

Tongue-tied

by Pan

Chapter 1

“So according to Ryan, the new console won’t...”

Mia trailed off.

“V? Are you okay?”

“Mm-hmm,” Veronica replied, her eyes glazed over. Mia waved her hand in front of her best friend’s face a few times: no response. “Uh...”

“I, um. You just...sorry, I was. Uh. What were we...”

Mia let her best friend stutter and stammer for almost a minute before she chimed in.

“You doing okay there, bud?” she asked playfully.

“Uh, yeah,” Veronica replied, a blush appearing on her face. “Sorry. I was just...”

She trailed off again, and Mia snapped her fingers in front of the young woman’s face.

“Hmm?”

“Dude, what the heck is wrong with you? We were talking about Final Fantasy Fifteen, and you acted like Chris Hemsworth came in and offered to go down on you.”

A smile appeared on Veronica’s face, and she sighed a happy sigh. “I did a little, didn’t I?”

“Spill,” Mia replied, giving her friend a playful shove. “Who’s the guy?”

V didn’t answer, and Mia shot her a look.

“Or...girl?” The eighteen-year old wiggled her eyebrows provocatively.

“N-no,” Veronica replied. Her blush was back. “No, it’s...it’s a guy. Sorry. I got a little...mmm...when you mentioned him.”

Mia furrowed her brow. Mentioned him? The only guy she’d talked about in the last few minutes was...

Oh, no. *No*.

“Ryan???” she shrieked, her jaw dropping when Veronica’s face once more took on that dreamy, distant expression.

“Mm-hmm,” she replied, letting out a long, shuddering sigh.

Mia couldn't believe what she was hearing. Or seeing. The entire situation made no sense. Veronica had never shown any interest in Mia's brother before...in fact, she was pretty sure that no girl ever had.

It wasn't like Ryan was a mutant or anything like that. He was just...a geek. A computer nerd. The kind of guy you batted your eyelids at to get help with your homework.

Hell, it was even conceivable that someone would be interested in dating him. Someday. But not Veronica. And “dating” was a far cry from her reaction just at hearing his name.

Mia and her friends weren't the most popular girls in school, but...well, they didn't go to that kind of school. Ryan and Mia went to an expensive private school. There was still a social hierarchy, but it wasn't as simple as “cheerleaders on top, nerds on the bottom”.

For example, Veronica and Mia were attractive, popular, *and* into video games. Veronica was a little under six feet tall, with blonde hair and blue eyes. She was athletic, with small breasts, a nice round ass, and a cute button nose. Her skin was tan, and she was gorgeous. On a good day, she could pass for a college student.

Mia was a bit shorter than Veronica, and her body was a lot less defined. She was a brunette, and – like her brother – her features were a mix of Asian and Italian descent. She was a little plumper than her fit friend, with a killer pair of tits. Her face pale, a little round, and she tended to wear too much make up.

Still, she was hot – both of them were – and they knew how to work their assets. For the first time in a few years, both girls were single; Mia had broken up with her girlfriend over the summer, and Veronica had been dumped by her boyfriend the day after her eighteenth birthday.

Both the girls played volleyball. Veronica also played basketball and soccer, and Mia was a member of the debate team. They'd been best friends since third grade, and spent every spare moment together. They weren't at the top of whatever social pyramid existed, but they were both well-liked.

Unlike Ryan. He wasn't bullied or anything like that, he was just considered...a little odd. He was always tinkering with computers (the entire school network had gone down for a week after he'd tried to upgrade their central system to the cloud) and devices, trying to optimize this or reprogram that.

He was a loner, and seemed quite happy that way. As a result, the rest of the school left him alone.

Mia could imagine a hypothetical world where another nerd girl (a proper geek, not like her and V) encountered Ryan, and was attracted to his hyperfocus, his devotion to tech, his weird little pockets of knowledge.

But that girl certainly wasn't Veronica. And even if she did develop a passing interest, it would

be exactly that: a crush, not a “I’m sorry, what we were talking about?” reaction just at the mention of his name.

“Is this a prank?” Mia asked, wrinkling up her nose. Now it was Veronica’s turn to throw her an odd look.

“What’s the prank?”

“I bring up Ryan, and you...yeah! That. Exactly.”

It had happened again. No sooner had Mia dropped her brother’s name when Veronica seemed to completely space out, acting like a schoolgirl with her first crush.

Mia had seen Veronica juggle two of the hottest guys in school, playing them off each other until they’d almost gotten into a fist-fight over who was going to take her to prom.

