



JOCK

A JOCK HARD NOVEL

ROW

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SARA NEY

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SARA NEY

Jock Row

A Jock Hard Novel

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For more information about Sara Ney and her books, visit:

www.authorsaraney.com

To Alina.
You deserve a love story.

FIRST FRIDAY

“The Friday When We Met.”

Scarlett

“**N**o offense, Scarlett, but if you didn’t feel good when I invited you to come with us tonight, you should have said something. Now I feel terrible.”

Tessa—a girl I lived next door to in the dorms freshman and sophomore year and remained friends with—flips her perfectly coifed hair, eyeing up my soft sweater, the one I always wear when I’m getting over a cold, or sick, because it’s cozy, oversized, and comforting. It’s more appropriate for a bonfire or night at home than a college party, and when Tessa shoots me that sympathetic face—lips turned down at the corners, eyeing me skeptically—I manage a soft laugh.

“Trust me, I’ve been home for the past few weekends—I needed this night out.”

Two to be exact, couch surfing and binging on random TV shows, consuming copious amounts of hot tea and chicken noodle soup.

“Are you sure? Because if you’re not...”

“I’m fine—that’s why I wore this sweater. It’s going to keep me toasty warm tonight so I don’t catch a chill.”

The last thing I want is her changing her plans because of me.

“But that sweater...” Tessa worries her bottom lip, chewing off some of the lipstick. “It gets so warm inside those parties...maybe just take the scarf off? And the jacket?”

Fingering the gray, cable knit length around my neck, I breathe in the merino wool that’s the only thing keeping my neck warm and my cough from coming back.

“My scarf? What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing’s *wrong* with it, but we’re going to the baseball house—you know, on Jock Row.”

When she says Jock Row, her voice changes, fills with this weird wistfulness and a playful giddiness, like we’re heading to some magical place. We’re not.

Jock Row: the off-campus housing block where student athletes live and party. Similar to Greek Row, each sport has its own designated apartment or house, spanning an entire city block. They study together, play together, live together. Hell, they even *eat* together in a special cafeteria I’ve only heard whispers about, with super special, healthy *jock* food.

How nice for them.

I remember listening to her talk about it in the dorms when we were new students; she’d babble for hours about wanting to date an athlete, explaining which ones she thought were cute, trolling them online. Crushing hard, wondering what it was *like* to date one but never having the lady balls to go to one of their parties.

Well, we have the courage now.

Tessa still has the same stars in her eyes when she talks about it, still has that same breathiness in her voice.

In a way, I don’t blame her, because the guys on Jock Row?

They aren’t boys—they’re a different breed of student *body* altogether.

These boys don’t compare to the guys from back home that I’m used to flirting with: the gangly, juvenile boys I grew up with who went to college but still haven’t matured—they are nothing like the boys of Jock Row.

Not physically.

Not mentally.

These guys? They’re *men*, with actual responsibilities and obligations. They work hard and play hard.

Bigger.

Brawny.

In peak physical condition—probably the best shape they’ll ever be in their lives.

Cocky.

Quick.

I've seen them in action on the baseball field; I know the team is good, and *damn*, they look good, too.

Smell good.

How do I know? I got close to one once, rooting around for a beverage at the football house one weekend a while back. A big, burly player cut me off in line at the keg, leaning over to grab the beer tap with his meaty fingers, and I accidentally caught a whiff—a long, deep whiff, one that ended with an internal 'ahhh' that only comes when we appreciate something truly delicious.

Obviously, being a warm-blooded female, I checked out his upper torso, muscular forearms, and thick neck in the process—like every other female in the room with a set of functioning eyes had been doing.

Every female, like Tessa and her roommate, Cameron, who's still in their bathroom primping.

I know what these two want: they're hoping to sink their hot pink talons into some unsuspecting athlete. They're older, wiser, and more confident. They're also wearing less clothes.

Tonight, Tessa has been prattling on about the baseball team's catcher. She bumped into him earlier this week on campus and has been social media stalking him since. Discovered that if she timed it *just right*, he'd be walking out of the science building at the same time she'd be walking out of the international studies building.

Guess I can't fault her; I've laid eyes on the guy a few times myself and don't blame her for fawning over him. He's dark, broody, and extremely good-looking, plus Latino to boot.

Muy caliente.

"Please trust me," Tessa is saying. "I'm no nursing major, but I know this: if you wear that outfit to the party, you're going to have a stroke, and there won't be anyone there to revive you."

"You don't think there will be any pre-med students there?"

"Pfft, *nooo*—they're probably studying right now."

"Thank god—saving lives takes some learn-ed learning."

She doesn't get my joke.

"I'm serious, Scarlett. You're literally going to die if you wear that. Plus..."

Her sentence trails off, blue eyes—the color of ocean breeze contact lenses—raking up and down my body for the second time. Cringing when they reach my scarf.

She hates my outfit but is too sweet to tell me.

"Do you not like my outfit?"

"It might be freezing *outside*, but it's not going to be cold inside—the house is hot, and the guys are hotter."

I wrap the scarf tighter, giving her arm a gentle pat. "We're walking there and it's freezing and I've been sick—I love you, Tess, but I'm not jeopardizing my health for one party."

I forgot how caring her blue eyes could be, and I'm surprised to see her blink with all the mascara clumped on her lashes, mouth downturned. "What about your sniffles?"

"The worst of my cold is over." I fake a cough. "Can we go? Otherwise I'm going to end up reading at home."

"Don't do that! You've turned into such a hermit since you got your own apartment."

"Nerd alert!" I tease, pointing a finger at myself. "I just bought a new book, and I've been waiting for it to release for nine months—nine! That's a damn eternity in romance novel years. You're lucky I dragged myself off the couch," I protest, head tilting toward their bathroom. "*What* is taking Cameron so long?"

"One of her hair extensions was loose. She had to add extra adhesive."

"Ah." I nod knowingly—as if that makes any sense.

Lucky for me, Cameron chooses that moment to come sashaying down the hallway as if she's on a fashion runway, thumbing a long strand of platinum blonde hair, curls sprayed into submission. The rest of them lie in silky waves, and I briefly wonder how she's going to walk the entire way on those four-inch heels.

Dark eyes, glossy lips, and black dress, Cam is ready to hit the Row.

Finally.

She halts when she sees me, pointing an accusatory finger at my boots. Practically *hisses*. “You are not wearing that outfit. It’s butt ugly.”

Tessa pipes up. “Save your breath—if we make her change she won’t come out with us, and I haven’t seen her in ages.”

“Aww, you are too sweet.” I wrap an arm around her slim waist, squeezing her in a side hug. “I kind of missed you two weirdos.”

Oh shit.

They were right—I’m sweltering and this entire outfit was a terrible idea.

Why didn’t they try harder to make me change into something new? I swear, Tessa is an abysmal friend.

I’m *dying*. I am going to have heat stroke.

It’s hot as Hades, the hundred bodies overcrowding the small space creating a blasted inferno, despite the freezing temperatures outdoors.

I pull off my jacket. Have no choice but to loosen the scarf clinging to my perspiring neck, a second skin, damp with my sweat.

Jerking at the end of it with my left hand, I pull it slack, lifting it over my head, relieving myself of one round mohair loop after another. Stuff the entire thing in my purse—which is more of a cumbersome tote—all the while holding a red cup in my right hand.

Drinking tonight wouldn’t be doing myself any favors with this cold still lingering, so it’s copious amounts of water disguised as alcohol instead.

And can I just say, finding a liquid in this house that isn’t beer was damn near impossible. I had to leave Tessa and Cam to their own devices to scavenge the kitchen, raiding the fridge.

There was a note taped to the door that said, *Off limits*, but it was old, and faded, and I was way too parched to care.

Inside, a treasure trove of water, juice, and power beverages, even some protein shakes.

Snagging two bottles of ice-cold water (one for now and one for later), I stuffed them into my tote, grateful I had a purse along and wondering why

they don't have water at the makeshift bar in their living room.

Is it stealing if the fridge was open?

I meander from room to room, searching for the two blondes I came here with, their pretty blonde heads having gone astray in the short amount of time it took for me to find two water bottles. I fidget, airing myself out by tugging at the neckline of my sweater, and take a few refreshing sips of my pilfered beverage.

Cold.

Delicious.

I fan myself idly, standing off to one side of the living room, doing my best not to faint dead away. A melodramatic statement, even for me, but if I manage not to pass out from overheating, it will be a damn miracle.

Three more sweeps of the room and I locate them near the front windows. My upper torso is so unbelievably *itchy*.

Stupid and scorching. I'm sweaty and irritable and *oh my freaking god why am I freaking wearing this!*

I slide a finger inside the furry collar to alleviate my crawling skin, lower my body temperature, giving it yet another tug. But, it's no use—I'm boiling in this godforsaken potato sack.

I need the porch, porch, porch.

No one hears my loud sigh over the music; how could they? It's turned up so loud the windows shake with the base, floor quaking with tiny vibrations.

Hating myself just a *lil* bit, I join the girls; they're both having more fun and better luck tonight than I, cloistered in a huddle and chatting it up with two insanely attractive young men.

Tessa is batting her lash extensions at the blond one—he's a tall, lanky guy, his winning feature a lazy smile he's freely throwing her way. Perfect teeth.

Boyish, in a way, but I can see why she's attracted to him, though my type is more rugged and rough around the edges. Someone large and strapping with a killer personality would win me over in a heartbeat.

"Hey guys—thought I lost you." I raise my water and take a long, refreshing drag. "What did I miss?"

“Scar, this is Derek and Ben,” Tessa says, introducing us. “They’re both on the team. Guys, this is Scarlett.”

“I’m sorry, which team are we talking about?” I can’t help teasing, just can’t.

“The baseball team,” the dark-haired guy mutters, running his brown gaze up and down my outfit. He’s not entertained—not in the least—and stares at me like I’m an idiot.

Huh.

Can’t please everyone, I guess.

“We were just about to take a selfie,” Cameron adds. “Scar, will you take it for us?” She unceremoniously thrusts her phone at me, fluffing her beautiful, wavy hair.

I fiddle with the flash, flipping the camera toward *me* and sticking out my tongue before clicking away. Take a few selfies before righting the camera and getting down to the business at hand.

“Would you quit screwing around?” Tessa prompts through clenched teeth, lips curved into a seductive smile. “I can’t keep my face like this much longer.”

“You can delete those.” I thumb through the pictures before turning the camera back on my friends. “Well not this one—I look adorable. Can you text it to me?”

I giggle.

“Everyone say ‘*Balls!*’” I take another six photos before slapping the cell into Cameron’s waiting palm. She immediately starts shuffling through them, dissecting herself in every one, huge smile plastered on her pretty face.

“So, it turns out you were right about the sweater.” I give Tessa a bump with my hip. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m ready to get going.”

Everyone stares.

“I’m hot and itchy, but thank god it’s not a rash, ha ha.” I’m the only one who laughs.

Ben, the guy wearing a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes and a baseball cap I want to knock off his head, points a finger in my direction. “Are you for real?”

“You have no idea how hot this shirt is, buddy.” I pull a long face, emphasizing my plight. Hold up my hands in mock defeat. “We’ve been here a few hours, and I wouldn’t hate it if we left. That’s all I’m sayin’.”

“How bad are you feeling really?” She reaches to feel my forehead. “You do feel warm, but it could just be the temperature in here.”

“Guys, we came together and we should leave together.”

“Tessa here can’t leave until she helps me with my little problem,” Ben says, eyes dropping down into her cleavage.

“*Little* problem?” My eyes drop unceremoniously down to the crotch of his jeans.

“My phone.” He holds his jet black cell in front of him like an offering. Tessa’s blue eyes land on the illuminated screen, her teeth raking across her bottom lip playfully. “There’s a problem with it.”

“What’s wrong?” she asks, tilting her head.

“I keep searching and searching but can’t find the number I’m looking for.” His big hand palms the device, thumb stroking up and down the screen, and I think he’s trying to be sexy? Or something?

“What number?” Tessa coos.

“You know—the *number* I’m *missing*.”

“Did it disappear?”

“No, baby, I’m trying to put it in here.” His thumb slides up and down the flat surface, stroking idly.

“But is it—”

Oh my god, I can’t take it anymore.

“I get it. I get it.” I step forward to finish the tease he’s trying his damndest to deliver, dragging out the pick-up line in a painfully slow fashion. “There’s a problem with his phone, Tess, because your number isn’t in it.”

“Huh?” Tessa wrinkles her brow, confused, while the guy stares me down, mouth set into a hard line.

I pull a face like a grade-school student who’s just blurted out the answer in class without raising their hand, my cheeks getting hotter.

Clearing my throat, I’m too embarrassed to glance up at Ben.

“Tessa, it’s...you know—a pick-up line? It goes like this.” I lower my voice, doing my best impression of a man. “There’s something wrong with my phone—because your name isn’t in it.” My head wobbles back and forth as I deliver the moronic sentence. “Get it? I read it online, probably Buzzfeed? There was this whole long list of the world’s shittiest pick-up lines, and that one topped it.”

When I do happen a glance up, it’s into a set of scowling eyes.

“Don’t get mad.” I awkwardly laugh, pulling at my neckline. “Get better lines. Those are awful.” My flirtatious giggle goes unappreciated. “Oh come on, I’m trying to help you! That was a pro tip.”

The guy opens his mouth. “Do you not realize you’re a fucking buzzkill? What the hell are you wearing?”

His tone is no longer friendly, no longer flirty. He’s no longer interested in being a team player; I’ve unintentionally pissed him off by stealing his thunder.

Tessa, bless her kind heart, breaks through the tension with a lighthearted laugh, giving Benny boy a few flirtatious pats on the cheek. Diverts his attention.

“You want my number?” She sounds positively giddy. “Why didn’t you just say so, silly?” She plucks the phone out of his hands, tapping her digits into the contacts as he shoots another distrustful glance in my direction.

Looks down his nose at me.

I clutch my cup tighter; it wasn’t my intention to offend or piss anyone off. All I want to do is have a good time and laugh a little after being sick for so long—is that a crime?

He’s certainly staring at me like it is.

“You know what you could do, Stacey?” Derek intentionally butchers my name; I can see in his steely gaze that he’s trying to belittle me, the dickhead. “Run along and get yourself another beer.” He’s on his tiptoes, pretending to stare down into my red cup. “Looks like yours is half empty.”

Ben nods, drinking from his cup. “We’d hate for our guests to be thirsty, especially the ones who need booze the most.”

“You’re not trying to get rid of me, are you?” My laugh is nervous.

“Us?” He manages to look affronted. “No, babe, I live here. It’s my *job* to

make sure everyone is having a good time, and *you* definitely don't seem like a good time. Ha. Ha."

I catch his dig. Try not to let it sting.

"I'm good, but thank you for the offer." I swirl the contents of my cup, peering into it with one eye closed. "Besides, this isn't beer. It's water with a little lemon and it's still pretty cold."

"Water?"

I scrunch up my nose. "Yeah, I'm not really much of a drinker, and I've been sick, so is it really a smart idea to get drunk?" My chin goes up a notch. "I don't think so."

Derek's face contorts. "Where'd you find water around here?"

"Uh, the kitchen?"

"Where in the kitchen?"

Is this a trick question? "Uh...the fridge?"

His eyes narrow. "We keep the fridge locked during parties."

My brows rise into my hairline. "You do?"

"Yeah. So no one takes shit." *Like you just did.* "Did you miss the big sign that says OFF LIMITS?"

My cheeks are on fire. No way is he accusing me of stealing from the house; it's just a bottle of water, from a fridge that was open. Sure, it had a lock on it, and sure, there might have been a sign, but the fridge was open nonetheless.

Crap.

"I'm sorry," I say sincerely. "I didn't realize it was supposed to be locked. It opened right up." All I had to do was fiddle with the handle a few seconds, and presto—all the drinks for me!

He glances down his nose at me for the second time tonight, silently judging me. "Maybe instead of sucking down that stolen water, you should have a beer—or five, since—"

"You seem so uptight," Ben finishes.

"Thanks, I'm good," I insist, pulling at my sweater, peeling it away from my scorching skin, needing room to breathe. The room seems to be getting hotter by the second—or is it just me? Normally, guys like this wouldn't

bother me—I can handle a little unease like a champ—but coupled with how warm I am, and the heat these guys are throwing off...

I'll admit to being more than a little uncomfortable, and not just from the sweater.

Cameron pipes up then, unwittingly rescuing me, resting her hand on his meaty bicep, displayed beneath a black, short sleeve shirt. Changes the topic. "Before when you were getting water, Derek was telling us before how the baseball team won the College World Series last year. That's the World Series of Baseball, but for college."

My brows go up, holding back a look of disbelief. "Yes, I know what the CWS is, Cameron, and Iowa didn't win it."

"Yes they did!" She laughs. "Derek threw the winning pitch—he's seriously amazing. Scarlett, you should hear the story." She has her entire arm wrapped around his, giving him an encouraging squeeze. "Tell her the story Derek."

I look at Ben. Glance at Derek. Back at these two naïve girls, and shake my head, dismayed. Literally can no longer handle their amount of bullshit.

"You realize these two are...teasing you, right?" The red cup hits my lips and I take a swig, readjusting the jacket and scarf I've been holding in my other hand. "USC won the College World Series last year—they win it almost every year." The water tastes warm now, tepid at best, as it flows down my throat.

"How the hell would you know that, Miss Know-It-All?" Ben, challenges me.

Miss Know-It-All? Wow. I don't think anyone has ever called me that a day in my life.

"My dad. He's not a huge fan of major league baseball, but he loves watching college ball—loves it." I tap my chin with a forefinger. "I remember last summer, he had the damn finals on for an entire week, on every TV in the house. We all had to watch that dumb game—no offense. The College World series is in June, right? I think I'm remembering that right..."

When my sentence trails off, Derek jerks his head in a terse nod at Ben, crossing his arms and spreading his legs in a defensive pose.

Raises his brows. Nods toward the kitchen.

“Anyway,” I chatter in an attempt to redeem myself, filling the silence with my babble. “I just remember being home and my dad watching that game. The highlights would be on when I left for work, and the game would be on when I got home from work. USC won that tournament, I’m sure of it.”

Both Cam and Tessa are having a hard time following the conversation. “Why would you say you won?”

I blow out a puff of air, gently tugging the sweater from my skin and giving it a few shakes to let the cooler air get in. “They lied because they’re trying to impress you, Tessa—kind of ridiculous if you ask me. I mean, honestly, you guys are really good-looking, you shouldn’t have to make shit up.” I push out a laugh—it comes out sounding strangled. “Weak. So. Weak.”

I push out another one, hoping to smooth things over, hoping they’ll be amused by the teasing tone of my voice and take pity on me.

“You’re not going to stand here with us all night, are you?” one of the guys asks.

“What else would I do?”

“I can call one of the rookies to take you home so you don’t have to keep standing here.” Ben drapes his arm around Tessa’s shoulders. “Besides, I want to get to know your friend better, and you’re making it impossible.” He tilts her chin up with his thumb, staring down into her eyes. “Wouldn’t you like to get to know me better, babe?”

Tessa nods, dumbly. *Damn her!*

I swallow the lump in my throat.

“We’ll take real good care of your friends.” He tries to back away with her, but I stop him. “You can walk away knowing they’re in good hands, babe.”

Not so fast, you bull hunk.

“I have no doubt about that.” I grip his forearm as he grins wolfishly down at Tessa and *holy shit* is it solid. Built like a tank, his forearm is a firm mass of muscle. I give my head a shake. “Are you sure it’s *wise* to go off with them? I mean...they’re strangers.”

“Strangers? What are you, fucking five?” He glares down at me. “What’s in that water that’s making you so goddamn bitchy?”

Tessa and Cameron volley back and forth between us, eyes wide as saucers. A little horrified, a little tipsy, a lot excited, and gorgeously clueless. I can hardly believe these two Neanderthals are turning my friends on! But they are—I can tell by the looks on both their enthralled faces.

Shit.

My friendship is no match for an athletic pedigree, great body, and handsome face.

So, I stand my ground, having nothing to lose; these girls are not leaving with me when I go.

“You did not just call me bitchy.” *No one* has ever called me that—not once—and if I wasn’t so pissed off, I might be embarrassed. All I’m trying to do is enjoy my night out, but these assholes are making it impossible. All because in some sick way, they see me as ruining their chances.

“Don’t call her bitchy, Ben, it’s mean!” Tessa scolds, narrowing her eyes and smacking at his arm. Her palms rests there, fingers doing a thorough pat-down of his skin. “You should apologize.”

He rolls his neck, getting the kinks out, his big, brown eyes rolling toward the ceiling. “If it’s not the sobriety making her act this way, it must be that butt ugly sweater.”

I glance down at my beige mohair garment, affronted. “I was cold, and I-I was sick!”

“Aren’t you fucking hot? Is that what’s making you run your mouth?”

“Yeah,” I admit begrudgingly, shoulders slouching. “*Maybe.*”

“You should go outside then and get some fresh air.”

Fresh air does sound better than standing in front of these idiots, putting up with their insults.

Ben casually arches a brow and the guys exchange another glance—so damn shady. I watch as he casually eases out of the conversation and disappears into the crowd, causing Cameron’s bottom lip to jut out in a pout. Arms cross. Boobs rise above the low neckline of her shirt.

“What did you say your name was?” Derek asks me.

My arms cross defensively. “Stacy.”

His face is a blank canvas, impassive, stony, and directed at me. “Are you

going to tell me your name again or not, because if you don't I'll just give you a nickname—I have a pretty good one already, right up here.”

He taps his skull.

I make a *hmph* sound they probably can't hear over the noise. “Scarlett.”

His mouth curves. “Sober Scarlett.”

“Oh so you think you're clever now cause you can alliterate?” I hold up my red plastic cup, not bothering to hold back the biting comment on my tongue. “Got any other set of skills?”

I wish I didn't sound so defensive, but these guys are bringing out the worst in me.

“You wouldn't know what to do with my other set of skills.” He chuckles, pleased with his innuendo, thinks he's being clever. Tessa must agree because the cheesy line throws her into a giggle fit.

Gross, Tessa. Just...*no*.

Get better taste in men!

Honestly, what is it with these guys?

Bunch of douchey jockholes congregating in one small space. The room lacks oxygen—that must be why they're acting like assholes.

I smirk at my own joke but am still unable to figure out why Tessa and Cam find these idiots so damn charming, especially with how rude they are. Crude and unoriginal, Ben and Derek have one modicum of sense between them. I can tell by the cold glint in Derek's eye that he's a colossal asshole and is reining it in for my friend's benefit.

Never have I ever met a bigger pair of douchebags.

I sigh into my water cup. *What a shame. God wasted all that talent and those incredible bodies on these two creeps.*

Amazing bodies, average personalities.

What *dicks*.

Derek's face goes from a scowl to a megawatt smile when his buddy Ben reappears. “Heads up, Cock Blocker, the cavalry has arrived.”

Cavalry? *Cock Blocker*?

I glance around—is he talking to *me*?

He must be drunk.

From behind, I feel a large hand gently gripping my shoulder, the sizzling weight of a heavy palm and splayed fingers reheating my upper torso. Surprised that someone is touching me from behind, my head swerves, gaze settling on a large, tan hand with square-tipped fingers covering my shoulder.

Short nails. Rough pads.

Manly.

My eyes trail up, following the arm attached to that hand. Travel upward, over a muscular, bare forearm. Lift their way to a set of wide shoulders. Meet an unsettling pair of curious green eyes, a strong, straight nose.

Full, downturned mouth.

Five o'clock shadow.

The human attached to the massive paw is just as handsome as the others, not in a beautiful way, like some athletes tend to be, but good-looking just the same. Add in the the fact that he's the only other human here *not* wearing a ridiculous Halloween costume?

Major points.

Imposing and intense, his gaze beams down as his fingers give my shoulder a light squeeze, refocusing my attention on his face.

His eyes are a diluted green, crinkled at the corners with laugh lines, like he smiles easily when he's not glowering at people.

Pillow-soft lips set in an unreadable, unhappy line, he's irritated, but not in the same way his friends are. I can tell immediately that he's friendlier, but right now he definitely means business.

Holy crap is he intense.

Broody, I wonder what his problem is and why he's got my shoulder in a vice. What is it with these damn baseball guys? Why are they so grumpy? Did someone piss on their third place trophies?

My eyes widen when he dips his torso to get closer, warm breath brushing the outer shell of my ear. Leans down, broad chest grazing my back as that exquisite, pouty mouth speaks slowly into my cerebellum. Reverberates down my spine.

"Can you follow me for a quick second? I gotta talk to you."

I shiver.

Inhale—*of course I do*—because he’s wearing cologne and it smells good and I can’t stop myself.

It’s what I do.

“Where do you want to talk?” My eyes stray to the front door, to the staircase leading to the second floor. To the kitchen, where I filched the water inside my cup and the bottle inside my bag. To the screened porch out back.

Cameron watches the exchange with rapid interest, eyes wide as mine, mouth twitching. She’s practically drooling, licking her lips.

“Over by the front door? This won’t take more than a few seconds. It’s too loud near the speakers to say what I have to say.”

What the hell could he possibly want?

And why is he so damn handsome?

I stare at the pronounced bow curving the top of his lip.

God, his voice. It’s deep and clear. Even with the pumping bass in the background, I can hear every syllable, the timbre sending an extra shiver of exhilaration down my spine.

“Just so you know, I’m fluent in karate.”

“Fluent in karate,” he deadpans, knowing I’m totally full of shit. “You don’t say?”

I slice through the air with my hands for good measure. “Yes, so make this quick.”

Warning bells go off inside my head, niggling at me, yet I trail along, curiosity and attraction getting the best of me. What could this guy possibly want?

God, what kind of idiot is persuaded so easily by a handsome face and sexy voice? Me—that’s what kind of idiot!

Me. I am.

I want to see what this cute guy wants and what’s going to come out of that pretty, perfect mouth of his. What’s the harm in following him to the corner of the room?

I mean—it’s the corner of the *room*. We’re not going outside, and he’s not taking me to one of the *bedrooms*. He can’t try anything in a room full of

people. Plus, I took self-defense last semester, so I know where to knee a man to knock his ass down: *right in the balls*.

Grinning, I glance over my shoulder at Derek, at Ben.

Roll my eyes at them both. “I’ll hear you out, but no funny business or I’ll scream.”

“Funny business?” His tone is bored.

“Yeah—you know, assault.”

“Jesus, I’m not going to assault you. Could you lower your voice?” He glances around us to make sure no one heard, gauging the distance between the crowd and us. “Stay close, yeah?”

Yeah, yeah, *whatever*.

I nod, giving Tessa and Cam one last sidelong glance before prancing off after this stranger. They nod enthusiastically, encouraging me. Ogling him. Giggling.

The guy I’m following is big.

Bigger than the others, his presence parting the crowd like Moses at the Red Sea as we wade through, students evaporating so he can get by.

Who the hell is this guy?

I follow, gaze trained on his broad back. His muscles are unmistakably defined beneath his t-shirt, straining with every step he takes, every fluid movement, the cords of his neck visibly tense.

He has rich brown hair, lightened by the sun at the top, the back recently trimmed, lines precise. Short on the sides, slightly longer at the top, it’s a mop top I could easily imagine a girl running her fingers through.

He glances back at me again when he reaches the front door, yanks the handle, pushes the screen open to the porch.

I come up short. “You said this would only take a few seconds—why are we going outside?”

“It’s loud in here.” He yells to illustrate his point, pointing to his mouth like I can read lips.

I hesitate.

Poise my foot on the threshold, toe of my boot on the step before striding all the way out, cool air hitting me like a welcome force.

I breathe it in then out with a sigh of relief. *God it feels so good.*

“So...we’re outside.” I take the jacket out of my tote and slide both arms into it, zipping the front with a satisfying whirr. “And doesn’t this feel amazing? I was dying in there.”

He studies me under the porch lights, silently crossing his arms, a beer clutched in one huge hand.

No jacket, short sleeves, and a scowl.

I raise one brow, waiting.

He continues staring me down, wordlessly.

This guy is tall—*good and tall*—legs spread slightly, bulky arms crossed defensively. What I imagine a powerful baseball player stance to be, except without the uniform or glove.

I can’t take it anymore.

“What’s up? Did you see me across the room and decided I was irresistible? You just *had* to talk to me?” Haha. “Don’t tell me—you can’t resist a fuzzy brown sweater?” I try for brave and nonchalant, but my nerves betray me and my voice quivers.

His nose dips down, those brawny arms uncrossing, the cords in his forearms stretching. Claps his hands together like two giant cymbals, the noise echoing in the quiet yard.

“So, I’m just going to throw it down, all right? It’s nothing personal.”

Nothing good comes from sentences that begin with, ‘It’s nothing personal’, which is just a generic form of ‘It’s not you, it’s me.’

“It’s like this,” he continues. “The guys decided that for the rest of the night, you’re not allowed back in the house.”

“I’m sorry, *what?*” My voice raises a few octaves above my normal tone. “Why?”

His voice also goes up a few decibels. “The guys decided that for the rest of the night, you’re not allowed—”

I put my hand up so he’ll shut his gorgeous face. “Why?”

“What do you mean, why? Isn’t it obvious?”

Uh, no. “If I knew, I wouldn’t have been dumb enough to follow you out here, would I?”

“I’m not fucking around, sorry. You can’t go back—you’re being booted for the night.”

“Booted.” I snort. “By who?”

“By the guys. By me.”

“And who are *you*?”

“I’m their fearless leader—and the unlucky bastard that drew the short straw.”

My nose crinkles like I’ve just swallowed a Sour Patch Kid. “And what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It *means* you’re running interference and it’s driving my friends fucking *nuts*. They want you gone. Hope you have all your personal shit.” He smiles, eyes catching the tote bag hanging off my shoulder. “Never mind, I see you brought a *giant* fucking suitcase along with you.”

“Are you for real right now?” Crap, now I sound like that asshole Derek.

“Yeah, I’m—*like*—for *real*.” He imitates an airhead, fake twirling an invisible lock of long hair, lobbing his head from side to side rudely.

“I’m not stupid, you don’t have to be a jerk, but what gives them the right to—”

“Cock Blocker.”

“I’m sorry, *what*?”

“That’s what they called you: cock blocker. You should have just left well enough alone—all you did by running interference was piss off Ben and Derek.”

“Running interference? I was making small talk, not that those meatheads would know the difference.”

Without warning, he plucks the red plastic cup from my fingers, sniffing the contents with that great, Greek nose of his.

“What’s in here, vodka?” He inhales inside the cup again, taking a good long whiff—the way I sniffed him earlier—sticking his nose all the way in. “What the hell is this, boring juice?”

My lip twitches because the way his nose twitches is kind of cute, and I try not to smile. “No, it’s water.”

“Huh. Just water?” He looks mildly entertained, thick eyebrows raised into

his hairline. “Well now it’s kind of starting to make sense.”

My chin goes up a notch. “Your friends are ridiculous, you know that, right? It’s not my fault they can’t take a joke.”

“Yeah, well, they’ve decided you’re grade-A pain in their ass.” He pauses, giving the yard another once-over. “Cock Blocker.” His laugh is low and deep as he recalls the nickname.

“Please don’t call me that. It’s insulting, even though it doesn’t surprise me.”

“You’re messing with their game.”

“Their *game*? Do people actually still use that term?” I snort, so unladylike, unable to stop the sound from coming out my nose. Charming, I know. “Your friends have no game, unless you give points for lies. They weren’t impressing anyone.”

His laugh echoes down into the yard. “Let’s face it—they were impressing your friends.”

He’s got me there. “Tessa is too sweet for her own damn good, okay?” Why am I telling him this? “And Cameron just wants...”

I clamp my mouth shut.

“Just wants to get laid?”

“No!”

“Just wants a jock notch on her bedpost?”

“Stop. Now you’re just trying to find creative ways to say *get laid*.” And I’m not supposed to be enjoying myself out here, dammit. I’m pissed at this guy—he literally just kicked me out of a house party.

I will not allow myself to be charmed, no matter how funny he is.

His shoulders shake in a quick shiver as he throws a thumb over his shoulder. “Wanna tell me what it was Wilson and Fitzgerald were lying about back there?”

“Does it *matter*?”

“No.” But he’s curious—I can see it in his eyes as he stares at me from across the porch, brows still imposingly arched. He’s not entirely bored.

“Look,” I begin, hefting my bag. “The pick-up lines were terrible, and I couldn’t resist giving Derek shit about it, if you must know the truth. Like—

the worst. If you were there, you would have done it too.” I pause. “Then when they started in about the College World Series, I couldn’t keep my mouth shut.”

His spine straightens. “What about the CWS?”

“They said they won it, and we all know that’s a load of crap. All I did was call them on it! Sue me. It was dumb that they lied to impress my friends.”

His smirk comes slowly, one side of his mouth curving into an arch. It’s more mischievous than sinister. “How are you so sure we didn’t win?”

“Dude, stop.”

He laughs when I call him *dude*, Adam’s apple bobbing. “The fact that you know that shit is so fucking random.”

“I have a baseball-obsessed father, all right? I can’t help myself—I’m the son he never had.” Inside my warm jacket, my shoulders move up and down in a tiny shrug. “Maybe remembering weird facts is my stupid human trick.”

The guy’s eyes stray to the window of the house, gazing through. “Look, I hate to be rude, but can you do me a favor and leave? It’s cold and I’m freezing my balls off.”

I will my eyes not to stray down the front of his jeans, to his zipper. To his balls.

“So this is real? You’re seriously kicking me out?”

His nod is authoritative. “Yup. This is me, seriously kicking your scrawny ass out.”

I do not have a scrawny ass! “That is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard anyone say.”

“Stick around long enough and it won’t be.” He’s laughing at himself again. “I say some pretty stupid shit.”

“You’re kind of an asshole.” My conviction is weak—so weak—and more wishful thinking than anything.

“You were disturbing the peace—the natural order of things, if you will—and I’ve been tasked with escorting you from the premises. Don’t shoot the messenger.”

Escorting me from the premises—what a ridiculous thing to say.

“The proverbial short straw you speak of.” I nod, knowingly, oh so wise and clever.

“Exactly.”

He’s pleased with himself, too, leaning against the balustrade, legs so long his ass rests comfortably on top of the rail.

A nervous, giddy laugh escapes my lips. I can’t handle moments like this; they make me uncomfortable when I’m not prepared, and this cold weather isn’t helping matters.

I’m laughing like an *idiot*, and he’s staring at me like I’ve lost my damn mind and now there is no way he’s going to let me back inside.

“Escort me from the premises?” I muse, rubbing my chin. “What are you, an undercover cop?” I’m sassing now, turning my embarrassment into a thinly veiled joke.

Except...

If this is a joke, it isn’t funny—not at all. It’s awkward and inconvenient and we’re out here on the porch in the cold, shivering. Locked in a battle of wills, neither one willing to bend, my teeth chattering the slightest bit. Thoughts straying from his handsome face to the warm scarf buried in my bag.

I wonder how tacky it would be for me to wrap it around my neck while he stands there, shuddering every so often, covered in goose bumps.

“Can I at least go back inside and tell my friends you’re kicking me out?”

“Nope.” He obnoxiously pops the P. “I’m under strict orders not to let you back in.”

“Whose strict orders?”

“Mine. Why are you arguing?” One mammoth paw scratches across his stupidly sexy square jaw. “It’s not helping your case.”

“Oh, I have a case now?” I ask sarcastically with an eye roll heavenward. “Is this a court of law or have I somehow entered a special kind of purgatory?”

His smile widens. “If I were actually an undercover cop, I’d have you arrested for resisting an officer.”

“Is that a thing?”

“Resisting an officer? Hell yeah it is.” He smirks, and *god* is he cute. Really, really cute. Handsome.

I glance down at my shoes, shuffling my feet, then out toward the street to stop myself from staring directly at his white teeth and chiseled jaw and stupid, sparkling eyes.

What a cliché he turned out to be.

Jerk.

“Please just let me run inside.” I try not to beg. “I’ll be quick like a bunny and tell them I’m leaving?”

“Quick like a *bunny*?” He rubs his jaw, the unshaven scruff scratching. “That I might pay to see.”

I bat my eyelashes, wishing I at least threw on one coat of mascara before leaving the house tonight. My face is naked and fresh, not likely to bend any guy to my will, let alone *this* one.

“Please?”

“Let’s try this again. Are you watching my lips? Are you paying attention? Because I’m only going to say this one more time.”

I nod, eyes glued to his gorgeous mouth. “I’m listening.”

“You. Are. Not. Going. Back. Inside.” His eyes trek the length of my zipper, searching for the pockets at my sides. “If you have a phone tucked away in there, get it out and text your friends. See if they give a shit you’re gone. Go ahead.”

“I will!”

A low chuckle. “What are you waiting for?”

Why is he being like this? Doesn’t he know how rude it is for me to just disappear on my friends? Under any other circumstances, I never would have walked out on them and left them inside.

I stomp my foot like a petulant child, the stubborn side of me kicking in like a knee-jerk reaction. Athletes aren’t the only ones with determination. “I am not leaving this porch until you let me back in!”

He yawns in my direction, sounding bored, patting his mouth. “Why are you being so dramatic? You’re worse than my four-year-old cousin.”

“Because! This goes against my...” I search for the appropriate words.

“Civil rights!”

“This goes against your civil rights,” he deadpans dryly, lip curving. “Now you just sound crazy.”

“You can’t kick me out.”

“Now you’re cock-blocking me from kicking you out? Do you not see the irony here?”

I narrow my eyes. “Stop trying to make me laugh—it won’t work.”

“But it’s so easy.”

“I’m not standing out on this porch while my girlfriends are being taken advantage of inside. I’m not *abandoning* them.”

“Uh...” he drones. “I can guarantee you it’s the other way around.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You don’t think those chicks inside aren’t taking advantage of the situation?” He throws a thumb over his shoulders, toward the house.

“No, I don’t think they’re taking advantage of the situation. They have no clue what’s going on. In fact, they probably thought—”

You were going to hit on me, and they weren’t going to stand in your way.

“See how easy it is to divert your attention? You’re like a cute, fuzzy brown squirrel with no nut—was that the point?” He hugs himself, moving his hands up and down his arms. “Real talk: if you don’t leave this property, I’ll end up babysitting you, and that’s not how I want to kill time on a Friday night.”

I pretend to ignore him, a knot of guilt tightening my stomach.

His teeth rake over his bottom lip, back and forth, gleaming white, as he studies me.

“Fine.” His sigh is resigned. “While you stand here being stubborn, I’ll be over on the stairs ignoring you while you ignore me.”

Removing his cell from the back pocket of his jeans, he holds it up, thumb sliding across the screen, the glow illuminating his inconveniently attractive face. He twists his wrist in my direction, wiggling his finger in small circles. “Don’t hesitate to text your friends and tell them you’re leaving.”

“Bossy,” I grumble, jealous he can so easily disregard me to play on his phone while I stew over my predicament. “I’m not leaving because I’m

reliable, and loyal.”

His ears don't so much as twitch; he's not listening.

Three more minutes tick by.

“You're really not going to let me back in?”

He barely spares me a glance. “I'm *really* not letting you back in.”

“What if I promise to behave?” I run two pinched fingers across my mouth, throw away the key. “I'll be good. No running interference.”

“Cute.” His eyes are still fastened to his phone. “But no.”

“I can't be out here and leave my poor friends alone with those idiots.” I pause. “Oops, did I say that out loud?”

His head gives a slow shake. Tsks. “It's going to be a *really* long night if you keep doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“*Begging* to get back inside. It's pitiful and annoying. Text your damn friends.”

“I'm not begging. I'm *asking*.”

His eyes leave the screen of his phone, raking my torso up and down with a dismissive brow. “It's begging—I know what the difference is, and you're being irksome.”

Damn. The fact that he just used the word irksome?

Kind of a huge turn-on.

“I thought determination was an admirable quality.” I sound pitiful, even to my own ears. “Surely you of all people can appreciate that.”

“Only when used in the right circumstances,” he grumbles after a long pause. “Like, say—*warmer* circumstances.”

“If...” I root around in my brain for something intelligent to say, to gain equal footing, but end up with, “If you don't let me back inside, I'm calling the cops.”

Ugh, why can't I just keep my mouth shut?

“Be my guest, call the cops.” He takes a loud, slurping sip of the beer he's been holding in his hand. “Tell them Rowdy Wade sent you.”

“You're impossible.”

“Trust me, doll face, I’ve been called worse.”

“Oh god—do not call me doll face.”

“What should I call you then? I know you don’t take kindly to Cock Blocker as an endearment.”

I stomp my foot, frustrated. “Why do you have to be so stubborn?”

“I’m stubborn? Uh, *okay*.” He mutters *Jesus Christ* under his breath like it’s an oath, the bright light from his phone illuminating his sharpening features.

I backpedal.

“I’m sorry. I just...” *Feel helpless out here on the porch*. “This night isn’t going anything like I planned. I haven’t been to a party in forever and I just wanted to have fun tonight, that’s all.”

“I bet...” he begins slowly, “when you were in high school, you were one of those girls who used to raise their hand during class to ask the teacher for extra credit.”

The “So?” slips out, and I groan while face-palming myself.

“So? No one liked those girls.”

My chin hitches up a notch. “I bet you were one of those jocks who barely passed their classes and cheated off of girls like *me*.”

He spreads his arms, wingspan wide. Grins wickedly, his entire face lighting up. “Yet *here I am* with a full ride to college. Do the math on those odds.”

Resigned, my body sags against the side of the house, the fabric of my jacket snagging on the wooden siding. “What am I supposed to do until my friends come out?”

I swear he winks at me. “Again, not my problem.”

“Did you just wink at me?”

He rubs his face with the knuckle of his left hand. “No. I obviously have dust in my eye.”

My head hits the house when I tip it to laugh. “Liar.”

“Pollen?”

We regard each other from our spots across the porch until he quietly asks,

“Want me to walk you home?”

He is so transparent. “So you can get me out of here quicker?”

He laughs to himself, chest constricting. “Pretty much.”

“You’re twice as big as I am—no way am I letting you walk me home in the dark.” I wasn’t born yesterday, and my mother didn’t raise a fool.

No matter how cute this guy is.

“Can I point out a fun fact?”

“Can I stop you?”

“Very cute, but no.” He takes a drag from his beer. “Your friends had no problem ignoring the fact that you disappeared when I hauled you off.”

“Do you honestly think those jockholes inside told them I was being kicked out? No. They’re blissfully unaware.”

Another pull from his beer. “They probably think I’m fucking you.”

Jesus. Blunt much?

My cheeks flush. “Don’t flatter yourself. They know me better than that.”

“So you’re a prude?”

I squint, ignoring him. “Remind me again why I followed you out here?”

Answer: Because curiosity killed the cat, Scarlett. You followed a good-looking stranger out into the dark and look where it got you—on the front porch, in the bitter cold.

“Don’t beat yourself up about it—any one of those girls would have followed me out here, too.”

Oh brother, he’s modest too? “And why do you suppose that is?”

His broad shoulders shrug and damn, he must be freezing his ass off. “Captain of the baseball team. Handsome as fuck. Funny as hell.”

“I don’t...wow. I don’t even know how to respond to that.”

He gives me a tight-lipped smile. “It’s a lot to take in all at once.”

Cannot argue with that. “It sure is,” I agree with a laugh.

“Can I ask you something?” He eyes me up and down from his spot on the ground. “Why are you dressed like you’re taking a trip to Antarctica?”

I press my lips together. Part them. “For your information, *smartass*, I’ve

been sick. I had a cold, so what was I supposed to do, wear a bandage dress to a house party? No thanks, I'm trying to get better before the break."

He holds up his bear paws. "Hey, no judgments—I can tell you're a really sensible girl. All I'm saying is, you're wearing a sweater that could double as a parka, and you're also wearing a parka."

This time, I can't stop the laugh from escaping my mouth.

"Why, are you cold? Cause I'm nice and toasty." I shoot him a wide grin to rub in the fact that I'm warm and he's not.

"You are an asshole," he snarks. "I'm a bit nippily, no thanks to you, but I'll live."

"Tell you what: let's dash inside and grab you something warm, a jacket perhaps?" I smile sweetly, fluttering my lashes. "Promise I won't disappear into the crowd."

His lips twitch. "I think I'll take my chances against the impending hypothermia. I can still have kids if my nut sac freezes off."

He taps away at the lit screen of his phone.

"Why do you think," he asks absentmindedly, "it bothered you so bad that your friends were getting hit on but you're not?"

"Is that what you think?"

He does a lot of shrugging, this guy. "No judgments."

My mouth drops open, and I slam it closed before he looks up. "I was not cock blocking my friends because I'm *jealous*."

"So you admit it—you were cock blocking."

If he wasn't so damn cute, I'd be furious right now. "You know that's not what I meant."

"So you're bitter because you're completely sober?"

"I'm not *completely* sober."

"So are you *drunk*?"

"No, of course not." I flip my ponytail.

"You had beer?" He's skeptical. "How many?"

"Um..." None and a half. I use my thumb and forefinger to indicate the amount. "'Bout that much?"

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” I can see him hiding a smile behind the glare of his phone. “You’re completely sober.”

“I’m recovering from a cold.” I fake a cough.

With those perfectly white, straight teeth, he smiles at me again, and I can’t even take it. Ugh. He’s so stupidly good-looking and getting cuter by the minute—damn him and his magnetic personality.

Look, I’m not completely delusional; I give the guy credit for not being a complete douchebag. Scale of one to ten on the Jockhole Scale? Six—and *that’s* only because he kicked me out.

“Far be it from me to point out the obvious, but I bet you wouldn’t be so uptight if you had a few drops of alcohol inside you. Might be more pleasant out here for both of us, yeah?”

“That’s what your friends were saying, and you know my opinion of them.”

“You’re a *little* uptight.” He squints over, shielding his eyes against the porch light shining in his face. “Hasn’t anyone told you that before?”

“You know nothing about me.” I reach down for the red plastic cup I abandoned a few minutes ago so I have something to do with my hands. “What would make you say I’m uptight? What’s this *oh-so-accurate* assessment based on?”

“Let me count the ways.” He hums, setting his beer bottle on the step, tapping the fingers of his right hand with his left, counting. “One, I’m on this porch when I could be partying because you won’t stop cock blocking. Two, you’re wearing a fucking bear rug to a party. Three, you’re drinking water. Four, you admitted to asking for extra credit in high school. Five, you won’t stop arguing.”

The smile teasing my lips couldn’t be more inconvenient.

The bastard holds up his hand, wiggling five large fingers. “All signs point to uptight.”

“Fine. I can’t even be mad, because that was all very accurate.” I raise a finger. “But first off, your buddies didn’t give me a chance to *redeem* myself before sending over their henchman to axe me.”

“And second?” The cheeky ass leans his head against the newel post, coyly pinning me down with a lazy smile. I try not to stare at the huge arms

crossed over his hard chest.

“Secondly, your friends were *lame* and not at all funny. They’re lucky they’re athletes, because if not, they’d probably *never* get laid.”

This makes him laugh. “I seriously doubt that.”

I continue ranting. “Their conversation would have bored me to tears. Mind-numbingly dull and unimaginative.” I pause. “Can you imagine what they’d be like in—”

I clamp my lips shut.

He leans in, waiting. Baiting me. Prompting me to finish.

“Can you imagine what they’d be like in...” He pauses then tries again. “In...” He unfolds his giant body from the steps, rising to his full height. Brushes off his jeans as if they’re covered in dust. “Go on. Say it.”

“Would you stop that? I’m not going there with you.”

“I just wanted to hear you say *bed*. Fuck, I must be bored if I want to play word association games. Jesus. I can fill in the blanks fine all by myself, spank you very much. I’m a big boy.”

He *is* a big boy.

Very big. And for the first time since stepping out onto this porch, I really *wonder* about him. Where he’s from. If we’ve ever crossed paths on campus. What’s he’s majoring in.

He stands over me now by a good seven inches, lean hips resting against the white railing of the baseball house. Brown hair cut short. Tan skin, no doubt from being outdoors all the time, probably on the practice field. Beautifully sculpted lips that should be permanently pressed against someone’s mouth, so pouty and defined.

His arms.

Who is this guy?

Curiously, because he seems to be inviting it, my eyes settle on those arms, peruse his wide shoulders and the muscular deltoids emphasized by his thin compression shirt. The bulge of his biceps and pec muscles. The tips of his nipples, hardened from the weather.

If he has an issue with me ogling, he doesn’t mention it or call me out, instead doing a brisk assessment of his own—though admittedly, he won’t

find much on me to look at with my puffy jacket concealing most of my body.

Brown half boots. Black leggings. Thick, chunky sweater and the coat covering it all.

His green eyes flicker where my breasts are positioned, pausing before migrating up to my face and touching my lips, nose, and hair. My long dark hair is pulled back tight into a conservative, practical ponytail, almost at the top of my head, more functional for tonight than attractive.

Boring, one might suppose.

My cheeks get hot as he stares me down. I feel my chest getting blotchy too, though he couldn't possibly see it.

Still...

I smile.

Rowdy

Jesus Christ, she has a dimple in her damn cheek.

I'm a sucker for those.

She shoots me a tentative smile, ass parked on the stoop, back propped against the wooden siding of the house.

It's obvious that she's blushing by the way she ducks her head, glancing down at the floor, the soft glow from the two dilapidated lamps illuminating the crown of her head.

The porch lights are busted and rusty, needing their bulbs changed, one flickering, the other just about to burn out. It makes the entire place look like a goddamn carnival fun-house, casting a weird glow on the girl's smooth, pale skin.

And her pretty dimple.

Stop staring at it, dipshit.

I cast my glance at her outfit, doing my best to analyze her under the dim lights. She must have been sweaty inside the house. I got a good look at her before convincing her to follow me, but I still study her as if seeing her for the first time.

Both of her boots are tucked under her legs, and she sits, cross-legged on the ground. Blows out a frustrated puff of air that translates into a billowing stream of steam.

“So.” She wraps her puffy-sleeved arms around her knees, hugging them tight. Shivers. “Now what?”

Her prim ponytail is jaunty, bobbing when she tilts her head to gaze over at me.

“Now I babysit you.”

“Lovely. We can bond.”

I position my large body against the railing, giving it a gentle shake to make sure it’s sturdy before resting all my weight on it. It’s solid and secure and is going to get real uncomfortable real fucking fast if I have to stand here all night.

The girl raises her brows at me. They appear black in this light, brows full and arched expertly. “Have you babysat anyone before?”

“No one I managed to keep alive,” I joke. “A few cousins my parents forced me to watch a few times. Never would feed them, but would occasionally throw out a dog bone so they wouldn’t get hungry.”

She smiles, dimple denting the smooth right side of her face. “Is that what you have planned for me?”

I raise my empty hands. “I’m fresh out of Scooby snacks. Guess we’ll both have to starve.”

“Sorry you have to sit out here.”

“Really?” I sound hopeful. “No one is forcing you to sit out here.”

Her light laugh is quiet. “Fine. I guess I’m not *that* sorry.” She bites down on her lower lip. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t enjoying your discomfort just a little bit.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“No one has texted me back yet, by the way.”

Shocker. “Your friends haven’t texted you back?”

“Nope.” She pops the P, same way I did before. “Not yet, but I’m sure they will.”

“Nice friends,” I mumble, just loud enough for her to hear.

“They actually are,” she counters. “Give them a break, would you? They’re just excited to be here.”

They let her follow a strange dude outside and she wants me to cut them some slack? Uh, okay...

“They just friends or also roommates?”

“Just friends, from freshman dorm life.”

“Ahh.” I don’t point out the fact that only a cleat chaser would leave her friend hanging for the chance to snag some baseball cock. “What are the odds they’re going to cut the evening short and come looking for you?”

“On a scale of one to ten?”

“Sure.”

“Two?” Her laugh comes easy.

“Those are terrible odds.”

“Don’t I know it.” Her sigh isn’t loud, but it’s heavy. Conflicted. “I’m not going to fault them for staying inside. Would you? It’s not worth getting pissed about, so...”

“You don’t think they’re going to make bad choices without you guard-dogging them?”

“Oh, I know for a fact they’re going to make bad choices.” She laughs again, softly, emitting a little humming sound as I throw back my head and laugh too, the frigid weather racking my body harder than what’s normal.

I have goose bumps covering my arms and chest; my nipples could cut glass.

The simple fact that her friends haven’t come outside to check on this chick speaks volumes about their character, but that’s not something I’m going to voice out loud if she wants to turn a blind eye to it. It’s none of my business, and this girl sitting across from me has taken enough hits tonight without me pointing out how craptastic her friends actually are.

I mean, they’re leaving her outside for the chance to get banged by an athlete—who does that?

Let’s face it, whatever happens with Derek or Ben or anyone from the team, it won’t lead to anything but the morning-after walk of shame.

If this girl is waiting for her friends to reappear, she’d best be in it for the

long haul, which means I'm stuck out here freezing my dick off.

"How long do you think you'll last before giving up?"

"I guess when I start getting cold?"

That, too, has me laughing like a maniac.

The balls on this chick.

"You're not cold? What are you, made of stone?" Because my nuts are shriveling inside my jeans like two raisins about to fall off the vine.

Her head cocks to one side. "I mean, this sweater is really warm, and I have this nifty scarf in my bag if you want to borrow it?"

"Hard pass."

When I rub my bare biceps vigorously to warm them up, her eyes follow the motion up and down—and who would blame her? My guns are *huge*.

