

Zeke’s eyes narrow.

“Furthermore,” I say, “I don’t even have an account, anonymous or otherwise, on the Dirt.”

The way he looks me over makes me think that he actually wants to believe me. And why wouldn’t he when we’ve always had such a rock-solid relationship?

I mean, yes, his frat house gets on my nerves, because seriously, they’re all a bunch of testosterone-filled man-children, but when it comes to presidential duties, we work together. The other Sigmas might not know ethics if it was slapping them in the face with a giant pink dildo, but Zeke has a moral compass. He does what’s right.

It’s why I have so much respect for him, despite everything. It’s why I made the ridiculous offer that started our Hush Hush meetups in the first place.

“So ... maybe you make some compelling arguments,” he says.

“Thank you.”

“It doesn’t mean I believe you.”

I let out a loud sigh and drop onto the side of my bed. “What’s it going to

take?”

“You putting on some clothes would be a start.”

Figures. I internally eye roll, wishing he'd offered to take off some clothes instead.

Never going to happen, Charles.

Not in broad daylight. Hell, probably never again.

I fish some underwear out of a drawer and pull them on. “Better?”

“Depends. When you remove that pillow, are you going to have Excalibur ready to greet me again?”

Instead of answering, I aim the pillow at his head and cross to my closet for actual clothes. He doesn't leave while I get dressed, and considering he just saw my hard-on, I should be a whole lot less embarrassed by that thought than I am. Instead of playing it cool though, my neck heats, and it takes me three attempts to get my pants on.

Fuck my life.

Today is going to be a day.

“Were you waiting on something?” I ask, hoping he'll get the hint and leave.

“Just wondering what other things you'll do to make me believe you.”

I plant my hands on my hips and turn to face him. “Why would I care if you believe me or not?”

“Because you hate being the bad guy.”

“I'm *always* the bad guy. At least to you Sigmas.”

“I've never thought you were a bad guy, but what the hell am I supposed to think now?”

That response steals the words from right out of my mouth. “Excuse me?”

“Overdramatic, maybe, but not bad.”

“And yet you were willing to believe that I'd do something like try to get your house into shit.”

He shrugs. “Honestly, I'm struggling to picture you doing something so underhanded, but come on. Do you blame me?”

Hmph. “I'm telling you, I didn't do it.”

“Who did, then?”

“It was anonymous. How am I meant to know that? Although if I did give you a name, it would prove I knew and therefore make me equally as guilty, so of course I'd deny it ...” I frown, trying to work out if I defended myself or proved his point.

Based on his laughter, I'd say it was the second one.

I throw my hands up. "I've told you it wasn't me and why it would be stupid for me to post it. If you don't believe that, there's nothing else I can do."

"You could help me find who did."

Urg. That sounds exactly like the type of headache I don't need right now. "I'm going to pass on that, but thank you for the offer."

"Not helping makes you look guilty ..."

"It's not on me how it looks. Besides, weren't you saying that no one will even see it on there, so you're not worried?"

Zeke rubs his jaw, the cocky disinterest fading. "Something about it feels off."

"Of course it does. How dare someone not like the great Sigma Beta Psis."

"Fuck you." He says the words through a smile, and I shouldn't like it as much as I do.

"I need to get ready for class," I say.

"Fine." He walks to the door. "Hey, one more thing."

"What?"

The slow grin that curls his lips makes me all fluttery. "You sleep naked?"

"Yes, and?" I hate how breathless I sound and how desperately I'm hoping he'll mention something, *anything* about last night. It kills me not to know what he thinks about it. He's so ... impossible to read.

"How don't your brothers all use that to their advantage?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know ..." He pauses in the doorway. "While you're sleeping. Wax in your pubes ... steal all your clothes ... throw water over you and film you jumping out of bed ..."

What is he ... "What the hell do you guys do in your house?"

He gives me a sheepish smile.

"Jesus, Zeke. No, we don't do any of those things. Around here, we knock. I'd appreciate you remembering that next time." I push him out the door and hurry to close it, then fake-sob in frustration over what a pathetic idiot I am.

ZEKE

I LEAN BACK IN MY CHAIR, ARMS FOLDED TIGHT, AND WATCH MY BROTHERS. Brandon and Miles are talking about something, hands flailing, mouths moving too fast for me to read. Larken's scrolling through his phone, one hand permanently tangled in his hair while he mouths the words he's reading, and Robbie and Chad ...

Are wrestling.

In the middle of the living room.

Because why not?

My lips tremble as I try to hold back a smile. When college ends, I'll miss this. I'm ready to move on, yeah, but it will be an adjustment to go from living in a house with thirty of my brothers to finding somewhere of my own.

But I still have to get through the rest of college to make it there.

And these next three months are suddenly feeling like the longest of my life.

I can't let that post go. There hasn't been anything since, and I keep going back and forth on whether to alert our governing body, Nationals, or to keep it to myself. Nationals are the ones who run the fraternities in the country like a business, and so whenever scandals come up, they're the ones who step in. Nobody else has seen it that I know of, and as much as I'd love to move on, hoping it will blow into oblivion, something in the way it was written makes me doubt that.

As far as I know, it's only me and Charles who know about the post.

Hmph. *Charles*.

He was basically waving his cock in my face like a landing beacon, and I couldn't stop thinking that *that* was the cock I'd wanted to touch the other night. I'd been so determined that it would finally happen, and just like every other hookup ... nothing. Somehow being robbed of a chance to touch him had been a bigger disappointment than Charles saying my name.

And ... now it's over.

Just like that.

Which is obviously for the best.

"Help me, Zeke," Chad calls, trying to shove Robbie off him. Our social chair is leaning all his two hundred and sixty pounds into Chad's back, and Chad is flopping around like a fish.

"I dunno ..." I rub my jaw. "You look like you're doing okay to me."

"Dude, mercy," Chad cries. "Brandon, get your boyfriend under control."

Brandon turns his attention to the two of them. "The only way I know how to do that is by getting his cock out. You sure you want help?"

"Changed my mind," Chad wheezes as Robbie pushes down more. "I've seen that thing way too many times for this lifetime."

I chuckle and give Chad another few moments to struggle before I say, "Robbie, get off him." Unlike Brandon, I don't need to use Robbie's cock to control him.

He grumbles as he stands.

"I'm doing your boyfriend a favor," I point out. "Killing another member is a lot of paperwork, and conjugal visits aren't sexy for anyone."

"Ooh, new role-play idea."

I hold up a hand and purposely don't look Brandon's way. "Don't need to know."

Robbie's panting a little as he drops down beside me. "You all good, prez?"

I'm about to tell him I'm A-okay when my phone lights up with a text and Charles's name pops up on the display.

Robbie obviously clocks it and drops his head back. "We didn't even do anything this time."

I chuckle because I know better than to believe him. "You've said that the last three times though."

"But this time, I mean it."

"I'm sure you've said that too." I'm smiling as I open the text, but as soon

as I read the message, the smile falls right off my face.

Charles: *Don't click this link if you want to have a good day*

Charles: *P.S. it wasn't me!*

Oh, hell to the fucking no. My gut sinks as I click on the link anyway, because how am I supposed to ignore it?

The Dirt opens, and there's that same fuckpot account with a new post. This time, they're calling on people to reply to them with anything my house has done. It's bullshit ... *and there are actually comments?*

My rage hits ninety, and I type back so fast, I typo the shit out of my message.

Me: *Yet somehow you were the one who saw it first!*

Damn it!

I don't bother reading the comments, just tuck my phone in my pocket and try to get my temper under control.

"Zeke?" Robbie's gaze is trained on the side of my face. I can feel it burning into me. I know he's waiting on a response, but what the hell do I even tell him? There are too many people around, and the last thing I need is Larken being scared out of the position and leaving me without a replacement.

But apparently, ignoring this fucker is going to get me nowhere.

I lean closer to Robbie. "Grab Brando and meet me in the war room in five. *Don't* let anyone know something is up."

"What are you—"

I shake my head and cut off his words. I'm not getting into it here.

He opens his mouth again, and when I think he's going to start questioning me some more, he swings around to face Brandon and says obnoxiously loudly, "I need sex."

The whole room goes silent, and it takes all my self-control not to whack him over the head. So much for not drawing attention.

Brandon smirks, then jumps to his feet. "What are you waiting for, then?"

Am I the only one in this house who thinks sex should be kept private? I mentally face-palm.

Robbie all but chases Brandon from the room, and I swear if he forgets the whole point of leaving, I'm gonna be pissed. I'm not above walking in on them as a reminder.

I pull out my phone and text Chad, then grab my laptop and pretend I'm heading back to my room. There are twelve executive positions; some of us

live in the house, and some of us don't, but out of everyone, Chad, Brandon, and Robbie are the ones I trust most. There were eight in our pledge group, but they're the three I shared the pledge hall with, and we had no choice but to become close.

There's nothing like lying in your bunks, listening to your brothers fap away all night.

If you ask me, I earned my private room.

Chad's the first one to join me. "What's going on, dude?"

"We have a slight problem."

"Oh no."

"What?" I laugh. "I said *slight*."

"Yeah, but something small to you is astronomical to the rest of us."

"Did it hurt to use a word that big?"

He flips me off. "I'll have you know I've been getting Bs in nearly everything."

"B for Bailey," I tease. But in Chad's defense, he has been putting in the effort since they started dating.

"Aww, look who can pass kindergarten. I also got an A for asshole the other day."

"Fuck, man. I'm happy for you."

"Thanks." He shifts, looking bashful. "He's, umm ... he's good for me."

"He is."

I'm worried he's about to get all gushy and emotional when Robbie slams open the door and Brandon trails in after him. "All right, fucker, what's going on?"

"You probably want to sit down for this."

Chad's eyes widen. "You *said slight*."

"And *you* said astronomical. Let's agree it's somewhere in the middle."

Robbie drops onto the couch. "Hit us with it."

"Someone's trying to start shit. Huge shit. I thought it would go away, but it looks like this dickhead is determined. We need to do something about it."

I show them the post I saved from yesterday, along with the one Charles sent me.

"*Parameters*?" Robbie all but yells. "That asshole."

"Sit down and shut up. It wasn't Chuck."

"Like hell it wasn't."

And here we go, Robbie overreacting again when it comes to anything to

do with the Kappas. “I already spoke to him. He said it wasn’t, and I believe it.”

“Like he’s going to admit to it. I bet this is his idea of ending his presidency in style. Being the one to get us shut down so the Kappas don’t have to deal with us anymore.”

Brandon squeezes Robbie’s thigh. “I have to agree here. This doesn’t look good.”

“I don’t give a shit how it looks. I said it wasn’t him. So it wasn’t. End of discussion.”

The three of them exchange looks they don’t even try to hide.

“Zeke—” Chad starts, but I don’t let him get out more than that.

“We’re brothers, and we’ve always trusted each other. When you said Bailey wasn’t responsible for that Kappa prank a few months ago, what did we do?” I ask Chad. Robbie had been the same back then, ready to take out every last Kappa for the prank they pulled on us that ended with Brandon in the hospital.

Chad sighs and leans against the table behind him. “You guys believed me.”

“Yeah, but you were dating Bailey,” Robbie argues. “Plus, he was only new around here. Charles has hated us for years.”

“And I’ve known Chuck that whole time, so if I say he didn’t do it, that’s the end of the fucking argument.”

None of them says anything to that. Biases aside, we *do* trust each other, and I can’t even explain it to myself, but I trust Charles as well. This underhanded sneakiness isn’t his style. If he wanted to get us in the shit, he could go direct to the dean with any number of pranks we’ve pulled over the year.

Unless he wanted to be anonymous.

Because if we don’t know it’s him, we won’t retaliate. I force those thoughts out because I’m supposed to be getting the others on my side here, not making myself doubt my own resolve.

No, it wasn’t Charles.

I’m good at reading people, and even if his, ah, *excitement* distracted me momentarily yesterday morning, it also didn’t seem like he was lying. We’ve had a lot of one-on-one time since becoming presidents—mostly so he could yap at me about whatever shit the guys have pulled—but I’ve spent a lot of those meetings observing him. Taking him in. Reading him.

His reaction yesterday was typical for him. All flappy hands and red cheeks.

I wonder if that's how he looks when he's on his knees for me ...

My lips twitch with a smile again. Fucking Charles. As annoying as he is, I can't help but like him.

Just a little.

Dammit, no. Separate. I have to force myself to separate the Charles I know through frat duties and the eager guy I meet in the dark who smells like those caramel candles they're always burning in Kappa house to cover up the smell of pretension. It always used to be so easy.

"Fine. Let's say it's not him." Chad's eyebrows are scrunched in thought. "What do we do?"

For once, I don't have a ready answer. "I have no idea."

CHARLES

CHARLES ARTHUR LEVINE THE THIRD. I HATE MY STUFFY NAME AND ALL THE expectation that goes with it. My name has always been a point of contention, and Zeke's "Chuck" isn't much better.

Grampy was my idol growing up because we shared a name. He always paid attention to me, taught me things, spent time with me when Gran was bottom-deep in a bottle of wine. But the older I've gotten, the more I've picked up on the signs. The stiffness between him and my dads, the disinterest, the pressure on me to find a *good girl* from a *good family* and live up to my surname. My cousin is going into politics, which left me the path of the law.

And I fucking hate it.

The thing about Grampy is that he'll shower you with attention when you're doing what he wants and cut you off completely if you're not. The rest of our cousins barely get a second of his time, and his will is heavily weighted with favorites. As a kid, it's hard to wrap your head around why your idol randomly refuses to look at you, let alone send a word your way, and the withholding of attention trained me early on which things would get me on the good list and which would have me ostracized.

It's so deeply ingrained by this point, I'm not even sure what I do for him and what I do for me anymore.

"Does this make sense?" Peter asks, and I turn to the work he's going over. Peter is a freshman studying international relations on a full-ride

scholarship. He's one of three other freshmen I tutor, and even with my coursework at an unachievable level this year, I refuse to give it up.

I don't do it for the money—I don't charge them.

I do it because ... well, teaching gives me something I don't get from anything else. Seeing the moment someone struggling makes sense of the work fills me with purpose. With being needed.

But telling Grampy I want to be a professor? Unacceptable. It'll be the thing that makes him turn his back on me and my dads for good.

I read through Peter's notes and add a few dot points and questions he needs to elaborate on in his essay, but otherwise, he's covered most of the information on foreign policy.

"Okay, that looks good."

He puffs out a breath of relief. "Thanks, Char. I don't know what I'm going to do once you're gone."

I aim for a reassuring smile I don't feel. "You know the work. You're just not getting deep enough into it."

"That's what she said."

I grin despite myself. Stupid saying. Stupid saying that reminds me of the Sigmas, which reminds me of Zeke. I pat Peter on the shoulder. "Like I said, you'll be fine."

We pack up and go our separate ways. Like every time I leave a tutoring session, my good mood lasts long enough for me to reach the library front doors, and then the real world crashes in again. The amount of coursework I have is clawing under my skin, and even though I'm good about keeping on top of most of it—and pulling all-nighters when I need to—I'm starting to resent the amount of work I'm putting in on something I don't love.

I drop onto a bench in the courtyard and lean back into the wall. I'm supposed to be heading to the house to check the philanthropy calendar for the next month and make sure all my brothers are pulling their weight, but I don't want to move.

Sure, there are easy things I could cut out of my week, like sending Sam to meet with Zeke, but ... I can't. I'm being an idiot, but clinging to these weekly meetings feels like a small act of rebellion. A thing that's all mine. The thoughts I have about Zeke would make Grampy red in the face.

Even if last week I had to sit through our meeting knowing it had been less than twelve hours since Zeke saw my dick. The frustrating part was that he didn't bring it up at all. There were no smirks, no weird looks. Just his

usual, steady gaze over his laptop as he took notes while I talked.

Sometimes, he's so calm and collected, I want to shake him to prove he has the same loose, messy pieces inside of him as me.

Unable to stop myself, I open the Dirt like an addict. Since sending the last post to Zeke, we haven't spoken any more about it, but there are a lot of comments. Some people are claiming recent grievances, others date back years, but the one thing in common is there's a definite pattern of hazing. It turns my stomach to read some of the claims, and I'm on the fence about whether to believe them.

False claims are common, but *this* many? By so many people over so many years, and no matter how I feel about Zeke, it has even *me* questioning whether they're true. Sigma Beta Psi has always been so outspoken about hazing, but was it all a front? Is the Zeke I think I know secretly some sadistic monster?

Once again, my mind returns to Hush Hush and his soft hands and gentle voice.

It's all I have to hang on to as a reminder that he isn't some idiot frat brother.

Not that any of it matters anyway because I said I wasn't getting involved in this, and our hookups are over, so Zeke and I are ... nothing to each other.

Ouch.

Okay, *that* thought hurts more than it should.

I rub out the ache in my chest and try to distract myself with other things, only before I can close the app, another comment pops up.

ANON7136: *SIGMA HOUSE SENT THEIR OWN RISK MANAGER TO THE HOSPITAL. Was he against the hazing and they were teaching him a lesson? Or did he get caught up in it? What's worse, they tried to blame Kappa house for it, then started attacking its members. Stand-up bunch of dudebros. Kick every last toxic one of them out.*

UH-OH. DREAD CREEPS OVER ME. I REMEMBER THE EXACT EVENT THIS PERSON is posting about, and it *was* actually our fault. Even if one of their pledges made things more dangerous than they should have been, we're the ones who

went through with the prank. That fucking day won't stop coming back to haunt me.

I feel as sick as I did back then, while I waited for news on whether Brandon was okay. Now it's being dragged back out into the open, even after everything we did to try and keep the gossip around it contained. Zeke and I made sure every member of our houses kept it quiet—how the hell is it coming out now?

Unfortunately, nothing stays a secret for long on Greek Row.

I'm contemplating whether or not to text Zeke *again* that this had absolutely nothing to do with me when my phone starts to ring and his name shows up on my screen.

A sudden twist hits me behind the navel, but I try to stamp that feeling way down deep and answer the phone as normally as possible.

"Hi-llo." *Dammit*. I curse whatever pathways exist between my brain and mouth.

"Ah, yeah." Holy shit, *his voice*. "So, that post is still gaining traction."

I clear my throat and speak carefully. "I saw. I've been, umm, keeping an eye on it."

"Why?"

A flicker of annoyance helps my confidence. "Because this doesn't just affect you, you know."

He chuckles softly. "Calm down, Chuck. Did you see you guys were mentioned?"

"Yes. And it's total bullshit. That had nothing to do with you and everything to do with us."

"Great. So you'll set the record straight."

I'll ... what? "I certainly will not. Owning up to that would be akin to admitting *we're* the ones not following the rules."

"But you did it."

"And all of you have done a lot worse, but you want me to take the bullet for you."

My words are met with silence.

I soften my tone. "Zeke?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I'm ... not sure what to do here."

"If we admit to it, we're basically giving legitimacy to every claim on there." It's on the tip of my tongue to say I'll help, but it would be an empty offer. Even if I wanted in on this mess, I don't have the time. "I'm sorry."

“Mmm ...”

“Do you, umm ... we can meet for coffee. If you need to talk, or whatever?” My nerves are going haywire.

But again, silence. “Thanks.” The word is so close to how he sounds in Hush Hush it does things to me that aren’t appropriate for this courtyard. “But, nah, I better get back to the house. I’m going to have to fill the guys in, so ...”

“Yeah, no, obviously, of course.” Mouth. Stop. Now. “Catch ya on the flip side.”

Oh, holy shit, that’s a thing that I just said.

“Later, Chuck.” I hear him laugh before the call ends.

Normally I’d berate him for calling me *Chuck* because I have to keep up pretenses that I hate it when I don’t, but I’m too busy kicking myself over how incredibly stupid I am around him.

This crush is getting out of control. I don’t want to be in lust with him, especially since college ends so soon, and from what he’s mentioned, he’s going to be on the other side of the country in only a few months. Oh, and the fact he has no actual interest in me probably doesn’t help my chances either.

No. It’s good he’s keeping his distance. There’s no reason for us to be anything more than friendly acquaintances, and hoping for more than that is leading myself to a world of frustration.

I wish I could switch focus to someone else. The problem with that line of thinking is there’s *never* been anyone else. I’ve hooked up—it’s been a long time since I’ve been a virgin—and those experiences were great. I had fun. I’ve dated a little. But no one has ever ignited my blood like Zeke. No one has ever made me tongue-tied and full of butterflies, and this goddamn ridiculous longing is something that’s only ever been for him.

I’m drawn to him. I can’t help it.

And it’s so incredibly messed up that the one person I want more than anything ... has had me and doesn’t want more.

ZEKE

AFTER A LONG DAY OF CLASSES, THIS IS THE LAST THING I NEED TO SEE WHEN I pull up back at home. Chad and Robbie are sitting in the recliners on our front lawn, buckets of Nerf bullets at their side and footprints leading in every direction through the lingering snow.

I brace myself before I climb out and approach them.

Robbie picks up the megaphone at his side and calls out to me with it. “Zeke!”

“Your voice doesn’t need that thing,” I point out.

“Sure it does.” He holds it up and directs it toward the street. “Blue team, go!”

As I watch, three of our brothers dart out of the bushes, blue bandanas tied around their foreheads and Nerf guns held out in front of them.

I have no idea what’s going on here, and past experience tells me I don’t want to know.

Turning my back on one problem, I prepare to address another. “There have been more comments on that post.”

Chad’s eyebrows wrinkle. “Anything specific?”

“Yeah and no. It’s all bullshit except for one comment about that prank the Kappas pulled last year.”

“Fuck,” Chad mutters.

“Blue team, left!”

I jump at Robbie’s sudden boom, but he puts the megaphone down and

shrugs.

“The way I see it, the post was ... a week ago? It’s had a few comments, but no one is really paying attention to it. They’re just some asshole geeds talking shit and hoping something will stick.”

“And if something does stick, we’re screwed.”

“You’re thinking about it too much, brother. Brando is keeping an eye on things, and nothing there has hit his radar. We have better things to focus on, like spring formal. I’m in charge of organizing it this year, and it’s gonna be epic.”

“Gotta say, I agree. Focusing on that noise is a waste of time,” Chad adds. “Plus, the Kappas are the ones who fucked up, not us. No one is taking a bunch of whining comments seriously.”

“Still think it’s them,” Robbie says. “Would be just like those fuckers to try and blame that on us.” The edge in Robbie’s voice always creeps in whenever he talks about that day.

“I’ve told you it isn’t.”

“No, you said it wasn’t Charles. Doesn’t mean it wasn’t one of the others.”

“Like Lucas,” Chad practically growls.

And now both of them are getting territorial over their men. Great. There’s no reasoning with them once their caveman instincts have kicked in. I’ll never understand.

And this is the part I hate about being president: getting through to my brothers. I love them—they’re fun and creative and have enormous hearts. But sometimes I wanna whack them over the heads.

There’s a wail behind me, and Robbie starts barking into the megaphone again. I turn to Chad.

“This is one of those things I don’t want to know about, isn’t it?”

He grins. “We’re just playing.”

“With Kappas?”

“Who else?”

I head for my car again. There’s no way I’m going to get through to any of them because in their mind, school is almost over, so that makes us untouchable. Plus, we *haven’t* done anything wrong. There’s no evidence because no hazing has taken place.

As I back out of the driveway, I’m torn between heading to the library to get some studying in and going, well, anywhere.

My brain is running wild with all the different outcomes of these stupid posts, and I don't think I'm going to get over it until I talk it out. Maybe Brandon would shut up and listen, or I could rope Larken into the mess and make him deal with it instead. Too bad I have a sense of responsibility the size of my fucking ego to deal with, and letting go of this and putting it from my mind isn't something I'm capable of doing.

I have friends I could talk to, family, and yet, when I think of who I could call to unload on, there's only one name that comes to mind.

He *did* offer. Charles already knows all about the shit going on, and out of everyone, he knows the kind of effect shit like this can have on fraternities. Hazing is a very real problem. There are even other branches of Sigma Beta Psi that do it, I'd bet my ass on it. It's a narrative the media froth over, and the clickbait titles get people every time.

It's serious. People have died.

That's why the Greek community at WHU has been so gung ho about weeding the filth out of our lives. We're not serious a lot of the time, but when it comes to safety, we'll peer pressure the hell out of anyone who doesn't make it a priority.

But talking to Charles is a slippery slope. We've always kept things frat related. As professional as two frat presidents can manage. No hints at our nightly meetups—I won't even let myself think of them during daylight hours. But I can't shake the feeling that something changed the second my name passed his lips as he came.

It was so fucking hot.

And *weird*.

Because the illusion vanished, and now I have to deal with constantly picturing him on his knees.

Even with that reminder, there's still a buzzing under my skin trying to convince myself it's the right step. Charles and I aren't *friends* specifically, and that's on purpose. But now that the fucking around is over, there's no real reason not to be. College is ending, the rivalry is behind us—maybe this is one last thing we can work on together?

Besides, as soon as Charles works out my idiots are pranking them, he'll want to let loose at me about that as well. Two birds, one stone.

Yes, this is definitely the right choice.

Even if I'm weirdly nervous as I tell my phone to call him. When he answers, it takes a second for my brain to kick in.

“Hey, ah, you still free for coffee?”

“Yeah, umm, like, right now? I’m free. Totally nothing on.” His breathless voice makes me smile.

“Sweet. Need me to pick you up?”

“I’m on campus—is that okay?”

“Text me where, and I’ll be there in five.”

When the text comes through, I almost curse. Of course he’s at the parking lot near Jeremiah, like the universe wants to constantly remind me of the things we’ve done to each other. I try to reason that it doesn’t count when we couldn’t see and it could have technically been anyone, but that excuse is getting thin on the ground when I can’t push that image of Charles on his knees out of my mind.

He’s waiting where he said, copper hair wind-tousled and cheeks slapped red from the cold. I pull in close to him and lean over the center console to open his door.

“Thanks,” he says, dumping his heavy bag into the footwell with a *thunk*. “I walked today, and I wasn’t looking forward to walking home.”

“Too easy.”

The car fills with his scent, and silence falls over us as I pull away.

“Where we’re going?” He clears his throat. “*Are* we going, I mean?”

I reach over to turn up the heat. It isn’t super cold out, but Charles is rubbing his hands like he’s trying to get them warm. “I was thinking about getting drive-thru coffee and sitting at the lake, but it’s cold. Maybe Deja Brew?”

“Do you want people to hear you talking about hazing? Besides, it’s not like we, umm, have to get out of the car, so ...”

“True. The lake it is, then.”

He tries to pay as we go through the drive-thru, but I wave the card away. Maybe he’s richer than god, I don’t know, but buying two coffees isn’t exactly going to break the bank.

There’s more silence as I drive. It settles around us so heavy the urge to blurt out anything is getting to me. It occurs to me this is probably the first time we’ve hung out without a detailed agenda to go through.

I pull up at the lake and put the car in park but keep the engine running.

“Thanks for the coffee.”

“Sure thing.” My heart seems to be thumping louder than usual, but I force the usual calmness I adopt whenever I’m in a stressful situation.

“Thanks for making time for me.”

“What happened to talking with your brothers?”

A small laugh slips past me. “I love them, but they’re not so great with the talking.”

“So you called me.”

“Well, you offered,” I throw back like he’s accused me of something. That fucking silence kicks in again.

“My brothers are pranking your house, by the way,” I tell him.

“They’re *what*?”

I send a lazy smile his way as I watch him scramble for his phone. “Relax, it’s probably over by now.”

“Is that why you called? To get me out of the way?”

“No offense, Chuck, but what are you gonna do to stop us?”

He glowers at me. The type of full-on glare that makes his lips all pouty. “I offered to be *nice*, and this is what I get? I should have known it was misguided to trust a Sigma, and yet time and again—”

I chuckle and give him a soft shove. “Dude, relax. That’s not why I asked you to come.”

“So why did you?”

“I ...” Fuck, why *did* I? Saying it felt right sounds lame and unexplainable. “Why not?”

He doesn’t answer, but before that stupid silence can kick in *again*, I say, “So ... hazing.”

“Yeah, whoever is doing this probably doesn’t realize they’re implicating us *all*.”

“Or maybe they do. Maybe they rushed Sigma and didn’t get a bid. Maybe they’re a geed who hates that we have an awesome brotherhood, and they’re left jerking off in the dorms over a pair of tits they saw that one time.”

“You can really paint a picture with your words.”

“And with other things.” The words are meant as a joke, but they come out full of subtext that even I’m not totally prepared for—like I’m determined to remind the both of us of all the times I’ve painted his tonsils with my cum.

Charles’s eyes fly to mine and lock on, and this uncomfortable sort of moment passes between us. I’ve ... I don’t think I’ve ever looked him in the eyes before. Is that right? It can’t be. I look at him when we talk, and I watch him as he rambles on about dumb shit, but ... I didn’t know his eyes were green—no. Blue? No ... I squint to try and work it out, but I can’t decide on a

definite color.

“What are you doing?”

His whisper cuts me out of the creepy-ass staring, and I jerk back. “Ah, just ...”

Charles hurries to busy himself with taking a sip of his coffee, but the lid displaces, and hot liquid gushes over him. “Oh, *shit*,” he gasps.

“Whoa.” I twist away from the spray, but my car isn’t so lucky, and before I can grab the wet wipes from my glove compartment, Charles’s mouth has hit fast forward.

“Holy crap I can’t believe that just happened. I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean—I’m not even sure—and now there’s coffee ... shit, it’s everywhere, Zeke, I—”

“Stop talking.”

His mouth snaps shut, and it almost makes me laugh.

“It’s only a drink. Chill.”

I lean over him to open the compartment and grab the wipes to hand over. He’s stiff beside me, but eventually, his arm comes alive, and he reaches for them. “Thanks.”

“Sure thing. You clean that shit up; I’ll grab you something to put on from the trunk.”

I jump out of the car before he can argue. My trunk is full of shit, but I sift through the mess, looking for something that would work. The first thing I find is my Sigma Beta Psi sweatshirt, but I toss it aside. There’s no way I’m giving him my letters. My swim bag is in there, along with the WHU team hoodie I wear to practice in the mornings. The damn thing doesn’t get washed nearly enough since I only wear it for a few minutes each morning, so it’s not my first choice, but it’ll have to do.

I grab it for a sniff test but can’t make out anything. Oh well, all I can do is cross my fingers that I’m not about to gas Charles with the stench.

He’s cleaned up my car by the time I’m back, and I hand over the hoodie.

“Y-your swim hoodie?”

“It was that or a Sigma sweater. I figure your brothers wouldn’t have let you back in the house with that on.”

“Good call.” His gaze darts to me and away again before he reaches for his shirt.

“What’s the matter? Want me to turn around?”

“A bit late for modesty between us, don’t you think?” His eyes fly wide,

and he's clearly as surprised as I am by the comment. "I-I mean because of the other morning"—his mouth is off again—"when I flashed you. That's why. Obviously, because it's the only time you've ever seen me naked. The other times were—I mean ...” He fans his wet shirt off his stomach.

I stare at him for a second ... and then I crack up laughing. There's nothing else I *can* do. This whole conversation has yo-yoed between awkward as fuck to almost normal and back again. Wow. My gut screwed up on this one because hanging out with Charles was *not* the right call.

“Just get changed.”

And like he was waiting for that reminder, he yanks his shirt up over his head. My gaze drops to his torso before I tear it away again. See? Look at that. I can respect his privacy.

But somehow, knowing he's shirtless next to me is catching my interest way more than his full-frontal assault the other morning.

It's the colliding of our two worlds. That's all.

I blow out a long breath.

The sound of a zipper gives me the all clear to look again.

And yet, that isn't any safer.

Charles shirtless feels like dangerous territory, but Charles huddled, flush-cheeked, in *my* hoodie ...

Yeah, my cock takes notice.

Because that image is fucking criminal.

CHARLES

ZEKE'S GRAY STARE TURNS MORE INTENSE THAN USUAL. I CAN'T WORK OUT what causes it, only that when it sharpens on me, I have to look away.

"So ... this person. *Anon7136*. Have you tried to contact them?" I ask.

"Why?"

Isn't that obvious? "To see what you can find out."

"I doubt they're going to monologue like a cheesy action villain."

"You never know." I pick up his phone from where it's rested between us. "Do you have an account?"

Zeke hesitates for a second before reaching over and unlocking his phone. His hand brushes mine for barely a fraction of a second, and it's still enough to send small shivers over my skin. "Should be signed in."

Right. App. I scroll through until I find it, then navigate to the post. The little "send message" button is right next to Anon's name, and I click it before pausing.

"Umm ... what should we write?"

"Do you mind detailing your whole, entire plan for us?"

I shoot him a glare. "Not helpful."

"I don't think this plan is helpful at all."

I'll admit it's a long shot, but it's not as though he has any better ideas. My thumb taps the side of his phone as I try to work out what to type.

"Hey, Anon," I mutter as I punch out the words. "I'm Zeke, the president of Sigma Beta Psi. I've seen your posts and was hoping we could chat." I

glance over at Zeke for approval.

He waves his hand. “Go nuts.”

After hitting Send, there’s a long, anxious moment where I watch the screen, waiting for something to change. It doesn’t.

“Anticlimactic,” Zeke sniggers.

My lips kick up on one side. “Most things with you are.”

“What?” He makes a choking noise. “We both know that’s total bullshit.”

And even though I could die over teasing him like this, my nerves are thrumming with excitement. “Do we? Do we really know that?”

He groans. “Don’t make me say it.”

“Say what?”

“That—”

His phone’s obnoxiously loud notification cuts off whatever reply he was about to send my way. *Shiiit*.

“Was that Anon? What did they write?” he asks, reminding me that—oh, yeah—I have his phone.

I tap on the messages and find the one he’s sent.

ANON7136: *WHY?*

“THEY’RE BEING DIFFICULT.” I SIGH. “NOT UNLIKE SOMEONE ELSE I KNOW.”

“Damn, Chuck, with the shade today.”

“Who said I was talking about you?” I throw back.

“My ego.” His elbow crosses the center console to nudge me. “You might want to stop with all that flattery, or I’ll get the wrong impression.”

His warm voice unsettles me. The best decision here is to ignore him and focus on these messages, which is already hard enough to do with Zeke’s scent literally flooding me.

ME: *YOU’RE MAKING SOME BOLD CLAIMS AND IF ANY OF THEM ARE TRUE, I want to look into them*

ANON7136: *THEY'RE ALL TRUE. YOU'VE HAD TIME TO LOOK INTO THEM AND you haven't. Now your time is up*

ME: *I DON'T FOR A SECOND BELIEVE YOU HAVE EVIDENCE OTHERWISE YOU would have gone to the dean already*

ANON7136: *HOW DO YOU KNOW I'M NOT BIDDING MY TIME? MAYBE I JUST WANT to fuck with you first*

ZEKE MAKES A CHOKING NOISE IN HIS THROAT WHEN I READ THAT REPLY OUT and snatches his phone back. "That fuck."

"What are you going to write?"

"I'm going to give him a piece of my mind."

Of course he is. "Maybe I'm wrong here, but I don't think he'll talk if you do that."

"I don't think he's planning to talk at all." Zeke's fingers fly across the keypad, and after he hits Send, he tilts the phone my way.

ME: *IS THAT YOUR WHOLE PLAN? TO FUCK WITH US. BECAUSE I GOTTA SAY, you're doing a terrible job*

ANON7136: *IT'S CLEARLY GOT YOU SCARED IF YOU'RE MESSAGING ME*

ME: *I'M NOT SCARED OF PUNKASS HACKY SACKERS LIKE YOU*

ANON7136: *FUCK OFF, I'M NO GEED*

ME: *THEN WHO ARE YOU?*

ANON7136: *WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO KNOW?*

ME: *WELL THIS HAS BEEN FUN. ENJOY YOUR PARENTS' BASEMENT WHILE THE rest of us are out here enjoying our lives*

ANON7136: *YOU'VE GOT NO IDEA, MAN. HOW DO YOU KNOW I'M NOT ANOTHER fraternity brother done with you not adhering to parameters?*

ZEKE'S HEAD FLIES UP. "PARAMETERS, AGAIN? THAT CAN'T BE A coincidence, right?"

I lift my hands like I'm surrendering, showing I don't have my phone. "Now do you believe it wasn't me?"

"I already did."

That confession should not make me as happy as it does. I clear my throat. "Right. Well. That was a dead end."

He hums, eyes going unfocused for a second. "What about this?"

ME: *PARAMETERS, HUH? THERE'S ONLY ONE PERSON I KNOW WHO USES THAT word and you sure as fuck had better not be who I'm thinking*

ANON7136: *SO WHAT IF I AM HIM?*

ME: *I'LL KICK YOUR ASS. JUST NAME A TIME AND PLACE*

ANON7136: *I'M SCARED. REALLY*

ME: *WHY ARE YOU TARGETING US, OUT OF ALL THE FRATS ON THE ROW?*

ANON7136: *BECAUSE I DON'T LIKE YOU. WASN'T THAT OBVIOUS?*

ME: *WHY? DID ONE OF MY BROTHERS STEAL YOUR GIRLFRIEND? PISS IN YOUR beer? Where's this shit coming from?*

ANON7136: *IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE ALL TALK. YOU SIGMAS EXPECT THE SHIT kickers to do what you tell them without question. That kind of power is dangerous*

ME: *AHH ... SO THAT'S WHY YOU WON'T FACE ME?*

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

Zeke shrugs. “If this dude is as power-hungry as he's acting, his pride won't let him walk away from a challenge.”

“There's no way he'd want you to know who he is.”

“I guess we'll see.” Zeke nods back to where a reply has come through.

ANON7136: *I'D FACE YOU ANY DAY OF THE WEEK*

ME: *PUT YOUR MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS*

ANON7136: *FINE. I'LL MEET YOU. I'LL LET YOU KNOW WHO I AM. I DON'T give a fuck because it won't change a thing. There's a small meeting room in the dean's building, right down the end, that's never used. I'll see you there at ten. The back entrance to the building will be unlocked. Don't bother bringing any of your frat brothers with you*

ZEKE SITS BACK IN HIS CHAIR AND LETS OUT A LONG BREATH. "SO, THAT'S weird, right?"

"Very. I ... I don't like it."

"Do we have a choice?"

"Of course we have a choice. I mean, the dean's building? What if we're caught?"

"And what if Anon is?"

That's actually a good point. If we can get there early, maybe scope out the place before whoever this person is shows up, we'll be able to make a plan once we know what we're dealing with. "Maybe we get there way early—like eight—and hide out? Then we can figure out who it is without them seeing us."

He taps his lips as he thinks, and I have to actively work to keep my attention off them. "That could work. Once we know who it is, we can ..."

"Go to the dean?"

"And break the golden rule?"

It's all I can do not to roll my eyes. "We don't want his attention on anything negative that we've done. This isn't us. If anything, we're being responsible by coming forward with it."

"That's a good point."

I can't shake how unsettled I am though. "I still think we're being set up."

"Oh, without a doubt," he agrees, but that doesn't stop him from texting back.

ME: *YOU'RE ON*

ZEKE

“THINK WE’RE GOOD TO GO?” I SHOOT A LOOK AT CHARLES, WHO’S HUDDLED in my hoodie, looking twenty shades of sexy.

“It doesn’t look like there’s anyone in there,” he answers.

I’d say that I bullied Charles into coming with me tonight, but I don’t think we actually talked about it. We both assumed. And I’m actually grateful I don’t have to do this shit solo. Anon said not to bring one of my frat brothers, and I’ve held up that side of the deal. Plus, if Charles is here, hopefully that’ll stop dickweed from constantly trying to blame the shitty posts on him.

“Okay, well, no point hesitating.”

“I guess ...” But he hesitates anyway.

Laughing, I grab the sleeve of my hoodie he’s wearing and drag him along with me. “Too late to chicken out now.”

“You’d think we’d be used to sneaking into buildings after hou—” He chokes on a sharp breath.

“You’re determined to relive that, aren’t you?”

“N-no, it’s ... sorry. I can’t seem to keep my mouth shut.”

And yet, every time he mentions it, it’s kinda nice. The reminder that those stolen moments were with an actual person. I throw him the side-eye.

“You regret it?”

“What?”

“Hush Hush.”

His mouth works uselessly for a moment. “I—of course not.”

“Cool.” I wait for him to ask if I regret it, but the question doesn’t come. Maybe unlike me, he doesn’t want the constant reminder that I’m the one he was with. Sure, I’d been the one to suggest no names or references to what happened, but he was quick to agree, and neither of us has brought that rule up again. We reach the back of the building, and like we were told, the door is unlocked.

“Not suspicious,” I say.

Charles is hovering close to my side, giving me a boost of confidence.

We creep in, careful to stay silent, and go down the short stairs to our left to the meeting room we’d been told about. It’s mostly used as storage now.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“Kinda hard to think when I’m so focused on us not being caught.”

I chuckle and crack open the door to peek inside. There’s a long meeting table surrounded by chairs, and filling the rest of the space are discarded office chairs, banners and flags, old desks, and some sporting paraphernalia.

Charles tugs my shirt. “Maybe we should hide in there?” He thumbs toward the cleaning cupboard across from us.

“You think?”

“There’s a metal grate in the bottom of the door. If we bend one of the panels right, we’ll be able to see the hall outside.”

“Good point.” I test the door and find we’re in luck. It slips open easily, and when I duck down to check the grate, the metal is easy enough to twist for a slight peephole.

“Is that enough?” he asks.

“Yep. We can make out enough that we’ll see them when they get here. Then we wait for them to go in the room, follow, and take a pic before they know what’s happening.”

“It’s the only plan we have, so let’s try it.” Charles follows me inside and pulls the door closed behind us. The smell of dust and bleach is made stronger by the darkness. I drop down to lie across the floor, face close to the grate, and Charles does the same. His body heat closes the distance between us so strongly it’s as though he’s pressed to my side.

Then ... we fall silent. It’s weird that just because I can no longer see him, my brain has suddenly cleared of any and all shit I could possibly say. Maybe it’s because this is too much like the other times we’ve met in the dark, but unlike then, this is awkward. At Hush Hush, we both know what

we're there for; no pretenses, no warming up to each other. We meet specifically to have sex.

It's easy to relax and *be* in that moment.

Now ...

"Ah, thanks for coming," I eventually say.

"Of course. I want to clear my name as much as you want these rumors to go away."

"Yeah ... it's wild that they're trying to set you specifically up."

His shoulder brushes mine. "I guess they knew that if they wanted to piss off Sigmas, I was the way to go hard there."

