



# The Amazing Alpha Tau Pledge Project

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Briar Pendelton is new to Lassiter, and he's determined to get into Alpha Tau, even if that means lying about already having passed his LSAT and doing stupid pledge stunts like dressing as a sorority girl. Besides, he's always looked killer in a skirt.

Casey Hill has been pledge master of Alpha Tau for two years. Keeping a bunch of pledges in line is a bit like herding cats, but Casey's got it down to a fine art.

When Briar sashays into their fraternity with eyeliner, attitude, and legs for miles, Casey is thrown for a loop—in the best possible way. Except what happens when Briar literally can't make the grade?

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# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:44 am*

## ONE

So the craziest thing about being pledge master for the Lassiter chapter of Alpha Tau was that I'd never even wanted to be in a fraternity. Like, at all.

Insert record scratch here and cut back to three years ago. Let me set the scene: the Hill family home. The living room. Interior. Night. The cat has got into my mom's crochet basket and dragged strings of wool everywhere, like one of those whiteboards in a movie about a serial killer where bits of bright thread connect all the photographs. I'm looking at the carpet wondering which series of deaths our cat might be investigating, and meanwhile my dad has turned down the TV to signal that this is a Serious Talk and he is Imparting Wisdom. That's the scene; now, the dialogue:

I groaned and flopped back against the couch. "Jesus Christ, Dad, I don't want to be some fucking dudebro snapback-wearing Scumbag Steve douchebag, you know?"

"I understood some of that sentence," Dad said, but he didn't sound too sure. He sighed. "Listen, Monty Tate's son is in Alpha Tau, and he speaks very highly of them."

"Monty," I said. "Dad, you're legit taking life advice off someone unironically called Monty. Let that sink in for a minute."

Dad reached for the remote control. "Just think about it, Casey. If only because it's the best accommodation available on campus."

And so, when I went to Lassiter, I thought about it. I thought about how I likely wouldn't fit in with the guys from Alpha Tau. I thought about how most of them were from the southern part of the state with its old money and older attitudes—and proud of it—whereas I was from the part that wished really, really hard it was on the other side of the Potomac. I'd grown up in Arlington, a Democrat stronghold since forever, with liberal-as-fuck parents who believed in crazy shit like equal rights and science, and Dad actually thought I'd have anything in common with a bunch of southern Virginians? I didn't know what would be worse: frat boys, good old boys, or whatever the fuck happened when you mixed those two together. But I'd promised my dad I'd think about it, and so I turned up to that first party in rush week, prepared to hate every second of it.

And those Alpha Tau fuckers had the audacity to be nothing like I'd expected.

Like, they had been, once. Of course they had been. This was Virginia. But somewhere along the way, things had changed.

“Hey,” a guy had said that first night, slapping me on the back. “You a freshman? My name's Marshall. Grab a drink. Hang around. Get to know us.”

It had been weird, friendly, and not at all like I was expecting. Wasn't I supposed to be hazed in the basement and then accidentally die of alcohol poisoning? But, in the first shock of the evening, it turned out that Alpha Tau didn't just pay lip service to all that “no hazing” stuff. They actually meant it. And so I'd hung around, and it hadn't taken long to figure out they were a decent bunch of guys. Turned out they actually meant all the stuff about being inclusive too.

Over the course of the week, I'd found myself coming back a second time, and when they'd invited me, a third. And when they'd extended a bid, I'd surprised even myself by accepting. And I got super interested in the fraternity history stuff that my big brother quizzed me on, because by knowing that history—the stories of the guys

who'd come before me—it was like I could see how Alpha Tau had transformed itself; this microcosm of society that every instinct in me told me should have stayed frozen because a fraternity was usually the last place anything changed. But because past brothers had pushed, Alpha Tau had shifted a little here, a little there, and each tiny step, however hard fought, had laid the path for who they were today. And that felt like something really important.

Something I could be a part of.

Okay, so it hadn't been like an instant realization. It had taken a while and a shitload of reflection on both my behavior and that of the past brothers, but eventually I'd figured out exactly what sort of Alpha Tau I wanted to be. I wanted to be one who pushed. So when I was offered the position of pledge master after the previous guy transferred, I grabbed the chance with both hands, and I'd been doing it ever since.

And I tried to remember that this was important and meaningful and that I was shaping the future as I stapled celebrity names to elastic headbands so tonight's freshmen could play dumb guessing games to get to know each other. And so we could get to know them too, see how they interacted, and figure out if they'd be a good fit when we offered bids.

Rush week was mad busy. Not only did we have to host three parties, but we had to compete with every other house on Fraternity Row, all of whom were doing the same thing. During rush week, Fraternity Row was bursting at the seams with freshmen wandering from party to party, wide-eyed, drunker than they should have been, and just about as dumb as you'd expect a bunch of freshmen to be. It was chaos, but I liked it.

“Casey?” Trey Montgomery, our chapter president, stuck his head around my door, where I was spread out between my bed and Marty's with my rush week craft project. “Have you got a minute?”

He looked serious. Trey often looked serious, but today his brows were tugging together a little, making a tiny divot in his forehead. He usually only wore that expression around exam time. It was Trey's first year as chapter president though, so I wasn't surprised he was feeling a bit stressed about it.

"Yeah," I said, sweeping a bunch of pens and cardboard aside. "Come on in. You might want to sit on my bed, not Marty's. I can't promise that Marty's washed his sheets this year yet."

Trey very sensibly sat on my bed.

"So, what's the deal, prez?"

"Oh, the deal is that 'prez' is not becoming a thing," Trey said. "At all."

I mock-saluted him. "Aye, aye, captain."

He rolled his eyes. "Anyway, we've got two legacies coming to the party tonight."

"Yeah," I said. "Sawyer McClintock and Ethan Brooks. I know the deal. Their dads are Alpha Taus, so we extend a bid."

"I also want you to extend a bid to Briar Pendelton."

I turned a marker over in my hand. "I don't know that name."

"You wouldn't," Trey said. "He's not a legacy. But we're extending him a bid anyway."

I narrowed my eyes at that. "Why?"

Trey glanced at the door and lowered his voice. “Because my father knows someone who asked if we’d give Briar special consideration. And my dad wouldn’t ask unless he had a good reason. He said Briar had a rough time last year at Harvey.”

“Wait, he’s not even a freshman?”

“Sophomore,” Trey confirmed. “This is his first year at Lassiter though.”

“Okay,” I said. “What if he’s not a good fit?”

“Twenty years ago, hell, ten years ago, I wouldn’t have been a good fit,” Trey said and raised his eyebrows.

“Which is bullshit,” I said. “And you know I don’t defend that shit. I’m not asking if this guy is Black or if he’s queer or if he’s Muslim or Jewish or whatever the fuck else used to mean he’d never get offered a bid at Alpha Tau. I’m asking what happens if he’s not a good fit personally. Like he’s a douchebag or something.”

“I don’t think he’s gonna be a douchebag,” Trey said. “But if you tell me you don’t think it’ll work out, then I’ll take that under advisement.”

That was fair enough, I guessed. And it wasn’t like Trey was the sort of guy who’d use his power as president to force us to take on a pledge who wasn’t right for Alpha Tau. But shit, I had enough issues with places being put aside for legacies and other potential pledges losing out because of it that I didn’t like the idea of another one of this year’s spots already being spoken for.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll keep an open mind.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” Trey said, when we both knew that he was actually asking a hell of a lot more than that. I hoped I could trust Trey’s judgment on this, and I hoped

that Briar Pendelton, whoever the hell he was, would be worth it.

By 8:00 p.m., the party was in full swing. It wasn't a huge party, and some of the rushees looked pretty disappointed when they arrived to discover they hadn't landed in a pit of drunken depravity that all those college movies from the eighties had promised. But this was a meet and greet. It was light on the beer and heavy on the "So, tell me about yourself and what you can bring to Alpha Tau."

It was easy to pick the legacies. There was a looseness to their posture and an ease in their gestures that said they knew they were just going through the motions and their place was secure. Sawyer McClintock seemed like a good bro though, so that was something. Ethan Brooks hadn't even bothered to turn up on time.

Most of the rushees present were visibly eager to please, standing ramrod straight, shoulders back as they surreptitiously patted their hair into place and buttoned and unbuttoned their blazers nervously. I had the feeling that if I'd taken them out back and showed them the agility course Marty had set up for his dog, they would have jumped through those hoops without a second thought, just to secure their spot.

Most of them.

Not this one kid, though. I noticed him right away when he arrived slightly after everyone else, shoulders hunched and hoodie pulled up over his head, jet-black hair peeking out the edges. He looked as though he'd rather be anywhere else in the world than here. Instead of introducing himself, he slunk off to a chair in the corner of the room and turtled into it, long legs encased in black skinny jeans curled up under him and head bowed as he picked at a black-painted fingernail. No, this kid wasn't out to impress anyone, which begged the question. What was he doing here anyway?

It wasn't easy to get a place in Alpha Tau, and while part of me was almost offended that this guy didn't think we were worth making an effort for, a bigger part of me was

intrigued. The elegant shape of the fingernails in question pointed to a manicure, which suggested that this wasn't just some kid who'd stolen his sister's polish in an effort to be edgy.

I threw a glance at Trey, who raised an eyebrow and wandered over.

"Who's that?" I asked quietly.

He didn't need to ask who I meant. "That's Briar. Why don't you go see if he wants a drink or something, say hi?"

"Sure, because he's obviously dying for interaction," I muttered.

Trey gave me an unimpressed look.

"Fine," I said with a sigh. I went through to the kitchen and grabbed a can of soda and took it over to Briar, who seemed entirely focused on petting Marty's dog, Squirrel.

"Hey."

His head jerked up rapidly, and he stared at me. His hood fell back as he did so, revealing a face that belonged on one of my grandma's porcelain dolls. The pale skin was in stark contrast to Briar's ink-black hair, and long dark lashes swept over his cheeks as he blinked at me. He was cute as hell. I found myself entranced by the soft pink of his lips and the curve of his Cupid's bow, and if I hadn't known before that I sometimes found guys attractive, I sure as hell knew it now.

And then he opened his mouth, and his tone was sharp. "I'm allowed to pet the dog. A guy told me I could." His gaze hardened to a glare, even though I hadn't said a word about Squirrel.



I raised an eyebrow. “A guy?”

He waved a hand. “Blond. Loud shirt. Fashion sense of a homeless clown.”

I bit my lip in an effort not to laugh. “That’d be Marty. Squirrel’s his dog. I’m Casey, the social chair.” I held the soda out to him.

He regarded me warily before taking it. “Thanks.” He didn’t offer his name in return and went back to petting Squirrel.

“Have you visited any of the other fraternities?” I asked. Trey had told me to keep an open mind, so here I was, extending the hand of friendship and all that good bullshit.

“Nope,” Briar said, not bothering to look my way.

I stood there a moment longer, but it seemed that Briar either had no interest in getting to know me better, or he’d reached his quota of social interaction for the night, so I left him alone. If this was how he acted when he was meant to be impressing me, no wonder he’d had a hard time at Harvey.

I did the rounds for a while to meet the other hopefuls, and there were a couple of guys that I could tell would fit right in. I made a mental note of their names, knowing that Trey was doing the same and that we’d sit down at the end of the week and decide who we were extending invitations to.

My gaze drifted over to Briar, who was still curled up in the armchair, although he seemed to have relaxed some. On impulse, I picked up a bowl of pretzels and took them over to him.

He looked at the bowl and wrinkled his nose. “No, thanks.”

“They’re not for you,” I said. “They’re for Squirrel. He loves them.”

At the mention of his name, Squirrel’s ears shot up and his tail thumped out a fast tattoo against the hardwood floor.

Briar gave me a cautious smile and took the bowl, and I waited to see if he had anything else to say, but all his attention was on feeding snacks to the dog.

To be fair, Squirrel was hella cute.

I went back to my duties as social chair, my gaze settling on a guy with sandy-colored slicked-back hair who was settled on the couch, manspreading and chugging a beer. I sat opposite him. “Hey. You’re Ethan Brooks, right?”

He crumpled his can one-handed and belched, then grinned at me like he’d done something clever. “Yeah, that’s me. And you’re Casey, social chair and pledge master, and the guy I’d be trying to impress if I wasn’t a legacy.” He elbowed the tall, nervous-looking redhead who was wedged next to him. “Sucks to be you, huh, trying to get a spot?”

The redhead pulled away, biting his bottom lip, and I felt a wave of sympathy for him. I gave him an easy smile. “Hey. I didn’t catch your name yet?”

“Charlie,” he half whispered. “Charlie Mercer.”

“Nice to meet you, Charlie,” I said. “I’m Casey Hill. Social chair.” I gestured to where Briar was sitting, Squirrel at his feet. The dog’s gaze was fixed on the pretzels. “Have you met Squirrel yet? He loves pets and pretzels.”

I was giving the guy an out, and from his grateful smile he knew it. He shuffled over to Briar and stood there awkwardly for a moment before saying something too quiet

for me to hear and leaning down to pet Squirrel.

“Thanks, man,” Ethan said. He laughed loudly. “That guy could not take a hint. He was stuck to me like a wet Kleenex. Also, pretty sure he’s here on a scholarship.”

He said it like it was a dirty word.

“No problem,” I said, though it hadn’t been for his benefit. Dude was radiating heavy douchebag vibes. “So, what are you looking forward to most about being an Alpha Tau?”

Ethan cracked open another beer and laughed again. “Not living in a fucking dorm room.”

I mean, it wasn’t a wrong answer. Who’d want to live in the dorms when they could live at Alpha Tau? This place was hella nice. But it annoyed me that Ethan didn’t even try and feed me some bullshit about brotherhood and community service and making connections that would stay with him long after he’d graduated. Like, I knew he was an entitled asshole, and he knew he was an entitled asshole, but shouldn’t he have at least tried to make a better first impression? I guess it pissed me off the most that he didn’t think I was even worth the bother.

We had room for ten bids this year, and this goddamn asshole had to be one of them. If I had my way, Charlie would be another, just on principle. The yin to balance Ethan’s yang, or something like that. The anti-douche.

“Okay, man,” I said. “I’ll catch you around.”

I headed over to Charlie and Briar. They were talking. Charlie was kneeling on the floor, giving Squirrel all the right sort of scratches, and Briar had uncurled and was leaning forward. He was smiling too, which... come on? Seriously? I’d been nice, and

I hadn't gotten a smile.

"Hey, you guys," I said, and Charlie straightened. "Nah, don't get up. You've got important Squirrel-feeding duties. I just came over to have a chat with you."

Briar shot me a suspicious look, and Charlie gave me a slightly anxious one.

"So, what is it about Alpha Tau that makes you want to join?" I asked.

"Um," Charlie said. "Like, the prelaw thing, obviously, but also because you guys are inclusive?" He ended it like a question.

"Yeah, we try," I said. "That important to you?"

"Um," he said again. "I'm gay, so, um, yeah."

"That's cool, man," I said. "That's not an issue here." I was aware that Briar was staring at me warily, but I kept my gaze on Charlie and flashed him a grin. "Hell, half the chapter executive is gay or bi. Like, if you guys get in, make sure you always knock before going into Trey and Scout's room, is all I'm sayin'."

Charlie let out a huff of laughter and then tried to swallow it, as though he wasn't sure he should find that funny or not.

"Seriously," I said. "This isn't your granddaddy's frat. All we care about is whether or not you'll be a good brother, and that's got nothing to do with your sexuality."

"Wow," Charlie said and blinked at me.

"So this is the part where you tell me why you think you'd be a good brother," I said. "You're here on an academic scholarship, right?"

“Yeah.” Charlie bit his lip as he petted Squirrel absently. Good with dogs; that’d get him Marty’s vote. His hand brushed against Briar’s as Briar reached down to join in the Squirrel love, and both of them shared an awkward smile before Charlie glanced back at me. “I like the idea of a support system. Like, being with guys who will all look out for each other and who have the same academic goals. But that goes both ways, I get it. Like, I don’t just want to be helped. I want to help too. I don’t know if I can because I don’t know anything yet, but anyhow, sorry, that sounds really lame.”

“Nah,” I said. “Sounds like you get it. What about you, Briar?”

He stared at me like a spotlighted raccoon. “Um, yeah. What Charlie said.”

I raised my eyebrows and waited for him to elaborate on that.

“Um,” he said again. “Also, I already took the LSAT?”

“Whoa, seriously? What’d you get?”

“Uh,” he said and blinked. “160.”

“That’s awesome! Man, half the guys here don’t even look at that until their sophomore year at least. Looks like we’ve got two academic overachievers right here.”

Charlie beamed, and Briar gave me a faint smile.

“Hey, don’t forget to try to socialize a bit tonight, okay?” I said. “Smart is good, but it’s not everything. I’ll catch up with you guys later on.”

And I headed back to the other hopeful freshmen, already mentally starting a list that had both Charlie Mercer and Briar Pendelton on it. Because they were both obviously

smart, and they both obviously needed help coming out of their shells. And also, since Ethan Brooks was also on the list, I really, really needed to stack this year's deck with some non-assholes.

The more, the better.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:44 am*

### TWO

I liked the start of the new school year at Lassiter. Summer was over, and fall was just starting to turn the leaves gold and red. Fraternity Row, shaded by a mix of huge red maples and laurels, was picturesque. The girls from Zeta Tau were all about standing around in the golden afternoon light Instagramming in their cute outfits with their pumpkin spice lattes and their apple cider donuts.

I was walking Squirrel past their house when Allison saw me, waved at me from the porch, and came out onto the sidewalk to talk. She was wearing tartan leggings, boots, and a fuzzy jacket. It was hot. Allison was hot too. We'd hooked up some, but neither of us were interested in anything more than that. We were good friends though. Back in sophomore year when I'd been veering into fuckboy territory—while I'd done a lot of maturing in college, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been immature as fuck at times too—Allison had given me the metaphorical slap in the face that had snapped me out of it again.

“Hey, slugger,” she said. She called me that because I'd been on my high school baseball team. And the only reason she knew that was because I'd been going through my old photos on Insta one night to show her my truly awful high school graduation suit—my girlfriend back then thought we'd look good in rose pink. We didn't. Anyway, Allison had been a lot more interested in the picture of my baseball uniform and—her words—the things it did to my ass.

“Hey, Ally. How's it going?”

She gave Squirrel a pat. “You know. Pledge week. Jesus, kill me now. Have

freshmen always been this needy?”

“Yup.”

She laughed. “You got any good candidates?”

“A couple,” I said. “Got a real asshole legacy too.”

She shuddered. “You’ll whip him into shape though, right?”

I thought of Ethan Brooks and made a face. “I dunno. Pretty sure he’s an asshole on a bone-deep level.”

“Do I need to let my girls know about him?” she asked. We usually had a mixer with the Zeta Taus after rush week.

“I’ll keep my eye on him,” I said, “but it wouldn’t hurt if he’s on y’all’s radar too. I’ll make sure to point him out to you.”

We shot the shit for a while longer and went over a few ideas for joint fundraisers. Last year we’d done a car wash, and it was still a point of friendly contention about whether the Zeta Taus, in bikini tops and Daisy Dukes, had earned more money than us with our shirts off.

“Well, I’m not doing another car wash until spring,” Allison said. “It’s way too cold to be wearing buckets of water. We should do a candy drive or something.”

“Come on, that’s hardly fair. You Zetas will crush us. Nobody can say no to cute girls in short skirts. That’s science.”

She grinned at me. “Then I guess you Alphas will have to up your game if you want



to beat us.”

“It’s on,” I said, and I liked to think that Squirrel was on my side since he picked that moment to take a dump on the Zetas’ lawn. Given that I had to pick it up, it wasn’t exactly a win. But still, he’d made a point.

I got Squirrel home just in time for the chapter meeting. We usually only held one of these every couple of weeks, but during rush week, the chapter executive caught up every day just to make sure we were all on the same page. It wasn’t a formal meeting - just chips and soda in the office.

Trey was president, and Archer was vice president. It was the first year in the positions for both of them, and they were both a little stressed about their new responsibilities, but they knew how things worked. Marshall and Andrew, our previous president and vice president, had been good examples to follow. Connor was the house manager this year, and Knox was the chapter secretary. I was the social chair again, and Scout was still treasurer, so we were sort of the steadying influence while everyone else found their feet in their new roles. And Marty had come along to the meeting as well because Marty always did even though he wasn’t a member of the chapter executive. But he brought snacks, so we let him.

“Squirrel!” Marty exclaimed, sliding off the couch and onto his ass on the floor so he could get dog hugs.

“Hey, am I late?” I asked.

“We started early because Marty brought donuts,” Scout said. He gave me a cold stare, but that was just a thing his face did. He was actually a good guy. “You missed them. They were delicious.”

I grabbed a handful of chips from the bowl on the desk. “I think I’ll live.”

“So, how’s it all going?” Trey asked. “Who do we like so far?”

Most of the guys had the same general picture I did of the guys who were rushing Alpha Tau. Who would be a good fit. Who wouldn’t. There was some debate over whether we could really have two pledges called James, but it wasn’t serious—they were both decent candidates.

But not everyone was on board with Briar.

“Briar Pendelton?” Knox asked dubiously. “The kid with the black hair and nail polish, right? I don’t know, bro. He kind of seemed like he’d rather be anywhere else. Like if you’d given him the choice of rushing or getting a root canal, he’d be lining up at the dentist’s instead.”

Trey caught my gaze but didn’t say anything, and I wondered if that whole “Briar has to get in” was just between us for now. Like, I got it. If the guy had been bullied last year or something, then he probably didn’t want his whole new fraternity to know that. And there was no reason it had to go any further than me and Trey, because when it came to pledges, our opinions counted the most.

“I figured that too at first,” I said, “but then, when I was telling Charlie about how inclusive we were, Briar’s attitude changed, and he got real interested real quick. I think he needs Alpha Tau, you get me? I think he’ll be a good fit too, once he comes out of his shell a bit. And he’s smart. Already took his LSAT and got 160. That’s a hell of an example for the other pledges to follow.”

Knox nodded. “Okay. Sounds like you got a better read on him than I did.”

Trey gave me a nod.

“Squirrel likes him,” Marty said. “And Squirrel’s an awesome judge of character.”

“Squirrel ran away from his own reflection when he saw it in a mirror,” Archer pointed out.

“Bro, that’s just smart,” Marty said. “If you turned a corner and saw yourself standing there, you’d run away too! That’s some horror movie bullshit right there, unless you’re an identical twin.”

“Pretty sure he’s got some social anxiety or something,” I said.

“He’s fine,” Marty said, scowling at me. “That’s just the vibe he gives off as a whippet.”

“Yeah, I was talking about Briar, not Squirrel,” I said. “So, we’ve got the cookout tonight, which should be even more chill than the first meet and greet. Hopefully we’ll get to know Briar a little better, but so far it’s a yes from me, for both him and Charlie.”

We went through a few other names, and I was pleased nobody else had warmed to Ethan Brooks either. Dude radiated some major gross vibes. Allison had said I’d have to whip him into shape, but honestly? A lifetime of being Mommy and Daddy’s entitled little golden boy was pretty much ingrained by this point. I didn’t have to spend a lot of time with Ethan Brooks to figure nobody had ever told him no before.

After the meeting, when we were setting up for the cookout, a few of the brothers who weren’t in the executive caught up with me to let me know their first impressions of this year’s rushees. It was good to discover that most of us were on the same page.

Ethan surprised me by turning up early to the cookout and offering to help out on the grill. Connor and Archer, who were in charge, made some space for him and drew him into a conversation.

Huh. So maybe what I needed to do was reserve judgment for now. Perhaps Ethan wasn't as bad as I'd thought. Like, it wouldn't be the first time I was wrong about someone. Call me a pessimist though, but I wasn't expecting Ethan to surprise me.

The other potential pledges rolled in with the golden and red light of the sunset. Nobody was dressed up tonight. Blazers and chinos had been replaced with jeans and hoodies. Briar, when he turned up, actually fit in tonight, though he was still wearing his hood up as though he wanted to hide inside it. Charlie was with him, appearing a little more confident than he had last night.

I scooped a couple of sodas out of the cooler and headed over to meet them as they wandered around the side of the house. "Hey, you guys. Glad you made it."

"Hi, Casey," Charlie said, taking his soda.

"Hi," Briar echoed. His fingers brushed mine as he took the can.

I drew my hand back, fingertips a little numb from the ice in the cooler. "You guys doing good?"

Briar's nails weren't nice like the first time I'd noticed them. They were ragged at the edges, like he'd been chewing on them. Not usually the sort of thing I'd notice about a guy, but there was something about Briar that kept drawing my gaze. He was shy and a bit prickly, and he was pretty. Just something about how he was put together that pinged my radar, I guess. Which was weird, because I had a type, and it was usually blondes—it was usually girls too—and here was this guy with ink-black hair that had to have come out of a bottle and bitten-down nails and wary glances and monosyllabic replies, and I just couldn't stop staring. Archer's boyfriend, Eli, had a bit of that angsty scene-kid-art-student vibe happening with his clothes and his hair and his lip ring, so it wasn't as though it was a surprise to discover that whole package could be attractive—except that Eli didn't do it for me like Briar apparently

did. I'd never thought Eli was pretty. They might have shopped at the same thrift stores, but that was where the resemblance ended. Eli's features weren't as delicate as Briar's. His eyes weren't so dark you could get lost in them.

And where the fuck did that come from? Holy shit. I could deal with the unexpected jolt of being wrenched up a few points on the Kinsey Scale toward the bigger, gayier numbers, but poetic metaphors about getting lost in Briar's eyes? That was a step too fucking far.

And I also needed to dial that shit back big time because I was the social chair and pledge master of Alpha Tau, and Briar was a potential pledge.

Not cool, Casey. Not fucking cool.

"So," I said, loudly enough that both Briar and Charlie jumped. "It's great you showed up. Both of you, I mean. Not that I thought you'd ditch us, but you know."

They didn't know. I didn't either. They exchanged what could only be considered an "Is Casey crazy?" look.

"Oh," I said, "and there are some dog treats in the kitchen if you guys want to grab some for Squirrel. Just don't feed him too much, or he'll be farting all night. And I share a room with him."

"With Squirrel?" Briar asked, and it might have been the first time he'd actually voluntarily kept a conversation going. "That's cool."

"Well, with Marty," I said. "It's a package deal with the dog."

"I didn't know frats were allowed dogs," Briar said.

“I told you, we’re inclusive,” I said with a grin, “and Marty’s boyfriend really wanted to get him a dog, so we made it happen.”

“Wait, Marty’s gay too?” Charlie asked, eyes widening. “He doesn’t look the type.”

“Oh yeah? How exactly should he look?” Marty was pure chaos, but he was my bro, and I was ready to throw hands if Charlie tried doubling down.

Charlie’s cheeks flamed. “No, I just... right. You’re right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed. He’s just such a...”

“Dudebro?” I nodded. “See, it’s all about appearances. You look at Marty, and you expect something different than you get.” My gaze shifted to Briar. “Same as when you first came over last night. You see this fancy fucking house full of portraits of old dudes with walrus moustaches. You see white guys—mostly—in blazers, with Daddy’s money, and you expect a bunch of entitled assholes.” I lowered my voice. “Trust me, I was exactly the same when I pledged.”

Briar bit his lower lip.

Charlie shuffled uncomfortably, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. “So, I haven’t, like, put my foot in my mouth and ruined my chances?”

“No, man. All I’m sayin’ is, don’t judge by appearances, okay? Because one thing we’re good at in Alpha Tau is flipping expectations.”

“I mean, to be fair, I didn’t even know I was gay until last year,” Marty said from over my shoulder, ruining my After School Special moment. “But then I met Dalton, and surprise! Turns out I’m all about the dick now. Well, Dalton’s dick, specifically. Plus, I love him, so there’s that.”

Charlie's jaw hit the ground. So did Briar's.

"You're pretty bi, Marty," I said. We'd had this conversation before. "You slept with half of Zeta Tau before you met Dalton."

"Yeah, and that was awesome too, but that was before I knew dicks were so great. I mean, everyone should try dick at least once." He winked at Charlie, whose face went as red as his hair. "You guys are gay, right? How great is it?"

"Um." Charlie was about to burst into flames if he got any redder. "It's pretty great?"

Marty fist-bumped him.

"Excuse me," Briar said, darting away before Marty could get an answer off him too.

Yeah, something sure as hell had gone wrong for him at his last school, and I was pretty certain it had everything to do with his sexuality.

Wait, was Briar even gay? Or had Marty just done exactly what I'd told the new guys not to do and made an assumption based on his appearance? Maybe that had been the problem at Briar's last school—being pretty and catching shit for it?

Part of my job as pledge master was looking out to see potential members weren't being made uncomfortable, and Marty could be a lot, so I hurried after Briar. At the grill, Ethan stepped out in front of me.

"Hey, Casey," he said. "Have you talked to Fisher and Graham? They're rushing too. They're buddies of mine."

"Yeah," I said, looking over his shoulder to where Briar was disappearing into the house. "I met them last night."

“Yeah, they’re really great and?—”

I pushed past him and hurried toward the house.

“Okay, cool, we’ll talk later!” Ethan called out, waving a pair of tongs at me. I didn’t bother to reply.

I found Briar in the kitchen, where he was standing by the refrigerator. Knox was talking to him—something about what classes he was taking.

“And Casey said you’ve already done the LSAT? That’s amazing. Oh, hey, Casey.”

“Hey. Sorry to interrupt, but can I speak to you for a second, Briar?”

He didn’t make eye contact. “Okay.”

“Come on up to my room,” I said. “It’s quieter there.”

The room I shared with Marty was on the second floor. It was pretty much a mess all the time. I could have blamed most of it on Marty, but that wouldn’t have been fair. I was terrible at keeping laundry, either clean or dirty, off the floor too.

I pulled the chair from Marty’s desk out for Briar and sat down in mine. Briar was tense and unhappy, vibrating like Squirrel when it was bath time.

“Hey,” I said quietly. “I just wanted to check if you’re okay. It seemed like you freaked out a little.”

“I’m fine,” he said, eyes fixed on a random stain on the rug where Marty had spilled something—I’d never been brave enough to ask exactly what.



I'd talked enough freshmen through various crises to recognize that his hunched shoulders and bowed head told a different story.

"Hey," I said again.

He lifted his gaze to mine, eyes wide and dark and almost haunted.

"So, I just told you guys not to make assumptions, so I won't either, but I'm guessing that people at your last school did, huh? And now you're worried we're gonna do the same?"

A shaky breath left him. "Something like that."

"So feel free not to share because it's literally none of my business, but are you gay, or did Marty make a wrong call? Because I can shut him down if that's something you either don't identify as or you're still figuring out yourself, or if you just don't want the whole fucking fraternity thinking it, or?—"

"Oh no, I'm straight," Briar said.

Huh. That was?—

"I am so straight," he said, completely deadpan. "The straightest straight ever to straight. Lemme prove it. Football. Beer. Boobs. Um, monster trucks?" And then, impossibly, he grinned at me.

Oh. He was a sarcastic little shit.

Inappropriate crush intensifying.

"Okay," I said and cleared my throat. "For the record, football doesn't count as a

straight-identifying activity. We have a mean flag football game every Sunday against the Theta Phis, and I'm pretty sure Marty cheats by going shirtless just to distract his boyfriend."

Briar's smile faded, and he let out a long breath. "Some stuff happened at my last college, and when I was looking at Lassiter, someone suggested I try to get into Alpha Tau because you guys wouldn't care that I'm gay. That you'd be cool with someone like..." He gestured at himself. "Me."

"What about you though?" I asked. "Do you want to be in Alpha Tau?"

He cocked his head to the side. "I wasn't sure, but now I've met you, and you seem okay. I think it could... be good? Sorry, I don't have any speeches about community service like Charlie does. I just..." He let out another breath. "Things got real bad last year. I think I might need somewhere safe, and you might be it."

"Okay," I said. I reached out and squeezed his knee. "If you want in, you're in, okay?"

"It's that easy?" Something like hope flitted across his face. "Don't I have to take part in a bunch of dumb stunts?"

"Oh, you definitely do, but that's after we make an official bid at the end of the week. And they're mainly for fun or if we're doing a fundraiser for the food bank or something. Does that sound okay?"

"Yeah," he said quietly. "It does." He broke into a wide smile, showing perfect white teeth, and his face lit up like a sunrise. A dimple appeared in his left cheek, and damn! If I'd thought he was pretty before, now he was stunning. Suddenly I couldn't think of a thing I wouldn't do to see more of that smile, and keep it directed at me.

A Klaxon blared in my head.

Nope. Nope. Nope.

I was the pledge master, and Briar was about to be a pledge. I didn't cross those lines. I wasn't that guy.

I forced myself to let go of his knee and cleared my throat. "So, welcome to Alpha Tau, I guess? Just maybe keep it under your hat until the end of the week when it's official."

Yeah, that smile wasn't any less captivating the second time around.

I was so screwed.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:44 am*

### THREE

Fucking sit-down suppers.

The worst part of the whole bid process and a huge pain in my ass. Everyone was wedged in around the three massive dining room tables—we had to bring extra chairs down from the attic—and there really wasn't enough room for all of us at the same time. You couldn't eat without copping an elbow in your face from both sides. Not all the brothers lived at the house, so usually we had a bit of space to move, but for bid night? Yeah, everyone turned up for that.

Not that we called it bid night. As far as our rushees knew, this was just another hoop they were being asked to jump through. What they hadn't realized was that if they'd been invited tonight, they were in. After supper, they'd be extended a formal bid and then taken downstairs to the basement to pledge. Which, for the record, had always struck me as kind of dumb. Why not pledge on the spot? But all fraternities—even the more progressive ones like Alpha Tau—had their weird traditions, and ours was leading a bunch of guys downstairs to the equivalent of the Batcave just to ask if they wanted to be in our special club.

Looking around the table, it was easy to spot who'd guessed what they were here for and who hadn't quite caught on yet. Charlie was oblivious. He looked like he was just happy to be invited to supper. It was good to see him a lot more relaxed than he'd been the first time he set foot in Alpha Tau. That might have had something to do with sitting next to Marty, who was busy describing something with unmistakable hand gestures that had Charlie blushing and laughing at the same time.

Briar definitely knew what was up because he'd approached me the day before and asked if there was a dress code. I'd told him smart casual, which in his case was a fitted gray blazer and a pair of pressed blue chinos. He was rocking the choppy haircut and had fresh nail polish though, and I was almost certain he was wearing eyeliner. I liked that he was confident enough to do that after our talk.

Ethan had obviously figured it out, although he didn't appear all that happy about it given that neither Fisher nor Graham had been invited. If Ethan was pissed, that made two of us. There was one kid, Jasper, that I'd really wanted to extend a bid to, but he was missing out. Ethan was a legacy, so we were stuck with him instead.

When we got to the end of supper, Trey stood and cleared his throat loudly, then waited for the conversation to die down. When it didn't, Scout let out a piercing whistle, which cut through the chatter, and everyone fell silent.

"Floor's yours," he said, scowling at Trey. Not that he was unhappy or anything. That was just his face.

"Okay, y'all," Trey said, in what was possibly the least formal start to a bid speech ever. "I'll keep this short. You're here tonight because you've earned an invitation to pledge. Congratulations, you made the cut."

There was an audible gasp from Charlie. "Really?" he asked, eyes bright. "I'm in?"

"You're in, bro," Marty said and fist-bumped him.

The rest of us broke into a round of applause. Looking around the table and seeing all the newbies wearing wide, relieved smiles at knowing they'd made the grade reminded me how much I enjoyed this part of the process. If I spent a few extra seconds watching Briar to make sure his smile was genuine—it was—well, that was just me doing my job as pledge master.

We got up from the table, and I was glad to see Charlie, Sawyer, and Briar stacking plates and taking them through to the kitchen without being asked. Connor's life as house manager would be a heck of a lot easier if the new guys were willing to pull their weight. Plus, as pledges they'd be doing plenty of shitty jobs, so they might as well get used to it.

