



THREE RULES
FOR DATING
A ~~HOCKEY~~
PLAYER

RULES OF THE GAME

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
J. WILDER

RULES OF THE GAME

RULE BREAKER SERIES

JESSA WILDER

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J. Wilder

Rules Of The Game

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To the readers. Thank you, a million times over. You've changed my life and I can't express how much I appreciate you.

To the Wild One's Facebook group. Thank you for making this the best writing experience. It's been so fun to begin this community with you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I hope you love Lucas as much as I do!
XOXOXOXO

Tropes:

- Brother's Best Friend
- Secret Pen Pal
- Jealousy
- Mutual pining
- *You're going to suffer, but you're going to be happy about it*

Triggers:

- Death of a loved one
- Depictions of loss and grief

This book has been reviewed by 3 sensitivity readers.

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PROLOGUE

PIPER

7 Years Old

We'd only been here for a day, and Marcus had already made a friend. He and Jax, our new neighbor down the road, were out playing road hockey while I was stuck in the house. I liked sports—soccer was my favorite, but I didn't like hockey. Like at all.

I walked in circles through the house, around the island, and into the living room, where my mom sat on the floor unpacking boxes, and back again. Everyone said I looked like her, blonde hair, with blue eyes, but now that we'd had to cut most of my hair, I thought I looked more like my brother.

On my fifth round trip, my mom huffed and looked at me. "Why don't you go see Dad in the garage? I bet he's got your bike out already."

"Really?" I couldn't hide my excitement. My mom hadn't let me out of her sight since the fire, but apparently, all it took was circling her a million times for her to want me out of her hair.

My dad was in the garage opening boxes and smiled at me when I walked in. "Hey, sweetheart. What are you up to?"

"Mom said I could ride my bike."

His bushy, dark eyebrows rose and creased his forehead as he stood from his crouched position. "Are you sure you don't want me to get your brother?"

The thought of my dad making Marcus come home just to hang out with me turned my stomach. "I'm sure."

"Okay." He helped me clip on my helmet and held my bike steady while I got on. Even though I'd learned to ride a few years ago, I was still a little

unsteady. My dad patted my helmet. “Just around the block, okay?”

“Okay, Dad.” I gave him a wide smile and stepped on my right pedal, driving the bike forward. The bike wobbled, and my grip tightened on the handlebars but smoothed out once I started pedaling.

I followed the sidewalk down our block and around the corner. Every house had a bright green lawn and flowers planted out front in all my favorite colors. A bush that had to be the same height as me started to wiggle, and leaves fell from its branches. My stomach hitched as I biked closer.

A boy my age, with a wide smile fell out of the leaves. His dark hair was faded up the sides, and even from this distance I could see his warm brown skin was peppered with freckles. I’d never thought a boy was pretty before, but I couldn’t think of a better way to describe him.

Distracted, I didn’t see the dip in the sidewalk. I screamed when my bike stopped suddenly, and my body flew over the handlebars. I tried to put my hands in front of me, but it was too fast. My face burned where it skidded across the pavement, and tears flooded my cheeks as heaving sobs racked my body.

“Are you okay?” Small hands landed on my shoulder and picked me up until I sat against a warm body. The boy from earlier cupped my cheek, careful of the scrape, and his eyes were wide on mine as he told me I was okay. I hiccupped, and he laughed, eyes not leaving mine. “You’re okay, you’re safe.”

I couldn’t look away from his light brown eyes rimmed with gold. “It hurt.”

“I bet it did. Hey, I didn’t know there was a daredevil in the neighborhood. You should’ve seen the air you caught before you dropped. It was killer.” He gave me a silly smile, and I slowly caught my breath.

“I’m Lucas. Are you from around here?”

“I just moved.” I turned my head and pointed at the house behind me. “There.”

He laughed. “That’s my house.”

My cheeks heated, and I looked away. “No, I mean the one on the other side.”

He looked at his house and back to me with a giant smile. “Want to be friends, Killer?”

“Yes—”

“Pipsqueak, what happened to you?” Marcus dropped his bike and ran up

to us, his friend Jax right behind him. “You okay?”

I nodded and pushed off the ground to stand, ignoring the sting from the scratches on my knees and arms. “Yeah, I fell, but I’m alright.”

“Mom’s been looking for you. She wants you to come home.” Marcus tilted his head as he looked me over. “You better hurry. She’s going to freak out.”

Lucas held the bike steady for me. It felt like butterflies danced in my stomach as I took it from him. I’d made a new friend. “Want to come over?”

“Mom’s going to want you to stay inside, Pipsqueak. He’s not going to want to do that.”

I stared at Lucas, hoping he’d come with me. We’d just decided to be friends, but the fluttering stopped in my stomach when he looked to my brother, who motioned for him to follow.

“I’m Marcus. Want to play hockey with us?”

Lucas had already looked away from me. “I don’t know how.”

“We’ll show you,” Jax piped in.

Lucas shrugged and gave me a soft smile. “We’ll play later.”

I sniffed as I rode home. I’d already lost my first friend.

ONE

PIPER

1 YEAR AGO

Summer before college

“I’ll have a Coors Light, and she’ll have a pinot noir,” Jayden told the waiter.

I thanked the man, giving him a small smile before he turned to get our drinks. I’d been dating Jayden for the past month, and I’d been entirely too excited when he invited me to the notoriously hard-to-get-into restaurant. Nero’s walls were adorned with murals of the Italian countryside, and the aroma of garlic filled the air.

Jayden leaned forward on the table toward me. “I missed you these last few days.”

A warm tingle rolled down my spine. I wasn’t exactly sure how I felt about him, but it felt damn good to be wanted. I bit my bottom lip, feeling warmth grow across my cheeks.

He’d had to leave for a work event the day after we slept together, but he’d called me every day since. Now he looked at me with hooded eyes, and my mouth went dry.

“Here you go, miss.” The waiter set my glass down in front of me, saving me from having to respond.

“Thank you.” I gave the server a small smile, and I resisted grabbing the glass and taking a deep sip as Jayden ordered for us. He ordered me an Alfredo, and I reached into my bag to grab a Lactaid, just in case.

As soon as the waiter left, Jayden leaned in close and glided his fingers up my wrist before entangling our fingers. “So, beautiful, you coming over tonight?”

I pulled my hand back, nearly knocking over my glass, and pasted on an

awkward smile while steadying it. It wasn't that I didn't want to. It had been fine the last time, but there was something off I couldn't figure out. His gaze lingered on my mouth, and I swallowed hard, feeling compelled to answer. "Yeah, of course."

"You look pretty, flushed like that." He ran his tongue along his top teeth and smirked at me.

I felt my cheeks grow hotter, and my memories drifted toward the last time I saw him—

"Jayden! What are you doing here?"

I looked up from my bread plate as a stunning brunette approached our table, her clear green eyes glaring down at me. They looked like they were meant to be together, with her white eyelet dress and simple shoes perfectly matching his popped-collared shirt.

Jayden's gaze darted quickly to mine, then back to her, and a red flush climbed up his neck. A sinking feeling landed hard in my stomach when she rested her arm over his shoulder and stroked painted red nails through his sandy-blond hair.

"I thought you weren't getting back until Sunday?" she hissed at him.

Panic contorted his handsome features as a cool chill spread across my body, out through my heart, down my arms, and to my very fingertips. I clutched tighter to my glass of wine. This was a mistake, right? It had to be. Jayden was my...well, maybe we weren't ready for labels, but this certainly hadn't been casual.

I mean, we'd had sex last week.

Okay, sort of sex. He definitely got off. I was nervous and all up in my head and distracted and—shit, his pretty girlfriend was looking right at me as if I had all the answers.

Sorry, girl. I'm just as lost as you.

I glanced across the booth at Jayden, curious to see what he'd say. Seeing the guilty look on his face, my devastation turned quickly to anger, which morphed lightning fast into disappointment. And just like that, I was detached. Ice queen. As he went to open his stupid mouth, I realized I didn't give a damn about anything he was about to say. This was over, whatever this was. Now I just wanted a way out.

A cool calmness settled over me as he grew more distressed. I was having a freakin' out-of-body experience watching this scene play out. I was almost looking forward to seeing how the hell he was going to try to weasel out of

this. Rationally, my first response should have been anger, disappointment, maybe even a little devastation to find out the guy I had been dating clearly had another girlfriend, but Jayden had yet to say anything, and the sheer audacity of him just sitting there was almost comical.

Girlfriend number two's head switched between him and me like a Ping-Pong ball until they finally landed on him. He just sat there with his mouth opening and closing like a dying fish.

My hands clenched and unclenched, and my teeth ground together as I rolled my eyes at his inability to form a coherent sentence.

"I can't believe I ever thought you were a decent guy." I pushed back from the table, my chair legs screeching and drawing the attention of the entire restaurant. My cheeks flushed with their stares, and I felt the need to flee. Girlfriend number two's eyes rimmed red and glossed over. Anything remotely funny about this situation died with the sheen of tears. I felt a pang of guilt in my chest.

"I didn't know," I said, hoping she could see the sincerity in my face.

A tear rolled down her cheek, and she asked, "How long?"

Clarification wasn't necessary; this asshole had clearly been leading her on. "A month," I said firmly, then stood, pressing both palms onto the table, and leaned over Jayden. Without looking away from him, I picked up my wine, swirling the dark red liquid in my glass, and then asked, "Have you been dating us both, Jayden?"

He smirked, his gaze flickering between me and his other girlfriend. "I guess you both just weren't enough to satisfy my needs."

"Wrong answer." Indignation burned through my veins, and a delicious idea popped into my head. I lifted the glass and poured its contents over his perfectly styled hair.

Jayden straight up spluttered, but instead of looking at me, he looked at the girl to my right. "Hey, you know I'm sorry, right?"

It shouldn't have mattered. I didn't want him back anyway, but something about him choosing her in front of me had cracks of rage forming in my cool shell. She moved in closer, and I spun on my heels, grabbing my bag from my chair before I could see her entertain his bullshit for a second.

Hopefully she came to her senses quickly because there was no way that boy was changing. I sucked back a breath, holding myself together as I hurried out of the restaurant. My body vibrated with the need to run, powered by an overwhelming sense of embarrassment, but I kept my steps steady and

my head held high.

I wanted Jayden to worry about just how okay I was. For him to know I didn't care. All I had to do was get the hell out of here first.

In a few more feet, I was pushing out of the restaurant into the warm summer air. Even at night, the humidity made my clothes stick to my skin, and the curls I'd painstakingly put in my hair went limp. The road was lit by streetlights, and the busy sound of cars driving by created a low background hum.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, ignoring the slight tremble. I just needed to get home before Marcus and the guys. I'd told everyone I was going to Shana's house because I'd planned on staying at Jayden's place. If I was spotted, people would have questions.

Cursing that I hadn't driven myself here, I started down the sidewalk toward my place only a few kilometers away. I had another two blocks to go before turning right onto a winding paved path.

Thank God the guys didn't know about Jayden, or they'd never let me live it down. I could already hear Marcus's voice inside my mind, telling me he told me so. Even though he was only eleven months older than me, he treated me like it was his God-given mission to "protect me." My mom had managed to convince our school to accept me early, so we were even in the same class. He had no right to treat me like some little kid. That didn't stop him from going on and on about how all guys were assholes and that I needed to be protected from them. I bit back my infuriated groan. I couldn't imagine the sheer size of the "I told you so."

It wasn't that I didn't know guys could be assholes. It was that it was sexist as hell to decide I couldn't handle it. Guess what? Girls could be evil too.

A shadow moved to my right, snapping me out of my thoughts and sending shivers down my spine. I strained my eyes, squinting into the darkness between the two restaurants, but the streetlight only covered the first few feet.

For a moment, I froze in place, listening to the sound of my own breath echoing in my ears. A second later, a raccoon popped its head out of the garbage, and my shoulders relaxed slightly.

Rationally, I knew that this was the same street I ran every morning, and the likelihood of anything going wrong was slim to none. But years of conditioning to never be alone at night had jitters dancing under my skin. I

dialed Shana, hoping she'd talk to me on the way home, but it went straight to voicemail. No real surprise there. I could only hope her night was going better than mine.

My fingers tightened over my phone, and I weighed my options. I couldn't call Marcus. I didn't even want to think about how that conversation would go down. But I couldn't shake the creepy feeling crawling up my skin being out here alone. It wasn't even that late, couldn't be much past nine, but once I'd passed the restaurant district, traffic died down, and most of the stores were closed. Unease settled over me, and I huffed out a breath, pulling out my phone.

There was another option, but it was hard to know if he was better or worse than my brother. On one hand, he'd be happy to lecture me, but on the other, I knew he would keep this to himself. So basically, my options were continue freaking out or call my brother's best friend and risk a lecture.

I took a deep breath and dialed Lucas.

TWO

LUCAS

I got home from the gym, and my garage door was wide open, “Teenage Dirtbag” by Wheatus blasting from my speakers. Jax must have taken over DJ duties for the night—he was always playing nineties music. As I walked into the garage, I saw him lounging on the couch with his legs sprawled out as if he owned the place, scrolling through his phone.

Marcus spotted me. His blond hair fell over his eyes as he lined up a puck and hit it effortlessly into the top-right target attached to the net.

“Hey, buddy, where have you been? I’ve been kicking Jax’s ass, practicing our shots for the last hour.” He spun and gave us a bow. Marcus was willpower and a bit of crazy all wrapped up in one. I had no doubt that’s why he was so successful on the ice.

“Fuck off, man,” Jax protested without bothering to look up from his phone. I smiled at the sight of them bickering like an old married couple.

Years ago, my dad had set up an indoor practice area in the garage. The floor was covered in a special white plastic that mimicked the feeling of ice, and the walls were protected by thick plywood panels, allowing us to shoot the puck without worrying about causing any damage. In the center was a regulation-size net, where Marcus was currently knocking targets down one after the other.

“Heard anything from Samantha?” Marcus asked, not looking up from what he was doing. Samantha was a regular puck bunny who’d been chasing me for the last two months. Too bad for her I wasn’t interested. Like at all. Don’t get me wrong, she was hot, but she’d also fucked pretty much everyone on the team, including Jax and Marcus. I wasn’t going to take on these guys’ leftovers, and they fucking knew it, giving me shit whenever they

could.

Jax sat forward, the change of topic catching his attention, and a wicked grin lifted his mouth. “Fuck, man, you’re missing out. She gives amazing head.”

Marcus laughed, resting his stick on the ground in a casual pose. “I forgot about that. She does that twist-and-lick move.”

Jax groaned and tipped his head back.

I choked out a laugh. “Fuck you guys.”

Jax winked. “Come on, man. What’s a little gossip between friends? Plus, since when have you been picky?”

I didn’t want to answer the question because I knew what would happen. They’d want to know how I had gone over a year without having sex. I hadn’t exactly lied to them, but I let them believe what they wanted. The truth was that no one had caught my interest after Piper had walked into her backyard in a pink string bikini. It barely covered her ass. I had to pin my aching cock under my swim shorts’ waistband before Marcus killed me for looking at her that way.

I spent the next two weeks fantasizing about her, palming myself to images of the way her bikini top had pulled tight and shifted to the side, revealing the soft pink edge of her nipple. It was a memory that would be burned into my mind forever.

Marcus clapped his hands together, and a mischievous smile took over his face. “We should start the Hunt.”

“Fuck that,” I protested, crashing onto the couch, and tried to keep my body language relaxed despite feeling anything but. There would be no hiding my situation if we started that shit up.

Jax choked on a laugh and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Are you kidding me? You’ve won the last two in a row. Don’t pussy out now.”

I couldn’t argue with him without giving myself away. We’d played some variation of this game since tenth grade, after Marcus had gotten his first handy. Now it was a kind of summer tradition, one that had escalated every year until it was definitely out of control. But I couldn’t tell them that. They were more than happy to fuck around. “Whatever, man,” I muttered.

Marcus searched my face and tilted his head a little to the side. He knew me entirely too well. “It’s settled. We need some new rules. It’s getting too easy” He crossed the room to a giant whiteboard and wrote down our names in columns. “For every chick you nail, you’ll get a mark. Whoever has the

most marks by the end of July wins.”

Jax took a long swig of Gatorade from his white hockey bottle. His T-shirt was plastered against his skin, and the ends of his shaggy hair were damp with sweat from taking countless practice shots. “New rule. Hookups only. No double-dipping. Doesn’t matter how many times you fuck her. One girl only counts for one point, assholes.”

I let out a sigh and ran my palms over my face. “Fine. Anything else? Before I beat your asses.” I tried to sound as confident as possible, even though I knew I was already losing this game.

“Yeah, no overnights,” Jax added, and Marcus burst out laughing. That was no surprise. Marcus was known to sneak his share of sleepovers, but Jax had a thing about girls staying over. They didn’t. Ever.

“What if I like to cuddle?” Marcus replied, but I knew he was fine with the rule. Cuddling meant the girls got too clingy, and no one was down for that.

Marcus’s expression turned serious. “Last rule. Stay the fuck away from my little sister.”

“As much as I’d love to see the look on your face, none of us see your sister like that, so relax, man.” Jax smirked.

I nodded when Marcus’s gaze shifted to me. “Stakes are the same. Winner always gets to ride shotgun. Losers buy drinks for the rest of the year.”

We took turns practicing trick shots for the next hour, until I was drenched in sweat. I removed my shirt, but it didn’t do enough to cool me down from the summer heat. I had gotten particularly good at the Michigan shot, where you flip the puck up onto the flat edge of your stick and flick it into the net over the goalie’s shoulder. Since you use it when you’re coming around from the back of the net, the goalie doesn’t stand a shot at blocking it.

I tipped my Gatorade back, taking a long pull, and watched the guys shoot it out. They were both forwards, and their skills were killer. As a defenseman, I practiced more on positioning and reading the play. That didn’t stop me from coming out here and fucking around with them though.

My phone buzzed, and Piper’s name flashed on the screen. What the hell was she doing calling me? I glanced at Marcus, then headed toward the door entering my house. “I’ll be back in a minute. Gotta run and grab milk for my mom.”

Neither of them responded, still busy with their competition.

Shutting the door behind me, I answered Marcus's sister's call.
"Killer?"

THREE

PIPER

“Killer?” Lucas’s familiar voice filled my ear, and all the emotions I’d been holding back slammed forward, and a small, pained sound escaped my mouth before I could stop it. Turned out I wasn’t unaffected; I was just really good at compartmentalizing. I blinked back the burning in the back of my eyes, refusing to cry over that man.

“Piper? You okay?” Even over the background noise, I could make out the rising panic in his voice.

I wanted to say something funny. Something that would let me talk to him while I walked but wouldn’t let him know I was upset. “Oh, come on, can’t I call you just to check in?”

“Don’t lie to me. Where are you?”

I swallowed hard, the concern in his voice melting me further, leaving me wide open for the mortification of what happened tonight. “Can we not talk about it?”

There was a long pause on the other end before he answered. “Sure, Killer. Just tell me where you are.”

“I’m walking down Camber Street. Just talk to me until I get there, ’kay?”

“Walking home from where?” His voice held an edge to it, one that told me he wouldn’t believe me if I lied and said Shana’s.

I huffed out a breath, readying myself to hear it from him. “Nero’s restaurant.”

“Were you on a date?” His words came out strained, almost muffled, and my chest squeezed, wanting so badly for it to mean something. But in the eleven years since my house burned down and we became neighbors, he’d given no signs that he’d ever wanted to be more than friends.

But whenever I got close to saying anything to him, he'd always disappear for a bit, just long enough for me to chicken out.

"Piper?"

I groaned. "Yes, I was on a date."

"With who?" He sounded so genuinely shocked that it felt like a punch to the gut.

"What, you don't think I could get a date?" I tried but couldn't stop the hurt from escaping.

"No, Killer. That's not...that's not what I meant. It's just..."

"It's just what?" I ground out the words, anger behind them.

Lucas laughed, and I startled to a stop. "I just didn't think anyone at our school would have the audacity to go after you after Marcus threatened everyone."

It was annoying but also not news to me that my brother, the star hockey player of our high school, had put an off-limits sign on me. Hell, I'd spent an entire summer dateless while all of the guys went out with different girls every night. The only thing that made it suck less was I wasn't interested in anyone. Not anyone who was interested in me, at least.

That was until we graduated and every puck bunny in a twenty-mile radius was all over Lucas, and my goddamn heart couldn't take it. It's not like I thought he was a virgin, but seeing him chase every single girl over the last month had my stomach churning. Lucas never looked at me like that, never chased me.

But Jayden had. From the second we'd met at the coffee shop, he'd actively pursued me. He asked for my number, set up the dates, and texted first. I still wasn't sure if I'd ever liked him or if I was just so excited that someone *wanted* me. Or at least I thought he did.

"He didn't go to our school. He's older."

"How much older?" Lucas's voice was hard through the phone.

"Old enough that he bought me a glass of wine tonight." Images of what I did with that glass flooded my brain, and I sniffed in a tear-filled breath. They weren't sad tears; they were frustrated, slam-your-fist-against-the-wall tears.

Lucas's voice softened immediately. "Shit, Killer. What happened?"

I inhaled slowly. "I'm fine, okay? Just...just tell me about your day."

"You don't sound okay. Tell me what happened."

Frustration, pain, embarrassment, and mortification all boiled to the

surface, threatening to overflow my restraint. I fought against the feelings as I turned right at the street corner and tried to answer. “He—”

I collided with a firm chest, and I screamed, stumbling backward.

“It’s okay. It’s me.” Lucas chuckled and wrapped his arms around me, pulling my face into his chest. My heart sent blood rushing into my ears, and I sucked in deep breaths of his familiar sandalwood cinnamon scent. I molded myself into him, letting the steady rhythm of his heart calm mine as he ran his hand up and down my spine in slow motions. It took several moments for my heart to stop pounding against my ribs before I was able to pull back from him. “You scared the crap out of me.”

He didn’t let go of my shoulders, still providing some support, and lowered his voice. “I can see that.”

I swallowed hard as his whiskey-colored eyes, framed with thick black lashes, roamed over my face. “How did you find me anyway?” I asked.

Lucas shrugged. “I figured you’d take the path since it’s the quickest route.”

His gaze felt intimate as his eyes searched mine. I dropped my face and swallowed hard, my sight catching on his low-slung sweatpants, and had to fight the heat threatening to flush my cheeks. Most hockey players were attractive. There was something in the sheer size of them and their natural cocky energy. Honestly, it should’ve been a deterrent, but something about all their red flags enticed girls like moths to a flame.

Lucas though, he was on a whole different level, with his broad chest that was at least twice the width of mine, offset by the boyish freckles peppering his cheeks, peeking through his warm brown skin.

His shirt was off-center, like he’d thrown it on as he rushed out of the door. Even though I’d seen Lucas shirtless countless times, that didn’t stop my mouth from watering at the images now flooding my head.

“What happened?” He repeated his question, and warm, calloused fingers slid across my jaw, his thumb guiding my chin up. He tilted his head and raised a questioning brow. With anyone else, I’d let tonight go to the grave, but I was never able to say no to him, no matter how mortifying it would be.

I turned away and focused on the green grass sticking out of the cracks in the pavement, straightening my shoulders. “I’ve been dating a guy for just over a month. He—”

Lucas stiffened, and his arm tightened around me, cutting off what I was going to say next. His chest rose and expanded against mine several times

before he spoke. “What did he do?”

Angry tears returned to my eyes, and I shook my head. I didn’t want to tell him about how I’d had sex with the asshole only to be surprised by his other girlfriend less than a week later. Or how I should’ve stayed and yelled at him, but instead, I ran. I sniffed and rocked back on my heels, but Lucas tightened his arm around me, pulling me deeper into his chest.

He paused, and his voice was rougher than before. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

My body collapsed against his, letting him take the majority of my weight. This was why I’d called Lucas, despite his overprotectiveness. He seemed to always know what I needed, and right now, I needed to forget this whole thing. I looked up, doing my best to put on a playful smile. “Lucas, I’d be fine if I never talked about tonight again.”

He searched my eyes for a second before a small smile curved his lips. “You know if you tell me who he is, I’ll kick his ass for you.”

A lightness filled my chest. Sometimes it felt good to know these guys had my back, and a soft chuckle formed on my lips. “I dumped my glass of wine on him.”

Lucas’s laugh vibrated against me, and he let his arms drop before tapping the underside of my chin softly with his curled index finger. “That’s my girl.”

I tried my best not to let the low timbre of his voice get to me, but the way he said *my girl*, like I was actually someone he wanted, had warmth flooding through me and crawling up my neck. I made a low humming sound, and his eyes darkened, dropping from mine to my lips. I didn’t dare to breathe for fear of breaking the moment. We stood so close his breaths came out in small pants, mingling with mine, and a muscle twitched in his jaw. The weight of the humid air thickened with the tension pulling between us like even the night sky knew this moment was important. Lucas didn’t close the distance, but he didn’t move away.

If I wanted him, I was going to have to be brave, and I wanted him so freaking bad. I swallowed, wetting my lips, and carefully lifted onto my toes. My lips barely grazed his before he was stumbling back and turning like nothing had happened. My cheeks glowed red as rejection set in, and suddenly, the hot air felt cold against my flushed skin. My eyes burned for an entirely new reason, and I turned my face so he couldn’t see.

Lucas stepped further away until we stood beside each other on the

sidewalk and looked straight down the road, all the smooth intimacy in his voice replaced with a playful tone. “Come on, before your brother kills us both.”

FOUR
LUCAS

Taking a shallow breath, I tried to stop the crisp scent of green apples from infiltrating my senses as Piper and I walked in silence toward our places. The air between us felt thick and heavy with what was left unsaid. I slid my eyes to the side, catching where her simple black dress hit her mid-thigh and how more of her tanned skin was exposed with each step. She was all toned muscles and defined calves leading to toes painted the same blue as her eyes. She was everything I had ever wanted, my seductress in an innocent package. I wondered if she had any idea just how much control she could have over me.

Her eyes met mine, catching me staring, and I jerked my gaze forward. I had no business noticing her like that. We'd been neighbors since we were seven, and her brother, Marcus, was one of my closest friends. The only thing that separated our backyards was a six-foot wooden fence. Within a year of the Adamses moving in, our parents installed a gate connecting our yards. Thank God for that because they had a gigantic pool perfect for humid summer nights like this.

I fought back memories of the sexy blonde standing next to me, climbing up the steps soaking wet. My jaw clenched, and I dropped my neck on my shoulders, satisfied with the cracking sound when I rolled it side to side. I had to get a grip on myself before we made it home.

I'd been so close to blowing everything when she came flying around the corner, landing against my chest and looking up at me with clear blue eyes rimmed red with unshed tears. I would have done anything to wipe that look away. The way her cheeks flushed, and her chest rose and fell with her soft pants had me craving the taste of her. When my eyes dropped down to her

painted pink mouth, I had to lock my muscles to keep from closing the distance between us.

I *wanted* to see how far I could push it, to see if I could steal her breath completely. But that wasn't going to happen, no matter how tempting she was.

My feet slowed as we reached the edge of her driveway, not quite wanting to break this moment. She turned slightly my way, just enough to let me know she had my attention, then cleared her throat and looked at the ground. "Thank you for doing that."

"Walking a few blocks isn't worth mentioning, Killer." I bit the side of my cheek, preventing the smile that wanted to break free. I loved the shade of pink she always turned when I called her that.

She huffed out a breath, and even though I couldn't see them, I knew she rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, you didn't have to. Just accept the thank-you."

I lifted my hands up in surrender. "Alright, you win. You're welcome."

Her bright blue eyes darted to mine, and a dimple appeared in her cheek with her smile. "You coming in?" She gestured toward her front door, which I already knew was unlocked from being here countless times. It was nearly identical to mine, with red brick, black awnings over the windows, and manicured evergreen bushes beside the front steps.

"Nah, I'm good. The boys are at my place."

Her gaze shifted away, not meeting mine, and I closed my hand into a tight fist to stop myself from reaching out and turning her attention back to me.

I hated the look of disappointment that crossed her features before she wiped it clean, putting on a small smile that looked so different from her real one. I wanted to tell her that I'd hang out with her over her brother any day. That the small moments she would hang with us were my favorite times. But I kept my mouth shut like the good friend I was. After years of moving from town to town, I'd never had time to make real friends, but the second Marcus moved in, that all changed. He was like a magnet to everyone around him, and my life went from quiet and alone to full of life. He and Jax accepted me like a brother, and we became inseparable. If Piper was Marcus's sister, then she was mine, and I had no goddamn business thinking of her the way I did.