I flex once for good measure, and to get a reaction.

It works. Her eyes move along my torso, lingering on the front of my shirt. "You really should have planned better. It's cold out—why are wearing short sleeves, anyway?"

"I knew it would be hot inside, and I wasn't planning on squatting on the damn porch all night like a hobo."

"Still," she hedges, "it's practically winter."

"Thanks. I finally got the memo."

"Layers, at least."

My green eyes narrow at her, just the slightest bit. "Are you always like this?"

"Like what?"

"Such a pain in the ass?"

"Am I pain in the ass? Hmm." *There goes that damn dimple.* "I guess it depends on who you ask. Tonight's probably not a good night to take a poll."

A ping fills the air, and she reaches for the cell lying next to her knees, lifts it, and taps the screen. Smiles, satisfied.

"They'll be out in ten minutes." The phone gets set back down after she taps out a reply. Rests her head back against the wall, smiling. "I knew they wouldn't leave me out here all night."

Liar. “You did not.”

This laugh is lilting. “You’re right—I was starting to get worried.”

She stands fifteen minutes later when her friends come stumbling out the door, brushing off her legs and ass. Stretches and holds out her hand to help me off the ground.

Which is so fucking ridiculous, because she’s tiny and petite and I tower over her by almost an entire foot. Nonetheless, I slide my hand into hers when she offers it, letting our palms sizzle from the contact.

Zap.

Standing on my own without her assistance, clasping her hand, I rise to my full height.

“Thank you.” She lingers a few seconds, glancing at her friends, now down in the yard, stumbling heels already clicking over the concrete of the sidewalk.

I release her hand, stuffing mine into the pocket of my jeans. Flex the fingers of my tingling flesh. “Don’t be such a pain in the ass next time.”

“I’ll try.”

She starts down the staircase, ponytail swinging in the breeze. Glances back once, over her shoulder.

And winks.

SECOND FRIDAY

“The Friday Where the Real Games Begin.”

Scarlett

Me: *Hey Tess, you guys hitting Jock Row tonight?*
Too desperate sounding?

I delete the message, bite down on my bottom lip, and start the message over, trying not to sound obvious. Like I'm fishing for an invitation to go out with them again.

Which I am.

Me: *What are you and Cam up to tonight?*

Tessa: *We're hitting Jock Row—Cameron is still totally into that Derek guy. Even though he was kind of an asshole to you last weekend?? Sorry bout that.*

Kind of an asshole is kind of an understatement, but I let the comment slide. Tess has apologized a few times, even though none of it was her fault.

Me: *I was thinking maybe I'd...*

I hit send, even though I haven't finished the sentence. Dammit, how do I tell her I want to go back to the house even though they kicked me out last weekend?

She spares me from asking.

Tessa: *You want to come with us?? It would be so fun!*

My stomach betrays my best intention to remain calm, rolling with anticipation.

Me: *Would that be weird? Seeing as how they were calling me Cock Blocker and made me stay on the porch?*

Tessa: *I don't think so. Those parties are so fun and there are cute guys everywhere.*

Me: *There sure are.*

But there's only one I'm interested in seeing tonight.

Tessa: *Are you willing to take the chance that they're not going to let you in?*

Yes.

All week, all I've been able to think about is the guy on the porch—Rowdy, as I noticed he called himself. All week long, I've looked for him on campus. In the quad and in the cafeteria. The library the one night I went to study. Stared a little too long at the entrance of the workout facility, hoping for a glimpse.

All week long, I've been looking forward to Friday.

Me: *The porch wasn't the worst.*

Tessa: *Um, if I had to stand outside with that hot guy, I'd go back too. Like, twist my arm why don't you, haha.*

Me: *So you don't think it's insane if I go back? I won't look desperate?*

Tessa: *You're the only SANE one between the three of us, Scarlett. Of course you should come. But maybe...*

Me: *Maybe what?*

Tessa: *Maybe dress warm? JUST in case, if you know what I mean? lol*

Me: *TESSA! lol. Do you really think they'll keep me outside again?*

Tessa: *Do you care? Will it matter?*

No. It wouldn't matter if I had to stand outside again—that boy is worth the cold and suffering.

But god, the thought does makes me nervous.

Me: *I want to see him.*

There, I admitted it.

Tessa: *All right, then we'll make ourselves scares when we get there. Deal?*

Me: *Deal.*

Me: *You know, I'm still a little bitter you and Cameron fell for every one of their dumb lies. You can do WAY better than those two jockholes.*

Tessa: *Try telling that to Cameron. She's been creeping on Derek since*

last Friday night. I swear, her fingers are going to fall off from all the Insta-stalking.

Me: *All right. I know it's crazy but I'm coming tonight.*

Tessa: *Well it's not like you had anything else going on, right?*

Scarlett: *#realtalk*

Tessa: *There are worse things in the world than being stranded on a front porch with a total hottie *preach hands emoji**

Rowdy

“Rowdy.” A hand claps down on my shoulder with a jostle, prompting me to turn. “Hey man, the guys wanted me to come get ya.”

“What do you *want*, Keats? Spit it out.”

The rookie freshman stutters when I pin him with a hard stare for interrupting my conversation with a guy from the rugby team.

“Th-That girl is back.”

I stand a bit taller. Yank at the hem of my shirt, trying to smooth out the wrinkles.

“Which girl?” I know exactly who he’s referring to. “You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“Uh...Ben called her Cock Blocker?”

“Well?” I crane my neck, height easily affording me an bird’s-eye view of the crowded room, scanning for any signs of the girl with the glossy ponytail and the dimple in her cheek. “Where the hell is she?”

Tony Keats gives a jerky nod toward the foyer. “Porch. The guys stalled her outside in case she wasn’t allowed back in tonight—no one knew what you’d want us to do.” His hands jam inside his pockets. “Her friends are flirting with Brinkman.”

“*Brinkman?*”

Brinkman is a sophomore and a total douchebag who loves attention from girls, guys, and anyone with a pulse. I hate that he made the team and that our coach signed him, but we’re stuck with him, girls love him, and he’s a fucking fantastic outfielder.

Kid might have a thirty-eight-inch vertical, but the tidy package includes a few STDs.

“Brinkman, huh? I thought the blonde one had a boner for Derek.”

“They’re both blonde,” Keats points out. “But ya know chicks love Brinkman, and he’s probably their best chance at getting laid tonight. No one wants to hit it with Cock Blocker’s friends after last weekend.”

Heat spreads through my chest as I scratch behind my ear, taking a swig from my beer bottle as Tony runs his loose mouth beside me.

“Girls are like stray cats man—you let one in, give them some milk, and they keep coming back. *We’re* the milk, by the way, in case you hadn’t figured it out.”

“I get the analogy, Tone. Thanks.”

I clap him on the back, chug the remainder of my beer, and set it on the closest surface. Wipe the condensation from the bottle on the leg of my pants.

“All right, give me a few—I’m going outside to figure this shit out.” We bump knuckles. “Run upstairs, would you? And bring my damn jacket from Amado’s room.”

I won’t lie, my heart rate quickens when I push through the front door of the baseball house. The girl is indeed on the porch, back against a support beam, hanging back as her friends cluster around Jonathan Brinkman.

She’s barely recognizable.

It’s cold tonight, and she’s dressed for the occasion in jeans, a jacket, and dark gray knit cap pulled down over her long dark hair. It’s the kind of knit hat you’d wear skiing or sledding.

Or on a trip to the frozen fucking tundra.

Or when you think you *might* be spending an entire night on a cold porch.

She’s causal, leaning on the railing, not one bit of surprise marring her expression when I push through the screen door, stepping down onto the floorboards of the porch.

My mouth, goddamn it, stretches into a toothy grin when we lock eyes, her brows rising beneath her warm hat. They wiggle in my direction as she raises two hands, covered in mittens, sending me a small, hopeful, wave.

She’s cheeky, this one.

I acknowledge Brinkman with a fist bump, and Cock Blocker's friends light up when they see me, two pair of eyes alive with interest and overenthusiasm. Possibly because I'm fresh meat to sink their cleat-chasing claws into.

I shrug it off; I'm not out here for them.

I tip my chin up at the girl. "Nice coat. Looks nice and insulated. Warmer than last weekend's attire."

"Indeed it is. I dug deep into my closet for this one—you know, just in case."

The trio on the porch with us choose that moment to make their escape. Brinkman and the two blondes push through the screen door to the house without stopping, without looking back—without checking to see if their friend is following behind them.

"I see you didn't take my advice." She flickers her gaze over my chest, brows raised. "Where is your jacket?"

"It's coming."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I had it ordered up when they came and told me you were here."

"Ordered up? What does that mean?"

I smirk arrogantly. "I'm having someone fetch it."

"You are not." She's about to smirk, too, but the grin is wiped off her face when—as if on cue—Tony Keats abruptly bangs through the door, thrusting my jacket into my outstretched hand.

My fingers close around it.

My arms shrug into it.

Thumbs hook into the pockets, and I jut my hip out, posing. Cocky.

"*Boom!* Jacket."

Her mouth opens, closes. "Wow. That was..."

"Awesome? Amazing?" I spin on my heels in a full circle for emphasis—as if she needs more evidence that I'm a badass.

"Yes." She's laughing now, tugging at her hat, pulling it down over her ears. "Sure, that's one way of putting it."

She takes a few hesitant steps forward, destination: the door behind me.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, not so hasty.” I tsk, raising my arm, preventing her from moving toward the door, almost clotheslining her in the process. Arm grazing against the scratchy fabric of her coat. “Where do you think you’re going?”

She drags her eyes up and down my body before casting a guilty glance down into the dark yard. Gulps.

“That’s right, take a good look at where you’re spending another night.” My hands go wide, panning around the porch. “Because we’re going to spend another night *outside*.”

What the hell is wrong with me? Let her in for fuck’s sake.

“We are?”

“Yeah, all signs point to: you can’t go back inside.”

Liar.

“They’re really not going to let me in?”

Yeah, they would, but you don’t need to know that.

“Oh.” Her voice is small. “I was kind of hoping...”

“Tonight’s not your night, babe—too many people inside.”

Shut the fuck up, Rowdy. Why are you doing this? Just let her inside so you don’t have to stand out here with her—give her what she wants.

She came to party.

She didn’t come to stand on the fucking porch with you.

But what if she did? She didn’t—she hasn’t hit on you once. Shut the fuck up, idiot.

Jesus Christ, now I’m arguing with myself.

“I’m really sorry Cock Blocker, it’s been decided.”

By me. Because I’m a selfish asshole.

Her arms brush my chest when she crosses them. She’s standing closer, her chin raised rather indignantly. “If we’re going to stand out here, could you not call me Cock Blocker? You and I *both* know it’s degrading.”

She’s right; calling her Cock Blocker is demeaning, but suddenly I’m an eight-year-old boy on the playground who doesn’t know how to conduct

himself in front of a cute girl. I'm four seconds from pulling at her hair.

Not to mention, if my *mother* heard me calling her Cock Blocker, she'd metaphorically kick my ass straight into next week.

"Sorry." I swallow. "There are rules you have to follow if you're going to stand on this porch with me, and not being a sass is one of them."

"Then it's going to be a really long night for both of us." Her mouth puckers.

"You know how athletes love their rules and playbooks."

She crosses her arms, setting her bag on the floor. "Actually, I don't."

My arm extends, resting on the doorjamb and creating a barricade. "We create rules as we go, and the porch-dwelling addendum is new, created special just for you."

I sound so fucking stupid.

Her eyes are brighter tonight, a black coat of mascara on her top lashes. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Her voice is almost a whisper, and for a brief second, I feel like a real fucking prick.

But that fucking dimple makes an appearance, and all my best intentions to behave fly out the window. Shit, who am I trying to kid? I have *no* best intentions.

"Why are *you* doing this? You had to have known you weren't coming inside—you wore a hat with your coat tonight. You *literally* look like you're going skiing."

Her arms raise, finger pointing into the living room her friends just disappeared into, exasperated. "But you let my friends inside!"

"It's been decided by the council. You cannot come back inside."

"Who's the council?"

Me.

"That's a well-guarded secret."

"God, you are so exasperating."

Ooh, exasperating—good word. "Thank you."

"I can't go back...ever?" Her eyes get wide.

A terse jerk of my head. “We’ll see.”

“You’re going to make me stand on the porch tonight while my friends stay inside?”

I cross my arms. “I can’t *make* you do anything, can I?”

Her lips blow out a frustrated puff of air, sending a few loose strands wisping around her face. “Be honest: don’t you think this is kind of ridiculous?”

Yeah—but I keep *that* shit to myself, because tonight, when I saw her, I decided to be selfish with her time, to stand out here and try to make her laugh just so I can make that dimple appear in her cheek.

Not that my friends would have been ecstatic to see her; she would have a shit time inside since Wilson and Fitzgerald are still ten shades of pissed, the fucking tit babies.

Bros before hos and all that sexist bullshit.

At least, that’s what I’ll be telling myself later when I’m staring up at the ceiling above my bed, thinking about that little dent in her cheek same as I’ve done every damn night this past week.

“Honestly, we here at the baseball house do our best to be as difficult as possible.”

“Haven’t I been punished enough?”

“Don’t consider it a punishment—consider it *banishment* on a case by case basis.” I snap my fingers. “Oh! Like you’ve been voted off the Island of Hornball Dudes Who Want to Get Laid.”

“Really?” She rolls her eyes, backing away a few steps. “*That’s* what you’d name your island?”

I laugh. “If it were my island, it would something way cooler, like Rowdy’s Tropical Hideaway.”

“So that really is your name?”

“Yes, that really is my name.”

“Your name is *Rowdy*?” She repeats it, and I can’t help but be slightly insulted by her tone.

I spread my arms wide. “In the flesh.”

“Huh. Interesting.” Her hands go to the hat pulled down over her forehead,

giving it a little tug upward to afford herself a better view of me.

I return the favor, giving my greedy eyes permission to wander the length of the hair peeking out from beneath her knit winter beanie; it's long—longer than it looked pulled into a ponytail last weekend, and a dark shade of chocolate brown.

When she tilts her head, catches me staring, I refocus my attention to the yard, feigning interest in the cars parked at the curb.

“What about you?”

“What *about* me?”

Is she being coy on purpose? “Do you have a name?”

“Of course I have a name.”

“So it's going to be like that, huh?”

Her pretty pink lips smirk. “Yeah, it's like that.”

“Mind if I take a guess?”

Shrug. “Be my guest.”

“Helga.”

Her brows shoot up. “*That's* your guess?”

“Rudy.”

“Seriously, you're such an asshole.” She laughs, eyes doing a sparkly little dance as she watches me. “Do I look like my name is *Rudy*? Rudy, jeez.”

I shrug. “Prudence?”

“I hate you so hard right now.” She laughs again. “My name is Scarlett.”

Scarlett.

Scarlett red. Scarlett fever.

“Huh. Never would have guessed.”

An ironic expression is pasted on her face. “No shit, Sherlock.”

Scarlett.

I slide the zipper of my jacket up and down to give my hands a chore, glancing at her on the sly.

“Why do you suppose, Scarlett,” I ask slowly, testing out her name, hands burrowing in my pockets, “that your friends keep abandoning you for *dick*?”

Her mouth twists into a bemused smile. “I don’t know, Rowdy—why do you think all women want from you and your friends is *dick*?”

Holy shit, this girl and her mouth.

“If you’re referring to our lack of personalities, I take offense.”

Scarlett sighs. “I can’t even be mad at you right now.”

“I don’t want you to be mad, I’m just making conversation.”

I shrug. “It’s your friends who are groupies, not you.”

“My friends aren’t groupies.” Her brows go up. “But it sounds like it’s bothering you way more than it’s bothering me.”

I do not understand girls.

I prod her. “Admit that’s what they are. Tell Uncle Rowdy your friends are gold diggers and we’ll get along just fine.”

The little burst of laughter is airy, kind of sweet, and has me puffing out my chest. *I did that*—she thinks I’m *funny*.

Most girls just see my face. The body. The uniform.

“Are you always this tenacious? You will not quit, will you?”

“Being a gold digger isn’t always a bad thing, Scarlett.”

“I *know* that, Rowdy.” She all but rolls her eyes toward the dark sky above. “But trust me, sometimes it has nothing to do with the fact that they play sports. Have you *seen* your friends? I mean, they’re good-looking. Some of them are so fucking *hot*.”

I stomp down a flare-up of jealousy.

“So so so good-looking.” She goes on, simply cannot stress enough how damn good-looking my friends are, and now my ass cheeks are puckering. “A girl would have to be *blind* not to notice.”

“And I’m not?” I swear to fucking god, my nostrils flare.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Whatever reply she has on the tip of her tongue is fleeting, gone within a heartbeat, and replaced with a simple, “You know you are.”

My chest inflates inside my jacket.

“Besides,” she goes on, “it’s not a crime to have a type—that doesn’t make them groupies, right? Or gold diggers? They just gravitate toward buff,

amazingly hot guys.”

“No, it’s not a crime to have a type.” I can’t believe I’m arguing about this stupid shit with her. “But the fact that they’re hanging out here, at this house specifically, when there are plenty of other house parties on campus makes them cleat chasers, hot dudes or not.”

I damn near choke on those last words.

Scarlett tilts her head at me, knit cap concealing the brows I know are being raised in my direction. I want to whip that hat off and see what’s underneath, what the exact shade of her hair is.

“Are you always this sure of yourself?”

I jerk out a decisive nod. “I’ve been playing at this for three years. I know the drill.”

Her next question surprises the shit out of me, like a casual bomb dropped in my lap. “What about you—how many cleat chasers have you let past third base?”

It detonates, as it was intended to.

“Ouch.” I grab my upper bicep. “Scarlett, that dig hurt me a little.”

She smirks, chuckling to herself, feeling sassy. “Ha, that’s what I thought. So judgmental yet so hypocritical.”

“Which guys are they panting over tonight?”

“I don’t know.” Her shoulders slump. “That same asshole Derek, and somebody Tessa found on IG—oh, and one of the outfielders we met on the porch. Bingman?”

Brinkman and Wilson? Man, her friends have shittastic taste in men if they’re chasing those twats around. Brinkman has no standards; his favorite conquests are desperate band geeks, sorority girls with dark hair, and teacher’s aids—which is way too fucking specific if you ask me.

“I know on our walk over last Friday, Cameron threw your name around quite a bit. I think she’s...” Scarlett chooses her next words carefully. “Kind of envious that I’m out here with you.”

I all but snort. “I’m not dumb enough to date girls like that.”

“When we left,” she goes on, “they were talking so much shit about what an asshole you are.”

“Stop.” I wave a hand at her, demurring. “Now you’re making me blush.”

Her laughter keeps coming easy tonight—and louder—steam rising from her lips with every giggle.

Fucking delightful is what it is.

“You’re definitely too—”

“Hot?” I interrupt, battering her with adjectives. “Magnificent? Insanely talented?”

“Not humble, that’s for sure.” If she rolls her eyes any farther into her head, they’ll get stuck in her skull. “Unattainable? They think they’ll have better luck with someone less...” She waves a hand in the air, searching for the adjectives.

“Sexy? Talented? Mind-blowing?”

“Would you please stop interrupting? You really are the worst.”

“I’m right though, aren’t I? They’re after smaller fish, knowing they’ll have a better chance at snagging one.”

“Maybe.”

“Well they’re right.” Those girls have zero chance with me and every chance with someone else. “You can tell them not to bother next time my name comes up.”

She buries her hands in the pockets of her warm jacket, tugging at her mittens. “Trust me, they are *not* here for you.”

I make a humming sound, unconvinced. Girls like the ones she came here with? They don’t give up easy, and they don’t play fair. Prime example: Scarlett being marooned on the porch, alone, despite the fact that it was by design.

“You want something to drink?” I walk the few feet to the cooler I had Keats place by the door so we’d have refreshments on the off chance she came back. Unhook the latch with my foot like a Neanderthal. Reach down and produce a bottle. “Beer? Water?”

“You brought me water?”

“Well, I didn’t want us—you—to die from thirst. Not on my watch.”

“That was really—”

I point a finger at her. “Don’t you fucking dare say nice, and don’t get

used to it. I'm not running a home for stray cats here."

Her eyes widen. "Stray *cats*?"

Shit. Damn Keats and his crap analogies. "Uh...never mind."

I grab a water for myself, twisting the tops off two bottles and handing one to Scarlett. She swipes it in her mitten-clad paw, sucking the first drops eagerly.

"Ugh, it tastes so good." Beneath the dim light of the porch, she offers me a smile, biting down on her lower lip. "I didn't know I needed this."

I take a long drag of my own to occupy myself, chugging down half the bottle in one gulp. Wipe my mouth, leaning against the house, letting the silence fill the space.

"So." I smack my lips.

"So." She smacks hers.

"Do you think this is boring?" I muse after a few long seconds of silence. "We've only been out here twenty minutes."

"We could play a game if you want." Scarlett studies me, mimicking my pose as she takes a position against the porch balustrade. Crosses her legs at the ankles, ass balanced on the rails. "Want to play Never Have I Ever?"

"Isn't that a drinking game?"

"I think so?"

"But we're not drinking."

"Do you want to play the game or sit here, bored out of your mind?"

"Fine, but you start."

"You have to take a drink if you have *done* the thing, even though we're not drinking alcohol."

"Thanks, wise ass—I know how to play Never Have I Ever. Can I just point out one fatal flaw with this whole thing? Pretty soon you're going to have to take a piss, and it'll have to be in the yard."

She nibbles her bottom lip, squinting down at the overgrown bushes. "Damn, good point. I guess if I have to pee, I'll deal with it." She cranes her neck, staring off into the dark. "It's not like I've never had to pee outside before."

“Suit yourself.”

“I’ve seen guys peeing off this very porch, so it wouldn’t be a big deal.”

I get the party started. “Never have I ever peed outside.”

We both sip from our bottles.

She clears her throat. “Never have I ever gone skinny dipping.”

Neither of us drink.

“Really?” Scarlett is clearly astonished by this revelation. “You’ve never gone in the water buck naked? Why does that surprise me?”

The answer seems obvious, but I enlighten her anyway. “Not a fan of public shrinkage.”

Her laugh fills the yard, head tipped back, mouth smiling. “Fair enough.”

I stare at her dimple, long and hard, before blowing a puff of air into the night sky. “Never have I ever made out with a stranger.”

I take a drink. Scarlett does not. “You’ve *never* kissed a stranger? Not even drunk-at-the-bar making out? I thought everyone has done that.”

“Negative ghost rider.” She thinks for a few seconds. “Never have I ever wet the bed.”

I groan out loud.

Take a chug of my water bottle as my stomach growls.

Scarlett laughs, the sound echoing in the cold night air. “Do not tell me you were a bed wetter.”

“No! Jesus, keep your voice down!” I glance around to make sure the few stragglers aren’t listening. “I mean, I might have had a few accidents as a kid.”

“Just as a kid?”

“Fine.” My lips purse. “I may or may not have gotten too hammered once or twice and pissed myself in recent years, but that’s hardly the same thing.”

She laughs again, hitting her head against the support beam holding up the porch with a wince.

“Ouch!” She giggles, rubbing the spot through her hat with a few fingers.

“You okay?” I stop myself from reaching out...touching her leg.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Her mouth is still grinning. “Your turn.”

“Hmm,” I hum. “Never have I ever...” I tap on the floorboard. “Never have I ever gone commando.”

Surprisingly, we both drink.

Huh. “Now you’re telling me you walk around with no underwear on?”

Her shoulders rise and fall within her jacket. “Sure, all the time.”

That’s a fun tidbit of information I latch onto, filing it away in my spank bank under *Cute Shit Scarlett Does*.

“Never have I ever caught my parents having sex.”

We both laugh, drinking, and Scarlett cringes at a thought, musing. “I don’t even want to visualize it. I was twelve, and I had friends over and everyone heard them doing it. Can you imagine the horror? It was so loud and so terrible, hearing my father grunting—like, couldn’t they have waited?” She physically shudders. “My friend Nicole still brings it up to this day.”

“I walked in on mine once on a Sunday morning. I’ll never fucking forget it. I think I was fourteen and wanted pancakes—now my parents refer to having sex as *making breakfast*.” I shudder too, dramatically, at the visual of my father pounding my mother doggy style. “Can we please change the subject?”

“Okay, okay—never have I ever ridden a mechanical bull.”

I pause, bottle poised at my mouth. “That is so random.”

“But have you done it?”

“Have *you*?” My brows rise when Scarlett takes a drink from her cup, wiggling her brows. “Really? *When*?” My tone tells her to prove it.

“At the county fair. My friends bet me twenty bucks I couldn’t ride it for eight seconds. They had the carnival guy crank up the dials on that stupid thing—I thought I was going to *die*.” She pretends to flip her hair. “Piece of cake.”

I stare at her, dumbfounded and a little bit turned on. “I’m having a hard time picturing you riding the mechanical bull at the county fair.”

“Why?”

“I just am.” My stomach grumbles again, loud enough that Scarlett overhears it complaining. “Goddammit I’m getting hungry.”

“Do you always complain about it?”

“Yes.” I shoot her my most menacing hangry look. “I have to consume a shit ton of calories per day to maintain this physique.”

I realize how conceited I sound, but it’s true. This body takes a ton of work, and it’s not always a walk in the park sustaining it.

“Want to hand me my bag?” Scarlett points to the black bag she dumped on the ground earlier, lying limply on the porch near the door.

I give it a shove in her direction with my foot.

She ignores the rudeness of my gesture, losing an entire arm as she digs through it. “Lucky for you, I happen to have a few snacks with me.”

This perks my stomach up considerably as I pat it with the palm of my hand. “There, there, it’s going to be okay pal—the nice lady brought snacks.”

“What are you hungry for? I have granola, protein bars, a bag of pretzels, and those hazelnut dipping stick things.” Scarlett continues rooting around. “And one pack of fruit snacks shaped like Scooby Doo.”

My eyes get wide. “You’re turning me on.”

“My preparedness is turning you on? You’re so weird.”

She produces the promised protein bars, extending two in my direction, giving them an appealing little shake. Enticing. “Chocolate chip or oatmeal raisin, take your pick.”

“Both?” I extend a palm and wiggle my fingers like I’m about to pick up a baby, because she brought the good shit—bars with actual protein. “Come to daddy.”

We both bend forward far enough to meet halfway, far enough that Scarlett can slap the bars in my open palm then rifle through her bag again.

“I think that’s all I have for protein bars.”

“No, don’t worry about it—these are awesome. Thank you.”

“Tha—” She stops. Laughs. “Oh my god, I almost just thanked *you* for staying outside with me.”

As I’m tearing open the silver wrapper on protein bar number one, I glance over. “For the record, this isn’t ruining my night, Scarlett—these parties are so fucking played out.”

Jamming half the oatmeal raisin bar in my mouth, I bite down. Chew.

Swallow. “Why did you come tonight if you thought you’d be sitting outside?”

“I didn’t have anything going on and thought maybe...” Her bottom lip juts out. “Thought maybe I’d wear you down with my sparkling personality and charm.”

Little does she fucking know we’re outside because I think she’s pretty and it’s too hard to talk inside with all the noise.

“So you keep saying.” I shoot her a cursory glance, eyes on her mid-length puffy coat. Knit winter hat. Mittens. “No offense—you don’t really look like you came dressed for a party.”

She rips open a pack of fruit snacks, package crinkling, popping a red one in her mouth. “I’m also a realist, Rowdy. I didn’t want to freeze my ass off if the answer was no bueno.”

Silently, we chew in tandem, legs extended in front of us. Her head rests against the house, eyes sliding closed when she swallows her first bite. “I love these stupid things. They’re so bad for you.”

In goes an orange one.

“Never have I ever taken food out of a trash can and eaten it,” I announce, taking a chug out of my water bottle like the total badass I am.

“Stop it right now! You have not!”

“I have,” I boast proudly. “I was starving and I was with a few buddies, and we were walking past a really nice restaurant. Technically we were walking in an *alley* past their dumpsters...”

“That is so gross—your mouth has been in the *trash*. What the hell did you eat?”

“Pasta with meatballs from inside a doggy bag.” I chuckle. “We were in the city and it had just been thrown out, so I figured it was clean.”

“Rowdy, that’s disgusting!” When she leans forward and taps me on the leg of my pants, chastising, my entire body goes rigid, calf burning where she poked at it with the tips of her fingers.

“It was still warm! Clearly, I didn’t die from it, so how bad could it have been?” I protest. “Plus, it had just the right amount of parmesan sprinkled on top.”

I pinch my fingers, sprinkling imaginary cheese onto an imaginary platter of spaghetti.

Scarlett plays footsies with me, urging me to quit talking about it. “I’m going to gag. Knock it off.”

Our loud laughter carries into the yard, causing the few people gathered by the road to glance up at the house.

I chomp down the last of the oatmeal bar and rip open the second one. Chew. “Okay brainiac.” Swallow. “Here’s one for you—never have I ever cheated on a test.”

Her pert nose wrinkles. “Why would you assume I’m a brainiac?”

“Uh, cause you’re the girl in class who wants extra credit.”

“You *would* latch onto that fact—but the truth is, I always needed extra credit because my grades were *just* okay, not because I loved the extra work. Let’s get real here.”

“Really?”

“Really. And for your information, yes—I’ve cheated on a test.” She takes a drink from her bottle. “It was in high school and it was a take-home algebra exam. We weren’t allowed to use calculators or get help, but during study hall a few of us worked on it together and I got busted.” She pops a fruit snack in her mouth. “God I am so bad at math.”

“I’ve never cheated on a test, unless you count the road test to get my driver’s license.”

“How can you cheat on the road test?”

“By flirting with the examiner?”

Under the dim light, beneath the winter cap, her eyes widen. “Guy or girl?”

“Guy.” I grin shamelessly.

“Was he cute?”

A laugh escapes my lips. “Yeah.”

“Have you ever flirted to get out of a speeding ticket?”

“No.”

Now she’s the one smiling. “I have.” Her grin widens. “I was home one

weekend, driving my dad's car, and got pulled over coming home from a dinner with some friends. I recognized the cop as someone from high school, a guy a few years older who had just become an officer. So"—she shrugs—"I might have unbuttoned my shirt a little while he was running the plates."

"No fucking way."

"Way. Two whole buttons." She laughs. "So much cleavage."

"Why Scarlett, you little..."

"I really think it's weird you think I'm some prude just because I got into an argument with your teammates."

"Honestly, I'm sure it had a lot to do with what you were wearing. They're morons."

Her groan is accompanied by a dramatic eye roll. "I'm burning that sweater when I get home."

"Yeah?"

"Heck no." She scoffs. "I love that stupid thing."

THIRD FRIDAY

“The Friday Where I Feed Him...and Give Up Trying to Stay Away from Jock Row.”

Scarlett

“Don’t you freeze your ass off out here?” Tessa’s heels click along the pavement, the strappy, impractical kind she has trouble walking in because they are impractically high.

I personally would never be caught dead in anything other than a wedge, but who am I to judge? I shamelessly wore an ugly sweater to one of the hottest party spots on campus.

It’s only two short blocks from Tessa and Cameron’s apartment complex to Jock Row, but it’s taken us more than twenty minutes because of their ridiculous shoes. At this rate, the party will be over by the time we get there.

Nonetheless, we trudge along.

“Why does he keep making you stay outside?” Cameron wants to know.

“I’m not sure,” I admit. “But then again, I haven’t asked.” Nor do I care.

“Explain again why do you keep going back?”

“Duh—because Rowdy Wade is freaking hot, that’s why. As if she needs any other reason.” Tessa’s ankle twists on a crack in the sidewalk and she slows her pace. “I’d sit outside on the front porch with him too if I had the chance.”

“I would, too, but I guess I just don’t get why the captain of the team is okay sitting outside on the porch.”

“Maybe he wants Scarlett all to himself.”

Tessa’s theory makes me blush, face hot as Hades, cold air notwithstanding.

“I hear he’s single,” Tessa adds. “Like, super single.”

“Has he hit on you?” Cameron wants to know.

“I don’t think so.”

Cameron stops in the middle of the sidewalk, grabbing my upper arm with her hot pink talons. “Well what would you do if he did? Maybe we should role play, just in case.”

“Fantastic idea, Cam,” Tessa enthuses. “Scarlett, pretend I’m Rowdy and I invite you back to my house. What do you say?”

“Uh...I’d ask what we were going to do there?”

She makes a buzzing sound. “Wrong. You never want to be the one doing the walk of shame—make him do it.”

“So I invite him to my place instead?”

“Exactly.”

These two, I swear.

“What do the two of you do on the porch, anyway?” Cam shoots me a sidelong glance, focusing on not stepping on any cracks in the sidewalk.

“I don’t know, a little bit of everything. We play games.”

“What’s he like? Like, what are his hobbies and stuff?” Cameron wants to know.

“Why? Are you collecting data so you can stalk him?” I tease.

“No, but maybe if you got a little more personal you’d—”

Tessa cuts her off. “Cameron, stop. She’ll figure it out on her own.”

But we have been getting personal, the deeper into Never Have I Ever we got. I learned he’s broken his arm twice, and neither time was while playing baseball. He’s never gone skydiving but it’s first on his Fucket List. Once, he dumped a girl he really liked because his friends dared him to, and it was over the phone, then felt so terrible he wrote her a letter.

He’s run red lights, almost been arrested for disorderly conduct, and his parents locked him out of the house once to punish him when he was two hours late for curfew. He sobbed on the steps like a baby for a solid half an hour before they let him in.

He was seventeen.

“So you have a crush on him?” Cameron confirms.

Yes.

Yes, yes, yes.

“I keep coming back because it’s entertaining. Is that so wrong? I think we’re becoming...friends? Is that weird?”

I hate sounding so insecure, but I haven’t hung out with these two in an entire year, and I’m not about to go spilling all my well-guarded secrets, no matter how well they have me pegged.

I make a mental note to spend more time with them during the week instead of just hitting parties on the weekends, really get to know them again. I want to be a better friend, not just their third wheel.

“Friends to *lovers*?”

If I blush any deeper, I’ll spontaneously combust and burn myself right out of this thick jacket.

“No, Tessa, not friends to lovers. Rowdy Wade is way out of my league.”

Cameron snorts. “No, he’s not. You’re fucking adorable.”

Adorable.

Great! I’m sure *cute* and *adorable* are exactly his type.

Cameron says it with such conviction I believe her—I believe she actually thinks Rowdy Wade could like me.

The butterflies in my stomach awaken as the baseball house comes into view. First, they roll, stretching. Then, on delicate wings of hope, they begin fluttering. Dancing.

Baby steps.

Little by little, one at a time.

And then suddenly, there he is.

Rowdy watches as we approach, removing his hands from the pockets of his thick, black jacket and placing them on the railing of the porch. He leans over, braced himself on his elbows, green eyes wrinkled at the corner, amused, watching us.

Watching *me*.

Damn him and his insane level of attractiveness, charisma, and charm.

My knees protest, giving a tiny wobble when he smiles.

“Ladies,” he greets us. “Scarlett.”

Tessa and Cameron do their best to hoof it up the stairs in their heels, toward the beat of the music, loud noise, and the smell of flowing alcohol.

“Come here often?” Rowdy teases when my first foot hits the bottom of the staircase leading up to the house.

“Har har.”

My feet gingerly take each step one by one until I reach the top. Tessa and Cam are understandably fascinated with our easy exchange; they hesitate by the front door, waiting for me, though their hungry eyes are locked on Rowdy.

Aggravated by their obviousness, I wave them off, shooing them inside. “You go on ahead. Give me a second.”

“Make it a few hours.” Rowdy coughs into his fist, masking his words like boys did in middle school, juvenile and immature.

My friends hesitate.

“Are you sure you don’t want us to wait with you?”

This is the first time they ask, and I’m unexpectedly heartened. “No, you go ahead. Have fun—I’ll text you if...you know.” *If he won’t let me in.*

“All right. Let us know this time, okay? It’s so cold out here.” Tessa chatters her teeth dramatically, cueing the need for them to hustle inside, both of their gorgeous blonde heads

disappearing from sight with the slamming of a screen door.

Rowdy and I stand wordlessly, listening to the noises from within at the same time my butterflies flap their pesky wings.

I inhale an anxious breath, wondering what he’s going to say when he finally speaks. Exhale, watching the small puff of steam float away.

His mouth opens. “Three weeks in a row, eh?” Rowdy clasps his hands. “I can’t decide which one of us is a bigger glutton for punishment, can you?”

“It’s definitely *you*.” I laugh. “We both know you could easily assign someone to babysit me—it doesn’t have to be you.”

But I’m glad it is him. I wouldn’t have shown up if I thought it was anyone else, and I certainly wouldn’t have stayed—not in this weather. I’m not a total sadist.

I've looked forward to seeing him every Friday since we met.

Rowdy is goofy and entertaining and witty, not to mention his handsome face and ridiculous body.

It's no hardship being sequestered on the porch with him, and if he took me inside right now, I'd be indisputably disappointed.

He's wearing a hat tonight, too—black knit, in a style similar to mine—pulled down over his ears and short, shorn hair.

Rowdy is masculine, even with that winter hat on his head. He gives me a gentle bump with his shoulder when I reach the top of the porch.

"Where did you find that hat?" I ask, setting my tote bag on the ground, same as I did *last* Friday, and same as I'll probably do *next* Friday.

"Bought it."

"When?"

He's still for a few heartbeats. "Yesterday."

"We kind of match," I point out, poking the air with my mitten, tilting my head to study him.

He shifts on his heels. "I'm surprised you showed up again. You're like a puppy dog that keeps getting kicked but comes back for more."

"That is an *appalling* analogy."

"But accurate," he counters.

"Be honest—you're not one bit surprised to see me here." *You bought a hat so you'd be warm, too.*

My heart skips a few rhythms, hands go to my hips, sinking into my puffy coat. I wave my mitten around. "You should know by now I can't resist a challenge."

He leans against the house, a cocky lift to his lips. "You consider me a challenge?"

"No, I consider getting inside the house a challenge."

"Is that the only reason you keep coming back?"

It's cold, and we're both breathing hard, our breaths mingling in gray swirls, shoulders knocking every few footsteps.

“What other reason would I have?”

I hold my breath, waiting for him to reply.

When he doesn't, I make a little humming sound, aware that each beat of my traitorous heart is pounding in my chest, my throat.

“I'm not a mind reader, Scarlett—if there's another reason you come here every Friday night, you'll have to spell it out for me.”

We size each other up, like two gunslingers reaching for their six-shooters, neither willing to bend. I don't know what he wants me to say, and I refuse to be the first one to admit to...whatever this is I'm feeling.

It's way too soon.

It's strangely silent then, the stereo momentarily cutting off inside the house. Voices die down. The indelicate sound of Rowdy's snarling stomach breaks the spell of our stare-down.

Seriously, does this guy not eat enough during dinner?

“You know what I have for you?”

“There are about five different ways I could answer that.” He eyes my bag. “But please tell me you brought food.”

If I was a peacock, I'd be fluffing my brilliant feathers about now with what I'm about to present to him.

“Not only did I bring food, I brought the good stuff.” I unzip my tote, glancing up at him coyly. “Any guesses?”

“Spaghetti and meatballs?”

I glare at him. “Are you trying to make me gag?”

“I get delirious when I'm hungry—you already know this.”

“When *aren't* you hungry?”

“Never not hungry, but I'm not always hungry for food.”

Startled, my mouth falls open and I gape at him like a fool;

it's the first innuendo he's made toward me, and I hardly know what to do with it.

“O-Out of curiosity,” I stammer, “are you planning on waiting outside for me *every* Friday?”

“Only until you can come inside that house.”

“And when will that be?”

He shrugs. “Don’t know.”

“Hmm.” I finger the plastic utensils inside my bag. “What if I decide not to come? How long would you be willing to wait for me to show up?”

“Five minutes.”

“Liar. Try again or I’m not showing you what’s in here.”

“I don’t know, Scarlett—eight minutes.”

My brows rise doubtfully at how specific the time is, and he rolls those big, beautiful green eyes at me.

“Fine. I’d wait an hour.” Pause. “Maybe a little longer if I knew for sure you were going to show up.”

He’d wait an hour for me? That’s an eternity in college guy years.

Satisfied, I dig out two white cardboard containers of Chinese takeout, still piping hot, fresh from the joint down the road. I had it delivered right before leaving the house, the rice and chicken and noodles heating my hip on the walk over.

If Tessa or Cameron noticed the smell, neither of them mentioned it.

Rowdy’s eyes damn near bug out of his skull he’s so excited.

“You have got to be shitting me. Are you serious? Scarlett, you’re fucking awesome.”

I blush beneath my winter jacket, smiling inside the collar, yet I hold the carton of Asian noodles hostage, out of his reach. “You can have this when you tell me how you knew I’d be here tonight.”

He’s desperate, so he folds like a house of cards in a soft breeze. “I sat next to the window like a damn dog waiting for its owner to come home. Now gimme.”

I removed my mittens before digging in my bag of tricks, so our fingers touch when I hand him the food, eyes locking before I pull away, brushing away an invisible lock of hair against my cheek.

“Staring out the window like a goddamn puppy.” He shoves a forkful into his mouth, grumbling.

“Good boy.” I reach over and pat him on the shoulder. “I hope you like General Tso’s chicken. I wasn’t sure so I just brought two of my favorites.”

“I’d eat anything, including the ass out of a dead skunk—this is perfection.”

This whole night is perfection, and if it was something other than what it is, tonight would have been the perfect date.

We eat in silence as I mull over what the ass of a dead skunk might taste like, and where the hell he comes up with his analogies, and how he had the balls to eat meatballs out of a dumpster.

“Oh shit!” he laments. “I’m the worst host.”

Rowdy stands, dragging the cooler closer to the stairs, patting the top with the palm of his hand. Cajoling. “Here, have a seat.”

I plop down, container in my lap, steam rising into the night air, forking the noodles into my mouth.

“What’s that you’re eating?” He’s staring rudely into my container, making love to it with his wanton gaze.

“Shrimp lo mein.”

Rowdy licks his lips, interested. “Would it be uncouth of me to suggest a trade?”

Uncouth? Honestly, what guy talks like that?

“You want to trade? Now?”

“Not right *now*—you eat half of yours and I’ll eat half of mine and then we’ll switch.”

“You’re not afraid of germs?”

One thick brow goes up, along with the right side of his pouty lips. “Remember that story about how I ate meatballs out of a dumpster?”

“The visual will linger in my mind forever.”

“I’m clean, promise.” Two of his fingers get lifted in the air. “STD and drug free, tested monthly.”

“My god.” I laugh, choking. Wave my hands around for air, dying dramatically. “Water! Water!”

“Watch your back, I might let you choke—I’m that hungry.”

I shoot him a glare, still coughing. “You”—*cough*—“are”—*cough*—“the worst.”

Cough.

“So you keep pointing out.”

He sees an opportunity, seizing it to capitalize on my weakness, grabbing my carton as I hunch over on the cooler, choking and laughing and gasping for breath.

Stabs his fork into my lo mein, piercing a shrimp and popping it into his fat face.

“You horse’s ass, give me back my dinner!”

I can’t even swat at him, I’m laughing so hard, eyes watering.

Rowdy pushes at my forehead to keep me at bay, to keep me from grabbing my dinner back like an annoying older brother, the palm of his giant hand singing my skin.

I can’t stop laughing, not even when he tips the container toward his face, shoveling the contents into his open mouth, spilling noodles on his jacket in his haste to beat the clock.

It’s disgusting.

It’s hilarious.

When he finally comes up for air, his face is a mess, chunks of celery and carrots stuck to his chin, just below his bottom lip.

“I can’t even look at you right now. You’re so gross.”

“I told you I was hungry. I wasn’t fucking around.”

“I’m never bringing you food again,” I lie. “You have zero manners, and I didn’t bring any napkins—I wasn’t expecting you to be such a slob.”

He couldn’t care less. “Come on, that was funny.”

“Maybe this is the reason you’re single,” I tease, watching as he tries to lick the sauce off his chin, pink tongue darting out. “Who would kiss that face?”

“I’m not single because I have bad manners, and trust me, plenty of girls have wanted to do more than kiss this face.” Sadly, he’s not even bragging; he’s just stating a fact, and we both know it.

“Everyone knows jocks make bad boyfriends.”

“What the hell would make you say that?” His head gives a sad little shake

at the same time he stuffs more noodles into his waiting mouth. “Where are you getting your facts?”

“The power of observation.”

“Fact: plenty of those guys inside are in relationships.”

My brows go up, interested. “Is that so?”

“Well...no.” He laughs. “But that doesn’t mean they’d make shitty boyfriends.”

I smack his arm, palm lingering on his forearm.

“If you had to guess how many guys on the baseball team were in actual, committed relationships, how many would you say it was? Ballpark it.”

“Haha, very punny.” He tosses his white carton into a giant garbage can at the end of the porch, trying to grab mine back. “I don’t know, five?”

My laugh cuts into the dark, clear as a bell, rising above the sound of the music from inside the house. “Out of how many players?”

“Thirty?”

“Well...” I smirk, digging my plastic fork into the white container, digging around for what’s left of my noodles. “You are pretty damn adorable, I’ll give you that.”

Rowdy cups his ear with his giant man hand to better hear me with. “Say again? Talk into my good ear.”

I demure, avoiding his blazing green eyes. “Say what again?”

“You just admitted you think I’m sexy.”

“I never called you sexy.”

I laugh. Nudge him in the bicep when he scoots closer on the cooler beside me, taking up most of the space with his massive thighs.

They burn holes into the legs of my pants, from the tops of my thighs down to my ankles.

Zing.

Sizzle.

“Your mama better get you to the otolaryngologist and have your hearing checked—I said you were *adorable*. God, you and your giant, inflated ego. I’m surprised you haven’t drifted off into the clouds.”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot see the difference between adorable and sexy.”

I mean, really—how does a person not roll their eyes at him a million times?

“I think you’re adorable.” He’s leaning forward, hands braced on his knees. Neck craned toward me, green eyes unflinching.

“Cute adorable or *sexy* adorable?” I almost choke again, holding my breath, waiting for his answer, heart beating so fast I actually *lose* oxygen.

His nostrils flare. “Scarlett...”

But we’re interrupted, just like in every cliché movie where two people sharing Chinese takeout who are about to kiss for the first time in the freezing cold always are.

Two girls push through the front door, and for a split second I think it’s Tessa and Cam. It’s not. Both girls are decked out in high heels and short dresses, way too skimpy for the cold, pre-winter weather we’ve been having, and I bury myself deeper into my puffy coat, self-conscious.

These girls are blatantly flaunting their sexuality while I’m bundled up like I’m waiting for the blizzard of the century to hit town, holding a steaming pile of carbs with a side of soy sauce.

Slightly embarrassed for the first time in three weeks, I pull at my gray knit cap, annoyed that I even care, that I’m having insecure thoughts in the first place—it’s so unlike me.

One of the girls—she’s beautiful and willowy and aggressive, if her stance is any indication—stops when she sees Rowdy, jutting out her hip, posing, toe of her high heel pointed at the floor.

“How’s it going Rowdy?” She’s chewing gum and lets it snap.

He takes a few seconds to reply, whole demeanor changing. “Vanessa, right?”

She nods, pleased when Rowdy spares her a glance, flipping her platinum blonde locks to one side. Posturing.

“You inside with Levinson?” he asks the question slowly, deliberately.

Vanessa’s red-lipped, self-righteous smile falters. Fades like the ombre tips of her hair. “Yeah.”

I dig into my Chinese food with my fork, pretending not to listen—but if I

were a GIF, I'd be the Michael Jackson eating popcorn in a movie theater one, so engrossed am I.

Rowdy shifts on our makeshift bench, his thigh pressing tighter alongside mine. It's thick and warm and—right *there*. Touching me.

He covers my hand with his, stealing away my fork, eyes never leaving Vanessa's face as he delivers his next line:

“Want me to tell his girlfriend you say hello? She's out of town with the cheer team—but you already knew that, didn't you?”

Stabs my fork into a shrimp, lifting it to his lips with a wolfish smirk.

Jesus.

Her dark lips part, throat chuffs. “You are such a *dick*.”

Vanessa grabs her friend by the arm, dragging her toward the steps, hightailing it down the stairs, lumbering on their perilously unsteady shoes.

Only when they're finally out of sight do I speak.

“Wow.” I steal back my fork. “You really go for the jugular.”

He shrugs. Brushes his jacket against mine, the two fabrics scratching together. “The dude Vanessa is fooling around with has a fucking girlfriend. I can't stand girls like that—she pisses me off.”

“*He's* the one cheating.”

The glare he gives me is sharp. “*Right*, but she knows his girlfriend personally and just keeps on fucking him. That's what pisses me off. No loyalty.” I jam a shrimp into my mouth, chewing as he continues venting. “I really fucking like Holly. I just wish she'd wise up and dump Levinson's useless ass.”

“Why doesn't she?”

He pauses, leveling me with a blank stare. “Seriously Scarlett? Why do you *think*?”

Why is he staring at me like that?

“What did I say?” I ask in a small voice.

“Levinson is going to the major leagues. Holly is never going to dump him—he's her golden ticket to WAG status. Everyone knows it.”

I feel my mouth turn downward into a frown. “I don't know what that

means.”

“You don’t know what a WAG is? God, you’re so naïvely sweet.” He pitches a thumb over his shoulder, toward the two girls who just walked off. “Why do you think that girl Vanessa is all over Levinson’s jock strap? He’s not even that fucking great. *Gold digger*. What do you think your friends keep coming back for, week after week? Gold diggers. Some of them are ‘lucky’ enough to get themselves knocked up—meal ticket for life in the form of child support payments.”

“Girls get pregnant on purpose?” I sound appalled because I genuinely am.

“Haven’t you ever heard the stories about girls poking holes into condoms?”

“Um...*no*.”

“Yeah, well.”

More food gets shoveled into his mouth from my container. He chews. I chew.

We both swallow.

Rowdy takes a swig of beer, washing it all down, while I take a chug of my water.

Then, “That’s the way it goes around here.”

“That’s really depressing.” I pause, trying to catch a glimpse of his profile. “Doesn’t it get old?”

“Real fast.” He stabs his fork into the rice. “Why do you think I moved out of this house?”

“You don’t live here?”

“Nope.”

“Why did I think you did?”

Rowdy stands, walking to the edge of the porch, peering off into the yard, though it’s hard to make out anything past the street.

He speaks with his back to me, hands braced on the bannister rail. “Communal living is fine when you’re a freshman or sophomore, but athletes on this row party a little too fucking hard. The random people hanging out at all fucking hours of the night are fun for one hot minute. The noise and... well, all the *bullshit* that comes along with living here? Not fun. Not

anymore.”

He turns, raking his gaze over me, scanning me from head to toe—from the ankles of my brown boots to the long tips of my glossy hair, half hidden under my gray winter hat.

“What about you?” he wants to know.

“I don’t live here either.” It takes him a few moments to get my joke, but when he does, his head tips back and he laughs, his chiseled jaw and Adam’s apple absolute male perfection.

“You’re a real wise ass.” His smile is warm, and I catch him biting his bottom lip when he turns back toward the street.

Loud laughter is amplified when the door to the house flies open again, the music spilling into our perfect moment like toxic waste, along with a small group of co-eds.

The inebriated group stumbles to the stairs, hanging on to each other, raucous laughter, barely making it to the bottom without breaking their necks, barely making it to the sidewalk still standing.

I’m half expecting some of them to begin crawling.

Rowdy frowns under the dim porch lights, his eyes trailing their movements, watching them warily.

“This is the shit I’m talking about.” I can barely hear him.

“Don’t you guys get busted having parties all the time?” I ask his back.

“Sometimes.” His broad shoulders move up and down. “But mostly, no.”

“How? I mean, the music is so loud.”

“Who’s going to call the cops on us, Scarlett? The rugby house next door? The football players across the street?” He leans toward me, reaching with his long limbs, stretching until he reaches me, pilfering my bottle of water.

Chugs it.

I watch, riveted, as the corded muscles of his tan throat work the water down, only glancing away when he swallows. Crushes the plastic bottle between his two hands.

“The other teams party like this when it’s their off season, too.”

“Makes sense. Who wouldn’t? You guys work hard.”

My eyes hit the house across the street, its dim lights shining through the windows but otherwise, little activity.

“That house across the street you’re staring at?” he asks. “Ten football players live there.”

“Ten!” How can that possibly be? The place is *tiny*. I continue to study the pitch-black house. “Seems quiet to me.”

“‘Cause half of them are inside *this* house, probably shitfaced. We’re going to have to physically take some of them home later. The other half are obeying their curfew.”

“What about *you*?”

“What about me?”

“What kind of player are you? A rule breaker, or do you—”

“Play by the rules?” Pause. “You’ll be surprised to learn, Scarlett”—I smile, relishing the sound of my name on his lips—“that as team captain, it’s my obligation to set a good example for the rest of my team, especially for the incoming freshmen and walk-on players.”

“Sounds noble.”

“It’s not all shits and gigs—the responsibility blows.”

I study him, trying to read his face, handing him a fresh bottle of water and cracking open one for myself. “Never have I ever broken a rule and lied about it.”

He studies me back, lifting the bottle to his mouth and taking a healthy gulp.

“Which one?” I want to know.