Trey, Archer, and Connor made their way down to the basement while Marty and I handed around celebratory beers and congratulated the successful pledges. Then I took them downstairs one at a time, starting with Sawyer.

When we got there, I sat him down at the long table we'd set up for the pledging, with a single chair on one side and four for the executive on the other. The table was placed in front of the rear wall that was decorated with portraits, old banners, memorabilia, and the Alpha Tau crest. The setup gave off a vibe that was far more "interrogation" than warm welcome, and was at definite odds with the homey sky-blue painted walls, corduroy beanbags, and worn couches that filled what was usually a hangout space. Sawyer didn't seem to notice, perching on the edge of his chair and nodding along as Trey ran through the benefits of belonging to our fraternity and what we'd expect in return. Trey wound up his spiel with, "You've got a week to consider?—"

"Nope, I'm in," Sawyer said. "Please." He flashed a smile that spoke of first-class orthodontics in his childhood, and it was obvious how happy he was to be a part of the Alpha Tau family.

Sawyer was a decent dude. He was a legacy, yeah, but I couldn't, in all fairness, hold that against him since, unlike Ethan, he wasn't a dick. Despite being a sure thing, when he signed the paperwork securing him a spot in Alpha Tau, he displayed the same eagerness as Marty when presented with a fresh donut. He shook hands with each of us in turn, still grinning from ear to ear. When he reached me and I said, "Welcome to Alpha Tau," I could swear that his eyes got a glossy sheen as he clasped

my hand.

We worked our way down the list of pledges, and they all reacted similarly, signing up without hesitation. It felt good, knowing that we'd made their day—let's be real, we'd probably made their next four years.

The eighth guy I took down to the basement was Ethan.

Unlike the others, he didn't seem in the least bit excited when I called him, instead stretching his arms over his head in a yawn and sauntering after me toward the stairs, very clearly projecting an attitude of "no big deal."

He nodded in all the right places as Trey read out his rights and obligations, and he sure as hell signed on the dotted line, but you could tell he was pissed, and we all knew why. I could only hope that he didn't feel the need to blurt something out and make this awkward.

So of course he opened his big dumb mouth and said, "I still don't see why you didn't invite Fisher and Graham. Like, I basically promised them I could get them in. What gives, man?"

He sprawled back in his chair, arms folded like he expected an explanation or something, which, fuck that guy.

Trey looked him up and down, unsmiling. Ethan squirmed under his gaze and sat upright and spread his hands wide, attempting something like a smile. "I'm just saying. You let the emo kid and that guy who's on a fucking scholarship in."

"Yeah," Trey said, raising one eyebrow slightly. "We did."

He didn't expand on that. He just fixed Ethan with a cool stare, and Ethan finally,

finally, got a fucking clue.

He ran a hand through his hair and then stood. “Well, thanks, I guess. When do we get our rooms? I can’t wait to move out of those shitty fucking dorms.”

“We’ll let you know,” Trey said.

Ethan put a hand on one hip and looked like he was about to push the point, but then he thought better of it and headed to the door without another word.

Once he was gone, Archer snorted. “Y’all agree he’s a dick, right?”

“Yeah,” Trey said with a sigh. “But we’re stuck with him.”

I stood and went up the stairs to fetch our next pledge and almost ran into the back of Ethan when I reached the top. He was standing there like he’d been waiting for me, and he reached out and grabbed my upper arm. “Listen, man,” he said in an undertone. “You’re pledge master. Can’t you do, like, something to get my guys an invitation?”

“Sorry, it’s not my call,” I said, even though it had very much been. Fisher and Graham had been assholes. I’d rejected them from the get-go, and Trey had agreed after he’d spotted them leaving the cookout loaded up with beer from the cooler. I pulled out of his grip. “You might wanna move out of the doorway, bro.”

Ethan glared after me as I sidestepped his bulk and went to get Charlie from the dining room. Ethan was gone when we got back, and Charlie almost tripped over himself in his haste to follow me into the basement, despite not having seen the last guy come out. That kid would never have survived five minutes in a slasher movie.

After Ethan, Charlie was a breath of fresh air. His knee jiggled in a nervous rhythm,



and he had a heap of questions, but I could tell that unlike Ethan, he wasn't asking to be obnoxious—he just wanted to get all his ducks in a row—and it was clear that he was so damn glad to be here. He must have said “thank you” about twenty times, and he couldn't keep the grin off his face.

“I still can't believe y'all picked me,” he confided once he'd signed his acceptance. “Like, my family ain't exactly living high on the hog, you know? We're just working-class folks.”

Archer waved a hand. “We like you, bro. And you're a good fit. That's the only thing we care about.”

By the time we got to the part where we all shook Charlie's hand and welcomed him, I thought he was going to vibrate out of his skin with happiness. I followed him up the stairs and into the dining room and beckoned to Briar. He was perched on the edge of the couch, and he bounced to his feet like he was spring-loaded and shot me a relieved smile, like maybe he thought we'd changed our minds or something.

Downstairs, we went through the whole song and dance of pledging and what our expectations were for the final time. When Trey got to the part where he asked if he had any questions, Briar raised his hand from his lap and then dropped it again. He chewed at his bottom lip before saying, “Um. So is my place here affected by my academic record?”

“Bro,” I said quickly, “you don't need to worry about that. I mean, you've already taken your LSAT. You're golden.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again and flashed me a smile. “In that case, where do I sign?”

We got the paperwork out of the way, and once Briar was gone, I said, “Okay. Now

that part's done, who wants to go and get hammered with the new guys?"

"Hell yeah," Archer said, high-fiving me. There was the rapid scrape of chair legs on concrete as we all hurried to get upstairs and let loose.

The post-pledging party was usually pretty wild, and it was one Alpha Tau ritual I could get behind.

The next week was a whirlwind of organization. I was responsible for making sure the new pledges all had a copy of the history of Alpha Tau to learn and be quizzed on, and Connor had to update the house rosters to include ten new people, all of whom were about to be loaded up with chores as part of their pledging process.

Things went downhill the morning he pinned a copy of the new roster up on the corkboard in the kitchen. The pledges had come over to have breakfast and bond and shit, and we figured it was as good a time as any to introduce them to what frat life was really like—more trash duty than toga parties. When Connor announced they'd been assigned their tasks for the month, Ethan pushed past the other pledges, took one look, and immediately declared he wasn't going on a roster to look after "some dumb dog."

When I heard him sounding off, I hustled over to the kitchen where the new guys were gathered. Marty was there, covering Squirrel's ears and glaring at Ethan like he was trying to set him on fire with the power of his mind. I made a mental note to hide Marty's lighter, just in case he thought of a backup plan if pyrokinesis failed.

"Is there a problem, pledge?" I asked Ethan.

Ethan's eyes widened, and I could tell he hadn't expected to be challenged—maybe he thought the rules of pledging didn't apply to him as a legacy. "No problem. I'm just not comfortable around dogs," he said. "It's one of those, you know. A trigger!"

He looked far too pleased with himself and not at all traumatized, despite Squirrel only being a few feet away.

“Huh,” I said. “Kind of weird that you’d pledge to literally the only frat with a dog.”

Charlie cleared his throat and said, “I can walk him extra. Squirrel’s cool.”

There was a kid who’d spent his life keeping the peace, I could tell.

“Done,” Connor said, pulling out a Sharpie and writing Charlie’s name over top of Ethan’s on the Squirrel roster.

Ethan smirked—right until Connor replaced Charlie’s name with Ethan’s on the trash roster. “Hey! No fair!”

“Gotta balance it out somehow,” Connor said with a shrug and walked away. I knew I liked that guy for a reason.

Ethan scowled at Charlie like this had been all his doing. “Good job, kid. Now I have to cart trash bags like the hired help. How does that work? I mean, you’re the one who’s a fucking charity case.”

Charlie flushed a deep red and ducked his head, curling in on himself. Ethan’s words had hit him hard. It looked like he was barely holding it together.

I was about to call Ethan out, but Briar beat me to it.

“Hey,” he said, stepping right up into Ethan’s space, chin tipped up in a clear challenge despite being a good four inches shorter. “How about you fuck right off with your rich boy privilege?”

Ethan gaped for a second, then said, “Who the hell asked you?”

Well, shit.

I stepped in before the situation got out of hand, wedging myself into the tiny space between Briar and Ethan so that Ethan was forced to take a step back. He was taller than me, but that didn’t stop me from eyeballing him hard. “Y’all might wanna get some manners real fast if you wanna keep your place here. And just so you know, Charlie was my first pick to join us, so maybe you should quit actin’ ugly.”

Ethan blinked in surprise. “But... I’m a legacy.”

“Exactly. You’re here because of who your daddy is. Charlie’s here because we want him here. So lose the attitude, okay?”

There was a tense moment when Ethan tried to stare me down, but I’d been wrangling pledges for a while now, and I pretty much had a spine of steel where cocky freshmen were concerned. I stood my ground, and it didn’t take long for Ethan to realize I wasn’t kidding. “Yeah, whatever,” he mumbled, slinking out of the kitchen.

Once he was gone, Charlie let out a shaky breath. “I’m sorry.”

“Dude, what the hell are you sorry for?” I said. “You didn’t do a thing.”

“Yeah, but...” He kept his gaze fixed on the floor.

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. This ain’t your granddaddy’s frat. We don’t give a good goddamn about who your family is, you got that?”

Charlie nodded, but his shoulders were still curled in like a pillbug.

“Course, it doesn’t hurt that both you and Briar are smarter’n hell and you’re gonna make our academic record look real good this year, but you’re here because we like you. And I’ll make sure Ethan doesn’t run his mouth again,” I said.

Charlie twisted the hem of his T-shirt between his fingers. “Thanks.”

Briar stepped up close and put a hand on Charlie’s shoulder. “And hey, so what if he called you a charity case?” he said. “Like, it could have been worse.”

Charlie lifted his head and raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “How?”

I held my breath. Briar might mean well, but this was obviously a sore point for Charlie, and Briar was gonna need to step real carefully.

Briar shrugged. “I mean, he could have called you... a ginger.”

Charlie blinked, and then he let out a startled laugh as the tension left him. I reminded myself to give Briar a little more credit.

Briar pulled Charlie into a one-armed hug, and Charlie relaxed against his side, a small smile on his face. “Thanks for looking out for me.”

“Yeah, thanks for stepping up,” I said. “Just don’t do it again, okay?”

Briar jutted his chin out. “But I was?—”

“I know you were, and I appreciate that.” I folded my arms and held Briar’s gaze. “But y’all have a pledge master—me. Anyone tries any bullshit, you come to me, and I’ll deal with it, understand? Nobody picks on my little bro pledges.”

For some reason Briar’s cheeks stained pink, and I wondered if I’d embarrassed him.

Then he gave me a shy smile and said, “I guess I’m not used to having someone who’ll step up for me.”

“Yeah? Well, get used to it. We look after our own.” I bumped my shoulder against his and gave in to the urge to ruffle his dark locks, making them look even more wild. That earned me a startled squawk, but he didn’t pull away from my touch. Instead, he smiled at me, and I did my best not to think about how fucking adorable he looked with those pink cheeks and mussed-up hair.

“Yeah, but... isn’t Ethan an Alpha Tau too?” Charlie asked hesitantly.

There was a loud snort from behind me.

“Well yeah, but we like you guys,” Marty said from where he was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall and Squirrel’s head in his lap. “Ethan’s a dick. And if he keeps it up, he and the chapter executive will be havin’ a come to Jesus talk real soon.”

Briar’s smile faded. “Is that a thing? Getting in trouble with the chapter executive?”

“Trust me, it’s not anything you have to worry about,” I said. “As long as you take part in all the pledge activities and don’t do anything dumbass like mouthing off to the executive members, you’re gonna be fine.”

The rest of the newbies nodded, and then they all scurried away like startled rabbits. I tried to remember if I’d been that wide-eyed and terrified when I’d first pledged—probably, if I was honest with myself. But I’d settled in just fine, and these guys would too, given time.

I sighed and grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl before going to find Trey. I needed to let him know that legacy or not, Ethan was proving our opinions of him true and

shaping up to be a pain in the ass.

When rush weekended was when my real work began: the probation period. First, I had to assign all the new pledges to their big brothers, who'd be their go-to guys for the first few weeks settling in. They would also be their mentors for the rest of their time at Lassiter and even going into their future lives and careers. It was something I took pretty seriously. Archer was Briar's big brother, because Archer was a hell of a good listener if Briar wanted to open up. I paired my problem child, Ethan, up with Marty—because Marty, despite all appearances to the contrary, was an excellent judge of character and saw a lot of stuff that other people missed. And if I'd missed something about Ethan, Marty would pick up on it and fill me in. Not that I thought I had—Ethan was about as shallow as a puddle of piss and just as pleasant—but just in case.

“Casey,” drawled Scout from my bedroom door.

I turned around from where I was sitting at my desk. “Is that a smoking jacket?”

Scout plucked at the velvet. “Yes.”

“Bro, it's like my grandma's couch.”

Scout narrowed his eyes. “Why do I have a little brother?”

“Because being in Alpha Tau is all about giving back, Scout,” I said. “Open your heart and feel the love.”

If looks could kill. “I don't like people.”

“Too bad,” I said and swiveled on my chair. Not only did I have to do all the pledge stuff, but I'd also got an email from Allison at Zeta Tau, and Professor Stern had

already given out his first history assignment for the year. I really didn't have time to argue with Scout about his little brother.

"Why have I gotten the shy, squishy one?"

"To toughen him up," I lied. I'd actually given him Charlie because Scout was a good guy. He just liked to pretend he was an asshole. "And, oh, you're also in charge of coming up with strategies for this year's first fundraiser. We're doing a joint candy drive with the Zeta Taus, and Allison said they can kick our asses."

"Well, that's not fair," Scout said, blinking. "They have boobs."

"That's what I said!"

"Huh." Scout scowled, but that was his default expression. "Well, let me think about it." He tapped the doorjamb and then dug a bag of weed out of the pocket of his velvet jacket. "Wanna come out back and smoke with me?"

"Sure," I said. "Since you dressed up for the occasion and all."

And besides, maybe getting high would stop me from thinking about Briar and the dumb, stupid crush I had on him.

At least it couldn't hurt to try.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:44 am*

### FOUR

When I woke up the next morning, the house was mostly empty. I didn't have any early classes today, thank fuck, so I got to hang for a while before heading out. I bought a breakfast burrito at the hole-in-the-wall place on campus and slunk into my English class late. Luckily both the professor and the TA were cool, so my lateness wouldn't bite me in the ass. I sent a few texts back and forth with my sister, Jamie, my phone held strategically under my desk. Jamie was doing a master's in International Development Policy at Georgetown because she'd always been an overachiever. We joked that one day she'd be a member of the House of Representatives, and I'd be on the Supreme Court. At least, I was only joking. Jamie was probably dead serious.

How's your frat boy pledge bullshit going?

Great! Thanks for asking!

Sarcasm really didn't translate well over text, so I threw in a few middle finger emojis to make sure she got the point. I got some cry-laughing faces in return.

Jamie liked to make fun of me for being in a fraternity—she used the terms “frat boy” and “fuckboy” interchangeably, which was, generally speaking, a very fair assessment—but she also listened when I talked to her about how Alpha Tau was different and about how I was a part of that difference. She had my back where it counted. Like, deep, deep down.

I think I have a crush on one of my pledges. Pledges aren't meant to be pretty!

Is the problem that he's a pledge or he's pretty?

I didn't even have to think about that answer.

That he's a pledge.

Then you could just try waiting until he's not and see how you feel then?

And that right there was why I'd texted her; Jamie was smart as hell. Like, I wasn't having a crisis about my sexuality or anything here. Our mom was proudly bi, and I'd once heard Dad tell her that he was updating his celebrity hall pass list to include Idris Elba. And it was cool. Shit like that didn't matter in my parents' house, but I'd be kidding myself if I said it didn't matter here in the southern part of Virginia, even on a campus as liberal as Lassiter. Because for all my talk of pushing for change at Alpha Tau, there was one thing I'd never done when I'd joined, and that was tell everyone that I wasn't straight. At the time, I'd assured myself it wasn't relevant. I mostly liked girls, after all. But looking back, I wondered how much of it was fear. It was easier to be the loud ally than to announce you had skin in the game, right? It was easier to cheer for Archer and Scout and Trey and Marty from the sidelines than to stand up alongside them.

And after all, if it was purely a numbers game, I did like girls more than guys. Except sexuality wasn't a numbers game and I'd sure done a lot of talking loudly about girls for someone who was supposedly secure with their bisexuality. Their secret bisexuality. Yeah, I wasn't proud of how I'd acted in my sophomore fuckboy phase, brief as it had been, where I'd somehow gotten it in my head that I didn't just need to date lots of girls—I also needed to be seen to be dating them.

I was pretty sure that fear had held me back from coming out. But that had been past me. This year, I was ready to share. And not just because Briar was cute as hell but because the time felt right for me.

After English, I headed for the campus bookstore in the student services mall off the quad. I pulled out my emergency credit card—the one Mom and Dad insisted was only for books, doctors' visits, and if I ever broke down on the side of the highway in the middle of the night—and bought a bi pride flag. When I got back to the fraternity house, I tacked the flag up on my and Marty's bedroom door. Then I went into the common room, fired up the PS5, and waited.

After a while, Scout slunk in like a narrow-eyed stray cat. He sat on the end of the couch and stared at me. "I have an idea for the candy drive."

"Oh yeah?" I asked, my eyes fixed on the screen.

"We should try to beat the Zetas at their own game," he said.

"Like how?"

"Like by getting our pledges to dress up like sorority girls."

I set the controller down. "I mean, that would probably sell a lot of candy. Run it by Trey though. I'm not agreeing to it unless the prez approves. And it's gotta be voluntary." I thought of Charlie and of Briar. "I don't want the guys to think we're trying to humiliate them."

Scout nodded, eyes still narrow. Then he stood up and walked away. He stopped at the door and turned to look at me. "I saw your flag. Nice."

He left the room, and I bit back a smile. That was about as demonstrative as Scout got.

Knox came by a few minutes later, but maybe he hadn't been upstairs yet because he didn't mention the flag. "Hey, did you get notes in today's English class?"

I nodded.

“Can you email them to me?”

“No problem.”

“Thanks, bro.” And he wandered out again, and I concentrated on killing mind flayers.

A bag of donuts hit me in the chest.

“Bro!” Marty’s ass hit the couch beside me. He bounced a couple of times, grabbed the donuts back, and then wrenched the controller out of my hands so he could pause the game. “I got us donuts.”

“Yeah,” I said, brushing bits of frosting off my shirt. “I see that.”

Marty shoved a donut into his mouth. “Do you have any pantyhose?”

“What?”

“Do you have any pantyhose?”

“The fuck would I have pantyhose?”

Marty didn’t answer that. “Scout says it’s not fair that the Zetas sell more candy than us, just because they’re hot girls. So he said we should be hot girls too. I dunno, bro. Maybe he just wants to try out sexy underwear for Trey but he’s too afraid to bring it up.”

“Firstly, Trey hasn’t approved the candy plan yet,” I said. “And secondly, it’s for the

pledges.”

Marty scrunched up his nose. “But I can join in if I want, right? This ass would pop in a skirt.”

I considered it. Marty was pretty popular on campus, and he’d probably make us a few hundred bucks just through his unrelenting enthusiasm. “I guess? But first the prez has to give it the okay.”

“I told you. Prez isn’t a thing.” Trey dropped to the couch on my other side. “And if this is the candy drive, I’m good with it as long as it’s voluntary. We don’t need anybody’s family coming for us when a picture of their son in a skirt turns up in twenty years’ time and saying we forced them into drag.”

I gave him a look. “You mean we don’t want one of our alumni saying in twenty years’ time that they were peer-pressured into depravities in their youth but fortunately God has forgiven them. And, by the way, let’s overturn some more human rights in the Supreme Court.”

Trey returned the look. “You think we’re producing that kind of alumni?”

“Well, we’re trying not to,” I said, helping myself to a donut, “but we’re working against a whole lot of generations of Southern gentlemen here.”

Trey’s mouth twitched. “And here I thought you were a Southern gentleman yourself.”

“I’m a northern Southern gentleman,” I said. “You can see DC from my house.”

“A fact you bring up whenever you can.”

“Because it’s an important distinction.”

Marty elbowed me. “You’re just a snob. Or a reverse snob. I don’t know which one. Hey, Trey, is the candy drive only for pledges, or can I wear a skirt too? I’m not gonna cry to God about it in twenty years. I mean, Jesus wore a dress, right?”

“Anyway,” Trey said. “Attending the candy drive is mandatory for the new bros, but the dressing up part is their choice. And wear whatever you want, Marty.”

“Thanks, prez,” Marty said.

“Not happening,” Trey said. He stood and stalked out of the room, scooping up Marty’s donuts on the way.

“That was harsh,” Marty grumbled, chasing a few crumbs on his shirt with his fingertip. “Maybe I won’t call him that again.” He looked at the screen. “You need to use your Animate Dead spell first.”

“I got it.”

“Then your Invisible Stalker.”

“Marty, I got it.”

“Did you buy me a gay flag?” Marty asked. “No, what’s the pink-and-purple one?”

“It’s bi.”

“Oh yeah. Well, I’m probably more gay than bi, but I haven’t really settled on it yet. Like, me and the Zetas used to smash, and it was great and all, but I think Dalton’s kind of it for me now. Does that mean I’m gay or am I bi?”

“I bought it for me, Marty.”

“Cool.” He held out a hand for a fist bump. “Are you, like, bi for anyone in particular? I think Charlie’s crushing on you.”

“No,” I said, “and no.” It was technically the truth. “I’ve known for years. Just figured it was time to be open about it, you know?”

“Not really,” Marty said. “I kind of went full gay before I even thought about that stuff. Worth it though.” He wiped his fingers on his shirt. “Have you seen Squirrel? I gotta walk him.”

“Sawyer came by and got him earlier. There’s a girl at Zeta Tau he’s interested in, and Squirrel’s being his wingman.”

“Nice. Squirrel’s the best for that,” Marty said and then flashed me a wicked smile. “Wait until Ethan figures out he’s missing out on all the love that comes with walking Squirrel. He’s gonna be hella mad.”

“Yeah, well. Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy,” I said. “I’ll bet you a twenty he kicks up a ruckus over wearing a skirt for the candy drive.”

“Skirts and heels, bro,” Marty said, “skirt and heels. You gotta commit. And nah, that’s a sucker bet.”

Some people thought Marty was stupid, but that right there was proof that they were wrong. He was smart when it mattered, like when I was trying to scam him out of twenty bucks.

I shrugged. “Worth a try.”

Marty just laughed and then stood and wandered out of the common room. I picked up my controller and played for a while longer before the alarm on my watch beeped, reminding me that it was my turn to supervise the pledges and make sure they were up to speed with their household chores. I was pretty confident we had a competent bunch this year, but I still had to go through the motions.

I turned the game off and stood, stretching to get the kinks out of my back from hunching over while I'd played. When I turned around, Briar was in the doorway watching me, lips slightly parted. Not that I was looking at his mouth or anything because I wasn't a creeper. He just happened to have a really nice Cupid's bow, and my gaze had landed on it, that was all.

"Hey," I said, shooting him a grin. "You good?"

"Yeah," he said, giving me a shy smile in return.

I tugged down my shirt, which had ridden up as I'd stretched, and ambled over. "You here to take your turn on the roster?"

"Bathroom restock." He wrinkled his nose. "I'm pretty sure I don't need someone to show me how to hang toilet paper and refill soap dispensers."

"But, Briar," I said, wide-eyed, "what if you hang the toilet roll under instead of over? Scout might have a breakdown, and then we'd have to listen to a lecture from Trey. Again."

Briar snorted.

"Bro," I said, "I'm serious. I'm pretty sure he still has a PowerPoint on it somewhere with pictures of the original toilet roll patent to prove he's right. He made it in our freshmen year to win an argument with Marshall."



Briar burst out laughing, and fuck me, even his laugh was pretty.

When we headed up the stairs, he was still smiling, and it was a far cry from the prickly, defensive little shit that had turned up at that first meet and greet. I liked to think I had something to do with his change in attitude, at least a little.

I led him to the store cupboard to show him where everything was kept, and he paused outside my bedroom door, taking in the flag. “Whose is that?”

“Mine,” I said.

He cocked his head. “It wasn’t there the other day.”

“Nope.” I did my best to sound confident rather than apologetic. It wasn’t like I had anything to apologize for.

Briar looked at the flag and at me and chewed his bottom lip for a second. His cheeks got a faint pink tinge, and he said, “Huh. Cool.” Then he shot me a sunny smile like he was proud of me or something, and swear to god, that smile was like a warm hug or some shit. It made my insides kind of melty and squirmy but not in a bad way. More in a “damn he’s cute, and I like him, and does he like me back?” kind of way. If I was a Zeta Tau, I would have been twirling the end of my ponytail around my finger right now.

“Anyhow,” I said and slapped him a little too hard on the back to overcompensate. “Good luck with the chores.”

And now he was looking at me like I was a crazy person, which was probably fair.

“Oh, hey,” I said. “Just FYI. The candy drive might be a drag thing now.”

His smile faded. “A drag thing?”

“It’s just for fun and totally voluntary,” I said. “Like, I wanna stress that. Nobody needs to do anything they’re not comfortable with. That’s not how we roll here.”

“Yeah.” His smile was back, this time a quick flash before he ducked his head. “I’m starting to get that.”

“I’ll send out the group text later,” I said. “But I wanted to give you a heads-up. And Charlie too.”

Briar chewed the inside of his mouth for a moment. “Because we’re the obvious gay kids who got swirlies in high school?”

“Oh shit. That’s fucking?—”

“I didn’t.” Briar narrowed his eyes. “But that’s the vibe I give off, right?”

“There’s no way for me to answer that without you kicking my ass, is there?”

“You think I could kick your ass?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Like, I’m bigger than you, but I’m pretty sure you’d have pure rage on your side. You’d be like a fighty little dumpster cat. Tiny but ferocious.”

He wrinkled his nose.

“It was a compliment, I promise,” I said. “You’d absolutely kick my ass.”

He laughed again.

I resisted the urge to stand there making heart eyes and instead left him to his chores.

When I ran Charlie through the Squirrel roster, I gave him the same heads-up about the candy drive as I'd given Briar. He laughed and said he was in, which was a pleasant surprise. If the rest of the new guys were on board, this would be hilarious and a great way for them to bond over the shared ridiculousness. Hell, Marty was doing it, so why not me? It was only supposed to be for the pledges, but what kind of pledge master would I be if I didn't lead by example?

After the chores were done, the new guys stayed for supper. It was always interesting talking to the pledges and watching them come out of their shell a little as they relaxed around us. Charlie, it turned out, had a wicked sense of humor, and Sawyer was hella into Roman history, of all things.

Ethan was intent on reminding everyone that his daddy was a lawyer, which wasn't the hot take he seemed to think it was—not at this table, anyway. And when Scout drawled, “Aw, ain't that cute? My daddy was a lawyer once, back when he started out. He's a judge now,” Ethan shut up pretty quick and focused on his potatoes.

I hid a smile. When Scout was done with you, you knew it.

After supper, I headed upstairs. Marty had gone over to Dalton's, and I had the room to myself, which was kinda nice. I sprawled across the bed and was just contemplating jerking off in peace when there was a knock at the door.

“Casey?” Trey's voice was muffled.

So much for that plan.

“Yeah?”

He opened the door and stuck his head inside. “Hey.”

“Hey. What’s up?”

“Nothing. Just checking in, what with, y’know. Coming out and all.”

Hearing him say it like that made it more real, somehow. I sat and swung my legs over the side of the bed, a dumb smile on my face and warmth flooding my chest because he’d thought to check in on me. It was a reminder that I belonged, that I mattered to these guys, and I appreciated the hell out of it. “I’m good, I think. Time felt right, y’know?”

“I might have some idea about that, yeah,” Trey said with a wry smile.

Trey and Scout had come out as a couple last year, and it turned out they’d been in a relationship for a while. They’d chosen to keep their private business private, and the rest of us were so oblivious that nobody had noticed they were together—except Marty. And he hadn’t thought it was worth mentioning to anyone.

“So, you sure you’re good?” Trey asked, leaning against the doorframe.

“I’m good, bro, I swear.”

“Cool. If you do need to talk?—”

“I know where you are,” I finished for him.

“Actually I was gonna say ‘find someone else, I’m busy running the place,’” he said, flashing me a bright smile.

I laughed and threw a pillow at him.

On Friday morning, the Zeta Taus got the jump on us by sending out a campus-wide email. CANDY DRIVE TONIGHT! HELP ZETA TAU SUPPORT THE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL. They'd covered all their bases by mentioning sick kids and sending out a flyer where all the Zetas looked sexy as fuck. All they needed to add was a shelter puppy and they'd hit the fucking charity trifecta. Those smart, social media-savvy bitches. Said with respect, obviously.

But still, this was war.

I climbed out of bed, ignoring the way Marty and Dalton were squeezed into Marty's twin bed like sardines, and grabbed my phone. Knowing the pledges would have seen the email, I sent out a series of messages to them:

Shit just got real.

We are not going to lose to Zeta Tau.

We will do whatever it takes.

You need to wear a skirt and heels and sell candy tonight, pledge.

Like, it wasn't Roosevelt's Day of Infamy speech or anything, but I hoped it'd inspire them enough to make a real effort. Then, because I wanted to get out of the room before Marty and Dalton woke up—Marty always woke up horny, but please don't ask me how I knew—I went and grabbed a shower and changed.

When I headed downstairs for breakfast, I checked my phone.

Sawyer's was the first reply.

Do I need to look good though? I ain't shaving these legs.

Caesar would have shaved his legs, Sawyer.

I got a lot of dots in response that told me he was either typing an entire essay, or he was backspacing a lot.

I don't think that's true.

Backspacing it was.

You don't need to shave your legs, bro, it's fine.

My phone continued to vibrate as I ate my cereal, and when I checked it, I had messages from every pledge except Briar. They were all in, with the exception of Ethan.

Big fucking surprise.

There wasn't a lot I could do about it, since we'd said it was voluntary, but fuck that guy, honestly. The joke was on him. He'd look like the odd one out when he was the only pledge who didn't dress up.

Unless Briar said no as well.

My stomach tightened into a knot as I considered that maybe suggesting he dress in a skirt had been a step too far, and that was why he hadn't replied yet. Hell, the kid lived in giant hoodies. And after making a real big deal of telling him that Alpha Tau was a safe space, what was the first thing I'd asked him to do? Open himself up for a whole lot of teasing by getting him to wear a skirt. Way to go, me.

I could only hope he'd see it for the dumb, fun activity that it was and not any kind of personal attack. Maybe I could get a bunch of the brothers to join in—I knew Marty

was keen. Yeah, it would be even more hilarious if everyone was involved.

I sent Trey a text:

I want all the brothers working on the candy drive to dress up, not just the pledges.

A moment later, the back door to the kitchen opened, and Trey stepped through. “All of them?”

“Yup,” I said, spooning some more cereal into my mouth. “Because we’re a team, Trey. Actually, you know what? We’re a brotherhood. A family. A?—”

“Fine. Do what you want!”

“Thanks, prez!”

He gave me a death stare as he left the room.

My phone buzzed again and, laughing, I picked it up.

The message was from Briar.

This ok?

And underneath it was a photo of...

My mouth went dry, despite being full of milk and cereal. I had no idea how that was scientifically possible, but it happened. Because Briar—was that really Briar?—had sent a photograph from the waist down, and he was wearing a pink checkered pleated skirt and white-and-pink striped socks that came up to above his knees. And between the top of those socks and the very, very short hem of that skirt, were six inches of

slender, naked, smooth-looking thighs.

My jaw dropped.

My dick sat up and took notice.

The buzzing noise in my skull drowned out every other sound.

I sent back:

Holy shit, bro

Probably should have added an exclamation mark or something, but I fumbled with my phone instead and dropped it with a splash into my cereal bowl.

Holy shit.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:44 am*

### FIVE

I had classes that morning, but I didn't remember a single one of them. I was fixated on the image of Briar in that skirt. It was seared into my memory, which was lucky because I would have hated to be caught staring at it in class. My phone had survived its brief milk bath undamaged, which was another lucky thing, because I'd spent most of the morning fielding messages from pledges and brothers who somehow seemed to think that I was their go-to guy when it came to questions about what to wear tonight and where to get size eleven heels.

This hadn't even been my idea!

Okay, so I was the one who'd decided to really run with it, but it was still Scout's baby. So, I directed everyone to him. I bet his scowl was getting a hell of a workout today.

I didn't have any afternoon classes, so after lunch I made a run to the local thrift store with Marty. We got some side-eye from the woman behind the counter, but once we explained we were dressing up for the children's hospital, she helped me find a skirt that kind of fit and even some clunky wedge heels that didn't pinch too badly.

I looked... well, I looked like a guy in a skirt that almost fit and who couldn't walk in heels. But that was fine. I figured I'd work the self-deprecating angle rather than trying to look good. People were more likely to hand over a buck for a candy bar when they were laughing at you trying not to fall on your ass and you were laughing right along with them.

My mind flashed unbidden to the photo in my phone. Briar hadn't looked like a dude in borrowed clothes. Briar had looked scorching. I pulled my phone out again, just to check and make sure I hadn't been imagining it.

Nope. Still hotter'n the sun.

"Bro!" Marty said. He was wearing a short black leather skirt he'd managed to wedge himself into. "Casey!" He held up a sleeveless silver mesh top and shook it. "I'm gonna try it on!"

He peeled his Hawaiian shirt and tee off where he stood and wrestled the top over his broad shoulders. It clung to the curves of his pecs and stopped three inches above his navel. Paired with the leather skirt, it gave the impression that Marty spent his nights shimmying around a pole. "What do you think? Does this say hot girl summer?"

I wanted to tell him he was ridiculous, except honestly? It kind of worked. "I think," I said slowly, "that you're gonna sell a shitload of candy bars."

Marty's face split into a wide grin, and he gave me a fist bump.

Once we'd paid, we headed back to Alpha Tau, and I spent the afternoon figuring out pairings and wrangling boxes of candy. I was just sorting piles of dollar bills for change when Scout appeared and whisked all the money away.

"Bro! We need that for change!"

"Oooh, I see what you're doing," Marty said. "Smart move."

"What? People will want their change."

"Nah," Marty said. "Scout's right. Watch." He scooped up a five-dollar bill and a

couple of candy bars and gave Scout the cash. “Buy my candy, Scout. Two bucks.”

Scout handed the five over.

“Aw, man,” Marty said with a sigh. “I can’t break that. I guess that’s no sale. Unless... you wanna buy two candy bars and donate the difference? I mean, bro. Come on. It’s a dollar. And it’s for sick kids.”

“See? Marty gets it,” Scout said.

I could only stare in admiration. Scout was a devious little fucker, and Marty was far smarter than most people gave him credit for.

We might win this thing after all.

I mean, the hospital would be the real winner, obviously, but that didn’t mean we couldn’t enjoy the bragging rights. “You’re both geniuses.”

Scout almost smiled.

That afternoon we all gathered in the foyer of Alpha Tau. I checked my watch. Allison had said the drive would start at six, so of course I was planning to send the guys out at five thirty. Hey, I’d seen the Zetas’ flyer. We needed any advantage we could get.

Everyone had turned up early except Charlie, Ethan, and Briar. I kind of hoped Ethan would be a no-show, if I was honest.