"Alright then." She turned, heading up her driveway, and gave me a quick glance back. "Thanks again."

There was a burning question that I needed answered before I could let

her go. “Why me?”

She spun and tilted her head. “What?”

“Why did you call me and not Marcus? You know he’d have come.”

Several moments passed before she answered. “Because I wanted it to be you.”

Jesus Christ. I wanted to be the one she called, fucking desperately. It was a dangerous feeling coursing through me. One I needed to stop. “Well, next time, call him. He’d want to know.”

She flinched, and I wanted to take them back, but she cut in before I could. “You aren’t going to tell him, are you?”

I should, but I wanted to be her secret keeper. To have something between us that was just ours. “Nah, not this time, but you better hope he doesn’t find out.”

I walked around the block, taking the long way, before approaching my house, needing some time to get a grip on myself. The boys were still in the garage practicing.

Jax’s head popped up, looking me over with a raised brow. “Got the milk?”

“Huh?”

“For your mom. Did you get it?” he asked.

Shit. “She called me when I was out and told me to forget about it.”

He tilted his head to the side and scrunched up his nose. “That’s weird.”

Jax examined me for several seconds before slapping his stick on the ground. “Alright, fuckers. Last to ten buys beers for the weekend.”

Unsurprisingly, Marcus kicked our asses. We might have been good at hockey, but he was the next all-star. We took turns practicing trick shots until I was drenched in sweat. Tired, I hung my stick in its custom spot on the wall and grabbed my shirt. “I’m heading up for a shower.”

Jax popped up from the couch. “It’s only eleven. You are such a fucking pussy.”

I let out a laugh and replied, “Says the man who still calls his mom every night when we’re at camps.”

“Fuck you. I can’t believe you brought my mom into it.”

I shrugged. “Don’t start shit you can’t finish.”

Marcus grabbed Jax’s shoulder. “Come on, buddy, before he burns you so bad there’s nothing left.”

I ripped off my shirt that clung to my skin, revealing my sweat-soaked abs, proud of how all my hard work on the ice was paying off. I didn’t miss how Piper’s attention caught on me this past year.

I groaned as the water from the shower cooled me down. It was the perfect pressure, hard enough to dig into my muscles but not too hard on my neck and face. I lathered up with an all-in-one bodywash and shampoo. Thoughts of Piper in that curve-hugging dress threatened to take over, and I quickly shut the water off, dried myself with a fluffy white towel my mom picked out, and then tied it around my waist.

My room was hot from my open window, and I should’ve shut it to keep in the air-conditioned air, but I didn’t. Instead, I left it open in case I caught a glimpse of a pretty blonde. Our bedroom windows faced each other since she moved in, and we had shouted across the distance more than a few times when we were young. I would love to say I left it open out of habit, but that would be a lie. The light in her room was off, casting it in impenetrable darkness. From this angle, I couldn’t make out her bed, which was a relief because I couldn’t promise I wouldn’t be a perv and watch her. Even the idea that she slept so close drove me crazy.

Knowing I wouldn’t sleep, I pulled up a pair of basketball shorts and tossed my towel into my hamper. I headed to the backyard to take a few shots on the basketball net.

I’d just gotten through a round when a sound caught my attention. At first, it was soft, but it quickly grew to a cry. I was already pushing through Piper’s gate when the cry became louder, changing into just short of a scream. I ran to her window and climbed through, not giving a damn if I was caught.

FIVE
PIPER

My lungs burned as I fought to take shallow breaths, and my eyes stung as smoke billowed under my bedroom door, snaking up the wall until my ceiling was covered in a rolling black cloud. I grabbed the doorknob, but it was too hot, and I snatched my hand back. Blisters immediately formed on my palms. A sob broke from my mouth, and tears filled my eyes as fear lanced through my chest. I cried out for my mom, my voice breaking until it was barely above a whisper.

I screamed for her over and over, but she didn't come. No one did. The smoke was thicker now, moving down until I had to lie on the floor, but it closed in too fast. Sweat covered my skin, and my pink nightgown with purple hearts stuck to my neck. With each breath, I felt it curl down my lungs, choking me and cutting off my air. My body trembled, the room too dark to see. I hated the dark. It's where monsters lived. I didn't understand why my mom didn't come get me. I needed her. I screamed, but no sound came out. I gasped, but no air came in, and my vision turned black. Panic took over, and I tried to get up, but my limbs wouldn't move. There was a roar coming from the other side of the door, growing louder. The door flew open, and flames burst through, the noise so loud it deafened me. I screamed as they licked my skin, burning my arm, but I was stuck to the ground like a weight was pressing on me. A cry pierced the inside, and fear took over my body as I shook against the flames. It hurt so bad.

"I've got you. You're safe now." A low voice rasped into my ear, and I jerked awake, my heart pounding in my chest before meeting a soft, familiar brown gaze. If the room had been lit by more than the moon through the open

window, I knew I would have seen warm caramel in their center. Lucas's weight pushed me into the bed, but unlike my dream, it calmed me—grounded me in reality. His warm fingers cupped my cheeks, and he wiped away my tears. "You're okay. It was a nightmare."

I did feel safe, cocooned in his arms, and I let out a shaky breath and took another one in before nodding. "I'm okay," I said, still feeling a bit shaken.

Lucas rolled off me, taking his warmth with him, and it took everything in me not to pull him back. My white comforter was pushed off me from thrashing in my sleep, leaving me in only an oversized T-shirt I'd stolen from him. If he recognized it, he never said anything. I had been seven when my house burned down, and this wasn't the first time he had crawled through my window in the last eleven years. It wasn't long after we had moved next door that I had woken up wrapped in warm, comforting arms, soothing words telling me I was safe pressed into my neck. It got to the point where I needed him, and the one time he had gone away, I hadn't been able to sleep. I had walked around like a zombie, and I'd had to avoid my place before my parents started to worry.

"You're good?" Lucas said, watching me with a concerned look. His eyes searched mine until my breaths calmed, and I was able to sit up. He dropped his legs over the side of the bed and turned his back to me. I hated this part almost as much as I hated the dreams. He never stayed. Even when I asked before.

All I wanted was for Lucas to care. But I'd be forever relegated to his friend's little sister. Taking a chance, I reached out, catching his wrist with my much smaller fingers. I tightened my grip, knowing he could pull away if he wanted to. "Stay," I said, pleading with him.

He inhaled sharply, his breath coming out in a whoosh, and his words were low and strained like he was forcing them out. "Marcus is my best friend. You know I can't."

My eyes burned with the sting of his rejection, but I wouldn't stop. This time, I couldn't let him go. "Please."

He rubbed his hand over his face, and his back rose and fell with each of his deep breaths. I thought he would leave then. That I had asked for too much. Fear trickled in that I had pushed him too far, and maybe next time, he wouldn't come.

"Just until you fall asleep," Lucas said as he guided me onto my side so I faced the window and he was between me and the door. He had noticed how

I would look at it, like that was where all my demons lived. His body enveloped mine as he tucked me into his chest and wrapped his arm around me. The pale moonlight made my skin almost see-through against his deep, warm brown.

My eyes grew heavy as the adrenaline from my nightmare wore off in the safety of his arms.

“Thank you.” My eyes drifted closed.

I swore I felt a soft kiss to the back of my head, and his deep voice rumbled through my back. “Always.”

Muffled voices from downstairs drew me out of my deep sleep. As I expected, the side of the bed Lucas had lain on was cold. I wasn't sure what time he'd left, but I could almost guarantee it was as soon as my breathing evened out. Last night was different though. He had never held me like that, never stayed after my nightmare had broken. He had only ever touched me long enough for me to calm down before pulling away. A warm sensation grew in my chest, and I fought against it. Begging someone to stay wasn't exactly proof of feelings.

He felt some weird obligation to look after me for Marcus, and that was as far as it went. No matter how many times I had wished it was different. Wished that he saw me the way I saw him.

I dragged myself out of bed, pulled on a pair of calf-length pants, and stripped out of my T-shirt, replacing it with a baggy one. Girls my age had switched to formfitting clothes that showed off their curves, but whenever I tried it, insecurity settled in.

Jax and Lucas had been eating breakfast in my kitchen every morning since they had early morning practices.

I released my hair from its scrunchy, letting the long blond waves tumble around my shoulders, landing a few inches above my waistband.

I took the stairs two at a time, entering our main living room. Our house was large, at least three thousand square feet, and we were situated in an upper-middle-class neighborhood. My parents weren't gated-community rich, but we weren't hurting for money. After the fire, I was worried about

moving, but that didn't last long. Within days of moving in, Marcus had already met both Jax and Lucas, and I had followed them wherever they went. Sure, I missed my friends, but not as much as I liked Marcus's new ones.

I entered the kitchen and blinked away the light pouring in from the large window overlooking our pool directly into Lucas's backyard. I hummed as the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled my nose.

As expected, the three friends sat on the island stools, eating heaping bowls of cereal. I swore they ate a box in one sitting. Lucas sat with his back toward me, deep-cut muscles visible beneath his shirt. He wore a black baseball cap pulled low and fitted track pants. I swallowed hard, ignoring the heat flushing my skin before someone caught me staring.

"Morning, boys."

"You look rough today, Pipsqueak. Late night?" Jax's smirk told me he was just messing around, but that didn't stop me from straightening my shirt and tucking my hair behind my ears. If by late night he meant terrible nightmares, then sure.

"Don't call me that," I complained, knowing that it was useless. The second Marcus had said it the first time, I knew it would stick. At least they predominantly called me Pips instead.

"Oh, come on, it's perfect," Marcus chimed in between spoonfuls of what looked like Lucky Charms.

I rolled my eyes and sat down at the empty spot next to Lucas. He didn't bother to glance my way, instead completely focused on his cereal, some form of disgustingly healthy multigrain. I grabbed the box of Froot Loops from the middle of the counter and frowned at the empty weight. "Hey, who finished my cereal?"

Jax laughed and took a bite of what was clearly multicolored Os. I groaned. The worst part of them being over all the time is they ate my stuff, especially Jax. That kid devoured everything since he shot up six inches in tenth grade.

A jolt of electricity buzzed up my arm when Lucas's elbow brushed mine. He slid a bowl full of my cereal over to me. "Thank you." My voice came out a whisper, and my heart jumped in my chest, knowing he clearly made sure I got some. But it dropped when he just grunted, barely acknowledging me. How could someone be so sweet at night and become so distant during the day?

Marcus looked between Lucas and me, and his eyes narrowed before his shoulders relaxed like he decided there was nothing to worry about. He'd laid down the no-dating-my-little-sister rule years ago despite my protests, and the guys had taken it seriously. So seriously that they'd extended it to our entire school. Thank God we'd graduated and I could do whatever the hell I wanted now. Well, almost...

I peeked at Lucas, trying not to look too desperate, but at least they wouldn't be able to control who I dated. Jayden was a colossal disaster, but I wasn't going to let him ruin the rest of my summer.

I poured almond milk into my bowl and tried to keep my gaze to myself. I liked to separate the colors, eating the yellow ones first and finishing with the blue last.

I wasn't sure when my feelings for Lucas shifted from friendship to obsession. Honestly, it might have been the very first time I'd woken up from a nightmare with him promising me I was safe. Back then, my nightmares plagued me nearly every night. My parents thought moving into the new house was what stopped them, but it was Lucas whispering he was there and nothing would happen to me that helped me get through the nights. I'd believed him then, just like I believed him now.

Marcus leaned back on his stool, a wide smile crossing his lips. "What are we up to today?"

"I've got practice," I said between bites. After winning the high school national volleyball championship, I was on too much of a high to give it a rest. So, I joined a summer league the second it opened.

Jax stood from the island and placed his bowl in the dishwasher. "Okay, well, you suck." He looked at the other two. "What are we up to?"

"I say we head to the Elora Gorge to meet up with some girls. Since you know I'm winning the Hunt this year." Marcus replied immediately, and Lucas stiffened beside me.

I choked on my cereal, and all eyes landed on me. "Aren't you a little old for that?"

Marcus laughed. "You're just mad that you don't get to participate."

I narrowed my eyes, tired of this little-sister BS. "I could, you know. I'd likely win."

Lucas's arm twitched, and his voice was a low command. "Not going to happen, Killer."

"Why? You don't think I could get more guys than you could girls?" I

raised a brow in question, forcing myself to look more sure than I was.

A muscle in Lucas's jaw worked, and he cleared his throat before looking away. "No I don't."

Pain radiated from my chest, followed quickly by embarrassment. Of course he'd think that. They were all eighteen and NHL draft contenders and had puck bunnies chasing them.

On the other hand, I was just barely not a virgin, thanks to their "no touching" rule. Lucas leaned forward as they planned their little conquest, but I couldn't hear him through the rushing in my ears. It hurt to know someone else was getting the attention I so desperately wanted. I cleared my throat and got up from the table, nearly knocking my stool over. "I've got to go."

Lucas stood up, eyes searching over my face, trying to get a read on me, but I plastered on my best smile, one I'd used on my parents countless times. His brows pulled together, and he took a step toward me. "I'll give you a ride."

I shook my head as a queasy feeling settled in my stomach. I suddenly couldn't stand to be anywhere near him. "Nah, I'm fine. I'll see you guys later."

Lucas didn't push harder, but his eyes didn't leave mine. "Don't forget we're going to the Gorge tonight."

"I've got plans." I didn't, but a thrill went through me at the look on his face. I'd never passed up a time to hang out with them before, but if they were going to play their stupid game, I wasn't going to stick around to watch it. I didn't think I could handle that. I grabbed my keys from the counter and headed out the front door to wait for Shana to pick me up, ignoring Marcus's questions about what I was up to. I was done with him controlling everything I did.

SIX

PIPER

Forty-five minutes into practice, I lifted the edge of my shirt to wipe sweat off my face, and Shana did the same beside me. Right now, the only thought going through my head was that it was freaking hot. The humidity trapped in the high school gym made it a struggle to take a breath. I had been ecstatic when Coach Bowen announced we were scrimmaging today. I hadn't anticipated it would feel like hell on earth. At least this was the last set. If we got the point, we would win the match and be done with the game.

Sweat rolled down my chest, pooling in my sports bra as I bent my knees into the ready position directly in front of the net. Shana's panting breath came from my left as we both watched her girlfriend, Hailey, line up as the opposing team's server. Shana had been my setter in high school too. She set the ball up for me to strike it down on our opponents' side. We had gotten to the point where we didn't need to speak to know what the other was thinking. She was at least a half of a foot shorter than me and had a decent amount of muscle on her. She looked fierce with her dark hair braided back and off her face, and her neon purple eyeliner stood out against her warm brown complexion.

Shana glanced over to me, and I nodded. We were finishing this, even if it killed me to do it. And honestly, it just might with the way my chest was compressing with the need to breathe. Shana stared at her girlfriend across the court, a small smile forming on both of their lips. They lived for this competition.

She served the ball in an arc over the net, and it went exactly where I knew it would, slamming firmly into Nikki's waiting forearms. My muscles tensed with anticipation as the ball was passed to Shana, and I was already

jumping into the air as she perfectly placed it for me. The other team didn't stand a chance. My hand connected with the ball with a hard smack, and it shot directly into the ground before anyone could touch it.

I tipped my head back, taking in a deep breath, then looked at my friends across the net. We were opponents today, but we would be back to being teammates tomorrow. They may have lost, but even they looked relieved it was over.

Shana bounced over to me and handed me my water bottle, curious eyes tracking me while I took a long sip. I raised a brow. "What?"

"How was your date? Did Jayden confess his undying love to you?"

The previously refreshing water turned sour in my stomach. I had purposely ignored her call last night, needing time to get my thoughts together. Reflecting now, I felt nothing but relief. Jayden was over. I'd hardly thought of him since leaving the restaurant. No, the only person I thought about was the standoffish hockey player who had walked me home.

Shana's foot tapped on the floor, and I rolled my eyes. "No, but I did meet his girlfriend."

Her brows pinched together, and her mouth twisted to the side as she said, "Okay, I'm not following here. Are you saying he asked you to be his girlfriend? Because honestly, I thought that was already solidified, and it makes him sound like an idiot."

I barked out a laugh as my discomfort turned to amusement over how this was going to go. "Oh, he's an idiot. And by the way his *beautiful brunette girlfriend* looked at him, I'm pretty sure I was the other woman."

"What?" Shana screeched loud enough that everyone turned toward us.

"Shh." My skin flushed impossibly hot. It was one thing for her to know. It was an entirely different thing for the whole team to find out just how badly Jayden had screwed me over.

Her mouth proceeded to open and close as she gathered her thoughts and spoke quietly. "What the hell! You're just telling me now?"

"I called you. It's not my fault you didn't answer," I said defensively. "Plus, Lucas walked me home."

"Did he now?" She gave me a knowing look.

"Drop it," I pleaded.

"Fine." A spark lit up her gaze, but she wasn't ready to let this go yet. "Please tell me you punched Jayden?"

I rocked back on my heels, enjoying the fierce look of protectiveness in

my much shorter friend's eyes. I'm pretty sure she would fight Jayden right on the spot if I asked her to. "Not quite, but I did pour my wine over his head."

She made a whoop sound, and I shushed her again. She gave me a sheepish smile. "Sorry, got excited."

I took another long sip of my water, glad that it was back to being refreshing. I could use a long swim in my pool. Shana laughed, and if mischief had a face, it would be hers right now.

She looked over my shoulder and smiled. "Well, well. What brings you here?"

The warmth from his gaze tickled up my spine, and I turned. Lucas leaned against the gym door, looking casual with his hands buried in his pockets. He had thrown on a white shirt and a pair of board shorts. His clothes fit him a bit too snugly, not able to stretch any further after his latest growth spurt. His gaze traveled over my tanned legs all the way to my small black exercise shorts where the thin fabric of my shirt clung to my stomach and paused where my shirt hung lower than my sports bra, leaving the top of my cleavage uncovered, then finally made its way up to meet mine. I sucked in a breath at the look of pure heat only half hidden under his lowered lids and stood mesmerized as he slowly dragged his thumb over his bottom lip. An entirely new kind of heat was taking over my body and pooling between my thighs.

Lucas straightened and cleared his throat. "Here to grab Killer before heading to the cliffs."

Jax popped his head out from around him and called to me. "What are you waiting for?"

Shana leaned into my shoulder, keeping her voice tinged with amusement, low enough so only I could hear. "Oh, now your boy's picking you up from practice?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, you don't know what I'm talking about? You mean you aren't excited to see the guy you've been practically drooling over since you were kids? Please. You're a horrible liar."

"I wouldn't say drooled."

"Would you prefer me to call you out for being madly in love with a guy that doesn't look twice at you?" She tilted her head and scanned Lucas. "Although, not going to lie, he looks interested right now."

My gaze snapped to him, but he stared down at his phone, as indifferent as ever. I pushed down my annoyance. It wasn't his fault that I had a crush on him.

"Let's go!" Lucas called, his tone impatient.

I cleared my throat and shouted, "I'm not going, remember?" *Why wasn't I going again?* Oh, right, because they were all on a mission to get laid, including Lucas, and I didn't think I could survive seeing that.

Jax ran up to me, steepling his fingers. "Please, Pips. We already know you're going anyway." He looked around, catching the attention of several of my teammates with a wide smirk on his face.

"What makes you think that?"

"Cause you love us." The smile he gave me was genuine and easy, and I couldn't help but give in.

Shana choked on a laugh, and I turned my attention to her. "Are you coming?"

"Lesbian, remember? I don't have time to deal with Puck Fucks. But your man's going to be there, so you should go."

I shushed her, grateful that Jax had wandered off to speak with a group of girls. "Jesus, Shana. Why don't you just lay it all out for him? That wouldn't be embarrassing at all."

"Well, one of us should. This whole quietly pining thing you've got going on isn't a good look for you." Shana took a deep sip of her water. "Relax. He's already gone." She grabbed my arm before I could head outside. "And girlie, you know I didn't forget. Happy birthday!"

"Hey, I'd prefer it if no one remembered." Rolling my eyes, I started toward the now empty doorway, Lucas nowhere to be found. I ignored the slight tinge of disappointment before patting Jax's shoulder. "Alright, but I'm riding in the front."

I'd just have to make sure not to pay attention to whoever Lucas was with. That couldn't be too hard. Right? Who knew, maybe I'd find a hookup of my own.

I packed up my stuff and waved off a smirking Shana before following Jax outside. Of course, Lucas was already sitting in the front seat of Marcus's lime-green Ford Mustang. My parents had purchased it for him when he won MVP at the OHL championship. Since my entire family would love to bubble wrap me, I owned a Mazda sedan hatchback that my mother had googled as the safest car of the year. Not that I would ever complain. I loved it. Luckily,

I'd left it at home, opting to catch a ride to practice with Shana.

Jax and I sat in the cramped back as Marcus sped down the road. My muscles clenched in my stomach, and my fingers turned white on the handle just above the window as my brother took another hard turn. I swear he didn't know the meaning of slow down, instead preferring to take the corner at full speed. I yelped when we drifted to the side, a loud screeching filling the air, and the putrid smell of burning rubber filled my nose. Strong fingers reached back between the doors and the front seat and wrapped around my bare calf. Lucas's fingers kneaded my muscle in slow, purposeful motions, and I matched my breaths to the rhythm. Without words, he was telling me I was safe. That he was here, and God, it was melting me from the inside.

Jax murmured to himself, and Lucas let go of me, his hand disappearing so fast my brain wanted to believe it had never been there. I glanced toward Jax, but he stared at his phone, his thumb flying over it, sending out quick messages, probably arranging his next hookup. A lopsided smirk formed, and he bit the side of his lip, confirming my assessment.

"Don't be gross."

"What? Come on, Pips. You know how it is. The Hunt's officially on."

"You know it's disgusting, right? Sleeping with girls just to win a stupid game?" I huffed.

Jax reared back and gave me an affronted look. "Hey now, I'm completely honest with them."

"It's not my fault they tend to think they're somehow the one that's going to nail us down," Marcus joined in.

"Don't their feelings matter to you?" I asked and couldn't help but notice that Lucas wasn't participating in the conversation.

"Don't our boundaries?" Jax had a point.

I shoved Jax's shoulder. "Fair."

The thing that wasn't fair was my lonely boyless existence directly correlated to the three of them. Marcus slammed on the brakes, turning to the side as he nearly missed the turn, and my body slammed into the door, drawing an oomph from my lungs.

Lucas snapped out, "What the fuck, man?"

"Sorry, guys, that one was a tad bit fast." Marcus chuckled, clearly not hearing the angry undercurrent coming from his friend.

"You think?" I practically screamed at him, but he waved me off like everything was fine. He was going to get us all killed driving like that one of

these days. He was the same on the ice, always a little bit reckless. It worked for him, got him out of tight spots or made impressive goals. It didn't translate well into driving, and I hoped he grew out of it fast. He was eighteen, and eighteen-year-old guys had negative self-control, but the least he could do was keep all four wheels on the ground. Thank God my mom talked him out of a motorcycle.

The parking lot to the Elora Gorge was nestled at the edge of the dense forest, its borders defined by towering trees that reached up to the sky. The lush greenery surrounded the lot, forming a natural barrier that provided privacy and seclusion. A few trailheads, marked by weathered wooden signs, offered glimpses of the hidden paths that led deeper into the wilderness.

The parking lot was full of a mix of cars, and the second we pulled into a spot, I yanked open my door and hauled myself out of the car. "I'm driving on the way home."

Marcus looked over the roof of the car at me. "No way."

Jax wrapped his arm around Marcus's shoulders. "Come on, man. That makes her the DD."

My brother smiled from ear to ear and tossed me his keys. "Sounds perfect. Thanks, Pipsqueak."

I rolled my eyes at the nickname, just happy I got the keys. The boys took off down the tree-lined path toward where the cliffs overlooked the Grand River. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the smell of pine and damp soil. The forest was dense enough you couldn't see through it to where the boys disappeared. I popped the trunk open, digging out a backpack I'd stored in there with my swimming supplies. It wasn't uncommon for us to take an impromptu trip to the beach, and it helped to be prepared.

I walked to the front of the car and crouched down where I was protected from view of anyone coming up the path or entering the parking lot. Still, I had to hurry the hell up. I whipped my T-shirt off, followed quickly by my sports bra, and froze as someone cleared their throat behind me.

I snapped my head around, covering my chest with both arms and keeping it pointing away from my intruder. I was already planning on all the ways I could escape when I met a smiling Lucas.

"What the hell are you doing here? I saw you leave," I spat.

"I came back to check on you when you didn't make it down."

"Consider me checked. You can go back to find everyone." My skin heated under his gaze when he didn't leave. I let out my air in a rush and

shook my head. “Fine. Turn around and be lookout. Make sure no other pervs show up.”

“Are you calling me a perv?”

“If the shoe fits.”

“And the shoe being me looking at your naked back.” His voice was a low purr that had an underlying note of danger. He was up to something.

“Among other things.”

“Are you trying to tell me you’ve never stared?”

I swallowed hard as memories flooded my mind. Rivulets over skin, trailing between muscles until they disappeared into the waistband of his very low shorts as Lucas climbed out of my pool. I shook my head hard, trying to snap myself out of it. “Fine. You’re not a perv, but turn around.”

Lucas was already facing away, but I watched him for several moments before deciding he wasn’t going to look. I made quick work of changing into my purple bikini and throwing on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. I stuffed my clothes back in my bag, lightly tossing it in the trunk before shutting it and taking off down the path, calling over my shoulder, “Beat you there.”

I’d been racing these guys since we were kids, and it had been a long time since I was able to win, but that didn’t stop me from trying. My hair raised, and my skin tingled as I felt his presence come up close to me. He didn’t pass like I knew he could, instead jogging easily behind me. His breath was coming out in hurried pants, and I swore I heard him groan. My bare foot landed wonky on the gravel path, and I nearly fell to the left. Lucas’s strong hands grasped my arms just below my shoulders and steadied me. I ignored the sparks that traveled from under his grip, up my arms and through my chest, and tugged away.

“I had it.”

“Sure you did.”

We’d finally reached the end of the path, which opened up to a rocky cliff that overlooked the winding river below. The drop from the ledge was at least fifty feet, and I could feel my heart rate increase as I peered over the edge. Despite not being afraid of heights, the sight still made my stomach churn with unease. I took deep breaths to calm myself, focusing on the beauty of the landscape around me.

Giggles drew my attention to where Marcus and Jax stood with some of their teammates and several girls. They were all gorgeous. Small with big breasts, tiny waists, and full hips. A stark contrast to my tall, athletic body

with practically no curves. I tried not to compare myself with other girls—it wasn't like I was ugly, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a teensy bit jealous.

“Hey, Marcus's little sister made it,” the defenseman, Miller, from the guys' junior team called out. If there was something I hated more than Pipsqueak, it was being called Marcus's little sister. It reduced me from a person to a little kid no matter how old I was. Somehow, the guys had convinced the entire hockey team to call me that in the ninth grade, and since then, it had been my go-to name. I huffed out a breath, refusing to respond to it.

Marcus's large arm wrapped around my shoulder and pressed down with its heavy weight. I lifted my eyebrow, letting him see my annoyance.

He gave me a little tug and said, “I promise we won't spread around the little-sister thing in college. It's Piper here on out.”

“What about Pipsqueak?”

He chuckled. “Oh, that stays, but only Jax, Lucas, and I can call you that.”

“Fine, but not in public.”

“Sure, Pips.” His words were full of amusement before he looked down at me. “I'm happy you made it out. Finally.”

“Hey, I come out.”

“When?” he asked with a raised brow before he reached down and grabbed a smooth rock, tucking it safely in his zippered pocket.

“Today.”

Marcus laughed. “It doesn't count if we have to corner you.”

I leaned my head against him. “Considering you spend like ninety percent of your time chasing girls, I think you can deal.”

He gave me a sheepish smile. “I'll make time for us to hang out. I miss you, Pips.”

Warmth filled my chest. He might have been a controlling bastard, but he was my overprotective bastard. I gave him a pass and changed the subject. “Are you nervous about the draft?”

“Fuck no. I'm in for sure.” His grin turned cocky, but his gaze drifted to where girls were pulling off their clothes, revealing their bikinis underneath. Marcus groaned and stepped away from me. “That's my cue.”

“You're disgusting.”

“Life's too short. You've got to live a little.”

“I would if you'd ease up on the big-brother act,” I shot back at him, and

he just winked.