It's not like I can deny it, because it's completely true, but the strain in his voice ... I don't like it. "Sorry. About that."

"It is what it is. It's not like I didn't know about the rivalry when I stepped into this position."

"Yeah, but ... it's not only the rivalry, is it?"

He stifles a laugh. "You mean how your entire house hates me and targets me with any pranks you run and makes out like I'm some big joke? Is *that* what you mean?"

"I guess so."

He doesn't immediately answer me. "I've learned to have thick skin growing up."

"What does *that* mean?"

"It means you can rest easy. I don't think about you Sigmas nearly as much as you probably think about me."

He's got me there. The guy isn't on my mind constantly, but even outside of Hush Hush, my thoughts do stray his way a fair bit. If my brothers are planning a prank, I immediately picture him flushed and chewing me out. If we have a meeting, I wonder how he runs his. Any parties we go to, he's the first one I look for. To make sure he wasn't up to shit, of course.

Which I'm well aware makes no sense, but I refuse to look any deeper into my actions.

"Well ... good." The reply doesn't sum up the shitty feelings I have over how he's treated, but if I actually care and want to stop being a dick ... I just need to not be a dick.

The light from the tiny crack in front of us gives me enough vision to make out some of his features, so when I hear steady footsteps, I see the exact moment he picks up on them too.

I lift my finger to my mouth as though he doesn't already know to keep quiet, and I swear we're both holding our breath as the footsteps get closer. They pause, and it sounds like whoever it is has stopped right outside, but not in a place where we can see anything other than their black Ultraboosts.

Charles and I exchange a confused look when—*click*. It comes from directly overhead.

The lock sliding into place is loud, and the footsteps immediately retreat.

“Fuck,” I whisper and spring to my feet. I try the door, but it's no use. “Double fuck.”

Charles's phone light comes alive, and he reaches for the lock on this side, but it just spins around and around. “Broken.”

“Dammit.”

“Was that them, do you think? Anon?”

“Who else would have known we were here?”

“But ...” Charles's jaw tenses. “How did they know we were *here*?”

“Shit ...” I throw my shoulder into the door, but it doesn't budge.

Charles parks his ass back on the floor. “We can call security to let us out.”

“And deal with some dumbass wannabe cop? No, thank you.”

“So what's your plan, then?”

I hesitate and slowly sit back next to him. We're so close my knee knocks against his. “We could call one of our brothers to let us out?”

“Are you going to explain why we're together?”

I snort. “It's not like we have anything to hide. This time.”

He hums noncommittally, and I pull out my phone. “Larken will be less likely to give us shit.”

“Okay, do it. It's not like we have any other choice here.”

Thankfully when I call through, he answers right away, and luckily he's still at the library on campus. He's got his puppy dog voice on and assures me he'll be here as soon as he can.

We hang up, and the display shows it's past eighty thirty. Looks like we weren't the only ones staking out the place early.

Fifteen minutes later, my phone rings again. “Shit, I'm sorry, Zeke. I can't get in.”

“You tried the back door?”

“Yep, it's locked.”

Of course it is. I thank him, and after promising for the billionth time that

we'll be fine and will call in the morning if we're still here, he hangs up. "So, we're fucked."

Charles curses under his breath. "What do you think will happen if we're found here?"

"If? I think that's a guarantee. I'm more worried about if one of us needs to piss."

He cringes. "Let's not think about that and hope we get lucky."

I look around, thanks to his phone light. "There's a bucket there. Plus a ton of bleach if we need to do cleanup."

"You say that like it's a good thing."

I snigger and stretch my legs out as best I can in the small space.

"What time do you think the cleaners will arrive?" he asks.

"Early, I guess."

My phone buzzes beside me, and I scoop it up to find a cocky-ass message.

ANON7136: *COZY?*

THAT FUCK.

ME: *LET ME GUESS, THIS IS YOU CREATING EVIDENCE OF WHAT ASSHOLES Sigmas are, huh? Hoping the dean will catch us?*

ANON7136: *NAH, JUST WAITING TO SEE YOUR BROTHER'S REACTION TO YOU spending the night with the enemy*

CHARLES AND I EXCHANGE A LOOK IN THE LOW LIGHT FROM HIS PHONE. IT hits me that he's leaning in really fucking close to read. "The enemy?"

"Yeah," I say, dropping his gaze. "That's weird."

"Maybe. Our rivalry is pretty well-known on campus."

“Yeah, but doesn’t everyone know it’s not serious? Yeah, we mess with each other, but at the end of the day, it’s all in good fun.”

“There are some people—even in our houses—that need reminding of that though.”

His tone catches my suspicion. “Like?”

“You’re kidding, aren’t you? Robbie, Chad, any of their little prodigies.”

“What about Lucas? That shit actively plotted against Bailey *and* Chad, and you still have him in your house.”

Charles scowls, and *damn*, I shouldn’t find the way his haughty face screws up adorable. “Lucas planned the prank exactly the way we all knew it would go. The only thing he didn’t tell us about was paying Carter to make sure the house was empty. Carter—*your* pledge—took it on himself to seal the windows.”

Okay, so maybe Charles has a point. “This wasn’t one of my brothers.”

“Seems like the kind of thing Robbie would do.”

“Nah, he’s harmless.” A detail occurs to me. “And his feet are bigger than whoever that was. Plus, no way could Robbie afford Ultraboosts.”

“Aren’t they a staple at Sigma house?”

I shake my head. “For some of the guys, but most of us have knockoffs. Or got them for Christmas or whatever. Those ones looked brand-new.”

“Well, Christmas was only a few months ago.”

“Yeah?” I lift an eyebrow. “And how are your shoes doing after trekking through all the slush out there?”

“Good point. Also why I wear boots.” We both fall into thought. “Maybe they were a birthday present?”

I sigh. “You’re determined to pin it on my guys.”

“They’re the most obvious. There’s the whole setting me up thing—and yeah, they were definitely setting me up because they knew who you were talking about when you hinted you thought it was me. You didn’t mention a gender, but they said *him*.”

“Good point.”

“Then they called me the enemy, and they’re wearing those shoes—”

“That about a billion other people on campus wear.”

“Not in the snow, they don’t. It’s a total frat-guy shoe.”

I cross my arms. “You’re forgetting one thing though.”

“Which is?”

“Why the hell would any of my brothers want to get us shut down?”

He doesn't have an answer for that. I get it, why he thinks what he does. It would be the most obvious option, except that all of my brothers love frat life. Even the ones who don't live in the house are active members, and we have more engagement from our guys than probably any other frat.

Charles shifts, then says, "I'm going to turn the light off. Save my battery, you know."

"Sure thing."

He plunges us into darkness again. I can't make out anything other than minuscule movement and the smell of those caramel candles. After a couple of minutes, I catch his soft breathing, and when he shifts again, his leg brushes mine.

"Sorry," he half whispers.

"All good." Hey, I wouldn't mind him doing it again. Closer. Instead of his leg brushing mine, I can picture him throwing it over my thighs to straddle me. I let out a long, silent breath as I try to refocus my thoughts.

"Y-you know what this reminds me of ..." Charles asks, breaking the quiet.

I groan. "We're not talking about it."

"Suddenly shy?" He has the faintest teasing note to his words that makes me smile.

"Nah, don't want to be tempted."

He lets out a weird noise, and I laugh.

"We're pushing our luck being here at all, let alone if the cleaners walk in and it smells like sex."

"W-we have bleach for cleanup ..."

All replies halt in my throat because I don't think he's teasing anymore. I think he's actually offering. And damn do I want to say yes. I mean, sex. Great, right? But something about him being here with me, talking to me and wearing my hoodie, is giving me all kinds of reservations.

So as much as it kills me, I grit my teeth and turn him down. "Probably not a good idea."

"No. Right. Of course."

I don't know what to say after that. Neither does he, apparently, and so we sit there, this thick tension between us. Maybe he doesn't feel it, but I'm warring with the urges to either run far or to climb into his lap.

Somehow, I keep my hands to myself, and conversation slowly returns until Charles shifts down farther on the floor and falls asleep. I stay sitting,

determined to last out the night and be ready for the second I hear the cleaners outside.

But the next thing I know, I'm falling backward. The warm weight on my lap connects with my knee, and it takes me a couple of seconds to blink up against the harsh light.

When my vision comes back, I wish I could shut it off again.

Dean Hutchins stares down at me, lips pressed tight. "There had better be a good explanation for this, Zeke."

Motherfucker.

The upside of running a house full of the college's top athletes: the dean knows your name.

The downside: the dean knows your name, making it so much easier for him to fuck you with it.

I try for a winning smile. "Do I have a story for you."

CHARLES

YESTERDAY WAS MESSED UP. FIRST HAVING TO EXPLAIN WHY THE HELL ZEKE and I were hiding out in a closet and then spending the day with constant aches and pains from sleeping on a hard floor all night.

It wouldn't have been nearly so bad if we'd been able to hook up while we were there, but given it was the dean who found us, I'm glad Zeke was smart about that. I doubt we would have been let off with a slap on the wrist if he'd suspected we'd spent the night having sex in his janitor closet.

I stagger out of bed and head for the bathroom. Zeke's hoodie is pulled tight around me, and the only time I've taken it off since he gave it to me was for classes and while I dealt with some of my frat duties. Then I came right back to my room, stripped off for bed, and climbed into the hoodie instead.

I'm embarrassed by how many times I jerked off last night while wearing it.

In my defense, the smell of chlorine and his crisp body spray is so strong I couldn't ignore it if I tried, and after spending the night before surrounded by that same scent, I was going out of my mind by the time I got home last night.

I *had* to touch myself.

Only I, umm, maybe didn't have to be wearing his hoodie while I did it.

Or have to fall asleep in it.

That doesn't stop me from hugging it tighter as I stumble into the bathroom and take aim for my morning leak. I'm still half-asleep, hoodie lifted to my nose so I can bury my face in it, when I let go and ... there's a weird echoing of the stream hitting *something*, and then warmth splashes over my legs.

"What the ..."

I look down to see my piss hitting a clear barrier and flinging off in every direction.

Some motherfucker cling-wrapped the toilet.

I'm struggling to stop *and* hold the hoodie up *and* get away from the pee splatter, but I end up covered anyway. So are the walls. And the floor.

Fucking hell.

My teeth set on edge, and I snatch my phone from where I left it on the vanity. I'm about a second away from hitting Zeke's number when I pause.

There's a ninety-nine percent chance the Sigmas did this—it's exactly their idea of stupid fun—but we *have* been hit by other houses before, and on the very unlikely off chance it wasn't the Sigmas, the last thing I want to do is call Zeke and have him picture me covered in my own urine.

I mentally gag at the thought.

Hell, even if it was them, I don't want him picturing that anyway.

Talk about complete boner killer.

I struggle down a calming breath when all I want to do is give him a piece of my mind.

I am *covered* in *piss*, goddamn it, and those Sigmas are going to ... to ... *get away with it*.

The snarl comes from me before I can help it, and I grab a wad of toilet paper to start cleaning up the mess before I reluctantly take off the hoodie and jump in the shower.

Thankfully, my cock is done bugging me, so my morning shower is much faster than usual. I'm out and dressed and reluctantly folding the hoodie before I can stop and think about the fact that someone walked through my room last night. While I was sleeping.

In Zeke's hoodie.

My head drops back, and I beg the universe that it was too dark for whoever it was to have made out anything.

Shit.

I run my hand through my hair and try to focus. It doesn't matter if someone saw. Unless it was Zeke, there's no way anyone would be able to link this hoodie back to him. Sure, he's on the swim team, but so are many, many other students. Yes. No reason for anyone to think Zeke and I are anything more than friends.

Especially considering I don't think we're even that.

I head out to the kitchen, where some of my brothers are bickering among themselves.

"What's happening here?"

Lucas huffs. "Someone covered all the toilets in cling film and then glued the toilet paper together."

"My bed was covered in water," Sam adds.

"Don't forget the maple syrup all over the front porch," Bailey says, sounding completely unbothered. "Is that the full list?"

"It was *your* boyfriend," Lucas throws at him. "You tell us."

Bailey goes on eating his breakfast. “I’ve told you before, I’m not responsible for anything Chad does.”

“No, but it’d be nice if you gave us the heads-up.” I like Bailey, I do, but it frustrates me to tears that he lets Chad get away with whatever he wants. We’re a brotherhood; we’re supposed to come first.

“Bet you gave him your keys again,” Lucas snarls.

I hold up my hand. “There is no evidence Bailey has ever done that.”

“Then how does Doomsen keep getting inside?”

“Maybe the same way he used to.” Bailey doesn’t even bother looking at Lucas. “He was getting in here long before I came along.”

“I propose we pass the motion that Doomsen isn’t welcome in this house anymore. He’s been given free rein since they started dating. All in favor?” Lucas lifts his hand, and Sam shoots a look my way, like he’s not sure whether to vote or not.

“Put your hand down,” I say, moving to make some tea. Coffee too early makes me more of an anxious wreck than usual. “Do I need to remind you Bailey is the whole reason we won King of Thieves last month?”

“No, but—”

“Then relax. It was a prank. There’s no evidence it was them.”

“Ah, yeah there is.” Bailey’s grinning now.

Of course. My eyes try to drift closed like they think if I go back to sleep, I can avoid what the rest of the day has in store for me. “Okay, I’ll bite. What is it?”

“Might want to look outside.”

I take my time making the tea, like I’m hoping this evidence will disappear. It doesn’t. And when I get to the front living area and look out the wide window, I see exactly what Bailey’s talking about.

The entire front lawn has been carved up with the Sigma Beta Psi lettering, the dark dirt standing out against the stubborn, lingering snowfall.

I sip my drink, wondering what I’m supposed to do about this. Technically, I should be going to the dean about destruction of property—hell, maybe even break and enter—but despite our rivalry, I don’t actually want to get them in trouble. This is the kind of thing that’s going to be noticed, the kind of thing that will draw attention to the rumors and make people believe them.

As much as I argued the point with Zeke, I’m still strongly on the side of disbelieving it was any of his brothers, though it’s hard to say why. Maybe

it's because of Zeke; maybe it's because no matter how idiotic those clowns are, I know that deep down, they're not harmful. Or maybe I'm a moron with hearts in his eyes. Either way, I lift my phone to snap a picture and hunt down Bailey.

He's already back in his room, door open, as he collects what he needs for today. I knock lightly.

"Hey," he says. "No idea if it was Chad, yes I still have my keys, no, I didn't know about it. That all?"

My lips twitch. He might be prickly, but I generally like him. "One more thing."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Grab a shovel. We need to hide the evidence."

That gets his attention. Bailey looks up sharply and eyes me. "Why?"

Eesh. He wasn't supposed to question me on this. "Do you want Chad to get in trouble?"

Bailey shrugs. "Obviously not, but he's a big boy. He doesn't need me to protect him."

I glance both ways along the hall before stepping into his room and closing the door.

Bailey straightens. "I don't know your deal, man, but I'm taken."

Dear lord. I open the Dirt and search for the post before handing it over to Bailey.

Thankfully, there's nothing new since I last checked, but what's there is enough to have Bailey's expression pull tight.

"What the fuck is that shit?"

"*That shit* is why we need to cover up those giant goddamn letters on our lawn. I'm not talking about protecting them from a slap on the wrist when I say they'll get into shit. I'm talking about *actual* trouble, the kind that comes with breaking the law."

"Fine, I'll help," Bailey says, handing my phone back as he passes me. "But hurry. I suddenly have plans to knock some shit into a certain lovable fool."

We don't talk about much while we work, but I warn Bailey against mentioning the post to anyone in the house. It hasn't hit the gossip channels yet, and I want it to stay that way. I love the other Kappas, but all it takes is one of them telling a friend and that friend telling another friend ... the fewer people who know about the existence of these posts, the better.

The better for all of us is the lie I tell myself, but I know why I'm trying to keep things quiet. Because I want to protect Zeke, even if he'll never know.

I'm not good at working with my hands, and Bailey isn't either, because it takes us way too long to cover up the damage done. Every one of our brothers who leaves the house has confusion written on their faces, but I turn my back and try to ignore it.

If they ask me later, I'll say I didn't want anything to do with Sigma house around here. Most of the guys are biased enough against our rivals that they won't question it.

Lucas shows his face when we're almost done, along with a handful of our pledges, and they get to work scrubbing the porch.

As soon as we're done, Bailey doesn't even bother going back inside; he just tosses his shovel on the lawn and stomps down the street.

I'd hate to be Chad Doomsen right now.

I move on to helping Lucas, and by the time the maple syrup is gone, I'm desperately in need of another shower. The dirt, sticky syrup, and prickle of sweat has left me feeling gross.

There are only a few minutes until I need to leave for class, so I take the fastest shower in history and get dressed, sorely tempted to put Zeke's hoodie back on and crawl into bed.

My phone sounds, and I'm about to turn it off and ignore it when I realize it's the ringtone and not a message.

And it's Bailey calling.

"Hello ..." I answer wearily.

"Hey, you got a second?"

"Not really. I—"

"Let me rephrase. You'll want to free up a second. Come meet me at Sigma house."

"Is this a trap? Do I need to remind you that it's brotherh—"

"Chuck?"

I almost swallow my tongue at Zeke's sudden voice.

"Not a trap. Just get down here." He pauses. "Please?"

"Yes, of course. I'll be right there." Why do I have to sound so fucking enthusiastic?

I hang up and go for the door, my gaze snagging on the hoodie.

Now would be the perfect time to return it.

But I *should* double-check I didn't piss on it, so it's only polite I hang on to it a little longer.

For Zeke.

Just in case.

ZEKE

WHEN CHARLES BLUSTERS INTO THE WAR ROOM, I CAN'T HELP THE SMILE that immediately jumps to my lips. Then I stamp that shit down because what I've heard this morning is far from happy news.

"Okay, I'm here," he says irritably. "But I have a class starting in fifteen minutes that I can't—"

"Might want to skip it," I say.

He levels me with a look. "My morning has been disrupted enough, thanks to your brothers. It's not like I can pick and choose which classes I go to. My degree is hard work, and I should be focused on end of year ..."

I cross my arms and listen to him vent. I've dealt with Charles enough to know that you've got to let him get it all off his chest before he's ready to focus on the actual conversation.

His objections come to an end.

"You good now?" I ask.

He nods and sinks into a chair. There's something about him this morning that is radiating ... unhappiness. It's unlike him. Even when he's frustrated or annoyed, he has a level of energy about him. Today, it's like all the air has been sucked out of his personality.

And I'll have time to psychoanalyze him later. There are more important things at stake here than his out-of-character vibe.

"It wasn't us," I say.

"What wasn't?"

"The prank. The lawn. We've asked around, and it wasn't anyone here."

"But ..." He scrambles for his phone, clicks on something, then holds it out so I can see. The Sigma Beta Psi letters stare back at me. "Who else would do this?"

I almost laugh. "Anyone but us. Why the hell would you think we'd leave that kind of evidence?"

His face falls. "So we covered up the crime scene?" He looks so scandalized, I can't help watching him. Charles's face is full of expression. Always. It doesn't matter how he's feeling, he wears it all out there for anyone to see.

I purposely keep my thoughts locked down tight.

I lick my lips slowly to keep that damn smile away. "Crime scene?"

“Well, yes. If it wasn’t you, then it was someone else.”

Chad shakes his head. “Except everyone would have thought the same as you did and assumed it was another one of our pranks. So, ah, thanks? For covering it up?”

Charles blinks at Chad, looking like he’s waiting for the punchline. When nothing comes, he turns to me, and I notice for the first time he’s not meeting my eyes. “If it wasn’t you, then who was it?”

“That’s the question.”

The four of us get lost in our thoughts, turning that over. Why the actual fuck would someone pull a harmless prank and try to make it look like us?

“Do you think—” Charles cuts off, and his eyes dart to Chad. “Could it be because of ... you know.”

“It’s okay. I told him, Robbie, and Brandon about the posts. And I dunno. It could be, but ... why? If they wanted to back up those posts, they would have done something bad, right? Why do something as boring as cling film if you’re trying to make us look like deviants?”

No one has an answer to that either.

“This is concerning,” Charles says. “But what are we supposed to do about any of it? Maybe the posts and the prank are connected, and maybe they’re not. We won’t figure out anything just now, and I *really* need to get to class.” There’s something in the way his voice pitches high that makes me take pity on him.

He’s got a point, after all. There’s nothing we can do right now. I’ve been scouring the house for any sign of shoes like the ones I saw and have come up empty. Which doesn’t make sense. My brothers are the only ones who know about the parameters thing, so unless it was one of the ones who don’t live at the house ...

“Wait a minute,” I say, head jerking up. “Who has the biggest cause to be pissed with us?”

Chad’s eyes flick to Charles.

I wave my hand. “I don’t mean Kappas. Think about it. Someone who’s been on the inside here. Who knows about Charles and wears the same shit we do but actually has a reason to hate us?”

“Carter,” Bailey answers before the other two can.

I snap my fingers and point at him. “Bingo. That guy has never fit in around here, plus he knew about the prank on Brandon.”

“Yeah, he definitely seems like the most likely,” Chad says, “but there are

a few holes. First, he doesn't own a pair of Ultraboosts—just budget knockoffs. He also got fired from the convenience store he was working at, and two nights ago when you were both ...” I swear suspicion crosses Chad's face.

“Trying to find out who Anon is,” I supply before he can come up with some other reason I was with Charles.

“Yeah. That. Well, Carter was at the same party as me. I remember because Robbie wanted to spray beer at him, and Brando and I had to keep talking him out of it.”

“Shocking,” I mutter. “Could he have left during the party?”

Chad shrugs. “Maybe. But the party was off campus, and we saw him a few times over the night.”

Charles moves, and my attention unwillingly returns to where he's massaging his forehead. “What party?” he asks.

Chad tells him, and a moment later, Charles's screen is full of photos.

“Carter's in a bunch of these,” Charles says. “There's no way he was there and locking us in at the same time.”

“Unless he was working with someone,” I point out.

“Sure, it's possible. But we have no proof on any of this. Even if we go and confront him, I doubt we'll get much more than him laughing in our faces.”

He's right, and the fact Chad doesn't think it's him means it probably isn't. Chad's never liked that guy, and I know that if he could get him back for the shit he pulled—trying specifically to target Chad—Chad would want to return the favor.

And so we're back at square one.

“You're right. Need a lift to class?”

Charles opens his mouth, and I'd put money down that he's going to argue, when he gives a curt nod instead. He's still not meeting my eyes, and when I follow him out, I can feel Chad's stare on my back. Whatever. I understand his confusion. While I've never been hostile toward Charles like the others, I also haven't gone out of my way to be nice to him—that they know about. But my curiosity at finding out what's up with him outweighs the knowledge that I'll have to explain myself later.

I'll just tell Chad I was scoping him out a bit more.

“I can drive myself, you know,” Charles says as we get to my car.

“Yeah, but like you said, you're running late. I have class in half an hour

anyway, so I might as well take you.”

He shakes his head. “Just drop me at my place on the way past. I need to get my laptop and textbooks.”

“I can’t believe you still have textbooks.”

“When you’re dealing with criminal law, it’s easier to have a physical copy to reference.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” But I don’t *want* to leave him at his place. “You run in,” I say, starting the car. “I’ll wait for you. It’ll save on gas. And we can both put that down as our environmental deed for the week.”

“Somehow, I don’t think presidential carpooling counts as being environmentally conscious.”

“Philanthropy quota, then. You survived a car ride with a Sigma Beta Psi and you *didn’t* commit murder. Someone should knight you.” Even I can hear the desperate tinge in my voice.

The soft laugh he lets out warms my gut. “Don’t get ahead of yourself—we’ve only made it seven houses. We still have the drive to campus to go.”

I pull up out the front of Kappa house, and Charles jumps out of the car but leaves the door wide open. If that’s not accepting my lift, I don’t know what is.

I don’t *not* watch his ass as he walks up the path, but then my attention is pulled away to the dug-up lawn, and I curse softly.

Something’s up. Very up. And surprisingly, it’s not my dick.

Fuckery is afoot, and it doesn’t feel like fraternity fun times.

My gut’s telling me I should be worried, but what the hell do I do? I have no clue where to start with any of it, and so far, the one time I tried to do anything about it, we ended up handing this Anon dick evidence of wrongdoing. Like hell am I going to make that mistake twice.

Maybe it’s time to take my brother’s advice. Maybe it’s time to hand off all this shit to Larken and enjoy the rest of my final year.

I don’t have to be in control of everything.

The soft thump of the front door draws my attention to Charles jogging down the stairs. He has a satchel slung across his chest, tan hoodie on over a button-up black shirt, and a giant textbook tucked under his arm. He looks like a total dork.

My mouth is dry.

“Okay,” he says, plopping back into the passenger seat and pulling the door closed. “I’m good.”

“Good.”

When I don’t move, it must catch his attention because those unusual eyes finally look at me. I still can’t tell what color they are. His eyebrows are dark though, unlike his copper hair. Thick, and dark brown, and currently bunched up and creasing his forehead.

“Are we going? I need to get to class.”

Fuck. “Yes, sorry, let’s do this.”

What the hell is wrong with me? I need to get my dumb ass under control, otherwise he’s going to think I’m a creep. What does it matter if his eyes are blue or green? Or that his eyebrows don’t match his hair color?

If I didn’t know better, I’d say my brain was waterlogged from all those early morning swims.

“What time do your classes end?” he asks when I get us back on the road.

“Two thirty.”

“Damn.”

“You?”

He screws up his face. “Not until five.”

“Ouch.”

“No one said being a lawyer would be easy.”

“I forgot that’s what you’re studying.” It’s either that or I never paid attention in the first place.

He hums. “You’re working on a business degree, right?”

“Yeah, I figured I should have a backup for if being a professional swimmer falls through.”

“You really think you can make it?”

I laugh. “You think I can’t?”

“I’m not qualified to answer that. I have no idea how it all works.”

“It’s not that complicated.” I talk him through the different heats and how I need to hit certain times to qualify.

To his credit, he actually seems to be listening. “And the one hundred is your specialty?”

“Yeah, with about half of the rest of the country.” As good as I am, and as fast as my times are, I refuse to jinx myself by talking like it’s a done deal. All it takes is one mistake, one shitty dive or bad turn, and then you lose the second you desperately needed to place.

It comes down to the qualifying swim. You either make it, or you don’t.

“I can barely doggy paddle, so I think that’s impressive.”

I shoot him a grin. “I don’t have the stamina for the longer swims, but I know how to go hard, fast.”

“Jesus ...”

I’m not sure if I’m supposed to have heard that or not, but the hitch in his voice gets my attention. “Don’t get me wrong, I can go the distance,” I say, not able to stop the words. “But I like to take my time with marathons. To enjoy it. Really work up a sweat and feel the burn that comes from a nice, long ... swim.”

When Charles laughs, it catches me totally by surprise. I glance over at him, not believing what I’m hearing, and it hits me that I’ve hardly ever heard him laugh like this.

I like it.

“Now you’re messing with me,” he says.

“Picked up on that, huh?”

“Well, you were so subtle, it was a hard call.”

My smile’s splitting my face. “I’ll be sure to try harder next time.”

He groans. “I hate that my brain is turning that into innuendo.”

“Who says it wasn’t?”

“You, when you said it was the last t—” He abruptly stops talking, and all the air is sucked from the car.

Fucking Charles.

Maybe it was my fault for messing with him first, but I didn’t actually mention specifics. The thing we had worked because we ignored that we had it at all. But there have been too many moments of meshing the two versions of our relationship together that now I need to figure out how to play this. Let his comment go and continue to pretend? Or acknowledge it already and get the goddamn elephant out there?

I’m nervous as my mouth makes the decision for me. “I said *probably*.”

“W-what?”

“I said we probably couldn’t keep it up. You agreed.”

He swallows so loudly I hear it over the music. “Umm, right.”

“We’re both too busy. That’s all it is.”

“Uh-huh.”

I pull up in the parking lot, and he has one hand on the door handle before I’ve even turned the car off. At the click of his door, my hand flies out like it’s been summoned, and I grab his arm to stop him from leaving.

My casual smile comes easily, even though everything inside me feels

like a complete mess. “It’s childish to keep pretending it didn’t happen. We’re both cool with it all. Sorta friends. It was good, yeah?”

“Uh-huh.”

I laugh. “Is that your only response?”

“I have to get to class.” His strangled voice throws me back to the way he said my name when he really, really shouldn’t have, and it takes me a second to remember I’m still holding on to his arm.

I let go, and Charles scrambles from the car.

Before he can close the door, my stupid brain gives me one line that doesn’t make it to my lips in time.

“Let me know if you’re ever not—”

The door slams.

“Busy.”

I drop back into my seat and press my face into my palm. What am I even doing?

CHARLES

I'M IN TROUBLE.

My feelings for Zeke have always been an abstract concept. Definitely lust, a little hero worship, but based around the idea I have of him in my head. Now that he's dropping some of that passive guard he's always kept up around me and referencing things we were never meant to talk about—thanks to my enormous mouth—that obsessive lust is turning into something more tangible.

And I don't have any level of patience to deal with myself.

Classes are difficult, and it takes all of my mental capacity to keep up with the professor. Final examinations are in two months, and so far, I've managed to scale back on nearly everything. My presidential duties have been largely passed on to Sam with the new VP stepping into his position, and my volunteering at the courthouse ended a few months ago.

Other than tutoring, I should theoretically be able to turn all of my focus toward nailing these exams. Even though I blitzed the LSATs, I still need final grades to graduate.

And yet ... I can't stop thinking about this morning. The dumb posts I could ignore, but framing the Sigmas for a prank on our house drags us into it. I'd been perfectly happy to let Zeke deal with his own mess, but now it's getting personal, and the further this thing spreads, the more people who know about it, the harder it will be to put the lid on the claims.

I'm not being dramatic when I say that if it gets on the dean's radar, we're all fucked.

Every time a fraternity anywhere in the country screws up—and it happens way more frequently than I care to think about—we get inundated with communication from Nationals, and the dean sends through “refreshers” on the rules for operating a fraternity at WHU. We're a lot more than party-boy fronts. Rho Kappa Tau is a countrywide organization that grows and nurtures the future leaders of the United States. It sounds pompous and a little too close to Grampy's mindset to say it, but our brotherhood matters.

I don't want to see all the hard work we've done here go to waste. For any of us.

Zeke least of all.

The RKT group chat has been blowing up over the prank all morning, and

while I've been keeping an eye on it, I haven't stepped in with an opinion yet. As far as they're concerned, it was the Sigmas who pranked us, but as of this moment, it doesn't look like any of them are planning to go against the no-pranking rules I brought in after the disaster last year.

When class winds up, I pull out my phone to call Bailey. It takes longer for him to answer than I would have guessed, and as I'm about to assume he's in class, he breathlessly answers the phone.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Is this a bad time?"

There's a pause and what sounds like hushed whispering, and then he's back. "Nope, you timed it well."

And considering he's probably with Chad, I don't want to know what he means by that. "Have you been in the house chat today?"

"For like a second, then I ignored it."

"Our brothers are pissed about the prank."

"When aren't they?"

"They want to retaliate."

"So let them." Bailey seems completely unaffected by this conversation.

"I don't think that's the right call."

"Well, why are you discussing this with me? Shouldn't Sam be making this decision with you?"

"Usually, yes, but so far you're the only one in the house who knows about the posts because you're the only one who has a reason to care about it being kept quiet."

"True, but ... sorry, man, what are you calling for? About them pranking? Let them, don't let them, I don't see how that will lead to them finding out about the posts—"

"Because I think they need to."

There's a long pause. "Okay, now I'm confused."

I don't know how that's possible when I'm explaining myself so well. Jesus fuck. Okay. I try to gather my scrambled thoughts.

"The way I see it is this. Someone is targeting the Sigmas through slander. This morning, someone targeted us with a prank they've tried to pin on another fraternity. That's not the way things work around here."

"And ...?"

"And whether they're connected or not, something is obviously going on that we don't know about. And until we know more ... I think it's time to

suggest a truce.”

“A truce?”

“Yes.”

“With the Sigmas?”

Chad says something in the background I miss.

“Chad’s right,” Bailey says. “Sigmas won’t join forces with us if we were the last frat on earth.”

“I’m sure you can find *some* way to convince your boyfriend to.”

“Hmm, probably. But there are another sixty or so of his brothers, and there’s no way in hell I’m going to offer to blow them all.”

Chad says something again, louder this time, and Bailey laughs.

“You don’t need to,” I hurriedly say. I am *not* advocating exchanging sex for favors. “We only have to get the ones who live in the house on board. You and Chad can convince Robbie Harrows and Brandon Blakely ...”

“There’s no way,” Chad says, and I realize they’ve switched me to speaker. “I love my brothers, but they’re not going to truce with the Kappas because I’m sticking my dick in one.”

There’s a thump, and Chad grunts.

“Sorry, princess, you know I have a point.”

“He does,” Bailey reluctantly agrees. “The only person anyone around here listens to is Zeke.”

Zeke ...

“So Chad can—”

“Nope,” Chad cuts me off. “No one convinces Zeke of anything.”

And yet ... I did. But after the weirdness of this morning, I was sort of hoping to avoid seeing him for a while. Trust the fucking Sigmas to screw that up for me.

“You do know *I’m* trying to help out here,” I snap.

“Sure you are, Chuck.”

Urg. I hang up. Zeke gets away with calling me that, but there’s no way in hell I’m letting Chad Doomsen do it.

Fine. I huff and glance at my watch. It’s nearly four, and my last class is about to start, but it’s not like Zeke would still be on campus anyway. My only option is to get through this lecture, then make a decision on what to do while I walk home in the goddamn cold.

I knew the minute I accepted the lift with him that my day would end up there, but instead of insisting I drive myself, I gave in to spending a measly

five minutes with him.

Then I remember the way he looked at me, and suddenly, a cold walk home sounds totally worth it.

Until, you know, I have to actually do it.

Winter is over, and the snow has backed off a lot, but when I leave class, it's cold enough I wouldn't be surprised if it actually starts snowing again. Of course. I huddle further into my hoodie and start the trek. The heavy clouds overhead are making it feel later than it is, and I can't wait for spring temperatures to break through this dismal weather.

I stomp along the slushy path, ignoring the car that pulls up alongside me until a sudden whistle splits the air.

My heart startles so hard the rest of me jumps in sympathy, and I lose my footing, landing hard on my hip on the path.

"Ouch ..." I let out pathetically as footsteps thump toward me.

"Fuck, Chuck, I'm sorry."

Oh no. My eyes fall closed with a silent sob, and I force myself to pull it together before he reaches me. The hand he rests on my shoulder is gentle.

I hurry to hold up a finger. "You saw nothing, this didn't happen, we will never speak of it again."

His pink, pillowy lips press together. "Okay. Does that mean I shouldn't ask if you're all right?"

I huff. "Just help me up."

To Zeke's credit, he holds in his laugh and helps me to my feet. My hip feels mildly tender, but I don't think I'm actually injured. It would have been embarrassing and way too erotic if Zeke had to carry me to his car, though it's probably not too late to pretend ...

No. It's a sad day when I have to remind myself I'm not that desperate.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, eyeing his wet hair. "I thought you said you finished at two thirty today."

"I, ah ... you know ... stayed back after class for a swim."

"Don't you normally swim in the morning?"

He shrugs. "I felt like something different today."

I huddle deeper into the hoodie, cursing the wet patch I now have on my pants, which could have been avoided if he'd bothered to let me know he was still around. "Well, thanks for the call to say you were staying back. You knew I finished now. I could have gotten a lift home."

Zeke's eyes widen, and his mouth falls like he's about to say something,

but he cuts whatever it is off with a bewildered laugh. “Ah, yeah. My bad.” He scuffs his gym shoes on the path. “Now, do you want to stand around berating me, or are you going to get in the car?”

“Definitely the car option.” While it’s annoying he didn’t think of me to begin with, I’m grateful he’s here now. The car heat is already pumping, and I hold my numb fingers up to the vent. “Thanks,” I say grudgingly when he finally climbs in.

“We’re not mentioning this, remember?”

I almost roll my eyes. Of course not. We don’t mention anything to anyone that could possibly pin us as more than ... well, the nothing we are. My confusion from the drive this morning is drying up fast. I read way too much into whatever that was.

“Music?” Zeke asks, reaching for it as he pulls back onto the road.

“Ah, wait. Actually, there was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“A truce.”

His eyebrows shoot up, and he glances at me before facing the road again. “Why?”

“Because of what happened this morning. If we’re in a truce, no one can prank us again and make it look like you guys.”

“But that also means we can’t prank you either.” He sends a grin my way.

“Don’t act like you’d be disappointed by that.”

“Hey, I might not do the actual pranks, but that doesn’t make them any less fun for me.”

“Oh yeah? What fun do you get out of them?”

“Seeing you all worked up and bitching me out until you’re red in the face.”

It’s my turn to be surprised. “That’s ... fun for you?”

“Sure.” He glances my way again and must read something on my face.

“Wait, that’s *not* fun for you?”

“Getting angry? *No*. Of course not.”

“But ... I thought ... I mean, that’s our thing.”

“*Our* thing?”

“Yeah. The others have their pranks; we have our ... our ...”

I have no idea where he’s taking this. “Outright animosity?” I suggest.

Zeke immediately shakes his head. “Our game.”

Game. He thought it was a game. “I take it all back. All those times I said

you were the smart, responsible one of your house ... all lies.”

“Aw, come on, Chuck.”

“Urg. Stop calling me Chuck.”

He sniggers. “Fine. We never had a thing. All in my head. But the truce still won’t fly with my brothers. Not when they only have a few months left of fun.”

“Then you don’t get our help.”

“Your ...” What I’m offering sinks in. “You said you didn’t want to get involved.”

“Well, it looks like I’m going to be anyway.”

“And your schedule?”

I sigh. “It’s time I hand things over to Sam anyway. If I do that, I can focus on exams, and my free time can be spent making sure these accusations never get out.”

“And helping me find out who’s behind them.”

I doubt we’ll ever do that. We just need to stop them. “We can try.”

“Fuck yeah.”

“But it means a truce. I mean it. Maybe ... maybe we need to get everyone together. We’ll both tell them we support it and why. Let them know we need to lay low for a bit.”

Zeke chuckles as he turns onto Greek Row. “Fine. I’m in. This is going to be interesting ...”

He pulls up out the front of Kappa house and I ignore the staticky air around us and climb out. It’s just as I’m walking up the front path that he calls out to me.

“Charles?” He’s lowered one of the windows and is leaning across the passenger seat to look at me. “You really think I’d hang around school this late for no reason?”

The look he pins me with before driving off, hits deep in my gut. I ignore it. Mostly. But seeing that look directed at me is a hard thing to forget.

ZEKE

I PLANT MY HANDS ON THE TABLE BEHIND ME AND WATCH CHARLES TRY TO take control of the room. It's entertaining, at least, even if he's shit out of luck at controlling any of them.

The Kappas are mostly behaving themselves, telling my guys to shut it whenever Charles attempts to get attention, but then one of the loudmouths—usually Robbie, to be fair—says something that lights a match under their asses.

I was right. This shit *is* interesting.

And they don't even know why we're here yet.

Larken leans in toward me. "Should I say something, or ...?"

"Nah." My gaze strays back to Charles. "Just give him another minute, and then I'll jump in."

And maybe it makes me a dick, but when Charles gets flustered, I can't tear my eyes away. These little red spots stain his cheeks, and his eyes burn ... well, whatever color they are. Everything about his dark-rimmed eyes, high cheekbones, and pouty lips make him look put together and in control ... I love seeing him crumble.

I quickly hide my smile when Charles spins to me. "Really? You're not going to say anything?"

"Hey, you're the one who said you wanted to try." I wave my hand toward the fifty or so guys filling the on-campus meeting room. "I'm waiting for you to get started."

His eyes flash, and dammit, there's my smile again.

"We decided this wasn't our thing, remember? Now, are you going to help or not?"

Yikes. Since picking him up yesterday, he's had a harder edge toward me than usual. When he gets annoyed, that's usually all it is, but since yesterday, there's a layer of true exasperation that he's never directed toward me before.

I'd say I haven't done anything, but that's probably not true.

So instead of poking him some more, I decide to stop being a pain in the ass. I press my fingers to my lips and whistle loudly.

My merry band of miscreants falls quiet.

Charles stares for a moment. "*Really?*"

"I'll accept a thank-you."

He huffs and turns back to the room. “Now that you’re all listening, I can tell you why you’re here.”

“I swear to the frat forefathers, if you assholes are trying to pull off a prank while we’re out of the house, you’ll regret it,” Robbie says.

“What would be the point of that?”

“Who the hell knows with you lot?”

I watch Charles and Sam exchange a look that clearly projects what an asshole they think Robbie is. First, fuck the both of them for thinking that about my brother, and second ... something dark slips past my attitude when Charles looks away and Sam keeps on watching him.

“There’d be no point,” Charles patiently explains. “Because we’re here to discuss a truce.”

Noise swells at *that* little bomb drop. Robbie scoffs, and some of the other guys laugh or tell Charles to go and fuck himself, but the Kappas aren’t quiet about the whole thing either.

Yep. This has gone about as well as I expected it to.

Larken shifts closer again. “Now do we say something?”

The panicked edge in his voice makes me laugh. I clap his shoulder and go to join Charles. There are a few people here not surprised by his news—namely Larken, Chad, and our next VP Rooster, plus whoever Charles has already filled in. I probably should have given Robbie and Brandon the heads-up as well, but I haven’t seen the two of them until now.

“Shut the fuck up,” I bark, and it takes longer than my whistle, but the noise slowly dies off. And look at that, even the Kappas listened to me. Exhibit A on why the president has to be a halfway decent person. That kind of power can go to any dude’s head. “Believe it or don’t, we’re not trying to be the fun police here. It’s for a reason.”

“There’s *no* reason to get in bed with you lot,” Lucas says, pointedly looking at Bailey, who smirks right back.

“Other than it’s fun, you mean?”

It takes all my self-control not to tell them to grow up. “Tuck your dicks away, and drop the gratitude. The piss-ass attempt at a prank yesterday wasn’t us—I don’t give a shit what was carved up in your lawn.”

“We’ll believe that never,” Jordan says.

And it’s lucky Charles steps in before I can flip him off. That would send our idea downhill fast. “It wasn’t them,” he says. “They’ve always claimed their pranks before; there’s no reason for them to start denying it now. Which

means someone is setting them up. And it might be the same person or persons trying to drag them down on the Dirt.”

“What are you talking about?” someone asks.

