

A CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE COLLECTION

HATING HIM

Wanting Him



SUMMER BROOKS

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BOSS ENEMY

BLURB

My sworn enemy is now my boss!

He doesn't know that I'm the woman whose family he burned to the ground.
Not even when circumstances put us together in one apartment... as roommates.
He can't know my secret.
And he definitely can't know that I lust for him.

**After all, my boss enemy doesn't deserve to be my first...
Or does he?**

MIA

The crowds were wild outside of the University. But at the same time, so was the happiness, cheer, and good tidings. This was, after all, the last time most of us would feel that freedom of not having to slave away at a job, have a summer vacation, and pretty much be allowed to live off of cheese fries and beer. It was my Graduate School Graduation from Cornell University. This was technically my third degree, my undergraduate being in Technology and Production, and my Master's being a dual in both Systems Engineering and Cognitive Science.

I know. It sounds insane, and most likely, after the work I've put in, I could be considered insane, but I wanted to have the best chance to step out on my own. Of course, my wild and crazy bestie, Lily, really didn't understand that.

"Why do I feel like I'm going to be paying for this amazing education forever? Seriously, I want to calculate out how much I would have made as a waitress with no student loans, versus whatever I become with a debt of a hundred grand. I bet it's freaking close." She was smiling for photos with me, speaking like a ventriloquist so no one but me could hear her.

I smiled for another picture, and turned to Lily, poking her in the shoulder. "Just because my father has money..."

"And a billion dollar company," Lily cut in. "Who happened to offer to give it to you one day if you wanted to work for him..."

I puckered my lips. "Which I don't. Who cares about investment and real estate? I want to create the technology of the future. Build big things, and not buildings."

Lily sighed, putting her arm over my shoulder and pointing at her mother who was trying to take another picture. "While I'm over here with a Master's degree in music about to, 'waste my education and existence while having to flip burgers.' Or so my father says."

A giggle escaped my lips. "You already have a spot in the Chicago Orchestra. And if that doesn't last forever, you can teach at any University in the world."

Lily flung her long brown hair over her shoulder, her tan skin perfectly contrasting her light pink, pouty lips. "And look damn good doing it."

We both laughed loudly, thankful that the parents had begun to congregate together. It gave us some much needed moments to ourselves. Lily and I wandered over to the benches on the edge of the student lawn. I turned and looked over my shoulder. "I spent so much time out there on that lawn, just trying to get some Vitamin D instead of being cooped up inside of the dorms."

Lily snorted. "That's not the only type of Vitamin D you needed."

I rolled my eyes. "It's fine, you got more than enough for the both of us."

She smiled, stretching her arms up over her head. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. I do what I can. You can live vicariously through me. Though, I think you’d learn to loosen up a lot more if you just got laid.”

My virginity was the last thing I wanted to think about, especially with everything we had to do that day. There was the flight back to Chicago, getting settled in, getting ready for work. The whole nine. My life got no break after college. That was the point, though, right? To jump into life headfirst?

Our parents were standing on the sidewalk far enough away for us not to be able to hear what they were saying. I watched my mother attempting to console Lily’s mother, who looked absolutely miserable.

Instantly, my eyebrow popped up and I tilted my head toward Lily. “So, your mom is still completely destroyed that you’re moving to Chicago, isn’t she?”

Lily looked over at her mother, tears streaming down her cheeks, her eyeliner smudged, and her father looking more than irritated by the whole debacle. She let out a deep groan. “Yes. The woman has had a year to get it together. I think she was living in denial. Thinking at any moment I was going to call and be like, oh hey mom, I got this place across the street from you in Brooklyn. We can be neighbors and besties.”

With a smirk, I chuckled. “That just means she loves you. She’ll get used to it, and before you know it, she’ll be doing all kinds of non-mom stuff, telling you that you can skip your Christmas visit because your father and her are going to Boca Raton for the holidays.”

Lily snorted, covering her mouth. “I just pictured my parents in shorts, t-shirts, and those plastic visors driving around in golf carts.”

I shrugged. “It’s the future for us all.”

“God, I hope not,” Lily gaffed. “I do not look good in calf high socks and I can’t get over the whole sandal sock trend.”

My nose wrinkled. “I don’t think that was a trend. I think that was just the unknowing of the world uniting in defiance. Not that I’m the expert on fashion, but there is a line.”

Lily patted me on the shoulder. “I am proud of you. Now if I can only get you to toss that Minnie Mouse, over-sized, t-shirt nightmare away before we head to Chicago, I will be on top of my game.”

I ignored her seven thousandth jab at my Minnie Mouse shirt. “We got everything from the room, right?”

Lily nodded. “Yeah. And I saw your dad’s people picking it up earlier to take it to the plane. But speaking of, do we need anything for our new gloriously fabulous condo in Chicago?”

My shoulders shrugged. “I don’t think so. Most likely my father hired someone to take care of everything, down to the toilet paper and sheets. Oh, and by the way, if you ever decide you want to leave our bachelorette pad, he said all of your bedroom furniture is a gift to you.”

She grabbed my arm, trying to hold back a squeal. “Oh my God. That is so awesome. But seriously, you are never getting rid of me. And if you one day marry some tech geek, he will have to understand I come with the house.”

“Like a pet? Or a toaster?”

Her eyes narrowed. “More like radiant granite countertops.”

I laughed. “From the 1960’s. You know, that wild pea green that went through the style scene back then. That’s you.”

She sighed. “It’s disheartening how you think of your dear best friend. I guess I’ll have to upgrade when I get to Chicago.”

I sat up on the bench, not at all excited to see my father walking toward us. However, before he

could get here, one of the professors he knew called his name. I slunk back down, crossing my legs.

Lily looked over at me and shook her head. "You are so weird. Seriously, your father is one of the most brilliant businessmen in the world. He has one of those old man stories about starting his company with twenty bucks and an old hammer, and you cringe when he comes near you. We did an entire study on him in one of my elective business classes."

"I know," I replied dryly. "I had to sit through six months of listening to you talk about my father every day. Not to mention the girls in your group that have some weird attraction to him."

Lily giggled. "I don't like old dudes, but for someone wrinkled, he's pretty hot. Not like Sean Connery was in his fifties, but still. The money makes up for it."

My body shivered. "You have problems."

She put on a fake smile and waved, talking under her breath again. "I do, and that's why you love me. Don't look now but the whole clan is coming to see us."

I forced a smile as well. "Oh boy, maybe my father can get in an epic decade-long battle with one of them and we can become enemies brought together by sisterhood."

Lily stood up. "Not likely. You can't pull that one off twice in one lifetime."

I stood up with her. "Have you met my father?"

My mother wrapped her arms around me, the smell of her expensive perfume wafting into my nostrils. It was like a shot of adrenaline. "I'm so proud of you."

"Me too," my father added, rubbing my shoulder.

As usual my mother shot him a nasty look. The two had been divorced since I was a little girl, and although I did love my dad, my mom had insisted I take her name to keep the pressure off of me growing up. I had to admit, it was a good idea. My father owned Cuthbert Investments, the flagship of many multi-million dollar companies. My last name was Crosswell, which was fine by me. I never wanted to be linked to him in a business sense. I wanted to forge my own path.

Lily's mom walked over sniffing. "So, what are your plans when you get back to Chicago?"

I took a deep breath. "I got a job at Innovations Technical, it's a technology firm."

"A huge one," my father chuckled. "Though I haven't done any business with them before, they are relatively new. Grew really fast and then kept the momentum."

"What about you, Lily?" my mother asked.

She stood tall and proud. "I got a chair with the Chicago Orchestra. I will start performing with them by winter as long as I get through all the material in a quick manner. I also have a part time instructor position at one of the local private music companies. I'll be teaching the cello there."

My mother swooned. "Oh, I just love the Chicago Orchestra. That is just fantastic. You girls have got a beautiful future ahead of you."

She was right, or at least I hoped it. I had worked my rear off to get that job with Innovation. I had done two summer internships with them and gone through 6 months of interviews. It was exactly how I had planned it. I had the proof, it was written down in a journal I'd been keeping since my freshman year of high school. I had managed to reach every goal or milestone I'd set up so far, and now it was time to move on to the next phase; adulthood.

Whatever that meant.

"Uh, speaking of your futures, the plane is set to depart the airport in an hour," my father said, looking down at his watch. "I won't be flying with you. I am going to hop over to New York and see some clients of mine."

I faked disappointment, but I was pretty sure Lily's pout was sincere. "Sorry, dad. We'll see you back in Chicago, right?"

“Of course,” he replied, putting his arms out.

We said our goodbyes, tearful from Lily’s family. I was pretty sure at one point I heard her father tell her mother to, “Get it together, Louise.” I wish I could say my mother would have been the same way, but I knew better. She loved me, but she was a rich woman who never gave up her life to raise me. She just took me everywhere she went or left me with the nanny. I didn’t mind, though, I wasn’t like the other rich girls. I had always been considered pretty but I didn’t care at all about that kind of thing. Fashion, make-up, style, it was all completely lost on me.

Lily grabbed my arm, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Get me out of here before she starts sobbing.”

I smiled and waved to everyone, pulling Lily toward the town car that had just pulled up to the curb. The driver opened the door for us and we climbed in, waving wildly at our families as we pulled off. I was disappointed because my parents would be just one jet behind, while Lily was thrilled to be finding her much wanted freedom. Luckily, I had plans. Plans that were going to take me places, and I wasn’t going to let anything stand in the way.

EVAN

The room felt almost stagnant with all the bodies seated around the large mahogany table. Papers were strewn everywhere and my secretary was still trying to figure out why the projection wouldn't work. Every couple of minutes there was a hissed, undertone, curse word, and a banging on the machine. I leaned my head back and looked over at Lydia.

"It's alright," I mouthed. "I'll figure out what's up with it later."

She sighed and dropped the remote in my hand, turning and dragging her sweaty head from the room. I swiveled the chair back around, my eyes glancing around at the old wrinkled faces of my Board of Directors. The whole room smelled like expensive cologne with a slight hint of early morning bourbon, most likely from Mr. Horngarden who was known to carry a flask in the pocket of his thousand dollar trousers.

"What do you think, Evan?" My father's voice dragged me from my haze.

I sat up in the chair and cleared my throat. "I don't know. I mean, I'm not really keen on our name being affiliated with anything political, even if it is a big project like this. Companies, major ones, have crashed and burned for things like that in the past."

My father pursed his lips, holding the paper out in front of him with his eyes squinted to look at it. A small grunt came from his throat, the same one he let out every morning when I was a kid and tried to talk to him, but he was too busy reading the paper. Finally, he set the list down on the table and took his glasses off.

"Here's the thing," he said, about to break out the numbers on me. "Your company has grown so fast, almost too fast. And you probably wonder how a business could grow too fast."

"Actually I...", he cut me off before I could respond.

Waving his glasses at me, he flipped his laptop around so I could see the charts. "You need to sustain your business in order for your long term shareholders to stay. We don't want this huge spike and then a major fall. That would scare them, and they will sell, jump ship, bye. While I agree with you for the political project, you need to have a big project on your plate, and soon. This momentum is great, but you have to be able to sustain it. My business..."

And there he goes. I had to admit, my father was a business genius, but damn it sucked having him on the Board of Directors of my company. But what was I going to do? He offered to give me the startup for the company as long as I put him on the board. It was that or spend the next ten years saving pennies working for some crappy tech company. I wanted to work for myself, just like him, except not just like him. While I loved my father, he was a bit of a...smooth talker. He wasn't the most moral man to do business with, or at least he didn't use to be. After the lawsuit...

“You see, Evan,” he said louder, noticing my eyes glazing over. “There are just too many ifs to let things stand as they are. So, it’s obviously the recommendation of the board that you make one of these work. We won’t be happy with a slide in the numbers if you don’t.”

I rubbed my face, leaning forward and grabbing the list from the table. “Well, I would say at least half of these are candidates for sure. I will have to thoroughly look through the research and I’ll start making calls.”

My father grunted again, followed by a chorus of other grunts from the men around him. “Yes, well, make it fast. It’s the beginning of the new quarter and we want to see the next quarterly report put our stockholders at ease.”

It seriously felt like I was not the CEO of the company, at least not in board meetings. My father had a habit of taking over all the time. It drove me nuts, but I couldn’t say anything. He was the whole reason my board was so high profile to begin with. They were on board if he was on board, and he was, not because I was his son, but because he did, deep down, believe in my business plan. Nonetheless, he stifled me in the board room.

I looked up at the clock, my father’s eyes following. He got my drift. It had been hours and everything we needed to talk about was done. He took a deep breath and leaned back. “I don’t know about you gentlemen but I’m ready to hit the course.”

There was a chorus of agreeing grumbles. They all looked over at me and I nodded. “Yep, I have plenty of work to do, that’s for sure. I call this board meeting to a close. The notes will be sent to all of you as usual.”

They wasted no time shaking each other’s hands and patting me on the shoulder as they filed out. It was the same pat I got when I used to go to my father’s office as a kid. The he’s-a-good-kid pat. Something else that irritated the hell out of me.

I stood up and buttoned my jacket, reaching out and shaking my father’s hand. He was the last of them to leave, as always. He nodded and looked around proudly. “You’re doing good. Just follow our lead and you’ll have that stability you’re looking for. Trust me.”

My grin was forced. “I trust you, dad. Just a lot to get going on.”

“Then that is my cue,” he smiled. “Your mother is waiting for me anyway. She has some godawful charity thing planned tonight.”

I chuckled, not really amused. That had been their life for the last twenty years. “You’ll get free Scotch. Just be happy for that.”

He leaned toward me, his hand on my back. “I’ve come to learn the richer you are, the less free anything is.”

Just then, my best friend, and head of marketing, Connor, walked in. He shook my father’s hand as he walked out of the room, and we stood there in the conference room waiting until we heard the elevator down the hall shut and my father’s grumbling cease. When it was finally over, I let out a deep breath and grabbed the stack of papers.

Connor chuckled. “That go good?”

I glared at him and rolled my eyes. “Sure, if I was a twelve-year-old boy with a lemonade stand. I have to get one of these clients on board and fast.”

Connor took the paper from me. “Hmm, they seem...complicated. Why such a rush? I thought the company was doing amazing.”

I nodded as we walked toward my office. “Maybe a little too good. The shareholders want to see stability and gradual increase now. In order to make sure we have a stable line of sales, we need one big client for this next quarter. Everything else will keep the stabilization and create a steady

increase. They're afraid we'll peak and then fall."

Connor shook his head, getting it. That's what I liked about Connor, he was smart. I didn't have to explain every little detail to him, and he was my best friend, had been since college. We wandered slowly down to my office at the end of the hall. Tossing the file on my desk, my ass hit the leather chair and my feet immediately lifted to my desk. I stared out the huge windows, overlooking the entire city.

"It can't be that bad," Connor said. "Besides, you want the investors happy. I know you hate this side of the business, but unfortunately that is the nature of the beast when you're the owner and CEO. You do have your father to help you out, even if he is annoying."

My palms rubbed up my stubbled cheeks. "Yeah, at least when he's here he isn't stumbling around lost like he has been at home."

Connor wrinkled his nose. "How long has that been going on?"

I chuckled. "Since the lawsuit years ago. He swears it was just the stress of it all that brought it on, but I really think its because he was such good friends with Robert Cuthbert. He never saw the lawsuit coming."

With a pen twirling in his fingers, Connor shrugged. "Yeah, well, it's not every day you try to pull one over on your friend like he tried to do to Cuthbert. Seeing as they were both sharks, it doesn't shock me at all that Cuthbert sued him. Just sucks it had to turn into such a battle. At least your father won."

"But what did it cost him?" I asked. "And I don't mean financially. I remember as a kid, we used to throw cookouts and parties, and my father was a social man. After the Cuthbert incident, I can't really remember him having parties anymore. Half his friends took Cuthbert's side, the other stayed, but you know rich people, they're rarely genuine in friendships."

Connor raised an eyebrow, smirking at me. "I'll have to remember that."

I let my head turn lazily toward him, giving him a look. "You know what I mean. Those old bogies trying to keep up appearances. The battle with the Cuthberts was a turning point for the old man. I think with this he feels that old sense of excitement but knows it doesn't fall on his shoulders."

Leaning back in his chair, Connor took in a long lazy breath. "You know what helps with that type of stress, right?"

"A bullet?" I asked sarcastically.

Connor rolled his eyes. "No man. A night out. We can hit up Delaney's on 3rd, and get crazy with it. I haven't seen you take home a girl in quite some time and I'm pretty sure a hot night fueled by vodka and blond girls will take some of that stress right off your shoulders."

I didn't answer him at first, focusing back out of the windows. "I don't know man. With all this work, I really need to be here. Whether I'm working late or coming in early this kind of thing needs to be rocking and rolling within a couple of days."

"And what better way to start it then with a clear head," Connor pointed out.

I knew he wasn't going to stop pressuring me. We always went out together. We always chased the girls, had a good time, and flaunted our eligibility. But lately it seemed that my mind steered me back toward work. Maybe I was growing up, or maybe I was just tired of the parties, something I'd been doing since before college. Whatever the reason, I didn't feel like going out that night.

Connor waited a few seconds, tapping his fingers on the desk. "Seriously dude. You are starting to act like you're sixty. Next thing I know, I'll find you in your condo in loafers and a smoking jacket, listening to classical music, eating olives, and acting like your staff are your only friends."

This made me crack a smile. "That actually doesn't sound bad."

Connor threw his hands up in the air.

Putting my feet back down, I swiveled toward him and let out a sigh of defeat. “Alright, fine. We’ll go. But I’ll meet you there so I can get a workout in and change my clothes.”

Connor jumped up and clapped his hands together. “Yes. That’s what I’m saying. You sir, will not regret this.”

I watched him walk out of the office. I really hoped he was right because the file in front of me could end up being the future of my company.

MIA

“Did you see the ceilings in the bedrooms?” Lily asked sticking her head out of her doorway. “How do I even get that high to clean them?”

I unpacked a couple of groceries and set them on the counter with a chuckle. “You don’t. That’s what the cleaning staff takes care of.”

Lily shook her head, walking gingerly down the hallway. “Seriously, this is why poor people are stuck in tiny little box houses. Because we can’t afford to hire someone to clean giant, tall ceilings. Crazy. Absolutely crazy.”

A laugh bubbled up from my chest and I tossed the ice cream we just bought into the freezer. Lily stood in front of the cabinets and threw them open dramatically, skimming over all of the food that had been stocked in the place before we got there. It only took a second for her to realize my father was kind of a health nut. She dropped her arms and grabbed a box out of the cabinet.

“Seriously?” she said, squinting her eyes at the box. “Low carb, high protein, vitamin-infused waffle mix? I really feel like I’ll get more out of it eating the powder.”

I took the box and closed up the cabinet. “Oh, I thought you believed my father was perfect?”

“Your father did this?” she asked, shocked.

My shoulders shrugged. “Kind of. He gave a list of foods to put in here and then hired someone to do it, but it’s pretty close.”

She picked up a box of monk fruit sweetener and sneered at it. “Maybe he just didn’t know that this person stocked it full of nature’s valley.”

I nodded my head toward the sunken living room that was lined with windows facing toward Lake Michigan and the skyline of Chicago, gorgeous and way lower down than our condo sat. Leave it to my father to find the one place in the city that hadn’t sold their penthouse yet. Lily put her chin in her hands and sighed. “It’s gorgeous, isn’t it? Your father sure knows how to pick a place.”

I glanced at her and gripped her chin, turning her head to the right where the two identical elliptical machines sat in front of a row of weights. “I meant that. If you live here, eat my father’s food, and use the equipment, you’ll be a supermodel in no time.”

Lily sneered, looking me up and down. “What happened to you?”

I gasped playfully and threw a peach at her, watching her catch it. “I had no interest in my father’s health routine. I was too busy trying to be perfect, remember?”

Lily giggled, tossing the peach back at me and bouncing down the living room steps and over to the window. “I came to Chicago when I was twelve and I went to the Sears Towers and stood up there looking out over everything. It was amazing. I don’t even think they were this high.”

My head nodded as I chewed the giant bite of juicy peach. “Mm, this one is one foot shorter. They didn’t get the okay from the city to go higher. It was right around 9/11 so everyone was terrified, you know? In fact, that was the only time I had gone out in the city and for a week after, I didn’t see a single sailor, Navy Sailor. They were all on lockdown on base.”

She rubbed her hands together. “Oh yeah, I forgot about the sailors. Cute little things and not around long enough to get attached to me. I like it.”

I snorted and took another bite, wiping the juice from my chin. “They are wild, let me tell you that.”

Lily flounced over to the catch and threw herself down. “So, what was it like growing up here? I mean, I know what NYC is like but this place is like a wealthier, cleaner version of it.”

I laughed, wiping my face with a paper towel and tossing the peach pit in the bin. I moved around the granite island and hopped up one of the breakfast bar stools. “It’s not all clean, trust me. I don’t know, there was always something to do, always some way to entertain ourselves. I tried to get away from the loudness but that’s hard to do in the city. When we finally moved out in the suburbs was when I was able to really focus. But Chicago is cool. Cold, really cold in the winter, but awesome.”

“And your father’s building is out there somewhere?”

I nodded, hopping down and moving to the window. I scanned the buildings and streets below, squinting and pointing across the tiny map in front of us. “You see that building with the green and blue lights lit up across the top? That’s my father’s building. His helicopter lands in the center of the roof. But he wasn’t always there.”

Lily was staring out the building, her lip curled. “One day I’m gonna own a building you can see from the top of a condo twenty miles away. It’s crazy. Crazy. I mean, I can’t imagine what it was like growing up like that. Growing up in a household where your family was worth more than Oprah.”

With a smile on my face, I sat down on the couch. “It was like I was a kid and had no concept of money. My dad was a good father, spent time with me, made sure I was happy and loved. It wasn’t until he had to sue the LaGrange empire that everything went crazy. My mom and dad got divorced, but really that wasn’t nuts. I can’t ever remember doing anything as a family. And then he almost lost his company. Everything he had worked for. And while I know my father isn’t the most moral businessman, he was my best friend as a child. But then I got older, his business boomed again, and my parents lived apart. He was the rich dad then.”

Lily’s face was comforting now, like she could see talking about it was hard. “And he didn’t come around a lot?”

I shrugged, looking down at my hands. “Not really. He sent stuff. I had tons of stuff. But not a single thing in that room, house, or estate replaced wanting to see him up front and in person. So, I turned my focus to school, to studying everything I could get my hands on. I made myself a plan. I didn’t want to just know what I didn’t want to do, I wanted to know what I would do. So, I took the lessons learned, mixed it with my research and created my life on a piece of paper.”

“And?” Lily smirked.

“And, it’s right on track so far. Right on track,” I replied, smiling big.

Lily nodded her head astutely. “Good. Then I think it’s time you start letting loose a bit. I’m getting ready to revamp my whole dating life. New City, new men, new chances for Mr. Right Now. You should do the same. Might take some of that stress out of those premature worry wrinkles on your forehead.”

I reached up with a furled brow and felt my forehead. Glancing over I knew what she wanted. She wanted to go out, get drinks, get crazy, and then whatever happened after that, happened. Of course,

that usually entailed me going home slightly drunk and her coming back the next morning.

Lily dropped to her knees and scooted across the floor. She put her palms together like she was praying and began to beg. "Please. Come on girl. You know you need to do it. It's our first night in Chicago and our last night as free college students. We need to commemorate it."

Staring at her for a moment everything in me wanted to fight back, but I knew it was futile. "Fine."

"Yay!" she squeaked, jumping up and grabbing my wrists. "Come on, I'll get you all sorts of hot and sexy. Look out Chi Town, we are coming for you."

THE BAR WAS loud and obnoxious, too many people jam-packed into one small stale-smelling building. Lily had done my hair, giving me a puff on the top of my head and letting the rest curl down over my shoulders. She started me out in a tank top, tiny skirt, heels, and red lipstick, but I managed to talk her down to a cardigan over the tank, the same skirt, and Chuck Taylors. Oh, and red exchanged for a bit less vibrant shade of lipstick.

"I'll get us two drinks," Lily yelled over the music and the voice. "Go grab that table over there."

I nodded, following her stare over at a table in the middle of the room. Holding my arms up in the air, I sucked it in, scooting between the packed patrons and finally onto the stool. I flung my hand, trying to get whatever it was I slid my hand through off. Probably just condensation from the last beer sat there, but I wasn't going to take any chances.

A few minutes later, Lily slid in, handing me a beer and smiling big as she looked around. "Wow. There are a ton of people here!"

Sipping my beer, I nodded. "Yep. That tends to be the Chicago way. I think we practice for when it's cold and windy. Keep a pack together instead of letting one of us blow off down the street."

Lily laughed and continued to look around, her shoulders and head bobbing to the sound of the music. I just sat there, watching the girls and guys coming in and out of the front door, wondering what everyone did when they weren't scoping out their next partner in a dirty bar in downtown Chicago. It was the game I played every time I got stuck out somewhere with Lily and she was off in her own world. I made up stories for people, sometimes their entire lives, all in one narrative in my head.

This time though, Lily's gasp brought me back. "That guy, over there at the bar. He is so hot. And his friend is pretty hot too. The guy with the dark teal button up, silver tie, sleeves rolled quarter length. Like he just got done prosecuting some bad guy in court."

I lifted my brow and looked over, shrugging. "I think his friend is way hotter."

Lily shimmied her eyebrows. "Come on, lets go over and say hi. You don't have to talk, I'll do all the introductions."

I rolled my eyes and groaned. "We just got here. And there is no way a guy like that is going to be into me."

Lily slapped my hand. "No, he won't if you keep having a terrible attitude like that. He'll never want to be around you. But, if you walk over with personality and self-assurance, he'll be all over you."

She put her hand out and I sighed, throwing mine into hers. I had to admit, the guy sitting with her interest was really sexy. His hair was thick and wild, his eyes this crazy ice blue color, and his smile was to die for, not that he was smiling very much. He looked exhausted. She was probably right, he was probably some big shot financial attorney. My father had several of those and they were all

douchebags.

But there I was, being propelled toward him by my best friend, hoping that I could at least talk without completely making a fool of myself. Let's just say, talking to guys wasn't always the easiest thing for me to do. Then again, nothing social ever was.

EVAN

As usual, the bar was jam packed with people. Some of them I recognized, most of them not. That was the only good thing about the downtown bars, you usually only saw the same person once or twice. Everyone from businessmen to out-of-towners went to those bars, looking for a good time, and something to pass the time. Or a warm body during the cold windy winter months. In that moment though, I really wasn't feeling either one of those things. I was feeling going home and working on the company, before my father kicked me in the teeth for procrastinating.

"You look miserable," Connor yelled. "You could at least look like you're not going to murder anyone who comes up to us."

I chuckled, flashing a smile. "Sorry, I don't know what it is. I'm just not feeling things."

Connor set a shot down in front of me. "Give it some time, and a few shots. You'll be feeling it in no time."

I raised my eyebrow and lifted the liquor to my lips, my mouth already watering with preparation for the bitterness afterward. Slinging it back, I held the glass in place, amusing myself with the distortion of the scantily clad girls through the glass.

Connor took the shot glass away from me, rolling his eyes. "I don't think it will be as hard as you're making it out to be to get one of those companies on your list. You have a world renowned company now. It's not like you're trying to be the lowest bidder, you're trying to woo them with your business acumen, and the success you've already had."

I grumbled as I picked up my whiskey and coke. "Right, but if I can't woo them, I am in some deep shit with the investors."

Before I could follow up, Connor's hand slapped into my stomach. His eyes were plastered to the right, staring out in the crowd. "Dude, who cares about your investors when the woman of tonight's dreams is heading right for me?"

Just as I glanced over, this bubbling red head in a tight, low-cut shirt and black short skirt thrust her hand out at Connor. "Hi. I'm Lily. And this..." She pulled another girl forward from behind her with a grunt. "This is Mia. She's a bit shy, but a beast in the sack."

Mia's mouth dropped open and she slapped Lily. Connor chuckled and put his arm over Lily's shoulder, pulling her to his other side. "Nice to meet you. Why don't we order some drinks?"

Lily winked at Mia but I acted like I didn't see it. Instead, I pulled a stool up next to me and nodded to it. I had a feeling if I didn't, she would have stood awkwardly right there for the rest of the night."

"Thanks," she whispered, sitting down on the stool, propping her worn Chuck Taylor's on the

ledge. "Sorry, my friend is definitely more excited about meeting new people than I am."

I chuckled. "No, I totally get it. Connor is the social butterfly of the group. Can I get you a drink?"

She looked at her empty beer bottle and shrugged, setting it down. "Sure. Why not?"

I flicked up one hand at the bartender who immediately grabbed her a drink and set it down. She looked at me kind of crazy for a moment, probably astounded I could get a drink that fast and then thanked me for it. There was something about her. She was quiet, kind of nerdy, like she was going to break out with an explanation of the Theory of Relativity or something, but at the same time, she was really hot.

The bracelet on her wrist sparkled in the low bar lights. I recognized it immediately from the insignia on the small charm that hung from the clasp. It was a multi thousand dollar bracelet. So, nerdy, and rich, or at least from a rich family. I guess I couldn't be too judgmental. I owned a tech company and came from the richest conglomerate owner in the world. Money had never been a thought in the extracurricular things we did, or the jewelry we bought either.

"This place is crazy," she yelled out, biting on her lightly shimmering bottom lip. There was something that shot down my spine when she did that. From a distance I wouldn't have even been able to imagine her do it, but she did, and I was struggling with it.

"Yeah," I blurted out, feeling like I waited far too long to answer her question. "Definitely busy tonight. But its always like that. Are you from Chicago?"

She nodded, swallowing her gulp of beer. "Yeah. I grew up downtown, but the rents? live outside of the city. I just came back from college."

"Nice," I replied. "Where did you go?"

"Cornell for graduate," she said proudly.

"Nice. New York," I nodded. "I like New York, especially the country areas. More stars than I've ever seen."

Her smile was intoxicating. "Yeah, I loved it out there at night. I'd walk home from the library studying for an exam and everyone was quiet, and the sky was clear. It was my favorite time there."

My smile was a little forced but only because flashes of wild frat parties and topless girls dancing on pool tables flashed through my mind. Those had always been my fondest memories, not that I really had a variety of them. It was refreshing to hear that kind of viewpoint. She was a good girl. A sexy one at that. A distraction.

I took a deep breath at the thought and glanced around the bar. The kind of girl I had always gone for were the ones that would expect nothing out of me the next day. I had enough responsibilities as it was. This was not the one-night-stand kind of girl. She was the forever type girl, the one you date for a year, ask her father, get married, buy a house and have a puppy named Jack with. And while that wasn't a terrible thing, I wasn't sure I could fit that kind of commitment in between my 9am board meetings and my 3pm client calls.

Still, I sat there, listening to her tell stories, growing more chatty by the minute...or the beer really. The bartender walked up at about one thirty and glanced over at me. "We'll take two waters."

My eyes shifted over to her. "You don't mind me ordering you water, do you? I just want to make sure you get home in one piece."

While a normal girl would pout at that point, under the realization there would be no hot drunken sex, her eyes sparkled. "I don't mind at all. Thank you for being a gentleman."

I gave her a sweet grin. She really was this crazy sweetheart, nerdy but hot, and those lips were so enticing. But her, the girl talking about the time a rat got in her dorm, completely oblivious to the fact that her friend and Connor had left about forty minutes earlier, tongues down each other's throats,

was too endearing for me to take advantage of. *Good lord what is wrong with me?*

She sipped her water and took in a deep breath, finally realizing she was alone. “Oh. Well, I guess I should have paid attention. How long have they been gone?”

I looked at my watch. “Almost an hour.”

Her eyes went wide and she put her hand up for the bartender. “Oh my God, I’m sorry. I’ve kept you here listening to my boring as hell stories about college and the whole time Lily was gone.”

I reached up and pushed her hand down, chuckling. “It’s alright. I paid the tabs already, for everyone. I didn’t mind, it was nice listening to them. Not the usual conversation you get. It was... refreshing.”

She snorted and then covered her mouth in shock. I laughed and stood up, grabbing my suit jacket and throwing it over my shoulder. “Come on, let’s get you a cab.”

Mia nodded, walking in front of me as I waved to the bartender. Out on the street there were cabs everywhere, people flooding out of one bar and heading over to the after-hours ones. I waved to a cab and opened the door, smiling at her. She looked at me for a moment and smiled back. “Well, it was nice meeting you...um...”

“Evan,” I laughed.

She nodded. “Nice meeting you Evan. Be safe.”

“You too,” I replied, waiting until she was inside and the door was shut.

Off she went, this crazy weird feeling in my chest. From behind me the bartender yelled out. “Mr. Lagrange, you almost forgot your card.”

“Thanks,” I replied wincing. “Evan, please. My father is Mr. Lagrange.”

THE SCREEN WAS big in front of me, and I tried not to stare at my video image in the upper right hand corner. A man, about my father’s age, Japanese, sat on the other end, flipping through a file. Video chat was the worst of both worlds. I wasn’t in-person to use my normal charm, but I still had to control my facial expressions and have a conversation on the phone. But he was in California, and I was in Chicago and this was the quickest way to him.

“I like what your company has done,” he said, rubbing his chin. “Let me tell you a story, Mr. Lagrange. My family came to America in the forties and my father worked hard, ensuring he had built a business and life out here. He was put in one of those internment camps near the end of it, but when he returned home, he wasn’t the same. He was even tougher.”

I nodded, swallowing a yawn as he continued.

He stared right into the screen. “I grew up knowing either I make a life for myself or I live in poverty. So, I built this company, manufacturing products from all over the world. Companies still come to me even though they can get it cheaper by outsourcing to the very country I come from. So, I have to stay at the top of the game. I need a technology, and a system, that can put me there. Something no one else has and something you will allow me to purchase the patent for once it is implemented.”

I furled my brow. “Mr. Hashimoto, that is very unorthodox, I...”

He nodded, putting up his hand. “I know. It’s not usually worth it to a company, but I will pay, let’s just say, more than your company is currently worth, to keep it mine. One day I will profit from it, but only once I am ready to let my secret out. I need to be the top.”

I cleared my throat trying to hide the shock that had struck me. “Alright, sir. We can make

arrangements for that.”

“Good,” he replied. “But I have two terms for the agreement.”

I picked up my pen. “Alright hit me with them.”

I was pretty sure he could tell me he wanted a working replica of the Stay Puff Marshmallow Man and I would agree. Though it wasn’t that, it was almost just as difficult.

“You are to be present for the production and implementation of the tech and system,” he said, taking me off guard. “I know you run a company, so I will set you up with an office here to keep up with business. Two, I need several proposals for this tech and system, just on paper, within a week. Then you draw up a prototype. As far as testing we can do all of that here.”

I cleared my throat. That was nuts. I ran a multi-million dollar company, how was I supposed to just leave? And where the hell would I find several designs for this complex manufacturing system in just a week? I was back against a wall. It may not have been the slow upward or stabilizing client my father was looking for, just creating more of an incline in the numbers, but how could I walk away from the chance to double my company’s worth?

“You got it, sir. I’ll send them over just as soon as they’re in my hands,” I replied, hoping to hell I could pull this off.

MIA

The alarm blared, startling me from my sleep. I snorted and wiped the drool from my chin, letting my face fall back into the pillow. The beer I drank the night before did not feel very good that morning. Opening one eye, I aimed my hand over the alarm and slammed down on it.

“You’re too early, go away,” I grumbled.

Suddenly, I remembered that it was my first day at work. My whole body jolted upward, my hair sticking out in all directions from the massive amount of hairspray that had been put into it the night before. In fact, I hadn’t even taken my clothes off before I’d passed out. So much for me clocking out early and having a bright face for my first day.

Putting my feet on the shag rug next to my bed, I squeezed my toes through it, stretching my arms out to the side and yawning loudly. Tilting my head, I examined the suit hanging on the back of my armoire. I had set everything out before I’d even left for the bar the night before. It was a good thing. Who knew how I would end up if I had to match anything at that moment? It was meticulous, just the same way I had been all of my life.

Hopping in the shower I used the mint bodywash to wake me up and cleared away all of the smudged makeup underneath my eyes. It was a bit wild for me, but hey, it had been fun. When I was done getting ready, I carried my shoes out to the kitchen and set them down, opening the fridge to look for the bread and jelly, the same breakfast I’d been eating since freshman year of my undergrad.

The front door creaked open and Lily backed in, trying not to wake me. I smiled and crossed my arms, watching her with amusement as she backed up and then turned right in front of me, jumping. “Holy shit, dude. Oh man, I didn’t want to wake you.”

I laughed and shook my head. “I have the first day today.”

She looked tired as hell and definitely hung over. “Is that today? Dang, I feel like I just left here.”

Walking her over to the breakfast stool, I helped her sit down. “I’ll pour you a cup of coffee. You look like you had a wild night.”

Her eyes went big and then droopy again. “Good lord, that is not even the half of it. I just did my first walk of shame in Chicago. Whoop!”

She pumped her hands for a moment and then cringed, holding her head. I handed her a cup of coffee and she wrapped her hands around it, holding it right under her nose as if it were her lifeline. “Thank you. Girl, that guy, Connor. Whew. He is a wild thing. Let’s just say, I’ve had enough man for at least a week or so.”

“Wow, that long? Won’t your lady bits shrivel up and fall off?” I asked laughing.

She shook her head wildly. “They are chapped. Why can’t they make Chapstick for down there?”

Not like that creepy jar of Vaseline but the kind that smells like cherries or café latte?”

I wrinkled my nose. “You want your Vijay to smell like a café latte? Like the gourmet ones or are we talking McDonald’s drive-through?”

“I think it would start out five star but after a night like that,” she replied sighing. “It would be like just a plain black coffee from the student lounge in C building on campus.”

I gasped in horror, putting my hand to my chest dramatically. “That is some crazy stuff then. I don’t think the coffee in student lounge C likes to smell the way it does.”

She grabbed a peach and bit into it, nodding knowingly. “You’re right. I was afraid the thing would blow up one day. But everyone still drank it. I don’t know what they used but it was like a shot of caffeine right to the soul.”

Giggling I sipped my coffee and put the travel lid on the mug. There was a tiny part of me, the guy from the bar flashing through my mind, that made me a little bit jealous of Lily. How free she was, how open everything was in her life. It worked for her. But I knew it would never work for me. I needed to keep focusing on my future.

Grabbing my bag, I kissed Lily on the forehead. “Try to get some food and sleep. Oh, and a shower. I don’t even know what that smell is, and don’t want to. But you might be dying.”

She giggled and waved as I walked to the door. “Good luck bestie. Make us the cash flow!”

Rolling my eyes with a smile, I shut the door behind me and headed out to catch a cab. While the building was only six blocks away, I didn’t want to get there sweaty or gross on my first day so I sprung for the cab. Pulling up in front of the huge skyscraper building, I paid the driver and got out, my mouth almost gaping at the place. I had done internships there multiple times, but for some reason, that day, it all felt so crazy. Maybe because it was no longer a temporary thing. This would be home for at least five to six years, when my next career move would be put into place.

The sound of honking in the street behind me, shook me out of my thoughts. I hurried in, checking-in at security and making my way down to HR. I knocked gently on the door and smiled, sticking my head inside. “Good morning.”

The woman behind the desk, Agnes, had been my HR rep for every internship I had. She looked up with a grumpy, stale face but it cracked into a full smile when she saw me. Standing up, the woman was about five feet four inches tall, wide hips, and as always, wearing something with a floral print. That day it was a conservative pant suit with a blue printed white linen top, and a matching black dress jacket.

Putting her arms out she pulled me in. “I saw that you were coming back, and this time as an official member of the team. Maybe you’ll actually be able to find someone to teach you something this time. I know in the internships most of you forget who you’re even working for, much less the corporate history.”

I laughed wholesomely. “I only came back for you, Mrs. Agnes. So, what do you have for me today?”

She hurried back over to her desk and dropped a stack of files and paperwork. “I hope you did some wrist exercises, you have contracts, NDA’s, technological support, waivers, health insurance, savings plan, everything to sign.”

Puffing out my cheeks I walked over and took a seat. “Well, let’s rock and roll then, shall we? I thought I didn’t get benefits until after my 90 days.”

She waved her pen, pulling the first thick packet out. “They really wanted you. So, they offered the insurance and saving plan early. Just remember, when you sign this paper contract, you can’t work for another company like theirs for two years. But we are one-of-a-kind so it usually doesn’t affect

the employee.”

I grinned in excitement and signed the first batch. “Good. I like to be forced to do what’s best for me. It’s the easiest way I know to get out of one thing and be stuck in another.”

Mrs. Agnes laughed, and launched into another story of her grandson, only an infant. When we were done with all the paperwork, Mrs. Agnes walked with me, getting inside the elevator and choosing the R&D department floor number where I would spend most of my time.

“Here you are, your security card code. At precisely 6am, this card will flash your daily code on the screen,” she explained, pointing at the card. “It’s the easiest way to keep our security tight. And this is your work badge, wear it when you’re in the building and most everyone will leave you be.”

I took everything from her and put the blue lanyard over my head, letting my ID card dangle in front of my chest. I clipped my security card with it for the time being. We reached the 25th floor and climbed out. It was considerably chattier there, but I could see why. It was the same team of people I interned with before, and just two new faces. We walked up to a stern looking woman, her arms crossed, looking over the R&D pit like Stalin over his troops. When she saw us though, her hardened expression melted and she looked like Lily’s mom whenever she went home.

“Mrs. Agnes, you brought us some genius brains,” she smiled, giving the woman a hug and then shaking my hand. “Good to see you again, Mia. When I heard you got the position, I was so excited for you. No lies, hands down the best. Thank you, Mrs. Agnes, I can take it from here.”

“Good luck Mia,” Mrs. Agnes whispered, turning to head back to the elevator.

Immediately I followed behind Sharon, the Innovation Tech manager. She pointed at an empty desk with a new computer and several office supplies piled on it. “This is your desk. Decorate any way you want. There are but two rules on this floor. Number one, if your lunch consists of nasty stuff like eggs, tuna, or any fish in general, you cannot bring it up here. We don’t all want to experience your baked salmon.”

I smirked, setting my bag down on the desk. “Got it.”

She tapped her fingers to her lips. “So, today is the day to get your bearings. I am going to have some people from different divisions come over and show you the process. Whatever you do, just let the big word count authors worry about it. You are got this down here?nonsense. People like to count us as a snack, but my Keto brain did not agree with that last night when we had Chicken Alfredo.”

I laughed, seeing her laugh, trying to get better at the whole social cue thing. “So, I’ll set up all my user stuff and passwords like I did when I was an intern.”

She nodded. “Yes, and then go through what the other people tell you, come up with your own best practices, and then come in tomorrow ready to kick some serious innovation butt. Anything you need, let me know.”

Nodding, I watched her walk away, her mind already focused somewhere else. I sat in front of the computer and cracked my knuckles. *Alright Mia, first day of your new life. Get it right.*

And off I went, going through every tutorial in the system. That was all before the other employees started hopping in, showing me the system from their point of view. That was good info too, just didn’t see myself going Hulk because I screwed up a piece. I was in it for the long haul. At four, Sharon tapped on my desk. “You can head out now, be ready for tomorrow. I heard you did fantastic. Excited to have you on the team.”

“Thank you, I’m glad to be here,” I replied, grabbing my bag.

She really didn’t have to tell me twice. While, I didn’t have much interest in eating with the swamp thing, aka my mother, I also really loved the wind in my face as one of my mother’s cars drove me through the city and out into the suburbs. I had promised to do dinner on the terrace with her after

my first day. And while that was not sounding very good at all with my upset stomach, it was that or have one of her servants come find me. So, I went peacefully.

I had forgotten how beautiful it was outside of the city. I was really glad I grew up in the beautiful brick mansion on the hill. We headed through the gate and up to the doors, the butler opening the door before I even got halfway. I smiled and hurried faster, throwing my arms around his waist. “I missed you. It hasn’t been the same.”

He laughed, that same feeling I had when I was only tall enough to lay my head on his belly. “Never gonna be the same without you here Miss Mia. Though, you’ve grown a bit.”

I took in a deep breath and looked around. It was just as it had always been, overly decorated, strange clear floors that had a mural of fish painted beneath it. It was beautiful, sure, but not really my adult style.

The butler leaned into me. “Your mother is out on the terrace, eating a salad, trying to be patient enough as she waits for you.”

I leaned up on my tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “Thanks for the lead. She tends to stick to shadowy corners.”

We both laughed as I walked through the house and out to the terrace. I stood in the doorway, waiting for her to turn around. When she did, she smiled big and then scanned my body from head to toe, curling her nose. “Good God, Mia. How are you ever supposed to catch a man in a skirt for the Amish? Show a little skin, I promise it’s legal.”

And there she was, the same old woman who destroyed her love life, and now wanted to vicariously live through mine. Problem was, I didn’t have one, nor did I want to talk about it at all. I could already tell this was going to be a long dinner.

EVAN

“Brooooooooooooo,” Connor yelled out, leaning his head back in the swiveling chair in front of my desk. His hands slapped down on the arms. “This girl was freaking wild. I should have seriously carbed up for a night with her. Like she ran me ragged, and you know me. I like it multiple times. But her...phew.”

I laughed lightly, my leg crossed over my knee, my pencil flipping around in between my fingers. “Yeah I looked over and you two were stumbling out the front doors. Her body was like halfway down your throat at that point.”

He smiled. “She was definitely a wild one. How about you? You seemed to be talking up a storm with the girl...what was her name?”

“Mia,” I replied, immediately looking down.

Connor narrowed his eyes and leaned forward, trying to get my eye attention. “Did you just get embarrassed?”

“No!” I yelled out in defiance, furling my forehead. “Not a chance. No, she was a really cool chick, for real. But she was not the kind of girl you could take home for one night.”

Connor licked his dry lips. “So, let me get this straight. You sat there even an hour after I had left, talking to a girl that you had no intention of sleeping with, and now you’re reping her to me? Did you fall and erase your mind before you came to work today?”

I sighed and gave him a deadpan look. “All I meant was that she would have gotten attached, and I didn’t really want that headache. I sent her back out into the universe to be found by someone ready for that kind of relationship.”

Connor rolled his eyes. “So, you’re saying you chickened out. Right. Got it.”

I threw a pad of sticky notes at him. “That’s not what I said. Don’t do that to me.”

Connor put up his hands like he was surrendering. “You’re right, I just have a hard time recognizing you without four half-naked girls pulling your scrawny sophomore ass back into the frat house. That was the night you had a porn experience.”

We both laughed and I shook my head. “No, that was the night I COULD have had one. Instead my young ass drank too much trying to impress the guys, threw up on one of them, and then passed out in the other’s huge fake tits. All I remember was their streaks and me finally being able to sleep.”

Connor and I stared off into space for a moment, both of us replaying moments of the old days in our heads. Finally, Connor slapped his hands on the desk. “So, did you pick a client?”

I blinked wildly and nodded, handing the file over to him. “I did. But look at the requirement sheet on the back.”

He flipped through, stopping and reading. “Uh, is this for real? You have to be there and there have to be submission mockups for this by the end of the week?”

Rubbing my freshly-shaved chin, I shook my head. “Yeah. And to be honest, I don’t know if that is even possible. Either he has serious robots in his factory that do everything or he thinks humans work much faster than they actually do.”

Connor dropped the file back down. “I say monsters. He is smart, very smart. They probably look like people so no one has to know.”

“I would take tiny little toaster robots at this point if it would give me some sort of idea,” I replied. “I could go down to the labs and start getting going but it’s been years.”

He put his hands up again. “Don’t look at me. I am not the face of innovation. I am the face of processes and keeping my people whipped into shape.”

My lips puckered and I looked out the window. “I know. But damn if I don’t feel like I’ve already screwed this over.”

Connor grabbed the file again and started reading through the client’s issue and what they want to fix it. Then his mouth dropped open. “Hold up, you’re going to sell the patent to them?”

I nodded proudly. “Look at the number he offered.”

Connor flipped the page and looked like he was about to die. “That is more money then you’ve made in the time of this company. You will pretty much turn into someone richer than most of the one percent in this country. Like Maui beach houses, private jets, girls with huge tits kind of money.”

Narrowing my eyes, I snatched the file from him. “Not hiring prostitutes.”

“Pffft,” Connor laughed. “With that kind of money, you wouldn’t have to. They just kind of materialize in your general vicinity. But hey, wait. I think I have an idea for your problem.”

“If it has to do with prostitution that is not going to work,” I replied.

Connor shook his head. “No man. You have an entire department, comprised of the brightest minds in technology. Have a damn competition. Have them all compete and you can pick the best ones, send them to the lab and then send them over. Seriously, you could totally get this done.”

I ran my tongue over my teeth. “You know, that’s not a bad idea. But what would I offer them?”

Connor shrugged. “The normal stuff that motivates people. Give the winner a raise, and a bonus. And dangle the whole trip to Cali thing in front of them. They get more money and they get to work with the big wigs at the actual location. That’s the kind of stuff dreams are made of for these techies. They’ll be the star of the show and you won’t even notice the missing money.”

I stood up and walked over to the window, thinking about his idea. Finally, I turned around and nodded with a smile. “That is genius. This is why I pay you the big bucks. I’ll get the department head on the phone right away. Genius dude. Genius.”

Connor looked at his watch. “Yeah. I know. This genius is going to go to an early lunch and eat something greasy because my hangover is a bitch. You doing anything tonight?”

I laughed. “No. I’m going to get some sleep, and prepare for all of this. It’s gonna be good though. Real good. I can feel it.”

He stood up and walked toward the door. “I can get that chick’s number for you if you want?”

Rolling my eyes, I picked up the phone to call Sharon. “Go. I think I can handle my own love life.”

Connor chuckled and put up his hands. “Alright, alright. Just making sure I’m looking out for my man.”

Giving him a stare, he laughed out of my office. I shook my head and went to work, setting everything up with R&D, my mood suddenly improving. While I did not want to go to California for

who knew how long, it was going to be huge for the company.

By the end of the day, everything was set up perfectly. The teams would be notified the next morning, they would be on hold on all other projects, and I would just sit and wait for the genius to roll in. I grabbed my stuff and called down to the front to have them bring a car around. “Your father sent the helicopter. It’s on the roof.”

I groaned. I hated that thing. “Thanks.”

Heading upstairs I was greeted by one of the pilots and shown into the back where I set my stuff down and buckled up. The chopper flew quickly over the city and beyond the landscape of the suburbs. Curving to the right it headed over to my parents’ mansion at the edge of the lake. It looked even bigger than I remembered, but it had been months since I visited. My mother had requested my presence for dinner and I couldn’t tell her no.

When the helicopter landed, they ushered me into a golf cart that drove me up to the house. My things were stowed at the front door like usual and I meandered into the dining room where they were waiting for me. My mom smiled and hurried over, hugging me tightly. “Sweetie. You look so good! How are you?”

I smiled, kissing her on the cheek. “I’m good, thank you.”

Taking my seat across from my father, I almost skipped the greeting. Besides, he was going to give me the same grunt he always did. He was already reading some files and not paying attention as it was. But I caved, remembering my mother’s obsession with manners. “Hey dad.”

He glanced up and took his glasses off. I thought for sure he was going to give me some actual attention for once. Silly me. “How are things going with the clients?”

“No,” my mother interrupted before I could respond. “No business at the table.”

I chuckled and put my napkin in my lap as the staff brought out the food. My mother took a sip of her wine and leaned back. “So, Evan, tell us. Are you seeing anyone? Planning on any wedding in the future?”

I groaned and shook my head. My father smirked and looked over his glass. “I bet you’d rather talk about clients.”

Sneering I sipped my drink. “I’d rather talk about colonoscopies.”

MIA

I took the last bite of my bagel as the cab pulled up in front of the building. Wiping my hands on the napkin and tossing it in my bag, I handed the driver the money and popped open my umbrella before stepping out. It was raining like wild, the wind blowing the streams in a sideways direction. It was not what I had in mind for my workday, but what was I going to do? I had to go in, and Lily had squashed the idea of a rain suit so there I was, my feet soaked in my shoes, and the wind pushing me sideways all the way to the door.

One of the security peeps opened up the door, reaching out and giving me a hand into the lobby. I stumbled inside, my umbrella pretty much upside down at that point. The guard took it from me with a smile. "I'll see if I can fix it for you Ms. Mia."

I shook off. "Thank you. You're the best."

As I took a step forward in my wedges, I slipped on the marble floors. He reached out and grabbed my arm, keeping me upright. "Seriously, I owe you."

He laughed. "Not having a busted head on my shift is thanks enough."

Carefully I shuffled over to the elevator and climbed in, pressing the button and stepping back for the other people to enter. I waited patiently as we moved up the floors, stopping about every three floors for someone to get on or off. I needed to start calculating elevator time into my morning routine if I wanted to make sure I was never late. To me being on time was late enough. I hated walking in when everyone else was already there, just like it would be when the doors slid open.

As they did, I walked through, stopping and looking out at the pit. There was no one sitting at their desks. I was starting to wonder if my clocks were wrong when they all started piling out of the conference room down the hall. Panic flew over me thinking I had missed a scheduled meeting, but it wasn't even my time to get in yet. I stood there smiling at everyone as they passed, inching my way down until Sharon came out of the conference room.

Sharon smiled. "Mia. Sorry you missed that. No biggie, it wasn't planned. For some strike of holiness everyone was early today."

I nodded, feeling a little better. "So, what's going on?"

Sharon handed me a packet. "A new contest. Or, a contest - we've never had one before. All other work is on hold for the rest of the week unless you finish the project before that. These are individual ideas. The company overview is in the folder and the specs for the project. It has to be non-copywrite material and the first part of it is a write up. A blueprint of your idea to solve the client's problem."

"Okay," I replied, skimming through the first page. "And the blueprint is due..."

"As fast as you can possibly give it to me," she chuckled. "I promise this kind of swing in work

never happens around here. For some reason this came down the pipeline last night and I was instructed to move into it asap. This is what we need for the company. And our jobs are to make it a success.”

“Okay, is this a mandatory assignment?” I asked.

Sharon nodded, handing her assistant the piles of paper she had. “It sure is. Everyone turns something in. But look at it this way, if you win, you get a raise, a bonus, and you get to go to California to personally install the program and technology with their teams. And the CEO, he is required to go as well.”

I furrowed my brow. “The client is going to decide from a write-up?”

Sharon laughed. “Oh, no, no. I guess I skipped right over that part. Seriously, I think I need three assistants to keep track of everything. No, a handful of proposals will be chosen by the client and those people will go to our labs and create a mockup of it. It’s for the client to physically see but will also give you a chance to work out physical issues. This project is in high gear and on a very rushed timeline.”

My eyes were big. “I’d say. Okay, I’ll get to my desk and start working on it. I actually have an idea, already. When I was in college this was very similar to a mock project we had to draw up for my minimalist technology class.”

Sharon grinned and patted me on the back. “I knew you’d be on it. You were on top of everything that we’ve handed you in the past.”

Great, pressure.

I think I showed it on my face because Sharon stopped and turned to me. “I want you to know we put you in this position because we know how good you are. It wasn’t even a question. In fact, several different departments argued over who would get you. But that doesn’t mean I expect you to be perfect. I don’t expect that you will know everything from day one. Just do your best, turn in something and then we can go back to normal.”

I smiled at her and nodded as she gleefully headed into her office. They might not expect me to be perfect but I expected me to be perfect. I had only worked on my future since I was old enough to know what a future was. And I knew if I didn’t shine from the beginning I would get lost in the shuffle. After that others would outshine me. Others would find roots where I would just sway. The company was far too large for that.

Sitting down at my desk I brought up the creation program on my computer and began to play around with the ideas in my head. Flipping through the file I pulled out the key information, imagined and pictured ideas in my head, and twisted the roots of the project into itself. If I could design the project above the scope, then I would know I hit every turn along the way. I always felt that putting ten different systems and processes into your company was silly. Why not have one process that fully encompassed everything from opening the doors in the morning to shutting the client’s door on delivery.

With the hum of the computers in my ears, drowning out the sound of the constant talking in the room, I buckled down, moving my project around in pieces. I created spreadsheets of processes, things that the company did in the product creation line that couldn’t get overlooked. I researched those processes, finding creative but not groundbreaking actions to streamline them. Groundbreaking was great, in the medical field, or in a moment where you had years to test, but this had to be proven and true.

“Hey, we’re headed to lunch, you coming?” Andy, one of the techs said, leaning on my desk.

I smiled and glanced from him to the computer and back again. “I’m not really hungry and I’m

really digging in this theory. I'll skip it for today. But thanks."

He chuckled as he turned to walk away. "Oh, to have the motivation of a newbie again."

While I got the reference, what he didn't understand was that was how I worked, new, old, veteran, when I had an idea it was like a cyclone, sucking me into it. It was impossible for me to put it down. I was caught in the vortex of it and my mind just had to see it to completion. The hours ticked by without me even realizing it. When I made my last keystroke, and leaned back, I realized that I was the only person left in the room.

I furled my brow and looked at the time. It was half past four, thirty minutes after quitting time. Leaning up in my chair I could see the light still on in Sharon's office. Good. I could get my proposal in to her. I printed everything out and slipped it into a presentation notebook. On the front I put my information in standard lettering, standard text and typeset. Flashy had never been my thing which was why I ended up in tech, not car design or building design. In my opinion flow and functionality was far more important than style any day, especially when it came to the inside of a manufacturing plant. I liked to let my ideas speak for themselves.

When the file was ready, I packed up my things and headed up the steps of the pits to Sharon's office. I knocked on the doorframe and poked my head in. "I just wanted to drop this off before I left."

Sharon looked up from her work and smiled. "Thanks. Your draft?"

Glancing at the stack of drafts to her right, I shook my head. "No, this is the final spec before mock-up."

She paused as I handed it to her, giving me a funny look. As she flipped through it, I stood nervously with my hands clenched together and my eyes roaming around the plain office. She sniffed, drawing my attention back to her face. There was a stunned look on it, one I didn't know how to read.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked. "I can rework something if it doesn't flow but I swear I checked it all."

She shook her head, her eyes shifting up to mine. "No. There's nothing wrong. This is...wow. No one else finished it today. All they got through were their drafts. Some didn't even get that far. This is fully ready for presentation."

I nodded, never really caring for other people's work timelines but I could see it had made an impression. "I just had the idea in my mind and I had to get it out fully or I would be up all night thinking about it."

Sharon continued to read through it, mouthing the words as she read. She even popped out her calculator at one point to check a couple of the calculations. Her eyes didn't leave the pages as she turned through them. When she got to the end, she set the booklet down in front of her and laughed with a breathless tone. "Mia, I don't know what to say about this. This is super impressive. You went far beyond the scope of the project, but sometimes that is what it takes. And while they will own the patent, if anything needs to be changed or updated, they will have to come to us for it."

I nodded. "Right. It was important they got what they wanted, but it left a residual income for us. If we were handing the whole thing to them, we would still need something to maximize the long-term finances. This gives us a residual trail on it. One that the client might not see, or find that it was worth it."

"Wow," she said, shaking her head again. "Good work on this. This is exactly the kind of thing we hoped for. I will send this up the pipeline but you should get an answer about mockup in a couple of days max. I guess until then just continue on with the project I gave you yesterday. There really isn't anything else I can tell you."

Nodding my head, I left the office, feeling really good about the work I had done. She was

impressed, though I really couldn't believe that when the others were done there wouldn't be something that completely blew me out of the water. They were seasoned veterans. Nonetheless, impressing my boss was good. Now all I had to do was figure out how to navigate my own life around work and will have completely mastered number fifteen on my life goal list. Everything was going just as it should be.

EVAN

Yawning, I entered the office, not having gotten much sleep the night before. I didn't go out or anything like that, I simply couldn't sleep. It had been a long time since a project had me twisted up like that. I had my own concepts going through my mind. So much so that I'd opened up the drawing room in my condo for the first time in about three years. The cleaning staff kept it dustless, but it was so still in there. I used to live in that space.

"Good morning, Evan," my secretary said, looking frustratedly at an electric pencil sharpener on her desk.

I laughed. "For someone who works for a tech company, you really don't get along with it."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, well, that's why I'm the secretary and not the inventor."

Lydia was a middle aged woman, very professional, very old school. She had worked for my father for years, but in the middle of changes to the company she faced a layoff. My father had her as his secretary for years and years. I always went to see her when I was a child, she had candy for me and gave comforting looks when my father was barreling down on one of his rampages. So, when the company started, I took her for myself.

"Lifesaver?" she asked, holding up the package of individually wrapped mints.

I grinned and took one, feeling just like that little boy for a moment. "Anything happen while I was gone?"

"Besides the death of three good pencils? Two messages from the patent department, and Sharon dropped off one of your proposals for the new project. I put it on your desk."

My brow pushed together. "Already? I would have assumed today would have been the earliest."

Sharon shrugged. "I don't know, she was going to bring it by last night but we were all gone for the evening."

"Huh," I replied, glancing in at the binder on my desk. "Sounds good. And for the love of God, please put down the pencils and join the 15th century. Use a pen, you don't have to sharpen them. And in celebration of our survival as a race into the 21st Century, you don't even have to refill them. Just click, click, toss it, get another one."

She gave a mock laugh as I chuckled my way to my desk. Setting my things down, I opened up the binder and began to flip through the pages. I was shocked right off the bat, even the presentation was perfect, just how my father had always instructed me to do them. No frills. Let the project be the frills, the excitement.

Sharon brought me a cup of coffee and hurried back out of the room as the phone rang. I shook my head at the project in front of me. It superseded the scope of the project, yet incorporated everything

that the client needed.

“Evan, line one is Sharon from Tech,” Lydia said through the speaker.

I picked up the line and shook my head, as if she could see it. “I am blown away by this project in front of me.”

“I know right,” she chuckled. “I told you she would be worth it.”

Shaking my head, I flipped to the front, realizing it was the new girl. “Mia, interesting. Well, as soon as she gets in this morning, I want you to send her over to mockup. This is a fantastic piece and I want to see the dummy version.”

“Yes sir, sounds good,” Sharon replied. “You should have more by close of business as well.”

“Thanks, and keep up the solid work over there,” I replied before hanging up.

Mia, Mia...why does that name sound so familiar. Maybe because she was that superstar internist that I kept hearing about.

Either way, I hadn’t seen work like that in a really long time. In fact, her style and thoughtfulness reminded me of the projects I had done in the past. She encompassed the entire idea of a client relationship. She gave them what they needed, what they didn’t know they would need, and the company a place to stand for further financial gain in the coming years. If I had ten people like her, I would have a company three times the size of what it was at that point. I wasn’t even sure if that was possible.

I pressed the com button. “Sharon, do I have any morning scheduled appointments?”

She clicked the button and I could hear her typing. “Nope, clear. Nothing until lunch with Connor.”

“Thanks. I’m going to head over to innovation and check things out. It’s been a while since I poked my head in.”

“I like that,” she replied. “I’ve always told you how much more productive your father’s company would get when he spent some time at home with his employees.”

“Well, here I go. Hopefully no one throws rotten fruit at me,” I joked.

“I might take an umbrella,” she joked back, dryly.

I shook my head, standing from my desk and pulling my suit jacket closed and buttoned. Meeting the people that worked for me used to be so important to me. It was like I had to connect with the people that made it all possible for me. But after the boom in sales, and my father’s input, I rarely even left my office except to head to the front door. Most of the people that worked for me didn’t even know my name. I didn’t like to have that showmanship. That information on me like a biography when new employees started. It was useless, and wouldn’t help to get them in gear for the future. It would only make me look farther away, if I could get any further away then I already was.

Taking the elevator down in the middle of the day was interesting. I got strange looks, nervous people, and others who I had never met, and clearly had no idea who I was. Fortunately, the conversation around the water cooler seemed pretty positive, except where people were complaining about the stall in innovation’s work.

Floor by floor I descended down to innovation, noting that another elevator might be worth looking into. It must have taken me twenty minutes to get down there. When the doors slid open, no one looked up, the innovation team was quieter, much quieter then I remembered in the past. Even Sharon was too engrossed in what she was doing to notice that I’d come down to say hello.

“Good morning, sir,” one of the innovation team’s longest standing tech’s said as she passed me in awe.

“Good morning, Tilly,” I replied with a happy tone.

That was when Sharon looked up. Her expression went from focused and steady, to shock, to panic as she raced across the pit to meet up with me. I put out my hand to greet her. “Morning Sharon.”

“Morning,” she replied. “I didn’t expect to see you here today.”

I nodded, putting my hands in my pockets. “I wanted to meet this woman that you sent the information over for this morning.”

Sharon glanced around. “I sent Mia to mockup. She was early as usual and I figured the faster the better.”

“Oh,” I replied, wrinkling my nose. “Okay. No, you did the right thing. I guess I’ll head over to the observation booth then and watch her work for a bit. I don’t want to interrupt the process and the cleansing requirements in there take hours.”

“Do you want me to call down?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No, that’s alright, I’ll just slip in and take a peek. Don’t want to mess anyone up over there.”

Sharon clutched a stack of projects to her chest and then glanced down at them. “Oh, these are some more of the finished blueprints.”

I nodded. “Just have them sent up to my secretary. I’ll glance at them when I get back. I have an early lunch today.”