I stayed back several feet and watched the others. Lucas stood at the edge of the cliff wearing nothing but his low-slung orange-and-blue color-blocked swim shorts. He looked like a freaking god standing over the thirty-foot drop. The setting sun cast the sky in a warm glow that illuminated the strong contours of his body. I sucked in a breath, and my heart pounded as I let my gaze drift over his muscular back, which tapered in before disappearing into his shorts. The muscles in his shoulders rippled as he dipped down, bending his legs before launching himself into the air and executing a perfect backflip.

It wasn't long after Lucas's dive before everyone else followed suit.

There was a stillness now that I was alone, and all of the excitement had followed them down into the water. I peeked over the edge to where heads bobbed as they made their way back to shore. I'd never jumped from this high before, instead always climbing down a level first, but the stubborn part of me wouldn't let me back down. I stripped out of my shirt and shorts, leaving me in my bikini, and placed them on a nearby rock.

I inched my way up to the ledge. Blood rushed in my ears as my heart pounded in my chest with my fight-or-flight instincts. Everything in me screamed flight, but I didn't step back, instead edging closer. The second I looked over, an intense bout of vertigo slammed into me, making it feel like the water was coming up to meet me, and I stumbled back, right into a solid wall. Lucas dropped his mouth to my ear, whispering, "You've got this."

My body trembled, and it had nothing to do with fear. His warmth seeped into my back where his wet chest pressed against me. The world tipped on its axis, and I took shaky breaths. His hands barely touched my elbows as he guided my arms to the sides before slowly crossing each one over my chest. His breath warmed the back of my neck, and his closeness momentarily distracted me from my fear.

I leaned in a little closer to him and kept my words light. "I almost had it."

"Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades." Lucas stepped back, and I instantly missed his heat at my back. He glanced at the water before his eyes slid to mine with so much intensity they felt like they were boring into my soul. Droplets of water trailed down his nose and clung to his lashes, lowered over whiskey-colored eyes. They dropped to my mouth, and his throat bobbed before he searched my face.

Laughing came from the trail that wound up from the water. The rest of them, including my brother, would be here any second. A thrill went through me when Lucas didn't look away; instead, his gaze became more intense. We were seconds from being caught when he held out his hand. "Jump with me."

His words felt loaded and heavy with unsaid meaning, and I didn't hesitate to place my palm in his. Tingles spread up my arm, and my breath hitched when he interlaced our fingers.

"Ready?" His voice was a rough, low rumble.

I looked down, a shiver running down my spine.

"Look at me," he commanded, and my attention snapped to him. "Good. You've got this."

His words filled me with lightness and a confidence that I could do anything. I nodded, and he smiled.

"Count of three."

"Okay." My reply was barely above a whisper.

"One. Two. Three. Jump."

I hopped off the edge, never letting go of his hand, even as the frigid water swallowed me whole. Lucas tugged me up, and when I crested the surface, I was met with his brilliant smile. My mouth curved to match his, a giddiness taking over as adrenaline pumped through my veins.

His warm hand wrapped around my waist, his thumb inches from my navel and fingertips brushing my spine. Every nerve in my body came alive, changing from light to intimate.

His fingers squeezed. "See? You just had to trust yourself."

Caught in a trance, I sank until only my eyes were above the water, watching Lucas as he watched me. He slowly slid a hand down my hip, playing with the thin bow tying my swim bottoms in place before descending to grip my thighs millimeters below the crease of my ass and lifting me until my shoulders were out of the water and we were chest to chest. The air stuck in my lungs when his eyes darkened on my mouth. He looked like he was starved, and I wanted to see if I could make him break. I slid my tongue over my top lip and reveled in his silent growl vibrating against my chest. He dropped his face closer until the golden hue of his irises was clear even in the dim light. My heart thudded in my chest. He was going to kiss me.

"Get out of the way," Jax shouted from above us, breaking the moment, and jumped before we moved. Lucas pulled me toward the shore before

getting out. His back muscles were drawn tight, and he didn't turn to look at me before he grabbed a towel and jogged up the path. Ice trickled through my veins, freezing me to the spot as he disappeared around the corner. My eyes stung against the whiplash Lucas was putting me through.

A splash of water came from behind me, and Jax shook his hair like a wet dog. I jumped back with a screech. "Hey!"

He tossed me a towel from where they'd laid them out when we first arrived. He glanced over, but his smile dropped the second he saw me. "What the hell happened, and who do I have to kill?"

I laughed even though Jax looked one hundred percent serious. "It's nothing I can't handle."

Jax looked up the path where Lucas had disappeared. "It's complicated, but it'll work itself out."

My heart jumped. "Do you know something I don't know?"

"No more than the obvious." Jax's dimple shone with his smile.

I followed him up the trail, grumbling, "Cryptic bastard."

There was already a fire started when we got to the top, long tendrils of smoke disappearing into the night sky. People had split off into two groups, one still jumping and the six others gathered around the fire cross-legged on their towels. An equal mix of girls to guys, clearly looking to pair off for the night.

I grabbed my clothes from the rock where I'd left them and pulled them over my wet suit. It felt wrong, but there was no way I was stripping out of my bikini anywhere near here. Not after what happened in the parking lot.

My eyes wandered to where Lucas sat around the fire. There was a girl chatting to the side of his face, but his focus was on me as I sat across from him. His eyes dropped to my chest where my swimsuit soaked through, making the thin white fabric see-through, and heat pooled between my thighs.

"Hey, aren't you Marcus's little sister?" The guy beside me leaned in and made no secret of the way he was checking me out. He was cute, in a typical hockey player way. Long, scruffy hair and a playful smile. He was so close I could feel the heat coming off him, and it was extremely unfortunate that there were no warm fuzzies fluttering in my stomach. Instead, I found myself wanting to inch away. I would have if it wasn't for Lucas's gaze searing into me, demanding I look at him. I shifted closer to the guy and smiled up at him, earning me a grin of his own.

"That's not my name."

“Oh, yeah? Tell me.”

“You’d have to earn it,” I teased, hopeful that a little flirting would spark some feelings.

His gaze darkened, and his face dropped forward. “I’m sure that would be my pleasure. I’m Davis.”

“Is that your first or last name?” I asked.

He chuckled and smirked. “Last. My first name’s Steve.”

“Steve, go get us some drinks,” Lucas demanded from across from us. I expected Steve to balk, but he just jumped to his feet, giving me an apologetic smile. “Sorry, still a rookie, and there’s no way I’m pissing him off. I’ll be right back.”

I glared at Lucas, eyes narrowed and teeth clenched, and he returned the look just as hard. The girl beside him, Samantha, followed his gaze and lifted a brow. She glanced over my wet hair, shirt clinging to my skin, and simple shorts and rolled her eyes before leaning into her friend, whispering into her ear. As a volleyball player, I knew that women-on-women drama was mostly bullshit that people like to use against us. But right now, I was definitely surrounded by catty bitches, and by the way their lips curled into smiles, they were up to something.

Samantha clapped her hands and shouted, “Let’s play a game.”

The four hockey players around the fire groaned simultaneously.

“Come on. It’ll be fun.” She looked right at me. “We can play never have I ever.”

I stiffened at the way they looked at me. Something told me this was a trap. Steve came from behind me before handing me a bottle. “Can’t play without a drink, right?”

I twisted it in my palms, enjoying the cool moisture gathered there. I could use some liquid courage for whatever came next. We wouldn’t be leaving for hours, so one drink wouldn’t hurt.

Anthony, the team’s starting right winger, leaned forward. “Never have I ever had sex with a virgin.”

Lucas didn’t raise his glass, but I swallowed a sip. Well, at least Jayden told me he was, which was probably a complete lie. His skills were definitely lacking, if that was anything to go by.

Lucas’s gaze pierced mine, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. Yeah, I bet he wasn’t expecting that from the overprotected little sister. The look on his face almost made meeting Jayden’s other girlfriend worth it.

“Never have I ever cheated on someone.”

“Never have I ever gone on a blind date.”

“Never have I ever had sex somewhere that wasn’t a bedroom.”

Questions continued around the circle, and it was becoming painfully obvious that I wasn’t as experienced as I’d like them to believe.

When it reached Samantha, she turned her cold eyes on me. I wasn’t sure what her problem was. I definitely hadn’t done anything to her, but there was a glint of malice in her expression.

“Never have I ever faked an orgasm.” She didn’t take a sip, but I raised my glass, swallowing down the cool liquid. “Never have I ever had an orgasm,” she said before the next person could go.

Embarrassment flushed my cheeks red, and my hands tightened on my bottle. I half considered not taking a sip anyway, but screw them. Who cared if I hadn’t? Certainly didn’t make a difference to her. It wasn’t until I felt Lucas’s gaze on me that I figured out what that question had been about, and by the way his dark eyes narrowed on me, the question had gotten a reaction.

He skipped his turn, and we made it through two more questions before I decided it had been long enough that I could escape and not look like I was fleeing. I stood holding up my near full beer. “I’m out.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t be like that,” Steve called from beside me.

“I’ll talk to you later, ’kay?” That seemed to appease him because a slow smile formed on his lips, and he faced the fire.

I grabbed my towel from the ground, shaking out the small rocks that clung to it, and headed down a level to where I usually jumped from. As I made my way down, the scenery opened up to reveal a breathtaking view. The ridge was smaller, tucked in behind the cliff face forming a wall. It was closed off on two sides, creating an almost alcove structure. The surrounding trees cast long shadows across the rocky terrain, adding a layer of depth to the already stunning landscape.

I found a spot to settle into, leaning my back against the cool, smooth stone of the ridge. I uncoiled my legs in front of me and took in the scenery. The moon was just rising, casting a soft glow over the rippling river water below. The light danced and shimmered on the surface, creating an ethereal effect that was truly mesmerizing. The cool breeze carried the scent of pine trees and fresh water, and I closed my eyes, taking in the peacefulness of the moment.

Small pebbles shifted beside me as Lucas sat down, kicking his feet out in

front of him. He handed me a water and took a long sip of his beer. He wasn't saying anything, just looked over the edge, and tension slowly built until it felt like the air was thick around us, compressing my lungs until I struggled to breathe. I couldn't just sit here like this. Not with him. Something had shifted for me today, whether he felt that way or not.

His arm brushed mine when he took another long sip, finishing it off, then said, "Is what you said back there true?"

My cheeks heated. Of course he was going to bring that up. "Let it go, Lucas."

He stayed quiet, and thoughts twisted through my brain until I had to fill the silence. "How do you feel about the draft tomorrow?"

He chuckled. "Not as confident as Marcus, that's for fucking sure."

"No one's as confident as Marcus. You're good though. You've already had teams looking into you."

He nodded. "A part of it is I don't want to split up. Sounds fucked-up to be so attached to our little friend group, but they're family, you know?"

Am I family?

I kept the question to myself, not wanting to hear how he thought of me as his little sister. "You're still going to university first though, right?"

"Yeah, Pips. You're still stuck with us for another four years."

A light, happy feeling filled me with his words. "Honestly, I like that...so long as you back off on the whole 'little sister' thing."

He barked out a laugh. "I'll back off, and I think Jax will too." He met my gaze. "But good fucking luck with Marcus. No one's good enough for you."

I huffed out a breath and shifted my position on the hard ground, freezing when my fingers grazed over his. He inhaled sharply, and the erratic rhythm of my pulse pounded in my ears when instead of pulling away, Lucas traced my fingers with a barely there touch. He turned my palm over, running his fingers along mine, sending tingles up my arm and straight to my core.

"Piper?" Lucas's voice was gruff, pulling my attention. His eyes were hot on mine, searching my face, before a small smile tipped the corner of his mouth. "Happy birthday."

I sucked in a breath as warmth flooded my chest and trickled through my veins. I wasn't disappointed people had forgotten, not with such a big day coming up tomorrow, but Lucas remembering had my head spinning. His thumb swept back and forth over my wrist, and his throat moved with his swallow. I shifted toward him—

“Pips! Piper!” Marcus called from the upper ridge.

Shit. I stood quickly, dusting myself off like I’d just been caught.

Lucas grinned at me. “You look so fucking guilty.”

Thank God it was dark enough that he wouldn’t be able to see the flush crawling up my cheeks. He was right—I did feel guilty, but there was clearly no reason to. I left Lucas and made my way up, not willing to look at him, but stilled when his fingers wrapped around my upper arm, stopping me gently. “Hey. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just want to get back to Marcus before he sends out a search party.”

Lucas slowly uncurled his fingers, his voice a low rasp. “You sure?”

I smiled, knowing it wouldn’t reach my eyes but hoping he wouldn’t notice. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

He flinched back but nodded. “Yeah. Of course.”

Marcus walked up to us and pointed his thumb toward the girl with long red hair. “I’m heading back with...”

I rolled my eyes. “Her name is Kayla.”

He just smirked. “You okay to drive the boys home?”

I scrunched my nose in disgust. I would never get used to all my brother’s hookups.

Jax wrapped me in a headlock and dragged his knuckles over my scalp until I begged for mercy. “Of course she can. What are little sisters for?”

I looked at Lucas, who was looking away. For some reason, I desperately wanted to see him react to me being called the little sister.

Marcus’s Mustang beeped when I hit the button. “Alright, get in the car.”

“Shotgun,” Jax shouted, but Lucas pointed at a truck with Steve and a few girls getting in.

“I’m alright. Got a ride already.”

My chest tightened with emotion I had no right to feel as he turned and walked toward Samantha, who was giving him a coy smile. She climbed into the truck, and he followed after.

Jax knocked his shoulder against mine. “What’s going on with you? You seem all sappy and shit.”

“You worried about me, Jaxie?”

He raised a brow. “Should I be?”

I don’t know.

“Never. I’m good. I just don’t like being out. You know that. Hurts my

introverted soul.”

“If you say so.”

He put on a crappy song the second we got into the car, and I slapped his hand away.

“Not a freaking chance.”

Images of Lucas helping Samantha into the truck sank into my gut, and I hit a few buttons on my phone until it played the perfect song. I belted out the chorus of Taylor’s “I Knew You Were Trouble” at the top of my lungs.

Jax groaned from beside me. “You’re a horrible singer.”

“Yup.” I kept singing, pushing out the words and letting them take over me. It wasn’t long until Jax joined in, his voice twice as loud.

“Love you, Pips. Don’t take too much shit. Okay?”

Jax always saw entirely too much. “I’ll try.”

SEVEN
LUCAS

“No matter what happens, I’m proud of you.” My dad’s deep voice rumbled against me as he wrapped me in one of his signature bear hugs. Anxiety crawled under my skin like a million ants, but his comforting words evened out my breaths.

My return hug was a little too tight, more like something I’d have given him as a kid, but in this moment, that was what I was. Waiting. The same feeling as when I sat around this room waiting to find out if I made it to the OHL.

Even with how spacious our living room was, every foot was filled with someone, crowded with people wanting to watch the draft, including a group of reporters.

I kept my voice low, not wanting to be heard. Especially not by the newscasters eager to get a deeper story. With three of us up for the draft, it wasn’t a surprise we’d gotten our own reporters. Just a taste of the weird level of attention we’d expect if this draft went the way we all wanted it to. My stomach tightened in a knot. “What if I don’t make it?”

My dad pulled back, and his brows lowered over his deep brown eyes. I’d gotten my eyes from my French mom, but the rest of my complexion was all his. My dad’s skin was a rich, warm brown that allowed the sprinkling of freckles across his nose and cheeks to shine through. His black hair was neatly trimmed and kept close to his scalp, accentuating the chiseled angles of his face. As a child, he’d looked like a giant; now, I stood several inches taller than him. He studied me, then glanced over my shoulder before his lips tipped in a familiar smile. “Not that I think you have anything to worry about, but there’s a lot of things to live for that aren’t hockey.”

I nodded. "But I want it."

My dad's laugh filled the room. "Of course you do. You'd be an idiot not to go after what you want." He wasn't looking at me. Instead, his eyes traveled to the doors where the Adamses walked in, Piper leading the way.

The air pushed from my lungs when she turned on the spot and her soft blue dress twirled around her, revealing more of her deeply tanned thighs. She'd traded out her usual casual athletic wear for a flower-printed sundress that had my heart skipping in my chest. Her golden hair was pulled back in a long braid and rested over the thin strap of her dress on her shoulder. She'd darkened her pale pink lips to a deep plum, and her eyes stood out from whatever makeup she wore. Fuck, she was stunning. She came directly toward us, a smile so wide it took over her face and crinkled the corners of her eyes.

"How's my favorite neighbor?" My dad was quick to wrap her up in a hug, wearing a smile of his own. She'd moved in next door when she was seven, and my parents had immediately taken a liking to her. I was an only child, so Piper became the daughter they never had.

"Excited." She glanced my way. "You ready?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not in the slightest. You're in it now." She patted my shoulder, and the touch sent tingles down my arm. "Where's your mom? I want to say hi before things get too crazy."

Just then, my mom called out Piper's name, and she was gone, bringing the soft scent of crisp apples.

My dad raised a brow, his mouth twisted to the side like he was trying to hide a smirk. "You going to tell her?"

"Tell her what?"

"Oh, you're playing it like that?"

"I'm not playing anything." I looked over to where Marcus lounged on one of the club chairs, eyes intent on the screen as the draft started. "It's... complicated."

"You're going to regret not making it uncomplicated."

I laughed. "You really had to do this today?"

"Not sure if you noticed, but you aren't around much anymore. I had to take the opportunity when it arose."

"It's starting!" my mom shouted in a tone two octaves too high.

I sat on the sofa beside a nervous-looking Jax. There were countless

people filling up the room behind me, and several cameras pointed at where we sat. The noise became a loud hum, taking over my senses until the room felt like it was closing in on me. My heart pounded against my chest as we watched the announcers take their places in front of the podium doing their introductions. I struggled to take in a breath, and blackness crept into the corners of my vision. *Oh shit, I'm having a panic attack.* I glanced over to the camera lens pointed directly at my face. *Fuck, I have to get out of here.* I shifted to get up, but a soft body sank into the cushion beside me. Her familiar scent surrounded me. I took slow, deep breaths, filling my lungs with crisp apples until my heart rate settled and I was able to look over at her. Piper's clear blue eyes met mine, and she intertwined our fingers hidden between us, giving them a little squeeze.

"I've got you."

A thrill went through me at hearing my words on her lips. Only she had the ability to distract me from the chaos around us. She rubbed her thumb over the side of my hand and gave me a gentle smile, whispering, "You okay?"

I let out my breath and concentrated on the heat of her pressed against me from shoulder through thigh. "I am now."

"Good, because it's go time."

I held my breath when the announcer spoke into the microphone. "Bruins' first pick is from the Sarnia Storm, Marcus Adams."

The room erupted in cheers, and Jax practically vibrated as he hauled Marcus into the air. Congratulations and shouts came from every direction. The reporter gestured for everyone to quiet and held up his mic. "We're going live in three, two, one... We're here with the first-round overall pick, Marcus Adams. Tell us, how do you feel about being drafted to Boston?"

Marcus smiled so wide it must've hurt his cheeks. "Best day of my life. It's not over yet. Still need to get these two on the team."

Several more teams picked players before it came back around to Boston, and at this point, you could've heard a pin drop with the anticipation. When they called Jax's name, the room exploded, this time Marcus hauling Jax into the air. I pulled them both into a bone-crushing hug and ignored the tinge of jealousy that they'd be together. The only thing that mattered now was getting drafted at all. I'd fallen behind a few rounds, and even though I knew there were a lot of background trades you didn't see behind the scenes, the wait was killing me.

I swallowed hard as team after team announced someone else and I dropped down to the third round. My attention snapped to the side when Piper's small hand squeezed my thigh, the touch hidden between us and providing me with some level of comfort.

Boston's GM came to the stand, and I held my breath for so long I could hear my pulse in my head. It would be unheard of to have three players drafted from the same area to the same NHL team. Practically impossible. When he called out my name, it was like the world stopped, and I wasn't sure I was even breathing. My gaze moved from the screen to Piper to confirm it was true. She was grinning from ear to ear, and I was captured by the light in her eyes. I wanted to lean forward and taste her lips right here. I shifted closer, and her breath hitched as her gaze darted from mine to my mouth. It would take nothing to close the distance.

Strong arms wrapped around my chest from behind, and I was pulled backward off the couch by an extremely exhilarated Marcus, followed quickly by Jax.

The house felt like it trembled with the force of excitement, and I lost Piper in the crowd.

After the draft, we ended up at Jax's, which was already crowded. His parents had left the place to us, saying they thought after tonight, we were mature enough to celebrate. They were so fucking wrong, but I wasn't complaining.

"We fucking did it, man! I can't wait to start spending our signing bonuses," Marcus yelled over the music, pulling me into his side with a one-armed hug and handing me a beer. My bonus wasn't as big as his, but I definitely had nothing to complain about.

I took a deep gulp, letting the crisp taste coat my tongue, and looked over the sea of people crowding Jax's living room. "Who are all these people?" I asked.

"No fucking idea. Better get used to it."

A blonde ponytail caught my attention, and my chest tightened, but when she turned her face, disappointment settled over me. I shouldn't care,

especially not while hanging with her brother, but I'd be fucking lying if I said I didn't want Piper here.

She'd made tonight a hundred times easier, and the realization that things had been shifting between us for a long time had slammed into my chest when I nearly kissed her right in my living room.

I could picture it now. Marcus pounding me into oblivion while it played live on national news, but honest to God, in that moment, it would've been worth it. I was man enough to admit I'd been terrified. It felt like the entire world was watching as my future was decided for me. The world was caving in, and Piper somehow knew it. She drugged my senses, making everything easier. An overwhelming feeling of rightness settled over me, and my heart slowed in my chest. No matter what happened in the draft, I was going to be just fine because Piper Adams's hand was laced in mine.

"You calling dibs on that?" Marcus followed my gaze, his dark eyes on the blonde, who I now realized was wearing the shortest skirt I'd ever seen. Something told me there would be nothing left to the imagination if she bent over.

"Since when do you give a shit about dibs?"

"Since I want to win this competition, I know better than to go against your pretty ass." Marcus punctuated his point with a slap to my ass that had me chuckling.

"Fuck off."

"You're such a slut, Lucas." He wasn't wrong. I'd spent years of our friendship being the most depraved of all of us. I'd done shit I wasn't proud of. Slept with girls who I had no intention of calling. But right now, there was only one girl I gave a shit about, and there was no way I was fucking that up with some nameless puck bunny.

The girl in question smiled at us, and unease unfurled in my stomach and left a nasty taste in my mouth. "She's all yours, buddy. I'm going to grab another drink. You want one?"

Marcus gave me a cocky-ass smile and started his way to his next conquest. "I'm good. I'll see you in a bit."

"Won't last long, eh?"

He chuckled, walking backward in her direction. "However long it takes to get the job done. So long as they're yelling my name."

"You know if they're screaming like a porn star, they're faking it, right?"

"Who gives a shit?" Marcus middle finger saluted me and headed into the

crowd.

I finished my beer in one sip. Poor fucking girls had no idea what they were getting into with him. He was a solid fucking friend, loyal to the core, and an amazing teammate. Always made you feel like together you could do anything on the ice. But he was a fucking asshole when it came to women. I was bad, but he was worse. Proof was in the fact that after that conversation, I highly doubted he'd ever given a girl an orgasm.

I scanned the room, spotting Jax in the kitchen, eating a slice of pizza while some chick talked him up. He was nodding while chewing and looked entirely too proud of himself. Probably happy that he had a sure lay tonight.

He wasn't who I was looking for though. Piper was somewhere in here. She'd turned up a half hour after us, but I'd instantly lost her in the crowd. If it wouldn't have been extremely fucking obvious, I'd have chased after her. I'd caught glimpses of her every now and then. She was with her friend Shana and another girl I didn't recognize. The last I'd seen of them, they'd been dancing, but their spot on the dance floor was now filled with a group of couples grinding on each other.

The music pulsed through the air, and the crowd moved with it. Their motions mimicked sex in the best way possible. The blood drained from my body and went straight to my dick when my gaze landed on the prettiest fucking blonde. Piper was shifting with the music in long, fluid movements, letting it take over her, and I was frozen in place, helpless to do anything but watch. Her clear blue eyes met mine, a slow smile curling the corner of her mouth until a fucking dead man crossed between us and wrapped his fingers around her waist.

My legs moved, and I had him by the collar before my brain caught up.

"The fuck are you doing?" I practically growled at the guy, who just looked at me with his mouth popped open.

"Buddy. I was just dancing with her."

"Now you're just leaving," I growled.

He looked between Piper and me and nodded. "Yeah, man. Of course. I'm out."

I didn't watch him leave, all my attention caught on Piper. I walked her backward until her spine was pressed against the wall, half hidden by a wood hutch from the rest of the room. We were so close our chests nearly touched with each of our breaths.

"Where's Samantha?"

“I don’t give a fuck about Samantha. I ditched her, and she went home with Davis.” Anger radiated down my spine at the idea that any one of these dicks would touch her. “Do you know who that asshole was?”

“Some hockey player.”

I laughed without humor, moving in closer until we lined up from thigh to chest. “Hockey players are only after one thing.”

“You’d know, wouldn’t you?” She wore a devilish smirk and brought her mouth to a hairsbreadth from mine. “I want a hockey player.”

Fuck. My fingers gripped her hips as tension rolled through my spine. Desperation skated over my skin as her tongue grazed my mouth when she wet her lip. I had to use all of my willpower to stop myself from chasing that touch, from taking her tongue into my mouth and tasting her. My arms trembled with the force of holding myself back while she looked up at me with heated eyes.

I inhaled through my nose, willing my heart to still as I straightened. It was physically painful to put distance between us, but this couldn’t happen. Wouldn’t happen. No matter how much I fucking wanted it to.

I stepped back, loosening my fingers when the room plunged into darkness.

“Power out!” Loud voices filled the silence, but I was lost to her breaths fanning over my lips. I tensed when Marcus called out, “Lucas, you got eyes on Piper?”

“Ye—” My words were cut off by the sweetest fucking mouth, and a low rumble formed in my chest. It was like a dam burst, and I chased after her strawberry taste, shifting the kiss from soft to needy. Now that I had her mouth, I was ravenous to have more. I walked her backward and pressed her against the wall, pinning her with my body, and ate up the needy whimpering sounds she made. Fuck, she tasted like heaven. I stroked her tongue, her teeth, her lips as I memorized every inch of her mouth. I’d been dreaming of this for years, but it didn’t come close to the softness of her touch.

My cock ached against my pants when she hitched her leg up my thigh and rocked her pussy against it. “Jesus Christ.”

I trailed my fingers down her neck, guiding the thin strap of her dress over her shoulder, then licked the hollow above her collarbone. I fucking craved filling every inch of her and rocked my hips hard, stealing a gasp from her lips.

Her fingers curled into my hair, painfully tight as she held me closer. I

rocked in a steady rhythm, listening to her breaths as they stuttered. She was so fucking close, and I wasn't even touching her yet.

"Lucas," she breathed.

My name on her mouth sent me absolutely feral. I wanted to see her come undone, scream my name, and then beg me to take her again.

The lights flickered on, and I threw myself back, nearly colliding with the guy behind me. Piper said something, but music blared from the speaker, washing it out.

I was locked in place by sky-blue eyes, not moving even when the party started back in full force. I clenched my fingers, fighting against the feel of her skin and the taste of her mouth. My chest heaved, and my heart pumped with each labored breath. She was everything I'd ever wanted and never let myself have.

"Kiss me again," Piper pleaded, and every sinew of control was lost to her.

I growled, grabbing her hand and leading her out of the party, taking in a desperate breath of the cool night air. I turned to her and rubbed one hand over the back of my neck. What the hell was I doing?

"Let me go, Lucas." Piper's cheeks were flushed, fist clenched, but it was the red-rimmed eyes that did me in. She looked like she was holding herself back, holding herself together, and there was no fucking way I was going to let that stand.

"Fucking never." I cupped her face between my palms and tilted her chin, then ran my nose along the length of her, taking in deep breaths.

It was a promise I planned to keep.

I captured her mouth, drowning in the taste of strawberries. Piper moaned, then sucked on my tongue, drawing a growl from the back of my throat.

Her delicate fingers traveled up my shoulders and dug into my neck, pulling me closer. *Fuck*. I rolled my hips, thrusting my leg between her thighs, and marveled at how she ground herself on it. "That's it. That's my girl."

She whimpered and rocked again, searching for pressure. I dropped my mouth to her ear and breathed, "I'm going to make you come so hard. You'll forget everything but the fact that I'm the only one able to give it to you."