Charles takes a deep breath and flips on a projector screen, showing an image of both posts. It still sets my teeth on edge to see them up there like that.

Turns out it’s the most effective method for keeping these guys quiet yet.

“Look, I know half of us aren’t friends,” I say. “But we all respect the way shit is done on Greek Row. This whole thing is a wild card that we’ve never had to deal with before.”

“It’s only someone running their mouth,” Jordan says.

“Probably.” So far, that’s what it looks like. “But the problem is, if one of us fucks up, it gives this person ammunition.”

Charles nods. “It’s possible that our lawn this morning was part of it. A way for *Anon7136* to create evidence to support these claims.”

“That seems far-fetched.” Lucas sends his glare my way. “People aren’t as obsessed with your house as you think.”

“And yet the evidence suggests otherwise.” Asshole. “But whether we take this shit seriously or not, we’re officially in a truce. No arguments, and anyone who breaks it is out on their ass.” I look pointedly over at Chad and Robbie. “There’s no reason to push this worthless gossip along, and with any luck, this shithead will get bored of us.”

“Sorry,” Jordan says, looking at the screen. “But how do we know you *didn’t* do it? There are a lot of comments there.”

Charles steps between us. “Because they didn’t. They’re idiots, not assholes. And now, we’re all working together. We keep this quiet, divert any conversations you might hear about it, and if anyone is vocal about who’s behind this, you bring that news straight to me or Zeke.”

“But it has nothing to do with us,” Lucas argues.

“Of course it does. One frat house behaving badly will make everyone assume we’re all that way. We need to keep our heads down and stay focused.”

“Sounds boring as fuck,” Robbie grumbles.

“But if it keeps the frat open ...” That’s all I need to point out to keep the big guy on board. The idea of the Sigma Beta Psi brotherhood not being there in years to come is a top-tier crime to him.

“I don’t think this is the right angle.” Brandon’s frowning, staring at the

side of Robbie's face, before he turns to me. "We still have a frat to run and pledges to train. We still have to pay dues—how do we do that without another one or two big parties? We can't completely turn ourselves off and run and hide. That's not us."

"This isn't about fun." Those splotchy circles are popping up on Charles's cheeks again. "This is serious."

"I *know* it's serious. I'm not saying it isn't. But what you're suggesting is a passive approach, and I don't think that's the best option."

"Well, Zeke and I decided—"

I sling my arm around Charles's shoulders. "Relax, dude. That was one option. Let Brando say what he wants to say, and we'll talk it through."

I can feel his glare on the side of my face, but I ignore it.

"So, like I was saying. We can act like we have something to hide, *or* we can remind people around here what we're actually good for. Our philanthropy is mostly on the down low—why not shove in people's faces how much good we do for the community? Fundraisers and events—big ones—are a good place to start ..."

Robbie perks up. "Oooh, we could do a Great Greek Row Bake-Off. Shut down the street and charge entry, get some music, some prizes ..."

Brandon points at him. "I'm concerned with how fast you came up with that, but yes. That's exactly what I mean. Things that will generate conversation and get us on the dean's radar for *good*. So if all this shit tries to blow up, we have a buffer."

And this is why each fraternity has a group of executives—no way would I have considered that. We're all good at what we do, and Brandon's got a mind for how to manage risks.

I hold up a finger. "We'll be right back."

My arm is still around Charles's shoulders as I steer him away from the others. I already know which way my vote is going to go, and judging by the rise of voices in the room, most people are discussing it.

"That's kinda brilliant," I say as soon as we're out of earshot.

Charles shrugs me off. "And a lot of work. What happened to our only focuses being school and figuring out who this *Anon7136* is?"

"And those will be our focuses. We have full houses of brothers who can run the fundraising side of things. They can run their ideas by Larken and Sam, and if those two have any concerns, that's when they bring it to us. You know how much people like a scandal, so this thing will get out. Why not

give everyone something else to be talking about?”

Charles’s attention is on the floor as he thinks. “I ... I don’t ...”

“You look stressed, dude.”

“Aren’t you?”

“It is what it is. Either we roll over and let this thing fuck us sideways with a cactus, or we inadvertently fight back.”

“My head hurts.” He rubs his temples, and I notice for the first time how long and slender his fingers are. No wonder they feel so good wrapped around my—*nope*.

“Come on ... it’s a good idea.”

He sighs. “I’m going to regret this.”

“Yes.” I fist pump, but he doesn’t look any happier about the situation. Little does he know that if my brothers are focused on ... whatever their ideas are, they’ll be less likely to get antsy over pranks.

Charles turns to head back to the group, but on a whim, I grab the back of his shirt and tug him to me. I lean into his ear—not too close because of all the people around—and drop my voice. “You know ... I can help with all that stress. If you want me to.”

He jerks out of my hold and spins, eyes wide. For once, I have no clue what’s going on in his head other than total shock.

“Chuck—”

He’s gone before I can say more, telling the others that we agree with Brandon and we’ll plan a bunch of things together. Then before anyone can ask a question or get his attention, he grabs his bag and leaves.

Well, I guess that’s my answer, then.

I’d kick myself, but I don’t get a second before my brothers are crowded around, running through ideas and sneering at Charles for leaving so fast.

I tell Larken to run point, but even with him handling the bulk, we don’t get out of there for another hour.

I’m torn.

Sulk and curse Charles for not being interested or hunt him down to apologize for crossing that line? Because yeah, I want sex again, but ... I’d sort of been hoping that we could have that *without* the games. There’s no more anonymity. Could I do it? Touch? See? Feel? What does Charles look like as he comes? What would his cock feel like in my hand? What do his curls look like sliding through my fingers? My nerves are at maximum level, heart pounding erratically.

But before I can decide how to play this, I pull out my phone and find a message waiting that I've sent a bunch of times myself and never once received back.

CHARLES: *HUSH HUSH 11*

CHARLES

THE DOOR TO HUSH HUSH CREAKS AS I OPEN IT, THEN PAUSE AND STRAIN MY ears. A noise. Fuck. Breathing, and the soft scuff of feet.

Sure, the one time my nerves took a back seat and I messaged him, our meetup is going to be foiled.

Gut sinking, I'm about to back out of the room when a familiar voice fills the darkness.

"That you?"

He's here.

He's here *first*.

I swallow back my sudden excitement as I duck inside and close the door. Even though I'm confident with where I'm going, it's harder to find knowing Zeke is already there waiting.

"It's me," I whisper, and strong hands grasp my outstretched arms. He tugs me in so my body collides with his, and a soft *oomph* puffs from my lips.

His gravelly hum by my ear gives away that he's smiling. "You messaged me."

"You said—"

"I did. And I meant it." He releases his hold to wrap his arms around me. Warm, big hands splay over my back, and I lean in to inhale the smell of chlorine. It centers me and gives my heart that extra incentive to keep beating. "You looked so stressed today."

I'm rendered speechless by that. We never talk about real life here, not specifics, anyway. Nothing that can remind ourselves of the person we're actually with. It's why me saying his name should have ground this thing to an immediate halt.

But ... we're here.

Zeke pushes his thigh between my legs, and the contact wakes my cock up. His lips brush my ear as one of his big hands palms my ass, holding me tighter against him. I can't place what's changed, but something in the way he's touching me feels different.

"I was," I say, only just remembering to answer him. "This entire thing is ... a lot."

"I'll say." His voice is warm and soft, like it usually is when we're here

together. The slow, deep tone always sends tremors through me, and tonight is the same.

Instead of fighting them, I let it happen, grinding my cock into his leg as I run my hands over his chest. I've seen him shirtless so many times but never while I've been touching him. I'd retake my fucking LSATs to have that privilege. To trace his tattoos with my fingertips.

Zeke leans down to suck a spot under my ear, and I tilt my head right back so he has access. His mouth is *right there* on my skin, and all it would take is a short turn to the left for our mouths to connect. For us to be kissing. Could I do it this time? Have things changed *that* much?

Before I can do it, Zeke spins us and presses me into the wall. His body blankets mine, one hand lightly cupping my jaw while the other slowly runs from my chest to my hip. He lets out a heavy exhale, and I have no idea what he's groping when I don't have muscles like his.

"So tense ... Relax ..." he murmurs.

"Not exactly easy."

"Isn't that what I'm here to help with?"

I tug him closer. "You *are* good at it."

"Exactly. Focus on that."

I'm trying, but while Zeke wrings me out in amazing ways, being with him has me coiled so tight I could burst.

"*Relax, Chuck.*"

I gasp. Did he ... did he really ... "I hate that name," I mutter, torn on whether I'm supposed to draw attention to it. But to my surprise, Zeke doesn't pull away. His hot breaths hit my ear.

"What should I call you, then?" he teases. "Charles is too stuffy for someone as passionate as you."

Passionate? What is happening? How am I supposed to answer him when Zeke is scrambling my goddamn brain? "I ... I, umm ..."

He moans, grabbing my thigh and wrapping it around his hip as he brings our cocks together. "I've got it ... down here, you're *Charlie.*"

"Ch-Charlie?"

"Mhmm." He nips my earlobe. "You're Chuck on the streets and my Charlie in the sheets."

His Charlie? Dear god.

"And every time I call you Chuck, you'll think of us like this, and you'll break out in these same sexy-as-fuck shivers, and I'll know you're hard for

me.”

He'll *what?* I'm a smart guy, but I'm not following a solid thing. I cup his face and gently push him back. In the darkness, I can barely make out my fingers on his cheeks. “I'm confused,” I confess. As much as I'd love to play it cool, nothing about this is going the way it normally does, and I'm not sure how I'm supposed to react here.

“What about?”

“Th-this ... we're ... talking. And you used my name. And you—” I can't say the words *want me hard for you* without dying of embarrassment.

“You said my name last time. And we talked about it yesterday. I can't separate it now, and it's totally your fault.”

“So ... you're, umm, picturing me? Right now?”

His chuckle is husky. “I'll go you one better.” He shifts, and before I know what he's doing, a light bursts between us.

I flinch at the sudden burn in my eyes, and when my vision clears, I blink up at him. His intense gray stare is trained on me, and he's placed his phone on the shelf beside us, giving everything sharp shadows that make his face look thinner and harsher. It makes his eyes more intense.

My knees feel weak.

His lips hitch up on one side. “Hi.”

“Umm, hey.”

“This okay?”

I can't do more than nod.

Zeke's attention drops to my lips, and he swipes his thumb over them. My breath catches for a second as I wonder if he's going to kiss me, but his focus drops again, and his fingers brush my buttons. “Better get this out of the way.”

“Uh-huh.”

I'm standing there like an idiot, staring at his face, while Zeke concentrates on getting my buttons open. Then he looks up, catches my eyes, and unleashes a smile that stops my heart. “Things are about to get messy.”

“They are?”

He winks. “If I get my way, they are.”

Zeke reaches for my fly.

“What are you—” I catch his hand. “Don't you want my mouth?”

His free hand returns to my face, thumb swiping my lips again. “Your mouth is incredible. But not tonight.”

“Then what ...”

“Turn that pretty brain off, and let me lead.”

I blink at him, thrown by that word and the affection it’s said with. “Since when do you think I’m pretty?” I can’t stop the question, even though I feel like an idiot for asking.

“How do you think we got here?” His gaze roams over my face. “You’re the prettiest dude I’ve ever seen.”

I release him and go pliant, knowing this is going to kill me. “Okay.”

Zeke returns to my fly, popping the button and sliding down the zipper, brushing the softest of touches against my straining cock. My jeans get pushed roughly down my thighs, and then Zeke reaches into my underwear and wraps his hand around me.

Ecstasy. It’s pure fucking ecstasy and takes all of my self-control to talk myself back from the edge. His hands are big and hot around me, not soft but not rough, just somewhere nicely in the middle.

Every nerve is overloaded as I scramble to reach for his shirt and push it upward.

Zeke hooks the material under his chin, and I watch my hands splay over all those delicious swimmer’s muscles, tattoos standing out starkly against his pale skin.

“Your body is insane,” I praise.

“You should see my cock.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“It’s a plea.” His voice strains on the word. “I need you to touch me.”

And like hell am I going to make the man beg me when I want this more than he does. I’m no stranger to his cock, but while I can picture that thing exactly from all the times I’ve been up close and friendly with it, my imagination is no competition for the real thing.

He’s wearing joggers, and I give silent thanks for the easy access before I shove them down.

Sweet gaybies, he’s going commando.

I hurry to grab him, and his hand finally moves. We touch each other slowly, carefully, stroking in time with the other. The angle must be frustrating Zeke, though, because he pushes my briefs down, then releases me.

“No, don’t stop.”

He chuckles and reaches for his pants to grab something from his pocket.

I don't stop stroking him the whole time. There's no sexier feeling than his thick, hot length in my palm.

"Travel lube," he says, holding up the packet for a split second before he tears it open.

He dribbles some over his cock head before doing the same to mine, then bats my hand away and steps closer.

"I'm doing the work this time." He wraps his hand around us both, and it feels so good my head drops back against the wall.

The tight pressure from his hand, the smooth, slick feel of his cock against mine ... I want to watch, but before I can look down, Zeke crowds in against me, and his lips find my neck.

"Your skin is goddamn delicious."

"Is that sexy talk or cannibalism?"

He nips the place right under my ear. "Not knowing is half the fun, right?"

"No c-complaints from me."

He chuckles. "Tell me, does your cum taste as good as you do?"

"I ... I don't know ... I've never tasted it ..."

He hums. "But you've tasted mine. You've drunk mine. Did *it* taste good?"

My cheeks are getting warm. "So good. Yours is the only ... I've never ... never tasted anyone else's."

His groan is long and deep, and his hips thrust into his hand. "That is so hot."

"I-it is?"

"Have you ever wrapped that pretty mouth around another cock?" he growls.

This is completely new and unexplored territory between us, but I don't think I hate it. I've gone down on women before and had my cock sucked, but that's not what he's asking. No other man has ever tempted me as much as he does.

I shake my head. "Never."

Zeke curses, and then his hand speeds up around us. He's working me over, sending lust burning through my system, and when his thrusts get fast and harder, I can't hold back either. I fuck up into his fist, chasing my orgasm, wishing it could both last forever and hit me already.

The ache building deep in my gut is begging for release.

Zeke attacks my neck, biting and sucking and gasping words like *sexy* and *so hot* and *fuck, fuck, fuck*.

My fingers are biting into his toned ass cheeks, and I'm panting and gasping, and I don't even know when I grabbed him, but I'm fucking his hand like my life depends on it.

"I'm gonna come on you," he pants. "All over you."

The words take my brain offline. My balls draw up, and before I can think to stop myself, I'm coming. My dick pulses with each spurt, and Zeke hurries to hold his shirt up again before aiming my cock at his body. Seeing my cum splash over his abs wrings out my orgasm until I'm oversensitive and weak.

I've barely stopped when Zeke shudders and follows me over the edge. His plump lips are separated, eyes locked on my stomach as he releases onto it.

He's still breathing heavily as he lets us both go and drops his forehead to mine. His warm breath ghosts over my lips and I'm kicking myself that I missed the chance to kiss him. But now I'm not horny, regret is starting to kick in.

Zeke might have been the one to come up with the *no names, no faces* rule, but it protected me as well.

Because when Zeke yanks up his joggers and tucks me back away, I know this was the stupidest thing I've ever done.

I've seen what Zeke looks like when he comes.

I've seen what his body looks like under my fingers.

I've seen his eyes filled with lust and directed my way.

"Thanks, Charlie." He steps in and presses his lips to my hair.

Like always.

And like always, it both hurts and feels amazing all at once.

Then Zeke grabs his phone, tells me he'll see me later, and taps off the light.

I watch the door open and close as he leaves.

ZEKE

“ONE OF THE OTHER IDEAS WAS OPENING UP SPRING FORMAL AND DOING A kind of silent auction,” Brandon explains.

Robbie lets out a noise of disagreement.

I almost laugh. “That’s a no from you?”

“Spring formal is sacred; we don’t want the geeds invading. I like the silent auction idea though. Maybe at the executive sleepover, we can do a live where each of the execs offer up ... something—”

Brandon cuts him off. “If this is some kind of prostitution idea again—”

Charles splutters.

“—then it’s a solid no.”

“*What?*” Robbie asks, and for someone who *has* suggested auctioning off dates before, he sounds more offended than he has any right to. “I meant like ... mowing lawns or washing cars. Geez, bro, get your head out of the gutter.”

“Before you start arguing again,” Charles says, “that’s actually a good idea. And I agree about keeping spring formal for fraternity and sorority members only. Some traditions should be upheld.”

Robbie blinks at him in surprise, and he’s not the only one. Charles agreeing with one of us, let alone Robbie, is a rare thing.

“How many ideas is that?” Charles asks, leaning toward me slightly but not looking at me. He hasn’t given me his attention once today, and it’s starting to bug me. I tilt the paper his way and show the list I’ve jotted down, but I don’t answer. If he wants to know, he can pay me respect by acknowledging my existence.

But his gaze lands right on the list, and he reads through it all.

“Right.” He nods. “I think that’s a good amount. We can start plans on those and reassess if more are needed, but we need to make sure we’re not overcommitting. Get some of the younger guys on the organizing. I don’t want anyone here cutting coursework for this.”

There’s general agreement, and I know my guys are confused why I’m not the one making the call on that, but it’s clear the only way Charles is comfortable in Sigma house is if he’s the one in control.

“Does that mean we’re done?” Lucas asks, half out of his chair.

“Meeting adjourned.” Charles claps his hands, and I almost point out the

gavel works so much better for that.

I don't make a move to stand, and most people don't notice, but I can tell by the tension in Charles's shoulders as he tucks his laptop into his bag that he's aware of me watching him.

"Coming, Zeke?" Larken asks.

I shake my head. "Need to talk to Chuck about something."

He leaves, but I hardly notice because the second I say his name, Charles's back stiffens. And would you look at that, I've found another way to fuck with him.

The asshole still doesn't look at me, but he doesn't move to leave either, and when the final person walks out, he awkwardly turns my way.

"Did it work?" I ask, filthy fucking smile stretching across my face.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yeah you do ..." My eyes drop to his crotch, but there's no way to tell if there's anything going on in there.

When I look up again, he's finally meeting my stare. And maybe it was a good thing he didn't give me his focus when we were surrounded by people because those stormy eyes throw me back to last week when he was putty in my hands.

Charles hooks a dark eyebrow up toward his hairline. "What did you need to talk to me about?"

"Why are you being weird?"

"Weird?"

"Yeah." I wave a hand his way. "All ... standoffish."

Charles looks at me for just too long to be comfortable. "I'm behaving exactly the same way I always have. If anything, you're the one behaving strangely."

"How so?" I'm as cool and collected as ever.

"You think I didn't notice you staring at me through the entire meeting? Normally, you act as though you're not in the same room as me, and today ..." He shakes his head. "Your brothers certainly noticed something is up. Especially Doomsen."

I shrug. I'm not worried about them—they'll believe whatever I tell them because nothing is more unbelievable than the fact I touched Charles's cock and am desperate to do it again. "I wasn't staring—"

"You moved your chair closer at least five times."

I frown at where I'm sitting and back to the chair Larken occupied. Huh. I

think I'm farther away than where I started. Interesting. My fingers run over the five-o'clock shadow starting to form on my jaw. I wasn't aware I was doing either of those things.

Charles turns and leans his hip into the table behind him, fighting a small smile. "What happened to covert? I was keeping up my end of the deal, but you were stomping all over those lines we drew."

"I haven't seen you for a week. I was trying to work out if you were a hologram or actually real."

He tears his eyes away again. "Well, with the truce, I didn't think we needed our usual weekly catch-up. I have no grievances to air."

"You sound so disappointed by that. If you like, I can have the guys work on something. Just for you."

"Don't you dare."

I chuckle, but it dies quickly. "You know we can still meet up. Have coffee. Whatever."

Charles's focus moves to the ceiling—anything to avoid looking at me, I swear—and he struggles to find an answer for me. "I ... holy shit, you confuse me."

"Why?"

"Why? *Why?* You're so ..." He lets out a noise that sounds suspiciously like a snarl. "I just ..."

"Well, I'm glad you can answer that with conviction."

"*Me* conviction? You're going back on everything we originally said, and now I don't know what the rules are."

My voice hitches with amusement. "Are you saying you need parameters?"

"Parameters ..." His eyes flutter closed, embarrassed, and then he takes a deep breath and seems to inflate himself. "Can you tell me if we're still doing this or not?"

That question is so much more direct from him than I expected that for a second, I'm lost for words. "Doing what?"

He deflates. "Please don't make me say it."

"Say *what?*"

"Now you're fucking with me."

"Am not." I totally am. It's a mixture of buying myself time and seeing those red spots spring up on his cheeks and just wanting to *hear* him talk about sex that has me playing dumb.

“Zeke ...”

“Charlie ...”

He twitches, and I fall into the delusion that he was fighting back a shiver. “Fine. Are we going to keep fucking?”

“Keep fucking? Should I be offended? Are you sure you’re thinking of the right person because we haven’t done that ... yet.”

Charles huffs. “You’re insufferable.”

He stands, but before he can turn for the door, I snag his belt loop and tug him between my spread thighs. If anyone walks in on us, we’re royally screwed, but my good sense is on vacation because all I can think of is how much I like to see him flustered. I wrap my hands around his hips and look up at him. “You like it when I’m insufferable.”

“It ... has its charm.” His whole face is going red, and it’s fucking beautiful.

“Then ...” I prompt.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“I think I want that. For you, umm ... to ... you know. F-fuck me.”

Holy shit. Lust hits my bloodstream hot and fast, and I groan as I lean forward and press my face to his groin. He’s hard, and it’s surreal and leaves me a little off-balance that I’m feeling him like this in broad daylight, where any of our brothers could walk in and catch us, and I don’t give a shit.

But when I look up into his hooded eyes, lips parted deliciously, and he runs his fingers over my hair, everything else is ... unimportant.

“D-do you want to?” he almost whispers.

I take his hand and tug him down to press his palm to the bulge in my pants. “What do you think?”

With him bent over, we’re almost eye to eye, and it’s impossible to miss how turned on he is. “Y-yes. You want to.”

“Hell yeah I do.”

“Does it have to be in Hush Hush? Now that we’re ... it’s not ... we’re doing this together. On purpose. I ... I want you to fuck me in the light.”

The image of him stretched out under me, totally naked, is way too tempting to pass on. My cock fucking throbs. “Deal.”

He swallows, then yanks himself away, hurrying to grab his bag and needlessly straighten out his clothes.

A knock on the door startles us both, and I thank frat for Charles’s self-

control.

Chad steps inside. “Lucas is waiting for you,” he tells Charles. “No offense, but can you hurry up? I want that dickhead out of my house.”

Charles rolls his eyes but hurries for the door, not stopping to look back at me.

Once he’s gone, Chad crosses his arms and pins me with a serious look. “I hope you know what you’re doing, man.”

I stand, strategically positioning my laptop in front of my boner, but it only makes Chad smirk. Which ... I don’t hate him knowing as much as I thought I would, but the idea of him spreading that I’m fucking around with Charles, like it’s some kind of joke, makes me ... angry.

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh. All I’m gonna say is it’s lucky it’s me here and not Robbie.”

“Got it. And all I’m going to say is that anything you did or didn’t see stays between us.”

He mimes locking his lips and holds his hands up, palms out.

“Better. Now, what are the chances of you keeping your lips locked for the rest of semester? Gotta say, it’ll be a whole lot quieter around here.”

He laughs, and the weird tension is broken. Whether he agrees with what I’m doing or not, I also know he won’t say shit. That’s brotherhood. We support each other through our dumb moments and don’t pass judgment.

And Charles is undoubtedly my dumbest moment yet.

CHARLES

WE WALK ALONG THE PATH TOWARD THE FOUNTAIN, WHERE ZEKE ASKED US to meet them, and with every step, I'm becoming less and less sure of this plan. My brothers are obviously picking up on my hesitation because Sam keeps muttering under his breath.

"I already said no one has to be here," I whisper. It's after midnight, and this part of campus is deserted. I'm sure there's security monitoring the grounds somewhere, but we haven't caused any trouble they can pin on us ... yet.

"Like I'm going to leave you to deal with those jocks solo," Sam says. "We still have no way of knowing whether we're being played."

"I told you, the truce was my idea."

"Yeah, but they've never agreed to one before."

"They've never needed us before." And that's what it all comes down to. I've suggested a truce more times than I can count, but I've never had something to bargain with. Now I have leverage, I plan to use it, but even more than that, I want to help Zeke.

Our brothers have gone all out in getting Robbie's bake-off idea organized, and even though Zeke and I are supposed to be working on figuring out who *Anon7136* is, we're floundering. First, I don't know where to start with it all, and second, I've been up until this time every night, trying to get through my assigned schoolwork.

I can't remember ever hating something more.

And that includes the Sigma Beta Psis.

"Still feels like a setup," Sam complains. Surprisingly, Lucas is quiet on the matter, and Bailey and Neilson are talking about some upcoming test.

"Not too late to go back."

Sam doesn't answer me. He's a good friend, and I value his opinion—I also totally get where he's coming from—but without being able to tell him *why* I trust Zeke, I'm never going to be able to reassure him.

I reach over and squeeze his shoulder. "Just trust me. I know what I'm doing."

"Let's hope so."

We round a bend in the path and find Zeke and his brothers exactly where they asked us to meet them. Unlike the four of us, there are at least twenty

Sigmas waiting.

Sam curses softly and hesitates, but I straighten my back and keep walking.

“Evening, gentlemen.”

“’Sup, Chuck.”

Dammit, Zeke. He’s right. Every time I hear that name, it reminds me of the deep, husky way he called me *Charlie*. I refuse to let him know it affects me, even though it’s been close to two weeks since we last hooked up. I’ve hardly seen him, and the only time we’ve spoken is to exchange some texts around fraternity duties. All I’ve wanted to do is reach out and organize a meeting with him, a ... a *fuck*, but with how all-consuming the last week has been, I haven’t found the time. I meant it when I said I didn’t want to keep hooking up under the illusion we were other people.

Thinking of other people only reminds me that Zeke hasn’t reached out either. It doesn’t do me any good to wonder if he’s been finding release elsewhere. He’s sexy as hell, and whenever there’s a party, people fall at his feet, but it’s something I actively try not to picture.

We’re not together; he can do what he wants.

It doesn’t mean I have to like it.

“Good night for it,” I comment lightly, trying to ease the tension radiating from the Sigmas toward us. And maybe from us to them to a lesser degree.

“This is your army?” Chad asks, nodding toward the guys behind me. “Geez, don’t hold back or anything.”

“You’re lucky they came at all. Do you understand the level of insanity needed to trust you guys in the dead of night after everything you’ve pulled?”

Robbie Harrows huffs, but Chad’s grin spreads wide. “Aw, you trust us? We’re so flattered.”

I don’t waste my time answering him and turn to Zeke instead. “What’s the plan?”

“We’ve brought a butt fuck ton of flyers to cover campus with. And when I say ‘cover,’ I mean *cover*. Buildings, windows, benches, walkways ... staple that shit to trees and hang the notices from anything overhead.”

I cross to the stack of flyers on the side of the fountain. They’re being held down by a rock, but from what I can read around it, the flyers look like an invitation to the first-ever Great Greek Row Bake-Off.

This had better work.

A Sigma hockey player who I haven’t had much to do with ... Mark?

Miles? ... picks up the flyers and hands stacks of them to each person.

“We need to get people talking,” Zeke explains. “When people show up on campus tomorrow, this needs to be all they see. It needs to be all people are talking about. We need to create a tidal wave through this school that washes away all the fucked-up rumors and replaces them with this.”

His brothers cheer softly, clearly in agreement, while Lucas, Sam, and Neilson look on. They’re all holding paper though, so that’s a good sign.

“Are you sure this is the right move?” I ask. “We’re supposed to be making a positive impression. Is littering really the right option?”

“First,” Robbie answers, “it’s recycled materials.” Like that makes all the difference. “Second, flyers are allowed. Not our problem they’ve failed to specify how many.”

“Do you think campus security will agree with that loophole?” Sam fires back.

“They don’t actively patrol,” Brandon says. “Ask us how we know.”

“We don’t need to know how you know,” I quickly say. Plausible deniability is needed in case the Sigmas’ behavior is ever called into light. “We don’t need ammunition against you.”

“Good call,” Zeke says before jumping up onto the side of the fountain. “Now, listen up. You all have an hour and a half to get as many of these up as possible. Think big; don’t play it safe. We need the message out. If campus security *does* find you, ditch your shit and run.”

“What happened to them not patrolling?” My voice takes on that slightly panicked edge, but the last thing I want is to drag my brothers into trouble.

“*If*, Chuck. I said *if*. We might not actually be breaking any rules, but I doubt they’re gonna be happy about us redecorating.”

He has a point.

“Then maybe we need a new plan,” Lucas calls.

“You’re playing with Sigma house now, baby,” Mark or Miles says. “This is the way we do things. Don’t like it, fuck off back to bed.”

“You think you’re so above the—”

“Anyway,” I cut Lucas off. “The faster we get this done, the less chance of being caught. So can we get to it?”

“Go,” Zeke says. At his word, the Sigmas scramble. Bailey races off after Chad, and Sam exchanges a look between Neilson and Lucas before turning to me.

“You coming, prez?”

“Actually, he’s staying with me,” Zeke answers before I can. “We’re running point, so we’ll be here if anything goes south.”

Sam throws him an unimpressed look before the three of them reluctantly leave.

“Running point?” I ask him as soon as we’re alone.

He shrugs. “Seems like something two leaders would do.”

“I think commanders have more buy-in when they join their troops on the front line.”

“That’s not their role.” He jumps down from the side of the fountain and plants his ass on the stone. Then he pats the place beside him.

I immediately take it because what’s the point of acting like I don’t want to? I already gave away way too much the last time we saw each other. I told the guy I want him to fuck me. It’s not as though I haven’t fantasized over it a million times before, but I was never supposed to admit that out loud. And *in the light*? Shit. I might as well tell him I’m falling for him at this rate.

“You okay over there?”

I jump at his voice. “Fine. Why do you keep asking that?”

“You’re staring.”

“So first I’m not looking at you enough, and now I’m looking at you too much. Have you ever thought that maybe you give mixed messages?”

“Nah, I’m a straight shooter.”

“Says you.” And maybe I won’t act as though I don’t want to be near him, but the urge to resist his charm is strong. Because holy hell does he have charm.

“And says you.” He nudges me. “Admit it. You’re starting to like me a little bit.”

“I like your dick, but I don’t think that’s the same thing.” I hold my breath the whole time I say it.

“Of course it is. My dick takes full control and responsibility for me. Therefore liking my dick is basically liking me, so I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

“I know it’s dark, so you probably can’t see, but I’m rolling my eyes at you.”

“Lucky you keep me up-to-date.”

“I’m also thinking about how flirty you are now but haven’t taken the time to send one text about our conversation since I last saw you.”

And apparently I’ve got him because he lets out a strangled noise. “I ...

dude, neither have you.”

“Because I’ve been up to my eyeballs in criminal law for a paper.”

“And I’ve been swimming every morning and studying every evening.”

He has a point. “We’re busy. Maybe we should have left it when we said we would.”

“Nuh-uh. You promised I could fuck you.”

“It wasn’t a promise.”

“It was basically a promise. And a verbal contract is binding. Shouldn’t you know that, Mr. lawyer?”

I turn to look at him, hating that I find him sort of endearing. “While an oral contract may be enforceable in Connecticut, you’d need to be able to prove it. Good luck finding a jury who is going to rule that I have to have sex with you.”

Zeke screws up his face. “Okay, this is sounding creepy. Can we go back to flirting now?”

“Hmm ... maybe.”

“I think it’s more of a yes or no question.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Are you ...” Shit, the nerves are kicking in again. They always take over right when I want to sound confident and in control. I lift my head and fake it. “How many people are you sleeping with at the moment?”

Silence meets my words. I slowly force myself to look up at him and find Zeke wearing a bewildered look.

He glances around. “At the moment?”

“Yes.”

“As in right now?”

“Well ... no. Not right now *right now*. Obviously. But in the recent past and possible present, how many people are you exchanging orgasms with?”

A smile creeps over his lips.

“It’s not funny,” I warn him.

“Of course not.”

“Like, at all.”

Zeke struggles to control his grin. “Are you asking me if I’ve slept with anyone other than you recently?”

Of course he couldn’t just answer the damn question. “I am.”

“And what would you say if I said I was?”

My heart sinks. “That it’s your business.” I sniff and turn away, trying to act as though I couldn’t care less. Even though I do care. More than I want to. I want Zeke to think I’m ... special. I want to be enough. And I kick myself for everything I want because it’s unrealistic to think about.

“You jealous?”

I scoff. “Get over yourself.”

The air stirs as Zeke slides closer. Then a soft breath brushes my ear. “What would you say if I said you were the only one?”

Butterflies spring up, but I refuse to encourage them. “I’d say that’s also, umm, your business.”

He hums. “It is my business. It’s my business that I’m getting tired of hookups. That drunken sexcapades don’t interest me anymore, and neither do all-night fuckathons. It’s also my business that all senior year, I’ve been getting incredible regular blow jobs from this sexy little redhead, and now all I’ve been able to think about is owning his ass.”

A shiver tears through me that has nothing to do with the night air. When I turn to Zeke, his face is *right there*, and he’s staring at me in that way that steals the breath from my lungs. “I don’t know any redheads,” I whisper.

One corner of his lips pulls up. “Your pubes say otherwise.”

“*Fuck ... Zeke.*”

“Now, are you going to stop playing around or what?” he asks. “I don’t have the time, energy, or want to hook up with anyone else. Your mouth has kept my attention for months, and if we start fucking, there’s every chance I’ll make it all the way to graduation a happy man. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Yes,” I answer truthfully. I have no right to claim all his attention like this, but I’m going to do it anyway. He doesn’t ask me if I’m seeing anyone else though, and I’m torn on whether that bothers me or not. “I can keep you satisfied until then.”

“So confident.”

“I know this is shocking information for you, but I’m usually confident.”

“Not in my experience.”

“Because you make me nervous.”

It’s the wrong thing to say because the smile Zeke’s been fighting takes over. “What about me makes you nervous?”

Everything. I’m relieved I have the sense not to say that.

When I don’t answer, he leans closer. “You’re never nervous in Hush

Hush. Are you sure it's you I've been meeting up with there and you haven't been sending a stand-in? Because that guy *is* confident and always takes the lead."

"Apparently when your dick is up for grabs, I don't hold back."

"So you're saying I need to keep my cock out."

"That's a surefire way to get creepy fast."

"Anything for you, Charlie."

I laugh, and while I meant what I said about his dick, there's also one other reason why it's so easy for me to take what I want down there. I don't mean to say it, but the words slip out. "You're nice."

He cocks his head. "What?"

"When we're down there ... you're nice. You don't tease me or have this weird guard up. We're ... two people. No rivalry. No history. I like ..." Fuck, am I even making sense? "I like how everything else disappears and you treat me like I ... like you're happy to be there with me."

The only sound that answers me is the wind whipping through the courtyard.

Then his fingers trail down my cheek. "Would I be a real douche to confess those moments have been a relief to me?"

"What?"

"Everything else I deal with, all day, every day, is this constant mad rush. It's on fast forward. Some days I barely remember I need to eat because it's so ..." He shakes his head. "The point is, those moments, with you, I can take a minute to breathe. You've been my escape. I might not have said it, but I needed you."

And I don't care if he only means that he needed the orgasms. My heart bursts with happiness. "Happy to help." I grin at him and get a soft smile in return.

Then he clears his throat and rubs his palms over his thighs. "Wanna join in?"

"What?"

He holds up some paper. "They all seem to be fine. What do you say we give this fountain a makeover?"

And even if these dumbass things aren't my idea of a good time, I can't say no with how excited Zeke looks over the suggestion. "I guess ..."

"Good." He hands over half of the pile. "You start making the statue a skirt while I work on a dick and balls."

And just when we were having a serious moment, Zeke has to go and remind me what a frat boy he is.

I should be more concerned than I am when I don't argue, just grab the tape and get to work.

Smiling harder than I have in a while.

ZEKE

TO NOBODY'S SURPRISE, DEAN HUTCHINS EMAILED A REMINDER TO ALL THE fraternities about being responsible with advertising non-school-sanctioned events. And to Charles's complete surprise, he followed up with a private email to both Sigmas and Kappas only that congratulated us on such an innovative and community-focused fundraiser.

Being slated for the Olympics and placing in the Pan Pacific Championships has its benefits. Besides, you know, *the Olympics*. I've always been on Dean Hutchins's good side, which will be a huge help if these dumbass rumors go south.

The thing that really pisses me off, though, is that the rumors are things that *actually* happen at other colleges. Hazing is dangerous, alcohol poisoning kills, and the things that happen to sorority sisters at parties ... I shudder. Straight up lying about this stuff makes it worse for the people who come through with legitimate complaints. And none of the complaints against us so far are legitimate. There's a reason no names have been mentioned.

With one hand tucked behind my head, I push it from my mind and type out my next message.

ME: *WHAT'S YOUR BIGGEST FANTASY?*

AFTER THE OTHER NIGHT, CHARLES AND I HAVE BEEN TEXTING BACK AND forth a ridiculous amount. He was actually fun to hang out with, which isn't something I ever thought I'd think of Charles. Fun to trade orgasms with, yes. Fun to have his mouth wrapped around my cock, well, obviously, though the bar isn't high on either of those things.

Fun to just ... *have fun* with. Yeah, that isn't something I was prepared for.

CHARLES: *I'M SUPPOSED TO WRITE SOMETHING SEXY HERE, RIGHT?*

Me: *That's what I was hoping for, but now you have me interested. Give me the slutty answer and then the real one*

Charles: *The slutty one, huh? I'm not sure I want you having that kind of ammunition*

Me: *I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours*

Charles: *Deal. But you go first*

Me: *Siiiigh. What you can suck my cock like a champ, but get all shy talking about sex?*

Charles: *... I hate that I had a reaction to that*

Me: *Oh reeeally? Now you have three things to tell me*

Charles: *You're pushing your luck*

Me: *And you're not answering any of my questions*

Charles: *You're infuriating*

Me: *So you've said. I think you like it*

Charles: *Against my will, I think I do too*

Me: *Ha! You admitted it. Now. Fantasy. Make it dirty*

Charles: *And now you're being insufferable. But fine. My slutty fantasy is you fucking me somewhere we could get caught*

I SIT UP, EYES ALMOST FALLING FROM MY HEAD. I'D BEEN EXPECTING SOME celebrity name or whatever, but if he wants to make this about us, I'm on board.

CHARLES: *OH, SHIT, YOU'RE NOT ANSWERING. IS THAT WEIRD? DID I MAKE IT weird?*

Me: *You're blushing, aren't you?*

Charles: *Fuck off*

Me: *That's not a no*

Charles: *Did I mention insufferable?*

Me: *First time I've heard it*

MY SMILE IS OUT OF CONTROL.

ME: *I LIKE YOUR FANTASY. I LIKE THE IDEA OF SLOWLY SLIDING INSIDE YOU, hand sealed over your mouth so you can't make a noise as we listen to the people around us. To slowly, achingly work you up until you can't hold back. To feel you spasming against my body, trying to hold in the delicious moans that end up coming out anyway. To see the way you blush as you come down from your high and realize what we've done ...*

Charles: *And now I'm hard. In the library. I officially hate you*

I CHUCKLE, PICTURING HIM SHIFTING IN HIS SEAT, TRYING TO HIDE HIS erection under the table.

ME: *PITY I'M NOT THERE. I COULD HAVE HELPED YOU OUT*

Charles: *Sure you can't do Hush Hush tonight?*

I CAN ALMOST HEAR THE NEEDY TONE IN HIS VOICE.

ME: *I TOLD YOU, THE NEXT TIME I'M INSIDE YOU, IT'LL BE YOUR ASS. AND we're not doing that there*

Charles: *I'm regretting all conversations we've had until this point*

Me: *Then let's change topic. What's your non-sexy fantasy?*

Charles: *No way. I can't talk about that when all the blood is in my dick. We'll have to take a rain check*

DAMMIT. I HAD TO PUSH TOO FAR. I DON'T REGRET IT, BUT I MAYBE COULD have been a little smarter about the whole exchange. If I hadn't finished frat duties late tonight and didn't have swimming early tomorrow, I'd be walking through the library doors this very minute. I type out another message on a whim.

ME: *COFFEE TOMORROW THEN? YOU HAVEN'T YELLED AT ME IN A WHILE*

HE TAKES WAY TOO LONG TO REPLY FOR SOMEONE WHO'S STUCK IN PLACE, hiding his boner.

CHARLES: *IT'S A DATE*

EVEN THOUGH WE PLANNED TO MEET AT DEJA BREW, WHEN I WALK IN AND find Chad has picked up an extra shift, I grab both coffees to go. For my "study session," as far as Chad knows. Then I hightail it out of there and just manage to catch Charles at the corner.

"What are you ..."

"Let's go for a walk instead." It's getting warm for early spring, so the suggestion shouldn't raise any suspicion, but he narrows his eyes anyway.

"Chad's working, isn't he?"

"You know what, I didn't even notice."

He rolls his eyes and takes the coffee I bought for him before leading the way down the street. "Your frat brothers won't assume something's going on because they see us together."

"It's not that." It's sort of that. But how do I explain to him that I'm not embarrassed or anything; it's more that I'm ... protective. I want this for us. Only us. Outside opinions will only piss me off.

"Uh-huh."

"Always the skeptic."

"For good reason." But he doesn't sound annoyed, more that he's teasing me.

"I figured we wouldn't be able to talk more about these fantasies if people we knew were around."

"Speaking of, you never did tell me yours," he says.

"Oh, mine is easy. Locker room sex. What every athlete wants and can never have."

"You're telling me you've never hooked up with another swimmer in the

change rooms?”

“Bit hard when there are only dudes in there.”

“And?”

“*And?*”

He stares at me like I’m crazy. “*I’m a dude.*”

“Yeah, that hasn’t escaped my notice.”

“So ...”

I shrug, trying to play it off because this isn’t something I was planning to get into with him. Ever. “Look, I always figured I was kinda into guys but never enough to *do* anything about it. Then you offered, so I thought ... if I was ever going to try it, I might as well say yes.”

He gets these little lines on either side of his mouth as his lips pull tight.

“I’m glad I could be of assistance.”

I laugh. “Don’t take that tone.”

“What tone?”

“The pissy tone you get right before you start ranting.”

He lifts his chin and turns away.

“Hey ...”