“Right,” she replied. “Thanks for coming by. We miss seeing you down here. I know the techs loved working projects with you in the past.”

I smiled, feeling good about her words, even if they weren’t true. “Well, I’ll have to start carving out time for them again. I’ll check in with you later.”

Sharon nodded, a stunned look still on her face as I climbed back in the elevator and headed down one more floor to the mockup room. It was a completely sterile environment, allowing for all the technology to be put together for mockups without the possibility of contamination or dust entering the small intricate workings. There was a viewing booth above it, something I had pioneered after watching a surgery a few years before the company took off.

Stepping inside, there were screens on the right and left, and a large window across the front. I looked down into the room, finding Chris, the supervisor of mockups standing with a woman, long brown hair and curvy hips. She wore the usual scrub type outfit and dainty pink flats. As she turned, my mouth dropped open just slightly. Now I knew where I had heard that name before.

“Mia,” I whispered.

She was the girl from the bar. The one I spent all night listening to talk about her college days, in awe of her nerdy but sexual persona. She was the tech that had blown me away with her project. And still, from up there, I couldn’t help but notice how hot she was, in a tech geek nerdy kind of way. The kind of way I would have found irresistible just a few years before. Apparently, that hadn’t changed much at all.

“Hey fool, I’ve been searching for you everywhere,” Connor’s voice rang out from the doorway.

Glancing over, I didn’t spend much time on him, not when I could be looking at Mia. “Sorry, wanted to meet our new tech. She sent down an absolutely brilliant blueprint yesterday and I sent her right to mockup.”

Connor positioned himself next to me and then pointed at Mia, giving me a double take. “Is that... That’s the girl. Lily’s friend from the other night at the bar.”

I chuckled and nodded. “Yeah. Her name is Mia and apparently she works for me.”

Feeling Connor’s eyes rolling over me, judging me, I tried to stiffen up, but it was too late. I could

hear his condescending chuckle gurgling in his belly. “You look kind of smitten dude.”

Right then, Mia looked up at the room, our eyes catching. Her face went from determined to shock, obviously recognizing me from the bar. She tripped over the wheel of one of the rolling carts and a metal piece fell from her half constructed model. She hurried over and grabbed it before it could roll under the cart.

“Wow, she’s a lot more of a nerd then I remember,” Connor laughed. “I feel like she might collect comic books and play some role-playing card game when not at work.”

Slowly I turned my head toward him. “I don’t think that’s the case. It’s a small world though. A very small world.”

Connor tapped his foot. “You know what’s even smaller? The fact that I have lunch reservations for us and we have to get across town in twenty minutes.”

I nodded, my eyes locked on hers as she stood in the middle of the room, staring up at me. Connor grabbed my shoulder. “Come on Casanova. She’ll still be nerding it out when you get back.”

With a nod, I gave her a small wave and followed Connor out of the viewing booth. There was something about seeing her again that slammed into me like a brick wall. Suddenly, I didn’t want to go another day without capturing a glimpse of her. I was either in a lot of trouble, or things were getting ready to change. Either way, Mia had made her entrance.

MIA

When Sharon had told me to load up and report to mockup, I could barely control my excitement. I could only assume that the big heads really liked my idea. They hadn't even waited to see the others in competition. I took the elevator down one floor and headed to the decontamination chamber. This company had the coolest process for mockup projects, a completely sterile environment to work in. It was about time someone did it, companies had been losing millions of dollars every year for tiny bits of dust in computational pieces. In fact, that issue had been one of my major focuses in the quality control portion of my thesis.

I pulled the scrub-like gown on over my business suit and stuck my shoes in the cleaning box. It was way more financially efficient to clean and sterilize them than it was to go through millions of pairs of booties every year. When I was ready, the doors hissed and I entered, finding the supervisor, Chris going over a checklist. When his eyes shifted up to me, he smiled.

"Mia, it's good to see you again," he grinned. "We had a fun time when you guys came down last year for part of your training. I heard you got the job but didn't know you had started until I got the call from Sharon. Come on, I'll show you around the lab. There's a ton of stuff but I have it labeled and catalogued to make it easier to find."

"Awesome," I replied with that excitement still in my voice. "This is probably my favorite part of the job, being able to create a physical representation of my idea. I just didn't think I would actually be able to create it anytime soon. I figured it would take years for me to get down here."

Chris chuckled. "I saw your proposal, it's pretty amazing. My question is, how are you planning on doing a mockup of that entire system? It spans the whole client's company."

I clicked my tongue, shaking my finger at him. "True, but you guys did a really successful mockup a few years back using tiny versions of everything. If I can create something that represents the company in a clear fluid way, they will be more likely to understand the concept."

Chris grinned. "That is perfect, and we should have everything you need."

He showed me over to the miniature process area, built a few years back for the historical markup but rarely used anymore. "So, everything you should need will be in this database. Just look for the name, or search in general areas for it. If for some reason we don't have it, you can pull up the order screen and send it out. Usually you get the piece the same day or the next."

I nodded, running my gloved hand over the workspace. "Great. I shouldn't have any out of the normal pieces. The complexity comes in the system work more than anything. And I started that last night. At least the demo version of it so I could test this out when I'm done."

"I wish everyone was as on point as you," Chris laughed, his eyes shifting upward. "Up, heads up,

you seem to be in celebrity status right now. The CEO even came out to watch you work.”

I could feel my shoulders freeze as I reached over and grabbed several pieces to take over to the oiling station. As I flipped back around, I glanced up, finding someone I wasn't expecting to see again ever. My eyes started at his perfectly shined shoes, moved up his expensive dress pants, over his dark teal shirt and black tie, and then stopped abruptly, on his face.

For a moment, my mouth dropped open, and I felt like I should say something, but I didn't. I really had no idea what to conjure up anyway. Words were never really my thing. But standing there, looking down at me, was the same exact guy from the bar the other night. His name was Evan, and in my drunken haze of that night, I could still tell he was a decent guy. In fact, he was the kind of guy a girl meets, becomes a high profile girlfriend, marries, and has a dog named Jack with. But that was not where my focus was. I had far too many things to do in my life before I reached that sector of my goal planning.

With my eyes still locked on him, I stepped forward, catching my foot beneath the wheel of one of the rolling carts. I tripped forward, several of the pieces flying out of my hands. Chris jumped, grabbing the cart and I immediately set the remaining pieces in my hand down so I could chase after the others. Great, there I was, crab-walking across the lab, grabbing small metal pieces before they rolled off into the drain.

Chris was good, helping me scoop them up, laying them on my workstation. He chuckled as he handed me the last piece. “Looks like I found your weakness. Everyone gets nervous about the big heads coming to watch them. Don't pay them any mind. I've met Evan. He's a nice guy. Wanted to be hands-on in the company and then it blew up, like skyrocketed and now he has a board, and a million responsibilities, and all that stuff. I feel bad for the dude. He acts like a zombie when he's around here. But I guess not too bad, he is the man with the checkbook.”

I gave a fake laugh, my mind on the night I met him, how dreamy I thought he was. How he listened to everything I had to say. I could feel my cheeks getting warm right then, and glanced up to see him turning to walk out. He flashed me a quick wave, too fast for me to wave back and then he was gone. Good lord, that was not at all what I was expecting by the owner of the company.

When I had one intake as a college student for my internship, I expected to be one of those boring histories of the company, but there was nothing. I had planned on asking about it, but I was thrown into the pit that day, never having seen an innovation team run before. It was wild, and the thought of knowing about the CEO ran right out of my mind. I was pretty sure they could have told me the Count from Sesame Street was the owner and I wouldn't have blinked. It was the place I had dreamed of working for years. It wasn't like I expected to sit drunk at a bar with him years later, telling my college horror stories.

I put the thoughts out of mind, there was no reason for me to get all crazy about it. I had worked really hard on the project and it needed to get done. I was sure I'd have more than enough to talk about with Lily, the girl was going to freak out. I wonder if she remembered Connor telling her that he worked for the place. It probably didn't matter if he did, she was pretty sloshed that night and I was surprised she remembered her own name the next day when I saw her.

Buckling down, I worked through the day, getting the project put together the best that I could. It was a miniature version with a port to the system. When I loaded the mock system in and flipped it on, everything began working right on cue. Chris stood behind me impressed. “That's crazy. Wow. It's an uninterrupted system. But what if a piece over in the back brakes? Does that stop everything?”

I shook my head. “No. It cuts the circuit and moves around. That way one small piece of machinery wouldn't lose them millions from having to stop all of their processes until they're fixed.”

Chris laughed. "That's pretty awesome. I'll have it sent up to Evan before I leave."

I looked at him with a smile. "You sure?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I got some work I gotta finish up anyways. Go home, you're done for the day."

Giggling with excitement, I headed out. I had the condo to myself for a while since it was the first day of rehearsals with the orchestra for Lily. So, I stopped at one of my favorite pizza places and grabbed a pie before heading over. For the first time in a long time, I put my feet up, clicked on useless television shows and ate my body weight in dough and cheese. It felt weird, like any minute I would need to study for a test or do another assignment. Eventually, though, the food took over and I yawned, dozing in and out.

"Wake up bitch," Lily yelled, plopping down on the couch.

I blinked and sat up, looking out the window. "Oh, I fell asleep. Uh, how was your rehearsal?"

She grabbed a slice of pizza and leaned back, taking a huge bite. "It was fabulous. They may actually let me perform with them in winter. I'll have a chair. Or I'm hoping I will. No one likes to be backup. How was your day, you look tired?"

I nodded. "It was good. I submitted a project to a company contest and they sent me to mockup to create it. While I was there though, I was being watched."

She wrinkled her forehead. "By whom?"

I chuckled and shook my head. "The CEO. And let me just say, he had a very familiar face, and a very familiar friend. Though out of the bar scene it took me a minute to recognize them."

Lily's eyes went wide and she gasped. "No way! Connor and his friend?"

"Yep, and Evan is the CEO," I replied. "Looked like Connor was someone important too."

She laughed, shaking her head. "How crazy is that? I mean small world big city, right? That must have been so weird for you."

I was staring down at my hands, my mind lost on his eyes sparkling down at me from above. Lily kicked at me. "Hello, earth to Mia. Holy hell, you have a major crush on him."

Shaking my head, I tried to protest. "No. Just was thinking about the coincidence."

She pursed her lips. "Whatever. You totally want him. All of him. Bow Chica Bow-Bow."

I rolled my eyes and stood up, walking toward my room. "Good night you heathen."

"Goodnight my wannabe slutty friend," she yelled back.

In my room, I didn't even turn on the light. I threw my clothes on the floor and climbed into the bed, pulling the covers up over me. I closed my eyes and visions of Evan started to flood me. They were memories at first, but they quickly began to change. His hot body in my mind's eye, my hands on his warm skin, his eyes boring into my soul.

Letting my hands slip down beneath my panties I pushed through my folds and gasped quietly, imagining they were his fingers, his tongue gliding across my wetness. That's when it happened, laying there in my bed, my legs spread out, my head back. It was the first time that Evan made me come. (Cum is the noun) The first time I could feel everything in my body wanting him. It was the first time that I really truly hoped my imagination wouldn't be the end of it. It was obvious and clear, I wanted him, and I wanted him badly.

EVAN

My morning was insane, so insane, in fact, that I had Sharon up in my office trying to give me the synopsis of every mockup to the blueprint project turned in to me. The whole department had gone all out and not a single one of them had missed the deadline. I was starting to think that the project was almost too popular. I hadn't even been able to choose which ones to send to mockup so I sent all of them over. In the end I rented out a space for everyone to work because the labs weren't big enough for all those people.

"Charles Winnipeg's is on the pallet to be sent over to the client," Sharon said, scanning down her notes. "It should be enroute. I had it shipped yesterday, overnight so they could see it. I know you said today was the deadline."

I shrugged, rummaging through paperwork. "I told him they would be completed on Friday and we would send them out. But that's fine, it'll keep him happy for a while."

Sharon's watch beeped. "Ah. I have to run to this meeting. I'll be back in a bit. Use the list, I've put shipped or waiting for shipping next to everything. The blank ones are sitting here, and your secretary has packing supplies."

I smiled. "Thanks for your help, Sharon. Go, do your thing. I can handle this mess. I really didn't think through it beforehand so here I am up package alley."

She tilted her head at me, not understanding the analogy. I blinked several times trying to figure it out myself. Finally, I waved my hands. "Never mind, that was an attempt at humor. A failed one. Go. You have a meeting to get to."

Sharon laughed as she exited the office, leaving me there amongst the mess and craziness. What was I thinking? Everything seemed perfectly fine when I was just sitting back behind my desk with some files and a pen ready to send them on or hold them back. But I knew when I started reading the blueprints, and all of them had opportunity, that things might just spiral out of country?. The only one that Mr. Hashimoto had was Mia's.

The girl had gone above and beyond, finishing her professional blueprint in one day and then knocking out her mockup by Wednesday night. By Thursday, the client had it in his possession, though I hadn't heard anything back. I didn't expect to though, the man wanted options, and looking at the two page list in front of me, we had definitely done that. All I had to do was get them to him without completely breaking everything on the way over. This would have been a lot easier if the client had been in my area.

"Sometimes, when the stakes are high and you're up to your ass in electronics, you just have to say screw it." Lydia stood in the doorway with packing tape in one hand and a sharpie in the other.

I let out a deep breath. “What would I do without you?”

“Normally I would take that as a compliment,” she said walking in and pushing the boxes to the side. “But your father said that too, and look, not working for his company anymore.”

I chuckled, knowing full well my father fought to keep her more than he fought to keep his own VP. “You know the family loves you.”

She rolled her eyes and leaned against the table. “Yeah, yeah. Enough with the compliments. You got about ten years’ worth of packages to get out in about two hours. Otherwise you’re going to be flying them over there yourself.”

I jumped slightly and came around the desk. “Right. Sorry. No rest until everything is done.”

She tossed me a roll of packing tape. “Good. I’ll address them, you tape them. There’s a guy coming by here to pick them all up for us.”

With a smile, I put myself in the center of all the boxes, finding the ones already addressed and spreading tape across them. I did it solidly, not wanting the mockups to completely break before getting to him. As I finished taping another box, the phone rang. I looked right and left, finally deciding on the one at my desk. With a leap, I tried to clear a box, but ended up almost face first on the low pile carpet in my office.

Looking up from the floor, Lydia looked down at me. She raised both eyebrows and reached easily to her right, picking up the call. “Evan’s office, Lydia speaking, how may I direct your call.”

It was amazing how quickly she could change the tone of her voice. We far too often received calls on that line that needed to go somewhere else. Grunting, I picked myself up off the floor and flung my hand, trying to get the tape off of it.

“Yes, of course,” she replied. “Hold one moment for me.”

She turned the phone toward her and put the call on hold. Carefully she looked up at me and paused. “Uhm. That would be the client. He asked to speak to you. He said it was extremely important.”

I tilted my head back and groaned. “God, I hope he isn’t trying to pull out. Communication between the two of us has been dodgy as hell.”

She shrugged. “All you can do is answer and find out.”

Nodding, I climbed over my desk and fell into my chair. I leaned forward and took a deep breath before picking up the line. “Sir, I’m sorry to keep you waiting, I...yes sir... Yes sir, we did send that, she’s a bit faster than the others. I have many boxes sitting here right now waiting for pickup... Mhmm.”

I waved my hand at Lydia and shook my head, running my palm across my throat like a warning sign. She stopped writing, putting her hand on her hip and listening as I continued the conversation with him. “Of course, sir. Yes. Thank you for giving me a heads up. You too.”

Hanging up the phone, I put both palms to my face and rubbed them strongly down. I smiled and laughed almost maniacally. I could tell Lydia had no idea what was going on. The stress level that had built up inside of me was the reason thousands of businessmen a day went down in full-on heart attacks.

“If you don’t spill it, I’m going to be forced to give you a sharpie mustache. Though they can be debonair in theory, they look ridiculous.” She was shaking the pen at me.

Putting up my hands in surrender, I chuckled. “No wonder my father used to call you a bully.”

She pursed her lips and lifted her chin. “I happen to be amazing. Amazing. Anyway, tell me what’s going on.”

I put my hands out to the side. “Stop all of this for a little while. Well, for good. We have a

winner. There's no need to send anymore."

Lydia narrowed her eyes and grabbed the clipboard. "That's either Winnipeg or the new girl. And I'm pretty sure Winnipeg just created a time machine and wants to see if it will work."

Laughing loudly, I nodded. "Yes. You're right. If you could have her sent up here, I would appreciate it. And toss me her file so I can just see what her background and such is. She was hired during that crazy time in my life. I haven't ever worked with her or anything."

Lydia nodded, putting the cap on the Sharpie. "Alright, but I'm getting the boys from downstairs to come move these boxes. Where do you want them to go?"

Glancing around I shrugged. "I guess R&D storage for now. We might be able to use them later in other projects. Waste not want not."

She laughed and shook her head. "You're too much for me. Sometimes I wonder if you weren't the milkman's baby. At least until you give me that raised eyebrow look, it's identical to your father's. Pain in the ass the two of you are."

Laughing, I listened as she made it back out the door and called downstairs for some help. There was shuffling and banging around and she came back in, climbing over boxes to bring me the file. "I'll call down for the winner, let me know when you're ready for her."

I nodded. "Thanks. And just have the guys come on in."

So, there I stood, Mia's information in my hand in a sea of boxes. I knew I was far too excited to get the chance to see her again, but I just couldn't help it. There was something about this girl that was irresistible, at least from a distance. Now I was going to get to tell her that we were spending weeks together in California. This might just be hard to keep professional, at least from my side of things. Of course, I'm not known for my restraint. I kind of always did what I wanted to do and up to this point, it paid off but I knew that would bite me in the ass one day.

I didn't know anything about this girl, but the file would give me a little more insight, and I hope it made her realize that I was actually a good guy. I never actually thought I would turn around and find the hot nerdy girl at the bar was actually one of my employees. It was still crazy to me.

Climbing over some of the boxes, I slid in behind my desk, almost tipping my chair over with me in it. I grabbed the side and pushed myself back and plopped the file on my desk. I had never been that excited to look at someone's file before. I was like a child. I opened the file up and a voice came over the boxes.

"Oh. Good lord this is going to take me until next week," the guy said to himself.

I stood up and he jumped a bit. "Oh, sorry sir, I didn't know you were...in there."

Laughing, I flipped the file shut and tossed it in the basket on my desk. "Did they only send one of you?"

He put his hands out, his shoulder up. "I guess so. They have a lot going on so I was really the only one they could spare and that's because I'm new."

With a sigh, I stepped up on my desk and jumped down in the middle. "Well, I can't really have you spending your first days with the company doing manual labor on your own. Bring that hand truck in and we'll pile these boxes up onto the cart."

"About time you did something," my secretary said with a smirk.

"Ignore her, she's a bitter woman," I said in above a whisper. "I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Tony," the guy said, shaking my hand.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Evan," I replied. "Come on, we got this."

We hauled the boxes out on the huge cart they sent up from shipping. Back and forth until the thing was full. I went with him down to storage since he didn't have any way of getting into it. By the time I

got back, my secretary had straightened out my room, taken my outbox stuff out of the bin and made it look like new again.

Plopping down in my chair, I unbuttoned my top button, sweat on my forehead. I knew I was doing something before I left, but I got so distracted by Tony, the people I met along the way, and getting everything unloaded, I wasn't sure what it was. Of course, with everything on my plate, that happened a lot. The day was turning around for me, and it felt really good to be part of my company again. Maybe this was the change I needed. The streak of good luck.

MIA

Taking the elevator up to the top floor of the building was bad enough, you could almost feel the thing sway slightly with the wind. But on top of that, I had been mid-project when I was pulled out, told to leave everything where it was, and escorted up to the CEO by security. I didn't realize they were security until we were in the elevator and I saw their guns under their jackets, but nonetheless.

"Do you guys normally escort people up to see the CEO?" I asked.

One of the guards glanced over. "We've had some security issues over the last five months, since the company hit the papers with its growth. We're here just to keep you and everyone else safe."

I nodded. "Oh. Okay, thanks."

When we finally made it to the top, the doors slid open and the guard pointed to the end of the hall. That's his office, the secretary will handle it from here."

"Thanks guys," I replied with a sweet smile.

I walked quietly down the hall, trying not to look into the offices along the way. They were all the big wigs of the company, most of them on the phone with their doors open. The guy from the bar that Lily had gone home with stepped out of the office I was heading toward, standing in front of the name plate. I could only assume it was his office, there weren't any left.

"Hey," Connor said excitedly shaking my hand. "Good to see you again."

"Mhmm, you too," I replied, realizing Connor was a big wig too.

He grinned with his groomed hair and nice smile. "Tell Lily I said what's up."

I choked back a laugh remembering the state she was in when she came back from his place. "I'm sure she'll be thrilled to hear it."

"Ms. Crosswell?" a friendly voice said from inside.

I stepped in with my hands crossed in front of me, thankful I had worn a cute outfit and heels that day. "Yes ma'am. That's me."

The woman was older, a kind smile, and a look that let you know she was tough, she didn't let anyone step at her, not even the upper echelon of the company. "Oh, excellent. You can go on in, Mr. Lagrange will see you now."

My mouth opened to say thank you but everything froze in place. "I'm sorry, did you say Lagrange? As in..."

"The Lagrange Empire?" she said happily. "Mhmm. Evan is Mr. Lagrange's son. I worked for his father for twenty years and then when things shifted, I came over here."

I was trying so desperately to keep the look of utter shock and dismay from my face. I couldn't

believe it. I couldn't believe that out of all the companies in the world I ended up at the one owned by my family's biggest rival. The son of the man that acted like my father's friend and then tricked him out of the biggest real estate investment in his life. And even then, he wouldn't admit he did it. Instead he played with my father, knowing he had far more money than him, and kept the legal battles tied up so long, my father finally had to bow out in order to not completely bankrupt us.

The boy I played with as a child, the one that saw me once at a party when we were in our teens and snubbed me because he knew who I was. This boy was now my boss, and not just that, the guy I had been fantasizing about since I met him at the bar. *You are so stupid! God, this is terrible.*

"Are you alright, sweetie?" the secretary asked. "It's perfectly natural to be nervous when you meet the owner of a company this big. But I promise you, just like his father, Evan is sweet and kind. He's a grade A boss. There are a lot of people that have come here to work with him after hearing how in touch with his employees he tries to stay. There is nothing to be worried about."

"Mmhmm, is that so?" I said, staring at the back of his door. "I heard all those things about him too, it was one of the things that pushed me to apply here first after college."

Stupid. How could you not have finished your research on this company. It was probably right there!

"Oh, good. Then you should be thrilled to get to talk to him," she smiled, motioning for the door.

Everything that I had planned for, everything I had tried to get away from was standing on the other side of that door. My father would be losing his mind right now if he knew who I worked for. Even he didn't take the time to research it. Not that it shocked me, he hadn't been the most put together person for quite a while. Nonetheless, I felt like a traitor standing there in his office.

Then I realized something. That whole time, all through college, I had specifically focused on learning as much as I could without my father's influence for a reason. Not because there weren't amazing attributes about my father that I didn't want to incorporate, but because I wanted my own life. I wanted my own future. All of this had been for me. It may not be the person I thought it would, but that job was not forever, and the past needed to stay in the past. I can't work out what you're saying here. There was no way I could let this family rivalry continue to thwart everything in our lives. Evan's father did what he did years ago to get under my father's skin and he's still winning today. I won't let him continue to win by taking this opportunity away from me.

Of course, there's the other side of things. I might not have been standing there for good reasons at all. In fact, I might have been standing there because Evan finally found out who I was, what my last name was, or what my last name used to be. He might have become enraged, thinking I was some sort of corporate spy here to sabotage his company for revenge. Maybe that was why the guards brought me up. Maybe that was why everyone seemed so robotically nice to me.

Wait a minute...maybe they were robots.

Get it together Mia, you're starting to lose it.

If I could have slapped myself on the cheek at that moment, I would have. I'd gone from excited to thinking that the Lagrange family had built an army of robot warriors and they were on the other side ready to call me out for being my father's daughter. Even amongst the heaviest of the battling I don't think it was evil robot worthy? Doesn't make sense. I really needed to get out more and stop watching so much television late at night. If he had found out, I'll tell him the truth and be done with it. If he believed me, good, if not that's fine too. I'll find another place to go.

Either way, I had to face him, I was standing at his doorstep and it was starting to get weird. I couldn't help but wonder if I was about to get fired. That would be an awkward conversation with everyone involved. And it would be the first time I'd ever been rejected by someone or something,

ever. It would be a lesson learned that was for sure. I took a deep breath and reached out, grasping the handle of the door and pushing inward.

With all of my bravery I stepped into the large office and glanced around. It was huge with glass windows all across the front, beautiful dark furniture, a sitting area, and of course the most expensive designer stuff on the market. What really caught my eye were the pictures of Evan and his father, standing side by side. When looking at them that way, I couldn't help but see the resemblance.

"I hate that picture," Evan's familiar voice echoed from my left.

Just the deep tones of his voice soothed me. I clasped my hands together and turned toward him, putting on a smile. "Why is that?"

He shrugged. "I don't like my hair. It looks ridiculous. And my father was pinching my elbow. I felt like I was going to have some royal photos done. It was terrible."

I laughed halfheartedly. He put his hands out and smiled. "I'm sorry that you had to figure out who I was this way."

"What do you mean?" My heart began to beat faster.

He chuckled. "You know, the guy you spent hours with at a bar while our friends ditched us."

I let out a deep breath and a laugh. "Oh, it's alright. I never asked what you did, I don't think."

"And I didn't either," he replied with that smile that made my knees weak.

As if he could read my mind, he put his hand out, leading me to one of the chairs in front of the desk. He sat down behind it and stretched his arms wide. There didn't seem to be any robots hiding in the wings, no security ready to take me away. In fact, it seemed like he didn't have a clue who I was. He acted like he hadn't even looked at my file. It was strange. So, if I wasn't fired, and he didn't have a clue who I was, what was I doing here?

"How are you liking everything down in innovation?" he asked.

"It's great," I smiled. "Just like I thought it would be, though I can't seem to get through any projects without something else coming up."

"That's really not the normal way here," he said.

I crossed my legs. "Yeah, that's what everyone keeps saying."

He chuckled. "Actually, there is one project that I know for a fact you won't be called off of. I sent your mockup to the client in California and before I could send any of the others, he called to tell me that he was blown away by your concept. He wants you."

My mouth dropped slightly open. "He...really?"

"Yes!" Evan laughed with a smile. "It was brilliant, Mia. It was leagues above anyone else's design and it not only set the client up but it set us up for long term financial gain with him, which is exactly what we needed. We didn't really want a one-timer coming through, but for the price he was willing to pay how could we turn it down?"

"Well, I assume to acquire the patent for it, he probably offered somewhere in the ballpark of your company's net worth. Which would ultimately only be fifteen percent of his for a system that would run the entire thing," I said, stopping abruptly when I realized I was rattling on.

"How...how did you?" he asked.

I had to think fast. "I learned it in business theory. It's one of the oldest tricks. Most companies don't haggle or argue because your doubling your worth. It was a shot in the dark really, I was hoping I was right."

He smiled again, easing my stress. "Maybe I shouldn't have slept through that class."

We both laughed into a small silence before he spoke up again. "So, we leave tomorrow for California. You will be in charge of the entire project. My attendance was also requested, so there we

go, we'll have plenty of time for more squirrel stories from college."

I laughed loudly, feeling my cheeks warm. "I'm sorry, that was the alcohol."

He grinned and stood, putting his hand out. "Mia, or I guess Ms....what is your last name?"

It was in that moment I realized he didn't have a clue who I was, and my last name, being my mother's maiden wouldn't even begin to give it away. That was the best thing that could have happened for me in that moment.

"Crosswell," I said, shaking his hand. "But please, just call me Mia."

EVAN

The car came to a slow stop on the hot black asphalt. I had been at that private airport a hundred times in my life, but for some reason, on that day, I was nervous. Maybe it was the gig, or maybe it was Mia, but either way, I wasn't quite feeling like myself. The driver opened my door and I stood, buttoning my jacket as the wind whipped against me. It was a cool breeze with hints of the heat from the ground. The airport always seemed ten degrees hotter than anywhere else.

The staff from the plane came out to greet me, pulling my luggage from the trunk of the car. I took my carry-on bag and slung it over my shoulder as the head flight attendant approached carrying a clipboard. "Morning Mr. Lagrange. We have the plane fueled and ready for takeoff. Breakfast will be served once we're at cruising altitude but we have coffee hot and ready for you and your guest."

"Is she here yet?" I asked.

The attendant, smiling, looked up and pointed her pen at a car coming to a stop. The driver opened the door for Mia and my stomach flip-flopped inside of me as she stepped out. It had to be the heat getting to me, there was no other explanation for the way I was acting. None. I couldn't even get any words out. As she stepped out of the car, she put her hand up, holding down a wide brimmed blue hat. Her blue and white polka dot dress pressed against her thin and curved body, the thin belt around her waist accentuating her hips.

Like a movie star, a pair of wide brim glasses sat perched on her nose, and her cheeks were rosy. She looked absolutely adorable, especially when she pulled her carry-on bag out and it had a large cat on the front holding a fish in its mouth. It was a cartoon, like something you would buy from a comic convention. It was large enough to hold her laptop and the rest of her luggage was retrieved by the attendants.

I walked up and she put out her hand, shaking it firmly. She seemed stiffer than she had been the day before. I smiled and put my hand out, showing her the way to the steps. "Have you flown on a private jet before?"

She smirked. "Believe it or not, Mr. Lagrange, not every low level employee you have comes from the slums, scraping to get by."

She was oddly spicy toward me, but I liked it. It was feisty and almost playful. I wasn't sure where it was coming from but in reality, I really didn't care. I liked assertive women and she was the perfect mixture of confident and graceful all wrapped into one. Besides the bag on her shoulder, I didn't see a single hint of that nerdy girl from the bar. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

"I like your hat," I complimented. "You don't see many women wearing them in the US. I always thought it? was the best part of European fashion."

Lowering her glasses, she folded them and put them in her bag. “Thanks. My mother has quite the collection, and I tend to steal them from time to time. This one’s mine though. The Princess of Monaco gave it to me as a gift when I was 21.”

With that she turned and walked up the steps, leaving me slightly speechless. The Princess? Gave her a gift? Who in the world was Mia Crosswell? Actually, it really didn’t matter, I liked her, she was brilliant, and I had a feeling we were going to make one hell of a team. When we boarded, we took our seats, across from each other, with a small table between us. The attendant immediately made us coffee and brought it over.

“As I tell Mr. Lagrange every time we take off, please hold onto your coffee until we hit cruising altitude. It can be a little slippery at an angle.” The attendant grinned as Mia gave her a kind smile.

When the doors were shut, the noise? dissipated quite a bit. “So, tell me. Are you excited about this project? It’s a huge undertaking but I saw the presentation notes you sent me last night. They were fantastic.”

“Thank you,” she replied, taking off her hat and setting it in the seat next to her.

Her hair cascaded down around her face, a different look than any of the times I’d seen her before. It glistened and billowed softly around her face, and the curls at the bottom bounced slightly. She took one hand and twirled the right side around her fingers, pushing it back behind her ear. It was almost mesmerizing and I had to pull myself away when she glanced up at me.

“So,” she said, pulling out her laptop. “I think we should take these couple of hours and go over everything with the project. That way, you are aware of the entirety of it, and then you can fill me in on the rest of the process.”

“Alright, let’s do it,” I replied excitedly.

I sat listening to her talk about her system and the tech that would be introduced with it. She explained that the system and hardware themselves would be the clients, but the intellectual property, the technological know-how would remain with the company. “To appease the client if he’s one to read the fine print, which I assume he is, there’s a two-year hold on any production of technology using that intellectual property unless it has nothing to do with manufacturing. So, for example, you could not break the tech apart and create simple pieces to sell to manufacturing plants, but you could create a new line of cell phones with it.”

“Perfect,” I replied.

“So, that’s pretty much it in a nutshell. “What happens after the system and hardware are installed?”

I took a deep breath, nodding my head. “Good question. So, we will be there through the installation and initial upload. Then, his quality team who is learning all about the system as we speak, will take over with testing for bugs, inefficiencies, etc. You are held on retainer for three years with the client. Meaning, as long as you work for us, he can call you up to come help on site with any issues they cannot manage. They are aware that implementing an untested software comes with serious challenges.”

“Oh good,” she replied in relief. “That’s great. I was worried that no one would touch on that subject. I did do a full scan of the software two days ago to check for any major system failures but in theory, it all seems fine. We’ll see more when it all is set up and functioning on a large scale. But its good when the miniature version works. It’s much more intricate and you are pushing the components way harder.”

She was so interesting to listen to. She was incredibly well-educated and, not just that, but intelligent as hell. It was really sexy, I had to admit it. We talked all the way to California, mostly

about the project with a couple semi-personal things thrown in, but nothing earth shattering. There was something familiar about her, but I couldn't put my finger on it. It was like I had known her in my past. Maybe it was a past life, or maybe it was just the tipsy version of her I had met at the bar that night. Either way, it made me feel comfortable around her and in my world, feeling comfortable around someone was very hard to come by.

"Do you want to work in innovation for a long time or are you looking to move on?" I asked, eating a bite of strawberry.

She shrugged. "My goals are to really dig in, work innovation for five or six years. Enough time to understand the processes, and then look to move up or out, whatever the options are at that time."

I chuckled as I wiped my mouth. "You sound very focused in your goals."

She smiled as she handed her plate to the attendant. "I have been tracking my goals since I was a little girl."

"Wow," I replied. "That's dedication. I knew a girl like that once. We were really young though and haven't spoken in a long time. I'm sure she met all of her goals though."

Mia smiled but it looked like an uncomfortable smile. She turned her head toward the window and sat quietly. It stayed that way until we were on the ground in Cali. There was a car to meet us at the airport, taking us straight to Hashimoto's office. When we arrived, they laid out the red carpet for us, but it was mostly for the brains of the operation, Mia.

"I want to thank you for having us," I said, shaking his hand.

He nodded and walked over to Mia. "Your creation was inspiring and I cannot wait to see it in action." He turned back toward me. "I would like her to present."

She looked shocked but I agreed, knowing it was for the best. Sitting there watching her was a different kind of experience. She was on point with everything. Somewhere in that nerdy intellectual persona she had a vibrant and wild personality. She held everyone's attention and even struck humor into the presentation. I had watched hundreds of people speak over the years, presenting ideas, but she was the best I had ever witnessed. The client was enthralled the entire time and barely asked any questions, but she covered that too.

"Mr. Hashimoto, you have been very quiet, do you have any questions for me?" she asked, glancing over at me.

He sat, straight faced, making us both extremely nervous for several minutes. Finally, pulling his pressed palms from his lips, he smiled broadly. "I wish I did. I have been keeping a mental list but you have explained everything so fluently. Does anyone else have a question?"

"What will the training for the system, beyond what we have been doing, look like?" one of the other men asked.

Mia took in a deep breath. "Well, I will have to see how advanced your people are on it. Usually we test for bugs before the training but since they will be doing both, I think it's important for them to know the base equations for the program. From there I will have them use it, a test of sorts so I can get a clear picture of their strengths and weaknesses. Then, simply put, we'll move through the program one page, one process at a time. This will allow them to fully understand it. When we find bugs along the way, we'll fix them. That will help reduce the amount of time it's in testing."

"Perfect," Mr. Hashimoto said, standing up and shaking Mia's hand.

I stood up as well and grasped his hand in mine. "Then I assume you're happy?"

"More than happy," he replied. "We start tomorrow, after breakfast. Does that suit you?"

I nodded with a smile. "It works perfectly for me."

Mr. Hashimoto snapped his fingers and his secretary ran around the corner. "Set them up with a

ride to their accommodations and have the driver first take them to Fitzgerald's, they'll like that restaurant and the whole thing is on the company."

"Thank you, sir," I replied.

"Thank you," Mia smiled.

She knocked it out of the park.

MIA

Evan clinked his glass to mine, the bubbles from the champagne simmering up the sides. “To the magnificent Mia. Not only did you create the most amazing technological invention, you killed it in the boardroom. I’m telling you now, one day, you will be my biggest competitor.”

I clinked my glass to him, laughing. “You mean the one you strive to catch up to? Okay. But I might take it easy on you.”

We both laughed, the champagne refreshing on my lips. I had given up the cold, stark, woman routine at that point. It was hard to keep up with and I was far too excited to keep trying. The little fact about my friendship with the princess from Monaco was a good one. It was completely true, but it had only been satisfying to say in that one moment. It wasn’t until he mentioned his memory of me, even though he didn’t know it was me, from his childhood that I began to clam up.

But there we were, sitting in an expensive candle-lit restaurant in the warmth of the California weather, completely stoked that we were about to embark on one of the biggest deals Evan had ever closed before. And I was at the center of it. Talk about starting my career off with a bang.

“I watched Hashimoto’s face the whole time,” he laughed. “I think he fell in love with you. You could be the next Mia Hashimoto.”

I wrinkled my nose and shook my head as I sipped my champagne. “No thank you. I will stick with building him tech systems.”

Evan laughed again, his smile so handsome and sexy. *Stop it Mia. You are not losing your virginity to the mortal enemy of your entire family. Put the champagne down.* I set the glass on the table and looked up as the hostess approached. “Excuse me, but your car has arrived, whenever you are ready.”

Evan stretched his arms wide. “You ready, superstar?”

I nodded, wiping my lips. “Mhmm. We have a very big day tomorrow.”

“Yes, yes we do,” he said, putting his hand on my lower back as he led me outside.

I had that happen to me a million times. My father and his friends just naturally guided women as if we were unable to find doorways without their help. It used to annoy me, but with Evan, it sent a warm chill down my spine. It was a dangerous feeling.

The driver opened the door and I slid in, Evan close behind. We were in the back of a limo, which was something I hadn’t ridden inside in years. They were always town cars. Evan grabbed the bottle of wine on ice and uncorked it, pouring us both a glass. The windows were cracked to let the cool breeze blow through.

“Thank you,” I chirped, taking my glass and sipping the sweet pink wine.

I leaned my head back and let the wind wash over my entire body. It felt so good, so relaxing. When I opened my eyes, I could tell Evan was staring at me, his eyes had quickly diverted to his glass. I didn't say anything though, there was something sexy about it.

"When we get to the hotel, we should have another drink before bed," he suggested. "Just a little more celebration before all the hard work begins."

I glanced down at my glass. *Fuck it.* "Sure. Why not? But you're buying."

He laughed and tapped his pockets. "I don't know if I can afford it."

I shook my head at his joke and giggled into my glass. I had reached giggling? This was not going to be good. Well, maybe it was going to be good but later I would think it was bad. I needed to stop overthinking everything.

The car pulled down a drive and up to a large condo that faced the ocean. Evan furled his brow. "I'm sorry, I thought we were going to the hotel."

The driver nodded. "This is the company's penthouse. It is used for guests. There are several bedrooms and a pool. Much more comfortable than the hotel. I will show you up."

The driver got out and came around, letting us out of the car. In that moment I wasn't sure what to think about any of it. We had come out to Cali thinking we would be saying apart from each other and now I was going to be living in a condo with the man.

As the attendants inside helped to gather our bags, Evan pulled me to the side. "Is this alright? I can get a hotel room."

I shook my head without even thinking about it. "No, it's fine. Please. Besides, we'll probably be up late working anyway. Makes it more convenient to be in the same space. But I get my own bathroom."

He smirked. "Deal."

We headed up the elevator to the penthouse, just twenty stories up. As soon as we walked in, my breath was taken. The whole front of the condo was made of glass and you could see out into the distance of the rolling ocean. The sun had already set, and I could smell the saltwater below us. It was amazing. Out on the porch was an infinity pool leading straight to the edge where I could already see myself taking in the sunset, relaxing with champagne.

"Well, this is a nice place, right?" Evan said, reminding me that he was still here and that he was, in fact, now my roomie.

I wasn't really sure how I felt about it all. I couldn't tell him that, of course, but I felt slightly awkward and I could tell he did too. "It's beautiful. I can't wait to see the sunset."

He came up next to me and looked out at the view. Nodding his head, he went back up the sunken living room steps and over to the bar. He fixed us both a drink, whiskey and coke. I was pretty sure it was the same whiskey my father drank, which meant they had dropped at least seven hundred or so just on the alcohol.

Evan handed me a drink and took in a deep breath. "Seriously though, it could be much worse. I've stayed at corporate condos before and they were nothing like this. They were apartments, usually in a college area. Decorated nicely but you had to listen to college kids chanting, 'chug, chug, chug,' all night long."

I laughed into my drink, shaking my head. "That sounds horrible. I would totally be that party pooper and go over there, mom style."

"I can already imagine you dragging the kids out by their ears," he gaffed.

Shaking my head, I turned and looked out the windows. I could hear the ocean from inside, and we had opened the doors to let the cool air inside. I could see Evan's reflection in the glass and it

was messing with me. Every move he made was something out of a romance movie. His face was perfect, his hair always looked like it was purposeful, and his smile made me all giggly inside. I was acting like a child on her first date. Only it wasn't a date. Suffice it to say, I was definitely attracted to him.

"What does your father do?" he asked.

The question unnerved me almost immediately. "He's in business," I replied.

Evan nodded, catching on that I wasn't going to give up those kinds of answers. "It seems it's in your blood. You could own your own company."

"Hopefully one day I will," I replied, lifting my glass and wiggling my brow.

It was hard work keeping my family a secret. I wasn't ashamed of them by any means, but I really didn't want to get fired in the middle of a condo in California. It would definitely be bad. Really bad. So, instead, I chugged my drink and waited for him to do the same, taking the glasses up and refilling them.

"Thank you," he said as I handed him one. "It just feels so good to have done something right. I mean, the whole company was right, but just when you think it's going to be a little easier, a little more established, the board steps in and kerflooy. I find myself with a roommate in California, appeasing a crazy client."

I plopped down on the couch just down from him. "Hey, I'm not too bad of a roommate."

"Oh," he said, looking genuinely worried that he had offended me. "I didn't mean you. I just meant it wasn't what I expected to be happening at this point in the company. But they know what they're doing."

"Are you sure about that?" I asked, giving zero cares as to whether I was overstepping the boundaries. "All I'm saying is that old businessmen tend to have old business views. In today's world, business is completely different. This was a good client, but would have been good even if you weren't under stress from your board."

He sat up and tilted his head to the side. "Oh yeah? Okay, I want to hear what you have to think. Genuinely. I want to hear someone tell me something other than the normal appeasement."

I looked at him for a moment with narrowed eyes and then shrugged. "Okay. So, if you find that you have a better intuition on marketing, use it. If you think that a hundred one-time clients are better than residual ones, focus on it. It's your company. Did the board get you where you are now?"

Shaking his head, he scoffed. "No. They didn't come around until after the company had flourished."

"So, they are riding the waves, just like the stockholders," I explained. "They don't care if your company goes down. They are just trying to make as much off of it as they possibly can before something happens. They are giving you advice based on their pockets, not yours. I know that boards can be tricky, but when you take control of them, really grasp control, that's when they start really looking at what you want to invest in."

He rubbed his chin, sipping his drink and listening to me talk. "Right, I see that. So, what am I supposed to do at that point?"

"Make choices," I said. "Look, when your board and the shareholders are making hand over fist money, you can start to exert your dominance. That is the best time because they want the hand over fist money. They don't care if that means switching ideals to be on your side. Your side is the winning side. You just don't want to end up on the wrong side."

I stood up and walked over to him, reaching down for his empty glass. As I stepped again, my heel got caught on the rug and I fell forward right into Evan's arms. He caught me strongly and held

me there for a moment, staring into my eyes. I should have moved, but I couldn't. I was stuck there staring at him, locked onto him.

"I should..." I whispered.

He ran his finger down my cheek. "You should what?"

My eyes flickered back and forth on his. "I don't know. I lost track of my thought."

Leaning down with his lips barely touching mine, he whispered, "Good."

Before I could respond his mouth was taking mine in, rubbing his tongue across the seam. I set the drinks haphazardly down on the coffee table, not unlatching myself from him. My hands went up, rubbing up his face and through his dark hair. I could feel my body pulsing into him, wanting nothing more than for him to take me. I didn't care that it would be my first time, it felt right.

As he stood, he cradled me in his arms, still kissing me as he turned and walked me down the hallway. My body trembled in excitement, and my mind craved the passion and lust that I knew he would give. Evan might be my mortal enemy every other day, but that night, he was going to be my lover.

EVAN

She was so beautiful, so powerful, there was nothing I could do to stop the intensity of attraction between us. And while she had a wild spirit, she seemed almost delicate and withdrawn in my arms. I could feel her breathing, her chest heaving against mine. I stepped into the dimly lit bedroom and laid her gently down on the end of the bed. My fingers slid down her body from her chest to her belly. As they brushed the waistband of her skirt, my fingers skimmed over to the side, slowly pulling down the zipper.

Lifting her ass, I pulled the skirt off, revealing her sexy black satin panties. I bit my lip, moving my hands back up to her blouse, pulling at the buttons. One came loose, then another, and another, until her matching bra heaved her breasts heavily up and down. She sat partway up, letting her shirt fall off her shoulders and tossing it to the side. Her body was so perfect, so intricate and curved just in the right places.

Leaning over her, I pulled one cup of her bra down and pulled her nipple into my mouth. She grunted lightly, so I did the same with the other. Moving down her body, dragging my lips over her skin, I gently pulled her panties down and off. I gripped her thighs and yanked her toward the edge of the bed, liking how she gasped, her fingers gently sitting on the edge of her lip. I lowered my body down onto my knees and ran my tongue, full force, up through her dripping wet mound. I could feel her foot, pointed, slide up my back, and arch high.

My tongue swished back and forth and around, pulling at her nub, giving her everything I had to give. She tasted so good. Her soft hands shook my concentration as they rubbed up the sides of my face and pulled me up her body. Her deep eyes stared into mine. "I want you inside of me."

My whole body shivered with anticipation and I wasn't about to tell her no. I smiled and began to pull my shirt off as she unbuttoned my pants, reaching into my boxer briefs and grabbing tightly to my hard shaft. I grunted, feeling the pleasure of her touch, wanting more and more of it. Somehow, in the midst of my passionate zoned-out persona, I managed to get all my clothes off and slide quickly between her thighs.

The tip of my cock rubbed against her vibrant and warm juices and I felt as if she could almost pull me in on her own. I gripped her thigh tightly as I pushed into her. God, she was so tight, so warm, it was already hard to control myself. Very slowly I began to pump my hips, watching her face twist into passion and heat. She gripped down on the bed and moaned deeply. Her voice was seductive and all I wanted to do was take her as hard and fast as I could, but she had to cum first. I wouldn't let her go until she shook with pleasure.

My hips started to move faster and faster, my teeth gritting hard. I could feel myself losing control

of my motions. Gripping her under her back, I pulled her up and on top of me. We sat, face to face, my dick still deep, her hips began to twist against me. Her mouth was slightly perched open at the feeling, her clit rubbing circles against my skin. I gripped her behind the head and pressed my mouth against hers as she started to swirl faster, grinding down onto me. As I released her lips she screamed out in pleasurable overload, unable to hold it back.

My head dipped to her neck and collar bone, nibbling at the skin. A little pain with a whole lot of pleasure was never something to turn away from. She flung her arms back, holding herself horizontal against me. Her body moved like a wave over my cock, every once in a while, pulling back and slamming back toward me. She was breathing heavily, her deep raspy breaths followed by sexy, deep grunts.

“Yeah,” she moaned in a high pitched tone.

I grabbed her hips and moved her body faster against mine. “That’s right. Give into it. Let me feel it.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, her head falling back. I could feel her entire body stiffen as she exploded in orgasm. I could feel every inch of my cock being smothered as her pussy contracted around the shaft, hot juices dripping down. I groaned, holding back and waiting for her to finish. As soon as she had begun to loosen her muscles, I threw her down on the bed and flipped her over on her stomach. She giggled in ecstasy and waved her ass back and forth at me.

I slapped it, listening to the exotic moan that came from her throat. Gripping one side tightly, I thrust into her, giving in to my carnal instincts. We both yelled out, feeling my shaft slipping in and out from tip to balls. It was so good. I wanted to release but at the same time, I didn’t want the feeling to end. I didn’t want it to be over. It was the most amazing type of torture.

As she began to mirror my motions, rocking back and forth, meeting me hard in the middle, I dug my fingers into her sides, knowing that was the end. I couldn’t hold back any longer. I breathed deeply and rolled my eyes back, tilting my head toward the ceiling. I thrust once, twice, and on the third I pushed deep inside of her and held her there. My manhood vibrated and pulsed as I released my deep seed. She squealed, shaking as she felt it flow up and through her. The ecstasy flowed through every vein in my body until it had completely run its course.

I released the deep breath in my lungs and fell forward, rubbing my face against her back. She let her knees slip down and I pulled out, rolling to her side and wrapping my arms around her waist. There was no awkward conversation, no question of where one should go. I simply pulled her sweet cherry skin toward me and nuzzled my nose into the back of her neck. It wasn’t my normal act, no, but I did what felt natural. Who knows? Maybe it was the liquor, but I wasn’t ready to let her go. If I hadn’t been drinking so much, we would definitely be preparing for a round two.

However, the warmth of her body coupled with the warmth of that whiskey, closed my eyes pretty quickly. I drifted off into a deep dreamless sleep, probably the best sleep of my entire life. This woman was amazing.

BEEP. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Mia groaned, turning over in the bed, her hair wild all around her. She reached down and gripped my wrist, bringing my watch to her face. I was so used to the sound that it woke me up on the first beep. She didn’t look very happy with the prospect of moving, though.

“Ugh, you’re the boss. Call a holiday,” she grumped.

I laughed and kissed her forehead, rubbing my hand down her cheek. Funny, I felt just the same as I did the night before, only by then I was sober. “But then we will disappoint the client you landed like a badass yesterday. All the celebration will be in vain.”

“Not all of it,” she giggled, her cheeks turning a light shade of pink.

I rolled over on top of her and ran my hands up her side, gripping her ribs. “We could always just be a little late...”

She smiled big and laid her arms up over her head. “That will not work. But we can go out there and get some food.”

I stuck out my bottom lip and we both laughed. Playfully, she rolled me off of her and trotted naked to the bathroom. She looked over her shoulder at me, her long wild hair swishing against her bare back. My heart skipped a beat, and so did a couple other things.

While she pulled on a robe, I found my boxer briefs and slid them on. She walked out with a robe for me and I slid it over my shoulders, leaving it open in the front. I liked how her eyes constantly trailed down my body. She hooked her arm in mine and we went out to the living room.

“What is this?” Mia asked in surprise.

I looked up to find a full breakfast spread set out on the dining room table. “I guess they are stealth too.”

“Sure am glad we went to the bedroom. That would have been awkward.” Mia giggled and sat down in the chair, reaching over and grabbing a strawberry.

I sat across from her, pouring myself a cup of coffee. I noticed her eyes shift to the side, her mind wandering. I flipped her cup and poured her some, putting the carafe down. “Sugar?”

She shook the daze from her face and looked down at the cup. “Oh. Um no. Just cream.”

“That’s how I drink it too,” I chuckled.

She gave a slightly forced smile. “So, there is something I want to tell you. I guess I don’t really need to but I feel like intimacy should include all of it.”

“You are secretly married?” I asked with a grin. “To a 75 year old billionaire.”

Her nose wrinkled in the most adorable way. “No, god. Gross. No, I uhm...That was my first time.”

I chewed a piece of bagel, pushing the bacon to the side of my plate. “The first time what?”

She cleared her throat and I looked up. “You know, first time...”

“Oh,” I replied, jumping slightly. “Really? I mean not that I took you as...what I mean is...you know what?”

I stood up and walked around the table, grabbing her face with my hands. I tilted her head toward mine. “You were amazing. I don’t care about any of that. I am honored to have had the privilege. Are you okay with it?”

“Yep,” she tweeted. “I just thought you might not be.”

“You are absolutely stunning, and amazing, don’t be silly,” I replied, pressing my lips to hers.

She smiled at me as I went back around the table. She took a few more bites of food and stretched. “I guess I should go jump in the shower so I don’t make us late. None of my clothes are unpacked.”

“I would join you, but I think that might make us even later,” I replied with a wink. “So, I’ll stick to my own bathroom.”

I watched her gleefully walk down the hall and disappear into her room, shutting the door. Picking up my phone off the table where I had left it, my brow furrowed. There were eleven missed calls

from my father. I knew he would be happy about the deal, but damn, not that happy. I dialed him back as I picked at the food on the table.

“Dad, sorry I missed your call,” I said happily. “I’m assuming you heard about how we, or Mia really, knocked it out of the park with the client.”

My father was quiet for a moment. “Son. I don’t know how you missed this.”

I stopped chewing. “What are you talking about? Everything was perfect.”

With a scoff, my father raised his voice a notch. “Everything except for the fact that you have Richard Cuthbert’s daughter working for you.”

I was confused. “Uh, where? Like at the office? Is she like a tech or something?”

“No son, Mia, Mia Crosswell is Cuthbert’s daughter. She took her mother’s name when they divorced,” he spat out.

The words echoed through my head but I struggled to comprehend them. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

MIA

I was pretty sure, that was the best shower I had ever taken in my entire life. It wasn't because the shower head probably cost more than my first college apartment, or because the water seemed to be set to match exactly what my body was looking for, but because of the thoughts that ran through my head. Every few seconds, a flash from the hot and amazing sex from the night before played in my head. It sent an almost electric shock to my heart that simmered down through every limb I had. I couldn't help but smile.

If I could have spent the entire day in there, I would have, except for maybe taking the time to drag him in there with me. But I was there for a purpose, and I had to go back to the real world, at least for a little while. Stepping out of the shower, I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around my body. I breathed in the fresh scent of lilacs from the designer products that had been put in the shower for me.

In my room, I carefully went through my suitcase and unpacked my things into the dresser. I knew we would probably be there a while, and I didn't want to live out of a suitcase the whole time. They had hung the rest of my clothes in the closet, thankfully, and I quickly picked out my favorite outfit. A calf length, pencil-skirted, black dress with hot neon heels that were compliments of Lily. I had fought it forever, but even I couldn't deny I looked smoking in it.

Once my hair was done, and my makeup applied, I slipped on my heels and grabbed my purse and briefcase, stopping for just a moment in front of the mirror. I had this overwhelming urge to whistle at myself, which in turn, made me giggle. I sure hoped Evan had the same reaction to me that I was having to myself. It would definitely build up some tension between us during our workday. Tension that would assuredly be released later on in the evening.

Coming out of the room, my heels clacked against the hardwood floors. I stopped in the archway leading into the main area, and glanced over at Evan standing with his back to me, his arm up, and his hand gripping the thin frame around the wall of glass. I smiled, trotting down the steps and over to him. I slid my hands across his sides and around to his waist. Before I had a chance to lay my forehead against his neck, he shuddered and pulled away from me.

I backed up, slightly thrown off as he turned around, refusing to make eye contact with me. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I figured my 6-inch sexy heels would've given you notice that I was coming down the hallway."

His face didn't change. He cleared his throat and walked away from me, talking in a low tone. "We need to get on the road. Mr. Hashimoto will expect us to be prompt. You can be prompt right?"

I didn't really like his tone, nor did I understand why he sounded like he was annoyed with me. He was already at the door though, so I thought it best not to question him at that point. "I've never

been late to anything in my life.”

He held the door open, still not making eye contact with me. He swung his hand toward the door, his eyebrows lifted up and his lips forced into a straight line. “Let’s go then.”

I tugged on my dress uncomfortably but moved swiftly through the room and out the door. I could tell that he wasn’t in the mood for me to give him any sort of real attention, so I just kept moving. When we got out to the car waiting for us, he climbed in first and sat in the corner, already looking out the window with his hand perched over his mouth. My eyes shifted from him to the floor and back again as I slid into the seat on the opposite side of the car.

We rode in silence for several moments before the stark shift in attitude began to boil inside of me. I knew it wasn’t the right time to talk about whatever was going on, so I picked a work topic instead. “We’ll need to get everybody up to speed on everything. I think that’s the biggest challenge here, it could really put us behind if not everyone is educated on this program.”

“What do you think I brought you for?” He snipped. “I’m sure you’ve got this covered, you seem to be a pro at everything.”

My mouth hung open for a moment and the words, the snappy comeback, lingered on my tongue for far too long. Remembering my place outside of the personal relationship we had the night before, I decided to keep it to myself and let the silence resume. That day was completely different than any of the others. When we got there, he took complete control, even cutting me off at some points. We were out on the floor discussing different parts of the project, and he couldn’t seem to keep his dismay hidden. He snapped at me and dismissed me several times. By the middle of the day I was tired of it and I didn’t completely hold back. Of course, that made everything worse and caused several small arguments between the two of us.

By quitting time, I couldn’t wait to get out of the silent car and back into the condo. At first, my plan was just to go to my room and spend the evening reading a book or working on the project. But as I stood there in the elevator, watching him and his foul grimace, everything started to boil inside of me all over again. Biting my bottom lip, I followed him out of the elevator and down the long hall.

I was at a loss. Everything had been absolutely perfect when I got into the shower that morning, but by the time I was done, it was like Evan had become a new man, and not for the better. I couldn’t figure out what could’ve possibly happened within that short amount of time, without me even being in the room, that made him treat me the way he was. As I stood there waiting for him to open the door, I rubbed my fingertips together and tapped my heel on the floor. I was trying so hard to hold back but every time I looked up at the snide, irritated face he was wearing, all I wanted to do was let him have it.

I stood still, just inside the condo. Evan immediately walked over to the bar and poured himself a drink. He took it to the window and stared out. I felt as if he was waiting for me to leave the room. Normally, I would’ve just done it and headed off to bed, but this time his attitude was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

I slammed my purse down on the table and walked to the center of the living room crossing my arms. “What the hell is wrong with you? Everything was fine before I got into the shower this morning and then suddenly, you’re acting like a complete asshole. You embarrassed me at work today. And everyone could tell there were some kind of creepy tension between the two of us. I will not spend the next however many months fighting with you and not even have any clue as to what I did wrong. Maybe you should act like an adult and actually have a conversation.”

I heard him chuckle, and he turned around putting his glass down on the small side table next to the couch. He set it down hard, spilling some of the liquor out onto the wood. He had a sneer on his

face and an entertained look in his eye from my comments. “So, you want to call me a child. You want to stand there in the living room, facing me, and call me a child. How about maybe thinking about the fact that you should’ve acted like an adult from the beginning, and told me that you were Richard Cuthbert’s daughter? The same man that put my father through hell all because he wasn’t a good enough businessman to close the deal.”

My fists clenched and my jaw closed tightly. I took another step toward him, narrowing my eyes. “How dare you! My father almost lost his entire business because your father snuck around behind his back and stole the deal right out from under him. Your father wasn’t even going to make that deal until my father told him about it. He used him and then tried to destroy him. That is all beside the point. There was no reason for me to disclose who my father was. This is my career and my life, not his. I can tell you this though, the apple hasn’t fallen far from the tree.”

He tilted his head back and laughed. “Right. Because you have so much room to talk. You knew the day I called you in my office who I was. You had every opportunity to come clean about what was going on. Hell, maybe I’m giving you too much credit. Maybe you knew exactly who I was when you searched out this company to do multiple internships for, and eventually make your first employment outside of college. Is this some kind of sick family feud, lifelong, revenge tactic?”

I shook my head, not believing what he was saying. I grabbed my purse off the counter and walked toward the hallway stopping and turning around. “You have a lot of audacity, you know that? I know you’re the little rich boy who has always gotten his way and has always been backed up by daddy, but let me just let you know right now, not everything is about you. Not everything in this world revolves around you. I can promise you, until I figured out who you were, you didn’t occupy even a microbe of space in my brain. That’s how unimportant you are to my life.”

I didn’t give him a chance to say anything back. I knew that was a low blow, but I was angry. I stomped down the hallway to my room and slammed the door shut, locking it behind me. I knew if he followed me, I just might punch him in the face. That’s how angry I was. I dropped my purse on the floor and kicked off my shoes before falling face first in my bed. Grabbing the pillow, I shoved my face into it and screamed at the top of my lungs.

Part of me was glad that I was so angry. I knew that if anger filled me, there was no way that heartbreak could enter into the equation. After all, what was there to be heartbroken over? At least I found out what kind of man he was before anything went any further with him. Still, it was hard to believe that the man standing in the living room just five minutes before had been the same man that I had spent the night with. Every ounce of sweetness and kindness he had shown, had drained completely out of him and all because his father and my father had a falling out almost two decades before.

I couldn’t believe that I had found myself in that situation. To top it all off, I had really been hoping that something would come out of our time together. From the looks of it, the only thing that was gonna come out of it was anger and hurt feelings. Just my luck.

EVAN

“I’ve got it,” she said with an attitude, taking the tool from my hand.

I backed up, putting my hands in the air and then crossing them over my chest as I watched her work. It looked weird watching her as she wrenched in a piece to the machinery, bent over in her tight black skirt, white blouse, and dress flats. Part of me was highly attracted to her, but the other part of me was still unequivocally irate at the information my father had given me.

No, let me take that back.

I wasn’t angry because she was Cuthbert’s daughter. I was angry because she concealed it from me. She lied to me about it. She had to have known it would’ve been an issue if I found out. I just didn’t understand. I knew that I said some nasty things to her when I first found out, but I was taken by surprise, off guard. If she had come clean from the beginning, and told me she was just trying to make her own way, especially after the work that she had showed me, I most likely would’ve worked something out with her.

Of course, then there was my father. It wouldn’t have mattered if she had discovered the biggest piece of technology in American history, he wouldn’t have wanted her working for us. I knew that things weren’t going to be okay between us, but I had no idea it would be that hard to work with her. There were so many emotions flowing through me, something that I was not used to in the least. I had spent the last decade building my career, avoiding emotional relationships at all cost, and focusing on myself and my business.

There I was though, standing in a giant warehouse, across the country from my office, watching a girl that half the time I wanted to strangle and the other half I couldn’t imagine not being around on a daily basis. Everything in me wanted to give in to the emotions I had for her based on that amazing first night we spent together. Every time I thought about it, my father’s voice would echo through my head. I could hear the stories he used to tell my mother after another tumultuous court battle between him and Mr. Cuthbert. I knew it was because my father cared about him as a friend, but he would’ve never stepped out and said he made a mistake. So, instead, part of what Mia was saying was true. My father did try to ruin his life.

Nonetheless, what happened between Mia and I couldn’t be taken back, but I was pretty sure it couldn’t be taken forward either. She was the enemy, and not just in a competition type of way, but in a deep-rooted family feud sort of way. I didn’t have anything against her, I was just a kid. But my father was an important man, both in my life, and to my business and I couldn’t imagine him ever letting go of that anger long enough to see Mia as an actual person and not an extension of her father.

The worst part of the day was the car ride. We sat across from each other, both refusing to look at

each other, and not speaking a word. I wish I could say we were ignoring each other, but the tension in the car was enough to make it explode. Both of our minds were on the other, but we were too stubborn to attempt to talk about it. I didn't even know what we would talk about. How do you fix something like that?

On a business level, Mia was probably one of the biggest assets I had at that point. Her mind was technologically amazing and she excelled at almost every part of the job. I tried to tell myself to put it to the side and deal with it later because in reality, the client required her to be there. We were far too involved at that point in the contract for me to replace her. Not to mention the fact that her design was so intricate that I needed her to be the one to implement it.

The teams were coming along awesomely. They were getting the system so easily. It was probably because Mia had a way of teaching it that not only covered every single step and inch of the software and the hardware, but she was able to do it in a way that almost anyone could understand. This was a new piece of machinery, something the staff hadn't seen before, but she explained it in a way where no experience was necessary. And the software was the same, she made it in-depth and specific, but at the same time, so user-friendly that my own mother could've worked it.

In some ways that was an excellent thing. If the staff knew how to use it and they knew how to implement it, that meant I didn't need to keep Mia with me. But thinking about it, that just didn't seem like a realistic option for me at that moment. In my mind I tried to justify it, telling myself that I would need her there in case anything went wrong. In reality, that wasn't the reason at all. I just didn't know if I was ready to let her go yet. I was pretty sure by the time I got back she would no longer work for us, and I didn't blame her. I hadn't reached a point where I felt completely comfortable severing ties with her.

Talk about confusing.

When we got back to the condo, I made sure that my movements were gentle and calm. I didn't want her to think that I was still fuming mad like the day before. "I might order something from the Italian restaurant down the street. Do you want to let me know what you want and I'll order it for you?"

She slipped her shoes off and leaned over picking them up by the backs. Her eyes shifted from the floor to mine as she stood up straight and paused for a moment. I could tell she was thinking about it. "No thanks. I think I'm just gonna retire for the night. Maybe catch up on emails and check in with my family. I know my roommate's gonna freak out if I don't call her. I had a big lunch anyway."

I nodded, trying to hide my disappointment. "Okay. I'm sure there will be leftovers from whatever I get so you're welcome to them. They'll be in the fridge."

She nodded her head, her eyes shifting uncomfortably back and forth. "Night."

I let out an easy sigh. "Good night. See you in the morning."