“I used to break curfew a lot when I was a freshman—a lot a lot—and a few times, I helped sneak girls into the hotel during away games. We call that road sex by the way.” There’s a long pause as he considers his numerous infractions. “Sometimes we go out drinking during the season when we’re not supposed to.”

“Not supposed to? I thought it was a free-for-all.”

The shaking of his head indicates the contrary. “We’re given one night a week to go out.”

Just one? “I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, usually it’s a Saturday.” He makes a box with his hands, using his fingers to create the corners. “See, if our coaches don’t give us structure, some guys? Jeez, they just fucking *cannot* handle playing at this level. It’s like when the teacher would leave the room in grade school—total chaos.

The notoriety, the crowds...drugs, sex, booze...it’s a lot to handle.”

“I’ve never thought of it that way.”

Rowdy sets his water bottle on the railing, balancing it there, twirling the top until it spins. “Never have I ever had a wet dream.”

“Dude, what the hell!” I sputter. “Where did that one come from? Give a girl a little warning, why don’t cha.”

“Well? Have you?”

“Can girls have a wet dream? They don’t even have the necessary equipment.”

“You tell me.”

I roll my eyes for lack of a better, more mature reaction, taking a slow sip from my water bottle. Rowdy watches intently from his perch on the railing, swallowing down the last of his water.

“Just to clarify, we’re not going to start talking dirty.” No good can come of that; I don’t know if my heart can handle anything casual, and sex talk will only leave me feeling vulnerable.

“Why not?”

“Because once we go down that road, things are going to get weird. Trust me.”

“How so?”

“I read it somewhere in an article.”

“Reading is bad, you should stop.” He clicks his tongue. “So, what you’re telling me is, you don’t sit around talking pervy with your friends?”

I shoot him a look.

His sheepish grin does not bode well for me. “Never have I ever talked like a pervert with my friends.”

He chugs.

I chug. Wipe my mouth. “Stop doing that.”

He laughs. “Never have I ever watched porn alone in my room.”

“Would you stop?!”

We both drink.

“We need to start drinking alcohol when we play this game. It would be way more fun, and imagine how drunk we’d be.”

It really would be. “I have a feeling you’re going to be a horrible influence, Rowdy Wade.”

“I might be a bad influence, but you obviously like it, and I doubt you’d be coming back every Friday if you didn’t like the thrill of being rejected.”

I don’t tell him I come back to see him, that I don’t feel rejected—I feel excited. I anticipate each day of the week as they fall away, leading to my new favorite day of the week: Friday.

No, I don’t feel the thrill of rejection.

I feel the thrill of being with him on this porch.

“It really does make sense if you think about it: you’ve been told a few times you’re not allowed in the house, yet here you are for the third week in a row. Admit it, you like the element of being somewhere you’re not supposed to be. It’s kind of like breaking and entering.”

“What are you, a psych major?” I joke.

“Yes.”

“For real?”

“Oh yeah, I’m a huge fan of Freud. Huge.” Rowdy’s *huge* biceps bulge when he sticks his hands beneath his armpits, arms still crossed. “What about you? What’s your major?”

“Marine biology.”

“For real? That’s pretty fucking cool—too bad you’re in Iowa.”

Which is basically the same reaction I get from anyone I tell.

“I realize that, Rowdy. It would be great if I was near an ocean, but...” I didn’t get accepted anywhere on a coastline—not even close. Of course, I don’t tell this to Rowdy.

His mouth curls into a smile, hands still in his pits. “What’s your favorite sea creature?”

“Coral.”

His brows furrow as his head draws back. “How is that a sea creature?”

“Coral is alive,” I enthuse passionately. “And it’s so beautiful. Have you ever been scuba diving? Or snorkeling? Thousands of organisms dwell inside a single reef.” I clamp my mouth shut before I word-vomit my love for the bottom of the ocean floor.

“Like Nemo.”

“Exactly.” I grin. “And his father.”

“And Dory. Man that fish is whack.”

We’re grinning at each other like idiots. The easy set of Rowdy’s mouth has me clearing my throat, his scrutiny of me intimidating. Suddenly self-conscious, I pick at the hem of my jacket, fiddling with the zipper.

Have I mentioned how good-looking he is? Especially when he’s focused.

And right now, he’s focusing all his attention on me.

“I should probably go.” I move to stand up, hand ready to push off the wooden porch. “It’s getting so cold.”

His next question pins me back down and my ass hits the floor again.

“Doesn’t it bother you that your friends leave you out here?”

“You seem really fixated on this—no, my friends do *not* leave me out here.” They make themselves scarce so I can be alone with him.

“I’m not fixating on it, I just want to know that you’re not being completely shit on.”

“Why? Are you feeling protective?” I try to make a joke, but it falls flat, his mouth still pressed in a straight line.

Damn.

“I think...” I search for the right words. “I’m not going to fault them for loving parties, just like they don’t fault me for wearing puffy coats *to* those parties.”

He can’t tell if I’m being serious or a smartass. “Remind me where you met them?”

“The dorms.” I pick at a loose strand of yarn on my mittens. “My best friends from home are at other schools, you know how that is. I don’t get to

see them unless it's a holiday or whatever. I do have friends from my classes, but they do lots of studying."

Which is what I should be doing more of if I want to improve my grades.

"Do you think those friends of yours inside realize they're wasting their time with my teammates?" he muses, chewing the mouthpiece of his water bottle.

"What do you mean?"

"Derek and Ben? *Brinkman*? They might be pricks, but they can smell a gold digger from a mile away—no offense, but those girls you came with reek of desperation." His smile is lazy as the bottle hits his lips. Lopsided grin, eyes hooded. He looks sated. "Not like you."

"What about me?" The butterflies in my stomach flutter their wings.

He shrugs. "I couldn't figure out what you were doing with those two. They're not even close to being in the same league as you."

"Did you just imply that I'm *classy*?"

"Why is that so hard to believe?"

I readjust myself, trying to get more comfortable on the hard ground, repositioning my legs. "You know, when the three of us were freshmen, we used to have way more fun. It wasn't about guys and parties and hooking up."

"What'd you do? Have, like, slumber parties and shit?"

"Something like that." I laugh, biting back my smile, pausing with a new train of thought. "You know what I couldn't stop thinking about when Ben and Derek were hitting on my friends?"

"What?"

"All I could think about was what it would be like to date them. They were so boring—no personalities."

"How so?"

"Ben kept lying about *the* dumbest shit, like winning the title for the College World Series, and his pick-up lines were so *terrible* even *I* knew the punchlines. Zero effort. Do you know what that tells me, Rowdy Wade?"

Rowdy shifts on the railing. "What does that tell you?"

"He's going to be selfish in bed." At this point I'm wishing I'd gone with

a beer instead of water. “I bet he’s not a giver.”

Rowdy chokes a little on his water. “Come again?”

My arms cross and I smirk at his pun—*come* again—giggling into the collar of my coat because occasionally I’m as juvenile as a fifteen-year-old boy.

“I’d rather date someone good in bed, wouldn’t you?” It’s a rhetorical question I don’t expect him to answer. “Derek and Ben are blah. *Total* nail and bail.” I drop the line casually, as if I deliver quips like this all the time.

I don’t.

I just want to see the look on his face.

Rowdy Wade does not disappoint; his poker face *sucks*, and he’d be an awful card partner in Vegas. His eyes are too wide. Obviously shocked. His brows, once a neutral line, are now shot up in his hairline.

My nose wrinkles at the thought of that Derek kid in bed and I stifle a snort, satisfied that I’ve managed to surprise Rowdy.

“What?”

“I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Nail and bail?” My expression is pure innocence. “You’ve never heard it? It’s like a pump and dump—you know, a one-night stand?”

His laugh is almost maniacal. “Oh, you don’t have to explain it to me—I’ve heard of them, all right. I’m just surprised you’re saying it. You seem so...you’re...”

I lean toward him, curious. “I’m what?”

“You’re—you seem like you’re, you know, someone with strong morals.”

That’s true. I lean back, pleased I’ve managed to surprise him with my foul mouth. “I *do* have strong morals—that doesn’t mean I can’t throw down a few trashy catchphrases.”

“I mean, you seem like the kind of girl who’s saving.”

“What do you mean?”

I’m not saving myself; I just haven’t found anyone I wanted to lose my virginity to, although I did come close after senior prom in high school. He was cute and we’d been casually dating, so I let him rent a hotel room and plan the whole thing.

Things when south went he tried to get me drunk—so gentlemanly—and instead we ended up fighting about all the liquor and condoms he'd brought.

Fun fact about me: I'm a virgin.

All my "pleasure parts" are intact, never been breached (unfortunately), though one thing is for certain: I'm most definitely *not* saving myself for marriage. I just haven't found anyone worthy of my V-card.

Silently, Rowdy watches the wheels spinning inside my head, content to watch me think, to watch as I stew over the lack of orgasms in my life that *aren't* self-induced.

"You're right." My shoulders rise and fall nonchalantly. "Maybe I am saving myself—I'm saving myself for a connection. I want to feel good about my decision after I make it, not regret it. So until Mr. No Regrets comes along..."

"Mr. No Regrets," he repeats. "Wonder what he looks like."

He looks like you.

He looks like Rowdy, and I don't even know what his real name is. A discontented noise rises from my throat, much like a *hmpf*, so I clear it, deploying my dimple on him. Twiddle my thumbs between my bent knees.

"You know what I'd like to know?" I muse. "Your first name."

For a few seconds, while the music is changing inside, we have utter quiet. Quiet while he rises to his full height, taking a few calculated steps in my direction.

It's a short jaunt, and then he crouches, plucking the empty water bottle out of my hand, still squatting when he lobs it. Tosses the bottle so it's soaring in an arch to the garbage. Hits the back of the can, bounces, and disappears inside with a swoosh.

Knees bent, Rowdy squats in front of me, getting in nice and close, a mere three inches from my face, warm breath blowing on my lips.

All his features are shadowed by the dark.

"Promise not to tell?" His deep voice is a conspiratorial whisper.

"Is it a secret?"

He shakes his head. *No.*

I swallow the lump in my throat, giving him a cheeky, "It's not all over

the internet?”

This time he nods, his white teeth playing peekaboo through his lips. “Yeah—it is all over the internet, but it appears you’re the only one who hasn’t looked it up.”

“I’m looking for it *now*.”

“I can see that.”

And he can, so up close and personal, breath fanning against my skin. I can smell the beer he had earlier, and the cold pre-winter air clinging to his skin.

“It’s Sterling.”

“Sterling,” I say back breathlessly, unable to stop myself.

I repeat it to myself, romanticizing the sound of it.

Sterling. Yes. He looks like a Sterling.

It’s a strong, masculine name. Moody, and kind of *dreamy*, the name of the hero in a romance novel.

Sexy.

Meant for low moans and breathless sighs in the bedroom.

Rawr.

“Is that what you want me to call you?”

“You don’t have to.” Unless you want to. He doesn’t speak that last part out loud, but somehow, I know that’s what he means.

I squirm on the ground as he remains crouched in front of me, legs parted, hands hanging between his thighs, balancing on his haunches.

Blood rushes through every vein in my body, nerves vibrating, when he tucks a knuckle under my chin to lift my gaze and caresses the side of my jaw with his giant thumb.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“I don’t know.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of the wooden swing at the end of the porch swaying in the gentle breeze. Back and forth, creaking. It’s old, suspended by rickety, rusty chains, the paint having worn off many years ago and never been refinished.

I break the moment, damned if I don't because my nerves are freaking the frack out, unprepared for this heated moment.

"W-Want to help me up?" My voice quivers. "I'm going to hop on the swing."

Rowdy rises, extending his large, open palm toward me, and before taking it, I study the pads of his fingers: rough, callused, and sturdy.

The hands of someone who works hard, who pushes.

I slide my hand across the sensitive skin there, hooking my thumb around his, and he pulls with an undemanding tug until I'm standing on two feet.

Sizzle. Zing.

I shiver. "Thanks."

He silently stares down at our clasped palms. Squeezes my petite palm in his mammoth one, and I note the contrast in our skin. Dark and light. Rough and soft.

Then, he pulls me to the swing.

Together, we plop down, my feet just barely touching the ground, and with some effort, I give it a nudge with the toe of my brown boot.

"Where are you from?" I'm insatiably curious about him.

"Florida."

"Florida!" I almost shout. The Atlantic Ocean. Sand. Sun.

Sea life.

Coral and clownfish.

I give him a shy glance, brushing back a lock of hair. "Sorry. I didn't mean to yell."

"Right, I get it." He laces our fingers together and I want to die. "You and your ocean fixation. If you said you grew up at Dodger Stadium, I'd have yelled, too."

Cute.

I bite back a smile, teeth tugging on my bottom lip, watching as my feet hit the floorboards, giving the swing yet another boost.

"What about you? Where are you from?" he asks in kind, shooting me a sidelong glance, examining my profile. I can feel him skimming the side of

my face, so I force my eyes straight ahead, cheeks burning.

“I’m from here, about two and a half hours north. I guess that makes me local?”

Here is Iowa. Long stretches of highway and soybean fields. Corn.

Landlocked.

“Why didn’t you stay in Florida?” I ask the night sky, searching out the stars among clusters of gray clouds. “Isn’t their baseball program decent?”

Better than decent, it’s phenomenal. I’ve heard my dad wax poetic about it a dozen times, when my family expected me to attend FSU.

“Tallahassee? Yeah, they’re decent.” He’s being modest; the university is top five for baseball in the nation. “But they didn’t offer me enough to play there.”

“What part of Florida are you from?”

“Tallahassee.” He chuckles ruefully. It’s throaty and deep, so deep and sensual, I’m grateful for the shadows shielding the heat creeping up my cheeks and the noises from inside the house drowning out the sound of my beating heart.

“You wanted to get the hell out of there, huh?”

“Basically. Growing up in a college town then staying in that college town? They couldn’t have offered me enough to stay, in all honesty. My mom would have been dropping in every damn weekend to bring me care packages and shit.”

“I know, but...” Guh. “*Florida.*”

My whispered sigh is dreamy and wistful.

Sun and sand and swimsuits...

“When you whisper the word like that, it’s creepy.” He laughs and I bump him with my elbow, teasing. Flirting. “You’ve got coral and dolphins and weird shit on the brain.”

Guilty.

I have *him* on the brain, too.

“I still don’t understand how anyone could up and leave Florida.” I know I sound a little over the top, but I don’t care. I’d give anything to live by the coast, near the wide open sea, the waves.

“Because it’s hot and crowded, and everywhere you go, it’s filled with annoying tourists or snowbirds in town for the winter.”

He nudges the swing forward when it slows.

“That *cannot* be the reason you aren’t going there.” I know I’m repeating myself, but who in their right mind passes up a scholarship to FSU?

An insane person, that’s who! I didn’t get accepted *anywhere* interesting, just Iowa, Iowa State, a school in Wisconsin, and one stuck between Minnesota and North Dakota.

No whales, no water.

“It’s not the only reason, *obviously*. When I came to Iowa for a visit, I really clicked with the team—their comradery game is strong. The facilities here are new, totally *sick*, and, I don’t know...it felt like the best decision for me at the time.”

At the time? “And now?”

“Now I only regret the decision when we lose.” He laughs, laying our joined hands on his hard thigh.

I look down at it, study the dark hairs sprinkled across his knuckles, which I can just make out in the light from the porch lanterns.

I swallow, blinking up at the moon.

“The Midwest isn’t exactly an epicenter of activity,” I can’t help pointing out, voice shaking a little. *Dammit*. “Don’t you get bored here?”

“Maybe a little, but I really love this campus—it’s pretty damn gorgeous. We don’t have buildings like this in the South.”

Quietly, I mentally list all the reasons he should have gone to school in his home state: in-state tuition, the beach, Disneyworld, year-round sunshine, the beach.

“*Hurricanes*.”

Shit. “Did I say that stuff out loud?”

“Just some of it.” He laughs softly. “You murmured it, really.”

I look toward the house, watching through the windows, looking at everyone inside, laughing and drinking and having fun. A few denim-clad asses are pressed against the glass, and within, people dance to the thumping, upbeat soundtrack.

It's a loud, bumping bass, and not at all my taste in music.

I don't miss the party one bit.

I'm rather content to sit out here with Rowdy—Sterling—and learn more about him.

“So what position do you play?”

“Shortstop.”

“Are you any good?”

“I got twenty-three full-ride scholarship offers.”

Holy shit. Does that actually happen to people?

“I haven't come and watch the team play yet. Baseball is more my dad's thing than mine,” I confess sheepishly.

Beside me, his wide shoulders give a casual shrug. “Usually girls come to the games for one of two reasons.” He stabs at his forefinger. “One, they're huge fans of the game.” He stabs at his thumb. “Or two, they're huge fans of the players.”

“I've always wondered what it would be like playing in front of huge crowds like that. Does it ever make you nervous?”

“It used to, back when I was freshman, but not anymore.”

“What's your favorite part of the game?”

“Winning,” his husky voice informs me, unapologetic.

“That was always my favorite part, too.”

“Do you play baseball?”

“I did—softball, through high school. Honestly, it's not really my passion, but I play here, too, in an intramural league. It's something to do.” Like I said, my father is obsessed with the game, and when I was little, he signed me up for every recreational team our town had. Coached a few of them, too.

“No fucking way—what position?”

“Third base, usually, depending on who shows up.”

“Are you any good?”

“Let me put it this way; I was offered *zero* full-ride scholarships.”

Rowdy's laugh is loud, punctuating the crisp night air like an exclamation point, his feet pumping the swing below our asses, making the chains creek.

“When does your season start?”

“After the winter break we start practicing, then we have a few pre-season games.”

January.

“Are you really a psych major? You weren’t kidding?” Lord, where are all these questions coming from?

“Yes, I’m really a psych major. If I don’t play baseball professionally, I’ll get my master’s and doctorate.” Rowdy dips his head, almost timidly, inspecting the ground as the swing rocks back and forth. “Maybe you should let me evaluate you—for science.”

I don’t know how he does it, but Rowdy twists his impressive form toward me, curling a leg under himself, unclasping our hands and draping an arm lazily on the back of the swing. Drums his fingers on the wood, green gaze learning all the lines in my face.

This is why I keep coming back—*this* moment right here. The intense way he’s watching me right now, like I’m pretty and interesting, even in these ridiculous clothes. The way his deep voice vibrates in my chest and awakens those damn butterflies every time he speaks.

His easy laugh. His disarming smile and the delicious way he smells, like aftershave and the shower and fresh air.

God, he’s fascinating. Good-looking and funny, and he makes my heart not just *pound*, but *palpitate*. Virile and strong, I spent the better part of last evening watching baseball videos of him online for two solid hours.

Two!

Videos of his hand dipping to retrieve a ball for drills infield before a game.

Video after video of him gripping a ball with three fingers before lobbing it to the pitcher. I watched him study the field under the brim of his dusty, black cap, hair sticking up under the brim. Watched him wipe sweat away, ball clenched in his fist.

Six foot two inches of sweet, homegrown Florida citrus.

Mmm mmm *mmm*.

“I have a serious question—this is for your psych eval.”

I nod, fiddling with my mittens, stomach doing a slow roll. “Okay.”

“If you suddenly found out your internal monologue from the last hour was made audible, how screwed would you be?”

So freaking screwed. “On a scale of one to ten?”

“*Sure,*” he draws out, relaxing his chin in the palm of his hand—the one he has perched against the seatback of the swing.

“Um, maybe a...” Twelve. “I don’t know, five?”

I hold his stare, unblinking. Unflinching.

His eyes narrow. “Are you lying?”

I force my mouth into a straight line. It betrays me. “Pfft, *no.*”

“Yes you are.” His grin is as lazy as his posture.

“I guess you’ll never know, will you?”

He rolls his eyes at me with a grin, and it’s positively endearing. “When’s the last time you had an indecent thought?”

Three minutes ago. “I can’t remember.”

Rowdy shakes his head because he knows I’m full of shit. I smile, big and toothy and fake. “What about you?”

“Guess you’ll never know, will you,” he deadpans, parroting me.

Dammit!

“Just tell me. Please?” I bat my lashes, hoping it looks pretty and not like I have a bug caught in my eye.

“Last indecent thought?” He rubs the scruff on his chin. “’Bout half an hour ago.”

What were we doing thirty minutes ago? “When we were *eating?*”

“Yes, Scarlett—you’re so unbelievably sexy when you inhale noodles.” Rowdy’s lips pucker and he sharply inhales, impersonating my noodle suckage, the sound it makes, and the sour look on my face when I eat them.

I cock my head, tapping my chin with the tip of my forefinger. “Why, Rowdy Wade, I was going to say the same thing about the way you eat chicken. *Nom nom nom.*”

I smack my lips like Cookie Monster then tip my head back, pantomiming the way he dumped the carton into his mouth.

“You’re so goddamn *cute* right now.” He laughs.

I was just going to say the same thing about you.

I cast my eyes downward, kicking at the ground, afraid to give myself away. “You’re just saying that because you like food.”

His hesitation is long. “*Sure* I am.”

I lift my head. “Was that you flirting with me?”

“Do you think I’m flirting with you?”

“Would you stop doing that? Answering questions with questions? The Sigmund Freud routine is getting stale.” Although, it does make me wonder... “Are you trying to reverse-psychology me into flirting with *you*?”

“No—but dang, why haven’t I thought of that? I’m going to keep that idea in my back pocket.”

“You do that, slip it right into that back pocket of yours.”

A few people drift out of the house, screen door banging against the frame with a clatter. I slip my cell out of my coat, waking it to check the time.

Nearly midnight. Holy crap.

I stop swinging. Stretch. “I really should get going.”

“Yeah, I should too.” Rowdy rises with me, stuffing those big paws into the deep pockets of his jacket. “It was really fucking cool that you brought food tonight. I appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

“You need a ride, or...”

“No, I’m good. It’s not far.” I pull at my knit hat, securing it over my ears. “You should probably, you know, make sure everything is copacetic inside.”

“All right then.” Both of us are hedging, shuffling our feet. “Night, Scarlett.” He hesitates. “See you next week?”

I bury my chin inside my coat, bury the fact that I’m grinning. “We’ll see.”

We both know I’ll be here.

FOURTH FRIDAY

“The Friday Where I Put Moist Things in my Mouth.”

Rowdy

The first female voice drifts down the street at a high volume, and I lean farther over the railing to listen better.

“Did it occur to you that maybe he’s not her type? Why are you nagging at her?”

“Read my lips: You. Are. Insane. That boy is everyone’s type.”

“Not her type? Are you being serious right now? Rowdy Wade is so fucking *hot*.” That voice is definitely not Scarlett’s. “If he paid me even the *slightest* bit of attention, I’d get pregnant just by looking at him. I can’t believe you haven’t slept with him.”

“Or,” the first voice continues, “maybe he’s just not that into you?”

“God I loved that movie,” yet another voice cuts in, this one distinctively Scarlett’s. “I bet I’ve seen it seventy times.”

“Look at you. I swear, Scarlett, you wear shit like that on purpose.”

“It’s cold out!”

“Bet Rowdy could keep you warm. Once the clothes come off, it hardly matters what you left the house wearing.”

Jesus Christ, why are they so loud?

If I can hear every word, no doubt the fucking neighbors can, too.

Nevertheless, I chuckle, listening to the banter coming my direction from down the sidewalk. The girls are loud enough I hear them before I see them—chattering and laughing, declarations echoing down the *very* quiet street, the usual weekend activity having been moved to a different location.

There is no party here tonight.

The girls are earlier than usual, clomping down the street in heels, with

purpose, shrouded in the dark until they're illuminated under the first set of streetlamps.

There are five of them, all trussed up like miniature streetwalkers.

Correction: all but *one*. One of them stands out in the crowd of tight dresses and high heels. Only *one* of them isn't heavily made up; all but *one* stomps in high heels, clicking and determined against the concrete.

Scarlett draws in all my attention in her black and white Chucks, thick winter coat, and black leggings, tote bag slung over one shoulder.

Who would have fucking thought?

I stand straighter at the sight of that bag, wondering what's inside, my stomach as interested as my eyes just became. I know it's food because she's too fucking sweet, and I'm excited. The anticipation has my gut rumbling.

Scarlett's recognizable laugh rings out for the second time, unabashed and drifting up the block toward the house, making me smile. Making me anxiously shake out the palms of my hands.

Too much nervous energy, I muse, dismissing the actions. I missed my run this morning, that's all. Nothing else to it.

One hundred feet.

Eighty.

Thirty more. *Come on, come on.*

I bounce on the balls of my feet, hands crammed in the pockets of my jeans.

Ten feet.

Five.

Her hair is screwed up into two buns atop her head, and as they get even closer, I make out furry earmuffs pulled down over her ears. They're black, the fur wispy, lightly grazing her cheeks.

The buns and the earmuffs? A goddamn adorable combination.

I could eat her up.

My smile broadens—Scarlett is dressed for a trip to the Arctic Circle, clearly not giving a shit what anyone thinks of her, halting to a stop behind her friends when our eyes finally meet. Stops at the edge of the yard, her tennis shoes stalled at the edge of the walkway, hands hoisting her bag higher

on her shoulder.

She props it on her hips and stares back.

Wiggles her brows.

My hands come out of hibernation when I lean forward to brace them on the bannister railing.

One of her friends giggles, high-pitched and way too enthusiastic. “Are you the official welcoming committee now?”

“Something like that.”

Everyone, including Scarlett, is giving their attention to the house behind me, obvious confusion falling on their expressions like fans doing the wave in the stands at a baseball game. And it’s no wonder—the lights inside are off, it’s eerily quiet, and no one is home.

“Where is everyone?” one of the blondes asks, biting down on a hot pink bottom lip. “Why is the house so dark?”

I lift my palms with no offering. “No party tonight.”

Protests of disappointment follow. “But we walked all the way over here —”

“—and my feet are already *killing* me—”

I interrupt them both. “Party has been moved to the Lambda house, ladies. The night isn’t over yet.”

Someone clears her throat. Another gets nudged in the back, stumbling forward a few feet.

“Are you coming out tonight, Rowdy?” the beautiful Latina blurts out, unable to stop herself. “You can walk with us.”

I glance down at Scarlett to gauge her reaction, our eyes meeting over four perfectly coiffed heads. Silently, she and I regard each other, and I can’t tell in this light what she could possibly be thinking.

“Yeah. I’ll walk over with you.”

I tell myself I’m only doing it to be chivalrous, and because anything can happen between point A and point B, regardless of the *safety in numbers* system. But, the truth is, I don’t live in the baseball house and had no reason to be loitering on the front porch.

I don’t bother checking to see if the door behind me is locked, or if all the

lights are turned off, or if anyone is squatting inside.

Instead, I bound down the stairs to Scarlett's side, giving her a playful bump with my shoulder, the contact of our bodies making the pit of my stomach turn over despite the heavy jackets separating our skin.

I shiver and obviously need to check myself, because this shit with her is getting so fucking weird.

Shaking off *whatever the hell that electric spark was*, I help steer the group to the left, down the walkway toward Greek Row. The large houses loom in the foreground, lit up, music so loud the bass can be heard several blocks over. From here, I can see people spilling onto the lawn of the Lambda house, and the desire to head home is strong.

"Thanks for waiting for us tonight—you didn't have to," Scarlett finally says, her friends booking it a few feet in front of us with newfound urgency.

Not them—you.

I waited for you.

I didn't have to, but I wanted to. Scarlett would have gotten there, seen there was no party, and within minutes, found out where everyone was through the power of social media, like everyone else tonight did when they arrived tonight.

"I know I didn't have to."

Without realizing it, our pace has slackened from a brisk walk to keep up with the group to a slow stroll, and soon, we're a good hundred paces behind her friends, almost an entire block separating us, Scarlett's tote bag swinging along with her stride.

"What's inside your bag? It's been driving me nuts."

"Oh!" She perks up, remembering herself. "I made brownies yesterday and wanted to get them out of my house before I ate them all myself."

"Liar. You made these for me."

"Pfft." When she doesn't deny it, goddamn if my heart doesn't flutter.

I poke at her bag. "Are you going to make me beg for a taste?"

I have to admit, I threw down that innuendo to measure her aversion, grinning when she shoots me a sardonic sideways glance, clamping her lips shut, tempted to retort.

Scarlett isn't the conservative she appears to be; I would bet money on it. She just hides it better than others, burying it beneath that damn jacket.

I wonder what her body looks like under all those layers. Is she skinny or curvy? Big boobs or flat-chested? Is she shy and modest or self-confident?

Jesus, I want to find out so damn bad.

"No. Of course I'm not going to make you *beg*." Her voice is quiet, barely above a whisper, and husky, like she's having dirty thoughts about me, too.

We stop onto the sidewalk so she can rifle through her tote, pulling out a clear Tupperware container with a red lid and handing it to me. I pop the lid, inhaling the smell of rich chocolate.

"Fuck yeah. I love brownies."

"Me too."

We resume our walk.

I bite down into a large square, groaning. "Goddamn this is good."

"Thank you."

"Moist," I can't help adding, just to see what she'll say.

Scarlett groans. "God, I hate that word."

Yeah, I figured—who doesn't?

"You hate the word *moist*?"

"Stop saying it," she says on a laugh, the dimple in her cheek winking at me.

"I would if these brownies weren't so...*moist*." Her laughter is low as we resume walking, side by side, in the dark. "You want a bite?"

Her teeth rake her bottom lip indecisively. "I probably shouldn't."

"Just a little. Here, nibble some of mine."

We pause under a streetlight, and I raise my arm, brownie pinched between my fingers, offering her some.

"Try it," I cajole, pulling back with a warning. "Just a bite—don't hog it all."

Scarlett steps closer, leaning in, breath a billow of steam into the cold, fall air. Her lips part, teeth nipping at the corner of the chocolate confection, doing her damndest to avoid my fingers with her mouth.

Eyes slide closed. “Mmm.”

Mmm is right.

Her pretty pink tongue darts out, licking her lips.

“Want more?”

Scarlett touches her finger to her mouth just then, hesitating. “I’m good, but thank you.”

“I’ve got a whole container of them if you change your mind,” I tease, patting the plastic container riding her hip. “Made them last night.”

I take the opportunity to stuff another chunk into my mouth, teeth hitting a chocolate chip. It melts unhurriedly on my tongue before I swallow.

Heaven. So fucking delicious.

“Wow, look at all those people,” Scarlett mutters, slowing her pace as the Lambda house comes into full view, up front and center of the show. We’ve rounded the corner and it seems the whole block has ignited, blazing lights beckoning everyone to the enormous, red brick fraternity house.

It’s located in the middle of the street, a massive monolith with Palladian white columns. The house is so fucking cool it ought to be a crime for these drunken idiots to live here.

Scarlett takes a few steps back instead of forward, hands clutching the strap on her tote.

“Uh, you know what? On second thought, I don’t think I want to hit a frat party tonight.”

“You don’t want to go in? Why not?”

“Rowdy, look at me.” She makes a jerky gesture down her torso. “Look at my outfit.”

“I *am* looking at you.” And I see nothing wrong with what she’s wearing—*nothing at all*. She’s adorable with her hair all rolled up into those cute motherfucking buns. Face flushed, eyes bright. And when she bites down on her bottom lip?

Totally makes me want to kiss her.

Still, we’re stuck standing in the middle of the sidewalk, in front of a fraternity party, and she doesn’t want to stay.

“I can walk you home.”

“Are you sure?”

I nod. “Where do you live?”

“Back the way we came, closer to the baseball house, actually.”

“Really?”

“Yup. About three blocks toward campus.” Scarlett hikes her bag. “What about you?”

“I’m across from the stadium.”

“Which stadium?”

If this was anyone else, I’d throw my head back and laugh in their face for asking such a dumb fucking question. But this is Scarlett, and somehow she’s managed to weasel her way into my life like a bad habit.

“The *baseball* stadium.”

“Oh.” She laughs nervously, miming smacking a palm to her forehead. “Duh.”

God she’s adorably clueless.

“Here, let me take your bag.” I reach for it. “I’ll walk you home.”

“No, no! Gosh, you don’t have to carry it,” she demurs.

I grab her tote, ending whatever other argument or protests are about to come out of her gorgeous mouth, giving her hip a little bump in the process to nudge her along.

“Never have I ever—”

Scarlett’s groan interrupts me, and now that her hands are free, she throws them in the air. “Oh lord, here we go.”

I glance down at her. “What? Would you rather play something else?”

“We can’t play Never Have I Ever—we don’t have anything to chug down if we lose.”

“But we have brownies.” I hold up her bag containing the tub of desserts, giving it a shake, totally willing to sacrifice the lot of them on our walk back to her place.

“If I eat all those chocolate brownies, I will *barf*.”

“Are you that confident you’re going to have to eat them?”

“With the questions *you* like to ask? Definitely.”

“It’s not that many blocks. You’ll live.” Once we fall into line, I dig into her bag to retrieve the container, our steps in sync. “Never have I ever read anyone’s diary.”

“Ugh, dammit Rowdy!”

I pop the top so Scarlett can retrieve a small piece from the plastic container and pop it in her mouth. Chew and swallow.

“Whose diary?” I want to know.

“My older sister’s when we were younger. She had some damn good stuff in it, too, like the first time she got felt up by a guy, she detailed the entire experience and I got to read about it.”

“You sneaky little shit.”

Scarlett shrugs. “It’s not like she hid it—kept it on her bookshelf along with her other junk. But honestly, I was notorious for going through her stuff. It was all just too good to keep my hands off of.” She sighs, and then smirks. “Have you ever been slapped across the face?”

I hesitate then bite off a chunk of chewy, *moist* brownie. “Yes.” A smug grin spreads across her mouth, and it makes me scowl. “You don’t have to be self-righteous about it, smartass. I wasn’t slapped by a pissed-off girl.”

“Stop it right now. You’re telling me you were slapped by a *guy*?” Her skepticism is spread across her entire face.

“Yup. Bitch-slapped by a dude, if you want to get technical.”

“Bet this is a good story.” She giggles, dancing alongside me, her black Chucks hopping on the pavement. “Are you going to tell me about it?”

It’s not a story I’ll likely ever forget. “I was out with a few guys my freshman year, and I had this friend on the team who was gay, right? Well, we went out during orientation week, and he’d been seeing this guy—real theatrical type—who thought Landon was having an affair or cheating on him or whatever because he’d been practicing so much. Spending way too much time with the team, you know?” I pause for dramatic effect. “Landon’s boyfriend finds us out one night playing pool after Landon had told him he was lifting. Dude taps me on the shoulder and slaps me as I turn around. It was one of those limp-armed hits though, not a full-on slap, and he was terrified I’d hit him back.”

“Did he clutch his hand to his chest?”

“Totally. Gaspd too.”

“Did they get into a fight after that?”

“Nah, I think they probably went home and screwed.” I palm another brownie from the container, stuffing it into my mouth. “God, these things are like crack.”

“I like to bake.” Scarlett stares straight ahead, pretending to be interested in the scenery, but I catch a glimpse of her smile when I call her brownies crack, see when she bites down on her lower lip.

“Have you ever had pot brownies?” She sounds so scandalized just asking the question that I chuckle.

“No. Have *you*?”

“No!” comes her indignant reply. “Of course not.”

“Have you ever *wanted* to?”

“No! Would you want to?”

My lip curls arrogantly. “Have you seen this body Scarlett? This body is a temple—we don’t wear it down, we build it up.” I invite her to ogle, wishing she could see more of my body. “Feel free to worship at the shrine.”

I watch as her gaze flickers down my torso, to my feet, then back up to my face. It’s too dark to tell if she’s blushing, but I bet a few hundo that she is.

Grinning, I change the subject. “Would you rather *eat* a meal or help cook it?”

“Oh, we’re doing that now? Playing Would You Rather?”

“Are you brave enough? It could get dicey.”

“Dicey—my *dad* says that.” She giggles. “I’d rather have someone cook me a meal, but I’d rather bake for someone else.”

I ignore the dad comment. “Would you rather not shower for a week or not brush your teeth?”

“That’s gross.”

“No it’s not. I can go a few days without showering, easy.”

She considers this. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. That’s the reason dry shampoo was invented—now they just need to make dry shampoo for my body.”

“Uh, pretty sure that’s called perfume…”

“You can’t spray perfume under your armpits.”

“Uh, pretty sure that’s called deodorant.”

Scarlett makes a *tsking* sound, clucking her tongue. “Well, aren’t you just full of the answers to everything.”

I roll my eyes, because I usually *do* have the answers to everything. “If you had to save a reef of coral or a school of clownfish, which would you save and which would you let die?”

Scarlett gasps, a puff of steam escaping from her pursed lips. “What kind of a monster are you? That is such a mean question! Both! I’d save both!”

“You have to choose!” I argue. “Those are the rules of the game, Scarlett.”

“Ugh, fine, you tyrant. Probably the clownfish because it can look me in the eye, but I’d regret the decision forever.” She turns to me, glaring. “Forever.”

We’re quiet a few seconds as she thinks of a new question to ask me.

Then, “Okay, here’s one for you: would you rather have your catching *hand* broken or break your entire arm?”

What the fuck!

“What the fuck kind of question is that, Scarlett? Neither!”

Jesus, she’s a sadist.

“You have to choose—those are the rules of the game, Sterling,” she mimics, her straight white teeth shining beneath the street lights, the little shithead. “Broken hand or arm?”

“You’re savage, Scarlett…” I have no idea what her last name is so I can’t chastise her properly. “What’s your last name?”

“Ripley.”

Scarlett Ripley.

“Stop avoiding the question.”

“Fine,” I huff. “I’d rather break my throwing arm—no, wait, my catching hand. Dammit! Arm.” I clutch that arm, cradling it tenderly, sweet-talking it with a stage whisper. “*I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it. She made me choose because she’s the devil.*”

Scarlett's laughter echoes in the dark, bouncing off the sky and clouds and houses, light and carefree and amused. Then, when I finally focus on our surroundings, I see we've stalled in front of a little white house at the end of a block I've passed dozens of times, a narrow stone sidewalk leading to a tidy front porch. It has a green awning and a short stoop. A single light glows from what I assume is the living room, but the curtains are drawn, so it's impossible to tell.

"Why did we stop?"

"This is me."

We stand on the sidewalk, both of us staring toward the house, me still clutching my poor, hypothetically broken baseball arm as if it actually pains me.

"Do you, um...do you want to come in for a bit? I think I have a few frozen pizzas in the freezer if you're still hungry."

Is my hunger even up for discussion? "Why are you always feeding me?"

"Because you're always hungry?"

I nod. "Fair." Follow her up a short, narrow sidewalk, staring down at her ass, just below the hem of her coat.

The backs of her calves.

Her slim, bare ankles as they tread along the concrete walkway.

She smiles over her shoulder, unlocking the deadbolt. Pushes through the door, flicking on the light to the right of the entrance. We enter in the kitchen; it's *miniscule*, all white and neat as a pin. The outdated appliances are clean, a lone bowl and glass set next to the sink, waiting to be washed.

How the...

"This place is fucking tiny." I glance around. "How the hell do you all fit in here?"

The kitchen and living room combined are smaller than my bedroom, so I can't imagine the rest of the place is any bigger.

"How the hell do I fit *who* in here?"

"You and your roommates. There's barely any room for anything."

"I don't have any roommates." Scarlett hangs her keys on a hook by the table, glancing over her shoulder. "It's just me."

My brows shoot up, surprised. “Wait, what?”

She lives *alone*? Well, well, well, isn’t this a pleasant new development.

Scarlett laughs and turns toward me, unzipping her jacket, its whirring metal the only sound in the kitchen. She parts it. Shrugs it down her narrow shoulders. Hangs the puffy winter coat on the kitchen chair and kicks off her shoes before moving to the fridge.

As she pulls open the freezer, my eyes trail after her, fastened on her backside, on the tight rear end in her black leggings—the ass I’m seeing for the first time.

It’s round and high, and I bet if I held out my hands, the whole thing would fit perfectly, like pieces of a puzzle.

“I live here alone.” Her arms rise, retrieving two pizzas from the freezer, wielding them like a waitress carrying a tray of drinks, jutting out a hip as she speaks, slamming the freezer closed. “I decided I didn’t want to live with a group of girls my senior year, so I don’t, and it’s been awesome.”

Scarlett turns to face me again, pizzas in her arms, all smiles.

Under the soft lamps in her cozy little kitchen—without the earmuffs and the coat and the warm clothes—I can analyze everything about her as if it’s the first time I’m seeing her.

For the first time in *four* weeks, I’m seeing what she looks like under all the jackets and scarves and bulky sweaters. The chocolate-colored hair she usually keeps under a knit cap is shining under the kitchen light, wrapped up in two bite-sized buns.

Insatiably curious, I rake my inquisitive green eyes down her body in the comfort of this small room, from the top of her head to the tips of her bare toes.

They are painted a bright, brilliant, glittery blue.

Her long-sleeved top is thin and white, *tight*. Slim waist with picture-perfect boobs, I can’t help but notice the outline of her white bra beneath the shirt. The smooth column of her neck. Notice for the first time the silver hoops in her ears.

With her hair twisted into those buns on the top of her head, she looks *prime*. Like a ballerina—one that actually has tits.

Sweet and sexy, both at the same time.

My gaze lowers again.

Man, those tits. The tops of them spilling out of her bra, defined by the fabric of her shirt.

Scarlett lists her head to one side, watching me devour her. Then, “Sterling?”

“Huh?” My head gives a shake. “Sorry, what?”

“If you’re staying, can you please take your shoes off? Not to be a pain in the ass, but I wiped down the floor on my hands and knees yesterday, and I hate cleaning, so...”

Scarlett on her hands and knees...

“Staying? You mean overnight?” *Please say yes, please say yes.*

Scarlett laughs quietly. “No, staying for *food*.”

Oh. Right. “Shit, yeah—sorry, I’ll take off my shoes. Sorry.”

Another megawatt smile from her and my stomach does a high dive off a steep ledge.

I busy myself then, kicking off my sneakers by the door, content to watch her fuss about her quaint kitchen. Preheating the oven. Fetching oven mitts. Tossing the cellophane pizza wrapper into the garbage can under the sink. Wiping the errant, frozen grated mozzarella cheese off the counter and into the sink.

“Two pizzas is good, right? You can eat a whole one all by yourself, I’m assuming.”

Four weeks and she knows me well.

Pulls open the stove, round ass sticking up, sliding the two pies on the racks, then shuts them in.

“Got anything to drink?”

“In the fridge—want to help yourself while I run to my room and throw on some fuzzy socks?”

“Sure.”

I watch her retreating form as it sashays in the direction of a hallway before peeling my eyes away, making my own way to the fridge, bending to peer inside.

“What the hell?” I mutter, because, holy shit, her fridge is better stocked than mine.

Fruit, vegetables. Bagels, juice, and pasta. Lunch meat in the drawer. Bottled water. Bottled mocha frappe. Two bottles of white wine. Small boxes of orange juice. I poke what looks like leftovers and identify it by picking up the container and turning it sideways: hamburger patties. A container of spaghetti sauce and a separate one of noodles.

I could get used to a fridge like this.

Ten minutes later, Scarlett returns. I’m seated in the center of her couch, flipping through the menu on her television, when she reenters the room, crossing in front of me to claim her own spot on the sofa. Whatever perfume she’s wearing has me sniffing the air like a damn bloodhound who just caught a whiff of the bitch at a neighboring farm.

She’s changed into gray yoga pants and a gray t-shirt that says *I don’t know what I’m training for but I hope it never happens* and, trying not to stare too hard at her chest, I chuckle.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I watch as she flops down cross-legged on the far end of the couch, boobs bouncing when she settles into the cushions.

So bouncy I suspect she’s not wearing a bra, and I strain to locate her nipples.

Drag a palm down my face, needing to let out a puff of pent-up air, arm going to the back of the couch. Lean back into the sofa, letting my large body sink deeper into the plush cushions.

Hesitate before putting my legs up, needing to hide this impending boner in my jeans.

“Do you mind if I put my feet on the coffee table?”

Scarlett’s gaze meets mine and I note the color of her eyes: blue. Black lashes flutter, eyes sliding down my denim-clad legs, hesitating on the bulge in my pants, landing at my feet.

I wiggle my toes and arch a brow when her eyes fly back to my face, cheeks blushing as I flirt with her.

Flirting with the girl my friends called Cock Blocker. Sitting in her house, eating her food, watching her TV. Walking her home and enjoying every

goddamn second of her company.

Man the guys have a field day with this.

“Sure, you can put your feet up. Make yourself comfortable.”

I gawk at her then, noticing that her eyes aren’t just blue—they’re deeper, darker, not navy, but...muddy, and *Jesus, I’m doing the shittiest job describing them.* I should stop.

She clears her throat when I stretch my long torso, spreading the long wingspan of my arms farther across the back of the couch, lips set, complacent. Head thumping back against the wall and hitting it by accident.

Ouch.

I let my eyelids fall closed.

“Don’t you dare fall asleep on me, Rowdy Wade,” Scarlett warns.

I grin. “I wouldn’t dream of it, because you’re going to feed me pizza soon. It’s so quiet in here though, it might be hard not to.”

Really nice and really fucking quiet. Plus, Scarlett has food.

“Now you know why I love staying home instead of going out. I can do what I want—sing as loud as I want, not do dishes, walk around naked.”

I raise my eyes, interested. “Do you now?”

“Do whatever I want? Heck yeah.”

“No, no, tell me more about this nudity. Do you walk around doing housecleaning and shit buck naked? Paint me a visual, and don’t spare any details.”

A pretty blush creeps up her neck. “I mean, yeah, sometimes. Doesn’t everybody?”

Uh, *no*. Not everyone walks around naked.

But seeing her like this, in her natural environment, removed from the porch of the house on Jock Row—knowing she probably isn’t wearing a bra even though I can’t see her nipples—my imagination takes hold faster than I can field a ground ball. Drags me by the balls and leads me on a path I probably shouldn’t be going down, skipping my dick merrily all the way.

Behind us in the kitchen, a timer dings.

I watch Scarlett rise off the sofa and pad into the kitchen. Hear a few

drawers open and close. Oven creak open, one pizza sliding out after the other. I look over my shoulder, watching her cut them into slices in precise movements and slide the pieces onto two plates.

“You need help in there?”

“Nope, I got it. You just sit there and relax.”

Is this girl for real? I’ve been here less than an hour and already she’s spoiling me rotten.

Scarlett returns moments later carrying two plates topped with pizza. Hands one to me, a goddess bearing gifts.

“Can we talk about this naked thing again?”

“I don’t understand why you’re so fascinated by it.”

I shoot her a look that says, *Really?*

“Sorry, but I just can’t let the subject go. And for the record, I have a roommate, so—no, I don’t walk around naked.”

Scarlett’s still standing in front of me, holding her plate. Leans toward me, dipping to hand me the pizza until the neckline of her shirt drops, to mutter, “But you walk around naked in the locker room, right?”

“Oh yeah—for sure.”

“*Mmm.*” Scarlett draws out the sound, like she’s just popped something savory into her mouth and it tastes like heaven. “All those athletic, naked, *toned* bodies showering in one spot.”

Whoa. Hold up.

My head lifts. “You care about athletic, toned bodies?”

In case she hasn’t fucking *noticed*, there’s a perfectly serviceable male specimen sitting right on her goddamn living room sofa that she’s barely spared a second glance at the entire time we’ve been here.

If Scarlett keeps acting like I’m resistible, quite frankly, I’m going to become insulted.

“I mean, just because I’m not on Jock Row with the sole purpose of finding my next lay like some girls doesn’t mean my brain isn’t triggered by the sight of your friends’ physical...attributes. Believe me, it’s been triggered.” She laughs. “I’m human for god’s sake.” She grabs a slice of pizza. Takes a bite of its end and slowly chews, thoughtfully. “And anyway,

you brought it up.”

Something I’ll later identify as jealousy wells up and makes me blurt out, “I said *nothing* about wet dudes in the locker room.”

“Wet dudes.” Her brows shoot up. Wiggle.

I narrow my eyes, irritated. “Would you knock that shit off?”

Jesus. Scarlett is kind of a pervert.

She bends her torso forward, toward me, and I finally get the boob shot I’ve been looking for: cleavage with the shadow of her nipples.

While I’m gawking down her shirt, Scarlett lowers her voice conspiratorially to a near whisper; obviously, I’m hanging on her every word.

“You wanna to hear a fun little factoid about women?”

“Fuck yeah.”

“We’re more perverted than guys.”

Bullshit. “How is that possible?”

She leans back, relaxing against a pillow with a satisfied sigh, queen of her domain. “We just are.” Her eyes rake up and down my torso, flickering briefly over the bulge of my crotch. “*Trust me.*”

I spread my legs a little wider. “Not buying it.”

“Just because we don’t run around making innuendos and grabbing our junk doesn’t mean some of us aren’t closet perverts.”

My eyes skim over *her* junk.

I study her hard. “So what you’re saying is, you’re a pervert.”

“Kind of.” Affirmative nod. “Eighty percent.”

“What a load of horse crap.”

Shrug. “You don’t have to believe me.” Takes a dainty bite of her crust, her dimple contracting with every nibble. “You have *no* idea what goes through my head half the time.”

“Oh yeah?” *Did my voice just fucking crack?* Jesus. “Like what?”

“Pfft, like I’d tell you.”

“You’re full of shit, that’s why.”

“I have nothing to prove.” Casually, she takes another bite of pizza, brows

raised, smiling while she chews. “*Except...*”

She swallows, takes her sweet time, chugging a sip of water and setting the bottle down on the coffee table.

“*Except?*” Goddammit, I wish she’d finish her sentence and put me out of my misery.

“Well.” Her pink tongue darts out, licking a crumb off the corner of her mouth. “Don’t think for one second that while you’re throwing down words like *hard*, or *taste*, or *moist*, my mind hasn’t flown straight into the gutter and I don’t want to laugh like a teenage boy.” She licks her lips again and I swear it’s just to taunt me. “And you know, those aren’t even pervy words. They’re ordinary adjectives.”

“Never would have guessed.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. I have an amazing poker face. We should play cards sometime.”

Damn right she has a good poker face; I wouldn’t be able to tell you what she was thinking right now if my life depended on it.

“Scarlett?”

“Hmm?” Crunch, crunch. Swallow.

“How much would you be willing to pay a psychic threatening to tell me everything you’re thinking right now?”

She pretends to mull it over, setting her plate down on the coffee table, wiping her hands on a napkin. Leans back against the couch cushions and steeple her fingers.

“Hmm, that’s a very good question. I don’t know—twenty bucks?”

My mouth falls open. “Twenty bucks? That’s it?”

“That’s all I have in my wallet.” A dainty shoulder rises and falls as she graces me with a lazy smile. “How much would you pay?”

“That’s a loaded question.”

“You’re the one who asked it. Just tell me what you’re thinking about right this second and I’ll leave you alone.” Her challenge is issued with a cocky smirk.

“All right.” I pause, and we chew, staring each other down.

“I’ve been obsessed with seeing your nipples since I realized you weren’t

wearing a bra.”

Scarlett chokes on the pizza crust currently in her mouth, bending at the waist and coughing so hard I’m forced to pound gently on her back. “That’s not”—*cough*—“what”—*cough*—“I thought”—*cough, cough*—“you were gonna say.” *Cough*. “Oh my god, I’m dying.”

She feels around for the water, which I place into her palm.

Red faced, she finally sits up, glaring at me. “You can’t say shit like that when I have food in my mouth.”

I imagine *other* things in her mouth, but not wanting to cross any lines, I force my lips shut.

“I dare you to show me the fourth screenshot in your phone.”

Scarlett scoops her cell off the coffee table, unlocks it with her thumb, and scrolls to her gallery. Counts four pictures in, pausing.

I smirk. “Too embarrassed to show me?”

Rolling her eyes, Scarlett taps on the screen and holds the entire phone in my direction.

It’s a list of five Truth or Dare questions, and my eyes go down the list, reading each one at a time.

“Did you save this for us?”

She hesitates. “Yes.”

I take the phone from her hand, raising it to eye level. “Truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

“Don’t you think this game should be renamed ‘Interrogation or Humiliation’?”

Scarlett laughs. “Yes.”

“Okay, first question.” I gaze down at the list. “What was the last lie you told?”

She purses her lips, debating. Gnaws on her bottom lip. “Last week when you asked me how screwed I’d be if my internal monologue was made audible? And I said on a scale of one to ten, it was a five—I was lying.”

“Yeah, I know.”

I hold out the phone so she can see it and ask the next question, but she

gives it a gentle push. “I don’t need to see it—I’ve looked at the list so many times I have them memorized.” Her head tilts. “Truth or dare?”

I want to say dare on the off chance she’ll dare me to kiss her, or fuck her, or play strip poker, but I go with truth instead so I don’t come off as eager as I’m beginning to feel.

Her blue eyes meet mine. “What’s the first physical feature you look for in someone you’re attracted to?”

Dimples. Tits. Long, dark hair. “Height.”

“Really?” She’s taken aback, and it’s obvious from her wide eyes that she doesn’t believe me. “Huh. That surprises me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I thought you’d say big boobs or something.”

Pfft, like I’d admit that shit out loud. I’m not a savage; I have *some* fucking manners.

“Not everyone’s boobs are showing when you first meet them,” I point out cryptically.

Hers weren’t.

“True.”

It’s my turn now to ask her, “Truth or dare?”

One. Two.

Six long seconds tick by.

“Dare.”