When I looked around the guys, I couldn’t suppress a snort of laughter. They were dressed in a mishmash of skirts and shoes that suggested some hurried calls to female friends and relatives, and a whole lot of beggars not being choosers. Marty was in his

stripper outfit, but since his feet were wide as fuck, he'd kept his customary slides and his sunglasses. So that was a whole vibe right there. I was pretty sure Sawyer was wearing a shortened bridesmaid's dress. He hadn't shaved his legs.

Still, they'd all done their best, and if you squinted just right, they almost looked like sorority girls. More importantly, they looked like a bunch of good-natured guys who were prepared to poke a little fun at themselves to raise money for a kids' hospital. People were gonna eat that shit up.

"Y'all are killing it," I said, grinning. "We're gonna make bank."

They responded by laughing and high-fiving each other. They were pumped, I could tell.

There was a knock at the door. I opened it to find Charlie standing there, face flushed. He was wearing a short red pleated skirt and a matching red cowboy hat and boots, and he was all kinds of cute. "Sorry I'm late," he said between panting breaths. "Have y'all ever tried to run across campus in heeled boots?"

"No problem," I said. "You're still early. And you're nailing that look."

Charlie beamed at me.

Everyone started pairing up, and Trey, Scout, and I handed out their boxes of candy. Marty had acquired a bright red lipstick from somewhere and was applying it to anyone who didn't get out of the way fast enough.

I checked my watch again. We were still missing Ethan and Briar, and if they didn't show up soon, we'd miss our head start. I was about to text them to see where they were when the door opened.

Briar stood there, eyes lowered like he was screwing up his courage. Then he raised his head, jutting out his chin, and stepped inside. He had one hand set on his hip like he was a runway model or something—which was exactly what he looked like.

For a second there, I forgot how to breathe.

I'd told myself I was mentally prepared for the sight of Briar in a skirt.

I was not, in fact, prepared.

Briar had chosen to go big or go home. He was wearing the skirt from the picture, and it was so short that it would have made my grandma blush. He'd paired it with a skintight hot pink crop top, over which he'd layered a longer pink string mesh top. Well, I said longer. It barely skimmed the bottom of his rib cage, leaving a wide strip of pale, flawless skin on display. Pink-and-white over-the-knee socks and heels completed his outfit.

His mouth shone with lip gloss, and his cheeks glowed with bronzer. His eyes stood out like dark pools on a moonless night, their depth enhanced by expertly applied eyeliner and mascara and a bold splash of dark blue eyeshadow. His hair was a tousled mess, but he'd used hair product, or quite possibly magic, to pull the strands forward artfully, and it was arranged so that it was the kind of mess that you wanted to sink your fingers into while you pulled him into a long, lingering kiss?—

“Jesus, Briar,” Charlie said, snapping me out of my fantasies. “You look amazing!” He spoke in a tone usually reserved for church.

Okay, then. Good to know I wasn't the only one having a religious experience.

Briar's gaze locked on mine. “You like it, Casey?”

Was he kidding? He was breathtaking.

And why was he asking me?

It took me a second to find the words. “Yeah,” I said, voice rough. “You look real pretty, Briar.”

Real pretty? What was I, a kid in junior high on his first date? And why was I even thinking about first dates?

Briar’s cheeks gained a more natural bloom, and then his face split into a sunrise smile. It made me want to haul him into my arms and kiss him senseless.

The moment was shattered when the door slammed open.

Ethan took a step inside and stopped short when he saw what everyone was wearing. He glanced down at his jeans and polo shirt. “You said we didn’t have to dress up!” he said, glaring at me. “And now y’all are dressed like... like a bunch of sissies!”

Fuck this guy, seriously.

“You don’t have to,” I snapped. “But just because you’re too insecure to step outside your comfort zone doesn’t mean you get to act ugly to the rest of us.”

“We Alpha Taus like to show our community spirit and have a little fun,” Trey added, fixing Ethan with a hard stare while running a hand down the pleats of his black-and-purple checked skirt. It was a good color combo on him. “That a problem, pledge?”

There was a tense moment before Ethan dropped his gaze and swallowed hard, his throat clicking. “Nossir.”

“Okay!” I said loudly, before this had the chance to turn into a whole thing. “Everyone grab your partner, and let’s go sell a fuckton of candy! We’ve got a sorority to beat!”

There was a chorus of agreement as everyone paired up. Ethan stood there looking lost, and Marty hooked a hand under his elbow. “Don’t worry, bro,” he said, adjusting the sunglasses perched on his head. “I’m hot enough for both of us!”

He grabbed the handle of one of the carts loaded with candy and sashayed out the door, dragging a bewildered Ethan after him.

I fucking loved Marty.

Everyone else followed, leaving the house and heading off to different parts of campus, pulling the candy-laden carts behind them. Connor and I paired up and stayed on Fraternity Row, starting at the far end. And sure, we copped some good-natured ribbing about our fashion choices, but once they’d ragged on us a little, people were happy to buy our candy bars. And Marty and Scout had been right about not carrying change too—we turned all those two-buck sales into five-dollar sales real easy.

Two hours later, we’d walked the length of Fraternity Row, and our cart was empty. My feet ached from wearing heels, and my balls were freezing where an icy breeze was whipping up my skirt. We’d just sold an entire box of candy bars to a couple of Kappa Beta Rhos who had the munchies. Since they’d gotten a new president, the Kappas had stopped being such a bunch of dicks, and they’d been so fixated on getting their candy that they hadn’t even given us shit for what we were wearing.

And now I was done.

“I’m calling it,” I told Connor, kicking my shoes off.

He gave a nod and pulled off his own shoes with a sigh of relief. We limped the half a block back to Alpha Tau, our heels dangling loosely from our hands. Now we really looked like sorority girls on a Saturday night.

When we got back, I went and pulled on a pair of sweats and a sweater—seriously, my balls had shrunk to raisins—and then Connor and I settled on the porch swing with a couple of beers and waited for the rest of the guys to return. I figured they'd be a while since they were spread all over campus, but we'd barely opened our second beer when I spied a figure storming back toward the house. I raised a hand to shield my eyes from the lights on Fraternity Row and squinted, but it turned out I knew who it was immediately. If the red skirt and hat hadn't given it away, the sound of cowboy boots on asphalt echoing through the night air would have.

Charlie.

My heart sank as he approached the driveway of Alpha Tau. Whatever had happened, it was bad enough that he was swiping at his eyes with the heel of his hand. He stopped dead at the end of the driveway and stood there, ramrod-stiff with his hands clenched into fists.

"Well, shit," Connor said. "That can't be good."

I sighed and put my bottle down, standing. But before I'd even stepped off the porch, a second figure came racing up behind Charlie, one that I would have recognized anywhere. Briar threw an arm around Charlie's shoulders, and as he did, Charlie seemed to just sort of... sag. Folding in on himself, he turned and buried his face against Briar's neck, and even from the porch I could see the way his shoulders shook.

My pledge master side took over instantly. Charlie was my baby Alpha, and damned if I was letting anyone make him cry.



I jumped off the porch, landing with a thud, and jogged over to them. When I got there, I put a hand gently on Charlie's back, and he lifted his head and stared at me, eyes red-rimmed and glassy.

"Hey, Charlie," I said quietly. "Wanna tell me what's goin' on?"

Charlie swallowed, obviously doing his best to get himself together. He dashed a hand across his eyes, took off his hat, and ran his fingers through that startling red hair. "I think—" He gave a hitching breath and tried again. "I think Alpha Tau's not a good fit. I'm pulling out."

He jutted his chin out in a show of determination, but it didn't quite take, and his bottom lip wobbled.

"What?" I put a hand on his shoulder and guided him through the front door, with Briar still plastered to his side. "How about you tell me what happened?"

"Ethan happened," Briar snapped.

Of course it was fucking Ethan.

I steered Charlie toward the couch in the living room and sat opposite him. He was still pretty shaken. "Okay, someone needs to tell me what the hell Ethan did."

"It was just a stupid prank," Charlie said. "But I just can't live with that guy, okay? I'm not spending the next three years waiting for the other shoe to drop. I'm... unpledging or whatever you wanna call it."

The front door slammed.

"Okay, first off, nobody's unpledging," I said.

“Who’s unpledging?” Trey asked, appearing in the doorway.

“I don’t think Alpha Tau is right for me,” Charlie said, and Jesus, I hoped he didn’t start crying again. I’d never been good with crying.

Trey took in the sight of the three of us, heaved a long sigh, and dropped onto the couch next to Charlie. He put a hand on his shoulder. “Let me guess. Ethan?”

“Yeah,” Briar burst out, vibrating with indignation. “He ducked out of the candy drive and fucked around with his friends. And then he cornered Charlie and took most of his money so he could pretend he’d been working!”

Trey’s brow creased. “How’d he think that was gonna work? Like, he must have known you were gonna tell us what he did.”

Briar blew a stray lock of hair off his forehead. “He doesn’t give a shit. He said the money’s still going to the same cause, so nobody would care, and he’s a legacy, so he’s here to stay. And he’s not wrong, is he? Ethan fucks around, but it’s Charlie who finds out what Alpha Tau is really like.”

Trey held his gaze, and his voice went quiet, the way it did when shit was about to get real. “What are you trying to say, Briar?”

“Oh, shit,” Scout said quietly from the doorway where he’d just arrived.

Briar didn’t back down, though. He looked Trey in the eye, quivering with incandescent rage on behalf of his friend. “You guys talk a big game about being safe and inclusive and all, but what are you actually gonna do? Lemme guess—jack shit. Because Ethan’s daddy was an Alpha Tau, and that gives him a free pass.”

Briar was clearly furious, eyes blazing and cheeks flushed, and was it wrong that even

with everything else going on, I found tiny, angry Briar one hell of a turn-on?

Probably.

“Casey,” Trey said, turning to me and raising an eyebrow, “you gotta do a better job with your pledges.”

Me?

“What the hell did I do?”

“Well, for a start, Briar and Ethan don’t know their charter,” Trey said, “if they’re under the impression that legacies are Teflon.”

Wait.

I glanced over at Trey, and his lips twitched up in a hint of a smile that told me all I needed to know. I wanted to kiss him—except obviously not because Scout would make sure the authorities would never find my body.

“Trey, are you saying?—”

“Yep,” Trey said. He didn’t usually cut people off, but his dander was up. “Being a legacy gets you in, but it sure as shit doesn’t keep you here. Ethan’s subject to the same code of conduct as everyone else in Alpha Tau. He crossed the line by threatening and stealing from a brother, and we’re dumping him.”

“Oh my god, really?” Charlie’s voice was a high-pitched squeak, and he slapped a hand over his mouth. His eyes were bright with a mixture of relief and surprise, and when he lowered his hand, he was grinning from ear to ear. He looked like a little kid at Christmas.

“Really,” Trey said. “That shit doesn’t fly at Alpha Tau.”

Briar stared at Trey for a second before he visibly deflated. It was like all the anger had leaked out of him and now he wasn’t sure what to replace it with.

“Um,” he said at last, “I probably fucked up by yelling at you, right?”

Trey silently held up his thumb and his forefinger, showing the tiniest of spaces between them.

Briar flushed. “Then I guess I owe you an apology. For the yelling and for not trusting you to take care of your pledges.”

“Yeah, you do,” Trey said, “and that’s why you’re spending an hour in the basement with Casey, making sure you learn the charter this time!”

“Okay,” I said. “You’re the prez.”

Trey’s glare followed me all the way out of the room.

### SIX

Iflicked on the basement lights as I headed down the stairs. I could hear Briar's heels tapping on the hardwood treads behind me. The basement had a concrete floor and blue walls. The floor was covered in a carpet that didn't quite reach the corners, but it helped deaden some of the sound once you got a bunch of loud guys down here. Alpha Tau memorabilia that dated back more than a century covered the back wall: flags, banners, jerseys, scarves, and—hanging just below the crest painted in the center of the wall—a broad wooden paddle that had probably bruised the asses of generations of Virginian lawmakers and politicians. Hazing was fucking brutal back in the day, and that paddle sure as shit wasn't the worst of it. That paddle represented everything bad that Briar thought about us—hell, it represented everything bad I'd thought about Alpha Tau before I'd pledged. The only reason I hadn't pulled it off the wall and burned it was because that reminder was important.

We weren't that fraternity anymore. Those guys on the wall who stared down at us from sepia photographs? They were spinning in their fucking graves right now because our chapter president was Black, a whole bunch of us were some flavor of not-straight, and we were about to kick out Ethan Brooks—probably the one guy in Alpha Tau they would happily have called their brother. We weren't any sort of Alpha Tau they'd even recognize, and I was damned proud of that.

Briar's heels tapped to a stop beside me. "I said I'm sorry." He jutted his bottom lip out, and I tried not to stare at his mouth.

"Yeah, I know you're sorry, but we're still going to go over the charter so you remember it for the future." I forced some lightness into my tone. "It'll be a breeze.

You're the academic whiz kid, remember?"

He looked away. "I guess." The neckline of his mesh top slipped off his shoulder, and he shrugged it back into place. "Whatever. Let's do this."

I let out a long breath. "What's with the attitude, Briar? Like, you're all over the place when it comes to us. You told me you wanted to be here, but you're acting as though the second we have to do something like this, it's all bullshit."

"Because it is," he said. "Reading the rules. It's... it's dumb. At least selling candy is helping out a kids' hospital. Who does reading the rules benefit?"

"Well, it's supposed to benefit you."

Briar rolled his eyes and stalked over to the side of the room. He sat on one of the old wooden chairs there and crossed his legs. He let his heel dangle from his foot, and I couldn't stop my gaze from following the long line of his leg up every rung of those pink-and-white striped thigh socks.

"I get it," I said, waving my hand at the wall and the paddle. "I get what this looks like. I get what you think. But I guess I'm confused, because this is the second time I've had to ask you if you really want to be here. Shit, it's pretty clear you don't respect us, and, okay, maybe we have to earn that—but do you even like us, Briar?"

Something I said must have hit harder than I'd thought because Briar blinked rapidly and then looked away again.

"I like you just fine," he said at last, softly, his voice hitching a little. And then he lifted his head and held my gaze, chin jutting up as though he were a stubborn kid. He stood up. "Maybe I like you a little too much."

“What?” I stepped back as he stalked toward me.

“I’m not talking about the fraternity. I’m talking about you, Casey,” he said. “Just you.”

I stepped back again, and a picture frame rattled against my skull. “Briar, I?—”

And he lunged forward and kissed me.

I had a hundred things I could have said about how inappropriate that was, but it was impossible to get any of them out with Briar’s tongue in my mouth. And, by the time he drew back, I suddenly had nothing to say at all.

I could barely even remember to blink. Or to breathe.

I’d never been kissed the way Briar kissed me—part pissed, part desperate, and hot as all hell. And now he was glaring at me like he didn’t know if he wanted to do it again or punch me in the face.

“Briar, we?—”

He snorted. “Here it comes.”

“What?”

He lifted his chin. “You’re gonna tell me that was a bad idea.”

“I’m the pledge master, Briar.” I blinked at him, still breathless, my dick hard in my sweats.

“So what? Is there anything in your precious charter about not messing around with

pledges?”

“I—” My mind was blank for way longer than it should have been because Briar was so fucking hot, I couldn’t think past that kiss. I wanted it again, except this time I wanted to give as good as I got. I wanted to grab him by the hip, dig my fingers into the fabric of that skirt. Wanted my other hand in his hair, holding tight. “No, it’s not in the rules.”

“Of course it’s not,” he said. “Because those rules were written by straight guys. They never saw me coming.”

“Pretty sure they weren’t the only ones.”

He shot me a wicked grin. “Besides, Archer’s my big brother, not you. So how about it, pledge master? Want to make out some more?” His fingertips danced along the short hem of his skirt, the light gleaming on his nail polish. “Do you wanna...”

I couldn’t fucking breathe.

He bit his bottom lip and drew the hem of his skirt up an inch or two. “Do you wanna get dirty, pledge master?”

Who the fuck was this guy? I’d come down these stairs thinking he could hardly stand any of us, and suddenly shit like that was coming out of his pretty mouth? Even if all my blood hadn’t been in my dick instead of my brain, I didn’t reckon I’d be able to figure him out.

Briar grinned, like he knew he had me on the hook. Had me flopping on the dock drawing in air, even. He stepped forward, his slim, lithe body pressed against mine, and blew hot air against the side of my neck. My whole body erupted in goose bumps, and my sweatpants were doing nothing to control my dick. And then Briar



leaned in, his mouth brushing my ear, and said, “But I think the wrong one of us is being pressed up against this wall, Casey.”

Maybe it was because he’d called me by my name that the last straining thread of my self-control shattered, or maybe it was because I knew he was daring me to do something, but I acted. I grabbed him by the wrists and spun us around. Pushed Briar against the wall—he was shorter than me, so his head didn’t hit the framed photograph of the 1932 rowing team—and leaned in to kiss him. Except I changed my mind at the last second and licked a stripe up his face instead. It was maybe the filthiest, most feral thing I’d ever done.

But, you know, the night was young.

Briar moaned, a low, breathy sound, and then wriggled. “No, hold on. Just wait a second.”

He twisted in my grasp until he’d managed to turn all the way around. He braced his hands on the wall and looked over his shoulder at me. “Put your dick between my thighs.”

“What?”

He pushed his ass back, connecting with my dick. “You’ve never done that before?”

I hadn’t. Like, there was third base and then a home run, right? There wasn’t a third-and-a-half base. Except what the fuck did I know, apparently?

Briar arched again. “Come on, Casey.” He wiggled his ass.

I blinked at the sepia photograph of the rowers—Avert your eyes, boys—and reached down and ran my hands up the backs of Briar’s thighs, lifting his skirt up until I could

get a look at his ass. He was wearing pink goddamn underwear.

I rubbed my still-clothed dick against the satin of his underwear, and we both shuddered. Briar moaned again.

Fuck. Was I seriously going to do this?

It was the hottest situation of my entire life. Of fucking course I was.

I shoved my sweatpants and underwear down. Held my dick in my shaking hand and leaned back so I could watch as I ran the head up and down the cleft of Briar's ass. The sensation was incredible, and the sight of the pink fabric of his underwear turning darker with my precum was almost enough to push me over the edge. I squeezed my eyes shut to stop from coming too soon.

"Casey," Briar said, pushing back against me. "Come on, please."

I guided my dick into the space between his thighs, my breath catching. It was hot and tight—tighter as he clenched—and the first few thrusts were a little too dry. But only the first few because my dick was leaking so much precum that it didn't take long for everything to get slippery and wet. My dick slid against the damp fabric of his underwear.

"Yeah," Briar said, arching his back. He lifted one hand off the wall. "That's it."

I put my hands on his hips and dug my fingers in. The hem of his short skirt bounced as I fucked between his thighs. His shoulder began to bounce too, and I realized he must've had his hand down the front of his underwear, and he was jerking himself off. Jesus, that was hot.

I leaned in and pressed my open mouth against the juncture of Briar's neck and

shoulder. Not kissing, not biting, just sort of... tasting? Fuck if I knew what I was doing, but Briar tilted his head to give me the room to do it. He tasted like sweat, like heat, and I could feel the vibrations in my lips and tongue every time he moaned.

I moved one hand from his hip to his abdomen, my knuckles knocking against his as he worked himself hard. God, I wished I could see his dick, underwear bunched up, his fist moving fast...

I sucked on his neck for a moment and then straightened up again. Rediscovered the rhythm of my thrusts and pulled Briar away from the wall. He made a surprised squeaking sound, his heels clattering on the bare concrete at the edge of the room. Then he caught his balance again and squeezed his thighs together hard around my dick as he pushed back against my thrusts.

I looked down over his shoulder. His flat chest heaved with heavy breaths. My hand was against his abdomen, my splayed fingers bridging the gap between his mesh top and his skirt, the heel of my hand pressing against the expanse of bare skin between them. Briar's fist was closed around his dick, the rosy head bouncing as my thrusts jolted him, and he jerked himself off.

"That's so fucking hot," I said.

Briar answered with a breathless groan. "Fuck me harder, Casey. I'm almost?—"

And then he came, harder than I was expecting. His thighs clamped like a vise around my dick as his body shook and shuddered, and he cried out. Strings of cum shot over his belly, and it felt almost scalding hot against the back of my hand. I came too, dragged over the edge by Briar, my cum hitting the wall in front of us.

"Holy shit." Briar put his hands on the wall again, and I sagged against him. We both gasped for breath. "Holy shit." His body shook, and it took me a second to realize he

was laughing. “Somebody’s gonna have to clean that banner, and it’s not me.”

“Shut up,” I said, but I couldn’t help laughing a little too. I turned him around by the shoulders and helped him smooth his skirt down. I reached up and tucked a hank of his sweaty hair behind his ear. He was still grinning, but I thought that maybe there was something vulnerable in his expression now, a little uncertain, like he didn’t know what the hell was going to happen next.

Well, that made two of us.

“I—” I began, and Briar cut me off.

“Well, this was fun!” He smiled, but it didn’t seem real. “Let me know how the cleaning goes.” He pushed past me, and I was too surprised to stop him. “We should do this again sometime!”

And then he clattered up the stairs in his heels, and he was gone, leaving me wondering what the fuck had just happened.

There might not have been anything in the charter about not messing around with pledges, but that didn’t stop fingers of guilt creeping down my spine. There was the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, and I was pretty sure I’d just jizzed all over the second one. It wasn’t the most elegant metaphor, but it was the only thing that came to mind as I sponged the Alpha Tau Debating Team banner clean before heading upstairs.

“Hey,” Trey said as I tried to scuttle past the executive office without him seeing me. “Is Briar good?”

Briar was better than good. Briar was fucking phenomenal.

“Uh,” I said. “Yeah. We went through the charter and stuff.”

“Okay, man,” Trey said. “Thanks.”

He looked like he believed my lie, but Trey was the smartest guy in the fraternity. What if he saw straight through me, and he was just giving me enough rope to hang myself with?

“I’m just gonna...” I gestured vaguely in the direction of the kitchen and then slunk away before Trey could keep me there. My head was still spinning.

“Hey!” Marty was in the kitchen, digging through one of the refrigerators for a soda. “You seen Ethan, that fuck?”

“Nah.”

“That asshole ditched me during the candy drive! I mean, Ethan might have shit for brains, but I thought he’d at least be good at lifting heavy things. But no, I had to drag that cart all over campus by myself.”

“Yeah, well. Ethan’s getting what’s coming to him as soon as he surfaces. He tried to pull some shit with Charlie.”

Marty swung around, eyes wide. “What sort of shit? Can I punch him?”

Honestly, I’d asked myself the same question. I didn’t tell Marty that, though. Instead I said, “No, but you can watch when Trey kicks him out of the chapter if you want?”

Marty’s face fell. “Oh, it was really bad, then? Not like, just being a bit of a dick but being a whole entire dick.”

“Yeah. He’s out.”

“That asswipe.” His expression softened. “Is Charlie okay?”

It made me smile to know that Marty had a soft spot for our baby pledges. “Yeah. He was pretty shook up, but Trey told him Ethan was out, so he should be okay.”

Marty cracked his soda can open. “I’m glad we’re keeping Charlie. He’s a good one.”

“Yeah,” I said, and then, because I couldn’t help myself, I added, “What do you think of Briar?”

“What do you think of Briar?” Marty countered with a grin, and yeah, I never got why some people thought he was stupid. He did dumb stuff sometimes, but stupid? Hell, no. Marty was a long way from stupid.

I pulled a face. “You seen him around?”

“Nope.”

“Okay. Thanks, bro.” I clapped him on the shoulder. “Did you sell all your candy?”

“Of fucking course,” Marty said, plucking at his ill-fitting skirt. “Look at me. I’m hot.”

I headed out of the kitchen and said over my shoulder, “You’re delusional, is what you are.”

Marty’s laughter followed me.

I wanted to go looking for Briar, but like my guilt reminded me, I was pledge master.

So before I could do anything else, I headed upstairs to see if Scout was in his room. The door was open, and he was sitting at his desk working at something on his computer.

“You got a second?” I asked.

He gave me a death stare. “What’s up?”

“Just wondering why you’re not checking in with Charlie,” I said. “Since he’s your little brother.”

Scout raised his eyebrows. “I already checked in with Charlie. And right now, Charlie and Luis and one of the Jameses have gone back to their dorms to get changed, and then they’re coming back to have pizza. Meanwhile, I’m figuring out how much candy we sold to see if we can lord it over the Zetas later or not.”

I moved closer and peered at the spreadsheet on his computer screen. “And can we?”

Scout’s mouth twitched, which was the closest he ever came to a belly laugh. “Depends what they made. But yeah, I think we’re sitting pretty right now.”

I grinned. “You’re some kind of genius coming up with that idea, you know that?”

Scout shrugged, but I could tell he was pleased.

“Hey, is Briar coming for pizza?” I asked.

Scout shrugged again. “I sent a text to all the newbies, and he said he already ate.”

Well, that was bullshit, since he’d been selling candy all night, and then he’d been in the basement with me.

I knew the uneasiness in my gut wouldn't settle until we'd had at least some kind of conversation. He'd been the one to come on to me, so I was certain he hadn't felt pressured or anything, but I still wanted to talk to him. And okay, maybe part of it was a selfish need to find out if he'd be interested in doing that again—because I sure as hell was.

But first, keeping an eye on all the pledges meant making sure they were getting three squares a day, right?

My heart was in my stomach when I climbed the stairs at the Brewster Building. Brewster was one of the smaller dorms on campus. One of the nicer ones too, though that was all relative, frankly, when compared to the houses on Fraternity Row. It was humming, even at this time of night, not because of any raucous parties or anything but just because there were a couple hundred people living under the one roof, and every tiny noise echoed off the vinyl flooring. If I hadn't gotten into Alpha Tau, I probably would have lived somewhere like Brewster.

Briar lived in 308, and my thighs were feeling the burn by the time I climbed the stairs clutching my takeout bag full of Chinese food. I figured that everyone liked Chinese food, and I'd bought a bunch of different things in case he was allergic or vegetarian or something like that.

I knocked on Briar's door, and he opened it.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I brought you Chinese food," I said. "Since you didn't want pizza."

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, then opened the door to let me in.

It was a small room, with twin beds and desks and not much space for anything else.



One-half of the room was neat enough, but the other half—Briar's, judging by the skirts and glittery tops tossed on the floor and all over the bed—was a disaster.

Briar was wearing satin boxer shorts and a worn gray T-shirt. He saw me staring at the mess and said, "I was gonna clean it up before my roommate gets back."

That wasn't why I was staring. "These are all yours," I said. "You didn't have to go to the thrift store or anything, I mean. You already have all these."

His expression shuttered, and he hunched his shoulders. "So what?"

"Nothing," I said. "It just explains why you looked so good when the rest of us looked like a bunch of trolls." I met his cautious gaze. "And Briar? You looked real good."

He shrugged and turned away, but not before I saw his mouth curl into a pleased smile, and a hint of a blush lit his cheeks.

I didn't want to be weird about this, but right now it felt like there was a neon light above both our heads that was flashing AWKWARD, AWKWARD, AWKWARD, and there was no use pretending we couldn't see it.

"So," I said, holding up the bag of Chinese food, "do you like wonton soup and egg rolls? Because if you're willing to let this go cold, we can never be friends."

Briar looked back at me and raised his eyebrows. "We're friends, huh?"

"We're friends like wonton soup, Briar," I said. "It's just for starters."

For a second, he stared at me, and then he snorted out a laugh. "Yeah, okay," he said. "Just for starters. And I hope you brought spoons, or we'll be drinking that soup."

I took that as an invitation to stay and set the food down on his desk.

I figured that with a guy as prickly as Briar, getting out of here tonight after supper with friendship on the table—and my balls still attached to my body—was just about the best I could hope for.

And I'd take it.

For now, at least, until I figured out if maybe we both wanted something more.

### SEVEN

Jasper Ellison couldn't believe his luck when I called him to let him know a spot had opened up for him to pledge at Alpha Tau. He was a good guy, and he'd impressed me and the rest of the brothers enough during the interview process that it had sucked when we didn't have room for him. But now, since we'd gotten rid of that douchebag Ethan, Jasper slotted right in alongside the other pledges like he'd always been there, and Marty was happy to get a little brother who wasn't an asshole.

Ethan hadn't even put up a fight when Trey had told him he was out. Instead, he'd muttered something about his friend Fisher getting him into his new frat, Kappa Beta Rho. Honestly, he'd probably fit right in with those guys.

We were also in a position to offer accommodation to all the pledges this year—one of the reasons Trey had kept the intake small—and they'd be moving in once they passed their probation. I had a mental list of who was rooming with who, and everyone had seemed pretty happy when I'd shown them their rooms and explained the fee schedule to them. Well, most of them had. Charlie had been pale and quiet, but I'd been too distracted by the thought of being under the same roof as Briar to follow it up then and there.

I was just glad that the nuts-and-bolts part of the pledge process was over. The guys were in the hands of their big brothers now, and unless that went spectacularly wrong over the next two weeks—it wouldn't because I'd matched everyone up just right—my work was pretty much done.

Allison and the Zeta Taus had conceded defeat gracefully after the candy drive. Of

course, there was nothing those girls didn't do gracefully. It was in their Southern DNA. Which wasn't to say they also weren't stone-cold bitches when the situation called for it. Just that, you know, if they ever curb stomped you, they'd do it with poise and charm.

With the pledges sorted out and the first fundraiser of the year done and dusted, I actually had some time to start paying attention to my schoolwork. I'd always been a decent enough student, but this year's course load was going to be a lot, especially because I intended to take the LSAT. The LSATs were a big deal at Alpha Tau, because we were all aiming for a decent law school, and a good score was key to getting accepted. The way I looked at it, if I screwed it up at the beginning of the New Year, I could retake it in April or June. April and June if I screwed it up twice. I wasn't usually anxious about exams, but the LSAT? I was definitely having those dreams where you turned up, and not only had you forgotten your pen, but you'd also forgotten your pants.

So yeah, the LSAT was looming large and not in a good way.

"Hey," Marty said one night, sitting beside me on the couch in the chapter office. "Am I late for the meeting?"

"There's no meeting," I said. "It's just quieter in here."

Marty laughed, probably thinking of the popcorn fight that was currently going on in the living room. If the guys didn't bust out the vacuum cleaner when they were done, Trey would have an aneurysm.

Marty leaned his head against the back of the couch and stared at the ceiling. "How are your classes going?"

"Pretty good."

“Did you take that one on screenplay writing? You were talking about that last year.”

“Yeah, I like it a lot so far. It won’t help me get into law school though.”

Marty poked me in the ribs. “Bro, when I have my face on a highway billboard touting for vengeful wives with cheating husbands, you’re gonna be out there in Hollywood or whatever, all John Grishaming it up with hookers and cocaine.”

“I don’t think that’s what John Grisham does. Anyway, you’re not really gonna practice divorce law, are you?”

“Dude, I want to do tree law,” Marty said. “It’s a whole thing on Reddit. Can you imagine? Marty O’Brien, tree lawyer. I could get the coolest business cards.”

“You could have a squirrel with a briefcase on them. It would kind of fit.”

“I could!” Marty got a faraway look in his eyes, like he was mentally developing his branding.

“And how much money is there in tree law?”

“Why would I care?” He laughed. “Bro, my boyfriend’s gonna be a doctor.”

“I’m not gonna be anything if I don’t up my game and get a good score on my LSAT,” I said with a sigh.

“Hard same,” Marty said. “Dalton’s been helping me with the practice questions, but that’s sort of unfair since he has his own doctor stuff to learn. Maybe we should start an LSAT study group?”

“That’s an awesome idea,” I said. “Maybe some of the guys who’ve already done it

could help us out.”

My mind went to Briar. It was doing that a lot lately, and it had nothing to do with academics and everything to do with soft, pale thighs and the shy, pleased smiles he’d been giving me since we’d hooked up.

Maybe he could walk me through it so at least I’d have an idea of what to expect. The practice quizzes could only take you so far, but studying with someone who’d not only taken the test in their freshman year but scored a 160? That was the good stuff.

The fact it would give me an excuse to hang out with him more was an added bonus. Unless I was reading it wrong, Briar was definitely flirting with me. We hadn’t hooked up since the basement—Briar hadn’t started anything, and neither had I. I was doing my best to follow Jamie’s advice and wait until he was a fully-fledged Alpha Tau.

We’d hung out a few times though, and I’d discovered that although Briar in a skirt really got my motor revving, so did Briar in a hoodie and jeans. Turns out it wasn’t the wrapping that attracted me. It was the entire package.

And the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to see if Briar would be interested in taking things further. I got a flutter in my stomach when I pictured taking Briar out to dinner or something, but it was a pleasant kind of sensation, not a queasy one. Yeah, I wanted to date Briar Pendelton, and I hoped he wanted to date me too.

But for now, our tentative friendship would have to be enough. I might have handed all the pledges off to their big brothers, but I was still the chapter pledge master, and that meant that if there was some problem their bigs couldn’t resolve, I was the guy who had to step up and help the pledges. And it didn’t feel right asking Briar for a date while I was in charge of the pledge process. I mean, what if I was the problem he had to come to me about? “My pledge master won’t take no for an answer.” That was

some Inception-level shit right there, and my head hurt just thinking about it.

So, I was holding off. Which was fine. That gave me another two weeks to get to know him better, and—in case this was all a crazy fever dream on my end and Briar wasn't interested in anything more—a chance to not make a total fool out of myself by coming on too strong. Being friends was enough for now.

Although, I couldn't think of any of my other friends I'd thigh-fucked in the basement. My dick twitched at the memory of his little skirt bouncing merrily and giving me flashes of pale skin, and heat curled in my belly.

“What's that face for?” Marty asked.

“Nothing.” I suddenly got very interested in my English notes.

The door to the study opened, and Scout stared at us. “Is there a chapter meeting?”

“Nope,” Marty said. “We're just chilling.”

“You're chilling. I'm studying.”

Scout shut the door behind him and crossed the floor to perch on the edge of Trey's desk. “I have a problem,” he said. “With Charlie.”

I set my notes aside. “What kind of problem?”

“The problem where even though we've offered him a room here, he's gonna keep living at Carmichael because his scholarship doesn't cover our live-in fees.” He shuddered. “Have you seen Carmichael? It's not fit for dogs, and I hate dogs.”

“No, you don't,” Marty said. “You bought Squirrel a steak as big as his head.”

“I was hoping he’d get pancreatitis.”

“You were not,” Marty said “Also, I’m gonna ask Dalton what that is.”

“Anyway,” Scout said, “I can’t be going to Carmichael to check in on my little brother. Someone might see me there. Imagine if word got out. Jesus.”

“Where are you going with this, Scout?” I asked. Because as much as it sounded like Scout was being an elitist asshole, I knew him better.

He rolled his eyes. “Obviously, Charlie’s gonna get a letter from the executive telling him he’s been selected as recipient of the Alpha Tau Accommodation Grant.”

“Bro. We don’t have an accommodation grant.”

Scout’s sigh came from somewhere around his knees, like he couldn’t believe he was having to spell it out. “We do now. The Talbot-Smith Accommodation Grant for Making Sure Scout Doesn’t Have to Be Seen Around the Sketchy Parts of Campus. I mean, Carmichael, Casey.”

Marty laughed.

“Shut up,” Scout said with a scowl I didn’t buy for a second. “Anyway, we’re not really calling it that. I don’t want Charlie knowing it was me. He’ll think I like him or something. So help me pick a name.”

“And Trey’s okayed this?” I asked.

Scout raised an eyebrow. “A conversation was had.”

“So why do you need us for this?” I asked. “I’m pretty sure you could come up with a



name on your own.”

“Well, I don’t really need Marty,” Scout said. “No offense, Marty.”

Marty grinned.

“What I need, Casey, is when Charlie inevitably starts asking questions like ‘Is this legit or do you just feel sorry for me?’ for you to tell him that Alpha Tau has a proud history of awarding inhouse grants that just aren’t mentioned in the literature because talking about how charitable you are is gauche.”