She gasped and rocked harder, and I gripped her ass, lifting her until her thighs wrapped around my waist. I slid my hand between us and guided it up

her smooth, bare thigh, groaning when I reached the drenched fabric of her panties.

I took a calming breath, resting my forehead against hers, and pressed my fingers against her pussy. “Is this okay?”

She gasped, her fingers digging into my shoulders before she whimpered. “Yes, yes. Don’t stop.”

I slid the fabric to the side and sucked a breath between my teeth as she soaked my hand. “So fucking wet.” I dipped a finger in and out of her, stroking her gently until her noises turned needy, any semblance of words turned to meaningless moans of pleasure.

I took my time, listening to what made her gasp and what made her groan, changing my rhythm from faster to slower until I found exactly what she liked. When she pulsed around my fingers, I curved them toward her front wall, stroking her closer to her release. She cried out my name and buried her face into my neck, rocking harder.

A low hum of satisfaction filled my chest, knowing as soon as she came, I would give her another one.

“That’s it.” I ground the palm of my hand against her clit. “Come for me, baby. I’ve got you.”

“Lucas,” she begged, and a shudder ran through me. Fuck, she was going to burst. As twisted as it was, my chest filled with pride that I was the *only* one able to give this to her.

I increased the pressure of my curved fingers until she bit my shoulder, muffling the sound of her cry, and I knew I’d hit the spot she craved. Her release soaked my palm, and it was the hottest thing I’d ever felt.

I panted, holding her close to me, and tried to regain control. I trailed my tongue up her neck, grinning at the goose bumps pebbling her skin before pulling back and tipping her jaw up. “Better than I fucking imagined.”

EIGHT
PIPER

A girl stumbled out of Jax's back door, nearly slamming into Lucas before a warm smile spread across her face. "Oops, sorry. Didn't see you there."

All that happy glow that had been building inside me flashed to flame, and I took a step toward her. Lucas caught me around the middle, his chuckle soft in my ear. "Easy there, Killer. You've got me. Let's go."

His fingers stayed closed around mine as he led me into the house. I followed behind Lucas as he shouldered through the partiers. If possible, it was even more crowded than before. We used the sea of people to hide our entwined hands as we made our way through Jax's place.

"Where are we going?" I had to shout for Lucas to hear me, and he squeezed my hand in response, pulling me closer to his side. His lips brushed against my ear. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." The word slid off my tongue, the easiest thing I ever said.

His hot gaze met mine, and he rubbed his thumb along his bottom lip, which slowly curved into a smile. "Good."

He grasped my hips and spun me around until my back pressed into a wall. He crowded into me, and my heart pounded in my ears and my breaths grew shallow as my gaze flew over partiers, looking for Marcus.

Lucas ran his nose along the column of my neck, drawing my attention, before nipping my earlobe. His tone was amused when he said, "You're supposed to trust me, remember?"

I relaxed into the wall, dropping my head back, and met his hooded eyes. "We're in the open."

He moved so that his shoulders blocked my view of the living room and vice versa before dropping his forehead to mine. "I need your mouth."

Shit. That was hot. I raised on my toes and pulled his bottom lip between my teeth, drawing a deep rumble from the back of his throat before he dipped down and took over the kiss.

His touch was softer than before as he took his time exploring my mouth and cupped my cheeks between his massive hands.

He pulled back and kissed between my brows. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to do that.”

I stiffened and tilted my head to the side. “You mean kiss me?” I looked at the hollow at the base of his neck, unable to meet his gaze. “You never even looked at me.”

He laughed and kissed me again before speaking against my mouth. “I’ve never looked away.”

My chest whooshed with flutters. Having him here, looking at me like that, was more than I’d let myself dream of having. I wasn’t going to let this chance slip by in case it didn’t last. I raked up his stomach, enjoying the way his muscles flexed under my touch, and I traced the hard lines beneath his shirt. He leaned into my touch, and his mouth descended on mine with slow, languid strokes.

I traced Lucas’s shorts, dipping my thumbs underneath, and grazed his hip. He stiffened, dropping his head to the crook of my neck. “Baby, I’ve got to get you somewhere private before I make a fucking scene.”

A laugh bubbled from me, loving the way his words seemed pained at even the idea of stopping. Hearing that one word from him took my breath away. I took pity on him and placed my hands safely on his shoulders. “Guest room?”

His groan tickled my neck and sent goose bumps down my spine before he pulled back and searched my face as if reading if I was serious or not. I’d never been so serious in my life as I was right now.

I slipped from his grasp, ducking under his arm, and made my way to the stairwell that led to the second floor. Warm fingers met mine, and I looked back to meet Lucas’s wide gaze. I ran my tongue along my bottom lip before biting it.

A wicked smile turned up his mouth, and he cleared the two steps between us. The heat of his chest connected with my spine as he rasped, “You keep looking at me like that and I’m going to forget we’re in public.”

A thrill went through me. A part of me desperately wanted to see what he’d do if I pushed him a little further, but there was no way I was going to

let Marcus interrupt this. Not when I'd waited so long.

I sprinted up the stairs, chuckling at Lucas's shocked noise before turning the corner into the dark second-floor hallway. I didn't make it ten feet before Lucas spun me around, lifted me off my feet, and crashed his mouth into mine. I wrapped my legs around his thighs and gasped when he palmed my ass and pulled my core against his hard length. His mouth captured mine, stealing my breath away in slow, hungry kisses, and I tightened my thighs around his waist as he carried me to the guest room.

He shut the door behind us, muffling the loud music from the party raging downstairs.

Lucas slowly lowered my feet to the ground, and I moaned as his hard body dragged against mine. I dropped my forehead to his chest and breathed in his spicy scent as lust took over my senses.

His heart beat rapidly against mine, and his chest rose and fell in quick breaths. I needed him more than I needed anything in my entire life, and I was terrified. "Lucas, this means something to me."

His fingers dug into the back of my hair, his thumb and forefinger massaging my scalp, and his low words reverberated through me. "You've always meant more to me. I should've told you sooner."

My eyes burned, and I buried my face in his chest, letting the warmth of his words wash over me. His fingers trailed down my spine and up my side before tracing the strap of my dress. He dropped his head to my shoulder, kissing softly, before guiding the thin fabric off. His thumb pulled down the other side until the neckline of my dress pooled low and caught on the edge of my bra.

He stroked his thumb over the top of my breast, sending delicious heat between my thighs before he pulled back. "Is this okay?"

I nodded, and his eyes met mine. "Use your words, baby."

My clit pulsed with his command. "Yes."

He pulled away and watched with hooded eyes as inch after inch of my body was exposed. His chest rose and fell as he took me in, and he trailed a finger from my ocean-blue bra to the rim of my matching panties. His gaze lifted to mine. "Fucking stunning."

Wanting to see him just as badly, I raised the hem of his shirt, and he helped me pull it over his head. My breath caught. I'd seen him shirtless countless times, but this was the first time I could touch him. I dragged my fingers down his chest and smirked when he inhaled sharply. I loved how he

responded to my touch. Like he needed this just as badly as I did.

I leaned until we both gasped, touching skin against skin. Lucas traced my jaw and my cheek with his thumb. "Tell me to stop."

"Don't stop," I pleaded, and a low sound reverberated from Lucas into me.

He lifted me easily, laying me on the bed before gripping my thighs and guiding me to the edge. His body engulfed mine as he bent and sucked my nipple through the thin satin fabric. I moaned deep in my throat as his warmth sank into my flesh. He chuckled before moving to the other side, giving it the same treatment until I was writhing beneath him. He was touching me without touching me, and I was dying to feel his mouth on my bare flesh. I dug my nails into his shoulder and pushed him back.

He jerked back, concern in his gaze that quickly switched to heat when I unclasped my bra and let it drop beside me. The muscles ticked in his jaw as he gazed upon my chest, and he slowly leaned forward, sucking my bottom lip and biting it. "So fucking perfect."

Lucas cupped each of my breasts in his hands and tightened his grip, pushing them together before running his tongue between the middle seam. I arched off the bed, thrusting my hips into his, and whimpered as he rocked against me, giving me the pressure I craved.

"You're fucking with my control," he growled, his voice strained.

"I don't want you to be controlled." I wanted him undone.

He sucked my nipple into his mouth, drawing on it at the same time as his cock ground into me and sent vibrant heat to my pulsing clit. "I'm going to take my time with you, Killer. I want every second to last."

He kissed down my chest, swirling his tongue over my navel before lowering it to my mound. Dark eyes met mine as he placed a kiss over my clit. "Have you done this before?"

"No." My voice trembled.

He hummed and gently gripped my thighs, separating them, then nuzzled my seam, breathing through his nose. "I want to taste you, Piper. I want to feel you come on my tongue. Do you want that, baby?"

Fire licked up my thighs, but there was an underlying nervousness taking over. "Yes."

I was vulnerable, on display for him, his serious gaze on mine. "I'm going to take care of you. Just breathe."

I took a deep breath, and he gave me a slight nod before dipping forward

and running his tongue up the middle of my core over my panties. He hooked his thumbs under the sides of my underwear, slowly sliding them down. “Fuck you’re so pretty. Pink and wet for me.”

He dipped his head and ran his tongue from my entrance over my clit. The sensation was almost too much, almost more than I could take, but he kept his movement slow. “I’m never going to be the same after tasting you.”

Lucas slowed his motions, giving me a devilish smile at my whimpered protest before rolling us over, straddling my hips over his face. He buried his tongue into my entrance and thrust it inside, holding my hips in place. I fell forward so that my hands were supporting me and ground down against his assault, but my release was just out of reach. I let out a frustrated, whimpered sound, and he broke away. “Tell me what you need.”

“I want you. Always you.” I breathed out the words.

“Fuck.” He bit my thigh and pressed a finger into my core. “I need to get you ready first.”

“I’m ready,” I pleaded.

He sucked on my clit, and my eyes rolled back before he said, “Not until you come again.”

I groaned in protest, but he slid a second finger inside, stealing my thoughts. My hips rocked against them but stilled when he pulled back just long enough to add a third.

“Breathe,” he murmured against my thigh.

I sucked in a shaky breath as he inched his fingers deeper.

“That’s it. You’re so wet for me.” He stroked me in slow, fluid movements up and back to meet him with each thrust. “That’s it, baby.”

He pressed a kiss against my clit. “So fucking good,” he said before sucking it into his mouth and swirling his tongue.

“Lucas,” I gasped, falling forward, unable to support my weight, and was instantly pinned in place with his large forearm.

“I’ve got you.” He fucked me with his fingers while sucking on my clit, until I shook from the force of my orgasm building in my core. Pressure grew from my lower stomach outward and encompassed all of me, shattering me into a million pieces. Lucas kept going while I shuddered against him.

A little tremor rolled up my spine. “Sensitive.”

He chuckled and flipped me under him so his face was lined up with mine. He licked his lips. “I could eat you all fucking night.”

My skin pebbled with his words, but I didn’t just want his mouth. I

wanted all of him. “I want you inside me.”

Lucas jerked, and a low groan rumbled from his chest. “You can’t say things like that if you want me to last.”

“Like what?” I smiled in my after-orgasm glow, enjoying the state he was in and that I could do this to him. “I want your cock, please?”

His hips rocked forward involuntarily, and my mouth watered at the hard ridge of him visible through his pants. “At any time, if you want to stop or you aren’t comfortable, let me know.”

He released me, and I helped him lower his pants, taking his boxers with them. He palmed his huge cock, stroking it, and I now understood why he took his time getting me ready. I stared at his length, mouth watering, and said, “That’s not going to be a problem.”

He leaned over me, keeping his hips just out of reach, and sucked on my neck, marking me. I writhed under him, lifting my hips to meet his, and was rewarded with the heavy weight of his cock over my core. He dropped his head into the crook of my neck and groaned, lowering his weight over me. “I shouldn’t be doing this. Tell me to stop.”

“Don’t stop, please.”

“I couldn’t if I wanted to, and I don’t want to.” His fingers trailed over the inside of my thighs before spreading my legs as he positioned himself at my entrance and entered me with one fluid thrust.

The fullness had my head going numb and the world falling apart. I’d never felt anything this good until he pulled back and thrust in again. He stretched me until he pressed on every wall, until he owned me from the inside out.

His gaze was hot, focused on where we were connected, and he wet his bottom lip. “So fucking sweet,” he said before his fingers dug into my hips, holding me still, and he thrust in again. “You are made for me.”

The air pushed from my lungs as the pressure built, and I was lost to him, body and soul. His muscles twitched under my grip, and he folded over me, grinding his pubic bone into my clit with each of his thrusts. I was painfully sensitive, but the now familiar tension grew in the small of my back. “Lucas, Lucas, I’m going to come. Don’t stop.”

Lucas took my mouth in his, thrusting his tongue deep at the same time as his cock entered me. I was lost to my orgasm—my body trembled, and I clawed him as he ripped it out of me. His thrusts stuttered, and he bit my shoulder as he came, filling me with his cum with every stroke. He collapsed

his weight against my chest and whispered against my lips, “Perfect.”

NINE
LUCAS

I buried my face into Piper's neck, unable and unwilling to move. None of this should've happened, but like fuck I would feel bad about it now. I knew it wasn't just the aftermath of my release that made me feel so good. I'd been holding back for so long, and finally, everything felt right.

"Lucas." Piper's voice was light, almost playful, muffled slightly by my shoulder.

I groaned in response and slid my thumb over the soft skin of her wrist I held at her side.

She kissed the sensitive curve at the base of my neck. "Lucas, I can't breathe."

Fuck. I lifted the bare minimum distance so she could inhale but maintained full-body contact.

"Lucas." She was laughing now, the sound seeping into my chest, and my mouth curled into a smile.

I growled and nipped at her ear. "What?"

"You're lucky I'm on birth control."

I froze but relaxed as her fingers drew designs over my back, sending ripples of tingles down my spine. I hadn't thought of that once, and it wasn't something I'd ever forgotten. An unexpected warmth formed in my sternum at the thought of what could've happened. It wasn't the right time, but I didn't hate the idea.

"Lucas." Her voice was pure amusement.

"Hmmm?" I kissed up her neck and ran my tongue over where I'd left marks.

She tilted her head to give me more access but said, "They're going to

notice we're both missing."

"Let them notice." Nuzzling into her hair, I took a deep breath

"Lucas."

I huffed, lifting all the way off her. "You're no fun."

"Oh, I'm plenty fun." She wore a devilish grin.

My cock twitched in agreement. I shouldn't be able to go again so soon, but something told me this time I could. "Can't we just stay here?"

Her smile turned sheepish. "Not unless you want Marcus to find out tonight."

Like a cold bucket of water, all the heat drained out of me. "We have to tell your brother. I can't lie to him."

Her soft gaze met mine, and she ran her finger along my cheekbone. "Okay, we'll tell him together." A smile took over her mouth. "Just in case he tries to kill you."

I turned my face, nipping her thumb. "You're a fucking minx."

She pressed her thumb deeper into my mouth, and my cock was officially hard again. "Come to my room tonight." Her pleading eyes were a dark swirl of lust I wanted to drown in.

I tipped my head back and looked at the ceiling, taking a deep breath. "The wait is going to kill me."

She popped out of bed before I could pin her back down and was already pulling her dress over her head. She looked beautiful with pink, flushed cheeks, her hair in wild waves around her, and her lips swollen from my kiss. The realization that Piper was the one for me soothed a deep fear in my chest. She was mine.

She gave me a lingering kiss and whispered, "Wait ten minutes, then come find me."

I had to clench the mattress to keep myself from stopping her as she left the room. I wanted to stay here, in this moment, forever.

Once she was gone, I got dressed, straightened the bed, and pulled out my phone. It was after midnight, and from looking at the social media posts, I could see the party had doubled in size. How long would I have to stay to make it not obvious I'd bailed early? A giddy, light feeling took over as I walked to the door to go find her. Everything felt like it clicked into place, and I finally understood how my parents felt. That I could have what they had too.

Today had been a whirlwind of emotions. Waiting to hear my name

called during the draft was physically painful, and the only thing that made it bearable was Piper, who somehow topped what was supposed to be the biggest day of my life. One kiss from her and I knew it was all over. Nothing would ever compare to having her in my arms. The scent of apples filling my lungs, the sweet taste of strawberries on my tongue. For years, I'd been denying myself, but giving in was the best thing I'd ever done. Looking back, it was inevitable. I wasn't sure I'd ever truly believed I could stay away from her. Not when she looked at me with wide, clear eyes straight into my soul, like she knew every part of me. I didn't deserve her—hell, no one did—but I had the rest of my life to change that.

I stepped out of the room, intent on finding her, but a large weight slammed into my side, sending me hurtling into the wall. A strangled groan slipped from my lips, and I struggled to take a breath, anger rippling through me before my stomach dropped out.

“You fucking bastard!” Marcus's enraged face stared back at me.

“Hey, it's not like that.” He wasn't supposed to find out like this. Not at some fucking party with me sneaking out of a guest room.

“She's my sister!” he growled.

“Fuck...it's different. I'm different with her.” I stood and interlaced my fingers on top of my head. I needed him to understand. “I love—”

“I trusted you.” Marcus's fist connected with my jaw, sending me stumbling back.

I grabbed his shoulders and held his hands in place, pleading with him. “You trusted me to keep her safe, and I will,” I promised.

“Safe?” he laughed, but there was no amusement in his tone. “You think you're safe?” He pushed me off him. “You are nothing but a fuckboy, and you'll be nothing but a fuckboy. How dare you? Haven't you wrecked enough girls?”

I flinched back, and pain radiated through my chest. He was right. I'd fucked up, but this was different. She was different.

Marcus took a step forward. “What, you don't think I noticed? How you let them fall for you first? How they obsess over you until you cut them free?”

“It's not like that.” Frustration grew in my chest.

“You're right, it's not, because you're not going anywhere fucking near her.”

Anger burned under my skin, and I spun him until he slammed into the

wall. "I'm not asking you, Marcus. Don't fuck with this."

Marcus spit in my face and shrugged out of my hold. "You are such an asshole."

He headed toward the stairs, and I grabbed his arm, halting him, hoping to God he could read the honesty in my expression. "I know how special she is. I would never do anything to hurt her. You've got to believe after all this time that I wouldn't do that to her. To either of you." Pain ripped through me like my ribs were being torn apart. "I love her, and I'll fight for her, Marcus. Even if that means fighting you."

A deep frown marred his face, anger rippling off him in waves, and he nodded. "You'll lose."

He took off down the stairs, and shame soured my mouth, not because I'd just lost my best friend, but because I knew it was worth it. She was worth it.

Marcus screamed out for Piper the second he got down the stairs. He didn't sound worried; he sounded furious. Blood rushed through my ears, and my heart pounded in my chest at the idea of her being blindsided by him. It was one thing to agree to tell him; it was a whole other to be caught. Determined to get to Piper first, I took the steps two at a time. I glimpsed Marcus's back as he crashed out the front door, still screaming for his sister. He'd calm down eventually. He'd always been quick to anger but was equally quick at being rational. It was the years of hockey ingrained in him that caused him to turn to aggression before rational thought. Great on the ice, fucking awful in the real world.

I pushed through the crowd, taking advantage of my size to clear a path as I looked for her. The dance floor was packed so tight there were no spaces between their bodies, just a jumble of limbs moving together in rhythm. Piper hated crowds, hated feeling trapped in any way, so I made my way to the backyard patio, fully expecting to find her there curled up on her phone, but I was met with an empty space.

I placed both hands on my head, trying to sort out where she'd gone. *Shit.* I headed down the street toward her house, the last place I could think she'd be. I jogged the block and stood in front of her lawn. The windows were dark, so instead of going through the front door, I circled around the back. There was a quietness, the only sound from the pool jets, and the only light was the moon reflecting off the water. With quiet steps, I made my way to Piper's window. *She had to be here.*

I let out a relieved breath that she'd left it open and crawled through the

tight opening. I was getting too big for this. The room was empty, only the faint smell of green apples still lingered.

Desperation tightened my lungs. I needed to speak with her first, to let her know that no matter what happened with Marcus, I would choose her.

I punched her number on my phone, and paced her room while it rang, hanging up at the sound of her voicemail. I dialed it again, but still got no answer.

Fuck. My fingers sped over the keys, sending her a text.

Me: I need to talk to you asap. Meet me at your place.

I waited for another fifteen minutes before I headed back to Jax's, determined to find her, but just as I got to the front door, Jax came flying out of nowhere.

His chest heaved, and his expression was distorted as he called out for Piper. Jesus, my heart cracked at the sight of his red-rimmed eyes as tears pooled in the corners and his voice cracked around her name.

I grabbed him by the shoulders, and he struggled to get free. "Jax. It's me. Fuck, Jax, look at me."

Startling gray eyes pierced mine, and the tears he'd been holding back flowed over his cheeks and dripped down his jaw. "I have to find Piper before someone tells her. I have to tell her."

"Tell me what's happening." Panic filled my veins with ice and sent my heart pounding in my chest. Seeing him like this was like being flayed alive, every one of his rasping breaths like a layer of my skin being removed with the heaviness of his emotions. Distantly, I saw people running down the street and a large crowd forming at the corner. Fear clenched my teeth firmly shut, no longer sure if I wanted to know. Clearly, something horrible had happened, and dread made bile rise in my throat, thinking about Piper's parents.

Jax pleaded, "Help me find her."

"Wh...why do you need to find her?"

His gaze flashed from determination to pain. His brows pulled together, and his jaw clenched like he didn't want to deliver this blow. "It's Marcus."

It would've been less of a shock if he'd have shot me. It didn't make sense. "No...no. It's okay, you're wrong. I just saw him."

His chin trembled, and he turned his head to the side, and the weight of

the world descended on my shoulders, crumbling everything I'd known.

"He was in a car accident down the road."

"No..." I stumbled back, unwilling to believe what he was saying. "He was just here."

"I saw him, Lucas. I saw him." Jax put his head against mine and said the words that broke me apart. "He's dead."

"No." My feet were moving before I could consciously make a decision, and I crashed through the crowd, needing to see what they did. Needing to see that Jax was wrong. That he'd made a mistake.

When I cleared a path, the wreckage of a two-car head-on collision appeared in front of me, and my stomach dropped at the sight of crumpled green steel. Piper kneeled beside the open driver's-side door, head bent over the twisted frame, and her body shook with her sobs.

I took a step closer, needing to wrap her in my arms and hide this from her, but froze when she cried.

"Marcus. You said we'd have more time." Her voice broke, and she sucked in a breath. "You can't leave."

Nausea climbed my throat, and I bent forward with the need to puke. Fuck. I did this. He was angry at me when he took off. Guilt racked through me, and I took a step back. My gaze traveled over Piper's silhouette, committing every line to memory before I turned and walked away. She would never forgive me.

TEN

PIPER

ONE WEEK LATER

I gasped, jolting from my nightmare, and my heart pounded in my chest as Marcus's blue eyes, the same shade as mine, haunted me. *It was just a dream.* My hair stuck to my sweat-soaked neck, and the breeze from the open window did nothing to cool me down.

A weight shifted behind me, and I took my first deep breath in days. Lucas had been avoiding me since Marcus's funeral. I pressed my palm against the constant ache in my sternum and shoved down the emotions waiting to take me over. I wasn't ready to face them, not when it would mean it was real. Instead, I took a deep breath, focusing on the man behind me. He'd been missing since that night. I'd barely glimpsed him at the wake before he disappeared again.

I rolled over, wrapping my arms around his waist, and buried my face in his back when Jax's familiar scent filled my nose. I froze, sucking in a deep breath, and swallowed my whimper. It was wrong, it was all wrong. His shoulders were large but smaller than I expected, and his hair was scruffy around the back of his neck.

I shifted away and rose on my palm. Jax was curled on his side, fully clothed above the blankets. He turned to face me, gray eyes meeting mine.

It was hard to take my next breath. He didn't come. Lucas always came. "Where is he?"

Jax didn't need me to clarify. He just shook his head, his sad eyes on mine. "He couldn't make it."

I twisted toward the window to look directly into Lucas's room, but it was closed, with the curtains drawn over. Anger was like acid in my gut as all my understanding burned away.

“Everyone needs to stop lying to me right now. Where’s Lucas, Jax?”

Jax swallowed but shook his head again. “He’s not coming.”

My brain became fuzzy, unable to process what he was saying. I crawled out of bed, grabbing an extra-large sweater off my dresser that nearly swallowed me whole, and made my way quietly to the back of the house. I knew Lucas was mourning. *I* was mourning, but we couldn’t do this. He couldn’t do this. I was done waiting. If he was too scared to talk to me, then I was going to go to him.

I knew where their extra key was. I’d just slip in and comfort him for once. I pushed open the back door a little too hard and nearly stumbled into the form sitting on the steps.

Lucas looked broken, with overgrown stubble and a wrinkled shirt, but his body was rigid, unmoving. He didn’t greet me when I walked around to face him, and I nearly gasped at the cold, hard look in his eyes. My lip trembled, but I wasn’t giving up on this. “Say something,” I pleaded.

Like I hadn’t said anything, Lucas stood and replied with an angry question of his own. “Did Jax not go up to you?”

“What are you talking about?” Confused tears pooled in my eyes.

He reached a hand to my face but dropped it before I could feel the warmth of his touch. “I sent Jax to stay with you in case you had a nightmare.”

“You heard it?” The night bugs were too loud, buzzing in my ears as I tried to work out what was happening. *He’d heard me having a nightmare and sent Jax?*

Lucas’s gaze softened, and the pain I saw had a hole forming in my chest before he turned cold right in front of me. His muscles flexed, and his face hardened like he was going to war, but the only person here was me.

“What’s happening?” My voice was weak.

“I’m leaving for Windsor in the morning.” He said it without any emotion. Like him moving two hours away a month early was no big deal. Like leaving me right now was nothing to him.

I sucked in a breath, shaking my head no. “I can’t go yet.”

“I know. You’re going to stay here.” He took a step back toward his house, and the cool air filled the distance between us.

“Why?” My voice broke, and a crack showed in his cold façade.

“I can’t stay here.” He shook his head and took another step back as if he needed the distance between us. “It’s too hard.”

My brows pinched together. There was something off in his words. “It’s too hard to be here with me?”

He looked away, inhaling through his nose before looking back at me. “Yes.”

“You said—”

He squared his shoulder, and his jaw tightened. “I lied.”

I’d taken a few volleyballs to the face, but nothing had ever stung the way those two words did. “But we…”

“I fucked up, okay?” He huffed out a breath that was like a mockery of irritation. Like he was doing the gesture, but it didn’t feel right with his posture. “That night shouldn’t have happened. It was a mistake. I’m sorry.”

I stumbled, and my back hit the doorjamb. He moved to catch me, but I flinched. “How can you say that?”

He stood straighter, raising his chin, and looked me in the eyes. “The Hunt’s off. None of it matters.”

“The Hunt.” I shaped the words without sound.

Lucas turned toward his place, and his shoulders folded in on himself. His back rose and fell, but he didn’t look back when he said, “I really am sorry, Piper. I shouldn’t have… I shouldn’t have done any of it.”

Was this what it felt like to be gutted? To have a knife shoved into your stomach and slowly work its way up until it cracked open your ribs and left your heart exposed? I swallowed hard, taking gasping breaths.

“Lucas,” I pleaded, and he stalled midway between our homes. His fists clenched at his sides before entwining over his head, and his pained noise carried over to me. But he didn’t turn around, walking straight to his door and letting it slam behind him.

Tears welled in my eyes before pooling over onto my cheeks. I felt myself breaking, and I gripped my chest, trying to pull its pieces together, trying to stop myself from falling apart, but nothing prevented the onslaught of pain. I dropped to my knees, curled into a ball, and rested my head against the cement step. Tears flowed over my cheeks, and I tried to ignore the shame I felt for not crying until now.

A motion from Lucas’s upstairs caught my attention, but there was no one there. The realization finally hit me. That I was alone. Lucas had lied. I’d never been safe.

ELEVEN

LUCAS

ONE YEAR LATER

I swung through my shot, catching the puck just underneath the blade of my stick, and it rocketed into the top-right corner of the net. I moved the empty bucket to the side and dumped another load of pucks in front of me, using my stick to line one up for my next shot. Practice ended a half hour ago, but there was nowhere better for me to be. Not when the burn in my muscles after each shot blanked out my thoughts. My body moved on autopilot when I was playing and gave me a fucking moment of peace. Sometimes, it felt like the only reason I was able to get through this past year was by drowning myself in the game.