Without another word she turned and walked from the room. I stood there, not moving, until I heard her door snap quietly shut. The truth was, I wasn't even hungry. I thought maybe eating together would give us a chance to at least smooth things over enough to work with each other. I hadn't given her enough time though. I was starting to think there wouldn't be enough time in the world for us to be agreeable with each other again. It made me think that I was just prolonging the inevitable, that maybe I should just tell her she could go home.

I groaned, running my hands through my hair and walking into the kitchen. I slung open the fridge and grabbed a beer from inside, popping off the cap. I stood there in the silence of the condo, scanning around the room looking for anything to keep my mind off of what was going on. I didn't feel like watching television, or doing any more work, so I headed out onto the balcony and pulled a chair

up to the railing. The air was warm and nice even that high up.

It had been a really long day and it was already nighttime. I could hear the cars in the city honking, and could make out just enough stars over my head to give me a focal point for my eyes. Part of my problem was that I hadn't told anybody about what happened. I hadn't asked for advice, I hadn't thought about what I should do more than just running the same thoughts over and over again in my head. I knew I needed to call Conner and at least tell him about what was going on.

Grabbing my cell phone out of my pocket, I paused, taking in a deep breath. I needed to try to get through the conversation without telling him what happened the other night, but he knew me so well it was going to be hard to hide it. Putting the phone to my ear I started to hope he didn't answer.

"Well hello there," Conner said with a chuckle. "I was starting to think that you ran away and left the business all to me. I even started moving my furniture into your office."

I smiled and shook my head, taking a sip of my beer. "Don't tempt me. I'm just about to hand over the keys to you."

Conner went quiet for a moment. "What's wrong? Is there a problem with the client?"

I shook my head wishing it was that easy. "No. Hashimoto is more than excited. He loves the whole system and everyone's getting it down really fast and really simply. Mia is doing a great job teaching everyone, and she was so concise with her software development, coupled with the company's program creation, there have been very few bugs or issues with the trial run."

"Okay," Conner said slowly with confusion in his voice. "What's wrong?"

I leaned my head back against the balcony chair and puffed out a long deep breath. "So, Mia really knocked it out of the park from the first moment that she got here. She's been amazing with the client, on top of work, and even gets her hands dirty putting the hardware together. And then my father called me yesterday morning..."

"Oh man," Conner laughed. "Let me guess, he's not thrilled about someone that's been with the company all of three days working one of your biggest projects ever."

I scoffed. "Please, my father would let a nine-year-old implement a system if he knew he could make money off of it. No, this was far worse. Apparently, my father did a little snooping into Mia's file. I'll be honest I hadn't read it yet. I knew that her name was Mia Crosswell and that she had several internships here. Other than that, I knew she was straight out of college so I didn't really think of looking at her resume. Turns out, she doesn't have the same name as her father."

"Please tell me you're not about to say what I think you're going to say," Conner groaned.

I rubbed my face with a cold bottle. "Trust me I wish I wasn't about to say what you think I'm going to say."

"She's Cuthbert's daughter?" Conner asked with disbelief. "How did you miss that? What in the hell is she doing working for you?"

I shrugged. "Apparently she didn't realize who I was until I introduced myself in the office the other day. You know how private I am about my information and how I want the company to be about technology and not who owns it. There's nothing in the indoctrination papers that talks about me. It was a shock to her but she decided to not tell me. Ever since I confronted her, things have been really weird between us."

"Wait, wait, wait," Connor hissed. "What do you mean things are really weird between you two? Why in the world have you not fired her yet?"

"The client requires her to be here and she's really excellent at this job," I said in defense. "I just don't know if the answer is firing her."

Conner was silent for several moments and I had this distinct feeling that he was figuring it out.

Finally, he came back over the line. “You slept with her, didn’t you?”
If only he knew how much deeper it went then that.

MIA

“In other news, the President and his Joint Chiefs of Staff met today to discuss the pending nuclear agreement with...” I clicked off the television and dropped the remote on the bed.

The last thing I wanted was to listen to more depressing news about how the country was struggling and how divided everyone was. There was enough division inside the condo at that moment to meet the country’s quota for the entire year.

Things had been better that day, but I knew it was mostly because I refused to fight with him. I needed to get work done, and our feud was just a distraction. I had never let anything distract me from school or work before, and I wasn’t about to start letting a man mess things up for me. Of course, I couldn’t help but think that maybe I was the one that messed things up for myself. I was trying to see his side of things. It was true, I had hidden my identity from him. But what was I supposed to do? I was being handed a promotion and a leadership role within the first three days of working for the company full-time. I was terrified that my father’s history was going to ruin my future.

I flopped back on the bed throwing my arms out to the sides and staring up at the ceiling fan. I needed to talk to someone about it. I didn’t want to admit the mess I had made for myself, but if anybody could understand making a mess of things, Lily would definitely get it.

Grabbing my phone and hitting the speed dial for her, I put the phone to my ear. I wanted to video chat her, but I didn’t want Evan to hear our conversation. It rang several times and when I thought it was about to go to voicemail, she finally picked up. “Well, well. Look who’s calling. I honestly thought you decided to just ditch everything and go live on an island somewhere. I thought to myself, ‘Yep. Mia has finally overdone it. She had a nervous breakdown and she’s gone off to become a hippie on some tiny island in the South Pacific.’ I hope you know, I was about three minutes away from turning your room into a new spa.”

I smiled for the first time in two days. “Lily, I’ve made a mess.”

I could hear Lily taking in a long deep breath. “All right give it to me straight. Tell me everything that’s happened.”

“Well,” I began. “I told you about the project that I was getting ready to work on, and how I would be out here with the owner of the company who happened to be the guy from the bar.”

“Mhmm. Go on.”

Wrinkling my nose, I was almost hesitant to go on. I knew she was going to flip out. “What I didn’t tell you, was that when he broke the news to me that I had been awarded the project, I also happened to find out his last name.”

“Okay? What? Is he like, someone famous or something?” Lily asked, not picking up on what I

was trying to put down.

“I guess you could say that,” I replied. “At least within my family. His name is Evan Lagrange. The kid I used to play with, the son of my father’s mortal enemy.”

“Holy shit balls,” Lily yelled out. “I don’t even know how you did that. How do you go to work for company and not know who the owner is? You know what, never mind. That’s not important right now. So, is that it? Is that what you’re freaking out over?”

“Not quite,” I sighed. “When I found out who he was, I neglected to tell him who I was. No problem at first. We got here we had this amazing meeting with the client, and then we came back after dinner and were drinking and celebrating and having a great time. Somewhere in there, several glasses of alcohol later, I…”

“You dog,” Lily laughed. “You totally had sex with him. You, safest girl in the world, not only lost your virginity, but you lost it to your family’s mortal enemy. This is some great shit. I really wish I was a writer.”

I rolled my eyes. “Lily, this is serious. Everything was perfect. But the next morning, after eating breakfast, and being all cutesy, I went and jumped in the shower. When I got out, he was a completely different person. We argued and bickered all day long. Finally, when we got home, I called him out. I wanted to know what the hell his problem was. Well, apparently his father had read my file and figured out who I was. So, it turned into this huge fight where he was talking trash about my father, and I was talking trash about his father, and then I ended up locking myself in my room until we had to go to work this morning. And then this morning at work, it was so weird. We didn’t speak to each other at all, which was better than fighting, but still awkward. He asked if I wanted to eat food with him but I turned it down and just came back to my room. Part of me wants to hate him, and leave him high and dry and come back home. But the other part of me doesn’t want to leave. I need your expert advice.”

Lily cleared her throat and I could tell she was sitting up straight and proud that I was asking her for help. “Okay, here’s the deal. Both of you are acting like children. And I don’t want you to defend yourself. You have spent your whole life trying to make a world for yourself outside of your father. You kept your mother’s last name so that people wouldn’t treat you differently because you were a Cuthbert. Why in the world, now, would you start giving in to the stupid family feud?”

She didn’t even give me a chance to respond. But she was on her soapbox, and unfortunately everything she was saying was making perfect sense.

“Mia,” Lily continued. “You can’t sit there and continue to let your father and his father control the rest of your life. If you like this guy, like really like him and not just because it’s forbidden, then you need to let it go. If you want to continue working for his company, and you want to continue either being friends, co-workers, or even lovers, sitting in your room and talking to me is not going to fix it. You gotta work it out with him.”

I groaned loudly knowing she was absolutely right. “I know! God, I know. I never meant for any of this to happen. And in all honesty, I should have told him who I was from the moment I realized who he was. I just got so scared because I worked so hard to get exactly what I wanted, only to have my father’s name ruin it for me. I knew I wasn’t gonna get away with it forever. But I hoped to have enough time to prove that it didn’t matter what my last name was. Unfortunately, three days with the company and two days with the owner was not quite enough time.”

“So, get off the phone with me,” Lily replied. “And go talk to him. It’s the only way that you’re going to get through this project, much less work anything out with him on any other terms. Be an adult here. Let your parents be the children.”

"I love you," I told Lily. "I'll call you back later and let you know how it goes."

"I'll put the bill on your bed," Lily laughed as she hung up.

I pulled myself together, knowing I had to put my ego aside, and headed out to the living room. The lights were all on but he wasn't there. I caught a breeze from the cracked balcony doors, and saw him sitting outside with his head leaned back staring up at the sky. I grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and headed out. As I pulled a chair up next to him, he opened his eyes and glanced over at me, giving me what felt like an actual warm smile.

I plopped down in the chair next to him and leaned my cheek on my shoulder, my eyes tilted up towards his. "So, I think we need to talk. But if you wouldn't mind, I'd really like to start."

He nodded and took a sip of his beer. I took several gulps of mine, trying to get my courage under wraps. I had never really done anything I had to apologize for, at least not since I was a child. And I managed to stay out of the drama enough to not be in real awkward situations. "The truth is, I should've told you who I was when I found out who you were. And that by the way, was about 30 seconds before I walked into your office. I wasn't trying to hide it at first, I put it on my resume. But when I was standing there in front of you, being given this amazing project, and meeting goals that I had set for myself three years from now, I clammed up. I knew that even if you were okay with it, your father and my father would definitely not be."

He chuckled and shook his head, looking down at his beer. "It's funny how we work so hard to grow up and become independent of our parents, yet as adults we're still making decisions based on what they would think. I'm sorry I said those things about your father. I don't think I have any right to say anything because I was just a kid when it all went down. And I know my father can be... Not the greatest guy sometimes. So, I'm not sitting here saying he was blameless but what I am saying is, it shouldn't affect you or me."

I smiled at him bringing my beer bottle up and tapping his. "I agree with you. And I'm sorry for the things that I said too. I want this project to go great, and I want things to be fun and exciting for both of us."

Surprising me a bit, he sat up and turned toward me, reaching out and putting his hand on top of mine. "Mia, I want you to understand that my feelings toward you have not changed from the other night. Your name didn't make me suddenly not like you anymore. That's one of the biggest things I've been struggling with, today. I knew we couldn't continue arguing like we were, but the thought of sending you back home, it was miserable. I didn't want to send you home. I don't want to send you home."

I could feel my cheeks growing warm and a smile curving on my lips. "I feel the same way. I don't want to leave you. Even if you fired me today because your father just couldn't deal with it, I'd want to stay here with you."

A grin moved across his lips, a very genuine smile. He didn't say another word. Instead, he put his beer down, stood up, and lifted me up onto my feet. Pushing his hands up through my hair, he leaned in and kissed me deeply. My knees shook and I felt weak and out of control. There was something about his kiss that touched me...in all sorts of places.

He lowered his hands down to my hips and ran them up my sides and under my T-shirt. He was so warm against my skin but at the same time sent chills up my spine. Gripping the bottom of my shirt, I put my arms up and let him pull it up over my head. I loved the way that his eyes roamed all over my body as he leaned down and licked my breast with his hot tongue. I was suddenly glad I hadn't put a bra back on, it would have been a waste of precious time.

When he stood back up, we stared at each other for a moment before lunging at each other. He

gripped me under the arms and lifted me up. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he charged across the patio, pushing my back against the window. Our mouths ran all over each other, and there was a desperation, a need between us unlike anything I had felt before.

Pulling his shirt off, I tackled his pants, undoing them and letting them fall to the ground. With a simple pull, my pajama pants followed. He bit his lip, running his fingers up my thigh and over my beating mound. I gasped as he pushed harder against it, exciting every nerve in my body. With a jerk, he grabbed my chin and kissed me again. His other hand pulled my thigh up to the side.

Keeping his mouth open to mine, he gripped his rock hard cock in his palm and quickly slid it through my wetness. I grabbed onto his shoulder and moaned, pressing my head to the window as he slid fast and hard inside of me. I wanted him so badly. I wanted him to rock me, make me explode.

He grabbed my waist and lifted me up again, bringing my legs up to his hips and pushing me hard against the glass. With our eyes latched he began to pulse, pulling slowly out and ramming hard into me. His body was so hot against mine. Picking up the speed, he bounced me up and down on his cock, spiraling me closer to ecstasy.

With a sharp movement, he put me down and spun me around, bending me over, and spreading my feet. He reached around and rubbed my clit as he slammed into me over and over again. I could hear his skin smack against my ass and echo out into the air. As I rose to my peak, so did he. He slammed in four more times before gripping me by the hips and pushing as deep as he could.

As his dick pulsed in explosion inside of me, I erupted, vibrating back. We gripped tightly, letting the orgasms meld together, finding a pleasure I had never known before. It was amazing. When both of our bodies began to relax, he stood me up and pulled me into his arms.

“Come to bed with me,” he whispered.

“Only if you ask nicely,” I grinned, kissing his lips.

That turned out better than I thought.

MIA

The sun trickled in through the floor-to-ceiling blinds in Evan's room. The bed was so comfortable, and I could still feel his warm body next to me. Slowly I opened my eyes, finding him lying there watching me sleep. I giggled, my cheeks getting warm, and my eyes looking down at the bed.

He reached up and tilted my chin toward him. "Good morning. You look absolutely beautiful today."

I laughed feeling the wildness of my hair. "You're either a very good liar, or you like me a lot more than I gave you credit for."

He laughed and kissed me on the nose before turning and jumping out of the bed. He waved his arm at me. "We're off today. So, get dressed, and let's go spend the whole day together. Did you bring a bathing suit?"

"Yeah," I cringed. "I'm pretty sure Lily threw one in my suitcase. Though I can't promise that it's appropriate or even flattering."

Evan rolled his eyes at me with a laugh. "I can't imagine anything being unflattering on you. Come on, go get dressed and brush your teeth. I'll be ready in 10 minutes."

I smiled as he walked into the bathroom and shut the door. Putting my hands over my face I silently squealed and kicked my legs in excitement. Maybe he and I were going to have a second chance after all. I ran to my room and changed my clothes quickly, meeting him in the living room. He put out his hand and I took it, butterflies fluttering in my stomach as we made our way out of the condo and down to the car waiting on us.

We had a full day, an amazing day. We went by the local bakery and got coffee and danish before heading over to the beach where we spread out blankets that he had snagged from the condo, and sat there talking for hours. He told me about what it was like for him growing up, and even how he noticed when I was no longer around as a kid. I was flattered that he remembered me at all. He asked me questions about my childhood, about my aspirations and dreams, and I was shocked at how well he sat there and really took in what I was saying.

Halfway through the day, we rolled up our blankets and threw them in the car before meandering down to the little section of beach businesses. We walked along holding hands, window shopping, and then grabbed lunch at a little hole-in-the-wall diner at the end of the street. The whole day was filled with laughter, jokes, and not one bit of stress. We didn't talk about our fathers very much, we didn't need to. It was a topic of conversation that we had been stuck in the middle of for far too long. I was just happy to get to know him for who he was, not who his father was, or who he was in

business.

When the sun began to set, we headed back to the car where the driver was waiting for us. Evan pulled a box from the back seat and smiled, handing it over to me. I narrowed my eyes and looked at him suspiciously. "You were with me all day, how could you possibly have done this?"

He shrugged and grinned. "Magic. And a really amazing driver that did me a favor."

I opened up the box to find a beautiful summer dress and a pair of cute wedge sandals. When I looked up at him, he was pulling a shirt over his head and buttoning a pair of khaki shorts. He put his arms out to the sides doing a turn so I could see his outfit. "I figured if we're going to go out to eat and watch the sunset, we should probably put on some regular clothes, at least for a couple hours."

I laughed, pulling off the bathing suit cover-up I was wearing and slipping the dress on over top of it. It fit perfectly, and fell tightly against my curves. He held my hand as I slipped my feet into my sandals and put my hands out doing the same type of turn. He whistled loudly and then pulled me close to him, kissing my lips softly. At that point I didn't even care about dinner, but I could tell he put some thought into it.

The driver took us about two miles down the beach to a small restaurant that had a balcony jutting out into the water. When the hostess walked us out onto the deck, I found just one single table, with white linens, candles, and a single red rose.

He laughed at my surprised look. "I also managed to get the deck booked for us at sundown."

I shook my head and kissed him on the cheek before sitting down in the chair he had pulled out for me. "You better watch out, you're spoiling me."

His eyes glistened as he stared across the table at me. "I really like spoiling you. In fact, I'm hoping I get to do it more often."

Good Lord, I hope so too.

We spent the sunset eating tapas, drinking wine, and talking about everything from starting a company to our first boyfriend and girlfriend, and even our favorite foods. By the time we were done, I was more than ready to go back to the condo and just cuddle up with him. It had been one of the best days I'd ever had.

We rode back to the house, sitting closely together, holding hands, and letting the wind blow on our sun-kissed skin. I could have ridden in the back of the car with him forever. Even when we got to the condo, walking to the elevator and making our way back up the hall, we stayed close, our hands clutching together. It was almost like we were afraid to let each other go, to put any distance between us.

Once inside, he rubbed his hands down my arms and kissed me softly on the top of the head. "Why don't you, while I start a fire in the firepit on the patio, go change into something comfortable and we'll continue our evening."

I smiled, feeling my heart begin to beat faster. "I will do that. Be careful though, don't set the place on fire."

"Hey," he laughed patting me on the butt as I made my way back to the hallway. "I was in Boy Scouts... For one year... When I was six."

I laughed, shaking my head as I walked into my room and shut the door behind me. I leaned back for a moment cupping my hands over my face and smiling wildly. It felt like I was in a dream. Like something that would happen in some cheesy romantic comedy. I knew that the real world would eventually hit us right in the face, but hopefully we were creating a strong enough bond that we would be able to get through it together. But I didn't want to think about any of that at the time. I wanted to get back out there with him.

I took off my dress and my bathing suit and laid them out in the bathroom to send out to be dry cleaned. As I turned to walk back into my bedroom, I caught a glance of my naked body in the mirror. I stopped for a moment, biting my bottom lip and gathering the courage to do something a little bit wild, a little bit out of my comfort zone.

Letting a smile crack across my face, I grabbed the blanket off my bed wrapped it around me like a towel, and then tiptoed out of my room. As I reached the end of the hallway, going over in my mind how I was going to surprise him, I heard him almost whispering right around the corner in the kitchen. It was strange to me, so I quietly inched towards the edge of the doorway listening to what he was saying.

He hissed with irritation into the phone. “Dad, I get it. Here’s the deal, I just need her to finish this project. The client requires it.”

My smile fell and I bit the inside of my lip, trying desperately not to cry. It felt like somebody punched me as hard as they could in the stomach. I couldn’t face him, I knew I couldn’t. He just betrayed every single conversation and apology we had shared. I very quietly swiveled back around and tiptoed to my room. Holding the doorknob to the side, I eased it shut and then hurried over to the bed. Climbing in, I laid my head down on the pillow.

Just a couple minutes later, I could hear his footsteps coming down the hallway. He knocked lightly on the door and I turned my head away from it, shutting my eyes. I could hear him walk across the room, and brush his hand over the side of my face, but I didn’t move. I had to hold my breath in order not to give away the fact that I wasn’t sleeping, especially when he leaned down and kissed me on the cheek, pulling the blanket up over my shoulders.

As soon as the lights were clicked off and my bedroom door shut again, I cupped my hand over my mouth, and began to cry.

EVAN

The alarm blared loudly right next to my head. Normally, I would groan, slapping the alarm until it either broke or turned off. That morning though, was completely different. I lifted my head and tapped the off button, with excitement brewing in my chest. Laying back down, I turned over on my back and stretched my arms up high over my head, pointing my toes. As I relaxed, I let out a long deep breath, a smile forming on my lips. I would've preferred waking up next to Mia, but just knowing that I was going to see her soon was enough for me to be motivated.

I couldn't believe that I was acting this way. Mia was literally right down the hall but I couldn't wait to see her. In fact, I wasn't planning on waiting. When I went in to check on her the night before, after dealing with my father, I found her asleep on the bed. From the silhouette of her body under the thin blanket, it looked like she was naked. It took everything in me not to climb in the bed with her but it had been a really long day, and I figured she could use the sleep.

Covering her up, I felt this strong and vibrant need to always protect her. I had never felt that way about anyone in my life but unlike the women I had dated in the past, my feelings for Mia didn't scare me in the least. Sure, it was complicated and it would be complicated for a while but complicated didn't have to mean that we couldn't pursue our feelings. She changed her entire life to get away from the stigma of being the daughter of a billionaire businessman. It was time for me to break that connection as well. My company was thriving and it was at the point where if my father was no longer on the board, it would continue to grow and strengthen.

I had to stop being afraid. I had to start taking life into my own hands and stop living in the shadow of my father. It may have taken a woman like Mia to show me that, but it was better than never. Healing the wounds of the past would be good for him and it would be good for everyone involved, including me, Mia, my mother, her mother, and everyone else that had been dragged through the drama of something that happened so many years before. This was real life, not a movie and my father needed to learn how to accept responsibility for his actions and forgive others.

For that morning though, I wasn't ready to tackle the world quite yet. Breakfast on the other hand, I was definitely ready for but mostly because Mia and I had made plans to drive out early to this little breakfast restaurant on the water before we had to go to work. We only had one day off, but the more that we worked the quicker we could get back home. While I liked being out there in a little bubble with Mia, I knew eventually we would have to rejoin the real world. My father made that very obvious the night before on the phone but I wasn't worried about what he thought.

I pulled myself out of bed and headed into the bathroom to take a shower. While I wanted to see her as quickly as possible, I also wanted to look absolutely amazing for her when she saw me. We

had both been exhausted from work and from the drama between the two of us and I felt like I hadn't taken care of my body since I had arrived. The entire time I was in the warm shower, my mind slipped through the images of Mia from our date the day before. It was no longer just images of her naked body, though I didn't mind those too much, it was also her smile, the way she laughed, and the way she looked at me when I was talking about my past or my future. She made me feel like what I had to say was important and it was the first time that anybody had made me feel that way in a very long time.

I'd showered, shaved, and pulled out one of my nicer casual business suits that had been pressed before arriving. I wished I had brought more casual clothes, not realizing we would be working frequently inside the warehouses. It didn't matter though, I was so used to wearing a suit I could probably go for a jog and it wouldn't even feel strange.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I began to pick myself apart. I combed my hair about 10 times, changed my button-up shirt twice, and smelled my own armpits about 10 times to make sure that I was fresh and clean for Mia. We may be on work leave but that didn't mean I couldn't make it as special and nice for her as possible. I wanted her to leave California to go back to Chicago with beautiful memories and a readiness to continue whatever it was that we had between us when we got back.

After about 30 minutes of primping and poking I finally talked myself into letting it go and waking her up so that we could go to breakfast. Regardless of how much I wanted to just do whatever we wanted to do, we did have to get in to the client's office that morning and go over some important stuff. I walked quietly through the hall and down to her room. As my knuckles lightly hit the door, it creaked open. I thought I had closed it all the way the night before but I'd been really careful not to wake her up so it was possible that it hadn't latched properly.

I pushed the door open and stepped inside, my eyes falling on the perfectly made bed in front of me. Mia wasn't there. I glanced around at the bathroom, but the lights were off and nobody was inside. I could only assume that she was already up and waiting on me in the living room. I chuckled at myself remembering how focused and professional Mia could be. She had probably been up for hours but just didn't want to wake me from my sleep.

When I made it out to the living room though, there was no one there. The balcony doors were shut and locked, the front door was locked, and it was uncomfortably quiet. My heart began to beat a little bit faster, wondering where she had gone. I trotted up the stairs from the sunken living room, heading back to my room to grab my phone. However, as I passed the counter to the kitchen, I saw a tented piece of paper, folded in half, with my name written in cursive on the front.

Standing there, I just stared at it. I don't know why I was so afraid to pick it up and read it but I think just the setting of everything going on told me more than I was willing to admit. After staring at the piece of paper for several moments, I finally grabbed it and opened it up. I could smell the sweet scent of lavender wafting from the paper. It was the same shampoo and body spray that Mia wore.

The handwriting on the letter was meticulous just like Mia was in everything that she did.

Dear Evan,

I'm not sure how it reached this point. I'm not sure how I even worked up the courage to wake up so early and take care of everything that I had to this morning. I really thought after our talk that we had worked things out to the point in which we could both feel comfortable with the past and the future. But it was obvious from the conversation I overheard with your father last night, that's not the way things are. I get it. You need me to finish this project and the only way to do that was to make me feel comfortable enough about our father's rivalry to stay on until it was done. Trying to see it from your point of view, however, is difficult for me considering I'm not the kind of

person to manipulate others, especially when it has to do with the heart. That being said, there was no way I could stay here. There is no way to fix this, and there was no way that I could look you in the eyes and pretend that it never happened.

If you're worried about the project, don't. Early this morning, I met up with the client, and explained that I had a family emergency and that I needed to go back home. I wasn't sure if I'd ever be able to come back but I told him that he was always welcome to contact me with any problems that may occur. He was comforted in knowing that you would be here, and that his staff had reached a full understanding of the technology. I attempted to lie to him so that he would not look negatively on you or your company. He thinks we're doing a great job so just make sure that you keep up with it. I left all the information for the project, the information books, and the project notes concerning risk factors on the flash drive in the front pouch of your briefcase. You shouldn't need any more information than that.

I wish that things had been different, but I was a silly enough girl to believe that what we were experiencing was real. A bit of advice. Be truthful with people, think about their feelings, and you won't have a problem getting the work you need done.

Good luck in your future.

Mia Crosswell Cuthbert

I must've read the letter at least 15 times before crumpling it up and throwing it as hard as I could across the room. I was pissed. I was pissed at so many things that I couldn't even focus my attention on one. I was angry at my father for making me feel as if I had to lie about why Mia was there. I was angry at Mia for leaving. But most of all I was angry at myself for allowing myself to be put in a position to be heartbroken. She didn't even let me explain.

Everything that I thought was real, had just tumbled down at full speed over my head. I knew I should've just stayed cold, focused on work, and alone. Anything was better than the crushing feeling in my chest at that moment.

MIA

It had been two days since I arrived back in Chicago. I had sent Lily a text message when I boarded the plane, not feeling like verbally expressing what had happened. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know that if I was coming home, alone, and early, something had happened. Lily had known me for so long that she knew exactly how to handle the situation. She picked me up from the airport but didn't ask me any questions, she just wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tightly before leading me out of the terminal and into the cab.

When we got home, I walked straight to my room, threw down my luggage, and climbed into the bed. I just felt so tired. I was worn out from the emotional roller coaster I had just been on. I could have faced Evan, but I didn't see the point in it. It would've just been a broken record, a repeat from the night before. He had lied to me, used me, and I could only imagine what my life would've been like when we got back. It would only have been a matter of time until I lost my job and it probably wouldn't have taken him very long to end things between the two of us. After all, he was just trying to keep me there to keep the client happy.

"Hey there," Lily smiled as I walked out to the living room wrapped in a blanket.

"Hi," I said with little emotion in my voice.

She scooted over and let me sit next to her on the couch. Looking me up and down, Lily flipped a piece of my greasy hair back out of my face. "I know you're having a grandiose moping session trying to heal your broken heart, but I want you to know that eventually I'm going to force you to stop. Right now, it's okay, it's within the timeframe you're allowed. But hearts break, I know this firsthand, and the only way to get that pain out of your chest is to pick yourself up and keep moving."

I laid my head on her shoulder, staring off into the distance. "This is a pretty magnificent mope though, you have to admit. I just don't understand how I could've been so stupid. I seriously thought that we were creating something together. I thought that he actually had feelings for me. When I came walking down the hall and I heard him talking to his father, it was like somebody punched me in the stomach. It was such a conflicting emotion. I wanted to yell at him. I wanted to hear him say that he didn't mean it. At the same time, I wanted to run as far away from him as I could get. How can you want someone and hate them so much at the same time?"

Lily put her arm around my shoulders and chuckled. "That is the age-old question that we've been asking the universe for centuries. It's those emotions that keep us in relationships we shouldn't be in. It's those emotions that leave you rendered almost helpless, greasy, and wrapped in a blanket in the middle of the day. But it's also those emotions that allow us to pick ourselves up and become stronger and more knowing as we grow."

I sighed deeply. “You’re so wise.”

I chuckled, lifting my head up as she rolled her eyes and flicked me in the arm. The smile faded from her lips and she glanced down at her hands. “I remember the first heartbreak I ever had. My first love. It hit me like a ton of bricks. It was the only relationship I’ve ever had that I actually imagined myself as a wife and a mother in. And I’m pretty sure it’s the exact breakup that turned me into the person I am today.”

I lifted one eyebrow. “You mean cynical and bitchy?”

Lily grinned. “That’s exactly what I mean. But that cynicism is what’s kept me from having another broken heart of that magnitude. It’s not that I don’t care about people or that I don’t fall in love, it’s that I’m very specific on who I give my emotions to.”

“But that cynicism can also be what keeps you from truly feeling those emotions,” I replied. “Don’t you ever wonder if you miss out on amazing things because you’re afraid to feel completely obliterated by a man again?”

Lily put her hand to her chin, shifting her eyes upward as if she were thinking. “No. I don’t really care. I don’t believe in soulmates or love at first sight. I believe there are many people on earth that we could be happy with. The key to it is, finding the one that doesn’t make you feel like you want to strangle them every day. I feel like Evan would’ve made you want to strangle him at least twice a week.”

I laughed, nodding my head. “I should’ve never given him another chance. I should’ve just let it be what it was, worked in silence, and then come home. I was suckered.”

Lily stuck out her bottom lip and gripped my shoulder tighter. “I feel like I need to apologize for some of that. I didn’t give you very good best friend advice. Most best friends would’ve been like run, do not pass go, do not collect the jerk on your way out. But instead, in my infinite wisdom, I gave you real-world advice because I know things are not black-and-white. What I should have done was give you the advice that I would’ve taken.”

“What advice would that be?”

Lily shrugged. “Screw his brains out, take his money, eat at some fancy restaurants, and then unload the baggage when you got back to Chicago.”

We both stared at each other for several moments before bursting into laughter. It felt so good to laugh. I seriously didn’t know if I would ever laugh again.

When Lily finally caught her breath, getting rid of the giggles, her face went serious once again. “But really, I’m sorry for pushing you back into it. I should’ve warned you about men like him but you sounded so happy, and I haven’t seen you happy about a guy in... Well, ever.”

Shaking my head, I padded Lily on the knee. “You can’t put this on you. It had nothing to do with you. I would’ve made that choice regardless. It’s just always easier when you have someone backing you up. The truth is, I was stupid to think that he was any different than his father. It seems I’ve let the Lagrange family screw me over once again.”

Lily sat shaking her head in disgust. “You want me to go to his office, knock on the door, and then just punch him in the balls and leave?”

I snorted with laughter. “No. While I like your idea of revenge, I think the best thing for me to do at this point is just stay as far away from him as I possibly can. Just continue this rivalry. It’s just so hard though, I made that typical girl mistake and imagined what my life would be like dating him back in Chicago. I made memories that weren’t even memories yet. Why we do that to ourselves I’ll never understand.”

My phone buzzed on the coffee table and I stared at it for a moment, nervous to see whose name

would pop up on the screen. Lily glanced at me and then over at the phone. She picked it up and looked at the number. "I don't know who this is."

It was a gamble, but I answered. "This is Mia."

An unfamiliar voice answered from the other end of the line. "Hi Mia, this is Chris Holton from Holton Technologies on the east side of Chicago. I apologize for getting back to you so late. We received your resume months ago, before you graduated from college, but at the time we were going through some slight changes and didn't want to call you until we had a full open position for you. I'd like you to come in and talk to me about our company. Just know we are fully ready to offer you a job. We aren't the biggest company, but there are opportunities to grow, both within the company, and as part of a growing corporation."

Holton Technologies, a small town tech company that had grown quite a bit over the last five years, but still wasn't in the major players of corporate technologies. The owner still ran the business, there was no board of directors, and you'd never find stock for their company online. Despite their size, I had heard amazing things about the owners and figured it would be a great backup plan should anything happen to my goals.

It seemed I was at the moment that I needed a backup plan. "You actually called at the perfect time. I just recently left the tech company that I was working for and was preparing to apply for new positions. I remember your company, I only sent resumes to companies I knew I would be happy working with. And if you have a job for me within your company, I don't really have to think about it. My answer would be of course, I would love to come work for you."

I took the job without a thought. What was there really do think about? I no longer had a job, they had a job for me, and I was lucky enough to be able to work in my chosen field. I was in a position where the salary really didn't make much difference. I didn't pay anything for where I lived, I didn't have a car payment, and my cell phone was still under my father's plan. It was actually kind of funny. I had tried so hard to break away from my father, but it was true, I didn't turn down the material things that would help me get further in life. In that moment, I was really grateful to be in that position.

"That's just great to hear," Chris replied. "I'm sorry that you left the other technology company. Hopefully you'll be up to finding a home here with us. I would love for you to come in tomorrow, meet the team, and we can go over employment contracts."

"That sounds perfect," I replied immediately. "I'll be there bright and early to see you guys. I very much appreciate you getting back to me. Like I said, I think the universe put us together."

Chris laughed. "I couldn't agree more. We'll see you in the morning."

I hung up the phone and glanced over at Lily whose lip was sneered and her forehead was wrinkled. "The universe brought you together? What? You get a broken heart and go on some spiritual enrichment path?"

Laughing, I shrugged. "The owner of Holton Technologies, Chris Holton, is a well-known spiritual person with no specific religion. I researched it when I sent in an application to them months ago. I figured it might come in handy at some point. I really had no idea what company was going to offer me a job, so I made sure that I had enough information to play my cards right."

Lily shook her head yawning. "You, ma'am, are much more cut-throat than I think you realize."

"That would've been the perfect thing to say to me when I called you."

Lily hung her head. "I'm still learning. I'm like a toddler in a grown woman's body, you know this. From now on, I'm just going to start calling you cut-throat. That way you never have to ask me for advice, you know you are hardcore."

I stood up and stretched my arms out, heading over to the freezer and pulling out two pints of ice

cream. I tossed one to Lily and grabbed two spoons. “Well, this hardcore tech geek is going to enjoy her last day of pity parties and eat this entire pint of ice cream. Hopefully, it’ll cure my broken heart.”

EVAN

Coming back to Chicago seemed like a chore. I didn't have to stay that long in California considering everyone was pretty well trained and the company was capable of doing virtual meetings at any time. The client was still very satisfied and excited to implement his new system. The check had been deposited in the company bank account that morning. I should've been extraordinarily happy about this, it was a huge break for my company, but I felt almost empty inside. The truth was, I had felt empty inside since Mia left.

It didn't help that as soon as I got back to Chicago my father wanted to have a meeting with me. I felt like a child being scorned. He was still livid about Mia even though she had been out of the company for a couple weeks at that point. I knew he wouldn't let it go for a really long time. I had every intention of going into the meeting and just sitting through it, letting him get it out of his system. But when I got there, I couldn't seem to keep my cool.

"What kind of irresponsible crap was that?" My father asked, banging his fist on the conference room table.

I cleared my throat and glanced over out the glass windows. Some of the employees were walking by, picking up their pace as my father started yelling. I had spent the last couple of weeks sitting in a house, doing nothing but thinking about Mia. I had stewed in it and stewed in it and still didn't feel any better than I did the moment I read that letter. The letter that was still folded in my pocket. Not still screwed up in a ball?

My father continued. "That family doesn't deserve the kind of position you were going to offer Mia. I don't care how smart she is, how determined she is, or how she explained to you that she was just trying to make a life for herself. They can't be trusted. I thought I taught you this when you were a kid. For all we know, she was there to spy on us."

I let him go on for a little bit longer but finally I lost my temper. I balled my fists and slammed them down on the desk, standing up and knocking my chair to the floor. My father went silent, never having seen me react like that. I pointed my finger at him, so angry I could barely find the words.

"How dare you," I growled at him. "How dare you sit here and lecture me on my choices, in my business, when you were the very person that started the feud between that family and ours. I don't care how much you want to feel better about yourself. You know, deep down inside, beyond the lies you've told all these years, you were the one that betrayed his trust to begin with. He was your friend, and he told you things in confidence for his business. What did you do? You jumped in on a sale that would've made his company, and stole it right out from beneath them. And you did it in an unethical way. In fact, the entire thing was unethical."

My father's mouth opened but then closed again, his own anger bubbling up inside. I wasn't about to take it from him either. Before he could say anything, I cut back in. "The whole reason that we have that client, that my company was just taken to the next level, is because of Mia. She's the reason why you got what you wanted. Not once did she complain. Not once did she try to do anything nefarious towards our company. She went above and beyond in every aspect of the project. She worked her ass off in college, did internships for us where she was a superstar, and then was here for less than a week before she was chosen for one of the biggest projects we've ever done. Stop blaming everyone else for you and her father's feud."

My father's hands were shaking. "You can't talk to me like this. He fought me for years. He wouldn't let it go. He was the reason his company almost went out of business. He just kept throwing money at lawyers knowing full well I had far deeper pockets than he did."

I put my hand up and shook my head. "I'm not rehashing this with you. You and her father have issues, and you both have dragged every person you know into them. You have made moments of excitement and happiness negative because you just had to tell your story to whoever would listen. You ruined birthdays and anniversaries, stressed mom out, and you tried to instill in your own son unethical business practices. That girl went through the same thing that I've been going through, but she is smart enough and strong enough to get out of the cycle. I'm tired of being treated like I'm still a little boy."

I grabbed my cell phone and shoved it in my pocket, walking toward the door. Yanking the door open, I stopped and looked over my shoulder at my father. "I think you forgot whose business this is. I appreciate everything you've done for me, I really do but at some point, I have to stand up for myself. This is not your company. And this is not your life. If I choose to employ Mia that is my business. If I choose to be friends with Mia that is my business. You have made me so uncomfortable that even as an adult I felt like I had to lie to you on the phone. And that lie was overheard by Mia. I hurt her because I was too weak to tell you to worry about yourself. I love you, I really do, but I think it's time maybe you thought about retiring. If you don't, you won't have anybody left in your life when you really need them the most."

I walked out of the conference room and didn't look back. I could tell that people were standing there staring, never having heard me stand up for myself or raise my voice to anyone. I didn't really care. It was time that I took steps towards a better life. To take control and stop letting those stupid things change the way that I lived.

I left the building and headed four blocks to one of the local parks. It was the same park that my mom would bring me to when I was a little boy, waiting for my father to get out of meetings. It was the middle of the day so no one was really there. I stepped up on the bench of the picnic table and sat down, looking out at the perfectly mowed green grass and the freshly painted kids play area. It was so nice and quiet there. Not quiet like the house was in California after Mia left, but peaceful and serene.

My mind raced through thoughts of her, wondering what she was doing, wondering how she was feeling. Was I on her mind like she had been on mine? Did she torture herself every day wondering what she could've done differently? Or had she completely forgotten about me and moved on? Even with my business doing so fantastically, I felt like everything was spiraling around and I had no grasp on anything. Mia grounded me. She held me down and I didn't even realize it until she was gone.

The truth of it, the bare-bones facts, was really simple but I hadn't been able to put it together until that moment. I wasn't angry because she was gone. I was frustrated because I knew that I needed her. I knew that I needed her in my life on a regular basis. It wasn't for business, it was for me. It was for my life. The life that I wanted to share with her. I hadn't even gotten to spend that much time with

her, but there was no doubt in my mind that she was the person I needed next to me. I had screwed it up so badly that I didn't have the faintest clue of how to correct it.

What I did know, was that I had to give it a try one way or another. I couldn't sit there another day hoping she would call me. I couldn't sit there wondering if I had just done one thing differently. If I had just been stronger when talking to my father. I closed my eyes and listened to the birds, trying to relax my shoulders. I was a walking ball of tension, and I had been ever since she left.

Reaching in my pocket, I pulled out my phone and scanned through the numbers. Sitting there, I let my finger hover over the call button, terrified to call her. I knew that I had to talk to her though, I had to try anything I could to get through to her. I pressed send on the cell phone and it rang and rang, finally going to voicemail. I stopped the call without leaving a message, knowing there was no way she would return it.

I wasn't going to give up though. I flipped back through my contacts and called my own office. My secretary answered the phone. "Where are you? You were in a meeting with your father and then suddenly you're missing and he went stomping out of the building, grumbling to himself."

I grimaced at the thought of it. "I'm sorry. I had to get out of there. I need you to do me a favor. I need you to look up Mia's information and give me her address."

"Okay," she said slowly. "Actually, I still have her file right here on my desk from when your father made a copy of it. I'll text the address over to you. Just give me a couple minutes."

I hung up the phone and waited for the text, hailing a cab as it came through. Pulling up in front of their building, I was pretty shocked at how nice it was. Then again, her father had probably been the one to put it all together for her. Not that I blamed her, I did the same thing with my father growing up.

With a little finagling, the desk clerk let me in the elevator and sent me to the top floor. My nerves began to race through me as I stood in front of her door, my hand perched to knock. I couldn't chicken out now, I was right there, so close. With a jolt of courage, I knocked on the door and took a step back. I could hear the footsteps walking across the floor and I straightened out my jacket as the doorknob turned.

"You," Lily said standing in front of me. "What are you doing here?"

I put my hands up in surrender. "I know I'm the last person that either of you want to see, but I have to talk to Mia. I have to apologize to her, to explain why my actions happened the way they did."

Lily looked unenthused, and I wasn't sure whether she was going to invite me in or punch me in the stomach. Thankfully, she invited me into the condo. She was being that protective best friend, watching with close eyes as I began to pace. "I know I'm the last person that you want to see. And I know you're being protective of Mia but I need to talk to her. Even if she laughs in my face, I need to be able to tell her everything that I want her to know. I love her, and I may not have noticed when I should have, but I know it now. And I'm no longer going to let my father dictate who I can and cannot have in my life because he made a mistake two decades ago."

Lily stood there with her arms crossed in front of her listening to me talk. As each moment went by her face softened a bit, and I hoped that was a good sign. I said everything that I felt I needed to put out there. And since Lily was Mia's best friend, I made sure to touch on all the emotions. It was as important to me that Lily understood how I felt as it was for Mia to know it too.

Lily scratched her chin, staring at me as I stood there vulnerable, spilling my guts to her. "I can't believe I'm saying this. I actually think that deep down you're a good guy. But if you're asking me to help you, I can't do that. Mia trusts me and she always has. You're going to have to think of another way."

It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but if another way was where I needed to go, that's exactly what I

would do.

MIA

“So, when you’re drawing it out, you want to make sure that you connect the vectors,” one of my coworkers explained after going through my trial run for a project. “Overall, you did an excellent job. If you turned in something like this for project, no one would complain about your lines.”

I smiled, making notes as they talked. “No, this is great. When I turn something in, I want to make sure that I do it with as high an accuracy rating as I possibly can. Anybody who can give me critique on my work is valuable to me.”

We finished up the conversation and I was left to my own work, sitting at my desk. At first, I was nervous. It had been a couple weeks at the company and I was loving every single thing about it. I was starting to think that maybe I was just overlooking the negatives, and they were going to come back and bite me in the ass later on. But no matter how many times I looked at the processes, the people, and the business in general, the better I felt about the decision that I had made.

Even the projects that I was given at that small company were better than the ones that I had worked on at Evan’s company. Hudson Technologies was a small business, and that small business received clients that were requesting technical solutions to a variety of problems. It was a real opportunity for me to let my creative side show and implement the technical skills that I had spent so much time working on.

Reaching across my desk, I pulled up the project I’d been assigned and took the client sheet out of the file. My phone buzzed on the table in front of me and I glanced over once, and then, giving it a double take, I froze. My hand began to shake, but my eyes were glued to the screen. It was Evan. He was calling me for some reason. He hadn’t made any effort to contact me since I left.

I reached for the phone but stopped myself. At first, I wondered if he was calling because of questions on the project I’d created. But then I realized that, regardless of why he was calling, I was not obligated to answer. Answering would only do one thing to me, send me back several steps in the process of healing my broken heart. Shaking my head, I took my phone and set it in my desk drawer, shutting it tightly.

“Mia, you coming to lunch with us today?” One of my other coworkers asked.

I shook my head with a smile. “Not today. My best friend is going to kill me if I don’t make time for her.”

It was so refreshing to have so many people on my new team that were just normal, or normal for that field. That tech geek kind of normal. I had some really great responsibilities, but nothing was as cool as still having the opportunity to work on mockups whenever I had an idea. Granted, I had to get my own work done first, I was never stopped and told not to create something.

My mother and father really didn't understand why I would go from the type of high-paying job that I had at Evan's company to a small no-name company with a salary less than half of what I made before. Of course, they were livid about the fact that Evan owned the company, not mad at me, but still angry. Their judgment still didn't persuade me to leave Hudson Technologies for a higher paycheck. Hudson fit me perfectly. It was exactly the type of place that a recent college graduate needed to start out. When I didn't understand something, they almost immediately would help me figure it out.

We were all constantly learning from each other, and when nobody knew the answer, we reached outside to find it. It was teamwork, 100%, all the time. Even when we were working on mockups of our own ideas, if someone needed help, we helped each other. No one was trying to one-up the other person or get a promotion based on how much they had stepped on other people to get where they were. We built projects as a team from the ground up, and then we either celebrated or paid for the results as a team.

My watch beeped, reminding me that I needed to get going if I was going to meet Lily for lunch. I had been so busy with the company that her and I had barely gotten to spend any time together. She didn't complain though, busy and excited was a lot better than heartbroken and upset. Not that I wasn't still heartbroken, but there was enough excitement in my life to help me get through that. Of course, seeing Evan's name on my phone that morning brought back a lot of those pent-up emotions. It had only been a couple weeks after all.

I took a cab to the restaurant since there wasn't anything on my side of town that Lily wanted to eat. She was pretty particular when it came to food. The car pulled up in front of her favorite low-key restaurant and I jumped out, greeting Lily with a big hug. She laughed patting me on the back. "Wow. Are you okay?"

I pulled away and nodded with a smile. "Sure. I just figured I would greet my best friend with a hug."

She was acting weird. I could see it in her eyes, something was up. I waited until we were inside and seated before I said anything about it. "Okay, you haven't been talking much, and you keep looking at me like you're about to tell me that you've got six weeks to live."

Chuckling, she ordered her food from the waitress and handed her the menu. When the server had walked away, I stared at Lily waiting for her to answer. "I don't want you to freak out when I tell you this."

I rolled my eyes. "How often do you actually see me freak out? I think I'm pretty level-headed when it comes to things."

Letting out a deep sigh, she nodded her head, knowing it was true. "I know. I just... I guess I think about it as if you were telling me this news. Of course, I'm one of the most dramatic people on earth."

I took a sip of my drink and gave her wide eyes, followed by a giggle. "Just tell me. I'm pretty sure I've been through so much in the last couple months nothing at this point is going to shock me."

She blotted her lips with her napkin and leaned forward slightly, lowering her voice. "At home this morning, there was a knock on the door. When I opened it... Evan was standing there."

She paused, looking for my reaction but I kept a straight face. Inside though, I was not nearly as calm. It felt like a boulder had been dropped into my stomach. It was one thing to call me, it was another thing to randomly show up at my house. "Did he say why he was there?"

Lily nodded. "I let him come in and talk. He was there looking for you but I told him you weren't there. I didn't tell him where you were but I told him you weren't there. He looked terrible, like he hadn't slept in weeks. At one point I thought he was gonna burst into tears. He told me that, basically,

he made a huge mistake. He let himself be trapped under his father's thumb with this stupid feud, and he loved you. He said he just had to tell you how he felt so that at least you would know."

I cracked my neck right and left, feeling the butterflies begin to melt into anger. "I don't need to hear anymore. I know he has a sob story. And I know that he is caught up in what his father thinks. But does it really matter? I was able to take myself out of it. I was able to step back and not allow that into my life anymore. He had the same opportunity. If he really cared about me, he would have stood up for me to his father. He wouldn't have lied to him. He wouldn't have lied to me either. How am I supposed to know if he's actually telling the truth or not? If he really was lying to his father, I would understand why he wanted to talk to me. Unfortunately for him, there's no actual evidence he can muster up to prove to me that he didn't want to lie about it."

"I feel really bad for even telling you," Lily said, tearing apart a piece of bread. "I should've just let it lie and never brought it up to you. But you're my best friend and we never lie to each other. I didn't want you to one day run into him and be taken off guard because he tells you that he came by the apartment. It's also not my place to decide what's best for you. I think it's important that you know he came to find you."

"It definitely feels good knowing that he hasn't forgotten about me," I replied looking down at my glass. "It feels good that he has some sort of remorse, enough to search me out at my own house. But I don't know what he expects of me. Did he expect me to come running out of my room and jump into his arms? All because he says that he didn't mean something, or says he has emotions towards me. When I was there, ready to take his emotions and his feelings, he trampled all over my heart."

Lily leaned her head into her left hand, propped up by her elbow on the table. "I get it. I'm really proud of you for making that kind of decision. I think though, if you had been standing in front of him it would've been a lot more difficult for you."

I chuckled. "Of course, it would have. He's a beautiful man, with big puppy dog eyes, and a smile that can melt you. But the reality of the situation is, I have to move on. I don't know if I can trust him or anything that he says. I wish I could. But one random day of him knocking on my front door does not make up for the weeks that my phone has sat absolutely silent."

Lily was proud of me, and I was proud of myself too. The problem was, underneath that calm façade, all I wanted to do was jump back into his arms. She was right, I was glad that I wasn't there. I just had to remember that one visit did not mean that he would be there for me. It didn't mean that anything had changed.

EVAN

I don't know what I was thinking. I had gone to Mia's apartment the day before, but Lily made it very obvious that she wasn't willing to help me talk to Mia. I wasn't upset with her, I understood. She was probably the person that had to be there for Mia when she came back from California. She wasn't going to put her neck on the line for somebody that had already broken her best friend's heart. That didn't mean that I was going to give up. I had to figure out a way to make it right, even if in the end, she still didn't want to have anything to do with me.

Waking up that morning, I already had a plan, but for some reason it felt like a much better plan three beers in, sitting in my living room, than it did sober getting dressed. Nonetheless, my choices had dwindled down to either going and speaking to Mia's father, or camping out on the front steps of her apartment waiting for her to come home. Both were equally volatile but at least I had a chance of not getting arrested when I went to Mia's father's house.

I was surprised at how familiar the drive to their house was. It had been twenty years since I'd gone there with my parents. Driving up that long driveway toward the enormous house on the hill brought back all kinds of memories from my childhood. They were memories that I didn't even know I had. Playing out in the field with Mia. Running around the stables and feeding the horses. From the looks of it, the stables had long been forgotten and the horses were no longer there.

The house wasn't Mia's mom's house, the main house that they lived in. It was their getaway house, just twenty minutes away from their main house, but out in the country where everything was quiet and the hustle and bustle of the city suddenly stopped. From what I could remember from my parents' discussions in the kitchen, Mia's father had been able to keep the getaway house in the divorce and that's where he set up his primary residence.

Of course, being the businessman he was, I had to make a couple phone calls to find out where he would be. It was just my luck that he had gotten back from London earlier that week and was going to spend some time home relaxing. Twenty years before, the concept of relaxing to men like Mia's father and my own, was an afternoon of golf before going back to the office. Everyone had grown older though, and the companies were pretty much run by other people.

I parked out front of the house next to the large fountain and slowly climbed the steps to the front doors. I rung out my hands, feeling extremely nervous. I must've walked up to the door and raised my fist to knock at least three different times before finally just giving in and pounding on it. A few seconds later the door opened and the butler stood staring at me.

"Can I help you?" He asked.

"Yes, I'm here to see Mr Cuthbert," I said in the most professional voice possible.

His eyes shifted up and down as if he were studying me. "Is he expecting you?"

Nervously, I cleared my throat and shook my head. "No, I'm pretty sure he was never expecting to see me again. My name is Evan and I have something I want to talk to him about concerning his daughter."

The Butler stepped to the side allowing me to walk into the large marble foyer. It had been redone since I was there as a child, but it was still as ornate and over-the-top as ever. The butler hurried across the entryway and disappeared into what I could only assume was either the study or the living room. Putting my hands behind my back I began to walk leisurely around, studying the different paintings hanging on the walls. They had always been so curious, their taste in art more than a little bit odd.

The sound of two sets of feet coming toward me brought my attention back to the doorway into the rest of the house. The butler appeared with Mr Cuthbert following close behind, aged far more than I expected. I still had a vision of him as this young entrepreneur that I'd been around when I was six. When he saw me, he stopped, turning his head to the side and studying me as if he didn't believe that I was who I was.

"Mr Cuthbert," I said, trying to get him talking before he just completely kicked me out of the house. "I'm sorry to show up unannounced but I wanted to talk to you about..."

"My daughter, Mia," he said finishing my sentence. "Is she okay?"

I quickly nodded, realizing that I'd probably just scared him. "Yes, yes she's fine. I didn't mean to scare you."

Mr Cuthbert let out a long deep breath and then squared his shoulders giving a nod to his butler who disappeared back into the room again. "You've grown a lot since I saw you last. To be quite honest with you, I didn't actually think I would ever see you again. But you've spiked my curiosity so why don't you come on into the study and I'll fix you a drink."

"Thank you, sir," I replied, following him back toward the study.

When I walked in, I instantly recognized the smell of expensive cigars and brandy. To me, it was a bit early for that, but who was I to judge? I stood in the center of the room as he fixed us two drinks and glanced around at all the books that lined the shelves attached to all four walls. It was like a mini library.

Mr Cuthbert walked back over to me and handed me the drink, tapping his glass to mine. "So, tell me, Evan Lagrange, what in the world has my daughter done that would bring you all the way out here to talk to me?"

"She hasn't done anything," I replied. "The truth is a little bit extended if you don't mind hearing the story."

He put out his arm, leading me to the couch. I sat down while he took a chair across from me. I immediately launched into the story, not really wanting to draw the whole situation out. He listened with patience and never made a nasty remark or off-putting facial expression. When I was done, he nodded his head and took a swig of his liquor.

"How's your father?" He asked, almost as if he didn't hear anything that I just said.

Thrown off a bit, I stuttered over my words. "Oh... He's... My father's just fine. Of course, he doesn't know that I'm here and if he did, he probably wouldn't be fine."

Mr Cuthbert chuckled and shook his head. "This drama that we went through 20 years ago is still hanging around, I guess."

He changed the subject, talking about the past, talking about when Mia and I were children, and launching into a couple of happy memories of my father from the past. At first, I thought I felt

comfortable with him because he was relatively calm. But as the hours ticked by, I realized that Mr Cuthbert was a lot more like my father that I had remembered. I could tell deep down he was a really good guy.

Mr. Cuthbert and my father were both men of old business. They started out their careers in a time where it was predominantly ruled by men, and rules and regulations weren't as tight as they are now. They believed in profit, taking care of their employees, unless of course it interfered with profit, and little government influence. They had control over the first two, but the last one seemed to fluctuate up and down over the years. The man had some serious distorted views, the same distorted drive that pushed my father to do the things that he did throughout his career.

When we were done talking about the past, he finally started talking about Mia and my feelings for her. "I'll be honest. When I heard that Mia had been working for your company, I was livid. But as I watched her talk about her time in California, I could see it in her eyes that something else was going on. The truth is, I'm so tired of this rivalry. I know that you're a hard-working man, with a kind disposition, and my daughter can be stubborn as hell sometimes."

With that, we began to laugh, and I pictured the stubbornness that plagued that beautiful woman on a daily basis. "I know this has to be strange for you. I was just a little boy when I last saw you and I didn't mean for any of this to happen, but I guess you can't pick how you feel about people. Well, I guess you can, but this one I have no choice over."

Mr. Cuthbert sat back in his chair crossing his legs. "Evan, it took a lot of courage for you to come here today. And not just because you haven't seen me in decades or because your father and I had a battle over business, but because your father would lose his mind if he knew where you were right now. That alone shows me that you must have some really strong feelings for my daughter. I wish I could say that she felt the same, but she doesn't talk to me about those kinds of things."

I was holding my breath at that point. Mia's father was my last actual option. I knew that sitting on her front stoop was not going to help anything. If her father couldn't make her listen to me, no one ever would be able to. "Does that mean you'll help me?"

Mr. Cuthbert rubbed his chin breathing deeply through his nose. "I'll help you. It's obvious that you care about my daughter deeply. I won't tell her how to feel though, that's up to her. But I will help you get her into position that will force her to confront the situation. In all honesty, tell her exactly what you told me. Tell her what happened, tell her how you feel, and then step back and let the chips fall where they may. My daughter is a beautiful person on the inside, but she also shuts down pretty hard when she gets hurt. I can only assume that's the reason why she's not currently allowing you to talk to her. Life is too short for me to continue to take history out on our future. I'll make a couple phone calls."

I watched as he left the room, mentally fist pumping the air. I didn't actually think it would work. Since it had, I was now facing the final stages of trying to get Mia back. If she didn't listen to me this time, I was going to have to find some sort of way to let her go.

MIA

“Thanks guys. Have a great weekend,” I said as I waved to my coworkers. I really was starting to enjoy having weekends off.

Up until that point, I was so used to either working on projects that I wanted to get ahead on or studying for upcoming tests, I didn't even know what to do with myself with two days off. The atmosphere at work was so fluent that I was constantly meeting or exceeding production goals. There was no need to work on the weekends. Our boss truly felt that in order to be the most productive and the most creative, we needed to have a life outside of work. I couldn't believe that I actually agreed with him. I had always been the girl that thought if you weren't always working or studying you weren't doing enough. I hadn't even realized that my mental health had taken a blow.

When I got outside of my office, there was a car waiting for me. My father had texted me in the middle of the day requesting that I come over to his house after work. He wouldn't tell me why, but he said that it was something important. For anyone else, that would send me into a panic but with my father it could simply be he had nobody else to talk about his triumphs and no one to pat him on the back. Either way, I hadn't seen him in a while and I knew there was no way to get out of it.

I sat back in the town car, looking out the window as we left the city and headed out into the country. I visited my mom a lot, but I rarely went to my father's. He stayed in the country house, the one we used to go to on weekends to relax. My horses were kept there when I was a child, so I always loved to go there. After the divorce though, we moved the horses to a stable and eventually sold them when I lost interest. I realized that, yes, I loved my horses, but what I really loved about the stables was that my father would spend time with me. After he divorced my mom though, he became incredibly busy and there was no real time for it. Even when I visited him, it was always somewhere other than the country house.

I let out a small sigh as we passed by the stables on the drive up to the house. It was the only place that hadn't been taken care of on the property. Everything else was pristine, trimmed, and landscaped but the stables sat uncared for and overrun with weeds. I imagined the stables were a representation of my father's conscience. He knew they were there, but they had sat untouched for so long that it was easy just to pass by and not do the work to clean them up.

“Miss Mia,” Miss Beverly said as she opened the door to the house with a grin.

Miss Beverly had been the head housekeeper for the estate for as long as I could remember. She had basically been like a nanny to me and I loved seeing her more than anybody else. I smiled and wrapped my arms around her. “Miss Beverly, it's so good to see you. I don't think you've aged a day since I was four years old.”

She giggled and hugged me back. "It's good to see you, girl. You look fantastic too. Just leave your bags right there by the door and I'll hang your things up. I was excited when your father said you were coming to visit. I don't know what he's scheming in there, but you know your father is always up to something."

My forehead wrinkled and my eyes shifted from side to side as I walked behind her. Sure, my father was always up to something but it usually didn't have anything to do with me. We walked to the double doors that led into the living room. Miss Beverly stopped before opening them. She looked nervous, which in turn made me feel nervous. "Now, whatever you feel about this, try to keep your calm. Your father meant well. "

I lifted an eyebrow and shifted my gaze to the door. "You're starting to scare me. Let's get this over with."

She nodded and opened the door, stepping to the side and looking down. That wasn't like Miss Beverly. She always held her head high, unless she knew something happened that might bring about a not so happy reaction. Gathering my courage, I charged through the door and into the large open living room. I squinted, the sun beating down on my face and blinding me for just a moment. When my eyes adjusted to the large windows cascading the evening light into the room, my legs stopped moving and my mouth fell open.

Standing in the center of the room, with a nervous grin, was Evan. "What... What are you doing here? No. You know what? It doesn't matter. This is an ambush."

I whirled around and headed straight back for the door. My nerves were flipping and flopping all over the place. I didn't know if I was angry or just surprised, but my first reaction was to run. As I reached the doorway, my father stepped out in front of me, folding his arms across his chest. "Come on Mia, give him a chance to explain himself."

I scoffed and looked back and forth between the two of them. "Are you kidding me? You go by whatever he told you and expect me to stand here and listen to him? And all of this was because of the feud that two families decided to start when I was just a girl."

My father reached out and put his hand on my shoulder. "Mia, he told me everything. Even how he treated you, and his fears, but you have to remember he was a child of this mess as well. You don't have to give anybody a chance to explain themselves, but let me just tell you from experience, you'll go the rest of your life wondering what things could have been like if you had replaced that anger and hate for forgiveness. At least hear him out."

Gritting my teeth and letting out a long sigh I turned back to him and walked over, flopping down on the couch. My father waved his hand at us but I didn't look. "I have a plane to catch. Try to work things out. I love you Mia and I'll talk with you soon."

With that, the door shut behind me and I flinched at the sound of it. I kept my eyes focused on the floor, too afraid to look at Evan. I knew if I looked at him, all of my resolve would fail. "Well, I guess I don't really have a choice. You came to my apartment but couldn't talk to me, so here I am, trapped in my father's living room."

Evan chuckled. "You're not trapped. And dramatic is not the kind of girl that I came to know." He walked up to me and knelt down, holding my hand in his even though I tried to pull away. I still kept my eyes focused on the floor, not ready to give in to the urge to look him in the face. "Oh Mia, I'm so sorry that I hurt you. The day that you left me in California was probably one of the worst days that I've ever had. And that day seems to have stretched out into weeks of agony. I think about you constantly. I haven't spoken to my father since I returned and had a huge blow up in the office. You are right, I've lived under my father's thumb for far too long."

I shifted my eyes straight toward him with anger. “We talked about all of this. We had made a connection, something that I’ve never felt before and I let you in even though it was dangerous. And then for me to stand there in the hallway and listen to you tell your father that I was nothing more than a pawn in your game, you made me so angry.”

He nodded his head, his eyes shamed? toward my lap. “I know. I am not worthy of your forgiveness. But I’m going to ask for it anyway. It’s not to clear my conscience or seduce you back to work, it’s because in those few days together in California, coupled with meeting you in the bar that night, I fell in love with you.”

My eyes darted suddenly toward him and my face eased a bit. He just told me he loved me. I didn’t even know what to say back to him and not because I lacked emotion but because in that moment, I realized I loved him too. “You don’t treat somebody you love like that.”

He put my hand to his lips and kissed it gently. “I know that now. I let my fear take over everything. It’s not like we had the best role models for what to do when you fall in love with someone.”

I chuckled through my anger and then met his eyes with mine. I wanted to stay angry so that I could protect myself, but I was drawn to him, I felt grounded when I was with him. I felt like anything in the world could be achieved by his side. There was no stopping it, I knew that if I left there in that moment, I would regret it for the rest of my life.

With a deep sigh I put my hand on his cheek. “The truth is, I was in the same place as you. Only I didn’t have to answer to my father just yet. I’m not sure what I would’ve done in that situation. And I want to be so angry at you, but in reality... I love you too.”

A smile pulled at his lips as he raised up on his knees and immediately pressed his lips to mine. A small whimper came from my throat and I wrapped my arms around him. Kissing him felt like home, like I did when I was just a girl riding horses at this very estate as the sun went down over the horizon. I found comfort and peace in his arms, and no matter how much I wanted to fight it and be stubborn, he was exactly where I needed to be.

Standing up, he reached his hand down and helped me to my feet. No more words needed to be spoken. I glanced over toward the hallway to where my bedroom was located, separate from the rest of the house. My father had renovated it in hopes that as an adult I would come to stay with him. Until that point, I found it too difficult to be in that house, there had been too much pain. But in that moment, all the pain slid away and I felt nothing but love.

I led him back to my bedroom and pulled the curtains closed on the large French doors leading to the gardens outside. He watched me as I carefully walked toward him unbuttoning my top and letting it drop from my shoulders. Immediately his lips met my neck I let out a deep breath, running my fingers down his taut hard skin. He picked me up and threw me down on the bed hovering over me as his hands ran up my stomach and over my breasts. My head tilted back and my eyes rolled, feeling the ecstasy of the moment.

