

Cross-Check

She's off-limits. He's never
played by the rules.



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Kings of Boston Series

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Walker University
Book Two

CALA RILEY



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For all those who want to see a jerk get his redemption, this one's for you.

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The book cover for 'That Christmas Night' by Cala Riley is displayed on a tablet. The cover features a dark red background with warm, out-of-focus bokeh lights. It is decorated with strings of colorful Christmas lights, green holly leaves, and gold and red ornaments. The title 'THAT Christmas NIGHT' is written in a mix of gold serif and cursive fonts. Below the title, the tagline 'a holiday to remember...' is written in a small, white script. The author's name 'CALA RILEY' is at the bottom in a gold serif font.

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prologue

Kellan

The summer sun beats down on me as I walk down the street with my mom. My shirt is already clinging to my skin.

I can't wait for the summer to end and for it to be bearable outside.

"Okay, did you make a list of things you need?" my mom asks.

"Mom, school doesn't start for another month. We don't need to buy anything right now," I remind her.

"You know I hate doing things at the last minute. I'd rather we get you what you need now so that way if something isn't in stock, we have plenty of time to order it."

I sigh, rubbing my hand over my face. If I would have known that she would start nagging at me so early, I would have stayed in bed.

"No, I don't have a list," I admit.

My mom sighs in disappointment, which is nothing new. It feels like this summer I haven't been able to do anything right in her eyes. She heard all about how me and Grace had a falling out, but not from me. No, Grace's mom and mine have weekly dinners. Seems I'm the villain in everyone's eyes.

No one even stopped to ask me my side of things. Not that it matters. None of it matters anymore.

She grabs my arm and points across the street. “Oh look, there’s Gracie.”

I look over and fight the urge to cringe when I see her with Clay. It’s bad enough to have to see them at school, but seeing them here in our hometown somehow makes it worse.

Or maybe it’s my own feelings on it. I feel like I should be heartbroken. I should be devastated that I lost the love of my life. Instead, I feel numb. Like there is nothing inside of me.

That is until I see Clay.

I feel betrayed by him. Sure, he owed me nothing, but I had built him up so much in my head that I feel like he waltzed in and stole the life I imagined for myself. It’s hard moving on from that.

“Gracie!” Mom hollers.

“Mom, they probably don’t want to be bothered,” I hiss.

Grace looks over and smiles when she sees my mom. When her eyes move over to me, it falters for a moment but stays intact. I watch as hand in hand they check both ways before crossing the street, heading our way.

Shit.

I knew it would happen eventually, but I haven’t talked to Grace since the beginning of the summer when I told her I needed space and time. It about killed me to have that conversation with her, but it needed to happen.

She’s moved on with her life, and I can’t blame her for it. No matter how I feel, she deserves to be happy.

I’m just not ready to see it yet.

I’ve seen her around town over the summer but have ducked out of sight before she could see me. That’s how far I was willing to go to keep this space I created between us.

It feels wrong. Grace has always been by my side through everything. Losing her has felt like losing a limb. I still get phantom pains sometimes, but when I look, she’s never there.

For the first time in weeks, hell, months, I truly look at the woman who I used to consider my best friend. She looks different yet the same. Her hair is a little longer, her glasses are perched on her nose, and her skin is tan from spending time outside. Most of all, though, she looks happy.

My heart pangs. Not necessarily in jealousy but over the fact that she’s so upbeat, and I don’t know why. I don’t know anything about her, and it kills me. I used to know the reason behind her smiles and her tears, and now

I don't. I'm starting to wonder if I ever really knew her or if she was the Grace she thought she needed to be for me.

That hurts me more than anything else.

"Look at you," Mom says, pulling me out of my head as she embraces Grace. "I've missed you this summer."

Grace winces as her eyes dart to me and then back to my mom. "I know, I'm sorry. This summer has just been so crazy. I feel like I've barely had any time to sleep, let alone hang out with anyone."

It's a lie that she doesn't need to tell. She knows as well as I do that our mothers hang out all the time. There is no way her mother didn't tell mine what a douchebag I was to Grace. It's the only reason I can come up with for how my mother has been looking at me lately. I know she loves me, but she is also disappointed in how I acted with Grace. At least, what she knows of it. I don't blame her.

"Well, it definitely isn't the same without you. I know Kellan feels the same way," my mom tells her.

Clay looks over at me and raises a brow, but I ignore him.

"Yeah, my mom made a comment that our grocery bill wasn't as high this summer as it usually is," Grace quips, making my mom laugh.

"I love your mother." Mom looks over at Clay. "And how are you, Clayton? Are you treating our girl well?"

"I'm well, Mrs. Cooper, and I'm trying." He looks down at Grace, and they share a look.

I can't help but look away, feeling like I'm an intruder in their bubble.

"What are you two doing today?" Grace asks.

"Oh, I needed to run some errands, and I made Kellan come with me to get out of the house. I wanted to pick him up some supplies for college, but he hasn't made a list of what he needs yet."

The corners of Grace's lips kick up. "I'm not surprised."

Mom claps her hands and clasps them under her chin. "Oh, I just had the most lovely idea. You two should join us for dinner tonight if you don't have plans."

I bite back a groan.

I might be numb where my feelings for Grace are concerned, but the last thing I want to do is sit across the table from them and share a meal. Not now, not yet, and possibly never.

Clay makes a sound in the back of his throat and tries to cover it with a cough.

Huh, it seems like we're on the same page about something for once. Shocking.

Panic crosses Grace's face, and she wrings her hands together in front of her. "Oh, I would love to, but unfortunately, we have plans. We're actually headed over to Clay's mom's house for a week before we have to head back to campus. We just stopped to grab some chocolate from the bakery for his sister."

My mom's bottom lip wobbles. "Oh no. Well, that's okay, we can always try again another time."

"Of course," Grace says smoothly.

"And you won't be home before you go back to school? You said you're leaving early?" Mom asks.

"Yes, as you know, the boys have to go early for hockey practice, but the lease on the place I'm moving into became available early. Instead of paying for an empty place for a couple of weeks, I'm just going to go get settled in now," Grace tells her.

"All right then, well the next time you are home, you better stop by," Mom says as she pulls Grace in for a hug.

I watch as Grace's eyes close and she leans into my mom's embrace. It's clear that she's missed my mom, something I had never thought about until now. This summer I've thought about her parents and have missed the conversations we would have, but I never thought about how she might feel the same way.

Shit, maybe I really am a self-centered jackass.

I miss what Grace says and watch as she pulls away from my mom. She turns toward me and smiles.

"See you on campus?" Grace gives me a tight smile.

I think what bothers me most is that I know she would forgive me the minute I suck it up and apologize to her for everything. Not the half-assed shit I gave her at the end of the year, but a true apology, but I can't bring myself to do it.

I'm such a mess.

I nod. "You know it." I look over at Clay. "See you at camp."

"For sure. Make sure you keep practicing those drills and stay in shape."

Grace rolls her eyes but smiles. "Come on before you guys start talking hockey." She waves as she pulls him back across the street.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I watch them go. Once they've slipped into the bakery, I turn back toward my mom and find her looking at me.

"What?"

"Are you ever going to tell me what happened?" Her words shock me.

She hasn't asked once about it. I thought she took Grace's side to heart and decided she didn't need to know mine.

I start walking, and she falls into step beside me. "I don't know what you mean."

Mom sighs. "Kellan Henry Cooper, I didn't raise you to be a liar. Now tell me what happened between you two. You know I already know parts of it. Tell me why you have been moping all summer."

I cringe, hating when she says my full name. It makes me feel like I'm five all over again and in trouble for spilling paint all over her freshly shampooed carpet that ended up having to be replaced.

My jaw clenches. "Long story short, I admitted to Grace I had feelings for her, but it was too late. She had already started dating Clay, and shit got messy."

She makes a noise of disappointment, making me hang my head.

"You know, I knew this would happen," she admits.

Frowning, I look over at her. "What do you mean?"

She looks at me with pity before looking back down the street. "You, my boy, have always gotten what you wanted when you've wanted it. You've always been good at everything and have never struggled. Everyone knew that Grace had feelings for you, but we watched you ignore them. It was clear that you thought she would just wait, but a girl like her, she won't wait forever, and you learned that the hard way."

I grunt, not wanting to tell her she's not wrong.

"Do you want to know what I think?"

"What's that?"

"You and Grace used each other as a crutch. You knew that no matter what, the other would be there, and you were comfortable with each other in a way you were never comfortable with anyone else. But for a real relationship, Kellan, you have to embrace the discomfort at times. You have to be willing to fall, and that was never going to happen with you two."

Don't get me wrong, I think you love each other, but not in the right way. Grace was always supposed to be your friend and never your lover."

"You think so?"

"I do. I think the little bit of time and space between you two was probably a good thing too, even though it was hard to watch. Now you can rebuild, if you're willing, a friendship as adults. You can support her in her relationship with Clay while looking for the woman you are supposed to spend the rest of your life with. Just don't rush and settle. You need to take some time and work on yourself first."

I chuckle. "I don't plan on settling down anytime soon, so don't worry."

"Good. I know I've enjoyed not having a new girl in my home every couple of months. I think this dating hiatus has been good for you. Now how about we head home and start working on that list of things you need?" She loops her arm through mine.

Maybe she's right. Maybe Grace was always meant to be someone I loved in an innocent sort of way. Maybe there's a woman out there who really is meant to be my other half. I guess I should start to figure out how to fix my friendship with Grace before it's too late.

one

Cora

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ONE MONTH LATER

Looking around my dorm room, I can't help but smile.
I made it.

There were a few times when I wondered if I would be able to make the grades to qualify for a grant so that I could go to college. It was conflicting for me.

Part of me is happy to be here at the same college as my older brother. It feels nice to be out of the house and on my own. No one to answer to but myself.

On the other hand, I was never sold on college. I know I need a degree, but not knowing what I want to do with my life has me wondering if this is all a waste of time and money.

"Do you love it?" Grace asks.

I shrug. "It's a small room. Are you going to be able to put up with me?" I ask Peyton.

She smiles. "Can't be any worse than Grace here. Besides, I work a lot, so I won't even be here most of the time."

"I can attest to that. I still wish you would have moved in with me. I have two extra rooms," Grace says.

"Well, Cora couldn't move in with you, and the college covers my room and board if I stay here, so it made sense."

It's true. Being a freshman on the grant I'm on, I'm required to live in a dorm on campus. I don't mind it, though. I don't need my brother hanging around all the time, which I know he will be doing with Grace living there.

"I appreciate you sacrificing for me," I tell Peyton.

"Anytime, boo." She winks.

"Well, next year you are both moving in with me, no questions. Don't even argue, Peyton. You know I don't want your money. I let you go this year for Cora, but next year it's us. Got it?" Grace gives a pointed look.

I hold my hands up. "Yes, ma'am. Do you order my brother around like that? Never mind, I don't want to know."

We all laugh at that.

"You get all your stuff from orientation and all that?" Grace asks.

“Yep. I even got signed up for this volunteer work at the local child welfare agency. I guess they need people to supervise visitation for some of the easier cases. It’s a new initiative they are starting. I’m excited for it,” I tell them.

“Oh, child welfare is hard, though, right? Seeing those kids not being placed with their parents?” Grace asks.

Peyton gives me a look. She gets it like I do. I grew up without a father and had a mother who worked all the time. Peyton lost her parents. We get where these kids will be at mentally. At least partially.

“It is, but someone has to do it, and I feel like I can make a real difference.”

She beams at me. “You have such a wonderful heart. If I wasn’t so overwhelmed with my schedule this semester, I would volunteer too. Remind me next semester, and I will try to work it in.”

I know the company could use more volunteers, but I won’t be reminding her. I want this to be something for only me, but I still say, “Of course.”

“I will not be volunteering,” Peyton starts. “Does it make me a bad person if I want to stay as far away from that field of work as possible?”

“Not at all. You lived it already. You don’t need to make it your entire life. Some people want to give back while others want to move on with their lives. That’s normal,” I tell her, remembering something one of my teachers in school once said to me.

It’s your choice where you take your life. You are a product of your raising, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t veer from the course you are on. Only you decide what your destiny is.

It has stuck with me ever since. Even on the preplanned road that my brother and mother put me on, I still think about what my destiny will be.

“I feel for the kids, but it’s not something I can handle mentally. I’m proud of you for giving it a go. If it’s too much, don’t feel bad for quitting. Trust me, those kids need someone who cares, not someone forcing themselves to be there,” Peyton tells me.

It makes me wonder what happened to her growing up. I know the basics, but she never wanted to go into it further. Not that I blame her. I wouldn’t want to dwell on the worst parts of my life either.

“Anyway, I start training on Monday for that. I should be able to sit in on my first visitation by the end of the week.”

Grace stands, coming to give me a hug. "So proud of you, babe."

Peyton comes over, hugging me too, putting us in a big group hug. "We are all going to do great things one day," Peyton murmurs.

"I wish I knew what I wanted to do," I admit softly.

"You're a freshman. It will come to you," Grace comforts me.

When we pull back, I change the subject. "There's a party tonight at one of the football player's houses. Either of you want to go?" I ask.

"Sorry, I have work. I have to be there at seven. What time is your party? I can walk you there so you aren't alone," Peyton offers.

"No thanks. A few of the girls from orientation are meeting downstairs. We were going to head over together. Grace, you in?" I ask.

"Clay and I have plans, but I can ask him to change them. You probably should have someone there looking out for you." Grace picks up her phone, but I put my hand over it.

"No, you keep your plans. I won't be alone, and before you say anything, don't worry. I will be smart. I don't need you two chaperoning. I am a legal adult now," I tell her.

She rolls her eyes. "Yes, but you will always be Clay's little sister in his eyes. He is going to be pissed that I didn't tell him about this. He would want to be there."

"So he can be a buzzkill? No thanks. You don't want to lie to him, though. If he asks, tell him where I'm going to be, but I also want you to tell him to think about his actions. If he embarrasses me, I still have that picture of him standing naked and peeing into the snow that I have no problem sharing all over social media."

Grace laughs. "All right. Point taken. I will tell him to mind his business. You call if you need a ride, though. We will come get you no matter what."

"I'm not interrupting date night." I give her a look.

"We will be sitting at the house binge-watching a new show. You will call if you need us or we will be at the party. Compromise, Cora."

I hate when she gets that mom tone. I know it's because she cares, but sometimes I wish she was my friend more than Clay's girlfriend.

"Fine."

My phone pings with an alert from the girls.

"They are getting ready downstairs. I'm going to go hang out with them for a bit. Thank you both for helping me move in and being here for me. I

love you guys.”

“Anytime. I should get going too. Clay will be out of practice soon. I have his car, you need a ride, Peyton?”

She shakes her head. “I have a ride. Thanks, though.”

Grace heads out the door first, but Peyton grabs my arm, stopping me. “I get it. If you need a ride, call me. I can find you a ride,” she whispers to me.

I peck her on the cheek. “You’re the best, Peyton. Have fun at work.”

Her laughter follows me down the hall. I’m so happy I decided to room with Peyton.

This is going to be one hell of a year.



Kellan

I don’t even know why I’m here.

Looking around at all the people milling about as they drink, I wonder how my life became this.

In high school, I was the life of the party. If I didn’t have a group of guys hanging on my every word, then I had a girl on my arm. I never spent any time alone.

Not anymore.

Now I’m sitting in a chair in the backyard of some shitty football party after one of the incoming freshmen on the hockey team begged me to come with him.

I look over to him now, making out with some girl against the fence. I shake my head.

Calvin needs to find better things to do.

As soon as the thought hits me, I feel guilty.

Last year, I was Calvin. I would be shitfaced with my tongue down my girlfriend’s throat while I ignored everyone around me. I would abandon my friends to do it too. Man, I was such a shitty person last year.

Now I'm sitting here, nursing a beer and judging all the people around me. My, how the mighty have fallen.

I should leave. There's nothing for me here anymore.

Standing, I consider telling Calvin goodbye, but then I see his hand down the girl's pants and decide it's best I just go. Besides, we walked. He can find his own way home.

I chug the rest of my beer and toss the cup in the trash by the back door.

"Hey, you there. Come here," a feminine voice calls out.

I reach for the door when a hand touches my arm.

"I'm not interested. I'm sure you are a great lay and would rock my world, but I'm not a one-and-done guy, and, well, I'm not looking for forever either," I spit out, not bothering to turn toward her.

I expect venom. That's what I usually get when I turn a girl down, but instead, she snorts.

Her hand leaves my skin, causing me to turn and look at her.

She's a pretty little thing. Shorter than me. Dark hair pulled back in a messy bun and brown eyes that look like they could pierce my soul.

"Awfully full of yourself there, hotshot. I hate to break it to you, but you aren't God's gift to women. Not everyone wants to get into your pants. I know it's a hit to the ego, but I'm sure you'll recover." She winks at me as she turns to leave.

I stand there shocked. She's feisty as hell. She hit a sore spot for sure. I'm still coming to terms with my new version of reality. The one that doesn't always get what he wants. So to have her call me out makes me feel seen in a way I haven't felt in a while.

It's nice.

Maybe that's why I trail after her.

"If you weren't trying to hit on me, what did you want then?" I ask her as she reaches the beer pong table.

"We wanted to play a game, but I don't have a partner. Thought you looked like you knew how to handle some balls. Guess I was wrong." She shrugs like it's no big deal that she is ribbing the fuck out of me.

I assume she made the joke because we are at a football house, but I don't play with balls. Pucks are more my thing, but she doesn't need to know that. For one night, maybe I can forget about all my drama and enjoy myself for just a bit.

I can go back to wallowing in my hole after.

Decision made, I step up to her side, looking across the table at the other couple. "All right, I'll play."

She shakes her head, patting my arm. "Move along. I don't need some hotshot on my team. I need a winner. I'll find someone else."

"I happen to be the best beer pong player here, so anyone else would be settling. Do you want to win or not?"

She sizes me up. While she does, I take a moment to take her in once more. She would have been my type in a heartbeat last year. I would have had her as my girlfriend by the end of the night. Then months down the road, I would break her heart because no matter who I dated, I never truly gave them all of myself. I always held something back.

I always thought they were the issue. That I was struggling to find the one, but maybe the truth is that I'm the problem. I need to work on myself before I can ever dream of finding my person.

It's a painful lesson to learn, but I'm glad I did.

Finally meeting the girl's eyes again, she smirks at me. She looks so damn familiar. Like I've seen her around before.

"Were you in one of my classes last year?"

The question surprises her as she shakes her head. "I'm a freshman."

Weird, but who knows. I've been walking around like a zombie lately. Maybe I've seen her on campus, but doesn't really matter. No matter how beautiful she is, I can't go there with her. Even if I like the way she is looking at me. Or if my chest feels lighter when she picks on me.

"Are we going to play or what?" I ask after a moment.

She laughs, and I swear it makes me feel like I won the lottery. She has a nice laugh.

It's nice to flirt with someone again. For the moment, I feel like I've found a part of myself that I've lost.

I don't want to lose it again.

"Sure thing, hotshot. Show me what you've got."

Just like that, my night goes from some sad, pitiful existence to laughter and fun. Maybe I should thank Calvin for dragging me to this party with him. I never imagined that it would change my life, but here I am.

The first genuine smile on my face since I lost Grace.

two

Cora

I sway to the music as I wait for Chad to toss his ball toward my end of the beer pong table. His ball spins at the top of the cup, and my partner quickly reaches forward, slapping it out with his fingers before it could hit the liquid.

“Good job, buddy.”

My partner smirks. “What can I say, I’m good with my hands.”

I roll my eyes. “Sure you are, big guy.”

He laughs under his breath as he hands me the ball. “Thank you.”

I wait for him to make his shot and study him out of the corner of my eye.

For the life of me, I can’t remember his name, but I know he plays hockey with my brother. I want to ask his name, but at the same time, I don’t want him to get the wrong idea that I’m interested. I mean, I am, but I don’t want a relationship. Not yet. Hell, I’m not even sure I want to be here at school. The last thing I need is to toss a boyfriend or a fuck buddy into the mix. Even if he has sandy blond hair, a sharp jawline, hazel eyes, and makes me feel small standing next to him because of his height.

God, could you imagine the way Clay would lose his mind if he found out I had a fuck buddy? I smile at the thought. Especially if it was someone on his team. He would lose his mind.

“It’s your turn,” he says after he sinks the ball.

“Nice.”

Taking a deep breath, I raise my arm and flick my wrist. The ball goes sailing through the air and lands perfectly in a cup in the back row.

“So you’ve played a time or two,” he muses.

“You could say that.”

“You look familiar. Are you sure we’ve never met?” he asks.

I smile into my cup. I should probably just tell him I’m Clay’s sister, but I don’t. I kind of like that he doesn’t know who I am. It was my main worry about coming here. Living in Clay’s shadow all over again.

“I don’t think so. Maybe you’ve seen me around campus?” The lie flows smoothly off my lips.

He hums. “Maybe. What’s your name?”

“Tell you what, if we run this table for the rest of the night, at the end we can exchange names.”

He raises a brow. “So what am I supposed to call you in the meantime?”

“I’m sure you’ll come up with something,” I tease.

His lips twitch. “How about I call you...beautiful?”

I roll my eyes and smile. “Does that line actually work for you?”

“I don’t know, you tell me.” He smirks.

The team we are playing against sinks both balls because we are too busy paying attention to each other. “Okay, hotshot, let’s kick some ass, yeah?”

“You got it, beautiful.”

For hours we stand side by side, running the table. People around us offer us fist bumps and high fives after every match while our opponents walk away pissed off they aren’t the ones to beat us. A couple of times guys call him by a number, and when they do, he quickly glances at me. I keep my head down, pretending that I don’t hear it, because honestly the numbers mean nothing to me.

I really do need to study the roster, so I know who the guys are talking about.

“Are you still playing?” Brit asks as she approaches.

“Yep,” I say as I take a drink.

She shakes her head. “You’d really rather play this than dance?”

“One hundred percent.” I nod.

“Well, the girls and I are going to head back to the dorms. Do you want to come with us or stay here?”

Biting my lip, I think about it. Logically, I know I’ve had enough to drink and that I should head back with the girls who I came with. Yet, I’m not quite ready for the night to end.

I’m not ready to walk away from my hotshot...

He rests his hand on my back, bringing my attention back to him. “Do you girls want me to walk you back to your dorm?”

Brit’s eyes light up when she looks at him, making my stomach sour. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he says quickly before looking back at me. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah, I probably should,” I say reluctantly.

He nods. “Come on then.”

Brit gathers the girls that we came with, and they all eye the guy next to me like they want to jump him. When we take off down the street, hotshot and I hang back, letting the group of girls walk in front of us. They keep looking over their shoulders at him, but he pays them no mind.

“So when are we playing again?” he asks.

“Huh?” I look up at him.

“Beer pong. When are we teaming up again?”

“You want to be my partner again?”

I’m honestly shocked. He didn’t seem to want to play at first, but now he wants to schedule another game?

“I mean, yeah. We dominated tonight, and I hate losing. Why ruin a good thing?” He pushes his shoulder into mine.

I chuckle under my breath. I wonder if he will still feel that way when he figures out who my brother is.

“I don’t know. I’m sure we can figure it out, though.”

We come to a stop in front of a building, and I wave my hand toward it while the girls step inside. “Well, this is me.”

He pulls out his phone. “What’s your number? That way we can figure out which party we will play at.”

I rattle off my number and feel my phone vibrate in my back pocket.

“Cool. I just texted you. For the record, you’re in my phone as Beautiful since you haven’t given me your name yet,” he says, raising a brow.

“You still want to know my name?”

“I mean, yeah. I wanna know who the mysterious girl is that I hung out with all night.”

Taking a deep breath, I hold out my hand. “I’m Cora.”

A beautiful smile covers his face as he grabs my hand. “Hi, Cora, I’m Kellan.”

As soon as his name leaves his mouth, my stomach drops.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

That’s why he was so familiar. He’s Grace’s ex-best friend. The one who spent all of last year pining for her. I heard my fair share of Clay complaining about him on the ice too.

Kellan frowns. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah, sorry. I just got tired all of a sudden,” I lie.

“It is pretty late. You should get inside,” he says as he drops my hand and stuffs his in his hoodie pocket.

“Okay. Bye, hotshot,” I say as I step around him.

“Until next time, beautiful.”

As I step into the building, my feelings run rampant, but I keep coming back to one thing. To me, he’s hotshot, not Kellan. I know I should delete his number and forget about everything that happened tonight, but I don’t want to. I really like him, and I don’t know what I’m going to do about it.

Is it really a betrayal when they never dated? It feels like one.

I have yet another decision to make, and I hope it doesn’t send my entire world into chaos.



Kellan

The whistle blows, and I slow down and circle back to huddle around the bench. Coach is standing there with a scowl on his face. Brett is standing to his left with an equally pissed-off look on his face. I don’t know if he’s pissed about what he just watched or because he can’t get on the ice.

Two weeks ago, while in the gym, he somehow managed to tear his ACL and MCL. He ended up having to have surgery on his ACL to repair it

and is out for the season. Somehow the guy managed to convince the school to redshirt him for a year so he will be able to play for a fifth year after Clay and Beckett leave. Lucky me, I get the torture of being his teammate for another year.

“I want to know what the hell happened to my team who walked out of this arena last year. You fools looked worse than a peewee team out there.”

Everyone shifts, hating the comparison.

My jaw clenches, and it’s almost like Coach knows I disagree with him because he looks right at me.

“Do you have something to say, Cooper?”

“No, sir,” I mutter.

“Damn right, you don’t. For fuck’s sake, I think I saw you trip over your own skates at one point.”

I feel the corner of my eye twitch when he moves his wrath onto someone else and calling them out for their shit performance. I know I’m a little slower on the ice than I usually am, but I sure as hell didn’t trip over my skates.

My stomach churns. I knew I shouldn’t have avoided the arena. My fear of running into Clay has pushed back all the progress I made this summer.

And it’s sure as hell not going to get me the captain spot either.

“As far as I’m concerned, I only have three players who did anything over summer break, and that’s James, Hayes, and Scott.” Coach looks over at Brett. “And clearly Woods here, but we won’t talk about it.”

Of course Clay and his friends got the coach’s praise. I don’t even know why I’m surprised. He’s the coach’s favorite after all.

“Now as you all know, every year, I encourage the leaders of the team to put together a team-building event for all of you. I’m a firm believer that the closer you are, the better you play. That’s why instead of waiting for right before the season kicks off, I’m encouraging you guys to do it now. In fact, I’m demanding it.” He looks over at Clay, who nods before looking back at the rest of us. “I don’t care what kind of kumbaya bullshit you do to get on the same page, but you need to do it, and fast. Otherwise, I’ll start cutting players from the team. Does everyone understand?”

“Yes, Coach,” we all mutter in unison, feeling the threat take hold of us.

“Bury whatever issues you have with other teammates now while you still can.”

My eyes fly up to Clay and find him already looking at me.

“Yeah, don’t think I don’t know about the bullshit between you two. Resolve it and start acting like a team.”

“You got it, Coach,” Clay says like the ass kisser he is.

Coach looks over at me and raises a brow.

“It won’t be an issue, Coach,” I tell him, my tongue feeling like lead.

Coach nods but looks at me like I’m full of shit, and we both know it.

“Good to hear it. Now get the fuck off my ice. I don’t want to see any of you until five a.m.”

Shit.

I can’t let my shit with Clayton take the team from me. I just can’t. This is all I have and all I’ve ever wanted. I can let the shit between us go, right? Fake it until you make it and all that bullshit.

The guys and I skate off the ice and head toward the locker room. I keep my head down and stick to myself. Once in the locker room, I strip out of my gear and head for the shower. As the water pelts down on my face, my mind goes crazy, thinking of what-ifs. It all becomes too much, and it starts to become hard to breathe.

What the fuck is happening to me?

Why is this happening?

Shit, I need to get out of here.

I don’t even double-check that I rinsed all the soap off of me before I’m sprinting out of the shower and heading to my locker. Reaching inside, I grab my clothes and get dressed like the devil is chasing me.

“Hey man, are you okay?” Wyatt asks when I stumble while slipping on my shoes.

“Yeah, fine,” I say breathlessly.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Are you sure?” he asks again.

I ignore him and grab my bag. Turning, I head for the door as my vision starts to tunnel and it becomes harder to breathe.

Air. I need fucking air.

As soon as I rip open the door and step outside, I take a deep breath, or as deep of one as I can get. I hear someone say something, but I don’t pay attention to them. I put my hands on my knees and concentrate on sucking in as much air as possible.

Chuck Taylors with smiley faces on the tips come into my view, and a hand comes down on my shoulder. Just barely do I stop myself from

flinching.

“Hey, hotshot, you good?”

Turning my head, I see Cora looking down at me with concern.

“I’m fine.” I clear my throat and stand. “What are you doing here?”

She shifts from foot to foot. “I was passing by and saw you. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Sorry for worrying you. Practice was just a bitch and harder than I expected it to be.”

Cora nods, but the crease between her eyebrows tells me she’s not buying my lie, not that I blame her. Grace always said my face can’t hide shit and speaks for itself.

“That makes sense. Want to talk about it?”

Do I? Yeah, I do, but right now the air feels like it has been sucked out of my lungs.

“I can’t,” I tell her.

She must see something in my eyes because hers soften. “Okay. That’s okay. Maybe you can walk with me for a minute?”

I nod, falling into step beside her as she walks. After a moment, my breathing becomes easier.

“Do you want me to walk you to class or home?”

She shakes her head. “I’m meeting someone, but they can wait a minute. Are you really okay? You don’t have to hide from me.”

“I’m not, but I will be. Eventually.”

My watch vibrates, and I look down. The reminder that I need to get across campus for my next class flashes across my screen. “Sorry to cut this short, but I got to go to class. Can I text you later?”

She doesn’t answer right away. She looks as if she’s not sure about me. She shouldn’t be. I’m a fucking mess.

“Sure.”

That one word has me feeling better. I don’t have much, but I have hockey, and maybe I can have Cora too. Maybe I can put my life back together.

“Cool. Later, beautiful,” I say before brushing past her.

I feel her eyes on my back as I walk away, but I don’t turn around. I can’t. Not right now. Not after what she just saw.

Shit, I embarrassed the fuck out of myself. Yet, she still said I could text her.

I hold on to that as I rush to class.

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three

Cora

Maybe I would feel differently about school if they didn't make me pretty much relearn everything from high school. Seriously, all of my classes so far have been a review of what we have already learned. If I wanted to sit through algebra again, I would have failed the first time.

Annoyed, I find my way to my next class. At least this one should be a little better.

Sociology was one of the classes that was available to freshmen that seemed to interest me. Studying human behavior will really help me with my volunteer work too.

I have my first session as a certified chaperone for the child welfare agency after my last class. I'm nervous, but excited too. I know it's a difficult time for families, so I hope I'm able to be something positive they can take from it. Hopefully this class teaches me something useful to use as well.

As I step through the door, my heart drops.

Standing at the front of the hall is Kellan. He looks gorgeous in his T-shirt and tight blue jeans. They hug his ass in the right way.

I am so shocked that I almost turn around and walk out, but then he looks up and meets my eye. He looks as shocked as I am. Still, he manages a smile and a small wave.

I swallow hard, giving him a small wave back as I rush to my seat.

What is he doing here?

He looks like he might walk over to me, but the teacher comes in and starts speaking to him. I don't miss the way he keeps flicking his eyes to me while he holds a conversation with the teacher.

After a few minutes, the teacher turns and addresses the class. "Hello, my name is Professor Lindburg. This is my assistant, Kellan. I hope you have all downloaded your syllabi. Let's go over it."

He keeps talking, but I can't tell you what he says, though.

For a whole hour, my mind is stuck on the man sitting in the corner writing in his notebook. I have no idea where he gets off looking like he has not a care in the world when I'm over here panicking.

I had decided to avoid him. Keep my distance so that I didn't have to deal with the drama that will ensue when Clay finds out that I'm crushing on the one teammate he would never in a million years let me within five feet of.

Then we ran into each other once, and I thought, okay, this is it.

Now he's my teacher's assistant?

God save me from myself because I'm starting to think that maybe the universe is putting Kellan in my path for a reason.

Why am I fighting this so hard? Isn't college where I'm supposed to find myself? What does that even mean?

I'm here because my mother and Clay wanted me to be. I feel like everything I've done lately is for someone else.

So why can't I have a little slice of happiness?

Looking over at Kellan once more, I find him already looking at me. He has a big smile on his face, which can't bode well for me.

The professor dismisses class, but I don't move. Kellan is already moving, though. Toward me.

"Hey, Cora. Do you have time to get lunch with me? My treat."

I suck in my bottom lip. I need to say no. I should say no.

"Yes."

Fuck it. I want to go.

I don't even get a chance to collect my things. Kellan has them up in his arms before I can even think about it. Then he holds out his arm for me to hold. I don't even hesitate. I feel so silly holding his arm like I'm some debutante, but I like it.

I like him.

As we walk, my eyes keep scanning for anyone I might know. I'm not ashamed of Kellan, but I don't want to cause any more issues for him either.

"What are the odds that we would end up in the same class like that?" Kellan asks, breaking the silence.

"Well, you aren't really in it. You're the assistant," I tell him.

He nods. "I took it last year. Did so well that the professor asked me to TA for him. It makes sense since my backup plan is to teach. Well, I want to be a coach, but most schools want you to also be able to teach a class or two."

"Really? That's so sweet. Why coaching?"

He thinks it over a moment before he answers me, which I respect. He never gives me some bullshit answer. It makes me think he is taking my questions seriously and wants to give me his most honest answer.

"Last year, I wouldn't have even had a backup plan, but after the shitty year I had, I realized that it could all be gone, and I would be left with nothing. So I buckled down and figured out what I wanted to do. I volunteer at the rink back home teaching the younger kids hockey and love watching the little ones fall in love with the sport. I think I could do that for the rest of my life."

His words stir something inside of me. It's like I've found a kindred spirit. I find the same joy when I see the kids from the center. I like watching them light up when they see their parents. It's supervised because of reasons beyond their control, but I like that I can be there during one of their happy times.

"That's so sweet. You'd be a great coach. You have this presence about you that I'm sure makes the kids more comfortable with you."

"Are you trying to say I'm childish?" he jokes.

"I mean, men are usually slower to mature than women, so if you compare yourself to me, it wouldn't be inaccurate," I tease back.

He lets out a loud, boisterous laugh. In that moment, all I can do is smile wider at him. He looks so carefree right now. It has my resolve fading.

I don't want to avoid Kellan. I actually like him.

Pushing the thoughts aside, I lean my head on his arm as we continue to walk. "So that's the end goal then? After hockey?" I ask.

“I mean, I hope I stay in hockey until I’m in my thirties, if not longer, but yes. I think I would like to find somewhere to teach hockey. Maybe my hometown rink? What about you? What are your big plans?” he asks.

It’s an innocent question. One that would be normal to talk about, but it has my gut churning.

“I’m not really sure. I’ve lived my life from day to day for so long that I think I forgot to worry about the future,” I admit softly.

He opens the door to the main cafeteria, stepping aside to let me go in first. He waits until we get into line before he speaks again.

“You don’t have to have your whole life figured out right now. In fact, I think it’s better you don’t. Take me, for example.” He grabs a tray and starts putting food on it, pointing to things for me to nod or shake my head depending on what I want. “I had my entire life figured out when I came here. I was going to be the youngest captain of the hockey team. I’d be living in the hockey house and have the respect of all the guys. Instead, I’m struggling and have a roommate who stays up playing video games all night. If you asked seventeen-year-old me, I would be a disappointment. Knowing exactly what you want puts pressure on yourself. You’re lucky.”

When we get to the end, he pays for both of our meals. I usually hate when people do that, but the way he didn’t even think about it or boast that he did it, has me accepting his generosity.

I follow him to a table, taking the seat across from him. After a moment, I say, “I don’t feel lucky. I feel lost.”

He reaches across the table, taking my hand in his. “It’s okay. I can be your anchor until you figure out which path you want to take. You have time. You’re still young. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

His words calm something inside of me. As we eat and chat, I realize I never really stood a chance.

Kellan was put into my life to be exactly what I need right now.



Kellan

There's more pep in my step as I head toward the rink.

I was surprised to find Cora in my TA class. I wanted to talk to her right away, but the professor came in. I took the opportunity to ask if it would be a conflict of interest if someone I was dating was in one of his classes.

He told me that as long as I don't grade their work, he doesn't care. That gave me the go-ahead to approach her after class.

She seemed hesitant but agreed to lunch. By the time we were finished eating, we were chatting and flirting like it was an everyday occurrence. I just can't believe how natural it feels to be with her.

I was happy when she let me walk her to her class, kissing the back of her hand before I sent her on her way. I loved the way her cheeks turned a pale shade of red. It kept me going all through my afternoon class.

Hell, it's the reason I'm practically skipping to practice.

Today is a good day. I refuse to let it be ruined.

The thought crosses my mind just as the rink comes into view. My stomach sours when I see the couple kissing outside of it.

Clay and Grace.

It's not even jealousy that makes me feel the way I do anymore. I'm smart enough to realize that while I thought I wanted Grace, it was in some abstract way. Grace is an amazing woman, but she was never right for me.

No, it's the negativity that surrounded last year in relation to her and Clay that has me averting my gaze and skirting around them. Hell, it's the guilt for what I put Grace through. The fact that I used to talk to her nearly every day, and now I can't even bring myself to wave her way.

Shame.

It's shame that has all the happiness from before flowing out of me, replaced by all the negative feelings that I cannot seem to shake. I can't seem to let go of any of the animosity I have toward Clay for irrevocably changing my life by getting with Grace.

It's selfish. I know it is, but sometimes knowing something and changing it is more difficult than it sounds. I have the want and desire to let it all go, but something is keeping me from doing it. I thought time healed all wounds, but this is taking a lot more time than I expected.

Changing out for practice doesn't take me long, so I head to the ice to warm up well before anyone else does. They are all sitting around laughing and chatting, but I'm alone. There's no one on this team who gives a fuck about me. Not even Calvin has made an effort to talk to me since the party.

It's exhausting feeling like the outcast. I've wondered more than once if it wouldn't have been better to enter the transfer portal and request another team. The only thing that stopped me is the fact that I have dreamed of playing for this team since I was a prepubescent kid. I wasn't quite ready to give up on it yet.

The others slowly trickle in as I skate in circles around the rink. When Coach finally stops beside the ice, I go to join the rest of the team.

"I want you running drills. James, you know what to do," he barks to Clay.

Clay turns around, separating us into groups as we start to run the drills. First, we do a one-versus-one around a circle drill. I start off slow, using it as a warm-up as intended, but one of the new players cuts me off, making me stumble.

"Watch it, Hendricks," I hiss at him.

"Heard Cap got your girl. How's it feel, Cooper?" he mutters to me.

I narrow my eyes at him as he skates away.

Trent Hendricks is a transfer student from Mississippi. He's a hell of an enforcer but has a bit of a temper. It was surprising that Coach picked him up. I haven't had much interaction with him, so I have no idea why he is targeting me now.

Throughout the drills, he continues to make comments to get under my skin. It's working too. I can see why he's an effective enforcer. He can get into people's heads.

It's during flush shooting drills that I finally snap.

"Wonder if Grace wants to take on another one of your teammates. She's a total babe. Bet she gives good head."

Friends with Grace or not, I refuse to put up with someone talking about her that way. It's inappropriate and a real prick move.

Before he can get away, I'm on him. It's not like I can do much damage with all of our gear on, but when I hear him grunt, I take a sick satisfaction in it.

When the guys finally pull me off, I'm glaring at him.

"James, take Cooper to the locker room. Woods, take Hendricks outside. You better come back without whatever the hell that was."

I frown as I skate off the ice, making my way to the locker room. Once inside, I sit on the bench, putting my head in my hands.

"What was that about?" Clay asks calmly.

I look up at him. “He was talking shit about your girlfriend. I didn’t appreciate it.”

“You don’t have to defend her anymore. She wouldn’t want you jeopardizing your spot on the team for her.” He folds his arms, leaning against the lockers.

“This isn’t some love thing, James. What he said was disgusting. He shouldn’t talk about women that way. It just hit a little harder because the girl he was talking about was Gracie,” I admit to him.

He nods. “Because you are in love with her?”

I shake my head. “I thought I was, but no. Because she is my best friend, even if we aren’t really talking at the moment.”

“She misses you too, you know.” He says it so matter-of-factly.

As if her missing me doesn’t bother him at all. It only makes me angrier.

“Shouldn’t you want to fuck that guy up? He was talking about Gracie in sexual terms. You should be the one sitting here in trouble. Not me.”

He smirks at me. “You think Hendricks doesn’t talk shit to me? He does. It’s his MO. He likes to cause chaos. Whatever is wrong with that kid, it’s internal. He is trying to get to us and make us act out. I don’t give him the satisfaction. I guess that’s why he moved on to you. Someone must have told him our history.”

“So we let him get away with it?” I say incredulously.

“Oh, absolutely not. We just have to have some finesse to it. He will get his when the time comes, but not right now. You need to get your head on straight. Last year is in the past. If you think you can move on from the shit, then I would love to mend the bridge between us. We don’t have to be friends, but you are one hell of a player. One of the best I’ve seen. You have the instincts to take you far in this game. Right now you are playing sloppy, but that’s because your head is in the wrong place. So get that shit straight and figure your life out. We need you out there. You are an asset to this team. We need you.”

His words hit me in the same place that outcast feeling did before, only this time, it feels a little lighter.

“Don’t blow smoke up my ass,” I spit out.

“When have you ever known me to say something I don’t mean?” He quirks an eyebrow at me.

He’s right. He makes sure his words are what he means. It’s what makes him a good captain, though I will never admit it to him.

“I’ll try my best,” I manage to say through gritted teeth.

He nods, looking satisfied. “Good. Take the rest of practice off. I’ll take the blame for it with Coach. Tomorrow, I want a more level-headed Cooper. Got it?”

I nod. “Yeah. Got it.”

As he leaves the locker room, I wonder if this means things between us will get better. Will I stop resenting him for the destruction he caused in my life?

Again, it’s all up to time.

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four

Cora

“**A**ll right, that’s it for today. I’ll see you guys later this week,” the professor says.

I wait in my seat, letting everyone clear out ahead of me. I thought high schoolers rushing out of classrooms was bad, but it’s even worse in college. Once the congestion trying to get out the door clears, I get up and make my way out of the room.

When I step outside, I sigh. The sun is shining, but there is already a chill in the air, teasing that winter is coming sooner than I’m ready to admit. I scan the area, and smile when I catch a familiar face sitting underneath a tree in the little courtyard.

Without thinking about it, I head toward him.

“Shouldn’t you be in class or at the gym, hotshot?” I tease.

Kellan looks up from the computer in his lap and smiles when he sees me. I don’t know if anyone has ever been as excited to see me as he is, and it makes my heart race.

Sure, I’ve dated in the past, but those guys were all tools. I never dated someone I like as much as I’ve grown to like Kellan.

“Hey, what are you up to?” He has this light tone to his voice that has butterflies stirring in my belly.

“I just got out of class. Can I sit?” I ask.

Kellan moves his bag. "Of course."

I sit down next to him. "What are you doing?"

"I was just getting some schoolwork done before I head to practice."