“Hey, let’s call it a day, eh?” Alex called from the boards. He’d already showered and gotten changed after practice. He was a big guy with long sandy-blond hair that curled from under his beanie and a set of dimples that made him look entirely too innocent. He’d used those dimples to his advantage, and I doubted he’d spent a night alone since we’d met.

He shuffled onto the ice in his sneakers and crossed his arms, watching as I took shot after shot. “You’re missing the sweet spot in the corner of every third one.”

Alex was one of the Huskies’ star forwards, and he was known for his wrist shot, but I knew he wasn’t here to give me pointers. We’d only known each other for one season, but it was already clear that despite his relaxed, almost playful demeanor, he paid attention to people. He’d noticed when Jax was having a hard time and made sure to help him, and I’d been forever grateful for that.

I ran out of pucks and skated to the net to collect them into the buckets before setting up again. As a defenseman, I rarely had the opportunity to

charge the net, but like fuck I was going to mess it up when I did.

A large hand landed on my shoulders and pushed me to the side. “Seriously, man. Your arms must be killing you. Go change.”

The muscles in my shoulder and abs ached with the punishment of nonstop practice, but with that pain came a blankness that was like an addiction. I needed to block *him* out. I needed to block *her* out.

Alex raised a brow that told me he’d do this all day if need be, and I nodded, giving up.

“Yeah, okay.” I turned toward the board

“I’m grabbing groceries. Want anything?” Alex asked.

“Nah, I’m alright.”

He patted my back with one of his giant-ass hands. “Sweet. See you at home.”

I needed a steaming hot shower, something to burn away the ache of my muscles. I walked into the empty dressing room and pulled off my skates and jersey, only to be stopped by our assistant coach, Mattie.

“Get dressed. Coach wants to see you in five.”

I pointed to myself, gesturing to my sweat-soaked hair. “Seriously?”

His jaw tightened, and I swallowed hard. “Are you talking back to me?”

“No. Sir.” One did not fuck with his coach, even an assistant one.

He raised a brow. “Good. Get your ass in there.”

“Yes, sir.” I stripped off my gear and dumped it in a pile at the bottom of my locker. I sprayed myself down with all-in-one body spray, but nothing was going to cover the stench coming off me in waves from my unwashed gear.

I knocked two knuckles on Coach’s open door, and he looked up from the papers he’d been reading on his desk. “Sit down, son.”

Oh, shit. My muscles tensed so hard I was surprised I could walk as I sat across from him. His office wasn’t big, no larger than a typical bedroom, but there was something ominous being called in here. Like your dad had just busted you for sneaking out.

“You wanted to see me, Coach?”

He scanned my face and rubbed a palm over his mouth. He was a heavysset man with salt-and-pepper hair, and even in his sixties, he could intimidate the fuck out of the biggest players. “You came a long way last season. It’s paid off on the ice—your defensive line had the fewest goals scored last year.” He pointed at the championship banner we’d earned.

The warmth of pride grew in my chest but was wiped out by his next words. “But you don’t play with the team. You hog the puck, take risky shots, and get into unnecessary fights. You’re a liability on the ice. I see you working out there, on the rink before everyone, then off last. At first, I thought you were dedicated, but now I’m worried it’s more, and I’m not letting you get lost in this game when you could be one of the best.”

My stomach twisted until my guts felt like they were going to climb out of my throat. “Sorry, sir. I’ll fix it.”

“You’re damn right you will.” He steepled his fingers in front of him and leaned forward. “Hodge’s decision to move up has removed him from the roster.”

“Shit.” My eyes went wide. That was a huge blow to the team. Hodge was the best captain I’d ever played under. He knew exactly what to say and when to say it to keep his team focused. Hell, he’d given me several pep talks that I could admit made my gameplay stronger.

Coach’s eyes met mine, daring me to talk back. “I’ve decided to pass his captaincy to you. Let’s see if a little added responsibility is what you need to pull yourself together.”

“What?” I barely got the word out as my heart stuttered, then pounded in my chest, and sweat formed at the base of my neck. I didn’t want to be responsible for anyone else. Hell, I didn’t want to be responsible for myself. “Sir, with all due respect, I think that would be a mistake.”

I sure as fuck do.

His brows pulled together, and his skin wrinkled in a deep frown. “Son, I know what happened with your friend was hard, but you’ve got a career ahead of you. One that you need to protect. You need to show you’re out there being a team player and not just taking matters into your own hands.”

“I know, and I will, but I...” I cut myself off, not wanting to tell him that I fucked everything up. If people knew what I did, what I was responsible for, they wouldn’t trust me again. “Give it to Alex. The guys love him.” I stood from the desk, and he followed suit.

“You’re going to be the captain, or you’re benched.” I searched his face for the bluff, but he looked dead serious.

All the air was sucked from my lungs, and I struggled to take my next breath. I needed hockey. I needed the burn in my legs and the sheer numbness that playing brought me. It was a fast-paced sport, no room for intrusive thoughts, just head in the game and focus on the play.

I ground my teeth together to stop myself from losing it. I couldn't lose hockey—I'd have nothing left. "Fine, but full disclosure, I think I'm the wrong person."

He sat back in his chair and sucked on his front tooth. "I want another championship. Don't fuck it up."

I pulled up to the back of our place and took the steps three at a time. The sky had turned gray and sticky with humidity, seconds away from a downpour. The two-story house was designed with renters in mind, and it was the perfect setup for the four of us. Each bedroom had its own attached private bathroom, and there was a large open-concept kitchen overlooking the living room. The place was fucking mint.

River's, our center, and Jax's rooms were upstairs, leaving Alex and me to take the two down here.

I made my way into my room, grimacing as I stripped off my shirt that stuck to my skin with hours' worth of sweat. Turning the shower on, I looked at my reflection while letting it warm up. With all the hours I'd put in at the rink and in the gym, I'd put on several more pounds of muscle. I was already a big guy, but now the rigid lines that split my muscles gave me a hardened look. Which was a good thing as a defenseman—I wanted the opponents to be terrified. I wanted them to screw up the second they saw I was on the ice.

The mirror steamed over, blurring my reflection, and I chucked my pants, climbing under the near boiling spray. I dug my fingers into my sore neck, loosening the muscles, and groaned at the sweet ache.

Fall semester hadn't started yet, and my life consisted of prework for school, practice, gym, and then passing the hell out from exhaustion just to do it again the next day.

The scent of apples filled the air as I lathered a cloth and washed down my body. A flash of blonde strands appeared behind my eyes, but the thoughts were cut off by the ringing doorbell. Fuck. I wrapped a white towel with the Huskies logo on it around my waist and secured it in the middle, calling to whoever it was, "I'm coming. Just a second."

I swung open the door, and the air was knocked out of my lungs as a

stunning pair of blue eyes stared me down.
I was so fucked.

TWELVE

PIPER

My chest caved in with the force of my exhale when Lucas Knight answered the door in all his perfect glory. Completely ignoring my common sense, my gaze tracked over him, taking in every detail. I swallowed hard, following a droplet as it traveled from his neck through the valleys of his muscles and disappeared into the towel wrapped around his hips. The bright white of the fabric showed off the warmth in his brown skin. Where I was pale and near see-through, he looked like he was lit from within by a freaking sun god. He shifted, and the new tattoos curving around the side of his body flexed. I closed my fingers into fists to stop myself from tracing each one.

Thunder in the distance told me to get inside, but I was frozen in place, barely noticing the rain soaking into my clothes. My therapist and I had prepared for this moment. I swallowed hard, internally slapping myself for drooling over him, and lifted my chin. He'd broken my freaking heart, shattered it into a million pieces when I needed him most, and I wasn't that naive little girl anymore with a stupid obsession.

Lucas filled the doorframe, blocking my way. He practically towered over my five-foot-seven frame, forcing me to tilt my head up to see his face. His eyes darted over me, mouth slightly open. Brown eyes rimmed in honey gold met mine, and my feet cemented firmly in place.

Staring back at me was *my Lucas*.

Not the impassive, hard look from the last time I'd seen him, but the warm eyes of a close friend, full of mischief, seconds away from getting us both into trouble. I wanted to hit him for denying me that look for so long.

My heart picked up its pace when his gaze stayed locked with mine, luring me in. I stepped closer, every instinct begging me to wrap myself

around him, but I resisted. I'd read his signals wrong before and paid the price for it.

His mouth kicked up at the corner, and I could almost believe he was happy to see me. "Killer?"

My breath hitched as his childhood nickname shot a thrill through me.

He flinched at the sound, looked away, and his jaw clenched as he asked, "What are you doing here?"

Frustration rolled over me as I watched his expression turn to cool indifference. Ah, the ice king was back.

"Well, hello to you too...asshole," I hissed out, standing tall as we settled back into our new roles. He'd made it home for the holidays last year, but he'd avoided me like he was paid to.

"What was that?" Lucas's shuttered eyes met mine, no hint of the lightness that had been there a moment before.

"What, did getting hit in the head too many times affect your hearing?" Faking a smug grin, I looked past him through the open door, doing my best to appear unaffected. Like being reminded of how he used to look at me for a fraction of a second didn't hurt like hell when he shut me out.

"You look like a drowned rat, Piper." His tone was mocking, and my gaze snapped back to him. His eyes were blank. Clearly, I was delusional to think I had seen warmth there. Now he was shutting me down, hard, to remind me he wasn't interested.

It had been drizzling when I got out of the car, but it turned into full-blown rain in the time we'd stood here staring. I pushed a wet strand of hair from my face. I was surprised the water pouring down on me didn't turn to steam from the lick of frustration that burned under my skin. "I'd look a lot better if you weren't blocking the door, dickwad."

He chuckled. "Dickwad—what are you, twelve?"

"Move." I took a step, so close I could feel the heat radiating off of him.

His mouth dipped, and his breath fanned across the shell of my ear. His demand came out low and rough, like sand. "Make me."

I sucked in a sharp breath and took a step back to read his eyes. For a brief second, I thought I saw heat. "I..."

A car pulled up, and Jax's steady voice broke the tension. "Pipsqueak?"

"Hey, Jaxie. Want to let me in?" My cheeks hurt from smiling so wide as he lifted me in a giant bear hug.

"Jesus, Pips, you're soaked." He let me go, taking a step back, and

smiled. “And you’re fucking hot. Damn, Pips. Where was this girl growing up?”

My cheeks flushed with the compliment. I knew Jax didn’t see me in anything but a platonic way, but I’d worked hard on myself both internally and externally since my world imploded, and it was nice to be acknowledged. His sharp eyes shot to Lucas. “Go grab her a change of clothes, asshole.”

I raised my brow at Lucas. *See? You are being a dick.*

Jax set me on my feet, and I watched his smile broaden across his face. “You should’ve told us you were heading in early.” He looked me over, his brow lifted. “Let’s get you a tea.”

“Thanks for your help, Jax.” Sarcasm coated the blond guy’s voice that followed in after Jax. He looked more like a Viking than a Ken model. He dumped the bags in the kitchen and smiled brightly. “I’m Alex. You must be Piper.”

He had dimples that softened his features, and he was giving off a warm, welcoming vibe. I instantly liked him.

“Ah, I see I’m infamous.”

Alex’s eyes darted to Lucas’s, and then a smirk took over his lips. “Something like that.”

Another guy stepped up behind Alex. He had dark hair that fell over the hard lines of his face. He looked sculpted from marble in all of his angular glory.

Alex wrapped his arm around the new guy’s shoulder. “This is River, our other roommate.”

“How many of you guys live here?”

“Just the four of us.” Alex started putting the food away as River brought in another four bags, and his lips tipped up at the corner, just barely showing a hint of a smile. Seeing them all reminded me of Marcus, and I rubbed at the dull ache in my chest.

These guys had been living together for the last year while going to university. Their house was bigger than I’d expected. Definitely had man cave vibes.

Leather couch. *Check.*

Giant TV. *Check.*

PlayStation, mini sticks, and a skate sharpener. *Check.*

The last one had more to do with them being hockey players than guys, but the place fit them perfectly. “Nice spot you have here.”

Jax's eyes followed mine, taking in the space, before he replied, "Pretty sweet, right?" He smiled wide, catching my attention. He looked relaxed, but there was something in his smile that wasn't quite right.

He handed me my mug, and we settled on the couch while the guys continued to put stuff away, occasionally glaring at Jax for skipping out on it, but he winked, then ignored them completely. We spent the next few minutes catching up on last year.

"How was your trip? Visit anywhere cool?" Jax asked, taking a sip of his coffee.

I'd worked the last few months, not that they'd know that. The official story was I wanted a year off to travel, but the only traveling I did was back and forth from the dump, hauling garbage for my landscaping job.

A tingle curling up my neck was the only warning before the loud *thwap* of clothes landed on the table beside me.

"Here." Lucas's voice came out harsh, and I glared at him.

My eyebrows raised, and my voice was sharp with sarcasm. "Thanks?"

"Ignore him," Jax said loud enough to ensure Lucas heard him. "He's a dickwad."

Laughter bubbled up when he used my favorite insult. Unoriginal? Sure, but it had been working for me since I could pronounce it.

Lucas paused in his stride, flipping Jax off before disappearing behind his bedroom door.

"Bathroom's the second door on the right." Jax directed me to a small powder bath off the kitchen to change.

My reflection in the mirror showed the black mascara that had melted under my eyes and the way my honey-blond hair was slicked to the side of my face. I really did look like a drowned rat. *Ugh.*

Quickly, I stripped out of my wet clothes. The fabric suctioned to my skin, and it was a fight to peel each layer off. My mood shifted as I thought about how ridiculous it was to stand out in the rain like that. I'd prepared for the moment I'd face Lucas again, all *be strong, and hold your ground*. He didn't have any power over me, no matter how hot he was. I should've pushed through the door, but I was so easily caught up in him. *Who knew I was turning into an idiot?*

I picked up a familiar worn-out black band T-shirt, pulled it over my head, and was quickly engulfed in the soft, thin fabric and the fresh scent of sandalwood and cinnamon. Memories threatened to pummel me, but I

reminded myself that none of it mattered.

Because no matter what I thought was between us, he'd made it clear it stopped the night Marcus died.

THIRTEEN
LUCAS

I dropped my head against my bedroom door and exhaled a long, slow breath from my nose. The fuck was she doing here?

Piper wasn't supposed to be here until next week. I'd taken steps to fill every waking second of my schedule to keep my distance. Then she blew all my plans to hell by showing up soaking wet and staring at me with big, familiar blue eyes. I couldn't look at her without thinking about Marcus.

The way his eyes had rounded with betrayal before he ran out of the house.

I'd been able to avoid her when we visited home, easily leaving the room whenever she showed up, and if our parents forced us together, I kept my distance, polite enough so that my dad wouldn't comment but never letting the conversation turn serious—*personal*.

The lilt of Piper's voice drifted through my door, and I lied to myself that I wasn't listening to every word. She talked circles around Jax, avoiding any questions about what she was up to these past months. Did she see how messed up he was?

I rubbed my fingers into my eyes and dragged them over my head before slamming it back into solid wood.

Laughter filtered in, and I pushed off the wall, gathering my gym bag. I had to get the fuck out of here before she seeped back into me and I couldn't get her out. I'd made the mistake before, and I wouldn't do it again.

I caught a glimpse of Piper where she sat with her feet tucked under her on the couch. She had a Nintendo controller in her hands, and she was focused on the game. My gaze caught on where my shirt slipped down her shoulders as she lifted onto her knees, shouting at the TV. Her head started to

turn toward me, as if she could feel my stare, and I snapped my focus forward.

I walked through the living room, ignoring the tension from everyone's eyes on me.

"Where are you headed?" Alex asked from the kitchen.

"Out." I slid my headphones over my ears and blocked any other questions before pushing through the front door and letting it slam behind me. At least the rain had died down.

"Lucas, wait up," Jax called from behind me, and I stalled. I didn't know what the hell I would do if he started asking questions.

"What?" I asked and took another step toward my car.

He caught up to me, gripping my shoulder, and turned me toward him. "What the fuck's going on?"

"Nothing." I lifted my gym bag. "Getting a workout in."

Jax huffed out a breath. "You barely said hi to her. Her fucking brother died. What's your problem?"

Pain laced through my chest, and I clenched my teeth, taking several deep breaths through my nose. "Nothing's my problem. I'm doing exactly what I'm supposed to be doing, so stay out of it."

"I'm not going to stay out of it. That's Marcus's little sister. You know he'd want us to take care of her." Jax's voice cracked, and I gripped his shoulder, putting us in a semi-hug.

"She's got you. I can't be a part of that." I let him go and opened my car door.

"You're going to regret this."

I knew all about regrets. I stepped into his space and lowered my voice so he had to listen. "I regret a lot of things. But I won't regret this. You don't want me to be an asshole? Keep her away from me."

"I don't even recognize you. Just fucking go." Jax pushed off my chest, and I stumbled a step backward. His jaw clenched, and his fist tightened at his sides, but he didn't stop me from getting in my car.

I reversed out of the lot and headed to the only place I found peace anymore, working my body to the bone.

I got home hours later, my legs burning from the extra hours of skating. The ache was a pleasant distraction from the shit show that was my life. I opened the door slowly, listening for any signs of Piper, but stepped through when I was met with silence.

River sat on a wooden stool, hunched over a bowl of pasta at the island. He eyed me as I walked in and dropped my stuff off at the door. Out of the three guys, River was the quietest, the most likely to leave me to my own devices, but the way he was eyeing me with one eyebrow raised let me know even he wasn't going to let me off that easily.

"She's gone to move into her dorm." He twirled pasta around his fork and took a bite, chewing it slowly. My nerves hummed under his calm gaze. What was this fucker up to?

"The boys go to help her?" I asked, then cleared my throat.

"Nah, she said she was all good. Something about only having a suitcase."

I grabbed a bottle from the fridge and took several deep sips before turning to River. "You've clearly got a question. Ask it."

He sucked on his top teeth and tilted his head. "We've been roommates for the last year, and I've never seen you act that cold toward anyone. I know you've got history there and that you're still beat up about Marcus, but that girl didn't deserve any of your bullshit."

I clenched my jaw and took deep, calming breaths. "I didn't say anything to her."

"Exactly. You were a closed-off dick. Jax said you all grew up together. What did she do, spit in your cereal growing up?" He took another bite, waiting out my answer.

If only it was as simple as childhood bullshit, then my muscles wouldn't hurt from how hard I'd worked to keep my shit together. I pressed my palms into the island and leaned toward River, who raised both brows when I spoke. "Let it go."

He dropped his gaze and went back to eating his pasta like the conversation never happened. I stood there, frozen and ready for an argument, but he just changed the subject.

"Saw you were called into Coach's office today. How'd that go?"

I stiffened. He'd hit on the only other topic I would love to avoid. "Nothing important."

"You can keep your personal stuff to yourself, but I'm not leaving you

alone about hockey. What did you do?” He got up and put his bowl into the dishwasher. His tone was firm but even, and he waited with all the confidence that I would answer.

“He made me captain.” I mumbled my confession.

River’s eyes went round, and he huffed out a breath. “How do you feel about that?”

My shoulders tightened, and I stood tall. “What are you, my therapist?”

He cocked his head to the side, examining me. “No, but I know you’ve been avoiding getting involved with the team.”

“What are you talking about? I live with the team, and I had one of the highest points last year for assists,” I said, defensive.

River, never one to be goaded into an argument, leaned back against the counter. “So, what did Coach say?”

Fuck, he had me. I rolled my eyes. “He wants me to be more involved with the team and thinks being captain will force me to do it.”

The smallest hint of a smile curved on River’s mouth but vanished before his next words. “He’s right. And once you get your head out of your ass, you’ll be a great captain.”

My shoulders relaxed for what felt like the first time today, knowing he wouldn’t have said it if he didn’t mean it. I nodded once and headed toward my room, in need of another shower. “Thanks, man.”

All three guys were in the living room when I came out of my room. There were a couple of boxes of pizzas laid out on the coffee table. The air was too quiet as they watched me approach.

“So, you going to be a dick all year, or did you get that out of your system?” Alex chimed in before shoving a bite into his mouth.

River knocked his shoulder into Alex’s side, drawing his attention, and shook his head.

Alex shrugged. “What? Someone had to say something to break the mood. Shit was getting entirely too serious.”

Ignoring Alex, I watched Jax. His face was turned away, and he stared at the hockey game playing on TV. It was a repeat from the playoffs last year

where his favorite team went down in the last round. He turned to me and raised a brow, some of the lightness returning to his features. “Heard you’re our new captain.”

My face snapped to River’s, who returned my stare. “Never pegged you for a gossip.”

“I told you. There’s no secrets in hockey.”

“So how fucking scared are you?” Jax asked, and I blew out a breath that he’d decided to let the subject of Piper go. For now.

“Honestly?” I sat in one of the armchairs and looked at all of them, but my gaze landed on Alex. “Should’ve been Alex. Everyone likes him, and he’s earned respect on the team.”

“Aw, you love me.” Alex batted his lashes.

River choked. “That right there is probably why Coach skipped you.”

Jax pushed the box of pizza my way in a peace offering and said, “So where we headed tonight? Heard there’s a house party, and I wouldn’t mind getting laid, then shit-faced.”

I eyed him, tension building in my chest. “Lately, that’s all you’ve been into.”

He kicked his feet up on the coffee table, moving a box to the side. “Got an opinion on it, *Captain?*”

I rubbed a hand over the back of my neck, deciding to give him the same courtesy of a free pass he’d given to me. “Fuck off with the captain shit.”

Alex laughed. “Oh, you better get used to that, or the team’s going to have a field day. Don’t worry, we’ll stick up for you.” He smirked.

These fuckers were going to be the death of me.

FOURTEEN
PIPER

What was I thinking drooling over Lucas like that? What happened to *Lucas who?*

If I thought not seeing him for a year would ease the ache he caused, I was dead wrong. My memory of him had faded, and when faced with the real deal, I was overwhelmed by his vibrancy. He was bigger, brighter, more potent than I'd remembered. My fingers itched to touch him, to be wrapped in one of his huge bear hugs he used to give freely. No one hugged me like he did.

He squeezed a little tighter, a little longer, a little closer.

I always felt like nothing could touch me when he wrapped me up like that.

For a few seconds, I would've sworn he was happy to see me, but I paid for that when his eyes shuttered, and he put his walls back up. Apparently, I'd developed masochistic tendencies because I knew he would send shards of pain through me, and I got close to him anyway.

Old habits die hard. I'd been madly in love with him since I crashed my bike, hurdled over the handlebars, and my face skidded across the pavement. I still had the scar on my cheek. Lucas had picked me up and held me against him as I let out giant heaving sobs, murmuring, random stuff, whatever he could think of to cheer me up, and that was it. My seven-year-old heart clung to him and never wanted to let go. But that was then, and now I knew freaking better.

Muttering to myself in the dorm parking lot, I yanked on my suitcase. It was lodged in the back seat of my Mazda, and I stumbled back after it finally released. Frustration ran through me; I was an idiot to deny I was holding out

hope he'd somehow revert back to the guy I grew up with. The one who'd explored the pond down the road, climbed giant sycamore trees, and calmed me down in the middle of the night. Lucas may have been Marcus's friend, but whether he'd like to admit it or not, he was one of my best friends too.

This last year had been hard. I'd needed him more than once. What none of the boys knew was when Marcus died, everything went to shit for my family. Dad fell into depression, made some horrible stock decisions, and managed to lose his job in less than six months. On that note, what kind of dick fired a guy who'd just lost a kid... My jaw clenched just thinking about it.

Thank God the school let me delay my scholarship for a year. I busted my ass off for a local landscaping company in order to save enough money for my general expenses. Countless days of shoveling, hauling dirt, and dump runs took a toll, but it paid well, so I sucked it up, no matter how exhausted I became.

I dragged my suitcase toward the Righthouse dorm. It was easily identifiable by the giant golden plaque next to the entryway. Student housing was set up in two large co-ed dormitories. They were angled perpendicularly, making them look like a giant L from ground level. The school had caught up with technology over the last few years, and instead of having to come in for orientation, I was able to do it all online. They'd mailed me my room key, making the entire process seamless. I was able to download the school map in a few easy clicks, and here we were.

This would be home sweet home for the next four years. None of the mingling students looked my way as I dragged my suitcase and overstuffed backpack into the elevator, doing my best not to grunt with the effort. Should I have let the guys help me move in? Probably, but a sad little part of me was worried about what I would do if Lucas offered...or if he didn't.

"Nothing quite like unrequited love to kick off your university experience," I grumbled under my breath.

I managed to get here a week early with intentions of settling in before my roommate arrived. Well...that was before I received a text from her today.

Roommate: Piper!!! I'm sooo excited to meet you!!! I've already moved in see you soon!!

Her text had dropped like a stone in my stomach. I needed time to prep for the year, to ease myself in, and from that one message alone, I could tell

she was going to overwhelm me with her personality.

I was the shy sibling. Marcus was the loud, energetic, lovable one. I was more of a watch-from-the-sidelines girl. It had earned me Lucas's annoying nickname, *Killer*, meant in the most ironic way possible.

When he'd call me Killer back then, it felt like an endearment. Like he was secretly whispering something sweet without the guys knowing. The way he practically hissed it out now made me think I had been a delusional teenager, reading into things I wanted to be there. That I was really the annoying sister that they all just wanted to leave them alone.

He'd barely acknowledged me this past year. I swear to God he was afraid to be in the same room as me... *Yeah, who's the one hiding now?*

I took a deep breath when the elevator doors opened to my floor. I had stalled at the boys' house long enough; it was time to muscle up and meet my roomie. The hall was lined with doors on both sides. The carpet was clean, but the walls looked like they could use a few coats of fresh paint. The room numbers went up with each door I passed, and my steps slowed to a stop when I reached mine. Number twenty-five.

Taking a deep breath, I dug my key card from my pocket, but the door swung open before I could swipe it. A petite girl with bright green hair and freckles grinned back at me. Green was a hard color to pull off, but it suited her. I held out my hand in my best attempt to start off on the right foot. "Misty, right?"

She beamed up at me, "Hi! O.M.G., you're so pretty!" Her voice was high—I could practically hear the exclamation points.

"Thanks. I love your hair." I led with a compliment. It was the truth though. Her hair was fun and vibrant and matched her bubbly demeanor perfectly.

She stepped back, letting me into the room, and my eyes must've been round like an owl as I tried to take it all in. The walls were covered with pictures of the school's hockey team.

Looking back at her, she wore a Huskies jersey. Jesus... She was a superfan.

I swallowed hard when I saw my guys' faces, hearts scribbled around their headshots. She even had some from before they'd started playing here last year.

Misty smiled, catching me staring at the hearts around Lucas's head. "Hot, right?" She pointed to Jax and Lucas's AAA team pics. "I know, I

know, I kind of took over your side of the room. I hope that's okay. I just have all these pictures, and I really wanted to put them up so it could feel like home. You know? Plus, I'm literally the team's number one fan." She kept rambling on, but stage four alarm bells were going off in my head *ALERT, ALERT, ALERT, PLEASE EVACUATE THE PREMISES.*

What the hell had I gotten myself into?

I knew the school took hockey seriously, but I wasn't sure I could handle all of *this*. Still staring around the room, I tried to soothe her nerves. "Yeah, no problem. I like them too."

That earned me a beaming smile. If we were going to live together, I would just have to look past her little bit of quirky. Everyone had something; she just wore hers on the outside.

One thing was for certain: she couldn't know that I was friends with the guys. She'd lose her freaking mind.

Luckily, she didn't hover around me, instead dropping on her bed with her laptop and headphones. I made quick work of putting my clothes away in the small four-drawer standing dresser and threw my sheets and comforter on the bed. It wasn't home, but the mattress wasn't half-bad when I collapsed back against it.

I grabbed my phone and pulled up my Grief Anonymous app. I wouldn't lie, I thought my therapist was delusional when she'd suggested it. For one, I had plenty of friends, and secondly, I didn't think an app was a good way to meet someone. Turned out I was wrong. The anonymity of the whole thing made it so much easier to open up about how I was feeling, and once I connected with Anon13, everything snapped into place.

Me: I did something crazy.

Anon13: Sounds about right. Tell me about it.

Me: You know how I was supposed to head to Windsor next Saturday.

Anon13: Yeah...

Me: I went today. Surprise!

Anon13: Lucas must have lost his mind.

Me: By the cold way he looked at me, I'd say he was fine. Plus, that's all behind me, remember? New year, new me and all that.