I glance at the phone. Glance up at Scarlett. “I dare you to show me *your* favorite body part.”

Those smooth cheeks of hers get pink. “All of it, or just point to it?”

I go for broke. “All of it.”

“All right.”

Scarlett sets her plate on the table in front of us, standing, flattening a palm down her stomach. Turns her back to me, slowly hooking her thumbs inside the waistband of her yoga pants.

Drags them down her hips, three fucking feet in front of me, peach skin emerging in full view, gray pants stopping right under the swell of her butt

cheeks.

White thong, ass smooth enough to slap, I'm only graced with three short seconds to gape before those gray pants get yanked back up, waistband snapping.

And that's a mental image I'll have burned into my fucking skull forever.

My Adam's apple gets lodged in my damn throat, along with the slice of pizza I just took a bite of.

"Your favorite feature is your own ass."

"Is that bad?"

"No. I like your ass, too," I joke, noting the time and setting the phone on the coffee table, putting an end to the game.

No good can come of this.

"You want to watch a movie? Or are you going to head home?"

It's still early, and I have no desire to leave...and she's inviting me to stay longer.

I nod. "Yeah, let's watch a movie. I don't feel like walking."

Scarlett

"Rowdy."

I smooth the back of my hand tenderly down his cheek, leisurely over his laugh lines. Over the coarse, unshaven stubble of a day's growth, bristly against my skin.

Rough, in a ruggedly sexy way.

His skin is soft near his eyes, lashes fanned out against his cheekbones as he deeply slumbers, the perfect slope of his nose a path I take with the tip of my thumb.

There are freckles there.

Brown specks I never would have noticed if I wasn't this close, studying every nuance from inches away. Never would I have the nerve if he was awake, although I suspect we're reaching that point.

I study his sideburns next.

The high arch of his tan cheekbones.

Both his buff arms are folded across his chest, shoulders wide. Neck tipped back, the column of thick and strong and sexy, Adam's apple still in the center of his throat. That, too, is covered with dark stubble.

I run my palm along his skin, admiring the curve of his lips and strong, square jaw.

He is all man.

And I showed him my butt cheeks.

Rowdy's lips move, startling the shit out of me. "You know they have names for people who watch other people sleep."

I pull my hand back like it's been set on fire. "Oh yeah? Like what?"

He cracks an eyelid. "Creepers."

"I'm not *creeping* on you." I am. "I said your name three times and patted your cheek twice."

"You said it once."

"Well why didn't you say anything?"

"Because you feel good."

He shifts on the couch, readjusting his weight. Moving his arms to his sides, letting his hands fall to the cushions. Cracks his beautiful green eyes open and shoots me a sleepy smile.

"What are you staring at so hard?"

I *boop* the tip of his nose then run it in tiny circles. "These freckles right here on the bridge of your nose."

Now he's more alert. "I don't have freckles."

"Yes you do. Right..." He watches me trace them with the tip of my finger, counting a few. "Here." I tap ever so gently, the barest touch. "And here." Tap. "And a few here, and you don't have to sound so put-out about it."

They're the most adorable things I've ever seen, and my new favorite thing about him.

"Freckles are for sissies."

My laugh is low. "Then you should wear sunscreen."

“Sunscreen is for sissies.”

I cluck my tongue to hold back a laugh. “Shame shame, I always wear sunscreen. That’s why I’m so pale.”

Warily, he watches me with half-hooded eyes, still sleepy. “Did I miss the movie?”

“You passed out about twenty minutes into it.”

“Why did you let me?”

“I didn’t have the heart to wake you up.”

“Did I snore?”

“No. Why, do you usually snore?”

“Only when I’m really tired.”

“Maybe you should start staying home on the weekends instead of hanging out on the front porch of the baseball house.”

“And shirk my civic duty?” The lazy smile he gives me sends the thousand butterflies inside my tummy spiraling out of control. “I have to protect the public from you.”

FIFTH FRIDAY

“The Friday Where She Doesn’t Show Up.”

Rowdy

Where the hell is Scarlett?

I check my phone again, then look out into the dark neighborhood, watching the sidewalk. Check for the familiar sight her black winter coat, earmuffs, and scuffed Chuck Taylors—but there is still no sign of her.

Those girls she’s come with a few times are inside, having arrived the better part of an hour ago, and I debate whether I should stay standing outside longer, the conversation we had a few weeks ago playing on a loop in my mind.

“How long would you be willing to wait for me to show up?”

“Five minutes.”

“Liar. Try again or I’m not showing you what’s in here.” That was the night she brought me food.

“I don’t know, Scarlett—eight minutes.” She’d raised her brows, challenging me.

“Fine. I’d wait an hour. Maybe a little longer if I knew for sure you were going to show up.”

Surely her friends would have told me Scarlett wasn’t coming, right? I mean, it’s been four consecutive Fridays of the same routine. The fact that she’s deviating and didn’t have the courtesy to tell me?

It annoys the shit out of me.

Scares the crap out of me, too, if I’m being honest.

Shoving through the front door, my gaze scans the perimeter of the room until they land on the familiar faces of Scarlett’s two blonde friends, whose names I have yet to catch. They’re flirting with my teammates, preening

when I approach, stomping through the crowd on a mission, the taller of the two girls sticking out her ample chest when I disrupt. I reach my arm out between them, inserting myself into the conversation to stop the flow. “Hey, sorry to interrupt, but I need to grab the girls for a second.”

No one objects when I motion them aside, and I didn’t expect them to.

“What’s up, Rowdy?” Her eyes are lined with thick black coal, lips cherry red. Way too much makeup, way too perky, way too enthusiastic.

Drunk.

I shove my hands in the deep recesses of my pockets, shoulders hunching. “Do you know where Scarlett is tonight? She hasn’t showed up.”

Her black lashes flutter. “She went out—like, out out.”

Out out? What the hell does that mean?

“Out where?”

“I’m not sure? A date?” She looks to her friend for confirmation. “Or am I confusing her with Natasha?”

The girl taps her chin, surely mistaken; Scarlett wouldn’t have a date on a Friday night—not when she’s supposed to be *here*. With *me*.

Impatiently I get out my cell. “Can I get her number so I can check in on her? I want to make sure she hasn’t been murdered or whatever.”

“Yeah, sure. Just use it wisely, okay? Don’t go all creepy weirdo stalker after I give it to you, okay? She’ll kill me if you do.”

I tap in the number as she rattles it off, hit save, and add it to my contacts. “Thanks.”

“Is that *all* you needed?” The other blonde is fishing for something else, something I’d never give to a girl like her, and I wonder what kind of friend this one is to Scarlett. She doesn’t seem as loyal as this other one.

My head bends in concentration as I tap on Scarlett’s number. “Yeah, thanks.”

I’m already composing a new message, walking toward the front door, seeking the quiet comfort of the porch.

Parking my ass on the railing, I wait impatiently for my text to be delivered. That little blue line at the top of the screen drags its sorry ass along at a glacial pace, taking its sweet time up in cyber space to reach her phone.

Another ten minutes for three little dots to appear on the screen—the ones that tell me Scarlett is messaging me back.

Ten. Minutes.

Me: *Hey. Where are you?*

Scarlett: *Who is this?*

Me: *Rowdy*

Scarlett: *Oh hey! Are you at the house?*

Me: *Yeah, I've been waiting for you. I thought you were going to show up tonight—was I wrong?*

Scarlett: *Yes, I'm sorry. I had some last-minute plans.*

Me: *Ah. I see.*

Scarlett: *No big deal, but I'm curious—how did you get my number?*

Me: *Your two friends are here. I had them give it to me.*

Scarlett: *I'm sure you barely had to browbeat them for it. lol*

Me: *Browbeat? All I had to do was bat my lashes. You should probably tell them not to give your number out to strange dudes—I could be a serial killer.*

Scarlett: *They know you're not a serial killer, we've been hanging out for weeks.*

Hanging out...is that what we've been doing?

Scarlett: *Tessa just texted me. She said: Rowdy Wade asked for your number, I hope it was okay for me to give it to him ha ha.*

Me: *You're not mad, are you?*

Scarlett: *Of course not! Don't you think it's weird you don't already have it? It HAS been a few weeks.*

Me: *I was thinking the same thing.*

Me: *Anyway, I just wanted to make sure you were okay. When you didn't show up...*

Scarlett: *Were you worried???*

Me: *No.*

Me: *Yes.*

Me: lol

Scarlett: *That's very sweet of you to check in.*

Me: *I mean, we've spent the last four weeks together, five if you'd have shown up tonight.*

Scarlett: *I'm sorry you worried, I really didn't think...I mean, I couldn't have gotten ahold of you even if I wanted to because I didn't have your number either.*

Me: *It's fine. Don't worry about it, I just wanted to make sure you were alive.*

Scarlett: *It really is very sweet of you to check in, make sure I'm not dead lol*

Me: *So, are you home, or...*

Scarlett: *No, I'm not home yet. Soon, though, if we don't go downtown.*

Me: *Oh?*

Scarlett: *Oh? What does that mean. Lol. The way you said that...*

Me: *So did you have like, a date tonight or something?*

My stomach knots up and I feel sick watching those three small dots at the bottom of my screen disappear and reappear as she types.

Scarlett: *I went out with friends—a few from my biology lab.*

Me: *So not a date?*

Scarlett: *No, not a date. We did get dressed up and go to dinner, though. Kind of a pre-end-of-the-semester celebration. More like an excuse to dress up.*

Me: *Are you still out?*

Scarlett: *Yes. We were just having dinner, and I just happened to walk into the bathroom.*

Scarlett: *Not to mention, I'm in a dress and it's freezing.*

Me: *What does it look like?*

Scarlett: *It's black and lacey and shows off how great my legs are. lol*

Me: *Have you had anything to drink?*

Scarlett: *No, right now I'm still sober-ish*

Scarlett: *Okay, fine—I've had one glass of wine, but I'm definitely not drunk.*

Scarlett: *How long have you been outside waiting for me?*

Me: *I don't know, a few minutes.*

Scarlett: *Rowdy, it's after eleven...*

Me: *Fine. I've been waiting an hour and change.*

An hour and forty-two minutes—but who's keeping track?

Scarlett: *Oh god, I'm so sorry!*

Me: *Don't apologize, you don't owe me anything.*

But then I add,

Me: *You want me to keep waiting for you?*

Scarlett: *You'd do that?*

Me: *If you want me to, yeah. I'll wait for you.*

Scarlett: *Thank you for checking on me tonight.*

Me: *Hey wait, what did you have for dinner?*

Scarlett: *Is it always about food with you? I had soup, salad, and chicken.*

Me: *Goddammit I'm hungry...*

Scarlett: ***laughs and laughs** I can't stay in this bathroom stall all night texting you, my friends will think I climbed out the window to avoid paying the bill.*

Me: *Brilliant idea. Stay put and I'll back my truck up to the window. I'll catch you.*

Scarlett: *You would not do that...*

Me: *Try me. I can be wherever you are in ten minutes.*

Scarlett: *You're crazy, do you know that?*

Yeah. Crazier for you every single fucking day.

Scarlett: *How about I have them drop me off at the house instead?*

Me: *I'll wait.*

Hurry.

I don't add that last part, instead, staring at my phone for the reply that never comes.

I don't recognize her at first glance.

Dismiss her as another baseball groupie striding up the walkway when she appears, pulling up to the curb in a gray car. Watch when she slides out of the passenger side, one leg at a time, bending at the waist to speak to the driver.

Slams the door and gracefully strides confidently up the sidewalk, hair swishing, fanning out behind her like some goddamn shampoo commercial.

I do a double take.

"Scarlett?"

She raises her hand, clutching a small blue purse in the other. "I made it."

I stare.

Barely recognize her. I mean—it's her, of course I recognize her, but...

She looks so fucking *different*.

Her, but...

More her.

Jesus.

Hips swaying, black skirt swishing beneath the hem of a black dress coat, she approaches the stairs, long tan legs taking the steps one by one, bright blue toenails playing peekaboo in black, open-toe heels.

I straighten. Blink down at her, confused.

"Did you get a spray tan?" I blurt out, fucking up my greeting. Couldn't the first words out of my mouth been 'Hello, you look beautiful'?

Scarlett laughs. "Yes, I got a spray tan. I'm so pale."

One step, then another two.

Four more and she's all the way to the top.

"What's with the red lips?" I blurt out again, harsher than I intend. Her mouth is a sexy, glossy red, shining when she grins at me under the light gleaming off the porch. Her teeth look blaring white in contrast.

"What's with you tonight? You're so crabby." She rolls her eyes, tucking her little blue handbag under her armpit. Purses her glossy mouth. "You don't like the red lips?"

I do. I like them a lot.

And why are her lashes so damn long? Jesus, her eyes look huge. I could watch them flutter at me all damn night.

“How was dinner?”

Another sassy grin, and her white teeth flashing get me kind of excited. “Great. Thanks for waiting on me.”

“I would have come and picked you up.” Should have gone all chivalrous on her, pulled some knight-in-shining-armor bullshit.

She touches my arm, giving my forearm a tap. “We were in the city—I never would have asked you to come that far.”

But I would have; I’d have driven clear across the state to pick her up just to see the look on her face. To see that damn dimple in her pretty, sweet cheek.

She looks so...*fucking*...

Her brows, which are darker than usual, furrow. “What?”

I blink. “You look...”

I bask in the brilliant sight of her, from her smooth thighs to the curve of her well-shaped calves. It might not sound like the most romantic body part to wax poetic about, but I’m an athlete and notice shit like that, the little things—like how perfect her toes are, peeking out of the front of her heels.

The place where the black belt of her dressy jacket cinches her slender waist.

And her hair?

It’s thick and full, falling in waves, draped over one shoulder, and I’ve never seen it down. It looks soft, sleek, and touchable, and I want to run my fingers through it.

“Why are you looking at me like that—stop being weird.”

Am I being weird? I do a better job schooling my expression.

Inhale a deep breath and attempt not to be a fuckwit.

“You look really pretty, that’s all I wanted to say. I’m not trying to be weird. And, uh, I have something for you.”

Her delicate arched brows go up. “You do?”

“It’s not a big deal, but...” Reaching into my coat pocket, I pull out the keychain I found at the store today. It’s a starfish, covered in coral-colored rhinestones, a crappy, cheap keychain, but it reminded me of her, so before I could dwell on it, I tossed it onto the checkout counter along with my bottled water, vegetables, and protein powder.

“I found this for you at the grocery store. Close your eyes and hold out your hand.”

Scarlett grins, her dimple the cutest little dent I ever did see, squeezing her eyes shut, long inky lashes resting on a set of smooth cheekbones. “Oh god, I’m scared. What is it?”

“You’re so dramatic. Just hold out your hand.”

Scarlett squeezes her eyes tighter, holding out her palm.

Licks her bottom lip.

It affords me a few moments to study her face under the porch light while she waits. Black inky lashes kissing her smooth, blush-covered cheekbones. Bronze skin. Glossy sapphire lips. Touchable silky hair.

Her eyebrows are full and arched with expectation as she waits for me to set the gift in her palm.

Even as I lay the keychain in her hand, my eyes never leave her face, laying the metal with a delicate clink on her splayed hand, the inexpensive, shiny silver winking in the light. Only when it hits her hand does she crack a lid open.

Looks down at her hand, stares at the trinket, confused.

The tips of my fingers linger on the pads of her palm. “I know it’s stupid, but—”

Her head shakes, cutting me off. “It’s not stupid, Sterling. It’s wonderful.”

She holds it aloft, pinched between two fingers, admiring it, turning it this way and that so the light hits the coral rhinestones at all angles. It sparkles and shines like her eyes and lips.

“It’s a starfish,” I explain, stating the obvious, feeling like a complete idiot. “Because you love the ocean.”

A grin plays at her bottom lip. “I’m in love with it. This is so sweet.”

“I saw it today when I was running errands and it reminded me of you.”

I'm so damn dumb. Like a boy who doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground. Like I want to tug on her damn braids to get her attention.

The grin she's trying to contain finally sneaks across her mouth. "Thank you."

When the wind kicks up, her shoulders shiver, her breath a fine mist in the evening as she studies my present.

"Shit, I'm so sorry." I draw my gaze away, dragging it to her bare legs. Painted toes. "You shouldn't be standing out here—it's freezing. You'll get sick again."

I shouldn't have asked her to come; it was selfish. I should have met her at home, where it's warm, let her change into something comfortable and settled in on the couch with her—not waited around and let her get dumped off at the goddamn baseball house.

"It is quite cold tonight, isn't it?"

And yet she did come to see me, in a dress and heels, to stand on the porch in the cold fall night, knowing there was no chance she was getting inside the house.

For a brief moment, I consider taking her in, walking her through the house on my arm and showing her off. Show everyone what they've been missing because they were complete fuckers.

Still...I'm feeling selfish.

"Do you...want to go inside?"

"The house?"

"Yeah. I'll take you home, but if you want to go inside for a little bit, we can do that, too."

"Are you saying you'll take me inside?" Her eyes are huge, disks of astonishment.

"If that's what you want, we'll go in and stay a while."

Her stare is intense, the breeze kicking up her hair as she studies me, lips still parted in surprise. "And ruin a perfectly good evening?" She scoffs, breath kicking up a puff of air. "I don't think so. Maybe next time."

My eyes flicker to the empty street. "Then let's get you home."

"All right, Rowdy Wade, I'll let you drive me home." Brushes a strand of

hair behind her ears. “I probably should have gone home first and thrown on some pants, huh? I don’t know what in the world I was thinking.”

A loud banging from inside interrupts, followed by raucous laughter and chanting.

“Jesus,” I groan. “They’re acting like idiots—beer pong tournament and drinking games. We’re not missing out.”

It’s true tonight, and on any given Friday. It’s hot as hell in there, though—she’d be plenty warm in that dress and those heels.

“You don’t think I’d enjoy a beer pong tournament or a drinking game? Shame on you—I’m so good at beer pong it’s stupid.”

I laugh when she winks. So fucking cute.

And pretty.

Really stupid pretty.

“I’m kind of hungry anyway. The restaurant we went to had tiny portions—my chicken was this small.” She makes a circle with her hands, demonstrating the size of her main course. “It was the size of an appetizer—you would have hated it, and then you would have died from starvation.”

“So you went someplace fancy?”

“*Real* fancy—hence the dress.” She does a little twirl, showing off her legs. “We’ve gone out before break the last two years. It’s kind of a tradition.”

I should have taken her out tonight.

Scarlett shivers. “Can we go now, please? I’m f-freezing.”

“Shit, I’m sorry—let me tell them I’m leaving real quick. Give me one sec.” When my hand clutches the doorknob, I turn, shooting her a cocky grin, gaze raking her up and down. “Don’t go anywhere.”

She shifts on her heels, eyes twinkling. “Very funny, wise ass. As if I’d walk the entire way home in these shoes.”

It takes me a record sixty seconds to dash inside the house, take the stairs two at a time, and retrieve the duffle bag I threw in one of the upstairs bedrooms earlier. Another two to let my friends know I’m heading home.

“Amado, I’m gonna bounce.” I walk through the kitchen, swiping an apple from the counter, sinking my teeth into the juicy meat and taking a huge bite.

Wipe my chin when it drips juice.

“Where the hell have you been, amigo?”

“Front porch.”

“For the last few hours?”

“Look, long story, but I’m heading out. If anyone needs me for anything, do not fucking call.”

I’ll kill anyone who interrupts me tonight.

“Where you goin’?”

“I’m taking Scarlett home—it’s colder than a witch’s tit outside.”

“Wait, *who*?”

“Scarlett.” I sigh. “You know, *Cock Blocker*.”

I practically choke on the words but say them so he knows who I’m talking about, and it works.

His face lights up with recognition, dark features curious. “You’re taking that chick *home*? The legs God gave her don’t work? If she’s not going to leave on her own, have one of the freshmen take her home for you.”

Yeah, no, that is not fucking happening.

“Nah. I got this. She’s cool.” I tamp down my actual feelings; now is not the time or place to begin a conversation about it—not with her waiting on the porch for me, in the cold.

“She’s cool.” He’s skeptical, tipping his beer back and gulping. “Tengo dudas.”

His use of Spanish has me glowering. “I have no idea what you just said—speak English.”

“I said, ‘Somehow, I doubt that.’ But whatever dude—suit yourself.”

“I will.”

He laughs. “Whatever you say, bro.”

“She’s outside freezing her ass off, so I’ve gotta go.” I hold out my closed fist for knuckles; he bumps them. “See you tomorrow in the gym?”

Already and always training for the season to start.

His black brows go up. “¿A las seis?”

“Did you just say six o’clock?”

He laughs. “Sí.”

“See you at six.”

Scarlett

“Never have I ever...” His deep voice cuts into the dark cab of his truck.

I groan, head hitting the back of the passenger side seat as Rowdy’s sturdy hands grip the steering wheel, driving in the direction of my house.

“You are becoming obsessed with this stupid game.”

He glances over at me across the center console, the glow from each passing street lamp illuminating the interior, casting a bright mask of light across his gorgeous green eyes.

They slide down my torso and to my legs.

“Your answers amuse me—it’s my new favorite game.” He ignores my protests. “Plus, this is the best way to get to know a person.”

The fact that he wants to get to know me makes the butterflies in my tummy stir.

“By asking them embarrassing questions?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“Can’t you ask normal questions? Like, ‘What’s your favorite color?’ Or ‘What are your biggest pet peeves?’”

“No, because those are boring, and I don’t really give a shit what your favorite color is—that’s something I can figure out on my own through the power of observation.”

I cross my arms. “You think you can guess my favorite color based on the one time you were in my house, go right ahead.”

He’s quiet a few moments, reaching to dial down the volume on the radio. “It’s blue.”

Whoa. “What makes you say that?”

“The pillows on your couch and the towels in your bathroom are blue, and your purse.”

Holy crap, he's right—my favorite color *is* blue.

Rowdy grins, teeth blaringly white in the dim cab. “So I'm right?”

“Yes.”

“You know what else I think? You love this game as much as I do. It's kind of long and drawn-out, like...”

Foreplay.

He doesn't say it, but I know that's what he's thinking.

My face flushes because he's right; I do like these games. They're slightly ridiculous and cheesy and stupidly fun, and even though we haven't gotten all that racy or sexual, the undertones of our recent conversations are getting more personal. Flirty. Testing our boundaries with each other, neither wanting to make the first move.

Rowdy finds my street without prompting, driving the hundred feet it takes to reach my house, pulling up to the curb and putting his truck in park. Idles, hands on the key buried in the ignition.

“I guess this is you.”

“This is me.”

Gripping my handbag—the one he noticed is blue—I unbuckle my seatbelt, fingers pawing for the handle, and I pause, twisting to face him. He's watching me—of course he is—eyes half hooded in the moonlight, shadows playing across his expression. Mouth set into a line, almost in a downward turn.

“You look like you want to say something.”

“I'm just wondering...” His voice trails off. “What kind of guy Scarlett Ripley agrees to go on a date with.”

Not what I was expecting him to say. Not in *that* tone of voice—it's low and expectant, like my answer might mean something important.

“That's what you're sitting there thinking about?”

“Humor me.” His velvety voice encourages me in the dark, fingers tapping on the steering wheel.

“Well,” I begin slowly, releasing the door handle. Sit back and stare straight ahead up the empty street. Clear my throat, buying myself a few more seconds of time. “I'd like to be with someone who makes me laugh,

someone funny...um..."

I shoot him a quick, sidelong glance, unnerved that he's watching me so unflinchingly.

"Charming."

"That's your type? Charming?"

"I don't think that's a type, but sure, charming is my type. Maybe not... overly friendly. Black hair and big muscles would be my type, too." I'm warming to the topic. "A sexy dork with a hot bod under his button-down shirt would be my type. A bad boy covered in tattoos would be my type."

"Now it just sounds like you're coming up with characters for a new book series."

I shift in my seat. "What about you? What kind of girl does Sterling Wade ask on a date?"

He faces the street, looking out the window, down the road, thinking. "Not many."

I wait for him to say more. "*Uh*, okay, but if you *were* going to ask someone on a date..."

He considers this, still watching the road. "She'd have to be someone I'd take home to my mother."

Oh.

Oh.

The purse in my hands is satin, and I glide my fingers along the clasp until I hear the magnetic clasp snap. Open. Close. Adding to the underlying tension filling the cab of this truck.

I hesitate. "I have one bottle of wine in the fridge if you want to come in for a little bit."

"*Two.*"

"Excuse me?"

"You have two bottles of wine in your fridge."

I do? "How do you know?"

"Obviously I was rooting around the other night. The contents of your fridge were a real turn-on, if I'm being honest."

Oh brother, this guy.

“Your appetite is going to get you in trouble one of these days.”

His grin is wicked. “I hope so.”

“Well...” I hesitate. “Come inside? We can play a proper game of Never Have I Ever, complete with alcohol.”

He unlocks the doors, huge hand already on the driver’s side door handle. “Fuck yeah, let’s do it.”

I don’t have to ask him twice.

Rowdy

Entering Scarlett’s kitchen is déjà vu, the small space exactly as it was the last time I was here: neat as a pin except for a dirty bowl and a plate set beside to the sink, blue dish towel folded into a tidy square.

Shoes neatly placed by the door. Keys hung on a hook. Chairs all pushed in, no clutter in sight.

I remove my hand from the small of her back to remove my jacket.

“You want anything to eat?” she asks, automatically playing hostess, fingers going to the belt at her waist, pulling gently, unknitting it. Her newly tan hands work the buttons, trailing up the front of her jacket, one toggle at a time.

I watch, transfixed—the anticipation of what’s beneath that jacket has me riveted.

Scarlett’s thick, black dress coat parts, revealing a dress, tan skin, and her beneath. Lace and boobs and legs. The jacket slides off and she hangs it by the door, narrow hips swiveling, balancing on a pair of wedge heels.

They add at least four inches to her petite frame.

Scarlett airily skims delicate hands down her narrow waist, sauntering toward me, hips gently swaying. I doubt it’s intentional, but still, it’s mesmerizing to see her this way.

Dressed up and sexy, in an entirely new light. Another layer to this girl I’ve already started falling for, feet first.

“I’m changing out of this dress. Want to pour some wine? Then we can

play that stupid game you've become obsessed with?"

She runs a hand down her hair, smoothing down her long, silky tresses. It's a rich brown, streaked near her face with lighter tones, highlighting her warm complexion. Pink cheeks.

"And can you see what the thermostat's set at? It feels warm in here, don't you think?"

I stare at her while I still have the chance to see her this way.

Her dress is lace. Delicate and snug and sexy with a gold zipper running the entire length of her spine. It's short, skimming mid-thigh, showing off her toned legs.

The skirt brushes against me when she passes, swishing on the way to her bedroom, the lingering smell of her perfume wafting around me after she disappears through the only door off the living room.

Scarlett tosses me a casual glance over her slender shoulder. "Be right back."

My eyes automatically watch her legs departing, calves shapely and *what the hell am I doing still standing here*. Part of me wants to pour the wine, part of me wants to follow her.

Five minutes later I'm pouting in the kitchen, two glasses of inexpensive, chilled white wine on the table when Scarlett's lilty voice rings out from down the hallway.

Tentative.

"Rowdy?"

My head shoots up. "Yeah?"

"Can you come here for a second? I need help."

Immediately setting down the wine bottle, I toss its metal twist top into the garbage, expecting we'll finish this entire bottle. Shit, I could easily chug the whole thing myself.

I head in the direction of her voice, sticking my head inside her bedroom when I find it, hungrily eyeing up the space.

She's facing the wall, one hand holding the hair off her nape, presenting me with a clear shot of her slim neck and shoulders. She turns, offering me her profile.

The pillar of her throat.

“I can’t quite reach the zipper and that little hook at the top. Can you get it started for me?”

Her shoes are gone, legs bare, and in a few more seconds, her back and body will be, too.

“Uh...sure.”

I step into the room, focused on that gold zipper running along the column of her spine. On her long, smooth neck. The dark pieces of delicate hair flirting with the flesh that until tonight, I’ve only ever seen pulled back.

Buns, ponytails, and under her knit winter cap.

Never down, like this. Curled and glossy.

“Just a few inches will do the trick,” she adds.

Just a few inches.

I snicker. “Yup, got it.”

Her head tilts. “What’s so funny?”

I shrug, catching her reflection in the mirror. “You said inches.”

She’s biting back a smile. “Guys are such idiots.”

“I can’t help it.”

“You’re so immature.”

I narrow my eyes at her lace-covered skin, studying the tiny hook securing the dress’s clasp. “How am I immature?”

“I asked you to unzip my dress and your mind goes to dick jokes.”

“Well yeah, because: *inches.*”

She wiggles her hips. “Quit stalling and unzip me. I want to get out of this thing while I’m still young.”

“This might take a minute, I feel like I have eighty fingers.”

Not wanting to tear her dress, I concentrate on that tiny clasp, leaning in, my callused fingers working it like a fragile instrument. Once I loop it through, I free the zipper, unhurriedly pulling the metal hardware.

The sound of it whirring down its track mingles with the sound of our breathing.

Scarlett's bare skin and back become visible, the shiny gold zipper a direct lifeline down her spine. I bet if I ran my finger down her back, she'd shiver. *I bet if I ran my finger down her spine, I wouldn't stop...*

Slowly, that gleaming zipper slides farther...farther than necessary, my gaze tracking the journey along with it.

I wonder...

I wonder if I could make her moan by leaning forward and resting my lips below her ear. If I gently blew on her skin. Licked. Nipped.

I could skim my mouth down the back of her neck, across her bare shoulder, and—

“Rowdy, what’s happening back there?” she asks in a whisper.

“Sorry, it’s stuck.”

But the zipper isn't stuck.

I am.

One inch. Two.

Three.

Five inches.

It hums down its track, all the way down the curve of her waist. Her ass.

No bra.

No underwear.

No bra, no underwear, no bra, no underwear, my horny brain echoes on an infinite loop.

What. The. *Fuck?*

Seriously. Why is she naked under her motherfucking dress?

God is testing my willpower—he must be. I haven't prayed to him in months, and this is my penance.

I remain rooted to the carpet, fingers clasping the cold metal of her dress, intently watching her reflection in the mirror. Watching as she stands with her arms holding her hair off her shoulders, presenting me with every opportunity.

I want to slide my big hands inside the black lace fabric from behind. Skim them along her ribcage. Cup her breasts from behind in my palms. I

wonder what they look like bare.

How big they actually are.

What her skin would look like covered in goose bumps? What would her tits look like, covered with my palms?

It's so fucking tempting.

It would be so easy...

She's right here, already half undressed, already breathless, already in my hands.

As if she can read my mind, her cherry red lips part, eyes sparkling, blazing hot. Dilated pupils meet mine in the mirror.

Do something with your hands, Rowdy. Don't just stand there. For Christ's sake, drop your hands.

After an expectant pause, I let them fall. Clear my throat.

"Thanks." Scarlett's dimple winks at me in the mirror.

I stare.

Holy fuck is she pretty.

The erection in my pants agrees.

"I-I'll just be a few minutes. Let me throw on something comfortable."

"See you in a minute." I nearly choke on my words.

In the hallway, next to her door, I pull at my jeans, adjusting the denim around my boner.

Scarlett

I thought he was going to kiss me.

When Rowdy backs out of my bedroom, the door closing safely behind him, I shudder a breath because *holy shit*, the look he was giving me could have melted glass.

I thought he was going to kiss me.

Why didn't he?

It was intense, as if he's never actually seen me before. His eyes seemed to

be soaking in every line of my face, erotically roaming my reflection in the mirror.

Undressing me with his eyes as his fingers worked the clasp and zipper of my dress.

My breasts ache at the thought, and I press my hands against them to ease the throbbing. They're heavy, nipples puckered with want.

He wanted to slide his big bear paws into the back of my dress—I could read it in his expression as he unzipped my dress.

So that's what eye-fucking looks like.

Sterling was eye-fucking me with everything he had, with no shame, and I could see him warring with himself, not wanting to be untoward.

That's one of the many things I admire about him—his level of self-control.

Sterling.

Sterling, standing behind me with his nostrils flaring...

The hard syllables of his name have the power to melt my panties.

Or they would, if I were wearing any.

I wish I could have recorded the look on his face the moment his sharp green eyes locked on the spot he expected my undergarments to appear. Wide-eyed disbelief.

No bra. No panties.

That's right, Rowdy Wade—I'm naked under this dress.

The palm of my right hand covers the frantically beating heart inside my chest, and I lift my eyes to the mirror. Push the straps of my dress down my shoulders, shrugging all the way out of it.

Let it glide to the floor.

Bend to scoop it up.

Stand buck naked as the day I was born. Turn this way and that, studying myself. My skin. Hair.

I touch the tip of my left breast as I watch, circling the stiff nipple.

Do I look different? Maybe.

Do I feel different? Yes.

Don't get carried away, Scarlett—he's waiting in your living room. He wants you. I acknowledge the fact to my reflection. *He likes you.*

I remember myself—drop my hand, yank open a dresser drawer, and root around for underwear. Shimmy into a pair of silky black boy shorts. Gray tank top. Black leggings.

Leave my hair down.

Keep my makeup on.

Tousle my hair in the mirror, leaning in, examining my face.

Pull the skin down under my eyes and groan.

“There. That ought to drive him a little bit crazy,” I tell the girl in the mirror, hoping she's wise enough to listen. Look her straight in the eye and demand, “You are going to march out there and not chicken out. Do you hear me? No chickening out,” I hiss at myself. “He is just a boy.”

Satisfied, I give myself a stern nod, smoothing my hands down the front of my tank top. Over the set of boobs Rowdy Wade is so obviously preoccupied with.

Normally I'd be embarrassed by the obvious outline of my nipples...

But not tonight.

“This is for you.” Rowdy hands me a plastic beer cup.

I raise it, peering at the wine inside. “Wow, you really pulled out all the stops.”

“I didn't want to rummage around in your cabinets for wine glasses, felt weird digging through your shit.” His knee bounces a few times before he stills it with the palm of his hand and rests it on his massive thigh.

“This is fine. It's not like we're about to embark on a classy evening. We're about to play a drinking game.”

I take a sip from my cup out of habit, because it's in my hand and still cold, and my nerves are dragging me all over the place.

“No starting early,” Rowdy chastises. “You have to save that!”

I shuffle to the couch, crossing in front of him, noticing those green eyes of his trailing along after me the entire way, tracking my movements.

I shiver.

Settle on the couch left of center.

“Never have I ever been handcuffed.” He wastes no time initiating the start of the game, masculine brows waggling. “For *any* reason.”

Heart already racing, I raise a brow, surprised he’s diving right in with the risqué topics. We haven’t traveled down this path yet, but it looks like tonight’s the night.

Neither of us takes a sip, but I’m convinced he’s lying.

“You mean to tell me you’ve never been handcuffed, even to a bed? Why do I find that hard to believe?” Impossible, as a matter of fact.

His right shoulder rises. “I don’t fancy being tied to a bedpost—I have trust issues.”

“Oh! You don’t *fancy* being tied up? What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

“Someone could leave me there with my nuts and bolts just sitting there blowing in the wind, all vulnerable and shit. No thanks, not into it.”

His voice is a deep and humor-filled vibration, and *Jesus*, now I’m visualizing him naked, silk ties wrapped around his wrists, legs spread, and—

“Seriously, Scarlett, give me some credit? It’s been five weeks—I can read your mind by now.”

“No you can’t.”

“Yes I fucking can—get your mind out of the gutter.”

My blush is *furious*, unattractively darkening my collarbone.

“Never have I ever flashed a bartender for a free drink at the bar.”

Nothing.

“Really Rowdy? You’ve never flashed a bartender?”

“What would I flash them, my rod?”

“Uh, or your abs.” I laugh.

“If you were a bartender, would it work if I flashed my abs at you?”

Uh, yes. “I’d have to see them first to make that judgment call. You might have a dad bod under that shirt for all I know.”

“Don’t insult me. My abs are chiseled from the hardest rock.”

My heart beats erratically as I play it cool, wanting to see his stomach, but worried I'll embarrass myself if I do. "If you say so."

He leans forward. "Want me to show you? After all, I have seen your ass."

"Do you think my ass is a fair trade for your abs?"

"I'd say it's even—you have some pretty sweet cheeks on you."

I tilt my head, tripping over my tongue. "I...I-I..."

"You wanna see?" He's so blatantly fishing, wanting to impress me, that I give in—no hardship there.

"Yes."

He straightens on the couch, setting his wine on my coffee table, rising to his knees. Grips the hem of his shirt and—

"This feels weird." He lets the shirt fall.

"Why?"

"Now I feel like I'm showing off."

"You're not showing off—this is for scientific research, remember? The bartenders?"

"Good point!"

His charcoal gray tee rises again, inch by inch, fisted by his tan hand. Bit by bit he exposes his chiseled abdomen, the hard muscles constricting as he balances on the couch, foot secured to the floor.

"If I was a bartender," I say slowly, accidentally chugging some of my wine, "I'd totally give you free drinks if you flashed me those abs."

They're absolutely ridiculous. As intimidating as he is.

Satisfied, he plops his ass back down on the couch.

"Never have I everrr..." I glance around the room for inspiration. "Woken up in a room I didn't recognize."

We stare at each other, defying the other to take a drink.

Neither of us does.

Rowdy's pouty lips part. "Never have I ever asked for extra credit from a teacher."

My chin tips up and I drink. "You already knew the answer to that one, you jockhole. That wasn't fair."

He ignores me, charging forward. “Never have I ever gotten kicked out of a house party.”

I narrow my eyes.

“I see what you’re doing, trying to get me tipsy.”

I drink, smirking. Two can play this game.

“Never have I ever slept with someone without knowing their last name.”

I grin when he drinks from his red cup, green eyes boring holes into me from above the rim.

“Never have I ever gotten in the way of my friends hooking up.” He smirks back.

I’m going to kill him.

Drink.

The chilled wine goes down smooth, loosens the lazy smile I now have directed at him, letting myself learn the little nuances about him.

He’s handsome, but not in a classical way. Not like some guys—some athletes—who are chiseled and perfect and *pretty*. The ones we see in magazines, digitally enhanced to flawlessness. Straight noses and arresting eyes, landscaped—or manscaped or whatever—within an inch of their lives to garner attention.

Sterling is none of these things.

He has scars and flaws, with freckles across the bridge of his nose that contradict how big and masculine he is. Imposing. Tall and boxy and—

“Scarlett?”

“Hmm?” I’m lost in my thoughts, the alcohol not doing me any favors.

“Never have I ever called someone out at their own party for being a lying sack of shit.”

I grab a pillow to wallop him with it. “Would you stop that!”

His smile is all innocence. “Stop what?”

“Stop asking questions you already know the answer to. Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“You’re doing the same thing I am!” His voice rises an adorable octave. “Maybe you’re trying to get *me* drunk.”

“Pfft, like you’d hate that.”

“No, I wouldn’t hate it.”

There is no doubt about it: we are trying to get each other drunk.

Naughty, naughty.

I can’t even look at his face when I ask, “What motivation could I possibly have to get you drunk?”

“To take advantage of me?” He sounds hopeful.

“In your dreams, pal.” I’m a pretty little liar.

“Accurate.” The neutral expression on his face gives nothing away. “Every damn night, as a matter of fact.”

I shake my head; he’s got me all tied up in knots, and I laugh it away to keep the mood from getting any more weirdly wonderful. God I’m getting drunk...that didn’t even make sense...

“All right, I’ll stop asking you questions I already know the answer to if you agree to do the same. Besides, it’s not as fun.”

“Agreed.”

“Good, because I want to get to know you better.” I bite down on my lower lip, concentrating. “Never have I ever...hmmm., let’s see. Never have I ever *cheated*?”

Rowdy tilts his head. “Didn’t you already ask me that once?”

“That’s right—you cheated on your road test by flirting with the guy at the DMV.”

We regard each other from across the couch and he raises a brow.

“How about rephrasing the question?” he asks slowly.

I let out a breath. “Never have I ever cheated on a significant other.”

There, I said it, the question I’ve been curious about but too damn afraid to ask. Is he faithful? Or is he a cheating, piece of shit, jock stereotype?

“Oh, well that one is easy.” He grins. “No.”

“Are you being honest?”

His brows furrow. “Why would I *lie*?”

“I just—you’re surrounded by girls, I just thought maybe—”

He cuts me off. “If you had asked if I’ve cheated at baseball or in class, then yes, I would have had to take a drink.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Yup. I used to cheat all the time when I was a kid, especially in middle school—I sucked at math so damn bad.”

“Yeah, I could see you sucking.” My face gets hot. “At *math*, I mean, not sucking on—at! Not sucking at other things. I can see you, uh, sucking at math.”

Stop saying suck—what the hell is wrong with you?

He clears his throat, glancing away, inspecting his fingernails with a smile. “Never have I ever sexted.”

My head rears back at that one, surprised he’s dropping a sext bomb. “What do you suppose the answer to that is?” I’d really like to know what he thinks of me.

He stares at my red plastic cup. “You? No way.”

“I get no street cred around here.” I laugh, chugging.

I swear, I’ve never seen anyone’s eyes get so wide as his are right now.

“For *real*?”

Laughing again, the alcohol in my cup is making me light and bubbly and kind of loopy.

“Yes, really. I’m super good at it, too.” I take another sip of my wine for good measure, those green eyes of his burning holes into the bare skin of my shoulders. Collarbone.

Cleavage.

Rowdy’s eyes take one more long drag of my hair before he clears his throat, focusing on the wall.

“Your turn.”

I tap my chin. “How about: never have I ever slept with someone *knowing* they only wanted to sleep with me because I’m popular.”

Rowdy stiffens. “Scarlett, come on.”

“*Sterling*, come on. Drink or don’t.”

Please don’t, please don’t.

But he does, raising his cup. Drinks from it before licking the rim, then licks the drops off those beautifully sculpted lips.

It's mesmerizing.

"Never have I ever fantasized about a friend," he mutters, voice low but steady. Steadier than mine, steadier than my hands, which feel weak.

Hell yes I fantasize about friends, I want to shout. I fantasize about *him*. Fantasize about all the unfriendly things I want to do to him, with him.

We stare at each other expectantly, raising our cups at the same time, pressing the plastic to our mouths, tipping back.

Chug the wine down because suddenly we both need it.

My pelvis wiggles on the couch, a dull ache building in my crotch. My breasts get heavy. Nipples hard.

I feel a desperate need to drink away this sudden heat between us, the way his gaze grazes my skin.

Say something Scarlett.

"Are you drunk?"

"No, it's going to take a lot more of these to get this tank drunk." He laughs. "But I'm definitely starting to feel a buzz. Should I get the rest of the bottle?"

"Please?"

He clucks his tongue, amused. "Such pretty manners."

When Sterling rises, stands, and stretches, my gaze lands squarely on his backside, dragging over his round, ballplayer's ass. His tapered waist.

His thick thighs.

That strong back, muscles straining against his tight gray compression t-shirt.

Jesus, his body is incredible—and I would know, because my eyes follow it alllll the way into the kitchen.

When he returns and takes his place back on the couch, he's closer than before, so close our thighs touch through the fabric of our pants.

"Did you check the thermostat before?" I ask, holding out my cup for the refill I so desperately need. "It feels warm."

He pours. “Yeah. It’s set at sixty-eight, you should be good.”

Right.

Sixty-eight degrees.

Most definitely *not* sixty-nine.

“I thought of one while I was in the kitchen.”

“Go.”

He repositions himself, spreading his legs. “Never have I ever gotten anyone drunk on purpose.”

“I would never do that.”

“Nope.” His grin is lopsided. “Me neither.”

“Really? You don’t haze the new guys on the team? Get them drunk on purpose.”

“That’s not exactly what I was talking about.”

“No, but now I’m curious. What’s the worst thing you’ve done to someone on the team as a joke?”

He’s quiet, giving it some thought, debating about whether or not he can tell me. “I don’t know—probably the time I helped put Simon Grant’s car up on blocks in the parking lot.”

“That seems harmless enough.”

“You say that now.” Rowdy smirks. “But *you* try getting a two-ton car down off cinderblocks by yourself.”

“Has anyone ever hazed you?”

“Sure.” He leans back, arms up on the back of the couch, still gripping his cup.

I roll my eyes, wanting more detail. I hate having to pry it out of people. “*And?*”

“*Andddd* someone once took all my clothes while I was showering, which was so fucking dumb, because I solved that problem right away by stealing someone else’s.”

“Very clever of you.”

His grin is mischievous. “I didn’t say they fit.”

“Never have I ever stolen someone’s clothes.”

I laugh when he takes a chug from his cup.

“How is the wine? Need more yet?”

I squint into the half-empty cup he refilled not five minutes ago. “Yes please.”

He takes my cup, fingers wrapping themselves around mine—deliberately or not, his strong, steady fingers send a shiver up the nerves in my arm and straight to my erratically beating heart.

Rowdy pours light gold liquid into my cup, never taking his hand off mine.

Until he does.

I exhale.

“Never have I ever played *Never Have I Ever* for so fucking long and for so many days.”

We clink glasses in a mock cheers, drinking down our wine with matching laughs. “Never have I ever played a drinking game with wine.”

“Never?” he asks.

“Never.” I wink at him. “I’m not sure how I feel about it—the wine is a bit much.”

“Have you ever...” His throat clears before he goes on. “Dated an athlete?”

“Just in high school.”

“Yeah.” He chuckles. “Not the same thing.”

No, I wouldn’t suppose so. Sterling Wade is nothing like the boys I went to high school with. He’s powerful, well on his way to becoming a man, with responsibilities.

“How is it different?”

“How much time do you have for me to explain?”

“All night.” I blush when he shifts in place, resting his arm on the back of the couch, our thighs and calves rubbing together when he relaxes.

“For starters, during the season, we’re constantly sore from working out. It sucks. Wanting to go home and pass the fuck out after practice is pretty standard, which makes life pretty boring, but—homework.” He exhales a

deep breath before continuing. “Training. Practice. Rehab if you’ve been injured.”

“How often do you train?”

“Up to forty hours a week. It’s a job, not a hobby, so...not like high school where anyone can play if they make the cut. You fuck up and you’re screwed—your mommy isn’t coming to rescue you or call the principal to get your ass off the bench.” Rowdy shifts his big body again so he’s facing me. “Then obviously, stamina.”

“Stamina?”

“You know, going the distance.” How he says that with a straight face, I will never know.

“Are we talking about sex now?”

He has the courtesy to be sheepish about his blatant innuendo, shrugging, face turning crimson red.

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Rowdy, but contrary to popular belief, no girl wants to have sex for *hours* when the goal can be accomplished in a few minutes.” I flip my long hair. “It’s not realistic, and it would make me sore as hell.”

Instead of arguing like I expect him to, Rowdy Wade tips his head back and laughs, Adam’s apple bouncing as his beautiful, unshaven throat constricts. I imagine those whiskers leaving marks on my silky skin, in places I can only see with a handheld mirror.

“Never have I ever considered a girl one of my best friends.” He pins me down, only a few feet away, stopping my mouth from opening when he continues, “Do you consider me a good friend Scarlett?”

“You know I do.”

“Never have I ever...” He pauses, swallowing. Stares straight at my mouth. “Never have I ever wanted to kiss one of my *friends*.”

He’s whispering, the hand in his lap now sliding down his thigh...toward mine. I watch that hand breathlessly—wide and sturdy and male—drumming on the denim material of his jeans.

Takes a drink of his wine with the other, the knot in his throat bobbing... nervously?

I'm tempted to drink from my cup, too, just to give my hands a job, before I start fidgeting from nerves, having him so close. When I inhale a breath, I catch a whiff of him, of the fresh air, aftershave, and laundry detergent fragrances on his clothes.

"Stop it, Sterling," I whisper back. "You shouldn't tease."

He looks unsure, oddly vulnerable. Smells so damn terrific. "I'm not trying to be funny. I'm..."

"You're what?"

"I'm trying to get you to kiss me. Why is it so damn difficult?"

My mouth forms an O.

He sets his cup down on the table in front of us, leaning forward to invade my personal space.

I let him.

I let him lean over, big body facing mine, torso twisted. Large hands slide up my bare arms to my shoulders.

"Never have I ever stared at someone's lips so fucking hard in my entire life." He pauses. "Never have I ever put the moves on someone and been so fucking nervous."

"You're nervous?"

"Yes," he rumbles.

"So am I."

Our faces are inches apart, hot breaths mingling.

My voice catches. "Sterling, don't ever play games with me."

I'm at a loss for words.

"This isn't part of the game, Scarlett."

"It's not?"

"No." The tip of his nose brushes mine and the rumble of his chuckle is low. "I have never, in my whole goddamn life, worked so hard to get someone to put their mouth on mine."

"Are you drunk?" I murmur.

Because I am, buzzing with nervous energy and anticipation. Drunk on his cologne and the tingle from his strong forearms breezing up my body.

“Maybe not on alcohol, but on something else entirely,” he admits. “Are you?”

My eyes close when his nose slides across my cheekbone, down my jawline, nuzzling my neck. He can’t see it, but my eyes roll back into my head from the contact.

Jesus he feels so good.

“A little.”

His breath. His nose.

His mouth.

It brushes the shell of my ear, hot breath making me crazy.

“We can blame it on the alcohol in the morning if we want to, yeah?” His voice is husky, vibrating my nerves, just at the base of my ear.

I tilt my neck. “We could.”

Instead of pressing his mouth to mine, Rowdy drags it down the column of my neck where the skin is bare. Kisses my clavicle, sucking gently. Grazes his way up my chin, the divot of my bottom lip.

My lips part, breath coming quicker, chest heaving.

“You smell so fucking good,” he says into my temple.

“I was just thinking the same thing about you.”

“Good, ’cause I showered tonight, just for you.”

That makes me laugh, not because it’s funny, but because he mentioned it—as if I couldn’t tell he smelled like soap and a little extra effort.

The alcohol has gone to my head—I’m a total lightweight—but alcohol isn’t what has me tipping my head back, isn’t what has me biting back a small moan when Rowdy kisses the sensitive skin next to my right eye.

When he drags his nose down mine and kisses the tip of it, my eyes shut. Lashes flutter when those callused hands of his graze my biceps, thumbs smoothing along my collarbone.

I know what’s coming next and I *want* it.

Want it more than anything I’ve wanted in a really long time.

The couch cushions dip when we lean into each other farther, my breasts gently rubbing his pecs through his thin shirt. I’m grateful for it, relishing the

heat and hardness of him.

Then...

His mouth is on mine, the light kiss scarcely touching my lips. It's a hot, searing form of torture.

My heart is beating so fast, pounding inside my chest so hard I can hear it in my ears, echoing in time with every breath I take.

Ba bum, ba bum, ba bum.

Rowdy is hesitating, waiting to really lay one on me, his penetrating green eyes roaming my face. Lips. Hair. I lean back to study his face, too, wondering what he sees when he looks at me. Study his dilated irises and pouty bottom lip. His cheekbones and the stubble on his cheeks from the day's growth.

So handsome and serious.

"What are you waiting for, Sterling?" I whisper.

"I don't know."

With a temperate nudge, I give his strapping shoulders a push, urging him back against the cushions, legs spread, hands at his sides.

I don't know what comes over me—sexual repression, probably—but I find myself straddling his wide hips, sitting my ass right on top of his thick thighs as if it has a right to be there.

My eager palms rest on his chest, easing up the smooth fabric of his shirt, every tendon in his body beneath my fingertips. At my mercy when I pin him down.

"Hands behind your head," I murmur into his ear, dragging my nose up and down the shell of it, his hair tickling my nostrils.

He complies quickly and without protest, clasping those great, masculine hands of his behind his head, lacing them together. His biceps bulge, whiter than the rest of him, veins blue and prominent.

I graze my fingertips along the sensitive skin there, relishing how soft it is. How strong and solid the muscles are. Firm. Flattening my palms, they skim Rowdy's flesh, over his armpits and down his ribcage.

He's breathing hard, squirming under me.

"What do you daydream about the most?"

“You.”

Good answer.

I kiss his neck, just below his jawline.

“What is your best physical feature?” I whisper.

“My...” He swallows, debating. There are so many choices. “My arms.”

I agree. I kiss the flesh of his powerful underarm.

“If you were given the chance to become invisible for one day, what would you do with this ability?”

“I...” he begins. Swallows. “I would spend it watching you walk around naked.”

“You think I walk around naked an entire day? My, my, what wishful thinking.”

Nevertheless, I kiss the space next to his eye, where it’s tender, kiss his laugh lines.

His eyes widen when my hands cradle his face, fingers flexing behind his head.

Rowdy is so damn adorable; I want to eat him up. So huge, my five-foot five-inch frame feels so petite in his lap. With my front row seat, my fingers brush his jawline, stroking upward over the unshaven bristles. Over his pouty bottom lip.

“Do it, Scarlett.” His fingers squeeze my waist to prompt me along, begging me to kiss him on the mouth. “Fucking do it already.”

“Stop being so bossy. I’ll get to it.”

Never would I ever have thought I’d be doing this with him, not in a million years...

“You can take your hands down now,” I inform him magnanimously, orienting myself so I can rub my breasts along his chest.

The first brush of my mouth against his is brief, sweeping. Soft.

Electric.

Zap.

Sizzle.

Startled, I pull back. “Did you feel that?”

A short nod. “Yes.”

He licks his gorgeous lips, lips still parted expectantly.

“Do it again.”

His hands grip my backside, fanned out on my spine.

