
TRADING UP

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Trading Up
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“Are you going to marry a prince, Cassidy?”

AI drop to my knees and adjust the diamond tiara on little Lacey’s head. “I’m not so sure about that,” I tell her, even though my mother has been grooming me to be a princess since the moment I was delivered and the doctor announced I was a girl.

A mixture of sadness and disappointment comes over Lacey’s angelic face—I’m very familiar with the look—and since she’s had enough letdowns in her five young years on this planet, I say, “Maybe someday I will, though.” I guess there’s no harm in letting her believe in prince charming and happily ever after. I prefer to live in reality, and why shouldn’t she have a few more years before she becomes jaded like the rest of us?

A smile lights up her face and brightens her pretty blue eyes and precocious child that she is, she reaches for the tiara. “Well then, you’re going to need this.”

I capture her hands to stop her. “No, this looks much better on you than it does on me.” I gently place her hands at her

sides and admire the gorgeous blue gown I'd given her earlier, and the way the tiara brings out the shimmering jewels in the little dress.

I have gowns of all shapes, colors and sizes. Most are back at my family home in Southern California. On my last visit home, I grabbed a few to give Lacey and her friends here at the shelter. I have no need for them. In fact, I hate them. They remind me of all the pageants my mother forced me to enter. But I can't forget that if I'm going to catch the attention of Swedish prince Stefan Lundin, who transferred to Kingston college for his senior year, those debutante lessons and pageantry skills that were thrust upon me are going to come in handy. And why can't I forget? Oh, because mother dearest keeps reminding me.

Can you imagine it? Me, Cassidy Collins, catching the eye of a prince? What a joke. I grew up a tomboy, the bane of my mother's socialite existence. She spent years trying to beat that boyish behavior out of me, and while I can dress and act like a debutante when need be, deep inside I'm still a girl who prefers big juicy cheeseburgers over salads, jeans over dresses and ponytails over flat irons. Which means I don't stand a chance at getting a rose from the handsome Swedish prince who is here at Kingston College seeking a proper American bride, much like his brother Jonas had last year. Do they not have suitable women in Sweden? What the hell is up with that anyway? I really don't know, and of course, my mother told me not to question such good fortune and get straight to work on finding a way to catch his eye. Even if I do manage to get him to notice me, I'm sure he'll be bored in minutes. What on earth would I have to talk about? I'm sure we have nothing in common.

“Of course, she’s going to marry a prince,” my best friend Becca says as she comes into the room. I stand as the scent of rich dark chocolate reaches my nose. She sets a plate with two freshly baked cupcakes down on the coffee table in front of Lacey and me, and as I inhale the decadent scent, my mother’s voice erupts inside my head. *You need to watch your weight, Cassidy.*

“Eat,” Becca says as I stare longingly at the fresh-baked treat. Becca and I have been best friends since childhood, debutantes together, and she knows my struggles as much as I know hers. Two young girls, with chocolate all over their cute little faces, come racing into the room, their ponytails bouncing.

“I baked this one just for you,” Bethany says, giving me a toothless grin as she picks up a cupcake and holds it out to me, hints of chocolate on her little cherub face. My heart misses a beat. Here I am lamenting about being on the pageantry circuit—about not being good enough for a prince—while these little girls have all been living in this women’s shelter with their moms and siblings for months. Becca and I visit once a week, not just to pad our resumes, and not just because volunteer work is required for our Public Relations degree, but because we enjoy hanging out and helping out. These little girls always brighten our day.

I graciously accept the cupcake, peel the wrapper back and take a big bite. “Bethany, this is the best cupcake I’ve ever tasted.”

She glows under my praise, and then her gaze goes to Lacey’s tiara. Her eyes jump wide open, and sparkle like the vibrant gemstones. She holds her hands together, like she’s working hard not to reach out and touch the jeweled crown fit for a princess. “That’s so pretty.”

Lacey takes it off and hands it to her. "Want to try it on?" My heart pinches as I watch her place the tiara on Bethany's head. "You look just like Cinderella," Lacey tells her and little Bethany spins.

"Bethany, I bet there's a dress in here you'd like. You too, Clara," I say to the other young girl who's a bit standoffish. She's new here and doesn't quite know who, and maybe even how, to trust, which breaks my heart. She takes a tentative step closer as I pull out numerous dresses from the bag I'd brought, and the girls begin to squeal in delight. Lacey's mother Patricia comes into the room, and I turn to her as the girls all appraise the dresses with glee.