“Gauche,” I repeated.

Scout waved a hand at me. “This is why you have to say it. You’ll make it sound better.”

“You mean like, ‘We believe that true philanthropy takes place out of the spotlight’?”

He blinked at me. “My mother’s Valentine’s Day Ball raised half a million dollars for a homeless youth charity last year. Pretty sure she had more than one spotlight there.”

“You don’t need to come up with anything,” Marty said. “Less is more when you’re spinning bullshit. And it’s not like he’s going to check.”

Marty really was going to make one hell of a lawyer one day, whether he was representing people or trees.

“Oh,” he said, lowering his voice for some reason, “you guys are gonna give me a bunch of money so I can stay here in this fancy historic mansion on Fraternity Row? Well, how about I audit your chapter accounts first of all to make sure that your accommodation grant historically exists?” He snorted. “You fucking dumbasses.”

“He’s mocking us,” Scout said, folding his arms over his chest. “We’re being mocked by Marty.”

“I’m mostly mocking you,” Marty clarified. “Not Casey. Stop overthinking shit just because you’re so fucking worried someone might actually see you do a nice thing, Scout.”

I snorted. “Don’t worry, Scout. Trey can call Charlie and tell him. He’ll never suspect you had anything to do with it.”

Scout almost smiled. He stood and drifted toward the door, pausing to ask, “Who’s he rooming with?”

“Aw, you do care,” Marty said. “You’re a big marshmallow under that scratchy surface, aren’t you?”

Scout scowled at him. “Fuck off. I just don’t want him coming to me with roommate drama, that’s all.”

Scout was such a goddamn liar.

“I thought he could share with Briar,” I said.

Scout gave the barest of nods, and then he was gone.

“Soooo,” Marty said. “Briar, huh?”

“What about him?”

“You gonna ask him out, or are you just gonna keep looking at him like you wanna eat him? And I do mean that in every sense of the word.”

I froze. “What?”

Marty grinned. “Bro, Briar’s cute as hell, and you sure get all twitterpated around him. So, are you planning to do anything about it?”

My mind went to the banner in the basement that looked clean but would never hold up to scrutiny under a black light, and my cheeks heated. “Maybe,” I mumbled.

Marty raised his eyebrows. “Like, I know you just came out, and I’m not sure if you’ve even dated a guy before, but for what it’s worth, ten out of ten would recommend. I’d never even ridden a dick before Dalton’s, and now it’s my favorite thing to do. Oooh, unless you count that thing he does with his tongue where?—”

“Thanks,” I said, before he could go into more detail.

“Just sayin’,” Marty said, “since you’re officially into guys now, Briar’s a hot one.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” I said. “I’m also his pledge master.”

Marty blinked at me. “Oh, that. How long has that got to go, anyway?”

“Twelve days, seven hours, sixteen minutes, give or take.”

“Not that you’re counting,” Marty said, laughing. “I’m telling you, bro, you should go for it. Like, I’ve seen him checking your ass out at least as often as you check out his.”

“I don’t?—”

“Yeah, you do,” Marty said easily, standing. “Oh, hey! He’s done his LSAT, right? Maybe you can ask him if he wants to study sometime. And by study I mean make

out. It worked with Dalton.”

“I’m way ahead of you,” I said and then felt my face burn. “I meant about studying, not making out.”

“Fine,” Marty said. “You study for twelve days and whatever and win him over with your charm, and then, when his probation is over, boom! You make your move.”

“When you put it like that, it sounds like things could get really messy.”

Marty grinned. “Well, only if you play your cards right, bro!”

“That’s not what I meant, Marty.”

Marty’s expression turned serious. “You’re, like, the most responsible guy I know, Casey. Apart from Trey. And Scout. And maybe Archer. And Dalton, obviously.” He paused, counting under his breath, before amending, “Okay, you’re one of the top five most responsible guys I know. And it’s not like you’re gonna pressure Briar to date you, right?”

“What? No!”

“Okay, then. What’s the problem?”

And when he put it like that, I didn’t have an answer.

Briar turned down my offer to join us playing flag football, but he sat on the steps with Eli and watched. He watched with his face screwed up like he had no idea what the fuck we were doing or why we were doing it, but at least he showed up. I was more surprised that Charlie joined in, to be honest. He couldn’t catch a pass to save his life, but if by some miracle he ended up with the ball, he was actually pretty fast.

We played for long enough to work up a sweat, and when Archer called a time-out and Marty peeled out of his shirt, I did too. The air was bitingly cold against my heated skin, but it was worth the goose bumps to see the way Briar sat up on the porch and suddenly took a whole lot more notice.

He nodded toward me and leaned in and said something to Eli, who grinned in response. I gave a wave in their direction, and Briar smiled and wagged his fingers before ducking his head. Eli stood and moved to the other end of the porch to hand a bottle of water to Archer, leaving the spot next to Briar vacant. I was pretty sure it was deliberate, given the wide-eyed look and thumbs-up he shot my way.

The Alpha Taus were Southern boys through and through—and apparently they’d all learned matchmaking at their mommas’ knees. I rolled my eyes at Eli and jogged over to Briar, settling next to him on the porch. He didn’t move away but inched closer. “Hey,” I said. “You having fun?”

He tilted his head, considering. “It’s football, so it’s not really my thing, but at least the view is nice.” He gave me a lingering gaze.

I found myself straightening my shoulders and puffing out my chest a little. I was long and lean, more boy next door than cover of Men’s Health, but I thought I looked pretty decent. I even had a six-pack, kind of. “Thanks.”

“I was talking about Marty.” He nodded to where Marty was kissing Dalton in the middle of the field, heedless of the rest of the guys watching. “His boyfriend’s hot too.”

“Oh.” I deflated a little.

“I’m kidding.” Briar leaned in and bumped our shoulders together before shooting me a devilish grin, eyes twinkling with mischief. “You’re plenty cute.”

I gave him a grateful smile. That was one of the things I liked about Briar. Sure, he liked to tease, and his quick wit kept me on my toes, but he wasn't mean about it, and he always made sure I knew he was kidding. I suspected that he'd been the butt of one too many "jokes" in his past, and he wasn't willing to trigger anyone else's insecurities, even in fun.

"Right back at you," I said, just to watch him blush. I fought the urge to pull him close and kiss him and settled for brushing a lock of dark hair off his face instead. I felt the heat of his velvet skin where my fingertips grazed his cheek, and his eyes were dark as he leaned into it. I allowed my touch to linger before drawing back, and he let out a tiny sigh, lips parted. It made me want to pin him to the porch and grind down on him until we both came in a sticky, panting mess.

Fuck. Why was it that Briar affected me like nobody else could? I really needed to get a grip. I took a shaky breath and set my hand in my lap. "So," I said, willing my dick down, "who would have picked Charlie for a footballer?"

"Right," Briar said. "Because never in the history of the game has there ever been a gay footballer." He arched one dark brow at me. "Didn't you tell me that flag football isn't just for the straights? If I didn't know better, I'd say you were stereotyping."

"Actually, I meant that, with his height, I would have pegged him as a basketball kid," I shot back, arching an eyebrow of my own. "I like Charlie."

Briar gave me a sheepish smile. "Yeah, that's fair. Sorry. Charlie brings out my protective side, I guess."

"Really? I hadn't noticed," I said dryly.

Briar snorted, and his smile became more genuine and less cynical. We were alone on the porch, with most of the other guys standing over near the drink coolers, so I took

the chance to ask. “Why did you go so hard for him over the Ethan thing? I mean, you basically went balls to the wall with the chapter president. That takes some guts.”

He sat there, and the click of his throat when he swallowed was audible over the music from the Bluetooth speakers. One hand tugged at a loose strand of hair, and the other clenched and unclenched in his lap when he said, “Because nobody ever went hard for me at Harvey, okay? And maybe if they had, things would have worked out differently. So when I came here, I told myself that if I saw someone getting bullied, I wasn’t gonna let it fly.”

It was the most he’d ever spoken about his last school, and he jutted his chin out in a defiant gesture I was becoming familiar with. I reached over and took hold of the hand in his lap, and he didn’t pull away. “Well, I thought it was hot as fuck.”

He blinked at me. “What?”

I grinned. “You heard me. Angry Briar is a turn-on.”

That startled a laugh out of him, and the tension in his shoulders eased.

“Bro!” Marty called. “Catch!” I looked up just in time to see the football flying toward me. It hit me square in the chest, knocking me flat on my back, and Briar laughed even harder as I spluttered and flailed. Then he picked the ball up from where it had fallen onto the porch and sent it sailing across the lawn. Marty let out a grunt as he caught the ball. The force and accuracy of Briar’s throw left me staring, open-mouthed.

I sat up. “You said you didn’t play!”

“I said it’s not my thing,” he corrected. “My dad, though, he liked to throw a ball around on the weekends, and my brother plays, so I did it to make them happy. But

I'd sooner just watch." He threw me a dazzling smile. "Still, maybe you're worth sitting out here and freezing my balls off for."

I couldn't help the dumb grin that spread across my face at the reassurance that the attraction I felt went both ways. And hey, if when we went back to playing, I maybe strutted a little for Briar's enjoyment, could you blame me?



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:44 am*

### EIGHT

Ididn't get a chance to ask Briar about the LSAT because over the next week, classes started to gear up properly, with assignments flying in thick and fast. Plus, Allison and I were busy arranging the combined mixer with Zeta Tau. We spent three nights in her office making lists and figuring out things like who the chaperones were, whether other frats were allowed to attend, and how much food and booze we needed. And let me tell you, anyone who thought a frat party happened on the spur of the moment didn't know shit.

We got it done though, and the mixer was a hell of a night. And even though I stuck to just two beers on account of being a designated "responsible party," it was still worth it for moments like seeing Sawyer finally asking Laura, the Zeta he was hot for, out on a date. Watching him make his move, I felt like a proud parent, in a totally appropriate and non-creepy way.

Briar was there, and he hit the spiked punch hard with Charlie. Turned out they were both lightweights—or maybe Marty hadn't held back when he'd added the coconut rum—but either way, both Briar and Charlie got hammered pretty quick. They ended up sprawled in an armchair together, giggling as Briar started twisting Charlie's red hair into elflocks. Anyone else might have been jealous, but one, I was just glad Charlie had someone watching his back, and two, Briar was an adorable drunk, and it was kind of fun seeing him without his usual prickly demeanor.

Trey sent everyone home around midnight. Since it had been the first big freshie mixer and most of them were well and truly wasted, tradition dictated that just this once, the committee would clean up. The pledges would get to sleep over, and in the

morning, we'd make them breakfast—well, some of us would. Marty was banned from anything more complicated than toast.

Trey came out of the kitchen and started handing out trash bags, and I resisted the urge to suggest we leave the mess, knowing from experience facing cleanup the next morning was always ten times worse. I started picking up red Solo cups and scraping the remains of smashed cupcakes off the hardwood flooring.

Allison and Mackenzie made sure all their pledges got safely home to Zeta Tau and then came back to help, and inside an hour, it looked good enough that Trey was willing to leave the rest until morning. Then came the fun part—putting a bunch of drunken freshmen to bed.

We left the Jameses and Sawyer sprawled on the couches since they were out cold, but Briar and Charlie stirred. Briar blinked at me, his eyes wide and dark, and said, “Help me up?” It was the easiest thing in the world to slide an arm around him and pull him to my chest, where he fit just right.

It was slow going climbing the stairs, but I didn't mind. Briar clung to me like a tipsy octopus, the weight of him warm against my side as he wobbled his way from step to step until we finally made the top landing. I steered him toward one of the empty bedrooms, and when we stepped inside, Briar wrapped his arms around my neck and gave me a clumsy kiss.

His lips landed on mine, his tongue searching, and I opened my mouth in response because he was gorgeous, and I wasn't made of stone. He tasted of sweet fruit punch and coconut rum, and I kissed him back for longer than I should have. I pulled away when his hands slid down my spine and cupped my ass, though. A kiss was one thing, but nothing else was happening while he was in this state.

Briar pouted, color high in his cheeks, and yeah, that did nothing to help my rapidly

filling dick. “Why’d you stop?”

“Because my parents raised me right, and you’ve had too much to drink to agree to anything.” I stepped back so I wouldn’t be tempted to kiss him again and folded my arms over my chest for good measure.

Briar reached out and ran a fingertip down my bicep. “I haven’t had that much. We can still fool around.”

And fuck if it wasn’t tempting. But my dad and I had had that talk about “if she’s too drunk to say no, she’s too drunk to say yes,” and I’d taken it to heart. I shook my head. “You can’t even stand straight, Briar.”

He giggled. “I can’t do anything straight.”

He laughed again, and I laughed with him before steering him over to the bed with a hand on his elbow. I made sure to leave room for Jesus in case he got any ideas. Briar, not Jesus. “Why don’t you get some sleep?”

A crease appeared briefly between Briar’s brows, but he huffed out a sigh as he sat on the side of the bed. “Fine.”

He extended his hands toward his shoes—a pair of lime-green Converse that laced all the way up his calves and looked killer with the purple skinny jeans he was wearing—and the crease reappeared. “Can you—shoes?”

He wagged his fingers, helpless. It was cute as hell.

I’d been in the same position more than once myself, so I crouched down in front of him and undid the laces, doing my best not to get distracted by the way his delicate calves fit into the palm of my hand as I held his foot steady.

I tugged one shoe off and then the other, and as I lowered Briar's foot to the ground, there was a soft thud. I glanced up to find that he'd passed out. He was sprawled across the mattress, eyes closed and limbs completely lax.

I levered myself to my feet, glad I'd listened to my instincts and not Briar and his "I haven't had that much" bullshit. I debated taking his jeans off so he could sleep more comfortably—I'd put drunken freshmen to bed before—but this felt different. Undressing a sleeping pledge that I was attracted to seemed wrong. I settled for popping the top button and lowering his zipper a scant inch before moving him around on the bed and rolling him onto his side so I could pull the blankets up over him.

He grumbled under his breath when I moved him, but then he was gone again, long lashes fanning across his cheeks and his dark hair a riotous mess. I gave in to the temptation to smooth it down against the nape of his neck and drop a kiss on his temple, and when I pulled back, he was smiling in his sleep. It was the most relaxed I'd ever seen him.

I left him and went downstairs, where I repeated the whole process with Charlie. He was in a worse state than Briar, but he was a happy drunk at least. He laughed the entire time when he staggered up the stairs and careened wildly into the walls of the upstairs hallway, bouncing between them like a long, skinny pinball. I caught hold of him and steered him into the bedroom and over to the bed under the window. Briar was still out cold, and he didn't stir when Charlie kicked off his shoes and collapsed across the surface of the other bed with a happy little snuffle.

I threw a blanket over him as well and left them to it. I wandered back downstairs to see if anyone else needed a hand, but James One and James Two and Sawyer were asleep on their couches, and someone—Trey probably—had helped everyone else to bed. A yawn escaped me, and I stretched and climbed the stairs for the third and hopefully last time.

My bedroom was empty, with no sign of either Marty or Squirrel, so I figured they must have gone over to Theta Phi for the night. I undressed down to my underwear and got into bed, the comforter cocooning me in warmth and softness. I closed my eyes, secure in the knowledge that I wouldn't be woken up by Marty having what he thought was quiet sex with Dalton. Spoiler—it was not quiet sex. I'd had to ask Marty more than once to dial it back, but he always seemed to forget.

I dozed for a while and must have fallen asleep because the next thing I was aware of was the creak of the floorboards beside my bed and a weight settling on the edge of my mattress.

“Wrong bed, Marty,” I mumbled.

The weight disappeared for a moment, and then my comforter shifted, and a wave of cooler air pebbled my skin as someone climbed into bed behind me. “It's not Marty.”

“Briar?” I rolled over. “Shit. What are you—you're drunk, bro.”

“Bro? Really?” In the faint beams of the moonlight streaming through the window, he raised a brow. “You're going with bro?”

Okay, so it sounded dumb when he said it like that. Because I didn't know what Briar and I were exactly, but we sure as hell weren't bros. I shifted back, trying to put some distance between us. “I don't know what to call you.”

“I have a name, Casey,” he said, wriggling closer.

With the wall behind me now, I had nowhere to go. “Briar.”

He smiled. “That's it.”

I put a hand on his chest to stop him plastering himself against me. “You’re drunk.”

“It’s almost dawn,” he said. “I’m sober as a judge.”

“Have you met many judges?”

He snorted. “The point is, I’m sober.”

“Can you reach my phone?”

He twisted around and grabbed it off the nightstand. “What for?”

“I want to see the time.”

He shoved the phone in my face. Yeah, it was past 5:00 a.m., so I’d definitely slept longer than I’d thought.

“Oooh!” He pulled the phone back. “Unlocked!” He rolled onto his back and held the phone up. “Let’s see what browser pages you have open.”

“Oh, come on! There’s nothing incriminating on there.” I really fucking hoped. I wasn’t awake enough to remember exactly what I’d been checking out online recently, but I didn’t think—

“Oooh! What’s this? ‘Cute femboy rides monster?—’”

“Shit! Give me that!” I grabbed the phone as Briar giggled. Except the browser wasn’t open to Pornhub. It was open to ESPN. Still, it took a moment for my heart to stop racing. “I wasn’t even looking at stuff like that, you little shit.”

“Oh, but you thought you might have been!” He elbowed me and wriggled. “Have

you been thinking naughty thoughts about pretty boys in stockings, Casey?"

"Do you mean like grabbing this pillow and suffocating them to death?" I asked.  
"Because yes. That one's real strong right now."

His giggle turned into a cackle, and then it subsided into a comfortable silence. Then, after a while, he said, "Hey, Casey?"

"Yeah?"

"Would it be okay if I kissed you?"

He sounded shy, which didn't at all vibe with the guy in the basement who'd basically thrown me up against a wall and had his way with me. Well, okay, Briar had been the one up against the wall, but no fucking way had I been in charge down there. It was all him, and thinking about it still blew my mind.

"Yeah," I said, letting the word loose on a breath.

Briar rolled toward me and propped himself up on one elbow. His shirt slid off his shoulder, and moonlight made his pale skin glow. His mouth was curved into a small, satisfied smile as he leaned in. He kissed me soft and slow, and I responded in kind, but soon his kisses turned hungry. Before I knew it, he was sliding on top of me and straddling me, pinning me and pressing my wrists into the mattress on either side of my head as he kissed me again.

I hadn't known being held down was a thing for me until now, but turned out it really, really was. My heart thundered in my chest, and arousal shot straight to my dick, which hardened under the weight of him. He pulled back with a smirk.

"Oh, you like that, huh?" he teased, eyes bright, and then he rolled his hips in a way

that made my eyes cross with how damn good it felt. The bulge in his boxers pressed against the fabric of mine, causing my dick to throb.

I let out a groan that was nothing short of filthy and rocked against him, chasing more friction. He let out a breathless laugh, pressing his body closer and setting up a fast rhythm as we humped each other like a couple of horny kids. Which, well. It looked like that fantasy I'd had about grinding against him until we both came was about to become a reality, and I was here for it. My dick strained against my boxers as I thrust up, and the rough push-pull of fabric against my sensitive cockhead soon had me panting.

Briar was breathing fast as well, and I couldn't tear my gaze away from the sight of him, perched above me in the moonlight with wide eyes and parted lips.

"Fuck, Casey," he whispered into the quiet before letting go of my wrists and settling more fully on top of me. He shoved one hand between our bodies and fumbled my boxers down past my aching balls, his knuckles grazing against my dick. He shoved his own underwear down and then swiped a thumb over the head of my dick, spreading precum down the shaft before wrapping long clever fingers around our erections.

I arched into the touch, and Briar huffed out a soft laugh against the side of my throat as he tightened his grip. The contrasting hardness of his dick and the velvet softness of his skin brushing against me stole my breath away. Jesus, I wasn't gonna last. My balls drew up tight, and it only took one firm stroke before I was coming all over his hand. I would have been embarrassed, but I was too busy riding out my orgasm—and it was only seconds before Briar tensed and groaned, and the pool of wetness on my belly grew as he added to it.

He slumped against me, and I found myself curling an arm around him, cupping his ass to hold him close. We didn't stay like that for long though because the cooling



cum on my stomach got too gross to ignore.

Briar rolled out of my grip and wrinkled his nose, looking down at himself.

“There are wet wipes in the drawer,” I said, propping myself up on my elbows.

He found them and handed me the pack, and I cleaned us up. I thought he might pull away and leave like he had last time, but instead he let out a satisfied sigh and curled up against me again, tracing a fingertip over the light dusting of hair on my chest. He tilted his head and blinked up at me, giving a shy smile. I kissed his cheek and settled back against the bed and just lay there for a while, drifting. It was different, having lean muscles under my hand instead of soft, feminine curves, but honestly? It was kind of awesome. This thing with Briar might be new and different, but I still wanted to see where it would take us—if we even were an us.

But Briar had come to my room and climbed into my bed and asked to kiss me, so we were something, right? Or rather we could be in three days, once Briar was a fully-fledged fraternity member.

Thinking about the pledges got me thinking about my classes and my grades and the practice LSAT I’d taken, which let me tell you, was a hell of a way to kill my post-orgasm high. I let out an involuntary sigh as I remembered my low score.

Briar squirmed against me and let out a sigh of his own, one tinged with impatience. “Don’t tell me you’re having a crisis of conscience again? Because I promise I want to be here, and we’re not breaking any rules.”

“It’s not that,” I said. “It’s the LSAT.”

Briar stiffened, then shuffled over, propping himself up on his elbows and raising one perfectly sculpted brow. “Why are you thinking about classes when we just got off?”

Do I need to up my game?”

I grinned at him. “You couldn’t up your game, not without giving me a heart attack. But school stuff is always on my mind.”

Some of the tension left his frame, and he waggled his eyebrows. “See, that sounds like a challenge right there. How hard do I have to make you come to drive every other thought out of your head? Do I need to wear those satin panties again?”

I groaned at the thought of it. “You’re a fucking tease.”

Briar let out a soft laugh. “It’s not teasing if I deliver.” He curled up against my side again, one hand trailing down the back of my thigh and making me shiver. “And now you can imagine me in lingerie instead of worrying about dumb tests that don’t matter.”

“Easy for you to say,” I said. “You’ve already passed it. I’m gonna get a score of 120 and end up at a law school run out of the basement of some guy who’s been disbarred for money laundering.”

“I’m pretty sure you can’t run law school from a basement,” Briar said.

“I know. I was joking. Mostly.” I rolled over so I could see his face. “You know what would be cool though? If you could help me study for it. Like, you got a 160. You obviously figured out what they’re looking for.”

Briar’s expression shuttered. “It’s subjective. I don’t think it’s something someone else can really help you with,” he said. He drew a breath. “Anyway, I gotta go. I’ll see you around, okay?”

And the next thing I knew he’d pulled away from my side and rolled out of bed in

one smooth movement. He slipped out the door before I could say anything, leaving me alone and confused.

What the hell?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:44 am*

### NINE

Trying to pin down Briar Pendelton was like trying to nail jello to the wall. I didn't even see him for two days after he sneaked into my bedroom, and then, when he finally showed up at the house on Friday afternoon to meet with Archer, he hardly said a word to me when he passed me in the hall. He was hot and cold, first with Alpha Tau in general and now with me specifically, and I didn't like it. It felt like only one of them could be the real deal, and I had no idea which. Was he into me, or not? And, if he wasn't, then what the hell was he doing? Like, if he just wanted to hook up every now and then, why not just tell me that? I couldn't get a read on him, and it sucked, because I hoped that he was as into me as I was into him, but if that was true, then why the hell did he keep running away like a scalded cat?

So, fuck my pride, or whatever.

I leaned against the wall outside Archer's room while Archer and Briar talked big brother/little brother stuff, so Briar couldn't avoid me when he was leaving. Not unless he climbed out the window. Which I wouldn't put past him if he knew I was waiting, honestly. So lucky he didn't know.

One of the Jameses gave me a strange look as he passed, but he was still too new to ask me what the fuck I was doing just standing there leaning on the wall beside Archer's closed door.

When the door opened, I straightened and pretended to be checking my phone.

"Casey?" Archer asked, stepping out into the hallway. "What's up, bro?"

“Oh, hey, man,” I said, like I was surprised to see him there. “Not much. Not much.” Briar sidled out into the hallway, shooting me a suspicious glare. “Briar, you got a minute? I need to go to Walmart and grab a couple more coolers since Knox managed to break one last night. You can come with.”

“Shouldn’t Knox be replacing it then?” Briar asked, raising his eyebrows like he could see right through me. Probably because I was transparent as fuck.

“Come on,” I said. “Who doesn’t like a trip to Walmart?”

“Scout,” Briar and Archer said at the same time.

I ignored them. “Part of being pledge master is assigning tasks, and?—”

“I thought I wasn’t a pledge anymore,” Briar said.

I ignored that too. “And I’m assigning you the job of Walmart, buddy.”

“Buddy? Seriously?” He folded his arms over his chest. “Fine!”

Archer gave us a look. “Do you guys need a?—”

“Nope,” I said. “We’re all good. Let’s go, Briar.”

He rolled his eyes and followed me down the stairs.

The Hopewell Walmart wasn’t exactly the kind of place you’d pick to take a guy you wanted to impress, or anyone you even respected the tiniest bit, but it wasn’t as though Briar had left me a choice. So, when we got there, I grabbed a cart with a wobbly wheel, tugged my list out of the pocket of my Alpha Tau hoodie, and headed for the sporting goods and camping section to check out coolers.

Briar followed along, dragging his feet and glaring at the footballs like they'd personally offended him.

I grabbed one. "Want to catch a pass?"

He raised his eyebrows and shoved his hands in his pockets. "If you throw that, I'll never speak to you again. We are indoors."

I put the football back. "You really don't like football, do you?"

"We are indoors," he repeated and grabbed the cart. "Go and grab a cooler."

"Yes, sir."

He rolled his eyes, but his mouth twitched.

And that was Briar all over, wasn't it? It was as though he was trying his hardest not to like me, or Alpha Tau, or anything about Lassiter, and I didn't understand that about him. He was a puzzle I couldn't figure out, and I didn't get why he was so difficult to know. Why he made himself that way. Why he bolted from every conversation and hookup we had. It wasn't like I was chasing after him with my grandmother's heirloom engagement ring and a book of swatches for the wedding color theme or anything. If he wanted casual, that was cool. That didn't mean we couldn't at least talk though, right? Just hang and shoot the shit like friends. But we could only do that if he was actually speaking to me. I squared my shoulders and mustered all my "having awkward conversations with pledges" skills.

At least this would be less cringeworthy than that time one of the newbies had accidentally cast his porn to the communal lounge TV—which had been a hell of a shock for those of us who were set to watch *Fight Club*.

“So,” I said casually, walking alongside Briar, “you wanna tell me why you’ve been avoiding me? Like, have I offended you or something?”

Briar focused all his attention on the old clearance sticker on the cart handle. “I haven’t been avoiding you.”

I hoped Briar wasn’t planning to be a defense lawyer because he was a terrible liar.

“So we’re cool?” I pressed.

“Super cool. Cooler than these coolers we’re buying,” he said with a slight smile, and okay, that was more convincing. I’d never hooked up with a guy before, so maybe this was normal behavior, and I was just overthinking it.

I decided that instead of overthinking this, I was going to take Briar at his word. “Then do you want to hang out tonight?”

Briar gave me a sideways look. “Like, hook up?”

“Uh,” I said. “Maybe, I guess? But also, if you just wanted to hang, that would be cool too.”

He let out a long breath. “Is that really a good idea?”

Said the guy who’d sneaked into my bedroom before dawn the other morning and exchanged hand jobs? Briar and I felt like we were in orbit, both of us circling around some central point, and sometimes he was almost close enough that I could feel his gravitational pull. And other times he was light-years away, on some outer curve of an ellipsis I could never reach.

Either Briar inspired these weird poetic thoughts in me, or it was because I was

staring at a brand label on a cooler that had the sun on it.

Probably the second thing.

“I...” Shit, this wasn’t going how I’d hoped it would. “Actually, forget that part about hanging out and hooking up.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“Briar.” I turned away from the coolers and faced him. “Would you go on a date with me?”

“A date?” He stepped back, nose wrinkling, like I’d suggested hunting humans for sport.

“Yeah,” I said. “Like dinner and a movie, you know.”

He didn’t say anything. He just blinked.

It had been a while since I’d felt humiliated. I’d forgotten the way it came over you cold and then hot, like a faulty shower. I forced a smile. “Okay. No problem. We’re cool.”

An expression I couldn’t read filtered across Briar’s face, but it seemed like the sort of awkward, pitying look you’d get when you were wondering how to extricate yourself from the world’s most awkward situation. His dark eyes swam with desperation. He opened his mouth. “Casey, I?—”

“Brian?” A guy in an orange Hoos shirt and faded jeans strode down the aisle, a folding camp chair tucked under each arm. He was a big guy, mostly muscle, and he clapped Briar on the back hard enough to send him a few steps toward me. “Shit, I



thought it was you! How you doin', man?"

Brian? Who the fuck was Brian?

Briar fixed what appeared to be a tense smile on his face. "Hey, Darryl. How's it going?"

"It's great, man," Darryl said. "It's great." And then he looked over to me.

"Oh," Briar said. "This is Casey. He's in my fraternity."

I don't know why that hit so hard. It wasn't like he was going to say, "This is Casey. He fucked me between the thighs so hard in the basement one time that he almost saw Jesus."

Darryl looked me up and down. Then he readjusted his camp chairs, shoving them both under his left arm, and stuck his right one out so that we could shake hands. He had a grip like iron.

"Sup," he said to me and then looked to Briar again. "Uncle Luke said you was away at college, but he never said where. So you're living in Hopewell now?"

"I'm at Lassiter." Briar was still smiling that grimace of a smile, and his voice was clipped.

Darryl didn't seem to notice the tension in him, even though Briar looked like he was vibrating as fast as a guitar string in an eighties rock ballad. "What was it you was studying? Was it?—"

"Prelaw," Briar said.

“Huh.” Darryl readjusted his chairs again. “Really? I didn’t know you wanted to be a lawyer.”

“It’s prelaw,” Briar said, his shoulders stiffening like he was shaping up to fight the guy or something. I hoped he wasn’t, because it was pretty clear that Darryl could wipe the floor with both of us without even raising a sweat.

“Huh.” Darryl shrugged the way people had when they didn’t really care, and Briar’s posture relaxed a fraction. “Anyways, me and Trisha are living over in Petersburg now. You should come by sometime.”

“Okay,” Briar said. “Sure.”

Darryl gave him a slightly puzzled look, as though he was realizing for the first time that Briar wasn’t comfortable. He shuffled his feet. “Well, it was nice seein’ you, Brian. Good to meet you, Casey.”

“Good to meet you too,” I said, and Darryl hefted his camp chairs more securely up into his armpits and ambled away down the aisle. “So, that was?—”

But Briar was already moving, in the opposite direction of Darryl. By the time I caught up with him with the cart, he was in the next aisle, looking as though he was seriously considering climbing inside a display tent to hide.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

He hunched his shoulders and stared fixedly at the tent. “That was my cousin.”

“Oh.”

“You can’t be called Briar, that’s a goddamn girl’s name.” His voice was gruff, like

he was imitating someone else. “My dad said that, not Darryl. But you were wondering, right? Why he didn’t call me Briar? It’s because nobody in my family calls me Briar.”

I felt hot and cold again, but this time it wasn’t humiliation—this time it was dread—and it wasn’t for me. “I don’t think Briar is a girl’s name.”

Briar snorted.

“Well, it’s your name,” I said. “And you’re not a girl. So it has to be a guy’s name too, right? Living proof, right here.”

He snorted again, and the sound came out a little wetter than he probably intended.

“I don’t trust people, Casey,” he said. He still wasn’t looking at me, but I didn’t need to meet his gaze to know the words were coming right from his heart. “I was supposed to go to college and leave all of them behind, you know? Be me for once.”

“And then Harvey happened,” I said. He’d never said exactly what had occurred at his last college, but it didn’t take a genius to realize it had been bad.

He hunched over more. “Yeah.”

Fuck it.

I stepped up behind him and put my arms around him. He stiffened in my awkward embrace for a second, and I thought for sure he’d push me away, but then he turned around and dropped his head on my shoulder. His arms snaked around me, and he sniffled.

“It’s not like that with us,” I said, thinking of my brothers at Alpha Tau. I rubbed a

hand up and down his back. “With me.”

“They’re not bad people,” Briar said into my shoulder. “My family. They’re not.”

I didn’t know which one of us he was trying to convince. “Okay.”

“They just...” He shuddered and then straightened up. Scrubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. “They don’t get the whole makeup and clothes thing.”

“So, what, you don’t see them at all?” I couldn’t imagine choosing not to talk to my family—but then again, I also couldn’t imagine my family not accepting me.

“It’s just... easier,” Briar said. He lifted his head and jutted his chin out, and I saw a flash of his normal prickly attitude. “Hell, if they can’t cope with me changing my name from Brian, they’re sure as shit not equipped to handle a pretty boy in eyeliner. But I’ve always hated Brian since I was little. It doesn’t fit.”

“Okay, so Brian’s a terrible name, and I see why you ditched it,” I said. “I mean, come on. Who wants to be named after the dog in Family Guy?”

Briar let out a snort, and the corners of his mouth tilted upward. “Right?”

“Right,” I said.

An old guy huffed impatiently, so I had to let Briar go to move the cart so he could get around us. I thought that was the end of our closeness, but as soon as the old guy passed by, Briar stepped close again. He tilted his head back and looked at me like he was considering something.

“So,” he said, “about the date thing.”

Right. Somehow, in the space of five minutes, I'd managed to forget that Briar wasn't interested, and now he felt the need to spell it out for me. Those hot and cold waves of humiliation were back, and wow, they never got any better, did they?

"It's fine. You already said no," I said roughly, eyeing the display tent. I wondered if Walmart leased space by the month and if I could hide out in the Bear Mountain Two Man Outdoor Deluxe until I got over making a fool of myself—which should take no longer than three to seven years, at a guess.

Briar put a hand on my forearm. "Wow," he said. "Just, wow." When I glanced over at him, he was smiling, a teasing little thing. "For someone who talks a whole heap about not making snap judgements, you're pretty quick to jump to conclusions. I never said no."

I blinked at him. "You never said yes either."

He rolled his eyes. "We're in Walmart, Casey. For coolers. Excuse me if you caught me by surprise."

"What?"

"Would I go out with you on a date?" he asked. "Yes. Would I go out with you on a date if you asked me in Walmart? Hell, no! Do better, Casey!"

Bubbles burst in my bloodstream, and I fought the urge not to break out in hysterical laughter. "Oh, shit. Okay. Um, I can ask you again in the parking lot. Would that count?"

"Hmm." Briar chewed his bottom lip for a moment. "Only if you buy me some of those pink frosted sugar cookies on the way out."

“Deal,” I said and began to push our cart toward the bakery section at breakneck speed with Briar rolling his eyes and following.

Saturday was movingin day for our newest brothers, the former pledges. It was the chaos of our first day back at campus, on a slightly smaller scale. Marty drove his Jeep back and forth between the dormitories and Fraternity Row, a circuitous route that would have been much quicker to walk, except for all the luggage and boxes that had to get loaded up. You wouldn’t think ten guys could have that much stuff, but it added up.

Charlie was first to arrive—Scout had insisted on collecting him—and despite the fact that it was barely past eight, he was full of energy and just so fucking happy to be moving into the house that I couldn’t even hold his good mood against him, and I was not a morning person.

He unloaded his stuff from Scout’s Jeep while Scout watched on, unsmiling.

“Hey, Scout,” I said.

“It’s too fucking early for this,” he said, leaning against the driver’s door with his arms folded. I wasn’t fooled. Dollars to donuts Scout had picked Charlie up early so he could take him out for breakfast.