When our mouths finally fuse, I lose myself in him a bit. One small piece of my soul becomes Sterling Wade’s, whether he wants it or not.

Up my back, one of his hands roams. Up my spine, strong and splayed. Up the column of my neck, fingers spread, plunging through my hair as his tongue plunges into my mouth, meeting mine.

The other is firmly planted on my ass.

This kiss is...

Shock and shiver and memorable. Insanity. Divine torment.

I cannot get my tongue far enough down his throat, body electrically charged, intensely aware of the throbbing member between my legs.

I will not grind on his cock, I will not grind on his cock, I will not...

Too late. My hips roll of their own accord; they can’t help themselves, wanting him as much as I do. His thick shaft is nestled snugly between my legs, begging for attention the way Rowdy was begging for my kisses.

Greedy. Needy.

Hot and sexy, our tongues and lips are wet, dipping into each other as if it’s the only time we’ll have the chance.

It’s madness.

I want to tear his clothes off and bang him on my living room floor.

Weeks of mutual, pent-up sexual tension have me reaching for the hem of his shirt and sliding my hands underneath. Aching and desperate to feel the weight of his skin, my fingertips glide over Rowdy’s textbook washboard abs.

They were carved out of marble.

Jesus, he’s so ripped and cut in all the right places I don’t know what to touch or stroke first.

Greedy. Selfish.

My hands find the light smattering of chest hair on his pecs. I sweep over

it with the pads of my fingers; my selfish palms slither over the solid, brawny muscles of his clavicle. Brush over his hard nipples with the pads of my thumb. Rest on his ribcage, caressing there, too.

“Don’t,” he warns into my mouth. “I’m ticklish.”

I’m such an asshole. I tickle near his arm pit.

“How ticklish?” I murmur, daring to torment him.

“Ticklish enough that I’m three seconds from picking you up and tossing you to the floor.”

My breath quickens. Picking me up and tossing me to the floor? *How exciting.*

“Is that so?”

I wiggle my finger under his pit, taunting the caged tiger, practically daring him to haul me up and do whatever nefarious things he’s going to do to me on the ground in the middle of the room.

Do it.

Do it, I dare him.

My heart accelerates at the thought; I’ve never made out with anyone so totally male before, making all the guys before him nothing but *boys*.

Rowdy could lift me in one motion as if I weighed nothing, and I want to see him do it, desperately.

“Are you testing my patience on purpose, Scarlett?”

I nod. “How strong your self-control?”

“Right now? Shitty.”

“Good.” I tip my chin, giving him access to nuzzle it. Lick it if he wants.

“You want me to toss you on the floor?”

Another nod and my lips part. “Yes.”

“How bout I do you one fuckin better?”

Fuckin’ do me better.

Sterling’s mammoth palms firmly grope my hamstrings before his arms brace and he stands, hoisting me up. Lifts me, as if I’m weightless, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

God he’s sexy, lips and teeth still lapping me up. Mouth on my neck,

sucking at my collarbone.

Instead of laying me on the floor as he threatened, he takes three long strides, stalking across the carpeted floor, pressing my back flat against the living room wall.

Bracing me between him and the kitchen.

His erection digs into the apex of my thighs through his pants, and with slow controlled movements, Sterling hovers me over his cock, working me up and down over his jeans until we're dry humping against the wall. Kissing. Making out like teenagers, devouring each other.

Rowdy squeezes my ass every so often, our tongues mating. Fucking, really.

Dirty.

I can't get my mouth open wide enough; this kiss is the best one I've ever had, messy and wet—so wet I'll probably have to wipe my mouth off when we're done, but I don't care. I'm delirious with want and need, dirty and delicious tension making us frantic.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about what it would be like to kiss Sterling Wade since the minute I walked out onto that porch with him, lying if I said I hadn't thought about those mammoth baseball player hands rubbing on my body.

They're huge. They're fantastic. They're gripping my bottom, grasping my butt cheeks. Sliding up my ribcage, around my slender frame to cup my breast through the fabric of my tank top.

I'm so glad I'm not wearing a bra.

"Mmm," I moan.

This kiss is everything, and I will remember it for the rest of my life.

I groan into his mouth when his hands firmly grip my body, holding me steady as if I weigh nothing. Moan again when his tongue does that sexy twirly rolling thing against mine. Draws my bottom lip into his mouth, nipping.

I pant when his teeth drag along my throat and his mouth sucks at my neck.

This kiss is everything...

Everything.

His mouth checks my vitals, sucking on the throbbing pulse in my neck, slowly driving me mad and probably giving me a hickey. I don't even care; I'll cover it with makeup.

I love it.

Love his mouth and tongue and rough, grasping hands.

This is more than a first kiss. This is us losing ourselves in each other, an out-of-body experience. For once in my life I don't want to be cautious. I want to throw caution to the wind.

I want him as much as he wants me.

But not against a wall. Or on the dirty carpet of my college rental. Or when we've been drinking.

I meet his wild, half-hooded eyes. Stare down at his puffy lips, running the tips of my fingers along the bowed top of his mouth, tracing the curve.

He parts his lips, tongue flicking the pad of my forefinger.

Then, I bring a hand to my own mouth, replicating the motion, pressing gently.

It's tender.

Thoroughly kissed.

"Scarlett, let's go to the bedroom." He continues to kiss along my jaw.

God I want to—I want to *so bad*.

But I'm not spontaneous, and no matter how hot my body is—the fire inside blazing from head to toe—I'm not the kind of girl who's going to have sex on a whim because it feels good.

"If we go into the bedroom, Sterling, we won't stop."

"You want to stop?" His expression is incredulous.

"I don't want to...but we should."

Rowdy still has me pressed against the wall, pelvis and cock digging into my crotch. He licks my cleavage, right in the valley between my breasts. "I want you to know, I have no problem playing the long game with you, just so you know what you're up against."

I'm dazed. "The long game?"

“I can wait you out, Scarlett Ripley.”

Wait me out. “What does that mean?”

“If you’re saying there’s even a chance of letting me inside your tight, wet pussy, I’m willing to wait until you’re ready.”

Jesus, his mouth is filthy.

I love it.

Warm heat floods my stomach, pooling in my lower abdomen.

“You’re so fucking...” He’s practically growling, sexual frustration clenching his control like a fist. “Look, okay...I just need a second.”

Even when he blows out an unsatisfied puff of air, releasing the pent-up tension from his lungs, it’s sexy. Watching this self-composed man come undone is...

Powerful.

“I’ve literally never had this conversation with anyone in my entire life,” he grumbles, the baritone of his voice reverberating deep. “My balls aren’t going to be blue, they’re going to turn purple.”

I kiss the corner of his mouth, in no hurry to be put back on the ground. “Never have I ever had a sex talk before I tried sleeping with someone.”

We kiss in lieu of drinking alcohol, still drunk on one another.

“You’d rather just rip all your clothes off and screw?” I ask when we come up for air.

“It’s always been easier than talking.”

“We’re being responsible.”

He grunts. “I guess, but doesn’t planning sex take the fun out of it?”

I wouldn’t have a clue. “Doesn’t anticipation give us something to look forward to?”

He considers the question. “What if the sex is crap after all this buildup?”

“What if it’s the best sex you’ve ever had?” I tap him on the nose. “Just something to think about.” Tilt my head, studying him as he holds me up as if I weigh nothing. “Have you ever done that? Not just had random sex?”

“I had a girlfriend once, my freshman year.”

He had a girlfriend? This surprises me and my brows go up.

“Oh yeah? What happened?” I try to keep my tone causal, but our breathing is labored and it’s difficult. Lean in to kiss his strong jaw.

“The team happened.” He hoists me, readjusting my weight, mouth below my ear. “The pressure, the—”

“Groupies?”

“No. I was going to say I was away too much. She didn’t like it.”

“*Hmm.*”

“*Hmm, what?*”

“Nothing.”

He sets me on the ground, gazing down into my eyes. “Not nothing. What were you going to say?”

“I was going to ask about fidelity.”

“Why? I already told you I’ve never cheated. Fidelity was never a problem for me like it was for her.”

“Can you clarify that?”

“She said she was left alone too much and I wasn’t giving her enough attention.” The words come out slightly bitter, and in reply, no sound comes out of my mouth but for a short intake of breath.

“Do you mean *she* cheated on *you*?”

He grunts, running his fingers through my hair. “I got over it.”

“But you haven’t had a girlfriend since.”

“No.”

“So you’re not emotionally scarred or anything?” I blurt out.

He laughs. “What the hell kind of question is that?”

“I’m just wondering if you were traumatized by it.”

He rolls his brilliant green eyes at me. “I was eighteen, Scarlett. Nothing traumatized me back then. My shit didn’t stink.”

“Whatever you say.” I’m not convinced.

He sighs. “I didn’t lie in bed crying about it, if that’s what you’re thinking happened.”

Yeah, that’s a little bit what I was thinking. “I want to have sex with you

—I do—just not against a wall.”

“Bite your tongue.” He bends at the knees, brushing my hair back and flicking his tongue along my lobe. Exhales into my ear. “I would never fuck anyone against a wall. Have you ever tried it? Stupid dangerous and way too much work on my end not to drop you.” He laughs into my hair. “Not worth it.”

“Shut up.” I laugh, wanting to smack him arm. “I’m being serious. I’m not a hook-up kind of girl, and you already know I’m kind of a pain in the ass—ask any one of your friends.”

“I’m not telling my friends *shit*.” After a few heartbeats, he adds, “It’s no one’s business but ours.”

I believe him, holding my breath when his palm roams up the smooth front of my top. Kneads my breast through the thin fabric.

“Scarlett?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m going to miss these boobs tonight when I get home.”

Whether he palms one for good measure or to torture us both, I’ll never know.

Rowdy: *I can’t sleep, can you?*

Scarlett: *No. I tried sleeping then finally started playing around on my phone. Watching for you to message me, lol, how lame am I?*

Rowdy: *Not as lame as me doing the same thing. I gave up waiting—you’re a real stubborn PITA sometimes, Ripley*

Rowdy: *I should have just spent the night. My dick would be tucked nicely into your ass crack. Was that TMI? Too soon?*

Scarlett: *lol, I’m not sure that would have helped. And do you really think we’re at that point? Sleepovers?*

Rowdy: *We’re friends, which is more than most people have when they start dating.*

Scarlett: *Dating... Is that what you want?*

Rowdy: *I told you I was playing the long game, remember?*

Scarlett: *I didn't forget, I guess I just didn't realize that's what you wanted.*

Rowdy: *Isn't what EVERY girl wants?*

Scarlett: *I only want what you're willing to give me.*

Rowdy: *Scarlett, it's two o'clock in the morning; I'm way too tired to get philosophical.*

Scarlett: *Let's talk about how you failed to nail me last night. What would we call that in baseball? A strike out?*

Rowdy: *JESUS you're fucking savage.*

Scarlett: *I'm so sorry, I couldn't pass that up. I thought I was flirting??*

Rowdy: *You could have taken a nice long pass on that joke.*

Scarlett: *Sorry I'm being a brat, especially when you're being so sweet, but I've been dying to use the phrase "nail me" in a sentence.*

Rowdy: *If I wanted to be abused, I'd go to the gym and let the physical therapist work out the knots in my shoulders.*

Scarlett: ***takes mental picture of your body with no shirt on***

Rowdy: *Next time you won't need a mental picture. All you have to do is ask, and I don't even care what tone you use.*

Scarlett: *I'm pretty good with my hands, maybe I'll give you a rub down one of these days.*

Rowdy: *Don't ever say rubdown because now a massage is the last thing on my mind. All I can think about is an actual rubdown.*

Scarlett: *You're just...*

Rowdy: *Horny?*

Scarlett: *Do you suppose there's a better word than that? Horny sounds so gross.*

Rowdy: *It sounds better than me saying I'm having lascivious thoughts about you.*

Scarlett: *Did you just google that word?*

Rowdy: *Yeah, the list of synonyms is terrible. None of them are dirty enough.*

Scarlett: *You're right, they're not. Weird, right?*

Scarlett: *When do you start spring training for baseball—like, what day?*

Rowdy: *January...twentieth or something I think, I'm not exactly sure, I'll have to look at the schedule. I actually come back before break is officially over, we start a few days before class resumes.*

Scarlett: *How did I not know this?*

Rowdy: *I was hoping you'd make a better WAG than this.*

Scarlett: *A what?*

Rowdy: *lol, look it up.*

Scarlett: *When are you done with exams?*

Rowdy: *The 12th but I have a bunch of shit to do at the field house before I leave; already have my plane ticket for December though.*

Scarlett: *Pause. Can we focus on the fact that you keep using semicolons in your text messages?*

Rowdy: *Is it turning you on?*

Scarlett: *Proper use of grammar always turns me on.*

Rowdy: *I'll remember that. You want me to email you my calendar?*

Scarlett: *Uh, sure? If you want?*

Rowdy: *I want.*

Rowdy: *What are you doing next weekend? I thought maybe we could hang out or something.*

Scarlett: *Going home for the first time in months.*

Rowdy: *Oh.*

Scarlett: *What about you?*

Rowdy: *I don't have any plans.*

Scarlett: *I'd bring you home with me, but my parents don't know you and I think my dad would have a fit. Plus my mom has this project she needs help with for my dad...*

Rowdy: *I need help with a few projects, lol ****eggplant and water emoji*****

Scarlett: *You're ****such**** a pervert!*

Rowdy: *Are you complaining? Should I dial it down a notch or 12?*

Scarlett: *No ****bites down on lower lip*****

Rowdy: *So there's no chance you're going to be here this weekend? I was hoping we could go to dinner or something.*

Scarlett: *Like a date?*

Rowdy: *Yeah, like a date.*

Scarlett: *Well now I feel terrible—I wish I could.*

Scarlett: *Are you disappointed?*

Rowdy: *Little bit, but I can text you all weekend, yeah?*

Scarlett: *I'm sorry, did you say texting or sexting?*

Rowdy: *You had me at sexting—now I'm kind of glad you're going to be gone.*

Scarlett: *Gee, thanks.*

SIXTH FRIDAY

“The Friday Scarlett is Home and I’m Bored Out of my Fucking Skull and Spend it Eating Takeout at the Kitchen Sink.”

Rowdy

I miss her.

Have I mentioned it’s only a three-day weekend? And I should grow a pair of balls and not be such a pussy? I’ve been metaphorically watching out the window for Scarlett to return to school, checking my phone constantly for her messages.

They come sparingly, her parents monopolizing her time.

Shit.

If it’s this bad now, what’s it going to be like for winter break when we’re home for an entire month and I’m a thousand miles away? It’s not a simple car ride; I have to take a plane home, which means I’m stuck there, with only my parents for company.

I punch my pillow and check my phone again.

Midnight.

She’s definitely asleep by now.

My thumb hovers over the messenger app.

I hesitate to tap it but it’s so fucking tempting. Scarlett sleeps with her sound on, and if I send her a message, she’ll wake up and we can...

Ugh. Fuck.

I flop back down against my pillows and groan, reaching into my boxers, running my fingers along the hardening cock resting against my thigh.

Thirty-six more hours to go.

A MONDAY

“The Monday After She Leaves for the Weekend.”

Rowdy

To say I've missed the sight of Scarlett would be putting it mildly. I spot her clear across the quad, and damn it all if my heart doesn't pick up its steady beat. This is my first on-campus sighting of her since meeting her six weeks ago, but she's out of reach. Still, my eyes greedily take her in.

It's not as if we haven't gone an entire seven days between seeing each other, but that was before.

Before the kissing...

The groping...

The dry humping that plays on a loop in my mind, causing me to jerk off more than I did in middle school.

She's definitely too far away for me to bellow out her name; I'd cause a scene and make a spectacle of myself.

Instead, my legs sprint into motion, propelled in her direction, dodging and weaving through students like the pro-baller I am, eyes focused on the end game: reaching her side before she's gone.

I haul ass, tightening the hold I have on the black backpack slung over my shoulder. Call out her name when I'm within range, grateful she hears me the first time so I don't embarrass myself by shouting it again.

Slow to a jog when I catch up, get her attention just as she's turning away, toward the parking lot, cheeks tinted a pretty shade of pink from the cold.

She's surprised when I skid to an abrupt halt in front of her, my short sprint worth the effort when she smiles, white teeth winking. Even more surprised when I bend, kissing her on the lips.

I do it again. Because I can, and I can't really help myself.

“Hey,” I puff out, touching her elbow, wanting the contact. Wanting to put my hands on her. Anywhere. God, I missed her so fucking much, and I don’t even care if that makes me sound whipped.

It’s freezing; temperatures having dropped over the weekend, and as we get closer to winter and the end of the semester, they continue to plummet in the Midwest—one of the few regrets I have about taking the scholarship in Iowa.

Let’s face it, I’m from Florida and my blood is thinner, so my nuts tend to shrivel up in these frigid temperatures, and occasionally, I’m a big fucking tit baby about it.

Yanking at my jacket, hating the wind, I pull it higher up my throat like a cold, little pussy.

For Scarlett’s part, she doesn’t seem bothered by it at all, the weather agreeing with her, cute black hat pulled down over her long hair, furry ball bopping at its top.

She’s dressed in a jacket I haven’t seen on before; it’s black and stylish—not that I give a shit about fashion—but every Friday night on the porch, she’s been dressed for function.

This coat isn’t puffy; it’s fitted, with a gray, faux fur collar brushing against her skin.

“Hi.” Her breath comes out in white wisps.

“I saw you from over there.” I point across the yard. “I’ve been waiting to plant you with a facer since you ditched me to go home last weekend,” I tease. But it’s the truth. Texting while she was home helped, but nothing beats being with her in person. Except maybe beating myself off, haha.

“A facer? Doesn’t that mean ‘punch someone in the face’?” I can’t tell if she’s teasing me or serious.

“Does it?” I thought it meant kiss.

She giggles. “I think so. Maybe don’t repeat that one too loud? Unless you want to get arrested for threatening someone with assault.”

I heft my backpack. “Where you headed?”

“I was heading home.”

“Me too.”

We stand in the middle of the sidewalk, on the far side of campus, staring one another down, and in the broad light of day, I can see how clear her skin is. How long her lashes are, the defined arches of her dark eyebrows playing peekaboo with her black hat. The pert tip of her candy-colored nose.

Running into her on campus like this feels intimate, more so than having my hand up her shirt or my tongue in her mouth. Her being out of context has me out of my element.

“Can I take you for coffee?”

Her dimple pops. “I could do a coffee.”

“Or lunch?” Damn I’m hungry.

Hungry for lunch *and* her company.

I’m so fucking desperate for her company.

I rack my brain for a cause; she isn’t dazzled by the attention I get from my peers, has no desire to be part of my fan club. She doesn’t seem to give a shit about baseball, though it’s kind of cool her dad does. Doesn’t care that I’m the team captain, or one of the nation’s best shortstops. Has no interest in finding out what my prospects are to play professional baseball—hasn’t even asked.

“You want to grab something on campus?” Scarlett asks.

“No—let’s get the hell out of here.” *I want to be alone with you, uninterrupted.* “I’m craving something from that sub shop down on Tenth Street. Have you been?”

“Once or twice.”

“You cool with that?”

“Sure, why not.” Her feet are still rooted to the ground. “Want to walk?”

“Hell no.” I laugh. “I’m freezing my balls off. I can drive if you’re okay with that. First we have to walk and pick up my truck.”

“Sure.”

Our feet move in tandem toward my house and without thinking twice, I reach for her hand.

Her mitten-covered hand is soft. I give it a squeeze before directing my gaze forward, and if she’s not into PDA, she isn’t saying anything.

The fuzzy little fur ball on top of her hat bobs as she trudges along beside

me, makes me smile. Her black leather boots click on the concrete alongside me.

Scarlett's backpack is a generic black, like mine, with gray accents, matching her jacket with its shiny silver zipper.

We make quick work of the short walk to my place, and I open the door to my truck, waiting to close it until she clambers up and buckles herself in. Brush my fingers over her, unnecessarily checking to make sure she's secure as an excuse to touch her.

"What?" She catches me staring at the sight of her in the passenger side, like she belongs there.

"Nothing. You just look good in my truck, that's all."

Good enough to eat, the rest of her face turning the same shade as the pink button of her nose as she fights back a smile—and loses.

I step onto the running board, grab the handle above the window, and kiss her again. "God you're cute."

Making out in my driveway wasn't the plan, but her lips are warm and I'm starving for her—been starving for her all weekend, and no amount of texting or sexting or FaceTime was going to slake my appetite.

When I pull back, all I can think about is, "A giant fucking sandwich with everything on it."

"Maybe some cherry pie for dessert," she breathlessly adds, touching a mitten to her lips where my mouth just was.

Cherry pie...was that an innuendo?

Landing another peck to her pretty mouth, I step down off the running board, shut her door, and jog around to the driver's side.

"God," I groan. "I haven't eaten anything since five o'clock this morning."

I start the engine, letting it hum.

"Five this morning? What were you doing up so early?"

"Lifting." My biceps flex as if on command.

"Lifting what?"

"Um, weights?" I laugh, amused, the sound filling the cab of the truck. "We work out during the week and check in with our trainers so we're not lazy pieces of shit when the season starts. Some guys really let themselves go

in the off season.”

“Getting up that early would kill me.”

“Not an early riser?”

“I’d be lying if I said I was.”

“You get used to it.” Sort of.

We reach Tenth Street, my eyes scanning the road for a curbside parking space. I find one, paralleling park the truck like a goddamn professional driver.

I don’t have time to make it around to Scarlett’s side of the truck; she hops out and onto the sidewalk before I can unbuckle myself, already waiting on the curb when I slide myself out.

Looking both ways, it’s slightly exhilarating bolting across the street with her by my side, grabbing her hand. I manage to reach the front door first. Open it for Scarlett and usher her through with a magnanimous gesture from my palm.

My mother taught me *some* manners.

We grab a table in the corner, and the place is far enough from campus that it’s not busy. The likelihood that we’ll bump into anyone? Slim to none, thank fucking God.

“I already know what I want.” She shakes her head, declining a menu when the waitress comes to take our order. “Whatever your soup of the day is, I’d love a bowl of that. And a banana nut muffin. Oh! A hot chocolate, too, please, with lots of whipped cream.”

I stare down at my menu, studying the photographs one by one, undecided. Then, “Give me the pita with everything, extra roast beef please. Mayo, mustard, oil. No tomatoes. Lots of lettuce, and I’ll take extra fries with my fries.” I close the menu and hand it back. “I’ll stick with water and a cup of whatever soup she’s having.”

The girl scribbles on her pad, sneaking furtive glances at me beneath her lashes. She’s definitely a student and definitely recognizes me; I wonder if she’ll ask me to confirm my identity later, or if she’ll leave us the fuck alone to talk in peace.

Then, Scarlett does one of my favorite things: stands to remove her coat.

I don't know what it is about this gesture that gets me excited, but it does, probably because she's taking off clothes—any clothes, it doesn't matter to me.

She's sliding down the zipper and I intently watch it part, anticipation thrumming my chest. Man, I love when she peels her jackets down her shoulders, revealing whatever she's got on underneath.

The tight shirt does not disappoint, hugging her fantastic rack. Her slender hips sport black leggings tucked into leather boots.

Scarlett plucks her hat off, finger-combing her hair until it's smooth. It falls in straight sheets, a stark contrast against her crisp shirt. I watch her bend to shove the hat in her jacket pocket before plopping her tight ass back into her chair.

Mine.

And I'd be remiss not to notice her boobs bouncing when she seats herself. I shake my head to center myself.

Focus, dammit.

"I want to clarify the conversation we had the other night, since we never really finished it." It's been eating away at me, niggling my mind—mostly because I want to fuck her so goddamn bad. "You know, the sex talk."

I pluck a pink sugar packet from the metal holder in the center of the table and roll it between the pads of my fingers. Tap it on the tabletop to busy my hands, folding back the corners.

My knee bounces under the table.

"Which sex talk? The one we had at my house, or the one we had this weekend when you texted me a picture of your rock hard...bat?"

No, I did *not* send her a dick pic. She is literally talking about the vintage Louisville Slugger my parents gave me when I signed with Iowa.

"The one where we discussed being responsible about it instead of having it." My nostrils flare.

"Oh *that* sex talk." She shifts in her seat, right leg crossed over her left knee.

"Yeah. *That* one."

We're silent for a few seconds when the waitress comes back with our

drinks, setting them one by one on the table, loitering. I raise my brows at her, irritated, hoping she'll take the hint and walk off.

“So let's talk about it, because it's all I can fucking think about.”

“That's because you're a raging hormone.” Scarlett takes a dainty sip of her hot chocolate. “I mean, look at you. You look like you want to leap across this table and...”

“Bang you?”

She sputters a little, white frothy whipped cream stuck to the corner of her lip. “That's one way to put it.” Her forearms rest on the table, but her fingers never leave the ceramic mug. “But you know...I don't want a relationship based on sex.”

“I don't want a relationship based on sex either, but it would be super neat if we had lots and lots of it.”

“And all this sex you're wanting to have is with *me*?” The sip she takes from her hot chocolate is anything but casual as she eyes me above the rim.

“Uh, *yes*?”

Her laugh is interrupted by yet another server who sets our plates down. She hovers, too, a blatant attempt at striking up a conversation, though not with *us* as a couple—with me.

My fingertips tap the table, agitated. Knee bounces.

“Can I get you anything else?”

You can get the fuck away from us. “Nope.”

“Are you sure? We have some really great cookies—they were just delivered from the corner bakery.”

Scarlett smiles politely, oblivious. “We're good.”

“If you need anything else—”

“Didn't you just hear us say no?”

Jesus Christ, I'm so irritated. Is she hard of hearing? Why won't these fucking waitresses leave us alone? *We were having a goddamn sex talk!*

“Sterling,” Scarlett's voice intones kindly, and she glances up at the girl, smiling apologetically. “We're good, but thank you.”

She scuttles away.

“Was I being rude?” I deadpan.

“A little?”

I let out a sigh. “Look, we have shit to talk about, and I don’t want to keep getting interrupted.” I glance toward the front counter. “Now that waitress is going to bitch about what an asshole I am, and no one will bother us. See how that works?”

Scarlett’s lips part.

“It sucks, and I’m sorry. I was a dick, but we’re leaving for break in two weeks and I just found you. I’m being selfish.”

She’s the only thing I’ve been thinking about since she left for home, and I’ve been jerking off to images and the idea of her every night, ever since.

My wrist is actually sore; I had to get it wrapped this morning by the athletic trainer.

Her eyes go wide, lashes fluttering. “Just *found* me?”

“Yeah.” I reach across the table, grabbing her hand. “How the hell am I supposed to freaking enjoy winter break without you? Friday nights are going to *suck*.”

“I...hadn’t thought about it.”

“I have. Being home sucks. What day do you leave for the holidays?”

“When do *you* leave?”

“We have a mandatory team meeting with the coaching staff the last night of classes. I’ll get a conditioning schedule from the trainer, see PT one more time, then fly home that Sunday.” I pause, grab a fistful of sandwich, and shove it in my mouth, take a big bite and chew.

The servers might be a pain in the ass, but goddamn this sandwich is good.

I moan, stuffing it farther into my mouth, rolling my eyes.

“God, Rowdy, have some manners!” She laughs, coughing, reaching for the water in front of her to clear her throat. “Stop it or I’m going to choke and die.”

“Too good, can’t help it.” I caveman my voice, chomping down. “So, when do you leave for winter break?”

Down goes her water glass. “Well, I get done with exams early, so I’m leaving on that Wednesday.”

Two more weeks until we won't see each other until January. Winter break is going to seriously suck; my parents are going to drive me nuts, and I won't get to see Scarlett. The idea of it is so fucking *weird*, considering we've spent the past six weeks' worth of Fridays together.

Teasing and talking and making out like teenagers.

It's been awesome.

"What are you doing while you're home?"

Scarlett shrugs. "Me? Working if I can pick up hours. It's hit or miss when all the college students flood the town during their breaks. What about you?"

My shoulders shrug. "I don't know, whatever my mom has planned—it's different every year. We don't have a big family so it's really uneventful, really fucking boring." I finally take another bite of sandwich. "My dad bitches every year about all the tourists in town, and this year they mentioned wanting to skip town."

"It's Florida! What could be better than that?"

"A last-minute cruise? It's so cheap leaving from the port in town since we don't have to fly to get there. It's less than an hour to the coast."

"That sounds like *heaven*."

"I can't wait to sit on my ass."

"You sit on your ass?"

"Well, no. I'll still work out, hit the gym and shit." My eyes rest on the dark hair falling over her right shoulder, quickly doing a scan, hitting all the points of her body. Delicate shoulders. Blue eyes. Gracefully shaped hands.

This is stupid.

I'm Rowdy fucking Wade for Christ's sake. I've played in stadiums full of thousands of people—I don't get nervous, and I sure as hell am never at a loss for words.

Scarlett smiles, offering up a piece of her muffin. "You want some?"

I suddenly want it all.

"You know," she says, peeling off the muffin liner. "This holiday is going to suck and it's partly your fault, being from Florida and all. I mean, who chooses Iowa over the Sunshine State?" She scoffs, envy filling her teasing tone.

I hesitate, weighing my words. “Why don’t you come home with me?”

Scarlett laughs, tipping her head back, the fabric of her shirt straining across her tits. “Go home with you—ha ha, very cute.”

Shit. She thinks I’m joking, and my stomach drops.

“It’s not the worst idea in the world.”

The idea takes root in my brain, and I immediately accept Mission: Get Scarlett to My House in Florida Over Break.

Plenty of couples do that, right? Visit each other and shit? It’s not unreasonable for her to come down for a vacation, is it? Spend time with me, get to know my friends? Meet my parents?

I’m not going to sugarcoat it: I’m fucking crazy about this girl.

Plus, she loves the ocean and I *have* the ocean, so why not give it to her? If she doesn’t see the logic in *that*, then she’s more unreasonable than I thought.

“You don’t seriously want me coming home with you.” She’s stirring her soup. “Do you? I mean, we just started...you know, hanging out.”

“I don’t want to be just hanging out, remember? Long haul?” I clarify. “I want to date you—just so we’re clear.”

“You want to be exclusive,” she deadpans.

I shift, uncomfortably. Why is she watching me that way? Like I’m an alien from another planet? “Yeah—that’s what we both want, right?”

Her hesitation only lasts a split second. “Yes.”

“Then why are you staring at me like that?”

Scarlett giggles. “Because, I just—this is crazy. This whole thing is nuts. I really like you, it’s just never been this easy with anyone before. Guys can be such dicks, and I guess I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop. It’s too easy with you.”

“Too easy—that’s a good thing, yeah?”

“Yes. That’s a good thing.”

I sit up straighter in my seat like a Golden Retriever wagging my tail, excited to have pleased my owner, recognizing Scarlett’s words as praise.

“I told you, I hate games.”

Her eyes are shining. “You like *our* games though.”

“Fuck yeah I do,” I mouth silently, raising an eyebrow. Jeez she’s sexy. “True or false, you want to sleep with me.”

“You’re so annoying,” Scarlett groans.

“Answer the question.”

“True.” She shrugs, noncommittal, slurping the soup off her spoon.

I grin wolfishly. “True or false, you find me attractive.”

“Put a leash around your ego’s neck, jeez. Of course I find you attractive—who doesn’t?” Scarlett crosses her arms, eyes stretching heavenward toward the ceiling. “True or false, *you* want to sleep with *me*.”

I like this game more now that she’s cooperating. “True.”

“True or false, *you* find *me* attractive.”

“Also true.”

Scarlett laps at a dollop of whipped cream heaped atop her hot chocolate, the froth slowly melting, steamy in her mug.

She licks it, cradling the mug, taking another sip from the edge with a tortured groan.

“True or false,” Scarlett begins tentatively, fiddling with the spoon resting in her soup bowl. “It’s normal for a girl to be a virgin at the age of twenty-one.”

Uh...say what now?

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to answer that.” I might be an asshole sometimes, but what someone does inside the bedroom is their own damn business. “It hardly matters if someone is a virgin or not.”

“True or false: virgins freak you out.”

I scoff. What the hell kind of question is this? “No?”

“Pick one Sterling: true or false.”

“False—*clearly*. I’ve never had sex with one, but it doesn’t matter if someone is a virgin or not. It’s not a virus.”

“What if that virgin was *me*?”

I laugh a little too loudly, causing a table nearby to crane their necks and look over. “You’re not a virgin, quit fucking around.”

Scarlett blushes, dipping her head so I don't see her flaming red cheeks. "Maybe they called me Cock Blocker back at the house for a reason, did you ever think of that?"

I scowl now, unamused. "Don't you dare call yourself that—and no, they were calling you Cock Blocker because they're pricks and they were bored, not because of anything you did wrong."

"I'm just saying."

"Well don't. It's not funny." She hasn't touched her soup, and it must be getting cold. "Aren't you hungry?"

"I am, but my nerves just kicked into overdrive." Instead of eating, she runs her palms up and down the legs of her pants, as if wiping off sweat. "I have something to tell you but I'm doing a terrible job spitting it out."

I sit back, my legs spread wide under the table. Waiting. "I'm a rock, Scarlett. You can tell me anything."

"Right," she says slowly. "I just don't want to disappoint you because I know the kind of girls you're used to and it's not the kind of girl I am."

"I decide what kind of girls I'm used to."

I have no idea what she's trying to tell me, but I can tell it's important and clamp my lips shut; I'm one step away from telling her I'm falling for her in the middle of a damn sandwich shop, just to calm her nerves, to take that worried look on her brow and turn it into a smile.

She looks both determined and panicked and like she might want to throw up, still fiddling with the edge of her napkin.

"I wouldn't be telling you this if I didn't like you, but I do want to have sex with you so I think you should know what you're getting into." She sighs nervously, crossing her hands in her lap. "I don't know how to tell you this."

"What is it? Do you have an STD?"

A nervous laugh bubbles out of her chest, erupting into a half laugh, half sob.

"Scarlett—are you pregnant?" *Jesus Christ, please say no.*

Another laugh, this one louder. "Would you stop? No, I do not have an STD, and no I'm not pregnant. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Sooo many things."

Scarlett takes a deep breath, voice low.

I watch her—the way she’s avoiding my eyes, and the ruddy tint of her cheeks...

“Scarlett, are you a *virgin*?” I ask it slowly—carefully—setting my sandwich back on my plate. Rest my hands on the table and wait.

How is she a virgin?

She’s beautiful and clever and chatty. Smart, with a sassy mouth on her. Slightly perverted—a total bonus. Says what’s on her mind and doesn’t bullshit anybody. And when she looks at me, whatever shit I’m dealing with? It disappears.

All I want to do is *be* with her.

I couldn’t care less if she’s a virgin or not—I’d still want to fuck her seven ways from Sunday.

In fact, it’s fucking awesome.

Scarlett’s eyes are downcast as she spoons soup past her puckered lips, the blush on her cheeks more prominent because of her white shirt.

“Are you?” My voice is almost at a whisper, affording us more privacy, but I lean closer so she can hear me. “Is that why you didn’t want to have sex the other night?”

She fidgets with her napkin. “It might be.”

I can feel my expression softening. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because we were *just* making out. I didn’t think it would be that...crazy. I didn’t think I would want to so fast.”

“That kiss was the best kiss I’ve ever had in my life.” It made my fucking toes curl—makes them curl now just thinking about it.

She stills. “It was?”

“Yes. My fucking mouth was tingling all night after that kiss.”

“Mine too.”

“And I would never force you to do anything you didn’t want to, but I won’t lie and say it didn’t kill me to stop.” I run a hand through my hair. “You...”

Her eyes dart around the restaurant, checking to make sure no one idles

nearby. Mouth puckers, sipping the soup off her spoon, and the round little O has me staring stupidly.

“I what?”

“Never mind.”

The last thing I want to do is start word-vomiting poetic bullshit at her. Not now. Not yet.

Everything that comes out of Scarlett’s sexy mouth has me squirming in my seat.

“I can be your sex camel,” I joke.

“My *what?*”

“It’s not ideal, but I could probably go a really long time before we have sex without dying, like a camel can go without water.”

“Oh my god Sterling.” She laughs. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I don’t want to wait—I’ve waited long enough. What I’m asking you is...are you okay with the fact that I’ve never slept with anyone before?”

I’ve never been anyone’s *first* before. The idea gets me excited.

“Why would I be disappointed no one has thrown their dick inside you before?” Is she being serious?

I also sit and wonder about what it will be like breaking someone’s hymen. *Shit, that’s what it’s called right?*

“You know I wouldn’t have any idea what I was fucking doing, right?” Do I handle her with kid gloves or just go at it?

“Don’t sit there and tell me with a straight face that you’re a virgin, too.” She snickers. “Because I’ve heard a few stories about you through the grapevine.”

“God no, I’m not a virgin.” I scoff. “But I’ve never, you know—had sex with one either.” How does that even work? “What if I fuck it up?”

“You won’t.”

“Jeez, what if it’s a bloody mess?”

The look on her face is priceless, and I wish I hadn’t said that last part out loud.

“I seriously cannot with you right now,” Scarlett practically hisses with a

laugh. “Can you please you lower your voice before I hyperventilate?”

Lower my voice? We’re practically whispering already. “How much lower can it be?”

God she’s adorable when she’s embarrassed.

“Do I get to play doctor with you now? Doctor Wade, Sex Therapist has a nice ring to it.” The idea gets me excited.

“Like—you’d diagnose my virgin status?”

“Yeah, after doing a *thorough* physical examination.” I pause to think, all jokes aside. “After we get back from break, we can, you know...discuss it more?”

Scarlett nudges her bowl and mug aside, making room to rest her elbows on the table, leaning into me, rising up over the table.

“How much are you going to miss me over the break?”

“Honestly? Like fucking crazy.” More than I’ve ever missed anyone, and she’s still sitting right here in front of me. In fact, I’m guaranteed to spend the entire freaking vacation jerking off to the fantasy of Scarlett in nothing but snow boots, a lacey thong, and a winter hat—the one with the little gray puff on top. Goddamn it’s cute.

“We’re not going to see each other for an entire month.” I shuffle my feet against the wooden floorboards like an amateur, self-conscious and exposed. “How do you feel about that?”

“I’ve gotten so used to having you around.”

“I know.”

We study each other from across the table.

I study her, then rise out of my seat, planting a quick kiss on her lips. Sit back down and raise my hand so the waitress will see me and bring the check.

“Let’s get out of here.”

We make quick work out of paying our bill, mostly because I scared the shit out of the waitress before. She gets us cashed out quickly and we’re back in my truck within minutes.

On our way to her place, the stretch of silence between us comfortable, smiling stupidly at each other the entire drive.

When I pull up to her house, I put the car in park. Let it idle, radio playing quietly in the background, wanting to invite myself inside but not wanting to be pushy. Not after that sex talk we just had back at the restaurant.

Scarlett unbuckles.

Watches the road ahead of us, staring down the empty street, her backpack still in my back seat.

Finally, a car drives by slowly, and we both watch it pass before she speaks.

“Of all the people in this world I would have paired myself with, it would never have been you,” she says quietly. Slowly. Thoughtfully, tilting her head only slightly to glance in my direction. “You’re really wonderful.”

Jesus, my fucking heart—the little bastard—swells up. I’m not supposed to feel this way so fast—it’s been what, six, seven weeks? Thirty? Ninety? Feelings don’t happen this fast—not to me.

I’ve never fallen in love with anyone, ever.

Is that what this is?

These fucked up knots in my stomach and late nights spent staring at the bloody ceiling? Counting stars because I can’t sleep? Tossing and turning, checking my phone every goddamn second of every day we’re not together?

I can’t fucking believe it’s happening now.

With the girl from the front porch.

Cheeseball bastard.

Sap.

Take it slow, my brain tells me.

Run with it, and run as far as you can go.

I’m an athlete—a champion.

I play hard and jock harder, and these little games I’ve started with her?

I’m playing to win.

SEVENTH FRIDAY

“The Friday Before I Have to Spend an Entire Break Wanking Off and Jerking it to Porn.”

Rowdy

I didn't realize those two weeks between Thanksgiving and the end of the semester would fly by so damn fast.

It doesn't help that ninety percent of our time was spent cramming for finals, packing, and preparing to head home.

Luckily for my lips and dick, the other ten percent with Scarlett was spent making out on every surface of her house we could. Her place is the best, private. No roommates to interrupt or share her with.

My favorite spot to grope her is the kitchen; if I grab her by the hips, I can lift her high enough to plant her sweet little ass on the countertop, where she's just the right height so I can step in between her legs...

I get turned on by the smallest things, too, like watching her make me a sandwich. Watching the nape of her neck as she stands at the sink. Observing her doing anything domestic gives me the biggest fucking boner.

Had me wedging myself more than a few times in front of her, scooping her up, wrapping her legs around my waist, and kissing the shit out of her.

God I'm going to miss her.

Somehow, I convinced her to stay until *I* have to leave—not that it was too hard. The second she started to protest, I kissed the argument right out of her. Took her to dinner and made staying a few more days worth her time.

And when I drive her home?

Every cell in my body is well aware that I'm not going to see her for thirty days.

My heart gives another squeeze, chest tight. Lump in my throat.

“Let me walk you to your door.”

A nod.

Her sidewalk is annoyingly short, and we’re at the front door in a matter of seconds. Scarlett pauses, back pressed against the doorframe, gazing up at me, she’s so damn beautiful.

“Want to come in?”

I want to—God knows I do. “I better not. If I come in, you know I won’t be able to leave, and I have to be up for my flight at three in the morning.” Not to mention a shit ton of other things to accomplish before I go.

“I’m leaving pretty early, too.”

My hands cup her face, buried in her hair. My thumbs brush her jaw, back and forth, then over her bottom lip.

Pink nose.

Long lashes.

Deceptively sweet dimple.

She’s nothing like I thought she’d be that night I dragged her onto the porch, nothing like that girl running her sassy mouth, arguing to get back inside.

Man am I glad I kicked her ass out, because now this ass is mine.

“Have fun in Florida,” she says against the palm of my hand, miserably.

“Not possible.”

“Yeah right. It’s my dream vacation.”

“You’re my dream vacation,” I croon, trying my damndest to sound sexy.

It has the opposite effect.

Sounds so fucking *dumb* that Scarlett starts laughing.

And not that cute, flirty little laugh I love so much—no, it’s the loud, obnoxious one that makes me want to tackle her to the ground and stick my tongue down her throat.

“I can’t.” She gasps. “I’m your dream vacation? Really Rowdy? Oh god, it’s so cheesy I can’t breathe.” She wheezes in the cold, white puffs steaming out her mouth.

“Okay, that didn’t come out the way it sounded in my head.”

“That was terrible. Don’t quit your day job.”

“Would you stop laughing?” I frown. “I’m trying to be serious for a second.”

“I know, I know, but come on...”

I shut her up the only way I can: pull her in until our lips meet and her saucy tongue is inside my mouth.

It’s cold, but she’s warm, and we stand like this on her front stoop, making out like I’m dropping her off at the airport.

Wrapping my arms around her waist, pulling her flush, our jackets making it impossible to get any closer.

“You going to start coming to my games when we get back?” Like a good girlfriend.

“Yes.” She’s breathless, raised on her tiptoes, kissing my chin. “And I know so much random baseball trivia, it’s going to knock your jock off.”

I don’t tell her she already has.

EIGHTH FRIDAY

FIRST FRIDAY OF WINTER BREAK

“The Friday Where I Try to Get Her in a Swimsuit.”

Scarlett

Rowdy: *You know, I’ve been giving this sex thing a lot of thought. Like... a LOT a lot of thought.*

My heart races at the sight of his name on my phone, as it does every single time he messages me or calls.

I sigh, content, tapping open his message, hunkering down deeper into my bedding. It’s freezing outside, winter in full force, the seven inches of snow that dumped on us last night lending a chill to the house. My father insists on keeping the house cool, so I’m always cold, and the weather makes it worse.

The thought of Rowdy warms my body considerably, and I smile, replying.

Me: *That’s the LEAST shocking thing I’ve heard you say since meeting you.*

Rowdy: *I laid in bed last night, and it dawned on me: I get to be the first guy to bang you.*

Rowdy: *[GIF attachment: camel walking through the desert]*

Rowdy: *Get it? That was my sex camel reference.*

Me: *[GIF attachment: disappears into shrubbery]*

Me: *I got that, loud and clear, you goof...*

Me: *What are you doing right now?*

Rowdy: *Plotting*

Me: *Plotting what?*

Rowdy: *In due time, Ms. Impatient. Missing me yet?*

Me: Yes—I was just about to message you to thank you for the present. It was so sweet of you to send me seashells, they're beautiful. I can't believe you got me a gift.

Rowdy: I went to the beach and picked them myself. My parents thought I was nuts.

Me: lol Why?

Rowdy: I haven't been shell seeking since I was five, that's why. And here I am, six two, bending over every two feet to pick shells up off the ground. Had to get there early to beat all the competition.

Rowdy: And the beach is an hour drive.

Me: Oh stop, it is not.

Rowdy: You love the ocean, Dimples. Of course I went to collect shells for you.

He is ridiculously thoughtful.

Me: I'd kiss your face so hard if you were here. I really miss you.

Rowdy: Promise?

Me: Yes. Right below your sexy mouth.

I love his lips.

Rowdy: You know how many times I've wanted to suck on your dimple over the past few days? Like two hundred.

Me: Uhhhhh...I don't know what to say to that, lol

Rowdy: It's the cutest fucking thing I've ever seen besides your ass.

Suddenly, the FaceTime notification on my cell starts chiming, buzzing and ringing, and I fumble, knocking my phone to the floor.

I grapple for the charging cord, reel it in like I'm fishing, and scramble to click on the nearby lamp.

It's Rowdy.

It's ten o'clock on Friday night, eleven o'clock his time.

"Hey." His handsome smile is a wicked, welcome sight.

"Hey."

I wipe the sleep from my eyes, propping myself up by the elbows so I can study his face.

“So, this is what you look like when you’re in bed, eh?”

Oh god.

Shoot me now.

“That shirt is *not* what I thought you’d be wearing.”

I glance down at it: a tank top that says *I licked it so it’s mine*. My mother hates it, so I have to wear a sweatshirt over it when I go down to the kitchen every morning for breakfast.

“What did you think I’d be wearing?”

“I don’t know—one of those cat onesies?”

“Shut up.” I laugh, snuggling down deeper into my pillow. “I don’t own a cat onesie.”

My onesie is a sloth, *obviously*, but he doesn’t have to know that.

His broad shoulders are bare, tan collarbone smooth, and the way he has his phone angled does nothing to afford me a better view of his assets. Dammit.

“So I’ve been thinking,” Rowdy starts with no preamble, leaning against a navy blue wall in a room I assume is his bedroom. “You doin’ anything this week?”

Am I? I rack my brain, going through the plans I made for the rest of the month, pulling the baby blue cotton sheet farther up my chest.

“Just going through my closet and taking whatever I don’t wear anymore to the donation center.” Man that sounds lame. “That’s about it. My dad might want to go skiing at some point before I leave because we just got a ton of snow.”

Rowdy’s face scrunches up at the mention of snow. “What about next weekend, like, Friday?”

“Hanging out with some friends who are home. What about you?”

He repositions himself on his bed, bending an arm and resting it behind his head to prop himself up, my eyes roaming to his armpit—good lord, even his damn armpit is sexy with its patch of light brown hair.

The cords in his thick neck strain, and I get a semi-decent shot of his chest. I was right, it does have a smattering of hair...

“...so that’s what they’re doing this year instead of staying in town,” he’s

saying as he moves the phone an inch and I get a clear shot of the television in the corner.

I didn't hear a word of anything he just said.

Too busy staring at his sleek skin and brown hair and into his green eyes.

"I...um, can you please repeat that? Was that a question?"

He smirks. "Something distracting you, Scarlett?" Flexes his pecs and biceps. Even his collarbone is mouthwatering.

"I was telling you my parents decided to head out of town—they're taking a short cruise."

"Wait." I sit up. "They're leaving you home alone for the holidays? That's so sad! And so very *Home Alone* of them."

He is unperturbed, yawning. "My dad's friend hooked them up with a killer deal. He works for the cruise line in their food service division, so I'll be home alone, but hopefully not for long."

"Don't tell me—you're going to throw a kegger while they're gone."

He doesn't respond right away, instead staring through the phone into my eyes until he has my full attention. Green eyes, black sooty lashes.

"Come to Florida."

"I'm sorry?" Surely I must have misunderstood him.

"Pack a bag and come down." He sucks on his bottom lip, and it glistens when he's done, *damn* his sexy face. "Come see me. Please."

I emit a weak little laugh, my stomach dipping into a clumsy curtsy.

"Rowdy, that's crazy. I can't up and fly myself to Florida."

"Why not?"

"Because...because it's *crazy!*" Is it? Spontaneous and fun and adventurous, that's what it is.

My heart speeds up, warming to the idea. Wanting to say yes but not wanting to appear too eager. Florida! With Sterling.

Nope. No. I can't do it, it's nuts.

"Why is that crazy? I want to see you—this vacation is too fucking long and it's total bullshit."

I can't help laughing, even though he's being serious.

Because he *is* being serious.

Hope and excitement and disbelief spear my heart like a thousand arrows.

“I checked flights,” he rambles quickly before I can interrupt. “They’re cheap right now because it’s so close to the departure date.”

He already checked on flights?

“Even so...” I sound weak—so so weak.

He’s stretched out now across his pillows, arm still above his head, bicep still bulging. Eyes mischievous.

“Coral reefs, Scarlett. *Sand*. Ocean life.”

I scrunch up my face; he’s not fighting fair anymore.

“Okay, now you’re just being mean. How close are you to the ocean if we had to drive?”

“Tallahassee to the coast? An hour. I promise I’ll take you snorkeling even if the beach is shitty.”

I sit up, mind racing. “Wait, you were being serious? You drove an *hour* to pick seashells?”

“Yes.” He’s impatient now. “Can you focus on the trip here?”

I press on my stomach to quiet the nerves. It rolls and protests expectantly. “Rowdy, why are you doing this to me?”

“Because I’m a selfish asshole and I want to see you.”

The heart inside my chest goes from constricting to thumping wildly with excitement and happiness and a whole list of other things I will categorize later when I don’t feel like hurling my guts out from nerves.

“Sterling...”

Jeez, what would my parents say if I hightailed it down to Florida? Not that I’d ask them for money to buy a ticket, but still—I’m twenty-one. Going to see a guy on break is insane, right? Would my dad let me do it?

You don’t need permission, Scarlett, you’re an adult..

“You know you want to. I can tell you’re thinking about it.” He lowers his voice, and it’s soft and silky. “I know you are.”

“Well of course I want to! Who in their right mind wouldn’t?!” But just because I want it doesn’t mean I can do it.

Can't I?

“Before you flat-out tell me no, would you do me a favor and at least talk to your parents? Be spontaneous with me, Scarlett.”

Be spontaneous *with* me.

Nevertheless, I huff. “Peer pressure isn’t going to work on me Sterling Wade.” My chin goes up. “Besides, I’m an adult—my parents stopped bossing me around when they started making me pay rent.”

That’s right: you don’t need permission, you’re an adult.

“Then what’s stopping you from saying yes?”

I stare at him through one eye, squeezing the other one shut dubiously.

“Where would I sleep?” To my own ears, I sound breathless.

His grin is crooked, white teeth shining. “Guest room?”

He sticks his tongue out like he’s just swallowed a bug.

Even making that face, he’s good-looking. “The guest room, huh?”

“Donald and Hannah Wade said you can sleep in my room if you want to be surrounded by all my trophies.”

Heart, meet throat. “You actually asked your parents if I could come down?”

“What? Did you think I was going to surprise them with some random girl I picked up at the airport? Of course I told them about you.” He yawns again. “For your information, my mother spent an hour creeping on your Instagram. She didn’t want me to bring a cleat chaser into the house.”

His mother was looking through my pictures? Oh god.

“By the way,” he adds nonchalantly, “she thinks you’re adorable.”

“Adorable,” I deadpan.

“She thinks you’re adorable. I think you’re sexy.”

“Wait, you follow me on social media, too?” How did this never occur to me before? I follow him but hadn’t thought about him following me, and apparently I missed the notification.

I flush.

His brow furrows. “I mean...yeah?”

I shake my head; this whole situation is entirely surreal.

“I still think this whole thing is nuts.” I say it slowly, trying to convince myself but failing miserably.

Rowdy senses the weak chink in my argument and takes advantage. Cajoling with that low voice of his that makes my skin shiver.

You don't need permission, Scarlett, you're an adult.

“You want to say yes, don't you?”

“Yes.”

“What's the problem? Don't you have a passport? Because a regular ID will work, too.”

“I have a passport...”

“Then say it,” he murmurs. “Say yes, baby.”

“Yes, baby.” I can't even tease with conviction—I want this trip so bad.

“Stop fucking with me, Scarlett. Be serious for a second.”

The poor boy, his eyes bear a guarded expression I've never seen from him before, and it occurs to me that he's vulnerable. There is nothing about his gaze that says he's messing around with me. Rowdy is dead serious; he wants to see me. He's eyeing me so intently, I have to glance away toward my closet.

I bite down on my bottom lip. “You must miss me, huh?”

“Yes,” is his emphatic reply. “All I fucking want is to see you.”

My nod is small but firm. “All right.”

He goes still. “Wait—so you're coming?”