"Do you want me to leave you to it?" I put my hands on the ground to push myself up when his hand touches my wrist.

"No, stay. I would rather spend time with you. I can do this later."

Turning my head, I try to hide my smile, but I feel my cheeks heat anyway.

His hand moves down until he's holding mine, and he starts playing with my fingers, running his over my rings. "How was class?"

"Boring, honestly," I say, making him laugh.

"Yeah, freshman year kind of sucks when you have to take all the required classes."

"Right? I feel like I learned most of this in high school. Call me crazy, but I shouldn't have to pay for that."

"Nah, you aren't crazy," he says with a smile on his face.

"How's hockey going?" I ask, changing the subject.

A look I can't quite name crosses his face. "It's going better than it was."

"Good. I hate the idea of you playing when you aren't feeling it."

"Are you worried about me, beautiful?"

I roll my eyes. "You wish."

"Maybe I do." He winks before looking down at my ring. "So what's the story with this ring?"

I look down at my hand and see he's looking at the one on my thumb. "Oh, one of my old friends made it for me. It's actually made out of a spoon."

His eyebrows wing up. "Out of a spoon?"

I nod. "Yeah, he buys spoons with kickass handles on them, then cuts them down and makes rings out of them."

"Did you pick this one or did he?"

"I did. For my birthday one year, he offered to make me a ring, and he let me dig through his box of spoons. I found this one toward the bottom."

The ring looks like a bunch of tiny delicate vines wrapped around my finger. I've never seen anything like it, and honestly don't know if I ever will again.

“It’s awesome. I never would have thought about making jewelry out of silverware.”

“Right? I’m so far from artistic it’s not even funny.”

“Yeah, me too. I honestly don’t think I’ve tried doing anything arts and crafts wise since elementary school.”

I bump his shoulder with mine. “Maybe we should try one of those sip and paint classes sometime.”

“Do you have a fake ID burning a hole in your pocket, beautiful?” he teases, making me laugh.

“I never said we should do it now. Just sometime.”

“Sure...” he drawls, shaking his head.

He opens his mouth to say something but stops himself.

“What were you about to say?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Come on, hotshot, don’t start keeping secrets from me now.”

He rubs his jaw. “I like that you are thinking about hanging out with me several years down the line. That’s all.”

“Yeah, I hate to break it to you, but once you’re in my circle, it takes a lot to get you out of it.”

“Oh really?”

“Yep, and if you ever try to leave, I’ll have to kill you,” I say solemnly.

Kellan tips his head back and laughs. “Damn, I had no idea that playing beer pong with you put my life on the line.”

“I mean, it is your fault.”

“Oh yeah? How so?”

I shrug. “You weren’t a douchebag.”

“Beautiful, if that’s all it took to become your friend, then we need to talk about your standards.”

“Hey, I never said that was the only reason. I just meant that’s what got you in. You’ve fully cemented yourself since you’ve been nice.”

He scoffs. “Nice. Ouch, talk about the kiss of death.”

“Oh please, we both know that’s not how I meant it,” I tease.

“Good to know.”

An alarm on my phone goes off, making me groan.

“You gotta go?”

“Yeah, that’s my alarm telling me I need to start walking over to where I’m volunteering.”

“You’re volunteering? Where at?”

“Over at the Department of Children and Families. There is a crisis with the number of workers compared to families needing intervention, so they started a new program that allows volunteers to help out in different areas of the system. I’m volunteering with their mediation program that supervises the visits between children and the family members who are attempting to regain custody. When I don’t have a visit, I’ve been spending time with the kids who are waiting on visits with other mediators. Mostly I keep them entertained or help them with homework.”

“Wait, really?” He looks shocked.

“Yeah.” I duck my head as I stand up.

“That’s amazing.” Kellan gets up. “Well shit, let me drive you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“No, but I want to. Come on, let me give you a ride,” he says as he picks up his bag.

“Are you sure you have time?” I ask as I fall into step with him.

Kellan looks down at me and smiles. “I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t. Now tell me, what made you start working there?”

“I’m not sure, really. Something about it called to me. Then I started and fell in love. I like helping people and feeling like I’m doing something to make their lives just a little bit easier.” I shrug. “That probably sounds stupid.”

Kellan reaches down and grabs my hand. “That doesn’t sound stupid at all. It sounds like you’ve found your calling. It’s admirable work.”

When we get to his truck, he opens the door for me. “Let’s get you to those kids.”

With that, my heart skips another beat.

I’m worried if it keeps doing this, I might not live to tell the tale of Kellan and my heart.



Kellan

I skate across the ice, catching the puck with my stick as Clay passes it to me. I pass the puck back to Clay as he comes up on my left side. I swerve right as Jacobs defends the puck from Clay.

We move down the ice until we are at the net. Clay looks like he is about to take a shot on Wyatt, but last minute, he sends the puck flying my way. I catch it, slapping it toward the net.

Wyatt barely catches it, giving me an impressed look.

Coach blows the whistle, signaling the end of practice.

Fuck, that felt good. It felt right. Today it was like the ice and I were on the same page. I could read the other guys' moves before they made them.

"Looked good today, Cooper."

I look over my shoulder and see Clay dip his chin toward me. "Thanks, Captain."

We circle around Coach, who's looking a little happier than he was the other day.

"That was better. Not great but better. Cooper, good job not tripping today. Scott, good job protecting the net. Hayes and James, that's exactly how I want you to handle your sticks." He calls out a few other players and gives them credit for playing well. "Who knows, we might start looking like a team before the end of the month," Coach quips, making a few guys laugh.

"James, have you boys put together a team-building exercise like I told you to?"

Clay nods. "Yes sir, the guys and I have been working on it."

Brett clears his throat, making the coach look his way. "I'm waiting to hear back from one more person before we announce what we're going to do."

Coach nods. "Good, and Woods, I'm glad you aren't hiding away from the team and still doing what you can despite the injury."

Brett's jaw clenches. "Nowhere else I would rather be."

Music starts blasting through the speakers, and we all look behind us. We watch as a female takes the ice and starts warming up.

"Goddamn figure skaters can't wait until we're done to start," Coach mumbles under his breath. "Okay, get on out of here. If you haven't hit the gym yet today, do that now. Oh, and fair warning, I'm checking grades in the morning. If any of you are behind in anything, I will find out about it and call you into my office, understood?"

“Yes, Coach,” we say in unison before leaving the ice.

“Do you think Emery interrupts practice to get Brett’s attention?” I hear Beckett ask someone behind me.

“Nah, the girl hates his guts. Trust me, she doesn’t want his attention,” Clay answers him.

“If she hates him so much, then why did he tell me he would wait for us where he was?” Beckett asks.

Huh, I have no idea who Emery is, but it’s interesting to hear that maybe, just maybe, Brett has a thing for her. A figure skater and a hockey player couple isn’t completely unheard of.

“Seriously though, Cooper, you did well today,” Clay says as I put my stuff in my locker.

“Thanks, you too,” I tell him before heading off to the shower.

Not bothering to let it heat up, I step under the cool spray and let it hit me in the face. Today really did feel different. Almost like when I was back at home. Now I just need to figure out what’s changed to make it keep happening.

Have I been eating better? Getting more sleep at night? Is it because my roommate started playing a new game that doesn’t include talking to other people all night through his headset?

You know what’s changed.

I don’t want to admit it, but I do.

Cora.

Cora is the only thing in my life that’s changed. She’s given me the one thing that I really haven’t had since last year before everything with Grace fell apart.

Friendship.

Not just that, though. She doesn’t care who I am or that I play hockey. All she cares about is the fact I’m not a douchebag to her. And I’m not.

The thought of being an asshole toward her makes my stomach roll. God, I can’t imagine being mean to her when she’s as sweet as...pie?

What the fuck, Cooper? As sweet as pie? Really?

Shaking my head, I shut off the shower and wrap a towel around my waist. Most of the locker room has cleared out, but a few guys linger. After getting dressed, I grab my shit and head out. When I step outside, I see Grace standing right inside the doorway. I’ll have to walk past her to go outside.

She's looking down at her phone, and I smile. Five bucks says that she has her nose buried in a book.

"Excuse me," I hear Clay mumble from behind me.

"Sorry," I say, stepping to the side.

She must hear us because she looks up. As soon as her eyes connect with him, she lights up. Her eyes dart to me, and she offers me a quick smile before looking back at him.

Sticking my hands in my pockets, I lean against the wall and watch them for a moment. I should be jealous that she came here waiting for him to get out of practice, right? That familiar feeling of uneasiness will settle in anytime now, but it doesn't. Because I'm not. In fact, the only thing I feel is a little bit of jealousy over the fact that I don't have someone waiting for me and that I don't have someone who looks at me the way she looks at him.

I want that.

But you already have it. Cora.

I can picture her clear as day waiting for me. She wouldn't jump into my arms or make a big scene. Cora would just step into my arms and wrap her arms around my waist before telling me what she thought.

"Good game, hotshot."

I would lean down and kiss her before thanking her for coming with me. She would tell me there was nowhere else she would rather be. Then we would head back to one of our places and hang out by ourselves for the rest of the night.

That. I want that.

The vision fades, and I know that I can't pretend that she's just a friend anymore. Cora is the girl I want to get to know. The one I want to be monogamous with for more than just a couple of months. I want everyone to know on campus that she's mine and I'm hers.

Cora is exactly what I need to cancel out the noise from all the other bullshit in my life. She's who I need to keep me grounded and my head in the game. I need to be better for her, though. I won't make the same mistakes with her that I've made in the past. In such a short time, she's come to mean something to me, and I don't want to mess it up.

I should probably wait until my head is clearer, but for the first time in months, the fog has lifted because of her.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my phone. I scroll through the contacts until I find the name I want and hit call. The line rings three times

before her sweet voice comes through.

“Miss me already, hotshot?” she teases, making me smile.

“Of course I do.”

She laughs softly. “What’s up?”

I take a deep breath as nerves run through my veins. “I was wondering, would you like to go out with me?”

“Like on a date?”

“Like a date,” I say, trying to fight back a smile.

“You know what? I think I would,” she says softly.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. When were you thinking?”

“What do you think about Friday night?”

“That works for me.”

I smile, looking down at my feet. “Well then, it’s settled.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“Okay, I’m going to get back to the kids.” That explains her low tone.

“Right, sorry. I forgot where you were. Do you need a ride home?” I feel my cheeks heat with embarrassment.

“It’s all good. Martha will give me a ride. Thanks, though.”

“All right, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay, and Kellan?”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t wait for our date.” She hangs up before I can say anything.

Laughing, I pull my phone away from my ear and shove it into my pocket. “Me neither, beautiful. Me neither.”

five

Cora

“T his place is nice,” I mumble as Kellan leads me inside.

My stomach is in knots because it’s a fancy place. One where you take your date to impress them. The thought of how many women he has brought here has my stomach souring.

“Yeah, it is,” he practically whispers before walking up to the hostess. “Reservation for two under Cooper.”

“Of course, Mr. Cooper. Right this way. We have the best table for you.”

That only has my nerves getting more frayed. He comes here enough that they would give him the best table?

This was a bad idea.

“Have a seat and your server will be right with you,” the woman says.

Kellan pulls out my chair, waiting until I’m seated before taking his own.

He takes his seat, smiling over at me softly. “You look beautiful tonight,” he tells me.

“You said that already.” The words come out a little blunt, but I’m starting to get pissed.

Why would he bring me here? I’m not one of his women. I thought I was special, but I guess they all did too. God, this is just a page out of his playbook.

I need to get out of here.

“You deserve to hear it a million times.”

That line should soften my heart, but it only has it reinforcing its defenses. I’m about to tell him I want to go home when the server comes up.

“Here are your menus. Sorry for the wait. Have you been here before?”

“No, sir. First time for us both, but you come highly recommended. Is there something on the menu that is your favorite?” Kellan asks.

I study him as the server reads off the specials and provides recommendations. Did he lie, or is this really his first time too? Did I read the situation all wrong?

“For you, miss?” the server asks.

“The steak special with truffle mashed potatoes sounds divine.”

“What kind of salad?”

“Caesar. Thank you.”

“Our Caesar comes with pine nuts on top. Is that okay?”

“Perfect.”

As he walks away, I give Kellan my full attention. “Highly recommended, huh?”

He nods. “The travel website says it’s the number one romantic date spot in the area. The reviews were mostly good.”

My stomach starts to ease. “How’d you get them to save the best table for you?”

He chuckles. “Pretty sure they say that to everyone. I know it’s a bit upscale and not like a place a college kid would normally eat at, but I wanted to plan something special so you know this was more than another first date. I didn’t want to take you somewhere we would forget. I wanted us to experience something together for the first time.”

There go those defenses falling as easily as they came up.

Thank God I didn’t say anything, otherwise, I would look like a bigger ass than I already feel.

“You’ve had a lot of first dates, huh? Any heartbreaks?”

I’m pushing my luck asking that. He hasn’t figured out that Clay is my brother, but he will. I’m worried that when he does, he will lose his shit. It could ruin whatever this is that we are starting. I can only hope that this doesn’t blow up in my face.

“If you would have asked me a year ago? I would have told you yes, but hindsight is twenty-twenty, right?”

“Oh, you are going to have to elaborate on that.” I give him a look like, *come on, man*.

He laughs. “Fair enough. I’d rather get the difficult shit out of the way anyway. Up until last year, I was what my best friend called a serial monogamist. I wasn’t a playboy who slept with lots of women then dumped them. I would date women for months at a time and then break up with them because they weren’t the right fit.” He cringes. “I know. It sounds so bad, and looking back, I was a terrible guy. I thought because I stayed with them, that made me better than a player, but the truth is that I only caused more hurt. I can see that now.”

“What changed?” I ask, but I know the answer.

Grace.

“My best friend did. She was my rock all through my life. I had this notion in my head that we would be together at some point, but I wasn’t ready for that, so I was out sowing my wild oats and all that. Then she met someone new, and it broke me. At the time, I thought it was because I was in love with her, but I know now that’s not the truth.”

My heart is hammering in my chest. While I’m happy to know that he isn’t actually in love with her, I feel horrible. Here he is thinking that this is all new information when it’s really not, or most of it’s not. I should have told him that I was Clay’s sister. This is giving me anxiety, sitting here and pretending I have no clue what he is talking about.

“What is the truth then? You didn’t love her?”

He shrugs. “I will always love her. She is my best friend, even if things are a bit difficult between us right now. It doesn’t matter, though, because at the end of the day, she is still the girl who was there when the pimples showed up and the awkward limbs were growing. She’s the one who watched me crash and burn the first time I asked a girl out, only for that same girl to turn around and ask me out a year later. She stayed by my side through it all. My only regret is that somewhere along the way I stopped being there for her. I can’t change that, and I hate myself for it. To answer your question, though, I thought I was in love with her, so seeing her with that guy felt like it was killing me, but when I took a step back and evaluated everything, I realized I wasn’t in love with her. I was in love with the idea of her. Of having someone I trusted without a doubt that I know

would never want me for my money or the clout they would get by being with me.”

The way he is talking is as if he went through therapy or something. Maybe he did. The man sitting in front of me is not the same man who Grace and Peyton complained about last year. He’s not the same immature guy who acted like Grace was a toy he didn’t want anyone else to play with. He has grown. He can see what he did was wrong and has remorse for how he treated her. I only wish he would tell her that.

“You should tell your best friend the conclusion you’ve come to,” I tell him.

He shakes his head. “I’m not there yet. I know I need to talk to her at some point. Our parents are best friends. I still get a queasy feeling when I see her with him. I don’t think it’s because I want to be with her, but until I can come to terms with their relationship and not want to gouge my eyes out every time I see them, I don’t think I can talk to her.”

I nod. I get it. Sometimes you know you need to do something but can’t bring yourself to do it.

That’s how I ended up here. Instead of telling my mom and Clay I wasn’t sure I wanted to go to college, I just came here and hoped for the best.

I can’t fault Kellan for that.

“Anyway. Now that I’ve been a total downer, tell me more about you.”

I allow him to steer the subject away from his past.

“My volunteer work is going great. In fact, Martha, the lead mediator, said that I’m her top requested volunteer. I guess the kids love me and the parents like that I give them distance while also maintaining the boundaries I am required to have. She says I have a real talent for working with families in a crisis.”

“That’s amazing, beautiful. I had no doubt that you would be a rock star. Look at what you’ve done with me. You have me spilling my guts, and it’s only the first date.”

“Oh come on, hotshot. You haven’t told me your deepest, darkest secrets yet. I still have some work to do.” I wink at him, making him laugh.

As the rest of dinner flies by with banter and flirting, I can’t help but look at Kellan for the man he is today. He isn’t the same kid who made dumb mistakes. He went through some trauma and pain and came out the other side stronger and wiser than he was before.

Looking at him now, I only see one thing.
Potential.



Kellan

Dinner was rocky at first, but ended up being a blast.

I was so nervous to take Cora to that place. The internet said it was a good date spot, but when we went inside, I felt so out of place. It didn't feel like a place college kids should be allowed. Yet they led us to the table, and we ate a phenomenal meal while we chatted about everything and nothing at the same time.

I won't lie. It was hard talking about Grace with Cora. I was worried it might scare her away.

Instead, I could see how her face softened as I spoke. It's like for the first time, someone actually sees me for who I really am. Not the guy they want me to be or the asshole who fucked shit up in the past.

She saw the Kellan who was right in front of her. The one desperate to make this date work because she has me catching feelings quicker than the common cold.

After I pay for our meal, I lead her back out to my truck. The drive to her place is a quick one, but I park a little further away so I can walk her to the door.

I'm not ready for the night to end.

She must not be either, because she takes my hand, setting a slower than normal walking pace. I match her, ready to waste the entire night with her if that's what it takes.

"You never told me about your family," I say, needing to hear her voice once more.

"Same old story. Raised by a single mom, and I have an older brother. His aspirations overshadowed everything else in our family. I've never resented him for it, though. I'm proud of him. Everyone makes comments like they should pity me because my brother received more attention, but I

don't want that. I don't need pity because there is enough room for both of us to have attention. I had a good life. My mother never favored one of us over the other. She showered me with what she could while also giving him what he needed to build a future for himself. She sacrificed so much so that we could have good lives."

"She sounds like an amazing woman," I tell her, pulling her to a stop by a tree several steps from the door to her dorm.

"She is. The best. Even now, she is working her ass off in case one of us needs something. She doesn't have to support us anymore, but I know she sends my brother weekly deposits of money as she does the same for me. Honestly, I'm grateful for how I grew up. I never missed not having a father. I had a mother who did enough to fill both spots in my heart. She taught me the importance of perseverance and hope. She and my brother showed me why it is important to be a good person and treat others with respect. They shaped me into who I am today. How can I be mad about that when I'm pretty damn happy with the person I am?" She looks up at me, her eyes shining with passion.

She means every single word she says. As she should. I'm beginning to see that Cora is more than the quirky, fun girl I met at that party. She is soulful. She has morals and sticks to them. I never have to question if Cora is going to do the right thing because it's not in her DNA to do the wrong thing.

It gives me all the more reason to like her.

"You can't be. I'm pretty happy about who you are too. In case you were wondering," I tease.

She rolls her eyes. "Of course you are. I'm a dime. You'd be a fool to toss me to the side for someone lesser than."

"The confidence is sexy. Tell me more about how amazing you are. It turns me on."

Her eyes sparkle with humor. "I should stop then. Don't want Rosie and her five sisters to have to be up all night helping you with your little issue."

I snort. "Little?"

She can't help but smile wider. "I'm assuming because of your truck. Usually only men who have something to compensate for drive lifted trucks."

I shake my head, laughing. "You are a spitfire. I'll give you that. Anytime you want, I can prove to you that I have nothing to prove."

Her laughter dies down as she grabs my other hand, facing me as she leans against the tree.

I want to kiss her. So bad do I want to kiss those lips. I won't, though. Not yet.

"One day I hope you do prove me wrong. I really like you, Kellan. You are a charmer, but you are also honest. You didn't shy away from telling me the hard stuff. I admire that. I like to live in the moment, though. Savor life as I experience it. So no matter how much I want you to lean in and kiss me right now like I'm sure you want to do, I'm going to ask you not to. We only get so many last first times in our life. If this is my last first date, I want to soak it in. I want my cheeks to never stop hurting from all the smiles and laughter. My stomach to never calm down from the butterflies causing chaos inside of me. I want to go to bed tonight and wonder what it would be like to have your lips on mine. I want to think about it for days to come until the time is right to experience it."

I pull my hand from hers and cup her face. "You want to take it slow? I can do slow. We can move at a glacial pace if we have to. Know that I'm right there with you, though. You will be in my dreams every night. My heart will skip a beat every time I see your name on my phone. I will be counting down the minutes until I get to bask in the peace that being in your presence brings me." I swallow hard before continuing. "And yeah. Rosie and her five sisters will be very busy helping me live out my fantasies with you until the time is right."

Her breath comes a little faster. "Should I be jealous of her?"

"Absolutely not. She can never hold a candle to you. Now I'm going to need you to go inside and make sure to look back over your shoulder at me. Give me a glimmer of hope that you are feeling this chemistry between us as potent as I am. Then you go up to your room and have a good night's sleep because if you don't, I'm going to kiss you. I'm going to kiss the fuck out of you and make you forget all that poetry we both just spit."

She shakes her head, laughing, and she steps into my arms, hugging me tight.

It feels amazing. To be held by her like this. At this moment, I never want to let her go.

I do, though.

She surprises me when she lands a kiss on my cheek, close to the corner of my mouth. "I promise to pine for you if you pine for me," she whispers.

“Deal. Run along now, beautiful.”

I watch her as she turns, scurrying up to the door. As I asked, she looks over at me, biting her bottom lip. It has my dick twitching in my pants.

She waves before going inside, leaving me out in the dark alone.

The entire drive home, I can't help but smile.

I am going to marry that girl one day.

I have no doubts about it.

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Cora

Weaving through the crowd, I set two cups of coffee down on the table before taking my seat. I turn Grace's so the mouth opening is facing her chair, so she won't have to turn it to take a drink when she arrives. Reaching for my cup, I take the top off to let it cool faster so I can take a drink.

Anything to keep my hands busy.

Even though I'm the one who invited Grace out for coffee today, I'm nervous. I love Grace and think she's perfect for my brother. Over the summer, she and I became close, and I genuinely think she's the person my brother needs in his life. She brings out a side of him I have never seen, but it's a good thing. He's better because of her.

Today, though, isn't just getting coffee with my future sister-in-law. I want to ask her about Kellan. Really, I want to be able to come clean and tell her all about what I've been doing, but I don't know if I can do that quite yet.

Will she hate me for having feelings for him?

I go to grab my phone out of my purse when I hear someone say my name. I look up and see Grace walking toward me with a smile on her face. "No glasses today?" I tease as I stand.

She rolls her eyes before pulling me into a hug. “You know I don’t have to wear them all the time. How are you?”

“I’m good.” We pull apart and sit down.

“Thank you for ordering this.” She takes a sip of her coffee.

“Of course.” I pick up my cup and blow on it before taking a small sip.

The taste of butterscotch and caramel makes me relax just a little. Even if this goes to hell, at least I got a coffee out of it.

“You know, I was so excited for you to come here. I had all these ideas, and now that they can happen, they haven’t.” She looks so dejected.

My stomach bottoms out. Oh god, does she know about Kellan?

“What do you mean?” I tread lightly.

“I thought we would hang out all the time, basically be inseparable, but we’ve both been so busy, I feel like I’ve barely seen you! I feel awful about it,” she says, making me relax.

Way to overthink it, Cora.

I laugh softly. “It’s okay, Grace. I knew this would happen.”

Her nose crinkles. “Did you?”

“I mean, yeah. It’s only normal, right? Our schedules are way different, we don’t share any classes, and we’re both busy with other stuff.”

“True. How is your volunteering going?”

I can’t help but smile as I think about it. “I love it.”

“Really?”

“Really. The staff there is fantastic. I haven’t had an issue with any of the families, and the kids are all amazing. It’s such rewarding work.”

“Good, I’m glad. I was kind of worried when you started,” she confesses.

“Really? Why?”

“Well, you never know what kind of clientele comes to those places.” She winces. “I know that makes me sound bad, but you always hear horror stories about people hurting people who are in social work. They don’t care that you are there to mediate, they blame you for keeping them from their family.”

“Mom had the same concerns. Don’t worry, we are carefully selected for each case. The more violent offenders are placed with actual employees and not volunteers. They also bring in extra security for those cases. Since I’m a volunteer, I only get the low-risk cases. Most of the families I see are close to being reunited.”

“That makes me feel a little bit better. What else is new? How are classes going?”

“Classes are all right. Boring, but all right.” I take a deep breath. “And I’m seeing someone.”

She leans forward and rests her elbow on the table and puts her chin in her palm. “Wait, really?”

“Yeah.”

“Why haven’t you said anything until now? Who is he? Do I know him?” she asks, making me laugh.

“Calm down, and I don’t know if you know him.” The lie falls off my lips easily.

Internally, I cringe. Why do I dig the hole deeper when I know I will have to fess up one day? I swear sometimes I make poor decisions for no good reason.

“Well then, tell me about him,” Grace says, pulling me from my thoughts.

That nagging feeling inside of me is telling me to tell her the truth, but I push it down. I think the fact that I had zero hesitation to lie to her means I’m not ready for her to pop this bubble I’m living in.

Not yet.

“He’s great. He’s a year older than me. He treats me well, and I really like him.”

Grace raises a brow. “That’s cool, but are you going to tell me his name?”

“I would rather not. Not right now at least.”

“Cora, is there a reason you’re hiding who you’re seeing?” Grace asks, frowning.

“I just want to keep it on the down-low for now and keep it to myself. I want to make sure that this is actually happening before I scream it from the rooftops. Besides, the less I tell you, the less you can report back to my brother.”

“Cora, whatever you say to me in confidence is just between us.” She is so sincere it hurts.

I know she means it too. She would keep it from Clay if I asked her to, but it’s not fair for me to ask her to do that.

“I know, but still. I’m not sure Clay will approve, and I don’t want you to get caught in the middle of Clay and me.”

A crease forms between her eyebrows. "Why wouldn't Clay approve? I won't lie, Cora, this isn't giving me the warm fuzzies."

I run a hand through my hair. "I'm messing this all up and not explaining it well, but I promise it's nothing bad. Honestly, the guy doesn't have the greatest reputation, and I know Clay wouldn't be a fan."

"First off, I don't care what the guy's reputation is. Second, your brother has no room to talk. When we met, everyone thought he was a manwhore who slept with every woman at the drop of a hat when it couldn't be further from the truth. We both know that reputations don't mean shit. Sometimes people's perceptions are off, and it takes really getting to know them to understand that."

"I know," I say softly as I spin my drink on the table.

"If he means something to you, I know the guys and I will give him a chance. We won't judge him for his past actions or what others say about him. The past is the past, and if your brother can't get on board with it, then oh well. It's your life."

"I know you will. See, he was kind of in a relationship last year, and he's left a little jaded from it. I just want to make sure it all works before I introduce him to everyone, you know?"

Understanding crosses Grace's face. "You're trying to protect your heart."

"You could say that, yeah."

Grace looks over my shoulder. While she's lost in thought, I take a drink, trying to calm my nerves. I should just tell her that it's Kellan. I know I should. The sooner they find out, the better, but I can't. I can't get my mouth to form the words.

It's because you don't want to see the look of hurt and betrayal on her face.

"You know, as long as I've known you, you've always been fearless. You've gone after what you want, guns blazing, giving zero fucks about the outcome. You don't care what anyone thinks, and I admire that about you. Hell, I wish I could be like you sometimes."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, but back to the point. I think you should give this guy a chance. If he breaks your heart, he breaks it. We will help you pick up the pieces. If you think he's worth it, dive in. It's okay to be scared, Cora. Sometimes we think the storm will be way worse than it actually is. I don't

want you to miss out on the possibility of happiness because you were too afraid.” I open my mouth to say something, but she holds up her hand, cutting me off. “Let me finish. As badly as I want you to jump in, I need you to watch your back. Red flags are very real, and you need to watch out for them. Trust your gut, and if it’s telling you something’s wrong, you need to jump ship. Just don’t assume something based on his reputation, let him prove himself to you. Okay?”

“Okay,” I say softly.

My heart is filled with gratitude for Grace. She has no idea that she just gave me permission to fall head over heels for her best friend, but she did. Somehow, she managed to turn my hesitancy into acceptance that he and I are happening.

I’ll go on one more date with Kellan, and if it’s as good as the last one, then I’ll tell her and Clay who it is I’m seeing.

Just one more date.



Kellan

Coach blows his whistle. “Again!”

Panting, I move back across the ice, and we start the play all over again. I get the puck and look toward Clay. When he’s clear and looking my way, I slap the puck toward him. He catches it with ease and pushes it down the ice further, toward the net. As soon as he can, he takes his shot, only for it to be deflected by Wyatt.

Again, the whistle blows, and Coach calls out another play. This time I’m the one with an opening. I line up my shot just right, and it skims over the top of Wyatt’s glove, falling into the back of the net.

“Fuck yeah!” one of the guys next to me mutters.

“Good job, Cooper,” Clay says as he skates by.

“Thanks.” I fight back my smile as I move back into position so we can start all over again.

Play after play, we do what we are supposed to. By the time Coach blows his whistle, signaling the end of practice, he's got his arms crossed over his chest with a look of pride in his eyes.

"Now that's what I'm talking about, boys," he says as we circle up. "Just in time with the first game approaching too. I was worried I was going to have to go borrow some guys from the beer league in town so I would have some players who wouldn't completely embarrass me on the ice."

A few of the guys chuckle but quickly stop when they realize Coach isn't joking. The dude would do whatever it takes to win a game as long as it's legal. While Coach waxes poetic about how we played today and the game coming up, my mind drifts.

Today it felt good to be on the ice. It almost felt like early last year. Before everything with Grace went down. We were all working together, and we were making magic happen on the ice. Clay and I were working as a team, and it made me realize something.

Maybe Clay was never the problem, and it was me all along. Maybe my head was so far up my ass that I was the one who was ruining everything. I wanted what Clay had so badly that I let it cloud my judgment. Hell, I wanted to be him. He got the C on his chest, and he got the girl, both things I wanted when all along they weren't meant to be mine, at least not right now. Once he leaves, I'll toss my hat into the ring to be team captain, but until then it's his job, not mine. I'm humble enough to accept it if it's never my job. Coach knows what's best for this team. I need to trust him.

Coach dismisses us, and we head toward the locker room. Even the atmosphere here feels different. It still smells like sweat, but it feels lighter.

I sit down on the bench and start undoing my laces.

"Hey, are you going to physical therapy with Brett?" Beckett asks Clay.

"Yeah, I want to see if there's anything we need to be doing at home to help him between appointments," Clay responds.

"Good. Have you noticed he's been a little quiet lately?" Beckett asks.

"You would be too if you were him," Wyatt says.

"True. I don't know, I just worry," Beckett tells them.

"Who would have known you would be a mother hen?" Clay teases him.

"Fuck you," Beckett says, making them laugh.

I can't help but be slightly envious of their easy banter. I don't remember the last time I had that kind of friendship with another player.

“You were great out there today, Cooper. I could tell you’ve been busting your ass. Whatever you’re doing, keep it up,” Clay says as he sits down across from me, pulling me out of my head.

“Thanks. I appreciate you saying that.”

He looks at me funny for a second before he nods.

“Yo, did you guys hear about that party that’s happening this weekend?” one of the freshmen asks.

“Which one? There’s a million parties every weekend,” Beckett deadpans, making everyone laugh.

The guy, I think his name is Quinn, his face turns red. “I don’t know, I heard some babes talking about it after I came out of my math class.”

Clay winces. “First off, let’s not call any female a babe. Second, we are too close to the season to party now. You need to be at the top of your game.”

Beckett chuckles while some of the guys groan. “Yeah, for all you know, you could be calling James’s sister a babe.”

“You have a sister, and she goes here?” I ask.

Clay looks over at me and nods. “Yeah, she’s a freshman.”

I think back to last year and try to picture who Grace sat with at games. The only person I remember seeing next to her that she knew was her roommate Peyton.

“Huh, I must have missed her in the stands last year.”

“Nah, you didn’t miss anything. She only came to one game, I think.”

“Ah, that makes sense. That’s cool that your sister goes here, though.”

Clay smiles. “Yeah, she’s the best.”

“What about you, Cooper? You got any sisters locked away?” Beckett asks.

“No, and if I did, I would make sure she would stay far away from you,” I quip.

Beckett clutches his chest as if I wounded him, making all the guys laugh.

Shit. I didn’t realize how much I missed the banter that is thrown back and forth in a locker room. Last year and so far this year, I’ve kept my head down and stuck to myself. I didn’t make friends with anyone on the team and saw them as competition. I thought they were beneath me.

Just another way I fucked up, and I didn’t even know it.

A feeling of melancholy fills me. I could have had this the entire time I've been here, but I let my pride and cockiness get in the way. I've made so many mistakes since I've come here, I don't know how I'll fix them. I don't know if there is a way to make it right.

"Hey man, are you okay?"

I look over and see Wyatt looking at me with concern. The guy doesn't know me, and I honestly don't know if he's ever said more than a handful of words to me before. I can't help but wonder what his story is. I know he's friends with Clay and lives with him, but that's it.

"Yeah, man, I'm good," I lie.

I might not be good right now, but I will be.

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SEVEN

Cora

“You look hot. Where are you off to looking like a hussy?” Peyton jokes.

My stomach drops as I smooth out my dress again. “Does it look like I’m trying too hard?” I turn to look at her.

She frowns. “I was joking. You look gorgeous. Why are you so nervous?”

“I have a date,” I admit softly.

“Oh my goodness. My little girl is all grown up. Who is this boy? He knows I have no qualms about wearing orange, right?”

I roll my eyes at her. “I’m not telling you. I’ll let you know when I know if he’s worth it. As for wearing orange, how about not threatening murder? I’d rather you were here with me than in jail.”

“Fair enough. Are you meeting him somewhere?” she asks.

I shake my head. “He’s picking me up.”

“So he’s not a freshman if he has a car. Does he go to college here?”

“Yes, Mom. He goes to school here. I have a copy of his ID that I have uploaded into my cloud in case anything were to happen to me. I would send it to you or Grace, but you psychopaths would do a deep dive on the dude that would put the FBI to shame.”

She scoffs. “Grace would be so offended.”

I give her a look. "Fine, not Grace, but you would know about the freckle on his left butt cheek that he had when he was a baby before he picked me up for our date."

"How do you know about it? Have you given this boy your virtue? I'm scandalized." Her hand lands on her chest.

"I'm leaving now. You're being ridiculous."

She stops me, pulling me into a hug. "I know, but I worry about you. These college boys can be douchebags. You have my number. Call me if you need me. Will you at least tell me where the date is? For my peace of mind? I promise I won't follow you there."

I sigh. "Club Zero on Broadway. My idea, not his."

"Watch your drink, and if he has even a sip of anything, you call me for a ride," she tells me.

"I will. What are you doing tonight? Working?"

"Nope. I get the night off, so I'm going to hang out here and catch up on school. So you won't be interrupting if you call." She gives me a pointed look.

My phone vibrates, letting me know Kellan is here.

"I'll call. Love you, PeyPey." I use the nickname I have for her.

"Love you too, CoCo. Be safe."

Leaving her in the room, I rush downstairs. I don't think she would snoop, but I'd rather she not find out it's Kellan I'm dating by catching us together.

When I get to the truck, I smile when I see Kellan waiting by the passenger door.

He opens it, stepping in my way so that I cannot get in.

"Gotta pay the toll, beautiful." He smirks at me.

I step into his arms, giving him a hug. He squeezes me extra tight before stepping back to allow me to climb into his truck. Once inside, he closes the door, walking around the front to get into the driver's side.

Once inside, he grabs my hand.

"You look beyond beautiful tonight, beautiful. Are you trying to earn a new nickname? Maybe...goddess? Sexiest woman alive?" he jokes.

It makes me blush. "Had to match you, hotshot. You are looking pretty snazzy."

He's wearing dark blue jeans, a fitted T-shirt, and a backward ball cap on his head. He looks dangerous. Maybe his new nickname should be

Danger to reflect how he has my lady bits standing to attention.

“So Club Zero, huh?”

“I like to dance. I’m the social one in my family, and I don’t mind crowds. I like making friends.”

“That much is obvious. You didn’t even hesitate to walk up to me and ask me to be your beer pong partner.”

“Nope. You don’t scare me. No one does, really. I think the fear of rejection is an interesting concept. You don’t want to ask the question for fear the answer is no, but the possibility is always there that it might be a yes. I don’t want to live a life full of what-ifs. I want to know for sure I did everything I wanted to do, and if I didn’t, I tried like hell to.”

“It’s a good way to live. Never have regrets. Lord knows I wish I had lived that way before now. Maybe that’s something I should start,” he tells me, letting go of my hand so he can back into a parking spot.

God, why is it so sexy when a man uses your seat for his arm as he backs in? He even has a backup cam, but he still looks over his shoulder. It makes me want to kiss him.

When he finally puts the truck in park, I swear my breathing has sped up.

“Wait there.”

I do as he asks, watching him take the same path as before to come collect me from the passenger side.

Go for it, Cora.

As he helps me down, I lean into him, but he is closing the door before I can take the plunge. Threading his fingers through mine, he leads me to the door. He pays the cover for both of us, leading me inside.

“Do you want a drink?” he asks.

I shake my head, grabbing his hand to lead him to the dance floor.

Without another word, I move in closer to him, moving my hips to the beat. At first, I keep my distance, dancing with my arms up on his shoulder and room between us, but as each song plays, I move closer and closer to him.

Spinning, I press my back into his front and start grinding on him. I can feel the evidence that he is enjoying this pressing into my back, but I keep going. My body is warm from both the dancing and the hormones rushing through it.

I'm intoxicated by this man. I'm not even drinking, and yet I feel dizzy. I feel weak in the knees.

I want him.

Pulling him off the dance floor, I find a wall and lean against it. I try to catch my breath as he leans his forehead against mine, his arm above my head holding his weight.

"You're a hell of a dancer."

"Thanks. You're not so bad yourself." I let my hands linger at the nape of his head.

He looks over his shoulder before looking back at me. Then it sounds like he says something like, "Fuck it."

The next second, his lips are on mine. My body melts into him at the first touch.

The butterflies are raging inside my stomach as I pull him closer. I feel like the hussy Peyton called me with the way my leg itches to wrap around him. I've never been this hot for someone before in my life. Not even when I've had sex before.

I wonder if it's the forbidden factor or maybe the anticipation that led up to it.

Either way, this is one hell of a kiss.

He pulls away, looking down at me. Then he looks over his shoulder again and stiffens.

Peeking out behind him, all the blood drains from my face. Clay and Grace are standing at the bar looking around.

I know why they are here. Peyton said she wouldn't come, but she never said she wouldn't tell Grace.

Kellan stiffened as soon as he saw them. In fact, he looked around before he kissed me. What if he only kissed me because she was watching?

My stomach sours. This amazing first kiss has turned to ash in my mouth.

"Wow," I murmur. I can't believe I let myself get here.

He looks back at me. "Yeah. Words fail me."

I shake my head. "Look, Kellan, I really like you. You are funny and down to earth. You've been honest, but I'm no one's pawn. I deserve to be first. I won't be anyone's rebound."

I go to step away, but he grabs my arm. "Wait, what? I'm confused. What just happened?"

I turn, tears threatening my eyes. “What happened is that the girl you were in love with last year? She’s over there at the bar along with my brother. You saw them and thought you’d show them you moved on by kissing me. It’s a shame, really. It was an amazing first kiss. I would have loved it if it was the last first kiss I ever had. Instead, it’s tainted now. I wish you the best, but this isn’t going to work.”

“That’s not what this is.”

He tries to convince me, but I’m numb now.

“It doesn’t matter. Take your hand off of me. I’m going home.”

He doesn’t stop me this time as I break his hold and stalk out of the club. It doesn’t take me long to pull up the rideshare app, ordering a ride.

The entire ride, I let the tears fall. Sadness for the lost relationship I thought I found.

Why did I believe he would be different? It was stupid really. You can really only count on yourself.

When I get back to the room, Peyton isn’t there, I’m grateful for it. I’m angry at her too. She helped ruin this night for me. I would have snapped at her.

Instead, I make myself a hot chocolate from our single pod coffee maker before cuddling into my bed with my comfort TV show, *One Tree Hill*.

Nathan Scott would never fail me the way Kellan would.

Too bad he’s fictional.



Kellan

What the fuck just happened?

One second, I am kissing the girl that I have already decided I need to marry. Not only is she gorgeous as hell, but she is kind, understanding, patient, and has a heart of gold. She also has some feistiness to her, so I know she won’t put up with my shit.

Now I ruined it all.

I run my hand through my hair and pull at the roots. She makes it seem like I knew they were here before we kissed, but I didn't. I only didn't want to get caught kissing the hell out of her by security. They don't tend to like that kind of thing as they are worried it will turn into more.

When I looked after the kiss is when I saw them.

She knew all along. She knew who I was. If anyone was played, it was me.

My chest feels tight, and it becomes hard to breathe. I rub my hand over my heart, trying to calm myself down.

I feel betrayed, but not enough to not want her anymore. I should care more that she's been lying to me, but the truth is I get why she did it. She likely knows everything between Grace and me. If I were her, I wouldn't have even given myself the time of day. Yet she did.

Now I know why she looked familiar. Jesus, I'm an idiot. I remember seeing her after that one game last year. I thought she was cute then, but I was more worried about Grace. What a stupid mistake.

Fuck. I need to fix this. I can't let this end here.

I turn, planning to go over to Clay, but he's already in front of me. In fact, he looks spitting mad.

He pushes me into the wall, his arm across my throat. "Leave my sister alone. You don't get to fuck with her because you want to fuck with me. Leave her out of our beef."

"I didn't even know she was your sister till just now. I thought our beef was squashed. What the hell, Clay? I can't breathe," I try to tell him, pushing at his chest.

Grace is at his side, pulling him away. When he finally backs off, I rub my throat. Fuck, that hurt.

Security comes over then. "All three of you out. No fighting."

I hold up my hands, making my way out the front door. Clay and Grace come out behind me.

I walk a few steps down the sidewalk before turning around. "I really didn't know, but I like her. A lot. She's amazing." I admit my feelings to them.

Clay scoffs. "You expect me to believe you didn't know? Bullshit."

He still looks like he wants to punch me. Maybe I should let him. It would hurt less than this feeling in my gut right now.

“Clay, give him the benefit of the doubt. She told me about him. You’re the guy she’s been dating, right? The one with a reputation Clay wouldn’t approve of?” Grace asks.

She told her that? Fuck.

“Yeah. We’ve been dating since the first week of school,” I tell her.

She frowns. “Listen to me closely, Kellan Henry Cooper. Cora is a good girl. She is kind and wants to see the best in everything. She does not deserve your serial monogamist ways. She deserves a man willing to make her the priority and date her and only her without getting bored with her after a few months. I swear to whatever God above, if you hurt that girl, I will kill you.”

It’s weird seeing Grace so angry about something. She looks like she really might pull the trigger if she had a gun in her hand.