I gave him a nod of agreement and grabbed some boxes. As we walked up the porch steps I said, “You eat yet?”

Charlie gave me an uncertain smile. “Um, yeah. Scout took me to that fancy place on Main. He said he refused to face the day without decent coffee and French toast. And then he said I should eat as well since we were there.” He bit his lip. “Casey, he paid for me, and when I offered to give him half, he just looked at me as if I’d suggested drowning a kitten or something.” He lowered his voice. “Do I, like, owe him

breakfast now?”

I grinned. “Nah, bro, you’re cool. With Scout, if he wants to buy you shit, it’s best to just go with it, or he gets hella cranky.” I’d let Scout keep his reputation as a grumpy asshole a little longer.

Charlie gave a relieved smile, and he didn’t even bitch when he had to climb all the way up to the third floor with his boxes. He was bouncier than Marty on a sugar high. I guessed it helped that many hands made light work—Connor kicked everyone out of bed to lift and carry.

When we got to his room, there was a delay while Charlie got caught up second-guessing himself about whether Briar would mind if he took the bed under the window. After he changed his mind for the fifth time, I pulled out my phone, and I texted Briar.

Yo, you want the bed by the window or the wall? Charlie’s having a conniption trying to choose.

Wall. So you can pin me against it.

My cheeks heated, and something like a whine escaped me. I had no idea what to say, but I sure as hell wasn’t letting that go unanswered in case Briar took my silence the wrong way. In the end, I fired back:

Holy shit, Briar.

I followed it with three chili emojis to make sure he knew I was on board.

Charlie raised his eyebrows and took a step toward me. “You okay?”

I stuffed my phone hastily into my pocket before he could see. “Briar says you can have the window,” I said, trying to ignore the images dancing in my brain of a half-naked Briar with his arms around my neck and his legs wrapped around my waist, panting and gasping as I railed him hard. I cleared my throat. “You good?”

“Oh, yeah! This place is so awesome! Like, before Trey told me about the accommodation grant, I really thought I was gonna be stuck at Carmichael, and it’s kind of nasty over there. Did you know they had an infestation of rats last year?”

“Oh, the rats?” Marty’s voice sailed into the room two seconds before the man himself. “Yeah, it was insane. Have you ever seen a rat king?” he asked with a gleam in his eye.

“No?”

“It’s disgusting and awesome all at once,” Marty said. “Lemme show you.” He pulled his phone out.

“No!” I wasn’t letting Marty traumatize my baby pledges—at least, not this early in the year. I grabbed his shoulder and turned him around so he was facing the door before giving him a shove. “You need to go collect Luis, remember?”

“Oh right!” He bounded back down the stairs. I turned to Charlie and said, “Trust me. Whatever you do, don’t google rat king. Or anything else Marty tells you to.”

Charlie nodded, eyes wide, and I followed Marty down the stairs.

It took until noon to get everyone moved in. I didn’t feel like lifting, so under the excuse of “fostering independence,” I made the pledges carry their own shit upstairs while Marty and I watched from the couch. Squirrel ran back and forth whimpering and making excited noises at all the new people, and I could see he was getting



hyped, so I stood and headed for the front door, grabbing his lead. “I’m gonna take him for a walk until he settles.”

As I was walking down the path, the front door flew open. “Casey! Wait!” I turned to see Briar waving at me. We’d exchanged nods when he’d arrived but hadn’t had a chance to talk yet, so I waited as he hurried to catch up. His hair was a mess, his cheeks were flushed, and there was a streak of dust smeared on his hoodie, and I still wanted to hold him against the wall and kiss him until we were both breathless.

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “Hey.”

Squirrel whined impatiently and pulled on his lead, closing the distance between us.

Briar leaned down and pet him and then straightened up again. He flashed me a wicked grin, which I loved, but I thought I saw some uncertainty in his gaze. I loved that a little bit too. For all his prickly edges, maybe that meant Briar got a matching swooping feeling in his belly when he saw me, the same as I did for him. The same sort you got on the Drop Tower at Kings Dominion right before it let you go.

“So,” he said, tilting his head. Sunlight gave his ink-black hair a blueish sheen. “When are you taking me on this epic date of ours?”

“Epic?” I asked. Squirrel tugged at his lead again, impatient to start his walk, and Briar fell into step beside me as I headed for the sidewalk.

“Yup,” Briar said. “I’ve decided.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ve decided that I’m ready for you to impress me. So, where are we going?”

“Cafe Meow?” Shit, I hoped that was impressive enough.

He nodded. “Sounds good.” We paused so Squirrel could investigate one of the red maples that lined Fraternity Row, and Briar tilted his head and bit his lip before saying, “And what should I wear?”

What sort of a question was that? “Smart casual, I guess?”

“So, if I turned up in stockings and a skirt and heels?” His chin jutted out in an unspoken challenge, and suddenly I got it. Briar didn’t care about the restaurant dress code. He wanted to know if I was willing to be seen with him in all his pretty femboy glory—which, fuck yes.

Just the thought of it had my dick perking up. I stepped closer, leaned down, and murmured in his ear, “If you turn up in a skirt and heels, I hope you don’t expect me to talk a lick of sense over dinner because I’ll spend the entire meal imagining what I’m gonna do to you after.”

“Oh?” Briar smirked. “And what are you gonna do to me?”

“Well, if you’re agreeable, I’m gonna take you back to my room, peel every stitch off of you, and?—”

“Yes,” Briar said. “Yes to everything.”

“You don’t know what I was going to say next.”

Briar gave me another one of those wicked smiles, more certain this time. “Casey, I don’t think you get it. For whatever reason, you push all my buttons.” He stepped forward, put his hand on my chest, pushed me so my back was pressed against the tree, and kissed me.

It took me a second to catch up, but then I was kissing him back, cupping one hand behind his head and opening my mouth eagerly when his tongue teased the seam of my lips, searching for entry. My eyes drifted closed, and I savored the taste and feel of his plush mouth against mine, sparks racing through me.

My hand in his hair tightened as the kiss grew more heated, and he let out a low moan. Want surged through me, and I didn't even care that we were making out against a tree in the middle of Fraternity Row because Briar kissing me had driven every other thought out of my head.

When Briar broke the kiss and pulled away, the loss of him was sudden and shocking. I didn't whimper, not exactly, but I sure as hell made some kind of sound.

Briar let out a breathless laugh, then grinned up at me and said, "Whatever we do after dinner tomorrow, I promise I'm gonna blow your everloving mind." And with that, he turned and sauntered ahead of me, adding an extra swing to his hips. I stood there, weak-kneed and turned on beyond belief, and tried to pull myself together.

Holy shit.

Tomorrow night couldn't come soon enough.

TEN

When I went to collect Briar from his room for our date, he wasn't wearing a skirt and heels. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed just for a second. But I got it. It was one thing to talk a big game and another to put yourself out there in a college town when you were trying to make a fresh start.

Besides, Briar was gorgeous. My breath caught as I took in the sight of him. His hair was gelled into a choppy, asymmetrical style that was somehow both punk and pretty, and he was wearing a long knitted purple sweater. The wide neckline left one shoulder exposed, and it was tied up in the opposite corner at the hem, pulling the edge up to show off his flat stomach and elegant thighs encased in skintight black jeans. His wrists were adorned with a pair of leather cuffs. A pair of sparkling purple Converse completed the outfit. He was wearing eyeliner, mascara, and eyeshadow, and his perfectly polished nails matched his shoes and sweater. He straddled the line between femme and flirty perfectly, and I was here for it.

"Wow," I said, looking him up and down. I couldn't seem to stop looking. "Just, wow."

"You like it?" he asked, sounding more uncertain than I would have expected after the way he'd strutted during the candy drive. But I guess he was able to pass it off as being part of his pledging then. Now it was just him, showing me who he was.

"Liking it doesn't even come close. You're breathtaking," I said. "It's like you're a fae prince or something, and I'm under your spell. I mean, you could ask me for my firstborn right now, and I'd agree on the spot."

His face split into a pleased smile. “Thanks. I’ll settle for dinner, though.”

“Good, because I don’t have a firstborn.”

He huffed out a laugh, then turned his attention onto me. I did my best not to fidget under the weight of his gaze. I’d spent an hour trying on different outfits earlier before Scout had walked past my door, pausing when he saw the pile of discarded clothing on my bed. He’d rolled his eyes, stepped inside, and plucked a pale blue shirt and a pair of tan chinos out of the pile and thrust them at me. Then he’d opened my closet and pulled out a dark blue blazer, saying, “Wear this. Trust me.”

And damned if he hadn’t been right because Briar’s eyes grew dark and hungry. “You look pretty killer yourself.”

“Thanks.” A wave of pleasure washed over me at the compliment, and I couldn’t keep the dumb grin off my face. I did look killer. I’d checked in the mirror half a dozen times just to be sure because I wanted Briar to know I was all in for this date.

When we got to Cafe Meow, the hostess seated us in one of the nice private booths with a smile and gave us our menus. Once she’d left, we sat awkwardly staring at each other while I panicked and tried to remember how dating worked.

It wasn’t that the dynamic was different with Briar than it would have been with a girl, exactly—that was some bullshit outdated thinking right there. When I took a girl on a date, I knew exactly what to do. I opened doors for her and helped her with her coat if it was winter, and I paid at the end. And like, I was going to do the same for Briar—not because he was femme but because I’d invited him on this date. That was how it worked. But the other stuff—the small conversation stuff—felt weirdly difficult. I already knew about his studies and his plan to get into law school because I’d asked all that shit when I was his pledge master. And I already knew what movies and shit he liked because we’d hung out as brothers and now we also lived in the

same house. And I sure as shit knew that “So, tell me about your family” would be about as dangerous and messy as tap-dancing into a minefield. So, I really didn’t have much to draw on.

“Marty says the fettuccine carbonara here is amazing,” I said, clinging to the menu like it was a life preserver and I was a drowning man.

“I once saw Marty eat a donut he found under the couch.” Briar raised his eyebrows. “So I’ll take that with a grain of salt, I think.”

“I dunno. Marty has pretty solid taste,” I said.

“Are we talking about the same Marty? The one with shirts that should only be worn on cruise ships by eighty-year-old men?”

I snorted. “Fair. But he also likes you, and obviously you’re amazing, so my point stands.”

Briar wrinkled his nose, like he wasn’t sure whether Marty’s approval was something he should be pleased about or not. He fiddled with his napkin before asking, “So, why did you pick me to be in Alpha Tau? I’m not exactly conventional fraternity material.”

I wasn’t prepared for the question, but my mamma didn’t raise a fool, and I sure as shit wasn’t going to ruin a promising first date by telling him Trey had made me choose him. Instead, after a moment’s consideration, I said, “Would you believe me if I said it’s because you didn’t try to fit in? Like, you could have showed up all slicked back and buttoned down, but you chose to be the real you—even if you did bury yourself in that hoodie and scowl. You were honest. Plus, Squirrel really likes you.”

Some of the tension in his frame eased, and he gave a wry smile. “Note to self—the balance of power at Alpha Tau is held by a whippet.”

I laughed. “Probably. Don’t let Trey hear you say that, though.”

Briar bit his lip before blurting out, “I am glad you chose me. And this...this is nice. Being on a date with you, I mean.” He gave a one-shouldered shrug, the corners of his mouth curving up and a blush creeping across his cheeks, like he was embarrassed at admitting to enjoying himself with me. He looked all kinds of adorable with his face flushed pink, and it made heat pool in my belly. I couldn’t wait to take him home and make him blush for other, filthier reasons.

Shit. I was getting a boner, and we hadn’t even ordered yet. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I couldn’t remember anyone else ever affecting me like this. I wasn’t sure if I was gayer than I’d realized, or if it was Briar’s apparent delicacy combined with his dominant streak that made my dick hard. In the end, I decided it didn’t matter. The important thing was that Briar did it for me—on every level.

He was the total package.

I didn’t realize I’d been staring until Briar licked his perfectly glossed lips and said, “See something you like?”

“Well, yeah,” I said, still staring.

He sat back in his chair and grinned, running a hand through his hair. “I meant the menu, but I’ll take it.”

It was my turn to blush. I cleared my throat. “Sorry. You’re just... so fucking pretty, you know?”

Briar's face lit up with a thousand-watt smile, and yeah, I was so gone on this guy.

I cleared my throat again. "What about you?"

"Oh yeah, I see something I like too," he said, eyes dancing. "And after dinner, I'm gonna get it."

I grinned, anticipation curling low in my gut. "What if I'm not the kind of boy who puts out on the first date?"

Briar raised one eyebrow. "Casey. Please. We both know you're that kind of boy. Besides, I can be very persuasive."

I didn't doubt it for a second.

We were interrupted by the server coming back to our table. We both ordered the steak and a couple glasses of sweet tea. "Hey, do you want to split a side of asparagus?" I asked.

"No I don't, and you don't want any either," Briar said.

"But I like asparagus."

Briar rolled his eyes and quickly grabbed his phone and started texting.

A moment later, my phone pinged.

Do you like asparagus more than you like getting your dick sucked?

It took a second for the penny to drop, but when it did, my face flamed. My cock twitched, and I swallowed convulsively, my throat suddenly dry as I pictured Briar on



his knees. I managed to croak out, “No sides, thanks.”

The server left, and Briar let out a low laugh. “I can’t believe I had to connect those dots for you. You’re such a baby gay.”

“Jesus, Briar.” A breath escaped me. “Are you trying to make me sit through dinner with a stiff dick?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Briar said, grinning.

“Well it’s working.” I squirmed in my seat, closing my eyes in an effort to will my cock into behaving. So I was caught off guard by the sensation of something sliding up my calf. I froze, my eyes snapping open. I lifted the edge of the tablecloth and glanced down to see one discarded glittering Converse lying on its side and one elegant, stocking-clad foot gliding up toward my knee.

Oh fuck.

“Wanna play footsies?” Briar asked. His tone was light, but he was grinning like a shark.

I could have pulled my legs back under my chair, sure. But I liked this sassy, self-assured Briar, and I wanted to see more of him. Plus, I didn’t think my dick had ever gotten hard so fast in my life. So I stayed where I was and let my knees fall slightly open. “Do your worst,” I said, attempting to sound nonchalant—which, it turned out, was a dumb move because I hadn’t accounted for two things.

Firstly, Briar was a tease.

And secondly, he was a bendy little fuck, who had no problem sliding down in his seat and settling his foot against my hard dick, flexing the sole so that he was

basically giving me a foot job under cover of the tablecloth. I made a sound that if it wasn't quite a whine sure as hell shared a zip code with one.

Briar gave me a wide smile full of teeth and promise and slid his foot down so he was massaging my balls. The gentle, persistent pressure had me ready to come right there, and I couldn't help it—I groaned loudly enough that the couple at the next table glanced over. Briar stilled his foot, and I was torn between relief and disappointment.

Then he licked his lips, slid his foot all the way down my leg, and murmured in a low voice, “Do you like it when I do bad things to you in public, Casey?”

And yeah, it turned out I did.

He sat up straight and removed his foot completely, and I was confused for a second, but then the server appeared with our meals. Briar blinked innocently as he thanked her like he hadn't just teased me to the edge of orgasm, the little shit.

I echoed his thanks. The meal was good, but I could have been eating one of Marty's couch donuts for all I cared, too caught up in the phantom sensation of Briar's toes curling against my cock. My mind kept circling back around to how bold he was and how bossy—and how much I liked it.

We were quiet as we ate, but it wasn't awkward or anything, and Briar kept shooting me shy glances from under his bangs, so I guessed he was enjoying himself. Still, I couldn't help but ask. “So, how am I doing for my first time dating a guy?”

He bumped his foot against mine under the table and flashed me a smile. “It's really nice,” he said, without a trace of sarcasm.

“Thanks.” The reassurance made me breathe a little easier.

“It’s not epic, though.”

I stopped with my fork halfway to my mouth. “It’s not?”

Briar licked his lips and leaned forward, his eyes dark and hungry as his gaze locked on mine. “Not yet.” His voice was husky in a way that sent a shiver down my spine and had my dick taking notice, even before he said, “That’ll be when I drag you home and make you come so hard you forget your own name.”

Holy shit.

And then he sat back primly and set the cutlery together in the center of his empty plate. He nodded at my few remaining fries and said, “So, are we done here?”

“We’re done,” I said and waved frantically for the check.

After I texted Marty, he had done me a solid and cleared out of our room, taking Squirrel with him, before Briar and I got back to Fraternity Row. Showing Briar up to my room felt as though it was a big step somehow. Like maybe one of the guys we passed downstairs when we got back was going to make it into a huge deal or something. They didn’t. And why would they? For all they knew, I was inviting Briar up to my room to give him my English notes. Well, apart from the fact that Briar had obviously dressed up for the occasion, and I was pretty sure I resembled a cartoon character who’d taken a frying pan to the face whenever I looked at him—twittering birds circling my head and all.

Briar was just gorgeous. I ran out of words in my head when I tried to think of them. Just... whatever the whole package was, he had it, you know? And it wasn’t only his looks. I wanted to figure out what made him tick. I wanted him to feel like he could open up to me. There was something about the way he both hid and revealed parts of himself every time he spoke, and even the way he blew hot and cold, that pulled me

in.

There was no blowing cold tonight.

Hell, no.

The second we were inside my room, Briar pushed me so I landed in a sideways sprawl on my bed. Then, while I was trying to catch the breath he'd knocked out of me, he prowled forward and stood between my knees. Chewed on the end of his fingertip and smirked down at me, the fucking tease. I didn't dare move, my heart pounding in my chest as I waited for him to do something—anything.

After watching me for what could have been seconds or hours, he leaned forward and gave my shoulders a gentle shove. I guessed he wanted me to move, and I obeyed without question, shuffling my way to the center of the bed.

“Good boy,” he said, making my insides curl with unexpected pleasure. While I was still processing that, he kicked off his sneakers and grabbed the hem of his sweater and drew it over his head, exposing a lean, pale chest with tight rosy nipples that had my half-hard dick filling completely. Then he shimmied out of his jeans and underwear, leaving him standing in nothing but a pair of sheer black thigh-high stockings. Biting his bottom lip, he placed one hand on his hip as if he were a model, or perhaps putting himself on display for my approval.

Maybe he was.

I propped myself on my elbows so I could see him properly, and my mouth fell open.

Holy shit.

The contrast of sheer dark stockings against Briar's milky white skin was hotter than

it had any right to be. Briar was all long lines and elegance, and the sight of him had my mouth watering. His slim cock was hard, flushed dark pink with precum pearling at the head, and who knew that even his dick would be pretty?

Heat gathered low in my gut, and my own cock throbbed, straining against the zipper of my pants. “Fuck, Briar. You’re gorgeous.”

He gave a pleased smile, then turned and, his feet shoulder width apart, bent at the waist. It was a hell of a view, and it took me a moment to realize he was fishing in the pocket of his discarded jeans. Then he straightened and faced me, holding a tube of lip gloss, and applied a fresh coat that made his lips sparkle and shimmer. He gave me a coy smile. “What? A boy can’t look his best when he sucks a dick?”

I let out a low groan. Briar was going to be the death of me.

He slid onto the bed and trailed a fingertip down my chest before smoothing his palm over the bulge in my pants. My cock throbbed, and I arched up into his touch. He grinned and reached down and unbuttoned my shirt, leaving my chest bare. Then he undid my fly, deftly sliding his hands under my ass and urging my hips upward. I obeyed, using the one working brain cell that wasn’t focused on how good Briar touching me felt to kick off my shoes. They hit the ground with a dull thud as Briar yanked my chinos and boxers down and off, leaving my lower half bare.

He straddled my thighs, pinning me in place as he studied me closely, his gaze settling on my erection.

I fought the urge to cover myself with my hands or do something dumb like ask if he liked what he saw. I had a pretty much standard-issue dick, so I couldn’t see why he wouldn’t, but it wasn’t as though I had another one to offer him if he didn’t.

He licked his lips and said, “Nice.”

A tightness in my chest that I hadn't been aware of eased. "Thanks." I let out a shaky laugh. "I grew it myself."

My laugh cut off when he wrapped a hand around my shaft. His skin was soft, but his grip was firm, and when he started stroking my cock in a lazy rhythm, a whimper escaped me.

Briar let out a soft laugh of his own. "Not that kind of boy, huh?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but the words got stuck in my throat when Briar pushed my knees apart and settled between them. He parted those candy-pink lips and wrapped them around the head of my cock.

My back arched, a jolt of pleasure running through me. I'd had blow jobs before, but they were nothing like this. Briar teased expertly around the head with the tip of his tongue, and the velvet heat massaging my shaft as he took more of me into his mouth had me gasping for breath. He splayed one hand over my stomach, holding me in place as he bobbed and sucked and drove me slowly insane. I squirmed under the weight of his hand, my fingers scrabbling desperately at the fabric of my comforter, but I couldn't do anything but lay there and take whatever he dished out—and I fucking loved it.

Briar pulled off and licked a wide stripe up my dick before blowing gently against the damp skin, the contrast sending a shudder rippling through me. My cock pulsed, leaking precum, and he swiped his thumb over the head and licked it clean as he grinned at me, eyes flashing. Then he took his hand off my stomach and reached out, grabbing my hand and guiding it up to his hair. His voice was hoarse when he said, "Go on. Fuck my throat."

Holy fuck.

His spine curved into a low arch as he sank down, setting both hands on my thighs and swallowing around my cock. I'd never seen anything prettier.

I rolled my hips and fucked up into his mouth like he'd told me to, not holding back. I pulled instinctively on his hair, and Briar let out a low, pleased groan. Heat raced through my veins, and my arousal coiled tight in my gut at the wet sounds Briar made as he sucked my cock. My dick was heavy with the urge to come, and I tugged harder on Briar's hair in warning.

He didn't pull away but instead hummed around my aching length, and that was all it took for my orgasm to roll over me like a freight train. Everything was reduced to heat and pleasure thundering through me, reaching right down into my bones.

It took a minute before I became aware that someone was making low, desperate noises, and a moment more before I realized that someone was me. Briar swallowed and sucked, cleaning my softening cock with little kitten licks, only stopping when I shuddered, oversensitive.

He pulled off and shimmied up the bed, where he sprawled on top of me. I blinked up as he grinned and asked, "What's your name?"

"No clue," I mumbled, still coming down from what I would forever think of as a dolphin high, thanks to Marty.

His grin widened. "Good."

I draped an arm over his back, my fingers skating over soft, cool skin. His erection was a line of heat against the crease of my thigh, and I had a sudden urge to taste it. I rolled us over, enjoying the indignant squawk Briar made when his back hit the mattress. We both knew he was in charge here, but that didn't mean I couldn't at least pretend to have the upper hand sometimes.

Briar arched an eyebrow at me. “What are you doing?”

I drew a breath. “It’s my turn.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You don’t have to say it like you’re getting a shot. Like, wow, you’re doing me such a big favor or something.”

Prickly, argumentative Briar was back. And usually I liked that guy but not right now.

“Shut up, Briar,” I said, “and let me suck your dick.”

And he shut up and let me suck his dick.



### ELEVEN

My dad once told me that college was all about experiencing new things.

This was probably not what he'd meant.

Although given his man crush on Idris Elba, maybe it was.

I was on top of Briar, my weight on my hands and knees, stuck between his accusing, challenging stare and his dick. Like, I was going to have to deal with something, and those were my two choices. And I wished that he hadn't turned this moment into a kind of a test and had just given me a minute to get here at my own pace, because what I really wanted was to make Briar feel as good as he'd made me feel, but somehow now I was stuck in a standoff with his attitude. And, again, his dick. And I was absolutely going to blow him—that had always been the plan—but it would have been nice if we'd been kissing right now instead of him eyeballing me like he was about to ask me if I wanted to go outside and fight.

I shuffled down the bed with zero grace, slotting into the space where Briar had his thighs spread wide. I didn't dare look up and meet his gaze, in case he said something snarky again. I leaned down and licked the head of his dick before I could overthink it and relished the small, shocked squeak he made, as though he'd really expected I wouldn't do it and that I'd chicken out at the last moment instead. Briar's cock tasted of skin and salt and sweat, and I was surprised how much I liked it.

But then, I'd always preferred salty over sweet. Maybe that was why Briar appealed to me. And, as I licked the head of his cock a second time, I discovered another thing

I really liked when he made that squeaking noise again—proving Briar wrong about me.

I couldn't pretend I knew exactly what I was doing. I was mostly working on instinct and on what I liked, but it wasn't as though dicks were complicated, right? Like, you just started sucking and eventually something would happen. But what surprised me was how much I was enjoying it, from the moment I closed my lips around the head of his cock and tried to see how much I could take in my mouth. I'd thought I was blowing Briar to satisfy my curiosity and because I wanted to make him feel good. But instead, the taste of his cock, the slide of it between my lips, and the way Briar made those noises and his legs twitched... it started a low burn of arousal in my gut that built higher and higher until my dick was valiantly trying to stage a comeback. Giving head was hot, and I wasn't even that great at it yet.

"Casey!" Briar didn't sound like he was arguing now. He was begging, which was fucking music. One of his hands found my hair and tugged.

I pulled back for long enough to get a glimpse of his wide-eyed face and then leaned back in to pay some attention to his balls. They were already tightly drawn up, like he was going to blow any second now. I wondered if that was because of my sloppy blow job, or if he'd been like that since he'd had my dick in his mouth. I licked his balls, just because I could, and Briar shuddered and squirmed and just about ripped a handful of hair from my scalp.

"Casey!" he whined and almost jackknifed off the mattress when I went back to his cock. I got my hand around it to hold it at the right angle. The neatly trimmed hair at the base rasped against my skin. I leaned in, and this time when I got my lips around his cock, I sucked as hard as I could. "Casey!"

I grinned around my mouthful of dick. Maybe I was better at this than I'd thought. Briar's cock pulsed, and my mouth flooded with the salty tang of precum.

“Casey, I’m gonna come!” Briar yanked my hair again in clear warning.

I considered swallowing for about a second before thinking better of it. I wasn’t a pro yet; I was still in the Little League of blow jobs, even though I’d had a great first game. So I gave Briar’s dick one last lick before pulling off—just in time for warm streaks of cum to hit my cheeks and chin. My mouth fell open in shock—and a spurt of cum landed in there too.

I lurched upright. “Holy shit!”

“Casey, I…” Briar stared at me, his chest heaving, and then he started laughing. “I didn’t mean to do that, I swear!”

“I—” I blinked down at him and felt my own mouth curving up into a grin. I wasn’t even mad. If anything, I was flattered—flattered and sticky. I climbed off him. “I have wet wipes.”

Briar sat up, shuffling backward. “Casey?”

“What?”

“Come here.” He reached out and caught me. “You don’t need wet wipes.”

“I’m pretty sure that?—”

He pulled me back onto the bed and swallowed the rest of my words with a kiss.

And this, this was what I’d wanted earlier—Briar kissing me like he craved it—like he craved me—and I melted into it. Then Briar laughed softly and pushed me onto my back. He lay against me, on his side, with one arm flung over my chest, and I turned my head hoping for another kiss.

I didn't get one, not exactly. Instead, Briar pressed his mouth to my cheek and licked. It took me a second for the penny to drop—he was licking up his cum. And it should have felt dirty and filthy in the best possible ways, but, weirdly, it was too sweet for that. This was a tender gesture, not a teasing one. I liked it.

His tongue rasped against my cheek as he licked his way across my face, leaving damp trails on my skin, and I rethought my earlier assessment that this was too sweet to be filthy, because it turned out to be a case of “both is good.”

Briar exhaled softly, his breath warm against my cheek, and then rolled away and rose to his feet.

“You're not leaving?” I asked, my heart racing and my stomach lurching. It was what Briar always did, but I'd hate it if it happened tonight. After our date and after everything else, when I'd hoped we were getting closer.

He shot me a look and then smiled as color crept up his cheeks. “I have to go to the bathroom, but I'm coming back.”

“Good,” I said. “I'd like that.”

He turned away, bending down to pick up his skinny jeans. Then he discarded them and reached for a pair of my jeans instead, which was fair. They'd be a lot easier to get on than his. He stepped into them and then grabbed my shirt as well. He was way too skinny to wear my clothes, but it looked cute on him because I knew they were mine.

He padded out of the room barefoot, leaving the door ajar.

Holy shit.

I stared at the ceiling and tried to recenter myself after Briar had thrown my universe off tilt in the best possible way. I was falling hard for him, and I wished I knew if he was feeling the same way for me. Briar played his cards very close to his chest, but I thought tonight was a turning point. He was staying over. That had to mean something, right?

Light flashed as a phone buzzed on the floor. I rolled over onto my side and reached down for it. I didn't know if it was mine or Briar's. Briar's, probably. He must have dislodged it from his jeans when he'd dropped them again. I didn't want him to step on it when he got back. My fingertips found it at last, and I grabbed it, intending to put it on my bedside table.

The screen lit up, displaying the preview screen, and I looked without meaning to.

The text was from someone called Alan.

Hey. It's been a while, are you free for dinner this week?

My heart squeezed in my chest.

Who the fuck was Alan?

I put the phone back on the floor, my heart still racing.

Moments later, Briar slipped back inside the room and began to undress.

"Hey," I said. "I think you got a text?"

"Huh." Briar picked up his phone, his face illuminated by the screen as he checked it. Then he slid the phone into the pocket of his skinny jeans and crawled back into bed with me, tugging the comforter up over both of us.

It felt good, cuddling up with him. Too good to be true.

“Nothing important?” I asked, keeping my voice casual.

“No.” Briar rested his head on my chest. “Just Charlie wanting my English notes.”

And then he dozed off, the hollow feeling in my gut growing larger and larger as I lay there and wondered what he was hiding.

When I woke the next morning, Briar was still asleep next to me, his dark hair peeking out from under the comforter. It looked like a small furry animal, and I itched to pet it, but I couldn’t be certain that Briar wouldn’t roll over and snap at my fingers—also like a small furry animal. Plus, my brain chose that second to remind me that the last words Briar had said to me before he’d fallen asleep had been a lie.

Thanks, brain. You’re an asshole.

I slipped out of bed and pulled on my jeans, pushing the thought aside. Whatever Briar’s deal was, I’d worry about it later. For now, I’d been brought up to treat my dates right, and the polite thing to do after someone stayed over was bring them breakfast.

It was later than I usually woke up. The day was overcast, so maybe that was why I’d slept in. The house was still pretty quiet as I headed down the stairs, but I could hear the TV playing in one of the lounges and faint voices from the kitchen. I didn’t run into anyone as I let myself out of the house.

Fraternity Row at this hour on a Monday morning was this weird twilight zone space, where it seemed like it should have been busy, but anyone who had classes was at them, and everyone else was still waking up, so it was quiet.

It only took ten minutes to get to Marty's favorite donut place, Hole Foods, and I was lucky enough to snag a parking space right out front. I went inside and was surprised as hell to see Charlie behind the counter, wearing a pink hat that clashed horribly with his red hair and a striped apron that made him look like a lollipop.

"Hey, Casey," he said, straightening up and looking a little self-conscious. "What can I get you?"

"I didn't know you worked here."

"It's only my second shift," he said. "Marty got me the job. He's pretty tight with the owner."

Probably because he spent a fortune here every opportunity he got. "I thought you got that accommodation grant."

"Oh, yeah." Charlie beamed. "It's great. Like, amazing. But my folks are kind of struggling a bit at the moment, so if I pick up a few shifts here a week, I don't need to ask them for money for clothes and stuff, you know?" He gestured at the menu board. "So, what can I get you?"

"Two maple bacon, two Boston cream, and two vanilla glaze." Briar had to like at least one of those, right?

Charlie put the assortment into a box for me and only hesitated a moment before adding two more. "Salted caramel," he said, grinning at me. "Briar's favorite."

Of course Charlie knew that Briar hadn't come home last night.

"Thanks, man." I paid and tipped him a twenty—partly for the inside info and partly because I appreciated the fact he hadn't given me shit about my first date with a guy.

I figured that the other brothers wouldn't be so restrained. There would definitely be questions about going from girls to a guy from the straight bros... and the not-so-straight ones.

Charlie beamed when I put the twenty in the tip jar, and I grabbed the box of donuts and headed back to campus. On my way, I thought about what he'd said. About his parents struggling. It must have been rough. That led to me wondering about Briar's nonexistent relationship with his family. Who was paying for his college? I knew he wasn't on any academic scholarships—that would have come up on his application for Alpha Tau back in rush week—so was he on student loans or something? Had he used them to pay for his fraternity fees? Shit, maybe he needed a job as well because student loans were brutal.

And then I remembered that text, and my brain made an ugly leap.

Just, Briar was superhot, right? Like, I would pay hundreds of dollars per month on his OnlyFans if he had one. Hell, in his hot-as-fuck shoes with killer heels, I'd probably set one up myself.

But that was dumb. That wasn't something broke college students did for real, was it? OnlyFans and cam shows and sugar daddies and shit like that?

But that text was still circling around in my head, and I couldn't help thinking that maybe Briar had a job, and maybe that job was Alan.

No, that was crazy.

My dumb self had taken one plus one and had somehow come up with five.

Right?



Right.

There was nothing weird going on with Briar at all.

When I got back to my room, Briar had gone. He'd even pulled the comforter up over the bed before he'd left, hiding the rumpled sheets. Holding my box of donuts, I headed upstairs.

When I knocked on the door of Briar's room, there was no reply, but as I stood there, a hand landed on my shoulder. I spun around to find Briar standing behind me, his hair damp and a towel wrapped around his waist.

"Hey," I said.

He stared at me, his expression guarded. I realized too late that leaving him to wake up alone probably hadn't been my smartest move. Hell, he probably thought I'd ditched him.

I cleared my throat. "I went and got us breakfast. I probably should have let you know."

He relaxed the barest fraction. "Oh, you think?"

There was still a barb in his tone, but I was starting to understand there was no avoiding those by groveling. So instead of trying to, I shrugged and said, "Sorry. Next time I'll risk waking you up."

His eyebrows shot up. "Oh, you'll risk it? What exactly do you think happens when I wake up, Casey?"

"I don't know. But you're such a prickly little shit the rest of the time, I figured you'd

probably bite me or something.” I could see him fighting back a smile, so I figured I was at least part way to unfucking my fuckup. I held out the box. “Donuts? I got you salted caramel.”

“I love salted caramel,” he said suspiciously.

I was pretty sure that suspicious was his default mode. And, worse than that, it was contagious.

“Hey,” I said as I followed him into his room, “did you know Charlie’s working at the donut shop?”

“Of course.” Briar gestured for me to sit on his bed and went and rummaged around in his drawers. Then he dropped the towel and stepped into a pair of black boxer briefs, giving me an eyeful of his amazing ass. They were basic Hanes boxer briefs, but somehow on Briar they looked as sexy as any lingerie. He shrugged into a loose tee and pulled on a pair of jeans before turning to face me.

“I guess he needs the money,” I said.

“Well, yeah. College is expensive,” Briar said, sitting down on the bed and opening the donut box. “Was it Charlie who told you I like salted caramel?”

“Yeah.”

He took a bite of a salted caramel. “That’s so good.”

I selected the other one from the box and ate it while I glanced around the room. It was about the same size as my and Marty’s room on the floor below with the same sage-colored walls—I think Jamie had said they were sage that time she came and visited—and white trim. Twin beds, twin desks with twin chairs, twin bedside

cabinets, and twin white closet doors on the back wall. There was a window beside Charlie's bed that overlooked the side yard and let in the light.

"You guys don't have any posters or anything up yet?" I asked, nodding at the bare hooks on the walls.

Briar sucked glaze off his thumb. "I've been here two days. Not all of us came to college with our beer posters framed and ready to go."

"I challenge you to find a single beer poster in anyone's room."

Briar hummed. "I'm pretty sure Knox has a Coors poster in his room. With a cowboy on it."