We were intertwined, moving on the same plane, his pleasure translating to me and mine to him. We undressed each other sensually, and he slowly climbed on top of me. Pointing my toes, I pulled my legs up to each side of his and gripped my thighs against his waist. His eyes were dark and needing and I kept mine locked on them. As he pressed inside of me, I lost my breath from both the pleasure and the intensity of our stare. It felt like I was locked there with him forever, but it was a good thing, a world that no one would want to leave.

He pushed deep inside of me, groaning quietly as my lips trailed over his cheek. He had wrapped me in his arms I was as close to him as he could possibly get me. Slowly he sat up, holding me behind

the back and pulling me with him until I was seated on top of him, the tips of our noses touching. We both paused a moment staring into each other's eyes and then my hips began to move, grinding down on him, pulling him as far into me as I could get. His hands gripped my ass and squeezed tightly as my fingers dug into his shoulders and whimpers of passion panted from my chest.

We moved in a rhythmic sequence, lost in our own world, pouring our love with every moment and every movement. My breath grew deeper and faster as my hips moved the same. He gripped the outside of my thighs and began to pull and push on me, mixing his motions with mine. I was full inside and ready to burst but went with our natural flow because I had no other control over anything.

As my body reached the precipice of passion, I dug my fingernails into his back and took in a deep breath. He gripped me tightly to him and pushed me down hard onto his large stiff manhood. He groaned as I exploded, still swirling my hips against him. I could feel his fingertips pushing into my skin as he too released, taking both of us spiraling into orgasm.

There were whispers of groans and moans coming from both of us but our eyes stayed locked on each other, our mouths hanging slightly open as our lips skimmed each other's lips. As the pleasure came to a pulsing end, he slid his hands up the back of my neck and stared at me, his eyes now softened and meaningful.

"Mia, I promise I'll never hurt you again," he whispered to me. "I love you more than anything else in the world."

I put one hand on his, my breath catching in my throat and my eyes watering. "I love you too Evan Lagrange and I'm pretty sure that's never going to change."

EPILOGUE: MIA

The crowd laughed and Evan rolled his eyes watching Conner stand at the front of the ballroom, dressed in his tuxedo, holding a flute of champagne in his right hand. “So, as you can see, from the very vivid pictures to my left, Evan has been a bit of a thrill seeker since he was... pretty much since he came out of the womb.”

Conner flipped to the next picture on the slideshow showing Evan, no more than five years old, standing completely naked, doing some sort of dance on a large stage at his father’s house. Evan shook his head, laughing along with everyone else. Connor flipped the screen again. It was a close-up of Evan’s parents’ faces in the background. “As you can see, his mother enjoyed his sense of humor, while I’m pretty sure right here is where his father’s soul crumpled up inside of him.”

Everyone laughed again and Evan’s father lifted his champagne flute and shrugged his shoulders. Conner clicked the button again and a picture of Evan and I from the trip we took to the mountains not long after that fateful day I was trapped in my father’s house came up on the screen. Everyone let out a collective sigh and Evan gripped my hand tightly in his lap.

Conner smiled and lifted his glass. “I have to be honest, I never thought there would be a day that Evan met a woman that out-shadowed him. We are more than grateful to you for taking this man off our hands. The two of you make a couple that everyone else hopes they can be. Congratulations on your marriage, I love you both, and I wish you the best in everything that you do together.”

“Salute,” the crowd said in unison, lifting their glasses.

We took a sip of our champagne and Evan kissed me on the cheek, beaming at me from ear to ear. Lily stepped up to the front dressed in the simple, long, satin bridesmaid’s gown that she had picked out when heading up the maid of honor duties for the wedding. I had to admit, it was absolutely gorgeous, but not nearly as gorgeous as the dress that she designed for me and I had custom-made. It was strapless and hugged tightly to my curves until it reached right below my hips and then dropped straight down to the floor. The train had been bunched up and pinned to the back but during the ceremony dragged three feet behind me. It was a crisp white satin material with a shimmering lace overlay, and small sparkling crystals covered the buttons up the back. On my feet, I wore those same neon pink heels that I had worn in California to give myself, what Lily called, “a little bit of swag.”

Lily lifted her glass to the crowd. “While I know you’re all wishing that I would click this little button and embarrassing pictures of my best friend would pop up on the screen, any of you that know her know that those pictures don’t exist. Even as a child she was meticulous and calm. And to be completely honest, anything that could be used against her was destroyed a long time ago. That’s what best friends are for.”

A chuckle moved over the crowd. Lily's eyes glimmered as she stared over at us with a smile on her face. "Mia you have been the most loyal friend to me. You have watched me fumble my way through life, making a complete mess, and leaving a disaster in my wake since we were young faced freshman in college. I always thought that you would be up here before me, at least for three of my weddings before you actually took the vows..."

I laughed loudly, shaking my head. Lily shrugged. She snickered at the crowd which was giggling. "Hey I'm honest. But seriously, you had so many goals and aspirations and you've met every single one of them. But this was not on there. I always told you the best things in life were never the things that you planned for. And while at the beginning of your relationship there were a couple times that I offered my bodyguard service to take down Evan, I'm really glad that I never had to use them because the two of you are absolutely perfect for each other. I could stand here and go on and on but I'm not really the teary-eyed kind of person. So in conclusion, Evan I want you to remember something. Mia promised me long ago, that I would always be her roommate so you better get the spare room cleaned up."

As the crowd laughed and clapped Lily held her glass up high. "To the beautiful couple, may you have a long beautiful relationship and create many, many babies that you never ask me to babysit."

"Salute," the crowd cheered.

I winked at Lily from across the room and took a sip of my champagne. The music was instrumental and low in the background and I looked out over this amazingly beautiful party that had been constructed in our honor. It was held at the country house ballroom where my father had completely renovated the place, including upgrading the stables for me and purchasing a couple of horses so that I could ride anytime I wanted to. The tables were spread out across the low-lit room, draped in white linens with large bouquets of flowers standing four feet tall in the middle of each table. The whole room was covered in candles giving it an evening saffron glow.

But I would have to say, the best part about it all was the table right in front of me. My mother and Evan's mother sat next to each other, leaning in toward each other and talking excitedly. My father and Evan's father did the same, looking as if they hadn't had a fight in their entire lives. After Evan had spoken to my father about us, and he left us to work it out, he himself made his way over to Mister Lagrange's home.

He hadn't realized until my happiness was on the line what him and Evan's father had done. So, they sat down and they worked it out. There was a lot of talking to do and a lot of whiskey to drink while they did it, but from what I was told, by the end of it, they had secured a friendship that I was pretty sure could never be broken again.

Evan squeezed my hand, bringing me out of my daze and nodded over toward our wedding planner. She tapped her wrist and pointed at the cake. The cake, a masterpiece in itself created by Miss Beverly and the chef at my father's estate. I had never seen a culinary confection as huge as this thing was. It was seven tiers of toffee red velvet cake covered in a smooth white fondant with ribbons of teal and gray candies winding down to the bottom. It had a sparkling sheen to it that looked like crystals in the candlelight.

We headed over to the cake and everybody watched with amusement as we cut it together and then struggled to avoid each other's face smashing. Luckily, Evan feared Lily's wrath if he messed up my makeup, so he very gently set a piece between my lips and dotted my nose with some of the icing. We kissed and everybody cooed as flashes from cameras flickered all around us.

The MC for the evening stood up on the stage in front of the orchestra. "One of the most interesting things that I found when planning this wedding with both families was the lengths that

Mia's father wanted to go to make this a memorable experience. This was one of the coolest."

He looked up at the ceiling as it clicked and clanked sliding back to reveal the beautiful night sky above us. There were gasps and whispers and my father sat proudly, smiling at me from across the room. The MC came back over the mic. "Now, I would like to present to you, for the first time as husband and wife, Evan and Mia Lagrange."

Everyone clapped as he took my hand and twirled me out onto the dance floor. I giggled knowing that my two left feet could possibly take me down at any moment. But there really wasn't anything to worry about, and I knew that because Evan always had me. From the moment we made things official, he never let me hit the floor, and that dance was no exception. He pulled me close and held my hand in his as the music began to play. Overhead whistles of silver shooting fireworks whizzed across the sky, leaving sparkling trails of glimmering lights above us.

Evan looked deeply in my eyes and my heart skipped a beat just like it did the first time he kissed me. "I couldn't imagine finding anyone more perfect and more in tune to me in this world. I love you Mia, and I always will. And this is just the beginning of our amazing future together."

A tear trickled down my cheek, a tear of happiness. "I couldn't agree with you more. I think we both finally got the happy ending that we deserved."

Evan shook his head whispering into my ear. "It's only the beginning."

PERFECTLY WRONG

BLURB

**Yes, I've broken the girl code.
I slept with my best friend's ex.**

He's a football star. Rich as sin.
And my sworn enemy from high school.
Bryant is perfectly wrong for me.
He has a big mouth.
And a bigger... *you know what!*
But we're college roommates now.
Oh, the hatred and those rough nights.
He spins my world around.
And I let him take control of me.
On one condition.
We remain each other's secret.
No one is supposed to find out about us.
We have too much on the line.
His career.
My friendship.
Our future.

**But every lie has a way of coming out.
So, who's gonna end up paying the price for this one?**

MIA

I was so tired I could just nap the day away, but that would be a mistake — I had so much to do. So much to pack.

Today was the day: I was finally going to Florida. Somehow, after the year of hell I'd gone through... everything ended up alright. Community college, working part-time, helping my family move back into our house after the fire, dealing with life after high school. It all worked out.

So why was I so sad? I should be excited.

Unable to help myself, I yawned. Last night I went out with Regina, one last celebration of our time together here. Even though I applied for the same school she did, I got accepted to Florida again — this time with a scholarship.

Regina took it pretty well. "Well, we all know traveling and learning to be the most kick-ass journalist ever is your destiny, Mia," she said, prodding her boyfriend to buy us a tray of shots.

"You're such a naughty girl," I teased my best friend. There was no ambiguity for me here: Regina was my best friend.

Not Samantha.

I couldn't possibly think that way, not after finding out what she did.

How could Samantha date that asshole, Bryant Howard? It didn't make sense to me. Sure, they were two kids from the same high school in Indianapolis, hundreds of miles away from their new life. But it wasn't as if Samantha had been desperate for attention there. She was *hot*. She could have been with anyone. In fact, from the phone calls we had almost every night before I found out about her and Bryant, I knew that she did hook up with lots of different guys.

It blew my mind, and it broke my heart.

Whatever.

"Here's to kicking ass," I said, raising a tequila shot. Regina and I downed ours and went straight to the dance floor.

Excitement kept me from being hungover, but not even adrenaline could stop me from being *tired*. I felt exhausted from all the worrying and fussing over everything. I was worse than my mom when it came to this.

My paranoia was that I somehow forgot something important I needed to pack. Or that I was taking the wrong sort of wardrobe.

My brother even stood at the doorway, laughing as I unpacked and repacked for probably the third time today. "Mia, what's gotten into you? If you forget something, I'll just send it to you."

"What if I need it right now?"

“Then you can pack again one more time, that’s it.”

For all of his fourteen years of age, Eugene was quite the old soul. I loved him, and I knew I was going to miss him. He was about to walk away when I jumped off my bed and rushed to tackle him with a hug.

“Hey! Get off! Jesus, Mia!” Eugene said, trying to fling me off him, but even I could tell he was grinning.

I tickled my little brother. “I’m gonna miss you. Can you skip baseball and come with me to the airport?”

“Uh, no, baseball’s way more important,” he joked. “Fine. Only because I wouldn’t want Mom to start lecturing you about... I don’t know. Staying *safe*.”

We both cringed. I didn’t need to confide in my kid brother about my sex life, but I wasn’t really planning on going to college to get laid. Miraculously, I had lasted through high school as a virgin, and I didn’t mind it at all. I had better things to focus on than horny boys trying to get in my pants.

Then again, it didn’t help that horny boys didn’t try to get in my pants because Bryant Howard kept putting me down as a mega-nerd.

“Check out the nerd’s new glasses,” I remembered one particularly painful moment of bullying. I had spent a whole day shopping for the right pair of frames, something that would be a chic step up from my admittedly geeky pair from before. Samantha and Regina had pooled a bunch of money together so I could get these fancy Japanese designer frames from Masunaga. We traveled to Chicago because that was the closest city that sold something as fancy as that... and when I got back to school, any good feeling I had about my new glasses were ruined the moment Bryant opened his cruel mouth.

At least with these glasses I can see him coming at me from a mile away, I thought to myself. I should’ve seen Samantha’s betrayal first, though.

I sighed. Anxiety and idleness meant I ended up repacking all over again. I just wanted to be horizontal, lying in bed until it was time to drive to the airport, but the flight was hours away. My open bags covered my bed, anyway, and I couldn’t be bothered to push them away and make space for my small frame to lie down.

“Whatever!” I exclaimed to my ceiling.

Was I really feeling this way about my future college life just because I found out that Samantha was dating Bryant? That sucked, yes, but surely after all we had gone through, I could forgive Sam, right? Or at least be the best possible friend while she... did *whatever* with Bryant?

Now that I thought about it, there was no reason I couldn’t just find a new set of friends, anyway. After all, my journalism department wasn’t even in the same faculty as Sam’s music production course. I knew I wanted to major as soon as I could, and my planned path involved making it clear to everyone that I was serious about my future in journalism.

In the weeks since I had been accepted to Florida, I read extensively about the various newspapers and media outlets interested in taking on freelancers. I reached out to editors and producers, introduced myself, offered to take on internships if the opportunity came up. I even got replies.

I was going to keep myself busy.

There was no way I could even find the time, let alone the energy, to be bothered by some jerk who used to say nasty things about me. Nerd with glasses — so what? I even wore contact lenses now, sometimes.

Regina was the one who recommended I try them. “Mia, you have gorgeous eyes. They’re, like, so blue. Ocean blue. The kind broody singer-songwriters make indie folk rock songs about.”

My parents exhaled in relief when my acceptance letter arrived, reading that this time I did get a scholarship. Florida was my main choice this time around, and I tailored my essay accordingly. I was so grateful that at least I could get a full-ride to a college I cared about.

Of course, I was actually going to have to study — my scholarship depended on me performing every semester, keeping a good GPA and showing active initiative with extracurricular activities too.

Part of this made me start to think about Bryant again. The wannabe macho man that was the high school bully and star quarterback also had a scholarship, which was probably the only thing in common between us. But his was an athletic scholarship, and it didn't strike me as fair that he could just laze around and not even focus on his studies so long as he showed academic potential.

I felt like my year made me *earn* the spot I had in that college. As for him, a quick browse on his Instagram shortly after I found out about Sam dating him told me he wasn't even a starter for the Florida University Renegades.

So why was he even there?

"Mia, do you need any help?"

I looked up, expecting my brother again, but it was my mom instead. She was still wearing her gardening gloves. Ever since we'd moved back in, she had poured a lot of her spare time into reviving our formerly lush garden, most of which had been ruined by the fire.

I still had nightmares when I thought about the fire. My dreams literally burned down that night.

"Sure, mom," I smiled, tilting my head to gesture that she could come in.

Mom took her gloves off and put them down on my study desk. "Eugene just complained that you were unpacking all over again."

"He's such a busybody. How's he going to handle himself when his big sister's away?" I joked back. "Anyway, I have all these bags, I just want to be sure one last time that I have everything."

"Take a picture or something, Mia! Don't be silly."

"Okay, okay, thanks, Mom."

She got on her knees and started taking some of my clothes, rolling them far more efficiently than I did. My mom was a queen when it came to making efficient use of space. I never knew how she did it — growing up, our family vacations felt like incredible feats of wardrobe shrinking.

"Dad's going to be home soon. I figure rather than go to the airport so quickly, you could just relax and calm down for a couple of hours, then we could have lunch before your flight?" she offered. "Remember our little family ritual during summer breaks?"

"Everyone buys Chicken McNuggets combos and we pool all the nuggets and fries together and eat them all," I grinned. "Okay. That sounds nice."

"Family rituals matter. Just because you're all the way in Florida doesn't mean we're going to forget you. So I hope this means you're not going to forget us either," Mom said.

I could tell this was a speech she had rehearsed, and I knew the best thing would be to not get defensive, to just let her make her point. Moms can be moms.

"I hear you," I said, nodding, letting her continue.

"You know, your father and I are really proud of you, Mia. You took the bad news from last year really well, and even though I could tell the old Mia would have really hated going to community college when you were definitely smart enough to go anywhere you wanted, I'm proud to say my daughter adapted to the circumstances and just... did a really great job."

I smiled. "Thanks, Mom."

"This school is going to be really good for you. And you'll be reunited with Sam, are you excited?"

On one level, I *was* excited, though mostly I was dreading it. But I wasn't going to tell my mom that. I hadn't told her that Sam was dating Bryant. Mom had had to deal with so much of the messy drama that came from being bullied by that jerk all throughout my school life, and I loved that she had also grown to hate him by proxy.

There were times in high school when she even made the trek over to the Howard home, complaining about something Bryant had done to make me cry when I got home from school.

Nobody had my back the way Mom did. I knew I could always trust her to support me.

"Hey, Mom, thanks for always being here for me," I told her, reaching for her hand and squeezing it. I got off the bed and joined her on the carpet, rolling dresses, skirts and underwear into my luggage.

"I'll always be here for you," my mother replied.

"So... do you mind if I put this YouTube channel on while we pack? It's like this gossip news vlog about life at Florida. It's kinda cool, but really bitchy and mean."

"Sounds like *Mean Girls*," Mom mused. "Sure, put it on."

"Meaner than *Mean Girls*, I'd say."

My laptop was on standby so I just tapped on the keyboard, resuming the screen. I had already been watching one of these episodes to begin with.

Sam had mentioned something about it when she first arrived at college, but I didn't really register its existence until after I was accepted. Now it was super important for me to get a grasp of how the dynamics were over there — a good journalist always has to be informed, after all.

The host, Fiona Davis, was this redhead girl who looked exactly like the stereotypical goth girl from a TV sitcom about college. Somehow I had been expecting it would be a preppy, entitled blonde instead, but Fiona could out-mean and out-gossip any preppy blonde.

"Exposed!" she began at the start of an episode, before the channel's logo had even appeared. "Looks like a few of the hunks from our beloved Renegades celebrated their dominant victory over Auburn University with a wild party — and main star Mike Liotta's in trouble. The senior reportedly took a little too much ecstasy at Jady Gomez's party and walked into oncoming traffic... naked! Here are the sordid photos. Censored... but you know where to find the real thing if you just look!"

Mom and I watched in awe as a huge, hulking guy with a shaved head, easily six-foot-six or something, stood naked while people snapped photos all around him. His crotch was pixelated, of course.

"Don't worry, Mom, you don't need to give me the Don't Do Drugs talk. I mean, have you even looked at me?" I said.

"I bet Mike Liotta's parents thought he was a responsible kid, so who knows..." Mom countered with a frown.

The photos flashed through. In one shot, Mike actually looked like he was trying to tackle a guy on a scooter. I giggled.

The screen dissolved back to Fiona. "The good news is this means second-choice quarterback Bryant Howard might cement his place in the team, after his first start this season saw him boss the outfield completely. He made the winning touchdown and led sixteen plays, all of which made sure we all partied hard that night. Although in Mike's case... a little too hard."

I cringed. The video cut to a video of the whole team lifting Bryant over their shoulders, cheering his name on. He grinned and looked exactly like a hero.

"Douche," my mother said bitterly.

Now my cringing face changed into pure delight. "You're my fave, Mom."

“Well, you were never wrong about him. He’s a bully, and a jerk. Douche might have been too harsh. I guess I’m sorry.”

I shook my head fiercely. “Don’t be, Mom. Let us both say it. Three — two — one...”

“Douche!” We echoed.

Fiona was talking about how Bryant was this hot dreamboat with rumors of him being rich as hell, telling girls to all line up and maybe they’d get a chance with the Renegades’ likely new starting quarterback.

“Yeah, well, I hope you’re not going to be one of those girls,” Mom said, playfully swatting at my arm. “I’d be so disappointed.”

“No way!” I laughed. “I’d literally rather die than be one of those dumb girls. Like, he’s a football player, whoop de doo, it’s no surprise he’s good at it. But does he have to be there? I mean, like, it’s a good school. They could just focus on the academic side of things. I bet he just wastes all the school’s resources.”

“He was only trouble in school, anyway. I’m willing to say he hasn’t changed a bit since then. And you know his Dad? Well, Mr. Howard’s a grade-A douche too. I never liked him, and he was always this aggressive asshole to me whenever I thought I’d have a civil parent-to-parent talk about his precious Bryant’s behavior back when, you know, you two were in school.”

“Yeah, I don’t know much about Mr. Howard, but I’ve heard some stories.”

“No wonder they got divorced. At least the mother’s nice. Not someone you really ever get close to, she wasn’t anyone’s friend that I could recall, but she knew some manners, at least. Howard Senior was just a dick.”

“Mom, I don’t know where you got all these sassy insults, but I’m loving it right now,” I said. I hugged my mother again. “Are you trying to be cool just because I’m leaving today?”

“God, no,” she laughed. “I’m just letting out some steam. And plants don’t really like to be called names. They wilt, they don’t smile the way you do.”

Now that I thought about it, I was mildly surprised to discover my mother knew so much about the Howard family, but it made sense — with Bryant’s dad being a rich businessman, and Ward Beer being such a major employer both in Indianapolis and in New York, people were bound to hear all sorts of unsavory stories about a guy with that sort of reputation.

I thought back to the time he and I fought on college acceptance letter day. In hindsight, I felt like making cheap shots about his family was mean, and in another parallel universe I might have even apologized. But in the end, I just shrugged. Sometimes people just aren’t worth that much thought.

Mom was great. Soon my bags were brought down. I just stayed in bed and texted Regina, and before I knew it I was asleep. By the time it was time for us to leave for the airport, I wasn’t worried about anything anymore.

We even had our little fast food ritual, turning into the closest outlet before the airport. “So. We’ve got forty-eight nuggets between us. Who wants to bet the one who eats the most is Dad?” I said, leaning over the table.

“No way,” Dad said, laughing. “Have you seen Eugene’s appetite? Kid’s going to have a growth spurt any day now.”

It was true. Gene had always been a skinny little kid, but in the last year he was changing right in front of my eyes.

There was a lot left unsaid between the two of us. For one, I had always suspected he was gay, but I’d recently encountered a few things on my computer when I loaned it to him — and we had a little heart-to-heart about his confusion over his sexuality.

But we were due a bigger talk about this, because I wanted my brother to know that he could always confide in me, that there was nothing that would break the bond between siblings.

At the airport, hugging everyone, I promised him we'd have that talk, whispering that I loved him and I'd miss him the most just as Dad helped push my bags towards security.

"Love you all!" I said, turning back and waving to my family just as I went over to begin my new life in college.

BRYANT

“Yo, what the hell — this is *not* okay,” I said, watching in fury as Fiona Davis spent a whole episode talking shit about me and my life.

I was angry. Just a couple of days after I had practically single-handedly won a big game for the football team, becoming the college man of the hour, Fiona was already taking me down.

The episode title: *Revealed! The Secret Life of Bryant Howard, Billionaire's Baby Boy*.

The content of the video attacked me as much as the video title and thumbnail (my head was photoshopped on top of a golden statue, fucking great), as she suggested that it was extremely unfair to everyone else that I was this rich boy getting an academic scholarship while everyone else had to bust their asses to pay their way through school.

She didn't know me, yet she made these attacks. I never understood why I'd had to deal with bullshit like this all my life.

“You know, the revolution's coming soon,” Fiona said, her eyes flashing maliciously. “If you're smart, you're going to want to rush straight for Bryant Howard's dorm when the revolution comes. We'll be able to shake him down for all the money he has. And if you can't get money, so what? His dad owns Ward Beer, that's right, the beers you naughty boys and girls have been downing in between drunken rounds of beer pong. Who knows how many kegs we could hold him ransom for?”

I slammed the laptop shut. “Stupid bitch!” I said.

Footsteps rushed down the stairs. I didn't even live in a dorm — my bros and I had a nice little house to ourselves not far from campus. I supposed, yes, this would only make the whole ‘Bryant's a rich boy’ narrative even stronger, but I was glad that Fiona hadn't gotten to that.

It was true that Dad paid for the rental. But it wasn't a party house. It was just that me and some of my buds from the football team needed a place to crash and applying for student housing was a real pain in the dick sometimes.

My closest buddy Marvin violently swung my bedroom door open. “For God's sake, Bryant, that's my laptop you just slammed down. I knew you would do that. Stop watching those stupid videos. And don't let Fiona get inside your head.”

“Easy for you to say,” I told him. “You're not in the firing line here. I don't get it. One minute I'm the hero, next I'm just a target.”

“Well, who told you to be a billionaire's son?” Marvin grinned. “And who told you to be so goddamn good at football?”

I matched his grin. Marvin gave me a lot of shit, but I knew he had my back. We had bonded pretty much from day one here at college, and it felt like fate that we were both so into football. Now he

was the starting defensive lineman, the biggest, heaviest, toughest bad boy on our team. I was awkwardly making my way onto the starting lineup, especially since Mike Liotta failed in his appeal against the disciplinary action that just dog-piled him after that unfortunate druggie streaking he did.

“Yo, stop smashing my laptop. Can’t you just, like, make your dad buy you one specifically to toss around? You know he’s got the money.”

I winced. Even though I knew Marvin had his heart in the right place, his Daddy’s boy comments sometimes came off really abrasive to me.

But that was the bro atmosphere we had going on in this house. Just because I paid for everyone’s rent — well, my father did — didn’t mean they weren’t going to give me shit. If anything, it made them more likely to do that, constantly ragging on me and bossing me around.

“Don’t think you’re the star here,” Tyrone Turner, one of our other roommates, said. He was a junior, and he had seniority in the Renegades compared to Marvin and me.

My phone was ringing, but I ignored it. I didn’t even need to know who was calling. Samantha, I could just tell.

She was starting to get on my nerves — she was hot, sure, and I really liked that we understood each other a lot better because we both came from the same part of the world compared to all these other kids, but like, I wished she would just leave me alone sometimes.

“Girl needs to chill out,” Marvin nodded, noticing the way I ignored the phone on my bed. “Hey, how about this? Since you slammed my laptop, I can toss your phone out a window.”

“Fuck off, Marvin,” I laughed. “You’re such a tough guy, huh? How’s that, when you’ve got the nerdiest name ever?”

My buddy laughed. Nobody would sass someone his size. He was bigger than even I was, and that was saying something. I felt like he was Andre the Giant reborn or something. How did someone get so huge? He was even bigger than Liotta, the poor guy. Should have known better than to mess with Ecstasy.

“What are you gonna do about that girl, bro?” Marvin said, coming into my room to take his laptop. “And please tell me you didn’t use my laptop for porn.”

“I don’t need porn,” I laughed at him. “I’m not like you. I get laid all the time, okay.”

“Getting laid so much that you’re ignoring her calls?”

“Shut up, Marvin,” I rolled my eyes. “And no, I don’t use your laptop for porn. I’m a DVD man.”

“Liar,” he laughed. “Question still stands.”

“I don’t know, bro. I’m going to have to break up with her or something. It’s awkward as fuck. Lots of girls are into me, but I’m with Sam, right? And instead of being chill about it, she’s become clingy as fuck. I’m getting really annoyed.”

“Wow, you’re going to break up with someone for *liking* you? Ruthless.”

I shrugged. “Coach Frost is going to kill me if I let some personal bullshit get in the way of being the best quarterback this team’s ever seen. This is just me taking his advice.”

“Yeah, about that,” Marvin nodded. “Coach Frost told me to tell you that I think he’s looking for you. Wants to have a word. No idea what it’s about.”

“I know what it’s about,” I sighed, slamming my fists on my bed. “That stupid Fiona Davis video.”

“Chill out, bro.”

“Like I said, easy for you to say when you’re not the one being targeted just because your deadbeat dad that you’re trying to distance yourself from is a billionaire. It’s not even like I spend much of his money,” I said.

“Well, you still spend some of it. And when he offers, you don’t turn it down,” Marvin pointed out.

I dropped back, pressing my back into my mattress. I thought about this hot physiotherapy student who slipped me her number the other night. I probably shouldn’t have thrown it away, but Sam was watching.

Not that I was thinking about messing around — not until I actually got out of this messy as fuck relationship I had going on with her.

“Coach Frost is going to ride my ass and you’re just here telling me I deserve it because I let my dad pay for the house you live in rent-free. Great, Marvin. You’re a true friend.”

The defensive lineman grinned. “What, you want me to show you some gratitude? Maybe cook you breakfast in bed? You want pancakes? Bacon? A *blowjob*?”

I reached for a pillow behind me and threw it at him, impressing even myself with the force in which I shot it. He didn’t react fast enough, and the pillow — the firmest one of the four I kept in bed — knocked him back a couple of steps.

“Jesus, Bryant, that hurt!” he said, flinging the pillow back at me. It missed, bouncing impotently back at his feet. “You’re a dick, bro.”

“I’ll have the pancakes and the bacon,” I chuckled. “Since you’re offering.”

“Fuck you, Howard,” he said, shaking his head with a smile. “Don’t know how anyone could be your friend if not for you having all that money. Maybe Fiona was right. We should redistribute all that wealth, huh? Get me a lifetime’s supply of Ward Special IPA.”

He walked off, leaving me alone in my room. At least interacting with my teammate left me in higher spirits than before. I could forget about Fiona, but I was tempted to show up to one of her tapings and just tell her to stop being such a bitch.

Of course, I knew how loaded that word was. Florida had a pretty activist student population. I knew that I couldn’t just say that out loud and not get in trouble. Hell, even Coach Frost would give me a hard time. But she deserved it.

My family was nobody else’s business. I was right to be defensive about this. I had seen the damage the divorce had done to my family, when my mom got out of the marriage with hardly any of the marital assets, thanks to Dad sending his team of lawyers out to harass her.

The way I saw it, using his money was an act of justice. Better him spending it on me than on his glamorous second family.

I had to protect my reputation now. The honest truth was, and even I could admit it, I was struggling here at college. It was hard juggling classes and football, even with the sort of free reign a guy like me with clear NFL potential had. I was missing assignments, I was barely focusing in most classes, and Coach Frost even doubted whether I was best used as a quarterback, suggesting he might shift me to a different position, just because I hadn’t dazzled him.

The big game against Auburn last week should have dispelled all those concerns. First of all, Coach Frost should’ve had to eat his hat. I was the best quarterback he had, way better than Mike Liotta, and now that Liotta was out, I couldn’t see what the coach had against me that would have him freeze me out of the team.

It was a different standard, of course. College football was way tougher than even the state championship I clinched for Broad Ripple back in high school. I was the best player by far there, single-handedly changing the fate of games just through my raw potential.

Meanwhile, the Renegades were so packed with talent I’d be surprised if I was even in the top five most talented players.

I missed high school. I missed how clear everything was, how I knew my place in the world. I was the star football player. I was the alpha dog. That didn't mean there wasn't competition, or that I couldn't handle it — It just meant that there was no room for doubt.

I couldn't afford to be alone with my thoughts anymore. Like I said, there was no room for doubt. I knew all about my talent, and I had worked my ass off to get to this level. Now that the starting spot was mine, I wasn't going to let some stupid video or some bullshit drama drag me down.

Coach Frost wasn't going to meet some meek version of me. He was going to meet confident and ready Bryant, me at my very best. If he thought I was rattled by any of that nonsense, he was wrong.

I walked downstairs, stretching my arms above my head as I did. Marvin sat on the couch, texting some girl he was trying to hook up with, no doubt. I came behind him and patted the back of his head. "Any luck?"

"I'm trying, I'm trying."

"You know what, I was just thinking, I miss being in high school," I confessed to him.

"Yeah, no kidding," Marvin said, tilting his head and grinning at me. "You're a man child, Howard."

"Shut up, dude," I said, my hands resting on his shoulders as I began to forcefully massage him. "Give me a break. Things were way easier back then."

"Yeah?"

"At this point, any memory of high school might make me happy. I'm sick of being unhappy all the damn time."

I could see Marvin was readying some jerk-off retort to give me a hard time.

"Yo," he said, taking his time, savoring every word. "You and Samantha were in high school together. That's a high school memory you can have."

I made a face, sighing. "You're a dick, dude. You know what? Whatever. She doesn't count."

MIA

The car finally stopped at the building that would be my home for at least this school year, and potentially much longer than that. I finally turned around to see Samantha, sitting in the driver's seat next to me.

"Thanks, Sam," I smiled.

The airport pickup had been so rushed — Sam had picked me up with her friend Tiffany, but because I was just one of what felt like thousands of new students showing up to start their new lives, we couldn't get parking. Which meant that I had to somehow navigate around the crazy mess that was Miami's airport.

They'd been waiting for me impatiently by the time I found myself at the exit gate at the domestic terminal, surrounded by plenty of other confused freshmen.

"So! We're here, babe," Sam said, matching my big smile. Taking our seatbelts off at the same time, we both leaned over to hug.

It felt good seeing her, even if Sam did look like she had changed. I couldn't figure it out, there was just something different about her now.

"Glad you took this flight, not the later one," her husky-voiced friend said. Tiffany Jobson was a petite black girl, the kind of girl who probably side-eyed everything anyone ever said. Probably the best sort of girl to have around you on a night out. "Traffic gets so crazy, girl."

"Tell me about it," Sam laughed.

There was a pause where we didn't say anything, didn't do anything. I let it pass before I motioned to exit the car. "Lend a hand with my bags?"

"Of course, babe," my best friend — former best friend? — quickly exclaimed, practically jumping out and rushing to the backseat, where some of my bags that couldn't fit in the trunk had to share space with Tiffany.

"When did you get a car, anyway?" I asked. "It's nice."

For a car, this was a pretty ordinary blue Mazda, nothing flashy, functional. The exact kind of car you might want to have. Sam had a car back home, but as far as I knew she hadn't sold it.

My twinsie winced, bracing herself for a bad reaction from me. "My boyfriend bought it for me."

"Your boyfriend... *Bryant*."

She let his name, which I said with *so* much disdain, hang in the air for a second.

Meanwhile, Tiffany got the hint. She went for my bags, giving us space.

"How is he, by the way?" I asked, trying to sound more civil. It didn't really work. I didn't have anything but negativity filled in my heart for the guy.

“He’s... okay. I don’t know if you keep up with life here, but he’s finally starting to make it big with his whole sports thing. Tiff and I were at the last game, he started and did well.”

Sam was watching me carefully. I kept a polite smile up, trying to compose my exact words.

My hesitation was enough for her to sigh. “You know, I was sure you were going to be disappointed. That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“Well, we haven’t really had a chance to talk about it, have we? It’s like you started freezing me out of your life after you made that big Insta announcement. Cute couple photo of you two.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “Babe, do we have to do this here? Like, I’m seriously excited you’re finally here, I’d hate for us to have to fight on your first day at college.”

“I’d hate that too,” I said coolly. “This isn’t going to be the last time we have this talk, though. Just warning you.”

“I get it,” Sam conceded, looking sad that we were starting out like this. We moved away from the car, relieving Tiffany of some of the bags.

“It’s chill,” Tiffany laughed. “I do a lot of weight training. Gotta build that strength, you know?”

“Damn, is that what I’m going to have to do to be a popular girl now? Go to the gym five times a week as well?” I cracked a joke. I glanced over at Samantha, hoping she wouldn’t take that as an attack. I knew that she loved working out the way I loved books and studying.

The dark look on my reunited best friend’s face told me everything I needed to know.

I mouthed an apology. She relaxed a little.

Then I winked at her. “Don’t forget your boyfriend’s an asshole.”

“Hey...” Sam said, and I could tell from the years and years we had spent together that we were about to get into a real big fight.

You know, the way best friends fought. The way two people who spent so much time together that they became sisters for life, did.

Part of me wanted the fight. At least Bryant was good for that. When we were in school, I could channel all my stubbornness to standing up for myself against that jerk. In the year since Sam left, a lot of unresolved resentment in our friendship bubbled... and if we weren’t going to get that out of the way now, I worried that it was going to come up at some other bad time.

Tiffany played mediator again. “Let’s all play nice for the rest of the day, okay? There’s a party tonight, everyone’s going to be there. Start things on the right foot.”

“I can do that,” I exhaled, hoping to calm myself down.

Sam led the way into the dorm building, a beautiful building with a fancy heritage facade that looked straight out of an ‘80s cop movie set in Miami Beach.

“Whoa, pretty,” I said, looking around. I was expecting student housing to be more... functional.

That was to say, barebones.

But no, the Warren Building that would be my dorm looked like a seriously impressive place. The interiors were done up beautifully, showing a mix of modern and more classical design. It didn’t seem fancy or *expensive*, but coming from a city like Indianapolis where architecture was a lot more restrained, the Art Deco elements of my new home really impressed me.

Sam and Tiffany helped me with the paperwork, sorting everything out. After all, being a year ahead of me meant that they knew the place far better than all the other confused freshmen here. I had hoped I could transfer my credits from community college, but that wasn’t a sure thing yet, and the best I might expect was that I could breeze through my first year with a good number of basic subjects taken care of.

There was no point worrying about that at the moment.

It did feel funny to see Sam as a big sister here, though. Everywhere we went around the dorm building made it clear just how popular she was. People would say hi and rush over to hug her, asking her about her last break.

If I was a nerd in high school, Sam was just... someone ordinary. She was in with most of the cliques, had no scandals that left her bullied, got along well with everyone generally. She wasn't *popular*, but I got the sense that she was, here.

Especially with Tiffany around — I really felt like someone as chic as Tiffany Jobson wouldn't just hang around anybody unless she thought they were cool.

My dorm room was cozy. Good lighting, decent space... I was lucky enough that coming in as a scholarship holder, I was on the priority list for a single occupancy dorm, and when I got it, it meant that I had a smaller room overall but at least I didn't have to share it with other people. I already had plans to make my room feel like a real home.

"Leave all the unpacking for tomorrow," Sam said, sitting on my bed. Tiffany had disappeared to get some clothes from her own place. "Tonight, you dress up real pretty, we're going to introduce you to everyone who matters, and this is going to be, like, your debut appearance to the student population of Florida University."

"I'm not going to be the only new student there, surely," I pointed out.

"Probably not, no, but still — you know someone, you're not like one of those freshmen who show up and don't know anyone, desperate for attention, you know?"

"Okay, okay, help me pick out something cute?"

We grinned at each other, knowing that this was a way we could bond all over again. This was special: we had done this a billion times before back home, getting ready for a party, picking out what to wear, prepared to take over the world together.

We were sisters, after all, remember?

I had to remind myself that. Sam was my best friend for a reason. Nobody knew me better than she did, nobody could get in sync with my head and heart the way Sam did.

Regina was a great friend who had been there for me when I needed her the most, but we had never connected that way — it always felt like we were friends brought together by circumstance and convenience.

Whereas for Samantha, everyone knew we were friends because we were meant to be friends. There was nobody who knew me better... and I hoped that even with the year that had passed, she felt that way about me, too.

Maybe I could find it in me to forgive her for dating Bryant.

Or at least I could just forget about it.

An hour later, we finally picked out the right outfit. I was going to wear a shiny gold lamé blouse that I had once bought for a disco-themed Halloween party, pairing it with black leggings. Sam liked it. "I've got something that can match with this. If you wanna do that thing we used to do, that is..."

"Twinning with you is mandatory," I told her, reaching out to hug Sam now that my mood was better. "It's unforgivable that you would consider not twinning with me."

"But I've got heels and you're still sticking to sneakers. I'm going to be like four inches taller than you, babe," Sam pointed out. "I've got to take you shopping or something. You look like you've worn these Converse to hell and back."

"Hey, they're not dirty! They can just tell a good story," I grinned. I glanced over at those white mid-top sneakers. Sam was right: they could use a seriously good scrub, but they were still the best pair of footwear I had for a party like this.

My flats just didn't match, and I had these wedges that I thought I liked and would elevate my height a couple of inches, but they were a little too summery for my liking.

"I'll wear the Converse's," I told Sam.

"Fine, fine," she said. "Hey — there are going to be a few drinks. Probably a lot of drinks. I'm not going to drive, if it's all the same with you. Have enough cash to pitch in for a cab with me and Tiff?"

As if on cue, Tiffany showed up, wearing a black cocktail dress that made her look *stunning*. Seriously. She looked like she was a full-time Instagram model.

"Fine, that works for me," I said, shrugging. I wasn't sure if I was going to drink that much tonight, not necessarily feeling the need for alcohol here, but I appreciated that Sam had matured a little from her high school days when she would sneakily drink tons of beer and somehow still convince me she was okay to drive.

I showered and got into my dress while Sam went to get dressed in her room. After my shower when I slipped my clothes on and looked in the mirror, I thought about whether I would go for the glasses.

Yeah, I was going to keep them on. They were me, like it or not, and if I was going to bump into Bryant Howard, I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of thinking that I was trying to reinvent myself as someone other than a "nerd with glasses."

"Cab's waiting!" Tiffany and Sam called out while I was still making faces in the mirror, deciding to wear glasses instead of contacts.

"Okay! Coming!"

It was a short drive. Less than fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the house.

Bryant "Billionaire's Son" Howard lived here alright. It was *huge*.

BRYANT

The night had barely begun when I started smelling weed *everywhere* in my damn house. I grinned, looking around. What was the point of having high ceilings and big, classy French windows if they couldn't help ventilate your place when you had a big party?

Marvin and Russel, another of our roommate-teammate hybrids, stood with me as people filed into the house. I had made it a point to make sure there was every brand of beer here *except* Ward, just to stick it to my dad. I held a Heineken while Marvin stuck to a flask he filled up with a genuinely disgusting smelling liquor.

"What do you even have in there?" I groaned.

"Like six different things. One of them is herbal or something. I'm not sure. Supposed to be a legal performance-enhancing thing. Since, you know, we have to stay away from the good stuff," Marvin said. "Hey, isn't that your girlfriend?"

We were at the balcony of the upper floor, looking down to the atrium, or in less fancy terms, the huge living room where the main entrance was. There were already over a hundred people both inside and outside the house. Marvin would have had to have seriously sharp eyes to spot Samantha.

After all, she was just one blonde among many, many, many sun-kissed blondes on this side of Florida. I remembered thinking how *lucky* I was to score someone as hot as her, the first time we hooked up shortly after getting to college.

But now I just felt like in terms of hotness, she was pretty ordinary. Nothing too special. Any one of the girls here was at the same level as her.

At least she was fit, though. I appreciated her physique, the avid gym-goer teasing me most mornings with the yoga pants that she would slip into after a wild night with me.

I felt weird about her staying over, even months into our relationship. There was too much bro energy here in this place, and I didn't like staying the night at her dorm. So mostly, we either just fucked all night or we'd chill out and after five minutes of silence one of us would offer to get the other a cab home.

"Are we predicting another Mike Liotta scene tonight?" Marvin asked me as we both began to descend the stairs.

I was still trying to spot Sam. I think I could see her in the far end of the atrium, getting handed beers from a couple of guys manning a keg. She had two friends with her. I knew Tiffany Jobson, of course, nobody could miss her ass and her afro.

But the other girl... she wasn't familiar.

Cute gold top. Good legs. Kinda small, kinda nice shape to her. Looked like she was making an

effort not to look so mousy.

I was intrigued.

I tried to investigate this stranger clinging to Sam, watching from afar and holding back at the foot of the stairs even as Marvin jumped from group to group, asking everyone if they were having a good time.

Sam was an only child, as far as I knew. This girl looked so familiar to her she might as well be her sister — a younger sister. Sam looked taller, and she was dressed like a sluttier version of this mystery girl.

But then I saw the glasses and it all made sense.

I fucking *laughed*.

“Mia Cowell.”

Trying to remember my last encounter with her, I guessed it had to be that time at the mall when I was coming out of my favorite sporting goods store. I’d bought a new football that day. I was excited about all the future was going to bring.

Mia was a real bitch to me that day. I remembered that much. We’d gotten into our usual verbal spats, fighting because we had so much sexual tension that we couldn’t fuck out of our system because that just wouldn’t work.

I heard she was a virgin anyway. Not the promised-to-Jesus kind of virgin, but really icy, really hard to get ahold of virgin.

“Can’t fucking believe that’s Mia Cowell,” I said, shaking my head.

She hadn’t spotted me. I bet she’d *freak*. Oh, I couldn’t even remember why she hated me so much. When I was a kid I knew she hated me, I just couldn’t figure out why, couldn’t really bring myself to care — I had plenty of friends, so if a snooty geek with her books and her fairy tales didn’t want to be my friend no matter how many times I tried to be nice, that was her problem, not mine.

Fuck, how did she even end up in Florida? There was that fire that burned her house down. I felt bad when I first heard the news, a couple of hours after I stormed out the school when she ruined my day just as I was celebrating getting accepted to a school I worked my ass off to earn a spot at.

But I didn’t feel bad about her house, or the fact that she wouldn’t be able to afford going to whichever university she was accepted to.

I felt bad because I remembered smiling to myself and thinking this was some kind of karma.

That her making snooty, bitchy remarks about me and my family meant she deserved having her house burn down at that moment.

Fuck, even thinking about it now made me feel bad. I wanted to think that I was a better person now compared to back then.

Awkwardness just jolted through me, so I looked out for Marvin, hoping to stick with him for now.

This was going to be a challenge, because I knew Sam would be trying nonstop to find me. I hoped she’d get drunk enough to be able to take the bad news that was coming her way.

I had decided to break up with her tonight.

On the bright side, at least she had her so-called twin and best friend there with her to deal with the news when I dropped the bomb on her.

And it was great that Mia was here. Sam could just hate me for a while, but then chill out and let Mia do all the heavy-duty hating for the rest of her school life.

Kind of like in high school.

“Yo,” I said as I rejoined Marvin. “Help me out, be a bro.”

“You want me to shield you from a certain Samantha Rogers?”

I patted my buddy on the shoulder, clasping the back of his neck like how we celebrated after a good play on field. “You know, for a defensive lineman, you’re not so dumb after all.”

“Screw you, Howard,” Marvin laughed. “Hey, stand between me and Tom. You know Tom, right?”

Of course, I did. Tom was a journalism senior, and if the rumors were true... he was Fiona Davis’ number one friend-with-benefits.

“How’s Fiona?” I immediately went into it, knocking my beer against his.

“Oh, shit,” Tom Birchwell said, shivering. “Bryant. Look, I just help with odd jobs on her YouTube channel. I don’t really, like, write the script or anything.”

“I don’t care about any of that,” I countered. “Just asking how a friend of a friend’s doing, you know?”

“I guess Fiona’s alright. She’s not really one for parties like these.”

“Marvin would probably have a few very heated things to say to her if she did show up,” I shrugged. Tom was cowering a little, feeling like he was being cornered. Marvin looked at me with a sly grin.

He was a good friend. Dragging Tom into the circle meant I had one way to occupy myself without thinking about Sam — I could let out some steam about the whole Fiona nonsense.

“Wh-what’s that?” Tom asked.

“This idiot broke my laptop because he saw that new episode, got so mad he forgot his own strength,” Marvin complained smoothly. We had a great rhythm going on — this was kinda like back in high school when me and the other guys of Broad Ripple’s football team would corner people.

Ugh, this wasn’t me, though. I didn’t need to distract myself from my own head by going for some alpha-dog domination of some guy like skinny Tom Birchwell.

“You want to smoke some weed?” I asked Tom. “You look a bit tense.”

“Uh, no thanks. I had some edibles just now. Thanks anyway though,” he said.

I leaned away from him, giving him just enough space so he could make an excuse to go. “Yeah, you go get that beer, Tom!” I laughed.

Marvin slapped my back. “Can you imagine the dynamic of Tom and Fiona in bed? Ten bucks says they’re crazy kinky. Whips and chains. Fiona wearing a corset, eyeshadow up to the max, Tom saying, ‘yes ma’am, no ma’am’ on command.”

I made a face.

“Rather not think about that, Marvin. You’re a sick boy.”

“You’re the one who borrows my laptop to look at porn.”

“I *don’t* use it for that, bro!”

Marvin brought his voice down. “Not so loud. Shit. I think you’ve got incoming.”

I glanced to where Marvin’s gaze was fixed and saw that Samantha was pulling both her friends towards me and my buddy.

Mia was there too. She was looking away. I guessed this wasn’t a surprise to her — she looked like she was unenthusiastically bracing herself to have to say hi.

“Shit, could this night get weirder?” I muttered to myself. “Sam, baby, hey. Tiffany, hey to you too. And... holy shit, is that... Mia?”

Sam raised an eyebrow as I skipped kissing her to open my arms wide to offer Mia a hug.

Mia visibly shrank at that offer, pulling her hands close to her as if she needed to get away.

“Bryant. Nice place,” she said.

She even had those clear-framed glasses she bought during our junior year of high school, the ones I tried to compliment but ended up just making a fool of myself when she got all sensitive about it.

When she said that I had a nice place I half-expected a follow-up remark about how my daddy must have paid for it, but if she thought it, she held it back.

Whew.

“Thanks, I guess,” I just said. Sam reached forward and planted a kiss on my cheek. “Uh, so... how are you guys doing? Party’s starting to get good. Someone must be curating the music because my Bluetooth speakers are sounding *great*.”

Tiffany shrugged. “It’s a bit last season. You should get me and Sam to DJ next time. You know we’re doing music production, right?”

“Yeah, how could I ever forget?”

I glanced over at Mia. “You don’t have a beer.”

“Nobody’s offered to get me one,” she said, maintaining that icy pleasantness. I was okay with that.

“Marv — be a gentleman, okay? Get this lady a nice rosé or something. Maybe a Cosmopolitan. I’m kidding, I’m kidding. Sorry, it’s all beers here.”

“One Ward Lager then,” Mia said, her eyes glimmering as she finally dared to bring up the family connection.

“No Ward Beers here, honey,” I said, tutting. “We’ve got everything else. Get her a Miller Lite, man. Just go, Marvin!”

Marvin laughed and decided he would do me a favor this once.

“You know, not being extra sarcastic or anything, but I actually like the beers your billionaire dad’s huge capitalist empire makes,” Mia said.

I chuckled. I was clear-headed enough to know she was just playing with me, not actually being a bitch. “Cool, cool. Next party, maybe. He does a lot of business in Florida. Spring break makes him a billion bucks alone, I bet.”

Although if she countered with a joke about how I was going to just coast along on my dad’s money, I would get sensitive again...

She didn’t.

“Hey,” I said, exhaling awkwardly, just as Marvin came back with two beers, one for Mia and one for me. I had forgotten I was still holding an empty bottle. “So... I don’t know. Make your own entertainment, the house is all yours. Sam, Tiff, Mia... drugs? We’ve got weed, we’ve got coke, lots of fun stuff, anything you want. Go get high.”

Sam and Tiffany exchanged looks and grinned. “Okay...”

“Mia?” I asked.

“I don’t do that sort of thing,” she said, wincing as if she was scared to telegraph how painfully uncool she was.

I shrugged. “Me neither. It’s not so bad going without.”

Well... only because I didn’t want to risk getting drug-tested between now and the end of the season.

And Coach Frost would literally kill me, damn.

I excused myself as Mia tagged along with Sam and Tiffany, Marvin getting all desperate for female attention as he followed after them.

He stopped just long enough to whisper in my ear, asking, “Do you really want to break up with

Sam? She's looking hot, dude!"

"Yeah, well, hot doesn't make up for clingy and annoying. Didn't you see the way she, like, reached over from across the room to kiss me on the cheek? Like a fucking giraffe leaning its head down or something," I joked.

Marvin just shrugged. He wasn't exactly a big philosopher when it came to girls: if he could somehow fumble his way into bed with a girl, that was good enough. Everything after that was a bonus.

Weird that someone as talented and physically gifted as Marvin was such a horn-dog when it came to women. Well, that wasn't the weird part. Of course, you'd expect a guy as built and alpha as him to be that way. But I was constantly surprised by just how little game he had. He was always chasing girls, clueless about how to actually handle them.

I wasn't going to say I was really all that much better. Marvin may have me beat on size and sheer muscularity, but I had the good looks, the great hair, the charm. I knew women loved that, and honestly, getting female attention was something so natural to me that I never had to even really think about it.

So Marvin might be right that I was being ruthless at the idea of dumping Sam for being a little clingier than your average college girl, but that was because I could have a revolving line of girls if I so chose.

I needed space. The whole house was starting to stink of weed. Jesus Christ, it was like the DEA started burning a whole field of marijuana crops here. How the fuck did a hundred college kids smoke so much weed?

It was Russel's job to acquire extra party accessories like drugs. I didn't touch them, and I was honestly a little scared about getting into it. I knew the kind of person I was. I got hooked onto things easily. I didn't want to be an addict, fuck, I'd never want to be an addict.

I think that was the natural reaction of growing up as Sergio Howard's son, telling myself my dad was just absent because of work, not because he was actually cheating on my mom in New York as he built his company to a multi-billion-dollar enterprise for the specific purpose of screwing Mom out of his earnings... all so he could make sure it stayed with his new family.

Craving approval and attention was a drug, maybe even a crazier drug than the ones on offer here tonight.

I could at least go for a cigarette, even if it fucked with my lungs and I didn't want to have my endurance weakened with practice scheduled for the next few days.

This was just stress.

Was it? I couldn't really tell. As I stood on the lawn, leaning against the stucco wall of my party house, I wondered if Mia's sudden appearance had started to mess with my head.

Maybe it was a good thing. A way to spur on competition. No, of course she wasn't competing to take my quarterback spot, what, that skinny nerd with glasses? Come on.

It was more that even I had to confess that she had this effect on me where she drove me on to do great things, just so I could prove to the world that I wasn't the fuck-up I kept second-guessing myself as. She kept me sharp. Even when she was being a bitch to me.

Damn, I never thought I would find myself grateful to see Mia Cowell.

Speak of the Devil, there Mia was.

She was walking around the outside of the house, following the walls, brushing her fingers idly against them as she aimlessly walked. I wondered what she was thinking.

Mia used to do a lot of that in school. I made fun of her for doing that, saying she was 'straying'.

She hated it *so* much, it was so funny. I figured this was her coping mechanism, just walking and letting herself think.

“Nobody slipped a tab of acid in your mouth while you weren’t paying attention, I take it?” I said to her, walking over to her from my perch at the wall, facing all the cars parked in my spacious front yard.

“Hah,” Mia shook her head. “Friend or not, if anyone tried that on me, I’d straight-up spray them with this baby right here.”

She patted a small can of pepper spray she had on a keychain from her handbag.

“Cute bag,” I pointed out. “Looks designer.”

It sounded a little elitist of me to say that: I didn’t mean to suggest she couldn’t typically afford anything nicer than department store stuff... which, let’s be real, was also pretty true.

“I saved up for it, actually. It’s this brand I like from Sweden that does a lot of ethical sourcing,” she said. I could tell she was proud of herself for doing that, and I was glad she didn’t take my words as an attack.

“Yo, that’s cool,” I said. “Everyone’s getting high and we’re talking about ethical sourcing. I’m all about the environment, this is cool stuff.”

“You’re still the worst conversationalist I’ve ever known,” Mia said, shaking her head with a small smile. “Why aren’t you getting high like everyone else?”

I was ready to tell her the Mike Liotta story, but maybe that was too much for a newbie at Florida University. “Eh, not really my thing.”

“Because of sports?”

“Because of... personality.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Tenth grade at Kim Jonas’s party you brought some weed in a baggie and made a big fuss about how you weren’t going to share any of it because we were dumb kids who couldn’t handle it.”

I burst out laughing. “Oh my God, I was such a poser back then.”

“You were always a poser, Bryant,” Mia grinned. “It wasn’t actually drugs, was it?”

“Oh God, no. It was oregano. I read it in a book somewhere and wanted to, you know, look cool.”

“Why does a cool kid even need to pretend?” she giggled. “That’s so weird.”

“You’d never understand,” I said, shrugging.

“Because I’m not a cool kid? Because I’m a *nerd with glasses*?”

I winced. “You know, today that doesn’t exactly sound like me at my most... eloquent.”

“Big word for a dumb football-playing primate,” Mia said, her eyes twinkling as her gaze met mine.

Fuck, this felt weird.

We were actually *connecting*.

Mia and I continued to walk along the veranda, where a bunch of people were just lying down on the wooden parquet floor, relaxing as they traded joints and tabs and who knows what else.

The idea of connecting with Mia seemed a bit weird. I kind of felt guilty, and it freaked me out that I was feeling that way.

So I had to swerve into some other topic.

“You okay?” she suddenly asked.

“Eh...” I said, trying to find anything random to say. The anxiety I was feeling made me come off a little aggressive “Hey, you’re not wearing your glasses anymore. You were four-eyes just now, though.”

She pursed her lips. "I don't really need them. They're in my bag."

"Oh, shit," I said, pausing before a laugh escaped me.

"You're a dick, Bryant. Well, you haven't changed."

"Hey, hey, hey, sorry, I wasn't trying to be that way," I said. "I'm just preoccupied."

I stopped and sat down on a bench.

"Well?" Mia asked. It was weird she was prodding me this way. It wasn't like her to be this interested in my life.

"I think I've just made a big decision about my life. I'm gonna break up with Samantha. I'm kinda sick of her, damn."

I regretted the words as soon as I said them, because when I heard a gasp behind me, I realized Sam was sitting down on the veranda, joint in hand, just a few feet from us the whole time.

MIA

“Sam!” I said, chasing after my friend as she ran away from the house. I was mad, alright: I turned around to glare at Bryant.

He was a bad guy. It didn’t surprise me at all that it only took him literally a few minutes to ruin everything, now that I was here in Florida.

“Sam, please!”

As much as she seemed like a changed girl now, my best friend was very much the same Samantha I had grown up with, and I could see that as I chased after her, a scene that you could have taken from any number of previous moments of breakups and drama.

“Sam!”

“What?”

She had run back inside the house, moving around the various drunk and stoned partygoers who were here at Bryant’s place. I could see tears in her eyes. And her look of rage could have mirrored mine.

Twinsies.

We knew each other best for a reason. Sam could have fooled herself into thinking Bryant was a good guy, but with some things you just can’t beat the truth.

“Hey...” I murmured, walking up to Sam, reaching for her hands. I brought them up to her chest, squeezing her hands with my palms. I had done this so many times for her, and she had done the same for me.

Boys. Always boy trouble.

“You’re right to be angry. But don’t let some jerk ruin your night, Sam,” I said, lowering my voice, hoping to soothe her.

“Some jerk, Mia?” Sam’s voice slurred as her eyes flashed with malice, and in that moment I realized something that didn’t quite make sense to me.

She thought *I* was the bad one here.

“Not some jerk,” Sam continued. “My *boyfriend*. You’re so freaking prejudiced against him. Bryant’s my boyfriend, okay? He’s the most important person in my life. You may have thought it was you, but then you had to... you disappeared on me. All because you didn’t like that I was dating your high school enemy. You could’ve just grown up, Mia. Babe, you’re so pathetic sometimes.”

I reeled at her words, letting go of her hands and stepping back — literally flinching. “Sam...”

“You’ve had it in for him since... I don’t know, since forever. I don’t get it. He’s not a bad guy.”

“Are you really defending him after he just said he wanted to break up with you?” I said in

disbelief.

“Well, he’s just saying that because you, like, twisted him into thinking that. That’s what you always do. You can’t help but try to mess things up for Bryant.”

I laughed at just how ridiculous Sam was sounding right now. “No, Sam, I think this is for the better. Because Bryant honestly is a bad apple. Like I can tell you right now, if he wasn’t going to do this to you tonight, he was going to pick some other awful time to break your heart. Have you thought about the possibility that he’s the asshole here?”

“Whatever. You’re jealous.”

I laughed again. Not a giggle, not even a polite laugh: this was me laughing *at* her, letting my best friend know just how dismissive I was at the thought of her ridiculous claim. “I think you’ve been wanting to have a big blow-up fight with me like this for ages, Sam. I don’t get it. We’re practically sisters. Can’t you see that I’m not the bad guy here?”

“So what are you saying, then? All guys are douchebags? No. Of course you aren’t saying that. You’re just saying that Bryant is. My boyfriend.”

I made a face. “Well, for one, he’s probably going to take offense to you calling him that still. Because it’s pretty clear to me that he doesn’t think he’s your boyfriend, Sam.”

Sam’s lips quivered, like she was about to say something, but she bit it back and burst into tears instead. Her arms went slack, falling to her sides. I immediately went forward, hugging her tight.

Sam might be wrong, but she was still my best friend. And being best friends meant having the energy to support her even when I was pissed off at the whole situation for other reasons.

“Don’t worry, Sam. I’m here. We’re here, together. We’re strong. We’re sisters, remember? Twins. Nothing we can’t do if we put our minds to it.”

I felt someone shift near us as we hugged, and I was ready to lash out, thinking it was Bryant waiting to cause more damage. But it wasn’t. It was Tiffany, somehow having tracked us.

“She’s high as fuck, Mia,” Tiffany said. She was slurring too, her eyelids fluttering from smoking too much too quickly. “Let’s take her home.”

“No!” Sam struggled, protesting. “I don’t want that. Fuck it. I’m going to just have a good time here. I don’t care about Bryant.”

“Bryant, got it,” Tiffany said, instantly piecing everything together the moment I gave her a look. This was probably not the first time Sam had broken down like this over the playboy footballer.

I let go of Sam to look around where we were. This was the kitchen and dining area, all the counters and surfaces covered with beer cans and red plastic cups. There were people standing, seated, but more often than not curled up on the carpets on the floor.

“Sam, don’t you think we should go home instead?” I tried again, glancing at Tiffany, who nodded.

“No. No, I don’t want that,” she said. Sam was starting to sound decisive and firm. I couldn’t fight her — I knew that when she got extra stubborn like this, there was no changing her mind.

“He’s a bad apple, though,” I murmured airily, not quite hoping to get through to her, because I didn’t want another fight... but I also didn’t want her to think I was simply letting it go.

“Ugh,” Sam said, clearly hearing me. “You’re jealous.”

“I’m not.”

“I don’t know what you’re jealous of, but I don’t like it, babe,” Sam said. Somehow, though, she started to look a little less sad. She was smiling now, wiping the tears from her face, blinking and murmuring that she needed to find a bathroom to redo her makeup.

Tiffany followed her, leading Sam as she quickly patted my shoulder. “I got this, hun,” she told me.

I exhaled. Bryant was *such* an asshole. Yet in the moments before he had to drop that bombshell, it seemed like I was ready to revise my opinion on him. Like, he seemed almost as if he was a decent guy I might have misunderstood over all the years.

Sighing, I realized that maybe there was something to what Sam said. That there was some long-standing prejudice that made me sure Bryant was a bad apple who was irredeemable.

But I sure wasn't jealous, no matter what Sam said. It wasn't as if guys didn't pay attention to me. Back in Indianapolis, especially while I was working at the sporting goods store, I got hit on all the time.

And boys were hardly what I was focusing on right now. I had school to ace, and a journalism career to kickstart. I wasn't going to let someone ruin all that with drama the way Bryant was messing with Sam.

I turned around to see him across the room, having some sort of hushed conversation with some tall, lanky redhead in a corner. She was swaying a little, and he was helping her stand steady — with hands right around her hips.

I felt disgusted. Did he feel no remorse at all for what he had done to Sam?

Maybe I made some sort of scoffing noise, because his eyes suddenly met mine, and he froze.

Bryant's hands moved away from the redhead's waist.

I grinned with satisfaction, especially when I saw the look of embarrassment on the quarterback. He excused himself from the redhead and walked over to me, hunched forward, resigned to the fact that I was definitely going to give him a seriously hard time for hurting my best friend.

"You know what, you've got some seriously big balls to speak to me again after what you just did," I stated to him, raising my eyebrow, daring him to sass back at me.

"Well, you're right," he said, sighing.

"What? That you have seriously big balls?"

"Uh, I guess, yeah," he said, chuckling when he realized how weird this conversation was sounding. "I meant more about the whole 'what you just did' part."

"You should leave Sam alone for the rest of the night. Especially if you meant it about breaking up with her," I told Bryant. He was so much taller than me, but I felt like we were standing toe-to-toe here, and the righteous fury I felt over my dumped best friend made me feel like I was ten feet tall.

"That is completely my plan."

"So you meant it?"

Bryant looked at me with surprise. "I mean... why else would I say it?"

"I don't know?" I threw back at him. "Maybe seeing me made you think back about all the bad times back in high school, so you punished Sam for that."

"Jesus," Bryant said, shaking his head viciously. "Who do you even think I am? I'm not going to *punish* anyone just because we were enemies in school. That sounds really childish. Plus, you know, the whole idea of enemies in school."

"That sounds like some historical revisionism here," I pointed out. "Enemies in school makes it sound like there wasn't a bully and bullied dynamic to it."

"Yeah, you're right," Bryant said, his face tightening. "You *were* a bit of a bully."

The absurdity of his defensiveness just made me break into a confused smile. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah. Seriously. Sometimes you were so harsh that I definitely felt bullied."

"But... you're the one who kept calling me a nerd, calling me all sorts of other names, having your friends and the other popular kids give me so much shit!" I said. "Don't you remember?"

Bryant blushed. Now this was something I don't recall him ever doing. He seemed genuinely

ashamed of himself here. “Okay.”