I’d deserve it.

“I already have, but not on purpose. She saw you two and thought that I only kissed her for your benefit. As for my past, I haven’t dated anyone since Monica. I haven’t wanted to. I think Cora could be someone special for me. I don’t want to lose her,” I admit to them both, knowing I look like a putz right now.

How did it come to this?

“Did you? Kiss her for us, I mean?” Grace asks.

“Fuck no. I kissed her because in that moment, I couldn’t think of anything else but doing so. She had me under her spell, and the only option I had was to give her whatever she wanted.”

I want to tell her that not everything is about them, but I bite my tongue.

“That’s my sister you are talking about,” Clay grumbles.

Trust me, right now I’m brutally aware of who she is.

“I’m sorry. I know we are getting somewhere with the team, but I won’t give her up because you ask. She grounds me in a way I’ve never had before. She’s the reason I’m playing as well as I am.” I pull at the neck of my shirt, feeling like my body is on fire.

Clay considers my words as Grace looks up at me with hope in her eyes.

“She likes those little chocolates with the white sprinkles on them that you get at the movie theater. What else, Clay?” Grace asks him.

He’s quiet for a moment before he holds out his hand. I hold mine out to him, enduring the crush of his hand as he shakes it.

“I don’t like this, and I don’t trust you, but I trust her. If you’re what she wants, then that’s it. You hurt her, though, and I will do everything in my power to get you off the team. I will ruin your life because that is what that girl is to me. She is my life. I have given everything in my life to make her life better. Do you understand?”

I nod. “I do. I will treat her with respect and do everything I can to make her happy.”

It’s the truth. Even if I’m still a little sour around them, I want Cora to be nothing but happy.

“Very well.” He takes his hand back. “She loves flowers. Any kind really, but she really loves marigolds. She likes how bright they are. Says it makes her feel happy. Her favorite pizza is ham and cheese. Ice cream is mint chocolate chip.”

“Thanks, man. You think getting her these things will help?”

He snorts. “No, but it will be a step in the right direction.”

“Clay.” Grace hits him in the stomach.

He shakes his head, sighing. “I cannot even believe I am helping you win my sister over. This is what you need to know about Cora. She is forgiving. Really, all the gifts in the world won’t win her over if you aren’t genuine. She needs to know the truth. Be honest with her. Go to her and ask her to talk. Be persistent. She won’t want to at first, but if you get her to give you at least five minutes, you have a shot. From there, it’s all you. I don’t know what to tell her because I don’t know your relationship. As corny as it sounds, talk to her from the heart. She’s always known when someone is being real with her. Then respect her wishes if she decides it’s not enough.”

I get what he is saying. I need to wear my heart on my sleeve for her, and if she stomps on it, I walk away knowing I did everything I could to win her back.

“Thanks, man. See you at practice in the morning?” I ask.

He nods. “Yes.”

I start to walk away, but he calls out to me. “Cooper.”

Turning, I look at them hand in hand. Only a small twinge from seeing it.

Progress.

“If you’re going to be dating my sister, you better get used to seeing a lot of me. I won’t have her avoiding me because of you. I can bury the

hatchet if you can.”

A little bit of relief hits me in the chest. That’s as close to a blessing as I’m going to get for now. I’ll just have to prove to him that I’m serious about her.

“Work in progress,” I call out.

He nods, understanding.

Rome wasn’t built in a day after all.

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eight

Cora

I did not want to come to class today, but I have no choice.

After the disastrous date from two nights ago, I've been refusing to even talk to anyone. Clay has been the pushy older brother trying to get me to talk to him about what he saw at the club. Grace is the epitome of her name, texting me only once to tell me she is here when I want to talk. Peyton has been the hardest to ignore since we share a room, but she's been mysteriously staying the night somewhere else since I reamed her ass for sending Grace and Clay to my date.

Then there's Kellan. He has texted three times since our date.

The night of, he asked me to let him know I made it safely home. I did text him back out of fear he would show up. He didn't say anything after that until the next morning. He wished me a good morning and said he would be here when I wanted to talk.

This morning's text was the same.

Only, I have to see him today because he is the TA in my class. I wish his professor had told him that he couldn't date a student in a class he TAs. That would have saved me the tears and sorrow.

It sounds ridiculous when we have only been dating a couple of weeks, but I miss him. I didn't realize what all the little text conversations we had

were doing to me. It made me crave his attention. Now that I don't have it, I feel empty.

Walking up to the steps of the building, I bristle when I see Kellan standing there with a single marigold and a box of my favorite chocolates.

"You can't buy me with gifts, Kellan." I glare at him before walking into the building.

He follows behind me. "I know, but I didn't want to show up empty-handed. Clay and Grace said you would like these. I wish I had time to learn that for myself, but I was desperate."

He talked to my brother and Grace? Why would he even bother? Probably to prove to them he was over them for real this time. The truth is the opposite of love isn't hate, as many people believe. No, the opposite of love is indifference. It's not caring what that person does anymore. They don't even register in your brain.

The effort he seems to be putting into showing them how okay he is shows he's not over it. I wish he was, though.

"Keep them. I don't want them."

He stops me before I enter the class.

"Five minutes. I don't deserve it, but please give me five minutes of your time to at least apologize."

He looks so sincere. I want to say yes, but I find myself shaking my head.

He nods once, looking like a dejected puppy. "Like you said. You won't know if you don't ask. Even if the rejection stings. Please take these. I have no idea what to do with them otherwise. I'll stay out of your way. I promise."

He holds out the flower and candies. I take them. Then I go into class, ready to ignore him for the entirety of it.

Only it doesn't work.

While the teacher drones on and on about shit I really need to pay attention to, I find my gaze flitting back to Kellan in the corner as he grades our first homework assignment.

I really do want to hear him out. I should talk to him, right? I hate that I am even questioning myself right now.

He picks up the next paper, his finger caressing the top of the page where the name usually is. He looks up, finding me already looking at him.

I can see the way his chest moves as he sighs. He gives me a sad smile before setting the paper aside. Then he continues his work.

It's that sad smile that sticks in my head. When the professor finally lets us out of class, I find myself walking to the front to stand in front of where Kellan is putting his stuff away.

"Five minutes and not a second longer," I tell him.

He looks up at me, surprised. "You won't regret it. I promise."

The problem is I already do. All the wall building I did around my heart the past two days feels flimsy.

I want to believe in whatever he says. I just don't know if I can trust him.

Maybe we were a mistake. Going into this knowing his past as intimately as I did, with being close friends with Grace and seeing what she experienced last year, made me biased against him.

I never really gave him a true shot if I'm being honest. In the back of my mind, I have been holding on to that knowledge and letting it tint everything he has shown me. It's like rose-colored glasses, except these only show you the shitty parts of things.

The paranoia. The questioning every single thing he does and says.

I feel like we are doomed.

Still, I follow him as he leads the way from the classroom. He doesn't speak until we step outside.

"Did I waste a few minutes getting us somewhere semi-private, or can my five minutes start now?" he asks, that boyish charm slipping through.

"They can start now. Let's walk toward the cafeteria."

He does as I ask, walking in the direction I told him.

Several seconds go by without him saying a word. It has my anger rising back up inside me. Why did he even seek me out if he wasn't going to talk to me?

I wait another thirty seconds or so before I speak to him, my sass coming on through.

"Did you want to waste the last five minutes you have in my presence in silence, or did you have something to say? I won't grant you another if you don't say a word."

He looks over at me, a small smile on his lips.

Then he speaks, shocking me.



Kellan

“I love that about you. You never bullshit anyone. I’m going to be completely honest and transparent with you right now. I worried so much about getting you to talk to me, which I never thought was going to happen, by the way, that I never once considered what I would say now that I have your attention. I’m tongue-tied. I feel like a fucking idiot. Not only for hurting you the other night, but for not even being able to put into words how I feel right now. That’s why I was silent. I was trying to figure out how to start this without it ending before it even began.”

She looks up at me, eyes wide.

“You have five minutes, Kellan. Just speak, and if I need clarification, I’ll ask.”

I nod. “Okay then. You think that I kissed you the other night because I knew Clay and Grace were there. I didn’t. I know why you thought that. I won’t lie to you and tell you I’ve never been to that club before. Monica loved it. We went all the time last year, so I knew that the security guards would break us up for kissing. They don’t like to deal with couples sneaking off into nooks and crannies to fuck, so they try to stop it before it gets that far. That’s what I was doing before our kiss. I was determining if I could get away with it before some guy pulled me off of you. It’s why I looked again afterward to see if I could see anyone headed our way. That’s when I saw Clay and Grace. After, not before. So I didn’t kiss you for any other reason than it was killing me not to.”

She looks as if she is absorbing my words, so I go on.

“I want to shoot myself for the fact that you feel like I ruined your potential last first kiss because it means that for once in my life, I was on the same page with the woman I was dating. It’s always been the girl planning our wedding and picking out kids’ names early in the relationship, and I went along with it because I didn’t know any better. How could I when I didn’t know what having a connection with someone should feel like? Then I met you, and I could see it. The white picket fence with the

three kids. Maybe a dog or two. I saw it, and it was you who was standing next to me. I'm not saying it's love. I'm not sure I even know what that is, but it would be too soon to declare it anyway, but I saw a future with you. A real one. I wanted that. I do want that. I know now that I ruined it, though. Maybe not the other night, but in the past."

I take a deep breath, stopping to turn to face her. She stops with me, her eyes glistening with tears.

I'm fucking all of this up.

Rubbing my hand down my face, I look to the sky.

"You deserve better than me. That's without a doubt. I'm a screw-up. I don't know what I'm doing. Hell, I fucked up the only relationship I ever had in my life with Grace under the notion that I was in love with her. I'm going to tell you something I have never told another soul and likely never will after you. Even when I pursued Grace, I knew I wasn't in love with her. It was such a dick move, which is why I avoided her most of the time. It's the real reason I kept flaking on our conversations. All I could think about was the conversations my mom would have with me growing up, telling me how wonderful it would be if I married Grace. That it was my responsibility to protect her and keep her safe always. The pressure it put on me had me acting without truly knowing what I was doing. It's the same reason I can't even be in a room with her anymore. Every time I look at her, all I can think about is the fact that my mother loved the idea of us being together so much that I let it ruin the single most important friendship I have ever had in my life, and I will never get it back."

I swallow back the tears as my eyes start to sting.

"I know that our friendship can never be the same as it was. I would murder any asshole who hurt that girl, and there I was being the one who needed to be murdered. That's when I knew I needed to change. I realized I dated all those girls hoping that I would find someone who would release me from the obligation I put on myself to marry Grace. Once I figured out the problem was me, I knew I needed to work on myself, and that was what I was doing. I never planned to date you, beautiful." I reach out and cup her face. "You were never part of the plan. I should have kept walking that night and saved you the heartache. Know that even though it was short-lived, you changed my life irrevocably. You made me a better man, and I will continue to try and be that man until the day I die. You taught me that."

"You done?" She snuffles.

I shake my head no.

“Continue then,” she whispers.

“You are the epitome of beautiful. You are kind, smart, funny, and the best person I have ever met in my life. I want you to go find happiness no matter what that looks like for you. Know that no matter what, I will be rooting you on, even if we never speak again. You are going to do great things in this world. I only wish I was going to be there to see it.”

I lift her hand to my mouth, bowing slightly, kissing the back of it. I linger for several seconds, a tear escaping without my permission. I wipe it away quickly before straightening back up.

I don’t bother to say goodbye. I’ve never liked them much. It feels so permanent.

Instead, I give her a tight smile, turning to walk away.

In my head, I keep chanting to myself to keep walking. The urge to turn around and beg on my knees for her to give us another shot riding me strong.

I don’t get far when I hear her call out my nickname.

“Hotshot.”

I turn, facing her.

“Don’t give up quite yet.” Her face softens. “Call me later? I’d maybe love to hear more about this new man I made out of you.”

I let out a short laugh, the relief filling me. “I will.”

Turning, I pull out my phone and stop next to a tree. I watch as she walks into the cafeteria before I dial her number.

She answers on the second ring. “Did you forget to say something?”

“It’s later. So when can we have this date?”

The sound of her laughter makes me feel like everything might be all right after all.

Cora

I let myself into my dorm room and pause when I see Peyton there. Lately it feels like we've been passing ships. It doesn't help that I haven't really been in a talkative mood with her.

"Hey, I thought you had to work tonight," I say as I shut the door behind me.

Peyton smiles at me as she puts her clothes away. "Hey, I was supposed to, but then they called and told me I could have tonight off because it's dead."

"I don't know if I should say sorry or not." I laugh, feeling a bit awkward around her.

I know Mom has mixed feelings every time she gets called out. She loved the unexpected time she got to spend with us, but at the same time, she ended up worrying about how much money she lost out on by not going in.

Peyton shrugs. "It's fine. I worked like crazy this summer, so I should be okay for a minute."

"Good."

"Listen, I really am sorry about telling Grace. At first, I just wanted them to know where you were, but then Clay said they were going to check

up on you, and I knew I fucked up. Please know I didn't do it on purpose. I love you and respect you more than that."

Her words settle the little bit of anger still residing in me. I know she didn't mean it, but I wasn't ready to hear her say it. Not until now.

"I forgive you. I might not be willing to share my location with you anymore, but Clay does what he wants. He is the overprotective big brother."

She nods. "I won't tell them again. You can trust me, and I will prove it. I didn't realize how he would be. I swear."

"He's not been around much during my dating years, so I didn't know he would go that far either. It's okay. Truly."

She nods slowly. "Soooo if we are okay..."

"Yes?" I say, knowing what she wants to know.

"Spill, girlfriend."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say as I sit on my bed, pretending I don't know what she's talking about, but I know Grace told her.

Peyton turns so she can look right at me and raises a brow. "Don't think I don't know who you were seen kissing not that long ago at the club. Kellan Cooper, seriously?"

Groaning, I throw myself to the side and cover my face with my arm. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, that's too damn bad, now spill."

"I like him, and before you say anything, he had no idea who I was, so I know he wasn't playing me from the start. Or at least I don't think he was." I look over at her. "Am I stupid for trusting him?"

Peyton sighs and stares at the wall. "Look, I've never hidden how I feel about Kellan. I think he's a grade A asshole who didn't know what he had until he lost it, but at the end of the day, I know for Grace to hang around as long as she did that he can't be all that bad. I'm a firm believer that a tiger can change their stripes and that you shouldn't hold someone's past against them unless it's truly heinous, like rape or pedophilia, know what I mean?"

"I do."

She nods. "So as far as I know, he's done nothing like that. I think if you like him, really like him, then maybe you should give him a shot. Give him a chance to show you that he is more than the little boy throwing tantrums last year, but I do think you should talk to Grace."

I rub my face with my hands. "God, I had coffee with her a while ago, and I almost blurted it out. I wanted to tell her so bad, but at the same time, I couldn't make the words leave my mouth."

Peyton laughs. "Hey, I get it. You get zero judgment from me. You know she knows, right? She's the one who saw you."

"Oh, I know. Her and Clay." I cringe.

"Good. Now let's go."

"Where are we going?" I ask as I get up, and she does the same.

"We are going over to the hockey house so you can talk to Grace."

"How do you know she's home? She might be in class or have plans with Clay."

Peyton rolls her eyes and shoves me toward the door. "Come on, stop being a little bitch and let's go. I know she's home by the way because I was supposed to be there an hour ago to hang out with everyone."

"Maybe I should stay here and let you guys have your night."

"You aren't getting out of this, girlfriend. Might as well quit wasting your breath," she quips as she links her arm through mine.

Leaving the dorms, we start our walk across campus.

"At least it's nice out today."

Peyton tips her chin toward the sky. "Yeah, there won't be too many more days like this before winter sets in."

"Hey, don't wish away the fall from me," I tease, making her laugh.

"You know, for as short of a walk this is, I hate it."

"I'm still surprised you agreed to room with me. Especially when you could have lived with all of them."

Peyton shrugs. "I honestly don't mind the dorms. Yeah, the rooms are kind of small, but I don't have a lot of things, and it's a roof over my head that I don't have to worry about."

Before I can think of anything to say to that, we walk up the steps of the house. Peyton opens the door and we walk inside.

"Honey, I'm home!" she yells.

Beckett peeks around the corner and smiles. "Hey, you two. What are you doing here?"

"We're here to hang out with Grace," Peyton tells him, practically ignoring him as she walks by him.

Beckett looks at me and raises a brow. "How are you doing, Hellraiser?"

“Hellraiser, really?”

“I mean, if the shoe fits...”

Peyton stomps back, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the stairs. “Stop giving her a hard time when she has enough guilt to sink the Titanic. Grace in her room?”

“Yeah, she was getting some studying done while waiting for you to show,” he says as we pass him. “Hey, Cora?” he says, making me pause and look over my shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t beat yourself up too much. You’re only human, and you can’t help who you like.”

I don’t miss how his eyes find Peyton’s back as she continues up the stairs. I have no idea what is going on with them, but the tension between the two could stifle a room.

“Thanks, Beck.” I smile and continue up the steps.

I pause right outside of Grace’s door and watch as she and Peyton laugh. While I adore both Grace and Peyton, sometimes I wish I had someone who just got me like they get each other.

“Knock knock. Can I come in?”

Grace looks over at me, and I wait for her smile to drop, but it never does.

“Hey, I was wondering when you would stop avoiding me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say as I walk into her room and drop down into the beanbag she has set up in the corner.

Grace rolls her eyes. “Sure you don’t.”

“Fine, maybe a little bit,” I say, holding up two fingers almost touching.

“So Kellan was the guy that you were telling me about, huh?”

“Yep.”

She tilts her head to the side and studies me. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

Unable to find the words to explain myself, I shrug.

“She was worried you wouldn’t approve,” Peyton says, chiming in as she scrolls on her phone while she lies on Grace’s bed.

Grace shakes her head as she frowns. “That’s dumb.”

“Is it though?” Peyton asks from her spot.

Grace looks over at her and glares. “Yes.” Grace looks back at me. “You know I don’t care if you want to date him, right?”

“Honestly, I don’t know what I know right now,” I confess.

“Okay, well then tell me, do you have feelings for him?”

“Yes...” I whisper as I stare up at the ceiling.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her nod. “Good. Then I think you should go for it.”

I tip my head forward and stare at her. “Really?”

“Really.”

“I...”

Grace sighs. “Look, I’ve known Kellan since high school. Even with shit being weird between us, he’s still one of my best friends, and I want nothing but the best for him. I want him to be as happy with someone as I am with your brother. If that person is you, then I’m all for it.”

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

“Oh come on, you can’t be too surprised,” Peyton teases.

Grace picks up a pillow off the floor and chucks it at her. “Stop teasing her.”

“Never,” Peyton quips.

Grace sighs and turns back toward me. “I don’t know exactly what I saw the other night, but I think it’s clear that you need to sit down with Kellan and figure that out. If you give him another shot, which I think you should, then I hope you are the one who ends up healing his heart and giving him what he needs. Because I can promise you, that man has a lot of love to give.”

“Are you sure?” I press.

“I’m positive. You have my blessing.” She rolls her eyes. “Not that you need it. You know he was willing to take a punch from Clay for you, right? Like I saw it in his eyes. He would have taken it and not fought back. That’s huge. He hated Clay last year. Instead, he practically begged him in his own way for his blessing to date you. Clay is the one who told him about your favorite flower, pizza, and ice cream. I only knew the candy.”

My heart hammers in my chest. I never considered that Clay was the one who told him. That Kellan asked Clay.

“I had no idea,” I murmur.

She smiles. “Kellan never loved me. You don’t love someone and treat them the way he did me. I don’t hold that against him, though. He had some growing up to do, but the Kellan we spoke with two nights ago? He wasn’t the same kid from last year.”

Her words echo the ones that Kellan said to me today. She could see the difference in him with one short conversation.

Maybe he really has changed.

“Clay gave his blessing, by the way. If you want to date him, we won’t stand in your way.”

“I love you,” I blurt out.

She laughs. “I love you too.”

“And I love you two. Now can we move on to something more interesting to talk about, please?” Peyton moans.

“Sure, are you ever going to tell us what’s going on between you and Beckett?” Grace quips.

Peyton gasps dramatically. “How dare you...”

I tune them out, my mind still on Kellan. I don’t know what our future looks like, but I really am excited to see what happens.



Kellan

My hands shake as I walk up to her dorm room. Taking a deep breath, I knock on her door before shoving them into my pockets. Cora answers the door with a smile on her face, making my heart race.

“You look beautiful.”

She rolls her eyes, but her smile stays intact. “I’m in a sweatshirt and jeans.”

I shrug. “You don’t need to dress up to be beautiful. Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah.”

She steps out of her room, letting the door fall shut behind her, and wraps her arms around my waist. Before she can let go, I wrap my arms around her and bury my face into her hair and breathe her in. I don’t know how she’s done it, but in such a short amount of time, she’s become such an important part of my life, and it’s been driving me crazy not knowing where we stand.

Even though we talked Monday, she wanted to wait until today to go out. It was a long five days, but Saturday is here, and now I get her to myself.

Not that I didn't text her every day, praying she would still text me back. Each time she did, I felt my hope grow.

"Come on, you promised me a date. Are you going to tell me where we're going?" she says when she pulls away.

"Honestly, I thought we could go do something low-key like one of those trails. The leaves have started to change colors, but we can do something else if you want." I rub the back of my neck.

Shit, I'm messing this up, and I haven't even managed to right my last wrong.

Cora shakes her head. "No, that works for me. I love fall."

"Okay, cool. Let's go."

I lead her out of the dorms, and we start walking through campus. Along the backside of the university, they have trails and shit for people to run between campus and the sports complex.

"So..." she says after some brutal silence.

"So..."

Cora laughs. "This is weird, isn't it?"

"Maybe just a little bit, but I'm sure we will find our way eventually."

She reaches over and grabs my hand. "I should probably tell you that I talked to Grace."

I close my eyes as my heart sinks in my chest. Fuck me. This is where she tells me it's over and she never wants to see me again. "And..."

"She gave us her blessing...not that we need it, but she gave it. Clay did too, I guess, not that I asked him."

I look down at her in surprise. "Wait, what?"

Cora nods as she looks forward. "Yep. She told me that if I want to be with you, she thinks it's a great idea."

"She said those exact words?"

"Not exactly verbatim, but yes."

"Huh..."

"Peyton even told me that if Grace is your friend, you can't really be that bad."

"Is she dying?" I blurt out, making her laugh.

“I know, right? Totally unlike her, but no, she’s perfectly healthy. Or at least I think she is.”

“Well damn, color me surprised.”

“I don’t think that’s how that saying goes,” she says as she knocks her shoulder into my arm.

“It works, though.”

We fall silent again as we walk. I try to find the words to tell her what’s on my mind. I want to tell her that I’m thankful she decided to give me another chance. I want to promise her that I won’t ever fuck up where she’s concerned, but we both know that would be a lie. Relationships are never easy and are bound to get messy at some point. You can hurt someone when you’re not even trying.

“You know, I love fall,” she says, pulling me out of my head.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, it speaks to my inner basic bitch,” she says, making me laugh.

“I don’t think there’s anything basic about you, beautiful.”

“Soon enough you’ll find out that you’re wrong.”

I squeeze her hand. “I hope so. Hell, there are a lot of things that I can’t wait to learn about you.”

“Yeah, like what?”

“What’s your favorite movie?”

I remember when Clay asked me what Grace’s favorites were, and I got it completely wrong. This time I’ll remember.

Cora’s nose crinkles. “Honestly, I don’t watch a lot of movies. I can binge-watch a seventeen-season show with twenty episodes a season, but movies put me to sleep.”

“Really?” I ask her. “I love movies. I can rewatch the same movies. The *Predator* franchise is one of my most-watched series. It’s my comfort noise in the background.”

She laughs. “I’ve never heard of them, but maybe we can watch them together sometime?”

“Sure.”

We fall back into silence. I try to come up with something else to say but come up with nothing. It’s never been this hard between us before, so I don’t know why it is now.

“You know what we should do one day?” she asks.

“What?”

“We should go skating.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You know how to skate?”

She looks over at me, her face full of confusion. “My brother is Clayton James, captain of the Walker Wolves, of course I do.”

“I just never pictured you on skates is all.”

“I’m not very good. Grace surpassed me skill-wise this summer while she was visiting, but I don’t fall on my ass.”

Grace knows how to skate? Since when?

Another slice of guilt hits me. Not once did I ever ask her if she wanted to learn to skate. She never hinted at being curious. Or was I so self-absorbed that I missed the signs?

“Hey, none of that,” Cora says as she pulls on my hand.

“None of what?” I ask as I feel like a piece of shit.

Cora comes to a stop and makes me look at her. “Okay, we need to figure this out now. I don’t want Grace and Clay to come between us.”

“I don’t want that either.”

She nods. “Okay, good. I don’t want to censor myself when it comes to them. They are a big part of my life, and I don’t want to worry that if I bring them up it will throw you off.”

“It won’t,” I say quickly, Cora raises a brow, and I correct myself. “Or I’ll try not to let it. It’s just weird. I started thinking about Grace skating, and I hated that I wasn’t there to watch her learn. I’m happy for her, really, I am. I just have a lot of guilt where she’s concerned. Besides, Clay told me that we would have to hang out with them if I dated you, and I accepted it. It’s not going to be an overnight thing to get over, though.”

“Then it sounds like you should probably talk to her about that and settle everything between you,” she tells me. “As for Clay, we will hang out with them, but I will give you time.”

“Thank you. You’re probably right about Grace. I’m afraid to talk to her, though.”

“Well, you should do it soon, so that way we can work on us. I want to be with you.”

“And I want to be with you too.”

“Good.”

“Good,” I repeat, making her smile. “You know, I really want to kiss you right now, but I won’t. Not until we are in the right place.”

The corners of her lips twitch. "I want you to kiss me too, but I can wait."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I know it will be worth it. Now come on, let's enjoy this date before it becomes any more awkward than it currently is," she teases, making me laugh.

I make a mental note right then and there to give this girl anything she wants. Especially skating lessons. I'm going to do things right with Cora.

I might not be worth it, but she definitely is.

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ten

Cora

Walking out of my dorm, I'm shocked to see four intimidating men leaning against my brother's car. Well, they might intimidate someone with the way their faces are set in stone and arms are crossed.

Not me. I know these fools are as gentle as teddy bears.

"I have to get to mediation. What are you guys even doing here?" I ask, stopping short of them.

It's almost comical to see them. Clay is leaning on the hood, trying to look angry, but I know him better than anyone else. He's worried.

Then you have Beckett. He is trying to mirror Clay but seems as if he's not sure he understands why they are here. He is leaning against the passenger door.

Brett looks like he is in pain as he leans all his weight against the rear passenger door while keeping his crutch under his arm. I'm a little worried about him actually. He looks clammy.

Then there's Wyatt. The man barely ever speaks, but right now his body language is screaming at me.

Out of all of them, he doesn't want to be here. He is pretending to go along with the guys, but his body isn't as closed off as the others. He doesn't want to come off as trying to assert himself against me.

It makes him my favorite immediately.

“We need to talk,” Clay mutters.

“Well, make it quick. I have a bus to catch.” I hike my bag up on my shoulder.

“You are an adult, but you need to make sure you are making good decisions,” Clay starts.

He looks over at Beckett, who clears his throat. “We aren’t trying to tell you what to do, but the people you associate yourself with can be detrimental to your future. We just want you to think before you act.”

I roll my eyes as he looks at Brett. They rehearsed this. Any other time I would think their tag-teaming was adorable, but not today. Not when it’s aimed at me. I swear I am going to punch them all in the dick.

When Brett doesn’t talk right away, Beckett elbows him, making him groan.

“Oh, um. Cora. We love you like a sister.” He coughs, wiping his forehead with his hand. “We only want the best for you.”

I look to Wyatt when I’m sure Brett is done. He considers his words for a moment before speaking.

“These idiots think you need a talk about Kellan, but I disagree.”

The others start to protest, but he shoots them a murderous look, making them quiet down.

“As I was saying, Kellan was a dick last year, but it’s water under the bridge. I’m sure every one of us standing here has done something stupid in our past we would rather not relive, so I don’t know why we are making this a big deal. Cora is an adult, like you said. She knows what is best for her and doesn’t need us looking out for her.” He looks back to me. “With that being said, if he hurts you, I will fillet his dick like I’m butterflying a piece of chicken before dropping him into the middle of the ocean.”

He says it so deadpan that it almost frightens me. Especially when he looks at me dead in the eye then nods once.

“Morbid, dude,” Beckett mumbles.

Brett grows even paler, his hand coming to cover his crotch.

Clay is the only one who seems unaffected.

“I understand your position, Wyatt, but she’s my sister. She’s barely an adult, and I’m worried she will make a decision that will alter her life forever. It’s my job to protect her.”

I grow angry at his words.

“Protect me? For the past four years, I have lived in our house with Mom, but we both know that means I have practically lived alone. I have taken care of myself. There was no one there to make sure I came home at a decent hour or that I wasn’t out doing things I shouldn’t have been. You know I stayed out all night once. By myself, but still. *No one noticed*,” I seethe. “I made my own food, did my own laundry, and made sure I made it to school by myself. For four years, no one tried to tell me what was best for me. I had to figure that out for myself. Well, until you and Mom decided I needed to go to college. So I don’t need you butting into my life now, Clay.”

He looks sad for a moment, making me feel guilty.

“I know I wasn’t there. I wanted to be, Cora. I wish I had. I have regrets, but can’t you see? I don’t want you to have the regrets I have. I’m your older brother. Shouldn’t I worry about you?”

His words deflate my anger. I look at them all. The guys know me, but not really. They only know what Clay has told them about me. I haven’t spent enough time with them to get to know them truly.

Yet they are here, ready to defend my honor. Or in Wyatt’s case, go all Dexter on the poor sap who decides to date me.

“I understand. Thank you, guys, for coming. It means a lot to me even if I’m not acting like it. I’m going to date Kellan. If it ends badly, I won’t regret it. I’ll take it as a lesson learned. I can’t live my life scared to do something because of the possible outcome. That wouldn’t be living. I need to take the leap of faith and deal with the consequences later. I want to find my Grace, Clay. I need you to give me room to do that.”

He sighs. “I know. I’m not saying don’t date him. I gave my blessing, and I meant it. I only want you to be careful and think about the decisions you make. That’s all I’m asking.”

Grace said he had given his blessing, but I didn’t believe it. Guess I have to now. I don’t get what he is saying then. Date Kellan, but be careful of my decisions?

Then it hits me.

Oh god. This fucking idiot.

“You do know that I’m not a virgin, right?” I ask Clay.

He balks as the other guys all make choking noises.

“Excuse me?” Clay’s eyes narrow.

“Junior prom. I lost it to Billy Jackson. Been active since. If that’s the decision you want me to be careful with, that ship has sailed.”

“I...what? I will kill him.” Clay clenches his fist.

It only makes me laugh. “Seriously? That’s what all of this was? You have sex with Grace all the time. I’m going to have sex too. It’s part of life. You need to get over it.”

“Please stop saying sex. The vein in his forehead is popping,” Beckett says to me as he stares at Clay.

At that moment, Brett pukes.

I jump back, glad the splatter misses me.

“Seriously, dude?” Beckett screams.

Wyatt grabs his arm, helping him stand back up.

“The pain was too much. That wasn’t a reflection of you, Cora,” Brett mutters.

Wyatt gives me a chin dip, moving Brett until he is in the back seat of the car.

“Cooper is going to get it,” Clay mutters.

I march up to Clay, pushing him in the chest. “No. You won’t do a thing to him. He has barely even kissed me. He is trying to do this right, and so am I. So stay out of my relationship. If you can’t, then I will have to cut you out of my life until you can. I won’t live my life forever in your shadow, Clay.”

“Cora.”

I shake my head. “No. I’m done. I’m going to be late. Goodbye.”

Stalking away, I leave them behind.

My heart hurts, though. I don’t want to shut Clay out, but I don’t need him to be acting like my father. I need him to be my support system when I need it but give me the space to grow and learn about myself.

If he can’t do that, I don’t know what I will do because life without him seems impossible.



Kellan

It's D-day. Okay, not really, but it is team-building day. My anxiety is through the roof. Breathing is even hard for me. I feel like there is this weight on my chest as I stand outside the building.

I know what I need to do, but I can't seem to get my feet to move.

"Cooper, are you going to stand out here all day?" Clay asks as he comes up behind me, stopping at my side.

"I was considering it. It's nice out today."

The weather is a little chilly, but I've always loved the fall weather. With it being nearly October already, it's perfect.

"I'm glad you are out here. We need to talk."

I take a deep breath, trying to breathe past the tightness in my chest. "What's up?" I ask.

"I know I already gave you my blessing to date my sister, but I want to make it clear. She might be willing to forgive the shit she wasn't here to live through, but I'm not there yet. You have something to prove to me. Show me you are the guy Grace has been best friends with for years. I need to know you aren't the dickwad who put her through hell last year."

"I know. I'm working on it," I mutter, rubbing my chest.

Why isn't it getting better? Why does my heart feel like it's about to beat out of my chest?

"Good. You can start here with the team. Some of the guys will scoff and act like this is beneath them. I expect your full participation today. Understood?"

I nod. "Anything it takes."

He pats my shoulder. "Good. Let's get in there."

Without a choice, I follow him inside. He goes to the desk, so I walk over to the group of guys huddled around. Calvin moves over, making room for me. I regret it when I see what they are doing.

Douchebag Hendricks is sharing photos some girl sent him. Intimate ones.

"Dude, that's fucked up." I push his phone away, shielding it from everyone.

"Don't touch my shit, Cooper," he growls at me.

"Don't disrespect the woman who trusted you enough to send those to you," I say through gritted teeth.

"She doesn't even know me, and she sent them. It's obvious she wants people to look at her."

I shake my head. “Have some integrity and decency. Put the phone away before I make you put it away.”

I take a step forward. The guys all back up a step, leaving me and Hendricks in the center of the circle.

Fuck, Clay isn’t going to like this, but what he’s doing is wrong. I won’t stand for it.

“I would like to see you try, Cooper. We all know you are a sucker for the pussy. Isn’t that how you ended up macking on Cap’s girl?”

I feel the anger rising inside. Mixed with the weight I still feel on my chest, I almost feel faint, but I square my shoulders.

“I have respect for women because I was taught to respect others. Now what’s it going to be, Hendricks?”

“Hendricks, why don’t you hand over your phone? You can see me after to get it back and we can discuss what is so interesting that everyone wants to see,” Clay says, coming up from behind. “In fact, all of you turn your phones into the desk. This is a phone-free day.”

The guys all grumble, but I hand mine over without thought. Then I head over to the wall, leaning against it while I try to get my body under control. I really wish my chest would loosen up.

After a moment, Wyatt comes over, leaning against the wall next to me. “That was cool of you.” He nods toward the group.

“I didn’t do it to be cool. He’s an asshole. That woman didn’t consent to her body being seen by the whole hockey team.”

He nods. “That’s why it was cool. You did it because it was right.”

He doesn’t say anything else, and I have no clue what to say, so we stand in silence.

Then Clay claps his hands. “Okay team, we will be breaking off into groups and doing some exercises. At the end, we will come back together as a group and reflect on the day. Remember, this is important to keep the vibe of the team good. We won’t play well if there is contention. Come up here when I call your name.”

Thankfully, Hendricks goes in the first group with Brett. Beckett is broken off into the second group with Calvin. Wyatt and I get put in the same group. Then Clay puts himself in the last group.

The workshop is silly, but the laughter has everyone in a better mood. It even has the feeling in my chest dissipating.

The room is set up with stations so each group goes around trying each one. From the human knot to hockey trivia, and even the classic trust fall, each station tests a different part of our togetherness as a team. Like Clay asked, I throw myself into it full force. Even when the guys make fun of the activity, I give it my all.

By the end, I can feel the difference. I do feel closer to the guys in my group. I learned a lot about them. From the fact that Wyatt likes classic rock songs while we played Name That Tune or that Lamar hates bananas with a passion.

For the first time since I was accepted on the team, I feel the camaraderie.

We are in the final circle now. All of us facing one another as we sit on the floor.

“The last activity is two truths and a lie. We will each do ours, and the person to the left gets to guess. If they get it wrong, the speaker will go to the person on their right. Once the lie is revealed, we will go clockwise until everyone has had a turn. This is meant to bring us closer, so let’s take this seriously and give good truths.” Clay looks around the room at everyone. “I’ll start. I would give up anything to be in the PHL. I get nervous before every game to the point that I feel like I might puke. I once stole bread from the corner store to feed myself and got caught.”

He turns to his right, which is Mack, one of the freshman players.

“The stealing. You have too much integrity for it,” he says confidently.

Clay smiles and shakes his head. “Nope. That’s true. I was eleven. My sister was starving, and our mom was at work. She didn’t have enough money to buy a lot of food that week, so I went to the store and stole the bread. The owner felt bad for me and ended up sending me home with a bag of food for me and Cora. They kept sending home food for us until we both graduated.”

It breaks my heart to hear that story from him. Especially knowing it is about Cora. I already understood his protective nature, being that he’s her brother, but knowing what lengths he has gone to for her has me gaining new respect for our captain.

He turns to his left, where he placed Hendricks.

He scoffs. “Obviously the second one. Wouldn’t all of us give up anything to play in the PHL?”

He's wrong. Looking at Clay right now, I know he wouldn't give up anything. He wouldn't let Grace go. He would already be in the PHL if that was true. I don't think he would take the position over his sister or mother either.

He's a family man at heart.

"Wrong again." Clay smiles. "I would love to play in the PHL, but I understand that there is more to life than a fat paycheck and the fame that comes with being in the PHL. I'm just as happy to pursue my passion while starting my own business or being involved in other ways. Especially if it means I keep my family, because I would never give them up. Lamar, you're next."

Each team member goes, most of them taking it seriously. Some reveal some deep stuff like Clay, while others keep it on the surface.

As it gets closer to me, I feel that heavy feeling return to my chest. I swallow hard, trying to keep myself from showing any discomfort. I must not be doing a good job at it because Wyatt leans over to me.

"You okay?" he whispers.

Clay looks over at us, concern on his face.

"Yeah. I don't like speaking in groups," I tell him.

It's not exactly a lie, but it's not the full truth. Right now, it's that I feel anxious about what I'm about to reveal.

Wyatt goes next, giving me one last bit of reprieve before I have to tell my truths.

"I was raised by a nanny because I'm an only child and my parents didn't want children. My number one school was Yale, but I ended up here instead. I never wanted to be a goalie," Wyatt says, looking at me.

I think over his answers. It's sad, but the first one is true. I don't know how I know, but I do. I also think the second one is.

"You always wanted to be a goalie," I tell him.

He nods. "That's the lie. As soon as I got on the ice, I knew I wanted to be a goalie. I wanted to go to Yale because my father did. I thought it would make him pay attention to me, but it didn't. I got accepted, but he didn't care. So I came here."

He doesn't explain the first one, but he doesn't have to. His pain is palpable to me. I reach out, patting his shoulder before turning the attention to me. Anything to get the attention off of him. I know he has to hate the pity looks from the other guys.

“I have been handed everything in my life, so I don’t know how to appreciate hard work when I see it. Last year was the worst year of my life because the real world is harder than the world I lived in prior to then. I’m an only child and have the syndrome that comes with being spoiled by my parents.”

I look to my right, nodding to one of the juniors, Gabe.

“Um, I don’t know, man. The last one?” he asks.

I shake my head. “That’s true. I’m an only child. My mother’s miracle baby, so she gave me anything I wanted. I think it affected my preparation for the world.”

I turn to Wyatt. He looks at me with understanding.

“You know what hard work is because you are on this team. No matter how easy everything else was for you, hockey never was.”

I nod. “I think that’s why I chose it. I liked the challenge. Things were handed to me, but I appreciate the hard work it takes to get here. As for last year, it really was the worst year of my life. I learned a lot of truths about myself and the world.” I look up at Clay. “Lessons I needed to learn to be a better person.”

The rest of the guys keep the game going, but I’m too far in my head. I excuse myself before the game has ended, heading toward the bathroom, and Wyatt follows me inside.

“I’m okay. You don’t need to hover,” I tell him.

“I know you are. That was deep, but that’s what Clay wanted from us. You did good out there. I know he wanted to talk to you before this and what he planned to say. I wanted to let you know that not all of us agree with him. I have your back. We are a team, and that makes you family.”

I snort. “So you feel Hendricks is family?”

He shakes his head. “He’s an interloper who will be a blip on our roster. He will be gone next year. Coach is already tired of him, but we have to keep him until the end of the season unless he fucks up.”

“Thank God. I wasn’t sure I could do another season with him after this.”

“I’ll leave you alone. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t leaving and to tell you that you are making progress and to keep it up. It’s being noticed.” He steps back out the door, leaving me alone.

I take several deep breaths, my mind clearing. That feeling on my chest is still there, but it’s manageable.

When I step out of the bathroom, I see all the guys getting their phones and leaving. I wait while the line goes, seeing Clay on the side talking to Hendricks. They look like they are arguing. I don't like how the man is stepping up to our captain.

After a moment, he snatches his phone from Clay's hand and storms out.

Clay walks over as I finally make it up to the desk to claim my phone.

"Seems we have a new problem child," he mutters.

"He sure is a peach," I say sarcastically.

I turn and start to head out, but Clay calls to me.

"Where are you going?"

I frown as I look over at him. "Home?"

He shakes his head. "The entire team building is over, but we still have some bonding to do. Wyatt, ride with Kellan. Show him where to go."

I'm confused as to why I'm being invited, but I don't question it, and I lead Wyatt to my car.

It is only a short drive, but when we pull up to the place, I raise an eyebrow.

"Karaoke?"

He nods. "Song choice is everything, Cooper. So choose wisely."

As he climbs out, I can't help but smile.

This is what I missed. Having people to count on.

Cora gave this back to me.

I shoot her a quick text.

Kellan
Miss you.

She doesn't respond back right away, but that's okay. I don't need her to.

eleven

Cora

Staring at the paper in front of me, I bite my lip in anticipation. Silently I give him directions on how to solve the problem, but I keep my mouth shut, making him work through it on his own. When he sets down his pencil, I can't help but smile.

Yes, he did it!

"Great job, Rev," I say when the little boy in front of me gets a math question right.

Rev is one of my favorites who comes in daily. He's only six, but he's been through so much. His mom died during childbirth, and he's being raised by his grandmother, who took custody when she did. The father didn't know he existed and is trying to get custody.

That's where we come in. Rev comes in every day after school to wait for his father to show up for visitation. Usually they only allow one or two a week, but his grandmother is elderly and can barely keep up with him. They are trying to fast-track his reunification with the father.

Maybe that's why I connect with him so much. Both of us come from broken homes.

"I got it right?" he asks me, wide-eyed.

"You did."

He pumps his fist in the air, making me laugh. "On my first try even!"

“Okay, keep going, and if you get stuck, just yell for me, okay? Once you’re done, I’ll check it over too.”

“Thank you, Miss Cora.”

“You’re so welcome, Rev.” I stand and walk away from the table.

I scan the room to see if anyone looks like they might need help, but my supervisor Martha gets my attention.

“Hi, Martha,” I say as I get close to her.

“Hello dear, how are you?”

“I’m good.”

