

My stomach tightened and flipped, making me sweaty and vaguely nauseous. For the first time in months, it had nothing to do with an early morning hangover and everything to do with a woman.

It was almost strange that I had never been to Emilie's room after all we'd been through. The memory of the day we'd first slept together, when I'd promised to pick her up right here where I stood, increased the empty feeling in my gut.

"Get it together, Rowland," I muttered under my breath, then jabbed the buzzer.

A moment later, a girl's disembodied voice wafted out of the intercom. "I'm late, what do you want?"

I rolled my eyes at Ruby's blunt answer and the tension immediately unwound in my neck. I could handle a smart mouth with a lot more ease than I could handle kindness and love.

"Ruby, it's Quinn."

Silence and static crackled over the intercom for at least thirty seconds, but I was determined to wait her out. It had been two months. One more day and I'd lose what remained of my mind.

"You may as well go away, dickface. No one in this house is ever sleeping with you again."

My pride urged me to protest, but I bit my tongue. That in itself told me I'd made the right decision today. That I was ready. "I don't want to sleep with any D.E.'s this morning, I only want an address."

"Nice fucking try."

More silence. Impatience fisted my hands at my sides and sent my foot tapping against the cement porch. Sweat beaded up on my forehead in the late June heat. This time I relented first, more desperate to see Emilie's face with every minute that ticked by. I could find her without Ruby, but this was the fastest way. And I was in a hurry. "Did you say you were late for something?"

She didn't answer, but a moment later the front door of the Delta Epsilon house swung open and she slipped outside, a pretty standard glare shooting my direction. Her long blond hair piled atop her head, strands falling around her face and down her back in a way that had to be on purpose—I'd watched enough girls get ready for tennis matches to know that those perfect little camera-ready curls didn't come loose on their own—wearing cotton shorts that showed off her legs and a tight Whitman U t-shirt that showed off her smallish boobs.

“I’m late for rehearsal, and I’m not telling you where Em is so that you can fuck with her head again.”

“You don’t give her enough credit.”

Her mouth fell open and her arms crossed over her chest. “I can’t even believe you have the balls to stand there and say that to *me*.”

“I have the balls to do a lot of things.”

She wrinkled her nose and started to push past me. Me and my goddamn cocky mouth. I reached out a hand and rested it lightly on Ruby’s arm, half-expecting her to punch me, but she only jerked loose.

“I’m sorry. You’re late for rehearsal. Can I offer you a ride?” I gestured to the Town Car idling at the curb, my heart climbing into my throat. I wanted to shake the answer out of her, but trying to force Ruby to comply with my wishes would be about as easy as taking out the top seeded Spaniard at the French Open.

Indecision warred on her classically pretty face, her pale cheeks already red from the heat, and she tried to glance surreptitiously at her phone to check the time. Instead of waiting, I tapped on the car’s roof. Leo hopped out, came around, and held the door.

Ruby glowered. “Fine. But only because it’s fucking hot, and I’ll be a sweaty enough mess after three hours of rehearsing outside.”

She slid into the car and I followed, giving Leo a tight nod of thanks and instructions to drive to the park as he closed the door behind us. Ruby slid across the seats until she sat as far away from me as possible.

“Are you dating a fellow cast member?” It took all of my concentration not to go right for the information I wanted. Ruby might be as prickly as a fucking cactus when it came to me, but she was still a woman. They loved talking.

“It’s none of your business.”

“You look lovely. I’m sure he’ll be ready to go soon, if he isn’t already.”

“Cut the shit, Quinn. You want me to give you Emilie’s address. Why?” Real curiosity burned behind the contempt in her icy blue gaze, infecting me with the barest amount of hope.

“I love her.”

She shrugged, glancing out the window as though the weather was more interesting than my declarations of love. “Yeah, well, that’s old news. You fell for her six months ago and still let her go, so what’s different now?”

“Everything. What I told you in *The Grind* that day, that she was better off without me...I believed it. I was a mess—my dad rejecting me, Sebastian’s blackmail—”

“Your own poor little rich boy bullshit,” she finished.

I winced. “Yes. And Emilie was always too good for me. She always will be.”

“You shouldn’t go to law school, because you suck at closing arguments.”

“Ruby.” Our eyes met. It took every ounce of courage I’d managed to scrape together over the past several weeks to let her see the desperation and pain, the grief and loss, tumbling around inside me, but I did. “I can’t bear another day. I haven’t been with a girl since she left, or thrown a party, or seen my dad, or done anything at all except try to salvage my future. To build something—someone—Emilie deserves to stand beside. I’m not quite there, but I need her. Today. Not tomorrow.”

To my surprise, tears pricked my eyes. A lump in my throat burned as I swallowed, trying to get control before Ruby kicked me while I was down, but she only stared.

“You haven’t had sex for two months? *You?*”

A tired smile found my lips, and I found it was genuine. “Trust me, Ruby, after you’ve had the real deal, everything else seems like a waste of time.”

“You have to give me a few things in return. If I tell you.”

The wariness I’d acquired during weeks of meeting with investors and accountants returned, and I shrugged into it like a favorite game day outfit. “Okay.”

“You have to love her, Quinn. Like, the kind of love where you’ll cry when she walks down the aisle, and think she’s beautiful when she’s all fat and knocked up, and hold her hand when you’re eighty. Emilie’s special. She deserves that. I don’t know if you do. But I know she’ll never love anyone the way she loves you.” She paused, wiping at her eyes. “Also, you could introduce me to Sam Bradford, if you want.”

I snorted and Ruby giggled, and for the first time it seemed like maybe the two of us had something in common. Maybe not much, but we both adored Emilie, and that made us sort of friends.

“Deal.” I stuck out my hand. “I love her, Ruby. If I didn’t, if I wasn’t sure this could really work, I’d leave her alone.”

“I believe you.”

Leo pulled up at the entrance to the park. The car rolled to a stop, and Ruby dug around in her messenger bag for a pen and a piece of paper, then handed me an address on the Upper East Side.

She hung onto it for a minute, our hands connected by the slip of paper, until our eyes met again. “I’m glad it’s you, Quinn. You’re a total douchecanoe sometimes but you two just seem to fit.”

Ruby got out of the car without another word or a backward glance. As she broke into a trot across the grass, I rolled down the privacy screen and met Leo’s gaze in the rearview mirror.

“The airport, Leo. Quickly.”

My arms twitched with the need to hold her again. All of the confessions I’d bitten back before burned the back of my throat, aching to be said. I wanted to see her face, to kiss her lips, to hear her say again that she wanted to be mine.

I only hoped I wasn’t too late.