He doesn’t answer, and I shouldn’t find it funny, but I kinda do.

“Charlie ...”

“Dammit, Zeke, you can’t use that name every time you want something.”

“Clearly, I can.”

He pins me with a look, and I give in.

“Fine. Here’s the truth. Maybe I’ve found guys hot before, but I’ve purposely not gone there. You agreed to a secret, and even that was a huge risk for me. I’m aiming for the Olympics—it’s literally my life goal—and even though there have been gay swimmers before me, it’s not easy. Some of the guys I swim with are assholes, and some of the coaches are complete homophobes. I’ve seen it in action. Until I make it there, I can’t risk being overlooked purely because of one person’s opinion of me. Because that’s all it takes.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Most people don’t. People who are supportive don’t or won’t believe that there’s still outright hatred. Most people like to pretend it doesn’t exist anymore because it’s easier than facing the truth.” I wave a hand. “Anyway. That’s too serious for today. Don’t mind me.”

“Does it make me a total asshole that I kind of like that you told me that? I mean, the whole thing is stupid, but ... yeah. I ... You haven’t said that before, have you?”

“Who am I going to tell?”

He gives my arm a small nudge. “I’m lucky that I had my dads growing up.”

“Dads, as in plural?”

“Yeah, they’re gay. I’ve never had to worry about being supported by them, but ... well, my Gramps has ... *opinions*.”

My mood sours. “He’s one of those types, huh?”

“Yes, and he likes to pretend he isn’t. He won’t be outright homophobic because it’s in poor taste, but he gets close. I used to think he was awesome. But he has very clear ideas on what a man should be, and his son doesn’t fit that mold. Neither do I, but he doesn’t know that because I’m good at pretending.”

“Geez ... sorry.”

“It is what it is.”

We walk without saying anything, sipping from our coffees occasionally.

“That’s actually part of my fantasy ...” he says.

I screw up my face. “Your ... grandpa?”

He shoves me, and I love the laugh that bursts from him. “Not like *that*. Fuck ...”

“What did you expect me to think?”

“Literally anything but incest being your first guess.”

Okay, he has a point. “Sorry, I’ll try again. Oh, a fantasy, Chuck, tell me more.”

“Better.” He takes a long breath. “I don’t want to be a lawyer. Law bores me to tears, and the only reason I’m doing it is to hopefully keep all the family on speaking terms. He already resents Dad; I’m worried this will be the thing that cuts all contact.”

From what he’s saying ... that doesn’t sound terrible. “Would that be the worst thing?”

“Urg. No? I don’t know? I hate conflict—”

“Could have fooled me.”

That at least makes him smile. “*Actual* conflict. Gramps has all the money—he could easily cut us off, and what then? Will he threaten to do the same to the rest of the family if they don’t follow his lead with us? He handpicks

favorites from each generation, and my cousin and I are his little trophies. His good grandsons who are carrying the family name.” Charles scrubs his free hand through his hair. “It’s a lot of pressure, either way.”

“What would you do if you could choose?”

“Be a teacher.” He ducks his head. “It’s ... it’s what I’ve always wanted.”

“I could see you as a teacher.”

His expression lights up when he turns to me. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You’re passionate, remember? It’s something all teachers should be.”

“I don’t think passionate about sex is the requirement. Actually, I think it’s the opposite.”

I crack up laughing and play-punch his jaw. “You know what, I think I’m starting to like you a little too.”

“A little? Don’t go overboard.”

“Well, I’ve gotta keep that overinflated ego of yours in check somehow.”

“My ego? Do we need to have a conversation on self-reflection?”

I open my mouth to bite back when Charles glances up and we lock eyes, and I swear the breath punches from my chest. I’m ... struggling to remember what the hell I was going to say.

“Zeke?”

“Uh, there’s a park over there,” I manage to get out, nodding across the road and ignoring the pit in my gut. “Let’s finish these there.”

CHARLES

I REFRESH THE DIRT, BUT IT LOOKS AS THOUGH THE RUMORS HAVE FINALLY gone quiet. Thank goodness for that. I said I'd help and that my house was on board, but I'd been dreading being pulled into the mess.

Kappa house is known for being do-gooders. We join in the fun, are involved in frat politics, but mostly we're here for that chance to build connections before we throw ourselves into the rest of our lives.

And for some of us, the rest of our lives is coming up fast.

I'm struggling to remember the conversation I had with Zeke. All I know is that it was freeing to say the words out loud. As far as anyone in my family knows—including my dads—and as far as anyone at school knows, I'm Charles Levine, future criminal defense attorney. Slated for some big hotshot law firm.

The idea turns my stomach.

Instead, for the first time ... maybe ever ... I let my mind wander. To a big classroom, faces staring down at me, ready to listen to my every word. I think about planning out my curriculum and picking reference materials. I don't even know what I *want* to teach either. I know enough about law to talk about it in my sleep, but it doesn't stoke that fire of passion inside me.

And Zeke thinks I'm passionate.

Still, I cut my thoughts off before they can get any deeper than that. I'm about to graduate. I'll have my bachelor's degree, and then that's that. Zeke will be off to who knows where, and I'll be headed for Cornell. Not even my first-pick school, but more importantly, not Grampy's either. If it were up to him, I would be Harvard-bound. A real Levine. If it was up to me, I would have accepted Fordham U's offer. But I know how to compromise. Cornell is Ivy League and has a good reputation for the level of pro bono work they do. At least I'll be helping people, even if it's not in the way I want.

Grampy won't be boasting about his *Cornell graduate* grandson though. Killing Gran would have been preferable to turning down Harvard in his mind.

The familiar pressure in my chest is building as I think about my family. My cousin Jason graduated top of his class and is well on his path to becoming a senator; some of my other cousins are doctors and engineers. Liara is an architect, which Grampy scoffs at. He constantly offers her money

for being *another starving artist with a useless degree*. Never mind the community project housing she's been designing. She could be earning millions, and it wouldn't matter though.

It's all about appearance. Liara should be heading community fundraisers and managing the house, not taking a common job in the city.

Me, briefcase in hand, designer suit, high-rise apartment, and wife playing the role a woman is supposed to play ...

Sex with a woman is hot, but spending my life with one? Romantically, there's no attraction there.

"Argh." I bury my face into my hand, ignoring the metallic taste building on my tongue, and force down a few breaths. The bitter thoughts won't stop invading though. I want to switch off and not concentrate, but Zeke's busy all afternoon, and then he has practice early, so I can't even text him. I have friends, but none of them would understand.

I swear my suit and tie are already strangling me, and then, at the worst moment possible, my father's name pops up on my phone screen.

"Shit ..."

If I don't answer, he'll keep calling since it's been a week or so since we last spoke.

My chest is still tight as I answer. "Father."

He chuckles. "Son."

"How are you?"

"Good ... What's with the tone?"

Why do people keep asking me that? "There's no tone. My voice is completely toneless."

"That's the problem." He pauses. "Everything okay with you?"

"I'm fine."

"Uh-huh. *Dash*, our son is depressed!"

"What? I'm not—"

"Charles ..." Dad's warm tone comes on the line next and makes me groan.

"*Not* depressed."

"Are the pressures of study getting to you?"

"There's no pressure. Everything is fine. I'm fine. This ... this is ..." I try to release a long breath, but it sticks somewhere in my throat.

"Panic attack?" Dad whispers, then raises his voice. "Charles, have you been skipping your meditation?"

I raise my eyes to the ceiling, begging for strength. “I’ve been busy.”

“Starting your day with meditation is a good way to clear your mind and relax your—”

“Just under three months,” my father takes over. “You’ve done so well up until now, and we’re both very proud of how far you’ve come.”

It isn’t anything they haven’t said before, but the prickling behind my eyes makes me frown. And they’re not happy tears. They’re frustrated ones. I want to be honest. I want to tell them that this whole law career feels like a one-way ticket to large mortgages and a larger house, 2.5 kids and a wife covered in diamonds. It’s ridiculously stereotypical, but when I picture my uncle, it’s not far from the truth.

It’s a future I’ve seen a hundred times, but then it adds another layer, and a new realization hits. Me, sitting in some fancy home, wife beside me, watching Zeke win gold on the TV. Seeing that smile. His joy. Never getting to be a part of that again.

“Oh, holy fuck, that hurts.”

“Ah ... what?”

I start at my father’s voice. “What?”

“You said it hurts. What hurts?”

Shit. I said it out loud. “Nothing hurts. What are you talking about?”

The silence on the line is heavy.

“Do we need to come up there?” Dad asks softly.

“No. It’s almost graduation. I just haven’t ... been sleeping as much. And then the *study* and the exams ... I’ll make time to meditate, I promise.”

They’re not convinced. Even with not saying anything, their thoughts are clear.

“You are making time for friends, aren’t you? Going out and having fun?”

“What’s fun?” I quip, then immediately regret it.

“Charles ...”

“It’s fine. I’m joking. I have all my brothers, and we go to parties most weeks”—at least *they* do—“and it’s *fun*, and everything is *fine*.”

“That’s five,” my father’s muffled voice says.

“Not six though,” Dad replies.

“What’s five?” I ask.

“We should visit.”

“No. God, no. Please don’t.”

“Ooh, there was fire in that reply,” Dad says. “What are you hiding?”

“*Nothing*. I just ... I’m busy ...”

“Flustered,” Father mutters. “Are you seeing someone?”

“Yes, his name is criminal law, and we have many a late night together —”

“You said *his*.”

“Ah, yes ...”

“Normally when you make that joke, law is a *she*. Isn’t it, Archie?”

“You’re right. Law is usually his mistress—”

“Do I need to remind you both that law is genderless and not an actual perso—”

“Who is he?” Dad asks.

Where’s that strength I asked for? Fuck it. I can’t tell them about how desperately the thought of my future depresses me, so I might as well give them something. “Zeke.”

“Zeke? Zeke Ariston? The Sigma Beta Psi president?” And of course my father knows exactly who he is. He didn’t go to WHU when he was younger, but he was in another Kappa branch, and he still has that deep-seated fraternity need for gossip.

“Yes. But you’re sworn to secrecy. That part is important.”

“Promise,” they both agree. And after everything Zeke told me, there’s no way I would have given his name if I didn’t have one hundred and ten percent confidence that my dads would keep it to themselves. They’re overinvolved and a little odd, but unlike the rest of my family, they don’t view gossip as currency. And with Grampy the way he is, they’re not going to out me in a hurry either. My father knows what it’s like to be outed before he was ready.

“So ...” Dad starts. I know they want details or some explanation of how and when it happened, but I’m keeping them in the dark on that one.

“Almost all senior year,” I say. “But it’s not serious. We’re letting off steam and having a bit of fun before school ends.”

“Good for you,” my father says.

“We’re very proud of you,” Dad adds. “And we support you completely. With anything or anyone. Nothing will make us love you less.”

Which is exactly what Dad’s parents should have said when he came out to them, rather than cutting him off. I smile. “Thank you. For never making me doubt that.”

We hang up, and I sit there for a moment, realizing I can breathe again. The spiraling thoughts are gone, and all that's left is this freeness filling me.

I want to see Zeke.

Maybe I'd downplayed how I felt to my dads, but I didn't lie. We *are* having fun and fooling around. The timeline we have left is starting to feel very, very small, and wasting weeks not seeing each other isn't a luxury we have.

Fuck it.

If everything is going to follow a set plan the minute I walk out of here, I want one last chance to be selfish. A time to look back on and remember whenever things get too hard and claustrophobic.

Zeke can be that for me.

No matter how I feel, there's no chance of a relationship being on the cards, if for no other reason than us logistically and personally being in very different areas of life. So why hold back? Why play coy and act like I don't want this?

In a fit of determination, I grab my laptop and look up gay sex. I've seen it in porn, and my dads gave a very clumsy version of a safe-sex talk, but I don't know the nitty-gritty. Which I probably should if I want to be doing it. Soon.

I check out everything I need in order to prep and bottom for someone, then grab my keys, jump in the car, and head for a sex shop ten minutes away.

I had no idea these things even existed in person, but fuck knows I'm glad they do.

Even if I blush like an idiot the whole time I'm in there. I channel some of the confidence I bring to my weekly meetings with Zeke and hold my head high.

Embarrassing but worth it.

For once, I'm getting what I want.

ZEKE

I CARVE MY WAY THROUGH THE WATER, CUTTING THE FASTEST LINE I CAN manage. I'm pushing hard this morning, no signs of tiring, and every time thoughts of frat stuff sneak in or my mind slips in images of Charles on our walk, I push all that noise back out again. The only focus I should have is my goal. What I want more than anything. The reason I get up at ass-crack o'clock every day.

Pretty boys with sweet smiles and explosively short fuses should not distract me this easily.

I hit the edge and resurface, sucking in a long breath before I turn to Coach. His lips purse, and his head jerks sharply from one side to the other.

Fuck.

I don't pound the side like I want to. I redirect that energy to climb out for attempt number two.

This time, I'll stay focused.

This time, I'll nail my—

Charles.

I freeze at the sight of him sitting huddled on a bench a few feet away. He's snuggled into his hoodie, hands clamped around his coffee while he watches.

I fight my immediate reaction to smile. He's not the first person I've had come watch me; my frat brothers stop by occasionally, and sometimes I haul Doomsen's ass out of bed to time me on the days Coach isn't here, so I'm not self-conscious about him being here. I'm ... something else.

And he got to witness a terrible swim.

I flick him a quick wave so he knows I've seen him, then snap my goggles back down and step up onto the starting block.

Okay, Zeke. Time to show off.

Wow. That's the most like Robbie I've ever sounded ... I'd be disgusted in myself if I didn't mean every word.

Coach calls for me to get ready, so I roll out my tight shoulders and take position. The second the whistle sounds, I dive, and as soon as I'm underwater, everything else disappears. My stroke feels perfect, effortless, thoughts completely clear, and I push that high to last me for the entire one-hundred-meter swim. I flip turn at the other end, picturing him watching,

impressed, maybe turned on, who knows, and it forces me faster. Every stroke is long and clean, and when I hit the end and flick my goggles back to look at Coach, this time, he's smiling.

He nods my way. "Much better. Again."

Yesss.

It's hard not to be cocky when I practically bounce out of the pool and go again.

When we wrap it up half an hour later, Charles stands and carries my towel over to me. This time, I can't hide my smile as I take the towel and wrap it around my shoulders.

"This is a surprise."

He's still clutching his coffee like his life depends on it. "I woke early. Thought I'd wander down and see what all the fuss is about."

"And now you get it, right? Why everyone is so obsessed with me?"

"With dreams like that, are you sure you're not still asleep?"

I wink. "If I was asleep right now, you'd be wearing a lot less clothing."

He laughs and scans the area, like he's checking there's no one around, but there are only three other people here this early, and none of them give a fuck about what we're doing.

"Come with me." I start toward the change room and feel him follow. His nervous energy is infecting me, and I hurriedly reach up to pull off my swim cap and goggles, then pointlessly comb my fingers through my damp hair. As soon as we're alone in the empty change room, I turn to him, my amusement growing by the second.

"Are you now going to tell me what you're doing here?" I ask.

"I told you, I—"

"Got up early? Right. You nearly peeled my skin from my face when I woke you at six thirty. You've been here since five. Try again."

His gaze darts away, body language drawing in on himself when he suddenly shakes his head and looks at me again. "I wanted to see you."

"Why?"

"Because it's been days."

"And?"

His bottom lip pouts. "You're in a *Speedo*, Zeke. You can't expect me to word right now."

"Ah, so you want me for my body, huh?"

He scowls.

I smile wider.

“You’re the one who said we’re sorta friends. Sorta friends do things like this.”

“Nope.” I shake my head. “Sorta friends meet up at parties. Borrow each other’s notes in class. *Good* friends show up to early morning swim practice. Are you saying we’re good friends, Chuck?”

“You’re impossible.”

“Just working out where we stand.”

“Fine. We’re good friends, then. What are you going to do about it?”

For one thing, not stop smiling apparently, because watching him get all prickly over this conversation is making me desperate to touch him. “Why don’t I show you tonight what a good, attentive friend like me can do?”

He swallows thickly. “Here.”

“What?”

“You have keys to get in early, don’t you? Let’s ... you know. Because of your ... and you ...”

“You want me to fuck you in this locker room?”

Almost his entire face goes red as his stare darts toward the shower stalls.

“M-maybe in there?”

“And if we’re caught?”

That question cuts through the lust taking over him. “We don’t have to,” he says, sounding more like himself. “I ... I just thought—”

“Yes.”

“Y-yes?”

“*But* we need to meet here early. That way, if anyone catches us, we can say I wanted to practice and you’re here to time me. Tomorrow morning at four. Think you can get up then?”

“Yes. I can be a very, *very* good friend too.”

CHARLES

DOING SOMETHING BECAUSE I WANT TO IS SO FOREIGN AND EXHILARATING that the feeling carries me through the day. Zeke and I grabbed breakfast together before heading to classes, and now I'm on my way to our final meeting about this bake-off idea. Even the thought of stepping foot into Sigma house doesn't fill me with the type of dread it normally does.

Instead, I'm ... excited? Holy shit.

I chuckle to myself as I strip out of my shirt and pull a clean one on. I hesitate over grabbing Zeke's hoodie like I usually do, and even though I *know* I have to give it back, I want to wear it one more time. So I leave it where it's thrown over the end of my bed and collect Sam on the way out.

He and Larken have actually done a better job at this than I expected. Sam, I had no concern about, but Larken isn't the most focused person I've ever met.

"I hate to say it," Sam says as we walk down the street, "but this was actually a good idea."

I chuckle. "We might have been at the tail end of their pranks for all these years, but you have to admit, those Sigma guys are never short on creativity."

His face screws up. "Is this ... *no*."

"No, what?"

"It almost feels like I have—don't make me say it."

"Say what?"

"*Respect*." Sam gags. "Wow. No. Definitely not. Let's pretend that odd moment didn't happen."

"Too late." I laugh as I jog up the porch stairs. "You *like* them."

"No fucking way."

"They're turning you. Are you going to defect and pledge their house? Be a prank king twatwaffle? Pull a Bailey and run off with one of them?"

Sam looks like he might legitimately be sick. "Okay, I said maybe, possibly, respect. I'm not ready for hair braiding or dick touching with any of them. They're an embarrassment to the row."

"And yet you *like* them."

"Take it back."

"Make me."

"Charles, I swear—"

I start making kissy noises.

“Mature.”

I keep going.

“Want me to start calling you Chuck too?”

“Oooh, now you *do* sound like a Sigma.”

“What about *Charlie*?”

The second the name is out of his mouth, the door opens and Zeke’s expression goes from passive to pissed off. His intense gaze bores into Sam before blinking over to me.

“Could you idiots be any louder?” he snaps before turning and storming off down the hall. He only makes it two steps before he yells back, “And his name is *Charles*.”

“What the hell is his problem?” Sam asks.

For once, I actually don’t know. Some of my good mood ebbs. “Do Sigmas need a reason to hate us?” I point out, slowly stepping into the house.

I wasn’t worried about coming here because I knew there’s no way Zeke would let any of his brothers pull shit on me, but now ... I don’t know where that sudden mood came from.

We make our way to the war room, where Bailey and Chad Doomsen are already waiting.

Zeke throws himself into a chair, arms crossed high on his chest, and it takes about a second for Chad to pick up that something’s wrong.

“You okay?”

Zeke’s gaze is trained on me. “Fine.”

“O-okay ...” I stutter, still completely thrown. “Do ... do we ...”

“Can we get started?” Sam asks.

“Larken isn’t here yet,” Zeke answers, making no secret of watching me. “We wait.”

So then the five of us get to sit in awkward silence for who knows how long. I don’t understand what’s going on. When I left Zeke this morning, things were fine between us—better, actually. He was all smiles and soft looks. Now, I feel like he’s trying to drill a hole in my head through eyesight alone.

It doesn’t work like that, meathead, I want to snap. But I keep it to myself, avoiding his eyes, and wait out the very, very, long silence.

“Chuck. A moment?” He stands before I can answer and leaves the room.

Bailey lifts his eyebrows in my direction, and I get the feeling he’s about

a second away from laughing. We can't have that. I scurry after Zeke.

He isn't in the hall, so I search through a few rooms before I find him. He's in a small storage room at the back of the house, pacing in the cramped space.

I cross my arms and lean against the doorjamb. "What's your problem?"

"Did you tell Sam?"

My jaw drops as I take in his pinched expression. "Excuse me?"

"Did you tell him about us? Was he messing with me?"

"Okay, so somehow you pole vaulted to that conclusion because we ... what? Were talking when you opened the door? I think you're going to the Olympics for the wrong sport."

"Does it look like the time for jokes?"

I'm not sure *what* it looks like. It's very, very rare that Zeke gets angry, and this ... I remember how guarded he was when he was talking about being careful with who knew about him. So while I want to snap at him for thinking I'm an idiot, I swallow back my pride and take the softer route. "I didn't tell him."

"So you slept with him, then?"

And there goes my softness. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"He called you *Charlie*."

Zeke's answer rings in my ears, and the annoyance simmers away to ... amusement. "Are you jealous?"

"Fucking *duh*," he says like it's the most normal and not unexpected answer in the history of answers.

"W-what?"

His hands flex into fists before he mirrors me and crosses his arms. "I'm the only one allowed to call you Charlie."

"Is this some kind of—"

"The *only* one."

His deep, steady tone makes me all shivery inside, and while I *know* I should protest his words or call him out or *something*, this base-instinct guilty-pleasure need for him makes everything else irrelevant. I study him for a moment, taking in his tightly coiled tension, his intense stare, and where I'd normally be losing my composure with the way he's eyeing me, I step forward and throw myself into his orbit.

"Fine. Only you. But if you get that, then I want something too."

He drops his arms. "Okay, what?"

What? That's a good question that even I'm blanking on the answer to. There are so many things I could ask for. So many demands I could make, and some might push too far, but this jealousy is making me goddamn giddy.

A nickname? Actual exclusivity? A *relationship*? As much as I might want those things, they'd be a waste because I know what the reality is here, even if I *do* have feelings for him.

"A kiss." The words come out too fast for me to catch them, and when I pull my eyes up to his, I'm met with total confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to kiss me."

"I've kissed you a hundred times before."

Of course he's arguing back instead of doing it without making things awkward. "Not ... p-properly." Look at that, my awkwardness is back. It takes next to no effort on his behalf to gain the upper hand.

"What are you talking about?"

"On the mouth. Kissing on the mouth. With lips and tongue and ..." I suck in a sharp breath. "Can you just *do it* already? Why are you making this weird?"

He leans in, and a soft laugh hits my cheek as his fingers lightly run down the other side of my face. "We haven't kissed before?"

"Never."

"I'm sure we—"

"*Ever*. Why would I lie about that?"

"Not *lie* but maybe forgot."

"I didn't. We haven't. Now kiss me already." I set my jaw and look him in the eyes so he knows I'm serious.

Which is a mistake because now it's ridiculously obvious why hooking up with him in the dark has always been the best option because seeing that affectionate look aimed my way ... my gut turns to jelly.

"P-please?"

His full lips tip up, and he leans in. I brace for contact, breath trapped in my lungs as the milliseconds tick away and he closes the space between us.

"—*where they got to.*"

Zeke jolts back at the voices in the hall, and I'm caught in a sudden freefall. My nerves bottom out as I scramble to keep my footing and step away from him at the same time.

It's not a second too soon.

“There you are,” Bailey says. “I lost rock, paper, scissors. Now, are you guys done? Larken’s here, and we want to get this over with.”

I tug my shirt straighter and step into the hall. “Yes. We were discussing presidential, uh, things and—”

“Chuck *always* finds something to complain about,” Zeke says, pacing past us.

“Weren’t you the one who was pissed?” Bailey asks.

“It’s because I knew the conversation I was headed into.” Zeke’s face is completely relaxed, and I have to give it to him, he’s a good liar.

Bailey’s eyes narrow. “But we’re in a truce ...”

“I know that,” Zeke agrees. “Now, I thought you wanted this meeting over with, or did you only need to get away from Dooms?”

“I want to get away *with* him. You’re holding me up.” He huffs and walks off, and I try my hardest not to glare at his back.

We’re holding *him* up? Fucking hell. Zeke was about to kiss me, dammit!

Just before I can walk back into the room, Zeke’s fingers close around my wrist, and he tugs me back to him. His lips are a breath from my ear. “You’re so cute when you’re all pissy.”

“I’m even cuter when I’ve just been kissed.”

He winks. “I guess I’ll find out in”—he checks his watch—“eleven hours.”

And with that countdown hanging over my head, I somehow have to walk back into the room and ignore the way my body is whining to get to Zeke.

Larken and Sam take us through their plans for the weekend, filling us in on the sign-off from both risk managers and safety aspects in play, Chad goes over ticket sales, and Bailey details what’s been spent to run the event.

The whole time I’m nodding and asking questions, trying to act like the president that I am, my gaze keeps straying to Zeke.

Over and over.

And he’s watching me every time.

ZEKE

OLD FAITHFUL, MY TOUGH-AS-NAILS NISSAN, PULLS IN NEXT TO CHARLES'S sleek Mercedes. It's dark and cold, and when I climb out of the car and Charles follows a second later, I find him huddled into my swim hoodie.

I like the sight more than I should. So much that I don't even call him on the fact he was supposed to give that thing back already. Instead, I send him a smile, grab my swim bag from the car, and lead the way across to the indoor pool. I'm always the first one here every morning, and today is one of the days Coach isn't coming in early for me, so I don't need to worry about him showing up and interrupting. I've had the same schedule for four years, every morning, and every morning is predictable and like clockwork. The chance of something changing this morning is next to zero, but my gut is still knotted over the idea we're going to do this.

I'm about to fuck Charles. For the first time. In my locker room.

Every part of that sentence helps chase away the anxiety over being caught, and in its place is a swirl of ... something. Excitement. Horniness—there's a whole lot of that. A deep-seated anticipation that thrums louder as I unlock the door and hold it open so Charles can pass. Even this early, I catch a whiff of the caramel that I will always associate with him.

"You okay?" I check as I pull the door closed and lock it again. Those of us who train early have a key we've signed for, but Coach is always on-site by five thirty to unlock since that's when the swim team show up to train.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because it's so early. You're missing your beauty sleep."

He doesn't try to hide the way he checks me out. "You better make it worth it, then."

"You think I won't?"

"Years of firsthand experience being disappointed by Sigma Beta Psis make my doubts valid."

My laugh is hollow. "Wow. Look at you making such a big gamble."

We reach the locker rooms, and Charles sends a grin over his shoulder as he leads the way inside. There are no cameras in here, unlike the main room, and only the high skylights overhead let in enough moonlight for us to see properly. I could turn on the main lights, could see everything in explicit, amazing detail, and give more weight to the idea I'm only here to train, but as

I drop my bag and step toward him ... the moment feels ... perfect.

He swallows. "Ah ... hey."

I chuckle and cup his face. "You look good in my hoodie."

His face floods with color, and before I can stop him, Charles unzips the hoodie and peels it off. "I've been meaning to give it back."

"Right." My hand closes over it, but he doesn't let go. "It's slipped your mind for a while now."

"I forgot."

Hmm. Something is telling me not to believe him.

I lift the hoodie to my nose and take a long inhale. His scent is all over it. *All* over it. When I open my eyes, Charles is staring at me funny.

"Why does it smell like you?" I ask.

"What do you mean?"

"Well ... the only way it could smell like you is if you've been wearing it. And if you've been wearing it, that means you didn't actually forget." My smile unfurls. "Have you been wearing my hoodie, Chuck?"

He scowls. "I have my own clothes. I only wore it here so I'd remember to give it to you."

I lift the hoodie again, and this time when I inhale deeply, I don't take my eyes off him. Charles's breath hitches as his gaze zeroes in on the action. "It's covered in you." I step closer. "Not just a hint. You're all I can smell. It's ... sexy."

"Sexy?"

"Thinking of you sitting around your room wearing only my hoodie."

He doesn't answer, but the way he juts out his chin and lifts his head is confirmation enough. Before I have a chance to think it through, I unzip the one I'm wearing, shrug out of it, then step closer to wrap it around Charles's shoulders. My lips tilt close to his ear. "Make it smell pretty for me."

He shudders but lifts the collar to breathe in my scent, and the action goes straight to my cock. To something deep inside me that wants him covered in my smell, hell, even my cum. I dunno what it is, but just like the way Sam calling him Charlie grated on me, this is something deeper than logic can understand.

Charles grabs my hand and takes a step back. "Come on, we should probably hurry."

He's right, I know he is, but my feet don't move. I tighten my grip and tug him back to me. "Sure. But first, I have something for you."

“What do you ...” His words trail off when his eyes meet mine.

He steals my breath, he’s so beautiful. High cheekbones, dark-rimmed eyes that fucking shine in the moonlight, and that full top lip. I want to suck on it, taste it, leave him as hungry for me as I am for him.

My heart is beating so fucking loud in the quiet locker room as I lean in and press my lips to his.

The moment we make contact, everything changes.

I’d doubted Charles earlier when he said we’d never kissed before, but it wasn’t something I’d ever thought about. Whenever we met, it was purely my dick leading the action, and even though I know I’ve tasted his skin and claimed his neck, it’s not until this moment that I realize he’s completely right.

I have never, ever been kissed like this before.

It’s warm. Soft. His mouth molds to mine, and I’m suspended in a moment where everything feels ...

Right.

His lips part on a sigh, and my tongue slips between them. His breath is minty, and when his tongue meets mine, there’s a desperate sort of hesitance to it. My gut swoops, skin shivering against this impossible connection building between us and sucking the air from the room. Charles’s grip on my hand twitches tighter. Grounding me. Stopping me from free-falling into whatever this feeling swelling in my chest is.

A moan escapes me, and it’s like the sound triggers Charles to act. He pushes onto his toes, free hand balling up my T-shirt, and fucking *claims* me. Confidence, possession, and need all come through, clearly laid out and ready for me to pick up and reciprocate.

I’m totally on board with this new development.

With one arm wrapped around his waist, I walk us toward the shower stalls. I’ve barely got us into the first one, door pulled closed behind us, before Charles shoves me back against the wall.

“You taste better than I imagined,” he says, voice rough, before he draws my bottom lip between his teeth. “I’ve been dying for this.”

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“If you wanted to kiss me, you would have.”

He’s giving me way too much credit. “Like you did, you mean?”

“Shut up.” A whine plays in his throat. “Are you going to fuck me or what?”

I grab his ass and pull him between my legs. *“Kiss me, Zeke. Fuck me, Zeke. Anything else, Your Highness?”*

“I want you to make me come.”

“Yes,” I rasp. *“You and all these good ideas. Goddamn genius.”*

“Then get to work.”

My tongue dives back into his mouth because now that I’ve had a taste, I can’t bring myself to stop. Every part of his body lines up against mine, and I hold him close as my hands roam, hungrily mapping out whatever part of him I can reach. My cock is thickening at the promise of some action, and apparently, Charles is done taking his time because he reaches for my shirt and yanks it over my head.

“Do I need to remind you of the limited time again? I’ll be pissed if someone interrupts this,” he says.

“Desperate for my cock, huh?”

“You have no idea.” His hand closes over my length, and he moans. *“I’m not above begging.”*

“As much as I’d love to hear that, it’s completely unnecessary.”

He shudders against me, and it never fails to turn me on so completely when he does that.

I flip us so he’s against the wall, then help him out of his T-shirt as well. Our naked torsos press together, and I can’t stop myself from kissing him again. The spitfire mouth is purring under my lips, giving way to the soft, needy Charles I’ve come to know all these months.

He works open his own pants and pushes them down, so I hurry to follow his lead. My cock is desperate to be free, and as soon as I push my sweats down, it bounces back against my abs. I kick the clothes aside and then step in, lining my naked body up with Charles’s and trying not to whine when our cocks make contact.

“So, how do we do this?” I ask between breath-stealing kisses.

He holds a condom up between two fingers. *“You put this on. I’ve taken care of the rest.”*

I take it, somewhat confused. *“When you say ‘taken care’ ...”*

“My hole is stretched and lubed.”

Oh, goddamn, that’s a thought. My cock throbs at the image of Charles sinking his fingers inside of himself, madly stretching that tight muscle so it’s ready for me.

I pant by his ear. *“Were you wearing my hoodie while you did that?”*

His chin juts forward, and my gut swoops happily.

“You were, weren’t you?”

“M-maybe.”

My cock feels like steel as I palm his ass and sneak a finger into his crease. “Is this what you did?” I ask. My fingertip passes over his slick hole, and he shudders against me again. “Did you rub yourself right here?” I press in, and after the slightest resistance, his ass swallows me to the knuckle. *Fuck*. I almost nut there and then with how incredible it feels.

“Zeke.” His ass clenches around me.

“I want to see it.” I gasp. “I want a video of you on your back, in my hoodie, with your fingers buried in your hole.”

His nails bite into my shoulders. “Yes.”

“Will you touch yourself?”

“Yes ... Fuck, I’ll give you anything.” He pushes back on the digit lodged inside him. “Just fuck me.”

“You didn’t ask nicely.”

“Please. Oh, yes, *please*.”

My teeth sink into his earlobe. “Turn around, Charlie,” I growl.

I step back so he has room to turn while I open the condom and roll it down my cock. Instead, Charles grabs a packet of lube from his pocket, tosses it to me, and then walks to the side of the stall where there’s a bench to keep clothes dry. I suit up and drizzle the lube over the condom as Charles gives me an uncertain smile.

“Just ... be gentle. I haven’t done this before.”

The sliver of vulnerability between all of his confidence makes me step forward and drop a soft kiss on his shoulder. “I’ve got you.”

With a deep breath, he turns and plants his hands on the bench, then tilts his hips up toward me.

I moan, letting my hand roam along his crease, down his taint, and gently over his balls. My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I remind myself that I need to be *inside* him before I come, because this sight is perfect fap material.

I take a long, chest-expanding breath to steady myself, then grab my cock and step forward. “We have to be quiet,” I remind him. I’m not sure how much time has passed, but this hasn’t been the quickie I thought it would be. I’m confident we still have time, but I’d hate to put too much trust into that guess and be wrong.

“I know.”

“You ready?”

“My cock is crying at how long you’re taking.”

I chuckle and press the head of my dick to his hole. Just like with my finger, there’s the slightest resistance, and then ... it pops past that tight ring of muscle, and his ass *sucks* me in.

At Charles’s sharp *hiss*, I force myself to stop.

“Everything okay?” I ask, sounding slightly out of breath.

“Yeah, but ... slowly. Please.”

With how fucking amazing he feels, I’d do anything he asked of me. The word *no* isn’t in my vocabulary. His ass owns me. The goddamn thing deserves a *shrine*. And okay, maybe I’m being dramatic, but there’s no blood left in my brain, and I’m pretty sure even my brain has ventured south.

I move my hand to his hip and rub soft circles into his skin as I lean forward and press light kisses over his shoulder.

His head tilts back. “We should have rethought locations.”

“Are you kidding? You’re fulfilling my deepest fantasy. Every time I walk into this locker room—*any* locker room—all I’ll be able to think of is your tight little ass.”

He gasps and pushes back onto me more. My breath catches. Hand flexes.

“You like that?”

“Even when you’re on the other side of the country?” he asks.

I sink a little farther. “Even when I’m on the other side of the world.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Promise me something,” I say, giving tiny, lazy thrusts halfway in. “When I make it to the Olympics, no matter where you are, I want you to watch my first swim.”

“I’ll watch all of them. Every one.”

I let out a gravelly hum, and press my lips to his ear. “Good. Because when I’m sitting in that locker room, right before my swim, the only thing I’ll be thinking of is you. And no matter where you are, I want you to look at me and know that you own that moment.”

“Shit.” He presses back, farther and farther, and when I’m almost all the way in, I snap my hips forward and seal us together.

A small cry falls from his lips, and I hurry to cover his mouth.

“That wasn’t very quiet.”

“Sorry,” comes his muffled voice under my palm.

I roll my hips, and he moans, almost making me do the same. “Next time

we fuck,” I say, “we’re doing it somewhere I can hear every filthy sound that leaves your filthy mouth.”

“N-next time?”

“My entire schedule just cleared.”

His ass flexes around me as he chuckles, and I readjust my hold to seal his mouth closed properly.

“I’m gonna make this fast.”

He nods.

“You ready?”

He nods again.

Shit, yes.

I draw out slowly, loving the drag and pull of the suction on my cock, and when I’m almost all the way out, I slam home again. He jolts. I’m pretty sure he gasps. But he presses back, again and again, with every thrust I give him. I set a medium pace, trying to focus on not coming too soon but keeping myself right there on the edge. I can’t make this last forever, but if it was up to me, I’d bury myself in his ass and stay there all night.

With his mouth out of action, the noises are building in his throat, in his chest, a private soundtrack all for me. I’m trying to keep my own appreciative noises under control, even as the steady slap of my balls against his ass echoes through the room. My ears are strained for any sound, any hint of someone walking in, and even though that thought terrifies me, it also stokes my arousal to unbearable levels.

My pace quickens, and Charles fucks himself back onto my cock. One of his hands is fisted against the tile while the other steadies him, and I’m torn between keeping his mouth covered to prevent the porny noises and reaching down to jack him off.

A high whine gets caught in his throat. Charles readjusts his weight to lean into the hand against the wall and goes to take the decision away from me.

“No.” I nip his shoulder. “Leave it. I want to take care of that.”

He whines and shoves back onto me.

“Trust ...”

Another noise of protest. *I’ll show him.* I straighten, arching his back and pulling him up with me so I can keep my hand over his mouth, then turn slightly and press him into the wall beside us.

“Your ass is indescribable,” I hiss before I completely let go of control.

There's no more holding off, no more taking it slow. I have one goal and one goal only in mind. I fuck Charles hard and fast, pounding his ass with every thrust. My teeth are buried into my bottom lip to hold back any sound, but my brain is fuzzing over. Bubbling full of lust and need. Flipping the switch to full-on animal mode, where all I can do is feel. Build. Hunt down my orgasm until I'm treated to sweet relief.

Another high-pitched whine from Charles makes me come undone. The needy noise shivers down my spine, pools into my balls and— "*Nrgh, coming.*"

I unload into the condom, hips rolling and thrusting with every throb of my release. I try to draw it out, desperately clutching the feeling and trying to hold on, but too soon it ebbs, and I'm left panting and sweaty against his back.

Charles squirms under my weight.

"Your turn."

I pull out, guide him to sit on the bench, then sink to my knees in front of him. His hands immediately card through my hair as my lips close around his cock. I have no idea what I'm doing, but it turns out it doesn't matter.

The second my eyes flick up to collide with his, the fingers in my hair pull tight, and his whole body goes stiff.

"Z-Zeke ..."

Cum hits my tongue, over and over, and Charles's whole body shudders under the force of his orgasm. I suck him through it, loving the taste, the feel, the way he's struggling to breathe through his smothered cries. Seeing someone who's usually so perfectly put together come undone is mind-blowing. He gives one last, long shiver, and then he falls still.

He's panting, red-cheeked, looking like he's just been stunned stupid.

I let his dick slip out of my mouth while his grip on my hair softens. He strokes my head, and I lean into the touch, feeling more satisfied than I ever have in my life.

"Wow," he says.

I straighten so we're eye to eye, then wrap my arms around him. "Yup."

"Like ... wow."

"So to sum up ... wow?"

"Much, much wow."

I chuckle and press my lips to his hair, lingering for that extra second like I've always done, until the slightest hint of shampoo hits my nose.

Wow, indeed.

CHARLES

Turns out a prostate is a wonderful, wonderful thing. Especially when it's introduced to Zeke's cock. It's been a whole two days, and it's all I've been able to think of. Thankfully I haven't had to do any of the legwork for this bake-off thing, because even during tutoring last night, I kept blanking out and getting distracted.

Sex has never been like that before. The intensity of being bent over and owned is still burning through my blood. The knowledge that it was my body that drove him to pleasure fills me with a satisfaction so deep I'm brimming with it.

"We're all ready," Sam says, jogging up the front stairs to join me on the deck.

I glance down Greek Row at the pop-up tents and platforms littering every lawn. All fourteen houses are taking part, and in a little over an hour, each fraternity or sorority will compete to create ... something. Naming it after a TV show where people can actually cook still seems ambitious to me, but at least they all have goals.

Both sides of the street are closed off, and we've pooled all the houses' pledges to either ticket collect at either side or to walk the crowd in cupcake costumes, collecting donations. There's already a metric truckload of food ready for the spectators and competitions and raffles for people to be involved with, and we have past alumni from each house coming to judge the bake-off.

As much as Kappa house loves to compete in things like this, Sam struggled to find volunteers who would be part of the competition. Most of us have grown up with cooks and can barely heat up a ready meal. It's not something I'm proud of, but hey, charity. That's what this day is about.

"Yo, Chuck."

My gut swims at the voice, and I glance over to the stairs just as Zeke climbs them. He looks incredible, like always, but there's something breath-catching about seeing him out of the blue.

"The dean's on board."

My mouth opens to reply, but it occurs to me that I don't have any clue what he's talking about. "On board for what?"

"Judging. He'll be our tie-breaker."

I gulp. “You *invited* him?”

“Duh. We’ve gotta keep him on side. This thing has snowballed—who knew people loved watching people cook?”

“Literally everyone on the Food Channel.”

Zeke grins. “I figured it would be a good PR move for WHU to show the fraternities and the college working together to raise money for a good cause.”

I hate to admit it, but it’s a good point. “Well, now the pressure is on.”

“No more than before.”

“*Definitely* more than before.” The more I think about the dean being *here*, paying attention to *us*, makes panic rise up. “We’re supposed to be impressing him from afar, not inviting him right here where anyone will be able to say anything and we won’t be able to refute it. Jesus, Zeke. What if someone mentions the app or the posts or worse—*shows* him? That’ll make this entire thing ...” My rant trails off at the way he’s watching me. Soft eyes, small smile. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“You’re laughing at me.”

“I’m not.” His smile grows. “You look so ... pissy.”

You’re cute when you’re all pissy.

My cheeks flood with heat. “That’s enough of that.”

“Breathe, Chuck. It’ll be fine. The dean isn’t interested in gossip that has no support. The dumb posts have disappeared. It’s a great day, and it’s been an *eye-opening* week.” He winks, and I glance over at Sam to see if he’s paying attention, but he’s busy reading through his list. “So relax and have fun for once.”

“I have a bad feeling ...”

“Noted. Now, push those emotions way down deep in a drawer somewhere, and let’s get this day started. Robbie and Miles are going to kick all of your asses.”