"Mommy, Cassidy is going to marry a prince," Lacey blurts out and puts both hands to her heart and sways.

Patricia raises her brow. "Is that so?"

"No, not really," I say and a stupid unladylike snort shoots from my nose. Like I said, that tomboy still resides inside of me.

"Would this prince happen to be Stefan Lundin?" she questions with a gleam in her eyes.

"You've heard?"

She laughs, the overhead light glistening on her gorgeous dark skin. "Who hasn't? It's all anyone can talk about. He's all over the news and in the papers. He's quite the handsome young man, don't you think?"

"Don't get any ideas. He's taken," Becca says playfully and loops her arm through mine. "Isn't that right, Cassidy?"

"No, that is not right." My stomach knots. I know Becca means well, but the pressure to snag a prince is getting to me.

Mom has been calling non-stop, asking if Stefan has given out any roses yet—like the campus is his game show and love is the prize. What-the-fuck-ever.

“Well, he’ll soon be taken.” Becca lifts her chin an inch. “He can give out as many roses as he likes, but Cassidy is in it to win it and will no doubt end up his princess.”

“You deserve your very own prince charming, Cassidy,” Patricia says. “Just promise me you’ll never forget one thing.”

I frown, having no idea what she’s getting at. “What?”

She taps me on the nose. “Never forget, you’re the prize.”

“So are you,” I tell her, and her lips pinch tight. She’s here at the shelter because of a bad marriage. She thought she’d found her prince, only for him to turn out to be an ogre, and not the cute kind from Disney. But one day I hope she finds love again—with the right guy.

“Mommy, don’t I look pretty?” Lacey says as Bethany puts the tiara back on Lacey’s head. Patricia turns to her daughter, and I check the time on my phone.

I catch Becca’s eye. “We should get going.”

Becca nods, and we say our goodbyes and head out into the warm day, and I glance up to take in the thickening clouds that threaten rain. It’s mid-September, and it’s still stinking hot in SoCal. I’m not complaining. I love the heat. If I ever married the Swedish prince, I have no idea how I’d survive the cold Stockholm winters. From what I hear they’re long, snowy and dreadful.

Wait, I’m only in my junior year, if I was given the final rose, would I have to forgo my public relations degree and move, or would I stay and finish? My mother doesn’t even expect me

to get a degree. She went to college to get her MRS and wants the same for me. What century are we living in anyway?

“Ohmigod, there he is,” Becca says and grips my hands. Our steps slow as Stefan comes toward us, his head down, scrolling through his phone. He briefly looks up, his glance moving through us like we don’t even exist. Put a leaf on my head and he’d think I was just another tree on the campus grounds. I shake my head.

“He doesn’t even know I’m alive.” Honestly, I’m not even sure I care, or that I want to marry a prince—or marry at all. My mother tells me once I’m married to royalty, I’ll be the happiest girl in the world. Do I really need a prince to be happy, though? Do I even need a guy?

What do you want, Cassidy?

“He is so hot,” Becca says dreamily, and I’m about to tell her maybe she should try to get herself a rose, when she squeezes my hand and adds, “Go, walk straight into him. Make him notice you once and for all.”

“I’m not doing that.” My phone pings and I pull it from my pocket and read the message from my brother.

James: Hey is Becca available? Asking for a friend.

“Eww.”

“What’s going on?” Becca asks.

I stare at my phone. No way am I going to hook my brother—who happens to be a star defense player for the Falcons

football team—up with my best friend. Not only does she have a boyfriend, the thoughts of her with my brother disgusts me. Don't get me wrong, I love James, and I'm totally proud of him but he's a total man whore. Even if she was available, I wouldn't hook any of his friends up with her either. They're all about the catch and release. With the exception of his best friend Braden Murphy. I sometimes wonder how the two guys are so close when they're so different.

I chuckle as I think about Braden's belief that he can't have sex during the football season because it will interfere with his performance. His superstitions make him all that much more interesting and appealing to girls. They like the challenge, I guess. Personally, I like Braden. I've known him forever, but I've never been attracted to him. I do, however, appreciate that he's not driven by sex, and that he has other goals and ambitions. I think he's actually one of the good guys. Not that my brother isn't. He's good to me, and the women who sleep with him know what they're getting themselves into.

I tuck my phone away. "What's going on is my brother asked if you were single."