There was no way she was into Ryan. Geeky, awkward, socially-inept Ryan.

“You’re freaking me out,” Mia said flatly. “Like, what’s wrong with you? What is going on here?”

Veronica looked back at her blankly, a soft smile on her face.

“Seriously,” Mia snapped. “There’s no way you’re drooling over my brother.”

“God,” Veronica sighed. “What I wouldn’t do to...”

She sat up, suddenly looking alert.

“...do you think he might be interested?”

Mia scrunched up her entire face. This was the strangest conversation she’d ever had.

“Who?” she asked, as though hoping the answer would revert everything to normal.

“*Ryan*,” Veronica sighed dreamily, and Mia’s shoulders slumped. “D-do you...do you think...d’you think he might be...”

It took several more attempts before Veronica finally got the words out. They left her mouth in a rush.

“D’youthinkhemightlikeme?”

Mia raised one eyebrow. “Honey, I think he’d go for anything with boobs. Hell, even just one boob.”

Veronica blushed, and bit her lip at the thought.

“I don’t know how you get anything done,” she sighed happily. “With him just a door away.”

“For real, V,” Mia said urgently. “This is getting old.”

Her friend didn’t respond. Instead, she was staring into space. Mia had no way of knowing, but Veronica was picturing herself getting old with – mmmm – *Ryan*.

“What’s up, Hablo?” Mia’s friend asked. Hablo had been Patrice’s nickname for Mia for so long, neither of them could even remember where it had come from.

The girls were on a video call; some Russian software that Ryan had installed for them. It wasn’t blocked by the school’s network, and he promised it was basically as secure as top-secret government communications. Mia was laying on her bed, while Patrice was stretching. The young woman was constantly moving, like she’d die if she ever stood still.

Patrice was short, with energy that Mia’s father had once described as halfway between a jockey and a goblin. Mia had rolled her eyes, but been forced to admit...he was right.

She ate like a quarterback, but never seemed to put on weight – Patrice was the smallest of the group of friends, spry and wiry, with a tight little ass and a tiny waist. She dabbled in everything – volleyball, ballet, acting, gymnastics, chess – but hadn’t yet managed to find her ‘thing’.

Mia and Patrice’s friendship was a mixture of competitiveness and mutual admiration. They were both attractive, popular, smart, and talented. Mia was a little better at all of those things, and she knew it.

“Oh, nothing much.” Mia paused. It had been so weird at the time – weird enough that just the prospect of saying it out loud made her wonder if she’d somehow imagined it. “Just talking to Veronica.”

“How is the bitch?”

Mia stifled a laugh. “She’s been acting weird all day,” she slowly admitted. “Like, really, seriously weird. It’s like...she’s not there. Or like, she’s...not like, really...her. You know what I mean?”

“Not really. Do you think she’s on...”

Patrice paused for dramatic effect.

“...*drugs*?”

Mia paused at the idea. They’d all tried weed before, and Patrice claimed to have had coke once at a party, but...well, drugs *would* explain her friend’s weird reaction.

No. No, she’d been completely fine and normal until Mia had brought up her brother.

“Mmmm, I don’t think so,” she said. In response to her friend’s serious tone, Patrice sat down firmly in front of the camera.

Mia couldn’t see, but she knew that her friend’s foot would be jiggling as she sat there. Patrice never stopped moving.

“You 'kay, Hablo?” she asked kindly, and Mia nodded.

“Yeah. No, I’m fine. It was just...I dunno, weird.”

Patrice tilted her head to the side sympathetically. “Tell mama all about it.”

Mia sighed. This was specifically why she’d called, but for some reason she just didn’t want to talk about it.

“I dunno,” she squirmed. “Everything was normal, and then she went all weird as soon as I started talking about...”

Patrice had picked up a fidget spinner, but she stopped spinning to star at her friend.

“Out with it, bitch,” she demanded. “What’d you bring up, the sacking of the Bastille?”

Mia sighed, glancing away from her computer screen. “As soon as I mentioned Ryan.”

She’d expected the stunned silence. That, or a snarky comment or three. But as the silence stretched on, Mia turned back to the screen.

Patrice was staring off into the distance, a happy smile on her face. For a moment, Mia thought the connection had frozen – she’d never seen her friend so still before. Like, ever.

“Patrice?” she prompted. “Yo. Mama?”

“Mmm?”

In response to her friend’s sigh, Mia’s face dropped. “Oh, I get it.”

“Mmm?” Patrice repeated. Her face was soft and still, like she was watching the first kiss in a romance movie.

“You’re doing a bit.”