Sam snorts, apparently done with his list. “Robbie? You’ve seriously chosen the least patient, loose cannon in your house?”

“I love the way you underestimate him, Sammy.”

Sam drops his head back. “Enough with the dumb nicknames.” Sam turns to me. “Right, *Chuck*?”

Before I can answer, Zeke cuts in. “I told you, it’s fucking *Charles*.”

His tone leaves no room for argument—or anything if the silence that

surrounds us is any indication.

I force a laugh. “Well, g-good luck to you and your brothers. May the best frat win.” My voice shakes, and I wish I could kick myself. Zeke must notice too because he pulls his gray eyes away from Sam and gives me that same smile he’s given me for years.

Because he thinks I’m cute.

I scowl.

“We might be in a truce, but you’re the enemy again today.” Zeke rubs his hands together.

“If you pull anything, the truce is off. This is a *friendly* competition.”

“Aren’t they always?” Zeke asks.

“No. You guys always go that step too far.”

He shrugs. “Maybe we’re just friendlier than you.”

“Urg, enough.” I grab Zeke’s arm and steer him toward the stairs. “Off you go.”

But as I’m about to release him, Zeke’s hand closes over mine, and he whispers, “Side wager. Check your phone.”

He leaves, and Sam sends a *what the fuck* look my way.

“Yeah, no idea what that was,” I say. It’s surprisingly easy to behave normally when Zeke isn’t around.

He texts me straight away, and I step inside to find the message: *President of the losers buys next coffee.*

I choke back my laugh.

ME: *ARE YOU A SIGMA OR NOT? COFFEE? PUT YOUR MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS—literally. Losing prez gets on his knees in Hush Hush tonight*

ZEKE: *I’M SO CONFUSED WHETHER THAT’S A LOSS OR WIN*

ME: *NEITHER. IT’S A DEAL*

ZEKE: *YOU'RE ON. ALSO, WE'RE REALLY BAD AT BETTING*

I SCREW UP MY NOSE.

ME: *OR MAYBE WE'RE JUST REALLY, REALLY GOOD AT IT*

I POCKET MY PHONE AND GET BACK TO IT. THE MORNING PASSES SO QUICKLY I don't get a chance to talk to Zeke again. People funnel in from both ends of the street, and Sam was right that there was more interest than we thought there'd be. One of the Delta brothers has set up his deck on their front porch, and music filters over the street as the pledges run up and down doing ... fuck, I don't even want to know what those brightly colored cupcakes are up to. The whole vibe is relaxed and happy, a far cry from those rumors about hazing and the seedy underbelly of frat life.

This is us sending a very clear message about how that shit doesn't fly at WHU. We're a community. A tight brotherhood. We're not stupid enough to hurt or traumatize our own people.

The rumors are more or less forgotten when twelve o'clock rolls around. Zeke and the Alpha Chi president jump on a platform in the middle of the street while the brothers we have lined up to compete get ready.

"Sup, esteemed attendees," Zeke says. "Thanks for coming down to witness a bunch of college kids trying to cook. While the Great Greek Row Bake-Off sounds promising, I shit you not, this is going to be a disaster."

Eric takes the megaphone, but my eyes don't leave Zeke. He's so ... cool. Easygoing. It's not hard to see why everyone wants to either friend him or fuck him, and somehow, he's settled on me.

The whole time I've known him, I've hardly seen him with anyone, and considering the way some of his brothers treat the women around here like an all-you-can-eat buffet, it was noticeable fast that Zeke Ariston was *picky*.

Whether that's the truth or total bullshit, I have no idea, but word got around, and suddenly Zeke became one of the hottest commodities on the row, even before he became president.

With those kinds of standards, I'm blown away that this thing between us

started in the first place, let alone that it's still going.

"... an hour and a half," Eric says. "Once the time limit is up, that's it. Judges will taste as is, and we'll all keep our fingers crossed they walk out of here alive."

Well, if they're dead, they wouldn't be walking out of here, would they?

He should have left the talking to Zeke.

Thankfully, Zeke takes back the megaphone, starts the countdown, and as soon as he reaches one, the whole street comes alive. My brothers break into a run for the kitchen to grab all the shit they need. Other than the ovens that we hauled out here with the help of multiple extension cords, everything else needs to be sourced inside the time limit. We've got everything lined up on the counter inside, but when I glance back down to Sigma house, they seem to be a lot further ahead than any other house on the street, and as I watch ...

"Those fucking cheaters."

I stomp down my front stairs and jog down the street, shouldering through the crowds of people around.

"Zeke!"

He turns to me with a shit-eating grin on his face. "Yes, Chuck?"

"What the hell is this?" I gesture to where Robbie and Miles are unloading the backpacks Chad, Rick, and Raymond are all wearing.

"Don't know if you heard, but we've got a competition on today. The Great Greek Row—"

"You *know* that's not what I mean."

His smile stretches wider. "Do I?"

"Zeke." It's my best cut-the-shit tone, but his eyebrows just creep higher. "Zeke. The rules specifically said no one was allowed to help."

He taps his chin. "Did they though?"

"Yes. We all agreed it would only be the two people baking who would complete this."

"Remind me of the wording."

"The wording?"

His smile is its biggest yet. "Yeah, the wording we all signed."

I frown, thinking of the piece of paper the presidents all jotted bullet points on before signing. "Two people only and—"

"—and all the rest are to be hands-off." Zeke throws out his arms toward his brothers like *ta-da*. "Look, Chuck. No hands."

That bastard is right. I swear steam shoots from my ears. Robbie and

Miles *are* the only ones touching the ingredients and everything they'll need. It looks like they loaded up the three backpacks inside and then unloaded them out here.

And because they were wearing backpacks, the others were completely hands-off.

Fuck.

Zeke pats my shoulder. "I know, I know, you're disappointed in me, though to be fair ..." His pat turns to a squeeze. "I'm disappointed in you too. You *really* should have picked this one."

He laughs and jogs up onto the platform, leaving me to walk back home feeling slightly miffed. They didn't break the rules—those assholes never do—but they also know when they're doing things that operate in the gray of sportsmanlike conduct, and that's definitely what this was. It hasn't given them much of a head start, but I don't for a second believe that's all they have up their sleeves.

Bailey's on our front lawn with the rest of our brothers.

"Did you know?" I ask, joining him.

"Nah, but I figured something was up. Chad couldn't stop this dumb giggle every time the bake-off was mentioned."

I shake my head. "We'll beat them at their own game one day."

"*Sure* we will. There's still a whole two months to manage what you couldn't in four years. Good to see you set yourself realistic goals."

"You've been hanging out with your boyfriend too much."

"If you had a boyfriend, you'd know that's impossible."

Spending too much time with one person? Definitely possible. But then I think about how much I crave Zeke basically always and think Bailey might have a point. In some hypothetical land where Zeke and I have a chance at being a thing, would spending time together come naturally, or would we get sick of each other?

I let out a long breath. That's not something I'll ever need to worry about.

"Unless you already have one."

My head jerks up at Bailey's words. "Ah, what?"

"Nothing." He eyes me. "Just wondering."

I lift my head to give the illusion of confidence and meet his eye. "There is no boyfriend. I'll be at Cornell in a few months, so that would be pointless."

"Uh-huh."

“And there’s no one I feel that way for. Besides, I’m ... my sexuality being what it is ...” I clear my throat. “There’s no one.”

Bailey laughs. “Okay, let’s both pretend I believe you.”

“There’s nothing to—”

“Charles, I couldn’t give less of a shit. It’s fine. You’re allowed your secrets.”

I expel all the air in my lungs. “Thank you.”

“Though you probably shouldn’t hook up in storage closets at Sigma house if you don’t want people to know.”

My cheeks flood with heat, and I know I have to say *something* because Zeke will hate me if anyone finds out about us.

Bailey grabs my arm. “Seriously, relax. I haven’t and I won’t tell anyone.”

“Not even your boyfriend?”

“No. It’s not on me to out people. If it’s not my business, it stays out of my mouth. I just wanted to let you know that you weren’t being subtle.”

“Fuck.” My shoulders slump. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, I guess we should cheer? They’ve added the thing to the thing.”

And this is why Bailey isn’t up there. “Is that why they’re also using the other thing?”

“Yeah, I think it’s so they can ...” His hand rolls like he’s searching for the word. “Do the thingy.”

“Mix?”

He snaps his fingers. “That. Yes. They will mix and they will bake, and there will be food at the end of it. Now cheer, dammit.”

The crowd *is* being enthusiastic, I guess. To their credit, the whole hour and a half passes fast, and the enthusiasm never wanes. I purposely don’t glance back at Sigma house because if they’re bending more rules, I don’t want to know about it. We’re here to raise money. It doesn’t matter.

I certainly do not find it borderline charming.

The longer it goes on, the more I become invested. Bailey and I cheer for our guys, calling for them to hurry up and shouting instructions and directions as the time ticks down and their ... I tilt my head. I’m not even sure *what* they’re cooking ... but it looks bare and unfinished.

“Chances of us being top three?” Bailey asks, clapping.

“Of the wrong end, maybe.”

He sniggers and cheers some more. Bailey's only been with us for a year, but it's been great to slowly see him fitting in with his brothers and becoming a part of the group. Even with the relationship he has, he's proven time and again that he's a team player.

Exactly an hour and a half later, Eric gets on the megaphone and begins a thirty-second countdown that everyone around us joins in on.

My brothers are in a mad rush, trying to get the finishing touches done, when I let my gaze roam back to Sigma house. And I ... I promised myself I wouldn't look for a reason. Brandon has something in his mouth—sprinkles? Glitter?—and is shaking it madly back and forth, while I *think* Miles is upside down, but Robbie's bulk is in the way, and Zeke is fist pumping and cheering over *something*—

I tear my eyes away. Nope. I don't want to know.

One thing can be said for those Sigma guys though: they know how to put on a show.

ZEKE

WE GATHER AROUND THE PLATFORM ON ALPHA CHI'S LAWN WHILE THEY announce the winners, and it's like the damn alums don't know how things work around here because we place fourth. *Fourth!* Outrageous. Even if I *am* surprised that cake was edible to begin with.

Still, I'm getting a blow job tonight because Kappas come an embarrassing eleventh. I'm going to have to talk to Charles about rubbing up on me some more because clearly the awesome hasn't transferred yet.

I'm smug as shit when I leave my brothers to go and find him. It's not smart. I get that. Charles comes to *me*, not the other way around, so the fact I've sought him out a few times now is bound to get someone's attention. It's lucky for me that having a thing with Charles is so outside of my brothers' scope of possibilities that it would never be their first guess. Well, except for Chad.

To my freaking surprise, I find Charles outside my house with Bailey, Chad, and Robbie.

"What ..." I point vaguely to the circle. "What's going on here?"

"Bonding, apparently," Robbie says, glaring at Charles.

"I love how you tried to cheat and still couldn't win," Charles says.

I shrug. "No cheating here. We followed the rules exactly."

"You bent them."

"Not even. If you haven't learned to be specific by now, there's nothing I can do for you."

An evil look crosses his face. "I'll keep that in mind."

Uh-huh. I'm scared.

"Holy shit!" Bailey shouts. "What is that?"

At first, I think he's being dramatic, but when I turn ... "Is that ... smoke?"

"Robbie!" I turn to see Brandon running down the street. "Extinguisher!"

Robbie springs to life, running inside and appearing a few seconds later. He throws the extinguisher to Chad, who catches it on the fly and takes off at a dead sprint.

The dark smoke fills the sky, smell clogging my nostrils.

Brandon is panting as he reaches us.

"Where is it?" I ask.

“Kappa house, I think.”

“Oh, *fuck!*”

Charles takes off, and I’m right behind him. The panic in that one word has me struggling not to try and comfort him in some way, but we have no idea what the situation even is yet. Kurt, Kappa’s risk manager, is clearing everyone away from their house by the time we get there, and I follow Charles along the side access toward the backyard, where it looks like the smoke is coming from.

I hear the extinguisher before I see them, and where I’d been expecting something dramatic, there are just a bunch of Kappas with a hose and Chad extinguishing the garden shed, wide grin in place.

“I’ve always wanted to use one of these things,” he shouts.

“I saw someone head that way!” Sam points toward the side fence that leads to the street.

We don’t have a second to delay. I sprint for the fence, haul myself up, and as I attempt to jump over the other side, my foot catches on something, I lose my grip, and—*oomph*.

I back-splat in their yard.

Ladies and gentlemen, your president.

“Ouch ...” wheezes from me. No one rushes to my aid, but a moment later, Sam’s face appears overhead.

“If you’d let me finish ... I saw someone head that way *before* I went to get the hose. They’d be long gone by now, Spider-Man.”

“Right. Yep. Okay.” I gingerly get to my feet, trying to hide the way my back hurts, then make my way over to the group.

Charles sounds in shock when he asks, “What happened?”

“I dunno. We saw the smoke, and by the time we got the tap attachment back on, the whole shed had gone up, and *this* cowboy,” Sam says, gesturing at Chad, “burst through the side fence and started spraying.”

“That’s what he said,” Chad mutters, and I snort back a laugh.

Not the time or place. “Why did you have to put the tap attachment back on?”

Charles scowls at me. “Because some assholes removed it when they set our sprinkler on as retaliation for a prank that wasn’t our fault. We decided to take it off whenever we weren’t using it so you couldn’t flood our shed again.”

Ooh, I’d forgotten about that. And by “forgotten,” it’s more that I tried to

ignore the pranks they were pulling after I thought Kappas were responsible for sending Brandon to hospital. “*Kinda* your fault,” I remind him. Though the dangerous part wasn’t in their plan. That was all Carter.

Charles scowls *again*, and I hold up my hands. Okay, okay, I get it. I shouldn’t find him adorable right now. But then my gaze slips to the back stairs, and my amusement dies.

“What the *fuck* is that?”

Scrawled in black graffiti are the letters *SBP*.

Oh, yeah. This was not an accident.

Chad swears, and Charles’s eyes almost fall from his head.

“Who did this?” I want answers, and I want them now.

The echo of the extinguisher stops, leaving a pile of charred, steaming metal behind.

Chad joins my side. “Think we’re being set up again?”

“Set up?” Lucas scoffs. “You’re really going to try and say this wasn’t you?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” My voice strains under forced politeness.

“I went along with Charles when he said the front lawn wasn’t you, but a *second* time?” Lucas turns to Charles. “We can’t keep giving them free passes. This could have hurt someone.”

“You would know,” Chad fires back. “Just because you have an issue with me, don’t take it out on my house, asshole. The truce will only last for so long.”

“Fuck off, Doomsen.”

“Tuck your dick back away,” I snap at Lucas. He might have personal issues with Chad, but I’m not letting them play a part here. “There’s no way we’d spray our own letters here—”

“You sure? Because that sounds like exactly the type of dumbass thing you’d do.”

“The dumb jock is a stereotype, asshole.”

“You sure about that?” He points at the letters. “Because someone in your house didn’t get the memo.”

“You need to shut your fucking mouth—” Chad starts, but I pull him back.

Charles places a hand on Lucas’s shoulder and takes over. “Seriously though, Zeke. I trust *you* had nothing to do with this, but are you sure no one

in your house—”

“No.”

“Not even—”

“I *said* no.”

He throws up both hands. “You’re not even willing to listen?”

“Of course I’m not. I trust my brothers.”

“Even after one of them screwed you over a few months ago?” he asks.

“Carter wasn’t my brother. He was a shithead pledge who got too big for his boots.”

“Well, what about Brandon?”

“What about him?”

“He *just* happened to be the first person to see it, and you guys *just* happened to have a fire extinguisher on hand—”

Chad fires back with a “go fuck yourself,” and my response is basically the same.

“Yeah, because he’s good at his job. He made sure we had an extinguisher on hand before he first got the risk manager job. Not my fault Kurt is a lazy dick who didn’t do the same.”

“Leave him out of this,” Charles says.

“So you can take a shot at my brothers, but I can’t take a shot at yours?”

“*Mine* have done nothing wrong here.”

“Well, neither have mine.”

At some point, we’ve both closed the distance, and now I’m glaring down into the eyes that usually knock me sideways. I can’t tell what I’m most angry about here. That this is being pinned on us again ... or that he doesn’t believe me.

“Is everyone okay here?”

I start at the deep, commanding voice and spring away from Charles.

“Dean Hutchins.” Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. “Everything’s fine. Just an accident.”

“Was it?” Lucas snaps.

Charles glares at him to shut up. The number one rule on the row is don’t go to the dean. Now the dean is here, and I’m waiting for Lucas to vomit everything we’ve ever done all over him.

Oh no. Is someone banging, or is that my heartbeat in my ears?

“Zeke’s right,” Charles says. “Everything is under control, thanks to Chad.”

“So there *was* a fire? How did it start?”

“Ah ...”

The dean takes one look at the stairs, and his gaze narrows in on me.

“Another prank, Zeke?”

“No! This wasn’t us.”

“Tell me why I’m struggling to believe that.”

“It wasn’t,” Chad says. “We’re the ones who put it out.”

“Coincidentally,” Lucas spits.

I want to flip that guy off so bad.

Charles steps forward before any of us can continue. “Chad’s right. We don’t know what happened, but Sam did see someone jump the fence. All of my brothers *and* Sigma house’s were accounted for, plus with the number of people around today, there’s no telling who it could have been. Yes, *SBP* could stand for Sigma Beta Psi, but it could also stand for a lot of other things.”

“Like?”

Slutty big penis?

Don’t say that.

“I don’t know,” Charles answers, much more maturely. “I only know that neither of our houses were involved.”

Dean Hutchins jerks his head to the side. “Both of you with me.” He stalks to the other side of the yard, me and Charles hurrying to follow. When he’s far enough away to be happy, he clasps his hands behind his back and swings around to face us. “This was not a school-sanctioned event. It was my belief that the entire thing was for charity—”

“It was—”

He talks over me. “But now I’m starting to doubt that. I have heard about the little tiff between the Rho Kappas and Sigma Betas, and I have largely been able to ignore it because neither of you have drawn attention. But let me be clear. *My* job is to protect the school’s reputation and get through the day as drama-free as possible. So I highly suggest you bring those boys of yours into line and remind them that these fraternities operate for as long as I allow them to.”

His threat is clear without him needing to go into detail: if we fuck up, he’ll shut us down. Charles looks sick, and I have an overwhelming need to take his hand.

“Of course, sir.”

Dean Hutchins stares down Charles until he nods.

“Y-yes, sir. We understand.”

“Good.” He expels a long breath. “Off the record, I don’t want to see that happen. It’s no secret the families from Kappa house make sizeable donations every year, and, Zeke, you and your boys have put WHU on the map across the sports we offer. So get it together. Control your people and we won’t have an issue here.”

“I swear it wasn’t them,” Charles tries again. I appreciate it, considering how he wasn’t sure if he believed that himself.

“Well, it very much looks like them, and the rumor mill is already turning with that theory. Without evidence otherwise, that’s all I can base my opinion on. Given this is private property, I have no jurisdiction, but if you want to keep operating as part of the college, I highly suggest you sort it out between yourselves. Like adults.”

The red splotches are growing on Charles’s cheeks, so I jump in before he can let loose.

“Thank you, sir, we will.”

“If I hadn’t had about a hundred requests, I wouldn’t have even been here today.” Dean Hutchins says goodbye and leaves the two of us alone.

As soon as he exits the yard, I lean over my knees and exhale. “Well, that was five shades of fucked.”

“Are you okay?” he whispers.

“Talking to me again, are you?”

“I’m sorry, I ...” He drags his hand through his hair. “You know I trust you. This whole thing is a lot, and I’m sure you don’t think badly of any of your brothers, but can you try to see it from my side? You have a huge number of members, and most of them don’t live in the house, so can you *really* be sure that there isn’t a single one of them doing this? It’s not like they haven’t proudly left the Sigma tag on their pranks before.”

I can see where he’s coming from. There are over sixty Sigma brothers, and I’d like to be able to say there isn’t a single one of them who would do this, but ... well, I thought I had everything under control, and then I find out *three* guys I live with all had relationships I didn’t know about. Look at what Charles and I are doing. People have secrets, no matter how well you think you know them.

So I swallow down my pride and say, “I see your point.”

“Good.” He holds his arms stiffly around himself. “I don’t like fighting.”

I laugh. “Could have fooled me.”

He doesn’t even crack a smile. If anything, his frown gets deeper. “No, like ... *real* fighting. Normally, it’s me venting at you and you being exasperated at me. Which pisses me off that you don’t take me seriously, but I’m never actually mad. I ... I want to be heard. Just before, you were ready to bite my head off.”

“I swear I wasn’t. This whole thing is stressful.” I look him in the eyes for the first time since they were filled with anger. Now, it’s uncertainty staring back at me. Like that, the rest doesn’t matter. “I’m sorry, Charlie.”

A small smile. “Me too.”

“You look like you need a hug.”

“A bit.” He glances back toward the house. “We should probably get that cleaned up.”

“Good point.” I hesitate, not sure whether I should jump straight to it or follow through on the urge to pull him to me. Just platonically, after all. We could do that. It wouldn’t be weird.

He walks away before I can decide.

Robbie and Brandon show up to check in as we get started, and to my surprise, neither of them argue about being made to scrub these stairs. The fewer people—even in our house—who know about this, the better.

“You guys moved fast today,” Charles says. He clears his throat. “So. Umm. Thank you.”

None of us knows what to say.

So we don’t.

We work in silence, and once we leave, I count down the hours until I can see Charles tonight. As much as I’m looking forward to him fulfilling his end of our bet, I also just want to *see* him. Properly. With none of the other bullshit around.

I even wear my WHU hoodie in case he wants to trade out.

But when I arrive, at five minutes past eleven, he isn’t here. It might be the first time ever that Charles has been late. Even when I beat him here last time, he was still early.

I give him another five minutes before sending a text.

ME: *YOU ON YOUR WAY?*

Charles: *Nope*

Me: *What the fuck, Chuck? I thought we were going to meet*

Charles: *Is that what we said?*

Me: *We bet that loser would suck the other dude's dick. Come on, I'm horny*

Charles: *Actually, our agreement was that the loser would get on his knees in Hush Hush*

A PHOTO COMES THROUGH, AND THERE'S CHARLES, KNEELING IN OUR USUAL spot, finger in his mouth, my WHU hoodie wrapped around him ... and I don't think he's wearing pants. Motherfucker.

ME: *IS THIS A JOKE?*

Charles: *Not at all. You really should learn to be more specific x*

MY MOUTH DROPS, AND I LOOK AT THE MESSAGE FOR A FULL MINUTE BEFORE I start to laugh. I'm disappointed knowing I won't see him tonight, but ... him giving me a taste of my own medicine is sexy as hell.

CHARLES

“SO *THIS* IS A LIBRARY.”

Zeke nudges Chad to make him shut up. “If you’d said that before you started dating Bailey, I’d probably believe you.”

Fair point. I know the two of them have late-night study sessions here. At least, I *think* they’re studying.

“Who else are we waiting on?” Robbie asks.

“This is it.” I’ve brought Bailey with me, and Zeke has Chad, Robbie, and Brandon.

“I thought you guys were bringing the people in your house you trust.” Robbie points at Bailey. “He’s the only brother you’d go to war with?”

“Well, that’s dramatic.”

“Is it? It feels accurate to me.”

Bailey and I exchange a look, but after how fast he reacted to the fire, I’m not completely committed to it. Robbie is ... a handful. But maybe not without his good qualities too.

“I brought Bailey because he’s the only one in my house I trust when it comes to you Sigmas.”

“What about Sam?” Zeke asks, and there’s *tone* simmering beneath the question.

“I trust Sam, but for the same reason Larken isn’t here, they need to focus on the everyday stuff. I think we can all agree this isn’t a run-of-the-mill Tuesday night.”

There are murmurs of agreement.

It’s late, and I booked this meeting room in the back of the library so we wouldn’t be seen or disturbed. The dean was right—people are already talking about how Sigma house set half of ours on fire and sent three of our guys to hospital. Total lies, but the rumors weren’t helped when Anon posted a photo on the Dirt of our shed on fire with the Sigma letters sprayed into our stairs.

“So why are we here?” Brandon asks.

“Because we need a plan to weed this person out.”

“Zeke explained that part.”

Urg. Of course he did. I turn to him. “We said we weren’t going to mention anything until we were sure we wouldn’t be overheard.”

“We did. I was sure.”

“That’s the whole reason I booked this room.”

He smiles. “That was never in the specifics.”

My cheeks heat, and I glare daggers his way, even as my stomach swims with acknowledgment. It’s been almost a week since he fucked me in the locker room, and I’m starting to get antsy.

“Before you two start your foreplay,” Chad cuts in, “I wrote out a list of anyone I know who’s had issues with us before. From parties or friendships imploding—anything.”

That’s ... oddly organized. “Thank you.”

He nods and hands it over as Zeke switches chairs to take the one next to mine. He leans in like he’s trying to read the list better, but his hand lands on my thigh.

“This is a good start,” he says, even as I’m trying not to swallow my tongue.

Bailey is on my other side, and I have no idea if he’s seen or not, but if he has, he’s quiet about it. The fact Zeke is taking the risk when I think Robbie’s head would actually blow off if he found out about us is incredible.

“I thought we already ruled out Carter,” I say, pointing at his name.

“Still think it could be him,” Robbie answers. “He didn’t buy a ticket to the bake-off, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“True, but we’re trying to narrow down the list.”

When Zeke sits back, he unfortunately takes his hand with him.

“So the next question is how we do that,” Zeke says.

“Have you cross-referenced it with social media?” Brandon asks. “Most people keep track of their lives that way.”

Good point. “We’ll do that next.”

Robbie reaches for the list, and I hand it to him. He’s scrolling through his phone. “These two were working.” He points to two names. “And this guy broke his ankle last week. Plus, *this* one is away with family.”

Four easy names dismissed, at least. “That still leaves us with about twenty people. What are you going to do? Interrogate them?”

“If we need to.”

“No,” Zeke says. “We need a plan. Something to catch the person or people out.”

The six of us fall quiet. Last time Zeke and I tried to plan something, we’d ended up locked in a storage cupboard together.

“We all agree it’s this Anon person, right?” Zeke asks.

“Well, we cleaned the letters off the steps completely, and the photo definitely had them in it.”

Bailey shudders. “I can’t believe this loser was sneaking through our house while we were sleeping, and none of us noticed.”

Chad laughs. “We sneak around your house all the time unnoticed. You’d think you’d have better security by now.”

“Doesn’t help when someone keeps stealing the keys.” I side-eye him.

He throws me an angelic smile back.

“Okay, so.” I pull out my phone and make a list. “They’re familiar with your pranks, they clearly have something against you all, they’re creating events to make you look guilty, they’ve roped a bunch of people into supporting their claims, and they waited to strike over the weekend until the dean was in attendance.”

“It was also the dean who found us when we got locked in that storage closet,” Zeke says.

Robbie perks up. “You were locked in a storage room? What? When?”

“None of your business.”

“Bro my god, dude, spill.”

“Spill what?” I ask. “Anon tricked us into waiting for them and then locked us in.”

“So they had a key,” Brandon says. “And knew which doors wouldn’t unlock from the inside.”

Hey, that’s also a good point. I jot that down too.

“And they knew enough to try and set up Charles as the one posting.”

“Are we still sure it wasn’t him though?” Robbie asks.

Before I can answer, Zeke does it for me. “Yes. We’re sure. And I don’t want it brought up again.”

Robbie nods. “Okay. So basically, we have a whole lot of nothing.”

“Could still be a Kappa,” Chad says, then holds up his hands at my shitty look. “What? You hate us, and you obviously had access to your own house.”

I shake my head. “Anon knew that you guys always tease me about parameters, and none of my brothers know that.”

Bailey sniggers beside me.

“Well, none except him. And besides, if this person had access to school keys, unless they’re some Bond villain or shitty rom-com star, there’s a high chance they’re in a position with access. Either janitorial or TA ... something

that requires them to need after-hours access.”

“Plus, I don’t think any Kappas own a pair of Ultraboosts.”

I point at Zeke. “That’s a good point too. At least in the house, I haven’t seen any.”

“Ultraboosts?” Chad asks.

“When we were locked in,” Zeke clarifies. “They were wearing a pair. Probably new.”

That gives the others something to think about.

I look through the list and try to figure out if there are any links, but I come up blank. “The only connection I can make is trying to get us in trouble with the dean.”

Zeke tilts my phone to look over it too. “The dean did say he got a ton of requests about judging, right?”

“He did.”

“But I’m the only one who emailed him.”

“He *said* hundreds.”

“Chuck ...” Zeke pins me with a look. “How many college students do you know who care whether the dean is there to judge a dumb frat contest or not?”

Literally none.

“We need some public way for the dean to be back on Greek Row,” Robbie says. “Clearly this person wanted the dean to witness that shit.”

“*What?*”

“If it was me”—he points my way—“don’t look at me like that. *If* it was, I would be looking for every opportunity to piss the dean off and put you on his radar. Like how we’re trying to do that but in an opposite way.”

“And failing,” I mutter.

Zeke kicks my foot under the table.

“We ... we really want to do this?” I ask.

“Why not?”

“It’s ...” I suck in a breath. “We’re not qualified for this. We have no idea what we’re dealing with. We have Nationals there for a reason. Shouldn’t we get their buy-in on how to handle it?”

Zeke shakes his head. “No. No Nationals. They’re a last resort only.”

“The dean said to make sure we’re keeping our noses clean and not getting into trouble. We graduate soon. A plan to catch this person in action is smart, but, I mean, they set something on fire last time. What if they go too

far and someone gets hurt?”

“That’s why you have me,” Brandon says gently. “We’ll make sure it’s safe.”

I look around helplessly. “Anyone have ideas, then?”

“Actually, I do.” Chad rubs his hands together. “How do you feel about a joint executive sleepover?”

Robbie groans. “More time with Kappa bitches?”

“More time to show good faith. Kappas and Sigmas working together. You want your auction, let’s do it. That night, we’ll hold a silent auction at Sigma house, and all the brothers will volunteer up time or expertise or whatever for people to bid on, and any of the Kappas who don’t have an executive position will have to conveniently be out of the house too—Charles, that’ll be up to you to organize. The next morning, we have the dean livestream reading out the winners. If fucker McGhee is smart, they’ll plan something for then. We’ll leave discreet cameras set up all over Kappa house to try and catch the person as they’re up to ... whatever it is.”

I glance at Zeke, who shrugs. “Simple but effective.”

It is. Except I’m going to be expected to spend the night in their house, *not* jumping Zeke’s bones. However will I manage?

“Might as well give it a try. It’s not like we have any other plan.”

Chad sighs. “That’s exactly the reaction you want to your master plans. *It’ll do, I guess.*” He turns big eyes on Bailey. “I thought it was frat as fuck.”

Bailey pats his cheek. “It was incredible. Bestest plan you’ve ever had.”

“That’s better.”

Robbie shoves Brandon. “Why don’t you ever tell me I have the bestest plans?”

“Because to have the bestest plans, you’d have to *plan*. We all know you make shit up as you go along.”

“Aww, you *do* know me.”

I watch them a moment before turning to where Bailey is *petting* Chad and then to Zeke, who’s smirking at me like he can read the very thought in my mind.

Dear god. This is our A-team.

We’re fucking screwed.

ZEKE

I'VE NEVER BEEN SOMEONE WHO HAS THAT INTENSE SEXUAL DRIVE THAT MY brothers do. If I go weeks or months with no sex, it doesn't bother me. So why the actual fuck am I so desperate for it now?

It was only last week that I was with Charles, and based on past experience, that kind of intense orgasm should have lasted me to the Olympics, but somehow, it's had the opposite effect. I've been choking the chicken all week with no end in sight.

Hush Hush and early locker room encounters aren't the answer though. Every time we meet up that way feels like a foggy memory, something that could just as easily be a dream. It's how I was able to disassociate so easily. Quickies are all well and good, but I'm craving ... more. A whole night. A chance to really figure out how his body works.

I kick myself over even teasing the impossibility as I slice through the water. Unless I'm willing to come out and play a huge gamble with my future, I need to be happy with anything I can get. I'm working on a business degree, I have options for my future, but where I'm at now, I can only see two possibilities.

The first, I end up in an office somewhere. Maybe toeing the line of middle class like my parents, hopefully as happy as them and not bitter that my dreams came to nothing. I have some ideas on directions I could take, but I've been actively avoiding giving myself a fallback.

The second, I live out my dreams. Because if I make it to the Olympics, I'm going to be on that fucking podium.

Maybe I'll come out after I've made a name for myself, maybe I won't. All I know is this addiction I'm feeling to being with Charles will pass. He's a way to spend time. I need to remember that.

Unfortunately, remembering becomes a whole lot harder when I haul myself out of the pool at the end of practice and find Charles sitting on the bench, waiting for me. My breath catches, and I have to remind myself to let go again.

"Hey," I say as I approach him, swim cap in one hand, towel drying my hair in the other.

Charles's stare immediately drops to my abs and then pings away again.

"Morning. I brought you coffee." He lifts a takeout cup, gaze fixed

somewhere off to the left.

“Thanks.” My lips tug at the corners. “I’ll go take a quick shower.”

And it might be my imagination, but his posture gets a bit straighter, his cheeks a bit redder, at the mention of those showers. Maybe he’s thinking the same thing I am, or maybe my thoughts are so clouded over by that moment that nothing else exists in my mind.

He nods stiffly. “I’ll wait right here.”

“Where else would you wait?”

He meets my eyes, and his face twitches like he wants to laugh. I wish he would. Instead, I hold his gaze for another beat before I drag it—and my ass—away.

It’s the fastest shower I’ve had in a long time, and I only half dry my hair before I stuff everything into my bag, pull my WHU hoodie on over my clothes, and then head back out to meet him.

My breath does that dumb hitch again, and it’s so ridiculous I can’t stop from laughing at myself. So this is infatuation, huh? I don’t hate it, but it could have picked a better time to hit. In a few months, all this will mean nothing, and I have to be careful not to let this ... interest get away from me.

Charles stands when I reach him, handing over a coffee that tastes freaking incredible.

“What is this?”

“Hazelnut latte.”

Huh. I take another sip, and yep. That’s what that taste is. “Nutty. I like nuts.”

He almost chokes on his laugh. “Please don’t make me think of nuts right now.”

“Hazelnuts. Geez, head out of the gutter. You’re in presidential company.”

Somehow, he doesn’t roll his eyes as he plucks my sleeve and drags me after him. That seems like an improvement to me.

Once we step out of the building and head toward the parking lot, some of the tension leaves him. “You’re going to have to be more careful than that if you don’t want anyone to know there’s ... that something is ... about ... *you know.*”

“About what?”

“About us.” He scowls. “Well, not that we’re an *us*, just that between us, there are things happening that you’d prefer no one knew about, and if you

keep looking at me like you want to eat me whole, someone is going to pick up on it.”

I swear he didn't take a breath that whole sentence. “Like I want to eat you whole. Is that how I look at you?”

“That's definitely the way my dick interprets it.”

Interesting. “Are you hard right now?”

“Zeke!”

“I'm going to take that as a yes.”

“That's a ‘we can't do anything, so don't tease me.’”

“Wow.” I blink at him. “My name translates into a lot.”

“You have no idea.” He crosses his arms, footsteps getting heavier as we cross the parking lot.

I chuckle, then jog to catch up with him. “You're kinda pissy today.”

“Long night.”

“Then why are you up so early?”

We reach my car, and Charles leans against it. He turns his pouty face up toward me, and it does things to my gut that I'd never admit out loud. Still, he doesn't answer me, and it takes my dumb ass a while to figure out what he's saying without saying it.

A smile springs to my face. “You missed me.”

“No need to sound so cocky about it.”

“You actually missed me.”

He sighs, pretending to inspect his nails. “Just let me know when you're done.”

“I'm done.”

He looks out at me from under a skeptically raised eyebrow.

I hold up my hands, trying not to drop my coffee. “Really.”

“Fine. Yes. So maybe I wanted to see you.”

That makes me unreasonably happy as I take in his appearance. He's almost disheveled, which is an odd look on him. “You okay?”

“Yeah. M'fine.”

I tilt my head, noting the dark smudges under his eyes. “Just how long was your night?”

“Long enough that my study session finished around the perfect time to pick up coffee before your morning swim ended.”

Yikes. He pulled an all-nighter. No one wonder he looks so wrecked. Then again, if our places were switched, I can guarantee I'd look like I'd

been punched in both eyes. Somehow, Charles still looks gorgeous. “Come on, I have an idea.”

He doesn’t move as I reach past him to unlock the car. “You’re going already?”

“We’re going.”

“Where?”

“Back to my place. You can have a sleep before class.”

“What? No. I—”

“Get in the car, Chuck.”

“There is just ...” He shakes his head. “So many reasons why that’s a no.”

I glance around to make sure there isn’t anyone else out, and once I’m sure the coast is clear, I step closer, caging him against the car. “Is one of those reasons that you don’t want to?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Then what’s the problem?”

He draws a long breath, and I try not to laugh at how familiar his exasperation is. It’s a heads-up that the blustering is about to start, so I let him get through it without interruption.

“First of all, any one of your brothers could see, and how the hell do we explain what I’m doing in your house so early—I don’t think a nap is going to cut it when I live five houses away. Plus, my first class starts at nine, and when I’m this tired, I’m likely to sleep through my alarm, and then I’ll miss the quiz I stayed up all night studying for in the first place. And also, I drove here. My car is literally right over there.”

I step closer and lean in so we’re eye to eye. “You good now?”

“*Hmph.*”

“Please come over.”

“Zeke ...”

“Don’t make me remind you about how much you missed me.”

He scowls. “So much for being done talking about that.”

I chuckle and tilt my lips to his ear. “If we’re done talking about it, I guess I shouldn’t tell you that I missed you too.”

When I pull back, Charles’s lips are mimicking a fish. “Y-you did?”

“Yeah, Charlie.” I tweak his chin. “I think I did.”

“Okay ...”

“Now, will you get in the fucking car?”

An uncertain smile flashes over his face, and then he hurries to nod. I step back so he can round the car while I slide into the driver's side.

The whole way back to Greek Row, Charles reminds me how against this idea he is, and how he won't be held responsible for my brothers finding out about me, and how he's only coming there to hang out and will not, will *absolutely* not be going to sleep. I smile while I listen to his never-ending voice, trying to remember a time when I ever found this annoying.

There were plenty of times when I told my brothers he was annoying. That his voice rubbed me wrong and it was draining listening to him whine all the damn time. But ... every meeting we've ever had, I've gone along to with no complaint. I could have handed it off, I could have canceled. And yet ... I never did.

"What are you smiling at?" he asks.

I didn't even realize I was. Shit. Well, I'm not going to tell him I was smiling over *him*, now am I? Or that I was picturing all those times I should have passed his problems off to someone else to deal with. And I'm definitely not going to say I'm smiling because I think I've had a soft spot for him for a while now.

"You'll smell it in a moment."

"What? *Dick!*" He scrambles for the window button and has his head in the fresh air before the window is all the way down.

Disaster averted. For now. I'm going to have to learn how to keep my face under control.

The house is as quiet as it normally is when we get back, and I crack the door and listen for any sounds of my brothers.

The lacrosse guys would be gone by now, and all my brothers who played football sleep in until the final possible moment to leave for class now that the season is over. I grab the sleeve of Charles's hoodie and drag him inside and down the hall. We're in my room before anyone sees us, and I quickly lock the door.

"I think you pulled my arm off," he says.

"Worth it."

"I'm glad loss of *my* limbs is a price you're willing to pay to spend time with me."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Now, get in bed."

"I *said* I'm not sleeping."

"Did I say anything about sleep?" I inject as much innocence as I can into

my tone. "I only mentioned getting into the bed."

"And what will you do with me once I'm there?" The husky way his voice drops makes my cock stir, but I stamp that shit down.

"Only one way to find out." I advance on him, loving the way he watches every move. His eyes burn into me, and when I pause, leaning in, his mouth tilts up toward mine. Damn, I want to kiss him too, but ...

I bypass his lips, grab the backs of his thighs, and throw him on the bed. His yelp is loud enough they probably heard it down the end of the street, and I have to stifle my laugh as I kick off my shoes and climb up after him.

Charles is on his back, staring at the ceiling. "I hate you."

"Sure you do."

"You think you're so charming, but you're not."

"I can think of many people who'd disagree with you."

He *hmphs* again as I reach down to take off his shoes and then pull the blanket over us both. "All of those people are mistaken."

"Including you?" I tease.

"Especially me."

I laugh, and even though I'm already skating a dangerous line, I wrap my arm around him and pull him closer. Charles immediately curls into my chest and tries to stifle the yawn that takes over.

"I'll miss my class," he murmurs.

"I swear I won't let that happen. Just close your eyes."

"I will, but only for a second and not because you told me to."

"I'm so glad you cleared that up."

It's barely a second later that his breathing suddenly deepens and soft snores come from under my chin. I roll onto my back, careful to take him with me, and distract myself with my phone. I promised him he wouldn't miss his class, and I'm sure as hell going to keep my word.

His warm weight pressing against my chest settles me, and as much as I wish I could drift off, as much as I wish we could say fuck classes and stay like this all day, I know we both have other responsibilities that we can't ignore.

But this next hour is ours.

And I let myself dream of days waking up like this, where it's nothing out of the ordinary.

Where it's me and the man I've chosen above everyone else.

A man who smells like caramel candles, wears his pride on his chin, and

unexpectedly snores.

I let the image go.

The only image that matters is the one I've had for years.

Gold.

A podium.

And my secret locked up tight.

It's getting really hard to remember that.

CHARLES

I'M TRYING NOT TO GET AHEAD OF MYSELF. NOT TO DRIFT AWAY ON THESE floating feelings that being around Zeke inspires. From waking up beside him the other morning to our meeting with the dean, where we kept throwing words like *school unity* and *philanthropic ventures* at him until he caved and agreed that our idea was a good one.

Mentioning my fathers coming to visit the school may have been underhanded, but it worked. Most people don't realize that Father doesn't have access to the family fortunes and that if they want to get to Grampy, he definitely isn't the way to do it.

We all have trusts, but those pale in comparison to the Levine funds.

It's warm enough today that Zeke and I walk back from campus. I'm buzzing being around him, even though we can't touch, and I try not to look at him when I can help it because when I'm with Zeke, the need inside me settles.

"I never knew you were so sneaky," he says in that slow, deep voice. There's a tinge of humor there that has pride swell in my chest.