Her face doesn't twist in disgust quite the way I expected. Heck, she's known James as long as I've known Braden. I wouldn't want to go out with Braden any more than she'd want to go out with James. Right? Man, the thought of the two together brings a lump to my gut. Besides, it's never going to happen. She has a boyfriend.

Becca sucks in a fast breath, and it pulls my attention back. "Oh no."

“What?” I ask, and my gaze jerks to hers. My heart thumps as Becca’s eyes go saucer wide. I follow her gaze to Stefan, as Kate Hilton—my frenemy—steps onto the path, right in front of him.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I murmur under my breath as my blood boils hot. I’m not sure what it is about Kate, but she brings out the absolute worst in me. Maybe I do know, and it’s because she’s always beaten me at everything. For as long as I can remember, my mother has been comparing me to her.

Why can’t you be more like Kate?

Why can’t you play with dolls instead of trains?

Why can’t you smile like she does?

Why...why...why.

Ugh, I am so sick of hearing about how wonderful Kate Hilton is.

I hike my bag over my shoulder, ready to go slamming into Stefan. Heck, five seconds ago, I wasn’t even sure I wanted his attention, but now thanks to Kate, I’m determined to get it. Becca grabs my arm to stop me.

“Wait.”

“What?” I ask.

“Last year, remember how Stefan’s brother Jonas stole Bianca from her boyfriend?”

“I remember.” I actually thought it was horrible. Bianca’s boyfriend, who played center on the Falcons, had been devastated when she dumped him for the Swedish prince.

Her brow furrows the way it always does when she's deep in thought. "I think there's something to be said about the chase."

"Meaning..."

"Maybe Stefan is like his brother. Maybe, in order to get him to notice you and take chase, you need to be already taken, or unavailable."

Kate flicks her hair over her shoulder and her laugh curls around me. God, I hate her so much. I'm sure she's the reason I didn't make the cheerleading team. There was one position left and she got it over me. But of course, she did. I should probably be thanking her for that, really. I could never admit that I was secretly happy about it. Mom was a cheerleader and was quite disappointed that I didn't make the cut. I'd rather focus on my degree.

"You might be missing one small detail. I am available," I say. Cripes, I hadn't had a boyfriend since my last year of high school—after my brother went off to college. I've been busy studying, and well...I'm sort of under the radar where guys are concerned. Throw in an overprotective older brother—and his protective best friend Braden, who would beat the crap out of any guy who did me wrong—and you have yourself one very hands-off girl.

"You know how all the girls want Braden simply because he stays celibate during football?" Becca asks.

"Yeah, they like the chase. It's all rather disturbing."

"Maybe, but it's all about the chase, right? If Stefan thought you were off limits, my guess is he'd want you all the more."

"I don't know about that."

“But you don’t not know about it.”

“Uh, what?”

She laughs. “Look, all you need to do is get yourself a boyfriend.”

“Yes, that’s easy to do because guys are falling at my feet.” I look down at the ground. “Oh, there’s one, oh, and there’s another.”

She nudges me with her hip. “Stop it. I’m not saying a real boyfriend. I’m saying get someone to pretend to be your boyfriend.”

I stare at her like she might have just arrived from outer space. “You can’t be serious. My life is not a rom com, Becca.”

“No, it’s not.” We both stand there and watch Kate and Stefan turn and head toward the campus pub. “But if you want it to be a fairy tale, you’d better get yourself a guy and soon.”

“Who?”

She puckers her lips and glances around, her gaze going to the football field as the players begin their drills. She points a finger. “How about him?”

My gaze settles on my brother’s best friend as he tugs on his helmet. I snort. “Do you have a brain tumor or something?”

She laughs. “Think about it. He’s totally focused on football and won’t so much as look at a girl until the season is over.”

She pokes my stomach, and I almost giggle like the Pillsbury dough boy. “If you were on his arm, it would turn a lot of heads. Think about it. The guy who is off women turns his back on his superstitions because he’s so totally in love. That,

my friend, would raise a lot of brows and bring a lot of attention.”

She’s not wrong. My gaze goes to the star running back, as he fixes his helmet and prepares for a drill. We’ve been friends for a long time, and while he’s always been overprotective of me, his loyalties are to my brother. “Forget it, he’ll never do it. Besides my brother would never let him.”

She cocks her head and her lips quirk. “You never know. With the right motivation, you can get anyone to do anything, Cassidy.”