“That’s it? Okay?”

“Fine. Okay, I’m sorry.”

I didn’t expect *that*.

So I just quieted up, looking at him. It wasn’t fair. He was born the luckiest, most privileged person ever. He had all those good looks, the natural charm that convinced everyone he was a good guy even when he hurt people around him like me and Sam. He was a billionaire’s child. He had athletic talent.

You could say it was expected that he was a jerk.

“Hey,” he said, cutting my thoughts off. “Looks like Marvin’s already going straight to Sam. Can you, like, do me a favor and encourage that? I can’t be here, Mia. I can’t handle Sam... and yes, she had to find out the hard way, but I feel like a giant weight’s been lifted from my shoulders now that I’ve actually broken up with her.”

“You want me to... distract Sam?”

“No, no... I mean, yes, I guess,” he said, looking frustrated enough that he was ready to punch a hole through the wall. “You may think that I don’t care about Sam’s feelings, but I do. I don’t want to be with her, I know that much, but I don’t want her to just be heartbroken, you know? She looks like she wants to have a good time. Hell, she looks like she’s actually digging being around Marvin.”

I glanced to see across the room, where Marvin was rolling a joint for her as they sat across each other on one of the spiral staircases leading upstairs.

He was right. She was definitely vibing with him.

“So all I’m asking is that you stay objective here. If you’ll forgive the football reference, I want you to be the umpire. Blow a whistle if play gets too rough, and I mean that between her and me. I want to stay away from her, but I know she won’t let me. All I need is for her to understand it’s over.”

I made a face, wincing at the responsibility. But Bryant was right. I didn’t know if guiding Sam towards a new fling was exactly a good idea, but at least it meant she’d have something to distract her. And I didn’t know Marvin, but he was pretty hot, so if Sam really felt the need to have some companionship in a tough period like this, it couldn’t be a bad idea, could it?

Finally, I nodded. “Okay, Bryant.”

“Thank you. For real, thank you.”

“This isn’t over, though,” I said, stamping my foot down to impress the fact to him.

He chuckled. “Well, between Sam and me it is. But trying to make sure there’s no drama here? You’re right. It’s not over. I’m going to try my best. Really, I am.”

“You’ve matured a little,” I said, giving him a little credit.

He looked grateful as he finally peeled himself away from me. As I watched him leave, I saw him even glance back and smile.

If only it was that easy, though. He was right about Sam, that she would probably act out, try to rub in his face the fact that breaking up with her was *his* loss, not hers.

I mentally prepared myself for her to start some sort of scene.

“Ugh, I need a drink,” I exhaled, thinking aloud. Walking over to the dining table, I picked up a can of beer — nope. It was empty. I lifted can after can until I found one that was unopened. And it was cold! Lucky me.

Cracking it open, some guy lurched forward, trying to flirt with me, but mostly ending up having to run off to throw up.

“Ugh,” I shook my head, amused but disgusted. Guys will be guys.

Tiffany came up to me. “Sam won’t leave. She says she wants to have fun, that she doesn’t want people talking about her because she made a scene.”

“I feel like she’s going to make a scene, one way or another,” I confessed.

“You’re her best friend, you’re the one who would know,” Tiffany shrugged. “Oh, here she comes. Okay, she’s your problem now. I’m getting another beer — and after that I’m going to seriously lower my standards over who I’m willing to go home with tonight.”

I squirmed at the thought. Was this college life? Mindless hookups where you actively told yourself you just had to accept you weren’t going to enjoy yourself?

“Uh, good luck, I guess,” I said, trying my hardest not to let any judgment seep into my tone.

“Welcome to Florida University, Mia,” Tiffany said, her warmth laced with sarcasm. “It’s gonna be a hell of a school year.”

The next thing I knew, Sam and Marvin had caught up to me. She tugged at my arm. “Babe!”

“Hey,” I murmured. “And, uh, Marvin, right?”

“That’s right. You’re Mia, Samantha’s been talking a lot about you.”

“Only the good things, I’m sure. Sam knows how to hype her friends up,” I said drily, my hands occupying themselves by trying to find new beers to hand these two. “Want a cold one?”

“Sure,” Sam shrugged. “I’m kinda really high, haha.”

I didn’t want to tell her that she was already high half an hour ago.

She decided to have me latch on to her and play third wheel while she flirted like crazy with Marvin. This... wasn’t an unfamiliar scene for me, honestly. In Sam’s more, ahem, experimental days, she’d have me more as her chaperone than her best friend when we went out to parties.

Older guys loved girls like Sam. They knew to stay away from me, because I could stand up for myself and I wasn’t afraid to call them out when they got too forward. Sam, though, she loved the attention.

Marvin, at least, was playing it cool. He was kind of sweet, in his own way. Sam practically had to grab his hands and place them on her, because he was being so respectful.

“Let’s play Truth or Dare,” Sam abruptly said, interrupting her own story she was telling involving some other girls who lived on her floor. “Get everyone who’s still alive here, Marvin. Be a man!”

Marvin laughed, shaking his head. “For real?”

“I mean it. Truth or Dare.”

I raised an eyebrow, placing a hand on Sam’s knee. “Tonight’s not the night for uncomfortable truths, Sam.”

“Babe, it already is for me,” she said, sounding very stern and sober all of a sudden. “Least we can do is have some fun with it.”

“Oh,” Marvin said, his eyes widening. “Yeah, sure, I’ll rustle up some people. Let’s go huddle around that coffee table, how’s that sound? And I’ll get Russel to bring us some more weed.”

“You’re such a good guy, Marv,” Sam smiled, shooting him looks of desire.

I sighed. “This is going to end up *terrible*.”

“No, listen to me, babe,” Sam said. “I actually have a plan.”

“Now this I’m scared of,” I said, following Sam to the coffee table, where we sat cross-legged, leaning forward with our elbows to the glass surface.

“I’m going to dare Bryant to take you on a date. And then you’re going to counter-dare by making it a double date with me and Marvin,” Sam declared, hunching over closer to me as her announcement came in a sort of loud whisper — hushed and secretive even as she practically shouted it, because

she was so stoned.

“I was right,” I groaned. “This is a really bad idea. I don’t want to do this. Seriously. It’s Bryant.”

“You want to know why he bullies you, right?” Sam replied quickly. “It’s because he’s practically been in love with you since the first day he saw you when we were kids.”

“That’s literally the biggest lie there ever is.”

“Hey, boys are just like that.”

I shook my head. “It’s 2019, Sam. I’m not about to let that nonsense fly. Sure, boys can be toxic and mean, but if he thought that was his way to express how much he liked me, he’s got to be kidding. And besides, think of all the years since. He’s not got a crush on me. Honestly? I think he’s *scared* of me.”

“Well, that, too,” Sam said. “Oh, Marvin! Who did you get?”

He gathered five people, all confused but intrigued enough to play a round of Truth or Dare, since there wasn’t really anything left to do now other than pass out or jump into the pool.

The redhead who was all over Bryant was there. So was Bryant, of course. Tiffany looked extremely bored and just in it because she couldn’t find a guy to go home with, and then there was another guy who looked like he was on the football team too. He definitely had the body for it.

“Pretty incestuous circle,” I remarked.

“I’ll start,” Sam declared. “Okay. Mia. Truth or dare?”

I could fight her on this, resist her plan. But I didn’t, of course. She gave me the most pitiful, sad look. Actual puppy dog eyes. I didn’t think I would ever fall for those again, but when Sam’s eyes practically begged me to call for a dare, I knew I couldn’t let my best friend down.

“Dare,” I exhaled.

“Mia, I dare you to ask Bryant out on a date.”

There were “ooh” sounds all over our little circle — clearly the backstory between us had already started spreading fast at the party.

Bryant shrugged. “Are you really gonna do that, Mia?”

I pulled myself closer to him, going around the coffee table. “Bryant, are you doing anything on Saturday night?”

“Nope.”

“Wanna go out on a date with me?” I said, hating myself for actually finding a thrill in doing this.

“Sure. Let’s do it. Me and you. A *date*.”

Our eyes met. His eyes twinkled. Strangely, instead of treating this like a chore... it seemed like the insanity of this plan got us both interested enough to go through with this plan.

“Hell yeah!” Marvin said, clapping.

“Your turn, Mia,” Sam said, looking impressed with me.

“Sam,” I immediately pointed back at my best friend.

“Dare.”

“I dare you to make this a double date. You and Marvin. Me and Bryant.”

You should have seen Bryant’s face. His look of intrigued smugness evaporated, and now he was just horrified.

Of course, Sam said yes.

BRYANT

Coach Frost was keeping me waiting outside his office while he was on the phone, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was doing this because he was somehow trying to punish me.

Or test me.

Punishment. Funny how that was something stuck in my head after Mia accused me of somehow trying to hurt Sam because of her. That girl could be seriously wrong about things, but she'd found a way to get inside my head.

Was I cold and distant to Sam because of some desire to just let go of the past?

If that was the case, I shouldn't be so curious about this upcoming date, even if I was sure I was being played by the two girls.

One thing was for certain. I could trust that Mia was a stubborn, loyal friend who would stick by her gal pal no matter what the trouble was. She might hate my guts, or tell herself that she should be hating my guts, but at least there's no doubt that she'd support Sam through all this.

I extracted her promise to take care of her best friend while she dealt with the breakup, and I was sure she would honor that.

Now that it had been a few days since the party and I could finally get over the drama, I was glad that things hadn't been as bad as I had expected. The story of our breakup had spread to practically everyone at the party, but at least it hadn't gotten to Fiona and her YouTube gossip channel.

The last thing Coach Frost would want was me seeming like I cared more about breaking girls' hearts than working on my plays and my touchdowns.

"Howard! Get in here!"

That was the coach.

He had a military bearing, the kind of disciplined energy that told you you could not fuck around and expect to continue to keep his respect. You had to shape up, or else risk everything you had been working for. It didn't matter how talented you were, he clearly cared more about someone who could be trusted to stick to his plan rather than try and show off how good he was.

Part of that had been why he had resisted for so long to name me as a starter, even when Mike Liotta started acting up. Of course, now things had changed permanently...

But then again, Coach was also someone who could be trusted to stick by his man, holding out until there really was no hope. If he believed in Mike, today's meeting might be bad news. Maybe he wanted to tell me that Mike and the university had made a deal and that he was on, like, academic probation for a short while but was expected to return to the field in no time.

Everyone on the team thought he was the most likely guy to ace the NFL draft. I resented him for

that, because I thought I was the sure guy. But it was clear things were a little too early for me.

Ah, I couldn't let myself drown in all these thoughts. I knocked on the coach's door and entered.

"Howard," Liam Frost said, nodding at me.

To think he was only a few years older than me, relatively speaking. You usually thought of college football coaches as middle-aged guys with beer bellies and a serious attitude.

Coach Frost was an ex-pro who had two good years in the NFL before a car accident killed his chances. That didn't deter him. He waited out his lengthy recovery period, tried again, realized there was no chance he would ever play professionally or even semi-professionally again, and then decided to enroll for a tour of duty with the Marines.

Like I said, military bearing. A guy who brooked no bullshit.

"What can I do for you, Coach?"

"You know the Liotta situation?"

"Of course."

"He's out. You're in. It's as easy as that."

I exhaled in relief. "Okay, thanks so much, Coach. But I started in the last game and did a pretty good job, why are we even really having this conversation? Unless you're telling me we're just swapping spots, and he's the new backup?"

Coach ran his hands through his buzzcut. "Liotta's exhausted all his possible appeals with the university. He's lost his scholarship. I was the one who decided he couldn't possibly continue after what he did. But I want you to think back to what I just said: *it's as easy as that.*"

I frowned. "Okay..."

"That means if you pull a psychotic drug-induced scandal, you're out, and I'll find myself a new starting quarterback even if I have to scout every department for someone even resembling your sort of build myself. I'm not going to tolerate any more of this hedonistic bullshit from you and the boys."

"I'm not that kind of guy, Coach," I tried to express to him.

"You better not be," he said, shaking his head. "Son, if you do this right, I'm sure you're probably a year or two away from getting in the best possible position for the draft."

I didn't like the sound of that. I felt like I was already *ready*. Why was he telling me I needed a couple of years more of development? Did he think I was going to wait until senior year to start playing ball as a pro?"

"I know that look," he said, pulling himself forward with his fists planted to his desk. "You think I'm being too slow on you. That you're talented enough to make it already."

Not wanting to confirm his suspicion, I didn't answer him.

"People push themselves too much, son. Take it from me. I sure did. Look, I've been giving this a lot of thought. It seemed like a no-brainer to you that Liotta's out, but aside from that stupid YouTube video, nobody would have really cared. I could've made that whole scandal go away. Probably talk the dean into giving our boy a chance, explain how he was our best hope to really show Division I what Florida could do."

I winced. I was right. Coach Frost really stuck by his man.

"But he took advantage of the trust I had for him, and talent or no talent, I'm not letting anybody break the team. I know you've got a lot of gossip surrounding you, so don't let that blow up in your face. Now's the time for you to be working hard."

I nodded, standing up. "You'll discover you were right to trust me, Coach."

"Better as hell be, son," he said. I couldn't get over how it didn't feel weird at all that a guy who was barely in his early thirties could call me 'son' and make it sound more like the case than my dad.

“Now I have more calls to make. We’re also going to think about moving some guys around, try different positions — gonna need a new quarterback, after all.”

“Gotcha, Coach,” I said, nodding. “Thank you again.”

“Thank yourself after you put in the practice and kick Kentucky’s ass for us in the next game. Now get out of here.”

As soon as I left the coach’s office, hopping over to my car parked across from the entrance to the athletic department, my phone rang.

It was my dad.

“When are you going to stop focusing on childish pursuits and just come work for the company like you’re meant to, son?” he said, without even a greeting.

Son.

It sounded mocking coming from Sergio Howard. He was my dad, yes, and I spent all my life looking up to him even when our family broke apart and everybody but him suffered for it... but I couldn’t help but react with an instinctive pride when he called me his son, even if he insulted my biggest passion in life in doing so.

“I’m not interested in having this conversation,” I said, my voice dropping low.

“Because you’d rather celebrate instead?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, maybe just because you’ve wasted enough hours to get a starting spot on your school’s football team. It’s been a frustrating year for you, hasn’t it? Now things are finally getting back on track,” he said.

This was my dad, alright. He loved to stand over me like this, dismiss me for wanting something other than to follow in his footsteps.

“Join the company, son. The school’s sent me your academic transcript so far and it’s not looking great. You’re just wasting your time outside of the football, which to me is an even bigger waste of time. So how about you make a graceful exit right now?”

I laughed in his face. I wished this was a video call, so I could see how ridiculous he was, trying to pull a stunt like this.

“You’re pretty well-informed, Dad.”

“I know everything. That’s the perk of having all this money and power, son. One day you’ll learn that. You don’t get to where I am without being able to know everything just as it happens.”

I didn’t care if Coach Frost and him were texting buddies, all I knew was I wanted him out of my hair.

“You spoken to your mother lately?” my father continued. “I’m sure she’s got it in her head that you’re going to mess up and end up injured with your lifelong dream broken. Just quit while you’re ahead, Bryant. You have a place in the company. Stop wasting your time in Florida and come to New York. At least I can groom you for bigger things.”

“Don’t you bring Mom up like that,” I said, icy and unhappy.

“Honestly, if you just wanted to keep an interest in football, just buy a team. I’ve got the money. You want that for your birthday?”

“*Fuck off, Dad,*” I hissed. I was done with him taunting me.

He really got to me. I couldn’t believe that big news like this could be soured so quickly by a phone call, but he did that.

When I got back to my apartment, I decided I was going to do nothing for the rest of the week except practice and study.

I was here for a reason. College football was the proving ground where I was going to meet my destiny of playing pro.

My dad could taunt me all he wanted, but I was ready to use all that bitterness and resentment to fuel my determination to be the very best quarterback I could be.

I couldn't afford to ignore school, either. My scholarship was why I was here — if I just wanted to go to any school on Ward Beer money, I'd be someone I could never be proud of.

After all, I earned all this. And the only thing that mattered to me right now was earning up to my potential.

Locking my door and planting myself straight down on my bed, I took my phone out and hoped I could at least distract myself by texting someone.

Mia had a message for me.

"We're going to Ciccio on Saturday," she told me.

Wow. Really? I texted her back at once. "That's a pretty expensive place. Are you buying for all four of us?"

"As if. You're paying."

"That's the Mia Cowell I know, alright."

I saw the Typing... text bubble show up. She had some sassy retort she was about to send me.

But she didn't.

So I sent her another message instead. "I feel like this is some kind of prank. I'm not going to end up going only to find out I'm having a date with Fiona dressed like you, am I?"

"Nope. But you're right to be on your toes. Serves you right for a change."

I grinned, planting my phone down so I could charge it.

Well, at least I had something to look forward to now. A date.

I don't remember the last time I actually had a proper date like that. I'm not really a date night kind of guy — I do parties, I do hookups, and I have girls who won't leave me alone until I gently, or not so gently, end things with them.

For Mia Cowell to be the one to take me out on a date, even if it felt suspiciously staged and planned... well, let's just say I was willing to go along with this for as long as I could.

When Saturday night finally arrived, I was dressed to impress. New tailored shirt, a navy blue blazer with an Italian cut. Skinny jeans that hugged my legs and showed off just how muscular I was.

"Pick me up at my dorm."

She sent me the location. Yeah, just as I thought. It was Sam's dorm building.

I drove over as fast as I could, hoping Sam wouldn't be there. Maybe this was a girl gang thing, that I'd drive over and be surrounded by a bunch of empowered women ready to dump all their resentment over men like me.

But no, it was just Mia wearing a cute little purple and gold halter dress sitting on a bench in front of the entrance.

She smiled as I drove my Mercedes right up to her, lowering the window. "Miss Cowell, I presume?" I said.

"Mr. Howard."

"You know, part of me was sure I was going to be surprised by like, fifty girls, all of them ready to throw eggs at me."

"I did consider a plan like that," Mia said, her smile widening. "But since you're paying for dinner, I'm deciding to be nice. I love Italian. This place better impress. Have you been?"

"Not really. The guys and I generally meal-plan throughout the week. I know, I know, it's boring."

Mia slipped into the passenger seat.

I didn't move, glancing back at the dorm building.

"Don't worry. Marvin and Sam already left for the restaurant."

"Whew," I said, closing my eyes in relief. "So... what gives? Is this actually a date, then? You're gonna forgive all those years of me tormenting you just because your drunken, stoned best friend put you to a dare?"

"Let's just say I'm trying out something new," Mia said. "And that something new is to be open to the possibility that people are capable of change."

Now I was the one who was surprised. No matter what I felt about how Mia was being uptight, I knew that she had her head in the right place, and that more often than not her being uptight was the product of her being overly righteous because she felt she had to stand by her principles.

The truth was, I had been a dick to her. It didn't stop. I let it continue, I even had fun doing that. I was actively a bully. So this was definitely a surprise.

She was okay with me being quiet on the drive to the restaurant, thinking hard about all this.

Well, if she was sincere, I was going to be a gentleman. I could do that, hell, I *owed* it to her.

We were vibing really well, honestly. Even in the silence, it felt comfortable. Like for once, all the years we had spent growing up together just made sense, that it gave us some sort of shared history that left us at ease with each other.

I had instantly got that feeling from hanging out with Samantha during freshman year, but it wasn't as strong as this. This felt... a little spooky just how comfortable it was.

We had a table inside and the maitre'd immediately showed us to it. "Best table in the house. Reservation for Cowell," he said in a silky voice, handing us menus. "Your friends have been waiting for you, but rest assured, they have been making full use of their time."

By that he meant they weren't able to get their hands off each other.

Marvin and Sam were making out intensely. I almost felt like a voyeur being there, watching them get at it.

My best friend and my ex-girlfriend locking lips — and mouths, and tongues. I wasn't a very jealous guy, and besides, I didn't want Sam anymore.

But this felt a little gross, even if I knew I was being put up to this by a vengeful Sam.

Mia turned to me, touching my elbow. "Let's just think about what we're going to order."

I couldn't ignore the almost-pornographic make-out session taking place across from me. "Uh, you choose."

"You sure?"

Sam pulled herself away from Marvin's mouth long enough to breathily instruct Mia to order for her too. "Just order the best things for four people. Real fancy, whatever you want."

Mia glanced at me, waiting for my take on this. I was grimacing, watching Marvin aggressively kiss Sam's neck, his hands pawing at her boobs against her sweater.

"Marvin, man! Seriously. Keep it together. Save that for later."

He came to, finally realizing I was there. "Oh shit, sorry, man."

"I don't mind you getting some action, but this is a classy establishment. Let's wait until we're, you know, done with the food. Or in this case, ordering the damn food, first."

Marvin grinned. "I don't know if I can wait."

Sam shook her head, playfully swatting at Marvin's beefy chest. "You better. This is a double date, not a Mia and Bryant one-on-one."

A waiter had come to take the order and Mia took it upon herself to decide what we were going to

have.

Under the table, I reached for her hand and squeezed it. "Thank you," I mouthed to her.

She didn't respond. I think she was actually... surprised that I was so grateful.

But now I was right back at the uncomfortable scene of having to watch Sam and Marvin just go at it together. Fucking hell, it was like they were desperately trying to get every inch of their bodies pressed together.

"This is so weird," Mia whispered in my direction. "I'm actually not okay with this."

"Tell me about it."

Sam looked over at her best friend, and I caught her wink at Mia.

I pushed my back against the chair, feeling like I got ensnared in a trap of my own making. Of course there was an agenda here. Mia was a pawn, just like I was. Sam wanted revenge, so she probably put her up to asking me out on a date, with the specific intention of turning it into this... weird, twisted scene.

"I'm gonna need some air," I said, trying to look away. "Have a smoke or something."

"You don't smoke," Sam taunted, in between kisses with Marvin.

Mia stood up too. "Neither do I, but I could do with a bit of fresh air. I feel like you two have sucked it all out of the room."

"Sounds about right," Sam smiled.

"Okay, we're going," Mia said, pulling at my hand.

We made it outside, just looking at each other without trading any words.

Sam actually stopped making out with Marvin as she watched us leave.

I think she was staring daggers at me. That was some real hate. I shuddered. I was used to girls being pissed off at me, but Sam looked like she was going to do everything she could to make me feel terrible.

Mia exhaled when we were finally outside. "Like I said, that was weird as fuck."

"Seriously."

"I... I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Because you have to deal with all this. And because, you know, if Marvin and Sam stay together, she'll probably keep doing this to you. She can be pretty vengeful."

"Learned from the best, am I right?" I said, trying not to sound too accusatory as I nudged my chin in her direction.

She smiled. "Hey, I'm good at what I'm good at."

We went quiet again.

Everything just felt... comfortable.

I didn't even mind that I had to deal with Sam and Marvin all night tonight. Part of my mind had already skipped forward and imagined having to hear Sam make loud sex noises back home when she inevitably hooked up with Marvin, but at least here with Mia I could forget all about that.

She was looking at me.

This wasn't a malicious stare, not like Sam's glare. She was being kind.

I felt my guard drop.

I had to kiss her.

So I did.

MIA

I was reeling from the kiss and now that warmth was flooding to my face again and I could think straight, I realized we had been smoking right outside a window within direct view of our table.

Which could only mean one thing.

I pushed Bryant off me and dared myself to look to our table.

Sam had seen me. She was already standing up, tossing a napkin to the floor, ready to storm out.

“Sam!” I whispered to Bryant, hitting his broad chest with both my fists, unhappy that drama kept chasing after us.

I didn’t have time to process the kiss. Not now. Not when I needed to get to Sam, explain that it wasn’t what she thought.

Or was it? I couldn’t even tell anymore. I thought of myself as this straight-laced, smart girl who knew what she was doing and could trust her sense of judgment, but now things were just spiraling out of control.

From being a bit player to a mess of Sam’s making, I was now mired in my own mess. This drama was now becoming swamp-like.

I also became incredibly conscious of all the people in town. People waiting for their ride-shares, people smoking outside restaurants and bars, people closing up shop.

Any one of them could know who Bryant was, could spark the rumor mill over our kiss.

I wasn’t even enrolled in Florida University yet and I had already seen the way gossip spreads here. I didn’t want to be the new girl in town splashed all over that YouTube gossip vlog channel run by that Fiona goth chick.

“Go,” Bryant said, moving out of my way.

I rushed to Sam.

Marvin stayed seated as Sam bolted her way out of the restaurant. My best friend briefly tried to glance around for alternate exits as she saw me walk back into the restaurant, but unless she wanted to exit through the kitchen, she had to face me. I could at least explain things to her.

But Sam was Sam. She chose to turn around and power-walk to the kitchen. Her heels clacked loudly along the restaurant’s marble floor, and I had to navigate around tables of irritated diners, apologizing as I tried to get to Sam.

Marvin laughed as he watched. I could tell from his face that he knew what all this was about. He must have witnessed the kiss, too.

She was midway through the kitchen, dodging busy cooks and waiters when I caught up with her.

“You know, I wouldn’t have even known if Marvin didn’t pull back and tell me to look out the

window,” Sam immediately began. “What the hell is going on? Are you insane? Mia, babe, what’s gotten into you — don’t you know that’s Bryant Howard, your arch-nemesis?”

Arch-nemesis, now that was a word I had used to describe him as a nerdy little angsty teen. To have Sam use that word and throw it back at me felt like she was trying to dig up our decades of friendship at this moment.

“Sam...”

“What? It’s not what I think? Please. It wasn’t a mistake. He kissed you, and you kissed back.”

“Did you see it?” I was sure she couldn’t have actually seen it, because if she did, at least I could tell her that it was... I don’t know, it just moved too fast, that this was out of my control, I was swept away.

But would anybody ever believe that excuse?

Things had gotten so good between us despite last weekend’s party. Bryant gave me his number, and I started texting him innocently, more curious to test and tease him over the weird dynamic of the date we had set up. Sam didn’t even mind.

Sam actually told me it would be good for me to let loose.

And we were starting to really get things together. Sam applied to move into my dorm room, since it was only a single-occupancy dorm because of my scholarship status, and I had really begun to enjoy the feeling of sisterhood that came from having her, effectively a bigger sister to me now in college since she had been here a year longer.

I didn’t want to jeopardize anything.

Normally I would be quick to drop Bryant, blame and curse him for everything he had done to ruin things — again.

But this time the fault was all on me. I would even believe it if Sam said I was leading him on, because in a way, I was.

My eyes watered, and Sam glared at me.

“That’s right, play the innocent good girl card on me, start the waterworks. But you’re the one being such a stupid little girl, you know? Bryant. Fuck, of course. Bryant Howard. I know how he rolls, Mia.”

“I know you do,” I nodded.

“He can get any woman in his bed. Including you. *Even* you.”

“That’s not what I want, Sam...” I tried to reason to her, reaching for her hands.

She just shook them away, bringing her hands behind her back. “No. Don’t give me that bullshit. You’re just so sad, you know that, Mia? I can’t believe you. This hurt. You were supposed to be on my side. This was our way of getting even, remember? To make Bryant understand what he was losing out on by doing what he did to me!”

“I know that, but... don’t you think that was a bit overdramatic? Trying to show off just how much you were enjoying having a fling with his best friend, flaunting it in front of his face? I know you’ve been going over to his place too, hoping to taunt him by dressing all sexy, staying just out of reach,” I pointed out. “That’s not right.”

“When the hell did you start to care what was or wasn’t right when it came to Bryant Howard? What, did he propose to you or something? Did he buy you off with his daddy’s billions?”

I flinched at how vicious Sam was sounding. “Hey. That’s not fair.”

“So, was that it?”

“I’m not interested in Bryant, okay?” I said, although part of me instantly felt like I was lying — if not to Sam, to myself. “This is just some petty revenge you wanted, so like, I just got stuck in this

mess. I didn't ask for this."

"But you said that a best friend was supposed to support her best friend. That you would stick by me no matter what."

"Doesn't mean I can't call you out when you're behaving like a psycho, Sam," I said, frowning. I took a step back. "This is insane. Just come back with me to the table. Keep doing what you were doing with Marvin. I bet Bryant is feeling awkward as hell over the kiss. You can still win."

Sam laughed in my face. "Fuck off, Mia. You're so dumb, oh my God. Bryant doesn't feel awkward. He feels like you're his latest *conquest*. I'm going home."

"Okay," I murmured.

"And what I mean by that," she said, her hands clasped tightly together, as if she was afraid she might hit me, "is that I think it would be better if you didn't come back to the dorm room either."

"Sam, come on. That's my room too. I feel bad, but this is just ridiculous."

"Whatever. I said what I said. I don't want to see you. Find some other place. Bryant's got a big bed. Go there instead."

I watched Sam leave, shocked that she would be so cruel to me. She had to understand that I didn't mean for any of this to happen, right? There was no way she could think that.

I couldn't believe my best friend would genuinely think that about me.

Time must have passed by as I slumped my shoulders and walked ever so slowly back out from the kitchen that continued to bustle around me.

Bryant was there waiting for me. Marvin was not.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

This was even weirder than the kiss. The quarterback sounded like he *cared*.

"Why does it even matter?" I said, unable to cut the depression out of my voice. I felt bad. I felt like a shitty friend, someone who had somehow, without even intending to, betrayed my closest friendship.

I wished I was back in Indianapolis. Life was simpler then, even if I felt unfulfilled and upset. I may have been envious of Sam's fancy college life while I toiled away at community college and my part-time job, but at least I had *something*.

And Regina had been a great friend through that time. We were starting to drift apart when it became clear our paths were diverging since we shared little in common, but she never gave me a migraine the way Sam had been every single night since I had gotten to Florida.

"Mia?"

I snapped out of my thoughts and returned my gaze to Bryant. Looking up, I started to see what everyone saw in him: the chiseled good looks, the stylish, short hair, his imposing six foot one height, how built he was. He wasn't just a dumb jock, he could be a gentleman when he tried, too.

I had spent all my life judging him, trying to paint him as this bully and villain. Yes, in many ways he was, especially to me, but how much of that was because I only let him play that role in my life?

I sighed. "Sorry."

"You shouldn't be apologizing to me, damn. You did nothing wrong."

"That's not true."

The unspoken implication that our kiss ruined this evening made for an uncomfortable silence.

"Our food actually just arrived. Why don't you come back to the table and we can, uh, eat in silence? I mean, you're looking all beautiful tonight anyway. And I'm pretty fucking starved, honestly."

I nodded, if only because I didn't have the energy to disagree. This wasn't the Mia I knew. How

did a little bit of drama and a crazy kiss suddenly suck all the fight out of me?

At least that made me laugh, one cynical laugh that almost sounded like I was barking it out.

“You must feel really shitty,” Bryant said, pulling my chair back so I can get seated.

I stood my ground. “That sort of chivalry thing is so outdated, Bryant.”

“This is a classy establishment. At least let me behave in an appropriate manner now, since I didn’t before,” Bryant shrugged. I think there was even a half-hearted attempt to wink, but I knew he was a little disgusted by all the drama too.

I gave him a smile. “Okay. Fine.”

“Thank you, Mia.”

“I should be thanking you. Now I’m going to be eating an Italian feast for four people.”

“Hey, don’t forget, I’m eating too. And you’re like, tiny, Mia. I’m so much bigger than you, and I have a serious appetite. You probably don’t even know the number of calories I need to consume per day to bulk up for the football season.”

I bit my lip when I realized just how weird it was that I was actually tingling at the thought of how much bigger he was than me.

Okay, I can forgive myself for that, right?

It’s only physical.

I could justify it that way.

To Bryant’s credit, he stopped talking at that point. We just sat in silence, eating. There was a *lot* of food. I had ordered four types of pasta, two bowls of homemade gnocchi, a meat and cheese plate, three salads, a seafood platter, and even oysters.

I cringed when I reached for my first oyster. “I guess we’re splitting a dozen oysters between the two of us.”

“Do you like oysters?” he said, breaking his silence.

“They’re kinda slimy, but they’re cool, too,” I said. “I like it when they’re good.”

“That’s not that helpful,” Bryant laughed. “Anything’s good when it’s good.”

“I guess you’re right. But it’s, uh, a little *sexual*, you know?”

Bryant’s eyes glimmered with amusement. “Get your head out of the gutter, Cowell.”

But he also stuck his tongue out and suggestively sucked an oyster, demonstrating to me as I clenched my thighs together that he was probably very, very good at other things involving his lips and tongue.

“Okay, okay,” I exhaled, keeping my gaze down, focusing on the food.

There was an expensive bottle of white wine that neither one of us touched, too.

When we were finally done eating, I had to lean back against my seat. “I don’t think a food baby is the right word here. I think I have food triplets.”

“Fuck me, you did a really good job. I’ve never seen a girl handle her food like that. Most girls just poke a fork at a salad and then say they’re full.”

“I really hate the idea of food waste, Bryant.”

“Well, I guess, me too?”

I smiled, shaking my head. “It’s okay. You’re allowed to have your priorities. I’ll focus on the environment, while you focus on football. And paying for the bill.”

Bryant groaned. “You’re right. I have to do that.”

“Come on. Can’t be *that* hard, right?”

I knew I had to be a little more gentle on this, because he really did get upset when I implied he was just a rich daddy’s boy...

He shook his head. "I spoke with my dad and he, uh, really pissed me off. I don't want to use his credit card. Yikes. This is a four hundred dollar meal. But I'll be paying for it myself. I won't let Dad have the satisfaction."

"To be fair, a hundred dollars of that is from the wine. And if you'll let me take it home, I'm okay with paying for it?" I offered.

For a second, it looked like Bryant was willing to take me up on the offer. "Nah."

"Come on. Please? Pretty please?"

Oh my God. I was *flirting* with him!

He paid with cash and left a respectful tip. Shaking his hands as he helped me up from my seat, he also reached for the chilled bottle. "No. And you earned that bottle of wine, because you're the one who's going to have to drink it to get over all the craziness of tonight. Can I drive you home?"

"Sam says she doesn't want to see me tonight. We're roommates."

"Yeah, I know," he said, nodding. "If you need a place to crash..."

"That would be a bad idea," I quickly ended that thought.

"Okay, cool. Just saying that it's an option."

I walked ahead of him, letting him stay behind me. Turning slightly to look at him, I gave him a wan smile. "It's good to know you can be sweet sometimes."

"Well, the keyword here is 'sometimes' — other times I'm, what, a jerk? An asshole? What's the one you like to use?"

I grinned as I went to the passenger side of his car. "Both of those will do for now."

"Sure. Gotta stick with the classics."

My arch-nemesis and I were trading grins. Of all the ways I imagined tonight would end, this was not going to be it.

"Maybe you'll be lucky and Sam's actually gone to Marvin's to channel her frustrations some other way," Bryant suggested.

"In that case, I definitely don't want to crash at yours."

"Good call."

We were only a short drive away from the campus, and when we got to the dorm I was surprised that Bryant actually jumped out of his seat to walk over to my side, opening the door for me.

"Such a gentleman," I teased him.

"Sometimes."

"Okay, thanks. Uh... I want to say this was nice, in its own way? I appreciated that we did get to have the meal together. And that for that hour or so, at least there was no drama."

"I'm also extra glad I didn't have to keep seeing Marvin dry-hump Sam nonstop," Bryant smiled, before wincing. "That was gross."

"So gross."

"They should get a room," Bryant and I both said. We laughed right after.

Bryant placed a hand on my waist.

Uh oh...

"Look," I quickly said, ready to end things cleanly here. "I appreciate how good you're being tonight, but that kiss can't happen again. I'm new here, and Sam's my best friend. Like it or not, she's important to me. I'm not ready to lose my best friend over... whatever it is we're doing."

"And especially because I'm me," Bryant guessed.

I sighed. "Yeah. That's part of it."

"Yo, no hate. I understand completely," Bryant offered. "Okay. Let's talk again when things are

less crazy, yeah?"

"Really, really appreciate that," I said, sighing. I was feeling a little sad that I had to do it this way, but this was the right call.

"I'm going to kiss you goodbye now," Bryant announced softly, leaning in.

This time I was ready. Even though I told him the kiss couldn't happen again, this time I wanted it... and I was willing to forgive this one instance.

BRYANT

It was a great thing that Marvin and I were such good friends, because after the drama at that Italian restaurant, I had to get my head focused on the things that really mattered.

And for me, it was always one thing. Football.

Coach Frost was ready to bite my head off if I got distracted by anything at all. He knew my priorities better than I did, it seemed.

I forgave Marvin and told him to just, you know, keep it cool.

“You’re a defensive lineman for a Division I school, Marv,” I told him. “It’s weird to me that you get so desperate about girls.”

“Shit, I’m not desperate,” he shook his head. “I’m just not into playing around, you know? I’m an all-in kinda guy. If I can get what I need, I don’t want to keep looking. Why waste that energy?”

I grinned. We were in his room back at the house, so instead of continuing to talk about our feelings — something we jocks would never resort to, apparently — we just kicked back and played some video games.

A week later and we were sitting back to back in the locker room as we prepared for a big game against Kentucky University.

This was a big one. Coach Frost had drilled us on plays, hoping to out-strategize a team that, on paper at least, had far more impressive prospects than us. We were somewhere in mid-table at this stage of the season, but Kentucky? They were second to Auburn, who all the commentators said were practically guaranteed a championship this year.

“Bad time to bring up last week’s events?” I asked Marvin as he was midway through his main quirk of a pre-game ritual: he’d strip naked, massaging himself with some deep tissue techniques he had learned from a couple of semesters doing physiotherapy courses.

We were alpha males charged with testosterone, so there was no weirdness about male nudity here. And if there was, Coach Frost would probably chew you out, tell you you had no place on his team, because the most important thing about this Florida team he was building for success was that every member of the team, whether they were a starter or a backup, had to surrender their trust to every other member.

So in that sense, Marvin understood that if I needed to let some feelings out by talking things through, bro-to-bro, he knew it was important.

The game could depend on it.

“I haven’t seen Sam since that night,” he said.

“I don’t care if you have or haven’t. Plus that’s nonsense, because I know you have. You weren’t

home on Wednesday, she probably booty called you, right?"

Marvin gave me a sheepish grin. "Okay. I haven't seen her since Wednesday night... I mean Thursday afternoon. We were huddled up for a while."

"Uh, that's great," I said, turning around to pat my friend's back to congratulate him on his newfound sexual success. His massage oil stuck to my palm. "Oh."

"Uh, sorry about that. You want a towel?"

"No, it's all good. Anyway, I just wanted to like, talk to you about that," I said.

Both Marvin's hands were busy rubbing under his arms, massaging his muscles. Dude was sculpted. He made me look like I was busy slacking off, honestly. I started to wonder about my percentage of body fat, because I knew Marvin's was probably zero.

He reminded me of The Rock or someone, he got everything going on good.

"So talk," Marvin said, surprising me.

"We're bros. I don't believe there's some bullshit bro code that you have to stick to, that it's forbidden for a guy to move in on a friend's ex, because honestly that's some lame possessive shit that I find really creepy. But it's important for you to realize that we've got a deep bond, and if it's going to be affected by a girl... we're going to have to talk about it."

Marvin started to look at me more carefully. "But you're the one who wanted me to chase after her. You practically threw me at her, so you could sneak away from your relationship."

He was right, but...

"Okay, sure. But that's not what I mean. I don't care if she's in between us. I just don't want you to like, be pulled into any games. If she's just rebounding with you to get back at me, then I want you to stand your ground. Trust me as your bro that I would do the same for you — that sex, no matter how good or no matter how hot that person is, shouldn't screw with our heads. Especially during the season."

Marvin slapped his hands together, nodding. "Okay. Got it. For what it's worth, I think she's gonna need a lot of time. And besides, don't you have a new girl? Shouldn't you be focusing on her?"

That was part of the problem. I *was* focusing on Mia.

I respected her desire for space, so I never texted her. Not until this morning.

It was a good morning text.

She read it and sent a smiley face.

I didn't know what to do after that.

"Okay, I'm gonna do my thing now," I told Marvin, stepping off from the bench, hugging my towel tight.

My main ritual before a big game was to meditate. Most people were surprised to hear I was into that, thinking that was some sort of hippie nonsense, but when Mom was trying out her new life as a single mother after the divorce, she started taking yoga lessons at home, and I remember watching them and thinking how serene they made me feel.

I wasn't really into yoga, not unless it was part of a wider fitness routine to get me into shape for the season, but I did find myself loving meditation.

Sometimes I liked guided meditation, and I'd play them from an app on my phone.

But I needed to clear my head totally, so I had to face all my thoughts.

I could do this under a shower, at least.

The rain of cold water rushing over my head was the sound I tried to concentrate on. I tried everything I could to make it work: to try to visualize every single droplet of water bouncing off my head, my shoulders, my chest... to block my senses beyond the sound of the torrent of water from

above... the tactile sensation of the wet tiled bath floor as my toes rubbed into it.

My head should have been clear right now.

But no, I kept flashing to a specific image.

It was Mia.

I couldn't stop thinking about Mia.

"Fuck it," I grunted, clenching my teeth. What, was I horny or something? Did I need to rub one out to clear my head?

Some of the guys did that, channel their sexual energy to gain pure athletic focus. Sounded like a waste to me, honestly.

My dick was rock hard because I was thinking about Mia, even though this was a cold shower with a temperature so low it might as well be icicles.

I slammed my fists against the bath wall in front of me. Leaning forward, letting the water blast down my back and onto my ass, I sighed.

Tonight's match was a big deal. I shouldn't be letting these stray thoughts take me over.

Okay, so I was thinking about Mia. So what? She wasn't into football. It wasn't like she was a cheerleader or something, or someone I might see in the stands tonight...

"Enough," I said, looking straight up to the shower head, letting the water rain all over my face. "Enough."

If meditating just meant thinking about Mia, I was going to just have to stop trying to meditate.

I walked out of my shower feeling more frustrated than anything else. I had to keep that down. I knew that in a team like ours, that sort of frustration ran the risk of rippling from player to player, some sort of undercurrent that stops us from being our best selves on the field.

My phone was buzzing when I returned to my locker.

"Mom," I said, surprised.

"I wanted to call you to wish you luck," she quickly said. "Your sister was browsing through ESPN and saw your game on the schedule. We're not watching it but I thought I might be able to get to you before it started."

"Aw, thanks, Mom. Yeah, we're about to start. I probably shouldn't be on the phone too long."

"Have you been okay, Bry? You seemed a little... unhappy, the last time we talked."

I glanced at the coach. He was still looking at his whiteboard. I probably had a minute or so to talk. "Well... you know how it was. Dad got on my nerves. He does that."

"You're right, he *does* do that," Mom told me. "But you've known that all your life. Just ignore what he was saying. He's a selfish person, and he only cares about getting his way. Screwing with your head to make you feel bad about something you love so much like football is exactly what he wants."

"I know," I swallowed unhappily. I realized in that instant that focusing on Mia had not just been my inability to meditate due to being horny for the last girl I kissed — it was a way to dwell on a more positive thought, instead of the much more negative anxieties I had, like worrying about my performance, or my conversation with Dad. "Thanks, Mom."

I didn't know what else to say, after all. It's different talking about my feelings to someone like my Mom compared to a bro like Marvin who lived with me and understood my life.

"You're welcome, honey," she said. "Sheryl sends her love. And wishes you luck, of course. She says that when Rob comes back from his trip he'll be watching highlights from the game, so make sure you knock it out of the park."

"Mom, that's a baseball reference. You're so clueless about football," I made fun of her. But it

was nice to hear from my older sister and her husband. I wondered what little Carl, their young son, was up to. Sheryl and I had been very close, growing up. “Thanks again.”

“I know you’ll do amazing. Love you, Bry.”

“Thanks, Mom. Love you.”

I needed that pick me up. The guys started to gather around Coach Frost for the pep talk, with just a few minutes to go before we had to play.

Mia. I kept seeing Mia.

It wasn’t a surprise to me that I couldn’t even pay attention to the pep talk, but I pretended damn well as if I did.

Plays. Strengths, weaknesses. Kentucky had a superior offense, but our defensive line was seen by everyone as being more disciplined. We had a reputation for snatching comebacks through quick plays when the other team lost their nerve in the last few minutes of the later quarters of every game.

So thankfully I didn’t miss out on much when Coach Frost gave his pep talk and I was busy mooning away thinking about Mia. I knew the drill.

So when he hyped us up by making us cheer ourselves on, and we ran onto the field, we were ready.

Things were still surreal to me, starting a game like this. I was used to sitting on the bench, watching every play, analyzing what I would have done better, where I needed the guys to improve. If it was something to do with positioning during offense, I would mentally tell myself to weave around the field and get in a better spot so I could be in line for a good pass, or try to spot how certain players on the other team betrayed certain physical reflexes that allowed me to rush past them when I had the football and plan my route all the way to the touch line.

This time it goes *well*.

Everything I had been doing just went right. I allowed myself to just follow the flow, no longer bossing around and getting in the way of my buds, just doing my thing as the quarterback. I led every play, calling out to my guys just as planned. Glancing every so often to Coach Frost as he followed everything from his position, I could tell that he was happy with our performance.

Two early touchdowns left us with a nice lead, and it was clear that the Kentucky coach was not expecting the game to turn out this way.

At the next timeout, he called his team together and essentially ordered them to just play more aggressively. The Kentucky wide receivers stopped focusing on making wide runs, instead spreading further along the field so we’d have to chase after them to block their plays, which left us vulnerable to being tackled and sacked too.

It was a good plan, but Coach Frost saw that coming. He told us to keep disciplined, not let ourselves get suckered into making any mistakes just because every single Kentucky player treated himself like a battering ram against us.

But the thing is, while it didn’t result in points for Kentucky, they were succeeding at tiring us out. Marvin was struggling, trying to stop the running plays our opponents were testing us with. I was getting in good positions, sending out pitch-perfect forward passes any time I got the ball to our receivers, but the Kentucky strategy was really disrupting our strategy.

“Timeout!” the referee called at the end of the next play. Everyone collectively sighed. We were getting battered here. We needed those thirty seconds.

I glanced around the stadium. Full crowd. Kentucky bussed in their students and fans and they were noisy as hell, beating even us in terms of atmosphere.

“Man,” I grunted, knocking helmets with Russel, who was standing closest to me. “They’re really

giving us a serious workout here.”

“Did you see DeShawn? He’s barely broken a sweat,” Russel said, nudging his chin in the direction of the Kentucky quarterback. I followed his gaze and saw the quarterback shoot me a sarcastic salute.

“Well, we need to do something about this,” I said.

Coach Frost was giving individual instructions. Marvin was getting told off for making a couple of sloppy mistakes that led to a couple of field goals in the last quarter. I walked over to Marvin, patting him on the back, waiting my turn.

“Howard, you’re doing great. You’re nimble on your feet, that’s important today. I want you to start pulling back and help out when the Kentucky guys try to do this battering ram play of theirs. Risk that pretty face of yours and tackle like hell.”

“Okay, got it, Coach,” I said, rapping my knuckles against my helmet to make sure everything was in place.

Game restarted and this time I knew I had to support my team more. It was a balancing act, anticipating tackles and breaking down the Kentucky plays by disrupting them with my defensive presence — I also had to have the stamina to break out of these plays when I had to, so I could be in a good position to make a touchline run.

But Coach Frost was always right, and I was the star of the show tonight. I could feel it. The energy of the crowd was electric.

They oohed and ahhed when I got dove on at the touch line, holding the ball up. It didn’t even matter when the Kentucky defense stormed me with their tackles.

We won.

The whistle and the roar of the crowd as Florida fans finally outshouted Kentucky’s noisy support was all that mattered to me.

I opened my eyes and watched our fans jump in joy, celebrating our dominant win.

Mia. I kept seeing Mia. She was my lucky charm, the talisman that led to me being able to really follow the flow tonight.

To my great surprise, I saw her there. On the bleachers, first row, sitting alone.

I walked right up to her, eyes shining with awe. Was it real?

Someone was coming up to me, asking me questions, but I didn’t even hear what they were saying. It was some girl with a phone stuck out from an outstretched arm, recording me.

“Mia,” I murmured when I was close enough to her. She watched me with a proud smile the whole time. “Mia fucking Cowell.”

“Mia Cowell, that’s her name?” the wannabe journalist following me with a phone said. I recognized that voice *immediately*.

That was Fiona Davis, YouTube girl.

MIA

The winning quarterback, the hero of the night, singled me out. Of all the girls in all the bleachers and seats in the stadium, of all the fans, of all the students...

Bryant Howard was walking to me.

There was *intent* in his eyes. Like he meant it when he picked me, walking with purpose.

Everyone's eyes were on me.

"Who's that girl?" I could hear people whisper.

A goth girl, clearly Fiona with the YouTube gossip channel, was following Bryant, pointing a phone in his face... and now moving it to include me in the shot.

I blushed. This wasn't what I was expecting.

He called my name, and I had to go to Bryant.

I was still blushing, keenly aware of everyone's attention on me. There was the phone pointed in my face. "Hey, please, I don't consent to you recording me."

"You heard her, Fiona," Bryant said, getting in the way of the shot. "Leave us alone."

"Who's this, Bryant? I thought you were dating Samantha Rogers. Are you two-timing on her? Or did you dump her and replace her with someone who looks just like her — except a little less hot?"

Bryant got mad at that last taunt. "Hey, why don't you just leave us alone, like I said?"

He was the hero of the moment. Of course the crowd was with him. People started heckling Fiona, and she made the smart move of backing off.

Then it was just Bryant and me.

"Mia," he murmured. "Wow."

"Wow yourself," I replied, shaking my head in surprise. "Um, what's going on here? Are we having... a moment?"

"Call it whatever you want," Bryant said. I realized he was still breathless from the game. Even a non-sports watcher like me could tell that he really bossed that game. Kentucky were playing rough, slamming tackle after tackle into the Florida boys, but any time Bryant had the ball, he was untouchable. He ran, he dodged, he weaved, he flung perfect forward passes.

I was really impressed, and the tough girl part of me that had always been opposed to Bryant was very much interested in not letting him notice that.

Preparing some witty retort for him, I inched forward...

And then we were interrupted by a scream of anger.

"You're such a bitch, Mia!"

I blinked. That was Samantha. My best friend turned feuding roommate snuck up behind us. She

slapped me on my shoulder. "Hey, watch it!"

"I can't believe you would be such a bitch," Sam said, full of viciousness. "I thought you were my friend."

Turning around to face her, I thought I could at least comfort and console her the way I normally did, by holding her by her wrists, bringing her hands down, talking her down.

But she was too angry.

Sam really thought I was the bad guy here. "Sam... what are you talking about?"

"You kissed that other night, and now you're doing this. What the hell, Mia? And you, Bryant, you're sick. You're honestly sick if you think you can just move on from me to... this bitch."

She spat those last two words with so much venom. I had to really fight hard not to let the tears rush to my face.

"Sam..."

"I don't even want to hear it. We're over. I never want to see you again."

Bryant stepped in. "You have a lot of problems you need to figure out, and this isn't the right place, Sam."

There was a crowd surrounding us. And Fiona may have backed off, but she didn't leave.

She wasn't the only one with a phone out.

Sam laughed bitterly. "So you broke up with me the night of the party just because you saw Mia? I knew you had some weird, twisted crush on her the whole time. Was that why you hooked up with me, huh, Bryant? Because I was your pretend-Mia?"

"What the hell?" Bryant said, shaking his head. "No. It's not like that at all."

"Just come clean, you're such a fucking coward," Sam shouted. She raised her voice to a pitch I had never heard. This wasn't the Sam I had known all my life. I realized she had to be high right now as well.

We didn't even go to the football game together. I didn't see her in any of the seats on my side, so she had to have been getting high by herself and then coming to stage some sort of intervention... only to see me and Bryant.

"Sam, please. Not now. Not in front of all these people," I begged my best friend.

"You don't have the right to ask me to do anything, *bitch*," Sam replied, her face contorted with anger. She clenched her fists and started to step up to me.

This was going to be bad. An argument was one thing, but an actual fight? Sam was crazy if that was what she wanted!

People were coming in to join the crowd. I realized they were Bryant's teammates.

"Yo, Bryant, what's up? Time to go, come on!" one dark-skinned, taller footballer said, hugging his helmet to his chest.

"Tyrone, give me a sec," Bryant replied, turning to him. "Can you do me a favor and like, tell everyone to just leave?"

Marvin was there too, frowning as he saw Sam. Sam acted like he wasn't there. "Alright everyone, this isn't the party, the team celebration's out by the Washington Building, not here at the stadium. Got it, everyone? Time to leave!"

He raised his voice, guarding Bryant as he and some of the other football players guided the crowd out.

I could finally breathe again. But I couldn't stop the flow of tears.

Bryant was being mobbed by his friends. I glanced over to him and realized I had to face this one alone.

“Sam...”

“You really did it this time, Mia,” she replied, shaking her head. She was still furious at me. “You broke the girl code. You’re no friend of mine. You’re honestly just the sneakiest, snakiest girl in this entire college.”

I wiped my tears. “Say whatever you need to say. Let it out. I don’t care. You’re my *friend*.”

“Doesn’t feel like it. Friends don’t go slobbering all over Bryant Howard after pretending to hate him for years.”

“I *did* hate him for years,” I protested.

“And you suddenly just gave that up because he picked you up for a date in a Mercedes?” Sam said, raising an eyebrow skeptically. “Or did you stop hating him after he fucked you?”

The crowd may have gone, but Fiona was still around, recording a video of this whole scene.

Bryant came back, managing to escape from the mob of teammates and fans. “Fiona! Get out of here.”

“Is it true?” she asked, stepping back, pointing the phone from Bryant to me to Sam. “You cheated on your girlfriend with her best friend who had just arrived here?”

“What? No!” Bryant said, waving his hands to block the phone camera. “We haven’t done anything like that.”

“Bullshit,” Sam cursed.

“Seriously, we haven’t,” I said, amid all my tears. “It was just one kiss. And it was a mistake. We agreed that it won’t happen again.”

Bryant nodded quietly, still shooing Fiona away. He turned to Sam. “It’s really not what you think.”

Fiona finally left, muttering about how she had the scoop of the year.

Sam took a few steps back, too angry to process all of these things.

I was shaking so hard. I didn’t like crying, let alone crying in public. And the horror of knowing that I would soon be the subject of university-wide gossip made it worse.

Bryant hugged me, holding me tight. “Are you okay?”

I couldn’t reply. Not with words, at least. I shook my head, letting him squeeze me with the warmth and comfort he could provide. I needed that.

But Sam was disgusted. This was clearly the last straw for her. She opened her mouth, but didn’t say anything — instead she just left.

“You’re shaking,” Bryant said, wrapping his arms over my arms to hold me in a tight hug. “Don’t worry. I’ll take you somewhere safe. You’re good now.”

His teammate Tyrone came back. “Bryant. Hey. Coach wants everyone to be at the team celebration. You want me to stall or something for you?”

“Nah, it’s okay, bro,” Bryant said. “Just... do your thing, I’ll catch up when I can. I don’t think I’ll make it to the celebration.”

Even with the tears blotting my vision, I could tell Tyrone didn’t think this was a good idea. “Are you sure, man?”

“Tyrone, I’m good. I just need to sort a problem out here first, okay?”

“Okay, cool. Let me know.”

Bryant let out a long breath. It was just the two of us at last, under all the lights, just as the stadium started progressively switching them all off, starting at the far side of the stands, slowly going dark second by second.

I just wanted to leave.

“Okay, Mia. Let’s go. Let’s get you out of here.”

His voice was so soothing, even though I could tell he was mad about all the drama.

But soothing or not, he couldn’t stop my tears. I was crying, I kept crying.

I felt like such an idiot.

BRYANT

I couldn't let Mia suffer like this, not when none of this was her fault.

She was getting blamed for a kiss that I initiated, that I pushed for, that I *wanted*.

"You're going to be safe now," I promised. There was a certain responsibility here I felt over her. She didn't know it yet, but I could make things right for her — being a quarterback at a school that worshipped its football players like Florida had its perks, and I was going to make sure I squeezed every last one of those perks in order to give Mia the safety and comfort she needed.

We made for my car, not looking back even once. The team celebration, any after-parties... those weren't important. Those were noise. Helping Mia through her situation was the only thing that mattered to me.

I watched her slowly enter my car, sitting down, putting her seatbelt on. I exhaled. "Okay. I'm guessing you can't go to your place. So I'm taking you back to mine."

Mia seemed a little unsure. "Maybe Sam's cooled off by now."

"You're her best friend, you should know that's not really her style."

"Ugh," Mia complained, nodding as she pressed her back into the luxurious leather seat of my car. "You're right. I'm in trouble, Bryant."

My body tingled when she said my name, especially since it was still an unusual feeling for me to hear Mia say it without the venom that I was all too familiar with in high school. "You don't have to stay over. I know you probably don't want that at all. But I do insist on you making sure you make it through the night unharmed... and I feel like I owe it to you to do that."

Mia frowned. "You don't owe me anything. Truly."

I shook my head, keeping my attention focused on the road. "Let's just say that you could use all the help you can right now, so it would be unfair to have you suffer alone."

"When did you get so nice?"

I raised an eyebrow as I smirked. "I've always been nice, Mia. You just refused to notice."

"Huh," she said, sounding like she was beginning to notice. "I guess you might be right about that."

Fuck our history of enmity. Fuck all that childish bullying, all that previous nonsense that marked our relationship. I didn't want any of that now. I just wanted to make sure she was alright.

At least she had stopped crying. That was a small blessing.

"This is a lot to take in," Mia said, looking out the window, her gaze completely avoiding me. "Sam's been mad at me before, but never like this."

"She feels threatened, Mia," I said.

“By what? Me and you? But... there’s nothing going on.”

My body deflated a little, hearing her say that. Was I somehow expecting that this drama was meant to not just bring us closer, but bring us *together*? It seemed like that was what I wanted the most.

Well, I knew I could have any girl I wanted. After a game night like this, I could probably literally point to the hottest stranger I saw and she would be waiting for me in bed.

But the thought of just treating dating like a meat market tasted really sour in my mouth right now. I didn’t want that, I wanted something meaningful.

There was a primal sense of responsibility here, as I tended to Mia’s needs. I found myself filled with pride that she had managed to stop crying, that I had done my best to keep the cameras out of her face when Fiona was bothering us.

It was strange, knowing that I really wanted to take care of Mia in a time like this.

What was it about her? Her puppy dog blue eyes? The way she looked innocent and waif-like, even now that she was out of high school? Samantha was now a hot Instagram model version of the girl she once was. Sam lined her eyebrows, wore chokers, was generally... provocative.

But Mia was something else. Mia was herself. I knew she was nobody other than the Mia Cowell, nerd with glasses, a dork, if a beautiful one.

Okay, there I was, commenting on her beauty.

“You’re being quiet,” I said, trying to keep a conversation going so I didn’t have to be stuck with my own thoughts.

“I don’t know how I’m going to resolve this whole Sam thing. It can’t go on like this. It’s bad enough this has started affecting her, but soon it’s going to affect me. And I’m on a scholarship, I have to study, I have to make sure I keep a good grade point average.”

“Look, Mia, there’s no way in the world you get anything other than a pretty top grade GPA,” I reassured her. “You’re smart as fuck.”

“That’s not enough now,” she said, offering a wan smile at my compliment. “You probably know a little bit about that, you’re on a scholarship too. You can’t let yourself drift and lose all your momentum. Or worse, get yourself swept away by all the distractions that take you away from keeping to the standard you set for yourself.”

“Whoa, you’re getting a little philosophical here, Mia,” I said, caution building up in me. “Let’s stay focused on the here and now. You can have a nice good night’s sleep at my place. Take my bed if you have to, I can crash on a couch downstairs.”

I turned the car into my street just as I said that. “See? Home sweet home.”

Mia shook her head fiercely. “I’m not letting you sleep on a couch.”

A shudder ran through my body, but I didn’t show it, I managed to keep that on lockdown — as pleasurable as it might have been. Was she going to invite me to join her in bed?

She paused, thinking about her words. “You didn’t have to do this. I’ll just take the couch instead.”

“In a testosterone-filled house like this? With a bunch of football players walking around naked, bringing girls back to their rooms? That would be awkward,” I said. “Look, there’s nothing wrong with my room. I am the guy whose dad is paying for the house’s whole rent, after all.”

“Well...” Mia said, letting me guide her to the house. “Fine. For now. But I need to think.”

“Think all you absolutely need,” I agreed. We went upstairs, walking down the corridor until we reached my room. I immediately gave her the bed, allowing myself to hover over her, leaning back on a wall, standing and watching her. “But after tonight, you’re going to want the rest, I’m thinking.”

“Yeah, alright, I do need that,” Mia agreed. “But I don’t think I can live with Sam anymore either. You know, this all got messed up real fast. I was a scholarship student with a single occupancy room, I could have just stuck with that, instead of applying to have Sam move into my room with me.”

“Right,” I nodded. She sat down on the edge of my bed, her hands folded neatly over her lap. She looked defeated. I felt sorry for her.

“The problem is... I can’t let her feelings keep me hostage anymore,” Mia said. “She actually had the guts to tell me not to come back every single time we have a fight. But it’s my room as much as hers. If I want to sleep in my own bed, that’s my right.”

“I hear you, Mia.”

“What am I going to do? I can’t just ask her to move out, not after we spent so much time planning all this out. And the RA’s a friend of hers. If anything, I’m the one who’s gonna lose out,” she sighed. “I wish I had the money for an apartment of my own.”

If money was the root cause of her problems, I was ready to offer mine to help her out. It wasn’t like I was desperate for more of my dad’s money, anyway. All that was coming in anyway, and I could at least do something good with that cash if I helped Mia out.

She cut me off before I could even open my mouth.

“Don’t even think about it, Bryant. I’m not letting someone else pay for my apartment.”

I slumped against the wall. “There’s nothing wrong with accepting help, you know.”

“Oh, I know that,” Mia said, finally looking up at me. “And I know you’re not the strings-attached sort of guy when it comes to these things.”

These things?

She clarified, seeing my confusion. “I mean you’re not the kind of guy who would dangle an obligation like this over someone’s head... but also the fact that you’re not exactly Mr. Commitment here. You prefer your women unattached, so you can jump from girl to girl.”

I made a face. “That’s not what I’m thinking right now.”

“Because the other alternative is pretty crazy to me...” Mia said, her voice trailing off.

“What is it?” I challenged her to answer.

“The alternative is you actually, for whatever reason, think you want to be with me right now. And I don’t quite believe that. It’s just too crazy.”

“What’s so crazy about that? Maybe it’s not that I want to be with you. Maybe I just want to help you out.”

“Nobody just helps a random girl out with money for an apartment,” Mia replied. “And I get it, I’m not a random girl either — but what am I, then? Your ex’s best friend... or a former stranger you kissed once.”

Twice, actually, but I didn’t want to correct her aloud.

I sighed. This was getting frustrating, but I saw it coming. After all, Mia was right to suspect my intentions. We had literally just met again after a year, and suddenly everything seemed so perfect?

Mia Cowell was always a skeptic, whose cynicism helped rule her motivations. I could tell that she was trying to figure out what the catch here could be. Well, there was no catch, but I didn’t know how we could prove that so easily.

Then I had an idea.

“What if I could help you change rooms? Switch to a different building. Have that all worked out tonight. I can pull some strings.”

Mia looked at me funny, but I could tell she was receptive to the idea. This was a lot better than staying for free with me, or accepting my money because of a problem she was in.

Even if I felt like I owed her.

“Tonight?” she finally said, considering the idea.

“Do you know Allie Rice?” I asked, knowing she most likely wouldn’t.

“No, who is that?”

I explained that Allie was someone I had taken a few classes with last year, who was now the RA for a different dorm building a short walk away from the Washington Building. Mia was now staying at. “She’s a friend, sort of.”

“Meaning you hooked up with her before,” Mia instantly guessed. Not incorrectly, either.

“Well, not quite. We didn’t really do anything, just flirted a lot, and I felt really comfortable with her so we ended up being friends, I guess? She’s got a girlfriend now, apparently our date sparked her interest in exploring her bisexuality. Anyway, that’s not important. What’s important is that she’s the RA at one of the other buildings, and if I asked her for help, I think she could work things out for me.”

“For *me*,” Mia said, frowning. “I don’t know, it’s a little uncomfortable. But you’re right, that’s a lot less bad compared to all the other options.”

What was there for her to be uncomfortable about? I didn’t even respond to that, so I just decided to start giving Allie a call.

Luckily for me, she was still up, and she was happy to help. “Why aren’t you at your team celebration? I just had Tyrone text me, asking me to come over.”

My teammate wasn’t her boyfriend, but he had been trying to get in her pants forever. He didn’t quite get the memo that Allie was with someone else. I chuckled at the thought. “Are you going to?”

“Well, I was still thinking about it,” Allie responded. “And it stopped me from getting into my PJs and readying for a quiet night. So I guess you might as well bring your friend over here, let’s see what I can do.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Allie,” I said, feeling grateful for her help.

“Well, don’t take too long. I’m not here to wait around for you. If you want this favor, come by now, okay?”

“We’re on our way.”

I nodded to Mia, smiling and telling her things were going to look up. She was still looking pretty blue.

“You’ve got a lot of power,” she said.