“Whassat?” Patrice asked, finally moving her attention back to the screen.

“You and Veronica have come up with this hill-arrriious bit, where you pretend that you’re super into Ryan.”

In response to Mia saying her brother’s name, Patrice licked her lips.

“Mmmm,” she nodded. “Thas...I mean, it’s...it’s...god, he’s so...well, I don’t have to tell you,

do I? He looks so...and those *hands*...but he doesn't even..."

Mia rolled her eyes.

"Okay, shithead," she grumbled. "If you're just going to be a bitch about it, I'm going to go find someone else to call. You know, like anyone else in the world."

"H'okay, Hablo," Patrice hummed, the distant smile still plastered on her face. "Just, um. I mean. Can you..."

"What?" Mia asked reluctantly. Patrice blushed, and it took Mia a moment to realize that she'd never seen her friend blush before. Patrice always seemed so calm and collected, whatever the situation. This strange look was particularly unnerving on her typically-energetic friend.

"Just, um. Let me know if Ryan mentions me, okay?"

By the end of the question, Patrice's voice was a squeak.

"Ha ha ha," Mia replied. "Not funny any more. I'll talk to you later, mama."

"Kay love you bye," Patrice responded, as she always did, and Mia ended the call, scratching her nose in annoyance. Patrice could be a real headache at times.

Her friend Crystal didn't answer, so Mia spent the rest of the day offline, catching up on some homework and contemplating how she could get revenge on her friends for their prank.

She got up around six to answer the door, but at the sound of her father's heavy footstep, let him get it instead. When he bellowed "Ryan!" a few minutes later, the teenage girl assumed it was a delivery – probably another set of parts for the iPod replacements he'd been working on, using her and her friends as test subjects for. The confused note in her father's voice didn't register until a few moments later, when she heard the sound of giggling.

A very familiar giggle, at that.

Opening her door, Mia was surprised to see her friend Crystal trotting down the hallway a few steps behind Ryan, a dopey look on her face.

"C-Crystal?" she asked, but it was as though the young woman didn't hear her.

Mia and her friends were all reasonably well-off – you had to be, to go to the school they did – but Crystal's mother could have bought the school *and* all the parents without her account manager even noticing. She'd been an early investor in a database software used by almost every tech company in Silicon Valley, and had re-invested her profits from that into a number of those tech companies.

Despite her parents frequently appearing on lists alongside Zuckerberg and Gates and Buffet, Crystal wasn't stuck up or snobby. The teenage girl was about the same height as Mia, with a

slender build. Her breasts, however, were really what made her stand out. They weren't huge – Mia's were probably larger – but the teen always wore clothes with the kind of cleavage that drew the eye in the first place, and then kept it there.

Crystal's hair was a beautiful shade of dark brown, so long it fell to the small of her back. She had a heart shaped face, full lips, a sharp chin, and deep, green eyes.

But right now, her face was flushed, her eyes wide, and she was practically panting.

“*Crystal*,” Mia repeated, grabbing her friend's hand. Ryan didn't even seem to notice, striding into his bedroom and closing the door behind him. “What are you doing here?”

“I, uh. Um. I mean. I. The...”

Crystal trailed off, and Mia balled her fists in fury.

“*Seriously?*” she hissed accusatorially. “The next step in this prank is to come over and fuck with me in person? What the hell did I do to piss everyone off?”

Her friend clearly wasn't listening, her eyes repeatedly darting to Ryan's closed door.

“Hmm?” she finally responded, turning her green eyes towards Mia. “Oh, h-hi Mia. Can I, um...”

Mia waited, tapping her foot in irritation as Crystal swallowed and managed to finish her thought.

“What can I do for you?” she finally asked, shooting her friend a shy smile.

“I'm done with this,” Mia replied, throwing her hands in the air. “Seriously. Whatever you're doing, I'm done with it. Go in there and do whatever the next step of the prank is – convince Ryan to make sex noises, or bang on the wall screaming his name, or find some excuse to come in here and beg me for a threesome. Just, just stop fucking me around.”

Crystal pursed her lips. “Mia,” she said softly, reaching out to touch the young woman's arm. “Are...are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” she grumbled, slumping her shoulders. “Just...just go.”

There was a moment of hesitation, as though Crystal was torn. When Mia (somewhat melodramatically) turned her back, there was another brief pause, before the teenager could hear the soft padding of Crystal's feet as she made her way down the hall.

When Mia turned around again, all she could see was her brother's bedroom door closing. Her mouth twisted in anger. Teenage girls could be so catty.