"*Sneaky*? Actually, I think I was very forthcoming."

"My fathers thought it was a good idea and were hoping to meet you when they're here next," he says in a voice I think is supposed to be mine.

I groan and let my eyes fall closed. "Friends don't remind other friends of their douchebag moments."

"*Good* friends." Zeke pumps his eyebrows.

Urg. All that does is remind me how long it's been since we've been able to show what *good* friends we actually are. Instead of pouting about it, I suck it up. Between tutoring, studying and coursework, Zeke's swimming, and us planning this stupid executive sleepover, I'm exhausted.

"You think this plan is going to work?" I ask as we get back to Kappa house.

"Nope." Zeke has way too much conviction behind that answer. "But we literally have nothing else, so might as well give it a try. The cameras are set up, the livestream is advertis—" Zeke cuts off as four guys dressed head to toe in black jump out from the bushes and pelt us with water balloons. I flinch at the cold spray, but more follow, and each hit explodes and makes my whole body seize up.

Laughter rings in my ears as I bolt for the front deck, and by the time I shoulder the front door open, I'm completely drenched. Zeke catches me by surprise when he tumbles in after me and hurries to slam the door.

He's laughing, chest jolting up and down, wet T-shirt clinging to his pecs and tempting me to lean forward and nuzzle them. It takes all my self-control to turn away and lean into the door beside him. My forehead connects with the wood, and before I can think it through, I start to laugh too.

"Charles?"

Shit. I spring away from Zeke at the voice, but thankfully, it's only Bailey. "We just got water bombed," I rush to say.

Bailey moves to look out the window. "Ah. So that's the *stuff* my idiot boyfriend had on." The affection in his tone is unmissable. He turns back to us, purposely looking from me to Zeke and back again. Then he points down.

"You're dripping on the floor."

I snigger and grab Zeke's hand. "Guess we should go get changed, then." Zeke follows all the way to my room before he jerks his hand from mine.

"What was that?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

"In front of Bailey."

I eye the way his body looks tense. "You mean ... your hand?"

"Duh."

I swallow, figuring now is as good of a time as any to tell him. "Bailey knows."

"*What?*"

"I didn't tell him," I rush to clarify. "He figured it out and swears he won't tell anyone. Even Chad. Take a breath."

"A breath—are you fucking serious?"

"Don't get pissed with me. You were the one who dragged me into that storage room."

His jaw clenches, that muscle flexing in his cheek. "That was ... a lapse in judgment."

"And what do you call fucking me in the locker room, and touching me in the parking lot, and taking me back to your room to *sleep* where we only just managed to sneak me out without anyone seeing? And what do you call it when you look at me like ... like ..."

His eyes widen encouragingly. "Like ..."

I swallow.

“Charlie ...”

“Don’t make me say it.”

His stare holds mine, and I fold.

“Like ... I’m *important*.”

Something shifts in Zeke’s face, and he steps forward, fingertips trailing down my cheek in the way that I love. “I call it the truth.”

A ripple of something heavy passes between us, and I step forward, hand sliding over his damp shoulder. “You can’t say things like that.”

“Says who?”

“Me.” I lift my head. “It’s not fair.”

His face falls, but he nods. “Okay. Yeah, I get it.”

“So do I.” I smile and drag my fingers through his hair. “I get why you don’t want to say anything. *Trust* me, I do. So stop thinking so hard.”

His boyish grin slips out. “Okay, no thinking.”

Then before I can ask what he means by that, his lips collide with mine. Big hands hold me close as he kisses me once, twice, before his tongue swipes my bottom lip, and I part for him to enter. I’m hungry for him, want to take every second of this and hold it close, because if the last week has taught me anything, it’s that I have no idea when this could happen again.

My stomach is in knots at the sudden contact. His kiss feels claiming, possessive, everything I want to twist into reality. I moan against his mouth, fingers curling into the wet fabric at his chest, pulling myself closer, tighter, wanting to melt in his arms.

He chuckles, then kisses me again, and when he tries to pull back, I cling to him like a goddamn barnacle.

It’s official; I’ve reached the pinnacle of my patheticness.

Instead of fighting me though, he bundles me up in his arms and kisses me hard again.

The front door slams, and I jump.

“Fucking Sigmas,” someone says. “What happened to the truce?”

Raised, indistinguishable voices answer, and I hear more people talking about being water bombed.

I pull away from Zeke. “I don’t think we’ll be alone for much longer.”

He shifts forward so his hard cock is pressed against my hip. “This is becoming a real problem.”

“I know what you mean.” I hesitate and ask a question I really don’t want the answer to. “Have you, umm, thought about fixing it with someone you

can actually be seen with?”

I can feel Zeke’s gaze on my face, but I purposely look everywhere but at him.

“Sure, that’d be easy.”

A flash of Zeke with someone else hits me, and I feel physically sick. “Uh-huh.”

“There’s a problem with that theory though.”

“Which is?”

“I hardly have time for the person I want to get naked with. Why the hell would I try to fit in anyone else?”

I meet his eyes, lips twitching. “And that person ... he’s me, right?”

“Matt Bomer, actually.”

I thump his shoulder. “Mean.”

“You make it so easy, Chuck.”

“*Fuck, they got me too.*”

I cringe and glance toward where the voice came from. “Guess I should get changed and deal with that.”

“Or ...” Zeke crosses to my window and slides it open. “We could get them back.”

“What do you mean?”

“That tap attachment back on round the back?”

“It ... is.”

He grins. “Then let’s grab the hose and give them a taste of their own medicine.”

“Really?” Zeke would go against his own brothers like that?

Zeke shrugs. “We’re in a truce, and technically, they got me first.”

“They did.”

“So, fair game as far as I’m concerned.”

My smile unfurls as I cross the room to where Zeke waves me ahead of him. I climb out of the window and make the short drop to the ground. Zeke follows a second later, and then we hurry to the backyard, unroll the hose, and crank the tap all the way on. My heartbeat is thumping in my ears because while we’ve always participated in the pranks, Kappas have never reached the levels of Sigma house when it comes to shenanigans, and every time I do something like this, it still feels new and exciting.

“Ready?” Zeke asks, handing me the hose.

“Hell yeah.”

We round the house, and I immediately spot where the Sigmas are hiding out with their water balloons. Zeke lets out that piercing whistle of his, the guys turn, and I immediately squeeze the nozzle hard.

Water sprays out, hitting the first guy hard in the chest, before I move on to the others. One of them falls over, another one tries to duck onto the other side of the bushes, and a third ducks my assault, grabs two balloons, and hauls them in our direction.

Everything moves quickly.

Balloons flying, water exploding everywhere. People slipping in the slushy, muddy front lawn. I run, ducking the spray and trying to shoot them in return, and from the corner of my eye, I see Zeke go for the water balloons and collect a bunch of his own.

There's loud laughter and swearing, and I realize too late that some of it is coming from me. By the time the balloons are gone and huge puddles have formed, it's cold and we're all panting hard.

Robbie pulls off his balaclava and flops back into the mud, a large squelch cutting through his labored laughs. Brandon kicks mud at his legs while Chad braces his hands on his knees, catching his breath. Larken is the final one to push up his balaclava.

"Sorry, Charles," he says sheepishly.

I wave him away when Zeke swings to me with a suspicious look.

"I'm not," he says.

"What are you—"

He throws himself at me, catching me around the middle, and I go flying back into the mud. It splatters up around us, spraying the others, and I let out a measly *oww*, even as my body rejoices at having Zeke pressed against it.

The others cheer for their president, and even I crack a smile.

"Get off me, you idiot."

Instead of listening, he grabs a handful of mud and rubs it into my hair.

"*Urg.*"

Robbie's loud laugh drowns out almost everything until Brandon says, "I know this breaks the truce, but we were bored."

"It's all good," Zeke says, rolling off me. "Truce is still intact. Because you're going to make it up to them. First, by picking up every busted balloon out here"—they try to argue—"and second, by spending your Saturday returning this lawn."

"Fuck that," Chad says.

“Presidential orders.” Zeke springs to his feet and holds out his hand to help me up. “Otherwise, the four of you will be back in pledge hall. *With* the pledges.”

“You can’t do that,” Robbie gasps, scandalized.

“Can and did.”

I smirk, unbelievably happy to have Zeke on my side for once. “Thanks for the fun, guys,” I add, and then I’m hit with a stroke of inspiration. “And don’t worry about getting your clothes dirty on Saturday. I’ll have something for you.”

ZEKE

IF CHARLES THOUGHT HE WAS GOING TO EMBARRASS ANY OF THESE GUYS, he's going to be sorely disappointed, because pink tutus are basically Robbie's and Chad's dream come true. Larken's cheeks match the skirt though, so I guess he got one out of four.

The other three ... the fishnet tights and bras were all them.

"Some days, I think my boyfriend is the hottest guy on the planet, and then others ..." Bailey waves a hand toward where Chad is kicking dirt at Robbie.

Charles chuckles, and I glance over at the sun lounge he's stretched out on. I've gotta say, being on this side of the divide isn't terrible. I should probably feel like I'm betraying the brotherhood or something, but we have a truce, and they all know how I am about rules. Bending them is fair game; breaking them is off-limits.

I take another long drink of the punch Bailey made us, sneaking covert looks over at Charles's long legs. I want to feel them wrapped around me. Maybe taste the soft pale skin on his inner thigh ...

A long breath huffs from me, and I glance up at where Charles is watching my brothers. His sunglasses are on against the glare, but there's something about the set of his mouth ...

I whack his thigh. "You really need to watch them so closely?"

"But if I don't, I might miss something."

I shouldn't have opened my big mouth. Even though he doesn't glance my way, the smugness is radiating from him. "I'm not jealous," I clarify.

Bailey sniggers.

"What?" I ask him. "I'm not."

"Uh-huh."

"Maybe I should be helping them after all." I cross my arms.

"More chances for Charles to perve on you that way." Bailey's eyes roam back to where Chad has heaved a huge roll of turf onto his shoulder. "*Damn.*"

I can't disagree with him. Sweaty and covered in dirt—even dressed as ridiculously as they are—is a good look. Fuck this. I whip off my shirt and go join them.

Like any good president would.

The whole time I work, I can feel Charles's focus burning into me.

And maybe I flex more than I need to and push myself to work harder than any of my brothers—those are the kinds of things you expect a president to do, after all.

My thoughts slip forward to the executive sleepover later tonight, and I internally groan. I'm going to be forced to sleep in a room with Charles. For an entire night. And not be able to touch him.

This is torture.

We need Hush Hush ASAP.

But after how tired he was the other day, I'm reluctant to cut into any sleep time he has. Graduation is coming up way too fast though, and I'm worried that if I don't take every opportunity we have that I'm going to regret it. I already regret the months that passed between secret hookups, but even taking Hush Hush out of the equation hasn't made it any easier.

I *could* come out. At least to my brothers. I'd swear them to secrecy and trust them to keep it, but that doesn't solve anything either, because then I'd have to tell them *who* I'm sleeping with.

A guy is okay.

Hell, even a Kappa is borderline fine.

Charles is not.

His presence is mostly seen as a joke in our house, and I'm part of that problem. So I need to be part of what fixes it. Even if no one ever finds out we're having fun on the side, I at least owe Charles that.

I want my brothers to see him the way I do.

Except maybe not as naked.

Once we're finished hauling grass around all morning, we head back to the house to shower and set up the war room. The furniture is pushed to the sides, and we retrieve all the mattresses we can get our hands on. Normally with the twelve executives, the twelve mattresses fit easily and we all camp out on our own, but the number is double tonight, and there's no way twenty-four beds will squish in.

So instead, we're playing Tetris and packing as many as we can fit on the floor, then every bastard can pick a spot.

It's going to be a snug fit.

I wish I was working on a different kind of snug fit.

Chad pauses after yeeting a bunch of bedding into the middle of the room. "What's on your mind, prez?"

"Nothing."

“Uh-huh.” He plants his hands on his hips and turns his back on the room to face me. “I’d believe that if you were Robbie. He doesn’t think a single thing through. You though? You’re always thinking.”

“Just frat stuff.”

“And you won’t share with your number two?”

I tilt a smile his way. “It doesn’t concern my number two.”

“Frat stuff that doesn’t concern me? Bullshit. I’d ask if it’s all the posts and this plan, but you don’t look like you’re worried or strategizing ...”

“Then how do I look?”

“Hmm ... kinda down?”

I scoff and shake my head. “That’s definitely not it.”

“I know you’ve already handed Bro-motions nights off to Larken, but if you need to chat, you have a whole brotherhood at your back, man.”

“I appreciate it.”

He eyes me for a bit longer, then steps forward and crushes me in a bear hug. “We love you, Ariston.”

Goddamn Chad. I laugh into his shoulder, and when he loosens his hold, a weight smacks into us from the side and squeezes tight.

“What are we doing?” comes Robbie’s loud voice, right beside my ear.

“Giving prez a boost.”

“Aww, Zeke,” Brandon teases before he joins the circle as well.

I have no idea how many of the others decide to get in on the action, but before I know it, I’m completely surrounded and being hugged from all sides.

Just. Great.

My lips twitch as I shrug them off me.

“Okay, you animals, back to work.”

They don’t need any more convincing than that. Most guys only took over their executive roles this year—I was a rare junior prez—and the executive sleepover is a thing of legend. No one outside the doors knows what goes on in here because it’s literally whatever we make it.

And tonight, we’re making it into a fucking auction.

We all have a couple of drinks before we go live, and thankfully, the event e-invites we’ve sent out means there are a hell of a lot of people waiting. Good news for us, because the more there are online, the more chance of bids. We’re dealing with a mostly broke college audience here, so I’m not expecting miracles, but it’ll be fun, it’ll generate talk, *and* it’ll raise some charity dollars to show the dean what stand-up guys we are.

Charles and I introduce the night to raucous applause, and it's still creeping me out to see our two houses *together* without a fistfight breaking out. Once we're done, Brandon and Kurt take over with their list of items on offer. There are the awesome, useful things like brothers doing the setup for parties, playing door bitch, and designated drivers for the rest of the year. Kurt is offering up doing someone's taxes. Charles has four free tutoring sessions. Miles has a few handyman-type things, and some of the brothers are willing to mow lawns, or dog walk, or wash cars—any shithouse job people don't want to do, we'll cover.

Then there are what can only be described as the Sigma items. They're less useful, and more dares. If we get to fifty bucks, Robbie will do a frozen slip and slide in his boxer briefs. A hundred and Larken will shave his head. Two hundred will have Chad wax his balls and asshole—and when we hit that point easily, Bailey gives him an evil grin and promises to be gentle.

My own balls try to crawl inside my body at the thought.

It takes forever for the guys to calm down from the auction and stop horsing around and being dickheads. I've set up a sleeping area next to Charles, and I'm desperate to use it, so I suggest we put a movie on the projector and shut the fuck up.

One movie turns to two, and then three. My brothers are all so hopped up on energy drinks and the response to our live that it takes forever for them to fall asleep. And while normally trying to sleep in the same room as them would have my guard up, we agreed to no messing with anyone who's asleep early. This is a safe zone.

Poor Robbie. I swear he's losing all opportunities to have fun.

I drift off at some point, and when I wake, the movie is still playing, but loud snores rattle the otherwise still room.

I prop up onto my elbows and look around in the light from the projector. From what I can tell, everyone is fast asleep.

Well, except one.

A hand clasps onto mine, and I look down to find Charles blinking sleepily up at me. His pouty lips are turned down, slight frown marring his forehead. "Where are you going?"

"Nowhere." I lie back down and roll onto my side to face him.

"Good." He tucks his hands under his cheek, and his eyes fall closed again.

Mine don't. I lie there watching him, hit with this overwhelming need to

lean in and kiss him. Not for any reason other than to just ... kiss.

My tongue swipes my suddenly dry lips, and *fuck it*.

After one more check that everyone is asleep, I lean in and press my lips gently to his. Charles's eyes snap open.

"What are you doing?" he whispers.

"Want me to stop?"

He takes a second to think about that. "Anyone could be awake."

"They're not."

"Zeke, if someone sees ..."

"Then it's on me." I mean it too. I don't want anyone to find out because I have enough going on without that kind of backlash, but a little kissing isn't exactly high risk.

"You sure?"

I lean in and kiss him harder this time. "Very." My voice deepens. "I've missed this."

His smile is fucking golden. Charles closes the distance between us, and suddenly, there's no more talking. Just his lips on mine, his tongue exploring my mouth. Slow and sensual, then fast and needy. He's got my cock worked up and giving a military salute within a second flat, and what I wouldn't do to flip him over and bury myself inside him.

Reluctantly, I pull back, and then I meet his eyes and can feel myself melting.

"I need you," he whines.

I know what he means. The need to devour him is strong, and I'm cursing myself that I started kissing him at all. The need hasn't lessened—if anything, I've just stoked the flames.

"Roll over."

Charles doesn't question me, and as soon as he's facing the other way, I crowd in behind him. My cock nestles perfectly in the crease between his ass cheeks, and I swear the thing goddamn purrs. I rock my hips, addicted to the friction, and savor the rattly breath Charles lets out. Life doesn't get better than this. Holding him, feeling his unrestrained want in the tiny tremors he tries to hold back, it all goes to my head as my blood drains south.

I press my lips to his ear. "Are you hard?"

"Umm ..." He's distracted by the fingers I drag lightly over his throat.

"Y-yes."

My touch roams over his chest. "And can you feel how hard you've made

me?”

He hurries to nod, but it’s not enough. I tweak his nipple and draw out a hiss.

“Tell me.”

“Yeah ... I can.” And as if to drive his point home, his ass grinds back against me.

It’s bliss.

He only stops when my fingers reach his stomach, hike up his shirt, and then skim down his V. I chuckle at the way his entire body stiffens, then creep my hand under the waistband of his sleep shorts.

“Z-Zeke.”

“Tell me to stop,” I say.

He shakes his head so hard he almost headbutts me. “Never.”

We both moan as my hand wraps around his stiff length.

“*Fuuuck*, you feel so good.”

Another unrestrained whimper that drives me goddamn wild. His neediness is like a red flag to a fucking bull, and I grind my cock harder between his cheeks as I jack him off. Being able to see him like this, to pull him apart bit by bit, is addictive. I love watching the responsibility and order he holds so close slowly fade away as he ignites under my hands.

His expensive cologne, a hint of caramel, the way he cants his hips into my fist.

Need is pulsing in my bloodstream, and when he tilts his head back, I can’t help leaning down and slowly running the flat of my tongue from his shoulder to his ear.

“You taste so good, Charlie,” I rasp.

His lips part silently, and I know he’s holding back for my sake. “Oh ... oh shit ...”

“What do you need?”

“You. I need you. Inside me.”

I chuckle darkly. “Not gonna happen. No supplies.”

An unhappy noise builds in his throat, and I hurry to *shush* him.

“You’ll wake them up.” My grip tightens over his leaking head, then loosens as I pump down and back up again. Remembering his fantasy, I gesture toward Sam sleeping beside him and play right into it. “All he has to do is open his eyes and you’ll give us away. Your cheeks are so red you’re practically begging for everyone to know I’m touching you. For everyone to

know you're hard. For everyone to know how desperate you are to be filled with my cock."

"Jesus ..."

"The big man can't help you now." I lick his throat again, grinding my hips forward before I stop to suck on his pulse point. He's so hot in my palm. The silky skin glides through my fist, and then I duck my hand down to cup his balls. They leap at the contact, and I chase the feeling over and over until his skin pulls tight and Charles shakes against me.

"*Please ...*" He pants. "I need you. I need you I need you."

"No supplies ..." I repeat.

"Then get some. Or take me somewhere. I don't care. Just please. Please, please, *please.*"

There's no way in hell I can say no to that begging.

My hand withdraws, and I achingly pull myself away from him as I sit up and look around the room. The snoring I'd drowned out is still going strong, and no one looks like they've moved.

I glance back down at Charles. His blown pupils, wet pouty lips, and pink-splotched cheeks, and I decide that fuck it all, I need him too.

"Come with me."

CHARLES

IT'S HARD TO SNEAK QUIETLY FROM THE ROOM WITH A THIRD FUCKING LEG filling out my pants, but I'll do anything I need to for us to escape unnoticed.

My breath is a ball in my chest, and I keep hold and pull the door slowly, wide enough to duck out into the hall. Zeke slips out after me and pulls it closed.

"What if someone wakes up and sees we're gone?" The last thing I want to do is give him reasons to back out, but it's a valid question. No amount of sex is worth Zeke being outed over.

"We went to grab a snack." He reaches down to rearrange the prominent bulge tenting his pants. "This isn't going to take long though, so I think we'll be fine."

I'm counting on it. As good as his hand felt on my cock, it's nothing to how it felt when he was fucking me. I need that feeling again.

"Where can we go?"

"My room."

"But your mattress ..." I nod back toward the room we just left.

"We'll figure something out. Come on." His big hand wraps around mine, and he drags me down one hall, then the next, until we reach his room. The second the door opens, I'm hit with the smell of chlorine and fresh bodywash; it's like a drug in how quickly it relaxes me. It's Zeke. All him.

He locks the door and backs me into it.

"You're such a tease," he says.

"Sure. Because *I* was the one shirtless and sweaty today. Like, shit, were you wearing briefs under your sweats? Because all I could see was the elephant trunk swinging."

"I was wearing the same thing I am right now." He gives me a cocky grin. "Maybe you should investigate."

That's a game I can get on board with. I drop to my knees, then reach for the waistband of his sweats. Slowly, carefully, I peel them down to reveal ... oh.

"Boxers?" I was convinced he was going commando. "Disappointing."

"Excuse you, sir, but I am a *gentleman*."

"You were just jerking me off in a room full of people."

"Yes. *Gently*."

I snort and give the boxers a firm tug, loving the way his cock springs out and slaps back against his abs. “So hot.”

He tilts his hips forward. “How about a little kiss?”

I’d laugh, but I’ve missed his cock so much that arguing seems pointless. I lean forward and close my mouth around the head, giving his slit a fast lick and melting at the taste. One that’s all Zeke.

My eyes fall closed as I take more of him in, savoring the feel of him on my tongue. The heat, the weight, it’s enough to make my blood hum.

He closes his hands over my upper arms before hauling me to my feet.

“I wasn’t lying about this being a fast one.”

“S-sorry.” I shake away the sex haze trying to take me down. “I got distracted.”

“It was a good distraction, but now I need you stripped down and bent over my bathroom counter.”

“We’re doing it in there?”

“We’re going to give it a try.” Zeke leans in for one lingering kiss, and then he jerks back, kicks off his clothes, and heads for his dresser. His long strides show he isn’t messing around, so I hurry to pull off my T-shirt and dump my sleep shorts where I’m standing.

Unlike him, I *was* going commando, and I’ve never been happier about that in my life. Normally I don’t sleep in anything, but I figured my brothers—and especially *his* brothers—wouldn’t be a fan of that choice.

Zeke walks in as I bend over, and I watch him in the mirror, admiring his lean muscle and patchwork of tats. He pauses, eyes roaming down my back to my ass before his gray eyes flick up to meet mine in the mirror. “I can’t believe you were hiding all of this from me in the dark.”

“Do I need to remind you who came up with Hush Hush?”

He chuckles, giving himself a long, firm pump. “Fair. But *fuck*, I didn’t know what I was missing.”

And neither did I. His tall swimmer’s build makes my mouth water.

I expect Zeke to get straight to it, but like every other time we’ve been together, he doesn’t act like he’s in a rush. He drops the supplies on the counter beside me and steps in close to press his body against mine. His cock slips between my legs, nudging my balls, as his hands slide from my stomach up to my chest.

“I love you like this,” he says, voice a deep rumble. “Naked and waiting.” Zeke’s fingers brush my nipple, and I squirm.

“I thought we had to hurry.”

“Maybe I’ve changed my mind.”

I let out a soft laugh and lean my head into his. “That’s because you’ve switched to your other brain. New rule: no decision-making when you’re horny.”

He buries his nose behind my ear. “But rushing things goes against every instinct I have.”

Well, that explains why he was always so unhurried in Hush Hush, even when it was supposed to be all impersonal fucking. “A quickie can be just as hot.”

“Yeah, but it’s not about the heat. It’s ...” He inhales deeply through his nose. “Touching you makes me high. You feel amazing. The way you respond. The way you don’t hold back anything.”

I shiver, and he chuckles.

“Just like that.”

His fingers keep exploring in featherlight touches, and his lips brush my skin as they make a slow path back to my shoulder. I know what he means about high. He’s touching me the way he looks at me sometimes ... like I’m important. Like I deserve to be treated gently. It makes my chest feel too big.

“Keep exploring,” I whisper. “I’ll take care of everything.”

He gives a curious grunt, but I don’t answer, just snap the lube open and pour a generous amount on my fingers. His pubes brush my knuckles as I reach between us, sliding my fingers down to the place I’m begging to be touched.

“You’re going to prep yourself?”

“Whatever it takes to get you inside me.”

“I want to see.” He makes no move to release me though.

I smile at him in the mirror as I work myself open. “You’ll have to detach yourself from me to do that.”

“Don’t wanna. Tell me instead.”

“Tell you?”

“Talk me through what you’re doing.”

“U-umm ...” My hand stalls.

For some reason, it brings out Zeke’s filthy smile. “Tell me all the nasty things you’re doing to yourself. Give me the details.”

“I’m not very good at that.”

His hips lazily glide his cock between my legs. “Try. For me?”

Anything for him. I'm starting to worry about how far that sentiment goes.

"I-I'm pressing against my ... my ass?"

"What part of your ass?" His amusement is clear in his words.

"If you're going to find this funny, I'll stop."

"Trust me, there isn't a single funny thing about this."

"You're laughing."

"I'm smiling. Because of you. And how adorable you are stuttering over your words and blushing like crazy."

I scowl. Fuck that. I'm not *adorable*. "I'm rubbing my hole," I grit out. "Trying to make it, umm, softer. Ready. Before I push in."

A soft rumble, another lazy roll of his hips. "Are you ready?"

"I think so."

"Then do it."

"Okay, slowly ..." I press my finger in at the same time Zeke lightly pinches my nipple. A zip of pleasure shoots to my balls, and I cut off a gasp as it tries to sneak free. "Mean," I pant.

"Are you in?"

"Yeah." I press forward more. "One finger, about halfway."

"And how does it feel?"

"Tight. Hot. Kinda like a soft massage against my finger as I'm being sucked in."

"Fuck ... I remember. You've got such a greedy ass."

My cock twitches at his words, and my finger slides all the way in. There's a slight sting, but nothing I can't breathe through. I've been practicing enough with it this week that I'm no stranger to the feeling. I swear, ever since Zeke fucked me, I've become addicted. An orgasm without my prostate involved doesn't have the same intensity to it. My fingers work, but there's something lacking there, and I'm praying that I haven't built up Zeke inside me into more than it was. Because I'm dying to get that again. To reach that place of fullness where the rest of the world doesn't exist.

His hand drops to wrap around my cock, and I suck in a sharp breath. Him jerking me off feels a million times better than anything I can do myself, so there's no way my brain is exaggerating what happened between us. My ass clenches as I remember how stretched and owned I felt.

"Gonna add another finger," I tell him before following through. Another sting, another moment to adjust.

"How does it feel?" he asks again.

“Good. But nowhere near as good as your cock.”

He growls, and then his hand presses into the middle of my shoulders, pushing me facedown into the counter. I work my fingers in and out slowly, loving the way Zeke’s breathing becomes unsteady. His stare almost feels like a physical thing, and being so exposed is sending my dick to aching as goose bumps race over my skin.

“N-need to add another one ...”

“Let me.” Zeke makes fast work of the lube before his finger joins mine. He’s gentle, hesitant, but once he slips inside, he pushes forward on a long, smooth stroke.

“Damn, Charlie ...”

My insides vibrate at the name. I squeeze my ass around our digits, and Zeke’s hips jerk back. He squeezes his balls with his free hand as I muffle my laugh in my arm.

“Shut up,” he says, slowly fucking me with his finger. “You have no idea how good you feel.”

“Argh. Okay. I’m ready.” I withdraw, taking him with me, and my ass twitches at the sudden vacancy. I’m so annoyingly empty, and Zeke is moving way too slowly.

“Come on,” I complain, rubbing my needy cock.

“You’re very demanding.”

“Because you’re driving me insane.”

He finishes rolling on the condom and steps forward, making no move to enter me.

“Dammit, I’m serious.” But I don’t sound serious. I sound *delirious*.

“Let me take my time.”

“You’ve taken your time. Your time is done. Now give me what I need.”

“And what do you need?” That damn teasing tone is back.

“I need you to fuck me. Desperately.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I honestly think I might die.” My voice cracks, and Zeke leans down to bury his face in my neck.

I can’t stand it. Can’t hold out any longer. I’m still rubbing my dick, but instead of getting closer to the edge, I’m only getting more frustrated. My ass needs something to clamp down on. Something to hold on to. Something to stretch and fill me in the way I crave.

“It’s so sexy,” he says. “The way you need me.”

He has no fucking idea. I'd take him like this every day if I could. Done waiting, I grab his cock and press it against my hole, but Zeke jerks out of my grip.

I almost sob.

Almost.

But then his hands are on me. He spins me to face him, grabs the backs of my thighs, and hikes me up onto the counter. Body pressed against mine, face this close-up, I'm treated to that small soft smile he sometimes gets.

"Hey ..."

I almost groan, and not in a good way. "Okay, I'd find all of this insanely sweet if I didn't need you inside me *right fucking now*."

He must sense that I'm serious because he doesn't argue, just reaches down, positions himself, and starts to push in.

His size takes my breath away. He's larger than I remember, the stretch more intense, and just when I'm questioning how the hell I fit him last time, he slips inside and pushes forward with that same steady thrust he used with his finger until he bottoms out.

I let out the breath I got caught on and finally relax. Sore or not, being filled by him is indescribable.

"Oh no ..." I murmur.

"What's wrong?"

"I ..." How the hell do I say this without sounding like a total freak? "You ... fit."

"Fit?"

Fuck it. Just talk. "Sex with you is so out-of-this-world amazing that I'm scared when you leave, I'll never get to have that again."

"Charlie ..."

"Ignore me." I slap his ass, and it lets out a satisfying *thwack*. "Just move."

Zeke chuckles, and instead of giving me the pounding I crave, he leans in, fingertips brushing my cheeks, and draws me into a slow, deep kiss.

I want to complain, but ... damn, he can kiss. As his tongue moves lazily in and out of my mouth, he starts to rock inside me. Short, deep thrusts that make me fuzzy and cause my cock to throb in protest. Somehow, it manages to be exactly what I want and nowhere near enough.

I don't think anything with him will ever be enough.

My hands slide from his firm shoulders to his bulging biceps and then

tuck under his arms to wrap around his back.

We hold each other close, his hand buried in my hair, as his hips rotate in a slow, sensual rhythm. The drag of each thrust is incredible but barely brushes my prostate, and that thing needs to be pummeled.

I shift and whine into his mouth.

“Impatient little thing, aren’t you?”

“I need you to stop holding back. I need you wild.”

His gaze sharpens, and then without breaking eye contact, he takes my hands and stretches them over my head to pin to the mirror. My back arches, shoulder blades against the cool glass, and I close my legs around him to steady myself.

His first thrust pulls back slowly, then slams home. Over and over, he tortures me. Slow withdraw before pistoning his hips forward with a force that rattles my teeth.

His jaw is clenched, intense gaze swirling in my gut, and as each thrust gets steadily faster, I melt. His cock pegs my prostate. Hard. Unrelenting. It goes on and on until my hands are straining against Zeke’s hold.

“Please ...” I beg. “I need to touch myself.”

“You already had your turn.”

His hand tightens around my wrists as his other grabs my chin and forces me to meet his eyes. Our gaze holds, and his thrusts speed up. Everything gets hazy around the edges as the high I’m building to intensifies. Pinned here like this, I’m completely helpless to anything Zeke wants to do to me, and if the steady pool of precum I’m leaking is any indication, I really fucking like that.

He releases my chin, and his attention drops to where his hand is roaming down my chest, over my ribs, before coming to a rest on my hip. Fingers bite into skin, and then he finally gives me what I want.

He unleashes on me, hips pounding into my ass with a steady *whapwhapwhap* that gets faster and louder, along with our breathing. Zeke’s grunts hit my ears, the smell of his sweat makes my head swim, and my cock is pulsing, throbbing, as the ache in my balls increases. They’re pulled so tight to my body, and still I can’t come. My release is so close but hanging that bit out of reach.

“Please,” I whine.

He grunts, and then his hand disappears from my hip and closes around my cock.

I almost sob with relief. My legs tighten around him, coaxing him harder, faster, sweat forming between our skin.

His hand jerks me tight and fast, and then he rasps, "Look at me."

The second my eyes meet his, it's over. His mouth drops, whole body stiffening as he slams back tight against my ass. Zeke's head drops backward as he lets out a long groan, but through it all, he doesn't stop jerking me.

And seeing Zeke let go like that is possibly the hottest thing I've ever witnessed in my life.

My gaze zeroes in on a bead of sweat rolling down his arched throat, over his pec to skim his nipple before plunging down to his abs.

My ass clenches tight as tingles erupt in my balls, and then my cock gives a massive throb, and I come so hard, my shoulders leave the glass, and the only things holding me up are Zeke's steady hand and my legs clutching his waist. Each pulse is fucking ecstasy, and Zeke strokes me through it all until I collapse back against the mirror in a sated puddle.

He chuckles, pulling me into his arms, lips pressed to my hair, and we sit there like that for so long I almost drift off against his shoulder.

We need to shower.

We need to get back.

But I'm finding it so hard to stress about that while I'm still full of Zeke, his naked body flush with mine.

His lips leave my hair, and hot air ghosts over my ear instead. "For the record," he says, "you fit too. And that doesn't just scare me, Charlie. It's fucking terrifying."

I pull back, trying to read his face. "Why?"

"Because not only have I never had that, it's terrifying because ... well, because you make me want to stay."

ZEKE

I'M SO DISTRACTED I ALMOST FORGET THE DEAN IS COMING. LAST NIGHT WAS insane. Not only a huge gamble in getting caught, but I said things I shouldn't have. Things that were unnervingly true.

I couldn't keep my hands off him. We showered together, dressed together, snuck back into the room, where we curled up together, trading kisses and soft words until I had to let him go, and the small distance between us killed me.

Like now, seeing him talking and laughing with Bailey and Sam fills me with so much envy I'm holding myself back from walking over there and claiming him.

And goddamn do I want to claim him. Every inch of his haughty, easily offended, spitfire frame.

Before I can follow that thought through, the dean arrives, and everyone snaps to attention. With any luck, sometime in the next half an hour, Larken will call with this fuckface motherfucker trapped and on camera messing with the Kappas' shit.

The pressure is mounting for this plan to work. If it doesn't, I have no clue what our next move should be because our leads are dry. The guys have been asking around, but whoever it is mustn't be talking.

Charles takes Dean Hutchins through who the winners were and their prizes, and I try to keep my focus on them and not the other end of the street, where Kappa house looks still and empty.

Looks can be deceiving.

I have everything crossed that this works. Then with the stupid claims gone, I can focus on graduation ... and Charles.

Who shouldn't even be a consideration.

I drag my hand through my hair, wishing I could go back to when compartmentalizing was so much easier. Getting to know Charles on top of all the sex has been too much. My brain is getting all screwy and caught in that trap that this can be more than it is.

Am I ready to drown my Olympic dreams?

Clearly fucking not, or I would have come out already.

I can't work out if that makes me selfish, stupid, or driven.

I'd like to think I'm so focused on my goals that nothing can dampen that

fire, but I'm overly aware of how true my words were last night. How easy it would be to say fuck it all and walk away and try for something real.

Charles and I have never had that talk. He's never specifically said anything like that would even be on the table, but I dunno, there's something there. I can feel it when we're touching, when we're talking, when we're texting. I don't even have confirmation that I'm the only one he's sleeping with. I just *know*.

Maybe that makes me a naive idiot, but every day only makes me trust Charles and what we have more.

I metaphorically kick myself with the reminder that what we have is the start. A barely thing. An arrangement that could work out to be amazing but needs to be stopped before we get to that point. I've never been one of those dudes who believe love is all you need and whatever. I have goals and ambition, ones I don't want to give up, and if Charles is making me question that, it can't be a good sign.

The fucked-up thing is he hasn't asked me to question anything. He's offered me sex and friendship, and I'm the one who's getting carried away with it all. Even last night, he'd been all about a quickie and making sure we weren't discovered, and all I wanted to do was touch and taste every part of him I could reach.

"Ready whenever you are," Chad says, holding up his phone.

That snaps me out of my circling thoughts and back to the important part. Dean Hutchins reads through the winners and announces the amount we raised. Every second he's talking seems to inch slower, and I can't stop looking back down the row again and again.

I'm swimming with nerves. Charles too, if the way he keeps pursing his lips and lifting up his head is any indication.

I want to hurry the dean out of here, but a big part of this was to show we're playing nice and are all about the school spirit or whatever.

When the recording ends, his gaze strays over by our front door. "That's, a, uh, interesting decoration," he says.

And when I turn to see what's caught his eye—*motherfucker*. Our Heroes Hunt trophy is hanging in pride of place.

And when I say *trophy*, what I mean is a bright pink dildo with trophy pieces superglued to it. Chad's eyes have widened comically, and I'm kind of hoping the front deck will open up and swallow me whole.

Robbie, on the other hand, cracks up laughing. "We're good at

improvising.”

“Hmm ...”

“It was part of a street-wide event,” I hurry to explain. “One of the great things about this community is the way we all come together. Events are a big one. Traditions that have been in place since the school was founded is another. That trophy is one tradition that’s been passed on to us.”

Dean Hutchins gives a curt nod, and I’m kicking myself for not removing the stupid thing. But that trophy has hung there for as long as I’ve been a Sigma Beta Psi, which is why we fight so hard to win the scavenger hunt every year.

“Good job with the money,” he says. “Charles, I’ll see you and your fathers next week.”

They shake hands, and the dean leaves. We all stand there, trying to act normal until he’s driven off, and then I grab my phone to text Larken.

Not even a minute later, I see him jogging down the street.

“Anything?” I ask.

He shakes his head, and my gut sinks. “No one showed.”

“Fuck.” The hope I’d been holding on to crashes. “*Fuck.*”

“Hey, it’s okay. We’ll make another plan.” Charles gives my arm a quick squeeze, and it kills me that I can’t have more.

“Another plan. More time spent on this, *fuck.*”

“Whoa,” Brandon says. “It’s okay, we’ll figure it out.”

“*Will we?*” And sure, it’s not like me to have these types of outbursts, but I can’t stop. “We don’t know who this asshole is. We don’t know why they’re doing it or what their plans are. We don’t know a goddamn thing, and it feels like this creep is playing with us.”

“We’re doing everything we can,” Brandon says.

“And if it’s not enough? What if we really do get shut down? And then I’m the president who sank Sigma Beta Psi. What a legacy to leave behind.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Not that bad?” I yank at my hair. “My record needs to be clean. Why do you think I joined a fraternity in the first place? Why do you think I became president? It wasn’t because I had nothing else to do. I’m working my goddamn ass off for that gold. It’s all I’ve ever cared about, but shit like that comes with consequences. It comes with notoriety and people wanting to dig and find out all the shit about you. My record needs to be squeaky clean so when I step onto that podium, I won’t have a single regret in the fucking

world.” My gaze slips to Charles, and I have to yank it away again. “My entire focus for the last three years has been to make it. I’m so close. College is almost over, and now some bored jackass in their parents’ fucking basement is trying to bring all that down because they, what ... think they’re important? Have something to prove?” I turn and drive the palm of my hand into the post by the front door. Pain shoots up my arm, but I grit my teeth against it.

Charles steps in front of me and grabs my upper arms. “Hey, that’s enough. Nothing happened today—that’s a *good* thing. It gives us more time to think.” His grip tightens. “I didn’t join a losing side.”

And for maybe the first time ever, it’s *him* calming *me* down. It works too. The conviction helps remind me that with all the worst-case scenarios rattling in my brain, none of them have actually happened yet.

We have time.

Only when I roll out of bed the next morning, I’m groggy and disoriented. I’ve slept through my alarm and missed my morning swim. For the first time since I joined college and—*crap!* It’s almost nine. If I don’t hurry, I’ll miss my morning class too.

I have a text from my coach to see where I am, along with a missed call from a private number. I click on the voicemail and switch my phone to speaker as I hurry to dig up clothes but pause as soon as a voice I almost recognize fills my room. “This is Pamela calling from Dean Hutchins’s office. The dean requires an urgent meeting with you. If you could call back on ...”

My mouth goes dry. What fresh hell is this?

It takes two attempts to punch in the number because my hand is shaking, and when Pamela won’t schedule me any earlier than four, I want to tell her to go and fuck herself and her “urgent” meeting. But I hold it together, forcing my unwavering calm to the forefront.

And when I drop onto the side of my bed, face in my hands, one thought is louder than the others.

I want Charles.

The urge is so brutally overpowering that I’m calling him before I can think it through. Before I can talk myself through all the risks and remind myself of keeping us quiet. I just ... I’m exhausted.

He answers on the third ring.

“Where are you?” I ask before he can even say as much as hello.

“Umm, home. About to leave for class.”

“Can you not?”

There’s a pause. “What’s wrong?”

“I have a meeting with the dean today. They wouldn’t tell me what it’s about, but apparently, it’s urgent.”

The silence is stifling, and I’m scared he’ll say no. I’m asking a lot, and I know it isn’t fair.

“What do you need?” he asks.

“You. Just you.” Not sex. Not someone amusing to pass the time with. *Him.*

“So am I coming to you, or are you coming here?”

The relief is immediate. “I’ll be right down.”

I shower quickly, then get dressed, and as I’m leaving, I pause to grab my swim hoodie to switch out for the one he has. I jog down the street and straight up the steps at his place, then walk right on in without knocking. There are people in the front room, but I don’t bother slowing down to see who, just continue into the hall and down to Charles’s room.

I slip inside, then close the door and immediately lock it behind me before I manage a huge inhale.

Charles’s eyes are filled with sympathy as he crosses the room to pull me into a hug. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t fucking know. Things are spiraling, and I don’t know how to stop it.”

“We will though. You know that, don’t you?”

I chuckle darkly into his shoulder. “Let’s hope.”

Lips brush my neck. “Do you want to go somewhere? Do something?”

“Like what?”

“Anything that will distract you.”

I pull back and pump my eyebrows. “Doing you will distract me.”

He laughs. “Not what I had in mind.”