“Well, this isn’t Daddy-bestowed power. I didn’t get any of these connections using my billionaire dad’s money, you know?” I replied. I needed her to understand that. The last thing I wanted was for her to pull back and go distant over her weird feelings about my family.

“Fine, let’s do it.”

Rushing Mia along because I knew Allie meant it that she wasn’t interested in waiting, we got in my car and drove to the Jackson Building in no time.

This dorm building didn’t have the heritage design that Mia’s had, no fancy colonial architecture, just a splash of Miami Art Deco. Nothing too special. You could tell the few flourishes they managed to put in, like the exposed brick and the wood panelling, were modern day touches. Not that it mattered, this probably was a good thing, seeing Mia needed to pay for her student housing using her scholarship.

“Allie, hey,” I said as soon as she met us outside the building.

“Okay, let’s make it quick. I’ve got a shared bedroom open because this one girl dropped out. You’d have to share, but I’m guessing you’re already sharing, right?” Allie asked Mia. “That makes it easier to do the transfer paperwork, honestly. And the girl who’s currently roommate-less is

desperate for anyone to join her. Why don't you go and check it out, say hi to her? That's room 308."

Mia nodded and went upstairs. I was surprised Allie didn't want to lead her up herself. I guessed she wanted to catch up with me.

"Bryant..." she said, in a low voice, catching me off-guard. I wasn't expecting a serious discussion now of all times.

"She's just a friend. I think," I quickly said.

Allie raised an eyebrow. "Mia Cowell is just a friend?"

"Jeez, how did you know all about her so soon?"

Then it struck me. Of course the rumors about Mia must have been spreading already. "There's huge drama, isn't there?"

"Yeah. Not just Fiona, but pretty much all of social media all over the school," Allie shrugged. "Your friend's not going to have a very easy time anywhere she goes, people are going to stare, people are going to talk."

"I get that," I nodded. "Hey, can we just go join her? I don't want to like, leave her alone right now."

"It's nice that you're trying to pull strings and help her out, but don't you think that's pushing it?" Allie asked. "I don't mind helping, of course, but everything I'm reading right now seems bad. Not just for her, but for you. You're going to end up super distracted. Your football will suffer."

"It didn't tonight," I shrugged. I had the game of my life, and I was going to guarantee that I would keep my levels up, do this every time. "So what? She's in trouble. And her best friend who's also her roommate is making her life a living hell."

"Could it be that she's the problem?" Allie asked.

I shook my head. That was definitely not it. This was all Sam.

"She's a smart, quiet girl. Bit of a nerd. Used to make fun of her for that in high school, Allie. Hey, let's just go back to her."

We went up to the third floor and found Mia standing outside room 308.

"I could take this one, yeah," she said, nodding.

"Well... I was just thinking," Allie started to speak, and I worried she was going to turn Mia away. "I also have a single bed. Girls can get mean when someone new is moving in — and you're someone with a pretty high profile, if you know what I mean."

Mia watched Allie carefully, analyzing what she was saying. "Oh. Okay, I get it." She glanced to me and I shrugged. This was just how it was.

"You might have to pay extra. I don't know the details, but I don't think your scholarship will cover it. A single bed in Jackson is more than a single bed in Washington."

Mia sighed. "Well, whatever. I'll find a job or something, dip into my savings. But I think you're right. This is for the best... I'll take a single occupancy dorm."

Allie nodded, turning to smile at me. "How about I lead you both to the room? It's just down the hall."

With any luck, room 315 was going to be Mia's home for the remainder of her time at Florida, and there wasn't going to be any more drama. At least here she had a place to stay, far enough away from Sam, far away from any more drama.

MIA

Bryant's friend left after handing me the forms I needed to fill out, telling me to take my time, I didn't have to worry about any deadlines or paperwork nonsense — she'd help me out.

I was grateful for this. This room was a little bigger than the room I had originally been given, the one that I ended up converting into being a shared dorm with Sam. Part of me wished I had never done that, that I could just undo it.

It would hurt, but I could definitely tell Sam to just go back to her old dorm, while I tried to ignore everything and make a home for myself in the place I was given to begin with.

But then I realized Sam was the one who made all those things happened. Until I fixed things with Sam, she would just make everything so miserable, and I didn't want that. Not at all. I just wanted to keep things in perspective. I was here to study journalism, not to get dragged into drama.

I sighed, and Bryant started to walk towards me. I could tell he was ready to give me another big bear hug.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Thanks, but I just want a little space right now."

"Okay," he understood. "I can leave. Looks like everything's under control here... right?"

"Sure it is. Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, I don't mean to be a spoilsport about things but... isn't this going to be expensive? Your scholarship won't cover all of it. You'll have to pay extra, and I don't want you to have to stretch yourself at a time when you've already got a lot of pressure coming your way. I just want you to be able to relax a little," Bryant said.

"Right," I said, listening carefully to his words. What was he trying to say? That he wanted to pay for this?

I let a silence pause between us. I was attracted to him, that was true. I was pissed off at him for driving a wedge between me and Sam, but even I knew that was an irrational feeling. He didn't really do anything. I was the one at fault for kissing him back, but in the end it was all about Sam, because she was the one who refused to see things straight.

So I told him what I needed him to know first and foremost.

"You don't owe me anything, Bryant."

The quarterback paused, making sure he picked the right words. I didn't like that he had to walk on glass around me, that he was so worried he'd set me off, but right now I was in a real bad mood, and I knew I could easily be set off. So this was a good thing.

"Doesn't mean you can't take any help, if it doesn't cost you anything," Bryant eventually said. He sounded a little annoyed, maybe at me, but probably more at himself.

A guy like Bryant Howard was not used to not getting his way. Paradoxically, sometimes that meant when he tried to help someone, he probably expected it to go over smoothly, that nobody would object, and suddenly all problems in the world are sorted.

I shook my head. "It doesn't really work like that. I'm an independent girl, I can afford this."

"For a few months, probably. What about at the end of the semester? Or the semester after that? I know you're the kind of girl who studies like crazy, so you'd be hurting yourself if you tried to juggle it working a dead-end part-time job, Mia."

I winced. "You know, in the whole year when I couldn't go here, that was exactly what I managed to do. I worked at the sporting goods store you used to go to, remember that place? We had our last big fight there."

A look of embarrassment came over Bryant, and he started to fold his arms in front of him. "Not my best moment."

"Or mine. But that's in the past, right? Can we at least agree on that?"

"Sure," he said, exhaling softly. "That's very generous of you."

I nodded. This was leading exactly where I wanted it to. "And it's very generous of you to have your friend help me get a new place at no notice at all. Most guys would never do that for someone, let alone someone who's had a lot of bad history with him. So thank you for that. But I can handle things on my own from here."

He looked surprised, and I had to hold back a thousand different things I would just as easily have said at that moment.

I couldn't tell him that as much as I was trying to be a tough girl, sitting in her room all alone, right now I just wanted comfort. I wanted it from him. I wanted Bryant to come over here, touch me and hold me, but I couldn't ask for that.

I couldn't guarantee it was going to be all right.

And the last thing I wanted was to stay too long in one place, get comfortable in his presence, contradict everything I had ever believed in just because it's easier to melt your worries away in Bryant's strong arms.

"I can go," he said, one more time.

But then I stopped myself from letting him do that. I just wanted to let this moment last, this nice feeling of knowing that Bryant was looking out for my best interests after all. He was *helping* me, and he wanted to make sure I was okay.

I raised a hand. "Don't."

"Don't... go?"

"Yeah. I don't want you to leave, not right now. Please stay, Bryant."

I couldn't read his face at that moment, because it must have been a sudden rush of conflicting emotions. We were sharing a moment here. I felt my body get lighter and lighter, as I focused on my breathing, pacing myself.

Something told me I was ready for him to be here in the room with me.

He could do whatever he wanted. He could keep me company.

Or he could come touch me, hold me, like I wanted.

My eyes must have spoken my desire to him, because the alpha male of a quarterback took slow, decisive steps towards me, until we were standing just inches away from each other.

I could feel his breath, the way his body seemed to glow and radiate warmth. He was so much taller than me. He was so much bigger, too.

He had wrapped his arms around me before, when I started crying after Sam blew up at me. That

felt so good. That was a feeling no guy had ever made me feel. In that moment, Bryant made me feel safe and secure.

"I want to feel safe again," I whispered to him.

He looked down at me, his eyes starting to fill with intensity. I had seen those deep brown eyes before, but this was the first time I really saw them as beautiful, that I started to realize just how hot he was.

It was crazy to me that Bryant Howard had been someone I called my arch-nemesis for so many years, that I had built up this crazy, negative impression of him, when actually, deep down inside, he was a good guy.

"You're not just a billionaire's son," I whispered to him. "You're so much more. You're a good man."

"I try," he said, his voice dark and low as well. "Fuck, I try so much."

I could tell these were words that really mattered to him.

My hands started to press against his chest. He was still wearing his football jersey, in this time he had only removed his helmet and most of his guard pads. Right now, in my room, in front of me, he was definitely the school's star quarterback.

"What now?" I whispered. "I just want to feel safe again."

"Let me make you feel safe," he immediately replied. My palms felt good pressed against his broad chest. His hands began to move to my waist.

That touch left me feeling weak. I could feel myself actually want something more. Not just a kiss. I needed tonight to wash away all the drama and pain from earlier.

"Please," I whispered, without even identifying what it was I was begging him to do.

But Bryant knew. His eyes flashed and I could tell he knew. He began to undress me, inching us forward towards the single bed.

It was too small for two people to sleep in, but that didn't mean we couldn't squeeze our bodies together there.

The thought of him doing that to me made me tingle.

"Yes, please," I whispered, tilting my neck towards him, just as he began to lean down and kiss me there.

My body began to tremble, and I realized I was ready to experience this closeness and intimacy with Bryant. All the drama of the past was stupid. This was what mattered.

I was ready.

"Please," I murmured to him again, while he began to remove my t-shirt, pulling it above my head. I had a denim skirt on, and I was suddenly painfully aware of my mismatched underwear. I had a beige bra on but white cotton panties.

Bryant kept kissing my body, while my hands wandered around his. I didn't know that I could want this so much.

I was a virgin, but did Bryant know that? It wasn't like this was a religious thing, or that I had been waiting for marriage. It was just that nothing had ever escalated to this level... and now that I knew Bryant was here, doing this to me... I was ready.

My heart was beating so fast as Bryant began to cup my breasts with his hands. "They're so nice," he said, even though he hadn't seen them yet, even though he was still just cupping my bra.

"Thanks," I said, blushing.

"I mean it," Bryant said. "Can I take them off?"

I waited until he was looking at my face again. I smiled up at him. "I'd love it if you did that."

This wasn't what you typically expected from a popular guy, an alpha male, a quarterback like Bryant. You thought of them as greedy guys whose sheer power of magnetism made you want to do everything he said, whether he asked it or not. There were all the stereotypes of the alpha male who would just take what he wanted.

Right now, Bryant was taking it slow. Bryant was making it feel *right*.

As he removed my bra after a few seconds of trying to find the clasp, I realized this wasn't just his style during sex — this was Bryant being a thoughtful guy in general.

He helped me get this room.

Did his friend suspect we were doing this right now? My eyes shot towards the closed door, wondering if I needed to pause everything, just lock the door, make sure nothing interrupted our time together.

But right now, being kissed by Bryant as he fondled my breasts, touching me, making me feel warm and wanted... I didn't want to risk suddenly ending this moment.

There was a magic to the way our bodies were reacting to each other, and the last thing I wanted was to interrupt that.

I raised my hands from his abs to touch his face, bringing it to my face level.

"I want to kiss you," I whispered, and then I did exactly that. Our lips began to meet, opening slightly so our mouths could kiss deeper, so I could feel his tongue with mine.

We kissed hard, and I could feel my body rapidly become taken over by the passion that had been simmering this whole time. I wanted passion, I was getting passion. I was getting Bryant Howard, uncensored, his attention fully devoted to me.

I could feel my face blush again as I thought about just how good he was at kissing. I had my fair share of practice, probably nowhere near the kind of time spent on kissing the way a guy who had always been popular his whole life like Bryant did, but I was blown away by just how good he was at that.

He had a real talent for kissing me, holding my body close to him, our waists pressed together.

I could feel his bulge against the front of my thigh. Just feeling that made me wet. "Oh my God," I whispered, flustered.

"Are you okay with this?" Bryant checked in with me.

"Of course," I nodded. "I'm just... you know, not used to this. It's hot."

"It is," Bryant agreed. "I'm going to keep undressing you, okay?"

He was being gentle with me, and that was exactly what I needed right now. I needed solace, I needed comfort, I needed his protection. He had such large, strong hands, and the muscles of his arms and chest were all I could think about.

When he stepped back from our previous kiss, I told him to wait, and then I immediately started reaching for his pants, undoing the knot and pulling them down.

My hand brushed against his bulge and I shivered.

Not that I had any real experience at this, but... He was *huge*.

My body was shivering nonstop. It wasn't anxiety, it was anticipation. Bryant was a man who could give me everything I needed, and that was what I wanted. Everything.

He was just in his tight grey briefs and his football jersey, the pads of his shoulders making his upper body look even more large and imposing.

I was topless for him now, and I let him take my skirt off, zipping from the sides so they fell down to the floor.

I was about to be naked for him, if not for my shoes, which thankfully slipped off with just a kick

of my heels, and my panties.

He had made me feel so vulnerable in such a sweet way, taking care of me like this, making me feel wanted. I wanted to show him just how happy I was for his help, for his attention.

Was this what hooking up as a college girl felt like? I didn't have anything like this during my year at community college, and something about Indianapolis guys always made me feel like they weren't really my type.

But Bryant was doing something to me that no guy had ever accomplished. Did this mean *he* was my type?

I was ready.

"Okay," I whispered, taking steps backwards until I felt the bed. I lowered myself, sitting up in bed, my legs open to him.

He followed me, removing his jersey so I could see his muscle-bound body, the quarterback with his incredibly built torso driving me wild at once.

Bryant began to remove my panties just as he lowered his head between my legs, kissing my inner thighs.

I moaned. I wanted so much more. I wanted him, I wanted Bryant Howard — I didn't care about everything we had fought over in the past, that was all unimportant now.

I wanted his body against mine, so when he pulled himself into bed with me I was glad to see that he was already removing his underwear.

All this foreplay had left me breathless for him. I ran my hands over his back, feeling the muscles and tension he kept in them.

He got into position, with me under him, with him kneeling over me, whispering at me to look at where his right hand was.

I kept my eyes open, watching him, holding my breath, as his hand went from my neck to the center of my chest right down to between my legs, where I couldn't resist reflexively grinding myself against his hand, skin on skin.

He placed his thumb there where my heat and arousal was, and I moaned when his thumb started to touch me, really touch me.

I closed my eyes, arcing my back for him.

"No, Mia," he said, shaking his head. "Look at where my hand is."

I opened my eyes again, and my gaze traveled just where he wanted me to. His right hand was cupped against my pussy, and it made me feel shy, knowing that, seeing that... then he moved it away.

His strong hand grasped his cock and I realized now, compared to his already large hand, he was really, really big. He was packing a very serious cock, and I wanted nothing else but for him to be inside me.

I was so wet that his palm had become slick with me, and he started to make a little show of stroking himself until he was really, really hard, and that was when he pinned me down, and told me to relax.

The pleasure I felt when he pushed that huge cock inside me was unbelievable.

BRYANT

This felt incredible. Like no experience I had with any other girl in college had been. Even with Sam it wasn't ever like this, even though she was a wild girl who was great in bed.

I couldn't compare Mia to anyone else. Mia was fucking amazing. She needed a tender touch, and I was feeling tender myself. I just wanted her to know how important it was for me to fix everything I had fucked up in the past.

The bed made so much noise while I was on top of her, that we had to stop for a second and catch our breaths as we just laughed. Mia was giggling, and after she had been sad all night, this was a really fucking nice thing to hear.

"Okay, wow, you're so hard," she said, looking down as I sat at the edge of her bed.

"Yeah... I really am," I said, in awe of my own hard-on. Sex was one of my favorite things, as much a physical pursuit as anything, just like football. It felt great when I was having sex, but having sex with Mia made it even more special.

Was this room going to be where I would come back to, wanting more? I began to lift her up and sit her on my lap, teasing her with more kisses, and a hand massaging her inner thigh.

"You're so hot," I told her.

She giggled again. "No, you're the one who's hot."

I left it at that and lifted her by her waist, before lowering her down to my cock again. I wanted her to ride me, her petite body mounted to me as I used my powerful thighs to push thrust after thrust into her.

She was really getting into the rhythm of this. This was the kind of sex I craved: not just wild and fun, but really strong, really intense. I wanted to connect with her, and I wanted to tell her just how fucking good she made me feel.

I couldn't believe my eyes, even as I started to lean back, propping my body up by my elbows against her mattress. This was Mia Cowell. Naked. Bared to me.

Riding me like it was her one purpose in life.

Just watching her like this drove me crazy. I had always imagined she had a cute little body under all her nerdy clothes, back in high school, but to actually see and experience for myself was something I never really expected. She was red-hot, her pale and soft skin contrasted to the more tan and rugged look of mine.

I had to touch her. She liked it when we kissed, so I angled my mouth towards her and she got the hint, riding me closer to my base as she brought her head down, kissing me deep.

Her tongue reached for mine, and I was impressed by just how not shy she was. So many of my

college hookups had been girls who kinda just shut down and let the guy get what he want, especially after a night of nonstop hinting about how we were going to end up in bed. Inexperienced girls often just went with the flow, never really knowing what they wanted.

I knew Mia was inexperienced. And specifically that she was a virgin. So for her to carry herself with this much intensity was exactly what I wanted to feel.

She wanted this. She wanted me. She showed me just how much she wanted all these things by the way she bounced up and down on me, her cute little ass pressing down against my lap, her petite breasts getting in my face every time she rose, right before dropping down again.

I was so turned on by her, I was struggling to breathe.

If this was my reward for winning the big game against Kentucky, I was ready to repeat my success every single time. I would be the D1 MVP, just because nothing felt so good after playing a football game and then immediately getting into bed with Mia.

With my hands guiding her hips, setting the motion so we collided into each other when she kept riding me, I fantasized about this being a prolonged thing — about her always coming to every game, and after we won, I'd skip the celebration, skip the club, skip the afterparty and the girls I didn't care about who all wanted my attention... and I'd just go back to Mia.

And we'd do exactly this.

“Oh my God,” Mia moaned, holding onto me tight. “I'm really close, I can feel it.”

“Fuck yeah, baby,” I whispered, grinning. I wanted her to have the climax of her life. I wanted her to really enjoy this moment. “Come on. You can do it. Please. You can do that for me.”

I could feel her body clench in anticipation. She really wanted me... and I really wanted her to come.

“I'm coming!” she cried, her nails digging into my back. I loved the spike of pleasure that came with the pain from her scratching and digging into me. Just the fact that she enjoyed it this much left me reeling from the overdose of pleasure I was experiencing too, and I couldn't help myself, I came with her.

“Fuck,” I said, gritting my teeth, slamming my back down to her new bed. My body tensed as I came, and she moaned again, propping herself over me. We were sweating all over each other, and this made it even hotter to me.

My eyes closed, and I felt the fatigue from my whole day catch up to me. “Fuck,” I said again, “I can't let myself fall asleep.”

“Yeah,” Mia laughed in a low voice. “You'd take up all the space in my bed.”

We relaxed for a moment, then I sat up, scooting to give her more space. It was her bed, after all.

There wasn't really much to the room right now, so she would need to decorate it. There was a simple Ikea writing desk with an uncomfortable-looking plastic chair. Those had to go. Mia wanted to study, after all.

With my head clearing up after my desire for sex was fulfilled, I felt some anxiety bubble to the surface. If Allie knew all about Mia, this meant the whole school would know. They were going to peg us as a couple, and I didn't even know if that was what we really were meant for.

I mean, the rules we had set for ourselves were pretty clear. Neither one of us wanted drama.

So I said that. “Neither one of us want drama.”

“That's right,” Mia nodded. “I have to fix things with Sam. Eventually, you're going to have to, too.”

“I don't see a window for me to do that anytime soon, honestly,” I confessed. “But yeah, you're right.”

Mia looked at me carefully, her hands folded in front of her to cover her breasts. It was cute how she was shy, now that we had finished hooking up. "So... what now?"

"Good question," I smirked. "Yeah. I was thinking just that."

"That was amazing, Bryant. And... I don't know if you knew this, but that was my first time."

I bit my lip. "Yeah, I knew."

"Also, I'm not on birth control, so... I'm going to need some Plan B. Just letting you know," Mia said. "It's cool, though. I mean, actually, it's *hot*."

I laughed. "Yeah. It is."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Well... if you still think what you thought after the kiss we had at the Italian place... how about you don't take this dorm room, and move into my place instead? Separate rooms. No more hookups. Clear boundaries. We could make it work."

Mia laughed. "There's no way I'm going to say yes to that." But while she laughed before, now she started to look a little more serious. She looked annoyed, even.

"What do you mean?"

"There's clearly strong physical attraction here. And I'm not a hookup girl, Bryant. So while you might think we'll keep hooking up — I'm not so sure. But I do know that if you put me in your apartment, like your little toy whenever you want some attention, there's no way we wouldn't hook up. We're definitely hooking up."

She said these things, but I couldn't really see how it was a negative. "But it'd be easier."

"I don't want that."

She started to stand up, gathering her clothes and mine.

I didn't get why she was so annoyed by all this. "What did I say?" I asked, confused.

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"Come on," I said, not willing to take that as an answer. "I'm just trying to help you."

"If only it was that easy, Bryant. Just be real about things for once. You're trying to make me live some kind of life that isn't really what I want for myself."

"What, to help you have a place where you can truly be yourself? I'm only looking out for you. I don't get it. Okay, I guess this is complicated," I said, frowning. I was annoyed now too, and Mia was the source of all this.

She got dressed quickly, and I knew it was time for me to make an exit. Part of me had hoped we would stay the night together, or that we'd have round two. Hooking up was amazing, but I wanted more.

And now she was just confusing me like this.

"Okay, I'll go," I declared, getting dressed again. I was sweating all over from the intense sex we had just had, so putting football clothes I had worn through a whole game made me feel distinctly aware of my discomfort.

I needed a fucking shower.

I needed to wash all this negativity off me.

She didn't really say anything, just grimly nodding at me when I turned around to see her.

"Okay, then," I said.

I drove around for a while, realizing it was still early — not even midnight. I could still head for the club, because Marvin, Tyrone and Russel had all been blowing my phone up with texts asking me to come to the club where the celebration was, saying everyone wanted a piece of the star quarterback who won the day.

I was feeling pretty fucking exhausted, but I figured this could at least get my mind off of things. At least at the celebration I wouldn't be this confused. I'd know exactly who I was: a football player, a quarterback, a Florida University hero, the guy everyone looked up to.

Unlike back in Mia's room, where one minute she desperately wanted me, and the other she acted like she couldn't stand me anymore.

But before I could go to the club I would need to get out of my football jersey, slip into more stylish clothes.

That shower would be perfect.

"Damn, I'm jealous of the guys who got to have an ice bath right after the game," I thought aloud, driving home. The roads were quiet, but even so, I made sure I drove slow, followed every stop sign and traffic light.

Bullshit drama getting in my head like this was exactly how someone ended up making some sort of life-altering mistake that ruins their career. I got a starting spot in the lineup because of someone else's life-altering mistake.

I couldn't afford to make one of my own.

When I got home, I took a minute for myself to think. I was the only one at home, which made sense, since the rest of the team would be at the club, celebrating.

We were a rowdy bunch at the house, and I started to realize just how nice it was to be alone here for a second.

Was that what Mia really wanted? Just to be alone? I was a super-extrovert, I hated the idea of too much quiet. Mia probably was the opposite of me like that. She liked to study and read, she always kept a small set of friends.

Like Sam.

Ugh, the last thing I needed to do was think about that psycho ex of mine. Especially since Sam's own best friend was full of complications.

I didn't want that to be the case, but maybe Mia was too much trouble for me. Too much drama for my life. I was glad I was no longer in her room, even if my cock twinged, wanting more female attention.

"Well, buddy, that's what going to the club is for," I said.

I knew women would be throwing themselves all over me there, but the thought didn't really leave me too excited. As I entered the shower, consciously choosing an ice-cold rinse instead of a hot one, trying to calm down the heat my body radiated, I was aware of the dangers of just going with the flow, jumping from one hook-up to another.

"Fuck," I murmured again, still thinking about Mia. Why did she have to ruin a night that was going so well? I just wanted to take care of her.

It felt nice, nicer than any hook-up, when you could just take responsibility and help someone out when they needed it. Mia seemed to freak out at me doing that for her.

I got dressed in a simple black slim-fit shirt and a pair of designer jeans Marvin had bought me for my birthday, a surprisingly good gift for a guy who I always thought was clueless at everything.

And I was ready to get wasted at the club, so I didn't even bother driving. I just called a car from an app on my phone, and then waited.

"Mia," I said, still unable to shake her from my thoughts. I was still repeating her name like some kind of chant before a big game, when the car arrived.

As soon as I got to the club, I realized this was a mistake. I didn't want to be here.

Some blonde immediately turned and saw me. "Bryant..." she whispered. "Come party with us!"

There was a ripple of excitement from everyone at the club as they recognized that I was there. The bouncer said everything was fine, I didn't even need to get carded, and across the room, I could see Marvin and Russel knock back shots.

"My name's Renee," the blonde said, walking flirtatiously around me. "Do you want a drink?"

I shook my head. "I think I made a mistake coming here," I confessed out loud, and I immediately started walking away.

So something was going on with me. My body felt unfulfilled, like I wanted more... but it wasn't sex, because if it was, I could have easily had the opportunity to pick out any one of those girls in the club. I was the star, they would have fought each other just to spend the night with me.

It wasn't bragging. It was the simple truth. I knew how these things worked.

So if it wasn't sex, what was it? Was it Mia, specifically her? She was beautiful, yes, but this couldn't have been just about looks.

I realized that it had to be in the way she made me feel amazing. That I couldn't wait to see her again.

I wasn't used to feeling that way. Even with Sam seeing her seemed like routine, that of course I would come hit her up every night, because that's what I did when I had a girl.

With Mia...

I had an idea. I saw a drugstore across the road, so I went in, bought myself a Red Bull to boost my energy levels, and then sheepishly asked for a morning-after pill. I paid with my card and put the box in my pocket, drinking my energy drink.

"Can you meet me outside your dorm room?" I asked Mia, frantically texting her.

I admitted that it was possible she wouldn't even respond to my text. If that was the case, well, too bad for me. "Ten minutes," I typed again.

She didn't reply, but I walked there anyway.

And when I got there, exactly ten minutes later, dressed for the club, I saw Mia waiting for me, sitting on the steps leading inside.

She was wearing a grey top and sweatpants. Basic, cozy, unsexy... but to me, she looked like a million bucks.

"I got you your Plan B," I said, bursting into a grin.

Mia didn't even say anything.

She just kissed me.

"Move in to the house with me. I promise it'll work," I said.

I watched her lip tremble. She opened her mouth, as if she had something to say. But she didn't.

This time, she just smiled.

MIA

Was I crazy for accepting Bryant's offer? Things seemed like they were going to move for the better now. My main fear was that Bryant was just stumbling into something with me out of some weird sense of obligation, not because he actually liked me.

But him coming over with a morning-after pill and an offer to move in with him was just... too sweet for me to ignore.

He told me not to worry, he'd sort everything out with his friend Allie, the RA — I couldn't imagine that was going to be a fun conversation, after he pulled strings for her to let me move, and then the one night I actually move in, we, uh... ruined the sheets with our passionate enjoyment of each others' bodies.

I was blushing just thinking about it. Of course, Bryant could pull strings, I got that.

The next morning, having bought Allie what he called an extravagantly expensive brunch, he came to see me at my dorm room. I was in my PJs, going through lecture notes from my previous class.

"Hey," I murmured, watching him enter my room. I smiled and stood up from my spot at the bare desk.

The quarterback walked over to me and gave me a quick peck of a kiss, and I started to blush again.

He was treating me real special, and I still didn't understand why — but I was willing to stop worrying about his motives now.

Maybe it was time to allow this attraction to feel real.

I still had my reservations, though. It wouldn't be out of place for me to worry if I could handle juggling all my commitments. I had school to prioritize, because of my scholarship. And being with Bryant was undoubtably going to take a toll on any woman — as the hunky, handsome star of the football team, there was no way he wasn't going to get a lot of attention from other women.

"So, I just spoke to Allie," Bryant said. "She's annoyed about this, but she says since you didn't formally file the paperwork, she can accept that we made a hasty decision, and she'll undo everything. I'm going to have to pay for cleaners though. After, you know, last night."

Of course, after he came back, he was hungry for me again. Bryant wanted round two... and then round three... and in the end I had to push him off, giggling and telling him that I was too tired for any more.

He looked adorable, holding his hard-on in his right hand, pouting and telling me he wasn't done with me yet.

But some things were still too new to us. He couldn't bring himself to stay the night. I pretended to sleep, curled up tight, and then kept my eyes closed as he peeled his body away from me, walking getting dressed quickly and then going out.

At least he texted me. He had to sort things out fast for us.

"I guess this is good," I nodded.

"There's a big room in the house you can have on the ground floor, or you can just have my bedroom, and I'll take the one on the ground floor," Bryant offered. "I'd feel bad if I made the one girl who lived in the house stay in the downstairs bedroom, you know?"

"It's fine," I said, smiling. "Better that way. Keep me away from the overflow of testosterone going on upstairs."

"Are you sure?" Bryant asked.

"A hundred percent positive, believe me."

He told me to slap something on, he wanted to go on a drive with me. We could grab something to eat.

"Didn't you just have brunch with Allie?"

"I'm a growing boy who wants to bulk up for professional football, Mia," Bryant grinned. "I eat like a crazy amount of calories a day."

"Yeah, I remember you telling me that when we had Italian," I nodded. "Okay, let me find something more presentable than PJs. Do you, uh, mind going outside for a sec?"

"What?" Bryant said. Now he had a cocky smile that looked like he was happy to devour me right there and then. "Nothing I haven't seen before, you know..."

I sighed. "Fine. It's just, it's not very sexy, me trying to pick out clothes so we can go out right now."

"You're sexy in your pajamas, you don't have to put in an effort to be sexy. It's not like I'm asking you to dress up for a date."

He suddenly went red at his last word, and I watched him rub his hands together anxiously. I guessed that he was worried about pressing on our new dynamic too much too soon — talking about dates was definitely risky.

And he was right. We weren't dating.

I had no idea what it was we were doing, but it sure wasn't dating.

I picked a pink crop top and a pair of stretch jeans. Cute, but nothing too exciting. He looked excited all the same, and I smiled at that thought.

"Okay, so where are we gonna go?"

"There's a new fast-food place across town that I've heard great things about," Bryant told me. "I mean, I saw some videos on Instagram and they looked pretty great. Burgers, but fancy. They've even got a wagyu one with a truffle butter sauce."

"That sounds way too rich for this hour of the day," I pointed out. It was still only eleven.

"Yeah, but when we get there it'll practically be lunchtime. Come on!" Bryant said, taking my hand and yanking me forward, as I yelped and laughed.

We rushed to his car, parked right outside my dorm.

"Oh, also, I'm calling movers to come to your old room at the Washington Building. They'll pack everything and take it to the house. You don't even have to be there if you don't want," he announced.

I frowned. "It's my stuff, I should probably be there. I'd feel pretty uncomfortable about that."

"Yeah, that's true," he accepted. "Do you want me there too? I've got a team meeting, but I can skip it."

Shaking my head, I looked at him and told him, “I don’t want you to sacrifice team stuff just because you’re trying to help me out. I get that we’re in some sort of *thing* now, but that doesn’t mean you have to give up on your priorities. I can handle movers just fine. In fact, uh, it makes me feel super privileged. I could just gather all my things and call an Uber or something.”

Bryant shrugged. “Movers barely cost anything.”

“No they don’t. They’re super expensive. If they weren’t, don’t you think everyone would use movers instead?”

I felt a twinge of annoyance knowing how in so many ways, Bryant still did take money for granted. I knew I felt glad to have him use his money on helping me, but I didn’t want him to think that that was all there was to life, that he could just buy people off because it didn’t cost that much to him... or his father’s credit card.

He got the hint, and stayed silent for the rest of the drive.

I switched the radio on, letting some popular pop songs fill the silence, while I looked out the window. In all my time here, I had rarely gotten a chance to really travel outside of campus, keeping mostly to a small circuit between my dorm and my classes.

Classes still had to come first for me. I came to college wanting to make a big difference to my future journalism career, so I wanted to make sure this semester was the strong foundation for all the ones in the future.

Part of me regretted that I had to deal with so much drama so early into my life at Florida University, but a more optimistic side told me that at least that probably hinted that the drama would mellow down and drop off by the time I got into my stride, academically, at least.

Bryant started perking up, humming to some songs. “Yo, so I’m really excited for some of these burgers. I might have two. One for now, one takeaway.”

“You could get takeout burgers for the rest of the guys at the house, too,” I pointed out. “I bet they’d love you for it. Marvin, especially. And who are the others?”

“Yeah. There’s Russel and there’s Tyrone. Aside from the room that’s going to you, we’ve actually got another room available, so I might consider offering it to someone else on the team who might be interested,” Bryant replied.

“Who’s that?”

“Guy named Antonio. He’s a running back, a bit of a quiet guy. I don’t know him as well as the other guys, but he’s smart as fuck. You’d like him,” he said, starting to grin. “He’s a nerd with glasses too.”

I raised my eyebrows. Not at his playful insult, but at his teammate’s name. “Antonio’s my dad’s name. Funny. I think I like him already.”

“Shit, maybe I shouldn’t offer him that place, then. Wouldn’t want him to like, ruin my chances with you. He’s pretty good looking, in a more, like, Latino lover kinda way. I guess there might be competition here.”

“Well now that you say it like that... I’m definitely sure there’s competition,” I said, smiling as I teased him.

He chuckled and then placed his hand on my knee, patting it once before resting it there.

It felt... really sweet.

The burger place was *busy*. All the seats were taken up, and we couldn’t even find a table we could maybe squeeze in and share spots with. Even the seating by the walls and windows, which had stools facing out, were all taken up. I even saw a guy standing alone eating a burger and drinking a milkshake with his free hand, somehow trying to swap between drinking and texting in between sips.

“You’re right, I guess hype really got to this place,” I laughed, shaking my head. “Bryant, is it crazy if I said we don’t actually have to eat here? Let’s go somewhere else instead.”

The quarterback rejected my idea at once. “No way. That drive was like forty minutes, Mia, we’ll wait it out. At least the queues not too long. What the hell is going on, anyway? Did Beyoncé and Jay-Z just take a photo of them eating here or something?”

I laughed again. “That would make sense. I’m the one who hasn’t eaten, though.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bryant said. “We’ll just order takeout, yeah? Do you know what you want?”

Shrugging, I told him to just pick something for me. I wasn’t much of a picky eater, anyway.

“Oh yeah, I’m texting the movers now. I’ve got that team meeting at two, so I could drop you off at your old dorm then? And have the movers be there waiting for you?” Bryant said, glancing down at his phone.

I watched his hands as he texted away, thinking that I liked the band he wore around his right wrist. Now that I realized it, he always wore it. I think he was even wearing it the day of the college acceptance letters, when he and Sam ended up in Florida and I ended up... having to rush home to a house that burned down.

Ugh. I didn’t need a bad memory like that to ruin what was shaping up to be a perfectly decent day, otherwise. So far, Bryant was being nice. Last night, I felt he was too intense — like sex had somehow unlocked his urge to go full alpha male and claim me, not necessarily in a sexual or romantic way, but like I was his to take care of.

He wanted me to move in, and of course I couldn’t handle that. He had literally just pulled so many strings to get me a new place at short notice, and even if it was going to be expensive, at least I could probably figure something out.

I watched him text and idly browse social media while I stood by him, silently. He was a good guy. I knew that much. I was already undoing all the years of negative prejudices I had held against him, but I didn’t like that one of the main sticking points that soured me about him was still true: unlike me, he had a more casual, carefree way about the value of a dollar, and that made me think he could be condescending and dismissive about why it’s important to me to actually be responsible for my own needs.

He probably thought I was being unnecessarily prideful. But I didn’t see it that way. Taking care of my independence, now that I’m living away from home for the first time in my life, was something I wanted to make sure only I would be in charge of that.

“Hey, excuse me,” someone said, pausing as he looked at Bryant and me. “Are you... Howard, the Florida Renegade #11? Quarterback who played last night against Kentucky?”

Bryant grinned. The guy asking was a balding man in his early forties, so not someone who went to our school — not likely, at least. “Yeah, man. That’s me.”

“I’m the manager here. Wow. I watched your game, and I thought you played so well. I’m a big fan of college football. You mind if we take a picture? Also, you shouldn’t be in the queue here, let me open a second counter, ease the long wait for you and the rest of the people waiting.”

The little act of goodwill got lots of people happy, after we had been overhearing grumbles of how long they had been waiting to order, and how much longer they were expecting their food to arrive.

“Oh, man,” Bryant laughed. “I told you things would work out.”

He took a selfie with the manager, then they chatted for a while, talking about football stuff I didn’t really understand. Plays, win-lose records, pass rates and percentages... I just smiled.

I was smarter at other things, so that was fine. But it was nice to know that Bryant's interest in football wasn't just a physical talent, but a lifelong interest. He lit up when he talked about his sport.

In a few minutes, not only did we order, but we had our food in six takeout bags. He had ordered two of each of the three different specials, including the expensive wagyu burger he was raving about, and when we got to the car, I couldn't help but think about how hungry I was.

It didn't help that everything smelled so delicious, too.

"Well, I guess this was a mission well done," I said, smiling. "So, look at you, huh? Star quarterback."

Bryant smiled, but his smile dropped quickly. "I never asked for the fame or the attention. And it feels like these days, the attention tends to be more negative than positive... so a moment like this is a nice surprise. It's not always like that, though."

He went quiet, but I knew exactly what he was talking about. I had actively ignored social media after last night, but not before I had seen tweets and comments about the girl who Bryant Howard was "in love" with.

Fiona hadn't posted a vlog about our drama yet, not to my knowledge, but she had already posted the full unedited video of Sam blowing up at me. I knew this because people, even people I didn't even know, were already tagging me.

We drove straight to Bryant's house, and he was buzzing, telling the guys that he had food for all of us. We huddled around the dining table. I remembered that one for being a surface covered in literally dozens of red plastic cups full of beer from the night of the party. Thankfully, this time it was clean — tasteful, even, now that I could see the glass and steel design.

"Bryant, you're gonna be a star," Tyrone said. The tight end was a more quiet guy, unlike Marvin, who loved to talk. "Coach Frost even had a bit of champagne and told us that what we did against Kentucky was exactly what he wanted us to keep doing. Anticipate their plays, figure out a strategy quickly, counter, and beat them. You did amazing, bro."

Bryant grinned, taking a bite of his burger. "I try, I try."

I sat back, letting them talk football. It wasn't all football, at least. Marvin and Tyrone talked about girls, being respectful enough not to talk in the coarser locker room talk I was sure they indulged in normally, since I was there, but when they turned their attention to me, they asked me if I was looking forward to moving in.

"Yeah, I guess I am," I smiled. "I don't know if I can afford my share of the rent, though. How do you guys do it?"

Marvin smiled, rapping his fist against the table. "You're funny. Oh God, no scholarship in the world could make me afford this. That's all you, Bryant. You know how to take care of us guys."

Bryant beamed.

I knew he had that overpowering urge to take care of his people. I guess this made me one of his people too?

Afterwards, with about an hour to go before I had to start overseeing the move from my old dorm room in the Washington Building, I figured I could probably catch up on some homework.

Bryant followed me instantly, just as I started to move down the corridor.

"Oh, hi there," I said, turning around as I reached the door, looking at him.

He looked like he was expecting an invite inside.

I shook my head, with a small smile. "I have to do homework, Bryant."

He got the hint, this time.

BRYANT

Not being able to hook up with Mia made me a little horny, so I had extra energy I needed to work out in my morning workout session.

I understood where she was coming from, and the last thing I wanted her to feel was that she somehow owed me physical attention just because we were living together now... but I wasn't used to being denied by anybody, let alone someone like Mia.

It was a strange feeling, but it made me want it more — it was like a sort of delayed gratification.

This denial also gave me the clarity to focus on my own body instead, to get me in peak performance now that it was the start of a new week.

Monday morning. This semester I had intentionally selected the minimum number of classes I had to attend, expecting I would need to focus more on my football. That was working out right, but now that I had earned my place on the team, I could at least think about focusing on actual school too.

Or at least, it meant I could try and get a better idea of what mattered to Mia. Maybe I could figure out if there was a class we could both share...

It was funny that I wanted to spend so much time with her. In a sense, we had spent the whole weekend together ever since the football game, but despite sex that night, we had kept ourself at a flirty, comfortable but not very physical level. There was definitely an awkwardness to things. I had to work on that at some point. She deserved better than to have to deal with all this awkwardness.

"Yo, Marvin," I said, watching my teammate emerge from bed, going downstairs and making his way straight to the fridge.

I was feeling like a liquid breakfast, so I had made a fruit smoothie, sipping on it slowly. Marvin liked his breakfast cereals.

"New week, new game. New Bryant too?" he asked.

"Nah, man. Same Bryant. What you see is what you get," I assured him. "I'm working out, do you wanna spot me?"

He shook his head. "Not today, bro. I have to rush to a morning class. Can't miss this one, the prof's taken notice of me. It's just some history thing, I don't know why it was mandatory for me this semester."

"History's not so bad," I shrugged. "I don't know if I've done that class. Coach Frost wants the offensive line to do drills this afternoon, what are the defense guys up to today?"

"All day in the gym," Marvin said. "I was gonna head there now before the class, left my textbook in my locker. Want to go together? You look like you could do with gym time instead of just home morning workouts."

I shook my head. "Before the drills, sure. For now, this is fine."

Marvin smirked. "I get it. You want Mia to wake up to you doing pushups, drive her crazy like that. You're a dog, man."

Laughing, I promised him that was not it. "Just taking care of my own body."

"Usually you don't do that in the living room, bro," Marvin smiled. "Okay, fine. I'm off. I just wanted you to drive me to the gym, I guess I'll have to walk there."

"Jog, man," I told him. "Makes you less lazy."

Marvin shook his head, chuckling. I found my usual workout spot in the living room, and began to do push-ups.

It didn't hurt that this was directly in the line of sight of the corridor Mia would exit into from her bedroom.

Grunting as I counted my pushups, I started to focus on my body, trying to identify problem areas. Resting on Sunday was a good thing. Pigging on fast food... not such a good idea. Not having sex with Mia also meant my body was probably hormonally wack. I guessed that was what happened when you were an athlete with this much testosterone to spare...

"Wow, looking good," a voice interrupted me. It was Mia.

I glanced up, still holding my pose. I decided to turn it into a half minute of planking. "Hey. Good morning."

"My morning's already looking good," she said, smiling softly.

I could tell she was turned on just looking at me do my push-ups. This was good: I knew I was hot, but I wanted her to feel that way. Part of me felt this weird insecure feeling that she was overcompensating for all the years when we had been enemies. Sure, I made fun of her, and sure, she would often get sarcastic and sassy right back, but that had gotten pretty intense — and I still wondered if my attraction to her now was because we hated each other before.

If that was the case, I was sure that I would get over her pretty quickly, once we had fucked a few times.

But that wasn't happening. If anything, the opposite was taking place.

I was getting incredibly close to her. There was this bond. I even thought back to the time yesterday when she joked about how she might be attracted to Antonio, warning also that that was her dad's name.

That wasn't just flirting. That was a real connection.

"Hello?" Mia asked, prompting me out of my thoughts.

"Oh, right. Hey," I said. "Um, want breakfast?"

"I'm fine," she said. "But I checked your fridge last night and saw that you were embarrassingly understocked. Not everyone in this house wants to live on a diet of protein powder and steaks, Bryant."

"Well... good thing we now have a female touch," I said. "Not that I would ever suggest your place was in the kitchen."

"I'm a pretty terrible cook," Mia shrugged, before smiling. "Good thing you won't have to experience that much. I'm not really here to cook for a bunch of football players with huge appetites."

Feeling teased, I raised an eyebrow. "So what are you here for, then?"

Mia tried to be serious, but I could see a playful glint take over her blue eyes. "I'm here to study. I have a lot of work to do on that. It's almost as if moving three times in a couple of weeks makes you lose all the time you need to spend studying."

"Well, it's not been that bad, surely," I said.

She shook her head. "I was at my old place yesterday, the movers did a great job. Thanks for that, Bryant. But Sam was hovering around, and as soon as she saw the movers I could tell she had already guessed what was going on."

"Samantha knows you're moving in here?" I asked. I didn't want her to lead to more trouble. I was even ready to tell Marvin he should probably find some other girl.

"Well, that wasn't her initial guess. First she thought you had gotten a place for me, but then she decided that was unrealistic, seeing as I barely had any time to get any of that done. So it could only possibly be one thing. I was moving into your house," Mia said, making a face. "Too much drama."

"I'm sorry about that," I told her.

"Well, so am I."

I thought that was going to be it for our conversation, since Mia started pacing around the living room and I began to do crunches, but then she turned around and looked at me.

"Can you do that somewhere else from now on? All the grunting and sweating and looking muscly and hot is... distracting. A fantastic distraction, but really distracting all the same," she said, teasing me.

"Sorry, honey. It's my house."

She smiled. "Okay, fine. I shouldn't be here anyway. Girl's gotta go to class sometime too."

"Oh yeah," I nodded. "What have you got today?"

She checked her phone. "I have History of Media Law with Professor Saltzmann at ten. That's a class I'm pretty excited about."

"Oh, that's interesting. Okay, cool, uh... see you."

She turned back to her room. Ten — that was still a couple of hours away. I had a plan.

I was going to sign up for that class, transfer into it. I didn't know Professor Saltzmann, but I imagined he wouldn't mind too much. After all, it was still early in the semester.

Wrapping up my workout, I stretched and did a quick cool-down, pleased that I wasn't feeling any lingering problems that could lead to any injuries this week. We had a game against Missouri this weekend, and I knew that was going to be a big one. They were a pretty strong team this season, they knew what they were doing.

And I had never played away there before, so I had no idea what to expect from their field conditions.

I had to take a quick shower, rinse the sweat from the workout, and then I wanted to go straight to find the professor for the History of Media Law class Mia was going to catch.

I took my smoothie with me. I wasn't done with that yet, either.

Professor Saltzmann wasn't hard to find, but I had made the mistake of assuming the professor was a man — no, she was Elaine Saltzmann, a sixty year old New Yorker who was surprised a jock like me was entering her office.

"Have you even declared a major, Mr. Howard?" she asked, when I told her I wondered if she could help me transfer into her class.

"Well, not really, but as you know, as a football player, we often deal with the media, and I'm really interested in how managing the media works... so I can have a broader understanding of the world of law in my own future career prospects," I said, hoping it didn't sound too much like bullshit.

The prof just smiled to herself. "That sounds nice, but I don't think you understand what it is I'm teaching. This is about defamation suits, things like that. Not exactly the kind relevant to what you meant."

"Well, that remains to be seen," I said, shrugging. "I'm interested, and I have an empty slot every

week at this time, so maybe you'd allow me to take this class."

"I have no problem with you taking this class, but it's a lot of writing. It's a foundational course for many people interested in journalism and public relations, not really... football." Professor Saltzmann sighed, clicking a pen. "But like I said, I have no problem with you doing this."

"Thanks, prof. You've got the class at ten, so it's fine if I just show up for that one, right?"

She looked at me carefully, as if she was trying to figure out why I had decided to show up to her class. "You're a pretty high profile figure in this school now. You know that there's a lot of talk about you on social media, right? I'm a media professor, I have to keep up to date with these things."

"Nasty stuff," I shrugged. "I try not to let it affect me."

"Now I want you to not let it affect the rest of the classroom. I don't want you to be distracted. This would not be acceptable to me. So keep your head down, study hard, pay attention, and apply yourself. That's my requirement if you want to transfer into my class."

I nodded. "I'm going to work hard. I promise."

"You're on an athletic scholarship... I don't usually see students like you showing any real interest in their studies, beyond the bare minimum they need so they can keep the scholarship. You've got something up your sleeve," Professor Saltzmann said. "Whatever it is, I don't want it affecting the class. Or any of the students."

"I can promise you that," I nodded. I didn't want to come off cocky or something, but it was pretty transparent that I could only be doing this because I wanted to be around Mia.

It was encouraging that the prof didn't connect the dots between Mia, who was already one of her students, and me. This meant that as much as there were all the rumors about Mia and me, people didn't really recognize her that much yet.

Me, I understood that I would be a much more prominent name. I wasn't just the star quarterback, I was the popular guy with the rich dad. People were bound to paint a target on my back even without actually knowing me.

With forty-five minutes to go before the class, I decided I would go drop by the gym, see whoever was there.

Tyrone was listening to some music while pacing himself on the treadmill. He waved at me as I walked into the gym. I looked around for someone less busy. My other teammate Antonio was there.

The running back nodded to greet me. "What's up, man?"

"Well, I just signed up for a class."

"Why the hell would you do that?" he said, confused as anybody would under those circumstances.

"I... it's nothing," I said, stopping myself from confessing my real motives.

People always got weird about me wanting to get in deeper with someone. When I first started dating Sam, it felt really nice to me, being able to connect with someone who had grown up in the same place as me. Florida attracted students from all over the country, and even international students from all over the world, but I didn't really know many people from the Midwest, plus most of the guys on the football team were usually from the South.

Was it so hard for people to believe that I didn't just want to be a playboy, that jumping from hook-up to hook-up was something a guy did because it was easy, not because it was what he wanted?

The guys on the team didn't, at least. Tyrone kept a pretty low profile when it came to his dating life. We heard whispers of him dating a girl, but never really found out who. Russel had a long-distance girlfriend back home, but I heard they were breaking up.

And then, of course, there was Marvin, my best friend who was clueless about women. In a way,

we were both alike, going all in on the women we cared about... but despite being the most built and jacked guy on the team, the defensive lineman always surprised me with his weird romantic choices.

I wondered if he was going to hate me if I interfered with him and Sam. Part of me thought he was just following through with that because it felt like a game to him, because it was amusing.

I hated visualizing his smirk, that gross, condescending look he had on his face like at Ciccio, the Italian restaurant where we had that disastrous double date. He was just making out with Sam like it was a soft-core porn movie, and I was there going, *bro, what the hell?*

Okay, I had to go to class now.

Mia was in for a surprise when she saw me. Sure enough, as I walked in, Mia didn't notice me at first, still deep in her books... but then she glanced up and was taken aback.

The seat next to her was taken, but I sat on her other side, with an Asian kid sitting next to me. "Hey, I'm Bryant," I introduced myself to him.

"Reggie," he quickly said.

I turned to Mia, leaning across the aisle. "Hey, you."

"What are you doing here?" she asked, looking more irritated than I was expecting.

"I just wanted to take a good class. The professor encouraged me to give it a go," I said.

Professor Saltzmann walked in right on cue. She looked around the class and saw me, giving me a curt nod.

I guessed she was checking to see if I would actually show up, and well, surprise, surprise, I did.

I even shut up, paying attention the whole time... or at least as much as I could, noticing the way people were already taking notice of my appearance in the class — not to mention the fact that I was there next to Mia.

But thankfully, all that was a minor annoyance. The whispering died down.

After class, I walked out with Mia.

"I hope you're not mad at me," I said.

"No, I'm not," she replied. "Anyway, I hope you're not going to just stalk me in all my classes. I did a lot of hard thinking, and I decided I need to find a part-time job. This semester I'm going to do my best to juggle it with work, but next semester I'm probably going to have to switch to a part-time schedule."

"Ouch," I said, rubbing the back of my head. "That's going to hurt you. For real, part-time work and studying? You're going to be stretched real thin. Are you sure you really want to do that?"

Mia frowned. "I've done it before. That was my life for my year in community college before this. It wasn't so bad."

"Yeah, but your coursework load is going to be way more intense than community college, I'm sure," I pointed out. "Are you sure you don't want..."

I had to trail my words off. She was already shaking her head.

"I don't want your money, Bryant."

Sighing, I tried to tell her I didn't mean I was just going to hand her free cash. "You could consider it a loan. Interest-free. And what is it you need to work for, anyway? Your room's free. And everything you need at home is sorted. I'll make sure of that."

"That's exactly what I don't want," Mia said softly. "I'm going to pay you at least some money for rent. I don't want a free ride. Like, I really hate the idea. Just... let me do this, okay?"

She paused and then changed direction, walking away from him.

"Hey, I'm sorry," I backed off, calling out at her.

She turned around but didn't say anything, just nodding once before resuming her walk away from

me.

I was confused. Why did she have to make everything about money? Some people really got defensive about it, but I had never seen someone be so intense about this the way Mia did.

And more importantly, why did I feel so personally responsible for her finances? That was intense, too. I was shocked by the person I became now that I was around her.

Maybe I needed to look at myself in the mirror, first.

MIA

With things finally settling down for me, I could actually start to think about my own life, instead of all the drama that I had been embroiled in.

Bryant surprised me by joining in that media law class, but to me that was a way for him to get close to me, testing the waters.

I could now see that he was a protective guy, someone who really cared about making things work. If this was a relationship, neither one of us had used those words, but I could understand why that was the case.

It wasn't easy. Not for Bryant, not with his sort of high profile. And definitely not for his reputation.

Thankfully, this week was my opportunity to really focus on my studies.

Most of the people I shared classes with were also people looking into working in journalism, either majoring in journalism or similar majors. I made a couple of friends, but nobody that close.

My suspicion was that they all knew who I was, and for some reason, the proximity to all that drama made them a little worried about being friends with me.

But on the other hand, most of them were kind, if not necessarily the most warm and friendly. Things could be worse, they could be a lot more cliquey.

The only source of stress going on for me was my inability to figure out how to make money. I wanted to find a job, but everything I could see either involved connections that I didn't have, like trying to get in touch with a top newspaper editor to start submitting stories there, or working so many hours I wouldn't be able to juggle class with it too.

That was a last resort. Maybe next semester, if things didn't work out as planned. My scholarship gave me a safety net, but I still needed to figure out life expenses — and a way to make myself feel a little more independent, considering I was living with Bryant.

To his credit, he left me alone whenever he knew I was busy and studying. With the football season ongoing, he was busy as ever, but every so often we made time to catch up in the kitchen, cleaning up after the food I cooked.

Sometimes I even cooked for him, telling him not to get his hopes up, since I was a terrible cook.

"Hey, at least there's this to think about. You didn't burn your house down because you were a bad cook," Bryant grinned.

"That's an awful thing to say!"

"Okay, sorry," he quickly backtracked. He reached over for my hand and pulled it forward, kissing it. "You know I don't mean it."

I was getting so comfortable with him that I was able to just relax and enjoy life now, and even him bringing up probably the most traumatic moment of my life was something I didn't have that many problems over.

I didn't want to be wrong, but I felt like there was something strong here. All we had to do was get over our various hang-ups and try to make something work.

But that didn't mean I didn't stress about money all the same. I started hanging around campus, looking for part-time opportunities. As a good writer, I offered to proofread and edit people's assignments, but I didn't really get any response to the ads I posted all around.

Sam and I weren't talking anymore, either, except when we really had to. In the Samantha-sized hole in my life, I tried to reach out to Regina, but maintaining a friendship with her was difficult with all the distance at play.

But at least she was nice, and she listened to me. We didn't hold phone calls the way Sam and I would, but when we texted, I felt like I had somebody.

Ironically, this did mean I filled the rest of my need for a social life by hanging out with Marvin, Tyrone and Russel, Bryant's closest teammates.

Most of them were real alpha guys who could only talk about girls, cars, video games, and football, but they made an effort to make me feel welcome — which was more than what I had experienced from others in Florida.

I started to realize they had a rule among themselves to never talk about Fiona and her YouTube show around me and Bryant, because once I walked in on Marvin showing Russel the latest episode, then hastily hiding his phone and acting like they were watching something else.

"What was that?" I asked innocently, already knowing what it was.

"Uh..." Russel hesitated.

Marvin came up with an idea. "Just some porn. Sorry. Boys being boys, you know?"

I raised an eyebrow. "That's a pretty ridiculous lie, Marvin, and you know it. So you were watching the new episode of Fiona's show. Well, is there anything about me?"

Marvin frowned. "Nah, so at least that's good."

"Does this mean I'm less of a target now? Like, people aren't actively spreading rumors about me?"

Russel stretched his arms above his head. "Yo, it's tough to say. People are still talking, and I'm pretty sure they're going to start talking more come the weekend, because of our big game against Missouri. But I don't think you've got anything to worry about. Just stay cool and you'll be fine."

"Stay cool," I murmured, shaking my head. "I don't know, this was not how I was expecting my life to turn out. Being the subject of campus-wide rumors."

"On the plus side, nobody knows you've moved in with us," Marvin said. "I was worried that would be some serious gossip fuel."

"That's good," I nodded, going to the fridge, pouring myself a cup of juice. "I don't really want people to think they can just boss me around here, make me look like some kind of drama queen. I'm not. I'm just here to study."

"Yeah, we know," Russel nodded. "You're a pretty sweet girl, Mia. I can see why Bryant has the hots for you."

Even after moving in, even after seeing the way he behaved around me, hearing other people tell me Bryant was attracted to *me* made me blush. It felt unreal. He could have any girl in the school, probably any girl in the state.

For some reason, he wants me.

And to still want me even though I had held out on hooking up with him since I moved in was a pretty impressive feat, too.

I didn't know if he was upset about this, or feeling frustrated... but if he did, honestly, I figured that was too bad. A guy like him needed a girl like me sometimes. He needed to know everything couldn't just be on his terms.

I liked that about myself, the fact that I stood up for myself.

It was also why I needed to keep looking for a job, some kind of way to earn some money. I knew Bryant would protest when I gave it to him, but I wanted to make sure that I was here as a renting tenant, someone who paid to be here.

After all, what would happen if we broke up and I suddenly didn't have a place to go? I didn't want that. I needed the protection of knowing I was safe. Sometimes a guy like Bryant was good at giving that, but most times you could never trust anyone for that better than your own self.

The reality was that I could take care of myself too, and I was determined to make that happen.

To his credit, Bryant didn't push back when I told him I was going to start giving him rent the next month.

He came back late, having to deal with interviews from the campus paper about the plan for the upcoming game. As the starting quarterback, he was the face of the team.

There were even rumors that if he could keep his performance up, other schools might want to poach him, in anticipation of a promising NFL draft spot down the line.

I was pouring myself another juice when he arrived at the house, dumping his backpack on the floor. "Hey, you."

Bryant lit up as soon as he saw me. "How's it going, Mia?"

"You look exhausted," I pointed out. "I'm doing fine. I'm just studying, but I'm starting to get a little bored right now. So it's either I watch something on TV or just read."

Bryant's eyes glimmered with interest. "I have an idea..."

"Down, boy," I giggled. "No. That wasn't what I was thinking about."

He pouted. "Damn. I wasn't expecting you to somehow stay so strong here. How do you do it?"

I smiled at him. "Sometimes you have to focus on your priorities."

He stood up straighter, hand reaching for his bulge. "I know my priorities."

"Seriously," I giggled again. "Take it easy, Bryant. You're such a horny mess sometimes."

"It's just all this athletic energy, you know?"

I laughed with him, feeling a little turned on by the attention he was giving me. Even if he was a transparently horny guy when he was in one of these moods, I really liked that he wasn't the kind of guy to play games.

I knew exactly what I was getting when I saw him. This didn't mean he was dumb or anything, just that I could figure him out without having to second-guess everything I did.

That was worth everything to me. I just didn't want him to think that I was making use of him, taking advantage and somehow not giving him what he expected.

But he was wrong if he thought I was going to pay rent with my body. That wasn't me. I was here because this was an option he offered, and I took it with the personal understanding that I would make sure he would get some money from me for rent.

"What have you been up to today?" Bryant asked, walking over to one of the couches. He gestured for me to join him.

I finished my glass of juice and then placed it in the sink. "You're on sink duty today, Howard," I told him in a faux-stern voice. "I've noticed that you've been slacking off on your housekeeping

responsibilities.”

“What?” he laughed. “No way.”

“Yeah, it’s true. Even Marvin cleans the bathrooms, he says you never have. And he was the one who got the cleaners to come in after the party.”

I knew what he was going to do next: he was going to shrug and say that he was the one who paid for it.

But he didn’t. I could tell he knew that was a mistake, a trap I placed in front of him to test if he was the spoiled rich boy he never wanted himself to be.

“Yeah, I guess Marvin’s been pulling his weight after all,” he said, thinking about it. “And you’re the glue that brings us sloppy sporty guys together, huh? That’s not bad at all.”

I smiled, walking to join him on the couch. Our knees touched, and I was glad for the cozy physical touch — and while he was looking hot, all tired from a whole day’s exertions, I wasn’t sure if I wanted sex. After all, wouldn’t that just complicate things further?

It was more important to me that we establish how sweet we were together, before we tried to do anything more intense. And for other college kids, sex might come first, but I saw how that could break relationships up.

And with the memory of Sam still fresh here, I knew he had to have something different. He was always the guy acting like he was taking care of everything and everyone, the responsible man who did everything important, but sometimes it was okay for a girl to step in and help him out too.

Helping didn’t always mean money.

“You seem a bit tense,” Bryant said. He sat up, reaching for my shoulders, gesturing for me to turn around. “Let me give you a massage.”

“Oh, wow,” I said. “Uh, okay.”

“Not a deep-tissue one. You probably couldn’t handle that. I’ll give you a nice back rub to take your mind off of things. Tell me what’s up, though.”

I was paying close attention to the way Bryant’s hands began kneading into my back, pressing deftly into all the places that revealed just how tense I actually was. I moaned, not that sexually, but still enough to make me blush.

God, was I glad he couldn’t see me blush.

Or feel how wet I got when he touched me, even something relatively harmless like this...

“Well, I’ve just been worrying about money. About figuring out a long-term plan here. I don’t want to ask my parents for money, and I did save up for college from my year at community college. At first I thought I would have trouble transferring all my credits from college and have to take an extra year, effectively making me a freshman, but this week I’ve been seeing a lot of professors and academic advisors, and they all tell me I’m looking pretty good. I might not get everything sorted this semester, but before the end of the academic year, I’ll be on equal terms with any other sophomore.”

“That’s fantastic news,” Bryant said, his hands gripping my shoulders, his fingers and palms untying the knots under my skin.

“But yeah, money. I need work. I’ve been trying my best lately but I don’t see anything sustainable, and I don’t want to drop everything to take a full-time job that I’ll have to juggle schoolwork with. That’s going to suck, because I came to Florida thinking I could make everything work.”

“Florida’s way more expensive than Indiana,” Bryant nodded. “Even I was surprised when I first got down here. Especially since we’re in a big city, after all. Bigger than Indianapolis.”

I nodded, tilting my head slightly so I could see Bryant. “Well, I’m trying to advertise my services

as a proofreader and editor for anything anybody in the university might need. Dissertations, theses, assignments, even presentations. My rate's pretty low since I'm just a student and nobody's really hired me, but even so, nobody's interested."

"These things take time."

"It's true," I sighed. "Well, maybe I can find some job online."

"Or..." Bryant started to speak.

I shrugged out of his grasp so I could face him again. "Not going to take your money, Bryant. Please."

"That wasn't my suggestion."

This got me intrigued. "What were you suggesting, then?"

"Well, football's more than just a bunch of guys on a field trying to move pigskin from one side of the field to another," Bryant said, grinning. "It's a big-money industry, you know? Lots of jobs related to football, and I could probably hook you up with something there. I know this guy who runs a tailgate company here. He works with the university."

"That's interesting," I said, waiting to see where this was going.

"Well, this won't even be me pulling strings. The owner, Andy, he's looking for an intern to help coordinate rentals, stalls and tents for all the tailgating on game days. You'd be doing marketing work, but it's not so bad, most of it can be done on your laptop or on your phone. It's funny, not a lot of people know about these jobs. He pays you by the day, but it's a good rate, I've heard."

I burst into a big smile. "That sounds perfect. Seriously, Bryant, thank you. Can you pass me his details so I can apply right away? I'm really excited about this. I think I'd be a good fit."

This could really work. I had experience coming from working at the sporting goods store anyway, so dealing with team-related merchandise and just keeping the tailgates organized sounded like something I knew I could easily do. Plus I liked working with people.

"It'll mean travel, as well. Andy's company opens away stalls when we play at other universities, not to mention when we have games at home. You know, I like this idea because this way you'll always be there when we win a game."

"Sounding real cocky there, Bryant," I said, leaning forward to give him a quick kiss. He instantly lit up, looking incredibly pleased to get that from me.

"Well, you're my lucky charm, if that game against Kentucky is anything to go by," he murmured softly.

I placed my hands on his knees. Oh, Bryant looked so attractive now, his handsomeness etched on his features as he sat up on the couch across from me. It felt nice when he helped me and respected the boundaries I needed.

Exhaling, I looked at him right in the eyes and said, "I... want to ask you something."