"That's vintage."

"Still a beer poster."

I snorted. "Yeah, okay. But you must have had something on your wall in your dorm at Harvey, right?"

He gave me a sidelong look. "I guess. I have no idea where it is though."

"So you still keep in touch with anyone from there?" I asked, thinking of his text from Alan.

His eyes narrowed to slits. "No."

I nudged the donut box closer to him. "What about from here? Have you made any friends outside Alpha Tau?"

“Why are we playing Twenty Questions?”

“It’s nothing. I’m just making conversation, that’s all. Try the Boston cream.”

You ever watched those shelter dog videos on YouTube, where the dogs are all growly and distrustful, and someone has to try to inch closer and closer to them without getting bitten? This conversation felt a lot like that. Like, eventually I might be able to scratch Briar behind the ears, but I’d probably lose some blood along the way.

Briar took a Boston cream.

“Have you seen the uniform Charlie has to wear?” I asked him. “It’s pink. Pink is not his color.”

Briar snorted. “It’s really not.”

“It’s not like he has any choice though,” I said. “Not if it’s his uniform. That’s the shitty thing about jobs, I guess. Like, you can’t tell them you’re not gonna wear a pink shirt because you need the money too much. What about you? Have you ever thought about looking for a job around here?”

Oh, nice segue, idiot. Totally subtle.

“What?” Briar scrunched up his face. “No.”

“Because I know you’re not on great terms with your family,” I said. “Like you said, college is expensive. So I was just wondering if they’re paying your tuition, or if you have loans, or?—”

“Casey.” His voice was cold. He dropped the half-eaten Boston cream back in the

box. “What the fuck is going on? Why are you asking all these weird questions about shit that is none of your business?”

“Because...” I thought of the text I’d seen. I thought of the number of times Briar had dodged anything I tried to ask him about his old college. I thought of every moment he kept me at arm’s length, when that wasn’t what this was supposed to be. “Because you’re my boyfriend,” I blurted out, “and I want to know things about you.”

Briar froze, his jaw dropping. It took him a long moment to close it again and to blink himself back into the conversation. “I’m your what?” he asked in a quiet voice.

My stomach twisted, and a million different insecurities rose up inside me like a drain about to overflow. “You’re my boyfriend. Aren’t you?”

Briar’s dark eyes grew wide, and then he blinked again, rapidly this time, and looked away. “Um. We never actually talked about that.”

“We didn’t?” Oh, shit. We didn’t. “I... I guess I just kind of assumed. Like, we went on a date, and it was great, and I guess I thought that means we’d go on another date soon, and a bunch more after that, and we’d be... a thing.”

Briar still wasn’t looking at me. “You know what they say about assuming, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Looks like I’m proving that right.”

He snorted and darted a quick look my way. Then he got interested in the donut box again. He picked up the rest of his slightly smooshed Boston cream. “Maybe not.”

Hope swooped in my gut. “No?”

He set the donut down again and turned his head to look at me properly. “I haven’t had a boyfriend before.”

“Well, me neither.”

“But I guess I could give it a try,” he said, and the way his voice wavered as though he still wasn’t sure made me want to grab him and kiss him until he was as onboard for this as he was for a hookup in the basement.

“I could too,” I said.

“Okay,” he said faintly and flashed me a quick smile before he looked away again. Except this time he reached out for my hand and hooked his little finger around mine.

“Okay,” I echoed. It was no mind-blowing kiss, but unless I was reading Briar all wrong, it was a huge step for him, and it was one he’d agreed to take with me, together, as boyfriends.

I could work with that.

### TWELVE

On Wednesday night, Briar wasn't at supper. I waited until afterward to go see if he was okay or if he maybe wanted to study together. I knocked on his bedroom door, and when he opened it, he had a long black peacoat slung over his arm. His hair was teased into a wild, dramatic style, he was wearing eyeliner and lip gloss, and he was dressed in a fitted navy cable-knit sweater, black jeans, and Doc Martens.

"What do you want?" he asked, his body blocking the doorway. "I have somewhere to be."

Huh. He hadn't mentioned going out when we'd had lunch together, but that didn't mean anything. Briar stored information like a doomsday prepper hoarded ammunition, and he was about as eager to share it. "You look nice. Where are you going?"

"Out." He stepped into the hallway and started walking toward the stairwell.

I hurried to catch up. Dating Briar seemed to consist of a whole lot of me trying to catch up, honestly. I followed him downstairs. "I was just wondering if you wanted to get together and study."

He stopped on the first-floor landing, turning to face me. "You don't want to study with me. It would be a waste of time. You've already taken my classes."

"I haven't taken the LSAT though, and you have."

His brows pulled together, and his mouth tightened into a thin line. Then his phone pinged, and he pulled it from his back pocket, checking the screen. His expression smoothed out. “My ride’s here.” He shrugged into his coat and after a moment’s hesitation, leaned in and kissed my cheek. “I might come by your room later?”

“Yeah,” I said, my throat tight. “I’d like that.”

He clattered down the stairs and out the door before I had a chance to follow him and see who he was meeting.

Not that I was planning to because that would be weird and stalkery. Briar didn’t have to check in with me before he made plans, and it was none of my business who he was meeting up with.

Except I couldn’t stop thinking about that text from the weekend. Free for dinner this week?

Briar had lied about the text, I knew. But then again, we hadn’t been actual boyfriends at that time. And let’s be real, we’d both been pretty fucked out at the time, so maybe it hadn’t been the right moment to get into a conversation about who was texting him.

And maybe it was none of my damn business, and I should stop freaking out over nothing.

I took a deep breath and went back downstairs and found Marty. He was lying on the couch in one of the smaller living areas with Squirrel sprawled next to him. He sat up when he saw me. “Hey, bro.” He looked past me. “Is your boo okay? He missed supper.”

I tried to imagine what Briar would do if I tried calling him my boo. Smother me in



my sleep, probably. I slumped down into an overstuffed armchair. “He’s gone out.”

“Oh, okay.” Marty petted Squirrel, and the dog stirred and jumped off the couch before sitting directly in front of Marty and staring at him intently. “Hey, boy, you need a walk?” Squirrel’s tail thumped against the floorboards, and Marty said, “You wanna come walk Squirrel with me?”

The idea of getting out of the house was actually pretty appealing right now, so I nodded and went to get my hoodie while Marty wrestled the dog into a fancy-ass dog coat made of fabric that had the Alpha Tau logo in a repeating pattern all over it. The coat had appeared out of nowhere when the weather first started to turn cold. Scout had never admitted it, but the coat had to have been custom-made, so we were all pretty sure it came from him.

I stuffed my hands into the pocket of my hoodie, and we meandered along under the streetlights in comfortable silence for a while, taking our time so that Squirrel could sniff around the bases of all the trees. Hanging out with Marty and breathing in the cool night air helped get me out of my thoughts, and I relaxed as we made our way along Fraternity Row.

“Where’s Dalton tonight?” I asked.

Marty gave an easy shrug. “Studying doctor stuff with a couple of guys from his biology class. They have a big test coming up. Hey, did you know the human body has 206 bones?”

“Um, no?”

“Well, it does. I’ve learned some hella interesting stuff dating a future doctor.” He paused so Squirrel could take a leak. “Hey, did you and Briar ever start studying for the LSAT?”

I ducked my head and examined the shadows the lights were casting on the sidewalk. “Not exactly. Briar’s schedule’s been kind of hard to pin down.”

“Huh.” Marty didn’t say anything else, but we’d been roommates for long enough that I knew a loaded huh when I heard one.

“What?”

Marty shrugged as we continued walking. “Just, it’s real weird that he stopped mentioning the LSAT as soon as he got into the fraternity. Like, if I had a score like his, you couldn’t get me to shut up about it. And have you noticed that he never gives a straight answer when you ask him something?”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. I didn’t want to have this conversation, but at the same time, I felt like I needed to. Marty was pretty good at seeing things other people didn’t, so maybe talking to him would help me figure out if I was expecting too much from Briar, or if there was something I was missing. “I guess since he got burned pretty bad at his last college, he’s extra cautious.”

Marty raised his eyebrows. “Bro. There’s cautious, and there’s whatever the hell Briar’s deal is. And I like Briar, don’t get me wrong, and Squirrel likes him too, so that’s a mark in his favor, but you know something in the milk ain’t clean.”

I released a long breath. “You’re not helping my paranoia, Marty.”

“Yeah, but is it paranoia if it’s true? Because when it comes to anyone asking about his grades and the LSAT, Briar’s slipperier’n a well lubed dick. And let me tell you, that’s plenty slippery. He’s hiding something.”

Marty wasn’t wrong. Briar ducked and dodged with all the skill of an inveterate liar. And sure, if he’d spent half his life pretending to be someone he wasn’t, it made

sense that he'd be reluctant to share all the parts of himself. But that didn't explain why he got so prickly every time someone mentioned something as innocuous as his college courses.

We reached the end of the row and crossed the street for the walk back, and I let out a sigh.

"I know he's lying to me," I admitted, "but not about anything I can call him out on. Because it's none of my business to start with. Besides, he has a good reason for us not studying together. He said it didn't make sense because I'm ahead of him."

Even as I said it, I wasn't buying it—and neither was Marty.

"Well that's bullshit for a start," he said. "Because he has that awesome LSAT insider knowledge, and you'd think he'd be happy to share. Plus, Dalton and I aren't even in the same courses, but we still study together, which is how I get to learn about bones and stuff. Of course, he also sucks my dick to keep my grades up, so, y'know. Maybe suggest that as a sweetener."

I snorted despite myself. "Not everything's about dick, Marty."

"No, but dick's pretty great, right?" His eyes twinkled under the streetlights, and his mouth curved into a grin. "Like, it's the best. Tell me I'm wrong."

My cheeks heated at the memory of Briar licking his cum off my face, all filthy-sweet, and despite my unease over what Briar wasn't telling me, a dumb smile spread over my face. "You're not wrong."

"Oh, man," Marty said, his grin widening. "You're totally gone on your pretty pledge."

“Shut up,” I said.

“That’s not a no,” Marty observed—and that right there was why he was going to win all his future cases and why I’d end up doing deceased estates and conveyancing. “You like him a lot.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I do.”

The question was, did Briar feel the same? Or was he playing me for some reason?

Some of what I was thinking must have shown on my face because Marty bumped shoulders with me in silent sympathy. Then he stopped in his tracks. “Oh, hey! I know! Remember how when Dalton and me started dating, you sat him down and threatened to hunt him to the ends of the earth and torture him until his soul left his body if he treated me bad?”

“I did not threaten to?—”

“Anyway,” Marty barreled on, excitement gleaming in his eyes the way it did when he was having one of his really terrible ideas. “I could do that to Briar! Like, I’d sit him down in the executive office, like I’m the godfather or something, and be all ‘Hey, my dude Casey is the best dude, and I need to know what you’re hiding from him,’ or some shit like that. And then I’ll stare him down until he cracks.”

“Jesus, Marty, no. You are not interrogating my boyfriend.” I shuddered at the thought of how Briar would react.

“Why not?”

“Because if you corner Briar and ask him personal shit, he’s likely to get mad enough that he’d rip your arm off and beat you with it.”

“Nah. He’s probably only a hundred pounds soaking wet. I could take him.”

I sighed and ran a hand down my face. “Remember the time that squirrel got mad at you and bit you?”

Marty grimaced. “Yeah. I still have a scar.”

“Now imagine Briar’s that squirrel, only the squirrel is angry.”

Marty stared into the distance for a second, brow creased, before he said, “Oh,” in a small voice. “Maybe I won’t do that, then.”

“Yeah, good call. I’ll figure it out, I guess. And hey,” I said with a confidence I didn’t quite feel, “maybe he’s not hiding anything. Maybe he’s just bad at talking. And feelings. And dating.”

Marty flung one arm across my shoulders and squeezed me tight against his side as we walked up the driveway of Alpha Tau. “For the record, whatever Briar’s deal is, he’s totally into you.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah. Haven’t you noticed the way he watches you when he thinks nobody’s looking? He gets this real dumb little smile. It’s like he can’t believe you’re for real, you know?”

I did know, and I felt the same way—like Briar was too good to be true, and if I blinked, he’d disappear in a cloud of glitter and sarcasm.

I smiled as I thought of him in his stockings and lip gloss.

Marty was right. Whatever my doubts about Briar were, one thing was certain.

I was completely gone on him.

I was still awake when the bedroom door cracked open, and light spilled in from the hallway a little after ten that night. I rolled over and saw Briar silhouetted against the door, and something settled in my chest. “Hey,” I said quietly.

Briar took a step inside the room. “Were you waiting up for me?”

I kept my tone light. “Well, yeah.”

“Checking up on me?” The way he asked suggested that there was a right and a wrong answer, and I’d better choose carefully.

I propped myself on my elbows and flicked on the bedside lamp. “Briar, when my pretty boyfriend promises to come visit me, you’d better believe I’m staying awake.”

I pulled the comforter back and patted the mattress, and Briar’s mouth quirked into a tentative smile.

There was a soft thumping sound on the floor as he closed the distance between the door and my bed—Squirrel’s tail hitting the floor as he wagged it in welcome. In the bed across from mine, Marty was crashed out and breathing deeply and steadily. At least he wasn’t snorting and snuffling tonight.

Briar sat down on my mattress and began to unlace his boots.

I put a hand on the small of his back, just because it was nice to touch him. I wanted to ask how his night had been, but that felt like it was skirting dangerously close to “Where have you been?” and “Who were you with?” and a hundred other questions

that would make him bristle like a wet cat. I liked Briar a lot. I didn't like the way I felt insecure with him as my boyfriend. When we'd taken that step, it was supposed to settle the uncertainty in me, right? Not bring it into even sharper relief.

Briar took his boots off and stood up for long enough to peel his jeans down his legs. Then he lay beside me, facing me, and pulled the comforter up over our heads. He squirmed closer and kissed me. I'd thought he was going for a "Hi, I missed you, now let's go to sleep" kind of a kiss, but that wasn't what I got at all. What I got was slow, filthy, and raised the temperature in our little comforter cave by about six million degrees in seconds.

"I'm not having sex with Marty in the room," I whispered to him.

Briar made an unhappy sound and slid a hand down my side, fingertips skating against the elastic of my boxers. Then he squirmed against me again, and I was pretty sure it was intentional. "We can be quiet."

"No way," I said. "I can't afford the cake, Briar."

"What?"

"Marty and Dalton thought they could be quiet too," I told him. "Marty bought me an apology cake. It had 'I'm sorry you heard me getting railed' on it."

Briar's body shook against me as he laughed. "Was it at least a nice cake?"

"Yeah, but not nice enough that it was worth it."

Briar stroked his fingers along my hip and leaned in and kissed me again. Snagged my bottom lip with his teeth and bit me with just enough pressure that every nerve in my body lit up. "Are you sure?"

“Bro,” Marty said sleepily from the other side of the room, “I promise I won’t listen.”

Briar froze, as wide-eyed as a raccoon caught in a porch light with his paws inside a trash can.

I laughed and pushed the comforter off us. I nudged Briar toward the edge of the mattress, which, given it was a twin, wasn’t that far away at all. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

I pulled a pair of sweatpants over my boxer briefs but didn’t bother with shoes or a shirt. It wasn’t like we were going outside. Briar tugged his jeans back on and fumbled over by my nightstand with his boots.

“Just leave them there,” I said.

He looked at Squirrel, looked at his boots, looked back at Squirrel again and then set his boots on top of the nightstand.

“Night,” Marty said around a yawn as we left the room.

“How about your room?” I asked, nodding in the direction of the stairs.

Briar shook his head. “Charlie always studies late.”

“Okay,” I said and caught him by the hand. I led him down the stairs instead of up. At first Briar wore a puzzled look, like he was wondering why the hell I was taking him into the part of the house most likely to have guys hanging around, but when we got to the basement door, he started to smile.

I opened the door and headed down the stairs.



The lights were on, and both Jameses were sitting on the floor with papers spread out between them.

“Urgent fraternity business,” I said. “I need this space.”

“Urgent fraternity business?” James asked. “At this time of night?”

“You can either choose to believe me, James Two, or this fraternity can go back to having just one James, which would honestly be much less confusing for everyone.”

I was only kidding, and by his snort and his grin he knew it, but he and James One started packing their shit up. I watched them, hands folded over my chest like I was being their hardass pledge master all over again, and Briar wandered over to the wall to look at the old photographs there.

“Have a good night,” James One said.

“Good luck with the urgent fraternity business,” James Two added.

The stairs creaked as they headed up them, and a moment before the door closed behind them, they began to laugh.

Briar darted up the stairs behind them, and I heard the lock click into place.

“That’s, um, a little embarrassing,” I said.

Briar shrugged as he rejoined me in the basement. “Why? We could be doing nothing, and they’d still tell everyone we were getting down and dirty, so we might as well get down and dirty, right?”

When he put it like that, it made perfect sense.

Still, I wasn't expecting it when he walked me backward to one of the old sagging armchairs and pushed me into it. I landed with enough force that my feet briefly left the floor, and Briar didn't waste any time, straddling my lap and leaning down to kiss me.

I closed my eyes and went with it, letting my hands slide over the curve of his ass as the kiss heated up. Briar's knees sank into the cushion, but I barely noticed him getting heavier because he started to grind against me, the denim of his jeans rasping against the soft fabric of my sweatpants.

I groaned against his mouth, and he nipped my bottom lip. He pulled back just far enough to whisper in my ear, "Can I ride you?"

My eyes snapped open—and I found myself looking into the steely gaze of Albert Watford III, 1924 fraternity president, as his portrait glared at me silently.

Talk about a mood killer.

"Wait." I gave Briar a gentle shove.

His brow creased, but he moved off me, standing with his arms folded over his chest like he was offended or something. When I stood and took the portrait down, though, he started to laugh. He was still laughing when I turned Albert to face the wall. "What? I can feel him judging me," I said, but I was laughing too.

"Do we need to move them all?" Briar asked, waving an arm at the portraits.

I settled back in the armchair to check. "Nah, just that guy."

Briar shook his head, his mouth still curved into a smile, and then pulled his sweater off. He unzipped his jeans and shimmied out of them, along with his boxers. He was

already half hard, and he curled his fingers around his dick and started jerking himself off so openly that I almost blushed on his behalf. Then my brain caught up, and I remembered that this wasn't high school baseball camp, and Briar actually wanted me to watch him.

He was so hot.

I slid my sweatpants down and wrapped a hand around my own dick. "How—how is this gonna work?"

Briar blinked at me. "Oh, um, you've never done?—"

"I mean." I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I have, but not with a guy. That's not what I was talking about though. I mean like lube and a condom and stuff."

"Oh, I got that covered." He bent down and dug around in his discarded clothes. "I stole some from your nightstand when I was putting my boots out of the dog's reach."

"You're so fucking smart."

He grinned. "Someone's gotta be."

My laugh was drowned by the flood of heat that swept over me as Briar straddled me again. He held the condom between his lips as he fiddled with the lube. How the fuck was I going to kiss him unless I took it out? I reached out and pulled the condom free and set it on the arm of the chair. But when I went in for a kiss, Briar dodged me, then straightened up and shifted his weight backward. It wasn't until he moved his glistening fingers around behind himself that I realized what he was doing.

He bit his lower lip, his gaze dark and heavy as he stared down at me. "Feel free to play with my tits while I do this, Casey."

A jolt of lust—and shock—went through me. But never let it be said that I couldn't take a hint. I leaned forward and mouthed at his nipple, and I must have been doing it right because he let out a gasp, and a shudder ran through him.

At first, I thought the wet heat against my abdomen meant he'd come already, but when I pulled back to look, it was precum. It was a lot. He was so hot for this—for me.

I teased at one nipple with my teeth while rolling the other between my thumb and forefinger and pinching lightly, drinking up the noises he made and the way he arched into my touch.

“Okay,” he said, breathless. “Okay. Condom.”

I tore the wrapper open with shaking hands and fumbled the condom on. I hadn't been this uncoordinated with a condom since I was thirteen years old and in an awkward conversation with my dad that involved a banana. I was nervous and excited all at once, and it felt like a miracle I got it on without putting my thumb through it.

No, scratch that.

The miracle was when Briar grabbed my dick to hold it steady, lifted himself up onto his knees and then sank slowly onto my dick. His eyes fluttered shut, and his mouth fell open as his tight heat clenched around me. He let out a small, shocked sound, then eased himself down farther, engulfing me in satiny soft flesh that had my cock throbbing.

“Mmm,” he said. He opened his eyes. “Yeah.”

Which pretty much summed it up, I guessed, and was more than I was capable of saying in the moment.

Briar held my gaze and then squirmed a little, sending a jolt of pleasure through me. And then, probably because I shuddered, he lifted the corners of his mouth in a wicked smile and squeezed.

A whine left my throat, and his smile widened.

“Do you like that, Casey? Being inside me?” He clenched around my cock, and it was all I could do not to come on the spot. It was probably only the lingering spirit of Albert Watford III that stopped me. Who needed to run through all the state capitals when Albert and his silent judgment were in the room?

“I love it,” I managed to say, my fingers finding his hips in what might have been a vain attempt to pretend I was even a little bit in charge of setting our pace here.

Briar wasn't fooled. He put his hands on my shoulders to steady himself and started to bounce, letting out little gasps every time he sank down on my cock. He set a fast pace, and the way my dick felt sinking into the heat of him was fucking phenomenal. I gave up any semblance of control and just went with it. I started to thrust up on the downstrokes, and I must have aimed right because Briar released a breathless moan and clenched down hard.

Not even Albert Watford III could stop me then.

“Jesus, Briar! I'm—” And before I could finish saying it, I already had.

Briar tilted his head back, the light gleaming on the sweat on his throat, and reached a hand between us. He jerked himself off, still clenching around me, and I sucked a mark on his shoulder, because something about Briar apparently brought out my animal instincts.

Briar came, hot and messy all over us both, and then sagged forward and put his head

on my shoulder. I ran my hands up and down his back. His muscles twitched as aftershocks worked their way through him.

And then, abruptly, he let out a weird giggle snort.

“What?” I asked, my voice rasping.

“You know how I said I was prepared?”

“Yeah.”

He leaned back so he could look me in the eye. “I didn’t bring a towel, and I think we’re gonna need one.” He widened his eyes as my gaze went to the floor, and he slapped me on the chest. “No! That’s my favorite sweater! We can use your pants.”

At that point he could have suggested mopping up with my mom’s wedding dress, and I wouldn’t have complained. “Okay, we’ll use my pants.”

Disengaging was slippery and messy. Putting on my sweatpants after Briar had wiped us both off was gross. Slipping the used condom into the pocket was even grosser, but not gross enough that I wouldn’t do it again. But the most surprising part of the process was when Briar didn’t immediately bail and instead pushed me back down into the chair again and climbed on top of me to cuddle.

To cuddle.

Briar.

If the sex hadn’t short-circuited my brain entirely, this would have. He rested his head on my shoulder. I couldn’t resist running my fingers through the riotous mess of his hair, smoothing out the snarls and tangles. I half expected him to tell me to stop

petting him like a dog, but he gave a contented hum and leaned into my touch. When I wrapped an arm around his back and pulled him closer, he didn't object to that either.

Maybe mine wasn't the only brain that had short-circuited.

We sat there for a while, and I enjoyed the weight of Briar's body against mine and pondered what it meant that he'd chosen to curl up against me like a contented kitten. It felt like we'd turned a corner or something, and he was starting to trust me.

I hoped so, anyway.

"So," I said quietly, "did you have a good time tonight?"

"Do you mean here, or in general?"

"In general." I waited for him to stiffen up, but he didn't.

"It was good."

He didn't say anything else, and neither did I. Instead, I kept my arms around him and enjoyed our closeness. If Briar had his secrets, they were his business until he decided he wanted to share them.

Because if he was starting to trust me, and I thought he was, then the least I could do was trust him in return.

### THIRTEEN

Briar and I didn't get too much shit for sneaking down to the basement that night, although I did wake up the next morning when Trey knocked on my door with a bucket, sponge, and a bottle of Clorox. I don't know what he thought had happened down there, but I saluted him, called him "prez" just to annoy him, and went and splashed some Clorox around in the basement to make him feel better.

Over the next few weeks, Briar and I got into a routine. Most importantly, so did Marty and me. We figured out a schedule of which nights he'd sleep over at Theta Phi with Dalton, and Briar could stay with me. It worked for the most part, just so long as I also sent Marty a text to remind him. He had about a million random tabs open in his brain at all times, so sometimes he missed stuff.

Archer started up an LSAT study group for anyone who was thinking of taking it in the next couple of months. We held it in the smaller of the downstairs living rooms. About a half dozen of us sat around with a bunch of practice tests, and Eli, Archer's boyfriend, rewarded correct answers with Twizzlers. Archer got kisses as well. Those two were cute as fuck. Briar said he wasn't interested in joining the study group, even though I pointed out that Eli came too—and Eli wasn't even prelaw. It wasn't really a huge deal. Hell, Briar had probably spent so long studying for it last year at his old school that he didn't ever want to look at it again. I felt the same way about Introduction to Applied Statistics. I'd somehow miraculously passed it in my first year, and now the plan was to avoid it for the rest of my college career. Possibly my life.

Briar hadn't joined any study groups that I knew of. But as Marty said when I



mentioned it in passing, “Maybe he’s study shy. Y’know, like pee shy, only with books. Can’t perform if anyone’s watching.”

“I think that’s just called ‘studies better alone.’”

Marty screwed his nose up. “That’s exactly what I said.”

I thought of how Briar liked to give me a show when he peeled down to his underwear, and the way he bossed me around in bed. Shy wasn’t a word I’d use to describe him. But then again, when he’d first come to Alpha Tau, he’d barely had two words to say, and he’d been curled up like a porcupine under threat, all prickly and unapproachable. It was only recently he’d let me see his soft underbelly, but it was as though taking that first step in trusting me had loosened something in him. He smiled these days and talked to the other guys more, and one night in the living room when we were all watching a movie, he’d climbed over James Two and Archer just so he could plant himself on my lap. He wore pink-tinted lip gloss to a game of flag football and left a sticky kiss on my cheek when I scored a touchdown. Marty called him a cutie one time and lived to tell the tale.

I discovered that Briar’s favorite comfort food was buttered noodles with garlic, and I learned how to make it the way he liked so it was ready for him every Thursday evening after his economics class—because he hated economics. We usually ate in the basement, away from the other guys and all the noise of a fraternity house at the end of the day.

“This is the first thing I learned to cook that wasn’t a Hot Pocket,” he said one evening, shoveling the noodles into his mouth. “I didn’t have garlic on it back then though. Just noodles and butter.”

“It 100 percent needs garlic though,” I said. “And also possibly mushrooms. And tomatoes. And some sort of sauce.”

“I think I was about ten,” he said. “I didn’t like garlic when I was ten.”

“Wow, you learned to cook when you were ten? Such an overachiever!”

Briar snorted and twirled his fork in the bowl. “Shut up.”

I leaned back in the old armchair. It was a squeeze to fit two of us when Briar wasn’t on my lap, but we managed. “We should bring a TV down here, so we’ve got something to look at instead of these old photos.”

He snorted again. “These old photos? When you were pledge master, you made us learn their names!” He put on a silly voice, which I think was supposed to be an impression of me. “‘This is your history now, pledges. To see where you’re going, you have to know where you came from.’”

“I have no idea who that’s supposed to be, but he sounds very wise.”

“He’s all right,” Briar said around a mouthful of noodles. “He’s a bit of a dick though.”

“Lucky you like dicks.”

That got a laugh out of him. “Lucky.” He shoved his bowl aside. “Speaking of dicks, did I ever tell you about my old roommate from Harvey?”

“Nope,” I said, keeping my voice soft.

Briar let out a breath, and it sounded as though he’d been holding it in for months. “His name was Gary. And he was okay at first. Like, I did the whole, ‘Hey, I’m Briar, and I’m gay, and I hope that’s not an issue,’ and he said he was cool with it. But it turned out I wasn’t the right sort of gay or something. Because one day I wore this

pink off-the-shoulder top to classes, and when I got back that afternoon, he'd gone through my stuff and tipped all my nail polishes onto my mattress and stamped my makeup into the rug." He shrugged. "It was like hundreds of dollars' worth of stuff. I'd had some of it since I was in junior high."

"What a fucking asshole," I said.

Briar darted a quick look at me and then glanced away again. "I'm just telling you because I guess you think, I don't know, that I had the shit kicked out of me in some hate crime. I didn't though."

"Just because it wasn't the worst thing that could happen, that doesn't mean it wasn't a bad thing." My chest hurt. "Is that when you moved?"

He laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "No. That was like a few months in. I had the rest of the year with him."

"What? As your roommate still?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't they move him?"

"I didn't have any proof it was him."

"Who the fuck else could it have been?"

He leaned against me and tucked his face into my side. "Yeah, that's what I said. But they just told me to make sure my stuff was secure in the future, like it was on me."

I couldn't imagine having to sleep in the same room, for months, with someone

who'd done that. Not because of the makeup but because of what they might do next. Property damage one minute; a punch to the face the next.

"Did he do... anything else?" I asked.

Briar shrugged. "Annoying shit. A spilled drink on my pillow, my course notes mysteriously getting thrown in the trash, that kind of thing. Dumb little stuff that could be explained away as an accident, you know?"

A part of me wondered how many Garys there were at Harvey and how easy it might be to track him down. The other part of me reminded me I was going to be a lawyer, and revenge stalking would look bad on my record. "Well, I'm glad you moved to Lassiter."

"Me too."

This was why he hadn't trusted any of us at first, I guessed. Maybe Gary had seemed like a good guy in those early days too. It made me glad all over again that we'd gotten rid of Ethan and explained why Briar had been angry on Charlie's behalf—he'd probably expected history to repeat itself.

"Thanks for telling me," I said. Which when I said it out loud sounded lame, but Briar obviously knew what I meant—thanks for trusting me—because he lifted his head and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. He tasted of butter and garlic, and I could feel the curve of his smile against my lips.

I liked Briar's smile a lot more than his scowl, and I decided I was going to do everything I could to see it more often.

I was in history when I got a text from Trey, but I didn't read it until I was out of class, because I wasn't enough of an idiot to look at my phone when Professor Stern

was speaking. If he didn't spot you, his TA would. That guy had eyesight like the raptors in Jurassic Park, and he could smell fear.

"Hey, any thoughts on our next fundraiser?" Allison asked, almost knocking me out with her backpack when she swung it over her shoulder.

"Are you admitting defeat over the candy drive yet?"

"I'm admitting nothing," she said. "Besides, it was good for the children's hospital, and that's what counts."

"That's what I'd say if I'd lost too. Like, pretend to take the moral high road and all."

This time she did smack me with her backpack, and it wasn't an accident since she had to take it off to do it.

We were both laughing as we got outside, and then Allison left for her next class, and I stood in the breezeway and dug my phone out.

Hey. Can you come and see me about Briar? Fraternity business, so please don't mention it to him.

I didn't like the sound of that.

Sure. When?

I didn't like the sound of his answer much either.

As soon as you can.

My first thought was that someone had beef with me dating a guy who'd pledged

under me and had put in a complaint to Trey, but I dismissed that almost immediately. We'd been dating for nearly a month, so if anyone had a problem with it, they were too late. Besides, I knew Trey would tell anyone who came to him with that bullshit to go fuck themselves. He'd tell them in very proper, presidential language, but they'd get the message. And then Scout would kneecap them in a dark alley when they were least expecting it, probably, just for bothering Trey. Well, that wasn't true. Scout would never do anything where he might get his clothes creased. He'd hire someone.

I hurried back to Alpha Tau, hands shoved into the pockets of my hoodie and the strings around my face pulled tight against the chill in the air. The hoodie smelled of Briar, since he'd been wearing it last night. Then, because he'd complained his hands were cold, he'd shoved them under my shirt and laughed when I yelped.

I had a knot in my gut as I climbed the porch steps at Alpha Tau. There was no way this was something good. Trey probably knew Briar still had classes for another hour. The fact he wanted to talk to me without Briar around wasn't a positive sign.

It wasn't just Trey waiting in the chapter executive office. It was Archer and Scout too.

"What's going on?" I asked uneasily, taking a seat as Scout closed and locked the door.

Trey leaned back against his desk. "Archer?"

Archer let out a breath. "So, did you know Briar's tanking his classes?"

"What?" That was impossible. "How the hell would you even know that?"

"Because Knox told me," Archer said. "He shares a bunch of classes with Briar, and

he says Briar has flunked every pop quiz they've had so far. Knox tried to talk to him about it, but Briar was all, y'know, Briar about it."

"He told Knox to fuck off and leave him alone," Scout said.

Well, that sounded like Briar, except...

"Except that has to be bullshit," I said. "He's a good student. He had a 3.6 GPA from Harvey."

Trey opened the file on his desk, and I recognized it as Briar's application to join Alpha Tau. "Yeah, that's what he said."

"What does that mean?" I bristled.

Scout raised an eyebrow. "That means that Trey thinks he's full of shit. And so do I."

I shot a hard stare at Archer. He looked miserable. "And so do you?"

"I don't know," Archer said. "Casey, I like Briar. But he never gives a straight answer, you know?"

I wished I didn't.

"Maybe it's just taking him a while to settle in," I said. "Changing colleges is a lot to deal with. Why don't we wait and see how he does with midterms?"

You ever feel like you're standing up against a hurricane, and you're holding just an umbrella? And that motherfucker for sure is going to flatten you, but you try to stand your ground anyway? And it wasn't the other guys who were the hurricane. The hurricane was Briar and the lies he'd told me.

Trey settled against the edge of the desk, running one hand through his hair as he sighed. “I just want to talk to him about it. See if maybe he can straighten things out.”

It was Trey’s turn to lie. A little chat with a new member about slipping grades? Hell, I’d given a few of them before and had once been on the receiving end of one. But those little chats didn’t take four of us in a locked office to set up. This was Trey laying the groundwork for some hard decision-making, something that went beyond the usual social probation and fines for typical fraternity infractions.

I almost felt sorry for him. It was his first year as president, and now he was having to balance his responsibility to the fraternity with his friendship with me as he considered the fate of my boyfriend. Add to that the inevitable accusations of discrimination he’d face if he kicked out someone as visibly different as Briar? No, I didn’t envy him that at all.

“So, what do you want?” I asked. “You want him to log into his Harvey account while you’re watching and download his transcript again?”

Trey didn’t say anything.

Scout did. “Well, that would probably help us figure out if he’s entirely full of shit or not, yes.”

“You can’t get him to do that,” I said. “We have an academic standard, but we’re a fraternity, not the fucking NSA. We don’t have the right to demand a background check.”

“We can’t legally demand it,” Trey agreed. “But we can ask.”

I looked to Archer again. “And you’re supporting this?”



Archer rubbed his face. “I think I am, yeah. Because nothing adds up about Briar.”

“You don’t know him like I do,” I said, right before I realized I’d just quoted every seventeen-year-old girl who ever dated a boy in a leather jacket with a motorbike and an STD.

“We don’t know him at all, Casey,” Archer said gently. “That’s why we’re trying to figure out what the hell is going on here. I’ve tried to talk to him about his old college, and he shuts me down.”

“Yeah, because he was treated like shit there.”

“I’ve tried to talk to him about his family, and?—”

“Same fucking deal, Archer!” My shout echoed off the office walls as the three of them stared at me.

“So, who’s paying his fraternity dues?” Scout asked. “This family that doesn’t want him?”

“Maybe he’s got student fucking loans, Scout,” I snapped. “That’s what people do when their parents aren’t made out of money. You know, regular people. If you ever bothered to speak to one of them, you might learn something.”

Scout just stared.

“Get the fuck out,” Trey said. His voice didn’t even change in tone. That made it scarier. “Get the fuck out, and don’t come back until you’re ready to apologize.”