“How’s school going?”

I must make a face because she laughs.

“That good, huh?”

“I’m just not sold on it really.”

Martha gives me her full attention. “What do you mean?”

“Truthfully?”

“Always.”

“Well, I don’t know what I want to do career-wise, so I feel a little bit guilty that I have a scholarship that someone else could be using. Someone who knows what they want to do, you know what I mean?”

Martha nods slowly. “I do. Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“Did you come to college because you wanted to or because your family wanted you to?”

“I mean, college is what you do, right? It’s to be expected.”

“College isn’t the only option, though. Now answer the question. Are you there for you or someone else?”

“My mom and my brother both really wanted me to go,” I admit reluctantly.

Martha hums. “Well then, I guess it’s up to you if you want to stay now, isn’t it?”

I bite my bottom lip and nod. I know I should stay. I’m just not sure if I want to.

“Do you want to know what I think?” Martha asks after a beat of silence.

“Please,” I blurt out, making her chuckle softly.

“I think you have a real talent for helping these families. The kids adore you, and the parents listen to you. You guide them with a gentle hand even

when they probably don't deserve it. You do good things here, Cora."

"I love it," I whisper.

Martha smiles. "And it's obvious, especially with how much time you spend here. So have you ever thought about making this your job?"

"I..." I stumble over words because, no, the thought never actually crossed my mind. "I don't even know how that would be possible. I can't volunteer for the rest of my life and live at my mom's house."

"Do you think I still live at home with my mother?" Martha deadpans.

Wincing, I hang my head. "Sorry."

"I'm only teasing, Cora, but to put you at ease, there are paid positions to do exactly what you're doing here. We even have two open right now. It's hard to find people to take them, though, because while you get all the easy cases, they aren't all that way."

"Really? I mean not about the cases, but the job. You have one available?"

"Really, and the best part is you don't have to have an expensive piece of paper to do it. Granted, a degree can help you get ahead in your field, but it's not required. You could work here for now, and if you want to go back to school later on for it, we would pay for it."

I open my mouth, but the words don't come out. I'm overwhelmed in the best possible way. I didn't even know that this was an option. Could this be it, though? I love what I do here. Hell, I keep coming back whenever I have free time, even when I'm not on the schedule. I like the way this place makes me feel afterward too. I feel like I've done something good, something useful. Like I've contributed to society.

At the same time, I don't want to let my mom or Clay down. They have both worked so hard to make sure I have everything I need and could want. Wouldn't it be selfish of me to bounce on the one thing they want me to do? That and Clay is always thinking about how it's his job to take care of us when he goes pro. For some reason I have a sneaking suspicion that this job won't pay a whole lot, and while I know I don't need much, I know it would give him another reason to worry.

But whose happiness is more important, his or mine?

"Can I think about it?"

Martha reaches out and rubs my shoulder. "Of course you can. Take all the time you need. Just know I'm here if you want to talk about it more."

"Thanks, Martha."

“Of course, now you best get out of here. Your time ended an hour ago, and I’m sure you have some studying to do,” she says, raising a brow.

“But helping the kids with their schoolwork is so much more fun than working on mine,” I groan.

Martha laughs and pushes me toward the door. “Go. Rev’s visit is the last of the night, and we both know that it’s just a formality at this point. I can handle it.”

I wave over my shoulder and go to collect my things.

The entire time I make my way back to campus, my mind swirls. I play over the possibility of doing this for real, and I can’t help but be excited over the prospect of it. By the time I make it back to my dorm room, my mind is made up. For the first time since I graduated high school, I feel like I have some sense of direction for my life.

Now I just need to figure out how to tell my mom and Clay about it.



Kellan

When we enter the bar, I can’t help but cringe as the music assaults my ears. There’s loud and then there’s this. A person is up on the stage attempting to sing, but it sounds like someone’s assaulting an animal. It’s even worse than nails on a chalkboard.

“Goddamn, someone get them off stage,” Brett grunts next to me.

“Amen,” I mutter.

I follow behind them and we make our way to a table. “Why are we here?” I ask as we sit down.

“What’s wrong with here?” Brett challenges.

I don’t know the guy very well, but he seems a little bit moodier than normal, and by the way his friends look at him, I’m not the only one picking up on his piss-poor mood.

“I didn’t say anything was wrong with here, I just wasn’t expecting a karaoke bar.”

Wyatt grunts as he takes a seat next to me. “They have some bomb-ass mozzarella sticks.”

“I’m partial to the fried pickles,” Beckett says as he takes a handful of peanuts that are in a bowl in the middle of the table.

Clay shakes his head as he stares at him. “How many times have I told you not to eat those? We don’t know who’s touched them and where their hands have been.”

“A little bit of germs won’t kill me.” Beckett winks.

“Yeah, but it might take you out for a game,” Wyatt points out.

“Then we will really be fucked,” Brett mutters.

Clay sighs and stares at me from across the table, silently saying *what can you do?*

Fuck, this is awkward. I don’t know these guys as well as I should, and I don’t know where to start after spending all of last year hating them. Still, they went out of their way to try and bridge the gap between us by inviting me. I know they are only doing it because of Cora, but still I’m thankful that they are trying, and I know I need to do the same.

I clear my throat. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“Don’t mention it,” Brett mumbles.

Clay opens his mouth to say something, but a big, burly motherfucker stares down at our table.

“What can I get you kids?” he grumbles.

“Hey, Burt, can I get a round of waters for my friends and a pitcher of beer for myself?” Brett says.

Burt grunts. “Anything else?”

“Fries, please,” I say when he looks at me.

“Mozzarella sticks with extra marinara sauce, please,” Wyatt says.

“Fried pickles, please,” Beckett says.

Burt looks at Clay.

Clay sighs. “I guess I’ll take some fries, please.”

Without saying anything, Burt turns around and walks away.

“Don’t look so glum, James. We all know you love fries,” Beckett says as he pops another table peanut into his mouth.

Clay winces. “You know I take my in-season diet seriously.”

“Season hasn’t started yet,” Brett points out.

“But it does soon,” Clay says, trying to defend himself.

“I get it. I try to eat clean year round, but sometimes a cheat meal is good for the soul,” I add.

Beckett tosses a peanut in the air and catches it with his mouth. “That sounds like something our Jelly Bean would say.”

“Jelly Bean?”

“Grace,” Clay says.

“Makes sense considering she’s the one who always said it,” I shrug.

It’s weird talking about her with these guys. Guys who clearly have a nickname for her. One I have no idea how she got, but as curious as I am, I won’t ask. I’ll wait until someone fills me in.

Burt comes back and slams the drinks down on the table, making water slosh over the sides before walking away.

“Great service as always, Burt!” Brett says loudly right as the horrible music stops.

Clay slaps him on the shoulder. “Knock it off before he kicks us out of here.”

Brett scoffs. “Please, we all know that man can’t turn away business. Look how dead it is in here.”

“How did you guys find this place?” I ask.

“By sheer accident,” Wyatt says quietly.

“Our sophomore year, the team thought bowling would be a good form of team bonding. One of the players shredded his bicep tendon and had to go to the hospital. Some of us stayed and then got kicked out when water started shooting out of the ceiling. We weren’t quite ready to call it a night, so we came over here since it was across the street,” Clay tells me.

“And then they dragged me here last year against my will,” Wyatt adds.

I grab my arm and wince. I’ve heard shredding your bicep is painful as fuck. I can’t imagine doing it while on a team-building exercise that’s mandatory.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to play other sports or do anything too dangerous so close to the season,” I mutter.

Brett raises his beer. “Why do you think that rule was created?”

I tip my head toward him. “Fair enough.”

“So, Kellan, how do you feel about bad karaoke?” Beckett asks.

“I mean, I’m here, aren’t I?” I quip, making Wyatt smile.

“Yes, but how do you feel about getting up there on stage and serenading all of us?” Beckett presses.

I look at all the guys before looking back at Beckett. “You can’t be serious.”

“If you want to date our sister, you need to prove that you are worthy of her,” Brett says.

I look at Clay and raise my brow. He responds with a shrug.

“I mean, if you ask me, we’re letting you off easy. We could be asking you to do something way worse,” Beckett adds.

My jaw clenches. I hate that they think I have to prove myself to them just to date Cora, but I get it. Hell, I’m sure I would feel the same way if I had a sister. Besides, a few minutes of torture isn’t that bad in the grand scheme of things, right?

“Okay, what do you have in mind?”

“I hope you know the words to ‘Barbie Girl.’” Beckett smirks.

“Seriously, that? Come on, pick something else, please,” I say, trying not to beg.

Anything but that.

“Nope. That’s our song of choice, take it or leave it. Just know if you walk out that door, then you won’t get another shot with Cora. You gotta be a team player and all that shit,” Brett tells me.

My eyes drift over to Clay and see that he’s trying not to laugh.

He holds up his hands. “Don’t look at me. I’m just along for the ride.

“Fuck it,” I mutter as I stand.

Reaching over, I grab Brett’s beer and swallow the rest of the glass in one go.

“Hey, that’s mine!” he groans when I place his empty glass back in front of him.

I make my way to the stage and give the god-awful song of choice to the DJ.

The DJ smirks. “Good luck, Barbie.”

“Fuck you,” I mutter under my breath as I walk on stage.

I squint when a light hits me just right in the eyes. When the white spots in my eyes finally clear, I see the guys have their phones pointed right at me.

Clearly it can get worse.

When the song starts up, I grab the microphone. At first I try to just say the words and not sing it. I should have known that the guys wouldn’t let that slide, though, and they start booing.

Rolling my eyes, I decide to fully go for it and try my hand at singing. Even from up here, I know I sound awful, but I don't give a fuck. Especially when at the end I'll get their approval to date Cora. Logically I know I don't need it, but I want it.

When the song ends, the guys cheer and I bow before making my way off stage.

"Please tell me I never have to do that again," I plead as I grab my glass of water.

"Yeah, we can't promise you that." Clay chuckles before looking over at Wyatt. "You're up."

Wyatt rolls his eyes and stands. I'm shocked when he doesn't put up a fight. The guy is so quiet I can't imagine him standing on a stage.

As soon as he gets up there, though, under the lights, everyone falls silent. Then he opens his mouth and belts out the lyrics to a Rolling Stones' song.

"Wait, he can fucking sing?" I hiss to the guys.

Without looking away from the stage, the guys nod.

"He can sing," Clay says with pride in his voice.

Huh, who would have thought that the quiet goalie was a secret musician?

twelve

Cora

An incessant ringing is pulling me from my deep slumber. I jolt awake when I realize it's my phone.

Looking at the screen, my heart clenches when I see Kellan's name. "What's wrong?" I hiss into the phone.

"Beautiful, are you awake?" He sounds a bit inebriated.

My stomach clenches at what he might have been up to in order to get so drunk. I have to trust him, though, so I choose to do so.

"I am now. Where are you?"

He laughs. "Walking home. It's such a nice night. Isn't it a nice night, Wyatt?"

"Bro, you are practically screaming. Chill out," I hear Wyatt tell him.

"You're with Wyatt?" I ask.

Surely he doesn't mean my Wyatt, right? The one who threatened to turn him into fish food.

"Yep. He agreed to walk me home like a gentleman. Isn't that sweet of him? Wyatt is all quiet and stoic." Kellan lowers his tone to a whisper-shout. "Don't tell him I said this, but underneath is he a big old gummy bear."

"I think the term you are looking for is teddy bear," I hear Wyatt provide in the background.

“Oh yes. Teddy bear.”

I smile at his antics. He is adorable when he is drunk.

Then it hits me.

He drunk-dialed me. That means that out of everyone, he wanted to talk to me.

“Well, Wyatt is the nicest of the bunch. Easily my favorite friend of my brother’s,” I admit.

“Thanks, Cora. That means a lot,” Wyatt calls out.

“Am I on speaker?” I cringe.

“Well, no, but I am half carrying him, so yeah, I can hear everything. Maybe don’t say anything to scar me,” he admits.

“Oh, so no telling Kellan how I want him to bend me over a table and...”

“Cora, whatever your middle name is...don’t you dare let him hear the things you want me to do to you. That is private between us,” Kellan hisses, making me laugh.

“Well, it seems like he won’t let me scare you anyway,” I tell Wyatt.

“Pretty much. Hold on. I’m getting him into his room now.”

I hear some commotion. Then it’s quiet. After a minute, there is a scratching noise on the phone.

“He’s in bed. Here he is,” Wyatt tells me. “Don’t say anything stupid,” he says farther away, obviously talking to Kellan.

“Never. Cora is my beautiful girl. Isn’t that right?” he mumbles into the phone.

“Bye, Cora,” Wyatt yells, and then it’s me and Kellan.

“Why did you get so drunk?” I ask.

“Your brother made me go to the karaoke bar with them. It was fun. I love those guys. I hate that I missed all last year with them because I couldn’t get my head out of my ass. Even if you decide you deserve better, which you do, please don’t take them from me,” he mumbles.

My heart aches at the insecurity in his voice.

“Oh, Kellan. I’m not the kind of girl to make them choose sides, but that’s not going to happen. We are giving this a real shot, remember?” I remind him.

“I know, but every time I think about you, I get all tingly and warm and stuff. Then I think about the fact that I am such a fuck-up that you deserve way better than me and it feels like an elephant has sat on my chest. It’s a

cycle I can't seem to stop. Don't leave me. I promise I will do whatever I can to make you happy. You want my hoodies? They are all yours."

"Hoodies? Why would I want those?" I ask, confused why that's his answer.

"Girls like to steal hoodies. I always hide mine because I like my hoodies, but you can have them."

Well shit, now I feel oddly touched.

"Well, thank you. That seems like a high honor. Maybe we can discuss you giving me your clothes when you are sober?"

"Okay. I miss you. I wish you were here. I know we are taking it slow, but I would cuddle the hell out of you."

That has me giggling. He is adorable when drunk.

"I bet you would," I tell him.

He sighs. "I can't wait to be the big spoon and hold you against me all night."

"Me neither."

"The day I met you, I was so depressed. I feel like you are an anchor for me. You keep me grounded. Do you believe in fate? I think you are my fate." His voice is a little more mumbly.

I think he is falling asleep.

"I do. I think that everything happens for a reason, and sometimes we aren't meant to understand the reason."

"Me too. I had to go through my dark year to see the light this year. Without it, I wouldn't have been able to appreciate you. I appreciate you so much. You're so pretty. Sometimes I wonder if I'm dreaming when I look at you. How could someone be so beautiful? That's why I gave you that name. You truly are the meaning of beauty. You know that, right?"

I only catch every third word of his ramble through the muffled sound of the phone being on the pillow, but I get the gist of it. It has my heart racing. He's talking a bunch of nonsense because he is drunk, but could it be the truth? What's that saying? Drunk words are sober thoughts? Does he even know he is talking to me anymore?

"I didn't know you wrote poetry, hotshot."

"I don't. I love when you call me that, though. I know you meant it as an insult, but it makes me feel all gooey inside. Do you like me, Cora?"

His breathing is starting to get deeper. He won't be awake much longer.

"I do, Kellan. A lot."

“I like you too. So much. I want to marry you one day. You’ll be my wife, and I’ll teach our kids how to ice skate. I’ll teach you too. You’ll be the best ice skater there is. We will have the perfect little family.”

My eyes prick with tears at his words. I know how to skate, but that’s not important right now. Everything else he said is. He painted the perfect picture for me, one that I desperately want. It takes me a minute to be able to collect myself to speak to him again.

“I hope you do,” I breathe into the phone, only he doesn’t respond. Instead, I hear steady snores as he settles into a deep sleep.

I must be a fool because I sit there for at least an hour listening to them. When I finally settle back down to go to bed, my dreams are filled with him and the family we will have.



Kellan

Meeting the guys at the rink this morning while being hungover wasn’t the most fun I have ever had, but it didn’t suck. It felt good to hang out with them again outside of practice. I feel like I’m back on track to the experience I hoped I would have last year.

Now showered, I’m standing outside of Cora’s dorm building debating whether or not I want to call and wake her up. I still feel bad that I called and rambled into her ear last night. I have no clue what I even said. I hope it wasn’t anything bad.

The door opens, and I wince when I see Monica step out. She keeps walking, but then stops in shock when she sees me.

“Are you here to apologize? It’s a year too late.”

I shake my head. “Nope. Waiting for someone.”

She scoffs, “Of course you’re dating someone in my dorm. Hope she knows what a lying snake you are. Whatever, I don’t need to waste any more time on you.” She tosses her hair over her shoulder, stomping away.

I really should probably apologize to her, but now doesn’t seem like a good time.

I need to make a list of people to make amends to. It seems my list keeps growing.

The door opens once more, and my heart skips a beat. Cora steps out in a sweatshirt and jeans, looking like an angel. I swear the light reflects around her the right way to showcase how beautiful she is.

You truly are the meaning of beauty.

I cringe as the drunken words come back. I mean they are true, but I'm sure I sounded like a sap. God, will she even want to talk to me?

"What are you doing here?" she asks with a smile.

"Waiting for you."

She nods. "Your hair is still wet."

"Took a shower after an impromptu practice with your brother and the guys."

"Interesting." She looks me up and down. "Is that the hoodie you're going to give me?"

I frown, looking down at it. It's nothing special. Doesn't even have my name on it. Just the team's logo.

"If you want it." I start to pull it off, but she laughs, stopping me.

"I'm kidding. I assume you don't remember much about last night?" she asks.

I shake my head. "I am afraid to say that after the fourth shot Brett convinced me to take, everything became a little blurry."

"Not surprised. I am surprised my brother let you guys drink. Don't you have a no-drinking policy during the season?"

"Usually," I tell her. "But Brett made a case for team building. I think he didn't want to drink alone since he's the only one who can't get on the ice."

"Poor Brett. It must be hard." She steps closer to me, wrapping her arms around me, hugging me to her.

I let my arms circle around her back. "I can't imagine how he feels."

"Same," she mumbles. "You're so warm."

"So you really do want my hoodie then?" I joke.

She smiles up at me. "Well, it is a sacred honor, I'm told."

I shake my head. "Do you want this one? Or the one with my name and number on it? Won't lie, I would love to see you with my name right here." I trace my finger along her back.

"Caveman. Lucky for you, I am here for it. Gimme." She smirks up at me.

“It’s yours. I’ll get it later for you. Right now, I have to ask you something.”

“Shoot.”

“Will you go to the hockey house with me today? The guys are making breakfast and then spending the day hanging out. The girls will be there too. I know you could go without me anyway, but I would like you to go with me as my date.” I press my forehead to hers, waiting for her answer.

She doesn’t disappoint me. “Of course. Anything for the hoodie.” She winks at me as she steps back.

I open the passenger door to my truck, helping her inside. The drive is a short one. We both are content listening to the radio.

Once we get there, I help Cora out of her side, but then freeze. I wring my hands together as I start to feel hot. I should give her my hoodie because at this point, I don’t need it even in the brisk fall air. My stomach is churning as I look up at the house that I have not stepped foot in since last year. My whole body seems to be vibrating.

Then I feel it.

Cora slips her hand in mine, stopping my hands from pulling on one another. I look down at her, wondering what is happening to me.

“It’s okay, Kel. I’ve got you. Let’s go inside,” she coaxes me.

Her voice helps calm me further. At least enough to lead me toward the front door. Once there, she knocks, looking up at me with a reassuring smile.

The door opens, and Beckett nods.

“Good, I was wondering what was taking you two so long. Breakfast will be ready in five minutes. Come on in.”

Cora pulls me inside to the living room. Brett is on the couch looking dejected and hungover while Peyton is sitting in one of the chairs. She perks up when she sees Cora.

“You came. I was wondering if you would since you were still sleeping when I left,” she tells Cora.

“I had a late night.” Cora gives me a look, making me smile.

“I heard you two talking.” She gives me a sly look. “Anyway. Grace is in the kitchen with Clay. Come, she wants to see you.”

Peyton pulls Cora, who gives me an apologetic look, toward the kitchen.

I take the seat next to Brett.

“How do you look so chipper?” he mumbles. “You drank as much as me.”

Wyatt walks into the room, chuckling. “He threw up once on the walk home and then twice more at the rink this morning. Don’t think he has anything in his body anymore.”

I glare at him. “I was being a good teammate. Bonding with my friend here.” I pat Brett’s shoulder.

“Thanks for the solidarity, but next time let’s not. Fuck, I’m gonna be sick.”

He tries to stand but struggles. Wyatt and I jump into action, getting him into the bathroom quickly before he spews everywhere. When we step out, closing the door behind him, Wyatt claps my shoulder.

“Glad you came, man. You belong here too.”

I wince at the sound of Brett retching. “Thanks.”

“Breakfast is ready,” Clay calls out.

“Let’s go before you start dry heaving from listening to him,” Wyatt says as he points toward the bathroom door.

I follow Wyatt to the kitchen where they have set out plates for everyone. The table is small, so we all opt to eat in the living room. I fill up my plate last, not wanting to take too much. As I watch them move around one another, they seem like a family. They joke and rib one another as they make their plates, each migrating to the other room.

When I finally make it in there, I see Clay sitting with Grace in his lap. For the first time, it doesn’t even faze me. Moving to where Cora is sitting on the couch, I settle on the floor, resting my head on her knee.

“You can sit here,” she tells me.

“I’m happy where I am, but thank you.” I smile up at her.

The sound of Brett’s retching comes down the hall, making me frown. “Should someone check on him?”

Beckett shakes his head. “Nah, he will be fine.”

I let it go because they know him better than I do. The conversation flows as we eat. After breakfast, the girls wave us off as they head to the kitchen to chat and clean up. I guess the guys cooked, so the girls cleaned. It’s a rule they have.

I offer to help as well, but Cora tells me to stay with the guys. Even Grace gives me a friendly smile, shaking her head no.

“Want to play some video games?” Clay asks.

“Oooh, old-school video game party?” Beckett asks, looking like a little kid despite his hangover.

“Yep. Go get your screens.”

The guys all move, so I stay in the living room with Wyatt as he sets up the gaming system there. “What’s happening?”

He looks over at me. “This is my system, so I don’t have to grab anything. The guys will all go get their TVs and systems and meet down here. You can play as the second on my system. We all play the same game online. Sometimes we play on the same team, while others we play on opposite teams.”

“That sounds interesting.”

He nods, tossing me a controller. “It is. Do you have a login for this system?”

I nod, typing it in. He adds me as a second player and loads up the game. I’m grateful it’s one I’ve played before. I don’t have a lot of time to play video games, so I will likely suck. Between hockey and Grace, I never played much in high school. I never had the time. It has me worried what the guys will think, but I swallow back the worry.

Fuck, I hate being bad at anything.

It doesn’t take long for the rest of the guys to get set up, and before I know it, we are playing. At some point, the girls come back and start talking. Cora takes her place on the couch behind me once more and starts running her hands through my hair. It feels so good.

I am not very good, but none of the guys say anything. They all joke around but never make me feel bad for being the obvious worst player.

When Brett finally emerges from the bathroom, I stand, handing him my controller.

“Take over for me. I’m going to get a drink.” Looking at Cora, I ask her, “You need anything?”

“Nope,” she murmurs, a look in her eye I can’t describe.

I pick up her hand, kissing the back of it before heading into the kitchen. When I close the fridge, I jump when Wyatt is standing there.

“Dude, make some noise or something.”

He shakes his head. “Nah, more fun this way.”

I step out of his way. “Give a man a heart attack.”

“You look at her differently than you did Grace.”

I feel my eyes widen. “What do you mean?”

“Cora, you look at her like the sun rises and sets with her. You never looked at Grace like that.”

I mean, I’m glad he noticed the difference, but at the same time, why was he watching me? How did I miss him watching me?

I nod. “I know. I made a mistake thinking Grace was more to me than a friend.”

“Good. Glad you admit it. You need to make that clear to her and to Clay. It’s time for you to put the water under the bridge and leave that shit behind.”

“When did you become a guru and all that?”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t, but I don’t like seeing Grace hurting. She misses having you as her friend. Clay is struggling to hold the team together with the douchebag while he is also still worried about what a wild card you will be. Then there’s Cora. She deserves to be able to hang out with her family without worrying about what it will do to you. Make it right.”

With that, he heads back into the living room, and I’m left realizing I need to get on that list of amends sooner rather than later.

My future depends on it.

thirteen

Cora

Most days I love coming to the center and mediating visits between children and their family members, but some days it's rough. Earlier a little boy bawled when his parents had to leave him behind. His parents are young and made a mistake and are trying to make amends so they can get him back. It broke my heart watching all three of them crying for each other. I wish I could just give them my blessing and tell them to go home and to have a happy life, but I can't do that.

After they left and the child calmed down, I was ushered into the next mediation.

Carol isn't exactly what I would call maternal. She doesn't know how to talk to her ten-year-old daughter, and it's obvious that Shelby wants nothing to do with her. In fact, the way that Shelby flinches every time her mother moves makes me wonder if this is much more than a case of neglect. As much as I want to usher Shelby away from the woman, I can't. I have to make sure they have their time and then report my findings to the courts so they can make their decision.

I clear my throat. "Shelby, did you tell your mom about the play?"

Carol's eyes narrow. "What play? We don't have no money for a play."

Shelby wilts into herself, and it takes everything in me not to reach out and smack her mom against the back of her head.

“Don’t worry, Miss Carol, it’s just a school play. No fees,” I say as cheerfully as I can.

Carol makes a noise in the back of her throat but keeps her mouth shut. For now. Lord knows it’s only a matter of time.

“Go on, Shelby. Tell her about it,” I prod.

Shelby looks up at me with dread in her eyes before she turns back to her mom. “It’s a play about traveling to a new world and joining the people who already live there. It’s for our American History class,” Shelby says softly.

“What are you excited about most with the play?” I ask.

Shelby smiles. “I’m excited to work on the props. We all get a small acting part, but I’m really excited to paint. Did you know that they have us painting on big pieces of wood?”

“Really? That’s amazing! Isn’t it, Miss Carol?” I say, trying to pull her mom into the topic at hand.

Carol scoffs. “It sounds like a waste of time. If that’s what our tax dollars are paying for, it sounds like I shouldn’t send you and keep you home to do things around the house.”

Shelby flinches and looks down at the ground. Grinding my molars together, I try to rein in my temper. Couldn’t she have said it sounds nice and supported her daughter? Of course not, that would be too easy for her. That and the only person Carol cares about is herself.

“Well, fortunately for Shelby here, she is required by law to receive an education,” I say brightly.

Carol starts digging through her purse, ignoring her daughter while I eye the clock. There’s only fifteen minutes left in this visit, and for the first time ever, I want to call it early. I can’t, though. While Carol has said some questionable things, she hasn’t made a move to hurt either of us.

“Shelby, how about we leave this one here and go get a snack from the vending machine? How does that sound to you?”

Before Shelby can say yes or no, I cut in. “Actually, Miss Carol, you can’t take Shelby to the vending machine alone. It’s policy. I’m sure you understand.”

Carol’s eyes narrow. “Excuse me? Where do you, a child, think you can tell me what I’m allowed and not allowed to do with my own daughter...”

I feel Shelby tense next to me, and I rest my hand on her leg. “Again, Miss Carol, it’s nothing personal. It’s just the policy we have in place to

protect everyone involved.”

“Policy be damned. She is my daughter, and I will do whatever the hell I want,” Carol says as she jabs her finger toward Shelby.

Shelby whimpers and buries her face into my arm.

Very carefully, I pull Shelby up and stand. Slowly I try to tuck her body behind mine as Carol stands.

“Miss Carol, I think it’s time to cut this visit short. I think it’s in Shelby’s best interest since she’s uncomfortable,” I say, trying to defuse the situation.

Carol jumps up, and her eyes narrow. “Uncomfortable? I’ll give you something to be uncomfortable about!”

Carol lunges toward me, and I push Shelby away from me, hoping she gets out of reach. Shelby cries out right as I get hit across the face. Before I can even react, the door to the conference room is slammed open and someone grabs Carol, pulling her out.

Holy shit. She hit me. That crazy fucking bitch hit me. All because I wanted to protect her daughter. I can’t believe it.

“Are you okay, Cora?” Martha asks cautiously as she rests her hands on my shoulders.

“Shelby...” I say as I frantically look around the room, not spotting my charge.

Shit, where did she go?

“Calm down, sweetheart. Shelby slipped out right as we were coming in.”

Relief hits me that maybe, just maybe, Shelby didn’t see her mom hit me. Not for my sake but for hers. No child should see their parent snap like that.

“Oh good.”

“Are you okay, though?”

“Yeah, my cheek kind of stings, but that’s it.”

Martha nods. “Well then, come on. Let’s get you some ice.”

Side by side, we move toward the break room.

“Sit,” Martha demands when we slip inside.

Completely exhausted, I don’t bother putting up a fight and do as she says.

I watch as Martha puts some ice in a Ziploc bag before wrapping it in a towel. She brings it over to me and presses it to my cheek.

“Thank you,” I tell her as I grab hold of it.

“You’re welcome. Want to tell me what happened?” Martha asks as she sits.

Blowing out a breath, I give her a quick recap of the visit. I even admit that I think Carol might have an abusive streak and tell her why. By the time I’m done talking, my throat is dry and scratchy.

Shit, I could go for some water right about now, but my water bottle is with my things in another room.

Martha drums her fingers on the table as she thinks about what I’ve told her. “Well, we will report it, and I’m sure the judge will have someone ask Shelby about your suspicions. Do you think she will admit it if it’s true?”

“Possibly. I could be wrong, but it doesn’t seem like Shelby is in a rush to be reunited with her mom.”

“I hate that,” Martha mutters.

“Me too.”

“How about you head out of here? You’ve had a long day.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, now go before I change my mind.”

“If it’s all right with you, I want to stop and check on Shelby first.”

“That right there, girlie pop, is why you will be fantastic at this job.”

Ducking my head, I smile. “Thanks for the ice.”

“Anytime, just don’t make a habit of needing it.”

Shaking my head, I leave the break room and go in search of the ten-year-old girl who appears so much older than she actually is.

“Hey, I’ve been looking for you. Are you okay?” I ask softly as I lean against the doorframe.

Shelby looks up at me with tears in her eyes. “She hit you.”

Dammit, I was really hoping that she didn’t see that. I could lie, but I won’t. I can’t if I want her to trust me.

“She did.”

“I’m sorry,” Shelby sobs.

Unable to handle it anymore, I go to her and pull her into my arms. “You know that her actions are not your fault, right? What your mother does has nothing to do with you and everything to do with her, okay?”

“But...”

I shake my head and cut in before she can give me some sort of excuse. “No excuses. I’m serious. Your mother’s actions are hers and hers alone.

You can't control another human and what they do."

Shelby pulls away and wipes the tears off of her face. "I don't like her."

I don't like her either, but I can't tell her that.

"You have a right to feel that way."

"I wish I knew who my dad was," she says, breaking my heart.

God, how many candles did I blow out hoping my dad would show up? How many times did I wish on him on a shooting star? I understand what she means by wanting him because I've been there. The only difference is I had a mother and brother who I knew would always be there for me and never allowed me to feel like I was missing out.

"Maybe we can talk to your caseworker and see if we can test your DNA. Maybe we can find some of your dad's family that way. How does that sound?"

"Can we really do that?"

"I don't know, but it wouldn't hurt to try."

Shelby throws herself into me and wraps her arms around my waist.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

I laugh softly. "Don't thank me yet. I don't know if I can make it happen."

But I'll try. I'll try to get all of these kids what they want. Even if it kills me.



Kellan

Tapping my pen against my list, I look down at the names I've written down so far.

Cora, Grace, and Clay.

Who the hell else do I need to make amends with? Who do I actually care to make amends with?

"Hey, man, what are you doing?" Wyatt asks as he slides into the chair across from me.

"I'm making a list. What are you doing here?"

Wyatt raises a brow and looks around the library.

“Okay, stupid question.” I laugh quietly.

“Nah, man. It’s all good. I just got done with a study group, and I saw you, so I thought I would come see what you were up to.”

“Not much other than staring at this piece of paper.”

“Do you want to go grab a burger or something?”

My stomach rumbles, reminding me I haven’t had anything to eat in a couple of hours. “Sure, why not.”

Quickly I pack up my shit and we head outside. “Do you want to drive or should I?”

“My Jeep is right there.” He points toward one that’s parked right up front.

“Nice.”

We get in, and while he starts to drive, I look around the Jeep. “This thing is way cleaner than my truck.”

Wyatt laughs. “Yeah, I’m not a fan of messes.”

“And yet you live in a house full of guys.”

“And a girl. Grace lives with us.”

“Wait, she lives with you guys?”

Wyatt looks over at me for a second before looking back at the road. “Is that a problem?”

“No, not at all. I knew she was living off campus, but I swore she told my mom she got her own place.”

He nods. “Ah, yeah. That was the deal she made with her dad. She could live with us as long as she didn’t tell everyone she was living with a bunch of guys. He didn’t want people to get the wrong idea.”

“That doesn’t surprise me actually,” I say when I think about it.

Her father hates unnecessary drama, and his daughter living with not only her boyfriend but a house full of guys would be seen as such.

We pull up to the local burger joint and get out. After going inside and placing our order, we sit.

“So are you going to tell me what kind of list you were writing?” he asks as he straightens the number placed on our table so the server can easily find us when she brings our food out.

“Do you really want to know?”

“I don’t know if you’ve figured this out yet, but I don’t talk just to make conversation.”

I tip my head toward him. I have noticed that about him. One thing about Wyatt Scott is he's comfortable in his own skin in a way that I'm not. The guy doesn't try to be someone he's not, and I admire that about him.

"I need to make amends with people so I can move forward in the right direction."

He nods. "Makes sense. Who do you have down so far?"

"Cora, Grace, and Clay. I'm sure there are others, but I don't know."

"What do you have to make right with Cora?"

"It's not necessarily amends with her but reassuring her that I'm with her for her. That I have no other ulterior motives and shit."

"Makes sense. Grace?"

I fight the urge to rub my chest as I think about her. "I need to make things right with her. Not because I'm in love with her but because I miss my best friend. I realize that I fucked a lot of shit up where she's concerned. Shit, she's practically a saint for dealing with me as long as she did."

"I don't think you can be a saint and have the kind of mouth she does, but continue."

I fight back my smile. "She can be mouthy, can't she? I just want to apologize to her. I don't know if we will ever be friends like we were at one point, but I would like to try."

"And if she lets you, are you going to be a self-centered dick again?"

"Fuck, Wyatt, you're not pulling any punches, are you?"

"Not my style."

I wait for the server to drop our food off and walk away before I pick back up where I left off. "I hope this time our friendship won't be so one-sided and all in my favor."

"What about James?" he asks about Clay.

I pick up a fry and roll it between my fingers. "I need to apologize to him for the disaster that was last year. I didn't bow out gracefully when it came to him getting Grace. Then he stayed instead of being drafted, taking away the possibility of me being the youngest captain the team has ever had. I wasn't a team player, and I fucked it all up."

"You know you were never going to be captain this year, right? Coach only chooses juniors or seniors for a reason. That's just not how it's done," he says bluntly, making me wince.

"Yeah, pride and cockiness can be a fatal combination."

Wyatt chuckles and takes a bite of his food. Picking up my burger, I do the same.

“What about that girl you dated last year? I’ve heard she’s still hung up on you,” he says after a few moments of silence.

I remember the two run-ins I’ve had with her. I did say I needed to make amends with her at some point too. She might be acting like a bitch right now, but she wasn’t always that way. At least from what I can remember.

“You’re right. I thought we ended on okay terms, but if the way she reacts when she sees me is anything to go by, I guess I was wrong.” I rub my forehead. “Maybe I should add a few of those exes to the list. Grace always did say that I tended to date women until I no longer liked them, then I would drop them. Fuck, I was so selfish.”

“Women can be messy.” He nods. “At least you understand you were a dick and changed.”

“Working on it at least,” I mutter. “Enough about me, what about you?”

“What about me?” He quirks his eyebrow at me.

“Got a girl hiding anywhere?” I tease as I eat a fry.

Wyatt grunts and shakes his head. “Nah.”

“Don’t want one?”

“It’s not that necessarily. It’s more like I’m not in a rush. If I find someone I like enough, then I won’t deny it, but I’m not actively searching.” He shrugs, dipping one of his fries in ketchup.

I nod in understanding. “I get it. I wasn’t looking for Cora, yet she fell in my lap.”

“You really like her, huh?”

I sigh. “More than I can explain.”

“Good. You two deserve each other.” He sounds like he really means it too.

“Thanks, man.”

The conversation turns to hockey, school, and life in general. We sit at the table for so long we get milkshakes just so they don’t kick us out.

By the time I get back to my dorm room, I can’t stop smiling. I feel like I made a friend tonight, and I fucking love it.

fourteen

Cora

I'm standing in my dorm wondering what I'm doing. After that shit of a shift at the center, I don't want to be alone. I knew Peyton was working tonight, but now that I'm alone, all I want is comfort.

Sliding my phone out of my pocket, I dial Kellan. He answers on the second ring.

"What's going on, beautiful? You make it home?"

Hearing his voice has my feet moving. I want to be with him.

"I'm walking to your dorm. Can I hang out for a bit? I don't want to be alone."

"Of course. My roommate is here, but he's always on his game anyway. He won't even notice if you are here, and even if he does, I'll deal with him. Do you want me to come get you?"

I step outside the dorm, breathing in the fresh air. Then I turn, taking off at a brisk pace to get to his dorm. "No. Maybe come downstairs, though?"

I hear him moving. "I'm coming down. Do you want to tell me what's wrong now or when you get here?"

I hiccup on a sob, and tears start to spill down my face.

"It was so bad. I got a new case today. It was a simple visitation, but the mom threw a fit when I told her she couldn't walk the kid down to the vending machine by herself. I had to shadow them. She went off on me. I

don't even know what happened. She struck me in the face. I'm okay. It's not even bruised, but it was scary. Security came and took her out of there." I suck in a breath, letting out a sob. "The worst part is the child witnessed it all. She was so upset, Kellan."

"Shhh. I know, beautiful. It's difficult when people don't care how their actions affect others."

I turn the corner toward his dorm and see him standing there waiting for me. He jogs toward me, hanging up the phone.

Then I'm in his arms. I sob against him as he runs his hand down the back of my head. I have no clue how long I stand there like that, but he doesn't complain about it.

When I finally pull back, he frowns at me.

"Where is your jacket? You're shivering. Let's get you inside."

I look at him, frowning. "You're in a T-shirt."

"Yes, but I was only waiting for you. You walked all the way over here without a jacket. You're going to get sick."

I let him pull me under his arm as he leads me inside. I burrow into his heat as I shiver. I didn't even realize I was cold until he mentioned it.

We navigate the halls and elevator until we are standing at his room door. He opens it, bringing me inside. There are no lights on, but there is light from a computer monitor. I can see a character moving while the person with their back to me mutters to themselves.

"Get him, Ramblebot. Jesus."

"My roommate. He talks to his online friends. I learned to ignore him."

He turns toward a closet, pulling something out. Then he puts a hoodie over my head. I squeak, but try to stay in place to let him do it.

Once it's on, he grabs my shoulders, turning me. Then he steps into me, whispering in my ear. "I knew you would look hella good with my name and number on your body."

I look over my shoulder at him. He shrugs before climbing back on his bed, kicking his shoes off at the end of it.

I take my shoes off, climbing next to him.

"What do you need me to do, beautiful? I'm still new at this. I can talk shit about the woman. Usually I'm against violence toward women, but I think she could be the exception. I'm willing to go punch her if it would make you feel better."

"No. I don't want you in jail. Then how would you hug me?"

“That’s what my hoodie is for. To be your hug when I can’t be with you.”

My heart is hammering in my chest at his words. They are some of the sweetest I’ve ever heard.

Moving closer, I whisper to him, “Hold me?”

His arms come around me, pulling me so I have my head resting on his chest. “I thought you would never ask. It killed me not cuddling you,” he admits.

I smile against his chest. Today has been a shitty day, but somehow he helps ease the pain.

“Are you a closet cuddler, Kellan Cooper?”

“More like a cuddler with the right person, if you will.”

“You can cuddle me anytime you’d like,” I tell him.

Then I look up at him. He is looking down at me like I am his reason for breathing. It’s so startling that it has me suck in a gasp of air.

His hand comes to my face, wiping the tear stains I’m sure are there.

“I don’t like you crying, beautiful. You should only have tears of joy.”

“That’s not the way life works. Sometimes you have to cry the sad ones, but it only makes the joyful ones all the sweeter.”

“You are so smart.” His eyes flit to my lips then back to my eyes. “How did I get so lucky?”

Leaning up, I kiss him softly. He lets me lead the kiss, not attempting to take more than I’m giving. I peck his lips several times before biting his lip.

He opens his mouth, leaving me room to slip my tongue in. He hesitantly strokes my tongue with his own, fully participating in this kiss but making it known that I control it.

“What the fuck?”

I jump back from him, looking over at his roommate. I expect to find him watching us kiss, but he’s still looking at his screen.

Looking back to Kellan, my cheeks heat.

Neither of us says another word as I reclaim my spot on his chest. I feel safe and loved in this moment. The way his arms hold me to him makes me feel like he would never let me go.

It might be stupid of me, but I don’t want him to.

I needed someone today, and Kellan was there for me. He is showing me with each of his actions that he wants to be the man I need in my life.

As I feel myself drift off to sleep, all I can wonder is what I need to do to be the woman he needs.



Kellan

Last night was the best sleep I have ever had in my life.

I know it's not a coincidence that there is a dark-haired beauty still in my arms. Feeling her breathe against me had me calmer than I have ever been. Even my normal dreams filled with the pressures in my life weren't there.

All I dreamed about was her. The way she smells of honeysuckle and sage, which I only know because I asked her once. It's intoxicating how she takes over every single one of my senses when she is around.

I didn't even need my earplugs last night. If my roommate made noise, I was unaware.

My phone beeps once, letting me know it's about to go off. Reaching over Cora, I turn it off.

I don't want to get up. This is the only place I want to be right now. With her in my arms.

Nothing could be more perfect.

I don't have a choice, though. I need to pull myself from this bed and pray like hell her scent lingers when I come back later.

Sitting up, I gently shake her. "Beautiful, I'm going to get ready for practice. I'll be back."

She mumbles but grabs my pillow, burrowing in.

She's so adorable.

I spy my roommate fast asleep in his bed. He must not have cared that she was here since he didn't throw a fit. He's a peculiar dude, but he has been chill so far.

Grabbing my shower caddy, I make my way down to the shared showers. It's so early that there isn't anyone else inside. Maybe that's why I let my thoughts drift to the woman in my bed.

She kissed me last night. It was even better than our first kiss. Instead of unbridled passion like I felt before, there was a connection there. Something real beyond the physical sparks I felt.

This is what I've been missing.

Then I think about the way her nipples pebbled when she shivered. I hated that she was cold, but I couldn't ignore the thoughts it sparked in my brain.

My dick comes to life at the thought, slowly filling.

I shouldn't touch myself. Not with her sleeping in my bed, but that smell of hers is still in my senses. I can still remember the way her tits felt pushed up against me as her breath hit me with each pull she took. Or the way my hand laid on her lower back right about the curve of that juicy peach of an ass she has.

She is temptation personified.