Bryant nodded purposefully, reaching for my hands and squeezing them once. It felt really nice to have him touch me...

"Do you want to come to my room with me? I'd like that a lot. Just want to feel you close to me right now."

I was blushing as I said all that, confessing that I wanted him as much as he had been wanting me. Me refusing him before wasn't because of a lack of desire, but because I wanted us to only hook up when we wanted to, not because it was convenient, not because it was easy.

I didn't want to hurt him. I wanted him to know I was here.

"Let's go," he said, picking me up and carrying me to my room.

BRYANT

Fuck, I was so turned on. She was light in my hands as I carried her from the couch to her room, my footsteps light and quiet as we made down the corridor.

She just looked up at me, her eyes flashing desire. I knew I was feeling the same. I couldn't wait to be in bed with her, touching her, our bodies meeting, our skin pressed to each other.

"Oh man," I whispered to her. "You really drive me crazy, Mia."

"It's worth it," she whispered back.

I set her down on her bed. This was a much bigger bed than that one in the single occupancy dorm she lived in for just one day. I was glad Allie wasn't giving me a lot of shit over that mixup of plans.

Right now, what mattered was Mia. I wanted her to experience just how much passion I had for her. Every morning, it took me so much restraint to not just pounce her, not to kiss her in front of all the guys, not to pull her by her wrist and press her to my chest.

This little petite blonde somehow made me wild for her the way no other person I had met here did. I don't know why that was. I didn't even question it anymore. What mattered was that we were close.

"I want you," Mia whispered. Compared to the first night, she was starting to take some control in bed, and we were starting to be equal partners. I knew how special it had been for her to give me her virginity, and I had been craving showing her exactly what she had been missing all week by dodging out of my advances.

"I want you more," I growled in her ear, starting to undress her.

While I had been massaging her just now, I had already been stripping her naked in my mind. She always wore cozy clothes at home that were unprovocative to most people who saw her, but made me think she was the sexiest girl around.

She wore a cute little baby blue tank top, and I knew she didn't have a bra on, because when I was massaging her and she turned around, I could see her nipples were hard against her tank top.

And the pajama bottoms she wore might be ankle-length, but all I had to do was undo the knot at her waist and then pull those pants off her. Then she'd be bared to me.

"Mmm," she murmured as I pinned her down in bed, kissing her. I gave her deep, long kisses. I wanted my mouth to enter hers, my lips moving to give her a dozen hard kisses in quick succession.

"Wow, you're really... into this," she said when I pulled away from the kiss. Her hands were already reaching for my jeans, her palm smoothing the creases of my crotch as she sought out my cock. "That bulge is so big."

"Guess why," I grinned, before kissing her neck. She was flat under me, while I was arched at an

angle so she could keep stroking the outline of my cock through my jeans and briefs. That felt good. It wasn't the direct stimulation I really craved right now, but it was a teaser for what was going to come.

"You always tease me like this," Mia moaned, starting to sound desperate. My hands were getting under her top, cupping her small but perky breasts. Every so often I'd push my mouth forward and kiss her again. "Take my clothes off, please."

"Thought you'd never ask," I growled again, unable to keep the grin from my face. I wanted her to experience all the pleasure now, to be as turned on by me as I was by her.

So I undressed her rapidly, my hands greedily removing everything I could. First I moved her arms so I could pull her tank top off, and then while she was topless, I kissed at the space between her breasts while starting to take her pants off.

She had cute little white striped panties, beige and pink. "So fucking adorable," I said, grinning. "You're really something, you know that?"

"Tease," Mia said, looking lost in the pleasure. She pouted her lips, desperate for another kiss from me. I gave her exactly as she asked.

Soon she was naked, and I was too turned on to take my own clothes off. I yanked my jeans down, thumbs into the band of my briefs so they fell as well, and allowed them to settle just under my knees, because I needed so bad to be inside Mia.

"Mia, mmm," I moaned as I lined her up for my play. I gripped my hard cock with one hand as I began to open her legs up for me, revealing that she was already incredibly wet.

First I wanted to tease her a little, rub my cock to her wetness, have strings of it cling to me. Her breathing got hot and heavy as I did, my body moving in a sawing position that was the ultimate tease to her now.

She was grinding herself against me. "Please, just do it, just put it in. I want you so bad, Bryant."

Every time she said my name my cock just pulsed even harder. I knew I was gifted downstairs, and I had always been a passionate lover who cared about giving his partner as much pleasure as I could... but with Mia, I was hungry for her, and I knew only the best would do.

I wanted her to have everything. I wanted her to have me.

So I started to press myself to her entrance and then I pushed inside her, and we both moaned.

She was perfect. Her warmth began to envelope me and her hands reached for mine. We immediately began to squeeze our hands together, fingers interlocking, already immediately entering a passionate rhythm, because I knew she and I had a connection and bond that was truly out of this world. I couldn't even tell why this was the case, I didn't know what it was about her that made me go this way, but now that we had truly gotten past all the bullshit of the past, and we could look to the future, I was so fucking into her. I was going into her deep, ready to make my body meet hers in the most intense way possible. Our bodies clashed into each other and this gave us the feeling of incredible closeness. I didn't want her to just think sex with me was good.

I wanted it to be mind-blowing every time.

Mia was mine.

"Please," she murmured, spreading her legs wide. I loved it when she opened them like that, inviting me to go in closer, get in deeper... because that was what I wanted. I knew I had to be in her, I knew we needed to fuck all the pain from our previous years away.

It was honestly not bragging at all to say this was heaven to me. I couldn't compare her to other girls, I knew that, and there was no need to — not when she was so perfect underneath me.

Seconds became minutes as we shifted positions and changed things up. First I went fast, then I

went slow, then I went slower still until she was the one doing all the work, grinding against me, humping her legs so that I could just kneel over her, letting her enjoy herself with me.

I couldn't think of anything that I wanted more than to just be with her at that moment.

"Oh, Mia," I said, as I felt my first orgasm start to come to me. She hadn't come yet, so I knew I had to hold it down. I wanted her to hit multiple climaxes with me, counting each time she did, taking and taking and taking because here she was fully allowed to be whatever she wanted and needed to be.

But only if it meant being mine.

"Oh, Mia," I moaned again, over the sounds of us having fierce, frenetic sex. This was as much a workout as all the workouts I had been doing all week. These were offensive drills, defensive practices, these used up all my muscles the way no test run of plays would for me.

Because although football was what I loved most, in bed with Mia, I could be my truest self. I could explore her body, treat her like a princess.

No, like a queen, because she was worth every crown.

Part of me had questioned, even criticized, the way I was when I was with her. Like it was a problem that I was trying so hard to impress her, by joining her in that media law class, by giving her this huge room that was better than any dorm.

I behaved funny around Mia Cowell, but there was nothing funny about how we enjoyed the pleasures of each other's bodies.

Wanting her as I did right now, I began to hold her by her hips and then really ram myself into her, foregoing deep strokes for the shallow machine-gun reflex of continuously going in and out of her.

"Bryant!" she screamed, pulled into the surge of energy here. "You're gonna make me... you're gonna make me..."

She was at a loss for words, so I instead of changing things up, I kept on doing exactly what I was doing.

Her legs were splayed over my chest, her ass was bouncing against the impact from my hard-slamming thrusts. I began to shift my angle just enough so I knew I would be able to get at her G-spot, take her by surprise.

"Oh my God!" she called out, and I felt her body ripple with release. She couldn't help herself, this wasn't a conscious decision where she allowed herself to reach her climax. No, this was me thoroughly dominating her body the way I wanted, using the sheer athletic force I had to give her an orgasm exactly when I wanted to.

"Wow, holy... wow," Mia said, tossing and turning in bed. I slowed my strokes down, but I was still playfully fucking her, just pacing myself a little bit so I could hold back my own impending volcano of an orgasm.

"You really enjoyed that, huh?" I said, impressed at my own handiwork. She was still tossing and turning, her mouth opening and closing as she struggled for words, just breathing in and out as much as she could.

She finally opened her eyes just as I was making a long stroke out of her, popping my cock out as I withdrew. "No, I want you back inside me," she said, still out of breath.

Her hand reached for me, pulling me back in.

I was the one who was impressed now. She was really trying to work me, and this was more energy I was spending than I would have at a football game.

Now she turned around so she was on her belly, exhausted but still engaged in our acts of passion. She rested face forward, her face planted against a pillow.

I pulled her by her hair, excited by the sight of her naked back. “No, you don’t,” I murmured. “You don’t get to hide that beautiful face when I’m with you. I want you to look at me.”

She had to arch her back and pull her head up as much as she could so I had an angle where I could kiss her, and when I kissed her, I delved right back into her, my cock popping back in.

Oh, we both moaned again while still kissing. The fierceness of the way I wanted her made me want to treat her even rougher than before. This was only the second time she was having sex, but the former virgin was a natural. She had no shyness at all, and this intense chemistry between us made me crave the next time we would have sex again.

Even when I was still deep inside her.

I couldn’t think about anything else around Mia. She was all I could focus on, she was all that mattered. I had already forgotten everything about this week, all the classes I had to attend, all the assignments that needed to be prepared, all the training plans for the game against Missouri.

Instead, all I saw with Mia.

It felt like the obsessive trance I felt just before the game against Kentucky. She had given me victory, even though I was worried I was being distracted by the thought of her.

The reality was she wasn’t the distraction, everything else was.

“Bryant, oh God, you’re so good,” she moaned, propping herself up with her palms and elbows against the mattress so she could arch her butt up for me to get in really, really deep.

I felt like this was Olympian-level athleticism that we were both giving each other, this sexual amazingness that just blew my mind.

I had to surrender to the pleasure.

That boiling sensation was already rising way too high in me, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to hold back any longer.

“Just remember,” Mia said in halting moans, “I’m not on birth control. Pull out if you can.”

That made me feel even wilder, my cock starting to pulse and go red-hot inside her. Yes, I had to respect that, I had to keep myself from releasing inside her. I wanted this climax, but we had to do it right.

We had to do it her way. That was the only way we could keep doing this every night, the way I wanted.

So when I knew I couldn’t hold back a second longer, I bit back a loud moan and managed to pull back out of her, slumping on her body as I began to be overwhelmed by my own pleasure. She was shaking and trembling too, clearly coming a second time just as I withdrew.

“Holy fuck,” I grunted, holding her tight. My hands wrapped under her, sandwiching her between me and the mattress. She felt so small under me.

“Oh, I love that,” she moaned with full lust. “That’s... amazing. You’re dangerous, Bryant. I’m going to get addicted.”

“I already am,” I joked.

Her back and my abs were sticky from me coming, and I slowly began to peel myself off of her.

“Okay, shower,” I said, exhaling with full pleasure. “That was amazing.”

“I already said that,” Mia smiled. “Ugh, I want to kiss you, but I don’t want to get the sheets all messy by flipping over. Can you take me to the shower? Please?”

Oh, I think when she said please, she made my cock throb all over again, ready for round two.

But she was right, we needed to get into the shower.

The release from having finally satisfied my desires with Mia made my body feel so light, like all my burdens had just gone away. She had an attached bathroom, which was great, because otherwise I

would have had to carry her naked across the corridor to the nearest bathroom — but then again, in this house, that wasn't exactly the most uncommon thing.

The other guys might still enjoy their playboy lives, hooking up with whoever was the hottie of the week. But sex with Mia was something else.

I couldn't get enough.

In fact, when I placed her gently feet down on the floor of the shower, I immediately began to line up behind her and try my luck.

"Bryant!" she laughed. "You have the world's biggest appetite."

"I'm a hungry boy," I grinned. "And you know that."

Mia and I showered together, Mia dodging slightly out of the flow of the water so she wouldn't have to worry about getting her hair wet. I liked the way her light, blonde hair echoed all over her body, leaving little fine blonde hairs that you couldn't really see unless you paid attention. Even her pubes were practically invisible, until you brushed a hand there and felt its softness.

And as I did just that, Mia smiled, teasing me a little by grinding her butt against me, but then turning around with liquid soap in her palms.

"Can you do my back?"

"*Of course*," I replied, always happy to help her with anything she needed.

There was only one towel, so after we showered, Mia had to jump out, towel off, and find a spare towel. It was one of hers, so it was way too small for me, barely covering my waist and crotch.

"I'm seriously objectifying you right now," she laughed. "You look ridiculous... and ridiculously hot."

I flexed, striking a pose. "How about now?"

"Bryant, you're so silly."

"Mmmm," I murmured, stepping up to her as I toweled the water off of my chest and back. "Give me a fucking kiss right now."

She was so much shorter than me that she had to get on her tiptoes and I had to crouch a little with the towel still wrapped around my right hand. "Cute," I said.

"You're the cute one," Mia shook her head. "I'm just... me."

"Well, there's only one of you, and I don't want you thinking you're comparable to any person ever. There's nobody like you. You're truly something else."

Mia raised an eyebrow. "Okay..."

"I mean it."

"If you say so," she said, smiling but rolling her eyes. It was strange to me that despite displaying to her just how much I wanted her, she still doubted herself. Surely she knew that I had to find her as hot as I often said? Or did she think it was just flattery?

"Hey, there's some noise coming from your room," I said, as I walked over to the bathroom door, opening it.

It sounded like a phone. Wasn't mine, my ringtone wasn't like that. "My phone?" Mia asked, ducking past me even as I blocked the doorway, and then heading over to the bed.

She had to find her phone from a pocket in her pajama pants. "Hello?"

I watched her face immediately change into worry as she listened to a conversation, occasionally responding to prompt the other person to speak.

It didn't sound like a good conversation. Someone was crying or something, and she was trying her best to comfort the person on the other end, only to get interrupted with more crying.

Toweling myself off until I was completely dry, I just watched her, trying to anticipate how I could

help her with this trouble.

Well, if she needed to be somewhere, I could drive her. My car was parked here, I had a full tank of gas. We could go as soon as the call ended.

Unless it was Samantha, in which case... I should probably keep my distance. But that didn't mean Mia didn't deserve help.

She finally ended the phone call, tears welling up in her eyes.

"It's Eugene," she said.

I tried to remember who that was.

"My brother, Eugene. He's... some kids bullied him and beat him up at school today."

"What?" I shouted.

"Because he's gay. This is sick. I can't believe this is still happening. He's always been a little more effeminate and in touch with his feelings, but beating him up is disgusting, I can't believe someone would do that to him. And it wasn't just one kid. There were multiple attackers."

My mouth was just left wide open. I felt sick hearing that too.

And I felt especially disgusted because I used to be a bully myself. I would never have picked on someone because of their orientation, but it made me instantly think back about all the crueler things I had done.

Name-calling and excluding people, threatening to expose someone's secrets, extorting other kids' lunch money... I wasn't very proud of myself at that moment. I had to find a way to help.

"I'm so sorry, Mia," I said, as I walked up to her.

Suddenly I felt really self-conscious about my nakedness. Like a minute ago, it would have been hot in that little towel, teasing her along. Now I felt bared and exposed.

And I felt like this was somehow punishment for my own years of being a bully.

Mia was right when she called me out on that. I had been a jerk to a lot of kids, all because they were different — and I wanted to tell myself that I would never have done something violent and cruel to a kid because he was gay, but could I really guarantee that? I did lots of dumb things as a kid.

Fuck, I felt so bad.

"Mia, what are you going to do?" I asked.

She sat up, pulling her towel tight around her body so it wrapped her up. "I need to fly home. Immediately. I have the money, I can buy the tickets. Uh... this is awkward. You probably didn't sign up for more drama."

"This isn't drama. This is serious," I said, shaking my head. "Okay, flying back home is a good idea. I think we can catch a late night flight."

"We?" Mia asked, looking up to me.

"Yeah. We. I'm going with you. Of course I'm going with you."

"It's Thursday night, Bryant. You've got a game this weekend, don't you have more important things to do than come with me to comfort my brother? You don't even really know my family," Mia said.

She wasn't protesting. I could tell she was just trying to understand why I would want to do this.

But I knew that I had to. I had a responsibility to be there for her.

So I said so.

"Responsibility..." Mia considered aloud. "Fine. Okay. You don't have to come. You should really think this through first. You're going to get in a lot of trouble."

I knew that I would, but I didn't think it was anything I couldn't get out of.

"No, Mia. I'm going with you. Pack whatever you need, I'll drive us to the airport as soon as

you're ready."

"How about the tickets?"

"We'll just buy them at the counter. People still do that, you know. Don't worry about it, just get your money and your clothes."

She relaxed a little more — I think it was because I made it clear she was paying for her own flight.

Flying back to Indianapolis right now meant I needed to tell the guys what was going on.

I excused myself for a second, walking out with the towel barely wrapped around me, heading straight upstairs so I could get to Marvin's room. I banged a fist on his door.

"What the hell, Bryant?" Marvin said, waking up and opening the door. "Uh... dude. Why are you naked?"

"Hey, man. I need you to cover for me. I'm going to have to fly out tonight. I don't know when I'm coming back."

His eyes widened. We were loud enough that Russel could hear us, so he immediately swung out of his room. "Are you fucking serious?" Russel immediately said.

"You're one of the quarterbacks on the team," I told him. "You've been showing really good progress. If I can't make it for the game in Missouri... I know you'll do a good job."

"Man, Coach Frost is going to kill you for this," Marvin immediately said. "You've got to be really careful. Are you sure? Why are you even doing this?"

"I'm doing it because this is the right thing to do. And if Coach Frost wants to kill me... well, when I come back I'll make sure he gets to hear the full story. I just need you guys to know about this first."

"Can we ask why you're leaving?" Tyrone said, frowning. He and Marvin traded looks.

"Mia's brother's in trouble. Some assholes beat them up. It's a long story. I just have to fly back home and... I don't know, fix everything," I told them.

I placed a hand on both Marvin and Tyrone's shoulders. "I wouldn't ask for your help unless I truly needed it. You two are my brothers. And you need to get Russel into this too. He's gotta know as well."

The guys didn't look any more convinced, but they finally let me go.

I went to my room, changed quickly into some fresh clothes, and then rushed downstairs to rejoin Mia.

"You don't have to come," she said one more time, zipping a backpack.

"I want to. And I know you want me to, too," I told her.

She didn't say anything, but I could sense her secret desire for me to come with her.

We got in the car, driving straight to the airport.

At least at this hour of the night it wasn't hard getting parking. We didn't even need to park in one of the long-term parking bays. I took her backpack and we walked straight to the counter.

There was a flight in an hour and a half that was still open. It was the only direct flight to Indianapolis. Otherwise we would need to fly to Chicago.

Mia counted her money, paying. "This is for one person," she said, handing it over to the woman manning the airline counter desk.

I handed her my credit card. "And this one's for me."

"One moment," she smiled.

I looked at Mia. "I've got this under control. Why don't you freshen up first before we go through the gate? Maybe grab something to eat."

She nodded sadly. She didn't even speak much during our drive, just looking out the window sadly. I could tell she was really broken up by this news.

It couldn't have been easy for her. She had to be really close to her brother if she would risk paying so much money to fly out immediately.

Her family didn't know I was coming too. I hoped I wouldn't get a frosty reception from them.

As soon as Mia was gone, I turned back to the person fixing up our tickets. "Hey... actually, can you do me a favor? I'd like to buy us upgrades to business class."

Mia deserved only the best.

MIA

I was lost in my sadness, horrified that something bad like this had happened.

Deep down, I blamed myself. Not that I had to protect Eugene, but because this was more proof that bad things happened when I started to settle down somewhere.

I got comfortable at home, dreaming of a perfect future life — going to college at an elite school, becoming a world-famous journalist... and look what happened. Our house burned down. When the insurance investigators checked through everything, they found problems with the electric heater which was my responsibility, because it was next to my room.

My family never blamed me for the traumatic loss of our house where we had spent all our time together. They didn't see it the way I did.

But I knew I brought bad luck with me. Even if I thought things were getting better now, I knew that I was just meant for a life of hardship.

Some people just got everything given to them. I didn't want to think Bryant, being the billionaire's son that he was, was one of them... but it was so frustrating sometimes seeing how he never took a step back to consider his privilege. To him, everything was easy.

To me, nothing was.

I couldn't even keep my best friend, and now that I lost her, I was terrified about the prospect of my brother being hurt.

I missed Eugene, even if my life at school had me thinking away, forgetting about my family... and look where that got me now.

Before we boarded, I was able to get a call through to Regina, telling her I was coming back. I asked if she could pick us up from the airport. She didn't hesitate, saying she would drive over as soon as her shift finished at her new job.

Now she was waitressing at a this expensive steakhouse, apparently. I didn't even know that about her — I had been so preoccupied with myself that I hadn't bothered to update myself on the lives of all the others I had left behind.

This was why I was so scared about Gene. I didn't want my brother to think he was abandoned. And I didn't want him to be alone at this time.

When he called me, he told me he hadn't told our parents yet. It was a good idea, because I didn't think Mom and Dad would handle it the right way. He needed comfort and support, not a lot of anger. Our parents would talk a big deal about taking this to the school authorities, but I knew kids at school would just treat him as a traitor, a snitch, someone who couldn't be trusted. I didn't want him to suffer even more social consequences for being him.

And Eugene was such a sweet boy, too. I remembered that he was the one who made me feel good just before I left for Florida. When my doubts were starting to take hold, he was the one who helped me.

Sure, he was a sassy, moody teen, but that was what happened when you had a fourteen year old boy trying to figure his life out.

His life didn't deserve being beaten up for being gay.

I was so angry.

My vision was so clouded by my anger and sadness that I didn't even notice that Bryant had somehow scored us an upgrade to business class, allowing us to board first.

"Tell me this was free," I said, rolling my eyes, knowing the answer.

"They understood the situation, so they gave us a happy break," he said, modestly. I loved that Bryant was so protective, and this was genuinely a nice thing to do.

It looked like it was going to be a busy flight, since the route to Indianapolis was only once a week. Most people flew in through Chicago or Pittsburgh, but tonight of all nights I didn't want a long layover, to be exhausted from just being around all these people at airports.

Right now what mattered was that we got home as soon as possible.

"I'll pay you back for the upgrade," I promised Bryant.

"Don't even think about it," he said, using my own words back against me. "You need this. And so do I. I'm a huge, hulking quarterback, Mia. I'm not going to be comfortable sitting in economy. Especially in one of these planes, where we'd probably have to squeeze in with four other people in the middle aisle."

I smiled. "Thank you."

"It's nothing. I didn't do anything," he said.

Well, he did. I knew he did. I felt bad about being so quiet and sad through the long flight, but I wasn't in a chatty mood.

Talking would just depress me. I didn't want any of that.

Eventually, I even managed to fall asleep.

Bryant was reading the in-flight magazine when I woke up. "Did I sleep for long?" I asked.

"No, just an hour or so. You looked pretty peaceful, I hope you didn't have any bad dreams."

I didn't. Dreamless sleep was exactly what I wanted right now, and I was grateful for it.

Over in business class, we had plenty of legroom to stretch out, and the seats even rotated for maximum space.

Bryant looked up at me. "Can I get you some champagne, at least?"

"We've got nothing to celebrate," I said drily.

"I know, but think of this as... fuel to help you get through a difficult night. Your family's going to freak out when they see you're there. There's going to be questions."

He was right, of course. I hadn't told my parents I was flying back tonight, because I didn't want to get them all worked up this late. I hoped that Regina would be able to bring us home, I'd be able to talk to Gene, give him a good hug, tell him that I was going to stay with him as long as it took for him to get better.

My brother sounded like he was beaten up bad. If it was so bad he needed to be hospitalized, I would never forgive myself if I had chosen to just stay put.

And I wanted to be the intermediary who would help him deal with Mom and Dad when they inevitably freaked out about what happened to Gene.

I sighed. "Okay, I'm ready. Give me some champagne."

Bryant signaled for a flight attendant to take our order. She came back almost instantly, filling our champagne flutes from a bottle she carried with her.

“Fancy,” I remarked. “Didn’t think flying home to comfort my brother would be my first business class trip on a plane. Is this what you do often?”

Bryant shrugged. “Not really. Dad would make me fly business when he wanted me to spend the summer in New York, but I hated it, especially as a kid. He wouldn’t even come pick me up from the airport, instead sending one of his workers to do it for him. They’d all try so hard to impress me, but I never could bring myself to be nice to them.”

“They’re just doing their jobs,” I said.

“I know. But my dad is a dick, and any time I spent with him made me feel like it was toxic, I couldn’t handle it. And knowing he had a second family, and that me and my sister were just... after thoughts? That hurt so bad.”

“Sorry,” I muttered, shaking my head and giving his hand a quick squeeze. “We don’t have to talk about that.”

“Well, it would be great if I got to see my mom, though. I’d like you to meet her. And Sheryl and Rob and little Carl,” he said. “That’s my sister and her husband, plus their young son.”

I smiled. “Wow, meeting your family.”

He looked a little sheepish. “Sorry. Too soon?”

“No, it’s perfect,” I said. Knowing he wanted me to do that gave me a little bit more hope, even through all this sadness and worrying.

Bryant was intent on proving to me that he was the real deal, that he didn’t just want to jerk me around, have sex with me then dump me. I still couldn’t figure out if he wanted a girlfriend or something... because this was just too strange. Everything about this made me feel grateful that we turned our relationship around, but I knew I had so many insecurities that kept me from truly letting myself feel free to be who I needed to be.

“I’m here for you,” I whispered, watching him close his eyes. “And I’d love to meet your family. Little Carl sounds super cute, too. He’s probably littler than Eugene, who’s kinda small for his age.”

“Well, Carl’s like, five years old. Eugene’s a bit older than that... so he should be bigger, right?” Bryant joked.

“If only Eugene was a six foot one quarterback,” I replied. “Then nobody would mess with him.”

Bryant nodded. I was still trying to figure him out. There was a game this weekend, one that would require the team to travel out of state. I worried for him. I didn’t want him to lose his spot just because he felt some obligation to be here.

I wasn’t going to tell him that now, but tomorrow I’d hint that he should go back to Florida before he did too much damage to the team.

Handling things here was something I could do by myself.

But I couldn’t deny that I was feeling so incredibly thankful that Bryant was here with me.

Part of me was terrified when I made the decision to leave tonight. I knew he couldn’t come with me, even though he offered at once. I wanted to tell him not to go, but that was because I knew he had other things instead of dealing with more stupid drama.

But in all that time, my heart was telling me to just admit the truth: I wanted Bryant to come.

And now that Bryant was here with me, sitting next to me in our business class seats, I felt at peace.

I even missed the in-flight meal, having fallen asleep again. I woke up to Bryant handing me a cinnamon roll, something he saved for me from his meal.

“Thanks,” I said.

“We’re landing in about ten minutes. Good thing we don’t have any luggage, I guess we can just jump straight out of the plane.”

I nodded. Glancing at my watch, I saw that we were on time. Regina was waiting for us, and she would take us straight to my house from the airport.

“This is awkward,” I realized something, “I probably can’t offer you a place to stay. My parents don’t know anything about this. And... to be honest, all they know about you is from all the complaining I used to make about you after school. So brace yourself for that.”

Bryant smiled, patting his hand over my lap. “I was expecting that. Don’t worry, I’ll be charming as I can be. It can’t be that bad, right?”

“Well, tears were shed. Lots. But that was in the past. I guess I’ll have to tell them that you’re different now,” I said.

How was I going to introduce Bryant to my family? Was he my boyfriend? Just a friend? I felt like this was a minefield that would potentially lead to more awkward discussions in the future. If Bryant wanted me to announce to everyone that we were a couple, this might be the best place for me to do so, with people who I could trust would be too distracted by the real drama of Eugene’s problem than to question my choice of words.

I didn’t know if it was business class or what, but this plane landed smoother than any I had ever been in. I exhaled.

Planes sometimes made me nervous. I hadn’t taken too many flights in my life, even though I dreamed of being a jet-setting journalist. Growing up, we mostly took road trips for vacations, Dad renting an RV we could all live in for a couple of weeks in the summer. A couple of times we flew to Boston and Toronto, where we had family.

My flight to Florida on the day I left home to go to university was the first flight I had taken solo. Now I was flying back... with a man.

Not just any man. Bryant Howard. Everyone’s darling at Broad Ripple High School, the star quarterback who was head and shoulders better than everyone else in high school football. I bet people were following his progress, too. With him getting all that attention from his recent performances since breaking into the team, he would be practically a homecoming celebrity.

“Do you remember my friend Regina?” I asked Bryant as we began to exit into the aisle, waiting for our turn to leave the airplane.

“Not really. In my head she was always just the girl who wasn’t you or Sam,” Bryant confessed.

“So you noticed me,” I pointed out.

He said nothing, but finally offered a smile. “Well, I don’t know if noticing would be the right word. You know I wasn’t exactly the nicest guy to you.”

“Yeah, oh well,” I shrugged, reaching for his hands. I wanted to feel his grip, the way he behaved so protectively around me. I wanted to feel safe right now.

My body was all sorts of crazy at this moment. We had just rapidly shifted from flirting to the most intense sex of my life to breaking down in tears over Eugene’s call. I could tell that my body was reacting physically to everything Bryant did.

When he looked at me, my legs closed shut.

When he squeezed my hands, I swooned.

When he patted his big palm on my lap, I felt comforted.

He was doing everything right.

“Regina!” I called out as we rushed out to Arrivals. Nobody was really waiting, so spotting her

was the easiest thing.

I remembered her car, the beat-up second hand Japanese make we had driven in over and over most nights in my year in community college.

Seeing her made me happier in a way that I hadn't experienced since, well, seeing Sam.

I didn't want to start ranking my friends according to who I liked best at the moment but right now, Regina was exactly who I needed to see.

"Is that...?" she asked, looking past me.

"Yeah," I said, smiling even though I was trying to contain myself.

Bryant extended a hand, introducing himself. "Hey, I'm Bryant. Thanks for this."

"Um, I know exactly who you are," Regina said, taking a second to shake his hand. She glanced at me, surprised. "I didn't know this..."

"Yeah."

"Wow."

Bryant smirked. "Okay, this is going to get awkward."

"Darling," Regina said, looking up at Bryant, "I think you're going to have a rerun of this awkwardness every single time you meet someone this trip. And especially since we're apparently driving straight to the Cowell house."

"Yes, please," I told her. We walked together to her car, parked just outside the exit.

Bryant got in the back, while I got in the more familiar passenger seat up front with Regina.

"Tonight isn't going to be the night I hassle you with questions, but Mia, I have a million questions for you."

"Hey, I can answer them too," Bryant said.

"But not tonight," I quickly added.

"Fine," Regina pretended to grumble, focusing on the road. Driving at night in Indianapolis was something we had become so accustomed too. We'd pull up somewhere, sit on the hood of the car, Regina would start smoking and I would inevitably talk about all my dreams of being a journalist.

Tonight, Regina kept mostly quiet, except to update me on people we knew, sometimes people I don't recall ever meeting. People she worked with at the mall, people from the new steakhouse, even people from school.

There were a lot of people who chose to stay back in Indianapolis.

"How's school going?" she asked me.

"Well, it's been pretty drama-heavy," I simply said. "I'm enjoying my classes. If I could just focus on my classes and nothing else, I'd be over the moon."

"Sucks," Regina replied. "I guess Bryant's keeping you busy, huh?"

I gasped at the implication of her words. "Regina!"

"Hey, I'm just fishing for info. But I get it. Not tonight. Let's catch up. How long are you staying?"

I shrugged. "I honestly don't know."

"Bryant gonna stay this long too?"

"However long Mia needs to be here," he said, puffing his chest out. I watched him through the rear view mirror.

"You don't have to do that, Bryant," I said. "You have a football game this weekend!"

"It doesn't matter, Mia," he assured me. "Let's take things one at a time, okay?"

Well, that was something we were failing to do. I wanted to take things one at a time, but Bryant wanted everything all at once. First he kissed me, then the next thing I knew, he was hugging me in front of a crowd, pushing Fiona back and telling people off for getting in my way. And of course,

hours later, he not only took my virginity... he got me to come move in with him.

"One thing at a time," I nodded, leaving it at that.

When we turned into my street, I saw my family's new house, and despite myself, I felt embarrassed.

We lived in a small house now, after the insurance payout limited our options for a new home.

Bryant probably lived in some kind of giant mansion. "Well, home sweet home," I said, hesitating. "Thanks so much, Regina."

"It's nothing, sweetie," my friend told me. "I'm gonna be up for a while longer if you want any more help."

"Thanks, Regina," Bryant said, tapping his knuckles against the body of her car as he exited swiftly. He was still holding my backpack.

I asked Bryant to wait outside for a second before I walked up our driveway and reached into my purse for my keys.

"Hello? Who's out there?" I heard as I inserted the key into the front door.

"Dad, it's me."

The door swung open and my parents stood in front of me, confused. "Mia? What are you doing here?"

"I'll explain. Do you mind if I go upstairs and see Eugene right now, first? It's really important."

I watched them hesitate. "Honey, are you in trouble? What's going on? Please tell us."

"It's not me," I promised. "But you're going to be upset all the same."

It was my mom who noticed Bryant first. She gasped, looking at me. "Mia... is that the boy who used to bully you?"

Dad looked over my shoulder, spotting Bryant standing in the distance. "My God, that *is* Bryant Howard. That douchebag Sergio's kid. The one who used to make fun of you, that's right..."

"It's... different now," I said, unable to figure out how to explain. "Can we please come inside?"

"Fine," Mom said, making way.

I turned to Bryant, gesturing for him to come in.

Walking with him to our small living room, with a few armchairs facing a TV, I offered to get Bryant some water. "Dad, you know Bryant, right?"

"Well... you're the Renegades' star quarterback, hard not to notice you. I love football, used to cheer the high school team on, I got excited when I started catching Florida games and saw that you had moved on there too," my father said, gushing as he shook Bryant's hand.

"Okay, I guess I'll leave you two to it," I smiled.

As I went to the kitchen, my mother confronted me. She was still in her dressing robe. "What's going on, Mia?"

"I can explain, but later, please."

"Why is he here?"

I exhaled. "We're dating, Mom."

"I thought he was with your friend Sam."

Wincing, I shook my head. "Not anymore."

"You're not in love with this boy, are you? Remember that I told you not to get involved with these kinds of guys before you went to college? Mia, I'm so worried about you."

"Mom, please," I raised my hands, hoping to interrupt her. "I just need to see Eugene, okay? It's really important."

My mother bit back everything else she needed to say, nodding quietly. She even took the glass of

water from my hand. “I’ll bring this over to Bryant.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

I had to go upstairs and see Eugene. I hoped my heart was ready for this.

BRYANT

Truth be told, the Cowells were reacting better to me being there than I expected.

Sure, Mia's mom was really confused – and suspicious. I understood perfectly. After all, Mia and I had grown up together, and that meant many, many years of nonstop harassment I had given her.

In hindsight, so much of it was because I liked her, and I didn't understand why she wouldn't just warm up to me like everyone else did. Mia was always the suspicious one, always convinced I had a bad side to me, one even worse than the fact that I was an ignorant jock who enjoyed putting people down, yes, bullying.

Talking football to Mr Cowell was easy. Since Mia had enrolled with Florida, he swapped allegiances from Texas A&M, where he had gone to, to Florida. It helped that we were enjoying a far better season than the Aggies, I supposed.

“But don't you have a big game at Missouri this weekend? I've been to Columbia once, it's a nice town. Not the biggest of college towns, but pretty impressive in its own way. And last I checked, they've been improving a lot in the last few seasons.”

“That's right, probably one of the biggest improvements of any team in our conference,” I said, agreeing with as much courtesy and politeness as I could manage.

Mia eventually came downstairs. “Bryant, can you come up with me? Eugene wants to say hello.”

I excused myself with Mr. and Mrs. Cowell, still holding the glass of water she had given me that I had sipped from just once.

I was dreading this moment. I thought back about all the kids I had pushed around and slammed into walls. I had never actually beaten anyone up, that seemed like a gross violation of even what most bullies did.

Hurting people was one thing. This was dangerous. The fact that Eugene got ganged up on by a bunch of other guys made me hate this situation even more.

I went upstairs, pushing the door to Eugene's room, left slightly ajar from when Mia went back in there.

Fuck, Mia's fourteen year old brother didn't look good at all. He had bruises all over his face, and a nasty-looking black eye. I could tell from the way that he was nursing his wrist that he had probably tried to punch back, only to sprain it when they effortlessly knocked him away.

Eugene seemed like a nice kid, a little small, maybe even a bit . He decorated his room tastefully, keeping to posters of video games — none of the violent shooting kind, mostly gentle-looking fantasy posters.

Fuck, I felt so bad for him. He seemed like he would be an easy target.

"I'm Bryant," I said.

"I know."

Exhaling as I took in the sight of his injuries, I sat down on the other side of his bed, since Mia was sitting there. "You doing okay, buddy? Does it hurt a lot still?"

Eugene shrugged, still holding his wrist close to his chest, resting it against his other arm. "This wasn't new, they always made fun of me, called me names and slurs... but I never thought they'd ambush me. I didn't even do anything."

"Of course you didn't," Mia said. "Nothing you could ever do would justify a hate crime like this."

Hate crime. That made my heart sink. That was exactly the truth, too. What happened to Eugene was more than just an act of bullying. This wasn't boys being boys.

I was sick with myself for having used that as an excuse before, allowing my father to bail me out from meetings with the principal when I was growing up. He was so callous about everything, shrugging and telling the principal it wasn't his boy's fault that they were wimpy little bitches.

Mia was watching me carefully. "This happened in school, too. Eugene had a free period and went to the bathroom, one of the boys saw him leave, had the other guy wait for him in there... then they both took turns attacking him."

Her brother winced at her retelling the story. "Look, I'm okay now. Thanks for coming. I'm sorry I made you travel all the way here."

I shook my head. "Look, buddy, it's important to your sister. It's important to me, as a result. Nobody deserves this, so I want to fix things."

"Fix things?"

I looked away, unwilling to say what I had in mind. "I just need their names."

Eugene shook his head. "I don't know about that... I don't want to snitch on anyone."

"It's okay to tell," Mia said, hugging her brother. "We care. And we want to make sure they don't do this again."

"They probably won't," Eugene said.

He was defending them. Why? Out of fear of more punishment and humiliation? Of course that was it — I should know. Nobody ever told on me and my friends when we used to bully others.

"Bullies need to be shown they can't get away with things like these," I explained. "What are their names? I want to teach them a lesson."

Mia raised an eyebrow. "I don't like where this is going."

"They need to be taught not to fucking hurt other kids just for their own amusement," I said, firmly this time. I was still looking at Eugene. "It's up to you, buddy. Your sister and I can fix this for you at once. Or you can hope that staying silent, just keeping a low profile, that'll save you. But I can tell you that it won't."

"No, it won't," Mia agreed. "I've been bullied too. You need to stand up for yourself. Or at least, when it's too scary, let someone stand up for you."

Part of me couldn't help but be amused by that, because Mia *did* stand up for herself. Nobody was as brave as her when it came to standing up to the person giving her a rough time at school... except I liked that, I thought that was just rough play. And when I started to realize how much she genuinely hated me, I just shrugged and accepted it.

I was never, ever going to let myself go "too bad" at things like these again.

No, this was as much an important lesson for me as it was for anyone else.

“You know,” Eugene said, breaking the silence. “I wish I wasn’t gay. I wish I wasn’t who I was, being this guy who everyone points and laughs at. I thought things were different now.”

“Don’t ever say that, buddy,” I quickly countered. I scooted over until I was closer to him, sitting in a triangle with Mia and Eugene. “You’re meant to be who you are. You’re great for being who you are. I don’t want you to start thinking that if you were just like everyone else, you wouldn’t get bullied. Because the people who are different aren’t the bullied, it’s the bullies.”

Mia didn’t say anything, but she nodded along to my words.

“So what, then? Just let you fix this for me? And what happens if they change their minds, bully me again? Hurt me like this? Maybe next time they’ll break my nose. Or kill me.”

Glancing over to Mia, I could tell she was horrified by how defeated Eugene sounded. I shook my head firmly, I didn’t want him to keep talking nonsense like this.

“No way. They’ll know they shouldn’t behave like psycho kids. They’ll learn from this. And the thing they’ll learn is that bullies can try as much as they want to be assholes, but someone’s always bigger than them. And right now, I don’t think you’ll find a bigger threat than... you know, me.”

“Big hunky college boy,” Mia smiled. “Seriously. Just look at his arms.”

I flexed my arm playfully, like a bodybuilder showing off. “Wanna touch those guns, Eugene?”

“Call me Gene,” he said, finally smiling. He seemed pretty exhausted, but at least he was looking a little more optimistic about things.

“Their names are Kurt Carling and Rick Truman. They’re both in my year, we’re in practically all the same classes. Most of the time they just threaten to beat me up unless I do their homework for them, which... ugh, I do.”

I winced. “Well, you won’t do that anymore. Kurt Carling, Rick Truman. I’m going to remember those names.”

“What are you going to do?” Eugene asked.

“Tomorrow’s Friday, so that’s a school day... why don’t you call in sick, while Mia and I go down to our old school and, uh, do the rounds?”

“What do you mean, do the rounds?”

“Just patrol the place. Reconnect with people from the past. And find new enemies.”

Mia laughed skeptically. “We’re going to confront these bullies... at school?”

“Sure, why not?” I asked. “They’re gonna be there. It’s not like beating Gene up is going to make them fly across the country, go into hiding... let’s confront them in school. Expose them for who they are. Little bullies pretending they’re big tough guys.”

Eugene looked to his big sister, who sat up now, sitting across from me. “What do you think?”

Mia made a face. “I guess I think this is a good idea. After all, we can’t just stay here forever. I’m missing classes tomorrow, but I’m sure I can catch up. At least this way we get to confront those assholes who did this to you, Gene.”

I nodded. “Exactly.”

The youngest Cowell made a big shrug, but at least this time he agreed with my plan. “Alright. I don’t really want to go to school tomorrow anyway. And this way if I miss one day, I’ll get a long weekend. Hopefully I’ll be looking better by Monday.”

Mia gave him another hug. “I’ll make sure to pretty you up with my makeup if you don’t. I brought lots of foundation.”

Eugene grinned. “I think I might actually be better at makeup than you. I’m one of the drama kids now, I’ve been working with a lot of different types of stage makeup.”

I was impressed. “Hey, that’s cool, buddy.”

“Thanks, Bryant,” he said. “You’re not that bad after all.”

He opened his arms, gesturing he would take a hug from me. I smiled and gave a big Bryant Howard signature bear hug to the little guy.

Mia hopped off his bed. “Okay, I’m going to talk to Mom and Dad now, okay?”

“Okay,” Eugene said, looking a little more tense.

“It’ll be fine, buddy,” I reassured him.

I went downstairs with Mia. I didn’t want to get in the way, so I just hovered behind her while she huddled with her parents, explaining what happened to Eugene, while they gasped and looked outraged.

But they didn’t do anything rash, which was a good thing. It would be too much if the response to Gene getting beaten up was too heavy, with parents and siblings and even strangers getting involved.

Mia’s mother started to cry, with her dad immediately hugging and consoling her.

I reached for Mia’s upper arm, hoping to console her too. She turned around and looked at me. “I guess we’re going to go to the school tomorrow. Sort this out.”

“Yeah,” I said.

Mia’s mother blinked some tears away. “Are you sure we shouldn’t get involved?”

I spoke before Mia did. “Mrs. Cowell, what we’re hoping to do is to fix things without making Eugene look even weaker, make him a bigger target to other bullies. Parents getting involved never looks good for kids like him.”

Mr. Cowell nodded. “I thought so too. I hate to say it, but my first reaction was that he should just man up and try to move past it.”

“You won’t be saying that when you see him,” Mia cautioned. “He doesn’t look great. I’m actually really pissed off. But okay, I’m going to calm down now. Can I sleep in my own bed?”

Mrs. Cowell started to look at me, registering my presence here. “Oh, that’s right... how could I forget? It’s really late now.”

“Sorry about that,” I offered a grin. “Don’t mean to be an uninvited guest.”

“Well, you should stay the night,” Mia’s mother said. Mrs. Cowell looked around the house, probably mentally checking where she could put me up. “Mia, how about you sleep with Gene, while Bryant sleeps in your room?”

Mia instantly started looking a little embarrassed. “We’re only napping a little bit, we mostly slept on the plane... there’s no need for that.”

I understood. Mia’s room had all her stuff from when she was growing up, she was probably embarrassed about me seeing all those things. For all I knew, she kept diaries talking about how much she hated me. I didn’t want to make her feel self-conscious in her own home, so I shook my head.

“The couch down here looks fine, Mrs. Cowell. I may look like a big guy, but when I’m all curled up on a couch, I shrink down a lot. You won’t even notice me.”

Everyone laughed. Mia added, “We’re only going to be napping, really. It’s practically morning now, and I want us to be able to get to the school early.”

I yawned. “Uh oh. I wasn’t factoring that in.”

“Yeah. We’re going to the school. Fix this.”

That somehow shut everyone up, her decisiveness making everyone ready to just go to bed. Mia was ready to go upstairs, but first she waited until her parents left, and then she gave me a long, deep kiss.

“Thank you, Bryant,” she said. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

I was happy too. This was what I wanted.

When she left, she flicked the light in the living room off, leaving me in the dark. I immediately started to curl up on the couch, glad I didn't need a sheet or a blanket, since the temperature was just nice for an Indianapolis fall.

Mia woke me up a couple of hours later, telling me it was already nine. School was already in, but at least it was still early in the day.

"Alright, cool," I said, yawning and stretching as I woke up. "How about breakfast?"

"How about I get you brunch — after we confront those kids?" Mia said. "Big brunch for the big guy with the big appetite."

My eyes flashed with desire. "Well, my appetite isn't for food right now."

Mia laughed, covering her mouth. "My mom and dad are still here, Bryant!"

"But when they aren't..."

"Nope. No way. Not a chance. Keep it in your pants." Mia grinned, fleeing from me, like she was afraid if I grabbed her, she wouldn't be able to resist herself either.

I didn't have any clothes to change into so I just kept the ones I had on. Mia slipped into a blue blouse and jeans, looking considerably more professional.

"You look like you're ready to see the manager."

"That's exactly what I'm about to do. Except the manager is the principal."

My plan was a little more... straightforward, but I didn't want her to change things by stopping me, so I didn't tell her that. We left the house, heading for the school.

When we got there, I was surprised by how little had changed.

Of course nothing had changed, it had only been a year. Some of the kids who moved around from class to class while we walked in there were kids I probably recognized, maybe even knew their names.

"What class would Eugene be in right now if he went today?" I asked Mia as I checked the locker area where I used to have mine. She was already moving towards the principal's office.

"Uh, U.S. History, I think?"

I nodded. "You go ahead first. You're the talker of the two of us, I'll let you start."

She went on without me, and I went straight for the classrooms, poking my head in and out of classes.

Teachers even recognized me. "Hey, big man! Bryant, I saw your game last week. That was amazing!"

I grinned. "Hey, Mr. P. Uh, sorry, I gotta go now."

The scene repeated as I wandered around the school, looking for Eugene's class.

Then I got there.

No teacher in yet. Most of the kids were just lazing around, doing nothing, hoping they'd just get through the day.

"Hey!" I called out, using my most booming quarterback voice — I really let it out, as if I was calling plays so loud I wanted the whole stadium to hear. "Carling, Truman. I want to see you both outside!"

Two boys jolted up. One was a tall, heavy-set kid with a cropped haircut. The other was a weasel-faced scrawny kid.

"Yeah, you two. Get out here. I want to talk to you."

They were surprised to be called out like this, and so they just obeyed, following me out.

I cornered them both, making sure they couldn't get past me. I clenched my fists.

"What the fuck did you do to my buddy Eugene Cowell, huh?"

First they complained that I had the wrong guy, but then I stamped a foot down and surprised them again. I lifted a hand, ready to slap one of them. I figured I should do it to Carling, the scrawny one.

“Answer me,” I repeated.

Those boys shrugged. “He had it coming. We don’t like boys like him. He’s gross.” That was Truman, the tall one.

Well, I guess I was wrong. I felt like I was taken back all those years, and it became the easiest thing to just slap Truman up, smacking him and telling him to stop behaving like a fucking little shit.

Then I gave Carling his turn, too. I grabbed him by his collar and slammed him against a locker, releasing him and then lifting my hand so fast he thought I was going to slap him.

Then I laughed.

Those boys started to stammer out apologies. “Okay, we’re sorry, we won’t ever do it again.”

“That’s not good enough,” I said. “I want you to apologize to Eugene.”

I took my phone out and recorded their apologies, while they cried. “Tell him you’re sorry, tell him you’re just a stupid little shit for trying to act like tough guys. I might have left this school now, but I’m not about to let this homophobic bullshit stand, got it?”

The two bullies looked right into my phone camera and did as I said, apologizing profusely.

When I made sure the video was saved, I took a step back, but not before feigning a punch. They both winced and ran away.

I turned around and saw that there was a crowd of people watching.

“Uh oh,” I murmured.

Mia caught my eye, watching the whole scene with a look of satisfaction. “Uh oh is right. We better get out of here, before you get in trouble. Let’s go, Bryant!”

I didn’t need the hint. We both started running down the familiar corridors of our school, until we were out and free again.

“Oh shit,” I said. “I can’t believe I did that.”

“Well... I think the public humiliation will teach those boys a serious lesson. So I guess you’re right.”

We both caught our breaths, leaning against a tree.

I waited until Mia was no longer doubled up, laughing and wheezing, and then as she stood straighter, I went in for a kiss.

“Oh. Wow,” she said, when I pulled back.

“God I want you.”

“Yeah... I know that. I want you too,” Mia said, exhaling. “I should get back to Gene, though. Can you send me that video? I’ll make sure everyone gets it.”

“Yeah, absolutely,” I nodded. “I... I guess I’ll go stay at my mom’s. I’ve been meaning to see my family. It’s been a while.”

Mia nodded. “Okay, Bryant.”

“Hey... do you want to come for dinner? Mom’s a pretty great cook.”

Mia didn’t even need to think about it. “I’d love to.”

MIA

I really appreciated that Bryant gave me space for the rest of the morning and afternoon, letting me catch up with Gene and my mom, while Dad went to work. I didn't know how much longer I was going to stay because when I got home and saw Gene was in a much better mood, I felt like I had done my part.

But it was really good to be with my family again.

And it felt even better to think that he wanted me to meet his family. Dinner tonight seemed like a big deal. Of course, we had a whirlwind romance that had gotten super dramatic what with Samantha and the football and the fact that we were both subject to nonstop social media rumor-mongering... but I craved the normalcy of these things like dinner.

I just wanted to have a nice little moment with him. Really understand what makes Bryant Howard tick.

He texted me saying his mother was excited to see me. "Oh my God," I said, surprised by that. It felt so wholesome... formal, even.

Sure, they were rich, but at least I knew his mother wasn't the arrogant billionaire like his dad. The father lived in New York, and from what I had been hearing from Bryant this whole time, it sounded like I was at no risk of having to meet *him*.

He probably wouldn't like me one bit, anyway.

Gene and I just hung out at home, as he did a little bit of homework, as I showed him photos of life in Florida. He was a lot more engaged now, no longer the sad, stiff boy from last night.

It broke my heart to see him like this.

When Bryant sent us the apology video, I showed him and he even laughed.

"Wow. They look so scared."

"Of course," I nodded. "Because they were."

"Tell me how you and Bryant ended up... getting together. He's hot. You're kinda lucky."

"I think he's the luckier one," I winked at him. "He's the one who has me, and got to hang out with you."

"Mmm," my brother said. "So you're not going to tell me?"

"Well, essentially... I arrived at my new school, and before I could even make any new friends, I got whisked away to a party at this big house. Of course it was Bryant's. He lives there with a bunch of his college football teammates. Big party. Kinda wild. Lots of drama."

Eugene nodded. "He was with your best friend, wasn't he?"

"Ugh, yeah. Sam and I... I don't know. We're not talking. I don't think we'll ever get back to

talking, either. Not if things stay as bad as they have been. It sucks, honestly. I feel like I lost a sister.”

“Is that why you came running here?” Gene said, his perceptiveness never failing him.

“What do you mean?”

“You feel the loss of a close friend, so when you got my call, you had to come back, because you don’t want that repeated so soon.”

“I’m not going to lose you, Gene,” I promised him. “Ever.”

“Well... thanks for all the help, all the same,” he said. He was always capable of sounding wiser beyond his years. “I’m really happy you’re my sis.”

I smiled, hugging him. “I’m having dinner at Bryant’s house. It’s a big one.”

“We should be the ones asking him to have dinner with us,” Eugene said.

I shrugged. “Our house is kinda small. I think four people is enough. Three is probably a lot more cozy, isn’t it?”

Eugene smiled. “Yeah, we’ve been having lots of fun since you’ve been gone. Totally forgot all about you, Mia.”

For those words, my brother got a playful swat across his chest. I gave him another hug and then went to my bedroom.

It was the same as it had always been. Nothing had changed. Bringing Bryant into this environment would have made me feel vulnerable, like this was something I wasn’t ready for yet.

That maybe wasn’t fair, but it was true all the same. I couldn’t expect him to just enter every part of my life, not even if he wanted me to.

But I was feeling a special sort of closeness to him now, after what he did for me here. He proved that he was the real deal, that he wanted more than just a regular hook-up. There was something real, and I was done doubting everything at this stage.

We would have to fly back to Florida at some point. I didn’t look forward to that flight. Going back to school felt like being jolted back to reality.

And knowing that Bryant was going to have to deal with lots of drama as a result of missing his game was bad news too.

It wasn’t fair for him to have to deal with consequences like that. I had always overheard from Marvin and the others about how uptight their coach was. If he found out the reason why Bryant ditched the game, he might freeze him from the team altogether.

Was that going to be on my conscience?

I napped for a little bit before I woke up to messages on my phone from Bryant. He had texted me saying that he would come pick me up around five.

It was four now, so I quickly took a shower and changed into my clothes — most of my best clothes I had taken with me to Florida, but I had a large enough wardrobe to look presentable.

My outfit for dinner was something polite but pretty. I didn’t know how formal things were for a guy who grew up the way Bryant did, so I picked something at least a little fancier than just a t-shirt and jeans.

I went with a casual dress with a pink and orange floral pattern. I wore this out all the time, and when I cinched the waist with a belt, it looked a little more fancy, too.

Glancing in the mirror, I looked at myself, realizing that I was picking clothes not just to be appropriate for dinner... but also because I wanted Bryant to look at me and think I was beautiful.

He always already gave me that look, but now I wanted him to say it over and over again.

And for one last accessory to complete this outfit, I rummaged through my things and found my old glasses.

The ones he used to point out and laugh and call me a nerd with glasses over. They weren't so bad. I was glad I wore contacts now, or swapped with a more stylish designer piece.

But putting my glasses on, I felt like I stopped looking like the adult college girl I was, and started to reminisce being the annoyed little girl in school who hated that boy Bryant for making her days a living hell.

This shouldn't be a memory I could smile to, but somehow, now... it was.

I was grateful for that.

Bryant arrived at five on the dot, driving a car that looked identical to his Mercedes he left in Florida.

I saw him park in our driveway, and I immediately started walking downstairs. I kissed my mom on the cheek. "Gonna be gone for the evening!"

"Are you coming back tonight?" she asked.

I just simply shrugged and walked right out of the house, greeting Bryant with my arms wide open in surprise.

"Did you have someone drive your car all the way here? I don't get it!" I said, looking at his ride.

"No, actually... it's my mom's. She was the one who got me my car. Thinks it's cute for us to have the exact same model. I don't know, I kinda love it."

"Well, that's adorable," I said.

He got out of the car, chivalrously opening the passenger door for me, so I could get in. "Speaking of adorable, you look adorable."

"I was going for something else," I smiled.

"Beautiful. But the glasses give it an extra edge. Wouldn't be able to forget those glasses ever, I know them too well," Bryant said. "Didn't I, uh, once pretend I was going to smash them into little pieces?"

I sighed. "Yes, you did. I was so scared you would do that, you know. I'm glad you've grown up. You were such an asshole."

Bryant slumped into his seat, pouting at me. "I'm sorry. I really was. Can I get a kiss?"

I leaned forward, pecking him on the lips with mine. It really felt like we had gone through a hell of a journey together, ending up where we were today, able to talk about our past and reminisce without feeling any more residual pain.

"Wow, so... I'm going to confess something. I love those glasses on you. I always have, you looked adorable. I just kept pointing them out to you because I liked how you got so mad when I did," Bryant said as he drove.

I rolled my eyes. "Boys are so stupid. Tell me you won't have to make fun of me now if there's something about me you like."

Bryant grinned. "I... can't promise that. I might still want to tease you. But only in an appropriate way, I promise."

"That's good enough for me."

His house wasn't that far from mine, especially now since we had moved away from the childhood home I grew up in.

It was in a street where there were plenty of McMansions, all looking almost identical. At the far end was Bryant's mother's house, differentiated from the others by the greenery and a more tastefully-designed facade.

He took me straight into the house, and I was impressed by just how big it was. From the entrance it looked like there were rooms after rooms, like some kind of Beverly Hills mansion owned by a

celebrity, where you had so many rooms you didn't even really know what to do with all of them — so you'd have a little game room, a room to paint in, I imagined Bryant even had his own little NFL-themed locker room.

"We're here!" he said.

"Oh, Bryant, great!" a woman a little older than him said. They looked similar, except instead of being six foot tall, she was a more svelte five foot seven or so. A little boy pushed past her legs, immediately clinging to Bryant.

"Uncle B!" he said.

"I never fail to feel super old when he calls me Uncle," Bryant said, looking at me. He carried his nephew up, holding him against his chest. "Hey, little man, I want you to meet Mia Cowell. Mia Cowell, I am delighted to present to you my nephew, Carl Milford, son of Robert Milford and my sister, Sheryl Howard Milford."

"Wow, you make us sound like royalty or something," Bryant's sister laughed, collecting her son from Bryant. She looked at me and smiled. "I'd give you a hug but my hands are kinda occupied. You look so sweet, Mia! Loving the print on your dress. Very fall. Very chic!"

I smiled, feeling grateful for the warm welcome. "Is your husband also here?"

"Oh yeah, Rob's in the kitchen, helping mom. We're making tacos and quesadillas tonight. With Bryant dressed so smart, you'd probably think we were the kind of people to have a ten-course meal or something. God, I hope not. I like things casual."

It was interesting to see just how ordinary Sheryl and Carl were. They didn't seem rich, not like how Bryant did sometimes. I realized that not everyone had to hold onto money the way Bryant's father did, and when Sergio Howard divorced his wife, it probably changed the dynamic by a lot.

I imagined he was the kind of guy who liked having all that money to dangle over someone as a threat, making them obey him because they needed the cash.

There was nothing I had heard about his father that I liked.

Bryant led me to the kitchen, where I saw a handsome bald guy mess around with some corn tortillas. Then there was an older woman who could only be Bryant's mother.

"Hello," I said, chiming as sunnily as I could. "I'm Mia. Thank you so much for having us here."

"Aw, Mia," his mom said. "Call me Rita. I'm so happy to see you. You know, Bryant's never asked me to prepare a big dinner for all of us like this before."

She perked up when she saw me, but I could see that she was a little sad for some reason. I didn't register why that was. Was it because she wished the family was complete, that his father could also be here? Or was it sadness over her son growing up so quick, her one and only baby boy now bringing someone home?

But I soon found out, when she inhaled sharply, stood a little taller, and addressed Bryant. It was clear she was telling him bad news.

"Your father's in town. He's been here since he found out you bought flights to Indianapolis. And when he tracked the car, he made sure to invite himself to our dinner. He's on the way now."

Bryant sighed. "Why does he always do this?"

Rita looked as disappointed as he was. "Because he just wants to make everyone's life terrible, because he's a bully."

I thought back about how Bryant had confronted the bullies this morning at our high school. It was a little rash to slap those kids around, and there was probably going to be consequences for him for that — banned from coming back, probably.

But he did it for the right reasons. And I knew deep down that he also did it because he wanted to

prove to himself that he had changed, and that he wasn't the bully he had always been before.

His father, however, seemed like the kind of guy who I felt could get to him, really get his nerves.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked Bryant, and then turned my question to Rita.

His brother-in-law Rob answered, "I think we can all handle Sergio together. He's not a nice guy, no. But he's here because he has a bone to pick against Bryant."

"Be strong tonight, Bry," Rita said. "I'd understand if you needed to leave early, but don't... let him get the satisfaction of seeing that he's hurt you."

Bryant was silent, but after giving it some thought, he nodded. "Thanks, Mom. I love you."

He hugged his mother, and I felt a twinge of pain in my own heart, watching this scene.

We all went to the dining table, and everyone's mood was a little more subdued. Even Carl picked up on the low energy of the table, occupying himself with his mother's iPhone instead.

Rob kept the conversation going, asking me about school. It turned out he was a media sales manager for a big advertising company that dealt with accounts in Chicago, so when I told him I was interested in becoming a journalist, he told me about all the interesting editors he had met in his time.

Bryant mostly had hushed conversations with his mom. Sheryl attended to her husband and her child, occasionally asking me a question about myself.

It didn't feel as awkward as it could have been. If anything, it felt sweet... except for the shadow hanging over the table.

And as if on cue, Bryant's dad arrived. I could hear the loud vroom of his sports car outside as he skidded to a stop, then marched inside. The door wasn't locked, so he could just slam the door open.

"Well, well, well," he said, looking amused at the scene as we all froze, anticipating his arrival in the dining room. "Bry, you're back. What's this? Already giving up on your football career, huh?"

Bryant said nothing.

"And I've watched enough YouTube to know that you're the one and only Miss Mia Cowell," he said, his smile baring teeth. "Well... you're quite plain. Plainer than I thought. I'm surprised Bryant would go for a girl like you. The last one was far hotter."

"Dad, shut up," Bryant said, through gritted teeth.

"Well, the last one looked a lot like you too, just... sluttier. Probably a good thing that you're not her, then," Sergio Howard said. "Aren't I invited to join this dinner?"

Rita closed her eyes, sighing. "Do you always have to do things like this, Serge?"

He laughed. "I think I have the right to do whatever I want in a home I still own."

Bryant stood up. "I don't want you threatening Mom like that. I'm sick of this shit coming from you, Dad. And I'm sick of you trying to ruin everyone's lives like this. Don't you have better things to do?"

His father paused, stepping closer to Bryant. He orbited around him, circling him, looking at him icily. Rob also stood up, ready to intervene, but he wasn't a big guy built the way Bryant and Sergio were.

"Son," Bryant's dad said, "I want you to tell me you're finished with school, finished with football. There's no point. Sure, you managed to luck out for a couple of games. But last year you were struggling, you were a backup with no prospects at all. I got reports from my people that you weren't even getting good feedback from your coaching team. Now I've spoken to Liam Frost, and I told him that you're back on a personal — that means family — matter. I told him not to keep his hopes up. That before the end of the season, you'll be coming to New York, so you can work with me."

"Nobody works with you," Bryant said. "You're only interested in people working *for* you."

I kept my gaze fixed on the vengeful father. He caught me staring at him. “What’s your problem?” he asked.

“My problem is that you’re making a very pleasant evening very unpleasant with your presence,” I said, as ice-cold as he had been.

Bryant didn’t have to face his jerk of a father alone.

I could sense the pride radiating from him, as he watched Sergio reel with anger.

“I won’t be talked to like this by some random little slut who’s riding my son’s dick. One of many, I’m sure,” he said.

“Dad, how fucking dare you,” Bryant said, blinking tears of anger back. “We’re getting out of here. This is ugly. You’re a toxic old man. I hope you come to realize this some day. Come on, Mia. We’re going.”

I didn’t know where it was we could go, but Bryant was right. This was a toxic environment.

I just followed after him.

We got into his mother’s car and I immediately reached over to hold him. He was struggling not to cry.

I had never seen him this vulnerable.

“Let’s just go somewhere, okay?” I suggested. “Drive to a hotel. Let’s just be there together. Me and you. And I’ll pay, so your dad won’t be able to track you.”

Bryant finally nodded. “I know a place.”

I was expecting it to be a five star hotel, but it ended up being a cute little motel owned by a Korean couple, closer to downtown but still not too far from my house.

“This is the kind of place that you go to on prom night when a long-standing high school couple wants to finally have sex together,” I giggled. “Is that why we’re here? Have you done that before?”

Bryant laughed along. “No, but you’re kinda right. It’s that vibe, isn’t it? But hey, I just want to spend Friday night with someone who won’t make me feel like a total piece of shit — and lucky for me, that person is you. So it doesn’t matter how fancy things are. I don’t need a presidential suite with a bathtub facing the White River or the zoo. I just want you.”

We could barely contain our giggles as we went to the counter, getting a mid-sized room. I paid in cash, because I had taken a lot with me to pay for the flight last night.

“A bathtub would actually be pretty nice,” I said. “I didn’t really get a chance to really sleep. Just nap.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Bryant said. “I didn’t know my dad knew I was here, though. That really sucked. And I’m sorry you had to see all that. I’m really sorry.”

I shushed him with a finger to his lips as we entered our room.

It smelled a little funky, but that somehow just added to the charm. For a moment, I could just imagine the kind of people who stayed at places like these... and yes, most of them were probably high school couples celebrating and hoping they could get away with some beers and some first-time sex.