Seconds after I put my helmet on, a weird sensation raises the hairs on the back of my neck. I turn and spot Cassidy and her best friend Becca staring at us from the path that cuts around the football field. “Hey James. Why is your sister staring at us like that?”

James laughs. “Probably because I shot a text off to her a few minutes ago asking if Becca was single.”

I turn to my friend, as he stretches his arms out. “You’re interested in Becca?”

“No,” he says with a non-committal shrug. But I know him well enough that he might be hedging the truth. Could James be into Becca? “It’s a big brother’s job to mess with his little sister,” he says, like he’s trying to backtrack. “You know that as well as I do.”

I put my hand on James’s shoulder. “Maybe so, but even if you did like Becca, she won’t let you near her with a ten-foot pole.”

For a brief second, I think I spot disappointment in his eyes. “Yeah, I know, but it’s fun to mess with her.”

Coach Meyers blows his whistle, and we head down the field toward him. I cast another fast glance Cassidy’s way, and she’s no longer looking at me. We walk past a few of the cheerleaders practicing for Friday night’s game, and they start waving their pom poms and calling out to me.

“Christ,” I murmur under my breath.

James throws his arm around me. “Dude, you’re really missing out. You could have your pick of girls.”

It’s true, I could, but only because I’m a challenge. I’m just so over that and let’s face it, I’m no prince charming. “I’ll just have to live vicariously through you, I guess.”

I steal another glance at the girls bouncing around on the sidelines. They’re only calling out to me because I’m the only guy on the team who remains celibate for the season. It’s a weird superstition I picked up in high school, and it’s gotten me this far, so I’m not about to go breaking it now. My only goal is to make it into the NFL, and I’m not about to get sidetracked by some girl who only wants me simply because she can’t have me. I’m not what you’d call classically handsome like my bro James. I’m no one’s prince charming and without football or my superstitions, no one would even notice me. But that’s perfectly fine. I have a career to focus on, and my education to fall back on.

For the next hour, we practice drills and once we’re done, we all head back to the locker room for a shower. After washing, I towel dry and toss it over my shoulder and walk back to the change room. The guys are all laughing and carrying on and talking about our upcoming game with the San Diego Sharks.

I join in the conversation as I tug on my jeans and reach for my T-shirt.

Beside me, James finishes dressing, and grabs his phone from his locker. My stomach takes that moment to grumble. “Do you want to hit up The Growler for a burger?” I ask. Neither one of us are great cooks, and even though we share a house with a state-of-the-art kitchen, most meals are spent at the campus pub. Instead of answering me, he stands there staring at his phone like it might have cooties, or crabs, or...something worse.

“Ah, is everything okay?” Worry races through me as I tug on my shirt and step up to him. Truthfully, I love the guy, but he’s been sleeping around a lot, and I’m worried cooties might be the least of his problems. Honestly, I’m not sure what’s going on with him. It’s not like James to keep things from me, but he’s been screwing like the devil is driving him. He holds his phone out to me and I read the message from Cassidy.

“She has dinner ready for us?” I frown as I scratch my head. We’re all friends, the three of us as tight as three siblings can be—not that she’s my biological sister—but cooking isn’t Cassidy’s thing either, even though she’s good at it. She’s good at a lot of things, despite the fact that she considers herself a failure at most. Just because she never won a pageant growing up, and failed at cheerleading, does not make her a loser. I hate that she thinks she is. “Since when does Cassidy cook for us?”

“Never.” He shoves his phone into his back pocket, a scowl on his face.

My stomach grumbles louder this time, the thoughts of a warm meal urging it on. “Maybe not, but I’m not going to say no to a homemade meal.”

“Not even if it comes with a favor?”

“A favor?”

“Yeah, Cassidy obviously expects something in return. No way is she doing this out of the goodness of her heart, and since she hates to cook, it’s obviously something we’re not going to like.”

“I’m pretty hungry, bro.” James shakes his head at me and I consider what kind of favor I’d do to taste one of Cassidy’s homemade meals. The consensus is: pretty much anything.

He reaches down, tosses his bag over his shoulder and heads toward the doors. “Come on. Let’s go find out what our little sister is up to.”

I snatch up my bag and follow him. We often call Cassidy our little sister because I’ve known her since she was just a kid, and she was like my sisters too—annoying. I chuckle at that. While it’s only James and Cassidy, I’m the oldest with two younger sisters. I had no trouble taking Cass on as another sister to look out for.