If she were any other girl, I would have made a move. Not with Cora, though. I want to do this right, which means waiting for the right time for both of us. Truth is, I've never waited more than a few dates to sleep with someone. Maybe that's why I feel a connection with her where I didn't with others.

I'm actually getting to know her and not the facade she's putting up in order to bag a future PHL player. I'm not distracted with all the sex.

Who knew being celibate could offer such clarity?

Still, my hand finds my cock, stroking it softly. I don't need sex, but it feels good to touch myself thinking about the woman who occupies all my free thoughts nowadays.

The way she sucks in her bottom lip, making it red and angry once she frees it. How her eyes track my body when I'm doing something she finds sexy. I know she thinks I don't notice, but I do every time. Or how she wears these tight jeans that showcase her curves, but then she wears these tight black pants that fit like a second skin.

I squeeze a little harder, picking up my pace.

God, the things I want to do to that woman. I've never enjoyed eating girls out much, but for her, I think I would feast on her. The way she would pull on my hair begging me for more would be everything to me.

Then I would take my time, finding the right pace while fucking her until she screams out my name. I wouldn't let her rest until she was so blissed out she couldn't see straight.

My hand slaps on the tile when my cock starts letting stream after stream of cum spill out of it. I curse when I see it hit the wall. Shit is hard to clean up. The consistency makes it stick better, so you have to cup your hands and hit it with some force to get it to come off the wall. That or you have to wipe it off with your hand.

Gross, but still, it took the edge off.

Finishing up my shower, I wrap the towel around my hips and head back to my room. When I step inside, I'm surprised to find Cora sitting up. Her eyes widen when she takes me in.

"Sorry, I thought you would still be asleep," I whisper.

"Nope. Closing my eyes now. Get dressed."

I laugh as she covers her eyes. I give her my back, dropping the towel. I pretend not to notice her slight gasp from behind me as I pull on my clothes. When I turn back to her, she's staring at me, shock on her face.

"You staying here? You can. For as long as you want. I'll be back from practice in a few hours."

She shakes her head. "I have class. I need to get back to my room and get my stuff."

"Let me drop you off on my way."

She nods, getting out of bed. Fuck if I don't love the way she looks in my hoodie. It has this possessive feeling come over me that I've never felt before.

She straightens up my bed before coming to my side. I grab my duffel bag I prepacked after practice yesterday and grab her hand.

I wait to speak again until we get into the truck. "We have to make a quick stop, if that's okay," I tell her.

"Sure."

Pulling up the popular coffee app, I order her favorite coffee along with a pastry for her. I don't bother getting anything for me.

When we pull up to the shop, she looks over at me.

"Be right back."

I rush inside, grabbing my order before getting back in the truck. I'm cutting it close, but it's worth being late.

When I climb back inside, I hand the coffee and bag to her.

"Where's yours?" she asks.

"I don't drink coffee before practice. Makes me want to puke. Same with eating."

“You stopped just for me?” she asks.

“Of course, beautiful.” I lean over, kissing her softly before backing up the truck.

I don’t miss the way she stares at my arm as I look over my shoulder, using her seat to rest my arm on.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“Anything for you.”

The drive to her dorm is quiet. I jump out, going to her side to help her out. Then I pull her in for a hug. “Have the best day, beautiful. I’ll see you in our shared class. Want to have lunch after?”

“Yes.” She smiles up at me. “Thank you for last night. I needed it.”

“Anytime.”

I lean in, kissing her once more. When I pull back, I brush her cheek.

“How adorable. Kellan has a new bunny on the hook. Going for freshman now?”

I turn, finding Monica standing off to the side, her arms folded.

“Did you just call yourself a puck bunny?” Cora asks.

I try not to snort at that.

“No, but that’s obviously what you are. You’re out of your league, little one. Besides, in a month, you’ll be old news.” She gives Cora a once-over.

I step in front of Cora, needing to protect her.

“I know I hurt you, Monica. For that, I am sorry, but I won’t let you talk to Cora that way. You need to kindly fuck off,” I tell her, my anger building.

Monica rolls her eyes and huffs. “Whatever, she will find out for herself soon.”

I watch as she walks into the building. I sigh, rubbing my face.

Spinning around, I look down at Cora. “I’m so sorry about that.”

She smiles, leaning up to kiss me. “Don’t apologize for things that aren’t your fault. Catch you later, hotshot.”

As she takes off into her dorm, I wonder again how I got so lucky to find a woman like her.

Then I wonder if my past will always come back to bite me in the ass.

fifteen

Cora

Groaning, I roll over and try to figure out what woke me up. After I got done with my classes for the day, I decided to come back to my room and take a nap rather than go to the center. Someone pounds on the door, making me frown.

“Coming,” I say as I get up.

Whoever is on the other side doesn’t have any patience because they knock again. It takes me a couple of steps to cross the room to answer the door.

“Yes?” I say with far more attitude than I mean to when I open the door.

The girl from this morning is standing across from me with her fist still raised in the air, like she was going to knock again.

“Can I help you?”

“Yeah, here,” she says, shoving a shirt into my chest.

Frowning, I pull the material away from my chest. “Why are you giving me this?”

“I figured if you’re Kellan’s latest plaything, then it would only be right for me to give it to you instead of back to him. He left that with me last year.” She smirks, thinking she’s saying something that will upset me.

“Okay, I can give it to him for you...”

Her eyes narrow, clearly upset I'm not giving her the reaction that she was hoping for. "Do you know who I am?"

"Based on what I heard this morning, someone who used to be involved with Kellan."

"Exactly. So hear me when I tell you that right when you think things are going well between you two, he will drop you like a hot potato. Kellan isn't the kind of guy who sticks around long term. He's only looking for a couple weeks of fun."

Even though I don't think things are like that between Kellan and me, her words still sting. If he was going to walk away, he would have done it already. Especially when we haven't even fooled around.

"I'm sorry that he hurt you."

Her eyes narrow. "Kellan Cooper could never hurt me."

Right.

"Just watch your back," she snaps.

I watch her walk down the hall and shoulder check Peyton as she passes by.

"I fucking hate that bitch," Peyton mumbles as she rubs her shoulder.

"I can see why," I say when I walk back into our room.

Peyton shuts the door and sits on her bed. "Why was the she-devil here?"

"For me." I sigh as I toss the shirt in the dirty clothes pile and sit down on my bed.

"What the hell did you do to end up on her radar?"

"I'll give you one guess."

Peyton winces. "Kellan."

"Yep. She saw us together this morning, and they shared a few words. Apparently that wasn't enough, so she thought she would come give me a friendly reminder and a T-shirt that he left behind when they stopped seeing each other."

Date. They probably dated, but I won't use that term. I hate the idea of him dating anyone other than me.

"You know why she's mad though, right?"

"No."

Peyton sighs and makes herself comfortable on her bed. "Kellan and Monica started dating at the beginning of the year. She hated Grace and who she was to Kellan. In all honesty, the woman was jealous as hell. Then

when Kellan thought that he was in love with Grace, he broke up with Monica. Supposedly she never saw it coming, but if you had two eyes, you could see the writing on the wall. She wailed about it for weeks after he supposedly broke her heart. Then she got pissed when he didn't date anyone else. Think it hurt her ego that he'd rather be alone than with her."

Groaning, I throw myself to the side and bury my face into my pillow. "Great, so she's a jealous ex."

"Oh, one hundred percent. Every time I saw Monica last year, she had a new guy on her arm, trying to make Kellan jealous, but he never noticed, which just pissed her off more."

Rolling over, I look at Peyton. "Fan-fucking-tastic."

She tilts her head to the side. "Did Kellan really not explain who she was when you saw her?"

"Honestly, I never asked. He was running late to practice, and it was just...weird."

"You should ask him about it."

"Should I though? I mean, an ex is an ex. Do I really need the details?"

"Usually I would agree with you, but a woman like Monica isn't going to take kindly to him moving on. I can almost guarantee that she's going to cause problems for you two."

"Fuck me," I grumble.

"No thanks, you're not my type."

"You've got jokes today."

"I always have jokes, baby," she quips as she gets off her bed. "Now, unfortunately for the both of us, I have to get ready for work."

"Do you have to go?" I whine.

Peyton looks over at me with sympathy. "I know. Now stop procrastinating and text him."

"I don't even know what to say to him."

"How about you start with 'hi,' and then work your way to 'what are you doing,' then cap it at 'want to hang out?'"

I roll my eyes. "You are such a smart ass."

"Better than being a dumbass." She snatches my phone off my desk and tosses it to me.

I catch it before it can hit me in the face, and I glare at her.

"Sorry!" She laughs as she turns to get dressed.

Sighing, I pull up my text thread with him and do exactly what she said.

Me

Hi, Hotshot.

Kellan

Hey, beautiful. How's your day?

Me

Can't complain. I was wondering, do you want to hang out?

I chew on my lip while I wait for his response. My heart races as I watch those three little dots bounce along the screen, letting me know that he's typing.

Kellan

Sure. I'll come pick you up.

Me

Cool. See you soon.

"He on his way?" Peyton asks.

I sit up and nod. "Yep."

"Cool. Remember to hear him out. Don't accuse him of anything."

"Yes, Mom."

Peyton rolls her eyes and walks toward the door. "I expect a full report later."

"Will do. Have a good shift," I say as she walks out the door.

And now I wait.



Kellan

With my backpack slung over my shoulders, I bound up the steps to her dorm room. I wasn't expecting to see her so soon, but I won't complain. Usually when she finishes class, she heads right over to the center, but I

guess after the shit show that was yesterday, she decided to take a day for herself.

Which she deserves.

I swear, if I ever find out that woman's name who made her day hell over a fucking vending machine, I'll give her a piece of my mind.

"Excuse me," I say as I pass someone going up the stairs.

In no time at all, I'm in front of her door. Taking a deep breath, I roll my shoulders back. I probably should have made her wait a little longer so that way she wouldn't know how eager I am to see her, but frankly I don't care. I want to spend every moment I can with her.

Her and hockey. That's all that matters to me right now.

Raising my fist, I knock on her door once before it swings open.

"Hey, beautiful," I say as I pull her into my arms.

Cora comes willingly and buries her face into my chest, right above my heart.

"Hi," she mumbles against my shirt.

When she pulls back, I lean down and kiss her lips softly. "I missed you."

"I missed you too. Now get in here." She grabs me by the front of my hoodie and pulls me inside her room, shutting the door behind us. "Make yourself comfortable."

I drop my bag at the foot of her bed, out of the way, and kick off my shoes. "I didn't realize how tall your bed is," I say when I get onto it.

"Yeah, I have it on stilts so I can have some storage underneath," she says as she gets onto the bed too.

Instead of curling up into my side like I expect her to do, she keeps her distance and faces me.

"Is something wrong?" My heart begins to race.

Shit, is she going to end this before we can really start? Did I do something to fuck this up? Did someone say something?

It's like she can sense my spiral because she reaches out and grabs my hand, squeezing it with hers.

"Hey, we're good. I just want to talk to you about something."

"Sure, what's up?" I say as I try to calm down.

She isn't ending this. Just breathe.

"I had a visitor today."

I frown as I study her. "Okay..."

“Your ex that we ran into this morning, Monica? She stopped by my room.”

“Why?”

“She wanted to warn me off of you.”

I open my mouth to defend myself, but Cora raises her hand, cutting me off.

“Before you say anything, everything she said went in one ear and out the other, but I wanted to talk to you about her. Oh, and she gave me this.”

Cora leans over the edge of her bed and grabs something. When she comes back up, she hands me a shirt. Reluctantly, I spread it out and see that it’s a shirt from The Williamson Hotel. I got it after my luggage was lost on a trip to Boston.

“I don’t even remember the last time I saw this.”

“Apparently you left it at her place,” she deadpans.

I scrunch my nose. “And she kept it for a year? Seriously?”

“Guess so.”

“That’s...”

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly.”

“Do I want to know what she said?”

“Told me that after a few months you would leave me heartbroken and move on to the next girl.”

I set the shirt down and turn toward her. “Whoa, you know that’s not true, right?”

“Kell—”

I cut her off. “Monica and I were never that serious. We never said I love you or did sleepovers. Did I sleep with her and take her on dates? Yes, because we were dating. I’ll be the first to admit that I was a shit boyfriend. I mean, I broke up with her because I thought I had feelings for Grace, and I thought I was doing the right thing. I didn’t lead her on or anything. After I broke up with her, I kept my distance. I never played games with her or made her think there was a chance of getting back together or anything. I know now that I was self-centered back then, but I swear I didn’t hurt her on purpose.”

Cora leans forward and grabs me by the back of my neck and slams her mouth against mine. She kisses me fearlessly and with no hesitation. All too soon, she pulls away and rests her forehead against mine.

“That was unexpected,” I mumble, trying to catch my breath.

Cora smiles. "I had to shut you up so I could get a word in."

"Sorry. What did you want to say?"

"I wanted to tell you that you have nothing to worry about. Was it an uncomfortable encounter? One thousand percent, but those are bound to happen. If we didn't have an awkward run-in with one of your exes, it would have been one of mine. It's part of dating."

"I don't like the thought of you with anyone else," I tell her bluntly.

Cora rolls her eyes and smiles. "The point is we both have a past, and we've clearly moved on with each other. You didn't show any emotion when we saw her this morning, and when I mentioned she stopped by, you looked worried that she said something mean, not because you were trying to hide something from me."

"I would never."

"And I believe you."

"Good. I really don't want to mess this up. Or let my past fuck it up for us."

"Like I said, the past is the past. It's in the rearview mirror, and I don't know about you, but I have no desire to look back. I only want to look forward. I just didn't want to keep her little visit a secret from you."

"I appreciate that. Actually, she's on a list I've been making. It sounds silly, but I have people I need to apologize to. Maybe I should start with her."

She hums a moment. "She's going to be a dick about it."

"Yeah, but I deserve it."

She shakes her head. "You're not that Kellan anymore. You don't deserve to be beat up for something you are clearly trying to make right."

Pulling away slightly, I kiss her forehead. "I don't know what I did to get so lucky to have you."

"I'm the lucky one," she says softly.

She might think she's the lucky one, but as far as I'm concerned, it's me. I don't know what I did to deserve her, but I'll work my ass off to keep her.

sixteen

Cora

Things have settled back down. Kellan and I are in such a good place. We still haven't crossed any lines, but I'm feeling more and more like we are getting closer to it.

He's been taking me on at least two dates a week. He says he needs to make up for the time he didn't know me. It's really quite sweet.

Between that and going to his games, we have been spending as much time as we can together, but it's hard when I have class and the center to get to every day.

After the shitty day I had there, I went back. Martha was surprised to see me. She thought I was scared off for good.

I'll admit, I did question if I was making the right choice, but then I remembered Shelby's face. The way she reacted to her mother broke my heart. Then to see her slowly come back to herself by talking to me?

I was meant to find that job. It was my destiny.

It's why I went back, and I continue to go back. Each day, I wonder if I can be doing more.

Then I remember what Martha said about making it a career. It feels right.

I'm worried how my mom and Clay will take it, though. That's why I decided to broach the subject with my mom first.

Sitting on my bed, I take a deep breath. I know she's got about an hour before she has to start getting ready for work. She's probably sitting on the couch with a cup of coffee, watching one of her talk shows.

The thought brings a smile to my face as I dial her number.

"Hey, baby. Shouldn't you be in class?" she asks.

"I'm on my lunch break. What are you up to?"

"Watching the *Kelly Clarkson Show*. She really is a funny girl. Shame that asshole ex of hers broke her heart."

I've heard so much about Kelly Clarkson's divorce that I know better than to encourage her.

"For sure. Are you going to work soon?"

"Yep. How's school?"

"Good. I'm dating someone," I admit to her.

"Clay mentioned that you started dating. Didn't tell me much. Does he approve?" she asks.

"I wouldn't say that," I hesitantly tell her.

"Good. He's your older brother. He needs to put the poor sap through his paces. Tell me about him. Do you think it's serious?"

I think about the fact that every morning I wake up thinking about him and how he is the last thing on my mind when I close my eyes at night. I miss him when he isn't around. I text him throughout the day just to feel close to him.

"I want it to be. It's only been a little over a month since we started dating." I leave out that we had a little hiccup there for a moment. "He's a good guy. I really like him."

"Oh, baby. I am so happy to hear that. You deserve some light in your life. Don't go tying yourself down too soon, though. You need to experience life a little before you settle down."

I frown at her words. I don't need to experience life. I feel like I've lived through so much of it that I should easily be in my forties instead of my teens.

I don't tell her that, though. I don't want to add to her guilt.

"I know, Mom. I actually called to talk to you about school. What do you think about me taking a few years off? Until I figure out what I really want to do," I tell her.

"Oh, Cora, honey. You are so sweet, but you don't need to do that. That's what college is for. You're supposed to be finding yourself while you

are there.” Her voice drips in concern.

“I know, but I think I might want to do something else.”

“Honey, I know what you are trying to do. I appreciate it. You and your brother have been so good to me. Always trying to limit the money you spend because you don’t want to take too much from me. It’s so kind of you both, but I don’t need it. Clay has his scholarship, and if you keep up the good grades, you will keep yours too. I have plenty to live on.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I sigh.

“You don’t have to keep worrying about your old mama. I’m doing good down here. I miss the two of you something fierce, but I’m happy that you are doing so well. I swear it was just yesterday when you would run around the house chasing one another using my underwear as hats.” She starts to laugh, but I hear the sob sneak out.

My heart drops. I can’t do this to her. Not now.

“I know, Mom. We were a bunch of rowdy kids.” I smile sadly to the empty room.

“I wouldn’t have traded it for the world, though. I worked so hard to keep a roof over our heads that sometimes I feel like I blinked and you were both gone. I missed so much. Promise me you’ll savor your life. Live in the moment and enjoy it.”

I play with the corner of my blanket. “You know I will. It’s my life motto.”

It’s the truth. Which is why I want to quit school and take the job. I feel like it is what is calling me right now. I’d have to stay in school until May to keep my dorm, but after that I could move into an apartment. Grace has already been talking about moving out of the hockey house once Clay is drafted in June. We could room together.

I should be able to tell my mother that’s what I want, but the part of me that doesn’t want to disappoint her has me biting my tongue. I can’t ruin the dream she has had for me since I was a child.

“Mom, I’ve got to go. My lunch period is almost over,” I lie. “I love you. I’ll call you again soon.”

“Please do. It’s been too long since I’ve heard your beautiful voice. I love you, baby.”

We hang up, and I hang my head. How one phone call could drain so much of my energy, I will never understand.

Yet here I am, feeling emotionally drained.

I wish I had the courage to tell her the truth, but for now I'll take the coward's way out.



Kellan

I'm sitting in the locker room waiting for Clay to come out of Coach's office. Once a week he stays behind and discusses with Coach how we could be better.

Today is the day. I need to talk to him and put all the shit truly under the bridge. I can't keep holding on to the shame from last year.

I started my talks with a few of my exes from high school. At first, they weren't happy to hear from me, but after talking, I think we mended fences. None of them resent me for what I did.

Then there was Monica. She refused to answer my call, and I can't seem to catch her on campus. So I skipped her for now, moving onto Clay.

I hear him and Coach talking as they exit his office. Then Coach must head out as I hear the locker room door shut behind him. Clay comes around the corner, startling when he sees me.

"Jesus, dude. Way to be a creeper. What are you still doing here?" Clay asks.

"We need to talk," I tell him.

He looks at me for a moment before nodding and straddling the bench next to me. "So we do. Go on," he tells me.

I'm silent for many moments. My chest tightens as I realize that I need to admit some really uncomfortable things to Clay right now. My hands grow clammy as I work up the courage to spit it out.

All the while, Clay sits there patiently waiting for me. He doesn't seem to be in a hurry at all. This is why he is the captain. He is good at it.

"I was jealous of you," I manage after a moment.

"For what?" he asks, not taking it easy on me.

"Grace, the team, all of it. Before I came here, you were my idol. I wanted to be just like you. Then I met you, and I thought about how cool

you were. Then Grace happened, and it all started to fall. I resented you, and you didn't deserve that."

"No, I didn't."

"Grace was my best friend. She always showed up to my games and stayed by my side. In high school, it was easier. Classes weren't so demanding. Hockey didn't require as much. She fit easily into my life. Then we came here, and everything became more precarious. I couldn't balance the spinning plates anymore, and they all crashed on top of me."

"Have you ever talked to anyone about the pressure you are under?" Clay asks.

I shake my head. "Never thought I had to. Everything was perfect before I came here. I had this dream in my head. You were going to be my other best friend. My guy best friend. We would hang out, and you would teach me all you know about hockey. Then you would get drafted, and I'd become the youngest captain in school history. It's so fucking dumb. I know, but it's what I wanted. Then you took Grace from me." I hold up my hand to stop him from interrupting. "I know you really didn't, but it felt that way. You weren't nice to me. It seemed like you hated me at times. You weren't teaching me anything. Then you didn't declare for the draft and stayed, stealing my hopes of being captain too. I blamed you for it all."

"I didn't do any of that to spite you. You know that, right? I mean, I wasn't nice to you, but it's because of how you made Grace feel," Clay admits. "I could have handled shit better too. Tried to talk to you."

I shake my head. "I wouldn't have heard you. It took hitting rock bottom to realize how bad I fucked everything up. I was so far into my own world that I couldn't see anyone outside of it."

"What changed your view of it?" Clay asks.

"Grace at first. My mom over summer break. Then Cora. She's really the one who has shown me what a terrible person I was. I don't want to be him anymore, though. I want to be a good teammate. I want you guys to trust and rely on me. I want to hopefully be the friend Grace deserves. I know I have work to do there, but I hope she can forgive me. If not, I'll understand, but I won't stop being her friend even if she doesn't want to be mine. I really fucking hope I can prove to you that I am worthy of your sister. I won't say I will ever deserve her because I won't. She is so much better than me, but I hope one day you will agree with me when I say that I

am the man who will do anything to put a smile on her face. I'll protect and care for her."

He claps a hand on my shoulder. "Grace is an amazing woman. She will forgive you. I bet if you asked her right now, she wouldn't even admit she was ever mad at you. That's who she is. You need to have that conversation with her. As for the rest of it, you are using your actions to prove it to us every day. You keep showing up to practice and giving it your all, and the guys will be good. Don't make my sister cry, and we will be even better."

"I'll keep doing better," I promise him.

He nods. "Good. Now this was sweet and everything, but I honestly thought we had already squashed all this shit. So while I appreciate it and all, you need to talk to Grace. We are good with the team, but until you make things right for her, I can't exactly be cool with you on a personal level. You get me?"

"I get you. I'm not quite ready to face that mountain yet. I know it's going to be hard, but I promise, she's on the list."

"List? You have a whole list?"

I nod. "People I need to talk to. Apologize to for being a dick. I've been through most of it."

"Good for you, man. I'm proud of you. As your captain, I want you to know that your efforts haven't gone unnoticed."

"Thanks."

"Well, I need to get home. Grace is cooking for me tonight."

I smile. She loves to cook.

"What's she cooking?"

"Chicken Alfredo."

My mouth drools at the memory of her pasta. "The peas make it. You enjoy it. It's the best I've ever had."

He laughs. "You don't have to tell me. Everything about her is the best I've ever had."

With that, he leaves me sitting in the locker room with my thoughts.

It wasn't as bad as I thought, but now I have nothing holding me back from talking to Grace. She deserves an apology, but part of me doesn't think I deserve to be forgiven.

It doesn't matter. It's not about me anymore.

It's about Grace.

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seventeen

Cora

Peyton groans as she sits next to Grace.

“You good?” Grace asks her without looking away from her food.

“Yeah, my feet hurt. I worked a double yesterday, and I’m regretting it.”

I cringe thinking about it. “My mom hates doubles.”

“They are brutal. I worked them a lot this summer, but I guess since I’ve been back here, my body has forgotten what it’s like,” Peyton says.

Grace pushes up her glasses. “You should get some better shoes. It might help.”

Peyton’s nose crinkles. “Spending money on ugly shoes sounds horrible.”

“But if it will save your feet...” Grace trails off.

“Fine, Mom,” Peyton groans as she picks up a chicken tender. “Anyway, enough about me. How are you two?”

“Zero complaints,” I tell her as I take a bite of salad.

“Did you get everything cleared up with lover boy?”

Grace looks between the two of us. “Wait, what’s going on with you and Kellan? Is something wrong?”

I shake my head. “Nothing like that. We’re good. I promise.”

Grace relaxes and takes a deep breath. “Good. I really want things to work out between you two.”

I smile. “Thanks, that means a lot. Let’s talk about something else, though.”

“I need to know what games we plan on going to this year so I can put in my requests to have off now,” Peyton tells us.

“All of the home games for sure,” Grace says.

Shit, am I supposed to know all of this? Am I a bad girlfriend because I don’t even know when the first game is? I never paid much attention to Clay’s schedule. I would go to a game here and there, but I never liked the attention I received by being his sister.

Being Kellan’s girlfriend is only going to make it worse.

“I don’t even know what the schedule looks like,” I admit, feeling awful.

Grace smiles softly. “I love that you don’t know that.”

“Why?”

“Because that means that you don’t care about what he can do on the ice but about him,” she tells me.

Before I can say anything, Peyton cuts in. “Yes, enough about Kellan Cooper. Games and schedules, ladies. Someone pull it up so we can figure this shit out before I go to work later.”

Chuckling, Grace reaches into her bag and pulls out a tablet. She taps the screen a few times before setting it in the middle of the table for all of us to see. Peyton grabs her phone and starts tapping away, presumably writing down all the dates of the home games.

“I want to go to this one. It’s only a two-hour drive, and they have a cute year-round Christmas market in the next town over. I figured if we leave early, we can go spend some money and get a head start on Christmas presents. Plus, I need decorations for the house,” Grace tells us.

“Are you going to set up a Christmas tree at the hockey house and cover the banister with garland?” I tease.

“Of course,” Grace deadpans.

I can’t quite tell if she’s joking or if she’s serious, but I don’t question it.

Peyton touches the screen. “We went to this one last year, right?”

“We did,” Grace confirms.

“We should go again. That game was awesome, and they had some hot guys in attendance that I wouldn’t mind flirting with.”

“Only flirting?” I quip.

“Only flirting. The last thing I need is a long-distance relationship.” Peyton shivers at the thought, making Grace and I laugh.

Before any of us can say something, someone comes up to our table and leans against the edge. I turn to face the intruder and see Monica.

Great. Just fucking great.

“Monica,” I say with zero emotion.

Monica’s eyes narrow. “You don’t know how to listen, do you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say calmly.

“I told you that you should ditch him before he can leave you, and yet here you are sitting with his side piece,” she says, waving toward Grace.

“Excuse me?” Grace gasps.

“Whoa, bitch, you better back off,” Peyton growls.

“First off, Grace is his friend and only his friend,” I tell her bluntly. “As for why I’m sitting here with her, not that it’s any of your business, but Grace is dating my brother and has been for a year. You know him, I’m sure. Clayton James,” I say, dropping his name.

Monica’s eyes widen for a split second before she goes back to spewing her venom. “Yeah, well, Clayton is as much a victim in all of this as I am. She’s going to leave him high and dry and run off into the sunset with her best friend.”

Is she for real? Does she live under a rock? My brother has no problem with the world knowing that he’s head over heels for Grace. Anyone with two eyes can see she feels the same way.

“Uh, I love Clayton. If I’m running off with anyone, it’s going to be him,” Grace says.

“Leave him. Leave him before it’s too late,” Monica demands, looking at me.

“No,” I tell her plainly.

“Monica, you need to walk away,” Peyton warns her.

“No, not until she does as I say,” Monica hisses at Peyton before looking back at me.

Slowly, I push my chair back and stand. I lean forward, resting my palms on the table and putting my face so close to hers that I can see how caked on her makeup is. “I don’t know if I can say this any clearer, but let me try again. No.”

Monica slaps her foot on the ground. “He was mine first.”

“And he’s mine now.”

“He was supposed to come back to me. We all know that I would look best on his arm,” she tells us.

As soon as the words leave her mouth, I feel sad for her. I can’t imagine being with someone just because of what they could give me and not because I want them for who they are. It’s obvious that she has this obsession with him because she wants what his status can give her.

I hate that Grace and he went through what they did last year, but if one good thing came from it, it was Monica no longer being his girl.

“You might believe that, but Kellan doesn’t. He’s with me. You need to move on. This whole schtick is reeking of desperation. He’s moved on.”

A wicked smile takes over her face. “We will see about that. I wonder, does he even love you? We will find out.”

“What the fuck is going on here?” Kellan gruffly asks.

Monica spins so fast on her heels that her hair slaps me in the face, poking me in the eye.

“Kellan!”

Perfect. Just fucking perfect.



Kellan

My heart races at the scene in front of me.

Grace is pale, Peyton looks like she’s ready to stab a bitch, and Monica is trying her damndest to appear innocent, but it’s Cora I can’t look away from. I can’t read her at all, and it’s killing me.

“Is anyone going to answer me?” I ask again.

“Oh, I was just having a little chat with your friend here. Encouraging her to leave your ass behind,” Monica says.

Peyton scoffs.

Monica looks over at her and glares.

“I mean, you did tell her that, but you also admitted you wanted to be his arm candy again. You probably shouldn’t have left that out.” Peyton picks up a fry and eats it.

The corner of Monica's eye twitches. It's obvious that she doesn't like being called out.

I look back at Cora and see that she's glaring at the back of Monica's head, making me worry that she just might do something irrational. Like pull out Monica's extensions or something.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. How the fuck did we end up here?

"You should speak up, Cooper, we're waiting," Peyton says, goading me.

Can't she see that I'm trying to pull my thoughts together? I wasn't expecting this.

Jesus, my heart feels like it is going to burst. I rub my chest, hoping the feeling goes away.

Sighing, I look down at Monica. "You need to stop this."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she says quickly, making the girls behind her scoff. "You were literally calling me all week. I figured your girlfriend should know that."

I wince as I look at Cora. "I was trying to apologize to her."

"You don't need to explain yourself. I trust you." Cora says the words, but I can see Monica's have affected her.

I can't catch a break. How many times does our relationship need to be tested before it breaks?

"I need you to leave my girlfriend and our friends alone, Monica. She doesn't deserve your harassment."

"She deserves the truth," Monica seethes.

I look behind her at Cora and find that she's already looking at me. Cora nods, giving me her silent support.

I look back at Monica. "Look, I owe you an apology. Like I told Cora, I wasn't a good boyfriend to you, and for that, I'm sorry. I was immature and thought the sun shined out of my ass when it didn't. I appreciate you trying to look out for Cora, but it's not needed. My relationship with her is completely different than ours was."

She steps forward with her hands out, like she's going to touch me. I dodge her touch and step closer to Cora, who comes up to my side.

"This isn't right. You weren't just a bad boyfriend, but you were inattentive, you didn't care about what I had to say or what I wanted to do. It was all you, you, you," Monica says.

"And yet you want him back," Peyton mumbles quietly.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Grace slap Peyton's arm.

"Knock it off," Grace hisses.

"Again, I apologize for not being what you needed. I'm sorry I couldn't give you my best, but that's not on Cora. She doesn't deserve your hatred. You have no reason to accost her in the cafeteria like she's the mistress when she's the only damn woman in my life."

Monica's jaw clenches. "I had plans for us. You know this."

"They were yours and not ours. I will never love you the way you deserve, and you need to accept that and move on. Find someone else," I tell her bluntly.

I'll never love you the way I love Cora, I think to myself.

Monica's shoulders deflate, and she looks around. She sees that none of us are going to give her what she wants.

"So this is it?"

"This is it," I tell her plainly.

She nods and turns to walk away.

"Monica." I wait for her to look back at me before I continue. "If I ever find out that you're still harassing my girl, we will press charges. I truly am sorry, but I won't let you ruin her life because of something I did."

Monica rolls her eyes. "I'd hardly call it harassing."

She turns and walks away, and we watch her go in silence.

"Well, Kellan, I think it's safe to say your taste in women has gotten better since last year," Peyton quips.

Grace groans while Cora buries her face into my chest. I wrap my arm around her shoulders, and her body shakes with silent laughter.

"Thanks, Peyton. I'm glad you noticed," I deadpan.

Peyton winks. "Anytime. Are you going to sit down and join us or not?"

I look over at Grace. "As long as it's okay with you."

"Sit down, Kellan," Grace says softly.

Cora pulls away and grabs my hand, pulling me down into the chair next to her.

"I'm sorry you guys had to see that," I tell them.

"You have no reason to apologize. Monica's actions are on her alone and not you," Grace tells me.

"I know that." I look over at Cora. "But she took her anger at me out on you, and I feel awful about it."

“You shouldn’t. Like Grace said, all of that was on Monica. Not you, but I am proud,” Cora tells me.

“Proud of me?”

“Yeah, you knew you made mistakes and apologized for them when you could have just told her to fuck off. You didn’t have to do that,” Cora says.

“It was really emotionally mature of you,” Grace adds.

“Thanks,” I say softly.

“Anyway...can we get back to what we were doing before the she-devil interrupted?” Peyton asks.

“What were you girls doing?”

“Picking out hockey games we want to go to. Do you have any recommendations?” Cora asks.

All of them. I want you at all of them.

“The Springfield game should be good again,” I say instead.

Grace nods. “We plan on catching that home game. Well, all the home games. We’re trying to decide which games we want to travel for, though.”

Grace and Peyton start discussing the trips, and I look over at Cora and see that she’s already staring at me.

“You know, I can’t wait for you to see me play,” I tell her quietly.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I can’t get the idea of you wearing my jersey while in the stands out of my head.”

Cora smirks. “Who said I would wear yours?”

I shake my head, caught off guard and slightly offended. “Why wouldn’t you wear mine?”

“Why would I wear your last name when I can wear mine?”

James. She means she would wear her brother’s name.

I open my mouth to tell her that it’s a shit idea, but I don’t have a legit reason for her not to. It is her last name, and she can wear whatever she wants to even if I hate it.

Cora squeezes my hand. “Hey, you know I’m teasing, right?”

“Are you though?” I ask softly.

“Yes, Kellan. I’ll wear the Cooper jersey I ordered at every game, okay?”

She already ordered one. God, I love this girl.

“I’d like that,” I tell her honestly.

“Yeah, well just remember that when my brother is pouting because I’m not wearing his. He’s sensitive with things like that,” she quips, making me laugh.

This girl...

“Hey, you guys are off on Halloween. We should do something,” Grace says.

“Ooh, I love dressing up.” Cora lights up.

They continue talking about it as an idea forms in my head. I don’t know where, but I’m taking my girl to a costume party.

I only need to get the guys on board. It can’t be that hard, can it?

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eighteen

Cora

Peyton sings along to the radio as Grace drives. Sitting in the back seat, I stare out the window, watching the world pass by.

I don't know why but today feels different. I've watched Kellan play several times now and cheered for him in the stands, so watching him isn't new. Every time someone gets a little too close to him, my breath catches. When someone hits him, I can't help but flinch as if it's me who has taken the blow.

It's different than when I've worried about Clay. With Kellan, it is like my heart is connected to every movement he makes.

Before I know it, we are pulling into the parking lot of the opposing team's arena and park. We all get out of the car. Somehow, I find myself sandwiched between Grace and Peyton, our arms all linked together.

"Are you okay, Cora?" Grace asks.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"You were awfully quiet on the drive over here," Grace tells me.

"I was waiting for you to spit whatever it is out that's bothering you," Peyton adds.

After going through security, we make our way to our seats and sit down.

"So are you going to tell us or not?" Peyton presses.

"I don't know why but today feels different." I admit the thoughts I had dwelled on the entire trip.

Grace hums. "Is it a good different or a bad different?"

"Good, I think."

"Does it have something to do with the guy whose name is plastered across your back?" Peyton asks.

I feel my cheeks heat, and I nod.

"Ah, I get it. It's okay, you know that, right?" Grace says, nodding as if it makes sense.

"What is?"

"To admit you're in love with Kellan. That's what this is about, right?" Grace asks.

As soon as her words hit me, I want to deny it, but I can't, because it's true.

I love Kellan Cooper.

"Holy shit," I mumble to myself.

Peyton laughs.

"How did you know?" I ask Grace.

She shrugs. "It's obvious to me. You know he loves you too, right?"

"You think so?"

Peyton scoffs. "Please, that boy is head over heels in love with you. Why else would he be making things right with people he's done wrong?"

"Because he's a good person?" I offer.

I hadn't even thought about why he wanted to make amends. All it meant to me was that he was doing the right thing. He is growing.

"Please, that boy wouldn't have pulled his head out of his ass yet if it wasn't for you," Peyton says.

Grace winces. "I hate to admit it, but I think she's right."

"You don't think he would have apologized to you by now if it wasn't for me?" I fold my arms over my chest.

Grace shakes her head. "No, he would have kept his head buried in the sand, pretending like nothing is wrong. Kellan is one of those guys who has mastered the art of out of sight, out of mind. Don't get me wrong, he would have come around eventually, but I don't think it would have been this soon. Besides, he hasn't actually cleared the air with me yet. He will, though. You will push him to do it in your own way."

"I don't push him to do anything." I take the stairs down to our seats.

“You don’t have to. His love for you is doing it for you. He wants to be who you deserve. I’m not mad about it, Cora. I’m glad he has you,” Grace tells me.

I take a deep breath, turning to her when we get to our seats. “I didn’t want to love him,” I finally admit.

“You never had a chance. Trust me, I get it.” Grace hugs me.

“I do too.” Peyton hugs me from behind.

“Wait, what? Who?” Grace demands.

“Yeah, who are you dating?”

Peyton laughs. “Kidding, guys. I just wanted to be included. Now can we watch these yummy players warm up?”

“Gross, one of them is my brother,” I tell her.

“One of them is your boyfriend too, so hush and watch the man become a sex symbol.”

Players start to take the ice, and I look out, trying to spot him as everyone zips around. When I find Kellan, I can’t help but smile when I see that he’s already looking my way. I watch as he taps Clay and points toward us.

Grace sighs next to me when my brother smiles her way. “I love that man,” she says wistfully.

“Do you think it’s too soon for me to love Kellan?” I blurt out.

“Do you feel like it is?” Peyton questions.

“I...I don’t know.” I chew on my bottom lip as nerves run through me.

I’ve never been in love before. How should I know if I’m doing it right or not?

“Cora, love has no timeline. You can fall hard and fast or soft and slow. It can sneak up on you when you least expect it, or you can know at first glance. The only one whose opinion matters right now is yours and maybe Kellan’s,” Grace tells me.

“You think so?”

Grace nods. “I know so, and for the record, I’m completely on board with you and Kellan loving each other. I know I said it before, but I don’t think you believe me.”

“How could you after what he did to you?”

“Like I’ve said before, he is a good guy, he just wasn’t for me. He’s always felt like family to me, though, and I just assumed it was because we

were best friends, but now I think it's because maybe someday we will be married to siblings," Grace says.

"Whoa, putting the cart before the horse, aren't we? Last I checked, neither of those two have put rings on either of your fingers," Peyton says as she scans our hands.

Grace rolls her eyes. "You knew what I meant."

"Words have meaning," Peyton quips, making us laugh.

"Are you feeling better now?" Peyton asks as we fall silent.

"Yeah, I think so. Thanks, you two."

"Why are you thanking us? We didn't do anything," Peyton says.

"I'm thanking you because I'm thankful for our friendship. You two brought me into the fold, no questions asked, when you didn't have to."

"Why wouldn't we have befriended you?" Grace asks.

"We know awesome when we see it, and you, my girl, are awesome. Embrace it," Peyton tells me.

"Well then, can I ask you a question, Peyton?"

"What's up?"

"When are you going to start dating someone?" I tease.

Peyton shivers in disgust. "Never."

"Really? Never? That sounds extreme." Grace laughs.

"The only thing a man can give me is orgasms, and I don't even need one for that," Peyton declares.

"I'll give you an orgasm, baby."

We turn and see three guys who look like they are maybe, at most, freshmen in high school sitting behind us and staring at Peyton with interest.

"Boys, while I applaud you for trying, you failed. You look like you wouldn't even know where the clit is if it jumped up and bit you. Now fuck off and stop eavesdropping. Leave us adults alone." Peyton rolls her eyes and turns around.

"So if you aren't interested in dating, then I guess nothing is going on with you and Beckett?"

Peyton tenses for a split second before relaxing. "Beckett and I are friends. If you want to even call us that. More like acquaintances because our friends are dating. That's where it ends. Nothing less, nothing more, and that's all we'll ever be."

Right...if you ask me, the lady doth protest too much. I wonder what she's keeping to herself and when she will finally clue all of us in.



Kellan

This game is a complete and utter shit show. Not because we are playing badly but because it's neck and neck. I don't know what St. Mary's has done since last year, but they sure as hell have improved. Last year it was like they had never been on skates, but this year they are playing like all the team players are part of the PHL.

Maybe Coach should challenge the school to see their birth certificates.

"This is insane," Jones mutters as he skates back toward the bench.

I look up at the scoreboard and see that we are still ahead, but it's close. Too fucking close.

The last thing I want to do is lose when Cora and the girls came all this way. Putting my head down, I skate harder than I have all night.

Clayton is charging down the ice with the puck. He can score as long as no one gets in his way. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a guy going at him from the side.

Holy shit, he's going to take him out.

Pushing off harder, I skate toward them. Before the guy can nail Clay in the back, I get to him, taking him down right as Clay takes the shot.

The horn blares through the arena, letting me know he made the goal but it was waved off. I lift myself up off the ice as the ref slides up to us. Before he can even say it, I start heading toward the penalty box.

Once inside, I scan the crowd and find Cora. She looks right at me and mouths, *are you okay?*

I wink at her right as Coach bangs on the safety glass on my other side. I turn toward him and see that he's glaring at me.

"Pay attention to the game, Cooper. You can flirt with your girlfriend later."

"Yes, Coach." I turn back toward the ice.

“Oh, and Cooper. Good job protecting your captain,” he mutters.

Smiling, I look up at the clock and watch it count down. We just have to hold them off for a little longer. Players go whizzing by, heading straight for Wyatt.

“Come on, come on. Block. Block. Fucking block, Scott,” I mutter under my breath.

The player from St. Mary’s pulls his stick back and shoots. The puck takes off like a bullet, heading right for Wyatt. Somehow, by the grace of God, Wyatt blocks the shot, right as the final buzzer sounds.

My fist shoots up into the air. “Yes!”

Leaving the sin bin, I head back to the ice. “Good game,” I say to one of the opposing team’s players.

“Fuck off,” he mutters as he shoulder checks me.

“They are so sweet and kind, aren’t they?” Beckett says as he comes up next to me.

As we skate back to the bench, I find Cora in the crowd again. She shoots me a thumbs-up, and she’s smiling from ear to ear.

God, she’s beautiful. And mine. All fucking mine.

I blow her a kiss, making her cheeks turn pink.

“Come on, man, flirt later,” Beckett says as he elbows me in the ribs.

“Yeah, yeah.”

As a team, we leave the ice and head toward the locker room.

“All right, boys, gather around,” Coach says.

All of us sit down on the benches and give Coach our full attention.

“I don’t know what the hell they did to improve so much from last year, but we definitely underestimated them, and we won’t be doing it again. You boys played well tonight, and we might have snuck by with the win, but we might not be so lucky next time. You should all thank Scott over there for protecting the net,” he says, waving a hand toward Wyatt.