There was a long pause that made me think he was busy before his next message popped up.

Anon13: He's an idiot.

Me: Well, they can't all be as perfect as you.

Anon13: You haven't even met me lol

Me: Exactly.

FIFTEEN

LUCAS

I sat at the kitchen island with my back turned to the living room. Piper laughed freely from the couch, and my muscles tensed. She'd been here the last three days, and I couldn't avoid her forever.

"Lucas, got anything planned for practice?" Alex shouted at me from the couch, forcing me to turn in his direction.

I kept my voice steady, even as my heart rate kicked up. Piper sat next to him. She'd pulled her long hair into an enormous bun that rested on top of her head, and a few pieces slipped out, falling forward. She'd changed. The roundness of her face had disappeared, and her cheeks were hollowed, making her look delicate, almost breakable.

"Not unless you count beep test drills."

"Fuck, man. You wouldn't do that to us," Alex complained, and he ran his hand through his dirty-blond hair.

"Try me," I said.

He kept talking, but I couldn't pull my attention from Piper. The blue of her eyes stood out against the purple smudges underneath. I cleared my throat, focusing on my phone, and swallowed hard, resisting the urge to go over there. To turn her face to mine and check that she was okay.

Jax's hand landed hard on my shoulder, breaking me out of my trance. I lifted my brow in question, but he returned the gesture. The muscles in my back twitched as he scrutinized me, but I kept my expression blank.

"Don't be a dick," Jax murmured low so only I could hear him.

I gritted my teeth. "Listen, if she stays away, so will I."

I knew full well that was a lie. I couldn't be in her orbit without being drawn in.

With my attention on Jax, I didn't see Piper walking up to us. She was laughing at something one of the guys said, but her smile faltered, and I spotted a spark of anger when her eyes turned on me.

"Lucas." She tried to make her voice drip with disdain, but we'd played this game before.

"Killer." The nickname slipped out before I could stop it.

"Don't call me that. Wouldn't want people to get the wrong idea and think we may actually like each other." Her lips curved in a slight smile, but her eyes remained bland.

"You better watch out. Pipsqueak's got fangs now." Jax grinned, and he winked at me.

Alex snuck up behind her, rubbing his knuckles on her head. The move was so familiar I felt a twinge of pain in my chest. How many times had I done that just to be closer to her? Alex continued. "You ever get fed up with this guy, Pips, say the word and he'll be out on his ass. Defensemen are a dime a dozen these days."

In true Piper fashion, she surveyed my face and found me lacking and looked back at Alex. "Careful, I may take you up on that one of these days."

Flipping him off, I said, "We've got a few hours before practice. What are we doing?"

Piper smirked, her eyes twinkling. Jax smiled back while I kept my face impassive. "What's that look about, Pips?"

"You got a ball?"

Jax and I groaned, and Alex looked between us.

It had been ages since we'd played soccer, too caught up in hockey to do anything else. Piper had been the only one who played competitively, which meant she'd firmly kicked our asses for years. She was a beast in both soccer and volleyball, and it would be a mistake to underestimate her in either.

River stepped out of his room, holding a black-and-white leather ball. "I'm down."

She jumped and made the world's most adorable cheering noise, half laugh, half squeal. "Oh, you're going down."

"You think so? You're looking pretty small, Pipsqueak," Jax said, and she laughed harder.

The crew headed out the door, and I turned back to my room. There was no fucking way I was headed out there with them.

Jax gripped my arm. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

“I’ve got some shit to take care of.” Lie.

His grip tightened. “Listen to me. I don’t know why you’re being such a fucking ass, but a game of soccer isn’t going to kill you.”

“I need to get some shit done. You’ll survive without me.” I ripped my arm away and took a step toward my door.

“She doesn’t look okay, Lucas.”

I froze, and the muscles in my back clenched. “I know.”

“I don’t know what happened between you two, but I know you’re better than this. Get your shit together.” Jax didn’t wait for my response before leaving.

I rubbed my palms over my face and took a deep breath. I couldn’t be the one she leaned on, but I needed to get my shit together. I groaned and grabbed a water bottle from the counter. Fuck it.

The field had permanent posts that acted like nets, and the smell of freshly mowed grass filled the air. I took a deep breath, letting it fill my lungs. Crisp green apples mixed with it, and I knew she was behind me. I held my breath, going rigid as I turned around.

Piper eyed me with crossed arms and looked me up and down. Her eyebrow arched, and her lips flattened as she assessed me. The disdain on her face was out of place, like a mask that didn’t quite fit, and I wanted to say something to wipe it off. Instead, I let her stare me down and lifted a brow.

“Problem, Killer?”

She huffed out a small breath, then jumped right into old times and called out, “Shirts versus skins.”

“Jax.” I shouted my first pick before she had a chance.

“Alex,” she replied.

“River.”

“Marc—” Pain laced through her gaze, and her chest collapsed as she struggled to take a breath. I stepped toward her, needing to help, even if I had no idea how, but she took a step back, holding up her hand.

Jax ran up to us and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her into his chest. He looked nearly as horrible as she did. His arms tightened, then let

her go. “I’ll play on both and switch on each point.”

She sniffed and raised her chin, her smile dipping slightly on the ends. “You can play on Lucas’s team. You won’t have to worry about switching.” She walked backward to where Alex stood.

“What, why?” I followed her as she moved, unable to shift my focus.

“Because you won’t score anyway.” Her voice was sly, and a mischievous grin grew across her face.

Jax choked on a laugh. “Fuck off.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll have no problem backing that up. You don’t mind if we start with the ball, do you? Since we’re one man short and all?”

I didn’t trust her sweet tone, but what the fuck was I supposed to do? I tossed her the ball and took my position on the opposite side of the net. Jax stood beside River, and I took the defensive position at the back.

Piper dropped the soccer ball to the ground and gave me one last smile before taking off.

We all had a foot on her. You’d think that would be an advantage, but she dipped and swooped around us like it was nothing. I beat her to the posts, positioning my body in the way, but she did some kind of fancy spin move and easily deked around me, scoring the first goal.

“That’s one!” Alex whooped and messed up her hair with a giant hand.

My heart pounded in my chest at the look of victory in her eyes. Her cheeks flushed with the heat of kicking our asses. “That’s your only one, Killer.”

She laughed, her body relaxing into it, and it wrapped around me. It had been entirely too long since I’d heard that sound. I used to go out of my way to hear it.

“Okay, sure. Your ball.” She tossed me the ball and trotted backward, giving us room, then adjusted herself into a ready position—knees slightly bent, hands forward, lifted onto the balls of her feet. My pulse rushed through my ears as adrenaline pounded through my veins, kicking every competitive instinct into gear.

She was ready, and I desperately wanted her to chase me.

Jax took off down the right, kicking the ball in front of him. She took the bait, cutting him off, but once she was in touching distance, he passed it over to me. It was like she forgot we played a competitive sport.

She turned to me with a giant smile, and shock registered through me. What the fuck. My body slammed into the brick wall that was Alex, and I

bounced back, losing my footing. He easily stole the ball while I stood fucking stunned.

She'd set me up.

River was in goal, ready as Alex ran toward him, and Jax got in between him and the net. My breath hitched, spotting Piper at the corner wide open, dancing on her toes. We were fucking idiots.

My legs burned with the effort to get to her and provide coverage, but they made their move. Alex passed it to her in the air, and she did a spectacular air kick fucking thing that defied gravity.

I hovered over her prone fallen form, sucking in deep breaths, and panted. "Where the fuck did you learn that?"

"Oh, you liked that, did you? Spent last summer practicing in Spain."

Her lie stung, and I looked away before reaching down. "Come on, you've got three more before you can celebrate."

She let me haul her to her feet and brushed the grass off her leggings. "It's going to be a short game. You might want to play best two out of three."



Jax collapsed down beside where I was already on the ground, panting. He looked over to me. "How the hell does she have that kind of endurance?"

"Fucking Energizer Bunny." I poured water over my head before sucking back half the bottle.

"Hell yeah, Pips." Alex spun a laughing Piper into the air as they celebrated their win.

My teeth clicked together when his hand dropped to her waist before setting her down. River was at his side, saying something to Alex, but his voice was too low to make it out.

Fucking quiet bastard. Alex turned away with a small smirk.

Piper crumpled to the ground and took the water River handed her. She swallowed several gulps before pointing the end at us. "You made that too easy."

"Easy there, Pips. Our egos are already bruised enough." Jax held up his hands in surrender, but a devious smile brought out his dimples.

I pushed his shoulder. "What the fuck is that look about."

Jax tilted his head to the side, looking entirely too innocent. “I just thought we could play another game.”

“That’s going to be a no from me, man. Getting my ass handed to me three times was enough.”

“You liked it,” Alex chimed in, and I caught a splash of pink cross River’s cheekbones before he could turn away.

Jax kicked his feet out in front of him, leaning back on his forearms. “Oh no. Not that type of game. I was thinking the Hunt.”

“Fuck no.” I slapped my hand against the back of his head, and he turned to ram into me.

A cheerful, feminine voice cut in before we could kill each other. “I think it’s a great idea.”

“You’re not playing,” I commanded, enunciating each word.

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m not asking for permission.”

“Oh!” Jax cheered, and I was seconds from decking him.

Alex stood, dusting grass from his knees. “You guys look like you’re having fun and all, but what the hell is the Hunt?”

“It’s a competition for who can get laid more.” Piper said it like it was so simple you’d think she was explaining checkers. My chest tightened, and my pulse beat in my throat.

Alex looked between her and me, a smirk of his own growing. “I’m in.”

I stood, looming over Piper. “There’s no fucking way you’re playing.”

She scrunched up her nose and made a face at me before asking, “Anyone else not want me to play?”

All three guys stayed silent, and I swore they were enjoying this. Fuckers wouldn’t enjoy it when I made their lives living hell on the ice. “If she plays, I don’t play.”

Piper clapped her hands. “Okay, now that’s settled, what’s the prize?”

“Whoever fucks the most girls—” Jax coughed and looked at Piper. “—sorry, *people* before the last regular-season game wins free food for a month. The losers have to streak through the school grounds on a Wednesday night.”

“Ouch, good thing I know I’ll win.” Alex twisted, and his back cracked.

“Doubtful,” Piper chimed in, her cheeks flushed pink, half-covered with the water bottle she brought up to her lips. Bile rose in my throat as they spoke over each other.

River grabbed his shirt from the ground. “I’m out.”

Alex whipped around. “What? You can’t back out.”

“I was never in.” River shrugged.

“Okay, me, Alex, and Piper. Sounds like a plan. Rules are the same as normal. No doubling up with the same person. They only count as one. No overnights, you sappy fuckers. Lastly...shit,” Jax cut himself off.

“What?” Piper huffed and tilted her head.

“The last rule is no fucking you.” I blanked out my expression just in time for Piper’s wide eyes to shoot to mine. Her brows pulled up in the middle while she scanned me over and made a ticking sound.

“That rule can stay. I don’t want to sleep with any of you asses anyway.”

“Perfect. Starts right now!” Jax whooped and wrapped his arms around Piper.

I swallowed back the acid taste in my mouth, and my ribs tightened. “I’m in.”

Jax’s smile widened as he turned to me. “Couldn’t let us have all the fun, could you?”

“Need to keep up my winning streak.”

A small sound came from Piper, but when I looked over to her, she glared up at me.

I wasn’t letting her in on this game, even if I had to spend the next two weeks sabotaging her. “Game on, Killer.”

When we got back to our place, Jax stepped beside me and lowered his voice. “Why do you think she’s been over here so often?”

I knew he didn’t mind, but I’d been wondering the same thing. Classes hadn’t started yet, but there were loads to explore. What was holding her back?

Against my better judgment, I grabbed my keys. “Come on, Killer. I’ll show you around.” Surprise registered across her face, but she didn’t hesitate to follow me.

There was almost no one in the coffee shop. In less than a week, it would be packed.

I brought Piper here, wanting her to experience it the way I first did, knowing she’d take in every detail. Her eyes scanned the room while her fingers absent-mindedly traced patterns on the wood table. I rubbed my hand over my mouth to hide my smirk when her gaze backtracked to the giant pastry display. Her teeth dug into her bottom lip, taking in row upon row of baked goods, finally landing on the one I knew she loved, although she’d have a hard time admitting it to me.

Her stomach grumbled, telling the world she was hungry, but she didn't walk up to order. Instead, she dug through her bag, pulling out a slim black wallet, and flipped through its contents. Her brows furrowed, and the slightest frown formed on her lips. When her eyes finally met mine, her cheeks grew pink, and she quickly dodged her gaze away.

She didn't owe me answers, so instead of pressing her, I walked up to the counter, not making eye contact with her, and placed an order that included her favorite latte and a piece of the carrot cake. I handed it to her like it was no big deal, not wanting her to look into the gesture, but I'd be damned if she walked around hungry.

"You didn't have to do that." She said it around a mouthful of cake before washing it down with her latte.

She looked perfectly content, and I fought against the tug in my chest.

"Yeah, I did."

Before she could say anything to that, I held the door open for her and asked, "Do you have your schedule on you?" She handed me her phone, and I looked over the itinerary.

I started showing her the fastest routes between classes until she knew exactly where she was going. We barely talked, in silent agreement to not break this momentary truce. Her eyes were wide, taking in the tall buildings surrounding us as we walked through paths, garden beds, and open fields. The campus was huge and soon to be full of life, but right now, it was perfectly quiet.

Did she see it like I did the first time I was here?

It wasn't until she looked at me with round blue eyes that I knew my mistake. The comfortable feeling that settled over us brought up our past. Her brows pinched in the center, and my hand nearly lifted to rub it away, but I clenched it at my side to squelch the impulse.

A million questions ran through her gaze.

Why won't I talk to her?

Why did I pull away?

Why did I abandon her when she needed me most?

I couldn't answer any of them.

Because she'd never forgive me if I did.

SIXTEEN
LUCAS

I shot another round of pucks before Mattie, our assistant coach, called me over. “Coach wants to talk to everyone.”

I blew out a breath and tipped my head back. “He’s telling them now?”

“Yeah, buddy. Get in there.” He patted my shoulder and simultaneously shoved me toward the changing room.

The team sat in front of their lockers in different stages of undress. I made my way to mine beside Jax.

Coach stood in the middle of the room and raised a brow, crossing his arms over his broad chest. His scowl was deeper than usual, which was saying something because I’d heard him referred to as pug-like on more than one occasion. “Hodge isn’t coming back. After last year, the Canucks decided to move him up.”

Johnsie, the second-line forward, smashed his stick into the wooden bench that lined our lockers, snapping it with the force. “How the fuck can he do that to us?”

The team was taking the news of our captain being gone worse than I did. I watched the players’ reactions from my spot on the bench while taking off my gear.

Coach raised a brow, crossing his arms over his broad chest. He huffed out a breath and sucked on his front teeth. “Hodge was a good player and a great captain. He helped lead the way to nationals, but he was just *one* player. You did it as a team, and you’ll do it again this year.”

Johnsie complained, “We didn’t just go to nationals, Coach. We fucking won.”

“Sit down,” Coach commanded, and Johnsie nearly fell backward into his

locker he sat so fast. “Do I look like an idiot?”

“No, Coach,” we murmured as a group.

“Well, from your whining, it sure sounds like you think I’m an idiot. If I’m not worried, you shouldn’t be worried. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach.”

“Good, because I’ve got an announcement.” He looked toward me, and I wanted to crawl into myself with all of the attention. There was a time I’d have lived for this, but now, there were few things I wanted less than the responsibility of taking care of this team. I wasn’t Hodge, golden-boy player. I was Lucas Knight, fuckup.

The worst part was the team knew I wasn’t a good fit for captain. I didn’t do pep talks or pats on the back. I was too busy using the game to numb my fucking mind.

Coach gestured my way. “Lucas is your new captain. I expect you to treat him with respect.”

All eyes shifted to Alex, who leaned on his locker across the room. As the current assistant captain, he was definitely the better fit for the position. He got along with everyone, helped out everyone he could. Basically a team favorite. *Fuck. He should be captain.*

A muscle ticked in Alex’s jaw before he smiled, walking over to me and slapping me on the back. “Can’t fucking wait, man. Just don’t bag skate us.”

“No promises,” I joked, and a weight lifted from my shoulders. People would follow his lead, and I might suck at this, but at least I wasn’t going to have to take shit from my team.

“Speech!” a rookie I’d just met a few days ago screamed from the corner. I studied his face, making sure to remember to make him skate extra laps tomorrow. Maybe this captain shit wouldn’t be horrible.

“Work hard, play hard, and don’t suck.” Lamest excuse for a speech, but the guys banged the ends of their sticks on their steel lockers, hurting my ears with the noise.

Coach clapped his hands. “Alright, knock it off. We’ve got the Paws and Claws fundraising fair in two hours. Which means you’ve got thirty to be down there to set up.”

Groans circled the room. I tensed, expecting Coach to flip his shit, but he turned and walked back into his office, closing his door. My guess was he didn’t want to do this any more than we did. Even if it was for a good cause.

The fair was taking place in the large south campus parking lot. The layout was simple, four rows of games each manned by a varsity player. That way, attendees could walk their way in a file while stopping at whatever station they'd like. There were some of the usual games—pie throwing, dunk tank, ball toss—but ours was a unique setup.

I lifted a forty-pound bag of ice from the back of Jax's pickup truck and hauled it over to our station. There were two large black soaker tubs filled with ice water next to a table with stopwatches on it.

The game was simple, if not familiar. If you stayed in the water for forty-five seconds, you won.

I tipped the bag of ice into the tub, goose bumps erupting on my arm where the already frigid water splashed my skin. I fucking hated ice baths. They were common for players, but I did my best to avoid them at all costs. Just like I would today.

"Jax." I called him over, and Alex followed. "Rock, paper, scissors for who goes in."

"Fuck you, buddy. We're taking turns."

"Are we though? I'm the captain. You're lucky I'm offering this."

"Asshole," Alex said, his smile undermining his insult.

Jax chuckled and held his fist out. "Are we doing this or what?"

"Rock, paper, scissors, shoot." Alex called it out, and we all played our hands. Both Alex and Jax chose rock like the fucking idiots they were, and I held up my paper. Fucking predictable.

They played another round, ending with Alex groaning and Jax chirping about how cold the water would be when a group of three girls walked up.

"Hi, what's your game? We want to play." The one in front looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place her. She had long blonde hair, but it was dull instead of vibrant, and her eyes were more green than blue.

I was about to brush them off when Alex placed his elbow on my shoulder and smiled at them, all dimples. Fucking Christ.

"What's your name? You want to get wet?" Alex asked.

All three girls blushed, but the blonde stepped forward. "Summer. How do you play?"

Jax wet his lips, his gaze focused on the girl's chest. "Forty-five seconds in the tub gets you a ticket for the draw. Double if you play against someone who can go in longer."

"I'll play you." Piper's smooth voice came from beside me, and I jerked in her direction. She strode up to us, a smile on her face.

"Dibs on Summer." Jax already had his hand around her waist, guiding her toward the furthest tub. I could just make out the red bikini revealed when she took off her shirt from the corner of my eye.

"Looks like you're all mine," Alex smirked at Piper.

Acid burned in my chest, and I walked up to them, staring her down. "Are you even wearing a swimsuit?"

She raised a brow, and Alex chuckled in my direction. "You really do like starting shit, don't you?"

Piper lifted her shirt, revealing her smooth stomach, and my mouth went dry. I followed its path over her sports bra and right into her pissed-off gaze. Wherever the sweet Piper was, she was gone now.

She hooked her thumbs into her shorts, and a low growl escaped my throat. Her gaze snapped to mine, and she gave me a devious smirk, pulling them down.

My shirt was over my head and onto hers before I could process what I was doing. The black fabric engulfed her, falling mid-thigh. She huffed but tucked her arms through their corresponding holes, then looked up to Alex.

"You're my tub buddy?"

"Fuck yes, Pips. Going to kick her ass."

"Like fuck you are." I grabbed her arm and practically dragged her to the ice bath. The blonde stared up at Jax, but he just looked between Piper and me with a light in his eyes. Fucking guy saw too much.

Alex came up, holding the timer. "Ready?"

Hell no. I took a deep breath and stepped in. The water was so cold it burned, and I had to push air through my nose to stop myself from holding my breath. I held my hand out to Piper once I got my balance, but she ignored it and stepped over the tall rim.

The second her foot submerged into the water, she made a high-pitched squeal that went right to my fucking dick. At least I knew the water would take care of it before it became a problem.

"Count of five," Alex said.

While Jax flirted with the shivering girl beside us, Piper looked dead

ahead, not bothering with me. The ends of her hair brushed against the smooth column of her neck, falling from where she'd pulled it up in a high ponytail. The sun caught the strands, making them more golden than blonde. The perfect match for her warm, tanned skin. She was like the fucking sun.

I nearly missed Alex's signal to start. I sank down into the chest-deep water and hissed out a breath. God dammit, it was always worse than I remembered.

Piper was shaking in front of me, body tucked into a ball, making sure we weren't touching, even in the small tub. Fuck. My shirt was slick to her body, and goose bumps trailed up her neck. She shook so hard it created ripples in the water. Screw this. I reached forward, grabbing her by the hips, and dragged her backward until she sat snugly between my legs. She made a sound of protest, but I reached around her chest bone, pinning her back with one arm, and clamped my other hand holding her hips back on her stomach.

Her skin was smooth and silky beneath my fingers, and I momentarily short-circuited.

"Let me go, Lucas," she hissed.

"Do you want to win or not?" I was banking on the fact that she was just as competitive as the rest of us because there was no way I was letting her go.

"Fine." She sucked in a shivering breath and leaned further into me. Heat flooded where we connected, and I had to stop myself from leaning forward and burying my face into her neck. Instead, I whispered in her ear. "I'm guessing fifteen more seconds till she's done. You got it in you?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Piper trembled, and I tightened my arms.

"It's okay. I've got you."

She stiffened in my arms, and a low growl rumbled in her throat before she struggled to get up. She yelled when I didn't release her. "Let me go, Lucas."

"Oh shit," Jax said from where he and the blonde were now staring at us wide-eyed.

I loosened my arms, and she broke free with enough speed to stumble when she hopped out of the tub.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I got out and touched her shoulder, but she flinched. It felt like a bullet to my gut. I kept my voice calm and didn't reach for her again. "What's wrong?"

She spun, and shining blue eyes met mine, rimmed with tears. "I believed

you before.”

I stepped forward, unsure where she was going with this. “Believed me about what?”

“That you had me,” she said, and I froze. How many times had I said that to her? She grabbed her clothes off the ground and stormed off into the sea of people. I went to follow her, but Jax held me back with a firm hand on my shoulder.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. She’s hurting. She needs time.”

My chest burned, and I swallowed back my words. I used to be the one she turned to when she was hurting. I broke free from Jax’s grasp and locked my fingers over my head, growling out, “Fuck!”

SEVENTEEN

PIPER

I'd escaped back to my dorm after fleeing from the fair and had been sitting here for a good forty minutes, surrounded by my books and trying to concentrate. But it was useless with the memory of Lucas's arms around me.

My roommate wasn't here. I'd have to ask her what she was up to since our schedules rarely lined up. I'd been worried about moving in with her before, but she'd proven to be an excellent roommate, even if she was a little too obsessed with the Huskies for me.

On every surface of our room, there was some form of Huskies merch, whether it was a poster, her backpack—even her freaking pillowcase had their logo on it.

Intense superfan didn't start to explain it.

I wasn't sure how I was going to keep my friendship with the boys a secret. I had to stop them from coming here at all costs. She was bound to lose her ever-loving mind.

Spending time with Lucas today was like a time warp. For a brief few moments, I let myself lean back into him and feel his arms around me.

When he whispered, "I've got you," every memory of him telling me those same words came rushing forward. The times he'd pull me from nightmares and hold me until I calmed. He stood above that cliff and convinced me so long as I jumped with him, everything would work out. It was all lies. I wasn't safe with him at all. He'd abandoned me when I needed him. I sucked in a broken breath. He broke me.

I practically ran from the fair, not wanting him to see me cry. I'd worked through this several times with my therapist. She'd helped me with techniques to calm my breathing, and I reminded myself that I had control of

my reactions. I'd cried enough over that boy.

We all grieve differently, but this wasn't just grief. He chopped me out of his life like a tumor. It hurt so bad I struggled to breathe. He was the one person who made me feel safe, and he'd abandoned me when I desperately needed him.

I was naive enough to think he loved me, even though he'd never said that to me, and he proved me so wrong when Marcus died. People don't leave their loved ones like that. It took time for me to work out who I was if I wasn't Marcus's sister in love with his best friend. I hadn't realized that had become my entire personality until they were ripped away. I'd spent the last year finding myself again.

The door banged open, and Misty's neon green hair bounced with her as she entered. I really did love her hair.

"Oh my God, I had no idea you were gonna be here. I'm so excited. I feel like you're never around." Her voice came out in a rapid mess of bubbly words.

"Yeah...sorry, I've been busy hanging out with friends. I'll be around more often." I couldn't help my smile that matched hers.

Loud beeping pierced my ears, and I pressed both hands against them to suppress the sound. My breaths came out too hard, and my heart was rapidly trying to escape out of my throat. I swallowed it down, repeating the same few words. "It's just a drill. There's no fire. They told us this would happen."

Misty opened the door and peeked her head outside. Students were shouting at each other, but all my focus landed on the burning smell of fire that wafted into the room.

My lungs hollowed out, and the room started to spin, knocking me to my knees. The smoke grew thicker, burning my nose with every weak breath I took.

Misty dropped down beside me, her voice high-pitched with panic. "We've gotta get out of here. You need to get up."

Memories flooded me, taking over rational thought. I curled into a ball, covering my head with my arms. Small hands pulled at my shoulders, but I was lost to that night twelve years ago. Black smoke billowing at the ceiling and flames crawling up the walls. A whimper escaped my throat, and my eyes burned.

"Get up, please, Piper. Get up," Misty pleaded with me, and she shook my shoulders, but I buried tighter into a ball, my fingers digging into my hair

until my scalp screamed in protest. I couldn't hear, couldn't breathe, couldn't see anything but flames. The lick of heat up my limbs. I could hear her crying, but I couldn't respond.

I trembled, and my breath was too shallow as my vision turned fuzzy. Distantly, banging sounded on the door, but I was too far gone, blackness closing in on me.

Callused hands covered mine, and warm breath fanned over my cheek.

"Breathe." Lucas's low command had me sucking in a breath and his scent. He gently moved my hands from over my ears, holding them in his own, and his lips grazed my ear. "Breathe, Piper. It's okay. I've got you. You're safe."

Unlike in the ice bath, his words were like a hit of Ativan calming my nerves, and I collapsed into his side. Lucas was here. I was safe.

He wrapped an arm around my back and the other under my knees before hauling me up to his chest.

"I'm going to get you out of here. The hall is filled with smoke. I'm going to need you to do something for me. Can you do that?" His low voice vibrated through my side, and I nodded with the smallest sound of affirmation.

"Press your face into my chest, breathe through my shirt, and keep your eyes shut." He kept his voice calm and soothing, and I buried my face into his body. His spicy scent filled my senses and blocked out anything else.

"There you go. That's my girl," he rasped and placed a kiss on my forehead. "We'll be out of here soon."

"Let's go." Misty said, her voice strained.

The alarms were louder in the hall, and I covered my ears again. Lucas moved swiftly, and I clenched my fist into his shirt when I jostled against him as he descended the stairs. I held on to him like a life raft, the only thing tying me to consciousness.

A cool breeze drifted over me, and the echo of the stairwell disappeared to reveal the hum of a crowd. Lucas lowered me to the ground, murmuring reassurances, but my fingers didn't loosen. I wasn't ready to let him go. He pressed another kiss into my head, hauled me into his lap, and ran his fingers through my hair, gently pushing it back from my face.

We sat like that for several minutes, me breathing him in and him drawing circles on the small of my back before I was able to lift my head. There were hundreds of students around me, all clustered into groups. Several

were in their pajamas or were shoeless, having rushed out of the building.

I looked up at Lucas, who was already watching me. His brows creased, and his eyes searched my face.

“It wasn’t a drill.” My voice was weak and broke around the words.

Lucas ran his thumb over my cheek, wiping away tears. “No, it wasn’t. I’ve got you though. You’re safe.”

“How?” I rubbed my temple and tried to clear my head. “How are you here?”