Well, in a way, I was glad I had lost my virginity in a college dorm room... even if that dorm room wasn’t mine.

“Come here,” I murmured, taking him into my hands, pulling him to me. I wanted to take him to bed. He was always such a strong guy, but I really just wanted to show him how much I appreciated him.

Bryant had come into my life at a time when I wasn’t expecting anything like this, and now that he was here, I could feel just how right it felt.

I wanted him to be here with me, forever.

Forever in the motel room, forever in business class seats, forever reminiscing about our high school days as we walked through the halls we had spent years in.

I kissed him, and told him everything was okay.

He didn't have to put on a show for me, give some athletic performance the way I always felt he did, when sex was not just an act of intimacy, but something more — him showing off just how good he was.

I already knew he was good. I already knew how good he was for me.

Now was all about us showing each other how much we needed one another.

I had to show Bryant that I cared for him, that everything he had done for me was special to me.

I wanted him to forget everything his father had said. Of course there was no way Bryant was going to give his college football career up. I wouldn't let him. He was so passionate about that, and the last thing I ever wanted for him was to have to sacrifice something he truly loved.

He sat up in bed, his back against the wall, his legs spread open. We got naked very quickly, and this time I told him to just relax, that I was going to give him everything he needed.

I kissed his body all over, appreciating the sculpted physicality that the quarterback worked hard for. I got wet just thinking about how rock-hard his abs were, long before I ended up kissing there. I could feel his cock stir, throbbing for me to give him attention.

No, not yet. It wasn't just fantastic sex that brought us together. It was something more. I wanted him to know that I was his, not just as someone to hook up with, but someone to look out for him the way he looked out for me.

There was no place for any toxic people in our lives anymore. I was ready to let go of Sam, and he needed to get out of his father's shadow.

"Things will be better," I promised him, as I began to kiss his abs again, making a short circuit up to his belly button, while my hand reached for his cock, feeling just how thick he got in my hand.

He was so big my small hand couldn't even really wrap around it.

"Mmm," I murmured.

He had his eyes closed, but his mouth was open. I could tell just how vulnerable he was feeling now, and he was opening up to me in a really special way, showing to me that for once, he could give up the role of protecting other people — that this time, he could just let me in and trust me.

I knew trust was a big issue here. Whenever I upset him by rejecting his offers to help me, I figured out that it was because he was someone who found it hard to trust other people... so when he offered this help, only to be turned down, he took it hard. He felt like I didn't trust *him*.

But I did. I trusted him. I lowered my mouth to his cock and let my tongue play with him, to give him the same sort of passion and enjoyment that I always experienced when we played together in bed.

Everything about this was perfect, and I wanted him to know that there was more of this — in Florida, in Indiana, wherever. We weren't bound by our locations, or the places we grew up in and went to school at. We could have this sort of connection no matter where.

I wasn't going to let him forget that.

Pulling my mouth away, feeling my saliva drip down my hand still grasping him by his base, I started to mount him.

I wanted to ride this gorgeous, athletic man.

He was an incredibly well-primed machine of a man, someone who devoted hours and hours of his life to improving himself so he would hit peak performance.

To experience him this purely was such an honor for me. But it wasn't just an honor. It was what I wanted, what I craved.

Because I could resist sex with Bryant for a few days, but it was a need that would build up in me.

He held my shoulders, helping guide me up and down him, as I bounced and felt him fill me up.

It was an exquisite feeling. His cock pointed straight up had so much power which he gave with every thrust.

The pleasure was overwhelming.

I didn't even know I was this close to coming, but in a matter of seconds, I was holding him tight, leaning forward while still riding him, and kissing him.

I came as our tongues passionately met.

BRYANT

Nobody could make me feel as good as Mia did. She treated me with the tenderness I needed, knowing what I needed was closeness.

I was sick of having such a complicated life. I was sick of my father barging in, ruling over everyone, acting like he was some kind of king. Nobody stood up to him except me, not my mom, not Sheryl, not even Rob.

But tonight Mia did.

I was starting to feel incredibly bad, but I didn't want any of that to bleed in to hooking up with Mia. Like it did just the night before, when we were still back at my house, before flying here... she was always able to make my body feel amazing.

It was as if she was made for me.

And that was what made everything so dangerous to me.

We had been doing it nonstop for several hours, fucking because our bodies were pent-up with a lot of frustrations that had nothing to do with us... or at least, so we thought.

Eventually, for the first time ever, Mia was the one who seemed like she was into it more than me. She was under me, grinding herself against me while I held her down and pushed thrust after thrust.

I was starting to weaken, but after hours of sweaty, full-force sex... that could be forgiven.

The problem was that Mia could see I was somewhere else.

"Okay," she murmured, giving me a quick kiss. "Shower and cleanup?"

"Sure, yeah," I said absently.

"You're far away, Bryant," she pointed out, but that was obvious to anyone, surely.

"I'm sick of a lot of different things," I said, my mood darkening. I didn't want to do this to her, I didn't want to worry like this.

But seeing my dad always ruined my day, because it reminded me of the one triggering incident in my life that always broke me.

The divorce.

Dad was cruel in his words, as usual. He blamed it on the life at home here in Indianapolis, said we were the ones to be faulted for him having a mistress in New York, who he had kids with in secret. He said if we had just been less whiny on the rare occasions he was home, we could at least be a family. Not a happy one, but an intact family.

I shuddered, thinking about how awful he was.

So many years had past yet I still wanted to see the good in my father. I knew that he was trying to reach out to me this way because he wanted to connect with me, his oldest son. He had nothing for

him outside of work and the isolating life of a billionaire, and his new family was as distant and cold as he was — they weren't people he could boss around.

It made sense that he kept coming back to me, to Mom, to Sheryl. It was all so he could dominate us, take some sick pleasure in this.

He was the true bully here.

I sighed, sliding down the wall until my head slumped against the overly soft motel pillows. At least the mattress wasn't so bad, even if the sheets probably could do with another wash.

Mia had left me to go to the shower.

People, in the end, always leave me.

That was my fear, the one thing that drove me on. Of course I would give my all to anyone who I cared this deeply about. But I did that in hopes that by cementing all these acts of service and kindness in their lives, I'd make myself indispensable. That they'd never want to leave me, the way Dad left the family.

This was why I hated it so much when Mia rejected all my offers of help. It didn't cost me anything, but it would help her so much.

I didn't want another drawn-out conversation about Mia telling me I didn't owe her anything. It wasn't like that. It wasn't about owing anyone anything. And I definitely had no intention of acting like I somehow owned her.

I wasn't my Dad, okay?

Mia came back, holding her phone. "There's a new Fiona video."

Frowning, I turned away from her. "I don't want to watch any of that shit."

"Except it's about you," Mia said, her voice soft, but full of caution. "I don't like watching this either, but maybe it's news about the football game. You might want to plan about how you're going to deal with that now, while you still can."

"Whatever," I said, annoyed that she was still watching. I didn't listen, but I could hear that irritating girl's voice — she mentioned the Renegades, she mentioned my name, she mentioned something about "my playboy days being over", whatever that was meant to be.

"Wait, what is this about?" I sat up, asking Mia to rewind.

She had a hard look on her face. It must have been about her and me. I leaned over to see her screen.

Fiona broke the story of how Mia had moved in with me. There were paparazzi-style photos of her and me kissing. That had to be recent, because the only time I could think of us sitting down on the couch next to the big windows of the living room facing out was... Thursday.

Thursday was yesterday.

People were staking out my *house*, trying to get some bullshit gossip news story.

This made me so fucking mad.

"Playboy days are over..." Mia repeated, looking up at me. "So we're public now in a way that we weren't before. Back then people were just guessing about me, but they didn't really care. Now I'm Bryant Howard's mystery roommate he's been photographed kissing."

I shook my head. "These videos are all bullshit. She doesn't know anything."

Mia raised an eyebrow, looking up at me. I was still naked, but she was already wearing her dress again, even with her bra and panties still on the floor. "I mean... you're not a playboy anymore, right?"

I didn't respond.

"I need you to answer this for me, Bryant. I really want to know how you feel. I want to know

how you feel *about me*. I know we've only been doing this for such a short time, but I've got feelings for you. And I'm here for you, you know I am. We're moving really fast, and I'm scared. So I need a little bit of reassurance."

There was no easy way of saying this. "I don't know how to answer."

"It's such a simple question. Do you want to be with me?"

"Yeah, sure I do," I said, even though there was just enough doubt in my voice to make her immediately look disappointed.

She tensed up. "This sounds like there's a big 'but' waiting to be said."

"I'm not like other guys, okay, Mia? I can't promise these things. Girls will throw themselves at me. I don't want to be with them... now. But I don't know what I'll feel two weeks from now. Or a month. Or next year. I don't want to make any promises I can't keep, I don't want you to think I'm some kind of bad guy for not knowing what my future will look like."

She shook her head. "You don't get to say that, Bryant. If you want to be with me... then just be with me. I know you don't want us to have labels or anything, but I've gone deep with you here. You don't have to be scared. Just go deep with me too."

Matters of the heart like this were not something I spent a lot of time talking about. If it was just sex, yes, I could understand. I could definitely promise that I wanted to keep having sex with her. Hooking up with Mia felt amazing, it was definitely the best I've ever had.

But tying myself to someone who I knew could leave me... I had no idea if I was ready for that.

"My life is complicated, Mia," I said, hoping to leave it at that.

She was too stubborn to take that as an answer. "So what? I saw that today. If it's your dad, well... I feel sorry for him, because he's going to have to deal with me. And I'm ready to fight. I've always been a fighter. I fought you for years, Bryant. I just want to know what's in your heart."

"I don't even know what's in my heart," I said, wishing there was some way I could show her that I wasn't being shady — I truly meant that I had no idea how I felt, and making promises was something I really hated to do.

When she told me she was scared, I almost blurted out the first thing that came to my mind. That I felt like I was possibly falling in love with her. But how would I even know if that was true? And if I showed my cards now and fell flat on my face, what next?

It didn't even matter to me if she was going to say that she was in love with me either. I just couldn't handle anything, not after this evening. I tried so hard to protect all the people I cared about... but I couldn't guarantee that.

Mia would just be disappointed with me. Just like she was right now.

And then she'd leave. By the time she did that, I'd have just made mistake after mistake, and there was no way to fix it — or even see the problems until it was too late.

"Well, I want you to know something. It's serious," Mia said. "I'm falling in love with you, Bryant. I love you. I really do."

I paused. What was I supposed to do? Say it back? I had never said those words to anyone other than my family members.

And my family members were all fucked up by the one man they looked up to and loved, too.

"You won't say it, then," Mia murmured softly.

She sighed, and I looked away.

I wasn't willing to just gamble on everything and tell her I felt like I was falling in love now, too. What if I was wrong?

I'd be breaking her heart.

After breaking Sam's heart, and feeling nothing over that... I wanted to change. I wanted to be someone I could be proud of.

But that didn't matter to Mia right now.

She stood up and gathered her things. "Sorry. I should probably get home."

"Let me drive you," I offered, limply.

She shook her head. "That's going to hurt too much. I'll just get a cab."

I didn't say anything. It wasn't even like I didn't have the energy to do that.

I just felt too depressed. Again, I was right. Mia was leaving.

People always left.

MIA

The next direct flight back to school was on a Sunday. I was taking that one, I couldn't miss my Monday classes too.

The only problem was that I knew Bryant was on that flight as well.

It wasn't like I was avoiding him, but I definitely was reeling from the surprise that he had been so... open about his doubts about us.

Was there even an 'us'? Had there ever been.

I spent Saturday trying my best to forget everything, staying in with my family. I woke up early, made breakfast for everyone, even as Dad woke up early and joked that he could smell the burning from upstairs.

Hey, it was just eggs with burnt toast. I also made pancakes, repeating a simple recipe my mom had taught me.

Gene and Mom came downstairs too, and for a second, everyone ignored the pain they had in their lives, happy to just enjoy a simple weekend breakfast with the family reunited.

But it didn't last.

Mom asked me how dinner went at Bryant's mom's place.

I simply shook my head. "Don't really want to talk about it, Mom. I'm sorry."

Dad understood. "These things are difficult, Mia. But if anybody out there is strong, it's you."

I moved on to a different topic. I told them I was going to be here the whole day, and I was happy to do whatever the family wanted to do. Gene was still all bruised up, so he didn't want to leave the house. Mom and Dad were going shopping for gardening tools, which didn't really excite me that much.

It turned out people were capable of having lives after I left. It made me feel a little sad, but on the other hand, I was glad they were able to fill my absence with hobbies and interests of their own.

So I just spent my time trying to be the best daughter and sister I was, helping around the house, doing chores, not keeping myself locked up in my room.

With nobody free, I ended up asking Regina if she wanted to have coffee.

The problem was that she worked Saturdays, so I had to catch her after her shift — which would be after closing.

She promised I could at least have a drink on her. We met at a bar that didn't look too carefully at the patrons' ages, but even so, it didn't feel too shady. This was Regina's usual sort of haunt.

"No boyfriend tonight?" I asked her.

She raised an eyebrow. "Could've asked you the same thing."

"No, he's not my boyfriend," I sighed.

"But you don't know if you want him to be, either," Regina instantly caught on. "Sounds like you're in some seriously complicated territory. But are you the complicated one, or is he?"

I shrugged. She got us margaritas, and we were sipping them down pretty fast. They were strong.

"Part of me was ready to look past all the suspicions I had about him. I know he's a good guy. I know I was wrong about a lot of things about him. But I've always had pretty strong intuition, and if something about him tells me there's something off... I should listen to it," I told Regina.

She smiled at the bartender, instantly getting his attention. We got another round of margaritas. Her smile was enough to get us a couple of tequila shots on the house, too.

"Well... sometimes you can be sure about these things, and still be wrong," Regina said, looking sure. "If he's got a problem, maybe you should help him. But maybe it's also too big for you to help, not unless he sorts it out first."

"I told him I was in love with him."

Regina was impressed. "Wow, that's... intense. What, is he freaking out just because of that? Typical."

I shook my head. "No, it's not like that. I think he has feelings too, but they're so deep inside him that he's afraid to really let himself feel them. He's not unemotional, though. He's just got his issues. And it's his family at the heart of it. I think he sees himself as this broken guy who has some sort of responsibility to be everyone's protector."

"That's masculinity for you," Regina sighed, knocking her tequila shot against mine before downing it, without even waiting for me. "Jesus, these guys really want to get us drunk."

"Look around. We're the only people here who aren't middle-aged Irish guys," I laughed. "You pick weird places, Regina."

"The weirder the place, the better they are to me." She turned to the bartender. "Fantastic shot. I'll love you forever if you gave us a tray of that."

"On you or on the house?" countered the bartender, a handsome older guy who looked like he was an actor back in the day.

"No way. On the house, of course," Regina grinned, leaning forward, giving him an eyeful of cleavage. "This doesn't ever get old, right?"

The bartender laughed. "My God, you're right, it never does. Coming right up, gimme a sec."

I laughed, looking at Regina. "I'm flying pretty early tomorrow. I don't want a hangover."

"Well, you're getting one anyway," Regina said, laughing along with me. She took a peek at my margarita. "You need to drink that faster. Your second round's already here."

I glanced around the room, almost hoping that Bryant would show up. Of course he didn't know I was here, but deep down, I just wanted him to be around for me, make me feel safe again.

That was going to be hard after the conversation we had. He got so distant so easily. Was it just because of his dad?

"Hey, Mia, sweetie, focus, please," Regina said in a staccato burst of words. "Don't think about some boy when we've got a tray of shots in front of us."

"I honestly don't know how you do this," I laughed, looking at my best friend of the last year. "You know, Sam's turned out to be such a drama queen."

Regina raised an eyebrow, lifting a shot. "To Sam being a drama queen," she toasted.

"Ugh, fine," I said, knocking our shot glasses together and then drinking.

Okay, this was kinda fun.

Regina immediately entered her usual rant about how she felt like Sam was a bit of a bitch to her,

how she preferred it a lot more now that Sam was in Florida. I felt like Regina was unloading to me that she missed me, that since she had gotten a lot busier with work, starting her new job just as I had started college, things were becoming different.

Of course, I was also in a state of transition too.

But it was good to bond. We were friends without the baggage of a guy getting in the way, which broke my friendship with Sam.

So without all of that, we could just be a little more free.

By the time Regina was done waving her boobs in front of the bartender that night, having scored us lots of drinks, I was feeling woozy. I had never gotten this drunk, wow.

She called me a cab, and I did everything I could to tiptoe quietly into my room. As a college girl, this felt strange... like an exceedingly childish thing to do. But here in my family's new house, I realized that I always felt like a kid.

Dad would always look at me with pride. Mom would always worry and stress herself over making sure I had everything I needed. Gene would hover around, saying something sarcastic before slipping into his wise mode, somehow making complex problems seem really trivial and solvable.

I loved being here.

I slumped into bed, still buzzing from thinking about how Regina would flirt with anyone who stopped by the bar while we were there. She was such a funny girl. I knew we were going to have seriously different paths in life, but I hoped she would be in my life forever.

I fell asleep, knowing I managed to enjoy one last night here before my morning flight.

Bryant would just have to deal with me then.

When I woke up, I groaned from how bright everything was. I got a lot of natural light at my room in Bryant's place too, but those were always shaded and filtered through lots of plants.

Here, my room's one window faced East, and as soon as morning came, I got sun all over my face.

With my sort of hangover, I was not looking forward to the rest of the day.

This wasn't a feeling I was used to. I stretched in bed, checking my phone for the time, and realized I did have enough time to get ready for the flight... but not enough time to catch more sleep.

Bryant texted me overnight, telling me he hoped he would see me at the airport.

I wanted to challenge him with some sort of sassy text right back, asking him why he wasn't just taking the private jet.

But now that I had personally experienced what life was like being the son of Sergio Howard, I felt sorry for him. I hated that I cared so much, even as he pushed me away all because he had some deep-held insecurity he wouldn't share with me.

It was his life. I understood that. He was scared of letting people in because he was scared I might get hurt too, or something like that. Maybe I was wrong, but if that was it, then I was right to be angry. It was idiotic! I cared about him too, I could give him the sort of comfort and protection he gave me.

Feeling safe wasn't just something he made me feel. I wanted him to feel that way too.

I had all these feelings for Bryant, and I didn't know what to do with them now. If he wanted us to just chill out, having been the one who brought us this deep and this far himself... then I would, but he'd lose out on being able to truly be with me.

And that was a big loss. I knew it was.

Mom wanted to drive me to the airport, but I was almost embarrassed by the idea. Nursing a hangover while your family's just watching TV on a Sunday morning seemed like a joke. I felt almost

pathetic.

"I can drive," Eugene offered.

"No you can't. Wait until you're sixteen," Dad shot back. "We'll all go. How about that?"

I said it was fine, since Regina had already promised to do that.

Mom and Dad seemed pretty pleased to hear that. "I like her. She's a little more... rough around the edges than you or Samantha, but I think she's a fine woman," Mom said. "You went out with her last night, didn't you?"

I didn't want to make my hangover too apparent. "Yeah, we just hung out."

"Like old times," Mom beamed.

"Sure did," I laughed. "Uh, I'm going to get my stuff and then wait for her around the corner, okay? Easier for us to get to the airport there."

I hated lying to my family, but the thought of having to take a big happy family drive when I was feeling this bad in my head, in multiple ways, no less... that just made me feel like my hangover would transform into a migraine.

So I just packed up and hailed a cab.

I had a little money left, enough to cover all this. If Bryant offered to give me a ride back home, I'd agree. But if I didn't see him, I wasn't going to wait around for him.

After all, he didn't seem like he was willing to wait around for *me*.

When I got to the airport I didn't have much to do, so I went straight to the gate. Bryant was already there. He saw me just as I cleared security and walked over towards the bank of seats waiting at the gate.

I took a seat far away from him, and at first he just nodded and accepted that.

This time, I made sure my seat wasn't upgraded. I booked it on my phone in the cab, with the intention of paying with my card when I got there. It didn't matter to me that Bryant probably booked two tickets... in business class, again.

No, I had to set clear boundaries now that I was not sure if we could continue doing what we were doing.

Was it just that he wanted sex from me, but somewhere along the way he developed feelings? It was the other way around in my case. I was touched by how much he cared about helping me, and sex was just the next step after all that sharing.

Maybe he really was just like all the other guys, and that he had freaked out when he realized that the fantastic sex we had when hooking up made him feel like he was changing.

Bryant came up to me. "Hey. Can I sit here?"

I shrugged.

"I'm sorry about everything."

Looking at him, I didn't see a change from the distant, worried guy I saw last night, the side of him that was revealed to me after he had to fight with his father.

"That's fine," I said, not trying to be curt with him, just not interested in having a fight. "What are you going to do today when we land?"

"I guess I'll have to go straight to Coach Frost," Bryant said, looking worried. "I'm not stressed about explaining that I came here with you, or because of you. It's just that I'm kinda going crazy at the thought that my dad was keeping tabs on me like this... talking to Coach Frost and hinting that I wasn't going to come back. He's really sabotaging me this way."

I understood. At least he was still open enough to tell me about his fears involving his dad. "I hope things will get way better," I told him, starting to soften.

“I’ll leave you alone for now. Sorry I interrupted you. Hey, my car’s still parked at the airport. Can we drive back together?” he asked.

My answer was a slow nod. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be too awkward anymore.

We didn’t sit together on the flight, which made me suspect he did get a business class seat after all. I didn’t sleep this time, my hangover still bothering me. My mood was pretty sour, and being on a plane for hours with strangers wedged on both sides of me as I sat in a middle seat just made me feel more unhappy.

Maybe it was a good thing that Bryant wasn’t in love with me. Maybe I could finally get out of his shadow now, and people would stop talking about me behind my back. Maybe I could even reconnect with Sam... but that was something I wasn’t looking forward to either, because she had proven herself to be just as toxic as someone like Bryant’s dad.

When we landed, Bryant waited for me at the arrival area, his car key out in his hand. “Are you hungry?” he tried.

“Nah, not really.” It was the truth. I ate on the plane, this time, but plane food wasn’t all that great... although I wasn’t hungry, anyway.

Some girls ate their feelings. I was not one of them. Me, I was more likely to just sleep all through a weekend, hoping that eventually when my body was no longer tired from all my emotions, I could carry on with all the things I needed to do.

We drove home in silence. I started to realize just how often we did that. Some couples talked a lot during their rides. Others teased each other, maybe even got sexual in the car. But more often than not, when Bryant and I were in a car, someone was in a mood.

This couldn’t be a good sign for our relationship, if we even had one still.

When we got home, the other guys were all gathered around a dining table. There were other guys I didn’t even know, who I assumed had to be from the football team. I just lugged my backpack, said hi in the best way I could without coming off sour and unhappy, and then marched off to my room.

I knew the guys would need to talk to Bryant first, and that meant he wouldn’t be able to come to my room and try to have a conversation with me again.

I didn’t know what I had to say, anyway. I felt like I was trapped, that there was a giant shadow hanging over our relationship that had nothing to do me and him. If that was the case, what was I even doing, giving him all this love?

And I was sure I loved him, too. Saying it aloud the first time just confirmed it. I had to toughen up and freeze those feelings, instead of melting all over him, but the reality was I did care so much for him.

When he finally came to my room, knocking on the door lightly and trying the knob, I remembered that I had locked the door, so I had to jump out of my bed and come meet him there.

I left the door only slightly ajar. Just enough to see him.

There was no invitation in.

I had come to a conclusion as to what I had to do, too.

“Hey,” I said to him.

He nodded silently. “Can we talk?”

“First I have a question for you,” I told him.

“Okay...”

“Do you want me to move out? Would that help you? If I moved out, maybe this could be a reset of sorts. We could try again, this time... maybe without so much drama.” I offered this while fighting tears in my eyes.

He paused just long enough that when he finally said no, I couldn't take him at his word.

"I don't want to come in the way of your success. I don't want to be a distraction to you. I don't want your coach punishing you for this, and I definitely don't want to be in a relationship where I have to bring up a Fiona video just for you to tell me you don't know if you can promise that you want to be my boyfriend," I told him.

He wanted to say something but he stopped, and I could tell he was getting mad.

"Is it because I couldn't be honest and say the words you wanted me to say?" he asked softly.

"It's not."

He shook his head. "You're lying. It's because of that. You want me to say I'm in love with you too. Well... I might be able to, some day. But I'm not ready right now."

I closed my eyes. Somehow, this felt like the conclusive answer I needed to hear.

He wasn't ready.

That meant I wasn't going to wait for him. He had to come to me. "Then tell me when you're ready. I'm not going to be here, Bryant. It would hurt me too much."

I pushed the door shut, letting him leave. I looked at all the stuff I had here. This time, I wasn't going to use professional movers.

This time, I was packing and moving out myself.

BRYANT

I fucked up with Mia, but she was right to blame me like this. I was the one who got myself into this mess.

Maybe she hated me now... maybe she hated me again.

But she needed space, and I gave her that. This time, I didn't try to offer my money to help her. The movers were overkill, anyway. She hadn't really settled here anyway, just like she had barely settled in the other dorm room.

I wasn't sure, but I heard she had moved back there. That meant being with Sam again.

I felt sorry for her because I knew she didn't want that.

But I was feeling even more sorry for me — for being stupid, for hurting her by being this fucked up mess of a man.

All I wanted to do was help. I cared a great deal about everyone that mattered to me, and it wasn't hard for me to help them at all. But sometimes my help caused more damage than assistance.

When that happened, Mia was right to move out.

It was only Wednesday. Three days had passed, which normally would be too short for me to miss someone... but with Mia things were different.

She showed me kindness and compassion even after being a dick to her for years. I knew she probably didn't even resent me for what I did, because I could tell that she had the empathy to understand the pain going through me.

Either way, I made this bed. Everything here was my own doing.

She wanted too much from me. I couldn't just outright declare that I was in love with her, not when that came with the risk of hurting her too. If she didn't see how much I cared for her, how I adored her, how I thought she was gorgeous... then she was blind.

Actually, I started to get mad thinking about that again.

If she didn't see how I had all those feelings for her, then, to put it simply: fuck her.

I wasn't going to put my life on hold because she was hell-bent on hearing exactly how I felt.

Plus, she already got a ringside seat to the absolute chaotic drama that was my family life. Even though I was in Florida, my family still mattered to me. I didn't want Carl to grow up with my dad's toxic behavior wrecking him up the way he wrecked me up.

I needed to relax. Fuck, I just wanted to let loose a little.

Coach Frost lived up to his name when I went to see him after Mia said she was moving out. He was frosty to me. Said he understood it was a personal matter, with the other teammates backing me. But they needed me in Missouri, and having to switch quarterbacks left the team underprepared for a

game we were playing away from home.

"I'm not happy about this, Bryant," he said in a long drawl. He used my first name, not my last, which meant he was especially unhappy. Normally the coach would just hide behind the formal cliches of being a coach. He'd bark my name, tell me to shape up or he'd kick me off the team... but now I felt like he was talking to me man-to-man.

And I was torn up inside that he looked so disappointed by me.

Now was the wrong time to ask him about whether I would still start the next game against Vanderbilt.

The topic was left unsaid, so I promised that I would make an extra effort in training this week.

"Extra effort?" Liam Frost gave me a cool smile. "You're supposed to give me 110% every day in training. Extra effort makes me wonder if you've been doing even that."

I nodded. "Sorry. Not what I mean."

"Get out of here, Howard. And you better show up and shape up."

The familiar cliches he used to motivate me made me relax. This could have gone a whole lot worse.

I was going to shape up.

But first I needed some kind of way to relax.

I found Marvin and Tyrone playing video games in Marvin's room.

"Yo. Let's have a party," I said.

Those were the magic words for a bunch of guys like us in college. These guys just had to put their controllers down and reach for their phones, and soon everyone who mattered on campus knew they should come to my house tonight.

It was a huge party. Bigger than the party I met Mia at.

I was going to invite her, but that seemed stupid, even for me. What, like she was just going to show up and then have a fun time?

Maybe Sam would come, but if she did, it wouldn't be on my invitation.

Friends and friends of friends brought lots of drinks over, getting their older friends to buy beers, while others even brought drugs.

There was coke, Ecstasy, weed... hell, everything looked far more intense that weed just seemed like about as tame as drinking a beer.

So when one girl I didn't know who was trying to have a conversation with me offered me some weed, I just shrugged and said sure.

She rolled for me. I didn't know her name, but she looked like the kind of daily stoner I knew there were lots of on campus. Florida was famous for stoners.

"You're gonna like this," she said. "It's good weed too. I think Gary got this from Thailand or something."

I looked around. "Sorry, who the fuck is Gary?"

"He's just this guy I hang out with," the girl said, finishing rolling me a joint. "Go on. Have a bit."

"Thanks," I said, taking the joint in my hands. Sure, it was expertly rolled, and it smelled pretty strong.

I hesitated for a second.

But then I decided I was done caring. I just went for it.

We shared that joint, just me and her, this nameless girl I didn't know but kept telling me stories about her and Gary, who I also didn't know and didn't care about.

Somehow, being stoned just made the absurdity of hearing these stories even more pronounced. I

was egging her on, telling her to tell me more, taking puffs on the joint and capturing all the smoke in my mouth so I could get a full blast of the effect.

Marvin sat down next to me. “Uh, Bryant, bro, what are you doing?”

I twirled the joint towards him. He shook his head. “Come on, man. It’s just a joint.”

“Who’s this guy?” the nameless girl asked.

“He’s my buddy. Everyone’s my buddy. It’s not hard to be my buddy,” I said, blurting out nonsense because I was so stoned.

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to just lose control, relaxing and inhaling the weed. This way, I could finally give up on all the bullshit that was bringing me down. I just wanted to be more chill.

I wanted to be like this hippie I was sharing the joint with.

“Do you do this every night?” I asked her.

“Yeah...”

I couldn’t do that, of course, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want it. I needed to unwind after a shitty week, so a couple of hits from a nicely-rolled joint was the right thing to do. Maybe now I could even learn to be more relaxed about things.

No need to be so anxious about other people being let down by me when I could just smoke the troubles away...

Fuck, I was getting stoned.

I wished Mia was here to see me. If I remembered correctly, her sometimes uptight character meant she never smoked either. So this would have been fun with her, exploring a side of her that nobody ever saw.

Ruining things with Mia was something I was regretting every day, so I was grateful for the haze of smoke getting in my brain, stopping me from feeling this way.

There was nothing I needed more than to just chill the fuck out.

I slowly lowered myself until I was lying down on the floor, hanging out with the hippie girl. There was loud music all over the place, sounding like Marvin’s kind of tunes, but smoking up made all that feel blurry and hazy...

I was definitely stoned.

“You got more?” I asked the girl. She gave me a big Cheshire smile and excused herself, probably looking for her mystery friend Gary.

Soon she came back, but not before bringing a bottle of whiskey as well. “I found this somewhere.”

We played some sort of drinking game, but she didn’t explain the rules too well, which was perfectly understandable given she spent more time inhaling from the joint than actually telling me how to play this drinking game.

But the mix of the drugs and the alcohol made me feel lightheaded quickly. I didn’t do this often, and even when I drank I usually stuck to just one thing. We were drinking Jack straight, and then every so often someone would join our little circle and hand out beers in return for hits on the joint, and sometimes there were other drinks too, gross mixes that felt way too strong.

I was feeling pretty good about this party. I didn’t care who the fuck these people were coming up to me and handing me drinks and joints, but if they were here enjoying this with me, there was no denying that they were my friends.

Well, sort of my friends.

I groaned. Fuck, I was stoned.

Super stoned.

Eventually Marvin brought Tyrone over. “We’re gonna take you to bed, okay?” my best friend told me, pushing everyone away.

“Why would you... do that?” I asked, slurring my words. I was going pretty wild, mixing Jack and cokes with the weed. That girl kept rolling joint after joint. “Hey, come on. It’s not like I was doing any hard drugs.”

“Man, you’re risking a lot right now,” Tyrone whispered to me. “We don’t know if Fiona’s here, or maybe someone else who’s recording what you’re doing and then sending it to her. We gotta look out for you, bro.”

I passed out as they dragged me upstairs.

But when I woke up, I woke up to the sight of Coach Frost standing over me.

“Bryant Howard,” he said, vocalizing every syllable in my full name. “I’m truly disappointed now.”

“Coach,” I said, blinking and hoping I wasn’t stinking of weed. “It’s not what you think.”

“You have no idea what I think,” he said. I flinched, expecting him to shout at me. He didn’t, though. Instead he just spoke to me like he did on Sunday, when I got back from Indianapolis.

He spoke to me with the disappointment of someone who had been let down by someone he trusted.

In other words, he was experiencing everything I feared I would be.

“You have to get your act together. Last night you got lucky. Looks like nobody caught you misbehaving. As for me? I know you’re going through a tough time, your teammates can’t help but cover for you.”

“Shit,” I said, feeling bad. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re not going to be able to get away with this again. There are consequences you’re going to have to pay, Bryant. Get your act together. You’re not my starting quarterback for the rest of the month. Russel’s still rusty, but at least he doesn’t cause trouble. I hope you enjoy yourself, sitting on the sidelines, watching someone you’re better than play instead of you.”

My mouth dropped. In no way could I argue that this wasn’t fair, but I wasn’t happy about it all the same.

Fuck, I hated that I did this to myself. I was the one who sabotaged myself.

MIA

It turned out that technically, since I never filed any formal paperwork to transfer into the second dorm room that Bryant helped me find... I was still registered as a resident at the George Washington Building, rooming with Sam.

At least she didn't seem to mind too much that I was back, lugging an overloaded backpack of my stuff, along with plastic bags for everything else I couldn't fit into my backpack or my suitcases.

"So, you're back," she said. She made it sound like she was surprised to see me, but I had actually texted her informing her that I was coming back to the dorm.

I rolled my eyes at her sarcastic comment.

"Look, I feel sorry for you," Sam said, sitting up in her dorm bed. My side of the room was bare, looking like I had never even moved in here. That was how good the movers were, they stripped all sign of me being there... and took it to Bryant's place instead.

"I don't want your sympathy, Sam," I said, trying to make it clear to her that I wasn't interested in more drama.

"Hey, he pulled a fast one on me too. I've been there, I know what you're feeling now," Sam said. But even as she said this, she had a smile up. It wasn't even a smirk, it was a straight-up smile of satisfaction.

She looked like she had won something.

"I don't really want to deal with this right now," I said, and instead of letting her say something to aggravate me further, I found my earphones in my backpack and popped them into my ears.

Life began to settle down. When Monday came, I wiped my tears away and went to class. I went to every class I had, doubled down on all my work, even braced myself to see Bryant at the History of Media Law class, but it was a lecture this week and I didn't see him in the whole hall.

Sam kept clear of me. She had Tiffany to hang out with, anyway.

I wished I had a friend. Seeing Regina over the weekend reminded me of how great it was to just have someone you could let loose with. It couldn't ever be Bryant, not with him so hung-up over his complicated life. And besides, the point of having a best friend was so that they didn't complicate your relationship further by being romantically or sexually involved.

Living with Bryant had its ups and downs, sure, but it also taught me that I couldn't just live with a guy and not expect him to want more from me... yet somehow not be able to give it back when he got it.

I loved him, but now it was time to set that aside for the moment. I needed to focus on my classes.

I also needed to find work.

Continuing my job hunt as before, I started to intensify this plan, applying for every job I found on campus, going through bulletin boards in every building, outside every office, just to find prospective offers.

I didn't really get that much success.

I kept checking my phone every day that week, hoping despite myself that it would be Bryant.

He did text me. On Thursday, he simply told me he was sorry for everything.

I scrolled through all his previous messages, wishing things could be simpler, that we could just go back in time.

It wasn't even that long ago that I was teasing him by not hooking up with him on demand, driving him crazy every time he saw me. I missed that.

He made me feel wanted. Bryant was so good at all that.

Eventually I scrolled up and realized that he did send me the phone number and email for his friend Andy, who had the tailgating job.

I immediately tried the phone number, and to my surprise, the job was not just still open... he was happy for me to start immediately.

"There's a home game for us this weekend," Andy said. "This is a great trial run for you. Just come by the office, I'll show you the ropes. You'll be working with another girl, a senior named Jess."

I showed up at his office the next morning and immediately felt at ease at the job. It was mostly organizational stuff, making phone calls to make sure we had the space, confirming tents, keeping a good inventory for the merchandise we were the ones selling directly.

Jess was nice to me, as well. Not super friendly, but she seemed like the kind of girl who would need to warm up to me first.

And we would have the best opportunity to do so on Saturday, as we worked hard to make sure the tailgate outside the Renegades stadium was perfect, especially for the first home game since the big Kentucky win the other week.

I was paid upfront for the day because Andy said it was easier that way rather than trying to find me in the crowd later, and I was grateful for the money.

I was dressed all cute, wearing a uniform that looked a little like a cheerleader's — still professional, just a little suggestive.

Jess was used to it. She told me that she'd been doing this since the last academic year, and she never stopped enjoying the work.

We hung around as group after group passed us, sometimes coming over to say hi and check out the merchandise we had on the tables we stacked next to Andy's car.

"Hey, did you hear Russel Watson is starting again?" I overheard one guy tell his friend. "That's two games in a row. I wonder if Bryant Howard is over. Feels bad, man. The guy looked great against Kentucky, then he just disappeared."

"No, he didn't disappear, he had shit going on," his friend replied. I leaned forward to eavesdrop.

"Is that from that YouTube channel? You watch that nonsense?"

"It's practically the university news station," the friend answered. "Like CNN for the Renegades. Except Fiona doesn't seem to target any of the guys on the football team except Howard."

"Yeah, but that's because he's a rich boy. Isn't he the son of the guy who owns Ward Beer? I mean, come on, how rich would you be if you owned the biggest beer company in the world?"

"Fucking billions, man."

I turned away from the conversation. "Ugh."

Jess patted my arm. "I'm sorry, I know about you and Bryant... I watch those videos too."

It always annoyed me when people knew me from Fiona's YouTube videos talking trash about me and Bryant, because it made me feel like those people would come in with a preconceived notion of me.

Maybe that was why I thought Jess was a little cold to me at first.

"Don't believe what you see," I said, leaving it at that.

Russel was a good player, but I knew from all the other guys that they thought Bryant was so much more talented than him. If Russel was playing, it could only mean that Bryant had gotten in trouble... and was dropped from the team.

I felt sad thinking about that, because it made me wonder if this was all my fault. He didn't have to miss the previous game, after all. And being in Indianapolis wasn't a fun time for him — everywhere he went, trouble followed.

This was all me. I knew I was bringing him bad luck. Perhaps now I had to worry about how my bad luck spread. First Eugene, now Bryant.

It was silly for me to blame myself like this, but I knew the truth.

With nothing else to do but watch people get drunk and party outside the stadium, I reached for my phone. I told myself to be strong, that I didn't need to reach out to Bryant.

He didn't want that, either. We were doing just fine giving each other space.

After all, almost a week had passed since our big fight. I was sure he had spent a lot of time thinking about his feelings since then.

If he decided he still couldn't open up to me, then I was right to leave. I wouldn't close the door on him yet, but I knew it was stupid of me to just keep waiting.

I deserved better than that.

I also deserved better than Samantha being mean to me.

She showed up at my table, peeking down at caps with the Renegades' logo. "Hi," she said airily.

"Hello," Jess greeted her.

"I'm here to say hi to Mia, I mean," my former best friend quickly added. "Are you going to go inside the stadium and watch the game?"

"Nope, I'm working, Sam," I told her.

"Well, I heard from Marvin that Bryant's not playing. Ouch. I'm sorry about that. I know, I know, I shouldn't be talking about him to you... but I wondered if you knew why," Sam said.

She was baiting me.

"No clue," I shrugged.

"Okay, fine. I get it. Hey, you know we're in the same boat now. You were right all along, Bryant Howard was a real asshole. Absolute grade-A asshole. You called it all those years ago, and I chose to ignore you. But the funny thing is, you chose to ignore yourself also! So I guess what I'm trying to say is I told you so. Or... *you* told you so."

I glared at Sam. "Sam, please just fuck off right now, okay?"

She smiled, putting the cap back down before leaving. I could see her join Tiffany and another friend.

"Wow, that girl was such a mean girl," Jess said. "I wanted to slap her."

"Well, we don't resort to physical violence in our relationship... maybe that's what's missing," I snarkily remarked. "Ugh. Sam is just rubbing everything in my face. I'm guessing if you watch those videos, you know who she is too, right?"

"Your guy's ex," Jess nodded.

“Except he’s not my guy anymore. I don’t know... it’s complicated. He’s the one who says it is, at least. I think he just wants to put some distance between us.”

“Even after you moved in with him, like, the same night you were recorded with him at the stadium during that other game? I was working that night, I remember that pretty clearly. People were talking long before the video went up,” Jess said. “Anyway, sorry, I shouldn’t be prying into your life.”

“You don’t need to apologize at all,” I smiled.

My smile dropped as I started to worry about Bryant. If Marvin told Sam, that meant there had to be something bigger than Bryant just being dropped because he went with me to Indiana.

It was a relief to know it wasn’t my fault, but I didn’t want his career to suffer. I moved away so I wouldn’t be a distraction, so I could let him thrive... yet there was something bugging him anyway.

I couldn’t bring myself to reach out to him.

I just had to carry on with my work.

Jess just watched me for the rest of the night, as we sat in our foldable chairs, staring out as people got drunk and partied.

BRYANT

I had come to terms with my mistakes. Coach Frost was doing the right thing, freezing me out from the team until I got my shit together.

It was different now, it wasn't like last week, where I simply was absent from the team. Now I had lost my starting spot and everyone else tried to tiptoe around this news.

That wasn't very fair to Russel, who was starting to get overwhelmed by all of it.

I went up to him in the locker room and gave him a hug. "Man, you don't deserve half the shit people are saying. You're a great quarterback."

"Not as good as you," he said.

No, it wasn't just modesty that I refused to accept his compliment. I meant what I said.

The coach stared at me with a hard look, before returning to confer with his assistants.

I wandered around the stadium, trying to psyche myself out of the depression I was starting to feel. Everything had happened exactly as it should have. I fucked up by ditching the team to fly back home. Then I fucked up smoking weed, risking my entire professional career.

If anything, Coach Frost had been exceedingly gentle with me. He wasn't the gentle kind, so he must have really seen my potential.

And it broke my heart to think that I was not meeting that potential.

If I kept on this path, I would just be another stupid rich boy, born with some talent, wasting it because he had money and a safety net.

In my case, a safety net of over fourteen billion dollars.

Maybe that's what my dad was hoping for right now. That all this would demoralize me to the point where I would simply give up and go home.

But if that was what he thought, he was wrong. This was my home. I owed the Renegades everything.

Going to Florida University was what I had envisioned my life plan to be, playing at D1 level, earning my way to my dream NFL draft, where I would finally break into the coveted world of pro football.

That was looking a lot more complicated now.

This much was clear, people were looking at me differently. I jogged around the whole stadium, tracing the path of the athletic track around the football field. The game wasn't going to start for some time now.

But people were staring.

I could tell from the way they all looked at their phones that this wasn't just them wondering about

why I was missing from the lineup.

They were *speculating*.

There had to be a new rumor.

If I was feeling less strong, I'd want a strong drink right now. But Coach Frost's advice really stuck with me, so I knew I had to just endure all this hardship.

As soon as I returned to the locker room, I went for my phone, scrolling through social media to find out what people were talking about me.

Marvin took the phone from my hands. "No, man. You don't want to find out."

"It's bad?"

"Yeah..." he said, trailing off.

I already had a guess in mind, but I hoped that no matter how bad it got, nobody would be talking about Mia, spreading rumors about her.

I could say I didn't owe Mia anything anymore, but I did owe her her privacy. It was because of me that she lost that to begin with.

Exhaling, I had to consider my options right now. I could just focus on the football and let my own mind go crazy, imagining worst-case scenarios making me unable to actually watch from the sidelines... or I could face up to the rumors.

"What are they saying?" I asked Marvin.

He pursed his lips, deciding not to say. Instead he just handed me my phone.

People were making memes about me, photoshopping joints and other drugs to photos of me in football gear.

"Fuck," I said, slamming a fist into a locker.

"I'm sorry, man," Marvin said.

"This is serious," I said. "People are spreading rumors that I did drugs."

Marvin raised an eyebrow. I shrugged at him. "Just go with the flow," I told him.

"Yeah... *rumors*. I hope you don't get tested for drug use anytime soon," Marvin said. "But if you've been staying clean, you shouldn't have a problem passing a test."

"I have been," I promised.

"Man, it sucks having you out of the team. You earned your spot. I'm sorry about all this. I've got to get ready."

I looked to the coach. He was on his phone too.

Coach Frost sighed and I saw him stand up. "Come with me, Howard," he said, waiting for me to join him.

I followed, doing as he asked.

"One day you're going to end up a pro football player, with a contract worth millions," he told me, wrapping an arm behind my back. "But before that happens, you need to be able to focus completely on your football. I'm not asking you to drop everything else in your life, because that's stupid, that'll just make a single-minded loser who doesn't have anything to fight for. But I am asking you to trust me, and work harder."

"I will, Coach."

"When I say work harder, I mean take everything that happens to you as a lesson. Just like being dropped today. I've got to manage a team, not an individual. The best team is the team that's got the most discipline, not the most talent. If you don't have discipline, you don't belong on my team."

I nodded. "I'm going to do everything I can to prove to you that I belong."

"Then let's go watch some football," he told me. "Don't let some rumors distract you for the

moment. Show me that you can live in the here and now.”

He patted me on the back, leaving me to it. I went out with the rest of the guys, wishing I was all suited up for play, but I could only spectate this time. The team was more than just me. I had to get over myself.

We played well against Vanderbilt. I thought about Mia, wishing I could find her, wishing she was here. I kept glancing away from the field to look through all the bleachers at the stadium, hoping I would catch that blonde hair of hers.

Of course, it wasn't as simple as that.

So I watched some football.

I had been going to training, but I wasn't permitted to join with the starters, leaving me to mostly exercise on my own or with some of the freshmen trying out for spots on the team. I didn't know their plays, even if I was familiar with Vanderbilt having seen them play against us last season.

Football seemed a lot less personal to me when I wasn't involved in every single thing. Russel called out plays I wished I was the one calling out. Because he was the quarterback, I watched him closest, mentally identifying all the mistakes he made that I wouldn't have, as well as clever tricks that showed that he had a pretty savvy sporting mind too.

When the game came to a close and we won handily, I thought he did a good job — good enough to keep him a starter, but not good enough that he could hold down the spot if I was back in contention.

I wished him well. Things were about to change, and there was going to be competition again.

Coach Frost came up to me after he gave the post-game talk to the guys who played. “Must have hurt like hell to watch the game but not play, right?”

“Yeah,” I confessed.

“Russel doesn't know it yet, but I got his medical report... and I think he's at risk for a hamstring injury if he doesn't watch himself. I'm putting him under observation. If you train well next week, you'll be a starter again.”

“Thanks, Coach,” I told him.

He patted me on the back, repeating the motion he had performed in the locker room. “Well, normally I wouldn't say this... but you should patch things up with your girlfriend. And I mean pronto.”

I raised an eyebrow. That definitely jolted me from my depression. “Excuse me?”

“The girl you're with. That Mia or something. You know, I think she's good for you.”

I started to grin. “Yeah... I think so too.”

“Heard a little birdie tell me that she's actually here at the stadium. Not watching, but working at the tailgate. Why don't you go find her? The sooner you get your act together, the better it'll be for everyone.”

My heart started to open up. “Thank you so much, Coach.”

“Get the hell out of here, Howard. Go get the girl.”

I did exactly as he said. I practically sprinted out of the stadium, heading towards the exit. I knew where the tailgate parties were, so if she had in fact taken the job Andy had been advertising, I was sure to find her easily.

And there she was. Blonde hair, blue eyes, all of five six. She was petite and pretty, but when she looked up and saw me, she was more than that.

She was gorgeous.

I remembered how she looked the night she went to dinner with me and my family, wearing those

dorky glasses.

She looked perfect then, but she was perfect now too.

We both walked to each other, and it felt as if the crowds were parting to give us way.

“Mia,” I said, when I was close enough.

She had tears in her eyes. I thought she was going to keep this distance, but instead she ran straight into my arms.

“I love you, Mia,” I said, lifting her up and hugging her close.

“I love you too, Bryant.”

“I’m so glad I said it. Now I want to say it a thousand more times. I love you, I love you, I love you. I want to see us have a future together.”

Mia cried into my chest, kissing my shirt as she did. “So where do we go from here?”

I thought back to the only place I wanted to go. The house that I rented and allowed all the people that mattered to me most to share that space with. Where Marvin would stumble out of his room holding a video game controller, where Tyrone would call me out for doing dumb things... the house where Mia would ask me to carry her to her bedroom, because we needed to make love.

“Let’s go home.”

EPILOGUE: MIA

Three years later...

WATCHING Bryant on TV was something I never got used to, even after all these years. His charm and charisma really got through, making commentators and interviewers even more excited about his potential as a quarterback.

But an interview after a big game was one thing. This was a longer back-and-forth on ESPN, talking about what he was expecting for the draft...

Because it was finally here. After three years of playing football at Florida, after clinching a championship for the Renegades against all odds the season after we had first started dating... Bryant finally made it to the draft.

People were calling him one of the most exciting prospects of the decade, a quarterback already being compared to some of the greats.

I was about to graduate with my journalism degree. I thought about starting out on the sports desk. Maybe this way I could get an insider view into the world that my boyfriend had dreamt of entering for years.

The commentator interviewing asked him his opinion on the physical showcase of his skills that he had to do on camera on the days preceding the first day of the draft.

"Well, it's exciting to be here in Seattle, I've never been more excited about my future," my boyfriend said. "But on draft day itself I'm going to be back home in Indianapolis, with my family, and my beloved girlfriend Mia."

"Your most ardent fans back in Florida say that the jump in your performance in your junior season could be directly attributable to a strong understanding you had with Mia, who you say helps you in every aspect of your personal life," the commentator replied.

"That's right," Bryant smiled, looking at the camera. "We're a team. I couldn't perform as well as I do, day in and day out, without her support. A woman like her truly is something to cherish."

"Will she move out with you as you find a new home at whichever franchise might pick you?"

Bryant contained his pride for a second, knowing he was in front of a camera broadcasting his interview live to millions. "Well, let's just take it one thing at a time, how about that?"

"Thank you, that was Bryant Howard, Florida University's highly rated #11, a quarterback with a considerably impressive record in the past two college football seasons."

He flew back to Indianapolis, with a camera crew following him everywhere — this sort of move made us all even more excited, because they wouldn't be shadowing him everywhere unless he was practically guaranteed to be selected.

"It's a question of which round of the draft he gets picked," my dad whispered to me, the night before. "Bryant's good, but with the hype around him, he might end up going to one of the lower-ranked franchises in the first round of the draft. That's not exactly a bad thing, but I'm sure Bryant wants to play for one of the big teams. He wants championships. Maybe even a Super Bowl..."

"You're really excited about this, Dad!" I laughed.

"Hey, he's a good kid. Your mom took a while to warm up to him, but ever since she started going to brunch dates with his mom, everything's been easy. I'm just glad to have him around," my dad responded.

I was full of pride for my quarterback.

We were all waiting for him to arrive from the airport, his family and mine gathered at his mother's place.

"Lucy, Antonio! So good to see you! And Eugene, too!" Rita said, greeting my family when they arrived. I had stayed the night there, helping Bryant's mom and sister prepare tacos for our viewing party.

"An extra big batch, since we've got some very hungry camera people too," his mother beamed. "Bryant asked if we should've just flown to Houston for the draft, but I think you deciding to watch it from home makes way more sense."

"He gets a little annoying when he's this tense," I laughed. "Besides, things may be different now, but family is still family. And Bryant knows that. Better to have it here at home."

A few minutes later, Bryant arrived, looking as nervous as we all were. The camera crew following him tried to needle him with questions, hoping to get shots of him looking anxious in front of the camera.

I got in the way. "The commissioner's going to start proceedings in a few minutes, why don't you guys grab a taco first?"

If Bryant was a first-round pick, acknowledging his incredible talent... we'd find out which franchise was going to trust him and offer a mega-contract in less than ten minutes.

But there was also the possibility that most of the 32 teams had a different idea of what they wanted, resulting in all sorts of trades, and the possibility that Bryant wouldn't be announced until later rounds...

Or possibly at all.

That seemed far-fetched. The media attention on him was far too strong.

I had already read enough articles about him that I could probably write one myself. Maybe that would be the first article I would pitch to a big newspaper — life as the journalist girlfriend to a future NFL superstar, following him from today's big day.

Having managed to dodge the camera guys, Bryant finally came up to me, hugging me close. "How's my baby?"

"Pretty excited for you," I said. "I think you're going to do great."

Rita agreed. "We're all so proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom. Oh, hey, Mr. Cowell, Mrs. Cowell — good to see you," Bryant said, turning his attention to my family. "And Eugene, too."

Gene had a late growth spurt, and now that he was seventeen, he was finally starting to look less awkward. He liked Bryant a lot, and they had even become friends who regularly texted and hung out

whenever they were both in the same place.

And since Bryant bought the house we were living in near campus, Florida was formally home for us now. I even voted in the midterms as a registered Floridian voter.

Our lives were building up to this moment.

There were so many things that had changed since I had first arrived in Florida. Sam and I stopped being enemies, but this decision came with the conscious act of us no longer being friends, either.

But that didn't mean I bore any ill will for her. It hurt at first to lose someone I considered a soul sister, my twin... but sometimes people just change. And in Sam's case, we definitely did.

Her on-off fling with Marvin ended, and she found herself single for a while before dating a guy she met at a party. I didn't know much about him, but they had to be doing fine, since it's been two years.

Bryant kissed my shoulder, wrapping an arm around my waist. "You know, the first thing I want to do when all this is over? I want to find an empty room and just... be with you," he said, whispering in my ear.

I shivered. That sounded really nice... exactly what I wanted right now. He had to fly off to Houston for the days leading up to the actual draft, showing off how physically fit he was in a bid to interest possible future teams.

"Do you have a preference?" I asked.

"I think I'd really like Tampa Bay. That means I don't have to move out of state, plus they're in a position where they definitely need to replace their main quarterback," he mused. "This way I get to start playing immediately, I'm not benched for someone more experienced."

"They did great last year, so they won't be making early picks in the draft," my dad said, since he was standing close enough to overhear us. "That's a solid choice, Bryant. I hope you get that."

My boyfriend smiled, extending a hand to shake with my dad. "You know... I heard my dad is coming too."

"He's on the way, that's right," I murmured.

Years ago this would have been a source of great dread, but even Bryant's relationship with his father had changed ever since I first met him.

Sergio couldn't keep his bitterness for long. When he started to see that Bryant was happy... he caved. It didn't mean he could transform overnight into being a nicer man, but he did show genuine interest in changing for the better.

Bryant took a long time to trust his father again, and I knew that was still a work in progress.

But what was sure was that they had an actual relationship with each other, for practically the first time in Bryant's life.

"Dad joked once that he would buy a team for me," Bryant told me. "It wasn't a very nice joke at the time... but I guess the worst thing that could happen is he starts massively investing into some franchise in hopes of getting me there."

"You don't need his help," I laughed. "If he wants to buy me a franchise, maybe I'll consider you in my draft picks."

Now Bryant burst into open laughter. "Wow. You shouldn't be a team owner, Mia. You were made to be commissioner of the whole damn league."

The camera crew were getting all sorts of really nice shots of me and Bryant enjoying ourselves. At least these weren't live — not yet. Not til the announcement.

We kept in close contact with the other Renegades who applied for the draft. Marvin, Russel,

Tyrone, Antonio... each of those guys had their own talent to offer, and their performances over the last three years made it clear that they were strong picks, just like Bryant.

In fact, Bryant started joking about how he'd feel if Russel was a first round pick ahead of him. "Man, I'd feel pretty embarrassed. But Russel knows what he's doing, you know? When you're doing drills with your backup quarterback, training together all the time, doing the same practice sessions... you start to gain a trust for the guy. And I've always trusted Russel."

The main ESPN journalist with the crew picked up on that and started to ask Bryant questions about his teammates. I chose to step away for the moment.

We were here in Indianapolis because this was where it all began. Bryant and I didn't experience the best of beginnings, and over the years the acrimony between us grew until it felt like it could never end.

It took me not being able to go to Florida University to finally let myself experience the changes I needed in my life to become better.

Bryant was not the only one who had growing up to do at the time. I did too, and I was grateful to have had that opportunity to do so.

"Commissioner's speaking!" my dad announced.

I started feeling so nervous I immediately exited to the kitchen. Maybe a taco would help calm my nerves...

Watching out the window, I thought about how lucky I was to have Bryant. When I first started getting to know him in college, we had all that drama get in between us, and for a second I even thought that that was it.

It wasn't. We grew from strength to strength as a couple, and with no more controversy about Bryant's supposed playboy life, people stopped caring about the rumors and the social media attention.

Fiona even gave up on making Bryant a target in the end, moving on to other topics. I actually even confronted her one time, offering to redo segments of her show for free.

"Trust me, I'm a journalism major," I said. "You'd get a lot more viewers if you had a lot more credibility. Right now people are watching your vlogs because there's nothing else that captures the culture of our campus. What are you going to do when someone else inevitably enters the picture?"

She started taking my advice seriously, focusing her gaze on matters that weren't just hot gossip. She even got commended by the school for her work in exposing a group of international students who were bringing illegal cigars from Cuba and selling them online on the dark net.

Fiona would never really be a friend of mine, but at least I was glad to know that I could make a difference in journalism somewhere.

Life as a journalist for me once I graduate was not going to be easy, I knew that. Lots of people wanted the few jobs there were in the industry. Bryant could probably pull strings, but in these three years, he had finally come to understand why I disliked him doing that. I wanted to earn the accomplishments I made myself.

"I get it," Bryant told me, a year ago. "You're a strong woman. You've always been a strong woman. I'm with you, but that doesn't mean I have to solve everything for you. There are lots of things you're perfectly capable of handling."

"Don't forget, I'm actually way more capable of handling them than you."

The door opened. I went to see who it was.

Sergio Howard arrived, bearing gift bags and a case of his own beer. Well, since the reconciliation began, this household started stocking its fridge with Ward Beer anyway, so there was

no risk of us running out of his booze.

“Mia, I’m glad to see you,” he said. Even after he started to reconnect with Bryant, he was still embarrassed around me — I was the only person who could make the domineering billionaire feel sheepish about anything.

I knew this could only be because I stood up to him the first time I met him.

It pleased me to know that having a backbone and standing up for myself was the core of my philosophy to everything. I wouldn’t be who I was if I didn’t do that.

Cheering from the TV room dragged me out of the kitchen.

There were whoops of excitement, so I quickly asked, “What happened?”

My dad was hugging Bryant, while Sergio screamed at the top of his lungs, pumping his fist in the air.

“Hell yes!”

Amid the noise, nobody could actually tell me anything — until Eugene slunk up next to me. “They just announced Bryant was a first round trade... picked by the first franchise and then immediately traded to Tampa Bay.”

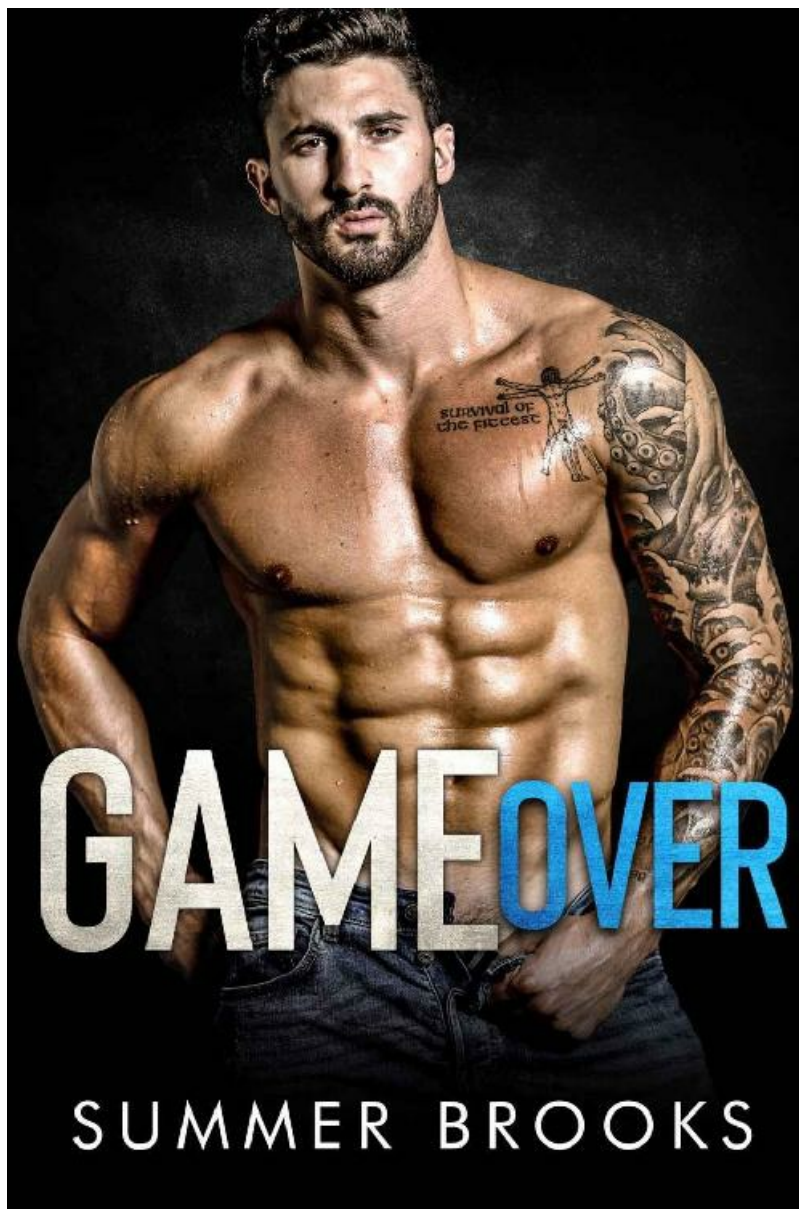
“Oh my God, Bryant, I’m so proud of you!” I said, rushing to him. It felt like a big football huddle, all of us congratulating our football prodigy.

Bryant stood up straight and pulled me to him, giving me a big kiss.

“It’s all you, baby. You’re the one who made me understand everything I needed. I love you. I love you more than anything...”

THE END

PREQUEL TO 'PERFECTLY WRONG'



Star athlete.
Popular with the ladies.
Rich as sin.
The world might love him...
But Bryant Howard is my sworn enemy.

Always has been. Always will be.
So, when he gets into Florida University and I don't,
I know that I'll never have to see him again.
Turns out, fate has another plan for us.
A much deadlier one.
Do me a favor?
Don't tell him that I'm showing up to class.

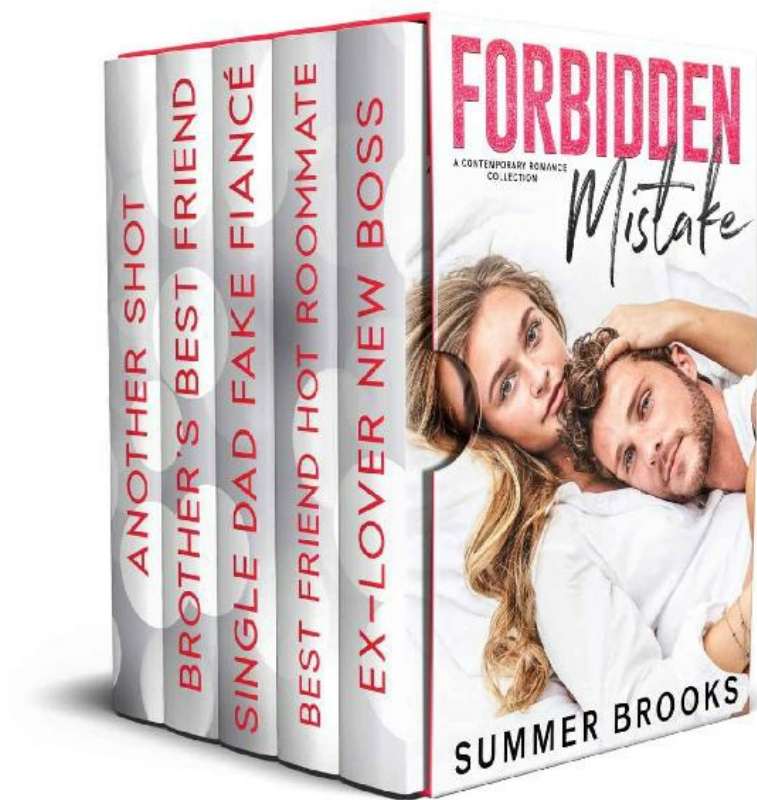
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Stalk Summer Brooks

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Summer Brooks is a diehard fan of books that drip with emotion and drama. The kind that would make you squirm under the blankets and set your heart on fire.

A steamy love story with a dash of tenderness and a whole lot of passion really gets her going. When Summer isn't ragingly typing away on her laptop, she's usually found listening to music and thinking of scenes that would make your toes curl.