Wyatt tucks his chin against his chest, avoiding the attention, something I’ve noticed he does often. It makes me curious why he plays at the collegiate level if he likes to keep to himself so much.

Coach continues his talk, praising and critiquing some of us, but I tune him out. I’m ready to fall face first into the bed at the hotel and pass out.

Too bad I can’t sneak Cora into my room. I know her, Grace, and Peyton all got a room to share at the same hotel.

Maybe I can keep my eyes open for just a little while and hang out with her in the lobby or out by the pool.

“Are you coming out with us tonight, Cooper?” Beckett asks when Coach walks away.

“Huh?”

“Are you coming out with us and the girls?” Beckett says.

Well, shit. It looks like Cora already has plans. I want to go wherever she is, but I don’t know if I should. While things are better with Clay and Grace, they aren’t perfect, and I don’t want to make anyone’s night weird.

“I don’t know...”

“You should come,” Clay says.

Turning, I look at him. “Are you sure?”

“Cooper, your girlfriend is going to be there. It’s kind of expected that you will be too, and if you’re worried about it being weird, it won’t be. Not unless you make it that way,” he tells me.

Thinking it over, it does sound nice. A night out with Cora and our friends, celebrating a win? That’s all I’ve ever wanted.

“Are you sure that Cora’s going?”

Clay nods. “Positive. The girls have all headed back to the hotel to get ready.”

I look over at Wyatt and see that he’s already looking at me.

“Are you going?”

“I’m taking Brett back to his room, but I’ll stop by after,” he says without missing a beat.

“All right then, sure.”

“Cool. Let’s get cleaned up and get out of here.” Clay stands.

I lean down to untie my skates when I feel his hand come down on my shoulder.

“Oh, and Cooper. Thanks for having my back out there. Literally,” Clay says.

“Yeah, no problem, man. It was nothing, don’t mention it.”

Shaking his head, Clay walks away.

I feel eyes on me, so I look over and see that Wyatt is staring at me. “What?”

“You having his back was something, and we all know it. Don’t downplay it.”

Ducking my head, I mutter, “Hurry up and get undressed so we can get out of here.”

He’s not wrong, though. Last year I would have let that dude take Clay down. I wouldn’t have done a thing to stop it. This year, though, things are different.

How’s that for growth?

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nineteen

Cora

The guys are high on their victory. They are cheering and yelling as we walk down the street to a local sports bar.

I'm laughing as I watch people glare around us. Probably not smart of us to be out screaming about our victory in the town of the losing team. Still, I can't help but smile as Kellan pulls me closer to his side, singing the school's fight song along with the guys.

I love seeing him getting along with them so well. It's like he's finally allowing himself to get close to them. To bond with them in a way he couldn't before.

I'm so glad I decided to come. I almost didn't because I didn't want to have to share a room with Grace and Peyton that I can't pay for. Grace refused to hear about it, though. She demanded I go and paid for the whole thing. Peyton told me to stop fighting it because Grace was going to do what Grace wanted to do. It didn't hurt that Kellan shoved some money at me for the ride down. He claims it's because he wanted me to look for these new fruit chews he has been looking for, but I think he's a liar. I found them at the first gas station, which tells me they are more popular than he is letting on.

Still, I accepted it from him. Even let him buy me a coffee for the trip.

It was worth it, though. Worth sucking up my pride and accepting the help because tonight was amazing.

I got to watch Kellan and Clay work together to win. Beckett and Wyatt looked good too. I had my girls by my side. Then Kellan blew me that kiss, and I swear I melted right into my seat.

I never thought I would like dating a hockey guy. Not with my brother being one, but I see the appeal. They are strong, have stamina, and there is this raw energy to them that makes them irresistible. Like even though we are walking into a bar together, I want to jump his bones. I've never felt this strongly before.

"Go get a seat with the girls. I'll bring you a drink." He taps my butt twice, making my heart rate up even more.

I can't even speak as he walks away. Other women are staring at him, but when he looks over his shoulder and winks at me, all I feel is special.

"Girl, you have hearts in your eyes," Peyton jokes, pulling me to the only free table. There are only four chairs, but the guys will manage.

"She's in loooove," Grace teases.

"Shhh." I look over at Kellan, but there's no way he heard us.

"You are so adorable. I love this look on you, girl. You are beaming," Peyton adds.

"Well, I don't know if I'm ready for him to know how I feel yet, so maybe we keep it on the DL?" I glare at them both.

They only laugh harder.

Assholes, the lot of them.

Clay comes back first, sliding a bottle of water over to Grace before standing behind her, his hands on her shoulders. Beckett and Kellan come over next, four bottles of water between them. I love that they take hockey so seriously. Even now, they won't drink because it's during the season.

"Here you go, beautiful." Kellan hands me my water, mirroring Clay's position.

Beckett hands Peyton hers, but she raises a brow at him. "Don't even think about it."

"What? I was going to take the free seat. You think I'm trying to snuggle up to you?" he asks.

"I am a fucking queen, so I wouldn't be surprised." She flips her hair over her shoulder, taking a sip of her water.

I don't miss the way Beckett follows her movements, longing in his eyes.

Poor guy has a crush, and yet she won't give him the time of day. I make a mental note to talk to her again. She's so focused on working, I don't think she even notices that he likes her.

"Where are Wyatt and Brett?" I ask, changing the subject.

"Brett was hurting, so Wyatt went back to the hotel with him," Clay advises.

"That's sweet of him," I murmur.

"Calvin, bro. Do yourself a favor." Kellan steps away from me to pull the freshman over to our table. "Put the shot down and drink water. Trust me. I drank most of the season last year, and you could tell with my playing."

"I'm not going to get to play this year, so why does it matter?" He looks dejected.

"Not the way to look at it. You could get called up at any minute. Even if you don't, you should treat your body well. Do you want to go pro?" Kellan asks him.

"Of course." The kid perks up.

"Then you need to prepare yourself like you are going to go pro. Don't mess up your chances by drinking. Is that shot really worth your career?" Kellan steps back from the kid, giving him a chance to think.

I reach out, grabbing his hand.

I love watching him be protective over this kid. It's like a glimpse into the future of what he will be like with his own kids. Maybe even our kids.

The thought has my cheeks heating.

"You're right. Hendricks said it would be a good way to blow off steam. Fuck." Calvin runs his hand over his face. "I'm going back to the hotel."

He sets the shot on the table and stalks away. Kellan grabs the shot, pouring it in the trash before setting the glass back on the table.

"That was smooth, Cooper. I don't know if I would have done the same," Clay admits.

"Been where he's at. It's easy to get distracted by the college experience and lose sight of your goals." Kellan shrugs, looking away uncomfortably.

I notice that he rubs his chest again. He does that a lot. It makes me wonder if he has bad heartburn or something.

Before I can ask, Peyton squeals. "This is my jam. Let's go."

She pulls Grace out onto the floor, pointing at me to do the same. Turning to Kellan, I give him a coy smile. "Dance with me, hotshot." "Would love to, beautiful."

"Gross. Get a room," Beckett calls after us.

I don't miss his grunt or the way Clay says, "Dude, that's my sister," as we walk away.

Once on the floor, I spin, wrapping Kellan's arms around my center as I start to dance with him. He pulls me even closer, grinding against my back. My body feels like it is on fire. Every place his hands touch me feels like sparks against my skin.

Spinning in his arms, I wrap my own around his neck. The way his hands lightly grab my ass has me ready to dry hump him on this floor. My pussy is throbbing, needing him inside of me.

I've never felt this turned on in my life.

Popping up onto my tiptoes, I pull his head down for a kiss. He doesn't hesitate, sliding his tongue against mine. All pretenses of dancing have fallen away as we make out on the dance floor without shame. I have no idea how long we stand in the middle of the floor like that, but the only thing that stops us is a tap on my shoulder.

I pull back, feeling how puffy my lips feel.

"We are going back to the hotel. You okay?" Peyton asks.

I nod. "All good."

"Good. Let me know if you are planning to sleep elsewhere. Grace is with Clay."

"She's staying with me." Kellan's husky tone has my core tightening.

"Yeah, I'm staying with him." I'm breathless.

Peyton only laughs, giving me a wink. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

As she walks away, I don't miss how Beckett meets her halfway, his hand falling to the small of her back.

Looking back at Kellan, I smile. "So I'm staying with you tonight?"

"I only want to cuddle. I like having you in my arms," he admits.

That only makes me grin wider. "That's too bad. I was hoping I could take you for a ride."

It takes him a minute to realize what I've said, but once it clicks, he smirks. "Then we better stop for condoms on the way to the hotel."

"Lead the way then."

As I walk out of the bar with him, I realize I have never felt as desired as I do in this moment.

It's all because of Kellan.



Kellan

Tonight has been perfect. It was a fight till the end, but we won our game. I think those victories are even sweeter because it shows how close the teams are skills-wise. Then we had a celebration, and for once, I got to go out with the guys I used to idolize. Grace was there, and I only felt happiness for her. The familiar shame is still there but faded.

Then there's Cora. She is what really made this night special. I've had many women sit up in the stands with my jersey, but I never once sought them out. Tonight, I wanted to see her cheering for me, my name on her back. I couldn't help the kiss I blew her way. I know the crowd was probably wondering what the hell I was doing, but she knew it was for her. Then we got to the bar, and everything escalated.

Dancing with Cora is the single most erotic thing I have ever done. The way her body pressed against mine, rubbing me in all the right ways. I was close to embarrassing myself in my pants, but thankfully I was able to hold off the release by naming off players on the championship teams for the last five years.

When she said she was hoping to take me for a ride, I knew there was no way I could tell her no. So I didn't.

Instead, I texted Wyatt and told him to find somewhere else to sleep.

After a quick stop at the corner convenience store for some condoms, we walked hand in hand down the sidewalk toward the hotel.

"Are you sure about this?" I ask Cora, holding open the door to let her go into the hotel in front of me.

"I am."

"If you're ever not sure, you'll tell me, right?" I pull her a little closer.

She squeezes me around my center as we stop to wait for the elevator.

“Your heart is racing. Maybe I should be asking you if you are sure about this.”

My hand reaches up, rubbing that spot on my chest that always hurts me. “I want to do this right,” I admit to her as the elevator dings before the doors open.

I step in, keeping her under my arm.

“There is no right or wrong, Kellan. There’s just us.”

Her words strike a chord in me. I’ve been doing everything I can to not be the man I was before. To be the man I think she deserves, but maybe I should be focused on being in the moment with her.

By the time we are standing at the door, I feel on edge. I have never been this nervous to be with a woman before.

That thought in itself has me wondering how shitty of a person I actually was because I know the reason why I care so much is because of Cora. I care about Cora more than I have ever cared about anyone else I have ever been in a relationship with. The connection we have, I feel it bone deep. As if she has burrowed her way into the very fiber of my being. I love every single minute of it.

As the door to my room closes behind me, she looks over the room. It’s not much. There are two queen beds with a nightstand between them. There is also a TV mounted on the wall with a dresser underneath it. Neither Wyatt nor I bothered to unpack, so our bags are sitting against the wall, our clothes sticking out of them. I’m glad Coach collected our hockey bags with our dirty clothes to put on the bus after the game. I’d hate to think what our room would smell like otherwise.

God, she’s beautiful, I think as I watch her take in the room. When she spins to face me, I feel like something has hit me in the chest.

I love this woman.

The thought doesn’t make me feel better, though. If anything, it has me feeling even more nervous.

“You rub your chest like that a lot,” Cora says suddenly.

I drop my hand, not realizing I had been rubbing it. “It’s subconscious. I don’t always know I’m doing it,” I admit.

“Do you have heartburn?”

I shake my head. “No. It happens mostly when I’m nervous or anxious.”

“Hmm.” She steps toward me, her hand coming to rest where I was rubbing on my chest. “Do I make you nervous, hotshot?”

“More than you fucking know, beautiful.”

She smiles up at me. “Good. You make me nervous too.”

I swallow hard. “I don’t want to fuck this up.”

“Shhh.” She leans up, taking my lips with hers once before pulling back. “There’s no pressure here. No expectations. Let’s just cuddle and see where it leads.”

I nod, walking over to my bag. I kick off my shoes and socks before stripping down to my boxers. The only thing I keep in my hands is the box of condoms. Then I turn, sucking in a gasp at what I see.

Standing in front of me is my very gorgeous girlfriend with my jersey falling to her knees. Her bare knees that were wearing jeans moments ago.

She reaches out for me, so I take her hand. I let her lead me to the bed, nearly nutting in my pants when she bends over to pull the covers back. She climbs under them, so I do too. I leave the box of condoms on the nightstand before I turn to face her.

As soon as I’m settled, she cuddles up next to me. She gets as close as she can, her lips only a breath away from my own.

“Such willpower you have. Most men wouldn’t be able to be this close without kissing a girl,” she teases.

I swallow hard. “I’m not most men, and you sure as hell aren’t most women.”

Her lip touches mine as she adjusts, her leg going over my body, making my dick twitch against it when it settles over me.

“Yeah, but still...”

My lips are on hers before she can finish the sentence. It wasn’t willpower holding me back. It was respect for her.

Trusting her to tell me if she wants me to stop, I lead the kiss, devouring her. My hand finds her leg, caressing it as I show her how much I truly want her with my body. She is right there with me.

It’s as if we are dancing. I slide my hand a little higher, she grinds into me harder. I kiss her a little deeper, and she pulls my hair, demanding I give her more. Each action of mine is met with enthusiasm from her.

I never thought she could feel a fraction of what I do, but in this moment, I think we are pretty evenly matched.

When my hand finally reaches her ass under my jersey, feeling nothing but skin, I groan into her mouth. “No underwear?” I ask her.

She shakes her head. “I was hoping we wouldn’t need any.”

Her eyes are flashing with mischief. Part of me wants to fuck her into the bed and show her what an animal she makes me, but the other part wants this to be different.

She is different.

So instead, I flip her on her back, kissing my way down her throat. I nip at her nipple through the jersey before finding my way between her legs. Pushing my head underneath the jersey, I find her glistening with arousal.

I don't hesitate. I lick her from opening to clit. When she lets out a loud moan, I do it again.

Some women can only get off with penetration while others need clit stimulation. Then others need a bit of both.

"Kellan, more," she whimpers, pulling at my hair.

I hum, making her arch into me. "Trust me. I'll take care of you."

Her breath catches as she nods, spreading her legs a little wider.

I take my time, exploring every single movement until I find the one that makes her scream the loudest. Thrusting my fingers inside her, I press down on her clit with my tongue until I feel her gush all over my tongue. I lap up every bit of release she gives me, not willing to leave a single drop behind.

When I finally come up for air, Cora is dazed and staring at me like I hung the moon.

She has me feeling like I'm the king of the world. The way she is looking at me now makes me feel like maybe, just maybe, I could be worthy of the love clearly shining in her eyes right now.

I know it's a mirage. I could never be worthy, but it encourages me to do everything in my power to be the man she needs. The one she deserves.

"Are you done? Do you want more?" I whisper, kissing her lips softly.

She grabs my cock in response, stroking it a few times. Then she reaches over, grabbing a condom.

I let her open it and push it down my length. There's something so intimate about allowing her to do it for me. It's not something I've ever trusted another woman with.

Once it's on, she positions me at her entrance.

I cup her cheek. "Look at me. The entire time I want your eyes on me."

She nods.

Slowly, I slide inside of her. It takes a few thrusts until I'm fully seated inside of her. Then I stare down at her, hoping my eyes are conveying how

my heart feels.

I love you.

The words want to spill from my lips but now is not the right time. I don't want her to ever question those words when they leave my mouth. I'm worried if I say them now, she will wonder if it was the emotions of the intimacy we are sharing.

No, I need her to know that I mean every single word.

So instead of speaking them out loud, I let my body tell hers what I am feeling.

I start off with a slow pace, grinding against her so that her clit is still stimulated.

As her breathing becomes more labored, I hitch her knees up over my arms, thrusting a little harder and deeper all the while keeping my eyes on hers.

She watches me right back with glassy eyes. Her mewls turn into moans. Before I know it, she is screaming out my name, her pussy clenching against me so hard, I come without warning. As my dick twitches inside of her, I shower her face with kisses.

Then she blinks up at me, the biggest smile on her face, and I know we are on the same page.

I love her, and I know she loves me too.

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twenty

Cora

A knock at the door has me looking over my shoulder.

“What are you still doing here?” Martha asks.

“Oh, I was just finishing up my report on my last visit,” I tell her.

“You didn’t have to do it here. I know you have somewhere you have to be.”

“Huh?”

“You said earlier when you came in that you had to take off early and to make sure you did because your sister-in-law needed a ride somewhere,” Martha says gently.

“Shit!” I jump up and start grabbing my things. “I totally lost track of time.”

“Slow down, Cora, no need to rush and get yourself hurt. You have time, but if you wait much longer, you’ll be late.”

Taking a deep breath, I nod. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“I usually am,” Martha quips.

“Can you handle this for me?” I hand her the report, and I put my bag over my shoulder.

“Of course. Drive safe, okay?”

“I will. Bye!”

I rush out of the building and head toward the car. I jump in and get it started. Grabbing my phone, I shoot off a quick text.

Me

I'm on my way.

Grace

Cool. Drive safe.

I put my phone away and then put on my seat belt. Leaving the parking lot, I smile when I see that overnight the city put up Halloween decorations on the light poles.

"About time, considering it's already October," I mutter to myself.

Fall holds a special place in my heart, but at the same time, I hate it because it means that winter is right around the corner. While I love winter in the beginning, by February, I'm over it and ready for spring.

I wonder if I could convince Kellan to go do a haunted house with me...

Thinking of Kellan makes me smile. I am so completely obsessed with him. Everything about being with him feels easy even though it's not. It doesn't feel like it's a chore spending time with him like it has in the past with some of my exes.

He looks at me differently than my exes did and gets me off when they couldn't.

I can't help but chuckle as the thought crosses my mind. We've only had sex once, but it was...amazing. It felt right. I can't wait for his fingers to dig into my hips again or to feel his skin on mine. We just need everyone to leave us alone so we can make it happen.

When neither of us is busy with classes, hockey, or work, it seems like one of our friends is always around. Either that or one of our roommates doesn't get the hint to give us some privacy.

Just the other day, Kellan asked his roommate if he minded giving us the room for an hour, and the guy looked at Kellan and flat-out told him no. The guy claimed he had a gaming tournament that he couldn't miss. The guy is so obsessed with video games I don't even know why he's at school. Surely his time would be better spent creating a gaming channel.

Even with our lack of making the magic happen, I'm happy. So fucking happy. I want to tell someone about it. I miss having a friend that I could spill all the dirty details of my relationship to. Sure, I could tell Peyton, but

if I tell her, then Grace would most likely find out. Grace knowing I slept with Kellan would be weird, right? Maybe? I don't know.

My mind is going a thousand miles a minute, and when I hear a loud pop and the steering wheel jerks, I jump.

"Shit!" I yell as I check my mirrors, making sure I can get over.

Once safely on the side of the road and the car is in park, I rub my chest. "This is why you don't drive while distracted, Cora," I mutter to myself.

Quickly, I turn on my hazard lights and then check the mirrors. When I see that the lane is clear, I get out. Rounding the car, I see that I have a flat back passenger side tire.

"Well, at least it wasn't on the driver's side closest to the road."

Sighing, I go to the passenger door and open it. I lean across the center console and hit the button to pop the trunk. After manhandling the spare tire out of its hole, I grab the shitty jack that comes with all cars and set it on the ground.

Now all I need to do is change it and then go pick Grace up. I check my watch and cringe. I'm already late, and there's no way I will make it to her in time.

Dammit, the one time Clay lends me the car to pick up Grace because he can't, and I mess it up.

What to do. What to do.

Fuck it.

I go back to the front passenger seat and grab my phone out of my purse. I find the number I want and press Call.

"Pick up. Pick up," I mumble to myself.

"Hey, beautiful, what's up?" Kellan asks.

"Hey, are you busy?"

"No...what's wrong?"

"I need a favor."

"Name it," he says with zero hesitation.

"I was supposed to pick up Grace, but I can't. I got a flat tire, and by the time I change it I'm going to be super late."

"Do you want me to come change it for you?" I hear him grabbing his keys, likely already headed out the door.

I shake my head even though he can't see me. "No, I was actually hoping you would go pick her up for me."

Kellan is quiet for so long that I pull the phone away from my ear to make sure the call is still connected.

"You there?" I ask.

Kellan clears his throat. "Do you think that's a good idea? Me picking up Grace."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I don't know. I don't have a problem with it, but I don't want to make you or Clay uncomfortable, or even her."

"Hotshot, you won't make any of us uncomfortable. It's not a big deal. Now will you do it or not?"

He blows out a breath. "Yeah, I can do that. As long as you're good with it."

"I'm good with it."

"Okay, where am I going?"

"I'll text it to you."

"Okay, let me know when you get that tire changed and are on your way back from campus, okay? If you need help, don't be afraid to call me."

"I will, and Kellan?"

"Yeah, beautiful?"

"Thank you."



Kellan

My hands shake as I start my truck.

Part of me is torn. I want to go to Cora and help her. She shouldn't have to change a tire on her own. That's why she has me, right? I should do the typical guy tasks for her, but no. She asked me to pick up Grace for her. Cora doesn't ask for much, so I do as she asks even though it goes against all my instincts.

I pull up in front of the building and see Grace sitting on the steps. Putting the truck in park, I jump up and round the hood. "Grace."

She looks up and frowns. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

“Cora asked me to pick you up. She got tied up,” I tell her as I open the passenger side door.

Grace stands and walks toward me. “Is she okay? She texted me and told me she was on her way. I was starting to worry because she should have been here by now.”

“She got a flat tire.”

Grace opens her mouth, but I raise my hand to cut her off.

“I offered to change her tire for her, but she turned me down. She was more worried about you than anything else. Now get in.”

Grace rolls her eyes but does as I ask.

“I forgot how demanding you can be,” she mumbles as I shut the door.

Rounding the hood, I get into the driver’s seat. “So why was Cora picking you up?” I ask as I start the truck and start driving.

“Oh, Clay had a study session tonight. He says I’m too distracting to be his study partner these days. He was going to leave early, but Cora volunteered to pick me up.”

“Ahh.”

We fall silent. It’s the first time we’ve been alone together since the end of last year and it’s...weird. We never had a problem with filling the silence before, but now we don’t know what to say to each other.

Don’t lie. You know what needs to be said. You know you need to make your amends.

I know I need to, but it’s hard. How do you even start that kind of conversation?

“Hey, are you okay?” she asks, cutting off my runaway thoughts.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

“You’re squeezing the shit out of the steering wheel,” she says, looking at my hands.

Wincing, I look down at my hands and see, sure enough, I’m squeezing it so tight that my knuckles have turned white.

Loosening my grip, I sigh. “Do you have anywhere you have to be?”

“No...”

“Can we go somewhere and talk? I have some things I want to say to you.”

She hesitates for a second. “Sure. Milkshakes?”

“Works for me.” I turn on my blinker and head toward the chain ice cream shop I know we both like.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Grace pull out her phone and shoot off a text.

“Cora messaged me. She apologized for not being able to pick me up. She’s on her way back to campus now.”

“So she got the tire taken care of?”

“Sounds like she got the donut on it for now. So yeah.”

“I’ll check her tires and see if all of them need replacing or if only the two do.”

“Kellan, you need to be careful,” she warns as I pull into the ice cream shop.

“With what?”

“The James siblings can be a little prideful when it comes to money. If she doesn’t want you to cover the cost, then don’t, okay?”

“But if I can help...”

“I know, but still. It’s hard for me too, but it’s one of those things you shouldn’t push. Trust me.”

I rub my face. “I don’t like it, but okay.”

We both get out of the truck and head toward the shop.

“Thank you,” she says when I hold the door open for her.

“You’re welcome.”

We go up to the counter and place our orders. She gets a chocolate brownie shake while I get a strawberry one. It almost feels like old times.

Almost.

“Thanks for paying,” she says as we sit down.

“Of course.”

“So what did you want to talk about?”

Taking a deep breath, I jump right in. “I’m sorry.”

She raises a brow. “Sorry for?”

“For everything?” I say, making us both laugh for a moment. “For real, I’m so sorry for last year. For all the years before then. For not being what you needed. Even more than that. For not noticing that I wasn’t being what you needed. My selfishness knew no bounds, and you got caught in the crossfire. I took advantage of you. Of the friendship you were offering me. I was an idiot, and I fucked it all up. You will never know how deeply I regret it.”

“So just everything,” she jokes, winking at me.

“Everything.” I nod.

Grace bites her bottom lip as she plays with the straw in her shake. I know she's trying to gather her thoughts, so I wait her out.

"You caused me a lot of pain. I think part of me broke in the eleventh grade when you told me we could never be together."

My heart feels like it's in a vise.

"I know. I was in such a shitty place then. I had this hockey career ahead of me. Girls were throwing themselves at me. Then you, the only woman I ever trusted, said you wanted to be with me, and I panicked. Part of me wanted to say yes to spare your feelings and fulfill my mom's wishes. The other part couldn't handle the thought of having to fake it with you. I knew if I had said yes, we would have broken up, and my best friend would be gone. It was a shitty way to let you down, but I didn't know what else to do. It broke my heart to watch you run off to the bathroom to cry. I never forgot about it."

Her eyes look glassy now. I really hope she doesn't cry. I could never handle her tears.

"Back then, it felt like the end of the world, but you know what I've learned?" she asks.

"What?" I ask.

"Sometimes we have to face some really tough times to be able to appreciate the good ones. Each experience you have helps you build character. It's not about what you go through, it's about how you react to it. Not only that, but when you do make a mistake, how do you learn from it and try to be better."

I nod solemnly. I didn't react well. I hope I'm learning, though.

"You should know I forgive you."

I feel my body relax at her words. Thank fuck.

"But you know it wasn't all your fault, right?"

I shake my head, caught off guard. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah, you did shit last year that never should have happened. You should have taken my rejection the first time and respected what I wanted, but it wasn't entirely your fault. I let you walk all over me for years. We did everything you wanted to do, and I did it happily. I was good with it at the time. I thought I could wait forever for you to love me back, but that wasn't fair to you. It wasn't fair to push my feelings on you so hard. Especially now that I know you felt that pressure from your mom too. You could have never loved me the way that I needed."

“I couldn’t, and it fucking kills me. I wanted to,” I murmur.

Grace nods. “I know you did. I might not have known it at the time, but I knew it when I saw the way you were attempting to fight for me. Your heart wasn’t in it. Maybe things would have been different if I told you what I wanted or if I had yelled at you for how you were treating me, but we will never know. As far as I’m concerned, though, it’s water under the bridge. We’ve both moved on, and we’re happy. You are happy, right?” she presses.

“For the most part, yeah.”

“What aren’t you happy about?” she asks, tilting her head to the side.

“I miss our friendship. I miss my best friend. I love Cora, and she’s becoming my best friend, but...”

“But sometimes you need one who isn’t your partner.” She smiles.

“Exactly.”

“I miss you too sometimes,” she confesses.

“Don’t say that too loud or Peyton might hear you,” I tease, making her laugh.

“Oh god, she would be so jealous.”

“I can only imagine the fit she would throw.”

“It would be dreadful,” she quips.

We fall silent for a moment, and for the first time since shit fell apart between us, it doesn’t feel like a cloud is hanging over us.

“So are we good?” I ask.

Grace looks up at me. “Yeah, Kellan, we’re good.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

“Me too.”

We get up, tossing our empty shake cups into the trash. Then I drive her to the hockey house.

Before she jumps out of the truck, she turns to me. “Hey, Kells?”

“Yes, Gracie?”

“You never once looked at me the way you look at her. Treat her the way she deserves.”

As she shuts the door, I don’t bother telling her I will. That promise isn’t for her.

It’s for the girl I’m head over heels in love with.

twenty-one

Cora

“Hey, beautiful. It’s time to wake up.”
His husky tone has me burying my face deeper into the pillow. He chuckles, squeezing me tighter.

“I know. I have to get to the rink, though,” he whispers against my ear.

My eyes flutter open, only it’s not him I see. It’s his roommate’s back as he plays his game on his side of the room.

Kellan shifts from behind me, kissing the side of my neck. I soak in the warmth of him at my back.

I wasn’t planning to stay the night last night, but once we laid down, I was a goner. I’m glad I did, though.

“I wish we could do something about that morning wood you have,” I whisper to him as I turn over in his arms.

He smirks. “I could sneak you into the shower with me.”

I glance back over my shoulder to see his roommate not paying us a lick of attention. “Let’s do it.”

He cups my chin, turning my face back toward him. “Are you being serious?”

I bite my lower lip and nod.

It's been hard for us to find time alone. With me sharing a room with Peyton and him sharing as well, we have nowhere to go to have some alone time.

That's got to change next year.

"Yes."

He jumps out of the bed, pulling me up with him. Grabbing his shower caddy and two towels, he leads me out of the room. When he gets to the bathroom, he pokes his head in before pulling me inside. He claims a stall in the far back corner, setting his stuff in the cubby outside. Then he turns the water on and starts undressing.

I swear I'm drooling as I watch him peel off his T-shirt, showcasing his very fit physique. The man sure knows how to take good care of himself. I wonder if he would let me lick chocolate off of him. It would be an interesting experience.

"You getting in with your clothes on?" His voice startles me from my thoughts.

I blush but start to undress. He takes my clothes from me, hiding them under the towels before he pulls me into the shower, shutting the curtain behind us.

"You have to be very quiet. Anyone can come in at any time, and girls aren't allowed in here," he tells me.

That should change my mind, but it doesn't. If anything, the threat of getting caught has me burning hotter for Kellan.

"Guess you'll have to do your best to make me scream then, won't you, hotshot?"

I see the challenge flash behind his eyes. I smirk at it. I loved our first time. It was sweet and proved to me that he feels very strongly for me. He hasn't said the L-word yet, but I know it's there. Just like it sits inside of me as well.

I don't want that right now, though. I want dirty, feral Kellan. The man he can be when he is passionate. I've seen it on the ice. Now I want to see what that man can do to my body.

He pushes me back against the shower wall, making me hiss at the coolness of it. He doesn't stop, though. His lips fall on mine, silencing the last bit of sound as he begins to kiss me like his life depends on it.

My leg comes up to circle his hip, grinding against his hard cock. He presses in closer to me, giving me the friction I needed.

I moan against his mouth, but he smothers the sound. After several minutes of grinding, he stops, pulling back.

“Turn around, hands on the wall,” he demands.

My body practically jumps to do his bidding. I hear the curtain move, making my core clench at the thought that someone might be out there.

After a moment, I hear the telltale sign that he is opening a condom. Then he is at my back, his cock running through my wetness.

“So ready for me,” he mumbles, kissing the side of my face. Then his hand comes up, covering my mouth. “Can’t have you letting the whole dorm know whose cock you love. Gotta keep that good girl reputation intact,” he whispers, sliding his cock inside my pussy.

I moan, pushing back against him. His free hand slides between me and the wall, rolling my nipple between his fingers as he sets a slow, steady pace.

“Such a dirty girl. You didn’t hesitate to come in here with me. You love being dirty for me, don’t you, beautiful?”

I can’t respond to him. All I can do is pant against his hand.

I hear the main door open and the sound of soft footsteps on the tile. I clench against him.

“There’s someone in here with us. You want them to hear you?”

I let out a little squeak, biting down on his hand. He hisses but starts fucking me harder. I’m sure the person can hear us, but after a few minutes, a toilet flushes before the door opens and closes again.

My toes curl as my orgasm rips through me.

“Fuck, so fucking tight. You’re strangling me,” Kellan grunts into my ear.

Two thrusts later, I feel him jerking inside of me, the movement causing me to moan as I feel my core clench against him.

He drops his hand from my mouth, wrapping his arms around me to hug me to his body as he kisses the side of my face.

We stay like that a moment, each breathing heavily. When he finally pulls back, he gently pushes me under the water. Then he methodically washes every part of me. Once we are done, he dries me just as gently and caringly as he washed me.

We don’t speak again until we are dressed and ready to head back to his room.

“I’ll drop this inside, then drive you home.”

I nod. "Okay."

I wait for him outside his door as he drops his shower caddy and grabs his hockey bag. Then he takes my hand, leading me down the hall.

I can't help but feel like I'm floating in the clouds as he walks with me to his truck. I don't know how I ever thought I could give him up. He's become the single most important person in my life.

After he helps me in the truck and drops his bag into the bed of the truck, he climbs into the driver's side, once again taking my hand.

"Are you ready for the game?" I ask him.

He looks over at me for a moment, smiling. "I am. I feel like my life is back on track. The talk with Grace helped ease some tension off of me that I didn't realize I was carrying. Then I have you here keeping me on my toes. Seriously, you're the main reason I smile." He pulls my hand to his lips, kissing it.

"You're exaggerating."

"Not even a little bit. Before you, my days were dark and gloomy. Now all I see is blue skies. It's like that song that talks about seeing clearly after the storms pass. That's you. You help me see the sky."

I blink away the emotion filling me. Sometimes I hate that I feel things so deeply. It makes me react to every little thing. Like the man I love telling me that I'm so important in his world.

He pulls up to my dorm a moment later, putting the car in park. Then he looks over at me.

"Cora, I know you don't see yourself like I see you. You're confident, sassy as hell, sexier than anyone has the right to be, caring with the biggest heart that this world has ever seen, and forgiving even when most people wouldn't blame you for holding a grudge. You helped your mom keep things going when Clay left to come here. I know you still call her to check in on her. I'd bet you refuse the money she tries to send you too. You are the single best person I have ever met in my life. I knew the moment I met you that you were something special. I didn't realize what you would come to mean to me."

My cheeks are heated as I ask him, "What do I mean to you, Kellan?"

He cups my cheek, tscking his tongue.

"Don't you know, beautiful? I love you more than words could ever express. They will be writing poetry about the way I feel about you, but they will never get it right. My body is filled with so much love for you that

there are times I feel like I can't breathe unless you are by my side. I know one thing for certain in this life, and it's the way I will always feel about you. I will love you until my dying breath. There's no option not to. You're it for me."

The tears are falling now. He's wiping them away as quickly as they fall. I suck in a breath. Then another. After several more, I finally collect myself. Kellan is patient through the entire ordeal, even though I know he is going to be late to practice.

"I love you, hotshot. I have for a while now."

He smiles, nodding, "I know. You knew I loved you too. This thing between us? It doesn't need any words. It's part of why we work so well. You know how I feel and what I want to say before I even say it. Just like one look from you from across the room, and I know what you need."

He's right. It's been that way for a while. I feel so in tune with him that if he were to take a step, I would match it every single time without looking.

Leaning over the center console, I press my lips to his. He kisses me back passionately. I'm ready to climb into his lap when his phone dings.

He ignores it, but I don't. I pull back, pecking him one last time.

"You're late," I whisper.

He nods, smirking at me. "You're worth it."



Kellan

It's a home game. The arena is going nuts.

So far we have the best record this season. Even with the struggles, we are on track to make it to the championships.

This year is shaping up to be the best year yet. The chemistry between us on the ice is better than it has ever been.

I'm getting ready by my locker when Clay comes in. I stiffen, not sure if he knows I took Grace home yesterday.

He doesn't stop at his locker, instead heading right toward me.

Right, so he knows. I wonder if he's about to punch me. My hands grow sweaty as my heart starts to go haywire.

I'm not ready to lose the camaraderie that I've gained with the guys. I have to accept it, though. Whatever Clay says, I will take it with my head held high.

"Hey, man." Clay stops beside me, patting my shoulder.

"Hey. What's going on?" I ask, my teeth clenching.

"I owe you. Thanks for getting Grace home safely. She's everything to me, so I'm glad you were able to swoop in and save her when I couldn't," he tells me.

So he doesn't want to beat my face in. Cool.

"You would have been there had she called. Besides, Cora was supposed to get her. I only grabbed her when she couldn't." I shrug as if it's no big deal.

"I see you, Kellan." He keeps his tone low. "You didn't have to go, but you did. You cleared the air with her and repaired something in her that I could never touch. Thank you."

I nod. "I needed it too."

"I know, bro."

"Are we done with the pillow talk? Jesus, you two are pansies. How are you even captain?" Hendricks calls out.

Clay's eyes tighten as he turns toward the guy. "Keep your lip up and you'll be sitting out of the game. I wonder how many scouts would want to know about your shitty attitude. You do know they talk to the captains of the team too, don't you? Not just the coach," Clay calls out.

That has Hendricks sobering and turning back to his locker.

"Douchebag," I mutter.

"You're telling me. I got rid of one only to replace him with another," he jokes, nudging me.

"I'm still here though," I tell him.

"Yes, but the douchebag isn't. Let's go win this game. For our girls."

He walks away from me, going to his own locker to get ready.

For our girls. I like the sound of that.

"Good to see you and Cap made up," Wyatt says, sitting down on the bench to wrap his hands.

"Yeah, I didn't realize how much it affected my game to be at odds with him."

“Your emotions always affect your game. Even if you think you can leave them at the door, it never happens. It’s not human nature.” He stands, walking away after dropping that little tidbit.

“Come on, guys, time to get on the ice,” Brett calls.

He’s taken to being the coach’s assistant this season. I thought I would hate it at the beginning of the year, but now I can see how well he does at it.

He would be a good leader.

I think I’ll vote for him to be captain next year.

Heading out to the ice, we start to warm up. I spot the girls, blowing a kiss to Cora like I have taken to doing at all my games now.

She smiles, pretending to catch it and hold it to her chest.

I’m blessed to have her.

As warm-ups end, Coach calls us to the bench to have a last-minute pep talk. I notice Hendricks is absent, making me wonder what happened to him. It’s not until I’m getting onto the ice with Beckett that I find out.

“Hendricks got pulled. Coach heard what he said to you and Clay. He’s off the team.”

I’m shocked, but I try not to show it.

Holy shit. In the grand scheme of things, what he said wasn’t bad. Thank God he never heard half the shit that I thought last year. I could have been gone just as quickly.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

“That could have been you. Glad you got your shit together, Coop. I like you,” he says as if he read my mind. Beckett pats my shoulder. “Now go win the faceoff. No pressure or anything.”

He has me laughing as I skate up to the circle. Then I wait. One heartbeat. Then another.

The puck drops, and I’m on the move. I pass it easily toward Beckett. He has it, passing it down to Clay.

I skate like my life depends on it, pushing to get down ice.

Clay sees me, passing the puck back my way.

The opening is clear, so I take it. I slap the shot right at the net.

Their goalie tries his best to block it, but it skates by him by less than an inch, flying into the back of the net.

Thirty seconds into the game, and I’ve scored the first goal.

All the guys surround me, congratulating me. I hear my name over the speakers along with Clay’s for the assist.

I turn, pointing at Cora, and mouth, *for you*.

It's true.

All of this progress I've made has been for her. If you had asked me two months ago if I would be cool with the guys again and playing at the top of my game, I would have called you a liar. I felt so hopeless. Like I was stuck in a rut that I would never get out of.

Until she came along and rescued me.

The rest of the game flies by in a blur. For the first time this season, we win without letting them score a single goal. It's the best we have ever played. Wyatt protected the net like his life depended on it, and we got a shutout.

Everyone can feel the difference in the air. We aren't the team struggling to get along or work together anymore.

We found our harmony.

As we celebrate in the locker room, all I can think about is getting out to my girl. I shower quickly, laughing when Clay is racing me out of the locker room.

Right outside, we find them. Grace, Peyton, and Cora are waiting for us as they laugh with one another.

Without hesitation, I drop my bag, walking right up to Cora to cup her cheeks. Then I kiss her like it's the last thing I will ever do.

When I finally pull back, she smiles up at me. "Good game, hotshot."

"I love you." The words fall out of my lips before I kiss her again.

I can't stop.

This is the woman I will spend the rest of my life with.

twenty-two

Cora

Br.

I can't help but shiver as I walk across campus to the administration building. While the temperature has been slowly going down each day, this morning it feels more than obvious that Halloween is right around the corner.

My social media has been filled with cute little towns that go all out for the holidays, hanging ghosts from lamp posts while hanging pumpkin lights in trees. I never knew towns like that existed, and now I'm obsessed.

I wonder if there are any close to us. Maybe Kellan and I can go on a little date to one.

Shaking my head, I make my way inside and down the hall to the door I need.

"Hi, how can I help you today?" the woman behind the counter asks.

"Morning, I have a meeting with Miss Monroe."

The woman looks at her computer screen and nods. "Cora?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Perfect. How about you take a seat, and I'll call her to let her know you are here?" she says as she picks up the phone.

"Thank you." I offer her a smile before walking over to the chairs they have against the glass wall.

Before I can even sit down, someone says my name.

“Cora? You can come right on back. How are you?” she asks as I fall into step behind her.

“I’m good. How are you?”

“I’m great. Thanks for asking,” she says as we walk into her office. “Please, take a seat.”

I do as she says and sit down. I watch as she rounds her desk and shuffles through a few papers.

“Sorry, you are my first student this morning, so I’m not as organized as I usually am.”

“It’s okay. Take your time.”

I wait a few minutes and watch her work. The clock ticking in the background seems to grow louder by the minute, setting me slightly on edge. I don’t know why, but sitting in here almost makes me feel like I’m sitting in the principal’s office, about to be in trouble.

She leans forward and rests her elbows on her desk. “Okay, sorry about that. Now tell me, how are your classes going?”

“Well. I’m passing everything.”

“Yes, I see that you’re passing, but how do you feel about the classes?” she asks kindly.

For a moment, I hesitate. I want to tell her that they are pointless and a waste of time. That I don’t feel like I’ve learned anything inside of a classroom this year on campus that I didn’t already know.

“So far they seem repetitive,” I say cautiously.

She nods. “You aren’t the first person to say that. The first half of the school year can be tricky for students. Especially freshmen, depending on the classes.” She tilts her head to the side. “Although, personally, I think some subjects stay the same all around.”

“So it’s not just me?”

“Oh, most definitely not.”

“Phew.” I pretend to wipe sweat from my brow, making her laugh.

“Have you thought about a major? I saw that you were undeclared when you started the year.”

“I was thinking about social work.”

Miss Monroe’s head bobs. “Very admirable profession and definitely isn’t for the weak. Do you have any experience?”

“Some. I’ve been volunteering over at DHS since the school year started.”

“Oh really? How are you liking it?”

“I love it, honestly. The people are great, and I love my boss.”

“That’s what I like to hear. We can totally get you set up to take classes you need for that major if that’s what you want.”

I open my mouth but shut it.

“What’s on your mind?” she asks, reading me like a book.

“Honestly, I was contemplating dropping out. I feel like I’m here for the wrong reasons, and I kind of feel guilty that someone else could be using my grant or have my spot here who really wants it. Martha at DHS offered me a job that I can start right away without a degree. They even have a program that will pay for school if I want to come back later down the road.”

She nods slowly. “And you’re thinking about taking it...”

“I am.”