Just being around him has helped to calm some of my rising panic. I hand over my hoodie, loving the way Charles’s face lights up before he presses it to his nose.

“Are you sure you’re okay with skipping class?”

“I shouldn’t.” He shrugs and falls back into his desk chair. “But every day, Cornell looks further and further away.”

“What do you mean?” I drop onto the side of his bed and lean back into

my hands.

“When you were talking yesterday ... I realized that I’ve never felt that way about anything before. There’s nothing I’d give up everything in my life to achieve. I’ve been raised to follow this path, to act a certain way, to think certain things and ... I hate it.” His laugh comes out on a burst of air. “Law is *painful*. I’m smart. I understand it when I try, but it’s like these little blades under my skin whenever I walk into a classroom or try to argue a case. *Especially* when the person I’m supposed to be defending is guilty. I ...” He snarls. “You said I’m passionate, but I’ve never, ever felt that burning need for something the way you do.”

There’s something in his words, his tone, that makes me swallow and ask, “Ever?” Because Charles is one of the most passionate people I know. It’s impossible to me that he doesn’t have that drive inside him, propelling him forward, reaching into every part of his life.

Then his eyes meet mine. And he swallows thickly. And suddenly, he doesn’t have to answer.

But I want him to.

“Not over ... *anything?*” I prompt.

His cheeks are going splotchy, and excitement is dancing in my veins.

And when he lifts his head, chin tilting that bit higher, I’m torn on whether he’s going to say what I think he will or lie. “Never.” Lie, it is, then. “Until you.”

“Charlie ...”

“I’m not asking for anything. There are no expectations. I know this thing between us is going to end, and I told myself I’d never tell you how I feel about you. But then ... I think ... well, you feel it too, don’t you?”

My neck is stiff, but I nod.

“Okay ...” He smiles before he ducks his head. “This doesn’t change anything. You’re still West Coast, I’m still East. But ... thank you. It’s nice to know I’m not alone in this.”

“You’re not.” My voice does this awkward crack, and I hurry to clear my throat. “I wish I could change things.”

“No. That’s not how this goes. We’re both realists, but it means that everything we share until then will be that much sweeter.”

I agree, because what else can I do? Nothing he’s saying isn’t true. But having that definite reminder of how limited the time we have left is makes me more desperate to hold on to it.

The easiest way to have that is to come out. To tell my brothers the truth and fuck what they think.

Charles moves to stand between my legs, and his soft fingers cup my face. “I’m coming with you today. To see the dean. From now until graduation, we’re partners in everything, and that includes this. We’re not going down without a fight.”

CHARLES

I'M GOING TO GRADUATE. I'M GOING TO BECOME A LAWYER. CORNELL IS MY future.

I swallow and glance to the side, where Zeke is sitting, elbows resting on his knees, hands loosely linked together. There's nothing about him that looks stressed or worried, even though I know how on edge he is.

I wish I could help. Do something to make whatever this meeting is about go away, especially because I get the feeling all we have ahead is bad news. I want to protect Zeke from that. To take all the stress away and leave him feeling as amazing as I do when I'm with him.

I'm going to graduate. I'm going to become a lawyer. Cornell is my future.

The words are playing on a loop in my head, trying to drown out the one thought I shouldn't be having: *But what if I don't?*

It's not helpful, the empty hope. Turning my back on everything I've worked toward means throwing away years of hard work. It's a slap in the face to the people who want to be where I am, and, embarrassingly, the part that worries me the most—it means being honest with Grampy and having my father pay that price.

The door to the dean's office opens.

"Zeke." Dean Hutchins's gaze moves to me. "And ... Charles? I didn't realize I had a meeting with you also."

"You don't. I'm here with Zeke."

"Hmm." He holds out a hand toward his office. "Okay, well, when you're both ready."

Zeke glances at me and away again, and even that brief connection gives me deep flutters. I want to take his hand, give him strength, but I know how relieved he is that I'm here at all.

Dean Hutchins closes his door behind us, and we take the seats across the desk from his. *I'm nervous*, and it's not even my meeting, so I can't imagine how Zeke feels.

But when I glance over, he has one ankle resting on his knee and an arm draped over the back of his chair.

Cool as a fucking cucumber.

Can I swoon any harder?

“So, to what do I owe this day of anxiety?” Zeke asks, sounding patient but with an edge I’m not sure anyone but me can catch.

“That’s what I was hoping you could tell me,” Dean Hutchins says. His face is tight, not angry, but definitely stern.

“Given Pamela wouldn’t even tell me what the meeting was about, that won’t be possible.”

Dean Hutchins drops a stack of papers in front of Zeke. “These were waiting on my desk for me this morning.”

I lean over to see what they are as Zeke picks them up. Screenshots of the Dirt is the first thing I notice, along with what looks like hospital reports and ... a petition?

“What is that?” I ask.

“Reports of hazing, with evidence, and the request to have Sigma Beta Psi removed from operating at West Haven University.”

Zeke’s mouth drops.

“You can’t,” I say, with absolutely no reasoning to back it up. At the end of the day, he can do whatever he likes.

“We have a good relationship, Zeke, and it’s in the school’s best interests to see you go far. I hardly need to point out the publicity that comes with having an Olympian alum. It’s because of that I bothered to call this meeting at all, because as far as I’m concerned, that evidence is damning.”

“It’s all bullshit,” Zeke snaps, and Dean Hutchins’s face turns stern again.

“Any other fraternity and they would have had a cease operation notice on their door first thing this morning.”

“You can’t suspend us over made-up claims.”

“The problem with that is I’m not so sure they’re made up.” He nods toward the papers Zeke is holding. “There’s evidence, multiple claims, brothers named as instigators—including yourself. Whoever is behind this has made it clear that unless you’re suspended, all of this goes to the media, and that’s not a shitstorm I’m prepared to deal with.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. “You’re going to punish people who are innocent to avoid bad publicity?”

“In order to argue that, I’d need proof that Sigma Beta Psi *are* innocent.” He holds out his hand, and Zeke passes the papers back.

Dean Hutchins flips through until he finds what he’s looking for. “Are you telling me a Brandon Blakely didn’t end up in the hospital after having an asthma attack due to a prank instigated by Rho Kappa Tau in conjunction

with one of Sigma house's pledges?"

Ahh ... I look to Zeke to see what we say to that.

The hand in his lap is clenching and unclenching, but his face is still relaxed.

"That was dealt with internally."

Dean Hutchins sighs. "But it happened?"

"It was an outlier," I argue.

"Unfortunately, that apparent outlier gives credibility to every one of these claims."

Zeke's jaw ticks. "Carter was a problem, and we got rid of him. No one should have even known about that. This is someone trying to mess with us—I can show you the messages from them, asking me to meet them here."

"Messages can be fabricated."

I point at the stack of paper. "And so can that."

Dean Hutchins leans back in his chair. "I'm sorry, Zeke. But I have no option but to suspend the Sigma fraternity from operation until we can investigate these claims."

Holy ...

Fuck.

There's a reason the number one rule on Greek Row is to not draw attention. Suspension means that any sorority or fraternity can't operate. At all. For an undetermined amount of time. That means no spring formal, no pranks, no parties, no events, and worst of all, no involvement in rush week, which means no new pledges for next year.

If we don't do something before we graduate, next year's Sigmas are fucked. I think of Larken and his unrestrained enthusiasm. Even with my grudge against most guys in that house, there's no way he deserves that.

"How will you investigate?" I ask since Zeke doesn't seem to be able to do anything but stare. And after the way he spilled his thoughts yesterday, I know he's looking forward and dreading what this means for himself and his future career.

"That will remain largely confidential, but first steps will be trying to track some of these people down. I don't need to point out that not only are these claims serious, some are downright illegal activities that may need to be handed over to police."

"No." Zeke scoots forward on his chair. "I understand how it looks, especially with the prank that went bad, but you cannot take these claims as

fact. Every single Greek org here has outlawed hazing, and we take it seriously. No one does it. Not even those douchebag Gammas. This is someone with a vendetta against us. You can't let them ruin a tradition that goes back so far."

The dean's fingers drum out a pattern of taps on his desk. "I understand what you're saying, but I'm sorry. I don't see a way around this. And unless these claims are proven to be false, I have to take action."

"So that's it?" Zeke asks.

"I'm afraid so."

"There's nothing I can do? We're suspended?"

"I'm sorry. Between us, I have nothing against the fraternities here. You do good work. But my hands are tied."

Zeke jumps up and leaves, and I remember to thank the dean before hurrying after him. He's already out of the building and crossing the courtyard before I catch up with him.

"Are you okay?"

He turns on me, eyes big and wild like he isn't sure where he is. "Fuck no. I have to go back to the house and tell them we're suspended. It's going to crush them. We're fucked. Do you know how many fraternities are reinstated after being suspended? And how many of those actually bounce back? The number is goddamn minuscule." He drags his hands back through his hair. "Fuck. What do I do?"

I don't have an answer to that.

"*Shit*. Robbie is deep into organizing spring formal. Derikson is working with the other Bigs on preparing for next year's rush. Without rush, we don't have pledges. Without new members, the dues have to be raised. No one in the house can afford that, especially when we can't throw any parties to cover the gap."

"Hey." I grab Zeke's arms and force him to look at me. "We'll figure something out."

"There's a month and a half left. That's it. Then I'm expected to walk away from here and leave them all with it?"

"If that's what you have to do, then yes."

His eyebrows shoot up. "I can't."

"Then we need to get busy. Standing around feeling sorry for ourselves isn't going to fix this. Where's that Sigma spirit?"

"Truthfully, kinda crushed."

My heart hurts for him. “I really want to give you a hug.”

“Friends hug.” His shoulders bunch up. “I think I need it.”

And that’s all it takes for me to step forward and wrap my arms around him. Even this beaten down, he holds me like I’m somebody, and that makes me more determined than ever to get us through this.

Maybe the smart thing to do for my fraternity and our brotherhood is to distance ourselves from their house. But if someone is coming for one of us, they’re coming for all of us. There’s no guarantee they’ll stop with Sigma, so we need to make sure they don’t have that option.

This witch hunt has gone on long enough.

Zeke suddenly stiffens.

“What’s wrong?”

“The dean knew.”

Apparently that’s important, but I’m lost on what he’s talking about. “Knew what?”

“About the prank. He knew details. That it was organized by you guys, but then our pledge fucked things up.” Zeke shakes his head. “We didn’t tell anyone. Carter went before the executives, who voted him out, and Raymond was sworn to keep the reasons quiet.”

“Bailey told everyone in our house about Carter, but it’s unlikely someone mentioned it. My guys only want to move the hell on from what happened.”

Zeke swears. “So how did it get out?”

“Well, I guess someone let it slip. It might have even been by accident.”

“I can’t get past the ‘parameters’ thing. I mean, how likely is it that anyone in your house would want to set you up?”

“Admittedly, it’s a lot of effort when my brothers just want to get their degrees. And I’m ninety-nine percent sure none of them know you tease me about that word.”

“But my brothers do. And only thirteen of them—including myself—knew about Carter messing with that prank.”

“Directly, maybe.” I shrug. “There’s every chance one of your execs said something. Or even the other pledge who was involved.”

“He’s on thin standing, so I doubt it was him.”

“Unless he’s angry about being black-sheeped after the whole event.” If I’d been implicated in something like that because I skipped out on supervision early based on my brother’s word things were fine, I’d be pissed.

Would I want to get revenge? Who knows. It seems extreme for someone who's still a member. "So if it wasn't him or you, that leaves eleven. Assuming it isn't one of the executives."

"Not Chad, Brandon, or Robbie."

"Are you sure you want to rule them out so quickly?"

Zeke nods. "Zero doubts there."

"Eight, then. That list isn't terrible."

"Except for one problem. How do we narrow down from here?"

ZEKE

SILENCE FILLS THE ROOM. IT'S THICK. SUFFOCATING. I CAN'T MEET ANY OF my brothers' eyes because I'm afraid to see the disappointment infecting me reflected back from them. And all I can think is that there's every chance one of these assholes is the cause of all this. I'm just holding out hope that it was an innocent slipup.

The suspension is gutting, but knowing one of our brothers possibly sold us out is the hardest thing about all of this.

Even harder than informing Nationals and having my ass chewed out. Even harder than telling Robbie we'll all be missing spring formal and have to cancel graduation bash—the largest party we throw every year.

No one knows what to say.

“All because of some fucked-up rumors,” Chad says, sounding lost.

And I know I'm president, and I know I'm supposed to be the one to deal with all this, but I can't stand my thoughts recycling any more than they already have been over the last twenty-four hours.

This would be so much easier if Charles was here.

Well, easier for me. My brothers don't need more shit news today.

But I also don't need to relive this shock with them.

“Right.” I bring my hands together and then stand. “I think we all need time to process this. I'll be working with the dean as best as I can, and if he comes to you with questions, just be honest and accommodating. If we're lucky, this will fizzle away to nothing.”

There are a few murmured responses that I don't even bother trying to make sense of. I leave them and head for my room when I pause. Study and feel sorry for myself? Or give in to the urge to go and see Charles.

I'm sure he said his dads were coming up today, but I have no idea what time they were meant to get here or how long they'd be staying. Fuck it.

I send Charles a text to let me know when he's free.

CHARLES: *MY DADS JUST GOT HERE AND WE'RE ABOUT TO HEAD OUT FOR lunch, so probably not until later. Way later, if last time they visited is anything to go by*

ME: *DAMMIT, I WANTED TO SEE YOU. TOMORROW, THEN?*

CHARLES: *SURE*

CHARLES: *BUT, I MEAN, YOU CAN COME WITH US. IF YOU WANT TO. NO pressure*

I BLINK AT THE TEXT, REREADING IT TO MAKE SURE I'M FOLLOWING WHAT he's asking. He wants me to go out for lunch ... with him *and* his dads? Hooboy. I'm being hit with a truck ton of nerves, similar to how I feel on the starter's block.

The only answer I can give is no, of course. Meeting the parents is kinda major, and even if we do have feelings for each other, that doesn't change that in reality, we're nothing to each other. I want to see him. I want to meet his dads. I want them to *like* me. But how can I expect them to do that when their son is nothing more than a secret to me?

ME: *AS FRIENDS?*

CHARLES: *WE CAN BE WHATEVER YOU WANT US TO BE*

AND I'D EXPECT NOTHING ELSE FROM CHARLES THAN TO PUT MY FEELINGS first here, but I kinda wish he'd pressure me. Ask me to step up and give me that push to stop being a wuss.

ME: *WHAT I WANT US TO BE ISN'T POSSIBLE*

CHARLES: *WE'RE THE ONLY ONES WHO GET TO DECIDE THAT*

ME: *SO, IF I DECIDED I WANTED YOU TO BE MY BOYFRIEND?*

MY PHONE IMMEDIATELY LIGHTS UP WITH A CALL, AND I DUCK INTO MY bedroom before I answer. I'm smiling, even with all the shit going on, because all it takes is his voice to make everything else not matter.

"Did you really ask me that over text?" he asks, sounding breathless. "Zeke Ariston, you take that back right now and—"

"You're cute."

He huffs. "Am not."

"Totally cute. And definite boyfriend material."

A whimper comes down the line. "You're going to kill me."

"Then we'd be even." I'm nervous when he doesn't reply straight away. "So ... this question is kinda a two-way street. I'm going to need to know how you feel about it."

"I ... You have no idea how much I want that, but ..."

"I'm moving."

"Exactly."

"And we don't have long left."

"No need to remind me." His voice is all pouty.

"Maybe ... maybe I need to think about coming out."

"No."

I laugh. "Isn't that my choice?"

"It is, but until you met me, you'd never even considered that. And I'm flattered, really, but what happens after you come out and things end between us? What if it completely fucks up your future?"

"And if I don't, it completely fucks up right now."

"Only if we let it." His voice softens. "You've been working on this for years. I'm not ruining that for you. I can stay secret, and we can make it work. But ..."

“Yeah?”

“Please don’t be angry, but I might have told my dads about us. Before we were anything. There’s no way they’d tell anyone—they get what it’s like to be closeted, but yeah. If you come, they know, and it’ll be up to you whether we clarify that things are still going or that we’re only friends now, whatever.”

I try to work out how I feel about that. That people know. Not only about me but about me *and* Charles. Instead of panic or nausea, I ... like it.

“Well, that’s four people because Chad knows too.”

“Really?”

“Well ...” I shrug even though he can’t see it. “He guessed, and I didn’t deny it.”

I swear I can *hear* him trying to smother a smile. “Well, the offer is there. It’s up to you.”

“I’m going to come,” I say.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” My whole chest feels inflated. “I dunno how I want to play it, but can we see how things go?”

“Of course.” He lets out a breath. “And no pressure, but I could use your support today.”

“With what?”

“Uh ... I want to talk to them about something. It might not go well.”

For once, I get a chance to repay him for all the support he gives me. “Whatever you need.”

“ZEKE ARISTON.” A MAN WHO LOOKS EXACTLY LIKE AN OLDER VERSION OF Charles holds out his hand. “It’s nice to put a face to the pain in the ass we keep hearing about.”

I snort and shake his hand. “Believe me when I say Charles gives as good as he gets.”

“Oh, we’d believe it,” the other man says. “I’m Dash, Charles’s dad. His father is Archibald Levine the Third. Ensure you address him accordingly.”

My gaze goes from him to older Charles and back again. “Please say you’re messing with me.”

“It’s Archie,” his father says, throwing Dash a look.

Dash cracks up laughing. “Charles wasn’t exaggerating. You don’t mess around.”

“Sorry to break it to you, Dash Levine the Seventieth. Titles mean jack shit to me.”

“You and me both. And it’s Dash Lewis. The first. I’m a nasty commoner.”

I take my seat. “Likewise.” Then, completely spurred on by Charles’s dads’ warmth, I reach over and take Charles’s hand. “Some guys just like it nasty.”

And like that, the red splotches I love so much appear on his cheeks as his eyes go wide. “Fuck me, I’m in trouble.”

Older Charles drops into the seat beside his husband. “I thought you would have put that together before now.”

“How ridiculous of me to think that everyone at this table liked me and wanted me to be happy.”

“Yeah, but we want *us* to be happy more, and teasing you *really* makes me happy,” I point out.

His eyes meet mine, and even though he’s desperately trying to be exasperated, his smile is sneaking through. “One day, it won’t work anymore.”

“I highly doubt that.” Not that I’m going to have the time to test that theory out.

“Zeke,” Archie says, pulling my attention from Charles. “We’re told you’re a swimmer?”

“Trying to be.”

“Suddenly modest?” Dash asks. “I don’t think Olympic-bound is *trying*.”

He has a point. “The thing about the Olympics is there’s no guarantee. Anyone could step up who’s better than me, or I could have a bad qualifying swim, and then it’s all over.”

“But you’re fucking good,” Charles says. “Zeke’s going to be at a facility in California that’s known for training Olympians. He’s going to go far.”

“California?” Archie asks, surprised. It doesn’t escape my notice that Dash presses a hand to his husband’s thigh under the table.

Suddenly, I’m uncomfortable under their stares. “Yeah. I fly home to see family after graduation, and then I move a month later.”

A painfully awkward silence follows.

“It’s going to be great,” Charles jumps in. “I’m so excited for him.”

I swallow hard and squeeze his hand tighter. Will we stay in contact after I leave? Will that be a painful fucking vortex of pining?

“And, actually ...” Charles turns back to his dads. “Talking about the future, I, umm ... Well ... I ...” He sucks in a sudden loud breath and says on an exhale, “I don’t think law is for me.”

My mouth drops, but Charles isn’t looking at any of us.

“I’m sorry, I know it’s a huge deal and that Grampy is going to be angry, but I can’t ... I just can’t. Every time I think about becoming a lawyer and living that life, it’s too much. I feel sick. Angry. Prematurely stressed for the me in ten years who’s living a life I hate and can’t escape from. I refuse for that to be my life, so this isn’t me asking permission, it’s me telling you.”

Holy shit. “Charlie ...”

He gives me a quick smile before lifting his chin to face his dads. “I know this sucks. I know the timing is the worst thing ever, and I know this puts us all in a horrible position with the family, but I hope you can try to understand. I’ll talk to Grampy over the summer once I’ve turned down Cornell and there’s nothing he can do to change my mind.”

I have to fight the urge to pull him into my lap. I’m so proud, so impressed to see him facing them down and being firm, and my heart is in my throat while I wait for his dads to answer. I don’t know them well, but they seem cool. Surely, fucking *surely* they’ll be cool about this.

They can’t want their son to be unhappy all his life.

And if Charles does walk away, if he throws in law and Cornell, what then? Does he have a plan?

My heart is beating out an anxious rhythm. He’s just over a month away from graduation. This could mean starting over. This is ... fucking huge.

But the one question that’s louder than the others is:

What could this mean for us?

CHARLES

WELL, THIS LACK OF RESPONSE IS REASSURING.

My heart is thumping hard, and Zeke's hand has a strangle grip on mine. I almost want to ask him to let up, but when I glance over at the mess of expression on his face, I squeeze his hand back as well.

"I don't think this is the kind of conversation you drop over lunch," Dad says, and I'm surprised at the edge in his voice. Out of the two of them, I'd thought he'd be the one to understand most.

"When would you approve of it, then? Over the phone? On graduation day?"

"How about four years ago before you started this degree?"

My laugh is hollow. "You wanted me to stand up to Grampy when I was *eighteen*? Father's almost fifty and he still doesn't."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Dad says.

"Yeah, I do. Father was given a choice between you and the family, and he chose you anyway. Why is he allowed to pick what makes him happy and I'm not?"

Father holds up a hand. "No one is saying that."

"It sounds like they are."

"We're ..." He exchanges a look with Dad that flicks toward Zeke, and Dad takes over.

"It's the timing that makes us suspicious. What are your plans? To decide not to graduate six weeks out? To ditch Cornell? Jesus, Charles, these are opportunities that most people would kill for. How do we know ..." His laugh is as humorless as mine. "How are we supposed to believe this has nothing to do with him?"

"Because if you think that," Zeke snaps, "you're severely underestimating him."

And while I appreciate the support, it *does* have to do with him. Not in the way my dads are thinking, but he's a big part of the timing.

"You're right. It was Zeke who helped me see how messed up it would be for me to force myself through this. Hearing him talk about his goals only proved how empty mine are. I'm going to graduate, but I'm also postponing Cornell. I want to take the next year off to recalibrate and figure out what the hell I want to do with my life."

“Being a lawyer is not that bad,” Father says.

“For people who want to be one, sure. But I don’t. It’s tedious. Do you want me dealing with that bone-deep exhaustion every day for the rest of my life?”

“Of course not.” Dad scrubs a hand over his beard. “We want you to be as happy as us one day, but you’ve always been your grandfather’s favorite, despite everything. Do you think you can walk away from that?”

“Yes. Because I’m not going to be a lawyer or a politician or anything else on his list of appropriate career choices. And I’m not going to marry a woman. Or live in New York. I’m not actually sure what I’m going to do, but the first thing I’m looking into is teaching and what it will take to get me there.”

“Teaching?” Father asks like he doesn’t understand the word.

But Zeke’s looking at me in awe. “You’d be an amazing teacher.”

“I think so.”

Dad chuckles. “And is this teaching going to take you to the West Coast?”

I stiffen at his question. I should have known he’d ask that, but I don’t have an answer. Before Zeke and I get a chance to talk about whether this is something real or a college *thing*, I’m definitely not going to be having this conversation with my parents. “I’m open to all possibilities,” I answer as pragmatically as I can.

“All?” Zeke asks, and the question takes him by surprise as much as it does me.

And even though I want him to beg me to come to California with him, I’m also determined not to base my life around one person again. “I have a lot to think about.”

“Wow.” Dad clears his throat and sits back in his chair. A very long pause joins us at the table. “Okay, so, lunch?”

“Yes. I’m starving.”

And even though I can tell my dads are wary of this change, I know I have their support anyway. They’re never going to sugarcoat things, and I know we’ll be talking about this more, but at the end of the day, I have what they both should have had from their parents: unconditional love.

No matter how much I fuck up, they’ll be there for me. If I tell them I’m moving to California to be with Zeke, even with no job or plans for what’s next, they’ll probably chew me out for being an idiot, but they’d never try to

stop me from leaving.

Dad's right. People would kill to have what I have.

We finish up eating, and Zeke excuses himself to go to the bathroom. Father watches him leave, a thoughtful look on his face.

"All right, out with it," I say.

"With what?"

"What you think about Zeke."

Dad's grin is fast. "I like him."

"Yes, because you know my father won't." Father purses his lips. "Tattoos, Charles, really? And what's going on with that eyebrow?"

"I like it. It's hot."

"He looks like a punk."

Dad sniggers. "So did I when you met me."

"Great," I groan. "My father and I share a type."

That makes them both laugh at my expense. Assholes. Finally, Father relaxes. "And how are you actually doing?"

This burst of happiness lights me up. "Really good."

The two of them share a soft look like they always do. "Zero," Dad says.

"Pardon?"

"That's how many times you told us you were fine today."

"I don't think I'm following."

Dad leans forward, crossing his arms over the table. "Whenever we talk to you, we count up how many times you tell us you're fine in the conversation. Anything more than five is cause for worry. You probably average a ..."

"Three." Father nods.

"Yeah, a three. Today, it was zero. I don't think we've ever had a zero."

"Not since senior year of high school," Dad agrees.

Judging by the way they're talking, it doesn't sound like a bad thing. "And you don't want me to be fine?" I clarify.

"Fuck no. Fine is a reflex, what you say when you don't want to think about things too hard. But *really good*, like you are today? I don't think we've heard that from you before."

I ... don't know what to say to that. "I mean ... it's not like I'm ever *unhappy*."

"Nah, we know. But you're never exactly happy, are you?"

I give myself a moment to think back over the last few years. Nothing

stands out as being an event that caused me to crash and burn, but over the years, I've gotten tired. Just quietly doing the things I'm supposed to. "I guess not."

"So, the question is, are you happy now because of what you've told us, or is someone else responsible for that?" Father's gaze drifts back toward the bathrooms, where Zeke disappeared.

"Don't get me wrong, Zeke makes me happy, and if things don't work out ..." I puff a breath, not wanting to follow that line of thought. "But my future is what I've been stressing over for years, and having that out there is this massive relief."

Dad cringes. "Is there a reason you didn't come to us before now?"

"I thought I could handle it. I figured there are way worse lives to have, and at the end of the day, I didn't want to cause any more strain between you guys and Grampy."

Father almost chokes. "The only reason we've kept him in our lives all this time was because you were so close with him."

"What?" I look between them. "I thought he threatened to cut you off?"

"He did. And that ultimatum is what ruined my relationship with him forever. But being a Levine means he'd never follow through, because then he'd have to admit to his friends that he turned his back on his queer son. Plus, he does love me in his own convoluted way. But the relationship he has with me was never up to him. It was up to me. And if he can't accept you making your own choices, I'm more than happy to walk away."

Well, that's a whole new perspective I'd never considered. This whole time I'd thought Grampy held the power. "Shit. This lunch has been a lot."

"You're telling me. I need a drink." Dad picks up the drinks menu from the middle of the table, but Father takes it and places it back down again.

"Even with all these changes, I still want you focused for the rest of the year. You might want to use this degree for credits or go back to law one day, and I don't want your final results to be ones you regret."

It's what I'd been planning anyway. I'm not stupid. I know throwing away four years of hard work is a huge risk. "Already planning to."

"Which means more focus on study and not boys."

I snort. With how little time Zeke and I get to spend with each other, that isn't a worry. "It's not Zeke who's the problem."

"Then what is?"

How do I tell my dads the fraternity that's driven me mad for years has

been suspended and I want to *undo* that suspension? I give them the quickest rundown I can, overly aware of when Zeke returns halfway through my explanation.

And then Father points out the one thing that had never occurred to me but should have been blatantly obvious.

“You know, the best thing about Greek life is that it’s a community. A tight-knit one. One that people outside of the brother or sisterhood will never understand. And it’s a *big* community, Charles. If two fraternities can pull off everything you’ve done this year ... imagine what they could all do.”

ZEKE

IT'S LATE BY THE TIME WE GET BACK TO KAPPA HOUSE, AND WHEN WE BOTH climb out of the car, I hesitate. Charles's eyes hit mine over the hood, and after a second, a smile twitches his lips.

"I'd ask if you wanted to come in, but—"

"Yes."

"Zeke ..."

I round the car and nod toward the house.

"My brothers will see you," he says. "Lots of them. How are we going to explain you being here, let alone in my room?"

"What if we—stay with me here—*don't*?"

"Don't?"

I shrug. "Why do we have to explain ourselves to anyone?"

He opens his mouth to argue, but nothing comes out. It's another one of those things that soften me toward him every day. Charles worries about keeping my secret more than I do some days, and the fact he cares about me that much gives my ego this funny little kick.

I slip my serious face on. "I think we need to talk after all that," I point out.

"Good point." He scruffs up his hair. "I'm just worried ..."

"I know you are, Charlie. It's why I like you so fucking much."

He rolls his eyes, but his smile is splitting his face. "Fine. Come on, then."

I follow Charles into the house, and he's right—his brothers are everywhere. I'm careful not to look too closely at who, and we both ignore it when someone calls out to Charles. There's every possibility they'll put two and two together by the time we've reached his bedroom, but while I'm worried about rumors, without either of us confirming shit, there's no way people will actually *know*.

We reach his room, and I immediately lock us inside while Charles swaps out his button-up for my swim hoodie. I greedily take him in, and I'm hit with this full-on, drop-kick-to-the-face fact that if I give up on this without trying, I'll regret it forever. My chest *hurts* when I think about leaving here, knowing I won't see him again. All these panicky splinters vibrate in my gut and force words from my mouth.

“Be my boyfriend.”

Charles opens his mouth, but before he can answer me, I plow on.

“I know we sorta talked about it before, but I’m serious. I want you. I want you with me when I go home this summer and with me when I move to California. I want to wake up with you and go to sleep with you. I want to win gold for you and be there while you work out what you want to do with your life. And if we’re lucky, that’ll be a life I get to be a part of.”

“Zeke ...”

“Please. I know you said you didn’t want to base what comes next on one person, but you should. You should base it on you and what makes you happy. And ... I make you happy. Right?”

“Fuck ... so much.”

“Then ...” My voice does this waver, and I have to clear my throat. “Can we try? The whole time we’ve been together, both of us have had one foot out, knowing it can’t last. And if you come with me, I’ll come out for you. I don’t fucking care. I just need you to say yes.”

His tongue swipes over his lips, and I swear I’ve forgotten how to breathe as I wait for his answer. “No.”

The hope, the rising emotion, the crystal-clear image of us together crashes. I can’t even answer him because if I do, my stupid eyes might start stupid leaking.

Charles steps forward and wraps his arms around me. “No coming out for me.”

“What?”

“I’ll come to California. We’ll work out what this is, and I’ll figure out what I want next. You’ll keep working toward your goal, like you have for years, and at least until you qualify, I’ll ... be your roommate.”

“But—”

“I’m serious.”

When I lift my gaze to meet his, complete sincerity stares back at me.

“The only thing you need to worry about for the next year is making your dreams happen, because you’re the whole reason that gets to be my focus too. Without you, there’s no way I could have gotten my shit together and walked away from a miserable future.”

I cup his face, thumbs stroking over his cheeks, completely goddamn stunned that this guy is real and he’s mine. “I don’t want you to be my roommate.”

He grins. “Good thing I’m really your boyfriend and the spare room we have will all be for show.”

Like that, I’m hit with this overwhelming truth that I’ll never meet anyone as perfect for me as Charles. I drop to my knees, holding his thighs, staring up at him like I can’t believe he’s in front of me. “You fucking own me, Charlie.”

And the look he gives me in that moment is one he’s never given me before. Barriers down. No fake pride. Just complete and total affection coming my way.

I surge to my feet to kiss him, and his mouth parts easily for me. My heart aches it’s so full. Charles presses closer, body flush with mine, hands sliding up to card through my hair.

“Mine,” I whisper, attacking his mouth again. “Mine, mine, mine.”

He shivers, and my hands splay over his back to feel every tremor. His neediness goes to my cock, fattening it against my thigh, and I have to exercise extreme self-control to stop from grinding against him like a teenager learning to dry hump for the first time.

“I need you,” he begs.

“How?”

“Inside me.”

I palm his deliciously firm ass. “Question for you.”

“Urg, now?”

I chuckle and work open the front of his pants to keep him happy while I talk. “I love being inside you. A lot. But ... do you ever want things the other way?”

“Me to top you?”

“Uh, yeah ...”

His hands drop to my shoulders as he pulls back. “Well ... I’m happy to do it if you want me to. I’m just greedy about having you inside me.”

A long, relieved breath leaves me, and I drop my forehead to his. “Yet another reason why you’re perfect. I wasn’t sure how I’d feel bottoming.”

“If you ever want to try it, I’m all for it. But it’s definitely not something I need. Or even prefer. Orgasms aren’t anywhere near as fun when I don’t have something up my ass.”

I laugh, then shove down his pants and briefs before lifting him. His legs close around me as I carry him to the bed.

“In that case, we better not keep your needy ass waiting any longer,

should we?”

“My needy ass thanks you.”

It’s hard to describe how much happier I am with him, considering I’ve always been a happy person. I work hard, but it’s not like I deprive myself of the things I want.

When I’m with Charles though, everything else is so damn trivial.

I lower him to the bed and we kiss long and hard, my body weight pressing him into the mattress, and his hard cock digging into my abs.

“Can I try something?” I ask, attacking his jaw like I can’t get enough of the taste of his skin.

“Anything.”

Nrgh. It makes me light-headed to think of how much time we have to explore *everything*.

I push onto my knees, yanking my shirt over my head, then sit back on my heels to admire the view. Charles is all swollen lips and pink cheeks, wrapped up in my hoodie, with his hard cock standing exposed between his spread legs.

He needs to be a fucking artwork.

“Can I take a photo of you?”

Surprise flashes across his face.

“I don’t have to.” I drink him in again. “But, *damn*, Charlie.”

He slowly nods. “If you get naked and I can take one of you as well.”

Boo yeah. I spring up, shuck off my jeans and boxers, then climb back up onto the bed between his thighs. He already has his phone ready, so I flex my muscles a little, then lean in and run my tongue over the head of his cock.

Charles breathes out a curse. “Okay, so maybe I took more than one.”

I laugh and scoop up my phone before leaning in and giving him a fast, bruising kiss. When his lips are all red and puffy again, I pull back, line up the shot so I have everything, and take a photo of the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

“Is that what you wanted to try?” he asks.

I let out a filthy chuckle. “Not even close.” I toss my phone onto the mattress, push up his thighs, then lean in and run my tongue along his crease.

“Oh, fuck,” Charles gasps, head dropping back. “More.”

Experiment successful, then. I drop onto my front, getting comfortable, and then bury my face between his cheeks. With every lick and suck, his reactions are insane. Trembling thighs, hitched breaths, fingers digging into

my scalp. I circle my tongue around his hole until it's soft enough to push in, and then I start to get him ready. I work him open with my fingers and tongue, loving the way his hole tightens around me, begging for more.

"Your ass is such a whore for me." I drive my cock into the mattress, seeking friction.

"Please, please tell me I'm ready."

"Let's find out." I jump up and grab a condom, covering my cock with it and a truckload of lube before climbing back on top of him.

"Should I ...?" He reaches for the hoodie zipper, but I snatch up his hand.

"Leave it on."

His lips pull up on one side. "You like seeing me in this."

"So much."

There's a second pause while I try to work out whether to kiss him after having my tongue up his ass, but Charles makes the decision for me. He draws me into a long, deep kiss that curls my toes. We lie there, making out like a pair of horned-up sweethearts who are in no hurry to end this.

My cock doesn't like that plan though. It's needy to the point where endurance might be a serious issue, but I take myself in hand and lightly run the head up and down his crease. It's slippery and hot and has my balls aching with need. Every time my cock passes over his hole, it catches the rim and begs to push inside. As much as I try to ignore the urge, I'm only human, and when Charles twitches and tries to bear down against me, I stop and finally let myself in.

Heaven. It's goddamn heaven.

He's so tight and warm, and I swear every time I do this, it just gets better. His sexy hole clamps around me like he never wants to let go, and when I bottom out, the whimper that comes from Charles vibrates through my blood.

I break the kiss. "You good?"

"So, so good. *Urg*, how does this feel so right?"

"Because it's us."

He smiles and cards his fingers through my hair. "I've had feelings for you for a long time."

"You ... what?"

He looks down between us. "Sorry, maybe I shouldn't have told you—"

"You can tell me anything." And damn if knowing that doesn't fill my chest with too much to contain.

We kiss while I fuck him slow, deep, holding his thighs apart as I try to fill him as much as I can. I have exactly zero shits to give about anyone hearing us and working out that we're having sex, because after today, I don't want anyone looking twice at him.

He's my Charlie. Fiery, bright, sweet, and passionate. I want every part of him.

My arms snake up his back so I can grip his shoulders as I pick up my thrusts. His cock is trapped between us, rubbing against me, making him squirm and let out the most delicious noises that I lap up with my tongue.

My mouth breaks from his to trail along his jaw. Stubble scrapes my lips, and when I drag my tongue up his neck, the taste of his skin goes to my head.

We're going to make this work. We have to.

Because life without Charles in it is fucking bleak.

I suck his earlobe into my mouth and give it a nip. "I'm gonna own your hole and your heart, Charlie. You'll see."

"I'm scared you already do."

That's all I need to know.

My thrusts increase, pistoning in and out, harder, faster. My hips meet his ass hard enough to push him up the bed. The steady *thwap thwap thwap* is loud, and I'm vaguely aware of the headboard rhythmically thumping against the wall, but I dig my knees into the mattress and pound into him like my life depends on it. Legs cramping, toes curling, Charles's nails digging into my back. It's sensory overload, and I do everything I can to hold off.

"Touch yourself," I growl.

Charles forces a hand between us, knuckles bumping my abs, and jerks off to the pace of my thrusts.

"I'm gonna ... I'm about to ..."

"Do it." I reach to push the hoodie up. "Get your cum all over us."

He groans, tensing, and then his release hits my skin. His ass tightens around me, begging me to go with him, and I stop holding back.

The tingles racing up and down my spine gather in my balls before it's all too much. My orgasm hits, cock jerking with my load as I fuck Charles through it, too checked out to even know what's going on.

The high ebbs, and I collapse on top of him, both of us sweaty and panting. Charles squeezes my ass, nuzzling the side of my face and dropping light kisses on my neck.

Still, one thought keeps circulating.

“You’ve had feelings for me for a while?” I ask, turning my head so I can see him.

He takes a moment, then nods. “Maybe ... a year. More?”

Holy fuck. All that time and he was going to let me walk away like his feelings never existed.

“Sorry it took me so long to catch up.”

“But you have.” He nuzzles my face again. “So every minute of waiting was worth it.”

CHARLES

“THIS IS THE LIST?” JENNY ASKS.

“It’s where we’re starting. The most likely suspects and then narrowing down from there.”

“With any luck,” Zeke says, “none of them will be our guy. I don’t like the thought of one of my brothers screwing us over.”

She hums and turns over the paper, as though checking the other side. Zeke and I called a meeting with each of the houses to fill them in on what happened and try to get ideas on how to fix the problem. Both our houses worked on the list, and it was the first time I think we’ve all been in a room without insults flying around. Might be because some of my brothers heard us fucking like animals the other day and now don’t know what to think—thankfully, none of them have actually asked me about it.

“What I’m struggling with is why. A lot of these guys are graduating soon. What reason would they have for getting you shut down?”

“I don’t care about the why, I care about the who,” Zeke answers. “I want it dealt with.”

She throws a skeptical look my way before turning back to the list.

“Wait, my name is on here,” Hugh says, pointing at the petition. “I didn’t sign this.”

I lean over and check out where his name has been scrawled across the line. “That’s not your signature?”

“No, it is. But there’s no way I’d have signed to have Sigma house shut down.” He turns to Zeke. “You guys throw the best parties.”

“Not anymore, we don’t.”

The whole room seems to droop.

“Well, we need to fix that before graduation bash, don’t we?” Christa, the Zeta president, says. She’s how I’d imagine a Barbie doll who’d come to life would look, and she’s probably the smartest person in the room. I have no idea what theoretical and mathematical physics entails, but with that many letters, I assume it’s complicated.

“Let’s hope.” Zeke leans back in his chair and tucks his hands behind his head. “Does anyone have actual ideas on how to do that though? Because I’m fresh out.”

I’m not sure if the lack of answers is because people are thinking or have

no clue what to suggest.

“You said you’ve texted with them?” Jenny clarifies. “Can I see?”

Zeke hands over his phone. Nearly everyone is looking through the reports the dean passed on to us, but Christa is typing furiously on her laptop.

“This might be obvious, but these messages feel personal,” Jenny says.

“Well, yeah. They hate all my guys.”

“May I see?” Christa asks.

When Zeke gives the okay, Jenny hands over the phone.

“I don’t think it’s that though,” Jenny pushes.

“I agree.” Christa glances back at the list of suspects and at the texts again. “Who out of these names do you have a good relationship with?” she asks.

“Everyone,” Zeke says like it should be obvious. “They’re my brothers, and we work closely together.”

“So why would any of them want to get *you* specifically in trouble? That’s clearly what they were planning when they asked you to meet them.”

“Because I’m president? I don’t know.”

She hums, pink-painted finger tapping the corner of her glossy lips. “Look here. *I don’t like you*. Not Sigmas. Not your fraternity. But *you*.”

My eyes narrow. “I thought that was the collective you?”

“It reads very targeted. Then there’s the fact this person knew ‘parameters’ would implicate Charles because when you vaguely mentioned the somebody you were thinking of, the poster knew it was a ‘him.’ And they used the term ‘geeds.’ How many people do you know who use that word?”

“Frat guys,” I say. “I don’t think I’ve heard it from anyone else.”

“That’s a big pool though,” Zeke points out.

“Is it?” Christa blinks at him through giant glasses. “I know it’s been coined by fraternity members, but there’s only a certain type of brother who uses that terminology. Charles, do you or your brothers use it?”

I stumble over the question, trying to think. “I ... I don’t think so.”

She nods. “From my experience, it’s usually the members who try to behave like a rom-com frat boy, or ... jocks.”

Zeke sighs. “My house again.”

“Which doesn’t make sense. There’s no logical reason for anyone in your house to do this.”

“That we know of,” I add.

Christa props her chin in her hand and turns her attention to Zeke. “Have

you checked your house for anyone wearing these shoes?”