“Yeah. Y’all are acting real ugly right now, Casey,” Archer said.

And I was. I knew I was, okay? Scout was super fucking generous, and he didn't flaunt his money or anything, not purposely. And he was plenty aware that college was expensive as hell. He'd secretly paid Charlie's fraternity dues, for fuck's sake. He'd only rubbed me up the wrong way because he wanted the same answers from Briar that I did, and it hurt to hear someone else saying out loud what I suspected already—that Briar was lying and had been all along.

And Scout didn't even know about the text from Alan.

"Scout, man, I didn't mean it. I'm sorry." I stood and extended a hand toward him.

He didn't take it.

I might have been ready to apologize like Trey wanted, but he wasn't ready to hear it yet. And that was fair because I'd been a complete asshole to him just now.

Archer stood up quickly. "Casey, let's go grab a soda."

"Yeah," I said, still looking at Scout. "Okay, let's do that."

I don't think I even saw Scout blink as Archer and I left the room.

In the kitchen, Knox grabbed the sandwich he was eating and bolted, so I guessed he'd figured out what meeting I'd just been to. I wanted to be pissed at him for telling Archer that Briar was tanking his classes, but none of this was Knox's fault. Besides, I still believed that stuff I told the pledges about how brothers looked out for each other. I could hardly hate Knox for looking out for Briar, right?

Archer grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator, handing it to me. Then he took one for himself and cracked it open. "Are you okay?"

I rolled the cold can against my forehead. “Nope.”

“It’s not like you to lose your shit,” Archer said.

“I felt like I was blindsided in there,” I said, my stomach twisting. “But the worst part is, it’s nothing I haven’t thought of myself. He lies. I know he does. But—but I don’t think he’s a bad guy, Archer.”

“I don’t think he is either. But something’s going on, and it’s our job to figure it out, right?”

“Right,” I said numbly.

Archer squeezed my shoulder and didn’t say anything else. What was there to add?

I hated how I felt that everything between me and Briar was about to come crumbling down. How certain I was that whatever happened next was going to force me to look back and realize I’d built everything up in my head, when really there was just nothing. I didn’t want to believe it—I didn’t want it to be true—but I felt like I was that guy in that old horror movie who was driving behind the log truck. I was strapped in, and there was no fucking dodging it.

I finished my Coke and crushed the can in my hand. “I gotta apologize to Scout, bro.”

“Yeah,” Archer said. “You really do.”

I left Archer finishing his Coke and went back to the chapter executive office.

Scout was leaning against the wall like he didn’t give a shit about anything, all casual. I knew him well enough to see through his bullshit.

“Hey,” I said, feeling like the biggest asshole in the world. “I’m sorry about before. It was a shitty thing to say.”

He pressed his mouth into a thin line and arched a brow.

“You’re a decent human being and a nice guy even if you try to hide it. I was the asshole, and I really am sorry.”

Scout narrowed his eyes at me. There was a moment’s silence, and then he muttered, “Okay. We’re good, bro.”

He extended his hand for an awkward fist bump, and I let out a relieved breath as our knuckles knocked together. Scout could hold a grudge like a world champion when he chose to, but it looked like he’d decided to let me off easy just this once.

There was a knock at the door, and Archer poked his head inside. “Briar’s back from classes. You want me to bring him in?”

Trey rolled his shoulders, let out a long breath, and sat behind the desk. “Yeah,” he said. “Let’s get this over with.” He sounded like a man about to order an execution.

And I felt like a man about to witness one.

### FOURTEEN

Briar smiled when he walked into the office and saw me. He was beautiful. He was wearing jeans and a white knitted sweater. The sweater had baggy sleeves that looked like they'd been slashed or something—there was probably a fashion term for it—and lacy inserts stitched in the gaps. It made him appear pretty and soft, but that illusion didn't last.

When he saw Trey and Scout, Briar's smile faded, and his brow creased. He dropped his backpack on the floor. "What's going on?"

Archer closed the door behind them.

"You want to take a seat, bro?" Trey asked, gesturing at the couch.

Briar looked at the couch, and then glanced back at Trey. "No. Bro."

All the hostility that had been slowly evaporating from him the whole time he'd been living with us was suddenly back, and it was as sharp as ever.

I sat down on the couch, hoping it'd encourage him to do the same.

It didn't.

"What's going on?" he asked again, his voice low.

"We just want to talk to you about some stuff," Trey said.

Briar folded his arms over his chest. “What sort of stuff?”

Trey flipped open the file on his desk. “Why you’re tanking your classes, for a start.”

“What?” Briar’s brow creased further, and then he rolled his eyes. “Fucking Knox, right? It’s no big deal. I suck at pop quizzes, that’s all. I can pull my grades up before exams.”

“You have a GPA of 3.6 from Harvey,” Scout said. “That’s pretty impressive. I wouldn’t expect someone with a GPA of 3.6 to have trouble with quizzes. And you got a—what was it? A 150 on your LSAT.”

“A 160,” I corrected, and Scout shot me a narrow look.

“Yeah,” Briar said, a little wide-eyed suddenly. “160.”

“Okay,” Trey said. “So, you know we have an academic standard in Alpha Tau. Like, we’re not gonna throw anyone out if they fail one class, but what we need is a commitment that you’re going to work towards upping your grades. If you have to retake a class, that’s fine.”

“I don’t,” Briar said. “I haven’t failed anything.”

“And this is like early intervention,” Archer said. He showed Briar an encouraging smile. “If you need help, or if you’re struggling because you had to change schools, we can figure out some strategies and stuff with you. Hell, we did it for Marty last year.”

“It’s probably tempting not to worry about your grades, what with having such an amazing LSAT score,” Scout said. “But you still gotta meet the requirements.”

Fuck. He just wasn't going to leave that alone, was he?

Briar shot him a death glare. "I haven't even failed anything yet. This is bullshit."

"Okay," Trey said. "But a part of what got you into Alpha Tau was your academic record. So, what we need going forward is a copy of your transcript from Harvey."

Briar's eyes narrowed.

"You can't ask for that," I said. "You know you can't."

Trey shrugged. "This whole discussion can be over the second we have it. It's really that simple."

Briar clenched and unclenched his fists. "What the fuck is this, Casey?"

I jolted when he said my name. "They think you lied about your GPA."

His gaze didn't leave mine. "And what do you think?"

There was no fucking way to answer that, was there? He knew it, and so did I. Our relationship had hit the rocks the moment he walked into this room and saw I was a part of this because one thing I didn't doubt for a second about Briar Pendelton was that he could hold a fucking grudge.

Still, I had to say something. "Briar, can't you just let them see your transcript?"

"Or your LSAT," Scout said. "We'd accept that as a show of good faith."

I thought Briar would tell us all to get fucked. Instead, he stared at me while he dragged his hand through his hair. Stared at me but said, "I think we are all aware,

Scout, that I have never taken the LSAT.”

I heard him, clear as day, but it took a moment longer for the words to actually sink in. It was so ridiculous that I almost wanted to laugh. I wasn’t aware he hadn’t taken the LSAT. It had never even crossed my mind, which made me the dumbest guy in the room—in the world—because even when Scout had grabbed onto it like a dog with a fucking bone, the penny hadn’t dropped for me.

“You lied,” I said. “You lied to get into Alpha Tau, and you didn’t even fucking like us. You lied to me.”

I didn’t even give a fuck about that shit. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. I was proud of Alpha Tau and proud of my part in vetting new members. It was just that the sudden realization that everything else between us had also been a lie felt so much bigger. Who cared if some asshole pledge wrote some bullshit on his fraternity application? But Briar had lied to me about who he was. About who we were. I’d spent the last few weeks falling for this guy, and the whole time he’d just been playing me.

“Who even are you, Briar?” I asked. My voice cracked. “Because I don’t think I can trust a single thing you’ve told me.”

“Casey,” Trey said sharply. “Not the time.”

It was a stark reminder that this wasn’t about me. Even though my world was falling apart, I was going to have to suck it up for now and deal with it later.

Note to self: schedule emotional meltdown for 8-8:30pm.

“So, what are our choices here?” Scout said.



Trey sat forward in his chair and set his elbows on the desk. “That’s up to Briar. If he helps us out, tells us exactly what his deal is, we can see if we can figure anything out. But we have to know what we’re dealing with here.” He let out a breath. “Briar?”

“Is that a plea deal you’re offering, counselor?” Briar’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “Fuck, you really all do get off playing at lawyers, don’t you?”

“We’re trying to help you,” Archer said, “but you gotta work with us.”

“Well maybe I don’t need your fucking help,” Briar snapped. “And hey, maybe I never wanted to be part of your special fucking lawyer club in the first place! In fact, you know what? You can shove your fucking fraternity right up your asses. I’m out.” His chest heaved, and his nostrils flared, and for a second there I thought he was going to start throwing punches. But he just turned on his heel and stormed out the door, leaving us staring after him.

After Briar left, I couldn’t move. It felt like my bones were made of lead, and standing was impossible. My stomach was tied in knots, and I didn’t know whether to laugh, cry, or throw up.

Probably not that last one. Scout would kill me if I ruined the good rug in Trey’s office. A weird hitching sound left me at the thought of it.

It was Archer who sank down onto the couch next to me. “Bro. You okay?”

I stared at him in disbelief. “Oh, yeah. I’m peachy, thanks. My boyfriend’s been lying to me, and now he’s leaving before I even get to speak to him properly, and I’m pretty sure we’re going to break up, but other than that, I’m absolutely fucking stellar.”

“Don’t be so dramatic and get off your ass and follow him,” Scout said, glaring at

me. “Someone has to.”

“What?”

Scout pinched the bridge of his nose. “Sure, he’s a lying little fucker, but he’s still a brother until we say he’s not. So you need to see if you can talk some sense into his stubborn ass, because he sure as fuck isn’t going to speak to anyone else right now.”

“And you think he’ll talk to me?”

“You’ve sucked his dick, Casey,” Scout said. “Well, I presume. I don’t need the details. My point is, he likes you more than he likes the rest of us.”

God, I wanted that to still be true. I had my doubts though. “I don’t know.”

Scout rolled his eyes. “Just go and do”—he waved a hand vaguely—“the thing you do as pledge master where you’re all understanding and shit. Pretend that Briar isn’t your boyfriend right now. This is a new brother having a meltdown, and I know you know how to deal with those.”

And the thing was, I did. Hell, Briar wasn’t the first brother who’d needed talking down. And I was good at it. So I had to put on my big boy pants, ignore my hurt feelings, and see if I couldn’t get Briar to at least talk to me.

“Fine.” I pushed myself to my feet.

Archer stood and wrapped his arms around me, patting me on the back in a gesture of encouragement. “You got this, bro.”

“Sure thing,” I said and went to find Briar before I could change my mind.

He was upstairs in his room, grabbing clothes and stuffing them into two suitcases with frantic movements. I knocked on the frame of the open door, and his head whipped around at the sound. His face was a picture of hurt, and he tensed at the sight of me. “What do you want? Have you come to make sure I’m leaving? Or are you checking that I’m not stealing the silverware?” His tone was sharp.

“Silverware’s in the kitchen,” I said. “And I wanted to see if you’d stay.”

He took two steps toward me, and I actually got my hopes up for a second there—right before he slammed the door in my face.

Okay then.

I looked up and down the hallway. James Two was looking out his door, and he gave me a thumbs-up and a grimace that I had no idea how to interpret. It probably meant something like “He’s going to eviscerate you, Casey, but it was nice knowing you.” Then he ducked back inside his room, presumably so he didn’t have to be a witness to my upcoming humiliation. I appreciated that.

“Briar?” I knocked gently on the door. “Bri?”

Of course he didn’t answer.

I turned around and leaned on the door for a moment. Talk to him, Scout had said, which was easier said than done with a door in my face. It wasn’t impossible though.

I slid down the door and landed on my ass on the floor. I stretched my legs out, figuring I was going to be here for a while, and then leaned my head back against the door.

“Okay,” I said. “Since you know we love playing at being lawyers, how about this?”

The facts in evidence. You're struggling in class. You told us you were on a 3.6 GPA from Harvey. That's hearsay though, right? So what we're trying to do, like the bunch of wannabe lawyers we are, is figure out the facts of the case. But also, like, your motive." I bumped my head against the back of the door. "I think this analogy is getting messy. Because real life lawyers aren't like Perry Mason. They don't solve the crime. Maybe I should go into tree law like Marty wants to."

I listened for a moment but only heard silence from inside Briar's room.

"I know you've lied about stuff," I said. "Not just school stuff. And I want to say I don't care about that, but I can't—not until I know the reason why. Like—here's another legal term—mitigating circumstances. That's a thing. And I get that you hate to share shit with people, but... but sometimes, that's the only way to get help. And you're probably in there right now making that scrunched up face of yours and telling yourself you don't need help, but I think you do, Briar." I had to clear my throat because it was stinging. "And even if you don't want my help, I think you need someone's help."

Silence. Then, "Keep talking."

"I really like you," I told the hallway. James Two's door snicked shut, and I closed my eyes as though that would stop me from thinking about how many guys could conceivably be listening in right now. Only one of them mattered. "You're the first guy I ever kissed. My first boyfriend. And maybe it's dumb, but I thought we really had something."

There was a soft thud on the other side of the door that sounded suspiciously like someone sitting their ass down to listen.

"I made stupid plans in my head," I said. "But I never mentioned them because I figured it'd freak you out. I wanted to take you home and introduce you to my sister."

She's super cool. You can't tell her I said that though. Tell her I said she was a bitch. She'll believe that. Anyway, her name's Jamie, and she knows about you. She knows I had a huge crush on you before we even did anything." I let out a long breath. "My parents don't know but only because I didn't think it was a conversation to have over the phone. They'll be chill. My mom is bi, and my dad says he's not, but he has what he calls a man crush on Idris Elba, so I guess the apple didn't fall far from the tree."

"Idris Elba's pretty hot, though." Briar said quietly. "Your dad can probably claim him as a mitigating circumstance."

"Case dismissed with all charges thrown out," I said, trying to keep my voice steady despite the way I wanted to yell and punch the air because Briar was actually talking to me. "Like, have you seen him with gray in his beard?" I let out a low whistle.

"You do realize how weird it is to be sitting in the hallway discussing your father's man crushes, right?"

"It's just the one crush," I said. "But yeah, I know. I would be inside your room talking about my father's man crushes, only there's this door."

"Maybe it's symbolic," Briar said. "Like, one door closes or something."

"Maybe. Or maybe you think that door's closed when it's really not."

Briar snorted. "You really suck at analogies, did you know that?"

"You started it with your metaphorical door. And your physical door."

Briar was silent for a moment. "I just... can't face you right now, okay?"

"I get it," I said quickly. "You're mad at me. At us. And for the record, I didn't hear

about today's meeting until right before you did. It's not like I was keeping it a secret or anything."

"I walked in there, and you were on their side."

He was wrong about that, but I could see why it looked that way.

"Maybe there aren't any sides."

A faint snort. "Is this another metaphorical door?"

"No. I'm just saying, maybe it's just one side, your side, but you just don't know what that looks like." I screwed up my face, glad he couldn't see it because I was afraid what I was about to say might set him off all over again. "Because I don't think many people have been on your side before, right?"

Silence stretched out in the hallway.

Then, at last, there was movement, and the door creaked open an inch. I stared at it until Briar said, "Well? Are you coming in or not?"

"I'm coming in," I said quickly, before he could change his mind. I stood and slipped into his room, and as soon as I did, Briar pushed the door closed and shoved me against it and wrapped himself around me.

He buried his face against my collarbone and mumbled, "I wish I could stay mad at you."

"You can stay mad at me," I said. "But please don't shut any more doors in my face. Either physical or metaphorical."

“Don’t be a dumbass, and it’s a deal,” he said. He lifted his head and grimaced. “I’m pretty sure we’re not going to be sharing any doors from now on, though. I did tell the chapter executive to go fuck themselves.”

“Point of order, you actually told them to shove their fucking fraternity up their asses. Completely different.”

He gave a bitter laugh. “Because that’s so much better, right? Either way, I’m out.” He buried his face in my collarbone again. I pretended not to notice his breath hitching as I traced soothing circles on the back of his sweater.

I waited until he was still and quiet before I said, “I wasn’t kidding. I came to see if you’d stay. There’s a place for you here.”

“They don’t want me.”

“Briar. It’s like you didn’t hear it right. Or maybe Trey said it wrong; I don’t know. Like, you lied about some pretty big stuff, but if you tell us why, then it might be something we can fix. We do want you here. Hell, I wanted you in Alpha Tau even before you said anything about the LSAT.”

“Cos I’m hot?” he mumbled against my shirt.

“Um. No? Well, maybe, but it wasn’t a conscious thing. Also, that’s a leading question, counselor.”

“Casey, I don’t want to be a lawyer, even. I never did.”

“What? Oh, shit.” Not that not being prelaw was a dealbreaker, but it was still a shock. “That’s—that’s not what I was expecting you to say.”

“I know.” He sniffed. “Why’d you want me in the fraternity?”

“Because you weren’t Ethan. You are the anti-Ethan, and the world needs more anti-Ethans. And you were nice to Charlie, even when you were prickly as fuck to everyone else, and Squirrel likes you. You fit here. I know you think you don’t, but you do.”

He lifted his head. His eyeliner was smeared all to hell, and he looked like an angry raccoon, but he had the beginnings of a smile. “Are we sure Squirrel doesn’t run this fraternity?”

“Jury’s still out,” I said.

Briar wrinkled his nose. “No more lawyer shit, please.”

“That’s fair.”

“You say I fit, but I don’t, do I? Because of the lawyer shit.”

“Alpha Tau is prelaw,” I said. “That’s what we’ve always been, for over a century. But you’re a good brother, Briar. You make us better.”

He bit his lip. “Maybe.”

“Definitely,” I corrected.

He shook his head. “It’s just such a mess.”

“So we figure it out,” I said. “Together.”

He held my gaze. “Can we?”



I had no idea what I was promising because Briar still hadn't explained why he'd lied or even how far those lies went. But this was him asking for help, and it was huge. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I shot him down now.

"Yeah," I said, with a hell of a lot more conviction than I actually felt. "Of course we can."

He gave me a rueful smile. "It's gonna start with me apologizing to the chapter executive, isn't it? And then I guess I need to explain some shit."

I let out a long breath. At least Briar was willing to try to mend his fences instead of burning his bridges.

Wow. I really did suck at analogies, didn't I?

I rested my hand in the small of his back and held him, and he didn't pull away, his frame relaxing against me. "You know, it was Scout who sent me to get you," I said. "He said you're still a brother. So that's a good sign, right?"

Briar wrinkled his nose. "Maybe. Seems fake though, Scout being nice."

I snorted. "Yeah, he tries to hide it."

Briar stepped back, but he tangled his fingers in mine and drew me away from the wall. "Will you come with me and be my emotional support boyfriend?"

"I think the emotional support is implied with the boyfriend part," I said, while my heart tripped in my chest at Briar still calling me his boyfriend. Sure, this whole thing was a mess, but maybe it wasn't as hopeless as it looked.

We made our way downstairs hand in hand, and we stopped outside the door of the

executive offices so Briar could take a deep breath.

“It’ll be fine,” he said, more to himself than me, and knocked.

Scout opened the door, his face impassive.

“Hey,” Briar said.

Scout stared. Trey appeared at his shoulder and rolled his eyes, nudging Scout with his elbow. Scout cleared his throat and then said, “Hey, guys.”

The doorbell rang.

I heard the squeak of the door opening, and someone said, “Hey. This Alpha Tau?”

Trey tilted his head, listening in as Knox answered, “Yeah? Can I help you?”

I was suddenly aware of Briar’s sharp intake of breath and his sudden death grip on my hand as the gruff voice replied, “Yeah. I’m looking for my son, Brian.”

### FIFTEEN

I hadn't thought it was possible for Briar to get any paler, but that was before I saw all traces of color drain from his cheeks. It happened fast, between heartbeats. He looked as though he was about to pass out then and there.

"Sorry, but there's nobody called Brian here," Knox said. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

"Yeah," the man said. "I'm looking for Brian. Brian Pendelton."

"We've got a Briar Pendelton?" Knox said. "Is that who you mean?"

The man let out a harrumph. "I guess."

"Let me see if he's here," Knox said.

Goddamn Virginia boys and their goddamn manners. Why couldn't Knox be a douche and shut the door?

"Fuck," Briar said. He gazed at me with wild eyes. "It's my fucking dad. I can't—I need to?"

"Brian?" the guy yelled, his voice getting louder. "You in here?"

"Sir!" Knox said. "You can't just come in here!"

Too fucking late, apparently.

Briar was frozen on the spot, and my first instinct was to shove him into Trey's office and lock the door behind us, but before I got the chance, a tall, heavysset blond man came striding around the corner.

He stopped when he saw us. "Brian?"

"Dad," Briar rasped, dropping my hand. "What are you doing here?"

He was a big guy, the sort who could fill up a room. Just tall and broad and loud. The sort of guy who made you think of lumberjacks and linebackers. Big and loud wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but the way Briar shrank back made me think there was more to the story.

Which was Briar in a nutshell, right?

"Ricky had a game in Hopewell," Mr. Pendelton said. "So your mom and I caught up with Darryl. He said you were at Lassiter now. In this fraternity." He gazed around the hall as though he was seeing the place for the first time—the high ceilings, the polished floors, the old oil paintings and photographs on the walls—and then his gaze fell on Briar again, and he narrowed his eyes. "Your face is a mess, and what the hell are you wearing? You can't see your mom looking like that."

"Mom's here?" Briar asked, his voice small.

Mr. Pendelton seemed to notice me and Trey and Scout at the same time. "She's out in the car."

Knox stood behind Mr. Pendelton, shuffling his feet like he wasn't sure what to do. He wasn't the only one.

“Brian—”

“I go by Briar.” Briar lifted his chin.

Mr. Pendelton rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Go wash your face and put on something decent and come outside and speak to your mother. She’s been worried sick about you.”

“You said...” Briar seemed to shrink into himself. “You both said you never wanted to see me again.”

There was a low growling sound from somewhere close by me, and for a second, I wondered if Squirrel had joined the party. Then I realized it was from Scout.

“Well not looking like that!” Mr Pendleton said with a snort. “Jesus Christ, Brian, just?—”

“He said he goes by Briar now.” I stepped in front of him protectively.

“Listen,” Mr. Pendelton said. “I don’t know who the hell any of you are, but this is between me and my son, and it is none of your business.” He glared at Briar. “I told you, go and clean yourself up, and then come outside and talk to your mother. We’d best not be waiting for long.”

And he strode toward the front door. I heard it slam shut behind him.

“The fuck was that?” Knox asked, his eyes as big as an owl’s. “I didn’t mean to let him in, y’all.”

Briar drew a tremulous breath. “That’s my family. It’s, um... I’d better go talk to my mom.”

“Hold on,” Trey said. “Do you want to?”

“What?” Briar blinked at him.

“Do you want to?” Trey asked. “Because they can’t make you.”

“And it sounds a hell of a lot like they kicked you out,” Scout said. “It’s the whole look you have going on, right? You’re too fabulous for them?”

A shaky laugh escaped Briar. “It’s a lot of stuff, but that’s a part of it, I guess.”

“So, they’ve turned up uninvited after they threw you out, and now they expect you to play nice? As the poet once said, ‘Fuck that noise,’” Scout said.

“What poet ever said that?” Knox asked.

Scout shrugged. “Shakespeare, probably. Or he would have if he’d thought of it. Anyway, my point stands.”

“Okay,” Trey said. “Let’s settle down. Briar, what do you want to happen here? Because we’ve got your back, but you have to tell us what you need.”

Briar grabbed my hand again. “I want to tell them to go away, but I don’t know if I can.”

I ran a thumb over the back of his knuckles. “I can,” I said. “And Trey and Scout and Archer and Knox can.”

“So can campus security,” Trey said, “if it comes to that.”

“Okay,” Briar said, but he didn’t sound sure. “I can probably do it, if—if you guys

are with me.”

Trey raised his eyebrows. “You’re our brother, Briar. Of course we’re with you.”

“Okay,” Briar said and squared his shoulders. “Okay, let’s do this.”

So, since Marty said I was going to be the next John Grisham on account of that one screenwriting course I took, let me set the scene.

Fraternity Row. Exterior. Evening. It was less high noon in a dusty Western town, and more chilly dusk in a teen slasher flick. The streetlights had just come on up and down the street, and they made the red leaves of the maples glow. Out on the sidewalk, a couple of girls from Zeta Tau were walking by, stopping just past a plain white sedan to wave at Marty, who was on the other side of the street currently tangled in Squirrel’s lead. There was a woman in the white sedan, or at least there was the vague shape of one. I couldn’t see her through the tinted windows, but the height of her hairstyle was a pretty clear indicator.

Mr. Pendelton paced back and forth on the porch. Probably stopping to stare pointedly at his watch as he waited for Briar to come outside.

Close up on the front door as it opened and then cut to the expression of surprise on Mr. Pendelton’s face when it wasn’t just Briar standing there. It was Briar and me and Trey and Scout and Knox and James Two and Archer. I think Sawyer and Connor might have been there too but as unscripted extras. It was hard to tell exactly who was there from the front of the pack.

Mr. Pendelton’s gaze snapped back to Briar, and he looked him up and down and huffed out, “I thought I told you to change?”

Briar’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “That’s what you’ve been telling me my

whole life.”

Mr. Pendelton shook his head. “Then why are you still wearing that? Why the hell can’t you just listen?”

“Why can’t you?” Briar shot back.

Mr. Pendelton’s mouth thinned into an unhappy line. He glanced over at the sedan. “Just talk to your mother, would you? She’s been worried.”

“See, I don’t think she has,” Briar said, his voice shaking, “because when you threw me out, I kept the same phone number, just in case. She didn’t call or text once. Neither did you.”

“Jesus,” Scout murmured.

My heart twisted in my chest, and I wondered how old Briar had been when he was cut loose.

Mr. Pendelton ran a meaty palm through his straw-colored locks and made a frustrated noise. He paced back and forth, looking between his watch and the sedan and Briar. “You make it sound worse than it was, like we made you leave. All we did was set some rules, and I don’t think it’s unreasonable for a man to want his son to use his goddamn name and dress like a boy! It was for your own good!”

Briar let out a bitter laugh. “Right. You just didn’t want me to embarrass you in front of your friends.”

“We never forced you to go,” his father said, folding his arms over his chest.

“No?” Briar’s voice cracked. “You just made it impossible to stay. So I chose not to



live somewhere where I couldn't be myself."

"Be yourself? What the hell does that mean?"

The car horn sounded.

Mr. Pendelton's head snapped around to the car and the woman inside. He lifted his hands in an exasperated "what do you expect me to do?" gesture before turning back to Briar, his hands on his hips in a classic disappointed dad pose. "Just stop, okay? You've caused enough trouble. Your mother's about ready to give you a piece of her mind for worrying her, disappearing like you did. How do you think we felt, having to explain to folks that you just up and went?" He gestured at the car. "Go on, go talk to your mother."

Briar's fingers flexed against my palm, and his grip tightened. I squeezed his hand back. Briar's voice was quiet when he said, "No. I think you should go."

"We came to see you, and now you won't give us the time of day?" his father said, disbelieving. "We raised you better than that! Now you get your ass over to that car, and?—"

It was Scout who cut in, giving Mr. Pendelton a dead-eyed stare. "Briar's asked you to leave. And now I'm telling you the same thing. And don't come back."

Mr. Pendelton gave an unhappy snort. "I don't know who you think you are, but I'm entitled to see my kid, you hear?"

"Just—Dad, just go, please?" Briar whispered, a note of desperation in his voice.

I kept hoping for Briar to snap and snarl at his dad like the prickly little asshole I knew he was, the guy I'd fallen for, but he didn't.

Instead Briar bit his bottom lip and gazed down at the porch timbers, wrapping an arm around himself. He fidgeted restlessly with the lace inset of his sleeve.

His father zeroed in on the movement, and something about it must have made him reach his breaking point. He stepped closer, his bulk suddenly a lot more menacing than before, and one hand flew out. He grabbed the front of Briar's sweater, yanking on it. "Just look at yourself!"

Briar let out a choked-off gasp as he stumbled forward a pace.

"Why can't you just... be normal?" his father snapped.

Briar flinched like he'd been slapped, and the rest of us froze in shock.

Which was when Charlie came racing up the porch steps out of nowhere, let out a loud yell, and launched himself at Mr. Pendelton in a flurry of limbs.

Mr. Pendelton grunted and staggered when Charlie slammed into him, letting go of Briar as he did so. Charlie flailed about, a mass of arms and legs and hot pink fabric, and did his best to dislodge Mr. Pendelton from the porch. He didn't get far—Charlie had the body mass of a stick insect—but it was impressive watching him try all the same, and it sure as hell got the rest of us moving.

I steered Briar out of reach of his father and pulled him close. He clung to me, staring up at me with wide, shocked eyes. I could feel his limbs trembling, and his heart thundered in his chest where he was pressed against my side. I ran a soothing hand down his back even though my own adrenaline was amped up to around a million.

We watched on as Trey stepped forward and put a hand on Charlie's shoulder. Charlie jerked at the touch before he saw who it was. He spun to face Trey, panting, his face as red as his hair.

“He doesn’t get to touch Briar,” he said fiercely, like he thought Trey was gonna argue or something.

“No,” Trey said, his voice like flint. “He doesn’t.”

Mr. Pendelton was breathing hard, and his cheeks were an unhealthy, blotched red. The ugly part of me hoped he had a heart attack and dropped dead right here and now.

Trey folded his arms and stared Mr. Pendelton down. “You need to leave now. Briar’s made it clear he doesn’t want to see you.”

“You can’t make me?—”

“Or,” Trey said, cutting him off, “I could call campus security. Take your pick.”

The car horn blared again, twice in quick succession, and a woman’s voice floated through the air. “Leave it be, Luke! We have to go get Ricky!”

Something weird happened to Briar’s dad then. He straightened up, still breathing heavily, and he smiled. “Best quarterback his team’s seen in twenty years,” he said, and his chest puffed out like a rooster’s. “That’s a boy who knows how to make his daddy proud.” His gaze fell on Briar, who burrowed closer into my side, and he added, “Unlike some.”

Which, it turned out, was my breaking point.

As the poet said, “Fuck that noise.”

“Hey,” I said loudly.

Mr. Pendelton shifted his stare from Briar to me.

“Why don’t you fuck off back to whatever hick town you’re from and take your shitty attitudes with you?” I said. “Briar’s fucking amazing, and if you can’t see it, you don’t deserve him as a son.”

I hated confrontations, and my heart was pounding like it was going to beat right out of my chest, but I held his gaze.

Mr. Pendelton looked from me to Briar and back at me again, and I jutted my chin out in a silent challenge. My parents hadn’t brought me up to brawl on the porch steps, but I was willing to make an exception if it came down to it.

Mr. Pendelton gave a disgusted huff and sagged like all the air had been let out of him. He’d obviously figured out he wasn’t winning this. He pointed at Briar, his hand shaking. “Don’t think you can come crawling back when it suits you, you hear? We leave today, we’re done with you.”

Briar caught my gaze, and I could tell that this was the moment where he’d either hunch in on himself more and do as he was told, or he’d fight back.

I held my breath waiting to see which it was.

Briar stepped away from my side, squaring his shoulders. The earlier desperation in his eyes had been replaced with a familiar mutinous glint that meant Briar was about to call someone on their bullshit. He reached out and swatted his father’s extended finger aside. “You were done with me a long time ago. And now I’m done with you. So why don’t you fuck off, Dad.”

And then he flipped his father the bird and turned and walked into the house, hips swaying, and slammed the door.

There was my prickly little asshole, and I'd never been happier to see him.

In the end, there was no big dramatic showdown. Mr. Pendelton headed for his car, appearing more exasperated than defeated. Scout hauled Charlie inside, and the rest of us stood there and watched as Briar's parents drove off.

Whole thing had taken only a couple of minutes. The Zeta Tau girls hadn't even made it inside their place, and over on the other side of the road, Marty was still tangled in Squirrel's lead.

"Go find him," Trey said and clapped me on the shoulder as we went back inside.

"About the meeting?—"

Trey raised his eyebrows and said, voice slow like he thought I was stupid, "Go find him, Casey. Everything else can wait."

And that right there was why Trey Montgomery was our chapter president.

I found Briar upstairs in his bedroom with Charlie and Scout. Well, Charlie was in the bedroom with him. Scout was lingering by the door. He wouldn't have looked anxious to many other people. He looked like a guy who could smell something bad and was trying to figure out where it was coming from. But that was mostly just his face.

"Hey," I said, and Scout moved aside to let me through.

Archer was right behind me.

Briar was sitting on his bed, feet on the floor, and his face in his hands. Charlie was seated beside him, rubbing his back worriedly. He looked relieved when Archer and I

turned up, as though he thought we might actually know what we were doing.

I wished.

“Hey,” Charlie said and then got up and retreated to his own bed so I could take his place beside Briar.

Archer sat down on the other side of Briar.

“You okay?” I asked Briar. Stupid question. “You were totally badass out there, by the way.”

His breathing hitched, and I started to rub his back the same as Charlie had. He didn’t answer. He didn’t glance up. I wondered if maybe he was crying and didn’t want us to see. Which was on brand for Briar, honestly. His body was as tense as a bowstring, but as I ran a palm down his spine, I thought I felt him unclench the tiniest bit. I took it as encouragement. I could do this. I bumped his shoulder gently with mine. “What do you need, Briar?”

He let out a shuddering sigh. “I... I’m not sure. I just wasn’t prepared to see them, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said, “like running into your ex after a bad breakup.”

Briar nodded, and the tension in his body eased some, so maybe just being here was enough.

“Do you want us to leave you alone?” Charlie asked, his brow furrowed. “Or is there someone we can call?”

Briar lifted his head from his hands. “I texted Alan. He’s on his way.”

I stiffened.

What the hell?

Who the fuck was Alan again? Oh, that's right. He was the mysterious guy I'd decided wasn't Briar's secret boyfriend, hookup, or sugar daddy. Right about the same time I'd decided to trust Briar. Of course, I'd decided that before today, when the extent of Briar's lies had become known. And it wasn't as though I was going to walk back on anything I'd said to Briar in this room before his parents turned up or anything, just...

Just who the fuck was Alan?

The only way I was going to find out was to ask, wasn't it?

Except was this really the time? Like, maybe it would clear the air, or maybe it would be the straw that broke the camel's back when it came to Briar. Like, this whole Alan thing was either a huge deal or it was absolutely nothing, but the only way I'd know was by asking. Which I couldn't do in case it was a huge deal because then I'd be the asshole who threw that out there when Briar was already in the middle of a crisis. What kind of boyfriend would that make me?

"Hey, Briar. I realize you just cut your horrible parents off, and you're also on thin ice with the fraternity for all the lies you've been telling, but my fragile ego needs to know. Are you seeing someone else?"

My sister Jamie once told me that relationships were complicated. Frankly, I'd thought she was exaggerating, but that was before I met Briar. Everything about Briar was complicated.

So was Alan. Fucking Alan, trapped in his box like Schrodinger's cat, either a sugar

daddy or not or both or neither. Point was, the whole box was a radioactive shitshow, and no good could come of it.

Well, maybe that wasn't the point.

I really wasn't sure about that whole concept, honestly.

I rubbed Briar's back quietly, and he leaned against me a little more with each passing minute. The room got darker as the dusk shifted slowly into evening, but nobody moved to turn on the light. It was like we were all waiting for Briar to be the one to break the spell of the silence that had fallen over us.

I watched the minutes tick over on the little digital alarm clock on Charlie's bedside cabinet.

I could hear voices downstairs. A distant door slamming. A song playing from someone's speakers from the other side of the house. A car with a whining transmission driving down Fraternity Row. And then the sound of footsteps in the corridor and the creak of the old floorboards.