“Let me check something real quick.” She turns toward her computer and starts typing. After a few minutes, she turned back toward me. “Okay, let me start by saying that this is one hundred percent your decision. Only you know what’s best for you. The last thing I want is for you to be miserable doing something you don’t want to. With that said, though, your grant goes until May. If you choose to stay in school, you will have to reapply, but as long as you meet their requirements, you’ll get it. If you choose to drop out at Christmas, though, that grant won’t go to anyone until next year. They won’t pick someone new to give it to. Same thing with your status here at the university. We are no longer accepting new students for January. So again, the slot you give up wouldn’t go to someone else, not yet at least.”

“Okay...”

“Personally, if I were you, I would tough it out for the rest of the year. Your costs are covered, and you would be able to have all your gen-ed classes out of the way if and when you decide to come back. Again, the choice is yours. I’m just telling you how it looks on our end.”

Chewing on my lip, I run my hand through my hair. I don’t know what to do. Part of me was hoping that when I came in here this morning, she would tell me exactly what I wanted to hear. That I could easily leave and someone could take my place without missing a step, but of course it’s not

that easy. There is also the idea that I would have had to move back home if I dropped out in January. So maybe this is the sign I needed to finish out the year.

“Have you talked to your loved ones about this?” she asks.

“No, not yet,” I admit.

“You should. Sometimes another perspective can help us make the right decision.”

Kellan instantly comes to mind. Should I be figuring him into all of this? Will he support me in my decision, or will he be like my mom, who instantly dismissed the thought?

Kellan would never.

“You’re right.” I stand. “Thank you. For everything.”

Miss Monroe stands and holds her hand out to shake mine. “Of course. My door is always open if you need to talk.”

Smiling, I leave her office. When I step outside, the chill slaps me in the face, stealing my breath. It almost feels like it resets my system in a way.

Knowing what I need to do, I pull out my phone and shoot off a text.

Me

Hey, are you busy? I want to run something by you.



Kellan

My heart races as I run up the steps into Cora’s dorm building. I don’t know why, but her text made unease rush through me. Especially when she said that she wanted to meet in private.

My mind races with the possibilities of what she wants to talk about. Did something happen between the last time I saw her and now? Did I do something wrong? Did fucking Monica harass her again?

Hurrying my steps, I make my way to her dorm room door and knock. Seconds later, Cora answers with a small smile on her face.

“Hey, hotshot, thanks for coming,” she says as she steps to the side.

Okay, she seems fine, so that means we're good, right?

"Hey, are you okay?" she asks.

Shaking my head, I realize she was waiting for me to come inside.

"Are we okay?" I blurt out, unable to make my feet move until I know for sure.

Cora's eyes soften. "We are great, Kellan. This isn't bad, I promise."

Taking a deep breath, I nod and step inside. I pull her body into mine as the door falls shut behind me.

"I'm sorry to make you worry," she murmurs against my chest.

"It's okay."

She pops up on her tiptoes and gives me a sweet kiss. All too soon, she pulls away.

"Come on." She grabs me by the hand and drags me toward her bed. I sit down with my feet hanging over the edge with my back to the wall. Cora doesn't curl up into my side like normal, though. Instead she sits on the edge of the bed, facing me.

My anxiety spikes again when I see that she's wringing her hands together.

"Beautiful, I need you to put me out of my misery and tell me what's going on. I'm a fuckin' wreck over here," I admit.

"So, I had to meet with my adviser today, and I want your opinion on something."

"Okay..."

"Look, I'm just going to come out and say it. I really, really want to drop out."

Shit, that's it? Here I was thinking it was something serious when all it is is her wanting to do something different.

I shrug. "So do it."

Confusion fills her face. "Wait, what? Don't you want to know why?"

"I mean, yeah, but why would I try to change your mind about something you feel that strongly about? It's your life, Cora. I can't make you do something you don't want to."

"I..." She shakes her head. "This is not how I saw things going."

"Me neither," I quip, making her laugh. "Okay, tell me."

Nodding, she takes a deep breath. "So you know how I love my volunteer work?"

"Of course."

“Well, I found out that to work there, like to earn a paycheck there, I don’t have to have a college degree. I can do the same thing I’m doing now but be on the payroll. If I take the job, they are willing to pay for my schooling down the line if that’s what I want.”

“And you want to drop out to work there.”

“I do.”

“What’s stopping you from doing it then?”

Cora winces. “My mom. Clay. Society?”

“One, fuck society. You don’t have to have a fancy piece of paper that puts you in debt to be a functioning member of society. Second, your mom and Clay both love you. I’m sure if you told them your plan, they would support you.”

She looks down at her hands, still wringing her fingers together. “I don’t know. I tried to broach the subject with my mom, but she shut it down. She thought it was about the money, but that’s not it at all.”

Unable to take it any longer, I reach over and pull her into my arms and lace my fingers through hers.

“Then try again. If you want, I’ll go with you to talk to her in person about it. That way she knows you’re serious.”

Cora looks up at me and searches my eyes. “Really?”

“Really.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“Because it can be. Will I miss seeing you on campus all the time? Sure, but that doesn’t mean I won’t see you at all. You’ll still be here in town.”

“I will,” she says softly.

“Then we are good, beautiful.”

“What about you?”

I frown. “What about me?”

“Well, if we’re making plans for me, what are yours?”

“You mean with school or hockey?”

She shrugs. “Both.”

I blow out a breath. “If you would have asked me this question last year, I would have told you I would be entering the draft at the end of the season.”

“But now?”

“I want to stay. Shit, Cora, I’ve learned so much about myself this year it isn’t even funny. I feel like I’m a better hockey player than I was last year,

and I know if I stay and with the help of Coach, I'll only get better. Is there a risk of injury? Of course, but that's a risk I'm willing to take."

"So you want to enter the draft at the end of your senior year? Like Clay is doing?"

"I do."

"I won't lie. I like the idea of having you to myself for two more years," she says with a little smile.

"I like that too, beautiful."

"You know, if you would have entered this year, you could have gone with Clay."

"I could have, but it's not the right call. I want to see what I can do here first. Besides, after last year, I want to prove to myself that I'm not in his shadow. That I'm doing all of this for the right reasons and not because I'm trying to compete with him."

"I get not wanting to live in his shadow," she says softly.

"Beautiful, you can't be in his shadow when all you do is light up any room you walk into."

Cora rolls her eyes and giggles. "That was cheesy."

I squeeze her tight. "You like it."

"I do."

"So are we good? Do we have a game plan?"

"We're good. You and me, together and living here for the next two years. Once you enter the draft, we can make a new plan."

"Fuck, beautiful, I like hearing you talk about our future that far down the road."

"It's going to be a wild ride, I'm sure."

A wild ride that hopefully ends up with me wearing a ring that she puts on my finger and her with my last name.

Fuck, I hope this all works out. I need it to, because I don't know what I would do without her next to me.

twenty-three

Cora

“Dude, is this real life right now?” Peyton asks as she scans the hotel room.

“It’s something that’s for sure,” I murmur, shaking my head.

I don’t know how Kellan and Wyatt did it, but they pulled off the ultimate surprise. According to Kellan, they got the guys on board at practice, and then when he came over, he convinced Peyton and me to go along with a surprise. I asked him about Grace, but he said Clay would make sure she came too.

When we arrived at the airport, though, is when my hesitation kicked in. Flying is a lot of money, and if you fly, then you can’t go home, which means even more money on hotel rooms. Kellan could tell I was uncomfortable and told me to trust him, leading to now.

The guys splurged and got suites. Each suite has two bedrooms and a shared living room area.

Kellan and I are in a suite with Clay and Grace. Peyton is in the other suite with Beckett, Brett, and Wyatt. Peyton offered to take the couch, but the guys wouldn’t hear of it. Two suites in New York City with high-rise views and a doorman have to be expensive.

Peyton about choked when she saw how luxurious it was. She tried to tell the guys to put her in the cheap motel down the street, but they wouldn’t

hear of it. They told her to shove her complaints somewhere else because it wouldn't be right to be here without her. It was actually kind of sweet and had me biting my own tongue and simply saying thank you.

They are up to something, though. They herded us all into the suite Grace and I are sharing while they ran some errands.

Grace hums as she looks around. "Not bad."

"Not bad? Girlfriend, I think our definitions of not bad are different," I tell her.

Peyton laughs. "No kidding. We didn't grow up with the kind of money they did."

Grace's cheeks turn red. "Hey, this wasn't my idea, so don't look at me."

"Did they tell you guys where we are going tonight?" I ask as I sit on a chair in the corner by the window.

"Nope," Grace and Peyton say in unison as someone knocks on the door.

"I got it." Peyton goes over and answers the door.

I hear low murmuring but don't pay any mind to it. My attention is firmly on the gridlocked street below.

How do people live like that?

"Let's see what they brought us," Peyton says as she sets a bag on her bed.

I watch as she pulls three outfits out and lays them on the bed.

"Is that lingerie?" I ask as I get up to get a closer look.

"Looks like it," Grace mutters.

"Hey, at least they were nice enough to get us booty shorts instead of thongs," Peyton says as she holds one up that has her name on it.

The one with my name is a deep green color. Grace's is a plum shade, and Peyton's is the brightest of all in a blood red.

"I'm not wearing that." I shake my head.

"You have to. I'm sure they picked these outfits for a reason," Peyton says.

"Dude, you want my brother to see me in that?" I give her a look.

Peyton and Grace both wince.

"I'm sure it won't be too bad. It's like a bathing suit, right?" Grace says lightly as she pushes up her glasses.

“Exactly. I’m sure we won’t be the only ones dressed crazy. It’s Halloween weekend. Besides, it’s not like we are going to run into people from back home outside of the guys. We have nothing to worry about.”

I’m not going to win.

Sighing, I hold out my hand. “Fine. Let’s do this before I change my mind.”



“What is this place?” I ask over the loud music.

“This is the hottest Halloween party in the city,” Kellan murmurs into my ear.

“We had to come all the way to New York City for a party?” I tease.

Kellan smirks and shrugs his shoulder. “We’re only young once, right?”

“Very true.” I look around the room, and I’m both relieved and shocked to see that there are people wearing way less than us in attendance.

It was so weird. At the door, the guys had to give their names and everything. It’s way more formal than any party I have ever been to.

“Did I tell you that you look fucking fantastic tonight, beautiful?”

I eye my man. “You too. It’s a good thing we got ready separately, otherwise, we would have never left the room.”

Kellan laughs like I’m joking, but I’m not. While they dressed us as Victoria’s Secret Angels, the guys dressed as Calvin Klein underwear models. I thought for sure at least one of them would look uncomfortable, but all five guys look as if it’s a typical Friday night. Then again, maybe it is for them, considering they see each other naked on the daily.

“Do I want to know what you were just thinking about?” Kellan asks, tearing me from my thoughts.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you don’t. Just because it’s dark in here doesn’t mean I didn’t see you blush.” He smirks.

Before I can come up with anything to say, our friends join us at the table with enough drinks for everyone.

“This place is crazy!” Grace yells.

“I fucking love it,” Peyton says, raising a drink.

“Of course you do,” Beckett teases her.

Peyton pushes a shot toward me, and I pick it up. When everyone raises theirs, I realize that Clay and Kellan are both missing one.

“What about you two?”

“We’re not drinking tonight,” Kellan tells me.

Clay nods. “We’re in charge of making sure everyone gets back safely.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind not drinking,” I tell them.

I’m not even old enough to drink. Kellan really isn’t either, come to think of it.

Kellan’s hand flexes on my hip. “Drink if you want to, beautiful. I got you.”

“Okay, okay. We need to cheers,” Peyton says.

“To condoms and bathroom hookups,” Brett says, making everyone cringe.

“To a Halloween for the record books,” Grace says, shaking her head.

We all tap our glasses together and repeat her before taking a drink. The tequila warms my throat as it goes down, making me shiver.

Fuck. I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to tequila or even if I want to.

“Hey, do we know them?” Grace asks, pointing across the room.

We all follow her line of sight and see a woman sitting on a man’s lap while holding the hand of another, while one more looks down at her like the sun rises and sets on her.

“Holy shit, is that Aurora Blake?” Peyton yells.

“Well, I would hope so considering this is one of their parties,” Wyatt deadpans.

“Who?” my brother asks cluelessly.

“Aurora Blake, she’s a huge social media influencer,” Kellan tells him.

“Why is she letting three dudes touch her?” Clay asks.

“Because why not?” Peyton challenges.

Clay raises his hands, signaling he means nothing by it.

“Wait, doesn’t she have four boyfriends?” Grace asks.

“I’m assuming that’s the dude who’s approaching them like he’s on a mission,” Brett says.

We watch as the fourth man in question walks right up to her, cutting off the conversation she was in and covers her mouth with his.

“Holy shit,” I can’t help but mumble.



Kellan

While Cora looks at the United Nations and their woman, my eyes don't leave her. The red from her cheeks travels down her neck, and she doesn't look away.

Holy shit is right. My girl likes watching them do their thing. I always knew she had a kinky side to her.

I wonder what else she would like watching. Or better yet, how she would feel about someone watching us.

Do I really want to share her like that, though? Do I want to risk someone seeing her as she comes and the way she gasps my name?

Discreetly, I adjust my hardening cock under the table. The last thing I need right now is for her brother to see it.

Talk about making shit fucking awkward.

"If sex was an Olympic sport, she would be a gold medalist," Peyton says randomly.

"What?" Beckett asks what we are all thinking.

Peyton shrugs. "Think about it. She bangs four dudes on the regular. That's a lot of sex. My pussy is weeping at the thought of it."

"Weeping in jealousy or in the idea of it?" Beckett asks her.

She raises her brow. "Wouldn't you like to know, big guy?"

"I would actually." He looks desperate for the answer.

"Okay, enough, you two. Let's try to keep things as PG as possible. The last thing we need is to be arrested for indecent exposure and having to call Coach," Clay says.

"Spoilsport," Brett mutters, making Clay roll his eyes.

Peyton picks up her drink and slams it. "Bottoms up, bitches. Let's go dance."

Grace and Cora share a look before shrugging at each other. Both women reach forward and grab another drink from the center of the table and drink it in one go.

"Are you coming with me?" Cora asks as she slides off her stool.

"You know it, beautiful."

"I got the table," Wyatt says to no one in particular.

Like the saps that Clay and I are, we follow the girls onto the dance floor. At first we start out dancing by our friends, but by the third song, enough people have moved between them and us, making it so they are out of sight.

Cora intentionally brushes her ass against my cock, making my eyes roll.

Fuck me.

Leaning down, I nip at her ear. "Is my girl wet and needy for me?"

"How about you find out for yourself?" She tries to move my hand down between her legs.

Chuckling, I shake my head and pull her arms behind her back, which instantly backfires when Cora rubs my cock through my underwear.

"Beautiful, you need to behave. I only have so much willpower and your brother could walk up at any moment."

"I need you, Kellan."

"I know you do, baby, but it's going to have to wait until we get back to the hotel room and you've sobered up."

Cora turns in my arms and wraps her arms around my neck. Instinctively, my hands go to her ass, and I pull her body into mine, making us both groan.

"I've only had two drinks."

"Two too many."

"I'm aching, hotshot," she whimpers.

"Fuck, I can feel how hot and wet you are," I groan as she rubs against my thigh.

"Then take care of me."

"Beautiful, your brother," I protest.

Cora looks around and then smiles. "Come with me," she says as she grabs my hand.

I follow behind her and glare at the guys who eye her up and down as we pass by. Part of me wants to punch them in the face for staring at what's mine, but the other part of me can't help but be a little cocky. She's mine, and they will never get a taste. When one dude reaches out to touch her, Cora slaps his hand away and keeps trailing forward.

When I stop to lay into him, she yanks on my arm. "Come on, Kellan."

Glaring at the dude, I follow her deeper into the club until we come to a hallway. Cora starts pulling on handles, and by the third try, one finally

opens, and she pulls me inside.

“I don’t think we are supposed to be in here,” I hiss.

“It’s fine,” she says as she pulls me into her.

Cora grabs me by the back of the neck and kisses me hard. Her hand is pulling my underwear down and stroking me within a second.

My head falls back as I look up at the ceiling. It’s dark in here, but there is a little light shining through to show me that we are in some sort of supply closet. There are several lines of shelves in the middle of the room with different things on them.

We both freeze when we hear someone moaning and the slapping of skin.

“I don’t think we are alone. Do you want to stay?” I murmur into her ear.

She squeezes me, looking up at me with pure lust in her eyes. Then she slowly nods.

Very slowly, she moves my hand to between her legs where I feel how drenched the lace is between her thighs.

Fuck me.

“Do you want me to get you off, beautiful, while we listen to someone else?” I ask quietly as I nip her ear.

Cora moans, arching into me.

Spinning, I pin her against the wall. “I won’t fuck you here, but I can take the edge off. Open your legs, beautiful.”

She widens her legs as I drop to my knees. I smirk at how willing and ready she is.

I can hear the panting from deeper in the closet, but I don’t stop. To be honest, it has my cock hard to think about what is going on back there and how wet it’s making my girl.

Licking her over her underwear, I can taste her. Her thighs are covered in the evidence that she is damn near ready to combust.

Pulling them aside, I look up at Cora. Her eyes are at the back of the room, as if she is imagining what is happening back there.

“Eyes on me, beautiful. Hold on tight.”

Her eyes snap to mine as I hike her leg over my shoulder. Then I lick her long and hard. I angle my tongue so that I can stick it inside her as far as I can before I lick and nip my way up to her clit. Her pants are coming faster as her hands dig into my hair.

I glance up, finding her eyes on me like I demanded.

I'm so fucking pleased. I'm going to reward her.

Using two fingers, I thrust inside of her while I attack her clit. She is moaning louder. So loud that I know whoever is in here with us can hear her, but they don't stop. Their moans match hers as if we are in competition.

Reaching down with my free hand, I stroke my own cock as I eat her like she is the last thing I will ever eat.

When she comes, I feel her gush down my chin. I lap at her, stroking myself harder until I come all over the wall.

I continue to hold Cora up as I pant against her. That's when I hear it. The quiet in the room.

I glance up and find Cora looking at something. When I look over my shoulder, I see a woman being escorted out by two men. As they get closer, I recognize them.

Our hosts tonight.

Aurora Blake with the Aussie and American.

"Keep him on his toes," Aurora tells Cora, winking at her as they exit the room. Neither guy looks at Cora, which I'm grateful for.

Lowering her leg, I put her panties back into place. Then I stand and press a kiss to her lips. "Are you okay?"

She smirks up at me. "That was thrilling."

I shake my head. "You're going to be the death of me."

"What a way to go, though."

Ain't that the damn truth.

twenty-four

Cora

Thanksgiving is coming up, and I think I'm going to tell my mom and Clay what I've decided about school. I don't want to do it alone, though. I'm all kinds of nervous.

What if it goes wrong? Or they refuse to let me?

I don't like arguing with them. I'm more of the passive sibling. Roll with the punches and do whatever I can to make their life easier.

It has me all kinds of fidgety. So much so that Kellan has taken note.

"Are you worried Peyton is going to come back? I thought she had to work tonight," he asks as he lies naked in my bed with me lying on his chest.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"You're tense, which you shouldn't be after the way I made you scream," he tells me.

I laugh. "You're ridiculous. I was thinking about Thanksgiving."

"Oh. Is it a stressful time for you?" he asks.

I shake my head against his chest. "It's not that."

"You could come home with me if you want. I always spend it with my parents. Being an only child, they tend to make way too much food and invite all the extended family members and the neighbors. On second thought, you shouldn't come. My cousin Ray will hit on you the entire

night, and then I'll have to knock his front teeth out again." He strokes his hands through my hair.

"Again?" I ask.

"Oh yeah. Sophomore year, Grace came to dinner with her mom. The entire day Ray followed her around like he was a puppy dog. He kept flirting with her and trying to get her to go outside to the old treehouse with him. She kept refusing. I told him to cut it out, but he wouldn't listen. After dinner, Grace and I were out back on the swing set when he came up and tried to lift up her dress. I decked him without thinking about it. Knocked his two front teeth out. His mom was pissed. So was mine until I explained why I did it. So yeah, Ray is an asshole." He chuckles.

"He deserved it. I'm glad you'd bust some teeth in my honor," I tell him.

"I'd do more than that for you, beautiful. Grace was my best friend, but you are so much more."

Every time he says something like that, it makes me feel like I'm a queen. Somehow I was able to get this man to love me so much that he would do anything for me.

"I wish I could, but I need to go home. My mom doesn't get a lot of time off. She always works over the holidays. Since Clay is spending Thanksgiving at home with Grace and then taking Grace to her family home for Christmas, Mom asked me if it was okay if she worked over Christmas. If I don't go, I won't see her for any of the holidays," I admit.

"I understand. Navigating family dynamics can be difficult. Do you want to come home with me for Christmas?" he asks.

My heart races at the thought. I know we've made plans about what our future could look like together, but going home for the holidays is different. It makes it all real.

I move so I can look up at him. "You think we will still be together at Christmas?"

He flips me over, kissing me senseless. After I'm breathless, he finally pulls back.

"We will be together this Christmas." He kisses my nose. "Next Christmas." He kisses one eye. "The Christmas after that." The other eye. "And the one after that." Then he kisses my lips deeply before pulling back. "Every Christmas until the last breath I take."

"Point taken."

I sound so breathless, and I love it. I love that he can make me feel this way.

“Why don’t you want to go home for Thanksgiving?” he asks, boxing me in with his arms, resting some of his weight on top of me.

I love the feeling. As if we couldn’t get any closer than we possibly are.

“I want to tell them about quitting school. I know it won’t be until May, but I want to tell them sooner rather than later and to their faces. I don’t know when I will have another opportunity to do it. So I know I need to go home, but part of me wants to hide here under the covers and cover my ears. Pretend the world doesn’t exist for a while.”

“If you wanted, I would stay here with you and we could do that. Shut out the world for a little while. It wouldn’t solve anything, though.” He kisses my cheek. “When we pray for patience, God puts us in situations to help build our patience. When we pray for strength, God gives us strength by testing it first. Burying your head in the sand will only leave you stuck. It won’t make the problem go away. Trust me, I know from experience.”

“You’re so wise.”

“Only because I have fucked up so many times to gain experience. I don’t recommend it. I know it will be hard, but I have faith in you, beautiful. You will survive. If it goes too badly, you call me. I will drive down to get you.”

“Even if you’re in the middle of knocking Ray’s teeth out?” I tease.

“Especially then. Mom will tan my hide if I do that again. Without you or Grace there to rely on, she will think it was all me.”

I smile at him. “I wish you could come with me. My mom would love you.”

He cringes. “Are you sure about that? I’m not known for being someone parents like.”

“Well, she already knows how much I like you, and she trusts my judgment. Plus Grace will be there too.”

“That might make it worse. Doesn’t she know what I did last year? Didn’t Clay tell her?”

I snort. “Clay does not talk to my mom about that stuff. When he calls, it’s all about her. He has made an art out of strategically avoiding any personal questions with her. He worries about her.”

“You would really want me there?” he asks.

I nod. “Maybe next year. We have a lifetime of them, right?”

He kisses me. “A whole lifetime of awkward holiday dinners with family. I promise.”

It’s a promise I’ll hold on to because I want that.

I want him.

Forever.



Kellan

The conversation with Cora has been nagging me all night. After staying over at her place, I knew that I wanted to do whatever I could to ease her worries.

So I called my mom.

“Hey, baby. You’re calling awfully early. Is something wrong?”

There’s something about hearing your mom’s voice that can bring you back to being seven years old again. I want to confide everything in her.

“I met someone,” I admit.

“Oh, that’s lovely.” Her tone says she’s not engaged in the conversation.

I don’t blame her. She’s gotten this call many times. This is different, though.

“Not like the others, Mom. I think this one is the one.”

“Big words. Are you sure you mean them?”

The statement hits me where she meant it. Do I really mean it?

I do.

“She’s been helping me get over my shit and grow up. I talked to Grace and Clay. Cleared the air. I think we are even friends.”

If it weren’t for the sound of the TV playing in the background, I would think the call dropped with how quiet she is as what I said sinks in.

“Wow. That is some growth. It’s all because of this girl?” Mom asks.

“No. That wouldn’t be fair to say. I think that I was getting there on my own before I met her. She helped speed up the process. Gave me a reason to stop moping around and get back on track.”

“You do sound happier. If everything is going well, why are you calling me now? Not that I don’t love you, but you have only ever called when you needed something since you left.”

Fuck. She’s not wrong. Just another way I’m a selfish asshole.

“I’m so sorry, Mom. I need to be a better son. You’re the best mom a guy could ask for, and I don’t appreciate you nearly enough. I’m going to start calling more,” I tell her, rubbing my hand down my face.

What started as a call to help ease Cora’s worries made me realize there are still more people who deserve an apology.

“Oh, stop it. That’s not what I meant. You’re a young man. You have hockey and school. It’s part of being a college kid to run off and enjoy yourself. I’m not bothered by it.”

“You should be,” I groan. “I have been such a selfish jerk. I wish you had called me out on it more.”

“It wouldn’t have stopped the Grace situation,” she tells me.

It’s true, but thinking back, I wonder if it would have helped at all.

“It doesn’t matter now, but I’m sorry, and the next time I see you, I will give you an apology to your face.”

“You really don’t need to,” she insists.

“Of course not, but I will. To Dad too.”

“Well then, I can’t wait to see this new and improved Kellan at Thanksgiving. Seems like he is growing into quite the young man.”

“Actually, that was why I was calling. Would you be upset if I skipped Thanksgiving this year?” I wince as the words come out of my mouth.

“Is it because of this girl?” she asks.

“I know I said this with Grace, but I really mean it with her. I’m in love with her. I think about her all the time. When she’s not with me, all I do is count down the minutes until I get to see her again. Then when I do, I feel like my whole world is right again. I have never felt this way before.”

“It sure does sound like something special. You want to go with her I suppose?”

“I invited her home with us, but she has something she wants to talk about with her mom and brother, but she doesn’t want to face it alone. She didn’t ask me to go home with her, but I feel I need to be there for her. She shouldn’t have to ask me to be the rock she needs. I should just do it because I love her.”

Mom chuckles. "Yeah, that sounds like love. Do I at least get to know the name of the girl who is taking my little boy away for the holiday?"

I smile. "Cora. Cora James."

"James? Isn't that Grace's new boyfriend's last name?" Mom hums.

"It's his sister, and before you say anything, I didn't know that when we started dating."

"My sweet boy. You really got yourself into something there, huh? Well, you don't need my blessing to skip Thanksgiving. You are an adult, but you have it anyway. I'll let your father know. He will be bummed, but he will get it. He was young and in love once too. I want to meet this girl that changed your life."

"You will. I invited her to come for Christmas. Hope you don't mind the extra guest," I joke.

"Really? Her family won't mind?" Mom asks.

"Clay will be with Grace, and her mom is working. She was planning to be at home alone, so I told her we had room for her."

"Perfect. Does she like to bake? Cook? We can bond while we make Christmas goodies. Oh, I need a list of what she likes. Anything she wants and needs. I need to put her on the Christmas shopping list. Oh, do you think she will do the matching pajamas with us? She can be on the Christmas card with us this year. This is so wonderful."

"Mom, breathe. I will ask her about all of that and report back."

"Please do. Oh, I have so many plans to make. You enjoy Thanksgiving with her and treat her right. If she's the one, then you don't want to lose her."

"I don't plan to."

"Love you, Kellan. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom. Love you too."

Hanging up the phone, I look at the clock. I still have fifteen minutes before I have to be at practice.

Hustling out of the dorm, I throw my bag in my truck, only one destination in mind. When I left Cora, she was sleeping soundly this morning. I didn't want to disturb her, so I kissed her softly and made my way back to my own dorm.

I don't want to wait to tell her the good news.

Leaving my truck in a no-parking zone, I take the risk and run up to the door. Thankfully someone is coming out, holding the door open so I don't

have to buzz up.

When I get to her door, I knock softly.

She grumbles, opening the door, looking sexy as hell in a pair of sleep shorts and my discarded T-shirt from the night before.

I love losing all my clothes to this girl.

“Did you forget something?” she mumbles in her sleep state.

“Yes. This.”

I kiss her deeply, making her grip me as I pull her as close as I can. When I pull back, she looks a bit more awake but still dazed.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth. That was gross,” she tells me.

“I don’t care.” I kiss her again, making her giggle. “I’m coming to Thanksgiving with you.”

Her eyes widen. “Excuse me?”

“You heard right. I’m coming to your mom’s for Thanksgiving. Cleared it with my mom and all. She’s excited to meet you at Christmas and has a bunch of questions for you. I’m going to be late now, but I wanted to tell you.”

Her eyes are glistening as she hugs me tightly. “Thank you. I love you.”

“I love you too, beautiful.”

Way more than she could ever know.

twenty-five

Cora

The crowd is nuts tonight. Class is out all week with Thanksgiving in two days, but you wouldn't know it. Not with the crowd that has shown up to cheer on the Wolves.

It doesn't hurt that this team is one of their main rivals and also happens to be the team that hurt Beckett last year. The Garrison Ravens have no idea the storm is coming their way. These guys have been gearing up to take them down a notch or two.

As the guys come out on the ice, I can't help but feel the buzz in the air. Kellan turns toward us as he always does, blowing me a kiss. I catch it and hold it to my heart.

It's become our own little pregame ritual. He admitted to me that during the away games I can't come to, he feels off because I'm not there to do it with him. Athletes are a superstitious bunch.

I won't lie, though. Feels good to know that I can do something to make him feel better about his game. He's especially nervous going into this one. He wants to win, but not for himself. He has grown so close to the guys that he wants to win for Beckett. He hates that they got away with the cheap shot on him last year.

I don't blame him. I remember Clay being a complete terror after that game. He ranted and raved about the asshole who did it when he called to

tell us about it.

"They better not play dirty this year. I will shank a bitch," Peyton mutters to me.

"Upset that Beckett got hurt, huh? Seems like you care more than you let on," I joke, nudging her.

"Oh, she does. Sometimes I come home and find her hanging out in the living room with him." Grace winks at Peyton.

"Once. You saw that once. I was waiting for you to get home because someone wanted some alone time in our room." Peyton gives me a pointed look.

I shrug. I can't deny it. It's not often, but I have asked her twice now if she could maybe take a little longer to come home so I could have some sexy time with Kellan. If I don't we would never get any time to ourselves. Next year, I really need to get an apartment. In fact...

"Grace, what are you doing for living arrangements next year? The hockey house will be off the table, right?" I ask.

"Yeah. I'm not sure. I haven't even started to think about it because if I do, then I start to think about the fact that Clay will be drafted, and he might end up somewhere far away from here. That makes my heart ache, so yeah, I have been playing ostrich."

"Can't bury your head in the sand forever, but you still have time. I was thinking, if you stay here, want to get an apartment together? You too, Peyton."

Peyton bites her lip. "I don't know if I can afford it. It's why I stayed in the dorms this year."

"I'm in. I don't want to move back to the dorms and have to get another roommate. I would never dream of stealing Peyton from you. Could we maybe look into it, Peyton? Figure out if there is anything that might work?"

"No promises, but yeah. I'd be willing to look into it with you guys," she says.

Before we can keep talking about it, the announcer comes on, and I clap my hands as they announce the players. I don't even boo when they announce the other team. I behave myself.

"Holy shit," Grace mutters.

"What?" I turn to her, but she's staring at some guy posted up near the bench.

“That’s Brantley Gibson. He owns the Boston Foxes.” Grace looks pale as she looks at him.

“Uh, do we need to do something? You look like you are going to faint.” Peyton helps Grace sit as her hand comes up to her mouth.

“Fuck, we knew they were sending a scout to see Clay play, but that’s not a scout. He *owns* the team. They must be serious about him, right?” Grace asks.

I look the guy up on my phone real quick. I confirm it is the guy she is referring to.

Then I see the articles.

BOSTON FOXES FIRE ANOTHER KEY STAFF MEMBER AMID CHEATING RUMORS.

BOSTON FOXES LOOKING TO RAMP UP THEIR DRAFT PICKS AFTER A POOR SEASON.

BOSTON FOXES TO HAVE THE FIRST DRAFT PICK.

“Well fuck,” I mutter.

“What? What is it?” Grace looks at me as we stand for the national anthem.

We pause our conversation, singing proudly. As soon as it’s over, we sit, and I turn to her.

“Seems they have had staffing changes. They did so poorly last season that they are getting the first draft pick. There’s a good chance that’s why he’s here. He isn’t leaving it to chance. He wants to see for himself.”

We all stare down at the man who is intently watching the guys get ready on the ice.

“Boston would be perfect,” Peyton singsongs.

“I don’t want him in Boston just because of me. I want him on the team that is best for him. You said they were doing poorly?”

“They did last year, but it seems that man down there is willing to make changes so that doesn’t happen this year. Could be a good thing for him. He will likely get to play right away at Boston. If he went to say Seattle, where they won last year, he might be riding the bench for a while,” I tell her.

She nods. “Okay, so this is good.” Then she stands, clapping her hands. “Let’s go Wolves.”

I stand, slipping my phone in my pocket. “Yes, let’s go Wolves. Kick some ass!” I scream out.

As the game starts, I focus on the ice. Kellan is out first, skating down the ice like his life depends on it. I watch as the puck flies across the ice from stick to stick. It's a fight, but after a minute or so, the line changes, bringing Clay out instead.

He is a beast on the ice. He attacks the puck, getting it down to the other end of the rink. He takes a shot, but it's deflected at the last minute.

This goes on and on as both teams fight for the win, but neither are successful.

I start praying internally for them to score at least once. Get ahead any way possible.

As if the Lord is listening, Kellan and Clay end up on the ice together.

It's like watching two people who move as one work together. They are so in tune with each other that when Clay flings the puck back to Kellan, he is right where he needs to be to catch it and shoot it right back at Clay.

Clay then takes the puck, sending it into the net, causing the horn to go off.

We cheer like crazy as I watch the two men in my life embrace over their shot. I smile even bigger when they announce Clay with the goal and Kellan with the assist.

It's almost the end of the first period when one of the Ravens players takes a shot at Kellan, pushing him into the wall.

He falls to the ice but gets back up quickly. I notice how he rubs over his chest. It's a telling sign for him. He's feeling anxious. I know the hit didn't hurt him with all the pads. At least, I hope it didn't.

My own nerves surface as the end of the first period comes.

"Want anything?" Peyton asks, indicating she's headed up to the concessions.

I shake my head, keeping my eye on Kellan.

He looks up to me and gives me a small smile before focusing back on the group.

That smile doesn't ease my concerns.

By the time the second period starts, I'm on the edge of my seat.

At first, it starts off fine. The guys are playing hard. There are more hits between the teams, making me flinch as I hear the contact.

Then it happens.

Kellan is flying down the ice when one of the Ravens checks him into the glass. This time it is so hard, it sounds like the glass might break at the

impact. The player skates away, leaving Kellan in place, only Kellan doesn't move. His hand is on his chest once more as he collapses to his knees. Then he is face down on the ice.

I scream. "Kellan!"



Kellan

"James, the owner of the Boston Foxes, is here, so be on top of your game. Got it?" Coach calls out to him.

Clay nods before we head out onto the ice to warm up. I blow my pregame kiss to Cora before taking up the spot next to him.

"Does having him here make you nervous?" I ask.

"Of course, but I put it out of my head. It doesn't matter that he is here. I need to play my best as always," Clay tells me.

Looking up, I spot Brantley Gibson. My body tenses as I think about the man standing on the other side of the glass. "He's not even here for me, and I'm nervous," I admit.

"He's a human like you or me. He's here to watch us play, sure, but we need to win this for us. Try to shake it off." He finishes his warm-up, skating around to check on the other guys.

I finish mine as well, but the tension doesn't fade. If anything, it gets worse.

I rub my chest, heading toward the bench.

"You got heartburn, kid?" Coach asks me.

I shake my head. "I'm fine. Nerves. It'll pass."

He nods, watching the rest of the guys skate over.

After they've announced us and done the national anthem, the game is ready to start. I'm out first.

I'm pushing myself hard. Harder than ever before, needing to look good. Not for me, but for Clay. I want to make our team look better so that he gets a shot at being drafted.

Line change comes, and I watch Clay skate out and attempt to make something out of chicken shit. It doesn't work for him either.

Back and forth we go, playing hard. I can tell the moment things change for the Ravens, though. They start to play a bit dirty. The refs don't catch the occasional tripping or the way they hit us into the boards extra hard, but I do.

Coach finally puts me and Clay on the ice together, and that's when the magic happens. We fly down the ice like we've done this a million times. When he passes the puck back to me without looking, I'm ready to catch it only to send it right back to him. He sends it into the net, bringing a smile to my face.

We've got this.

After celebrating a moment, we get back in the zone. We push harder, fighting for every inch we can get from these guys.

Then one player targets me, pushing me into the wall, and it jolts me. My ear rings for a moment with the impact, but I'm able to stay on my feet. The slight moment of confusion scares me. I've never had that happen before. I rub my chest as it grows tighter. My breathing comes a little faster, but I try to keep it under control.

"You've got this, Kellan," I mutter to myself.

The end of the first period brings me some relief.

"You okay?" Clay asks as I come off the ice.

"Yeah, that hit was just a bit hard," I mutter.

"I saw that. Fucker needs to watch himself," Beckett says, putting his arm around me.

"Okay guys, this is going well. We are ahead, and we need to stay that way. We want to score, but we also need to defend. I'm proud of the effort you are putting into this. Go out and show them we have so much more to give them," Coach calls out.

Just like that, we are back on the ice.

We keep going round and round with these guys, but they are getting more brutal. Every time one of them comes near me, I can't help but flinch. It's like my body is preparing for another hard hit.

No amount of preparation would have helped me, though.

As the Ravens player checks me into the glass, my teeth rattle. I feel like my airways close as the breath is knocked from me and sends me spiraling.

The player skates away quickly, but I'm stuck. I can't move if I even tried. My hand reaches up, attempting to get my heart to release the tension, but instead I collapse to my knees.

The last thing I remember is hitting the ice.

Sometime later, my eyes open, and all I can see are the bright lights of the rink.

"You're going to be okay, kid," Coach tells me, walking beside the paramedics as they carry me off the ice.

I can't even respond to him. I feel like I can't breathe. That only has me panicking.

"Hey, it's okay. You're okay. Breathe in for me. One, two, three, four," the woman next to me says.

I try to follow her instructions. Soon I'm breathing easily again.

She continues to help me breathe until they get me back to the medical room. Coach waits with me while the doctor assesses me.

"He's fine. His heart rate is a little high. Can you tell me what happened?" the doctor asks me.

"He pushed me into the boards, and I couldn't breathe. My chest felt so tight. Then I fell," I tell him.

He nods. "Is this the first time you felt the tightness?"

I shake my head. "No. It happens often, actually. Usually when my nerves are getting to me."

"Were you nervous tonight?"

"I'm always nervous getting on the ice. It did start to get worse after the first hit caused my ears to ring a bit."

"Do you have anxiety?" The doctor writes something in his notebook.

"Don't we all?" I scoff.

"I mean, have you been diagnosed?" he clarifies.

I shake my head.

"You will need to go see another doctor, but what you are describing to me are symptoms of anxiety. I think that you might have had a panic attack, which is what caused you to feel like you couldn't breathe. We can treat it, but I recommend you sit out the rest of the game."

My heart drops. I feel so ashamed for letting my teammates down.

Coach steps forward. "Rest. When Doc says you can, you can come watch the rest of the game. Take it easy, and we will talk about this later."

"Thanks, Coach. Tell the guys I'm sorry," I mumble.

“No need to be sorry, kid. We will get this worked out. It’s not the end of the world.”

He moves to leave but stops once he opens the door. “You’ve got a James sibling sitting outside the door. Should I send her in?” he asks.

My eyes fly to the door, seeing Cora sitting across the hall.

“Yes.” My throat seems raw all of a sudden.

I sit up, waiting for her, and she doesn’t disappoint.

Cora comes running in, stepping between my legs to hug me like it’s the last time she will ever do it. She has tears pouring down her face.

“How did you get back here?” I whisper, kissing the side of her face.

The medical staff are all avoiding looking at us, giving us some semblance of privacy.

“I begged the security guard. It was only after Grace told him I was related to Clay that he let me back. I had to show him family photos. God, I thought you died. My heart stopped, Kellan. Literally stopped.”

She’s sobbing now. I hold her and let her get it all out. I rub my hand down the back of her head as she does.

When she is all cried out, she pulls back, sniffing. I hand her a tissue, smiling as she coyly turns around to blow her nose.

“I’m so gross, I’m sorry,” she mumbles.

“Not at all. Come sit with me.” I pat the side of the medical table. She hops up next to me, resting her head on my shoulder.

“What happened?” she asks.

“I had a panic attack. At least that’s what they think. Medically I’m fine, but I felt like I was dying.”

“That’s not good. Are you going to the hospital to get checked out?” she asks.

I nod. “Once the game is over, I’ll go. Coach will want to go with me. He said we could discuss what this means for me later.”

“You think it will affect your ability to play hockey?” she asks.

“No idea. I’m trying not to think about it. Makes me feel all tight-chested again,” I admit to her.

She holds me around my center, and I wrap my arm around her, kissing her head.

“It’s going to all be okay. I love you,” she tells me.

“I love you too.”

Tonight was the scariest moment of my life, but having her here with me helps soothe some of the anxiety.

After twenty minutes, I feel better, so I ask the doctor if we can watch the rest of the game. Cora stays by my side as we watch my teammates lead us to victory.

A pang of sadness hits me that I wasn't on the ice with them, but I'm proud of them.

I'm proud of us.

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twenty-six

Cora

A football game is cued up on the TV while the sound of laughter rings out through the house. I love spending time with Mom and Clay during the holidays, but today it feels different, and it has everything to do with Kellan and Grace being with us. I know it will be even crazier when the rest of the guys show up.

The Wolves have a hockey game this weekend, so the coach put a travel ban on the team for anywhere farther than an hour and a half away. At first the guys were going to stay home and do their own thing, but when Mom found out, she had Clay invite them. Considering they are guys and they never turn down food, they accepted the invitation. They plan on making the drive down here this morning and then heading back to campus tonight.

At first I didn't know how I felt about them coming. Not because I don't want them to, but because I need to talk to Mom and Clay about my plans. I don't know how they will take it, and the last thing I want is for them to blow up in front of the guys. The guys coming though, buys me a little time, and right now I'm all about putting things off it seems.

"You know, Grace, this feels like a normal Thanksgiving, just at a different location and without our parents," Kellan says as he pops a cracker with cheese into his mouth.

Grace smiles as she slices more cheese for the charcuterie board. "You're right."

"You guys spend Thanksgiving together?" my mom asks.

"Almost every year since we were in high school," Kellan confirms.

"Our moms are best friends and basically attached to the hip," Grace adds.

"Ah, well that's nice. I'm glad we could give you a little bit of normalcy today then," Mom says.

Kellan looks over at me. "Fair warning, we do Christmas Eve together too."

"So what I'm hearing is that I will get to hang out with my brother then too?"

"You know it." Kellan winks.

"Do you guys have any Christmas Day traditions?" Mom asks.

"Christmas morning is for our individual houses, but that night we all get together and order way too much Chinese food and watch movies and play board games," Grace says.

"Looks like you're stuck with me for both holidays." Clay teases me as he walks into the room.

I scrunch my nose. "And here I was looking forward to the day that I wouldn't have to see your face across from me at every holiday meal."

"Cora..." Mom scolds.