We cut across campus, and as we walk past Wolf House, I spot Kate chatting with Stefan, the Swedish prince who recently transferred here. Kate was in Cassidy’s grade growing up, and I don’t know her all that well. What I do know, I like. She touches Stefan’s arm and laughs when he says something.

Come on, Kate, you’re better than that.

Sure, Stefan is attractive, and the entire campus is abuzz with his presence, every girl vying to be his princess, and although I

don't know why—I've never really considered myself a great judge of character—there's just something about him that rubs me the wrong way. It's not the way he walks around like he's better than everyone else. I couldn't care less about his stature. Nor is it the way the privileged entitlement rolls off him in waves. All I know is I want Cassidy to stay as far away from him as possible. Seriously though, what kind of guy gives out roses and then decides who he'll take for a bride? I guess maybe that's what bothers me. That he thinks he can have his pick of women. That love is some kind of a prize. This is Kingston College, for Christ's sake. Not some reality game show.

James nudges me when he sees them. "Look."

"Yeah, I see them."

A half snort, half groan crawls out of James' throat. It's a Collins thing. I've heard his sister make that exact same sound. "That guy's a fucking douche."

"I know."

James' steps slow, and I can almost hear his heart crash against his chest. He swallows, hard, and curses under his breath. Unease clutches onto my balls with the death grip. I've only ever seen that look on James' face once before. It was when one of our teammates back in high school asked about taking out his sister. Murder. It's the only way to explain it.

"What?" I ask quietly, as every muscle in James' body tightens.

"I have a bad feeling."

"About Kate and Stefan?"

“No,” he says picking up the pace. “About Cassidy and Stefan.”

“Oh fuck.” I double my steps to keep his pace. “You think that’s what this dinner is all about?”

“You know my mom. I can just imagine she’s all over Cassidy.” James grips the handles on his bag harder, and the muscles in his jaw clench. Neither of us like the pressure his mother puts on Cassidy. Christ, when we were kids, and she used to play baseball and dodgeball and tumble in the dirt with us, his mother would go into hysterics, demanding she put on a dress and act like a lady.

I hated how it always deflated Cassidy, how her vivacious and contagious smile would run away from her face. It hurt my heart back then as much as it hurts it now. She’s a good kid, down to earth with a kind heart—heck, she wouldn’t even hurt a spider and she hates spiders—and in my world, that’s all that matters. I pray to fuck her mother isn’t pressuring her into impressing prince Stefan Lundin from Sweden. Like Kate, she’s better than that and better than him.

We reach our place, and James rushes up the three stairs and bangs open the door. He’s already questioning Cassidy by the time I reach the stoop. I don’t know whether to hang back or not. This is a family matter. Then again, I consider Cassidy family too. I quietly close the door, drop my bag next to James’ and walk down the hall to the kitchen.

My stomach grumbles loud as the scent of freshly baked bread reaches my nostrils. Cassidy made bread? My entire body stiffens. This is bad, so very bad. I lean against the doorjamb when I reach the kitchen, and her gaze darts to mine. Her lids flicker nervously and she tears her gaze away, like she can’t quite bring herself to look at me. What the hell?

“Cass,” I say, and her chest rises and falls, her lids briefly closed like she’s bracing herself for something. I push off the door and step into the room.

“Just give me a minute,” she says, and James and I exchange a worried glance.

“Tell me this has nothing to do with Stefan,” James says, but she doesn’t need to answer for me to know it has everything to do with Stefan.

“Sit, have something to eat first. You guys look like you’re starving.” She pulls two chairs out, and we drop into them, keeping a laser focus on her. She bends and pulls a fresh baguette from the oven. After cutting it into slices, she sets it on the table. I reach for a piece, ravenous, and when James doesn’t move, I pull my hand back despite the grumble in my stomach.

James eyes his sister. “You’re not in some kind of trouble, are you?”

“No, no of course not. Now eat.”

With that, James hesitantly grabs a slice and so do I. I take one bite of the sweet buttery soft bread and in that instant, I don’t care what kind of favor Cassidy wants. I’d agree to anything...well, just about anything.

“School going okay?” James asks.

“Yes, in fact I have been thinking about some ways to fundraise for the football team. There were rumblings about the team wanting new uniforms, but it wasn’t in the coffers this year.”