“Yes.”

Brows shoot up. “Yes?”

“Yes, Rowdy—YES.” How many times do I have to say it? “I'll come down to Florida.”

Oh god, I'm doing it! I'm going to freaking FLORIDA.

“Mom!” Rowdy suddenly shouts, holding the phone out, and I notice for the first time that his bedroom door is open. “Scarlett is coming to Florida!”

From somewhere within the recesses of his parents' house, I hear a female voice shout back. “That's nice, sweetie!”

I'm going to meet his parents!

I'm going to see the ocean!

I'm going to see Sterling.

That's when I freak out—on my bed, kicking my legs like a maniac. Beneath the covers, exuberant and excited, the sheets flying all over the place as I squeal. And kick and toss and turn and squeal some more, wanting to scream for my mother, who's probably in bed reading a romance novel.

“Did you know...when you kick your legs like that, your boobs bounce? Thanks for wearing a tank top.”

I can't even be mad at him for being a perv.

“I'm coming to see you,” I whisper, wanting to pinch myself. Wanting to kiss his face through the phone. “I'm coming to Florida.”

If I keep saying it over and over, it's more real by the syllable.

Rowdy's grin is easy and beautiful.

Arrogant.

“Wow. That was way easier than I thought it would be.” He breathes a sigh of relief, running a big, tan hand through his hair. “That took less than ten minutes—you're way too fucking easy. We need to work on your negotiation skills. Thank god you're not a business major.”

“You asshole!” I giggle. “You knew I was going to say yes the entire time you were hassling me!”

“Yes, but I'm an asshole who's taking you to the beach.”

Suddenly, I can't contain my excitement. “This is going to be the best winter break.”

I kick my covers again, like a child who was just told they're going to Disneyworld in the morning.

“Pack your shit, baby, and I'll book your plane ticket. I'll pick you up at the airport next Friday.”

Friday, Friday, Friday.

Our lucky day of the week.

“I'll buy the ticket tonight and send you the flight information.”

My nod is trancelike, a blissful stupor, and I'm drunk with excitement. Rowdy and I peer at each other, through the miles, over the phone, goofy

smiles impossible to contain.

“I should get some sleep,” he says at last. “I’m running a half marathon at five in the morning with a friend from high school.”

“A half marathon?”

“Yeah, no big deal. It’s only thirteen miles.”

Jesus. No wonder he’s in such great shape.

“Good night, Sterling,” I say on an exhalation.

His lips curve. “Night, Scarlett. See you Friday.”

We hang up.

It’s impossible to sleep.

A text message comes through as I’m rolling back over, and I grab my cell one last time before silencing it.

Rowdy: *Hey Scarlett?*

Me: *Yeah?*

Rowdy: *If this distance didn’t exist, we’d be fucking right now.*

NINTH FRIDAY

“The Friday of Sun and Sand and Tits and Bikinis.”

Rowdy

“Can you do me a favor and not embarrass me in front of my friend?” I flex the fingers of my left hand nervously, a habit I picked up from standing long hours in the infield during baseball games.

“You mean your girlfriend?”

“Mom, please don’t call her that when she’s here.”

“So she’s not your girlfriend?” She feigns ignorance to torture me.

“Yes, she is. Just hearing it...” makes me so damn stupid, I don’t know what’s going to come flying out of my mouth. I’m giddy, and having Scarlett here, in my fucking house, is making me want to run circles around the neighborhood to burn off this nervous energy.

I’m pumped. So fucking stoked.

“It’s all good, kiddo. Mom is hip.”

“Just—oh my god. This is going to be my worst nightmare.”

My mom sets down the knife she’s using to cut up a pineapple, resting it on a butcher-block cutting board.

“Why are you so dramatic?” She sighs, popping a chunk of fruit in her mouth. Chews. “So high strung, just like your father.”

I press my lips together and take a deep, steadying breath. “Mom, just...be cool, all right? Don’t start planning our wedding. *Don’t* mention babies. Don’t ask what books she reads, don’t—”

Wrong thing to say.

My mother cuts me off with a palm in the air. “Does she not *read*?”

“Yes, she likes to read, just don’t grill her about your novels, okay?”

My mother writes historical romance novels and is a total nerd when it comes to reading.

“What does she like to read, then?” she presses.

“*Mom*. If you embarrass me, I’m never bringing her back here again.”

She straightens against the counter, uncurling her spine indignantly. As if I’ve offended her somehow.

“You’re hurting my heart.” She places a hand to her chest, affronted that I’d even suggest to her that they’re an embarrassment. “I’m not a regular mom, I’m a cool mom.”

Oh for fuck’s sake.

“I’m serious. Don’t do that thing you always do when there are girls around...”

“What thing?” She glances around the kitchen as if expecting someone to pop out from one of the cabinets. “What girls?”

“That thing!” My arms are waving around as if independent from my body. “That thing, that *thing*—babies and weddings and shit.”

“Sterling Aaron, I don’t even *know* this girl. I certainly wouldn’t talk about *babies* in front of her.” There’s a brief pause. “Why? Does she like babies.”

I’m so screwed.

“I just don’t need you scaring her.”

“Why?” She leans forward, elbow on the counter, eyes bright, alive with interest. “Do you actually like her? Is this one going to stick?” Mom makes the sign of the cross against her chest. “I’ll be on my best behavior, promise.”

Shit. That’s not a good sign, either.

See, the thing about my parents—especially my mother—is that they’ve always been overinvolved where I’m concerned. As their only son—and one who was athletically inclined—no matter how busy they were or how often they traveled for work, they were always at my games.

Overinvolved. Overenthusiastic. Overactive imaginations.

My mother is a romance novelist, so it’s always come with the territory—she romanticizes everything I’ve done. Every girl I’ve gone out with, every relationship I’ve never committed to—all fodder for her writing.

She simply cannot help herself.

It's her job.

But, that's never made it any less annoying.

I sigh, grabbing my car keys off the counter. "I'm running to the airport to grab Scarlett and when I get back, can you just behave? We aren't characters in one of your novels."

A terse nod. A mischievous tip of the lips. "Of course you're not."

She's not looking me in the eye.

"Thanks, Mom."

Another cube of pineapple gets popped into her mouth. "Drive safe, and wear your seatbelt."

Scarlett

Rowdy looks just like his mother.

It's the first thing I notice when she greets us at the door when we return from the airport...having made out in the car for fifteen minutes before coming inside the house from the garage.

Mrs. Wade is tall, the familiar smile on her pretty face spreading. She does a good enough job trying to disguise it behind a coffee mug, but I catch it.

And there is no hiding her twinkling green eyes.

They're just like her son's.

"So I'm just going to throw this out there then let the two of you go on your way—and feel free to shoot the idea down," she starts, leaning over the counter and steepling her fingers. "Don and I were talking to our friend Ken, who works at the cruise line, and he managed to get an extra cabin this weekend."

Cabin?

Heat climbs my neck. Is she implying what I think she's implying?

"Don't look so horrified, they're not adjoining rooms." She laughs. "We thought it would be so fun for the four of us to go, kind of like a really long double date!"

Go with them? Go with them where?

She prattles on, taking another sip from her white ceramic mug. “What do you think? Leave tomorrow, back on Monday? Two nights, bim bam boom?”

Rowdy’s fingers find the belt loops of my jeans and give them a little tug so I know he’s come up behind me.

“Go with you on your cruise?” Rowdy asks into the crown of my head, above me.

My heart thumps harder.

Mrs. Wade—Hannah—waves a hand airily. “Just a quick jaunt to the islands down south.”

The islands down south means the Caribbean. Fish and coral reefs and buckets of seashells.

“I understand if you planned on just lying around, so go discuss it. Dad is jonesing for some tacos so we’re running down to grab a few from the cart down the block before they close up shop, but we’ll be back in twenty minutes. I should let Ken know within the hour if he can release the cabin for booking or if we’re taking it.”

She is so casual about it—having me in the house, taking me on a vacation.

As if any of this is normal.

“Think about it, kids—we’d have the whole weekend to get to know each other!”

Rowdy groans, but his fingers tickle the waistband of my pants. “Wanna talk about it? Bring your bags upstairs?” His tall frame reaches for my suitcase, still sitting on the floor next to the mudroom door, and when I go to remove it from his hands, he shoos me away. “I got it.”

He insists I climb the stairs first—they’re conveniently located off the kitchen, his bedroom the first door at the top. Dumping everything as we enter, he leads me inside, closing the door behind him.

We’re alone.

In his childhood bedroom.

My eyes are drawn back to him as he plops down on the bed unceremoniously, bouncing on the mattress, excited. “What do you think?”

Wanna go?”

Yes, yes, yes!

I want to go so bad it’s a damn miracle I didn’t burst into song and dance in the middle of his parents’ kitchen—but I do the moment I shut his bedroom door behind us. Blood courses through my entire body, the liquid oxygen making me lightheaded and dazed, flushing with anticipation.

I hop in place, a high-pitched squeak causing him to quirk an eyebrow.

“Sooo that’s a yes?”

Week after week of getting to know me on the front porch of the baseball house, I know I’ll never be able to fake him out. Never be able to be coyly demure.

Even if I wasn’t *dancing* in his bedroom, he’d be able to read me better than most of my friends can.

I calm myself, inhaling a few quick breaths. “I want to go so bad.”

“I knew you’d say yes.”

I push him down onto the mattress and crawl over him, staring down into his eyes. “Did you plan this?”

Shrug. “I may have already known my parents could get a second room so we could go along, but I didn’t know if you would say yes.”

My blue eyes narrow, lips hovering inches from his. “Was this an ambush?”

Rowdy licks his lips. “My mom is a hopeless romantic—she’ll do anything to get me into a committed relationship.” He cranes his neck, pressing a kiss to my mouth. “I haven’t brought a girl home since I was in high school, and it was probably for some stupid dance.”

“So I’m special?” I tease him, wanting to hear the words. Dying for them.

“So special I want to parade you all over the place when we get back to school—I’m going to force all my pissant friends to spend time with you.”

“God, please don’t!”

“Why not?”

“Because they...don’t like me.” They think I’m annoying.

“Tough shit. They’ll get used to it.”

“Are you keeping me?”

“Can I?” His hands slide from my ribs to my back, caressing my spine, big and warm and secure.

Mmm. “I’ll think about it.”

“In the meantime, I should probably pack, too—throw some shit into an overnight bag.” He shoots me a grin, slaps me on the ass.

“I’m surprised you haven’t done that already, you shady bastard.”

He gives those broad shoulders another shrug. “Sue me for wanting to see you in a swimsuit.”

“You would have seen me in one eventually.”

“Did you bring a one-piece or a bikini?” he demands, gaze skimming down the front of my shirt to where my breasts are plumped up from being squeezed against his chest.

His perusal gives me goose bumps.

“Both,” I whisper. “I brought both, just in case.”

Rowdy sits up, hauling me along with him, spreading his legs. Resting me on thick thighs, giant hands skimming to my hips. Caressing.

“Just in case what?”

“Just in case I got brave.”

“Baby, it wouldn’t matter if you wore a brown paper bag.” His voice dips low as his hands massage my waist, through my shirt. “I’d still think you were sexy.”

I’m his *baby* now?

“Brown paper bag?” I’m skeptical.

“I mean, good luck finding one, but, yeah—I’d take you in a paper bag.” His fingers toy with the hem of my shirt, tugging gently. Leans in close to whisper, “Then, I’d push you in the ocean and you’d get soaking wet, and the bag would disintegrate. Boom, *naked.*”

“So we’re doing it.”

“My balls want you to define the term *doing it.*”

I swallow. “Don’t be such a pervert. I meant going on vacation together.” I pause, thinking. Then, “Wait, if we’re sharing a cabin, does that mean we’re

going to end up sharing a bed?”

Rowdy laughs, burying his face in the crook of my neck.

“Oh we’re *definitely* sharing a bed.” His fingers brush the skin under my shirt.

“But some of those rooms have bunk beds, right?”

Rowdy laughs, tipping his head back, and for a brief moment I’m able to admire his strong, thick neck. “Who says we’ll be in an interior cabin?”

“I mean—we’re *kids*.” No way would my parents ever put me in a room with balconies, let alone a window, on a cruise ship. It costs way too much money.

“Kids, huh?” He stretches his legs in front of him, long torso and form large and imposing and definitely in no way childlike. “Do I look like a little boy to you?”

No. He does not.

He looks like a big, strapping hottie with a five o’clock shadow and firm pecs and thick thighs. He looks like he wants to show me all the un-childlike activities we can do in this room, tracking my movements when I back away from him, stepping out from between his long, outstretched legs.

A photograph on his dresser catches my eye so I stroll to it, limbs a bit wobbly, glancing over my shoulder, smiling to myself when I catch him watching me intently.

Bending at the waist, I inspect the picture of him in high school with a medal around his neck and a baseball glove on his hand. His face is flushed, sunburnt, and he’s squinting from the glare of the sun.

He’s happy and beaming. Sweaty, too, like he just played a hard game and won.

“That was the day I made All-American,” his deep voice tells me from behind.

I nod, moving on to the next one, then the next. Then on to his medals and trophies, of which there are many. A royal blue varsity letter is pinned to a bulletin board above his desk, and on it are newspaper clippings, the gold tassel from his high school graduation cap.

“I don’t know why I still have all that shit hanging up.” He sounds

sheepish. Apologetic. “I’m hardly ever here anymore.”

I shoot him a glance. “Because you’ve achieved so much.”

On his bookshelf are bobble heads of legendary baseball figures, that I—as little as I know about the game—recognize: Babe Ruth. Hank Aaron. Barry Bonds.

Nolan Ryan.

Some baseball cards in plastic. Books, obviously, and lots of them. A surprising number, actually, ranging from popular fiction to historical non-fiction. On the top shelf is a purple geode, which makes me smile as I pluck it up and hold it in my palm, studying the sparkles under the light before gingerly placing it back in its spot next to a conch shell.

Wandering to the closet, my fingers graze the soft cotton of a few shirts hanging limply inside. I consider stealing one away, for pajamas, but think better of it with his eyes following me so diligently.

“Find anything interesting?”

Not really. Nothing shocking or embarrassing. No skeletons hiding inside, from what I can see.

When I turn, my insatiable eyes skim his torso; my brain wants to straddle him again, but my body cooperates, deciding to exercise a little self-control.

Cool it, Scarlett—his parents are downstairs, for crying out loud.

Quiet but for the sound of our breathing, my feet tread across his plush beige carpet, breaking up the silence. I clasp my hands behind my back.

“It sounds like my parents might be back.” His sexy, relaxed posture kicks up the butterflies in my stomach. “I’ll run down and tell them we’re definitely going.”

My teeth worry my bottom lip, but I can’t suppress the smile. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to get ready for bed.”

He nods.

“It’s going to be an early morning—we have a two-hour drive to the cruise port, then we can spend the afternoon exploring the ship before it leaves the dock.”

Nervous and excited, sick to my stomach and elated, all at the same time. Sighing, I retrieve some clean underwear from my suitcase, pajama bottoms

and top, following behind him halfway down the hall.

Toward the bathroom I roam, engrossed with Rowdy's broad shoulders as they flex. Fixated on the back of his sexy, corded neck. I find it impossible to tear my gaze off the bare skin above the collar of his shirt, eyes trailing him until he's out of view, down the stairs.

To me, it's the sexist part of a man—the delicious slope at the back of their neck where their shoulders meet.

I love everything about that spot on his body, the straining muscles of his trapezius and deltoids. The freshly trimmed hair at Rowdy's nape. The tight fit of his dark shirt and the promise that its fabric would be velvety soft beneath my fingers if I had the nerve to caress it. Or hook the tip of one finger inside his collar and trail it along his warm skin.

I want to plow my hands through his neatly shorn mop. Run my palms down his smooth shoulder blades slowly. Daydream about it while the mirrors in his bathroom fog from shower steam and I scrub myself clean under the spray of Sterling Wade's shower.

Lifting his red bottle of liquid body gel from the shelf, I snap the top open, inhaling the masculine scent. *Mmm, I get to curl up with him later and do whatever I want to him.*

The thought sends my stomach surging into a dramatic roll, nerves causing me to snap the bottle shut. Concentrate on my task, scrubbing myself clean. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Smooth a bar of Dove soap over my breasts and between the apex of my thighs. I lather up my legs, my calves. Run a blue disposable razor slowly up the length of each one until all the hair is sliced off. Stroke my hands up and down, rinsing away the suds.

Shave between my legs.

Clean.

Smooth.

I dry off with a big, gray towel, patting it along my damp skin, humidity moistening my flesh. Slide on my underwear. Pull on tank top and sleep shorts.

Go through my regular bathroom routine: lotion, moisturizer, body spray.

Pad down the hall when I've finished in the bathroom, Rowdy's room

empty when I give a little tap and push the door open.

Bite down on my lip, debating.

Loathe to sit here by myself with only nervous energy for company while he sits downstairs with his parents, I rifle through my suitcase and find the one sweatshirt I packed, yanking it over my wet tresses.

I'm heading down the back stairs when the sound of his mother's voice gives me pause at the bottom step, foot poised to continue.

"Where is Scarlett, sweetie?" Mrs. Wade asks.

"In the shower. Then I'll just meet her in bed

"Whose bed?" His mother's good-natured laugh makes me blush a bright, cherry red.

"Haha, very funny. Mine." *He's shameless.* "We couldn't find any sheets to fit the bed in the spare bedroom and we looked all over. Are you sure you want us sharing a bed?"

"Dammit." She hmphs. "Those sheets are probably still folded up in the laundry room—you know how I get when I'm on a deadline. I'm too tired to go check, so no funny business under this roof, okay? We're trusting you."

Rowdy sighs. "Mom, we're going on vacation tomorrow and you're sticking us in a private room for two nights."

"Because you're not a teenager anymore. I don't want to trust you—I *have* to trust you. That doesn't mean I'm not going to be listening for strange noises tonight."

"Oh my god, Mom."

She clicks her tongue. "What happens on the high seas stays on the high seas—as long as what happens doesn't come back to haunt us in nine months. Ha."

He isn't amused. "Do you honestly think you're being funny?"

"Yes, I honestly think I'm being funny." She titters. "It's my *job* as your mother to humiliate you and make you uncomfortable as long as I roam this earth."

I can *hear* him rolling his eyes. "And another thing: please don't watch everything we do with a calculating look on your face."

"Calculating—good word, sweetie."

“Mom, I’m being serious.”

Her sigh is drawn out. “Why do you think I’m watching you? I see Iowa isn’t doing your ego any favors.”

“Come on, I know you’re using us for research.”

“I am appalled by the accusation.” His mom huffs dramatically but doesn’t deny it.

“Well, is that what you’ve been doing?”

“I might be...just a little.” Another pause. “Count yourself lucky I’m not taking actual notes—this little back and forth between the two of you is romance novel *gold*. I can feel the tension in my soul.”

“Jesus, Mom! *This* is why I never bring anyone home.”

“No, that is *not* why you never bring anyone home. You never bring anyone home because you’ve never liked anyone enough, not even Chelsea Newman, and she was such a lovely girl.”

“I hate when you do that,” Rowdy groans. “Stop bringing up my ex-girlfriends.”

“You were seventeen and she was your girlfriend for all of ninety *seconds*—that hardly counts. You barely held hands.”

“We did more than hold hands.” He chuckles deep in his chest at his joke.

His mother ignores him. “I’m just illustrating my point. You haven’t brought anyone home since high school, and this one you had fly in from another state during the holidays?” It sounds like she’s taking a long sip from her coffee mug, followed by the telltale sign of it hitting the table’s wooden surface. “Want to tell me what that’s all about? Dad and I have been dying from curiosity.”

“Dad is *not* dying from curiosity.”

“Fine. I’m the one dying—tell me what’s going on.”

“We’re friends.” He’s grinning, I just know it.

“Does Scarlett know you’re just friends?” his mother teases.

Long silence. “I didn’t say we were *just* friends.”

“What are you saying, exactly?”

My breath hitches, honestly it does, and I become a cliché from a movie,

leaning closer to the doorjamb, straining for his next words. He's suddenly gone quiet, thinking. The silence drags on an agonizingly long time—or just a few seconds, I have no idea, but it's torture. Waiting in this hiding spot I've accidentally found myself in is sheer agony.

I'm hiding like a damn creeper, but I cannot pull myself away.

"We haven't slept together, if that's what you're asking." His mom laughs. "That's *not* what I was asking, but thanks for the intel. Oh, while we're on the subject, please tell me you're using protectio—"

"Stop. Don't say it. Jesus."

I imagine her casually raising a brow, just like her son does. "Be safe, that's all I'm saying."

"You gave me this speech two years ago."

"Well it's never been more necessary. The last thing you want is your paycheck going toward child support."

"Scarlett isn't like that—we haven't..." It sounds like he's clamping his lips shut, blowing out a puff of air. "Mom, can I ask you something and have you promise you won't freak out?"

"When do I freak out?"

"Uh—*all* the time."

"Hmm, I'm sure that's not true."

Rowdy's sigh is loud. "Can I ask you something or not?"

"Of course! And I promise I won't freak out."

A drawn-out silence fills the kitchen.

My palms begin to sweat.

"Do you believe someone can fall in love in a few short weeks?" He asks so quietly, I swear my ears are playing tricks on me. "Because I'm about to lose my mind here."

His mom is quiet, too. "I write romance novels, sweetie," she says slowly. Carefully. "Of course I believe you can fall in love fast." She pauses. "Is that how you're feeling about Scarlett?"

Another long, tortured pause, and everyone holds their breath.

"I don't know. She's all I can think about, ya know? I can't concentrate on

anything when she's not around, which is most of the time, and all I want to do is spend time with her."

His mom hums out a cryptic, "Hmmm."

And now Rowdy is on a roll, having gotten the words out. "At first, she was just this girl I had to keep out of the baseball house for the night, right? Because the guys are such dumbasses..." His voice trails off, irritated. "Anyway, is this normal? I dream about her and shit."

I'm all he can think about?

He *dreams* about me? He's said it before, but it's always when we're joking around.

"Sure it's normal, when you're attracted to someone—"

"I'm not just attracted to her, Mom. It's like...I don't know, it's like..."

"It's like what?"

He groans, frustrated. "I don't *know*."

"Love doesn't make sense, honey. Maybe you should ask your father." She chuckles. "God, he had no idea what he was doing when we started dating. It was such a train wreck."

"I'm not talking to *Dad* about my love life." He's horrified by the thought.

"What are you going to do?"

"I think I'm in love with her," his voice confirms, repeating the words, stunning everyone. "Or falling in love with her, whatever. Feeling something. I don't fucking know what's happening to me."

He's laughing now, and the deep timbre has me pulling back in shock. Falling slack, back against the wall, my hands press against my flaming hot cheeks.

Rowdy is falling in love with me?

He loves me.

Oh my god, he's in love with me?

Say it again, Sterling, I silently beg, greedy for the words. Just one more time.

"Have you discussed it with her?"

"God no!" He screeches. "Are you *nuts*?"

I have to press a palm to my mouth to stop from giggling as Mrs. Wade laughs. “Why not?”

“I’m not ready to confess that shit to her, Mother. I don’t know what she’ll say and I’m not a *masochist*.”

“I’m just asking, Sterling, *relax*. You’re so sensitive.” Mrs. Wade chuckles again. “Please stop staring at me with that look—you’re being ridiculous.”

It sounds like he’s crossing his arms, slumping in the chair. “I’m not discussing my feelings with her.”

“Why not?”

“*Because*.” His voice is stern, resolute. “I don’t think she feels the same way. It’s been two months.”

“Why would you say that?” she asks gently, and I imagine if I stuck my head around the corner, I’d see her hand resting on his forearm, comforting. “Two months is a long time.”

“Scarlett is...” His voice trails off. “Smart and beautiful and...she’s intimidating.”

Intimidating?

Me?

I intimidate *him*? Is he delusional?

I’m five foot five on a tall day, couldn’t get into my dream college even after applying and appealing the rejection twice. Half the time I’m wearing yoga pants, and the other half he’s only seen me in puffy winter jackets.

What’s so intimidating about *that*?

Sterling Wade is six foot two of solid muscle and tan skin. Smooth planes and masculine lines. He’s intense and funny and I’ve been dreaming about him every night since we met. Dreamed about meeting a guy like him when I was younger, imagining the perfect match for myself.

He is as close to perfect as a guy could possibly be.

And sweet Jesus, that boy loves me.

His voice, a deep baritone that never fails to send a shiver down my spine, is soft as he describes me to his mother.

“She’s independent, doesn’t really give a shit about me playing baseball or

that I'm, you know—popular or whatever.”

I cringe. That part makes me sound like *such* an asshole. Is that what he truly thinks? That I don't give a shit about him playing baseball?

My hands are shaking as I bring them up to my face, cool palms pressed against my flaming hot cheeks, embarrassed by that last part of his assessment.

What is he doing to me?

What do I do with myself now that I have this new information?

I can't walk into the kitchen and act *normal*, as if I haven't just overheard him emotionally unload to his mother.

I can't.

I'm bright red from head to toe, still pressed to the wall in my hiding spot around the corner, next to the kitchen, just feet away from where they're sitting.

Mrs. Wade *hmphs*, unimpressed. “She doesn't give a shit about you playing baseball? Baseball is your *future*—is she supportive? What *does* she care about?”

“Relax, Mom, that's not what I meant. I just meant she isn't dating me *because* I play ball. She's into marine biology. Graduating, I guess. She hates parties.”

What? I don't *hate parties*!

Not much.

Fine, I do—but they're a necessary evil if I'm determined not to become a hermit, sequestering myself inside the tiny hovel I call home.

“I thought you said you *met* her at a party?”

“I did.” He's shifting in his chair. “But she was just coming off of a cold and her friends dragged her there. That whole night didn't end well. I don't know why she kept coming back.”

Finally, I hear a smile in his mother's voice. “She came back for you, sweet boy.”

“Do not call me sweet boy—it makes me sound five.”

“You like her because she's different.” Mrs. Wade sounds pleased. “This makes more sense to me now. Hmm, must be a big change from the *usual*.”

I know what she's referring to: jock, jersey, cleat chasers. Gold diggers. Groupies. Women who only date men because of their status on campus.

"Yeah, it was weird at first," Rowdy admits. "Sometimes I don't know what to say around her anymore, or where to put my hands—like, I just want to hug her all the time and I don't give a shit that we haven't had sex yet." Long pause. "Okay that's a lie, I totally give a shit that we haven't had sex, but I don't want to freak her out. She's so smart, Mom."

"Mmhmm, mmhmm." Now it sounds like his mother is preoccupied. "What else?"

"I mean, at first when she started coming to the house, it was casual and we just sat there playing games because we were bored. I—" He stops. "*Mom!* Jesus, you said you weren't going to write any of this shit down! No taking notes!"

"What? It's my job! It's not like I'm using your names—this is fiction! Besides, I write regency romance, not contemporary, so no one will know it's you."

Rowdy's mother writes romance novels? That is awesome—how did I not know this?

I don't hear the rest of their exchange. Backing away, I tiptoe up the narrow staircase, quiet as a church mouse until reaching the sanctuary of his bedroom. Standing at the foot of Rowdy's bed, I breathe heavily, staring down at his navy bedspread, the four pillows stacked invitingly against the headboard.

A lamp glows in the corner, my small suitcase tucked neatly into the corner of the blue room. Navy walls, white woodwork—a total boys' room.

My intention was to sleep in the guest room, but Rowdy wasn't lying when he told his mom we couldn't find a spare set of sheets. No matter how hard we searched, not a single set was to be found—not that he knew where to look, and he hadn't even bothered to ask his mom where they were, probably so I'd be forced to sleep with him, I reluctantly admit to myself.

I'm so clueless sometimes. How did I not know he was falling in love with me at the same time I was falling in love with him?

Because I was too busy blinking at him starry-eyed, that's why!

Removing my sweatshirt, I pull the hem of my threadbare tank top down

over the waistband of my sleep shorts. Run a hand along my damp hair, still wet from the shower.

Freeze as footfalls thump at the top of the stairs, stopping at the bathroom. The door closes, bang echoing in the hall.

Minutes later, the toilet flushes.

Faucet runs for what feels like an eternity.

He must be brushing his teeth, or shaving, or *oh my god I wish he'd just hurry up and get back in here already* so I can stop fidgeting, pacing like a caged tiger, a ball of nerves.

The bathroom door opens.

One step, then two, and Rowdy is standing outside his bedroom door; I can *hear* him hesitate. Debating. Hear his hand resting on the doorknob, motionless. The three short raps with his knuckles against the wood have my heart skipping like a stone across a lake.

Electricity crackles that door handle, and I watch it slowly turn.

“Yeah?”

Why is he knocking? It's his room.

And why did I just say *Yeah*, and not, *Come on in!*

“Is it safe to come in?”

“It's safe to come in.” I let a nervous giggle slide through my lips, hand pressing on my stomach to quell it when it flutters.

Rowdy's big body slips through the gap in the door like a mouse squeezing through a crack in the wall, as if he's tasked with protecting my modesty.

He stands with his broad back to the door, eyes tracking along my freshly shaven legs, pausing to study the fluffy white sheep on my shorts—if you can call them that. In reality, they're glorified underwear, barely covering my ass, pale pink, the scallop hem skimming my upper thigh.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” I already know the answer, already know why he's burning holes through me. Why he's memorizing my hair and every inch of my body.

This big, beautiful boy *dreams* about me.

Sterling Wade is in love with me.

The thought warms me from the inside out, lowering my defenses as I lower my arms, uncrossing them from my chest, letting him look his fill.

He's never seen me like this before, in my pajamas with barely any clothes on, and look his fill he does, taking every advantage of his viewpoint from the doorway, the low lights casting shadows on us both.

"Am I staring?" That sexy smile is warm and wide. Those wide shoulders shrug. "Sorry, it's just—you're in my bedroom."

Oh jeez, he is so sweet.

"Uh..." I laugh, clearing my throat, stretching out a fake yawn. Pat it with my hand. Point to the right side of the mattress. "Mind if I take this side of the bed?"

Another slow, cryptic smile. "You take whatever you want."

I watch, captivated, as Rowdy's arms crisscross, reaching down to drag his shirt up and over his torso, tossing it to the carpet.

"Mind if I take my shorts off? I get so hot at night." His fingers are already hooking inside the red mesh of his gym shorts, thumbs tugging at the fabric.

I gulp when he leans over, ab muscles tightening, gaping at one sinewy bicep, then the other. They're perfection, just barely close to bulging, hot veins running along his forearm to the bend in his elbow, making me want to trace along their path. Making me want to leisurely run my hands along those washboard abs—earned from hours upon hours of conditioning—and damn, even his belly button is attractive.

Down those shorts slide. Over a pair of athletic, toned hips, shucked boldly to his feet, feet spread shoulder-width apart before he chucks them to the side.

Sterling Wade standing in only a pair of charcoal gray boxer briefs challenges the most resplendent national treasure as a thing of beauty, the thin fabric clinging insatiably to his thick thighs.

Clinging to the length of him tucked inside, laying flat against his inner thigh.

Sterling Wade is perfect. Raw.

Beautiful.

Mine for the taking.

The reality of that is still so odd to me that I find myself licking my lips like a bad pantomime, pushing a strand of hair behind my ear before remembering myself.

I am ogling him like a desperate fool.

Like a groupie—yet not a single soul on earth would blame me, or deprive me of this moment.

I will never get it back or forget it.

One of his knees bends, hitting the bed, hands braced on the mattress. Leaning forward, his broad, golden shoulders flex attractively. I don't know whether it's an invitation to gawk at him some more, but I do, unable to peel my eyes away from his incredible body.

Every inch of him is well defined. Flawless.

Every inch carved of warm, firm flesh, smooth all over. Hair tousled from having just whipped off his shirt, it sticks out in ten different directions, waiting for my hands to run through it—so we can both get the chills.

Hot skin. Trembling hands.

I fold back the covers of his dark sheets before my legs give out, wobbly, easing onto the right side of the bed, heart rate fast, as if I've just sprinted a mile.

Rowdy slides in after me, leaving the light on, large body taking up more than half the mattress as he folds both arms behind his head. Turns to study me, wordlessly.

I war with myself.

I wanna do more things to this boy than I've wanted to do to any one human in my entire life. Which is why I'm a virgin who always settled for gif porn and the occasional solo masturbatory mission.

I bite my lower lip. God is rewarding me for my patience.

Am I going to sleep with him this weekend?

Yes.

No.

Yes!

I want to, more so now than ever, and we're going to be alone for two whole nights. There will never be a more perfect opportunity, just him and the ocean—two things I can't stop thinking about.

And he loves me.

"Are you excited about tomorrow?" I break the silence.

"Yeah, totally. Are you?"

"I am so excited I don't know how I'll be able to sleep." All this excitement and these feelings are information overload; I'm not sure yet what to do with it all.

Rowdy hums his agreement, chest vibrating. Nonchalant and carefree, face impassive. If I hadn't overheard him just now, I never would have known—never in a million years.

But I know better.

The lamp's light radiates softly on the bedside table, casting a warm glow on his expression.

"You tired?" I ask, rolling toward him, burrowing my petite frame in the crook of his arm, lining myself up, breasts pressing into his ribcage. My hand slides unhurried across his expansive chest, landing on his left pec, the tip of my index finger wandering close to his hard nipple.

"Do I *look* tired?" Beneath my palm, his heart beats like a war drum—and when I lay my head on his chest, I can hear it, too.

I press closer, lifting my leg, draping it over his thick thigh, and god does it feel good to be this close.

Rowdy Wade is hot and cool to the touch.

His long arm comes around me, hand resting on my ass, splayed palm creeping under my sleep shorts to cup my bare butt cheek. Fingers flex close to my crack, forefinger twitching.

I swear we both stop breathing.

"What time are we getting up?"

"I set my phone for eight."

"We should probably try to sleep, huh?"

The tip of his index finger treads a slow path up and down the flesh of my ass, plucking at my underwear band, branding my skin. "We *should*."

He breathes in; he breathes out.

In.

Out.

Like he's trying to control his breathing, impossible with my hand exploring his chest. Plucking gently at his puckered nipple and breathing hotly onto the other one.

It's so close to my mouth—right there—stiff and straining.

I arch into him, pressing, tongue catching the tip of it. Roll my body closer until I can suck it. Flick it then blow, as I've seen in a hundred porn gifs.

Rowdy's hand creeps under the back of my shirt, caressing his new favorite spot: my spine. Tenderly while I tease him, he's so unbelievably sexy. So incredibly magnificent.

I want to touch him all over. "You want me to rub your back?"

His eyes are heavy-lidded, mouth in a straight line, expression impossible to read.

"I'd love for you to rub whatever you want."

I suppress an eye roll. "On your side."

He complies, facing the door, presenting me with the steel fortress of his back. He's a massive wall of strength, and when my palms hit the flat plane of his trapezius, my fingers spread wide, kneading at the base of his neck.

It's solid and thick. Tight.

I rub there, in that same spot, for a good five minutes, thumbs pressing into his skin. Pushing into the knots, listening as I burnish each one out. One by one.

My hands wander.

Feather light, they trail down his spine to his oblique, and discover two back dimples right above his firm ass.

Dimples of Venus.

Jesus, they're so absurdly sexy.

Both of my palms stroke across them, heating his flesh, massaging at the waistband of his snug boxer briefs. Stroke over his butt, squeezing it the way he was squeezing mine.

“As far as massages go, this one feels more like foreplay,” he murmurs into his pillow, arms at his side. “Am I right or am I right?”

“Does it?”

“Is it?”

“No.”

“Too bad. You’re making me so fucking hard.”

“Am I?” I stare at my hands in wonder.

“You really have to ask?”

Three more minutes of pretense and Rowdy’s maneuvering himself to his back. I avert my gaze, not wanting it to settle on the erection tenting his briefs.

But it’s hard, so hard—no pun intended.

“Come here.” He beckons me closer and like a moth to a flame, I go.

Lean into him, kissing him full on the lips.

“You’re so fucking pretty.” He swipes the long hair out of my face; it hangs in sheets down my chest and over my eyes. Presses his thumbs lightly into my cheek, over my dimple. “I love this. It does weird, fucked up shit to me every time you smile.”

When I smile, he smiles back, reaching for me, arm sliding under my ribcage, the other circling my waist.

Bodies pressed together, I cradle his erection between the apex of my thighs, our mouths widen, tongues dancing. Unhurriedly rolling together. Sloppy and wet.

“Wanna climb on top so we can spoon?”

“That’s not how you spoon.” What a weirdo.

“Wanna climb on top so I can feel your tits on my chest? Is that good?”

Good enough.

Effortlessly, he hauls me on top—as if I weigh nothing—bodies a perfect fit. Like two pieces of a sexually fueled puzzle. Rowdy’s giant hands are tense, palming my butt, dragging me up and down his cock, mimicking sex, the motion making us both moan.

So good it hurts.

“God I want to tear your clothes off,” I moan, hastening to add, “But not in your parents’ house.”

“Right,” he agrees. “*Definitely* not in my parents’ house.” His pause is comical. “Uh, why not in my parents’ house?”

“I’d never be able to look your mother in the eye tomorrow morning. I’d be mortified.”

“What about just our shirts so I can play with your boobs?”

My body shivers at the thought of him touching my bare breasts.

“If I take my shirt off and you start touching me, my bottoms will come off.”

His large hand pulls me down so our mouths meet again.

His tongue traces my bottom lip.

“What is it you think I’ll do if these skimpy little bottoms come off?” He’s murmuring, question a husky, molten masculinity that has my panties dampening. I gasp when the tip of his cock finds my clit through our thin underwear.

We grind at each other slowly, kissing slowly.

“Tell me what I’d do to you, Scarlett.”

“You’d...”

He licks my earlobe, distracting, hips rotating slowly beneath me, reaching between our bodies to push aside my shorts. “I’d *what?*”

God his voice drives me mad. Makes me as hot as his mouth on my neck does. His hard dick between my legs.

“D-Don’t make me say it,” I stutter, eyes almost rolling to the back of my head, forgetting how to focus.

“I want to do *everything* to you, so fucking bad.” He’s crooning, sexy and sweet. “You *know* that, don’t you?”

I can feel it.

He’s a rock hard, raging hormone between my legs. But even still, he doesn’t pressure me to have sex with him.

“But not in your mother’s house.”

“Not in my mother’s house.” His voice cracks. “That would be bad.”

I breathe out, leaning down, breasts rubbing against his magnificent chest.

“I have an idea.” He perks up. “What if we dry fuck with our clothes on until we come in our pants? Like horny teenagers?”

Dry fuck? *That* I can do.

“Dry fuck me,” I moan when he licks my neck, pulling back the strap of my tank top with his forefinger. Sucks on my nipple.

But he’s not done talking dirty. “One of these days you’re going to sit on my face while my tongue makes you come.”

Lordy.

“You want me to do that, baby? Eat you out?”

Oh Jesus.

I can’t do anything but nod dumbly, the visuals making my clit tingle. Rowdy’s hot fingers slide into my underwear, up the back, index finger sliding down my crack, pressing into the skin of my ass.

“*God,*” I gasp, gyrating desperately.

“Push your panties aside, baby, help me out,” he pants.

I do as he says, peeling back the cotton fabric of my thin, lacey underwear. Moan when the tip of his dick digs into my pussy, restrained only by his gray boxer briefs.

“Christ you feel good. The *shit* I’m going to do to you when we’re alone...” His growl is low as those huge hands grip my hips, urging me to swivel. “Whatever you do, don’t stop—my cock is in the perfect fucking spot right now.”

My lids flutter closed as my mouth falls open. One push of his boxers and he’d be all the way inside. So easy, too easy. So good.

“I’m so goddamn close,” he declares, gripping my backside and flipping me with one, singular motion. Like a well-trained wrestler, not missing a beat.

Strong. Stealth.

Bold.

A little too loud, mimicking sex a *little* too well.

“Keep it down,” I beg breathlessly. “I swear Sterling, you’re going to

knock the headboard into the wall.”

“You want me to fake screw you nice and slow, Scarlett? Is that it?”

He’s so dirty, so unfiltered—a contrast to the gentleman he is the rest of the time we’re together.

“Do you always talk like this?” I manage to ask, and when my eyes roll to the back of my head, he sucks on my nipple through my shirt and I almost float off the bed, euphoric.

“Like what?”

“Do you always talk this dirty?”

“Don’t you like it?”

I love it. “Yes.”

It’s erotic and makes me feel sexy. Makes me want to peel my shirt—and everything else—off.

His cock glides up and down the fold between my legs, hitting every nerve along the way. Hitting my clit. Gripping my butt cheeks, pulling me in.

So close, so close...don’t stop, don’t stop.

We’re winded, the telltale signs of two impending orgasms looming, mouths fusing, mattress on the verge of squeaking—banging against his bedroom wall.

So close, don’t stop.

“Sh-shh,” I admonish, not sure if it’s him or me making all the noise.

His mouth latches onto my neck. “I want you so fucking bad it’s making me mental.”

So close, don’t stop.

We don’t, not until we’re done, climaxing at the same time, Rowdy’s face buried in the crook of my neck. The noises he’s making—tortured moans of pleasure I’ve never heard a man make.

Sexy.

Mine.

We lay entwined, fully clothed.

Glowing.

Then...

“We should probably both change our underwear. There is jizz *everywhere* inside my shorts.”

SATURDAY

Rowdy

We made it to the ship with hours to spare, the gangway a long, winding way up to the atrium deck.

I'm close behind Scarlett, eyes glued to her fantastic backside, admiring the view. The pretty top with tiny holes in it and pair of white shorts she's wearing don't stop me from ogling as she takes one long stride after other.

Unfortunately, no sooner do we step onto the threshold of the ship than my dad catches me staring at her ass, pulling me aside by the arm. Gets in close so he doesn't have to raise his voice, gearing up for a lecture.

Patiently, I let him deliver the speech I know is coming.

Blush a little, too.

"Your mom and I are trusting you this weekend. Please use your best judgment."

I nod. "I understand."

"Do you? You're sharing a room with this girl, whom we've never met before this weekend. We have to trust that you're both going to be responsible."

"Responsible?" I smirk, crossing my arms. "What do you mean?"

Never good at the sex talks, my dad's face turns as bright as Scarlett's when she's blushing.

"Did you bring..."

I cocked my head to the side. "Did I bring what? Sunblock?"

"You know..."

He cannot not bring himself to say the word *protection*, or *condoms*, or *birth control*. Dad is the reserved one in my parents' relationship, while my mother is an extrovert. The balance has always been a positive one—except when it comes to shit like *this*.

Lord help him, he sucks at giving me lectures. Always has.

Has no countenance for it, while Mom would probably be whipping out a diagram and drawing me a picture. Or pulling a strip of condoms out of her purse—the ones with her book logo on them.

“Two sets of nice clothes?”

“Sterling, if you’re being coy with me, I don’t appreciate it.”

“Coy, Dad?” That’s such a Mom word.

“Your mother is the one who wanted me to have this talk with you.”

“What talk? Seriously Dad, I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

That’s when he takes a good look at my face, at my shit-eating grin.

“You little smartass.”

My grin widens. “Hardly *little*.”

It’s so easy to embarrass my father. “Sterling, *enough*.”

“Dad, I get it.” I give him a reassuring clap on the back. “Don’t worry, no one wants clones of me running around.”

Last night’s humpfest was as close to being unscrupulous about protection as I’ve ever gotten, and only because Scarlett and I were both wearing underwear.

But my big dick wanted in, and he wanted in *deep*.

My mother’s voice cuts in to my perverted reminiscing, retracing her steps to find out where my father and I ran off to.

“Come on you two, let’s go!” She hands me one of the ships pre-paid cell phones so we can communicate this weekend. “Dad and I are going to drop these bags off then head to the bar by the pool if you want to meet us up there later?”

“Cool, maybe.” I take Scarlett’s bag, the one hanging from her shoulder, and sling it over mine, carrying them both, resting my palm on the small of her back. “We’ll scope everything out, do a lap or two around the ship, get the lay of the land.”

“All right. If we don’t bump into you, we’ll see you for dinner at six.”

I bend to kiss my mother on the cheek. “Love you guys. Catch you later.”

She wraps her arms around Scarlett, embracing her in a hug. “Have fun.”

As they go one way, I pull Scarlett another, toward the elevator banks. A door slides open and I gesture for her to enter first.

“All aboard the hot mess express.”

I catch her smile, biting down on her lower lip, hair braided in a crown at the top of her head. She looks...

Fucking adorable.

She steps into the elevator. “Thank you.”

The doors close, trapping us in, alone. “I hope it doesn’t take them forever to get our bags in the room.”

“Does it normally?”

“It can.”

But it doesn’t. As luck would have it, both our suitcases are at the door to our stateroom when we arrive, and I scan the keycard, hauling them aside so Scarlett can enter first. Lug them into the room, the door slamming shut behind me.

“Wow. Sterling, this room is...” She turns to face me, speechless, beaming up at me. “I’m so excited.”

I’m filled with pride having made her smile like that.

Without waiting, she takes the short journey to the balcony doors, sliding them open and stepping into the warm Florida air, arms spread wide on the rails.

It’s early yet—four more hours until the ship leaves—with plenty of time to explore, both the ship and each other.

I join her on the balcony, approaching from behind, my hands circling her middle, chin resting on her shoulder. Breathing in her hair, kissing the back of her neck.

“This is gorgeous and we haven’t even left yet.”

My fingers brush back the stray hairs that have escaped from her braid. “It is.” *She* is.

Resting my lips on her shoulder, the sound of the waves lapping against the side of the ship, and hundreds of seagulls are on the playlist as we stand there, studying the horizon.

It’s warm—already seventy degrees—so tank tops and shorts are the order

of the day.

And when Scarlett reaches behind her to run her fingers through my hair, I take advantage, sliding my hands under the hem of her prissy blue top. Sweep them up, cupping her breasts over her bra.

Kiss her neck again, this time sucking, too.

I haven't had sex in *months*, and with all these emotions suddenly raging inside me along with my hormones, all I can think about is s-e-x; every attempt to dial down my sexual appetite has failed. Everything Scarlett does turns me on, from the quick way she blushes to the conservative braids in her hair and her quirky little laugh.

She's not even doing it on purpose—that's how affected we are by the sight of each other.

She made it easy to fall in love with her, she just...doesn't know it yet.

Growling into the curve of her neck, I pull back and step away before I doing something stupid, like unclasp her bra and strip off all my clothes.

She would be so pissed.

“Should we explore the ship?” Her bright, toothy grin and dimple punch me right in the gut, spreading to my stomach.

“Whatever you want—this is your weekend.”

Her head gives a bashful shake. “Stop it, Rowdy.”

“Stop what?”

“You did not do this all for me.”

The hell I didn't.

The ocean, the beaches—it's my gift to her.

I don't know what my fucking problem is lately; I might be a ballplayer, but what do I bring to the table other than my body and a skill that's practically useless unless I'm in the infield of a baseball diamond?

“Let me slip my sandals on and we can go.”

We spent the afternoon idle. Relaxed, lying about in deck chairs next to the pool and watching the ship leave port, the houses on land getting smaller and smaller.

Dots on the horizon disappearing from sight after a few miles.

Ordering fruity drinks, we talked and laughed the afternoon away like we've been a couple for years. Napped. Dinner with my parents, which ended up being painless because they showed up twenty minutes before it was over.

"Should we go see what the opening production is?" Scarlett glances up from the ship's entertainment itinerary, reading out loud and chewing on a chocolate-covered strawberry. "*The welcome aboard opening production is a thrilling prelude to a weekend's worth of fun, including musical numbers, dancing, and a message from the entertainment director.*" She turns to me. "Can we do that?"

"Sure." *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* I'd rather poke my eye out with a dull pencil than sit through one of those onboard productions.

We set our napkins on the table, push our chairs out from the dining room table, and say good night to my parents.

"Breakfast in the morning before we get off at the island?" Dad asks.

I scratch my head. "Um, I'm thinking room service."

Mom narrows her eyes at me. "If you order us anything, I will kill you."

My palms go up in mock surrender. "I only did that *one time*—you've got to stop bringing it up."

She shoots Scarlett a look. "There is a menu hanging on the back of your door. You fill it out and hang it outside your stateroom. Someone comes along and picks it up, and the next morning, they deliver whatever it was you circled." Her lips purse. "Once, Sterling ordered us *one of everything* and had it delivered at seven AM."

Damn that was funny—man were they pissed off.

"Hey, I came and ate it all."

"But if you hadn't, it would have gone to waste."

I scoot to my mom's side, planting a kiss on her upturned cheek. "Come on, you thought it was funny."

"It wasn't funny—not when you're on vacation and your two-hundred-pound man child climbs onto the bed with trays of food, and especially not when you're trying to be romantic with your husband whilst on vacation."

"Jeez Mom!" Is nothing sacred?

She shrugs. “I’m just pointing out the obvious. Your timing always did suck.”

“Anddd *that’s* our cue to leave.”

Scarlett and I make haste, fingers laced together, hustling to find the ship’s amphitheater.

We’ve been here ten minutes when I first start to doze. On stage, costumed crew members dance across the stage, a large forest scene hanging in the backdrop. The shadow of trees loom, backlit by blue lights, and honestly, I don’t have a clue what the fuck is supposed to be going on.

My parents live for this shit.

I, however, am bored as fuck, and I lean back in my seat, legs spread, head hitting the wall so I can close my eyes.

I yawn.

Tune out, mind wandering.

Wonder what’s going to happen when we get back from this vacation, back to school. I’ve never done anything in half measures, and I’m not starting with her.

When we get back, I’m going to tell her I love her and hope we can make this relationship work.

Scarlett catches me stifling a yawn with the back of my hand, giving me a little poke in the ribs. Leans over to stage whisper, “Should we go? You look tired.”

I *am* beat—but so is she.

Still, I shrug, not willing to end her fun. “Only if you don’t want to stay.”

Her eyes study me in the dark. “We can go. I’m okay heading up to the room.”

Thank God. “You sure?”

“Definitely.” A nod. “Yes.”

“All right.” I stand, grabbing her hand, leading her down the theater aisle in the dark. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

We sneak out, dashing to the elevators, pressed to the mirrored wall of one when ten people cram in with us. I catch her eye above half a dozen heads, wiggling my eyebrows. Feel for her hand behind an old balding dude,

tickling her palm with my forefinger.

Together, we exit on the eighth floor, strolling down the narrow hallway, bumping into each other every few steps, laughing. Flirting.

When we reach the door, I pretend to have forgotten the key inside the room, and Scarlett smacks my arm when I finally fish it out of my back pocket.

Anticipation thrums through my body as I swipe the keycard in front of its sensor on the door, the little green light granting us entry with a blink, blink, blink.

“You going to take a shower?”

“I have to—I feel so gross.”

“Ladies first.”

“Thanks.” She skirts around me, gathering up her stuff. Removing her necklace and other jewelry, setting it all on the desk. “It won’t take me long.”

“No rush.” I flop down on the bed, arms resting behind my head, watching her fuss, crossing my legs at the ankle. Casually learning her tells. The little things about her that will have me lying in bed at night fantasizing: her slender wrists and the way she rubs them after removing her bracelet. The way she purses her lips when she looks in the mirror at herself. How short she is compared to me when she unbuckles her wedge heels, but not when we’re lying horizontally on the bed.

Scarlett begins pulling little black bobby pins from her hair, setting them one by one on the table, loosening the braid. Uncoiling it from the crown of her head.

It falls down her back, wavy and full. Wild.

“Is there any way you can leave it like that?”

“My hair?” She turns, touching the strands with the tips of her fingers. “Do you like it like this?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty.”

Pleased, she continues padding barefoot around the room. Asks me to unzip her dress. Grabs fresh underwear and pajamas from the tiny cabin closet, disappearing into the bathroom, running the shower and using the toilet.

For ten minutes she's in the bathroom, taking off her makeup and doing whatever the hell it is girls do in the bathroom, door clicking open at the eleven-minute mark.

My girl is prompt.

White towel wrapped around her head as a turban, she's got on that pitiful excuse for pajamas: sheer, white tank top—the one I can see her nipples through—the pink bottoms with sheep, and not much else.

I wonder if she knows I can see her tits through that top, but far be it from me to point it out.

I'm an athlete, not an idiot.

Peeling myself off the bed, I grab my shower shit and vow to get in and out in as little time as possible.

Five minutes.

Tops.

“Be right back.”

“Are you excited about tomorrow?” Scarlett asks when I slide back into bed, dressed only in a pair of black boxer briefs.

We're hitting the beach in the morning, renting snorkel gear and swimmin' with the fishes—so to speak.

“If you're asking if I'm excited about seeing you in a swimsuit, the answer is yes, I'm excited about tomorrow.”

“Did you have fun today?”

“Eh, it was all right. I enjoyed spending the day with you, but man, I am so fucking tired.”

“It was a long day—the drive with your parents was fun.”

I give her a side eye; the two-hour ride was torture, not *fun*.

“What part of my mother's inquisition, exactly, did you enjoy?”

“Oh come on, it wasn't that bad.” She laughs, pulling up the sheets to hide her smile.

“Scarlett, my mom had a *list*—an actual fucking list she was asking you questions from. How did you not think that was weird?”

“It was harmless, but you don’t think she’s going to...ya know, put my answers in any of her books, do you?”