I drew a breath. "Briar?—"

I was interrupted by Trey tapping on the doorframe. "Hey, Briar. Alan's here. If you want, I can bring him up?"

Briar looked around the cramped room and gave Trey a watery smile. "Um, can I use the executive lounge? It's kind of crowded in here."

Trey nodded, and Briar bumped his shoulder against mine before rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his hands and taking a deep, shaky breath. He stood and slipped out of the room, and the door to the bathroom down the hall click closed a moment later.



Charlie, Archer, and Scout left as well, leaving me sitting on the bed and Trey leaning on the doorframe with his arms folded, watching me with raised eyebrows. “You okay, bro?”

“Who’s Alan?” I blurted out.

Trey’s brow furrowed. “You don’t know?”

I rolled my eyes. “Obviously not, or I wouldn’t be asking.”

Trey stared at me for a minute and then said, “You really don’t know. And you’re worried Briar’s cheating, aren’t you?”

“No!” I snapped.

Trey shot me an unimpressed look.

“Maybe,” I amended. “I mean, I don’t want to think there’s something going on, but...” I shrugged as if to say who knows?

Trey came over and sat his ass next to me on the bed and sighed. “Alan’s his father, Casey.”

Insert record scratch noises.

“His... but we met his father.” What Trey said made no sense. “He’s that asshole who was just here.”

“Yeah. It’s complicated,” Trey said. “We met his stepfather. Alan’s his biological dad. His wife works with my dad, and she asked him if he thought Alpha Tau would be a good fit for Briar and could I put a word in for him.”

“You heard about what happened at Harvey, didn’t you?” I felt an unhappy tightness in my chest. “With the makeup and stuff?”

Trey nodded.

“You didn’t say anything.”

“It wasn’t my place.” Trey cleared his throat. “Listen, to be clear, I haven’t talked to Briar about any of this. So what he’s told you, you’ve earned, you get me?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I think it’s all pretty new,” Trey said. “All this family stuff. So don’t be weird if he hasn’t mentioned it, is what I’m saying.”

“You giving me relationship advice now?”

“Only because that’s another thing that’s all new,” Trey said. “Right?”

He didn’t mean with a guy. He meant a relationship that mattered. Not like my others hadn’t. I mean, I’d liked those girls, and I’d never cheated or hopefully been too much of a dick. But Briar? Briar mattered on a whole different level. What I was feeling for him was a hell of a lot bigger than anything I’d ever felt for anyone before. And that was fucking terrifying, honestly.

“Right,” I said, my voice wavering on the word. I drew a breath and rediscovered my smile. “I guess since you’ve managed to make it work with Scout, you know a thing or two about dating secretive, prickly assholes.”

Trey didn’t smile, but he was probably laughing on the inside. “Come on downstairs, Casey.”

I stood up. “Sure thing, prez.”

And I dodged past him out the door before he could retaliate.

### SIXTEEN

When I saw Briar sitting on the couch next to the stranger in the executive lounge, he didn't even need to introduce us for me to know that this was his father. They were like peas in a pod, if one pea was about twenty years older and forty pounds heavier than the other. And dressed like an accountant. Also, when he turned around and saw me, he smiled.

They were very different peas, actually.

Briar introduced us, his voice soft and tentative. "Casey, this is my father, Alan. Alan, this is Casey. He's my boyfriend." He bit his lip.

My heart fluttered in my chest at hearing him call me his boyfriend, followed by a flush of pride on his behalf. Introducing your parents to the person you were dating could be nerve-wracking at the best of times, let alone on the heels of a shitshow like today, but Briar was doing it anyway.

What Briar didn't know was that I was an expert at meeting parents. Like, I had good grades, excellent prospects, I dressed neatly, and I was respectful. Even dads who posted Facebook selfies with guns and trucks and flags loved me.

"Nice to meet you, sir," I said and held out my hand.

"Casey, call me Alan," he said, shaking. "From what Briar says, I need to thank you for standing up for him today."

Briar darted a glance at me, his cheeks pink.

“It was Briar who did the standing up,” I said, sitting on the couch opposite them. “Me and the other guys were just there with him.”

Briar got a little pinker, but he didn’t deny it.

“Well, I’m glad you were there,” Alan said. “Real glad.” He looked around the executive lounge. “It sounds like Alpha Tau was the right choice for you, Briar.”

“I’m probably not staying,” Briar said. “I might be quitting the fraternity.”

Alan’s brow creased. “Quitting? Why?”

Briar hunched over, just like he had when Mr. Pendelton had been here. “It’s just not for me, maybe.”

“Oh.” Alan sounded confused. “Last we talked, you said how much you liked it.”

Briar caught my gaze and then looked back at his dad. “I lied. Not about that but about other stuff. I told these guys I already did the LSAT so they’d take me in. But I didn’t do it.”

Alan’s expression did something complicated, and it held an echo of Briar’s when he was about to argue the point. “I mean I could be wrong, my source material is watching Legally Blonde, but isn’t the LSAT something you can do any time?”

“Um, yeah,” I said when Briar remained silent.

“So what’s the big deal? You can always take it later.”

Briar tipped his head back, staring at the ceiling. "I might have lied about the whole 'wanting to be a lawyer' thing as well. And Alpha Tau is prelaw."

"I don't understand," Alan said in the wary tone of someone who'd dealt with Briar before.

Briar looked at him, his face screwed up. "I don't want to be a lawyer. I never did. You wanted that. I didn't!"

"Hold up," Alan said, showing Briar the palms of his hands. "Just hold up a second there, kiddo. Where's all this coming from? I never said I wanted you to be a lawyer."

"Not in so many words, no." Briar jutted out his chin. "But we were talking about jobs that time, and you said law would be a good career, and then later you told me you'd found a frat that could be a good fit for me and offered to pay my fraternity fees if I got accepted. And that frat turned out to be prelaw, so what was I meant to think?"

Alan stared at Briar with wide eyes and then threw back his head and began to laugh. I got the feeling it was more from disbelief than anything else.

Briar scowled at him.

"Oh, Jesus, kiddo. I'm sorry. Just give me a second." He rubbed his face. "Briar, that time we talked about jobs, I said law would be good. I also said architecture was a good choice. And so was nursing. I meant anything, Briar. Anything you wanted to do, I'd support you."

"But you didn't offer to pay for my housing at nursing college," Briar said, sounding uncertain. "I thought you would only pay if I went to Lassiter and got into Alpha Tau."

You only mentioned Alpha Tau.”

“No, that was never... you didn’t bring up nursing again. I thought you’d settled on law.” All traces of Alan’s laughter had vanished now. “Shit. They really did a number on you, didn’t they?”

I didn’t have to ask who he meant.

“I’m sorry for laughing.” Alan let out a long breath. “Briar, you could tell me you wanted to go study the kazoo or train marmosets to ride bicycles, and I’d look after you in any way you needed. God knows, I didn’t get the chance when you were younger.”

“You didn’t even know I existed,” Briar murmured.

“That doesn’t make me feel like less of a failure here,” Alan said. “But you need to hear this, Briar. My support of you? It’s not conditional, okay? I don’t care what you study. I just want you to be safe while you do it. And I didn’t want you to be alone. That’s the only reason I mentioned Alpha Tau, because Mel said her boss’s son is the chapter president, and she figured any fraternity that’s run by a Black guy with a boyfriend was more likely to be accepting of someone who doesn’t tick all the conventional boxes. I didn’t mean to make you feel like I was pushing you into something you didn’t want. And if you’re unhappy here, we can find you somewhere else that isn’t a dormitory, okay?”

Briar’s shoulders uncurled, and he let out a long breath. “Really?”

“Really.” Alan reached across and ruffled Briar’s hair. “Hell, we can get you an apartment off campus. I meant it when I said whatever you need, Mel and I are here for you.”

Briar looked over at me. “I do like it here, and I’d like to stay, but it’s not up to me. I lied to get in.” He chewed on a fingernail. “And these guys are all prelaw.”

The prelaw thing was only mostly true. That was our focus at Alpha Tau, certainly, just like across the road at Theta Phi it was medicine. But sometimes guys changed their focus when they’d been at college for a while. Sometimes they decided not to go to law school. Sometimes they were a legacy who was studying something completely different but still wanted to pledge. It wasn’t the kind of thing you put in the rules because circumstances might change. And besides, the most popular brother in Alpha Tau wasn’t even a little interested in the law. He was busy majoring in sniffing butts and stealing pretzels. If Squirrel was a brother, there was no way Briar would be out of consideration for changing his major or his postgrad plans.

If he was out, it was because of the lying.

“It’s not up to me,” I said. “It’s something the chapter executive has to discuss, and it might even go to a vote with the rest of the brothers. But I told you, I’ll do what I can to help you stay.”

“Even if I don’t want to be a lawyer?” Briar asked.

“Of course.”

“I’ve messed everything up,” he whispered. “Haven’t I?”

“Not everything,” I said. “I mean, if I count for something.”

“You do,” he said softly.

He held my gaze for the longest moment, and I wondered if, like me, he was hoping that was enough.



It was a weird night at Alpha Tau. Trey ordered in a shitload of pizzas, which we paid for out of the social fund account. The impromptu pizza party spanned the length of the house, but Briar and I, and most of the chapter executive, claimed the smaller living room. Knox managed to put a smile on his resting bitch face and gave Alan and his wife, Mel, a tour of the house. Marty and Squirrel were a total hit with Alan and Mel's daughters, two little girls who'd thought they were on a trip to Grandma's house before Alan had got the text from Briar but were now happily running up and down the stairs with my roommate and his dog. They were five and seven or something, so Marty was like a god to them.

"It's complicated," Briar told me over a slice of pepperoni. "My dad always treated me like—not like shit, not exactly, but it was clear I wasn't good enough compared to Ricky. I was about fifteen when my uncle got drunk one Thanksgiving and spilled the beans about Alan. Apparently, my mom met him on a work trip." He did air quotes. "Anyhow, as soon as he told me, it made sense. Like, you've seen my dad, right? And Ricky looks just like him, all tall and blond and built like a tank. And then there was me, skinny and short and pale. I don't know how I didn't figure it out sooner."

"Shit. That's rough."

He shrugged. "In a weird way, it was almost a relief. Knowing there was a reason I'd never measure up, that he would never be proud of me, and it wasn't anything I could change. It meant I got to stop trying. And that's when I decided it was okay for me to be Briar and dye my hair black and do those things I'd always been afraid to try in case my dad didn't approve. Like, what did I have to lose?"

I winced.

"Yeah," he said with a rueful smile. "It didn't go down well. I got the whole 'not under my roof' bullshit."

“What happened?”

Briar shrugged. “I took myself out from under his roof. I couch surfed for a while. Ended up staying with a friend from school whose parents were cool with it. It wasn’t as bad as it sounds. And after a while, I finally got up the courage to message Alan on Facebook.”

“You said he didn’t know you existed?”

“Oh, man, can you imagine?” Briar laughed softly and shook his head. “He’s just checking Facebook one day, and there’s this message that’s basically like, ‘Hi. Are you the Alan Sutton from Richmond who slept with Luanne Platter seventeen years ago? If you are, then I think I’m your son.’ He said he almost had a heart attack.”

I stared at him. “That’s how you introduced yourself? What if it had been the wrong Alan?”

He grinned. “I sent it to seven Alan Suttons. I was immediately blocked on three accounts, had another three threaten lawsuits, and got one invitation to meet up for coffee. Like, from his profile pic I thought, yeah maybe... but when I walked into that coffee shop, I knew for sure, even before we did the test.”

“That must’ve been something,” I said.

“It was. Like, we share the same body language. We have the same laugh. You know that kids’ movie where the last dinosaur of its kind comes over a hill and finds an entire herd of other dinosaurs just like them? That’s what it was like. Finally, I’d found somewhere I fit.”

“And you went to live with him?”

Briar shook his head. “He was a stranger. He still is, mostly. I don’t want—I didn’t want to mess it up.”

I didn’t miss the way he’d stumbled over his tenses there. “It’s still new.”

He nodded.

Still new, and he didn’t trust it. Still new, and he was terrified of losing it. Just like he was with Alpha Tau. Alan was right. Briar’s family had sure done a number on him.

Trey sat down on the couch opposite us.

Squirrel skittered into the room and then skittered out again. One of the little girls screamed with laughter.

Scout joined Trey on the couch, a paper napkin folded carefully under his pizza, because God forbid he get a grease stain anywhere on him.

“You good?” Trey asked.

Briar leaned against me and gave a jerky nod.

Trey tore the crust off his pizza and ate it first. The weirdo. “Just so you know, Archer and I have talked about it, and there’s not going to be a vote or anything. You’re our brother, Briar, and this house is your house as long as you’re at Lassiter.”

“But I lied,” Briar said in a small voice.

“Yeah,” Trey said. “So what?”

Briar blinked at him.

Scout leaned back. “If you had any interest in the law at all, Briar, which you obviously don’t, you’d know that there’s the letter of the law, and then there’s the spirit of the law. And Trey is much more invested in the spirit of the law.”

“And you?” I asked because I couldn’t help myself.

“I’m a pedant,” Scout said. “I believe the death penalty should be introduced for misplaced commas.”

Trey snorted out a laugh. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” Scout asked, giving him a cold, dead stare.

I was 80 percent sure it was a lie. Maybe 75.

“So, Briar, you’re on social probation and extra chores for the rest of the semester, and you work on getting your grades up,” Trey said. “And then, next semester, it’s a clean slate. Does that work for you?”

“Yes,” Briar said, blinking again. “What’s social probation?”

“No fraternity parties or events for you,” I said.

“What a shame,” Scout deadpanned. “Because he’s such an extroverted social butterfly. Remember the meet and greet? We could hardly get a word in edgewise. Everyone was like, ‘Briar, dude, just dial it down to eleven, please. You’re too much fun.’”

“The downside to this deal is you’ll have to deal with Scout until he graduates,” I said, threading my fingers through Briar’s.

He squeezed my hand. “A punishment worse than death, then?”

Scout hid a smirk behind a slice of pizza.

Archer wandered in with his boyfriend, Eli, and passed around a bunch of sodas. Knox and Alan and Mel returned soon after, Mel gushing about the bones of the house, and it didn’t take long until Marty was drawn by the smell of pizza. Squirrel and the little girls came with him, and the girls squeezed onto the couch on either side of Briar, making me shift over a bit.

Trey and Scout gave up their couch for Alan and Mel. Trey sat on the floor with Archer, Eli, Connor, Knox, and Marty. Scout went and got himself a chair from the dining room.

One of the little girls plucked at the lace on Briar’s sweater sleeve. “I like your shirt, Briar,” she said shyly.

He looked a bit startled but smiled. “Thank you, Emily.”

She beamed at him.

It was a strange night but a good one.

An hour later, when Marty and Knox were carrying the sleeping girls to the car with Mel leading the way, Alan hung back and shook all our hands. When he reached me, he followed the handshake up with a hug.

“Thanks,” he said into my ear, “for looking out for him.”

“Thanks for coming,” Briar said when Alan hugged him. “On, like no notice and stuff. Please tell Mel’s mom I’m sorry you had to cancel your plans.”

“I will,” Alan said. “But, Briar, anytime you need anything, you call me, okay?”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, and I got the impression they’d had this conversation more than once before. He shrugged. “But you have a family, and?—”

“And you’re a part of it,” Alan said. “No take backs, kiddo.”

I couldn’t imagine there was anyone else in the world with the balls to call Briar “kiddo” and not get immediately eviscerated.

“No take backs,” Briar said with a wobbly smile.

After they’d left, Briar leaned against my side smothering a yawn, which had me yawning in turn. The whole day had been an emotional roller coaster, and I was exhausted. I wrapped an arm around his shoulders and guided him toward the staircase, and he didn’t argue.

“Oh hey,” Marty said, jogging past me. “Lemme grab my keys, and I’ll head over to Dalton’s and give you some privacy. I mean, you guys are gonna be getting it on, right? Like, comfort sex?”

Marty was far more observant than some people thought. He really could have used a filter sometimes, though.

“Uh...”

“Thanks, Marty,” Briar said quietly and took my hand and led me up the stairs. When we got to my room, Briar draped his arms around my neck and leaned up and kissed me.

I kissed him back, slow and soft, and he melted into it, and then I said, “We’re not

just doing this because Marty said to, right?”

Briar laughed softly and leaned his forehead against my shoulder for a moment. When he looked up again, the customary glint in his eye was back. “I’m pretty sure I know what I want, Casey.”

“Oh yeah?” I tilted my chin up. “And what’s that?”

“I would like to aggressively...” He hummed. “Cuddle.”

I let out a laugh. “That sounds good to me.”

I kissed him again, then untangled myself from his arms and kicked my shoes off. I paused. “This is naked cuddling, right?”

Briar sat on the side of the bed and peeled his sweater off. “Obviously.”

I paused with my jeans half down. How the fuck did I get someone as gorgeous as Briar? The light from the lamp on my nightstand made his pale skin glow golden, and his hair was as dark as ink.

Scrappy as an alley cat, but right now he was as soft and quiet and trusting as a kitten. I’d earned that, somehow. I’d earned Briar’s trust.

He stared right back at me and then tilted his head. The corner of his mouth quirked. “Um, Casey, have you forgotten how to take your pants off? Because if you have, we might need to break up.”

“Excuse you. I was savoring the moment!”

He laughed and looked the most beautiful I’d ever seen him. And probably would

tomorrow too, and the day after that. Happiness suited him.

I stripped out of my jeans and shirt and joined him on the bed, and together we worked his skinny jeans off him and then slid under the comforter together. There was no urgency, just me and Briar. We lay facing each other, and he ran his hands over every inch of bare skin he could reach, and I did the same. It was like we were reassuring each other that this was real, and we got to keep each other.

“What a fucking day, huh?” I murmured.

“Yeah.” His eyes fluttered closed as I kissed his collarbones. “Crazy.”

“It ended up okay though. You and me, right here.”

He opened his eyes. “I’m hoping it ends up better than okay.”

I knew how to take a hint.

My arousal had been growing with every sweep of Briar’s hands over my naked body, and my dick was rock-hard. I tugged at Briar’s waist until he was on top of me, and grabbed his ass to pull him close so I could grind up against him. A breathless laugh escaped him and he buried his head against the dip of my shoulder, rolling his hips, working with me as our dicks rubbed against each other in a choppy, desperate rhythm. Heat built between us, and I was soon on the edge, and Briar was letting out ragged pants against my shoulder. He thrust forward and groaned; then he dug his fingers into my hip and shuddered against me as he came. That was all it took to send me flying right along with him.

We floated back to Earth slowly, catching our breath and kissing. Catching our breath again when our kisses drew out too long.



It was warm and messy and sweet, and it felt like coming had sapped every last bit of energy I had. I could barely roll over and reach for the wet wipes on the nightstand to clean us up.

“Thank you for everything today,” Briar murmured around a yawn as I fished for the wipes. “You’re the best boyfriend, Casey.”

“Lucky,” I said, grunting as I finally snagged the packet. “Because no take backs.”

When I rolled back over to face him and to wipe up our mess, he’d already fallen asleep with a smile on his face.

I was pretty sure I was wearing one that matched.

Three months later

Somewhere on I-95, just outside of Stafford, I got so mesmerized by watching Casey's hands on the steering wheel that I zoned out and completely missed what he said to me. His index and middle fingers tapped on the wheel, tendons popping and knuckles shifting in a wave, and all I could think about was how last night those fingers had been inside me until I'd cried, and then he said, "Briar? Earth to Briar?" and I jolted back into awareness.

I did not like awareness.

Awareness was a hungry pit of anxiety in my gut, growing more and more ravenous with every passing mile.

"What?" I snapped and flinched at the tone in my voice.

Casey didn't though. He just looked over at me and raised his eyebrows. A question, not a rebuke.

"Sorry," I said and tempered my tone. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I asked if you were okay," he said, looking back at the road. "But then you almost took my head off, so I guess that answers that."

"Sorry." Did I sound like a broken record yet? I tugged at the cuffs of my sweater and remembered the Lassiter hoodie in my backpack. Maybe I should wear that instead?

"I'm nervous is all."

I'd worn the sweater with the lace inserts because it was one of Casey's favorites, and it usually made me feel good. This afternoon it was doing the opposite though and only magnifying my insecurities. I thought I'd put on armor, but what if I'd put on a target instead? What if they hated me?

"Briar," he said, just like he'd said about a hundred times over the last few weeks, ever since we decided to do this, "they're gonna love you."

And he said it with such certainty that I wanted to believe him, but I wasn't quite there yet. Past experience had taught me that there were no guarantees. But it was Casey's mom's birthday, and I had to meet his folks sometime.

I made a noise that I hoped passed for agreement.

It clearly didn't because Casey took the next exit off I-95.

"Where are we going?" I asked. He didn't answer. I glared at him and then at the bright red sign we were approaching. "Sheetz? We're stopping at Sheetz?"

He gave me a maddening grin and didn't answer.

He didn't have to answer, because, yes, we stopped at Sheetz.

A few weeks back, we'd gone on a trip to stay at Marty's grandfather's cabin with Marty and Dalton. Fishing and shooting and that kind of shit. Which was not my kind of shit. So Dalton and I had mostly stayed inside and played Monopoly with Marty's grandfather's husband—and hadn't that little revelation been a surprise?—while Marty and Casey and Marty's grandfather got all outdoorsy and muddy and stinky. Anyway, on the way back, we'd stopped at a Sheetz, and Casey had bought me a quesarito. So he joked now that Sheetz was our restaurant. It was a pretty lame joke, but I let it slide as long as the quesaritos kept coming. And those cinnamon almonds because those were legit incredible.

“I’m not going in,” I said when he’d pulled into a parking spot.

“You don’t have to,” he said. “I’m just getting snacks.”

“Can you get me a quesarito?”

He grinned at me. “I know your order, baby.”

And fuck him for calling me that when he was fully aware it turned my insides to jelly and took away my ability to argue with him.

I leaned against the passenger window and watched his ass as he went inside. It was a hell of a view. While he was gone, I flipped down the visor and examined myself in the mirror, running my fingers through the front of my hair to make it sit right. I debated changing my sweater for the hundredth time before catching sight of Casey’s phone still sitting in the center console. I knew if I touched the screen, it would light up to show a picture of me. The me in that picture had cherry-red lips and killer eyeliner, and I was sucking on a lollipop with a gleam in my eye. If you looked at that picture and guessed that ten minutes later I’d sucked Casey’s dick, you’d be right.

But that wasn’t the point. The point was, when Casey had taken that photo, he’d spent a solid minute staring at it with dumb heart eyes before setting it as his lock screen. I’d never been someone’s lock screen before, and it still made me warm all over. And the me in that picture? That was who he wanted his parents to meet—the real me, not some watered down, apologetic version of myself.

So why the fuck was I still wanting to wrap myself up in my boring Lassiter hoodie when instead I should have been digging through my bag to get to my eyeliner and lipstick?

It was simple.

I wanted them to approve of me. I didn't care if I walked into a room full of strangers and they stared and laughed, because fuck them, but Casey's family? Okay, they were strangers too, but I needed them to like me. I didn't want Casey to have to ever choose between his family and me because I might have been his lock screen now, but that didn't mean I'd be his first choice. And I wanted to be his first choice because he was mine.

My phone buzzed with a text alert, and I pulled it out of my pocket. It was a message from Charlie.

Did you take your laptop with you?

Yes. In case I need to watch Netflix.

NO!!!! For your English paper!

Charlie had been my study buddy for three months now, and he took it very seriously.

Relax. I was kidding. I'm going to get it finished.

I couldn't pretend that my grades had shot up into the stratosphere or anything, but with Charlie's help, at least I was treading water now instead of sinking. It turned out that Charlie in tutoring mode hit the perfect combination of calm and reassuring, and when he explained things I didn't understand, it somehow tricked my brain into retaining the information. Plus, letting Charlie down would have been like kicking a puppy.

Anyway, I was getting to grips with all the course material I'd been ignoring. Partly it was Charlie, but partly it was that I was no longer struggling under the weight of the lies I'd told to get into Alpha Tau. Now that I wasn't running every sentence through a fact checker before I opened my mouth to make sure I had my story straight, I had a lot more capacity to actually study.

Who knew that honesty really was the best policy?

And the guys were good. None of the brothers seemed to be holding a grudge. I guess that my parents had done me a favor, in a twisted way, by turning up like they had that day. Not only had the Alpha Taus decided not to kick me when I was down, but they'd lifted me back up and dusted me off. Turned out that stuff Casey had droned on about when I was pledging had been real—the brotherhood, the trust, the strength, the family. At the time I'd thought he was either an idiot or a hypocrite—a hot one, but still—but he'd been right all along.

So maybe he was right about his family liking me as well.

I still wasn't sure how I'd ended up in a “meet the parents” situation if I was honest—and I was trying to be honest these days—because that hadn't been my intention.

My initial assessment of Casey had been “cute but straight, probably full of shit.” But then that bi flag had appeared on his door, and it had caught me off guard. I'd had to concede that maybe when he talked about inclusion, he was talking about himself too, so he probably meant that bit at least.

Still, when the challenge had come to wear a skirt to sell candy, I'd decided, fuck it. Why not dress all the way up and put Alpha Tau to the test and see if they—and Casey specifically—were as chill as they claimed? I figured if they were dicks about it, at least I'd know. At least I'd prove they were full of shit.

But when I'd showed up in full femboy mode, rocking a skirt, makeup, and stockings, nobody had been a dick—other than Ethan, but that was no surprise—and Casey hadn't acted like he was disgusted or weirded out—far from it. No, Casey had stared at me as though he wanted to devour me like the candy bars we were selling—and damn if it hadn't sent a thrill right down my spine.

And later that night when he'd taken me to the basement to "study the charter," I'd caught him looking at me again, undeniable hunger in his gaze, and I'd thought that it might be fun to rattle his cage a little by coming onto him. Plus, I mentioned he was hot, right?

I'd thought he'd turn me down, but he'd been into it. Really into it. And watching this too-good-to-be-real, boy-next-door type, losing his mind over thighfucking me in stockings and a skirt? It was sexy as hell and so was he. I wanted more.

It turned out we both did. And I'll admit, I didn't make it easy for him. Why would I? But every time I threw a curveball Casey's way, he surprised me by catching it, and I found myself trusting him more and more—which, believe me, was a shock to both of us.

And now? I trusted him completely—more than trusted him. Sometime in the last couple of months, I'd gone from liking Casey a whole lot to loving him.

I was in love, and it was scary as hell but also the best thing ever.

I hadn't told him yet, but I was planning to.

Just as soon as I screwed up my courage.

When Casey got back to the car, he was juggling a couple of drinks, a bag of quesaritos and fries, and he had a pack of cinnamon almonds shoved down the front of his shirt. We ate in the car. Casey finished first and scrolled through his text messages.

"Mom says are you allergic to anything?" he asked.

"Nope." Except possibly the entire Hill family experience.

Casey snorted at something on his phone. “Allison wants to do another candy drive, like we didn’t kick the Zetas’ asses last time.”

I hummed. “You said it was your best fundraiser yet.”

“Yeah,” he said. “When Scout saw the final tally, he almost smiled.”

I snorted. “Scout’s a marshmallow.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” Casey said, grinning. “He thinks we haven’t noticed.”

“Well, he’s an idiot.” I reached into the back seat and wrenched my backpack forward onto my lap. The grease from the food had done a number on my lip gloss. I opened my backpack and dug around for my makeup bag. I found my lip gloss and put it on.

“You’re just using the clear?” Casey asked.

I hummed an affirmative and pretended my stomach didn’t twist at his loaded question.

“I like that red one you use,” he said.

I gave him a look. “That’s not exactly specific.”

“The new one.”

“It’s called Lady Bug,” I said. “It’s MAC.”

Mel, Alan’s wife, had given it to me. Both she and Alan were pretty chill about the whole... well, about me. I’d been spending more time with them these last few



months, learning to believe I was wanted, because I thought that maybe that was true. It was a new feeling, and I was trying to lean into it slowly, because it took a lot of getting used to.

Casey grinned. “I understood some of those words.” Then his smile faded into something more serious and about a hundred degrees hotter. “I really like that one.”

My fingers closed on the Lady Bug in my makeup bag, but I forced them open again. “Maybe you can take me on a date sometime, and I’ll wear it.”

Casey reached out for my spare hand. Curled his fingers around my wrist and stroked my pulse point. “What else will you wear?”

I licked my lips and didn’t miss the way his gaze followed the movement. “Let’s see. Where are we going? Cafe Meow?”

“No,” he said quickly. “Somewhere better.”

I hummed. “Heels, then,” I said, “and definitely stockings. And maybe, oh, that black-and-blue skirt with the lace trim?”

Casey’s mouth dropped open. “You’d wear that for me?”

I put my index finger up to my mouth and bit the end of it lightly. Hummed, like I had to think of how to answer. “I guess so. If you promised to make it worth my while.”

Casey shifted in his seat, tugging at his jeans. “Would it be those stockings with the ribbons at the top?” he asked, and I almost laughed at how eager he was. Casey was crazy for those stockings.

I bit my bottom lip. “Hmm. I suppose so.”

“You’re such a fucking tease,” he said, but I could tell he was enjoying every minute of it. God, I loved how transparent he was. Scratch that, I loved him. But I still laughed when he palmed at the front of his jeans again and gave me a betrayed look. “How am I meant to drive with a boner?”

I reached over and put my hand on top of his. “I could blow you if you want. Put that lipstick on and?—”

“Briar! We’re in the parking lot of a Sheetz!” He looked equal parts scandalized and intrigued.

I shrugged. “Guess you’re driving like that, then.”

It wasn’t very fair of me, but hey, I hadn’t forced his dick to get hard. Besides, if I had to be uncomfortable when I stepped out of the car when we finally got to his parents’ place in Arlington, then so did he.

Casey’s parents lived in a cream-colored Craftsman style house with a wraparound porch and a red doorway. It was picture-perfect, situated on a tree-lined avenue with wide sidewalks. The front lawn was neatly manicured. It was the sort of house that when you looked, you just knew whoever lived there gave out the full-sized candy bars at Halloween. That didn’t stop my stomach from swooping like we were at the house from Amityville Horror instead.

We stopped behind a small blue hatchback, and Casey said, “Hey, Jamie’s home too!”

I tried to smile, like that was a good thing. Who didn’t love meeting extra family members with no warning?

“Hey,” Casey said, in an encouraging tone of voice. “You’ve got this, okay? You’re fucking incredible.”

I tugged at the hem of my sweater. “That’s it? That’s the pep talk?”

“You’re incredible, period. That encompasses everything.” He reached out and took my hand and squeezed it. “Okay, so how about this? They’re gonna love you. I know I keep saying that, but that’s because I’m certain it’s true. But you’re not, and I get that. So, here’s the deal. If you’re uncomfortable, or you hate it, or, hell, the cat looks at you sideways, we’ll leave.”

My heart beat a little faster. “Really?”

“Yup.” His eyes crinkled when he smiled. “Simple as that.”

“You’d choose me over them?”

“Yup.”

“You make it sound easy,” I said.

“Briar.” He let out a slow breath. “It’s an easy promise to make because I know it’s not gonna happen. But if it did? Then, yeah. I’d choose you.”

I stared at Casey, who’d never dated a guy before but who had pushed past his own inexperience and my bullshit and taken a chance on me—on us. He was the one who was incredible.

The words spilled out of me without warning. “You know I love you, right?”

Casey’s eyes went wide. My heart clenched, just for a second, but then he smiled that dumb smile that he kept just for me and said, “Thank fuck you said it first. I’ve wanted to tell you for weeks, but I was scared it’d freak you out.”

It was the least romantic declaration I’d ever heard, and I didn’t care. It was still

enough to bring a lump to my throat and make my heart flutter in my chest in the best way.

“You still didn’t say it,” I pointed out, fighting a smile.

Casey laughed. “I love you, okay?”

It felt just as good to hear it as to say it.

“Oh, man,” Casey said. “How awesome is this? We get to say it all the time now.”

I squeezed his hand and smiled. “It’s pretty awesome.” I glanced out the windshield to see the curtains at the front of the house fluttering. “Okay, let’s do this. Let’s go inside. Only because there’s a cat in there though.”

Casey laughed and leaned over the console and kissed me, a brief, comforting brush of his lips against mine. “If anyone’s going to be an asshole, it’ll be the cat. But don’t take it personally. She’s an asshole to everyone.”

“I like her best already.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re probably soulmates or something.”

I checked my reflection in the mirror and bit my lip. When I’d left home, I’d promised myself that I wouldn’t hide who I was anymore. Maybe it was time to live up to that.

As Casey went to open the door, I said, “Wait!”

Casey paused and turned to me, his brow creased in concern. “We don’t have to?—”

I waved an impatient hand at him as I dug in my bag, pulling out the Lady Bug and

applying it expertly. I pressed my lips together and checked my reflection again. I looked fucking amazing, and screw anyone who thought otherwise.

I arched an eyebrow at Casey. “Just so you know, if your parents are dicks about this, I reserve the right to string you up by your balls. Deal?”

Casey was grinning from ear to ear when he said, “Deal, baby.”

We got out of the car just as the front door swung open, and an attractive woman stepped out onto the porch.

I took a deep breath. Casey was sure his parents would like me, and one thing I’d learned was that I could trust him. So I was going to trust him with this too. I reached out and grabbed his hand to steady my nerves, and he tangled his fingers in mine as we walked up the path together.

His mom stepped forward eagerly and met us halfway down the driveway, like she’d just been waiting for us to make the first move. The front door opened again, and a tall, sporty-looking guy who must have been Casey’s father joined her.

His mom wrapped Casey in a hug that was hard enough to cause him to let out a squeak that I’d definitely give him shit about later. She turned to me. “You must be Briar! I haven’t heard nearly enough about you because Casey is terrible at communicating.”

“Really?” I said before I could stop myself. “Because normally he won’t shut up.”

Casey’s mom laughed, and Casey gave me a grin.

“Oh, aren’t you just gorgeous!” his mom exclaimed, letting go of Casey and pulling me into a hug that smelled like Estée Lauder’s White Linen. She took a while to let go, but I didn’t hate it. “Now, Casey said you’re not allergic to anything, but I wanted

to double check.”

“No, I’m good,” I said.

“Great! Because Alex makes a satay chicken to die for. But if you had a peanut allergy, well, you’d literally die from it, and what is it I always say, Casey?”

“That you wouldn’t handle prison,” he said.

My mouth dropped open, but his mom just laughed.

Wait... she really always said that?

“Come on in and meet Alex and Jamie,” Casey’s mom said, “and Casey can show you where to put your bag. I’ve put you both in Casey’s room. Is that okay?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said, heat creeping up my face. “That’s fine.”

Casey’s mom shot me a smile as she led the way toward the porch.

Casey squeezed my hand. “You good?”

“Yeah,” I said, and I drew a deep breath and discovered that it wasn’t a lie. I was done with lying, after all. I was here, in a new place, in the middle of meeting new people whose opinion of me mattered, but I was okay. Because I was holding Casey’s hand, and I loved him, and it turned out he loved me too.

There had been a lot of people in my life who’d looked at me and didn’t like what they saw. But now there were a lot of people in my life who supported me: Alan and Mel, my brothers at Alpha Tau, and Casey Hill. Casey Hill, that idiot or hypocrite pledge master who’d turned out to be telling the truth the whole damn time. But not the whole truth. He’d told me I’d have brothers and a family in Alpha Tau. He didn’t

tell me I'd be loved. But here I was, holding his hand on a driveway in Arlington, and I was safe and happy and loved.

And I was going to hold onto that feeling for as long as I could. For today, for this weekend, for the rest of my time at Lassiter. And just maybe, with Casey beside me, for the rest of my life.