His chest rose and fell against me, and he tipped his head back before saying, “I wanted to check on you after what happened at the fair. I didn’t want to leave it that way.”

I huffed a small breath through my nose and leaned my head into his shoulder. “I think this makes up for it.”

His soft chuckle rumbled through me and soothed me even more. “Heads up, you’ve got a visitor.”

I’d barely turned when Misty came crashing down beside me, her eyes wide and her green hair curling wildly around her. “Jesus, Piper, are you okay? You scared the shit out of me.”

“I’m alright. I guess I owe you an explanation.”

She eyed me, then relaxed. “Yeah you do, but it can wait—” Her words cut off, and she gasped. “Oh my God, oh my God. You’re Knight! Lucas Knight.”

Shit.

Her loud squeak nearly pierced my eardrums and drew the crowd’s attention.

Lucas whispered, “Yeah, but I don’t want to announce it right now.”

She lowered her voice to match his. “Of course not. Sorry. It’s just...I’m a huge fan.”

Misty turned on me, eyes pinched together. “You know him?” Accusation was clear in her voice.

Think. Maybe I could pretend I didn’t know who he was? “Ummm...”

“Killer, let’s go,” Lucas said, keeping me tucked into his chest but letting my legs drop to the ground as he stood.

I scrunched up my nose and grimaced. “Something else I can explain later.”

Misty placed her hands on her hips. “Ah, yeah.”

“You have somewhere to go tonight?” Lucas questioned her.

“Yeah, my mom lives just outside the city. She’s probably freaking out.” Misty lifted her phone, flashing us the five missed calls from her mom.

I leaned into Lucas. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow, ’kay?”

“First thing.” She did a quirky double-handed gun move as she said it before turning toward the parking lot, and I chuckled.

“Your roommate’s...interesting.”

“Don’t make fun of her. She’s good people.”

Lucas ran his thumb along my jaw, directing it to him. “She stayed with you even when you wouldn’t get up. I don’t care how...intense she is. She’s good.”

I sighed. “I owe her so many answers.”

His laugh reverberated through me. “Oh, I’m positive she’s going to demand them. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

His light blue Dodge Charger was parked illegally against the curb closest to us. He let go of me and opened the door before jogging around to the other side.

I clipped my seat belt and rested my head against the seat. “Drop me off at Shana’s. I can crash on her couch.”

“Not happening. You’ll stay at our place.” He put the car in drive, pulled out, and looked straight ahead. It was like a switch flipped and he remembered who he was talking to. His voice hardened, and my chest grew tight. He built a wall between us with each breath he took, and another layer of brick and mortar was laid between us.

I twisted my hands in my lap and leaned my head against the window, exhaustion settling in my bones. “No, really, it’s fine. She’s not far.”

“It’s funny you think this is up for discussion, Killer.” He turned the corner toward his place. I wasn’t ready to go back to Lucas wanting nothing to do with me, and it split my chest when his eyes turned cold.

“I already texted her. It’s all set.” I raised my phone and rolled my lips between my teeth.

His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. “The fuck do you think is happening here? Do you really think I’d let Marcus’s little sister stay on her own after that?”

I stiffened as pain lanced through my chest at the mention of Marcus, underlined by the sheer frustration of being reduced to his little sister again. All the warmth of the last thirty minutes was replaced with ice.

Confusion about his sudden change swirled my thoughts, and I choked

out a laugh, using sarcasm as a defense. “Really? I’m just Marcus’s little sister now? That’s not what you were saying a year ago.”

He met my gaze at the next stoplight, and I sucked in a breath at all the pain and disappointment I saw in them. His jaw was clamped shut as he searched my face for several moments like he didn’t want to say what was coming next. Silently, I begged him not to, already knowing it was going to hurt.

“Piper.” His voice was a hoarse whisper.

“What?”

“That night never should’ve happened.”

“It sure felt like you enjoyed it,” I said through gritted teeth as I seethed.

His stare bored into mine, and he waited until he had all my attention. “I never said I didn’t, but you were the wrong girl, and I fucking knew better. I’m sorry I hurt you. I really am.”

Somehow, his apology hurt more than his rejection. I turned my face and looked out the window, not willing to let him see the tears flood my eyes. That was the difference between us. There was nothing I regretted about that night with him. I wanted to be with him every night from that point on. I lost Marcus, but I lost him too, and it nearly killed me. “I don’t accept your apology, Lucas. Some things are too big to be forgiven.”

He sucked air through his teeth. “Good.”

The car behind us laid on their horn. The light had turned green while he was crushing my heart. Lucas drove, ignoring the guy flipping him off as he passed us, and turned on the radio louder than necessary. He’d made his point clear. The conversation was over.

Good. How could such a simple word hurt so bad? I ignored the pain in my chest that screamed how much I wished he’d said something different. That he had some completely rational reason for disappearing after that night. I sniffed back my tears. It sucked being his regret when he’d been everything I wanted.

We pulled up to their place, where Jax was already frowning in the open back doorway. When did Lucas have time to text him? I got out of the car and walked in front of Lucas to enter the house first.

I raised my hands. “Before you get started, I’m fine.”

“Fuck, Pips. You scared me.” He wrapped me up in a bear hug before following me into the house.

“I told Lucas he could just drop me off at Shana’s.” I turned back to see

Jax frown, and I knew I was alone in this.

“Yeah, no. I’m with Lucas on this one.”

Traitor.

Alex came out of his room, a bag already packed. “I’ll stay with River upstairs. He’s got a couch set up. You can take my room.”

“Fine, but we’re talking about this in the morning.”

Lucas pointed toward the doorway Alex had just vacated. “Sure we are. Answer will be the same then too.”

I looked between the three of them and quelled the urge to stomp my foot. Rationally, I knew this was a solid plan, that if there wasn’t so much stuff between me and Lucas, I’d have jumped at the chance to stay here. But the idea of being so close to him had my chest caving in.

“Whatever.” I strode to Alex’s room and slammed the door behind me. It was a typical boy’s room. Bed, desk, TV hung on the wall with a gaming console underneath it. I looked at the thin black comforter and navy sheets. What were the chances I could sneak back into my dorm and grab my bedding? How many girls did Alex take back here in the last year? My stomach curled, and I stepped back directly into Lucas’s hard chest. I froze when his hands landed on my arms, steadying me, before he stepped around me to set new bedding down. “Go to sleep, Killer.”

I stared at the bed like it was going to bite me. Sleep. Right.

“I can’t—” I went to protest, but Lucas was already gone. I huffed and stripped the blankets and sheets from the bed, tossing them in the hamper, then made quick work putting on the sheets. If I just didn’t think about it, I’d be fine.

Lucas had left a shirt and shorts. I lifted the shirt, letting the faded black fabric slide over my fingers. This had been one of my favorites. I pulled it over my head and let the smell of sandalwood and cinnamon engulf me. I climbed under the blanket and buried my face into the shirt. As much as I’d pay for it later, his scent was like an addiction I’d been denied for too long. Tomorrow, I’d find somewhere else to stay. I wrapped the blankets over me and buried my nose into his pillow. Tomorrow.

I stood outside my bedroom window as flames engulfed the room, turning the night air warm against my skin. The smoke covered the ceiling in a billowing black cloud, and the wallpaper ignited. It was almost pretty watching from the outside as the room slowly descended into the inferno. I leaned in closer, following the rapidly growing flames as they caught the end of my comforter and quickly climbed over the bed. Startling blue eyes looked back at me through the window, and Marcus smiled at me, the smoke curling around his hair. No. I cried out and tugged on the window, screaming for help. It was locked in place, and no matter how many times I yelled at him to open it, he didn't move, just smiled at me as the fire licked up his legs—

My phone beeped beside me, pulling me out of the nightmare, and I took gasping breaths to calm my lungs. I've had some version of this dream several times a week since my brother died. It left me with an overwhelming sense of helplessness. No matter what I did, I couldn't stop it from happening. I always lost him.

I kept my eyes closed and ran through the script from my therapist. "It was just a dream. It wasn't real." Deep breath. "It was just a dream. It wasn't real." Deep breath. "It was just a dream. It wasn't real." But that was a lie. It might not have been a fire, but Marcus was gone. I swallowed hard to stop a cry from escaping.

My phone beeped again, and I rolled over, grabbing it from my nightstand.

Anon13: Hey, just checking in. I had the best ice cream today. You'd freak, it was non dairy peanut butter, vanilla.

Me: Did you really wake me up to tell me about ice cream?

Anon13: In fairness it was pretty amazing.

I laughed, and some of the tightness loosened in my chest. He had an unnatural ability to message me at the perfect time.

Me: It does sound pretty amazing.

Anon13: Did I wake you? I didn't expect an answer until the morning.

Me: Sorta but it's a good thing.

Anon13: Another nightmare?

I'd told him all about my dreams when we'd first started talking. He always walked me through them and broke them down until they didn't haunt me as much as they once had. I always knew I could write to him if I needed to. But tonight, I just wanted to let it all go.

Me: I'm fine now. Promise. Please drop it.

Anon13: I'm only letting this slide because you asked.

I released a breath and changed the subject.

Me: So how was your day?

Anon13: Well, I fucked up today.

Me: Did you at least apologize?

Anon13: Not for what I should have. It's for the best. You know?

Me: Somehow I doubt that.

Me: Want to talk about it?

Anon13: Not tonight.

Me: You'll never guess where I am.

Anon13: Where?

Me: Guess first.

Anon13: If I knew your whole name I'd be calling you it now.

Anon13: You're at your boyfriend's house and he's currently staring jealously at you while you smile at your phone.

A smirk pulled the corner of my lips.

Me: He wishes.

Anon13: Who wishes?

Me: Lucas.

Anon13: I bet he does.

Anon13: So? Are you going to explain why you're apparently being stared down by Lucas or are you going to leave me guessing?

Me: Not stared down. But I'm crashing here tonight. There may have been a small fire at my place.

Anon13: Are you okay?

Me: As okay as I can be.

I winced when he took longer than necessary to answer. I knew he'd be worried about me, which was why I didn't tell him.

Anon13: And that's why you're staying with the guy you hate?

Me: yes

Anon13: Good.

Me: You should've seen him. He was actually sweet before going all cold as ice again.

Me: He kinda rescued me.

Anon13: He's an asshole and you're not a damsel in distress. Do I have to give you the whole speech again?

Me: Maybe

Anon13: You're the smartest, wittiest, most determined person I know. It's been hard but you've been doing amazing. Don't let some dick make you feel any different.

Me: Yeah, you aren't too bad yourself. I'll talk to you tomorrow, k?

Anon13: Night.

My mouth was painfully dry, and I craved water like it was my last breath. I pulled myself out of bed, wrapping my sweat-drenched hair in a high, messy bun, and headed to the kitchen.

A dim light was on, and Lucas was leaning against the counter with an oven mitt on. His eyes darkened as they traveled up my legs, thighs, and chest to my face. A muscle ticked in his jaw, and we stood in silence for several moments before he cleared his throat. "What are you doing awake?"

"Water," I croaked, unsure if it was because my throat was dry or that he was shirtless, wearing only low-slung basketball shorts. I swallowed hard and approached him with caution, taking care not to touch him when I reached around to grab a glass.

I filled it from the tap and took several gulping sips. "I answered you. Why are you up?"

A timer dinged on the oven, and his lips tipped up. "Got hungry."

Of course he did. He probably had to eat like twelve times a day. He opened the oven door, and the sweet smell of blueberry muffins took over my senses. He tipped the tray over onto a plate, and my stomach rumbled. I'd skipped dinner because my stomach felt uneasy after the fair. Lucas's smile grew, and he held them out to me. "Take one."

I reached for one, but he pulled it back. "Careful, they're hot."

"Yeah, I got that since you just pulled them out of the oven." I reached for one again, and this time, he didn't pull it away. I took extra care to hold it gently while blowing on the top. "So you midnight bake often?" I asked, not looking up from the muffin.

He huffed out a breath. "First time."

"Lucky me." I took a bite, and the sweet taste of berries flooded my mouth, drawing a low moan from my throat.

His gaze traced my mouth, and he leaned closer until I could feel the heat of his chest against mine before he lowered his head to my ear. "Something like that."

I choked on my bite, and Lucas backed away, filling my glass before

handing it to me. “Good night, Killer.”

He walked to his room, closing the door behind him. My mouth was bone-dry, and I took a sip of my drink, surprise registering at the sweet taste of vanilla almond milk. The open carton sat beside the baking tray. I bit my bottom lip and fought against the warmth growing in my chest. It wasn't until after I finished my muffin that I realized he didn't have one.

EIGHTEEN
PIPER

I climbed out of bed and headed toward the kitchen, eager to get my hands on a coffee, but nearly tripped over a bag placed right outside my door. I lifted the bag and spotted my running shoes, which were hidden behind it. Huh, I could use a run after everything.

The bag was full of my clothes, folded in neat piles. I pulled one out, expecting it to smell like smoke, but instead, it had the distinct scent of laundry detergent.

Warmth filled my chest, knowing whoever left this had stayed up late washing my things. My phone beeped, drawing my attention.

Misty: Do you want the good news or the bad news?

Me: Good news.

Misty: Dammit. I was hoping you wouldn't pick that.

Me: Why.

Misty: There's not really any good news. It was just something to say.

A smile cracks my lips at her antics.

Me: Okay. What's the bad news?

Misty: Bad news. I got a hold of the dorm administration office and the smoke damage is pretty bad. I guess it's going to take a few weeks to get it all sorted.

Me: No.

Misty: Yes.

I squeezed my lids tight and took a deep breath. It was totally fine. I just needed to speak with Shana and get the hell out of here.

Me: Did they tell you what happened?

Misty: Hot plate Mr. Noodle disaster.

I huffed out a breath, not even bothering to figure out how that led to that big of a fire.

Me: You staying with your parents?

Misty: Yuppers.

Misty: Are you staying with Lucas? Please tell me you're staying with Lucas. You should have seen the way he came in to rescue you.

I refused to remember just how safe I felt in Lucas's arms or the way he'd shown up exactly when I needed him.

Me: Don't start.

Misty: oh, don't worry. We're having this discussion when we get back to the dorm even if I have to pin you down to do it.

Misty: I can't believe you didn't tell me.

Might as well rip the Band-Aid off.

Me: I maybe, sorta, kinda know four of the guys.

Misty: Who???

Me: Jax, River, and Alex.

Misty: You're lucky I like you or I'd never forgive you for holding out on me.

Misty: It was the posters wasn't it?

Me: they may have had something to do with it.

Misty: Fair.

Misty: See you soon.

Me: Hey.

Misty: Yeah?

Me: thank you for staying with me.

Misty: Girl you scared the shit out of me. Probably lost five years of my life.

Me: Sorry.

Misty: There's an easy way to make it up to me.

Me: Already got us tickets for the opener.

Misty: I just totally squealed. Stay in touch, k?

Me: Will do. Let me know if you hear anything else.

Five kilometers into my run, sweat dripped down my neck, over my shoulder blades, and into the black fabric of my sports bra. My legs burned, and a sharp pain dug into my lower stomach, but I kept putting one foot in front of the other.

Lucas ran a few feet behind me, his breathing even as he kept himself at my much slower pace. He'd caught up ten minutes into my jog, and I'd nearly tripped at the sight of him wearing a hat pulled low over his brows, a white shirt with the arms cut off, revealing large sections of his chest with each of his movements, and a pair of loose-fitting shorts. He'd kept his earbuds in when he said good morning and didn't attempt to overtake me on the path.

There was a familiar, comfortable silence between us, even though I knew I was supposed to keep some distance between us. Some protection against all the hurt I still held for him. All I really wanted to do was keep moving forward, letting exhaustion take over my body with each step, and forget about all the reasons why I should still be mad at him.

I cracked my neck and doubled my pace, then tripled it until I was flying down the road at full tilt. Lucas's groan was lost to the noise of my pulse in my ears as I pounded my feet against the ground, propelling me forward.

Lucas's loud steps grew closer as we approached the front lawn, but if I could just hang on a little longer, I'd win.

I stepped on the curb leading up to the guys' lawn, ready to claim victory, but my toe slipped off. I wheeled my arms, trying to stay balanced, but tumbled forward toward the grass.

Strong arms came around me, hauling me back up, and the scent of sandalwood and cinnamon filled my lungs as I took heaving breaths to get my heart under control.

"Thanks. That was close," I said between pants.

"You always were clumsy."

"Was not." I collapsed like dead weight, and he released me slowly to the ground, where I lay out on my back with my eyes closed.

My chest squeezed at the sound of the door swinging shut, but I ignored it, instead appreciating the ache in my muscles. It had been entirely too long since I'd pushed myself like that.

Memories of when I'd raced Lucas to the cliffs flooded my head and how he'd held me to his chest to stop me from falling forward. I thought he was going to kiss me that night when he'd remembered my birthday, but he took

off with some other girl.

A shadow fell over my face, and I opened my eyes to see a grinning Lucas.

“You should see your face right now,” he said, holding out a bottle of water to me. “You are bright red.”

I groaned, grabbing the water from his grasp, but didn’t bother getting up. “Yeah, well, not all of us can be blessed with your skin tone. Some of us are the color of the inside of a banana, and we turn bright red when we’re hot. Win some, lose some.”

He chuckled. “It’s fucking cute.”

“Uh-huh.” I took a long sip, letting the water cool the back of my throat before reaching out my hand.

He grabbed it, hauling me up to my feet, not letting go until I was steady. “What are your plans today?”

I smirked, my nose scrunching up, and tilted my head to the side. “Class.”

Today was the first day of the semester, and I was all set to start my kinesiology major with a business minor. I may have bitten off more than I could chew.

“Oh, right. Yeah, me too.” His eyes darted away, and he rubbed the back of his neck.

The moment grew taut, and a creeping awkwardness that had never been between us crept in. I cleared my throat, breaking the moment. “First day with the Huskies volleyball team this afternoon.”

“They kept your spot. That’s great, Piper.” Lucas’s voice was warm and seemed to hum inside me before I really processed what he said.

Heat flushed my cheeks. “I’m an alternate, but I get to earn my spot.”

Lucas’s fingers slid along my jaw and tilted my face to his. “Nothing to worry about. You’ve got this.”

His touch sent heat curling over my skin and a shiver down my back. His mouth was so close, and his soft eyes were looking into mine. His chest rose and fell with mine, and everything in me wanted to take a step closer. Have him wrap his arms around me and lift up on my toes to press my mouth against—

Lucas pulled back. His hand dropped from my jaw to pat my shoulder. “Go get ’em.”

He turned and disappeared into the house like he couldn’t get away from me fast enough. I rubbed my hands over my face. I needed to get over him. A

slow smile spread over my lips. No better way to show him I didn't care anymore than winning the Hunt.

I stepped inside the classroom, and my mouth hung open. It was at least three times the size of any stadium-style class I'd been in before. This was the type of room you got lost in. The kind where you're just a number because there was no way anyone could know everyone. There was something comforting in that.

In this room, I wasn't the girl who nearly died in a fire, and I wasn't the girl who'd lost her brother. I was just one in a few hundred.

An arm collided with mine, tipping me forward and spilling my bag on the floor.

"I'm so sorry." A petite brunette danced in front of me and picked up my bag for me, holding it up. "I swear I'm not always that clumsy." She looked around the class. "It's just freaking huge in here."

"You're good. I'm pretty sure I should be saying sorry to you. I stalled out midstep walking in here." I grabbed my backpack and slung it over my shoulder. "I'm Piper."

She tucked her deep brown hair over her shoulder, revealing a near white layer underneath. "Sidney. Want to sit with me?"

I followed her to a spot a few rows from the front, and we took our time taking out our things. I'd just set up my laptop when a guy stood beside me. The strong smell of citrus made me blink a few times before I noticed him smiling at me.

"Hey, I'm Eric. Mind if I sit here?" He was tall with messy, light brown hair that curled at the ends, and he wore thin metal glasses.

Sidney glanced between Eric and me, then shrugged.

He took the seat beside me and meticulously peeled an orange, separating each piece before sliding one between his teeth.

"I'm Piper. This is Sidney." I swallowed hard, suddenly thirsty.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." This whole thing should be a turn-off, right? Like, he was suave as shit, and we all knew it was an act, but there was something about the glasses and the slightly curled hair that was just making

this guy more attractive than he should be. Or maybe it was because I'd spent most of my life surrounded by jocks, and having someone who looked put together interested in me felt new. And by the way his gaze dipped to my lips, he was definitely interested.

If I was going up against the boys in their stupid game, then I was going to have to act fast, and Eric looked like the perfect guy to get started with. I slid my tongue over my bottom lip and watched his pupils dilate.

I turned my attention toward the front of the class, where the teacher entered. She had her hair pulled back in a severe bun and was looking at us all with a scowl. Well, I hoped she just had a bad case of RBF, or this class was going to suck.

Eric dipped his mouth to my ear. "You free Friday night?"

I kept my voice down, not wanting to get on the professor's bad side on the first day. "Yes."

"Bitch, you're finally here!" Shana squealed and wrapped her arms around me the second I walked into the locker room.

"It feels weird being back. It's been a long time since I played." I rolled my lips between my teeth. "What if I suck?"

"I'm not even going to justify that with an answer. There's a reason you're still on a full-ride scholarship."

"Yeah, as an alternate." I changed from my joggers and white T-shirt into my spandex shorts and tank top that was opened at the sides, revealing my bright green sports bra.

"That just means you've got to show Coach Keller you're better than Amber, and trust me, you're better than her," Shana said while she walked backward toward the gym entrance. "Come on, she wants to meet you."

Tension pulled my shoulder blades together, and I tightened my ponytail before following her out into the large cavernous space. My eyes widened, taking in the space. We were the first on the court, and our footsteps echoed against the white-painted walls, and the ceiling was lined with provincial tournament banners.

"So you're the star athlete Shana's always telling me about." An athletic

woman stepped out of her office, dressed in a gray pantsuit and white blouse, and a whistle hung from a beaded lanyard. She was the epitome of badass.

I plastered a smile on my face, giving Shana a quick side-eye glance before holding out my hand. “Piper Adams. Nice to meet you.”

“I’ve watched your film, and you look pretty good out there. That year off affect your game?”

“No, ma’am.” Starting off lying to my coach.

Her hand tightened on mine. “Alright, nice to hear it. You’re going to start as an alternate, but you’ll have the opportunity to show me what you’ve got. I’ll be watching.”

I swallowed hard, and my palms became wet with sweat. “I’ve got this.”

Shana gave me the thumbs-up from behind Coach Keller, and I had to fight back a smile. Players filled the gym slowly as they set up for practice. I recognized most of the girls stretching, having played them over the last several years. Volleyball was a small community, which meant I knew exactly who I had to beat. I could only hope that the year off didn’t leave me too rusty and I’d bounce back quickly.

Coach ran us through several intense drills. As with most teams, the first few practices were all about endurance to get yourself together after having the summer off. I noticeably lagged behind the others in almost all activities, but I still owned my position on the court. I was able to spike the ball into any target set out for me. Grateful that my muscle memory didn’t let me down, I collapsed to the floor the second Coach whistled to end the practice.

Shana sat beside me, handing me my water. “You’re pretty red there, sunshine.”

I groaned. “You’re the second person to say that to me today.”

She tilted her head. “Oh yeah? Who was the first?”

Shit. I froze and no doubt looked guilty.

She raised a brow. “Spit it out.”

“I may have stayed in with the guys last night after the fire.” I smiled through my teeth, sucking in a breath.

“I’m sorry, what?” Her mouth dropped open, and her eyes widened. “Can you repeat that because I know I didn’t hear you right. You messaged me you were staying with Misty, you liar.”

“Lucas kind of insisted I stay there.” I shrugged like it was no big deal and stood.

Her eyes softened, and she tugged me down to the floor. “How are you

doing after the fire?”

She knew my childhood fire still bothered me, and her voice was full of concern.

“I’m okay, I think. It was scary. I totally freaked out.” I let out a breath. “Lucas showed up out of nowhere and talked me down, then carried me out.”

She mouthed the words *carried out* before shaking her head. “How did he even know?”

I didn’t want to get into the whole ice bath thing and how he said he was coming to apologize, so I twisted the truth slightly. “I guess he was headed toward the school.”

“So you’re staying there? For how long?”

“I honestly don’t know. I guess the floor has some smoke damage they need to clear up before we can move back.” I took a long sip of water, not making eye contact after that statement.

Shana’s eyes turned soft. She knew what happened. She’d recognized that there was more upsetting me than Marcus’s death, but she didn’t pry. Just like she didn’t pry now.

“So what about the red-faced comment?” She changed the topic.

“He followed me on my run.”

She laughed. “Like a lost puppy.”

A smirk grew on my mouth. “Yeah, kinda.”

“Do you think he wants you back?”

My fist tightened on my bottle, and I lifted my chin. “I don’t think he ever really wanted me. Not in the way I wanted him.”

“He’s an idiot.”

“Yes he is. Plus, just because he didn’t like me like that, doesn’t mean he won’t get jealous. You should’ve seen his face when I put my name in for the Hunt.”

She snapped her face to me. “You’re really going to participate in that?”

“Of course not, but he doesn’t need to know that.” I wrapped my arms around my knees, tucking them to my chest. “Although I do have a date for Friday night.”

“Hell yeah you do. Who is he?” she asked.

“A guy from class.”

“Is he cute?” She grinned.

I could feel my cheeks warming. “He’s definitely hot, but the best part is he’s nothing like Lucas. He’s more nerdy and hipster.”

“Oh, he’s going to hate that.”
A grin pulled at my mouth. “I know.”

NINETEEN

PIPER

I scrolled through my phone mindlessly, propped up against my headboard. I'd been living here for the last few days and had been trying not to notice that I hadn't spoken with Lucas since the muffin incident. It wasn't that I wanted to see him; it was just a little insulting that he'd avoid his own home rather than have to talk to me.

"Pipsqueak." Jax swung my bedroom door open and leaned against the frame. His eyes went wide when he spotted me, but that didn't stop him from declaring, "We're going out."

I looked down at my plaid pajama shorts and oversized T-shirt before pointing at my under-eye masks. "Yeah, I'm going to pass."

Alex popped his head in from around the corner. "Come on, Pips! It's going to be epic."

I huffed out a laugh. It hadn't taken him long to pick up on Jax's nickname for me. Both men watched me eagerly, and curiosity built in my chest until I couldn't hold it in. "I'm not saying I'm going. But if I was, where would it be?"

Jax rubbed his hand over his face. "I'm not sure how I understood that, but we're heading to the pool."

My brows pulled together. "Uh, I know it's Windsor and all, but October is a bit chilly for a night swim."

"It's a good thing it's indoors. Now, get up before we miss all the fun," Jax said and left before I could respond, knowing I wouldn't be able to resist the adventure in his tone.

It only took a half hour for Jax to pull his truck up to the school's athletic department. I looked between him, River, and Alex, and my eyes went wide when they all started to get out.

"What are we doing here?" I whisper shouted when I rounded the truck and stepped directly in front of Jax.

"Swimming." Jax tilted his head and raised his brows.

My stomach rolled over itself as I looked at the darkened school windows. I couldn't make out anything inside. "The school's closed."

Jax wrapped an arm around my shoulder and rubbed his fist against my hair. I twisted to get out of his grasp, but he held me still. "All you do is class and study. Come on, Piper. Live a little."

His broad smile was infectious, and I dropped my head back in defeat. "We better not get caught."

"Don't worry. Alex is fucking the security guard. We're good."

I groaned. Could've lived without knowing that. I followed after Jax, entering the side steel door propped open by a rock, and was instantly hit by the sharp smell of chlorine and voices echoing around the cavernous room.

The main lights were off, casting the Olympic-sized pool in near complete darkness if it wasn't for the four emergency lights located around the room marking the exits. There were at least ten other people here, most of them women, but I couldn't make out their faces enough to know them.

"Hell yeah." Alex kicked off his shoes and ripped off his shirt, leaving him in a pair of bright blue swim shorts, before doing a front flip into the pool. Water splashed around me, leaving wet spots on my clothes.

"Asshat," I hollered after him.

"Get in here," Jax called to me from the middle of the water.

I huffed out a breath, starting to seriously reconsider my being here, and swiped off my thigh-length dress, pulling it over my head and revealing my favorite periwinkle-blue string bikini. The room went silent, and my cheeks flushed as everyone's attention drifted to me. Unease settled in my stomach before a tingling sensation formed between my shoulder blades, and I barely had time to look back before I was being hauled into thick, muscled arms against a solid chest. I sucked in a breath of spice before we started rushing

toward the edge.