I toss my head back and laugh. “Oh ho, oh yeah—she’s definitely putting that shit in her books. Somehow she’ll find a way to make it work.”

Scarlett pushes the coverlet down, rolling to her side, bending her arm and resting her cheek there. “It was a good day. Tomorrow is going to be better.” She’s quiet for a few beats. “Have you ever brought anyone on a vacation with you?”

“No. Have you?”

“No, and besides, we never really took many family vacations to begin with. I do go on the trips through the science department, but that doesn’t really count, does it?”

She shifts, the straps of her tank top slipping a few inches down her right shoulder. My gaze fastens there briefly then drags itself reluctantly back to her eyes.

“Are we a couple?”

“Yes?” I hope that’s the answer she’s looking for.

“And...other stuff?”

Other stuff. Fuck yeah to other stuff.

“You’re my friend, Scar. I feel like the physical part is the natural next step. Plus, I want to bone you so hard it’s becoming both physically and mentally draining.”

“I don’t even know how to respond to that,” She giggles.

Laughing is a good sign, right?

I swallow the lump forming in my throat, pressing on my Adam’s apple, to make it go the hell away, so I can say what I’m about to say.

“You know the night you went to dinner with your friends from bio lab? I knew I wanted to be more than just your friend.”

“How?”

“Don’t you ever just look at something and *know*? I just...did.”

I fell in love with her that night.

Gag.

“I can’t believe we’re having a relationship talk.” My mother must be rubbing off on me, dammit.

“I *love* that we’re talking.”

Love.

There’s that word that’s wreaking havoc in my damn chest. I wish she’d stop saying it so my heart would stop racing.

Scarlett

“My mom said I should talk to you more about this stuff more often.” He averts his eyes, watching the ceiling as he speaks, a lopsided smile plastered on his face. “Feelings and shit.”

He’s pleased with himself for opening up to me.

Truthfully, I am, too.

“Oh?” I feign ignorance. “Did she?”

“Yeah. Both my parents are a wealth of infinite wisdom. Today when we got on the boat, my dad told me to use my common sense this weekend and wear a condom.”

Condom, condom, condom.

My body temperature skyrockets, and I brush my gaze toward the thermostat. How hot do they have it set in here, anyway?

“He never had the sex talk with you when you were growing up?”

“Oh, we’ve had the sex talk all right—a few times, actually.” Rowdy readjusts his large body on the bed, folding those thick biceps behind his head, mattress dipping from his weight.

“My senior year of high school, they *both* sat me down to explain that since I’d signed my letter of intent to play for Iowa, girls were going to be coming out the woodwork.”

“Were your parents right?”

A brief hesitation. “Yeah.”

He casts me a guilty look, thick eyebrows knitted into a frown as if just realizing what that one word implies: he took full advantage. Had lots of

meaningless sex with countless meaningless women.

Well.

That information I certainly could have lived without, but I asked, so I have no one to blame but myself for the small crater of jealousy forming in the pit of my stomach.

“They’re always riding my ass about groupies, and safe sex, and using my head—not the one inside my boxers.”

“I don’t blame them. I bet it’s not easy watching your son work his ass off, keep up his grades, and then have to fend off all the girls.”

“I guess I don’t either. The girls are...” He clears his throat, once again directing his gaze toward the ceiling, as if the answers are spelled out for him up there. “I was done with the parties and the casual sex by my sophomore year. That’s why I moved out of the house. It got real old—not for everyone in the house, obviously, but it did for me.”

I can’t imagine what that world is like. Being a biology student is so far removed from the world of athletics, it’s laughable.

“Do you feel like you have to be *on* all the time?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like...” I prop myself up so I can see him better. “You can’t say or do what you want because people are always watching.”

He nods. “That’s exactly it, yes. Coaches, the media, other students with their fucking cell phones recording us. The popular players can’t even take a dump in a public bathroom without it ending up online.”

I try to picture my face on some stranger’s profile online, or an article written about me on the internet.

“What’s it like?”

“It doesn’t happen to me often—I’m not a big enough name for anyone to give a shit about. I play ball for *Iowa*, *Scarlett*, not *Miami* or *Vanderbilt*.”

“Are those teams good?”

“Those teams are the *best*.”

“Could you have played there?”

He goes quiet. “Yeah, I could have played there.”

“Should you have played there?”

“No.” He turns his head toward me and studies my face. “I’m right where I need to be.”

My heart leaps, damn if it doesn’t, and suddenly we’re not talking about baseball anymore. We’re talking about us—him and me and the fact that we’re lying here now, alone in this room, alone in this bed.

“You can touch me, you know.” His voice has a hesitance to it, as if he’s afraid I’m going to reject him. “I want you to.”

His voice is rumbly and low, twisting up my insides like it always does. So deep from fatigue, my stupid, neglected ovaries clench into a tight fist while the space between my legs grows uncomfortably hot.

Rowdy is so achingly handsome. So. Freaking.

Hot.

I could stare at him all day and he wouldn’t have to say a single word to entertain me.

His green eyes watch, transfixed, as my hand glides through the white sheets toward him, waiting with baited breath for my next move. It’s as close to a beseeching look as Sterling Wade has ever given me, a slight tremor in his voice.

He wants me to touch him—bad.

“Do you? What if I don’t know what I’m doing?”

“You don’t have to know what you’re doing, you just have to listen to your body, and hopefully that body is telling you to touch me.”

He delivers that quip with a serious expression, the smile not quite reaching his eyes.

“I can’t believe you can say shit like that with a straight face.”

His chest rumbles. “Sometimes neither can I.”

My hand rests atop the white bedding, tentatively pausing.

He rolls on his side, matching my position. Arm creeping forward, fingers sliding, large, tan hand meeting mine in the middle of the bed. It’s a warm palm covering mine, caressing, the tip of his forefinger tracing along my ring finger.

Touches my shiny, pale pink nails before flipping it over. Continues

tracing the sensitive skin there, giving me the shivers before moving up my wrist, drawing tiny circles along my flesh.

Up my inner arm to the crook of my elbow.

Then down again.

I hold my breath when he retraces his steps, the journey headed north, up my bicep.

Stop breathing completely when his fingers splay under the strap of my tank top, his eyes tracking the movements, together with mine.

The boat rocks, waves splashing against the steel hull of the ship as it cuts through the rough sea. A glass of water on the desk slides to one end, hits the edge, then slides back again.

A part of me wants to climb out of bed and open the balcony door; the other part wants to see where his hand goes next.

The ocean wins.

“Give me one second?”

I pull away, scurrying to the door, pulling the latch and sliding it open, greeted by the sound of pounding waves. Stand staring out into the dark, the vast ocean illuminated by the bright moon looming above. Locate a few wayward stars among the overcast sky before turning and settling myself back on the bed.

Climbing on all fours toward Sterling’s body, he’s covered from the waist down by the stark, snowy sheet. A golden god whose tan, size, and chiseled attributes are highlighted by the moonlight.

Rising to my knees, I grabble for the hem of my tank top, gliding it up my torso, pause before exposing my breasts.

Take a deep breath, peel my shirt off, and toss it to the foot of the mattress.

His nostrils flare.

“Can I get under the covers with you?”

He reaches for me then, pulling back the sheets so I can climb inside. Tenderly tugs me over so I’m on top, skin on skin.

Instantly, his hands begin rubbing my back—down, then up—plunging into the waistband of my sleep shorts. He grips my ass gently, caressing,

while the ship rocks slightly back and forth.

I run my fingers through his hair. Run them over his shoulders, gripping his biceps. Clasp his hand, lacing our fingers when our lips finally meet.

The ship creaks.

Waves crash.

Tongues roll.

Then, in one swift motion, I'm on my back and Sterling hovers over me, eyes raking down my body, settling on my naked breasts.

When he reaches up to settle his giant hand on one, I arch my back and moan, tipping my head back into the pillow. Teeth rake my bottom lip.

Slowly.

Painfully slowly, he brushes his thumb across my nipple while the rest of his palm cradles the underside, lightly pushing it up. Plump.

His voice is gravelly, low. "I've been wondering what these look like."

Mine comes out breathless. "And now you know."

His eyes make contact.

Lips curve.

"And now I know."

I watch, fascinated, as his shoulders dip, presenting me with the crown of his head. Lips find and fasten on my breast, sucking. Licking. Sucking some more.

I moan.

He moans.

The ship? Moans.

Everyone is satisfied.

Tiny nips of his teeth have my lower half wriggling; I'm on fire, and when he makes his way down my stomach, kissing a wet trail down to my belly button, a thousand thoughts go through my mind: *What is he doing? Is he about to go down on me? Did I wash well enough when I took a shower? Shit, I never shaved my crotch. What if it takes too long for me to come and I suffocate him?*

Even worse: *What if he's terrible and I don't come at all?*

I've never, in my life, had anyone with their face between my legs.

But I do now.

Sterling's thumbs hook my pajama bottoms and underwear, dragging them down together my hips until I'm completely naked. His large hands drift slowly up my torso, over my breasts, weighing them in his palms before working their way back down.

He's sweet and tender and easing my legs apart, broad shoulders nudging my knees open with a gentle bump.

He hums, content. Studying my vagina as if committing it to memory and later there will be a test.

Two large fingers spread my—

“Oh *lord*,” I gasp.

“Go ahead and pray to Jesus, baby,” he coaxes. “I'm about to make you come all over my face.”

The words—so dirty.

The tongue—so *wet*.

One slow lick up my slit, then another, and I raise my head to watch. God, I want to *watch*.

Fascinated, I breathe hard, tiny jolts of pleasure racking my ovaries as he licks and sucks and licks my clit. Sucks again as if auditioning for the starring role in a porno.

“Uhh...oh god...” My hands white-knuckle the sheets, head hits the pillow when Sterling makes round circles with his thumb on my—“*Oh god*”—clit as he sucks.

Wow. He's really good at this.

My lips part and I try to get actual, coherent words out, but the only ones I can find are, “*Uhhh*,” attached to a long, drawn-out groan.

His groan.

Sterling is enjoying this as much as I am.

He never comes up for air, not once, never takes his mouth off me.

Not until I lose myself. Not until I fall apart, coming and coming—on his mouth—and even after he's licked me completely dry, he drags my orgasm

out until my pelvis trembles with tiny shocks. Grips my ass, holding me down, sucking until I throw an arm over my brow, lying motionlessly like a limp doll.

I catch him licking his fingers and want to die—absolutely *die*, mortified and turned on, both at the same time.

He's so fucking sexy.

So greedy.

So *tall* when he stands, leaning in to plant a kiss on my mouth, dragging his lower half along for the ride. Grinding. Flexing his firm ass.

That delicious, erotic *tip* of him eases into the wet spot between my legs. Digging in just enough that I inhale from surprise, the sensitive nub still swollen from my orgasm. I give Rowdy a push with my hands to get him off my body.

“You better stop before you get carried away.”

“I won't. I can control it.”

“You won't—you're too...” Horny. Aroused.

Desperate for me. For sex.

“Babe, *please*.”

“No. We should stop.”

I'm such an asshole, numbly watching when he peels himself off me, off the bed, cock stiff in his underwear, jutting out proud and dejected, the loser in this game.

Sterling peers down at my body, hand cupping his balls through the thin fabric, stroking absentmindedly. Turns his back on me and strides a few paces toward the door.

“Where are you going?”

I drag myself over the edge of the bed, covering myself to the waist with the white cotton sheet.

“To finish myself off in the bathroom.”

Finish himself *off*? Oh lord.

“I can't let you do that—it wouldn't be fair.”

His beautiful mouth is amused. “No. It really wouldn't be.”

“I’ve never really—I mean, I don’t want you to finish yourself off.” How embarrassing. “I want to do it for you. I want...” A lump forms in my throat, but I’m determined to say the words. I’m mature enough to offer him a blow job, can at least freaking say the words. “Do you want...”

Ugh.

“Yes, Scarlett, I want you to suck my dick.” He says it softly but *oh my god, the words!*

He’s standing next to the bathroom door, hand still on his erection, leisurely stroking it through his boxer briefs.

“Don’t judge me, okay? I’ve never done it before.”

“It’s pretty easy,” he says slowly, hands up in surrender. “All you have to do...is put...your mouth...on my cock...and *suck.*” He makes himself moan. “You can’t screw it up.”

I swallow my nerves, crooking my finger. “Then come back to bed.”

Those five words are an aphrodisiac, ones he wants so badly.

I can see that he’s exercising all his self-control by not bounding over. I can tell by the way his body inches toward me, halted, taking its time, approaching unhurriedly.

Still, he’s desperate for me to blow him.

“You sure?”

I almost roll my eyes—he’s being coy, and we both know it. He’s positively vibrating from excitement, eyes slightly wild. Pupils dilated, nostrils flaring.

“Yes. Come here.”

He does, standing at the foot of the bed so I have to crawl to him on my knees until I’m face to face with his erection, my greedy palms connecting with his sinewy skin. Touching. Caressing.

Stroking.

Lovingly trail one of my hot fingers down his abs, following the dusky hairs of his happy trail.

Half-hooded eyes watch, transfixed, while I fondle him through his underwear, lids getting droopy. Chest heaving, hands hanging and clenched at his sides.

He's aroused, painfully so, if his thick dick is any indication. I can see every part of it outlined inside his briefs—the head, the thick shaft.

I swear I can see it throbbing, but maybe that's just my imagination.

I want to see it.

Tugging the elastic band circling his waist, I drag his boxers down, down, careful not to catch them on the head of his dick, anticipation needling every nerve cell in my body. My body hums with energy.

Both of us are breathing hard.

Sterling is thick, hard, and throbbing.

My hand grips it, testing its girth.

My legs climb off the bed so I can turn him, pushing him onto the mattress so I can get down on my knees on the carpet in front of him.

“God, Scarlett,” he chokes out, voice strangled before I even have my mouth on him, the simple sight of me kneeling driving him to distraction.

Still, he grabs a fistful of my hair, brushing my long strands aside so he can watch me. I read in a magazine once that guys love the sight of themselves getting head, and Sterling is no exception.

His eyes close when my mouth closes over him. His head bobs back like it's on a string when I suck it for the first several seconds—just the tip.

“Fuck...oh fuck.”

The vulgar language spurs me on, and I take him deeper, a novice, but enthusiastic. I mean—his dick is in my mouth, how bad could I be at giving him a blowie? He already seems to be enjoying it, and based on his begging, this won't take long.

“Oh god, yeah, Scarlett, suck it,” he pleads.

And he is begging.

Begging *me*.

Me, the girl they called Cock Blocker the night he kicked me out of the baseball house. Me, the girl he fell in love with when we weren't even trying to get along.

I lift my head, removing my mouth. “Would you rather...”

“Don't you fucking dare.” He moans. “I s-swear to f-fucking god,

Scarlett..."

"Would you rather come in my mouth or in my hand?"

"C-Come in your mouth—Jesus, please keep sucking," he implores frantically, glassy eyed and gorgeous. "I want to come in your mouth."

So he does.

He comes and groans and makes so much damn noise I have to *shush* him before someone calls customer relations to complain, and I've never felt more *powerful*.

Later, when we're lying side by side in bed, spent and wrapped in each other's arms, I gather one more shred of courage.

"I'm going to assume you brought protection? Because I'm not on any form of birth control."

I definitely want to have sex with him this weekend.

It's happening.

His brows go up as his hand strokes my hair. Kisses my temple. "Yeah, I took care of it, all kinds of optimistic. Since I met you, I've only ever come inside my pants or your mouth." He laughs. "No offense, but I'm looking forward to coming inside a condom instead."

Never has a single soul made me blush this much. My body is in a state of *burgundy*. My toes actually curl from the thrill, and will I ever go back to my normal shade of pale?

Somehow, I doubt it.

SUNDAY

Scarlett

Today has been a dream.

Rowdy and his family took me snorkeling—a first for me. We're back after an entire day on a charter boat, splashing in the tide on a beautiful public beach near the ship's dock.

Standing waist deep in the water, I trail my palms on the surface, having just snorkeled my way from a colorful reef not fifty feet out. The sand is white, the water crystal clear, the occasional fish darting around as we wade closer to shore.

I'm dawdling, in no hurry, lifting tiny shells out of their beds of sand. Turn them this way and that, studying each one with a keen eye.

Nearby, Rowdy dips into the waves, tipping his head into the ocean and brushing his hair back. My eyes suction to his pecs when he rises, salty seawater sluicing off his hard, tan body.

Dripping.

Wet.

Droplets fall down his backside, glistening along his spine, absorbed by his aqua blue and hot pink swim trunks.

His beautiful mouth was on me last night, down between my legs.

I try not to gawk at him, but it's damn difficult. He's smiling at me, white teeth and sun reflecting off the water, sparkling like diamonds on his shoulders, chest, and abs.

Dear lord.

I drop the shell in my hand and it drifts away, gone.

The sound of the waves is a seductive caress and has me feeling exhilarated. Reflective.

“Rowdy?”

“Yeah?” He strides toward me, dragging his snorkel through the water.

“Why did you invite me here?”

He rolls his eyes. “Because you love the water.”

“Not to the beach, you goof—on this trip, to Florida to spend time with your family.”

Shrug. “Airfare was cheap.”

We’re closer to the shore now, my blue goggles resting atop my forehead, toes digging into the sandy ocean floor with every step I take.

My hand shoots out, grabbing him by his brawny bicep.

We both glance down at my hand, barely able to cuff halfway around his thick muscle, before our eyes lock.

“Sterling, stop.”

I’ve taken to calling him that lately, rather than his baseball nickname. It makes me feel closer to him, like we share something special, and only *I* can use his given name to address him.

He takes my other hand, sliding it around his narrow waist with a shiver under the blazing, Caribbean sun.

“Is that the only reason? The cheap airfare?”

He pauses, uncertain. “Of course not.”

“Why then?”

“I wanted to make you happy.” As he says it, his hands drift from the water, up my arms, resting on my shoulders.

“Why?”

His thumbs rub my wet skin, scorching it into oblivion. “Jeez, Scar, why are you asking all these questions? Is everything okay?”

Because I want to hear you say you love me—to me, not just to your mother.

“I’m not trying to be dramatic.” Too late. “I’m just curious—the waves got me thinking, that’s all. I’m so happy right now, I can’t even believe I’m here. I could stay here forever, right here in this spot.”

With you.

“You grew on me like a weed, babe—of course I want to haul you along

everywhere.”

“A weed,” I deadpan.

“A *cute* weed?”

Cute? I narrow my eyes.

“A smoking hot weed with a beautiful set of tits I’d give anything to see naked right now?”

Tits.

Jeez, that word.

“Sterling!” I chastise, though his words get me so hot I moan. No amount of cool ocean waves can tamp down the electric sizzle running through my spine.

Those giant man hands of his graze my bikini top, thumbs hooking the straps, tugging.

“There are *people* watching.” There are families everywhere, kids. Couples. Grandparents.

His *parents*.

My eyes roam the beach, locating them under a cluster of palm trees, lying on deck chairs, his dad reading a World War II book, his mom sleeping with a towel draped over her face.

Rowdy follows my gaze while the tips of his thumbs brush across my nipples. “If we were alone, would you let me take your top off?”

That’s a no-brainer. “Yes.”

“What a coincidence,” he croons, deep voice giving me goose bumps. “We’re going to be alone later.”

“Is sex the only thing you think about?”

“Who said anything about sex? I’m talking about sucking on your boobs.”

If my face wasn’t already red from snorkeling, I’d be blushing, but the bright sun is sparing me the embarrassment.

Rowdy leans in, licking my ear. “But if you want to have sex later, I won’t shove you off the bed—promise.”

“How romantic.”

Now his hands are at my waist, pulling me against him, water sloshing

around our midriffs. My breasts press against his chest—his gorgeous, firm pecs. His nipples stiff, dark areolas puckered.

“You look so fucking cute in that snorkel.”

Snort. “No one looks cute in a snorkel.”

“*You* do, especially with your purdy little ass sticking up out of the water.”

“Were you even *looking* at the fish?” I ask accusingly, palms sliding up over his abdominals.

“What fish?”

I smack him in the bicep. “These fringing reefs provide habitats for some of the most beautiful creatures on this planet, Sterling. I can’t believe you’re not even paying attention! There was a Nassau grouper back there!”

“You are so hot when you get feisty.”

I glare, disappointed. “Babe, it’s not funny.”

Suddenly, his eyes widen at the endearment, hands reaching beneath the water to scoop me up, lifting me into his strong arms, out of the water, legs dangling over his forearms.

“Stop! Put me down,” I demand through a laugh.

“What did you just call me?” He kisses my collarbone, next to the yellow strap of my bikini top. “Baby, did you seriously just call me *babe*?”

“Stop teasing, you big *jock*, put me down.” I barely put up a fight.

“Damn right I have a big jock.” The lips that woke me up this morning sweep across my mouth. “I want to stick my tongue in your mouth so bad.”

“I would honestly die. Your parents are *right* there.”

“Just once?”

“Everyone can see us!” I throw my arms wide, gesturing to the human-filled beach as he bobs me in the water. “Literally every passenger from the ship is on this beach with us.”

“Will you at least let me take a peek at your nipples? I’ll block you with my back so no one sees.”

My nipples harden into solid pebbles.

He notices.

“Please?” He’s begging, and lord if it isn’t turning me on. “Just a peek.”

I roll my eyes and bite down on my bottom lip at the same time, swim bottoms getting soaked—and not from the sea surrounding us. “I swear I’m going to kill you.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes, but be quick.”

He’s strong enough to hold me with one arm so he can peel away the slick fabric of my yellow triangle top with the other, stealing a peek at my bare breast, nostrils flaring when he uncovers my entire, dusky nipple.

“You’re sure you won’t let me suck on these?”

I squirm, out of breath. “We’re in *public!*”

“But they’re so fucking pretty and it’s *right* fucking there.” He groans, bending his neck. “God Scarlett, I’m so hard. All I want to do is go back to the ship and fuck you.”

“You sound like a horny fourteen-year-old. It’s absolutely ridiculous.”

“Do you blame me? Baby, I run on adrenaline and haven’t gotten my workout in today. I’m like a bomb ready to detonate.”

Babe.

Baby.

I can see already we’re going to be one of those disgusting PDA couples.

The fabric of my suit might have fallen back into place, but he’s right—one peek isn’t enough. Looking won’t be enough. Sucking and wandering hands and tongue aren’t ever going to be enough.

Not for me. Not for him.

Not anymore.

“All right, Sterling.”

“All right what?” He looks so confused.

“Let’s do it.”

“Do what?”

Honestly. “If you can’t figure it out, then sorry buddy, it’s not happening for you tonight.”

“Don’t you dare fucking joke about sex. I’ve been jonesing to screw you since the day we met—I swear my nuts are about to fall off.”

He sets me down on the sandy sea floor and rubs his erection into my ass.

“You couldn’t stand me when you met me.” I let him grind it into my crack, strapping arms wrapped around my middle from behind. “You called me Cock Blocker.”

“And now all I want to do is get this cock inside you.”

“God you’re a pervert.”

His hands dip below the water, fingers running into my bikini bottoms. Forefinger pressing the sensitive nub between my legs.

“Should we skip dinner tonight?” I tip my head back, wanting nothing more than for him to make me come—but then a Frisbee whizzes by and we both look in its direction, startled.

He groans miserably at my suggestion. “No, we can’t skip dinner. My parents will know why we’re not there and I promised my dad I’d behave.”

“You think they’d think we were...?” Screwing?

When he laughs, I want to lick his Adam’s apple. “That’s definitely what my parents would think we were doing, so if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not have my father try to kick my ass.”

I wade a few feet before donning my goggles again, fitting the mouthpiece of the rented snorkel into my mouth, floating buoyantly on my stomach. Stretching my arms wide, I float, legs doing little scissor kicks in the ocean while Rowdy watches over me a few feet away.

Sand. Shells.

A tiny guppy scuttling by.

It’s unremarkable and remarkable all at the same time, and I bask in the water, cooling my body as it drifts listlessly. Face down, I kick, on my way to anywhere. Deeper still, until finally, I see signs of more marine life: a gray horseshoe crab drags its shell through the infinite space. The smallest of starfish lies still, half buried in the white sand.

I scan the ocean floor, paddling, paddling, until I see Sterling nearby, watching me under the water, rear almost hitting the bottom as he buoys. He gives me a little wave, bubbles rising from his snorkel to the surface of the tide.

I swim along in his direction, smiling, the tight goggles distorting my

mouth. Reach him and rise, feet hitting the sand, pushing myself high enough so my shoulders feel the warm air. As he emerges in front of me, I pop the snorkel out of my mouth piece and remove the goggles, pressing against him. Drape my legs over his squatting form at the same time I wrap my arms around his neck.

Plant a wet, salty kiss on his lips. It's slow and soft, and would be considered sweet if my tongue hadn't just slipped into his mouth. *God I love his lips*, undemanding and pliant and *eager* for me.

His hands grip my waist, holding me firmly on his lap, blanketed by the tide, while my greedy, selfish fingers remove his goggles so I can rake them through his wet hair.

“You said you didn't want to make out in public.”

I nibble his full bottom lip. It's salty and warm, and tastes so fantastically like *him*. “I changed my mind.”

“You're powerless to resist me—I like it.”

“You're powerless to resist *me*.”

“Careful now,” he intones quietly. “Or you'll drown us both.”

Rowdy

“Having a good time?”

Scarlett and I slough up the sandy shore toward my parents. They're lying in lounge chairs under a cluster of shady palm trees, watching us approach, Mom with a book in her hands and sunglasses on her face.

She takes them in her index finger and thumb, drawing them down a notch to inspect us over the rim.

“It sure looks like it.”

“The water is fantastic. Thank you again for inviting me, today has been a dream,” Scarlett enthuses, dripping wet in her bright yellow bikini. I will my eyes to stay off her ass, but they sneak a peek at her curvy backside to spite me.

Dart to the pair of tits that sway when she stops and scoops up a beach towel.

“I can’t convince your mother to dip her toes in,” Dad adds in, lying flat on his back, a worn Iowa baseball hat covering his face.

“Sterling did enough flapping around in the water for all of us, Don.” She rakes me up and down with her lips pursed. “You’re like a walking hormone—give the girl a break.”

Beside me, I hear Scarlett laugh, running the towel over her damp limbs. Down her arm and over her stomach, patting it dry.

I feel my skin getting hot—and not from the sunburn I’ve already acquired being in the hot, tropical sun. The hollow of my neck, rising to my cheeks and coloring my ears—goddamn guarantee they’re hot pink.

Scarlett turns to look at me. “You’re not blushing, are you?” she teases, poking me in the ribcage, making my face burn hotter.

She sweeps her towel across my chest, soaking up the beads of water on my pecs then handing it to me.

“Scarlett, sweetie, listen to me—take some advice from the boy’s mother: make him work for it. Everything always comes so easy to this kid.” She sets the book on her stomach, pointing at Scarlett with the nail of her finger. “Make him sweat a little.”

“*Mom!*”

“Oh, calm down, I’m just making an observation.” She reaches for and grabs the white chair next to her, pulling it close.

We sidle up to my parents and I straddle the lounge, resting against the back of it, leaving plenty of room for Scarlett. She joins me, facing my mother.

A waiter walks past, and we order two drinks—what it is, I don’t care, I just want something in my hands. My freaking mother is making me nervous; I have no idea what’s going to come out of her mouth next.

“So, Scarlett,” she begins. “Sterling never really told us the entire story of how you two met.”

“Oh. Well...” Scarlett looks at me helplessly, shrugging. “I guess it was at a party?”

“Ah. At the house?” Mom makes a face.

“Yes, and our first meeting didn’t go very well.” “There was an incident,” I

add drolly, taking two blended piña coladas when the waiter comes back. Give him fifteen bucks, tell him to keep the change. Pop the cherry off the top and suck it into my mouth, chewing.

“What *incident*?” Dad has his neck craned, suddenly interested in entering the conversation. “You boys better not be doing anything suspect in that place.”

“Dad, it’s nothing like *that*.”

“Mind if I tell the story?” Scarlett touches my thigh. “I was at the baseball house with a few of my friends, and you know how it is in those places—wall-to-wall people.” She sips from her plastic cocktail cup. “Anyway, my friends were...chatting up two players, and...I don’t know, they weren’t very friendly to *me*.”

“And then Sterling stepped in and set them straight?” My dad peels back the hat, squinting at me in the sun.

“Not exactly. The players wanted me out, mostly because I was being—” She turns to me for help filling in the blanks. “Would you say I was being a buzzkill?”

“No, babe, you weren’t being a buzzkill.” I shake my head, irritated, turn toward my parents. “She was giving Ben Wilson shit because he’s a straight-up liar, and Ben got pissed and wanted her kicked out of the house.”

“And then you stepped in and set them straight?” my mom asks, leaning forward, completely immersed in the story.

“Well no. I kicked her ass out.”

“Sterling!” My mother is appalled—*totally* appalled. “Stop it, that’s not even funny.”

“He’s not joking Mrs. Wade, he did indeed kick my ass out.” Scarlett laughs. “He spent the night policing me, and we kept arguing, and...then I went back the next weekend.”

“And he let you in, obviously.”

“Nope.”

“Sterling!” Mom practically shouts, sitting up in her chair, book falling to the sand. “I raised you better than that! How utterly unromantic!”

“Mom, relax. I couldn’t shake her no matter how hard I tried. She was like

a bad rash.”

Scarlett rolls her eyes. “It actually was kind of romantic. He would wait for me on the front porch every Friday, and one night I went to dinner with a bunch of my friends and I didn’t show up—I think he was jealous he wasn’t invited along.”

“I don’t think that’s what I was feeling that night—I was worried, not jealous.”

“Don’t lie, you were a little jealous.”

Yeah, fine—I was a little bit jealous of her friends.

“So you became friends first?” My mom draws out the words, and I can see an idea taking root. “Friends to lovers. Frenemies. I like it.”

No, not lovers—not yet.

But soon.

“To entertain ourselves, we sat outside and played games—”

“And she fed me.”

We’re finishing each other’s sentences now? Barf.

“What kind of games?” Dad asks, flat on his back again, eyes covered with his cap.

“Never Have I Ever.” I clear my throat. “Would You Rather.”

“Drinking games, Sterling? Where did I go wrong with you?”

“We were sober every night, Mom, relax. There was no alcohol involved.”

“Well, except for that one time...” Scarlett mutters.

Ah, that’s *right*—the night I went to her house, had her ass cheeks filling the palms of my giant hands, my tongue down her throat, and her back against the wall.

That was a *great* fucking night.

It wasn’t the night I realized I loved her, but it’s when I knew I could.

“It was good for us, I think,” Scarlett finally says. “We learned a lot about each other.”

And ourselves.

“Did you know Sterling was once slapped by a guy?”

Mom looks at me, brows raised. “No, I did *not*.” Her tone is clipped.

Scarlett laughs, reaching to brush my hair back. Takes a drink of piña colada. “You’re so cute when you’re embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed.”

“Did he tell you he used to wet the bed until he was eight?” My dad’s voice is half dazed, half asleep.

“Jeez Dad! Go to sleep!”

“Oh that’s right!” My mom cackles. “And he was a big kid, too, so it was a *lot* of pee.”

“Okay, yeah—now I’m embarrassed. You guys can stop.”

We sit here a little longer, laughing and talking beneath the palms, until eventually, Scarlett readjusts herself on the lounge chair so she’s in a position to rest her back against my chest.

“It’s so nice out here, I could stay in the sun all day. The weather is so gross back home.”

She closes her eyes, and I drape the towel over her lower half to blanket her. Stroke her hair. Kiss her shoulder when my parents aren’t looking, resting my mouth there.

Eventually I lean my head back and close my eyes, too.

Rowdy

Ironically, it was my parents who skipped dinner.

Scarlett and I went the ship’s formal dining room and when we arrived at the empty table, I immediately craved room service—specifically fresh sushi I could eat off Scarlett’s naked body—but she was hungry and didn’t have the patience for the forty-five-minute wait.

So, we stayed. Had the entire table to ourselves and ordered practically one of everything off the menu. After dessert, there was no pretense of doing anything but going back to our stateroom.

I flop down on the bed when we get back, legs spread, watching as Scarlett removes her shoes, silky leg propped on the desk chair, fingers expertly unclasping each buckle.

Suddenly, she's four inches shorter.

"We have one more day tomorrow—what should we do?"

"Beach day?" she suggests. "Or we could bum around town?"

"I could do another beach day." I'll do whatever she wants, all damn day, and not complain. "Do you mind, though, if I get up early and hit the gym for a few hours? I'll be back before you wake up."

"Of course I don't mind."

I lie back, balancing on the mattress, propped up on my elbows. Watching.

She removes her earrings, setting them on the desk, then her bracelets. The three gold bangles jingled all during dinner like a tiny chorus of bells.

"I'm going to take my makeup off real quick."

While she does that, I kick off my shoes. Peel off my black polo shirt, pull my brown leather belt through the loops of the dress pants Mom made me pack.

Now I don't know what to do with myself or my hands until Scarlett comes out of the bathroom. I could peel these pants off, but would it be weird if I was just sitting here on the bed in my skivvies?

The bathroom door clicks open and Scarlett pushes through, stepping down into the room, fresh faced and beautiful, her skin a little darker than when we left home.

She stops and stares at my bare chest when she sees me, eyes dropping to the flat of my stomach. It's rippled due to the way I'm positioned, the muscles hard as a rock.

"You took your shirt off."

And my socks, and my belt.

My brow lifts. "Should I put it back on?" *Better yet, should I take yours off?*

"No."

I reach for her hand, giving her a gentle tug toward me. Position her between my legs, hugging her waist, arms wrapped around her middle. Kiss the underside of her jaw, brushing away the hair falling over her shoulder.

"We're totally alone," she observes with a brow raised, dimple pressing into her smooth cheek.

“True.”

“It’s still early.”

I kiss her in reply, and this time my lips brush her collarbone. “Also true.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go do something? Play checkers perhaps?” Such a little tease.

“Want to play cards?” I call her bluff. “Or we could find a shuffleboard game on deck twelve.”

“Shut up,” she mumbles as she laughs.

“I’m just throwing out ideas—I didn’t say they’d be any good.”

“You’re really sweet, do you know that?”

No.

Not a single soul has ever told me I’m sweet, largely because I’m *not*...or they’re too busy using me for social gain to actually get to know me on a personal level—the way Scarlett has.

“Thanks.”

When she kisses my forehead, my eyes slide closed. When the tips of her fingers brush my cheekbones, I sigh, kissing her palm when it skates past my mouth. Her thumb drags tenderly along my chin, over my lips.

“You’re beautiful,” she whispers.

Hot. Handsome. *Sexy*.

Those are terms I’m more familiar with.

“I love your parents. They’re adorable.” Scarlett’s fingers rake through my hair, and I lean forward, burying my face in her cleavage.

“My parents are *not* adorable,” I mumble.

“I can’t decide if you look more like your mom or your dad.”

I’m a healthy mix of both—Dad’s height and Mom’s green eyes.

“Can we stop talking about my parents, please?”

“Sorry.” She chuckles, not sorry at all. “Thank you for this weekend.”

I angle my head toward her and she frames my face, cupping my jawline in her palms. “You’re welcome.”

Scarlett lowers her mouth. Presses her lips to the corner of my mine, first

one side, then the other, kissing those tiny divots she seems so enamored with.

My lips fall open, wanting.

But she only settles her kiss on my bottom lip, brushing gently across the sensitive skin and creating a *zing!* down my spine like I've never felt before.

It's not the same as being horny; this sensation is because I care about someone other than myself for a change. I'm in love with my friend and it's giving me the goddamn chills, sitting here like this. In the quiet of this room, with the sound of the ocean beyond our door, the dull ache in my dick finds its way to my heart.

Squeezes.

I breathe in and out, unsuccessfully trying to control my heart rate.

I know where this is going to lead.

I thought I was ready. I'm not a virgin; I've fucked plenty of women, all of them more than willing, most of them the aggressors.

I can count on one *finger* how many times I've been nervous when I was about to have sex with someone, and this is that one moment.

Which is why the hands around Scarlett's waist are fucking afraid to move. Physically, my body knows what to do; it's my brain that's giving me problems.

"Want to help me with the zipper of this dress, hmm?" Her murmur is as soft as her skin.

"Turn around."

Slowly, she turns, presenting me with her back, pulling a mass of her dark hair forward so it doesn't get caught when I drag the zipper down her spine. Waits while I give the metal pull a light tug, guiding it down the track as I've done for her several times before.

But never like this.

This time, I know where this is going to lead.

The light blue dress has spaghetti straps, and she shrugs those off her shoulders, baring her entire back. She's not wearing a bra, but she is wearing underwear, the white fabric playing peekaboo above where the zipper stops.

Scarlett delicately shimmies, the dress sliding past her hips and thighs of

its own accord, and settles on the floor in a dry puddle of blue material. Her feet are rooted to the ground, and for the briefest moment I consider not touching her, consider placing my hands on the top of my thighs and leaving them there.

But anticipation strums our nerves, a chorus to the waves drumming the hull of the ship, and I'm determined to control it.

"Why aren't you touching me?" Scarlett whispers, still facing the opposite wall. "You're making me nervous."

"I don't know where to put my hands," I admit to her back, eyes drifting south, down the curve of her spine to the round globes of her butt.

As if warring with herself, she stands, presenting me with her rear end for another few seconds, deliberating. Waiting. Breathes in and out, short intakes of air, unsteady. Her skin? Covered in goose bumps.

I grip her left hand, tugging so she'll face me.

And time fucking *stops* when she makes the full rotation, tits at eye level, and I can't decide where to look first.

So I look everywhere, starting with her...

Nipples.

Goddamn they're perfect.

Flat stomach and a belly button I want to press with my finger.

Nipples.

Scarlett's underwear is sheer; I can see clear through them to the neatly trimmed dark patch between her legs, the area I had in my mouth last night.

That same mouth waters.

"I think you should take your pants off so I'm not the only one standing here naked."

I rise, unbuttoning my khakis, shoving them down my hips and kicking them out of my way with one quick motion.

Fucking pants—who needs them?

Falling to my knees in front of Scarlett, I let my forehead touch her stomach as my trembling hands skim up her calves.

Knees.

Thighs.

Tentatively, her fingers stroke the top of my head, twisting a few strands of my hair. Gently tugging before her hands drop to my shoulders, lightly stroking the sun-kissed skin there.

I pull back a few inches so I can kiss her abs. Kiss the warm valley between her breasts, inhale the perfume she must have sprayed on while she was in the bathroom.

My fingers toy with the waistband of her underwear, forefingers creeping inside, giving them a diminutive pull. We both know they're coming off; why prolong the inevitable?

I tug again, working the flimsy material down over her slender hips. She spreads her legs a tiny bit to make the job easier, and my mouth waters when the panties are past her pussy.

Her tidy, well-trimmed pussy.

I help her step completely out of them then give that apex between her legs my total focus, spread it with my thumbs. Incline toward it, sending out a puff of breath to warm it. Lick up the middle.

Her fingers tighten on my shoulders. Squeeze.

A warning.

“Th-This isn't a good idea. I'm not steady enough to stand here w-while you do that without falling.” She's stuttering—a good sign.

An *excellent* sign.

I rise slowly, dragging myself along her naked body, licking her tits as my hands slide up her backside, gripping her ass cheeks.

Scarlett gasps when I haul her up, rotate and lower her to the bed. Stand back and get rid of the boxer briefs clinging to my thick thighs.

Arms above her head, she's spread out like an angel, dark hair fanned out on the white bedspread, skin a light golden brown from her time in the sun.

Cheeks? Pink.

Lips? Pouty and parted.

Dimple? One hundred fucking percent lickable.

Her eyes are expectant and wide when I crawl over her body, sucking on her nipple along the way and wetting it with my ravenous tongue.

Scarlett's throat constricts in an uneasy swallow when she glances between our bodies, at my hard dick swaying in the breeze. "Just so you know, I harbor no illusions about this going well."

I pause, listening. Watching her chest move up and down. "What do you mean?"

"I know it's going to hurt, Sterling, and only one of us is going to enjoy it."

My stomach drops and I actually move my fucking hand there. "Why would you say that?"

"None of my friends liked sex their first time."

"None?"

Her head gives a bashful shake.

Well shit. This will not do.

Not on my watch.

"Not only are you going to like it, you're going to orgasm."

Scarlett laughs, shoulders shaking at the confident tone of my voice, her hands sliding along my arms to cup my face, pulling me down so she can smack a kiss to my lips.

"You're adorably full of yourself."

Maybe, but since when is that a bad thing? "It's called confidence."

"You're confident you can make me orgasm the first time I have sex? You're not a *magician*. It's going to hurt."

"Magic has nothing to do with it—*this* does." I lower my pelvis, letting my cock drag across the slit of her pussy while my tongue plays along her lips until her mouth opens. "I've been hard for you for weeks."

"You have?"

"You couldn't tell? I feel like I've been walking around with a fucking boner in my pants since I hauled you onto that porch."

"You didn't haul me onto that porch—I followed you."

"Probably so you could check out my ass."

She reaches around, hands skimming the sensitive skin of my ribcage. Slides them down to my buttocks, squeezing. "And what a lovely ass it is."

Firm? Yes.

Lovely? No.

Moaning when my painfully stiff dick slides back and forth over her pussy, she sucks on my tongue. Comes up for air when I nudge the tip between the folds. “Don’t get too carried away with that thing. It’s dangerous.”

But fuck does it feels good.

“Then hold that thought.” I climb off Scarlett for a few seconds to grab a condom from the bedside table; I stashed them there the first night we arrived, optimistic and wanting to be prepared—just in case.

She locks eyes with the blue metallic wrapper as I toss it to the side. Blushes furiously, breasts and all.

Scarlett

This body is a temple—we don’t wear it down, we build it up. Feel free to worship at the shrine...

I remember him saying that to me once, and it comes back now as he grabs a condom from the bedside table, casually tossing it on the pillow. It lands near my head, the wrapper blue and shiny. I’ve never put one on a man before, let alone had one inside me.

Well I’m certainly worshiping his body now.

Sterling Wade is sleek and impressively built, and I admire the efforts of his endless athletic training. I admire the Venus kisses above his fantastic butt—it’s pale, down to his dense hamstrings, unlike the rest of his ridiculous body that seems to have been dipped in liquid sun.

Every muscle flexes when he reaches for the bedside table, every tendon strains.

He tosses the condom and a small bottle of lube on the bed like it’s no big deal.

I blush furiously because to me, it is.

I’ve never been naked like this with anyone before, and I’m not sure what to do with myself while I lay here, on full display. Because I’m about to have

sex.

About to have sex!

Finally.

I resist the urge to cover my bits with the palms of my hands; he's already seen them, sucked and licked them. He's had his mouth on my—

Sterling slips back onto the mattress, inching up next to me, long arm reaching to the foot of the bed, towing the sheets up to cover us both.

Kisses me.

Kisses and kisses and kisses me, erection digging into my thigh.

It's distracting, my brain focused on three things: impending pain, trying to relax so I'm not tense (too late), and praying this won't be a complete disaster.

God, I hope it's not terrible.

God, I hope I don't disappoint him.

God, I hope it doesn't hurt like a mother.

"Babe, are you okay? You look a little pale—we don't have to do this." Sterling's voice is a welcome interruption to an imagination taking a downward spiral.

"I'm overthinking it."

"We can stop. Just tell me when, and I'll stop."

"Don't you dare," I demand, sounding bossier and less tense than I feel.

"I'd be happy sucking your pretty boobs all night." He nips at one, drawing a nipple into his mouth, flicking the tip with his tongue. "If I died doing this, I'd die happy."

"No. This is what I want."

Rowdy

I stare down at her longer than I probably should, arms braced on either side of her head, kissing the corner of her mouth.

She cuffs my biceps with her palms, squeezing. "This is what I want. Don't you dare stop."

“I won’t.” Even if it’s going to kill me to hurt her.

“I think you should get on with it. I’m way too tense to drag this out—just rip off the bandage.”

“Are you sure?”

I’m not as eager as I thought I would be to slide the condom on, nervous energy replacing the anticipation of screwing Scarlett, anxious to do it right the first time.

I rise up on my haunches and unroll the condom down my dick, crack the tube of KY lube, squeezing out a small amount on my thumb and forefinger, rubbing them together. Reach down and rub them over her clit in tiny circles, watching as her lips part and eyelids lower.

Beautiful.

Run my hand over my cock, the lubricant getting me slick.

I lower myself, face inches from hers.

Reach between us and guide myself in. Push until the entire tip is inside, and *motherfucker* is she hot. I slide in easy, cock lubed and hard as I’ve ever been.

Christ, I’m sweating, beads of perspiration breaking out on my forehead as I inch forward, centimeters at a time—and damn if my arms aren’t shaking...

My head dips.

Scarlett kisses the crown of my head, my hair. Fingers roaming to my backside, tenderly splayed over my ass.

Deeper still...

Her nostrils flare and eyes widen with shock when I push through her hymen, her hips rearing away—fight or flight. I cover my mouth with hers, muffling the squeak of protest tearing from her throat. Kiss away the pain, motionless, listening to her breathe.

I love you, Scarlett.

I’m sorry if it hurts.

Pull out.

Push in.

Out. In.

Slower than I've ever gone in my entire fucking life.

Rise to my knees again, locking eyes, breathing hard. Pressing my thumb against her clit and starting slow little circles.

My lips part, too.

I love you.

Out.

In.

“Okay?”

“Yeah.” She pants, watching me as my hips thrust forward. Pull back. Thrust forward.

I peer between our bodies, hand on her pelvis, dragging us tight together, round and round my callused thumb goes over her pussy.

“You feel so good, baby.” I barely have any breath in my lungs.

I feel my face contort, and I imagine it looks like I'm terrified—she's so fucking tight. So tight.

A dream.

Round and round.

“Does that feel good?”

She nods, biting her lip.

“You like that?”

Another nod and her head thrashes on the pillow—a fantastic sign. She is going to come if it kills us both.

I want to pound into her so hard my ass cheeks are flexing, self-control the only thing holding me back.

Quiet sex has never been my style—I like it loud and dirty and messy—but there's something to be said about what she and I have now, here, in this moment.

It's more than a physical connection because I love her.

Then, something incredible happens.

Scarlett's eyes widen, this time not from pain, but from pleasure. Cheeks flush, boobs bounce as I thrust just a little harder, thumb still working the hot button between her legs.

“Oh...” she moans.

Moans again, head tipping back, hands grasping the pillow.

Yes...yes.

Fuck. Yes.

My hips swivel. Pelvis rocks.

“Sterling...”

The look on her face matches mine—panicked.

Frantic.

And it’s magical when she comes. I will never forget the look on her face, or the sounds she makes, the gasping noises and tortured near sobs.

Gorgeous.

I love you, Scarlett.

MONDAY

Scarlett

I t's much too dark in our cabin, curtains pulled closed, and I can barely make out the shape of Rowdy as he yanks on his gym shorts in the corner of the room, trying not to wake me but failing when he bumps into the compact-sized coffee table.

Black mesh shorts with red stripes running up the sides. Formfitting tank top. White socks. Black trainers.

He's going to drive all the women in the workout room *crazy*.

Even in the dark he looks hot.

I roll toward him, resting my chin in the crook of my arm. "What time is it?"

He sits down on the edge of the mattress, stroking my back. Leans down to kiss my bare shoulder. "Shh, babe, go back to sleep. I didn't mean to wake you."

Next, his lips kiss my temple, hand sliding beneath the sheet and skimming over my waist. He's so big and warm, and I want to cuddle, missing him already.

"Don't go." I stretch, reaching for him.

"Go back to sleep." Another kiss to my exposed skin. "I won't be gone long, maybe two hours."

Two hours!

"I'll take a shower in the gym then wake you up with post-workout morning sex."

"But I'm already awake." I yawn, rolling to my back.

"Think of it this way," he croons in the dark. "I'll get a better workout knowing my reward is a slow bang when I get back. Do me a favor and be naked when I get back."

I'm already naked under these blankets, neither of us bothering to get dressed after having sex last night; our pajamas never even made it to the party.

"Unless." He trails a finger down my stomach, circling my belly button. "You want me to get you off before I go?"

I moan, sore but greedy.

His hand strays back up, gently kneading a breast. "Shit, I shouldn't have started touching you." He leans over me, kissing my cheek where my dimple is. "Maybe I should get naked and stay."

"No, you should go. You'll regret it all day if you don't."

We regard each other in the near dark, only a thin sliver of light peeking through the shades. He knows I'm right; he would regret it if he didn't go.

"Promise you'll be in this spot in two hours when I get back?"

"It's five o'clock." I stretch like a cat. "I'm not about to hop out of bed."

"Okay, I'll hurry." He rises, standing over me. "Don't go anywhere."

I yawn. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Instead, I dream of him.

Dream of the night we met—only this time when he leads me out of the party, he's holding me by the hand. This time when I follow him out to the porch, there are lavender roses on the swing, their fragrance drifting up to my nose. It rocks back and forth in the wind, the flowers falling to the floor, one at a time, petals scattering in the wind.

When I reach for Rowdy's hand, he's gone, replaced by a tall, looming—

I jerk awake, flat on my back, staring at the ceiling.

It's light outside now, sun furiously pushing through the shades, hot white light. That one sliver of light is blinding, so I shift, turning toward the door.

Rise up slowly, feet thrown over the mattress.

The space between my thighs is sore, tender. I test out my legs before standing.

Not the best, but not the worst.

Sterling isn't back yet, but he will be soon, so I stand and hobble to the bathroom.

When I pee, it burns, and I cringe, wiping away a little blood. Stare at the toilet paper in my hands—at the blood and what those red spots mean: *I am no longer a virgin.*

My heart gives a thrilling pound as I remove my toothbrush from the travel case and stand idly at the sink, brushing my teeth. Wash my mouth out with spearmint.

Brush the knots out of my hair until it's shiny and straight.

No sooner am I climbing back into bed—naked—than I hear the keycard being swiped over the security pad, the lock clicking open.

The door eases open bit by bit, Rowdy steps inside, dropping his bag by our tiny couch. Kicks off his shoes and pulls off his socks.

I watch from the bed as he lifts his shirt, balls it up, and tosses it next to the bed. Shucks his shorts, sliding them down his tapered waist.

Rowdy's muscles are dense and taut, veins rushing with liquid oxygen. He braces his arms behind his head and stretches, rotating his waist to the left, then the right, pulling on his forearms.

His abs contract.

My body gets hot.

When he's done stretching, he turns his back on the bed, walking to the bathroom, every muscle in his body contracting.

I hear the sink running when he steps inside then the tapping of his toothbrush against the porcelain. The toilet flushes.

I'm on my back when he comes out, sheet up over my torso, hands folded behind my head. Content and lazy, like a cat waiting to be petted.

Worshiped and adored.

"You're up." He smiles in the semi-darkness.

"Mmm," is my reply. "I'm up."

"What a coincidence." He chuckles. "I'm up, too."

There is a noticeable bulge in his boxers that he adjusts when he moves closer, squatting a few inches to lift and shift his dick from one side of his shorts to the other. It's a total jock thing to do.

Now he's next to the bed, leaning over to kiss me, his minty fresh mouth opening to taste me, tongue sliding in. I let my hands slide into the waistband

of his underwear, edging them off his hips.

He tugs them off completely, stepping out, leaving them in a heap on the floor.

Slides the sheet off my body and crawls into bed, arm already reaching for the condoms in the bedside table.

One of those big, rough hands skims tenderly down my hip. “Are you sore?”

“A little.”

He kisses me again. “Sorry.”

But his large body feels divine. Heavy and warm, brawny arm draped around my waist, hauling me in. Bodies lined up, perfect.

“It’s all right. I knew what to expect.”

“Want me to kiss it and make it better?”

No. I want him to fill me like he did last night; insatiably curious, I want more. Everything, not just his tongue.

“Or do you want a quickie?”

“No.” I shake my head slowly. “I want it slow.”

I want him gentle. I want to take our time.

I want Sterling to feel how fast my heart beats when he touches me, big bear paws gently caressing the skin along my hip, lips warm. Tender.

I love everything about him; he is everything.

We kiss with our eyes open, mouths open, tongues lazily stroking so I can see everything he feels reflected in his eyes—the same way I did last night.

The self-control for my sake.

The adoration.

How he knows my body is still sensitive and treats me like a breakable piece of glass when really all he wants to do is pound into me. His self-control is like nothing I’ve ever seen in my entire life.

Remarkable.

Impressive.

Admirable, really.

Inch by glorious inch, he pushes in, inhaling the air at the crook of my neck. Murmuring. Checking to make sure I'm okay.

“Are you all right?”

I'm better than all right.

I reach up to brush back his hair, the words *I love you, Sterling* burning the back of my throat. The telltale signs of my nose tingling give my brain the signal to send water to my eyes.

These tears are my feelings for him, tangible proof that everything between us is right. Last night was everything a first time should be, and I couldn't have chosen any better.

Sterling eyes widen when he spots the tear sliding down my cheek. “Why—are you okay? Scarlett...”

“I'm happy.” *I love you.*

He holds himself above me, buried inside. Leans down, those massive, strong forearms braced on either side of my face. Instead of brushing the tear away with his fingertip like I expect him to do, he licks it.

Flicks it with his tongue.

I grip his biceps. “Deeper.”

I never get tired of seeing his bottom teeth drag along his lower lips, and it arouses me more seeing them now. White, gleaming, perfect.