“Yeah, I’ve been keeping my eye out, but most of the guys who own Ultraboosts have had the same pair forever, and the ones who have new ones aren’t a match.”

“There’s also the part about the shitkickers,” Jenny says. “No offense, but I can’t picture any of your execs being all that worried about how the pledges are treated.”

“We ... worry,” Zeke says with no conviction. “We just believe that the brotherhood needs to be built. You connect with people when you’ve been through hard work together.”

Jenny taps her nails on the table. “I don’t think it’s anyone on this list.”

“Then who else?” Zeke asks.

“That’s what we need to figure out.”

“Here,” Hugh says. “The rest of you check this for your names. In the meanwhile, I think we need to Venn diagram this shit. Work out who has those shoes you saw along with who has ties to a fraternity *and* access to the dean’s office.”

“And if we figure out who it is?” I ask.

Christa clears her throat. “Here’s my proposal. The petition is invalid when we can prove that at least some of the names have been forged—those of us with our names attached will email the dean and state that we had no affiliation with this document.”

“It might also help to point out it’s a felony,” I add. “And that you’re seriously concerned about circumstantial evidence being taken as fact and the forgery ignored.”

“Good point.” She makes a note. “Now, you need to put your pre-law knowledge to use and comb the bylaws on fraternity operation. We’ll distribute images of the shoes in question to every member of our houses and tell them to compile a list of anyone wearing them on campus. We need to find if anyone we know works administration for the school or volunteers in the offices—there has to be someone—and that person needs to get us a list of anyone with access to the dean’s building. And while we work on smoking this fish out, my sisters and I will do what we do best: social media.”

“How does that help?” Zeke asks. “It’s what got us into this mess.”

“Bless,” she mutters. “It’s the court of public opinion. The dean is worried about tarnishing the school’s image, and he should be. Hazing is serious. So, let’s get a jump on it. After the new Zeta house was built, our

social media exploded. We have reach and relevancy, and spinning the story that a fraternity is being targeted with false claims directly after a number of its executives has come out as queer will cause a tidal wave of support.”

“Nah.” The legs of Zeke’s chair hit the floor. “I don’t want my brothers exploited.”

“It’s not exploitation when it’s the truth.”

Still feels iffy to me. On one hand, I get what she’s saying, but I also understand where Zeke is coming from. “Queerness isn’t a weapon.”

“You’re wrong. Queerness has been weaponized against the LGBTQ community forever. It still is. I’m not advocating lying, simply stating the necessary facts in an order that will have people connect the dots the way we want.”

It’s hard to argue with that. Besides, if it means finding a way to get Sigma house out of this mess, to take the pressure off Zeke’s shoulders and get things back to the way they’ve always been, I’m prepared to do anything at this point.

I clear my throat. “In that case, it’s a big coincidence that the person set up for these posts is also bi.”

Zeke’s attention whips toward me, and after a beat of silence, Jenny says, “Do you mean you?”

“Yeah, it’s not like it’s a secret.” Anymore, at least.

Christa reaches over to squeeze my shoulder. “Good. The Free Sigma campaign starts now. My sisters and I will organize everything, but you’ll all need to have your members share and interact to have the message spread far and wide. Hugh, please have your members put together a counterpetition, and Jenny, I’d appreciate it if your girls can work on the existing list and find as many people as you can who are willing to say they never signed this.”

Jenny slides the petition into her bag. “Yeah, for sure.”

Zeke rakes both hands through his hair and exhales loudly. “We need to get this asshole. It might be too late to do things like spring formal, but I can’t walk away from here knowing this guy has won.”

“How’s Robbie feel about spring formal?” Jenny asks. “He organized most of it.”

“Miserable. We all are.”

I’m not surprised. Getting in a tux and playing fancy, having the executives honored—or in the Sigmas’ case, roasted—by our brothers is the highlight of our year. No exams, no frat politics, just fun. I can’t imagine it

without them there.

None of us could.

I bite my nail, a plan slowly coming to me.

“Right.” Christa claps her hands together. “Well, this meeting has gone swimmingly, wouldn’t you all agree?”

That’s one word for it. My head is still spinning from outing myself, and the speed with which Christa came up with that plan has me left feeling like I’ve been steamrolled. But we have something. Something I feel good about.

Now let’s hope it works.

ZEKE

ROBBIE, CHAD, AND BRANDON ARE ONLY TOO HAPPY TO FILM THE CORNIEST, cheesiest, most ridiculous videos for Christa's social media, which are blowing the hell up. Bailey was a reluctant participant in some of them too.

We also sent through every prank we'd recorded over the years for her to use however the hell she wanted. I'm putting a lot of faith in her with that shit, but at this point, can things get any worse?

The meeting has lit a fire under my ass though, and I'm determined to have this thing wrapped up before I graduate. While they all deal with taking our positive-angle approach to the next level, I'm scouring campus for any sign of this motherfucker.

It's a guy.

He has black shoes.

And the asshole thinks his shit don't stink.

It's not a lot to go on, but I'm determined.

From walking into the wrong classes to check people out, to messaging the fucker nonstop, hoping for details, to staking my ass outside the dean's offices through the day, I'm here for it all. I have a running list of anyone who could fit the brief, but most people on it I don't even know, let alone have beef with them.

Anytime I'm not studying, swimming, or having sex, I'm poring over that goddamn list.

I walk into the kitchen to refill my water bottle and find Robbie at the small table, sorting M&Ms into colors.

"You good, man?" I ask.

He huffs and scoops the blue ones up to pour into his mouth. "Not how I imagined the rest of the year would go, I've gotta say."

"You and me both."

The chair he's sitting in creaks as he leans back into it. "No chance we can say fuck the rules and do what we want anyway?"

"Not while there's still a chance of being reinstated. If we'd been shut down, I'd say to go nuts."

"It fucking sucks." He sounds devastated, and as president, I'm completely responsible for not saving us. I pat his shoulder and leave the kitchen, with no idea what else to say, but before I've even made it to my

room, a sound from outside makes me pause.

Robbie's head pokes into the hall. "What was that?"

It happens again.

"A trumpet?"

Robbie's whole face lights up, and he heads for the front door.

"I swear," I say, following him. "If this is another flash mob marching band, I'm going to have your balls."

"Good luck getting them back from Brandon," he throws over his shoulder.

When we reach the front door, we're not the first ones there, and I have to push by my brothers crowding the front deck to see what has their attention.

And what I see ...

A red carpet has been rolled out from the road to our front steps, two dudes holding horns standing on either side, and gathered on the lawn are the brothers from Kappa house, all in suits and holding a rose.

"What the shit is this?" Robbie asks.

I glance around and find Christa recording as Bailey breaks away from the group, hits the red carpet, and approaches Chad, holding out the rose. "Will you be my date to spring formal?"

I choke back a laugh at how Chad lights up. Jesus fuck, those two. All this for a date request.

Chad accepts, and they kiss, and I'm about to go back inside when Jordan makes his way down the red carpet.

"Miles?" he calls out.

I glance over at our loveable hockey player to find him blushing to his ears.

"Ah, yeah?" he asks, looking everywhere but at Jordan.

"Wanna come to spring formal with me, dude?"

"With ... you?" He glances around again like he's waiting for someone to laugh. To be fair, I think we're all feeling a bit that way, judging by the confused looks on my brother's faces. "Ah, like, a date? Because sorry, man, I'm not—"

Jordan laughs. "Me neither. But it's not spring formal without you guys, and at our last meeting, we voted—"

Another Kappa brother walks up the red carpet and approaches Rooster.

"—and figured we'd rather date you assholes for a night than have you all miss out."

Miles twitches, then reaches out and takes the rose. “For real? But you guys hate us.”

“This is more important.” Jordan winks. “We can hate you again once it’s over.”

All around me, brothers are being offered roses and being stunned into silence. Sigmas are blushing left and right, and I think it’s the first time I’ve ever heard my guys fucking silent.

“Is this even allowed?” Miles asks, turning to me.

I shrug. “Technically, we’re not allowed to engage in any fraternity-related events ...”

My words trail off as Charles steps onto the red carpet, and nerves hit me square in the gut. His eyes meet mine, and I know without a doubt that he’s going to ask me instead of covering for us and asking someone else, and maybe I’m a dumbass, but I hadn’t even seen this coming, even as all my brothers were approached.

I feel sick in a good kind of way that makes my head swim and a smile hitch one side of my mouth.

Charles jogs up the stairs. “I believe the bylaws prohibit suspended fraternities from organizing and participating in any fraternity events, however, they don’t have a clause outlining the legality of active fraternity members inviting suspended brothers as their dates.” He holds up the rose, and I’m giddy—fucking giddy—over something as dumb as a formal and this setup and the fact my brothers are all standing around, waiting to follow my lead.

I take the flower. “You are one smart motherfucker, Charlie.”

And with my acceptance, a chorus of “fuck, yeses” follow me. Robbie grabs Sam in a bear hug and lifts him off his feet while he points at the Kappa who’s asked Brandon and warns, “He’s not gonna put out, so don’t think about it.”

Brandon responds by wrapping his arm around his date’s waist and blowing Robbie a kiss.

Conversation swells up around us, Kappas and Sigmas *talking* and *laughing* and *what?*

I gape at Charles and his smug smile. “You planned this.”

“Eh. Apparently, we’re fond of idiot jocks who don’t know when to quit.”

“I never ...” I glance around at my guys, absorbing their excitement and energy. We’re no closer to removing the suspension, but the fact that we still

get to do this is huge. And the Kappas made it happen. “How are we supposed to go back to hating you guys after this?” I ask.

Charles laughs. “You don’t. We leave the juniors to carry on that legacy, and the rest of us just ... relax.”

Relax? That word isn’t in my vocabulary, but I can’t say it isn’t tempting. The sooner we can get these rumors wrapped up and my frat reinstated, the sooner I can hand everything off to Larken and ... let go.

Before I can second-guess myself, I haul Charles into a quick hug. He’s warm, sweet-smelling comfort. I’m reluctant to let him go, but I do, slowly, achingly, fighting the urge to tug him back in again.

His bluebrowngreen—whatever—eyes meet mine, and our secret passes between us until we’re both smiling again.

“Will you come to spring formal with me”—he lowers his voice—“boyfriend?”

“It’s a date.” Our very first one.

CHARLES

ZEKE'S SWEATY AND CATCHING HIS BREATH ON TOP OF ME WHEN HIS PHONE starts to ring.

I wrap my arms around him. "Don't answer it."

"Might be important," he says, lips brushing my neck.

And even though I've just come, my skin prickles with awareness. "Then they'll call back later."

Zeke snorts and rolls off me, fishing his phone from the floor. "It's Jenny."

"Urg. Fine. Answer it, then."

He tweaks my nipple, which makes me hiss, before hitting the green button. "'Sup?"

I can't hear Jenny enough to follow the conversation, but Zeke's eyebrows almost jump to his hairline. "How many?"

More muffled murmuring.

"Put it on speaker," I whine.

Zeke cuts into Jenny's monologue. "Just switching you over so Charles can hear this too."

She must agree because he hits the button and sets the phone between us.

"Okay. So. Like I was telling Zeke, we've managed to find close to one hundred and fifty people whose names were signed on this petition and are happy to come forward and say they had no idea what they were signing—if they even signed it at all."

"Wow, that's a great number."

"It is," she agrees. "But what do we do with this information now?"

A slow smile spreads across Zeke's face. "I think I know."

"You going to share with the class?" I ask.

"In a minute." He raises his voice. "Jenny, see if you can organize everyone to meet in the dean's courtyard at five today."

"Will do. See you."

We hang up, and I eye Zeke. "What are you planning?"

His lips twitch. "The dean wanted a very urgent meeting with me the other day. I figure it's only fair I return the favor—and bring over a hundred of my closest friends with me."

I snort as Zeke calls through to Pamela and arranges a time for a *very*

important meeting that the dean will learn the details of once the meeting begins. Fucking smart-ass. I love it.

“You’re not afraid of pissing him off?” I ask.

Zeke rakes his large hand back through his hair, exhaling loudly. “Well, yeah. A wrong move and it’s all over. But I’m not going to bend over and take a beating. If there’s a way to get my frat back, I’m going to do it.”

I lean in and press a kiss to his temple. “You’re an amazing president.”

“That’s *mister* president to you, Chuck.”

I chuckle and tilt my lips to his ear. “Think you can go again ... *mister president?*”

He cracks up laughing. “As much as it kills me to turn you down, we have a meeting to organize. Also ... I wanted to give you this. Grab the hoodie I gave you.”

Our weekly trade. I grab mine from where it’s folded on my nightstand as Zeke leans over to grab his swim bag.

He rifles through it for a moment, and where I’m expecting him to pull out the green-and-white hoodie, he holds up a sweatshirt instead.

A red one.

With gold Sigma Beta Psi lettering across the front.

“W-what ...”

He gives me that gorgeous boyish smile that makes me all fluttery inside. “This one’s for keeps. If you want it.”

“B-but ...” I’m still low-key in shock. Some frat brothers will give their letters to long-term partners, but mostly, the letters belong to the house. It’s a huge deal for Zeke to not only be offering this but to actually want me to wear it. “Chad hasn’t even given his to Bailey ...”

Zeke shrugs. “I’m not on their timeline. Besides, Bailey doesn’t seem like the type of guy to want that; he’s already struggling to stay a Kappa. Whereas you *are* Rho Kappa Tau. I’m just hoping you could be a little bit Sigma too.”

I hug the sweater to my chest, then change my mind and pull it on. It’s warm, and when I hold it to my nose, it’s all Zeke.

“You look good in that.” And like he always does when I’m in something of his, he gets this possessive glint in his eyes. “I like you in my clothes.”

“I know.” I lie back and let my legs fall open. “Imagine how many of your things I’ll be able to borrow when we’re living together.”

He groans and climbs over the top of me. “Why do we have to have a meeting again? And classes? And exams to study for?”

“Something about our future.”

“Sounds false to me.” His lips work their way along my neck. “Just think, in a few months, we’ll be able to stay in bed all day together.”

I pout. “And now you’re teasing me.”

“It’s about time I got my own back.”

His lips brush over mine before Zeke reluctantly pushes up again. “Okay. Meeting. I’ll see you at five, yes?”

“I’ll come straight there from class.”

Disappointingly, he pulls on his clothes, blows me a kiss, and leaves again. It’s an hour before I’ll see him again when I pick him up for school, but the more time we spend together, the more I crave him.

I’m trying not to get my hopes up over California, because I’m struggling to see it actually being a possibility.

To move with him, live with him, and have Zeke all to myself. We’ll still be on the down low, but we’ll be able to hang out, and at home, we won’t have to hide. We’ll be able to do what we like. It’s nearly impossible to wrap my head around.

I let my fingers trail over the Sigma lettering on the sweatshirt.

Nearly impossible.

And while the chance might be small, I’m going to do anything to make it happen.

ZEKE

THANKFULLY, THE WEATHER HAS WARMED UP FRACTIONALLY, AND THE WALLS of the dean's courtyard block us from the unseasonably windy day. Jenny pulled through with finding these people, and she's already handing around a petition about letting Sigma house operate again. I check the time on my phone. Five past.

If the dean doesn't show, I'm going to be pissed. Christa is filming quick videos with anyone who'll agree, leaning heavily on the idea that the dean is quick to act based off a fake petition rather than listening to upstanding students such as myself.

Heh.

It's all shit, and I feel kinda bad when Dean Hutchins isn't a bad guy, but I'm at the point where I either want to find this asshole starting rumors or be reinstated and put this mess behind me.

Both would be even better.

By quarter past, I'm getting antsy. Charles shows up, looking out of breath, and apologizes for his class running over, but I'm not even annoyed about that. Pamela confirmed the time. Where the hell is the—

The back door opens and Dean Hutchins steps out, lips twisted into a sardonic smile.

"Well, this is a sight."

I sidestep the person beside me and hurry over to meet him at the stairs. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't show."

"What's going on here?"

"These mofos ..." I throw a thumb back toward the crowd of students. "Were on that petition demanding Sigma house closes, and none of them actually signed it."

Dean Hutchins's lips flatten. "That seems unlikely," he says, stare traveling the courtyard.

"Maybe, but it's the truth. Ask any of them, including the presidents from all the other houses who apparently wanted us shut down."

He rubs a hand over his face, and I can already tell what his answer will be. "This is a small portion of the people who signed that thing—"

"But with even one signature fabricated, that's enough reasonable doubt to launch an investigation into whether they all are," Charles says.

The dean doesn't answer him but turns to me instead. "You're asking me to take the words of your friends on this. Can you understand why I'd be hesitant to do that?"

"Excuse me," Christa says, stepping between us. "All of my followers would love to hear the reason why you don't believe fraternity brothers who are gold-star athletes and philanthropic kings. Going live!"

"No live videos," the dean snaps. "What are you doing, Zeke?"

"Getting my fraternity back," I say, staring him dead in the eyes while Christa's phone is pointed straight at me. "I told you none of those claims were true. I showed you the messages between me and that anonymous person. I told you what happened when he lured me and Charles to the school after hours and had us locked in so we'd get into shit." Then I'm hit with a stroke of genius that also happens to be the truth. "For the last month or so, this guy has been bullying myself and my brothers—"

"Bullying?" Dean Hutchins recoils. "Come on, Zeke, it's not bullying if ___"

"Actually," Charles cuts in, "bullying is defined as a targeted pattern of behavior. That's what this is."

I fold my arms. "Exactly. And instead of addressing the bullying, you've punished the victims."

He stutters for a moment before deciding Christa is the biggest risk. "Turn that off."

"Why? My hundreds of thousands of followers only want to see you do the right thing."

He mouths, "Hundreds of ..." before forcing his expression neutral. "No one is being punished. We're simply investigating the allegations of illegal activity. For which I was well within my right to put a hold on Sigma Beta Psi activities."

"You're saying they're guilty until proven innocent?" Christa asks. "Is that because of the low median income of that house? Or the higher percentage of LGBTQ students?"

It's obvious when it clicks with him what she's trying to do, but Dean Hutchins is no longer rattled. He casually tucks his hands into his pockets—so he doesn't strangle me, I assume—and says, "West Haven University is now, and always will be, an equal-opportunity facility. We have strong stances against the harassment and discrimination of our students and staff ___"

“So prove it,” I challenge. “If you support the kids who carry these sports teams, even when our daddies can’t buy a new science wing or football field, then prove it to us. Reinstate us.”

Instead of giving in, his gaze hardens. “I have an investigation to continue. Enjoy your evening.”

And with that, he turns and walks back inside.

Fuck.

Hopefully it’s given him something to think about, but I’d been hoping that by proving the petition was a piece of shit that he’d see everything else was too.

“You okay?” Christa asks, resting her hand on my shoulder.

“Yeah, we just need to regroup, I guess.”

Charles gives my other arm a quick squeeze. “We’ll figure it out.”

“We will,” Hugh adds. “It’s bullshit he wouldn’t listen.”

I nod because I’m out of words from reaffirming the same things. Jenny and her sisters are buzzing around the people she’s brought here, making sure we’ve got their signatures and letting them know if we’ll need anything else.

But it feels like we’ve hit another dead end.

“Excuse me,” someone says, pushing their way past. Charles hurries to step aside, bumping into me, and in my annoyance, I turn to snap at the person that they can go around when—

The janitor walks past and climbs the back steps to the dean’s building with my shithead ex-pledge behind him.

Carter.

If I had to put money down on who did it, he would have been my only guess.

He hated Kappas more than any of us.

He always wanted to do more hard-core pranks and laughed at us running Bro-motions night.

He’s the fuckface who sent Brandon to hospital.

All because he found out Chad was dating Bailey.

And I kicked his ass to the curb.

“You’ve got to be fucking with me.”

“What is it?” Charles asks.

I point toward Carter.

“He ... works here?” Charles asks.

“I guess.”

“So, you’re saying he has access to this building?”

I grit my teeth. “Looks like it. But we already ruled him out.”

Charles suddenly grabs my arm. “Look at his shoes.”

No way. The dipshit is wearing a brand-new pair of black Ultraboosts.

“But ... the photos.”

“They can be faked. Staged, even.”

“But Chad saw him there.”

“He didn’t mention a time, though, and if Chad was drinking, who knows how accurate his recount of the night was.”

Shit. I take off after Carter, no plan in mind, and hear footsteps following me. I push through the back door, eyes taking a second to readjust to the dim hall before ducking left down the short steps and rounding the corner to where the door to the storage cupboard we were locked in is open. The janitor is in there, so I pass him, checking the rooms in the hall until someone steps out of a room at the same time I’m about to check it, and we almost run headfirst into each other.

My gaze drops straight to his Ultraboosts. Then I glance up to lock eyes with Carter fucking Delaney.

“You dumb piece of shit,” are the first words out of my mouth.

A flicker of surprise crosses his face, and his gaze darts behind me for a second before he smirks. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The posts. Anon7136. Ring any bells?”

He shrugs. “Nope.”

“I know it was you.”

“And I still claim I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

It takes everything in me not to slug him right in his dumb face. “Why’d you do it? Because you were kicked out of the frat for being a complete twatknuckle?”

“I’m working.” He tries to get around me, but I step to the side, blocking his path.

“How’d you get all those people to back up your dumb lies?”

His lips twitch, and *oh holy frat fucks*, I wanna punch him. “What lies?”

“You know, if you’d been a decent human, you never would have been kicked out.”

“And I never would have gone so far if any of you followed your own rules.” He pins me with a look. “How would your brothers feel to know you’re hooking up with Mr. Parameters?”

Prickles of cold shoot along my arms to my fingers. “You leave him out of this.”

“You’re all a joke. Whoever got you shut down did WHU a favor.”

“Suspended. Not shut down. And when I go to the dean and tell him what you did, you’ll be lucky to still be at this school.”

Carter shifts the trash can he’s holding to the other hand, the first crack in his haughtiness showing through. “You can’t prove shit.”

“We don’t need to,” Charles says, reminding me he’s even there. “All we need to do is post the same accusations as you, only unlike your vague posts, we’ll include a name. Yours.”

“There’s no proof—”

“This petition says otherwise.” I start at Jenny’s voice, and when I glance back, all of the presidents are with me. We fill out the hall, and I guess that explains why Carter hasn’t walked away already. “All these people have signed saying the only petition they’ve seen recently was yours.”

I force my face to stay relaxed, even as I try to puzzle that one out. She’s clearly lying, and judging by the way Carter is eyeing her, he doesn’t know whether to call her on it or not. For the first time in weeks, I’m back in control.

“Here’s how it’s going to work,” I say. “You’ll remove all posts and write one final one saying you were mistaken about Sigma Beta Psi. Then you’ll delete your account. Anyone you had posting for or with you will do the same. You’ll resign from your job here, and you’ll find a way to withdraw the complaint against us—if that means coming forward, you fucking do it, because if we’re not reinstated by the end of the week, we’re coming for you.”

His face is starting to go splotchy and not in the cute way Charles’s does. “There’s no way I’m doing any of that.”

“Okay,” Charles says, lifting his phone. “I’ll go first. Carter Delaney not only plotted with another Greek house against his own fraternity members but actively tampered with a prank in order to cause injury or illness.”

Carter shakes his head, slow and then gradually faster. “There’s no proof.”

“He doesn’t need it.” Christa moves to Charles’s other side. “We’re going to take every post and every claim you made against the Sigmas and turn it against you. ‘Carter Delaney attacked me at a party,’” she quotes.

“He waterboarded me,” Hugh says, moving beside Jenny.

“He forced me to drink beer until I threw up,” Eric says.

One by one, the presidents move until we have him completely surrounded.

I stare him down. “Still wanna play this little game? Because I can guarantee you once some of those posts hit the Dirt, you’ll have police at your door with questions.”

And even though I’m talking out of my ass, I can read him. He’s panicked. Truthfully, we don’t have the type of evidence we need to take this to the dean, but we could get it. It’d take time, but now I’m sure it’s him, I’d follow him all day, every day, until he slipped up.

Carter’s jaw ticks.

I lean in. “You have exactly ten seconds to admit what you did, or I go to the dean. I don’t think I need to remind you that the football team has very clear rules on code of conduct, and without football, you have no scholarship.”

His nostrils flare, and a surge of satisfaction hits me.

I take a leaf out of Christa’s book and pull out my phone. “I’m recording you admitting to scheming against Sigma Beta Psi in order to have the fraternity shut down. Everything you posted about us, all the claims of hazing were completely fabricated. Do you disagree?”

He doesn’t answer. So I start to count backward from ten.

“Easy way or hard way,” Charles says.

“Go to hell.”

“Enjoy finding another college who’ll take you.” But as I go to turn away, he moves.

“Stop recording.”

“Yeah, not gonna do that. This is my insurance policy.”

He swallows, visibly sweating. “I’m not saying shit with that on.”

“Can and will. And I’ll keep this recording until you retract everything, and once you have, I’ll let you delete it myself.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“At this point, your hesitating is proof enough. But unlike you, none of us here want this extra drama. We’ve got way too much shit on our plates to worry about some fucking *geed*.”

His face flames red.

“And if you thought you’d be able to rush another frat next year, I think it’s obvious that’s off the table.”

“That was your plan, wasn’t it?” Charles asks. “A bit of revenge, but mostly knowing that if you got rid of the Sigmas, there’d be none of them around next year to warn your new fraternity about you.”

I turn to smile at him. “Someone’s a little genius.”

“Turns out all my training in law has been good for *something*. I can pick a lying son of a bitch a mile away.”

“Last chance,” I tell him. “I’m done playing. Either admit it, or play your chances.”

He swallows thickly, then drops his eyes to the ground. “*Fine*.”

“Fine, what?”

“Fine, I did it. I made up a bunch of shit to get you shut down. Happy?”

I turn off the recording. “Very. Now follow through with everything else and you won’t have an issue, but let me be clear. Everyone in Greek life will know what you did, and they’ll be watching. If you try to pull this shit ever again, we’ll be onto you. Consider yourself blacklisted.”

“One last thing,” Charles says. “How did you do it? The posts? The photos when you were supposed to be meeting us? The pranks?”

He scowls. “I’m an IT major, dickwad. It’s basic-level shit.”

“And the pranks?” I ask.

“Like I’m going to rat anyone out.”

“But you had help?”

“Fuck you. I already admitted to everything. That’s all you’re getting out of me.”

I spin on my heel and storm away, leaving him to his red eyes and clenched jaw. Maybe I’d feel sorry for the asshole if I thought he had a shred of remorse, but everything he’s ever done and said makes that hard to believe.

When I step foot out into the courtyard, everyone who was here has moved on, and I lean over my knees to take a long breath.

That’s it.

We got him.

Charles steps up beside me, and his fingers lightly rub the back of my neck. “You okay?”

“Fucking perfect.” And damn I wish we could kiss right now because I couldn’t have done this without him.

CHARLES

IT TOOK LONGER THAN I WOULD HAVE LIKED FOR EVERYTHING TO BE CLEARED up, but once Carter was dealt with and the suspension on Sigma house was removed, I felt like I could breathe again.

Well, mostly.

Exams were going to kick my ass, and while I haven't been able to see Zeke as much as I've wanted to, he came by the other night and we booked our plane tickets back to his place this summer. My nerves over meeting his family are in overdrive, but after everything we've been through ... yeah, nope. That idea is still petrifying.

Thankfully, his coming out to his parents went well, and they're looking forward to meeting me. But with the way Zeke relayed the message, it sounded borderline like a threat.

Still, I'd rather face off with them over Grampy any day. I'd been planning to see him once school was done to tell him my plans, but Father was only too happy to take on that conversation.

The one time I tried to call him, he didn't answer, and he hasn't tried to call me back. That's as clear a message as I could expect from him.

I look around the huge event room we've hired, grateful that spring formal is going exactly to plan. Well, sort of. Even with the suspension removed, Zeke's and my brothers agreed a date is a date and somehow are all here together. The bickering is driving me insane.

When our drinks are placed on the bar in front of me, I scoop them up and head back to Zeke. And damn, every time I catch a glimpse of him, he steals my breath. Fitted tux, sides of his hair and the line in his eyebrow freshly shaved, pillowy lips tilted in a secret smile all for me, and that intense stormy gaze that sets zaps off in my stomach. It's taken herculean self-control to resist dragging him into the bathrooms for a quick blow job.

"Why do you have to look so good tonight?" I ask when I reach him.

He chuckles as he takes his drink and has a quick sip. "You know why. Gotta combat the nerves."

"Still going through with it?"

He doesn't look at all sure. "I am. Christa has the account set up, all focused around my swimming and the frat stuff. If she wasn't such a brainiac, she could easily be a social media manager."

“So you’re just going to slip a video of us dancing in there?”

“Yup.” He shakes out his free arms as though he’s been hit with nerves. “She said to do it slowly. Give hints, don’t confirm anything, gauge people’s reactions. From the support my brothers have been getting over the past few weeks, I’m pretty sure the social media side will be okay. But you never know how your coach is gonna be, and ...”

I quickly take his hand, even though I probably shouldn’t, but when Zeke is anything less than his calm and relaxed self, I want to help. “You know I don’t expect anything from you, right? I’m okay with roommates. The important people in our lives know, and you’ve always been clear with me on what I’m signing up for. If you want to come out, I’m here for you. Always. But please don’t do it because you think I need you to.”

“I won’t.” He takes my hand. “You always made it clear what I’m signing up for too.”

Zeke places his drink on the table, then takes mine and sets it down beside his before pulling us onto the dance floor. My heart is drumming in my ears, gut churning, but when I glance up at Zeke, you would never pick the stress he’s under. His indulgent gaze is on me, smile in place that only widens when he wraps his arms around me.

“So, w-what did you think you were signing up for with me?”

“Freedom.”

My focus snaps to him. “What?”

“Too cheesy for you?”

“Too unbelievable. What are you talking about?”

“I don’t want to say now.”

I nudge him. “Well, you’re gonna, so get to it.”

He ducks that boyish smile I adore, and when he looks up again, some of the humor has subsided. “You don’t hold back. Your opinion, your smarts, your passion. Going after what you want. I admire that about you. I want more of it myself.”

“Now, there’s a recipe for disaster. Don’t you know only one partner can be right at all times? I’ve already claimed that role.”

“And I don’t get a say?”

“No, because then you’d pick you, and you’d be wrong already.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” I say, like duh. “Because I’m always right.”

His eyes soften, and he reaches up to cup my face. “Must be one of the

reasons why I love you so damn much.”

He ... *huh?*

My feet stop moving, my whole body seizing up like he’s uttered a curse instead of the most gorgeous word I’ve ever heard.

“Charles?”

I just blink at him. My heart feels too hot, too fast, my breathing stilted and ineffectual. “You ... y-you, you ...”

His free hand ghosts over my other cheek. “There’s the spluttering I love.”

“Oh god ...” He’s trying to kill me.

“You have no idea how much I love the red splotches on your cheeks ...”

“Zeke ...”

“And I love the way you say my name.”

Dead. I’m going to die.

“But mostly, I just really love you.”

“Zeke.”

He smirks. “Yeah, Charlie?”

I blink at him for a whole five seconds, feeling impossibly *full*. “I love you too.”

He doesn’t hesitate when he kisses me, and I want to push him back and remind him to go slow, but instead, my hand closes around his lapel, and I pull him tighter against me, never able to get enough.

He laughs as he pulls away. “Always so eager.”

“Do you love that too?”

“You bet your ass I do. And before you ask, yes, I love your ass as well.”

Before I can respond, I’m knocked from the side and would have ended up on my ass if Zeke wasn’t holding on so tight.

“What the hell is going on here?” Robbie asks.

My good mood sinks. Of course he’s here to ruin the moment. But Zeke’s hold on me doesn’t relax.

“Clearly being a better boyfriend than you. Where’s Brandon?”

“Getting drinks.”

“I thought you were going dry for the rest of this year.”

“And I am. He’s getting me a soda. Now, don’t try to change the subject.” He waves a finger between us. “When did this happen?”

“Not sure,” Zeke answers honestly. “A few months. But mostly it’s been coming on for a while.”

Robbie turns his blue eyes on me and holds my gaze for one beat. Two. I lift my head, refusing to back down, and he finally cracks a smile. “Eh. I guess Kappas aren’t the worst things to happen to Greek life. At least he’s not a Gamma.”

Zeke scoffs, and I hold back a laugh. “I would never.”

“Holy shit,” Bailey exclaims, dragging Chad toward us. “Did I see what I thought I saw? You’ve officially come over to the dark side?” He eyes Robbie, then leans in conspiratorially. “Is he being a dick? Need me to kick his ass? I can, you know.”

Chad wraps an arm around Bailey’s waist and hauls him back against his chest. “First, that wasn’t a whisper—you’re shouting. Second, there will be no ass kicking, even though I totally believe you could.”

Bailey sags back against his boyfriend. “I’m sleepy.”

“You have the six vodka shots to thank for that.”

“What the hell is happening here?” Brandon asks.

Robbie looks around. “Where’s my drink?”

“Back there. I figured I needed to come over and help protect Charles.”

“Protect?” Robbie asks, confused. “From what?”

The five of us blink at him.

“Okay, fuck you all. It’s very, maybe, possible that I don’t totally think he’s a complete dick. Sort of.”

I laugh at the most half-assed ... whatever that was in history. “Cheers, Robdog.”

His whole face lights up, and Brandon mutters, “Oh no,” under his breath.

“And Charles suddenly became my new favorite person. Drink? Brandon’s buying.”

I shake my head and step closer to Zeke. “We were kinda in the middle of something.”

“Oh. Shit. Sorry.” Robbie steps back, and Brandon gives his arm a tug to get him to move away. Chad has to drag Bailey from the dance floor.

And with them gone, I let out a long breath. “That was ...”

“Not what I was expecting,” Zeke says.

“Aww, are we finishing each other’s sentences?” Damn if that thought doesn’t make me giddy.

“I’d prefer you finished something else of mine.”

I snort. “Classy.”

“Never claimed to be.”

With a quick glance around to make sure we're not being watched, I grab his hand and lead him to an exit on the side of the room.

"Best. Boyfriend. Ever," he says with each step.

We reach the dark hall outside, and after closing the door behind us, I press him into the wall. "Now I can kiss you properly."

So that's exactly what we do. Kiss up against the wall, matching smiles stretching our faces, my fingers tangled in his hair and his slipping under my shirt.

"Goddamn you look sexy tonight," he says.

I shift, avoiding the compliment. "Look who's talking."

He ignores me. Indulgent stare, roaming fingers, he unsettles me in the best way.

"I'm scared," I admit.

He blinks, shaking off whatever thoughts had been spinning in his mind. "Of what?"

"Everything. Moving, figuring out what steps to take next, meeting your family ... losing you."

He doesn't answer me immediately, but right before my anxiety can kick in, his warm hand rests on my neck, thumb drawing circles on my skin. "I get that. We have a lot of change coming up, and we're only new, but ..." He shakes his head. "There's something here. I can't even say how I know. I just feel it. It's like ... a *click*."

"A click?"

"Yeah. That universal sound when two things fit together, exactly right."

And like that, I know exactly what he means. That *click* that resounds in my chest whenever he's around and reminds me that while all this change is making me freak out, it'll all be worth it. "I feel it too," I tell him. "But our chances for making it are slim, right? Most people don't."

Zeke's expression turns determined. "I don't think that's a fair comparison because we have something those other relationships don't."

I try to get to the conclusion before he tells me, but I'm lost. "What?"

"Us, duh. You can't compare us to anyone else. All we can do is treat each other right and see where this goes. No one can predict the future, but when I see mine, fuck if I don't imagine you there with me."

"For as long as you'll have me."

"I'm gonna hold you to that." He gives me one last, lingering kiss. "Let's go find Christa and make sure she got the video of us dancing."

“Ready to post?”

He nods, shoulders a little straighter. “Completely ready for whatever comes next.”

EPILOGUE

TEN YEARS LATER

ZEKE

OUR TEN-YEAR REUNION GOES EXACTLY THE WAY I PICTURED IT WOULD. A few people made a big deal about my gold medals, most of the people I used to be friends with congratulated me but didn't give more or less of a shit about me now than what they did in college, and now, my boneheaded brothers are dragging me away from the reunion to walk our old stomping grounds.

I deeply inhale the cool night air as we turn onto Greek Row and find things more or less the same as when we lived here. A few of the houses have had updates, but otherwise ... a pang hits me as I look out at everything we had that disappeared way too soon.

I don't necessarily have regrets, but college wasn't for me what it was for my brothers.

If I'd known back then that I'd end up with an incredible career, multiple golds, and the man of my dreams by my side every step of the way, I would have approached life very differently.

"Wanna do the honors, prez?" Robbie asks, handing over a roll of TP.

This strange prickling hits the backs of my eyes, and I take it from him. The prank life was never for me. I never had more than a periphery involvement, and I liked it that way.

But as I unstick the roll and take aim, this tiny thrill punches me right in the chest.

"Fucking Kappas," I laugh. I launch it high, the white paper unfurling behind it, leaving a stream over one of the awnings as the paper hits the ground on the other side. Three more rolls arch overhead, and my brothers cackle with laughter as they run to retrieve the rolls and try again.

And even a decade later, they *are* still my brothers. Not only in title but in reality too. They're my biggest supports. They'll always call or text after a swim to either fuck with me over it being a good one or rib me over a bad one. We meet up at least every few months, and all the way back when Charles and I first started dating, they were there for the good and the bad.

We were on the unofficial down low for a few months, which was harder than either of us expected, and getting through my training and traveling for the Olympics and comps while he was studying put physical distance between us that was almost unbearable.

He and Bailey became close, and at one point while I was away and Robbie and Brandon were visiting family in Arizona, they drove all the way to our apartment in Cali to spend the weekend with him and take him out.

Some days, I wonder if we would have made it if it wasn't for them all.

Other days, I'm glad we had those times to work through because I know now that we can get through anything together.

Even through the rough times, we put in the work to be together.

Neither of us wanted to get married, so as far as anyone knows, we're not. The wedding, the party, the fuss, not for us. But we did secretly register as husbands so that legally we're covered. And Robbie will never, ever find out that he missed the chance to throw a huge event.

"Hey, catch!"

I turn at the familiar voice and cop an armful of toilet paper to the face. Before I can bat it away, a jet of water gets me right in the face and I splutter through the relentless stream.

"What the—"

Judging by the yelp from somewhere behind me, I'd say someone else just met the same fate.

I swipe at the paper, but it's gluggy and sticking to me, and when I get my face clear, there's Charles and his shit-eating grin.

"You Sigmas are so predictable."

I shake my head like *huh*, and he nods to where Bailey, Lucas, and Jordan are super soaking my brothers. Robbie's covered head to toe in white muck, and instead of fighting it, he runs forward, arms outstretched, trying to get to whoever he can.

Chad's made better work of his mess and bolts after Bailey, who keeps shooting him, and Brandon barely makes it to Robbie in time to stop him from walking head first into a tree.

I lift my hands. "Can I surrender?"

"No chance." Charles shoots me again, and I lunge for him, missing his arm by the scrape of my fingers.

"You're dead to me," I warn him.

"If I thought you could live without me, I might be worried."

"Please. I have a truckload of fans ready to take your place."

He gets me right in the face, and yep, I deserved that one. I laugh and push through the stream of water until I'm close enough to tackle him.

He goes down, hitting the grass under me, just like he did in this same

spot forever ago.

“What they don’t realize,” I say, “is that you’re irreplaceable.”

He huffs. “Much better.”

“Oomph.” Robbie hits the ground next to us. “I’m out of breath. I’m already out of breath. How. Am I. So unfit?”

Brandon pats his head from where he’s standing beside him. “You save your energy for where it counts.”

Chad, Bailey, Lucas, and Jordan all join us, and I roll off Charles but don’t get far. My man is still affectionate and almost clingy, but it’s one of the things I like best. He’s never made me feel unwanted.

“Remember the times we used to do this every weekend?” Chad asks.

Other than Robbie, the rest of us respond with a chorus of “no’s.”

“Huh. You guys really were boring in college, weren’t you?”

I flip him off while Brandon points out he was busy keeping their dumb asses safe, and while it might be bittersweet to be back on the row, nothing’s changed. We’re all still the same dumbasses we were back then, only we have an extra decade of mistakes behind us.

The door to Kappa house cracks open, and I hear someone from inside ask who’s making all the noise. The guy at the door clocks us, looking us over before shaking his head and walking back inside.

“Just a bunch of old dudes” is all I hear before the door closes.

There’s a beat.

And then we all lose our shit laughing.

I jump to my feet, holding out my hand for Charles, and old dudes or not, my man is still a fucking wet dream. After he graduated for the second time, he’s been tutoring athletes who haven’t kept up with mainstream education. It’s also allowed him to travel to the last two Olympics with me, tutoring the kids on the team who still should have been in high school.

He’s doing what he loves, and every day, I get to see the same passionate guy I fell for.

But the travel is winding down. My swimming career isn’t over yet, but it’s getting to the point where we need to work out what’s next, and while I haven’t completely settled on whether I want to go into coaching or try to open my own swim center, there’s one thing we’ve both agreed on.

It’s time to be dads.

I sling my arm around his shoulders as we all head back to campus together.

“So,” I say, lifting my voice. “Where did the water guns come from?”

“If Chad’s taught me anything,” Bailey says, “it’s to always be prepared.”

“And you just knew we were going to sneak off, did you?”

Charles shrugs. “We knew Robbie and Chad would pull something like this, therefore Brandon would be here too. Honestly, Zeke, I’m disappointed. I thought you were above all that.” He’s fighting not to laugh.

“Coming from the guy who still lives in my Sigma sweater.”

He immediately blushes like I knew he would. “I will deny it until my last breath.”

“Y’all think you’re so smart,” Robbie says, toilet paper still stuck in his hair. “But the water guns were always our thing.”

“That’s why we chose them,” Bailey points out. “Falling on your own sword and all that. Besides, everyone knows you need to be prepared for war. It’s not our fault you forgot that.”

“The frat wars are over though.” And Brandon must realize his mistake the second the words are out because Robbie lets out a booming laugh.

“The frat wars are never over. Ever. Why do you think we had kids?”

Brandon swears, and I laugh, reevaluating whether I want my offspring anywhere near theirs. They’re all going to be as competitive as each other.

I lean in to plant a kiss on Charles’s hair. It’s shorter now and hasn’t smelled like caramel since he moved out of Kappa house, but I’m addicted to his scent anyway.

To all of him.

“Love you, Charlie. You’re the greatest gold I ever earned.”

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