“That’s true.”

A wide smile lights up her eyes. “If I could pull off a big fundraiser, with the help of you guys and your teammates, it would be good for you all, don’t you think?”

James nods, a measure of relief moving across his face as I bite into another piece of bread. “I’m sure the guys would love to help out. I know Braden and I are in.” He looks at me as I chew and I nod in agreement. James reaches for another slice of bread and his hand stops mid-air. “Wait, what’s in it for you?”

“Extra credit.”

“Oh, okay.”

She goes to the stove, grabs a set of tongs and dishes up two generous plates of pasta and meatballs. Only my favorite meal on the face of this earth. I’m pretty low maintenance like that. James’ favorite meal is steak and fries. Wait, why is she making *my* favorite meal and not his? Oh, because this meal isn’t at all about fundraising and extra credit. She wants another favor and it has something to do with me.

Motherfucker.

I toss a big meatball into my mouth, and note the way Cassidy’s gaze keeps flickering my way. Yet every time I lift my head to see her, she busies herself.

“Aren’t you going to eat with us?” I ask.

Her hands go around her waist, and she hugs herself. “No, I’m not hungry. This is just for you guys.”

“That’s what this meal is about, then? You wanting to do the team a favor for extra credit?”

“Well yes, but...” She takes a big drink of water, draining nearly the whole glass. She’s stalling. I get it. After she

finishes drinking, she gingerly sets the glass down and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. I grin. This is the Cassidy I know and love. If her mother was here, she'd be demanding that Cassidy dab the corners of her mouth with a napkin. I'm glad she doesn't feel the need to do it around James and me. It's not like she doesn't have manners. She does, she just doesn't need to pretend to be something she's not. She's loveable just the way she is.

"But what?" James asks, suspicion back in his eyes.

"Okay, so..." she begins, and checks to see how much we've eaten. She obviously wants our bellies full before she tells us what this is really all about. "You know Stefan..."

James drops his fork onto his plate and it lands with a clang. Cassidy jumps from the clatter, and holds her hands out, cutting James off before he can get a word out. "If you'll just hear me out."

James curses and his fingers fist at his sides. "I already don't like this, and—"

"James," I say, cutting him off. "Let's hear what she has to say. It can't hurt to listen and it's obviously important to her if she went through all this trouble."

Cassidy gives me a grateful smile. She takes a deep breath, and with her gaze still locked on mine, she blurts out, "I need you to pretend to be my boyfriend." My mouth drops open. So does James'. "It's just pretend, for a bit. You know how guys want what other guys have. I mean, Braden, you know how all the girls want to sleep with you during football because they can't. Because of your superstitions." I sit there, staring at her, trying to put the pieces together as she rambles on. "Remember last year...when Stefan's brother Jonas was here...and how he—"

“How he stole Bianca from Carlos. Is that what you’re getting at, Cassidy?” James asks.

“Well, yeah.”

“Carlos was devastated,” James adds.

“When you put it that way, it sounds horrible. But my guess is Bianca and Carlos must have been having problems.” There’s hope in her eyes as she says that. “Otherwise, she wouldn’t have dumped him, right?”

Is she trying to convince us or herself that anything about that was right?

“Cassidy, if you’re doing this because of Mom—”

“I’m not. I really like him. He’s handsome and sweet, and I think we’d make a great couple. Only problem is, I’m not on his radar, and—”

“Then he’s an idiot,” I blurt out and all eyes turn to me. “What? He is. You’re smart and beautiful and if he doesn’t see that, that’s on him, not you.”

“Yeah, okay sure,” she says like she doesn’t believe me. “I still think if he saw me with you, Braden, he might begin to notice me.”

“Is that what you want in a guy?” I ask. How could she be attracted to a douche bag who’d only want her if he thought she was good enough for someone else, someone he could take her from? What kind of guy does that make him? Rage races through my veins and I work to tamp it down.

“Are you sure about this, Cass?” James asks. “He’s who you want?”

“Yes,” she answers, her gaze on me. “Braden, would you be able to help me out? Pretend to be my boyfriend for a little while, and once I have Stefan’s attention, we can stage a breakup?” As I take in her big blue eyes full of hope and worry, and the way she’s nervously coiling a long strand of dark hair around her finger my stomach clenches because damned if she didn’t just ask the one thing I wouldn’t do for a homecooked meal.

Fuck me six ways to Sunday.