"I'm joking!"

"Sure you were," Clay teases.

The doorbell rings, and the guys leave to answer it.

"Okay, Mom, what do you need me to do now?" I ask as I push up my sleeves.

"Can you start peeling potatoes, please? Grace, when you're done with that, if you could move on to the green bean casserole, I would appreciate it."

"Of course."

The sound of footsteps coming our way has us all looking up. Brett, Beckett, and Wyatt all come into the room holding different things in their hands.

"Ladies, did you miss me?" Beckett teases.

"I literally saw you yesterday," Grace deadpans.

“Jelly Bean, you wound me.” Beckett clutches his chest like she shot him, making her roll her eyes.

“Hey, Cora,” the guys say as they give me hugs before moving on to Grace.

“Thank you for inviting us,” Brett says as he hands Mom a bottle of wine.

“Yeah, thank you for letting us crash your Thanksgiving,” Beckett says as he sets down a pie.

“Thank you,” Wyatt says plainly as he hands her flowers.

“Oh, you boys didn’t need to bring anything,” my mom says.

“Yes, we did. Do you need us to do anything?” Beckett asks.

“No, how about you three go join Clay and Kellan in the living room? I think I heard a pregame show playing earlier.”

Wordlessly they leave the kitchen, and we get to work. While I peel potatoes, I can’t help but smile. Today is way more chaotic and louder than normal, and I absolutely love it. I never realized how quiet our house was until I moved out. It’s nice having everyone together and in one place. The only person missing is Peyton.

“Hey Grace, have you heard from Peyton today?” I ask.

“Yeah, she said it was a madhouse at work, but the tips were fantastic.”

“You told her she was more than welcome to join us, right?” Mom asks.

“I invited her,” I tell her.

Grace nods. “She knew she was more than welcome. I know Clay and I tried to convince her to come several times, but she was adamant about working a double today. She’s getting paid time and a half plus all the tips. She said she couldn’t say no.”

Mom nods. “Well, I understand that. That kind of money is hard to walk away from. We will send her food back with the boys.”

“Especially when you are doing it all on your own like she is,” I add.

“She’s a boss for sure,” Grace says.

The guys cheer, making us pause before we burst out laughing.

“I wonder what’s going on in there,” Grace says.

Mom shakes her head with a smile. “I don’t know, but it’s definitely louder in here than normal. I kind of like it.”

“Don’t say that too loud or they might get ideas,” I tease.

Mom reaches out and swats my arm. “Behave and make sure you get all the skin off those potatoes.”

She turns her back toward me, so I roll my eyes. “I know how to peel potatoes, Mom.”

“Don’t roll your eyes at me.”

Grace looks at me wide-eyed and whispers, “How did she know?”

“Moms...” I murmur so only she can hear me.

“How is school going for you girls?” Mom asks.

“Great. I’m loving my classes,” Grace tells her.

“I can’t believe you decided to live with the boys.” Mom shakes her head.

Grace shrugs. “It’s really not bad. They all clean up after themselves, and we get along great. They give me space when I need it, and it’s nice knowing that unless there is a game, there is always someone there when I get home.”

“I could see how that is nice. What about you Cora?” Mom asks.

“What about me?”

Mom shoots me a look that screams, *why are you being difficult?* “How are classes?”

“Fine.” I shrug.

I don’t look up at her. I know if I do, she will know that something is wrong, and getting into me wanting to drop out of school isn’t an option. Not right now at least.

I just need a few more hours. That’s it.

Then I’ll come clean.



Kellan

“Okay, boys, the food is ready. Come help us move it all to the table so we can eat,” Grace says.

Without a complaint, the guys and I all get up and head into the kitchen. We move the food to the dining room all at once.

Clay sits at the head of the table, and his mom sits on the opposite end. Cora sits next to her mom, and I sit next to her. Grace is on my other side,

where she sits next to Clay. Then on the other side of the table, Beckett is by Ms. James, and Brett is down by Clay. Leaving Wyatt in front of me.

“We don’t say grace or anything like that here, so just dig in. I hope you like everything,” Ms. James says.

“I’m sure it’s great,” I tell her, and the guys murmur in agreement.

The food is passed around and plates are filled.

Beckett groans as he takes a bite. “Ms. James, this is delicious. Marry me?”

Cora’s mom laughs, and her cheeks turn pink as she slaps his arm. “Stop it.”

“Yeah, Beckett, what would Peyton think of you proposing to someone else?” Grace teases.

Beckett rolls his eyes. “How many times do we have to tell you, Jelly Bean Pey and I are just friends. It’s not like that between us.”

Wyatt shoots me a look over the table, and I duck my head as I chuckle. He told me the other day that he’s almost positive he heard Beckett and Peyton fucking in Beckett’s room, which shares a wall with his. It seems like denial is the name of the game between them.

“This is seriously good,” Brett says as he takes a bite of mashed potatoes.

“We need to make sure we take a plate home for Peyton,” Wyatt reminds them.

“That’s sweet of you boys. I said the same thing in the kitchen. I’ll make sure to send you with plenty of leftovers. Lord knows when these four leave, I won’t have a need for them,” Cora’s mom says.

Beckett inspects a roll. “Did you make these yourself, or did you buy them?”

“The girls made them last night. The dough proofed in a bread maker,” Ms. James said.

Beckett turns toward Grace. “Do we have room for a bread maker in the kitchen? If so, we should totally buy one so we have these all the time.”

Grace rolls her eyes. “You guys rarely eat at home as it is. I don’t think we need a bread maker.”

“Hey, it’s not our fault that a meal plan is part of the hockey program. It would be a waste if we didn’t take advantage of it,” Brett says.

“Right...” Grace drawls.

Clay points his fork at her. "Wasn't it you that had me bring her the poke cake every day last week? Last I checked, it couldn't be found in the normal cafeteria."

Grace ducks her head. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Cora turns toward me. "There was cake, and you never brought me any?"

I freeze, my fork halfway to my mouth. "Uh..."

"Oh, you done messed up..." Beckett whispers.

"I'm sorry? Next time they make it, I'll grab you a slice," I tell her.

"Fine." Cora's eyes narrow. "Just know I'm watching. If Grace gets dessert, I want some too."

I look down at Clay. "This is all your fault."

Clay shrugs. "What my girl wants, she gets. You should take notes."

"Trust me, Kellan takes care of me just fine," Cora says before I can say anything.

Clay cringes while the guys toss their heads back and laugh, totally catching Cora's meaning.

I feel my cheeks heat. There's nothing like your girlfriend making a sex joke at the dinner table.

"Cora, behave," her mom scolds. "Although I am glad to hear that he's taking care of you...as long as you all are being safe."

"Mom!" both James kids cry out.

Shit, this is great.

"This would never happen at our Thanksgiving," Grace whispers to me.

"Never. I like it," I say quietly.

"Me too," she says before looking back at her food.

She's not wrong, though. While it's a little weird being away from my parents today and I do miss them, I'm glad I'm here. I like getting to spend the holiday with Cora and everyone else.

She hasn't told them about her plans yet, though. I know it's going to happen, and things will be weird and probably a little tense when she does, but if today is anything to go by, it will be fine. It's clear as day that they love her and will support her any way they can.

Cora's phone starts ringing in the other room.

"Shit, sorry." Cora jumps up and runs into the kitchen.

"I really wish she would have let it ring. No one should be calling today." Her mom frowns.

“Maybe it’s something important. Like you said, no one should be calling,” Clay points out.

“You’re right.” His mom sighs.

The conversation picks back up. Everyone is laughing and having a good time. You would never know that a year ago, almost everyone at this table hated my guts.

“Shit, I forgot the pitcher of water. Anyone need anything?” Clay asks.

“Language,” his mom scolds.

“I’m good, man,” I tell him.

Everyone says they are good, and he leaves the room.

“Are you fucking serious right now?” Clay yells, making everyone tense. “Please tell me you’re joking, Cora.”

“Excuse us,” Grace says.

In unison, Grace and I push back our chairs and run into the kitchen. Seeing Cora cornered against the cabinets with tears running down her face and her phone clenched against her chest has me seeing red.

“Back off, Clay,” I demand as I slip between them.

Clay scoffs. “Did you know? Wait, of course you know. You probably encouraged her.”

“Kellan doesn’t make decisions for me, Clay,” Cora snaps.

“How about we all just calm down? I’m sure Cora has a reason for everything,” Grace says calmly.

“No, her reason is because she’s out of her fucking mind,” Clay sneers.

“Watch it, Clay,” I snap. “I won’t let you talk to her like that.”

“This is a family issue and is none of your business.”

“Yeah, it is a family issue, and considering I’m in love with your sister, that makes her my family, which in turn makes it my goddamn business. So again, don’t speak to her like that or we’re leaving,” I tell him bluntly.

Clay’s jaw clenches as he looks away.

I feel Cora come up behind me and touch my arm. “It’s okay.”

“No, no, it’s not,” I tell her.

twenty-seven

Cora

Clay is fuming. I didn't want him to find out this way, but part of me is glad it's in the open.

I didn't expect Martha to give me a call today, but the paperwork went through. I'll start my part-time job after the break. Then in May, I will quit school and go full-time.

That's what Clay overheard. The quitting school part.

I've been on edge all night trying to come up with the words to tell them that this is what I want. Now that tension has popped, leaving me with the room to breathe.

"We should go back into the dining room. I'll tell everyone at the same time," I tell Clay.

He glares at Kellan before turning and stalking back into the dining room. He takes his place at the table, but no one is eating.

Kellan and I also take our places. I stare down at the plate of food that I wish I could eat, but I'm too keyed up to even try.

"What's going on? Why are you two yelling? It's a holiday. Can't you two get along for two seconds?" Mom asks, looking at both of us like we have lost our minds.

"Ask Cora why we were yelling. Trust me, Mom. You'll be yelling too." Clay crosses his arms over his chest.

Grace reaches out, pulling his arm down until she can hold his hand.

Kellan reaches under the table, taking my hand as well, calming some of my nerves.

“I’ve made a decision about my future, and Clay doesn’t agree with it. I’ve enjoyed the work I have been doing at the center, and they have offered me to apply for a full-time job. If I take it, I won’t be able to go to school and work at the same time. Not the way I am now. So I’ve decided that after next semester, I’m putting a pause on school. Until I figure out what I really want to do with it.”

You can hear a pin drop with how quiet it is at the table. The guys are all acting like their food is the most interesting thing in the world. For once, not one of them has a joke.

I look at Mom, but she is staring at her plate, zoned out. My heart aches at the look on her face. She’s disappointed in me.

Then Clay opens his mouth. “I think this is a mistake. You need to stay in school and get your degree. Why are you doing this anyway? Do you need money?”

“No, it’s not about the money. It’s about the fulfillment I get doing the work that I’m doing. I’ve thought this out. Martha said that if I get hired on, I can work there and gain experience. It’s a foot in the door. Once I decide which area I like most, I can narrow down what I need to go to school for. After a few years, they will pay for my entire college education and work my schedule around school. They promote from within when they can, so the opportunities are endless for me.”

“You support this?” Clay glares at Kellan.

“Do I support Cora in whatever she wants to do to make her happy? Yes. Yes, I do. Just like you better do the same for Grace.” Kellan keeps his tone steady.

I’m impressed with the way he is keeping his temper in check. I know he hates that they are talking down to me. I can feel it in the way he is holding my hand. I only hope it’s not about to trigger an anxiety episode.

“It doesn’t matter if he supports it or not. This is about me, so stop talking about me like I’m not here. I made a decision. I’m an adult, and it is my life. This is what I want to do. I would love it if you supported me as well, but if you can’t, I get it. I know you both feel like college is the path for me, but I don’t. This isn’t what I want.”

Clay sighs, shaking his head. "Cora, I have busted my ass to make it somewhere so I can pay for your college. I wanted to get drafted in June for the sole reason of providing for you and Mom financially, so you have to excuse me if I cannot accept that you want to give up college and go work yourself to the bone like Mom does. I want better for you. I expect better from you."

That one hurt. My heart breaks a little at his statement, and I can feel my eyes tear.

"I understand your position. You've had your life planned out since you were a kid. You always knew that it would be hockey for you. I didn't have that. I lived in the shadow of the great Clayton James. I was good in school because I was expected to be. I went to college because you and Mom asked me to. Not once did anyone ask me what I wanted. I understand that college is important to some people, but it's not to me. Not right now. You don't want me working myself to the bone, but I won't be. The pay is competitive, and the work is rewarding. Will I be making millions? No. Not a chance, but will I be happy? That's the only question that matters to me, Clay. And the answer is yes."

"Cora," Clay starts, but Mom finally speaks up.

"Enough, Clayton."

I swallow at her stern tone.

"Sorry, Mom," Clay mutters.

"Cora." Mom turns to me. "I can't say I approve, because I don't. I work as hard as I do to make sure you kids have a better life. I feel like you are throwing that away, but you're right. You are an adult and can make your own decisions. Only you know what's in your heart, and if this is the journey it is telling you to go on, then you go. I will always be here for you, no matter what. Clayton will be too. That's what family does. So stop your arguing." She turns to Clay. "I understand you feel responsible for her. You are her older brother, but more than that, you have been like a father figure to her at times. You were the man of the house, and I think I put too much pressure on you to help me parent Cora. That wasn't fair. We will support your sister in this because she has always supported you without complaint. She gave up the opportunity for her to have her own thing because she wanted you to be able to pursue hockey, so I want you to show her some respect and support her."

Clay nods at her, turning to face me after a moment. "I'm sorry. I love you, and I don't want you to struggle anymore. I'm worried the path you have chosen will be hard. I don't want that for you."

"I respect that, but I'm not scared of the rougher path, Clay. We are survivors. All three of us. We have fought through hell and made it out on the other side. So while you see a difficult path ahead for me, I only see the sunshine at the end. I can do this. I know I can. It feels right."

"Okay then, I will support you," Clay concedes.

"Me too. We love you, Cora." Mom reaches over, grabbing my free hand.

"If my opinion matters at all, I am proud of you, Cora. You have looked happy when you talk about work, so I'm glad you found your passion," Grace adds.

"Thank you, Grace."

"Okay, enough of that. Who wants dessert?" Mom asks, getting up from the table.

I frown at her as we have barely eaten, but I see it for what it is. She needs a moment. She is acting strong for me, but I think I broke her heart.

Kellan leans closer to me. "It's going to be okay. I'm proud of you."

His whispered words help ease some of the hurt in my chest, but not all of it.

I hope I'm making the right decision.



Kellan

"Well, that was eventful," Cora says as she shuts the bedroom door behind her.

"Are you okay? Really?" I ask her, pulling her into my arms.

She snuggles in closer to me. "I think I broke my mom's heart."

"She is disappointed right now, but when she sees you go out and kill it, she will know you made the right decisions. Sometimes it's hard to let go of the dream you had, especially when it's for someone you love."

“You are so wise.” She smiles, pushing me back toward the bed.

“What are you doing?”

Once I’m seated on the edge of the bed, she straddles my lap.

“I’m checking in on you. How are you doing?”

I shrug. “I have an appointment next week to see if medication is the best route for me or if there are other options for me.”

She nods. “Meditation can help. Staying active too, but you are already so active. Oh, they also say eliminating caffeine and alcohol intake will help.”

I smirk up at her. “Did you do some research?”

She looks bashful now. “I did. I don’t like not knowing how to help you.”

I pull her closer, kissing her softly. “You being here helps me. You bring me peace when the world is chaos.”

She leans down, taking my lips with hers. I let her lead the kiss, enjoying having her in my arms.

Tonight was tough. With the way Clay reacted, I thought I was going to have to knock him out. Thankfully everything calmed down, but that energy is still in my body.

“You know what else helps with anxiety?” Cora whispers against my lips.

“What?” I ask, nipping her bottom lip.

“Serotonin.”

Then she grinds on me.

I groan, my lips falling to her neck to suck her skin in. “We are in your childhood bedroom, beautiful. You can’t grind on me like that.”

That only makes her do it again. Fuck, my dick is awake and ready to work.

“Today was kind of shitty, hotshot. Make me forget,” she whispers to me.

That I can do.

Flipping her, I wince when the bed springs squeak. “Everyone is going to know what we are doing,” I warn her.

She scrunches her nose. “Get creative then.”

I sit up, looking around the room. I could fuck her against the wall, but her brother’s room is on the only wall free. The other wall is against the outside of the house, but there is a desk against it.

Picking Cora up, I smile when she squeals. I walk her over to the desk and set her on the edge.

"I like how you think." Cora leans up, kissing the side of my neck.

"You have to be quiet. I don't want to come to blows with your brother today," I warn her, pulling her pants and underwear off in one go.

"Yes, sir." She mock salutes me.

Oh, she's going to pay for that one.

I pull off her shirt next, then her bra. I leave her sitting on the edge of the desk naked, then spread her knees.

She is glistening already.

Stepping back from her, I take my time stripping, and she watches my every move. I don't miss the way she licks her lips as she watches me strip down until I'm standing in front of her naked.

"I want to taste you," she says.

I smirk at her. "You already had dessert, beautiful."

"I need more." She gives me a coy smile.

"Greedy." I kneel down on the floor, licking her pussy, making her gasp.

"You want my dick?" I ask her.

"Yes." She looks at me with pure lust in her eyes.

"Come sit on my face then," I tell her, lying on the floor.

She doesn't hesitate. She jumps off the desk, turning until she is facing my dick. Then she lowers herself over me. I grip her hips, moving her until she is where I want her. Then I suck her clit into my mouth.

She moans loudly, making me smack her ass.

"Better fill that mouth with my cock before we get caught. I didn't see a lock on that door."

"Because there isn't one," she pants before sucking me into her mouth.

My own groan threatens to spill out, so I bury my mouth in her pussy. It doesn't take her long to start grinding down onto my face while she sucks my dick like it's the best damn thing in the world. When she comes on my tongue, her moans only muffled by my cock, I nearly find my own release. I withhold it, barely though.

I keep licking her until she pulls off me with a pop. Then she lays her head on my thigh.

"Up, beautiful." I tap her ass twice.

She does as I ask, flopping onto the floor next to me. I wince at the red rug marks on her knees.

Helping her up, I rub them softly. "You okay?" I ask.

She nods. "You didn't come."

"It's okay."

She shakes her head, turning to bend over the desk. "Fuck me, hotshot. Make me come again."

Who can resist a demand like that? I sure can't.

Moving to my pants, I grab a condom and roll it on. Then I move back behind her.

At first, I push in slow. I'm already on edge, so I don't want to lose it too soon. She asked for another orgasm, so she will be getting one.

Reaching my hand around, I cover her mouth as I pick up the pace. It seems we end up in situations that require me to keep her quiet. I think she secretly likes the idea of being caught.

"Such a dirty girl," I whisper to her. "Taking my cock so well. Look at that greedy pussy sucking me in like she can't get enough."

She clenches against me, a moan slipping out.

"That's right. You love the idea of being caught, don't you? The door is unlocked. Anyone could walk in at any time. You want them to see you taking my cock? You want them to know how much you love it when you are filled to the brim with me?"

I think she tries to moan out my name, but I can't hear it.

"Fuck, Cora. You are so fucking tight, I can barely get inside of you. You want me to fuck you till I come? You want me to mark you as mine inside and out?" I taunt her.

It's really a taunt for me. I wish the condom was gone. I want to do what I said.

She must too because she comes at my words, her pussy squeezing my own pleasure out of me. She nearly collapses from the exhaustion, but I hold her up, kissing her back.

When I pull out, I carry her over to the bed before finding a box of tissues to dispose of the condom. Pulling on my sweats, I walk over to kiss the side of her face.

"Be right back, beautiful."

I sneak out of the room to the bathroom. I throw the condom out in the trash, hiding it under some other tissues inside, hoping her mom doesn't see it or, if she does, she blames Clay. Then I take a washcloth and wet it.

When I get back to the room, Cora is half asleep. I clean her up before putting some sleep shorts and my T-shirt on her.

Once under the covers, I pull her into my side. "I love you, Cora."

She mumbles back to me. "I love you, hotshot."

All is right in the world with those four simple words.

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twenty-eight

Cora

Nerves fill me as I walk inside.

I've been here hundreds of times before, but today feels different. Today I'm not only a volunteer but an employee. Martha was kind enough to put me on the payroll now while working part-time rather than waiting for the school year to end.

I took the day off of classes to be here, but now I'm nervous. Am I making the right decision?

"Cora, there you are!" Martha says.

"Am I late?" I ask as panic washes through me.

Martha laughs. "Heavens no, I'm sorry if I scared you. I'm just so excited."

I blow out a breath and laugh. "I'm excited too."

"Good. If you'll follow me, I have some paperwork for you, and then I'll give you the lay of the land from this perspective."

"Sounds good," I say as I follow her into her office.

I take a seat right as she hands me a clipboard. Quickly I fill in all the important information. Name, date of birth, emergency contact, and banking details. When I'm finished, I double-check it and hand it over.

"Awesome. Now before we head out there, do you have any questions or concerns?"

“You’re good with me not starting full time until after finals at the end of the school year, right?”

Martha nods. “Yes. I know your brother graduates this year, so I was going to give you a week off at graduation and then have you start full time after.”

“Thank you. I know that my mom and brother will love that.”

“Of course. I try to make my staff as happy as possible. Have you found a place to live yet?”

“I plan on moving in with my brother’s girlfriend. We have a couple of places lined up to look at but nothing concrete yet.”

“Well, you have time. Just let me know, and I’ll make sure to change your address in your file. Now let’s go.”

Standing, we leave her office and head down the hall to the break room. When we walk in, people are standing around chatting. I recognize some people and others I don’t. They must be people who leave before I get here.

“Everyone,” Martha says, getting their attention. “I would like you to meet our newest staff member, Cora. Some of you may know her, and some of you may not. Right now, Cora is finishing up the school year at Walker U before joining us full time. She’s been an avid volunteer who’s gone above and beyond what we’ve asked of her, and I can’t wait to make her a permanent member of our staff.”

I raise my hand and wave awkwardly as I smile. Suddenly, I feel bad for every new kid who ever joined my school growing up. This shit is uncomfortable.

“We’re glad to have you, Cora,” Phoebe says as she pulls me into a hug.

“Thank you.”

A couple of other people come up and introduce themselves and say congratulations before running off to their first clients of the day.

“What now?” I ask as the room clears out.

“Now we look at the roster and see when the next family who needs help comes in.”

“Sounds good.”

Martha grabs the tablet that’s on the wall by the door that’s meant for staff and opens up what she’s looking for. “Well, lucky for you, it doesn’t look like anyone comes in for another twenty minutes if you want to take that one.”

“Hey, just tell me where you want me.”

“Martha, I’m sorry to interrupt.” We turn and see a man who introduced himself as Stan standing in the doorway with a frazzled look. “My daughter’s school just called and said she’s throwing up. Do you mind if I leave?”

“Go. Family comes first, you know that,” Martha tells him.

The man winces. “I just pulled the Clearwater family into room two when I got the call.”

“I can handle them,” I say.

“Are you sure? You haven’t had time to go over the file,” Martha says.

“I really don’t mind.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You are the best,” the man chants, making me laugh.

“Go, get your daughter,” Martha tells him.

“Well, it looks like you have your first family as an official staff member. The Clearwaters are on their last visit. They have complied with all of their requirements, so today is essentially a formality. Provided nothing goes terribly wrong, they will be getting their little girl back by the end of the day. Are you ready?”

“I’ve never been more ready for anything,” I say with sincerity.

“I knew you were the right person for this job. Check in with me afterward.” She hands me the file.

“You know it.”

“I’ll send the child to you once you get inside.” Martha hands me the tablet with all the information I might need for the visit.

“Sounds good.”

I take off down the hall and pause when I step in front of room number two. I take a deep breath and center myself.

This is it. I got this.

Taking a quick look at the file, I get ready to go inside.

Opening the door, I walk inside. “Hi, my name is Cora, and I’ll actually be supervising your visit today.”

“What happened to Stan?” the nervous-looking father asks.

I smile softly as I sit. “Stan had to leave for a family emergency.”

“Oh no. I hope everything is okay,” the mother says softly.

“I’m sure everything will be fine. Now before we get started, do you have any questions for me today?” I ask as I pull up their chart.

“This is our last one, right? And then we get to bring our baby home?” Mrs. Clearwater says as she wrings her hands together.

“Essentially yes, but your daughter won’t be leaving with you today. As soon as today’s visit ends, I will send off my report. Once the judge has looked it over, a decision will be made. From what I can tell based on your file, you have nothing to worry about.”

I want to tell them that it will likely still be today, but I learned early you don’t make promises to these families. You only tell them what you absolutely know.

“It’s just nerve-racking, you know, someone else taking care of your child.” Mr. Clearwater’s throat bobs. “A complete stranger at that.”

“I won’t lie to you and say I understand, because I don’t. I’m not a parent yet. With that said, though, I can’t imagine how terrifying that must be.”

“You hear so many horror stories about foster families,” Mrs. Clearwater whispers.

“Do you have a concern about where your daughter is located?” I ask as fear runs through me.

Shit. I’ve never had a report of a suspicion of abuse from a foster family.

Mrs. Clearwater shakes her head. “No, Roma seems to like them well enough, but...”

“I get it, I do.”

“Okay, enough worrying. Can we see Roma now?” Mr. Clearwater blurts out, making me laugh.

“Of course, let me get her.”

As the visit goes on, I smile more and more at the family. It’s obvious that they love their daughter.

I’m saddened that the child was ever removed, but it was for the best. The father had lost his job and had started drinking excessively. His wife seems sweet, but the reports say that she fell down the hole with him.

One night, their house caught fire. They almost died that night looking for Roma, but she hadn’t been in the house. She had gotten out of the front door prior to the fire and was found three streets over playing on a play set in a neighbor’s yard.

To be cautious, she was removed from their care. With no family nearby, foster care was the only option.

I'm glad they see the errors of their ways. Everyone has some down times. Sometimes they don't make the right decisions.

Watching this family smiling, happy together, I know that not all bad decisions lead to destruction. Sometimes it's the wake-up call needed to get your life back on track.

This is why I wanted to do this job.

I want to be the one to help these people get back on the right path.



Kellan

As I wait for Cora to get out of work, I think about how different this year is from last. Last year around this time, I was moping about losing Grace. I felt like my entire world was ending.

Now I feel like I hadn't lived before Cora.

It's been a whirlwind, but I wouldn't change it for anything in the world.

The door opens, and I watch as Cora walks out. She's chatting with another older woman with a bright smile on her face. I love seeing her look so happy. I could stare at that smile all day long.

They separate as Cora skips toward me.

"Thanks for picking me up, hotshot." She wraps her arms around me, kissing me.

I kiss her back a moment before pulling back. "I kind of had to since I dropped you off."

"I could have driven my car," she teases.

My mind flashes back to this morning in my dorm's shower, making my dick twitch. It's become a frequent place for us to bring each other pleasure. It also meant not having time to drop her off at her car.

Worth it.

"I like having excuses to spend more time with you," I tell her, leaning down to kiss her once more before pulling back and opening the passenger door.

Once she is inside, I go around to the driver's side and climb in.

"First, you look beautiful." She blushes at my words. "Second, what do you want for our celebration dinner?"

"Celebration?" she asks.

"Yeah. You started your new job today. That is cause for celebration."

"I'm not even full time yet. They are easing me in so I can work around my school schedule until May," she tells me.

"Doesn't matter. Still counts as your first job." I grab her hand, pulling it to my mouth to kiss the back of it.

"BLT pizza and movies at my place. That's what I want." She bats those beautiful eyelashes at me.

She doesn't even need to work for it. She could have asked for Gordon Ramsey's beef Wellington, and I would have driven across the country to get it for her. Anything my girl wants, my girl gets.

"You got it."

Picking up my phone, I put the order in quickly before I start the truck and start driving. "So tell me about your day," I say to her.

She tells me every little piece of her day. I smile as she gets excited, tripping over her words when she remembers something she has missed in her storytelling.

She is adorable.

She only pauses long enough for me to run in and grab the food. As soon as I'm back in the truck, she continues making me feel like a king.

I want to be the one she wants to share her excitement with as much as the one she shares her tears with. I want to be everything to her because that is what she is for me. My reason for breathing.

She winds down as we pull up to the dorms.

"I'm sorry, I didn't give you a chance to speak at all. How was your day?" she asks as she slips her hand into my free one as we walk up to her dorm.

She uses her keycard to let us in, holding the door open for me before taking her place at my side.

"Hockey and classes. It was good. Did you get your assignments done from your classes today?"

She nods. "I did. I'm glad my teacher understood. Now that I've finished the human resource stuff, I can come and go as I please at the

center. I can't wait for school to end, though. I'm ready to be there all the time."

"I'm so proud of you, beautiful. The look on your face right now is pure happiness. Never give that up for anything. Promise me."

She cuddles into my side as we make it to her door.

"I don't plan to ever let you go, so that's an easy promise to make," she tells me.

I'm speechless as she opens her door for us. I set the pizza on the desk, kicking my shoes off before I climb onto her bed.

Then I watch her as she changes out of her work clothes. I love watching her body move. My smile only grows when I see her grab the hoodie with my name and number on the back. I love watching her wear it.

When she climbs back into bed with me, pulling her laptop over, I tuck her under my arm. She starts up a movie while I get the pizza, opening the box for us to eat over it.

It's the perfect evening.

After we have eaten and settled down next to one another, I press a kiss to the top of her head. She lets out a content sigh, making me feel like all is right in the world.

"I love you, hotshot." She glances up at me from her place on my chest.

"I love you so much that I don't know how I ever thought I loved anyone before you," I admit.

"I don't need to be your first love, Kellan. All I want to be is your last love."

I shake my head. "My only love. I'm telling you, Cora. I thought I loved Grace, but it was only familial love. I knew it then, and now that I have experienced love with you, I know that it is absurd that I ever confused the two to begin with."

She leans up, kissing me. I kiss her back with all the feelings rushing through me. When she straddles me, I hold her hips, looking up at her.

"None of it matters anymore. All that matters is we are together now. It's us against the world."

It's the truth.

I would take on the world for this woman. I know we will survive because I have her at my side.

I was going down a long, dark, lonely path when I met Cora. I was mourning the life I thought I wanted. I never expected her to fly into my

life, checking me into the boards and knocking my life off path. When I emerged from the penalty box, I found a brighter path laid out before me with a gorgeous beauty at the end coaxing me forward.

Cora saved my life.

She will never understand to what extent, but I know I will spend every single one of my breaths trying to show her how much she means to me.

Without Cora, none of this matters.

She is my world. My everything.

Best of all...

She's all mine.

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epilogue

Cora

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MONTHS LATER

Who knew working full time would be so exhausting? Not that it isn't always rewarding.

It's only been a week of me officially taking the job that Martha offered me with DHS, but it has been a hell of an adjustment. I went from only going a few times a week and working a few hours to being thrown into the circus and learning to hold the right ropes.

There is way more to child welfare than I ever anticipated.

I still have training to go through until I can become a caseworker, but Martha assured me that I would still be handling mediations several times a week as well. She had spoken so highly of me that the head of the department came to my interview to meet me.

Let's just say that he was impressed with my compassion for the children.

As I park my car, I spot Peyton heading to hers in the spot next to me. I smile and wave, but she comes over to me instead.

"What's up?" I ask her.

She smiles. "You have a surprise waiting for you upstairs. I also wanted to let you know I won't be home tonight. So don't wait up."

When she winks at me, I roll my eyes and smile.

"Love you, PeyPey," I call out to her back as she rounds her car to get in.

"You too, CoCo."

Grabbing my bag from the back seat, I make my way up to the apartment.

I know Kellan is here. His truck was parked in one of the visitors' parking spots. The apartment complex only provides two parking spots per apartment, and since Grace doesn't own a car, Peyton and I claimed them.

When I get to the apartment door, I open it, smiling when I see what is in store for me.

Kellan is standing there in a button-down and slacks. In his hand is a bouquet of marigolds in yellows, oranges, and reds. They are so beautiful.

"I love them," I tell him.

He smiles. "I love you. Come in, I made dinner."

Kellan isn't much of a cook, so I'm surprised when I see a whole meal laid out on the table.

"What is all of this?"

He looks sheepish. "Grace helped."

"Where is she anyway?"

"Out with Clay. Said she wouldn't be back, so we have the place to ourselves."

My heart is in my throat. I've been thinking about it for a while. I wonder if he is planning to propose. This seems like something you would do to propose.

"Sit. Let's eat."

I do as he says, taking my seat. My mind is running a million miles a minute.

If he asks, will I say yes?

Of course I will. I love him and want to marry him. At the same time, I'm not ready for that step.

"Hey, beautiful. Calm those thoughts. How was work?" he murmurs, kissing the back of my hand.

I take a bite of the perfectly cooked chicken while I think about my answer.

"It was rough, but I like the work. I shadowed a caseworker who had to remove two children today. One of them got into their parents' coke stash and ended up in the hospital."

He frowns. "That's fucked."

"Yeah. The kids were crying, but so were the parents. It was heartbreaking. The parents seemed remorseful."

"I don't understand how they can choose drugs over their kids. I hope they get their lives straight."

"Me too. What about you? How was your day?"

"Good. Hockey season is officially over. Tomorrow is the passing of the torch. Coach will crown a new captain, and the hockey house will be back up for grabs."

"Who do you think it will be?" I ask.

"Brett. He's been Coach's assistant all year. He's the best choice," he tells me.

"Makes sense. How do you feel about that?"

He eats in silence for a minute, and I let him work through his emotions. He's not perfect. He messes up sometimes, but he is trying, and that is all that matters.

"I'm disappointed it won't be me. It was what I wanted, but then I realized that maybe it's for the best. If I'm not the best option, then I don't want it."

I nod, understanding what he means.

"If they think you are the best option?" I ask.

He smiles. "I would be grateful for the opportunity and do everything I could to prove they made the right choice."

We continue to chat as we eat. Once we finish, I smile when he brings out the apple crumble I love from a place down the street. It only has me more nervous.

"Why are you being extra sweet tonight? It feels like you are trying to make it special."

He swallows hard and nods. "It is. Well, I'm buttering you up at least. I have a question for you, and I'm afraid of the rejection."

My heart starts racing in my chest.

Oh god. This is it.

"Cora, can I stay here for the summer with you?" He looks down at his lap like he is waiting for the sting.

A laugh bursts out of me, making him look up at me with confusion on his face.

"Oh fuck. I thought you were proposing. Jesus, Kellan. What the hell?"

His eyes change to those of shock.

"I mean, I want to. Don't get me wrong, but I don't have the means to get a ring, and I thought you wouldn't want to this early, so I've been holding off, but I mean, yes, it can be that if you want me to. Let me go buy a ring first though. Please?" he rambles.

I shake my head, tears falling from my eyes from the laughter and relief I feel. I want to marry Kellan, but today is not the day.

"Oh god, no. I mean, I want to marry you too. One day, but I am way too young to be thinking about marriage. My life is a mess right now. Fuck, that wasn't what I was expecting."

"So no to getting married, but does that mean I can't stay with you? I don't want to be hours away from you all summer, and getting an apartment makes no sense when I will be in the dorm in September."

“Oh, you sweet adorable man.” I get out of my seat, straddling his lap. “Yes, you can stay here with me for as long as you want. To be clear, that wasn’t a no on the marriage thing. It was a not right now.”

He nods. “I got that. Can I kiss you now? I feel like I embarrassed the hell out of myself.”

I don’t answer him. Instead, I take his lips with mine. The kiss starts off innocent enough, but when I start grinding, he unbuttons my pants and sticks his hand in them. As he circles my clit, I moan.

“Hotshot, take them off.”

He helps me stand, stripping me of my clothes. When he goes to stand too, I shake my head.

“I’ve always wanted to fuck someone with their clothes on. Makes it seem more taboo,” I tell him, taking his cock out of his pants.

His breathing grows quicker as I stroke him until I’m certain he is as lustful as I am.

Then I position myself over him, sliding down his length in one go.

He halts my hips, hissing. “Condom.”

I smile at him. “Birth control. I’m not ready to take a major step, but I am ready to take the next step with you.”

That was all he needed to hear. He grips my hips, helping me set a steady pace as I fuck him into the chair.

My orgasm hits me first, his name falling from my lips.

The feeling of warmth fills me as he shoots his load.

He holds me in his arms as my breathing slows back down. Then he slaps my ass once.

“Hold on, beautiful. I’m not done with you yet.”

He picks me up, carrying me to my room.

We don’t leave it for the rest of the night.



Kellan

Everything is right in my world.

We won the championship. Cora is sleeping by my side more nights than she is not. She even agreed to let me stay the summer with her. The guys and I are on good terms. Grace is slowly becoming my best friend again. Well, outside of Cora, that is. Wyatt and I have gotten close as well. I confide in him more than any of the other guys.

On top of all of that, my anxiety is under control. Or as under control as it can be. It's weird how something can affect you so much without you even realizing it. It's taken months, but I'm slowly figuring it out and what works for me. With the help of my family, Cora, and my doctors, we decided to avoid medications and only go that route if I couldn't manage it other ways. Now I have a whole regimen of relaxation techniques that I use daily to keep my stress levels down. It's been trial and error for sure, and while I have had an attack here and there, nothing as bad as the night on the ice.

It's something that I'll always have to live with, but knowing what triggers to avoid and what to do if it happens helps. For a moment I thought being diagnosed with anxiety would be a death sentence for my career, but I've learned it's more common than one would think. It's something that I can manage all while continuing to do what I love.

My world couldn't get any better.

"All right, guys. The moment you have all been waiting for. This has been an amazing season, and I have been blessed to be your captain for the last two years. What no one will ever know is that we are a team, yes, but we are also a family. Those who bleed for the family and give every last drop of sweat on their brow will always be part of this family. Ten years down the road, we will still be family. No one can replace the chemistry we had this year. I only hope that you find your own chemistry next year and the year after that. Life is constantly changing, but it's how you handle the change that determines the person you are. With that being said, we have the votes, and the new captain has been decided." Clay holds up the envelope, but I know he already knows who it is.

Coach called him into the office before this whole thing to discuss it with him.

"Being a captain is less about the glory and more about what you are willing to do in order to keep your guys on the right track. At times, you are like a father to your peers, offering the guidance they need to keep themselves on track. Other times, you are a friend who listens to their

burdens and helps them through their rough times. Most of the time, you are their coach. You are helping them become the best they can be for themselves and the team. It is a thankless position. Many times, you will be hated for the decisions you make. Others will covet it and want what you have.”

My heart hurts at that statement. I know that I was one of those people.

He continues. “It’s a position that brings great responsibility. One I know this person understands and will do his best to fulfill.”

I look over to Brett and smile at him. He is a coach already. The way he handles the team is amazing. He will be a good leader.

“So with great honor, I pass the torch.” He holds up a literal torch as if it’s the Olympics. “To Kellan Cooper.”

I freeze, not sure I heard him right. This has to be one of my dreams. There is no way he just said my name.

My heart is racing in my chest as I blink my eyes, looking around at the other guys. I’m waiting for the gotcha moment. It doesn’t come, though.

“Kellan, come get the patch, man,” Clay jokes, pulling me out of my stupor.

Everyone is cheering, but it sounds like I’m in a tunnel. Wyatt slaps my shoulder, prompting me to move. I take step after step until I’m at the front of the group.

“Are you sure?” I whisper to Clay as I make it to him.

“Never been more sure. Congrats, man.” He holds the torch out, patting my shoulder with his free hand.

I take the torch, forcing a smile as I wave at everyone. “What if I fuck it up?” I ask under my breath.

He laughs. “I’ll be around to help you unfuck it. You’re not on your own. You have Wyatt and Brett too. Beckett is only a call away. You’re not alone anymore, Kellan.”

The words hit me somewhere deep. I’m not alone anymore. I have Cora, my bright light even when the days get dark. I have Wyatt, the man who has become my closest friend. Then there’s Beckett, Brett, and Clay. They have accepted me into their little family as if I was always meant to be part of it.

It’s everything I wanted. Icing on the cake? I’m now the captain of the team. I’m humbled by how much my life has changed in one short year.

“I’ve never been more glad to have you drafted to Boston. I’m going to be calling,” I warn him.

He laughs. "At first, maybe, but you'll get the hang of it. I have faith in you."

Then Coach comes over and shakes my hand.

"I knew you had it in you, kid. Make me proud. Don't forget to pick your roommates for next year. I want you moved in by August." He hands me a key.

Not just any key.

The key to the hockey house.

"No excessive celebrations, please. Don't need a repeat of Woods," he says, referring to Brett.

I nod as he makes his way out of the rink, leaving me with the team.

I smile and talk to every single one of them. After they are done, Brett, Beckett, Wyatt, and Clay come over to me.

"So have you thought about who you are going to live with?" Brett asks, that megawatt smile on his face.

I laugh. "Don't worry. Your room is safe. As is Wyatt's."

"What about the last room?" Clay asks.

I look around, noting all the players. I know we have incoming freshmen too. I could be nice like Clay and choose one of them, but when my eyes land on the rookie of the season, I know who it will be.

"Calvin," I call out.

He looks up, shocked, but heads our way.

"Him? Really?" Brett huffs, but I ignore him.

"Yes, Cap?" He looks nervous.

"I want you to move into your new room in the next month. No exceptions," I demand.

"New room? Dorms don't open until August, I thought." He looks adorably confused.

I love it.

"Hockey house is open now, freshman. Show me what you're going to do to keep your spot as a sophomore."

"Really?" the kid squeaks.

"Really. Don't make me regret it."

"I won't. Thank you. Thank you so much."

He runs off, leaving us laughing in his wake.

"Why him?" Clay asks.

I smile. "I see myself in him. He's made some mistakes this year, but with good influences, he can be great. I want to be part of the story making him great."

Clay pats my shoulder, pulling the coveted "C" from his pocket before handing it over.

"Told you that you were the right person for the job."

Holding that letter, I know I might not be, but I will do everything in my power to be the best I can be.

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a look at book three:

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BREAKOUT

Some risks are worth taking. Others could cost you everything.

Peyton Anderson doesn't do trust. She's learned the hard way that the only person she can count on is herself. Sure, she has friends—and a no-strings-attached arrangement with Walker Wolves star Beckett Hayes—but letting people in? That's never been her game. So when an unexpected inheritance comes with one massive condition—she has to be married—Peyton is ready to walk away.

Beckett, however, sees an opportunity. He's wanted more with Peyton from the start, and if a marriage of convenience is what it takes to prove they belong together, he's all in. But what starts as a simple arrangement quickly turns complicated. As past wounds resurface and outside pressures mount, their secret marriage begins to feel anything but temporary.

Peyton is convinced they've made a mistake. Beckett knows he's exactly what she needs—if only she'll let him in. But with hearts and futures on the line, will their love be the ultimate goal... or just another penalty?

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acknowledgments

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The book cover for 'That Christmas Night' by Cala Riley is displayed on a tablet. The cover features a dark red background with bokeh light effects. It is decorated with strings of colorful Christmas lights, green holly leaves, and gold snowflakes. The title 'THAT Christmas NIGHT' is written in a mix of gold serif and cursive fonts. Below the title, the tagline 'a holiday to remember...' is written in a small, white cursive font. The author's name 'CALA RILEY' is at the bottom in a gold serif font.

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