He pushes deeper. Rotates his pelvis.

“Yeah, like that...”

“Mmm...” My head turns to the side, cheek against the pillow.

“Scarlett, *look* at me,” he rasps, emotional.

I look at him.

I see him.

I love him.

TENTH FRIDAY

“The One Where I Stick it in Some Other Guy’s Ass (Metaphorically Speaking).”

Rowdy

Me: *I miss your face so fucking hard.*

Scarlett: *I know, I miss you, too. So much.*

Me: *One more week is going to drive me nuts—how many days is it exactly?*

Scarlett: *I don’t do math, remember?*

Me: *Shit, that’s right. I’m going to have to carry this team when it comes to numbers.*

Scarlett: *Very funny, wise guy.*

Me: *But also, true.*

Me: *You know, there’s a party at the house tonight.*

Scarlett: *The baseball house? But I thought you weren’t supposed to have parties once the season started.*

Me: *I know, but a few of them have their heads up their ass—they want to have a welcome home party.*

I adjust myself on the couch and shift the limp dick in my jeans. It misses Scarlett as much as I do, if not more. Making love to her is my new favorite sport.

Me: *Will you come back? I want to see you.*

Scarlett: *When?*

Me: *Is NOW too soon? Please.*

Scarlett: *No, now isn’t too soon...but then I’m at school for a week with nothing to do before classes start. And I’d miss a week of work.*

Me: *You can do ME for a week before classes start. I'll come stay at your place.*

Scarlett: *Really? You'd stay at my place?*

Is she serious? I would kill to stay at her place. We can play house and practice making babies every night.

Me: *Yeah, really. Pack your shit and come home.*

Scarlett: *Let me think about it.*

Dammit, why is she so sensible sometimes?

I run a hand through my hair, staring hard at my phone, at the screen, waiting for those three little dots to disappear and a new message to pop up.

“What the hell are you smiling at?” Blake Sheffield, one of our outfielders, grabs a controller for the gaming system in the entertainment center and points it at the television. “You look like such an idiot.”

Shit. I forgot I'm not alone.

I popped into the baseball house this afternoon to meet with the other captain of the team and a few of the older players. Then I sat my ass down on the couch and have been on it since, top popped on a bottle of Gatorade.

I wipe my mouth. “You know Scarlett?”

“Uh, *no.*”

“Scarlett.” I sigh, taking another chug of the ice blue liquid, opening my throat so it slides down easy. “You heard the guys calling that girl Cock Blocker a few weekends ago?”

“Yeah—what about her?”

“That's Scarlett. She's my girlfriend.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa—hold up, bro. You have a *girlfriend*? Since when? When the hell did you start seeing someone?” He rattles off questions rapid-fire.

“We started seeing each other the night I kicked her out of the house.” That is technically true. “Apparently, she liked it,” I joke, taking another swig, downing the bottle and throwing it onto the coffee table. It bounces off the wood and lands on the carpet.

Sheffield watches me, expectantly. “And?” He's so goddamn nosey, prodding for more information.

“And...that’s it. I’m *telling* you this because if I can convince her to come back to school, I’ll bringing her by tonight. I don’t want to be fucking embarrassed, and I don’t expect her to be hassled.”

“No man, of course not.”

“Not by Ben, not by Derek—not by anybody.”

Eager to please, he nods emphatically. “Got it.”

I give him a sidelong glance. “You know you guys aren’t supposed to be having any more parties, right?”

“Yeah—this one was Tag’s fucking idea.”

“Well if you get us in trouble, I’m going to beat the shit out of you.”

“I know, Rowdy, we’ve already had this conversation.”

“Just so we’re clear.”

“We’re clear. And they got clearance from Coach.”

Well shit, if Coach knows about the party...

I relax my shoulders, sinking farther into the couch.

The front door opens and the team’s catcher, Dante Amado, walks through with a girl on his arm. Dark hair and even darker eyes, she trails behind him, holding his hand.

I recognize that look; it’s the same one I’ve seen on Scarlett a dozen times: uncertainty, hesitation, dread.

I don’t blame her—she’s walking into a den of wolves, but if she’s with Amado, she’s probably not a groupie, and he’ll look out for her.

As they pause in the entry to the living room, Sheffield gives them both a short wave.

“Hi.”

Dante jerks his head to the side. “Guys, you remember Amelia.”

We’re both openly staring—it’s hard not to. Dante has never brought a girl around, not while *I* was living here, and I would have heard about it if he had recently—our goddamn friends are nosey as hell. Curious as a group of unruly toddlers.

Sheffield sprawls in the center of the couch, remote control in his hands, pausing the game. Looks the girl over from head to toe then back up again,

wrinkling his forehead.

“I thought you said her name was Lucy.”

The girl finds a smile, and then her voice. Brushes back a long strand of dark hair. “Nope. It’s Amelia. You must be confusing me with someone else.”

They make a really good-looking couple.

“Shit, sorry.”

Dante’s arms slides around his date’s waist. “Anyway, we’ll be in my room. Don’t bother us.”

We watch the pair walk out of the room, and I unlock my phone.

Scarlett: *What will I tell my boss?*

Me: *I forgot you have to work; I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’m just being selfish.*

Scarlett: *There you go again, using semicolons in your text messages. You know I can’t resist good grammer. Gramar? Grammar? CRAP, HOW IS IT SPELLED?*

Me: *No one knows!!!!*

Scarlett: *lol. So—a party tonight, huh? And you want me there?*

Me: *It’s not a big deal, babe—not if you need to work.*

Scarlett: *You’re okay going alone?*

Me: *Me? Yeah. I mean, I miss you, but what’s a few more nights of jerking off in my cold, dark bedroom? It has a lock and all the porn I need.*

Scarlett: *Same.*

Me: *I hope you’re thinking of me when you diddle yourself.*

Scarlett: *Please don’t ever says diddle again. It just made me die inside.*

Me: *lol, sorry.*

Scarlett: *You really want to come stay with me this week? I have tampons in my bathroom, and I’d have to empty all the psycho meds out of my medicine cabinet.*

Me: *Trust me, I looked in your medicine cabinet the first time I came over. I had to see what level of crazy I was dealing with.*

Scarlett: *I don’t even want to know...*

Me: *You really don't.*

Scarlett: *I'm thinking...if I leave here by 3:00, I can be back by 6:30, depending on how many times I stop*

Me: *Does this mean you're coming back?*

Scarlett: *On a scale of 1 to 10, how bad do you miss me?*

Me: *Elevnty.*

Scarlett: *Well then, what other choice do I have?*

“You know what? Instead of this party, how about we go on an actual date? Like to dinner, or...I don't know, to the *movies*.” She's trying to change the subject, trying to change my mind about the party.

I take a left at the stop sign, turning onto Jock Row.

“I want my friends to get to know you—once you're in, Scar, you're in. They'll look out for you the way they look out for me. Don't be scared, babe—they're going to love you.”

She scoffs, staring out the window. “Stop, they will not.”

“You're right—I'm probably going to spend the entire night pissed off, because chances are, they're going to try to bang you.”

I pull up to the baseball house, park my truck in the driveway. It's cold—frigidly so—but Scarlett wore a black, off-the-shoulder top, so different from any outfit I've ever seen her in, I'm wondering if anyone will even recognize her tonight.

“Are you sure they're not going to be...you know...” She waves a dainty hand in the air, unable to finish her sentence. Not wanting to be rude.

“*Dicks?*” I pull her in close. “I'm the fucking captain of this baseball team,” I remind her. “*I* say whether or not they get to act like pricks.”

A few of them will probably act like pricks, guaranteed.

They're jocks—it's in their friggin' DNA.

We're walking toward the house, hands clasped together, and I have to slow my pace so Scarlett can walk in her heels. They're tall wedges, so she's a good four inches taller now—easier to kiss on the mouth—and her eyes are rimmed in dark liner. Lashes a million miles long, covered in black mascara.

Long hair down, big silver hoops flirting with the skin on her neck.

How the fuck did I get so damn lucky?

Seriously.

And before I start spouting off about fate and all that other lovey-dovey bullshit, I reach for her hand, help her climb the stairs of the porch, steam from our collective breaths fogging up the night air.

My hand reaches for the doorknob, but before I tug it open, I turn to her. “Do you think once we step through those doors, we’re going to be miserable because we’re not alone?”

Her mouth twists as she looks around. “We had some really good times out here on this porch. It’s like our spot.”

“I’ll buy this house some day, rip the porch off, and bring it with us when we have our own place.” Our house. *Our* porch. Enough kids for a little league team.

Her eyes get wide at my mention of our future.

Shit. Too soon?

I want to eat her up, starting with her pretty petite fingers; she has her nails painted bright blue. Then I want to kiss the tip of her pert nose—it gets more pink the longer we stand out here, stalling.

I wiggle my fingers in her direction. “Stick your gloves in my pocket and take my hand.”

She hesitates, slowly sliding off her black mittens one at a time and handing them to me. I shove them in the back pocket of my jeans and reach down to take her hand, lacing our fingers.

We both shiver.

“I’ve got you—I won’t leave your side.”

Scarlett rolls her eyes. “What exactly do you think is going to happen?”

“I’m afraid you’re going to wander off and steal shit from the fridge.”

“I did not steal from the fridge!” She huffs. “It was unlocked.”

So damn gorgeous, even in a snit.

I twist my torso, leaning down, planting a firm kiss in the middle of her pursed mouth.

“Let’s go.”

Scarlett

From the moment we step into the house, Rowdy is greeted like a celebrity. People shout his name, and it’s loud and distracting and obnoxious, if I’m being honest. I know *none* of the people approaching him, smacking him on the back like the lost messiah that’s finally come home. Girls touching him even though he’s holding steady to my hand.

To be fair, guys are touching him too—but it’s not the same thing.

He squeezes my hand before letting go, slides it around the curve of my waist, wrapping his arm around me. Pulls me in close. Tucks his massive palm into the back pocket of my jeans like a bad advertisement for an eighties rom-com.

This is our first public appearance as a couple, and I’m both nervous and excited to be here. On his arm. By his side.

Still...

“What...is happening right now?” I laugh, oddly irritated at the spectacle. “Why is everyone...this is so weird.”

“I haven’t been here in weeks, *that’s* what’s happening right now.” He actually has to holler in my direction so I can hear him. “They’re glad to see me.”

My brows go up.

“I’m their leader, Scarlett,” he says, as if that statement explains everything.

“Their leader has been outside for the past eight weeks.” I roll my eyes. “It’s not like you went anywhere—you were literally thirty feet away this entire time.”

His skin is darker than it was before our vacation, tan skin setting off the green shade of his eyes and the pearly white of his teeth. He must have gotten his hair trimmed today, because it’s short, obviously styled by a professional.

I think about how I’m going to run my fingers through it later.

I ogle him some more, pressing my nose against his shirt to catch a whiff,

lids fluttering closed. *Mmm, mmm, good.*

“Hey man,” Ben, the guy from the first house party—the one who had me kicked out—walks up with his fist raised for a bump.

I struggle not to narrow my eyes, but it’s difficult.

Rowdy accepts it, bumping it back. “What’s up Wilson?”

Ben’s blue eyes appraise me, trying to place me. He knows he’s seen me before, but he’s not sure where. “Are you going to introduce us?”

I step forward, presenting him with my hand like I’m a fine lady about to take tea in Britain, Sterling’s steadfast fingers pressed into the small of my back. “Oh, we’ve met.”

Ben grins, taking my hand, pumping it gently, acting the gentleman. *Prick.* “I always recognize a gorgeous face.”

“Is that so?” My nude, glossy lips smirk, and for the life of me, I cannot figure out where this badass inner me is coming from. I thought I’d be nervous, coming face to face with Ben.

But I’m not.

Not one little bit.

He can’t have sex with me because I’m taken, and he can’t place me because I’m unrecognizable from the girl he met eight weeks ago. My hair is down, I’m wearing more makeup than usual, and I’m four inches taller—not to mention, no beige sweater.

As a result, Ben does what I’d expect from a guy like him: he goes about ignoring me to speak Rowdy.

Ben shifts his gaze. “What’s up Wade—where the hell have you been? I feel like the only place I’ve seen you is the gym.”

“I’ve been around.” Rowdy laughs. “Mostly on the porch.”

Ben looks down, notices Rowdy’s arm firmly around my waist. Looks at me again, studying me closer.

“The porch? Why?”

“That’s where I met my little duple puss.” He bends and kisses the top of my head. “That’s a hybrid word I made up,” Rowdy explains to his friend like he’s a relationship expert. “It’s a cross between dumpling and dimple. She *loves* it.”

He has zero shame.

“I don’t think we’ve met.” Ben reconsiders me with a more critical eye; he knows I’m the reason he hasn’t seen his captain in *weeks*. “I’m Ben.”

“Scarlett.”

He tilts his head like an animal listening for a sound in the distance, my name processing in his mind; I see the wheels turning like rusty spokes that need oil, chugging along through his brain.

He nods ever so slowly, up and down. “*Scarlett*.”

One word. Just my name.

He knows.

Then, “You’ve been MIA for fucking *ever*.” His arms cross and I note that his arms are thick, too—a trait shared by most of the players. “The guys aren’t going to like this.”

He nods in my direction. Ugh, what. An. Asshole.

Still holding my waist, Rowdy laughs. “You actually think I give a shit?”

“You should.” Ben gives me another glance. “No offense, Cock Blocker, but I didn’t expect to see you back here.”

Rowdy’s entire body stiffens. “How about you *not* fucking call her that?” Holy shit he sounds so pissed. “She wasn’t voted out of the house, Wilson. Stop being a petty little bitch.”

“Sorry, that’s not going to happen.”

“I suggest you figure out how to be cool with it, or it’s going to be a really long season. Scarlett is my girlfriend, not some party girl here to hook up.”

My breath catches at the sound of him sounding just a little bit protective.

Ben pales, then flushes. “Girlfriend?”

“Did I st-st-stutter?”

God, the bitchy tone of his voice is so damn hot. Sarcastic and fuming, daring Ben to challenge him a few more times. Daring Ben to defame me, wanting to get right up in his face.

Christ, it’s turning me on—what is my freaking problem? I want to shove my tongue down his throat.

I shift on my heels.

“I have an idea, Wilson, since you obviously have nothing better to do than stand here with your pants down around your ankles—run and fetch my girl a drink.”

He’s being a huge dick and *I love it*.

“I’m not a fucking rookie anymore,” Ben grits out tightly.

“No, but you might as well be. I don’t like your shitty attitude. And you know what else? You’ve pissed me the fuck off one too many times, and I’m your captain, so you’re going to march into the fucking kitchen and do it, yeah? Because my *girlfriend* wants a goddamn water.”

I want to rip his clothes off so bad right now.

With my teeth.

Seconds pass. Music thunders around us.

Then, Benjamin Wilson does the unthinkable: he stuffs his hands in his pockets and glances down at the ground. Backs up a step.

Pastes on a fake smile. “Can I get you anything to drink, Scarlett?”

I bite down on my bottom lip, feigning indecision. “Water would be so great. I’m not a big drinker, as you know.”

“*Bottled* water,” Rowdy’s deep voice instructs. “From the *fridge*.”

I lay a hand on his chest—he’s so thoughtful, getting in that tiny jab.

“Oh babe, that sounds so refreshing, thank you.” My palms give his pecs a few pats; they’re nice and firm.

Rowdy pats my ass with his large palm, two little taps.

We watch as Ben stalks away to fetch me the liquid refreshment I don’t actually really want.

“Jeez, bitter much?” my boyfriend grumbles.

I turn to face him, up on my tiptoes. “We don’t have to wait around, do we? You’re totally turning me on right now.”

His dark brows rise, hands sliding down to my ass. “That was turning you on? Wow, you’re easy.”

“I am.” I nip at his earlobe with my teeth. “Let’s go. I don’t think I can stand to be here all night. I want to go home and rip your clothes off.”

We’ve been here less than ten minutes.

“So what you’re trying to tell me is: you’re horny?”

God I hate when he uses *that* word. “Yes. That’s what I’m saying. And if I have to stand here another second...”

“Shh. Say no more.” His forefinger silences me. “If my baby wants to go home and screw, I’m going to take her home and screw her brains out, because that’s just the kind of guy I am.”

My vajayjay is positively *tingling*.

“Your place or mine?” He’s already dragging me toward the door like a caveman, minus the club and pet dinosaur.

“Someplace where no one will hear you?”

I’ve learned that when Rowdy Wade has sex, he’s vocal—louder than I am, his groans of pleasure embarrassingly dirty and noisy. He swears and grunts, headboard usually banging against the wall.

So erotic, I could orgasm just listening to him moan.

Rowdy releases me, grabbing me by the hand. “Let’s get the fuck out of here and go bang.”

Rowdy

“Are you watching me sleep?”

Scarlett’s drowsy question comes from out of the dark, the only light coming from the light in the hall. I left it on when I took a piss earlier, and the soft glow streams into her bedroom, casting a radiant filter on her smooth, bare shoulders.

She got up after we had sex to braid her hair, and now it drapes down her back like a long, silky cord.

It’s one o’clock in the morning and I haven’t been able to sleep since she shut her eyes and drifted off—hours ago.

I don’t know what woke her up, but her eyes are blinking open, lashes fluttering like butterflies.

“What’s wrong?” Her voice is laced with fatigue and concern. “Can’t you sleep?”

“Nothing is wrong.” Nothing is wrong and everything is right and I just

want to lie here, basking in it, in how easy this relationship is.

Scarlett reaches for me, sliding her lithe naked body across the mattress until her ass is pressed into my front, as if it's not the most counterproductive thing to do.

My cock twitches knowingly.

I slide my arms around her, resting along the underside of her breasts, stroking with my thumb, burying my lips in the crook of her neck.

"I love it when you touch me," she murmurs, groggy. Then, when she raises an arm behind her to stroke the back of my neck, I use the opportunity to cup her breast in my palm. Play with the nipple, breathing into her hair. "*Mmm. Love it when you touch me.*"

Love.

Tenderly, I caress her skin. Gently. Lovingly.

Over her hip, deliberately, lips pressing into the flesh behind her ear. "Go back to sleep, sweetheart."

"It's too late for that." Scarlett captures my hand, settling it between her legs, a week's worth of non-stop sex making her bold.

And she's good at it, too.

We've discovered she likes it rough. Likes a little hair pulling, likes it from behind. *Loves* it on top, especially when her hands can grip the headboard.

We discovered that if I suck her tits long enough, she'll come.

We discovered that if she sucks *just my tip* long enough, *I'll* come.

My stiff erection finds its home between her ass cheeks, digging in. Teasing. Hot and hard.

Scarlett rolls.

I grab a condom from the bedside table, rip open the wrapper, roll it on. Rise above her, pushing in.

Tired, she watches my eyes, hands on my biceps as if needing to brace me up. When I'm balls deep, I lean down, latching our mouths together, hips swiveling painfully slowly.

Mercilessly slowly.

I whimper, burying one of my hands beneath her ass, pushing deeper, the tip of my cock bumping her cervix. My eyes roll to the back of my head. Nostrils flare.

Pelvis grinds.

Scarlett lies beneath me, barely moving except to moan, tipping her head back and swirling her tongue around in my mouth. Sucks on my bottom lip.

Half asleep fucking is the best kind of fucking.

Fuck it feels good.

Shift my shoulders back, breaking the kiss, chest heavy. “Scarlett.”

I pause to glance between our bodies. Down my abs, where we’re connected. Back up, into her half-hooded eyes.

I love you. My mouth shapes the words, though no sounds come out. When I press my lips back against hers, the bridge of my nose tingles. “I love you.”

Freaking eyes get misty, so goddamn cheesy. What the actual fuck is wrong with me? Am I seriously about to fucking cry?

These are my last coherent thoughts as I start spilling my guts—just as I’m dumping my load into the condom, the words start cascading out of my freakin’ mouth.

“I’m so fucking in love with you, Scarlett.”

Her sleepy doe eyes—they’re beautiful, blue perfection. Soft as she gazes up at me, the palm of her petite hand cupping my jaw, adoringly.

“I love you, too,” she whispers.

I kiss the palm of her hand before bowing my head, burying it in her shoulder. We stay this way for a long while, wrapped up in each other, neither in any rush, my spent cock still inside her heat.

My best friend.

I am one lucky bastard.

113th FRIDAY

EPILOGUE

“The One Where We Went Back for Homecoming Two Years Later.”

Scarlett

The baseball house hasn't changed a bit—same peeling paint on the siding, same crooked floorboards, same porch swing.

The chains are rustier now, and it still hasn't been given a new coat of paint, but it's swaying back and forth with the breeze, sturdy and inviting as it ever was.

I plop down on it, feet dangling. Give it a push, letting it glide me back and forth. Take a sip from my water bottle just as a group of co-eds climb the wooden stairs, their tight leggings and Iowa crop tops a stark contrast to my outfit: blue jeans and a fitted black and yellow Wade #8 baseball jersey.

Sterling had it custom made for me so I'd be a better WAG (I had to google it after all, not knowing that it meant wives and girlfriends of athletes), and his were all too large for me.

When he got drafted—sixth round, to the Diamondbacks—he had one of those jerseys made for me, too.

That's where we ended up: Arizona.

Farther from water than I was before, but Sterling bought us the sweetest little house with beautiful mountain views, a pool, and giant king-sized bed. I managed to land a job at the new aquarium they built in Phoenix, three years old, full of state-of-the-art lab equipment, and some of most beautiful saltwater fish I've ever seen.

Life is good.

I love my job, but not nearly as much as I love *him*, so when I can travel to his away games during the season, I do, not wanting to become so independent I lose sight of what we're working toward.

Us.

I pull my warm coat tighter around my body, enjoying the cool breeze kicking, when a familiar face walks past the porch from the side yard.

“Hey sweetie, where have you been?”

Sterling’s face is older now and every bit as handsome, the Arizona sun having bronzed it to perfection. “I was just about to come looking for you.”

“What are you still doing out here alone? I thought everyone went inside?” And I was here, waiting for him.

“Waiting for you, I guess.” I give the swing another push with the toe of my boot. “Enjoying the quiet.”

“You weren’t inside cock blocking any of the youngsters inside, were you?” Sterling teases. “Ben didn’t try to kick you out for old times’ sake, did he?”

“Ben’s blacklisting days are over, honey.”

Because Sterling and I are legendary now.

Everyone on campus eventually heard our story, how I was brought onto the porch for driving his friends crazy, how I came back the next Friday, and the Friday after that...

And, every once in a while, Sterling will get a message from Ben Wilson—the colossal asshole who wanted me gone, who’s now taking credit for our relationship. Ben isn’t playing baseball professionally, but he’s living with a girl he met at the house on Jock Row. Felicity showed up to one of their *ridiculous* parties wearing a turtleneck and blue jeans, finished the punchline to his terrible pick-up line before he could, and called him a douchebag to his face.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Ben took one look at her and fell hard.

“You’re out here because it’s quiet?” His brows go up.

The music inside is blasting and the place is packed, full of drinking games and shouting, drunk, cheering voices.

My mouth quirks. “You know what I mean.” I’ve never been wild about hanging out inside. Even though at homecoming there are just as many alums as collegians, which evens out the underage drinking ratio considerably in the

right direction.

Something about this porch is everything I need.

Sterling wipes the palms of his hands on the dark denim of his thighs, taking the seat beside me on the swing. Wipes his hands again, resting them on his knees—his *bouncing* knees.

It creaks under his solid, 220-pound weight and sudden fidgeting.

My brow creases, but I say nothing.

“Feels good to be back, doesn’t it?”

“Sure.” But I don’t miss it as much as I thought I would when we left, probably because we’re together. And Sterling Wade is the funniest, sexiest, sweetest man. And he’s *mine*.

“Do you remember...” Sterling begins. “When I said I’d buy this house and rip the porch off? I said I’d bring it with us when we had our own place.”

I smile at the memory. “I remember.”

“I was an idiot.” He laughs nervously. “You can’t buy a front porch.”

No, you can’t. Not unless you’re crazy.

“But...” He nods decisively. “There are other things you can do.”

I cock my head to the side. “Like what?”

“I have something to show you.”

As he reaches behind us and plucks a manila envelope from the railing, the music cuts off inside the house, the raucous noise dying down by decibels. The evening suddenly becoming tranquil.

So strange.

I hadn’t seen the envelope when I sat down earlier, but Sterling is peeling open the seal and tugging out its contents. Lifts out a rectangular, gold-plated plaque.

Hands it to me.

I tilt it so it catches enough of the dim light to read:

IN THIS SPOT, U OF I SHORTSTOP STERLING “ROWDY” WADE
(CLASS OF ’18) MET AND FELL IN LOVE WITH SCARLETT REGINA
RIPLEY

“What is this?”

Sterling clears his throat. “They’re hanging it out here, next to the front door.”

The plaque is suspended between my hands, the metal shiny and new. Symbolic.

“The guys are going to hang it out here?” I look down at the inscription again, biting down on my bottom lip. My god he’s adorable. “This is seriously the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life.”

I adore him and his sweet, sexy face.

I twist my torso, clasping my hands behind his thick neck, planting my mouth firmly on his. Whisper, “You’re the most handsome man on this earth, and I swear I could eat you up.”

Sterling gently removes my hands from around his neck. Stands. Takes a deep breath, facing me as I rock back and forth on the swing.

“Never have I ever...” Drops to his knee. “Been down on one knee.”

I roll my eyes; what an odd thing to say. “What are you doing on the ground?”

Instead of standing like I expect him to, he inhales a deep, steely breath. When he speaks, it’s raspy. “Scarlett, I love you.”

I nod, frowning. “I love you, too.”

The giant hands that were all over my body this morning, making me moan, are reaching into the pocket of his Diamondbacks team jacket, large fingers holding a black velvet box.

Breathing escapes me.

“Never have I ever been this nervous since the season opener,” he jokes, voice croaking, sounding terrified.

Sterling might be intimidating to most people—an imposing, beautiful ass—but he’s the most romantic soul I’ve ever met.

His head is bowed, breathing unsteady. Blows out a shuddery breath as those mammoth hands *shake*, cracking open the lid, fingers trembling; a sparkling solitaire diamond ring sits on a bed of satin, twinkling under the dim lights of the porch.

“Never have I ever been engaged to be married.”

My own palm covers my mouth—just like in the movies—my wobbly

legs holding the swing steady.

“I loved you from the minute I laid eyes on you, Scarlett. I love you, so I’m asking you here, in front all of these witnesses...” He gestures toward the house, where an entire party full of people have their faces pressed against the glass of the living room window.

Laughter bubbles up inside my stomach.

“Would you rather suffer a lifetime without me or marry me and be my wife?”

I drop down on my knees beside him. “I want to marry you and be your wife.”

When our foreheads press together, Sterling snaps the velvet ring box and lets it fall to the ground, cupping my face. Kissing me senseless on the front porch where we met.

He gasps then says, “Let’s get married right here.”

I pull a face. “Uh, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We have plenty of time to figure it out.”

“Come on, honey, it would be so fun.”

Yeah—for him and his baseball buddies.

Someone inside bangs on the window, and we look up to see Ben Wilson waving at us. “What did she say?!” he shouts through the glass.

Sterling looks at me, fumbles and feels around on the ground for the ring. Plucks it up and re-opens the box, removing the pretty little ring nestled inside.

Slides it onto my fourth finger.

I turn it this way and that, letting it catch the light as we both admire how perfectly it fits.

He clasps my hand and holds it up for everyone in the house to see. “She said *fuck yeah!*”

Unruly cheers erupt and the music explodes back on, blasting louder than it was before, booze flowing freely. I watch as someone shakes a gilded champagne bottle, pops the cork, and detonates it over the entire crowd dancing in the center of the room.

Oh jeez.

I eye the scene dubiously. “That floor is going to collapse into the basement.”

“Yeah, maybe we shouldn’t rush inside just yet.”

He’s so very wise.

And so very mine.

Forever.

“We like it better out here anyway,” I point out. “In our spot.”

We lean into each other again, lips touching. “I love you so fucking much.”

“I love you too.”

“Plus, you’re the best lay I’ve ever had.”

THE END

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This book was more difficult to write than you'd probably expect, and I never set out to write something laugh-out-loud funny. Or sweet. Or sexy. These characters took on lives of their own. Scarlett and Sterling wanted drama-free as much as I tried to throw in a little conflict.

Wasn't happening.

I'm glad I listened, because I love this couple and hope you did, too.

It takes a village, so I want to say *Thank You* to the slew of people who made it possible for me to hit publish. I don't even know what order to put any of this in, so I'm just going to wing it:

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Now.

On to writing Love, Sincerely, Yours (with Meghan Quinn) and JOCK RULE (Book 2 in the Jock Hard series). See you on the other side.

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About Sara



Sara Ney is the USA Today Bestselling Author of the How to Date a Douchebag series, and is best known for her sexy, laugh-out-loud New Adult romances. Among her favorite vices, she includes: iced latte's, historical architecture and well-placed sarcasm. She lives colorfully, collects vintage books, art, loves flea markets, and fancies herself British.

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**Love,
Sincerely,
Yours**

Meghan Quinn

PROLOGUE

Peyton

Vivian: *God, why is he such an asshole...?*

Brielle: *Don't you think the better question is, 'Poor George, why is he never prepared?'*

Peyton: *George spends more time at the latte machine than his computer, that's why—and look at how jolly he is. Like a cute little Santa Clause...*

Vivian: *Sigh. George's wife makes the best apple pie.*

Brielle: *Oh crap, Vivian, look out, he's coming for you.*

“Vivian, what came out of your test study?” A man's voice cuts into our group chat and, unprepared, our co-worker stumbles to pull her notes up on her iPad.

Brielle: *Shit, Viv is a goner.*

Peyton: *Oh I feel bad, she's turning red.*

Brielle: *Yeah Viv, you're turning SO red.*

Peyton: *Viv, you should see your ears...*

Brielle: *Maybe if the devil himself wasn't breathing down her neck, she wouldn't be sweating so much.*

Peyton: *To be fair, we are in the middle of a meeting—she should be prepared, not pretending to take notes but instead chatting online.*

Brielle: *Look how irritated he is. His nostrils are flaring.*

Peyton: *Yeah...look at his face. He looks like a dragon tempted to light the entire room on fire.*

I turn to study it from my chair at the conference table, the long wooden slab a monolithic buffer between me and my boss. He's at the head of this table, brandishing control and silver tongue over the room like a sharp sword.

No one is exempt from his contempt.

I watch as he reprimands my friend from the marketing department—her small office is two down from mine—laying both palms on the desk and leaning toward her.

“I have no new ideas to work with here. How the fu—” He stops himself from cursing midsentence, pausing to take a deep breath and starting over. Runs one of those large, masculine palms through his dark hair. “What the hell is it you do in your office all day? Stare out the damn windows waiting for inspiration? I want you outside for fucks sake—go climb a goddamn mountain. This is an *outdoor* adventures company, for fucks sake! Go outdoors!”

He pins a big, brawny guy named Branson with a hard, emotionless stare. “Innovations are your job, Branson. Take a tent out, set the fucking thing up, and find a way to improve it.”

He’s breathing hard, pissed off.

“Look. I know we’ve just come off the holiday season and everyone is beat—but if we don’t get some advances with our designs to boost sales, this fiscal year is going to end up being complete shit.”

He drones on, deep voice reverberating off the walls as we all sit silently, holding our breath.

Vivian: *Uh, hey, guys? Do you think he still wants my notes?*

Brielle: *Fuck your notes, Viv—don’t say another word unless your “notes” are actual notes.*

Peyton: *Pretty sure you lost your moment before he stood up and starting pacing like a tiger at the zoo.*

Vivian: *Thank god—I had nothing new to ad.*

I watch across the table as Vivian slouches with relief, a sly smile playing across her bubble gum painted lips. Her lithe fingers tap away at the cell phone she’s holding beneath the table, and I know her next message isn’t to us.

Brielle: *Do you not have notes because you were so focused on flirting with the guy tet online that has—how did you put it...*

Peyton: *Meat steaks for pecs?*

Brielle: *Yeah, that guys. “Meat steak guy.”*

Vivian: *I can't be accountable for my actions! I have to flirt!*

Peyton: *You don't even know if he's real.*

Vivian: *Who cares if he's real—he's the perfect distraction.*

“I want everyone to crawl back to their hole of an office and pull an idea out of their ass by noon. This is the summer of ‘roughing it.’ Our target demographic—Harry can provide the data—is the millennial, and the yuppie. If you don't know what a yuppie is, google it. If you can't figure it out how to do *that*, clear the shit out of your desk.”

At the mention of his name, Harry blanches, an unattractive contrast to the muddy green color of his short sleeve plaid shirt. His neck turns a ruddy burgundy, which only serves to highlight the stubble his razor missed when he shaved this morning.

Brielle: *Did you guys just see that? Harry wiped his brow, he's legit sweating.*

Peyton: *Yeah, I saw that—gross. He looks like he's about to barf—you heard what happened though, right?*

Vivian: *No, what happened?*

Peyton: *Rumor has it, the ad copy he proofed for Mountain Man Magazine had three errors in it.*

Brielle: *NO IT DID NOT!*

Vivian: *THREE?? Ohhhh shitttttt....*

Peyton: *Yes, three.*

Our boss levitates Harry with a pair of eyes so gray I squirm, though they're not directed anywhere in my direction.

Thank God.

Bossman holds up three fingers.

“How could you let three god-” He stops himself again, pushing his large, hand through his thick, ruffled hair. “How could you let three errors get through proofing? You had one job, Harry. One. Keep us from looking from looking illiterate.”

He has a point; an ad has no more than 100 words in it.

“I'm so sorry, Rome, I, uh, had a headache that day,” Harry fidgets with the handkerchief in his hand. It was given to him by his wife, embroidered

with his initials and a heart that's gag worthy sweet—too bad he's using it to wipe the jittery sweat pouring from his temples.

It's not a good look for Harry—or anyone for that matter.

“You're giving *me* a headache.” Boss man surrenders to his chair, head in his hand.

“I'm sorry, Rome, I—”

“No, Harold, I'm the one that's sorry.” His meaning couldn't be more clear: I'm sorry I hired you. I regret it. I intent to fire you if you fuck up one more time. “There will be no more second chances.”

He straightens to his full height, addressing the room full of minions.

“For the love of all that's holy—someone give me something by noon.”

My fingers, about to tap out another message to my friends, cease their mission.

It's ten fifteen in the morning.

He wants ideas by noon.

I have an appointment with him at *eleven*.

Shit.

When my eyes up from the small screen cradled in my hands, they connect with a set of steel gray ones. Dark brows an expressionless line. Full lips, impassive.

He is so good-looking.

Beautiful, even.

Such a waste on a man so emotionally unattached.

Still.

When our eyes lock—a little too long to be coincidental—

heat rises up my chest, neck, then cheeks. Colors my entire face and has me reaching to press a palm there.

It's warm, too.

I shiver.

I have an appointment with him at eleven.

And he isn't going to like what I have to say.

CHAPTER 1

Rome

Why the fuck is she staring at me like that?

She hasn't said a goddamn word in—I check my watch—three minutes.

Allowing the seconds to tick by despite her discomfort, or possibly because of it, I let the silence stretch in front of us unpleasantly long. Uncomfortable and challenging situations are what I do best, and I thrive on them.

Tic.

Tock.

No worries, my sardonic smile says at her. *I have plenty of time*. An entire twenty minutes penciled in just for her, per her request, to sit here pissing away my precious time. Waiting for her to open that pretty mouth and speak her mind.

Instead she shifts in her seat, the gray skirt she's unable to tug down hugging her hips. It's tight and prim, complimented by a stark, white button down shirt. Black glasses sit primly perched on the tip of her nose, the dark slash of eyebrows above their rims, raised in surprise.

She doesn't look like any marketing coordinator I've ever met, and I certainly had no idea there was someone who looked like her working for me. *Under me*.

Four floors down.

She looks like a goddamn accountant. Or secretary. Or the principal of an east coast prep school.

I swivel in my leather chair before plucking a pen off my desk and pinching it between my fingers, studying it with half hooded eyes.

Feign boredom.

I'm anything but.

Click the end cap once, twice, watching this woman's large brown eyes track my movements from the other side of this mammoth desk. Her brows pinch, thinly veiled patience wearing thin.

Peyton.

Shit, when I saw her name in appointment calendar, I assumed the person walking through the door would be a male. Imagine my surprise when the delicate wrist gently knocking on my doorframe belonged to the woman seated at my conference table this morning.

She'd been on her cell phone during that meeting, I'd bet my right nutsack on it.

I glance down at the sheet of paper at stare at each letter of her name; I've never had a sit down, or meeting, with this woman a single time she's been with my company.

Five years.

Even with a solid track record for results (according to my secretary's snooping), she's never once been in my office. Peyton somethingorother, whose last name I can't fucking pronounce and won't bother to try.

Why bother? She has one prissy foot out the door of the company *I* built.

I part my lips and put us both out of our misery. "Does your supervisor know you're here?"

"Not yet." She begins, spine straightening, breasts straining against the starched shirt. "I wanted..." she pauses, inhaling a nervous breath.

"Why didn't you go to HR first? That's protocol."

I like being direct. Favor bluntness over candy coated bullshit, no matter what the flavor someone is trying to feed me.

"I wanted to give you my two week notice in person. I thought it would be personable."

Personable.

Is she fucking serious? Who does that?

"You're *quitting*. Do you think I give a shit about being personable?" Or polite? Or her trying to be *considerate*?

Those traits have no place in this office.

It's an office not a daycare center; we're here to make money, not pander

to hurt feelings.

Another pause from Peyton before her shaky breath says, “I thought since it was *your* company, it would behoove me to not burn any bridges down.”

Behoove.

Isn't she just fucking adorable? I suddenly imagine her from a small town in the middle of nowhere USA, where parents teach their children manners and spend quality time together on the weekends. Family movie nights and all that feel-good bullshit.

I snort, clicking my pen.

Peyton. What kind of a name is that?

A *man's* name, that's what.

“You didn't want to burn down any bridges.” I repeat with a sneer, thumbing the cream colored paper she'd set down on my desk upon entering. Her letter of resignation, printed out on resume paper. “I don't just burn down bridges, I drain the rivers and fill them with concrete.”

Then I go camping along the banks of the rivers remains; I own an outdoor adventure company, so finding a tent would be easy.

Peyton's mouth puckers, surprised or shocked or disgusted by my candor, I can't tell.

I skim the paper in my hands. “It doesn't say where you're headed next. Do you not have need for a letter of recommendation? Because I must say, Peyton,” I lean back in my chair, letting it squeak on its rusted old hinges. “Quitting is a piss poor way of wringing one out of me.”

Her head shakes, the dark hair pulled back in a tidy bun at the nap of her neck doesn't budge an inch. All it's missing is a hair net.

I let my eyes drift from the tips of her shiny leather heels to the collar of her starched dress shirt.

Narrow my eyes. “Do you always dress like that for work?”

She glances down at her blouse, touching a pearl button fastened against her throat. “When I have an important meeting, yes.”

“It's a goddamn *outdoor* adventures company and you have a librarian bun in your hair.”

She stiffens, eyes falling to the blue silk tie knotted around my throat; the

broad shoulders of my suit coat, no doubt labeling me a hypocrite. Tough shit, it's my company. I do what ever the fuck I want, and I too have an important meeting this afternoon with advertisers. I'm not about to show up in a goddamn lumberjack plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up to my elbows.

Peyton fiddles with a gold, hoop earring. "I thought our meeting warranted a little extra effort this morning."

"Well you could have saved yourself the trouble. When someone quits on Roam, Inc., I no longer have use for their time."

"But Rome, I was hoping..." She uses my first name instead of my last, lifting an arm, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear that isn't there; a nervous habit she can't partake in because it's pulled back in that damn matronly bun. "I came in to suggest that though I'm striking out on my own, my services could still be of use to you."

"Your services?" A chuckle escapes my lips despite myself, lips settling into a sneer.

When I think *services*, my mind goes immediately into the gutter: escorts and blow jobs and loose woman. Sue me for immediately thinking about sex.

She must read my thoughts reflected in my eyes, because hers flutter and the skin on her exposed neck ignites to a hot red.

"My *design* services, yes. I'm finally—"

Agitated by the excited glint in her eye, I cut her off. She's leaving and has the balls to begin a pitch for her sub-contract work?

I don't fucking think so, sweetheart.

"We'll manage just fine without you, I'm sure." I lean forward, hands folded on my desktop, sleeves of my dress shirt cuffed and rolled to my elbows. "I'm not successful because I spend my time sensitivity training the shit out of everyone who needs it. This is a business, not a hobby. And since you insisted on this little meeting, let me fill you in on something; a valuable lesson that might come in handy for your next job, if you will."

"I-Im listening."

I level Peyton with a hard stare. "If you think for one second you're going to work for a competitor, think again."

I shift the papers on my desk, jabbing my finger at her non-compete contract; the one she signed the first week she came onboard at Roam, Inc.

It's ironclad and irrevocable for one year after the termination of her employment, and I'm not afraid to enforce it.

Yup. I'd take her for everything she was worth if she went to work for the competition.

Her chin lifts a fraction. "I would never."

My lip curls into a smile. "That's what everyone says."

She stares at my mouth a few heartbeats before shaking her head. "I won't be working for anyone again—I'm finally going to work for myself. And if you can't respect that, I guess I underestimated you."

I lean forward, clasping my hands on the desk. "Underestimated me?"

"I thought you were progressive. As someone that started their own company from the ground up, I thought maybe you'd give me a chance." She stands, handing me a manila folder. "My graphic design work is good. Fantastic even. If you can't see that, then, well. You...you're a..."

My brows raise into my hairline. "I'm a what?"

"An ass."

When she's gone, I fiddle with the mouse of my laptop, scrolling through the company contacts. Click on her name. Hit enter.

Peyton

The sound of Rome Blackburn's door closing behind me startles me out of my stupor. Out of the haze of *delusion* I'd somehow created and been surrounding myself with the past few weeks, thinking maybe—just maybe—he'd want to hire me on as a contractor once I left the company.

I was betting on him giving me a chance.

What the hell just happened in there?

Did I just march into Mister Outdoor Adventures office to resign with an envelope full of designs? To pitch him my new company? To *stare* at the strong set of his jaw while he rattled off insults?

I did.

Oh God, I did.

And I called him an ass—to his face. Honestly, the look on his face will be burned into my brain forever. And I doubt insulting him will bode well for me in the slightest. Talk about not wanting to burn bridges . . .

But he didn't even let me get a word in edgewise.

Well maybe a few—a stutter here and there.

Good job, Peyton, way to represent the future of Fresh Minted Designs by losing your backbone when you needed it the most. How is that going to help you succeed?

“How'd it go?”

I breeze past the front reception girl, her voice stopping me with a staged whisper. She's leaning over her the cold stone counter, glancing up and down the hall—then back at me, crooking her finger so I'll come closer.

“Well? How did it go, you weren't in there long.”

I glance toward Rome Blackburn's office, my face defeated. “*Not* as I expected. And now I know where he gets his last name from.”

His personality is as *black* as his soul.

Wincing, Lauren motions with her finger for me to come closer, still. I have nothing better to do since I just *quit*, so I follow her little command, resting my hip against her granite reception counter with a loud sigh.

She grimaces. “That bad, huh?”

“*Worse.*”

“I didn't hear any shouting—how bad could it have been?”

My brows shoot up. “Shouting?”

“Well yeah—you're *leaving*. You quit. Rome Blackburn doesn't take kindly to people leaving the company.”

As if I needed to be told; I just witnessed it first hand.

“Were you able to give him your two-weeks notice?”

“No. The conversation tanked when he started talking about my non-compete.”

Lauren laughs, clicking away at her keyboard. “Yeah, he usually has people clean out their desk on the spot when they intend to leave. Don't be surprised if there's a box already packed by the time you reach your desk.”

“Oh really? I never would have guessed.” The words drip from my mouth, coated in sarcasm I can’t conceal, but my stomach drops.

I hope he lets me stay; I *need* this last two weeks.

“He’s built this company on blood, sweat, and tears from the ground—”

I lean over to pat Lauren on shoulder. “Sweetie, I know. You don’t have to defend him. I get it. It’s nothing personal, it’s business. I just wish he would have given me more of a chance to—”

Down the corridor, a door opens.

His door.

Lauren’s back goes rigid; her fingers immediately begin flying faster across her keyboard.

I freeze.

My shoulders stiffen, back straightens, senses kick on, suddenly on high alert.

His cologne is sharp and masculine—with an air of power, mixed into one unmistakable and ridiculously intoxicating scent *and what the hell am I even saying?*

Rome Blackburn is woods and rivers and adventure.

He is excitement.

He is an asshole.

Rome Blackburn is a freaking. Prick.

The energy in the entire room shifts in the hallway. Commanding steps move toward Lauren and I, stopping just behind me.

“Ms Lll...” He stops, unable to pronounce my last name, and not even attempting to try. “What are you still doing here? Don’t you have two weeks notice to give to your supervisor?”

He’s not making me clean out my desk. *He’s not making me clean out my desk!*

“It’s Lévêque.” It’s pronounced le-veck.

“What is?”

“My last name.”

Sharp, intense green eyes narrow, five o’clock shadow covering his

strong, chiseled jaw. Rome crosses his arms, biceps straining against the expensive fabric of his blue, button down shirt, feet a shoulder width apart. The stance makes the room feel smaller, tighter, sucking all the air.

“Le veck,” he repeats, testing it on his lips. His gorgeous, pouty lips.

“Yes.”

“Then why the hell don’t you spell it that way?”

“It’s French.”

His eyes narrow even further—if that were possible—

jaw ticking, thrumming an irritated beat as he sticks his hand in his pocket.

“Lauren, please show Ms Fancy Pants Le-Veck to the elevator, the clock is ticking on her time here.”

“Yes, Mr. Blackburn.” Flicking an apologetic look my way, his secretary stands, hastening to do his bidding, guiding me hastily to the elevators twenty feet in front of her desk, hands on my shoulders, propelling me forward.

“I’m so sorry. We’ll talk more later,” she whispers, her ruby red nail poking at the down button; the doors automatically slide open, revealing the interior black and chrome walls.

Stepping in, I turn around and press my floor button, four levels down.

“Human Recourses first Ms Fancy Pants,” Rome calls out the reminder with a smirk. “It’s that way.”

He points toward the ceiling.

Jerk.

God he’s good-looking.

Tall, with wide shoulders and tapered waist, the best part about him is his broody demeanor. I am attracted to it like bee’s to honey; it intrigued me to no end.

As the doors of the elevator begin to shut, Rome steps into view, hands tucked into the pockets of his perfectly pressed trousers and watches me, scowl etched across his beautiful dark brows.

Just because I feel the need to be pleasant—despite how rude he’s treated me—I mouth the words, “Thank you, Mr. Blackburn,” as the door slide closed in front of me.

Smile to myself, knowing I had the last word.

Smile as the door shut me in.

Only when they close do I slump my shoulders and lean against the wall for support, letting out a ragged breath.

Giving your two-weeks notice is difficult enough—giving it directly to a man like *that*?

Harder.

That could have gone better.

It went exactly nothing like I'd imagined when I played out the scenario in my mind. Or when I'd rehearsed the speech I was going to give to my dog, a rescue mutt I'd named Scott, because I think it's hilarious giving my pets people names.

“Scott and Mister Blackburn—thanks so much for seeing me today, I know your time is valuable.” I'd cleared my throat. *“Oh, what's that? You like my skirt? (giggle) Thank you so much, I picked it out just for you.”*

But he hadn't liked my skirt; he'd made fun of it. I'd stuttered over myself, hadn't been able to give him my pitch, and fallen flat on my face.

I had visions of how much better that could have been. Dreams actually.

Praise and gratitude were supposed to be thrown my way. Excitement for a new partnership. For growth! Maybe some high fives or at least a few professional handshakes or a fist bump to seal the deal!

I adjust my tweed, tight-fitted pencil skirt, feeling the hug of the fabric and slit up the back, allowing for some breathing room. Pluck open the top two buttons of my stifling shirt.

Embarrassed from the gauntlet I just ran through, I make my way back to small office, that's really just a glorified cubicle, passing many on-looking and incredibly nosey co-workers.

Leave the door open.

Squeaky wheels adjust against the plastic chair mat that protects the carpet of the office, rolling forward as I sit down. Leaning forward, I grip my forehead with one of my hands and replay the meeting over and over in my head.

Rome Blackburn's casual, yet intimidating stance. The pinch of his long

fingers as he fiddled with that damn pen. My eyes as they roamed to the taper of his waist of his well-tailored pants as he watched the elevator doors close on me. The simple *mess* of his hair, pushed in all different directions, as if moments ago he was pulling on the silky brown strands, making a decision for the fortune 500 company he's created from the ground up.

And those eyes.

Dark brows hooded over pools of complex green, that for once, I'd been close enough to discover the color of.

Mossy, they'd gotten darker as he'd gotten more irritated with me.

With me.

Ugh.

Rome Blackburn is callous, brash, and calculating. Yet, in that brief moment we'd stared at each other, I saw it—

saw a fleeting look of vulnerability behind his tough exterior.

A glimmer of—

Knock, knock.

The wrap of knuckles sound on the top of my cubicle wall, and before I even look up, I know it's my best friend Genevieve.

“Well. How did it go?” Genevieve works in IT, the technical side of Roam, Inc, and has been incredibly supportive of me leaving the company to start one of my own. A branding and consulting firm.

Gen sits on a small filing cabinet in my office, smooth legs crossed and ready to listen.

Spinning slowly in my chair, I angle toward her. Purse my lips. “How do you think it went?”

Her face contorts. “I'm going to guess not so well?” She phrases it like a question. “Mister Blackburn doesn't seem like an understanding kind of guy. He's too pissed off all the time.”

Understatement of the year.

“God, Gen, I wussed out so hard. I'm so embarrassed—and I didn't even get to talk about my idea or my plans.” I shake my head. “What he hell was I thinking? Rome Blackburn legit cut me off before I could even get my words out of my mouth.” I laugh some more, finding the meeting more comical with

each passing breath.

“At least it’s a pretty mouth,” my friend teases.

“He didn’t even know my last name, which means he had no idea who I was. Awesome.”

That gathers a chuckle from Genevieve. “He seems so refined, how could he mess up your last name?”

“He couldn’t pronounce it so he didn’t bother saying it.” I shrug. “Or maybe it was his way of jabbing me with one last insult before I left.”

Dutiful and supportive, my friend rubs my back.

“All it did was make him look like an ass.” Her high heeled shoe bounces up and down. “Hey. Listen. Forget about him—you’re leaving and you’re going to some serious kick ass when you’re out there, hustling all these companies, making a name for yourself, he’s going to be sorry he passed on you.”

I shake my head mirthfully. “He is not. You’re so stupid.”

Genevieve considers that a compliment. “I’m telling you, he’ll be sorry.”

Picking up a paperclip, I play with the metal and undo its shape—a nervous tick of mine. When I was younger, I’d shove the metal in my mouth against my teeth and pretend it was braces. I’m older now, so I set the bent metal back on my desk. “Any gossip I need to know about lately?”

Genevieve knows *everything*. And, in my opinion, has the best job in the company.

She monitors the instant messaging accounts, watching for any kind of misconduct or misuse of time. Creates new employee accounts and emails. Deletes old ones. Takes random screenshots of co-worker’s desktops.

Basically, she is the eyes and ears of Roam, Inc.

The best part of her job? No one knows exactly what she does; they just think she sets up work phones and fixes their computers every now and again—so she can dig up some real dirt on people.

“Hmmm,” she hums, taping a finger against her chin. “Calvin over in finance has a girlfriend getting implants this Monday, and he’s paying for the entire thing.”

“You’re lying.”

She shakes her head.

I quietly laugh, slightly jealous, my shoulders shaking. “What about Rose and Blaine?”

She takes a mint from my candy dish and pops it in her mouth, the crinkle of the wrapper rolling in her fingers before she tosses it in the trash can next to my desk.

“Still in a stand-off. He won’t admit to crushing on her, and she won’t admit to kissing him when they were drunk at the last office party. Looks like good old fashion stubbornness is going to get in their way of true love.”

“Such a shame.” Toss my paper clip in the trash, grabbing another one. “And Sally up in payroll? Is she still talking shit about me to Jessica?”

Genevieve rolls her bright blue eyes. “*Always*. Said you were dressed like a tramp today and went to the top floor today to try to fuck the boss.” She emits a soft snort. “As if anyone would want to go near that icicle dick.”

I bite the corner of my lip, eyes cast down. I don’t know, *someone* might want to fuck him.

In fact, I could name one person off the top of my head in an instant.

Me.

Me, me, me.

I would do Rome Blackburn in a heartbeat.

My friend chatters on, oblivious.

“Hey!” She perks up, sitting up ramrod straight on the desk. “Are we all still on for tomorrow night? Thirtieth birthday celebration!” She claps her hands, excited.

Some people might dread turning thirty, but not me.

I’m excited to be out of my twenties and I’m ready to be taken more seriously. I’m ready to have my own business, I’m ready for this new chapter in my life, despite the slightly negative start to it.

“We’re on. I need a stiff drink.”

My friend snickers. “A stiff drink and a stiff cock inside you.”

“Trust me, that’s not going to happen.”

“Why not?”

Because. I'm saving it for someone who doesn't want me back: Rome Blackburn.

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