“Put me down.” I thrashed in his arms, but they only tightened.

“Not a chance, Killer,” Lucas said before launching us both into the air, and he didn’t let go until we were both submerged underwater. I couldn’t see anything, the dim light not able to penetrate the surface, and grasped at Lucas’s arm. He lifted me and smiled.

“You’re an asshole,” I hissed, wiping my hair out of my eyes.

“Never said I wasn’t.” He choked out a laugh and swam to the opposite side of the pool, where I could make out the silhouette of a girl hanging off him. My blood simmered in my veins as I watched the shadows over the group, my nose barely over the water when River approached me from the side.

“You okay?” His voice was low so it didn’t travel through the room.

I ignored the tightening of my chest and turned to him fully. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I be.”

River looked between where Lucas had gone and me, then shook his head. “Fuck if I know.”

“River, where the hell are you?” Alex’s voice traveled, and I caught the corner of River’s mouth curving and lifted a brow at him.

“What’s going on there—”

River cut me off. “I won’t ask if you don’t.”

Suddenly feeling protective of him, I nodded before swimming toward Jax and Alex. “Deal.”

It didn’t take long for the guys to drift off into dark corners with the girls I still hadn’t recognized. I swore if I heard the rhythmic slapping of water, I was stealing Jax’s truck, and they could cab it home.

I rested my head on my folded arms, perched at the furthest end of the pool. The light was dimmer here, and the noise slightly dimmed by the distance to the others. I kicked my feet languidly, enjoying the heated water against my skin.

I startled at the sound of a breath directly behind me and caught my toe on the wall in my attempt to twist around. “Ouch.”

Wide hands gripped my hips, searing my naked skin, and my eyes snapped to Lucas’s. I couldn’t make out his features, but his voice was full of concern. “Shit. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

My chest constricted at his proximity, and I struggled to speak. “It’s fine. I just kicked the wall.”

In a fluid motion, he lifted me to sit on the edge of the pool before his hands drifted lower until his fingers grazed the cheeks of my ass. “Which one?”

“Which what?” I swallowed hard, trying to remember what was happening.

A low chuckle rumbled through his chest, and I had to fight against the urge to touch him there. “Which foot did you hurt?”

Oh, shit. I shook my head, trying to snap myself back into reality. “Left.”

I didn’t dare breathe as his hands bracketed my thigh before trailing over the inside of my knee, then squeezed my calf. I felt my skin erupt in goose bumps, and I was grateful for the lack of light.

Lucas caught my ankle, then worked his thumb against my instep. My head dropped back, and I braced my hands behind me, taking in rasping breaths. Heat licked every place he touched until I felt like I would burn from the inside.

His fingers traced each of my toes with a featherlight touch. “Does this hurt?”

“No,” I breathed.

His breaths filled the space around us, and the air grew thick. Lucas moved closer, and I spread my legs, making room for him.

“Lucas. Where the fuck did you go, man?” Jax called.

I froze, suddenly aware of all the reasons this was an epically bad idea.

“Fuck.” Lucas groaned, and then he was gone.

A shiver ran down my spine, his absence leaving me cold and empty. I knew better than this, but for those few seconds, I was able to forget.

TWENTY
LUCAS

Jax: Where the hell are you?

Me: I'm on my way.

Jax: You better hurry your ass up and get here before coach notices you're late for pre-game warm up.

Tucking my phone into my back pocket, I grabbed my bag from my bedroom floor and rushed to get out of there. I was running late to the rink, and if I didn't get there soon, Coach would sit me out. I headed toward the front of the house, swinging open the door, but the second I twisted the handle, I heard a noise from behind me. I turned just in time to see Piper step out of Alex's room and immediately shut it. I sucked in a breath, and my chest tightened as I took her in. I'd only seen glimpses of her throughout the week, having spent considerable energy to keep us apart, leaving me completely unprepared to see her now.

She was stunning with her blonde hair pulled back off her face, exposing the delicate column of her throat, and she had on a simple black dress that hugged her body as it swished just above her knees. The muscle in my jaw ticked as I looked her over.

Her outfit had *date* written all over it, and my chest tightened painfully.

I fought back a growl. "What are you doing, Killer? Not coming to our exhibition game?"

She startled, her gaze snapping to mine. "Um, no. I've got plans."

"What sort of plans?" I knew I didn't have the right to grill her. I fucking knew I'd given that up, but damn if I didn't want to drag her back into my room and lock her in.

Piper's foot tapped on the floor, and she placed her hands on her hips.

“I’ve got a date. You know the Hunt isn’t going to win itself.”

Fuck. I curled my fingers into a fist and bit back my words, unsure if I was going to give her shit or fucking beg her not to go.

I swallowed hard, getting myself together. “You look good, Piper.”

Her eyes widened, then looked down. Not the response she expected. I wanted to run my thumb over the pink flush of her cheeks and tip her head back to look at me.

The doorbell rang, breaking the moment, and I swung it open.

A lean fucker stood in front of me, wearing dress pants and a crisp white shirt. He pushed his glasses up his nose, getting a better look at me. Was this what she wanted now? Some kind of intellectual hipster?

He cleared his throat. “Ah, is Piper here?”

“Who are you?” So much for staying out of her way.

He tried to look behind me, raising his voice. “I’m here to pick her up. She knows I’m coming.”

“I didn’t ask what you were doing. I asked who you are.” I blocked the doorframe, effectively hiding Piper, but she pushed under my arm and smiled at him.

“Ignore him. He’s just being the overprotective brother’s best friend.” Sharp pain pierced my chest, and she visibly flinched before continuing. “He’s harmless.”

She walked toward his car, a shiny black BMW, and glanced back. “Don’t wait up.”

Fuck. My blood heated in my veins and blocked out the sounds around me. I held myself still, knowing if I took a step forward, I’d drag her back inside. I watched them leave, not going back into the house until they’d turned the corner. I closed the door softly, then turned, slamming my fist into a wall and splitting my knuckles. The sting was a small relief to the pang deep in my chest and the voice at the back of my head screaming at me. My heart battered my ribs, pain radiating outward, and I choked it down. She wasn’t mine to protect, and I had no one to blame but myself. I rested my head against the wall taking deep breaths until my phone buzzed in my pocket.

Jax: Hurry the fuck up.

My heart pounded in my chest when I stepped onto the ice for my shift. I could feel the cool air rushing past my face as I tried to clear my mind and focus on the game. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake the image of her in that tight black dress.

The starting forward caught the pass that I should've intercepted and booked it down the ice. My legs burned with the effort to catch up to him, but he easily deked the goalie, shooting the puck into the top right corner for the goal.

Fuck. I could hear my coach yelling from our bench, but all I saw was red as I powered through my strides, chasing down the player with the puck. He groaned when I slammed him into the glass, but the hit was clean.

He pushed me off him and snarled. "You're playing like a rookie out here. My mom could get past you."

I gave him a cocky smile, knowing exactly what would help me burn off the tension pulling me apart. "Ah, come on. Your mom's more likely to beg me to stay."

His face reddened, and he pushed off the wall. "I'm going to enjoy kicking your ass." He threw down his gloves, ready to come at me, but I landed the first punch directly into his ear, one of the only places unprotected by a helmet. He swayed on his feet, and I came at him again, leveling him with an uppercut. Distantly, I heard whistles and shouting, but I didn't stop. He slipped, landing hard on his knees, and I went to hit him again, but a strong arm caught mine mid-throw.

"Let him up, Lucas. This isn't you." River spoke calmly, no judgment in his warning.

I huffed out a breath and straightened. He was right. I didn't hit someone when they were down. Hell, I didn't get pissed on the ice. Ever. I was a defenseman but not an enforcer.

A ref caught me around the stomach, guiding me backward toward the penalty box like a toddler. I let him maneuver me until I was almost there. "Alright, alright. I'm good."

He looked at me and cocked a brow. "You're not normally like that out here. Don't make a habit of it."

I nodded and got into the box. The other guy shouted from his side, but I ignored him, focusing on the game. They scored again, and cheers came from beside me, causing me to grind my teeth. Fuck tonight.

The buzzer went off, marking the intermission for the third period. A quick glance at the clock showed me we were losing nine to two. It was a brutal way to start the season. I slammed my stick against the wall in the tunnel leading to the dressing room, and my coach grabbed me by the shoulder pad.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but you need to get your shit together. Three of those goals were scored on one of your shifts. You’re better than this.” He let go of me and stared me down. “Now, get into that dressing room and tell your team to turn it around.”

How the hell was I supposed to convince them to be positive when I didn’t believe it myself? I pulled my helmet off, tucking it under my arm, took a deep breath, and walked into the locker room. It smelled like stale sweat and Gatorade, and there was a low hum of voices. No one was happy with how things were going. “Listen. We played horrible out there. If you want to win this game, we’ve got to smarten the fuck up.” I ran my hand through my hair. I was horrible at this. “We’ve got this.”

I was met with half-assed grunts of approval, but I couldn’t expect much else after that speech. Sitting down beside Jax, I ignored his raised brow. There was no way I was getting into this with the nosey bastard.

He cleared his throat, and when I didn’t look his way, he shoved my shoulder. “What the hell is going on with you?”

“Nothing, just a bad game. It happens.” I clenched my teeth at the half-truth.

“It happens to other people. Not to you. Now, stop lying to me. What’s going on?” he insisted.

I took a deep breath and dropped my head back against the locker door. “Piper’s on a date.”

“What?” He jerked toward me, and his mouth hung open before curling at the corner. “You’re fucking jealous.”

Frustrated, I ran my hand over the back of my neck. “Yeah, I’m jealous.”

“I don’t know what your problem is, but you’re fucking things up with Piper, and you *will* regret it.” His voice was stern, and I shifted my weight like I’d been scolded.

“Lay off, man. You don’t get it.” *No one does.*

“She’s not going to wait forever for you to figure out your shit.”

“That’s the point. I want her to move on.” I tipped my head back and looked at the ceiling, hiding the lie in my eyes.

“Keep telling yourself that. Maybe everyone else believes you, but I see the way you look at her. The way you’ve always looked at her.” His eyes softened. “Whatever it is, you can tell me. I know it all happened when Marcus died.” He took a long sip of his Gatorade. “It’s time for all of us to let go.”

TWENTY-ONE

PIPER

I checked my phone and bit back a groan. It was the third period, and the Huskies just let in another two goals. For how much I loved the rustic, French atmosphere of the restaurant, I couldn't help but wish we were in a sports bar. Instead, I was sneaking a look every few minutes.

"Something wrong?" Eric asked, peering where my hands were hidden.

My head snapped up from where I held my phone in my lap, and I pulled my lips between my teeth. *Shit*. "Everything's fine. Sorry."

"Piper. I know when a girl's distracted. What are you looking at?"

"Promise not to be mad?" I pleaded.

"Well, that's worrisome, but sure. Lay it on me." Eric leaned forward, and I was struck by how cute he was. Why couldn't I be interested in him? He was funny, smart, and clearly easygoing if you took into account he wasn't mad that I'd practically ignored him on our date.

I let out my breath. "The Huskies are losing eleven to four. It's brutal."

"And you're a fan of the Huskies?" He raised a brow.

I wrung my hands together. "Close friends of mine are players."

He eyed me intently, scanning my face. "Is one of them the guy I met at your place?"

My cheeks heated, but I didn't bother hiding it. "Yes."

He nodded before asking, "Thought so. Is there history there?"

I laughed. "More than I could explain."

"I'm going to take you home. Okay?" He let out a breath and raised his hand to bring the waiter over.

Disappointment flooded my chest, bit with anger. I wasn't supposed to be letting Lucas ruin things for me. I was supposed to be over him. This was

going to require a nice long video chat with my therapist.

The drive home was quiet besides the low music playing through the speakers. I traced my fingers over the red stitching in the leather seat. Taking a deep breath, I stared out the window. I'd messed up huge. I should've been paying attention to Eric instead of obsessing over the guy who'd made it crystal clear he didn't want me. Now it was too late, and I doubted Eric would talk to me again after this epic failure of a date.

He pulled into the back parking lot to the guys' place. I expected him to rush me out, but instead, he put the car in park. He had a soft smirk on his face, and he spoke softly. "Tonight didn't go to plan, did it?"

I huffed out a laugh. "Yeah, I guess not." I grimaced, scrunching up my nose. "I really am sorry."

"That's okay. You can make it up to me next time." His tone was light and friendly.

My gaze snapped to him. "You want to go out again?"

He shrugged. "I'd like to give it another shot."

The corner of my lip curled. "I think I'd like that."

He nodded slightly before asking, "Just tell me. Is there a shot for this?" He pointed back and forth between us. "Or are you still hung up on him?"

I didn't want to lie to him, but I also didn't want to let Lucas take another thing away from me. I'd let him unknowingly dictate most of my life, and it was all on me. I was done with making decisions around him. I could feel my cheeks heat. "You've got a shot."

A slow smile pulled up his lips, and he leaned in close to me, his breath fanning my mouth. My heart hammered in my chest, and my ears rang, knowing what would happen next. He leaned down, and I reached for the door, swung it open, and jumped out.

"Good night. Thanks for supper. And I really am sorry." I was rambling as I went to shut the door, cheeks on fire.

"Next Friday okay?" He shook his head slightly and shifted down so he could maintain eye contact before I shut the door.

I swallowed hard. "See you in class?"

He smiled wide. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

The lights were off in the house when I walked in. The boys must’ve gone to a party after the game. I huffed out a breath. Lucas clearly didn’t have as big of a problem going out as I did. They were probably racing to see who could hook up first because of that stupid bet. My chest tightened, and I struggled to take in a breath.

I clenched my teeth hard and tightened my hands. I had to stop this. I had to let him go, or it was going to tear me apart. He was going to bring one of those girls home, and it was going to outright kill me if I didn’t get a grip.

I grabbed my pajamas from my room and headed to the shower. I turned the stainless handle until it was set to scalding hot, needing the heat to burn away the night. I stripped out of my clothes, waiting for the water to warm up.

Eric had been nice, and I really wanted to go on that second date, but the tightness in my chest thinking about Lucas told me I wasn’t ready. I could only hope I wouldn’t waste too much more time on a guy who clearly didn’t want me.

Steam filled the room, and I climbed under the water, humming as it flushed my skin. I let my head fall back into the stream and grabbed a bottle of shampoo from the ledge. I worked it through my hair, and the spicy scent of sandalwood and cinnamon filled the shower. A quick glance told me I’d accidentally grabbed his bottle instead of mine. I leaned against the cool tile and rested my head back, taking in lungfuls of his familiar smell. A calmness surrounded me as it wrapped me in a comfortable safety. It had been over a year since I’d felt safe, and I closed my eyes, basking in the feeling. Memories of his arms around me on the cliff before we jumped. Him whispering, “I’ve got you.”

Tears leaked down my cheeks as pain radiated through my chest. I missed my brother. I missed the life we had. I’d broken apart and strung myself together, but I was faking it.

I needed to get out of here.

Drying off, I wrapped my hair up on my head in a towel and slid on a loose tank top and a pair of blue-and-white polka-dot sleep shorts that fit almost like boxers.

I’d just settled into the couch to watch a movie when the door swung open. Lucas walked in, half carrying, half dragging Jax with him.

“Oh my God. Is he okay?” I jumped to my feet, rushing toward them.

“Of...course...Pips...” Jax slurred each word until they were barely recognizable.

“He’s fine. Just a little too much to drink,” Lucas said and hauled the heavy weight of his friend higher.

I could normally count on Jax to be a hilarious drunk, but there was something off about him tonight. He wasn’t just inebriated; he was loaded, now completely hanging off his friend’s shoulders. His eyes were shut, and he swayed as Lucas tried to balance him, nearly tipping them both over.

I swung Jax’s other arm over my shoulder and helped to steady them.

Jax groaned. “I don’t want you to see me like this, Pips. Not like this.”

He sounded devastated, all the joy leaked from him, and I struggled to keep my voice steady. “It’s okay. We take care of each other, right?”

“Right—” He brought his hand to his mouth. “I’m going to be sick.” We came with him to the bathroom, where he dropped to his knees and proceeded to empty the contents of his stomach, murmuring he was sorry.

“It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.” I stroked his hair back from his face and helped position him so his arm was across the back of the bowl and his forehead rested against it. Not exactly comfortable, but better than nothing.

“I miss him, so fucking much.” Jax’s voice broke, and my heart ached.

“Me too, Jaxie, but you need to take care of yourself. Okay?” I looked at Lucas and whispered, “How often?”

His eyes were downcast, and he clenched his jaw. “More than he should. We all cope differently.” His voice was stern, defending his friend, but it wasn’t necessary.

“I care for him too.”

Lucas’s shoulders relaxed, and he sat on the edge of the tub. “Fuck, Piper. I know you do. It’s just been a hard year. I’ve been trying to keep him together.”

I wanted to curl up into his arms, hold him against me, while we took care of our friend, but I stayed where I was, stroking Jax’s hair.

Once it was clear he was done puking for the night, I helped Lucas pull Jax’s shirt over his head and wiped his face with a clean cloth.

“Just a few sips.” Lucas handed him a glass of water with two pills.

Jax groaned but took them dutifully and let Lucas guide him to his room. I rested against the doorframe, watching as Lucas laid Jax on his stomach and situated a garbage pail near that end of the bed.

I stepped out, leaving room for Lucas to pass me before following him

into the living room. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He didn’t want you to know he wasn’t okay.” Lucas stepped up to me, so close his shirt brushed my hands. I rested my head against his chest, breathing in his scent.

“None of us are okay.” My throat burned with unshed tears. I’d pay more attention to Jax now and his too-bright smiles. The man had been drowning himself in women, each day a new check on the board. He never brought them back here, never said their names. He was blocking out the hurt by numbing himself the only way he could.

Lucas cupped the back of my neck and swept his thumb from my collar to my neckline in soothing motions. “He’ll be okay.” He pulled back, his eyes meeting mine. “We all will.”

TWENTY-TWO
LUCAS

Jax mumbled in his sleep when I covered him in a blanket, and his eyes cracked open. “I’m sorry, man.”

“Fuck off. I’m here for you.” I placed another glass of water beside his bed. I didn’t envy him in the morning. “Even when you’re shitfaced.”

He laughed quickly, followed up with a groan. “What time is it?”

“Three. You’ve been home for a few hours. I just wanted to check once more before heading to bed.”

“I’m still spinning. How bad was it?” He hung his hand over the bed and touched the ground like it would steady him.

“Well, you ran out the front door of the house party.” I almost felt bad being the one to tell him this next part. Almost.

“That’s good. At least I didn’t ruin their couch or anything.” He breathed out a sigh of relief.

I bit my cheek to stop my smile before continuing. “Oh no, you just splattered the girl sitting on the front steps.”

Jax lifted up and looked at me with wide eyes, searching my face for the lie. “No?”

“Afraid so. She shrieked and everything.”

He let his head drop, and his words were muffled in his pillow. “Fuck. I’m such an asshole.”

I patted him. “Whatever. Ask her out next week and she’ll be fine.”

“Was she hot, at least?” he asked, contemplating the idea, and took a long sip of water.

I choked out a laugh. “Are you asking if the girl covered in your vomit was hot?”

“I didn’t score tonight, but I’m still ahead of you. What’s up with that?” He gave me an all-too-knowing look. “Unless you hooked up tonight?”

“Leave it.”

“So you’re just going to lose the Hunt?” He smirked, nosey bastard.

I took a step back and shrugged. “You and I both know I never had any intention of playing.”

“You could talk to her.” He slurred his words, taking him under.

I huffed out a breath, walked to my room, and leaned against the wall that connected with Piper’s. I slid down the wall, kicking my feet out in front of me, and let my head fall back. It nearly killed me to step away when she’d rested against my chest earlier. I wanted to wrap her in my arms and bury my face into where her hair fell over the curve of her neck.

Jax’s words circled my brain. *You could talk to her.* My stomach turned in on itself at the idea. I couldn’t handle it if her soft brown eyes turned hard when she finally heard what I’d done. If she hated me now, she would loathe me after.

Knowing she was on a date tonight drove me insane. Worst game of my life, and my coach definitely let me know. I was the fucking captain and couldn’t keep my shit together. But even the idea of her with someone else was like driving a knife through my chest and twisting it just for fun.

I groaned. The way she mentioned the Hunt like it was no big deal to pick someone else up, no big deal to *be* with someone else, fucking gutted me. I couldn’t even look at another girl without feeling like I was betraying Piper. It didn’t matter that she wasn’t mine. I wasn’t ready not to be hers anymore, even if seeing her move on was fucking brutal.

Rustling came through the wall, followed by a low moan. I pressed my ear against it and shuddered when I made out her cries.

I pulled out my phone, pulled open the Grief Anonymous app, and sent her a message. I’d modified her name months ago.

Me: Alright I’m checking in that your date didn’t abduct you.

Her phone beeped on the other side of the wall, and I could just make out the sound of her sheets moving and what sounded like a hand patting the nightstand.

Killer: yeah, it was shit.

I was evil for how happy that made me. I got up and went to the kitchen, pulling out a mixing bowl, eggs, milk, cinnamon, and flour.

Me: That bad?

Killer: You have no idea. I'll tell you about it all tomorrow.

The door opened down the hall, and I heard her soft footsteps before she rounded the corner. She startled before letting out a breath. "Jesus, you scared me."

I swallowed, taking in her loose tank top that hung off her shoulder and her shorts that barely peeked out from under it. I cleared my throat and held up an egg. "I couldn't sleep. Thought some food might help."

She eyed me, and her brows pulled in before entering the kitchen area. "Can I help?"

"Sure, measure these out." I passed her the flour, baking powder, and the recipe book.

She scooped it up, clearing the top of the measuring cup until it was smooth, and dumped it into a large bowl. She smirked up at me. "So, what happened in the game tonight?"

I groaned. "Saw that, did you?"

"You mean saw you get your ass kicked and have not one but three turnovers in one game?" She laughed. "Yeah, I saw that."

"Damn, rub it in, why don't you?" I cracked the last egg and tossed the shells into the trash before a slow grin curled my lips. "Weren't you on a date?"

She turned the prettiest shade of pink and bit the corner of her lip. My mouth watered, and my dick twitched, begging me to move toward her. I coughed and grabbed the bowl from her, pouring sugar in and mixing it with a whisk. I practically fucking glowed from the inside, knowing she'd been watching me instead of paying attention to her date. "I bet he hated that."

"He asked me out again."

My gaze snapped to hers. She was already watching me intently, her eyes roaming over my face, trying to read me. "Are you going?"

"I think so," she replied, still scanning for my reaction.

The muscles in my back tightened, and my mouth went bone-dry. I fucking hated this. I didn't have the strength to lock her out, not when I was so close to losing her forever. I dipped a finger into the flour mix and ran it over the tip of her nose.

She scoffed, mouth falling open. "You didn't just do that?"

"You've got something right there." I pointed at her.

"Oh, do I?" she growled, taking a fistful of powder before throwing it at me.

Specks of white sprayed my shirt. “You’re fucking done for.”

“You started it!” She squealed a laugh, circling the other side of the island, and a wide smile took over her face, stealing my breath. I’d missed her so fucking much. With flour in my hand, I chased her around, easily snagging her waist.

“No. No. No. No.” She wiggled in my arm, trying to escape, and I nearly groaned when her ass pressed against my hardening cock.

“You deserve this.” I went to cover her face, but she twisted, and my fingers landed along her jaw, then drifted over her throat.

She stilled, and her heart beat against my hand. I shifted, running my nose up the column of her neck, smiling as a shiver raked through her and goose bumps covered her skin. I kept her in place with my hand on her neck and ghosted my other one over her body.

Her breath hitched when my fingers trailed over her stomach, making sure to keep a sliver of a gap between us. The air grew thick, and each breath felt heavy in my lungs as I breathed in her scent and imagined what she’d feel like if I touched her.

The thin fabric over her shorts tickled my palm before the heat of her thighs sank into it. Piper’s head fell back, resting on my shoulder, completely exposing herself to me, and she let out a small moan when I tightened my fingers around her throat.

Fuck. My hips jerked forward, grinding my dick into her ass, and she pressed firmly into it. My mind went completely white before I remembered to breathe.

I followed the contour of her thigh inward, and she adjusted her stance to make room for me. My pulse rushed through my ears, blanking all sounds but hers. My fingers drifted over her core, still not touching, and I growled when a whimper escaped her mouth. My fingers twitched to touch her. To feel if she was as wet for me as I thought she’d be. Memories of burying my cock into her slick—

The thought jerked me back to reality, and I let go of her, stepping back. The air was cool against my skin, and I immediately regretted it.

Piper turned with wide eyes. “Is it me?”

“No. Of course not.” I shook my head.

“Then what’s the problem?” She looked so calm, collected, but her next words gutted me. “Nothing happened before. We were just friends, and it was just one night.”

I stepped toward her, and she took a step back. “Fuck, Piper. Is that what you think?”

“That’s what I *know*, Lucas. If it was any more than that, you wouldn’t have disappeared.”

I groaned, clenching my hands into fists to stop myself from grabbing her. I turned and laced my fingers on top of my head. “I’m sorry.”

“Lucas, don’t. I don’t need an apology...I need...I need to forget.”

I spun back around and was met with pleading blue eyes. She took a hesitant step toward me.

She lifted onto her toes and placed a soft kiss on the corner of my mouth. “I need you to make me forget.”

Fuck. My control snapped like a band, and I dug my fingers through her hair, securing her mouth to mine. Her sweet taste filled my mouth, and I was lost. I dug my fingers beneath her thighs and lifted her to sit on the counter, then stepped between them. She devoured my mouth, dragging her tongue across mine and sinking her teeth into my bottom lip before soothing the sting with her tongue.

I circled her knees with my fingers and tugged her closer, groaning when the heat of her pussy aligned with my cock. Piper’s nails dug into my shoulder, and she rocked against me, searching for the friction her body demanded. I dropped my mouth to her exposed neck and ran a line of open-mouthed kisses to her ear, gripping her hips. “I’m going to make you come so hard you won’t need to forget because you won’t be able to think.” I slid my hands higher until the heat of her stomach scorched my palms. “And before you come down from it, I’m going to do it again.”

She whimpered, dropping her head back as I raised her shirt, exposing her inch by inch. She reached down, helping pull the thin material over her head, and leaned back, resting on her elbows. My dick wept at the sight of her displayed for me. Her small breasts lifted in the air, tipped by rose-colored nipples. She was fucking delicious. “Perfect,” I breathed.

I traced her navel with my tongue before leaving a wet path up her sternum. Stormy blue eyes met mine, and I dipped my head, licking the underside of her breast. Her breaths came in pants, and her nails dug into my skin, but I took my time, knowing this would be it for me. That I didn’t deserve this moment, but I was selfish enough to enjoy every second.

I breathed on her nipple, drawing a pained sound from her, before covering it with my mouth. I drew her in with long, slow pulls that had her

squirming beneath me and rolled her other nipple between my thumb and forefinger, pinching each time she rocked against me.

“Lucas.” I captured her mouth, cutting off her words, and wrapped my hands around her warm thighs. My fingertips grazed the outer edge while my thumbs rested between. Slowly, I slid my palms up her smooth skin, never breaking apart, and stroked my thumb under the wide edge of her shorts. She whimpered and gripped onto my shirt, tugging me closer.

I broke away. “Is this okay?”

“Yes...please, God, yes.”

I smiled against her mouth at her enthusiasm and drove my hands higher, groaning low when they were met with only skin, no barrier of panties between us. I rested my forehead in the crook of her neck. “Fuck, you’re going to kill me.”

Now that I knew she walked around with nothing on under her pajamas, I might fucking die every time I saw her. I drew in a deep breath of her scent and ran my thumb along the middle of her core, coating it with her wetness. My chest caved, unable to take another breath as she moved against me, demanding more.

I sank two fingers into her core and circled her clit with the pad of my thumb and caught her earlobe between my teeth. “That’s it, beautiful. Fuck my fingers. Take what you need.”

Her head fell back with her cry, and I wrapped my lips around her nipple, swirling my tongue over it as she ground herself against me. I pressed my palm down on her clit, making small circles of pressure while thrusting my fingers deep within her.

She shook in my arms, her body vibrating with her impending release. I added a third finger and ran her nipple between my teeth. She went taut, quaking with her release, and I clamped my free hand over her mouth, muffling her cries.

I rested my head on her stomach, the sweet scent of her release filling my nose, and my cock ached to fill her. I let out a shaking breath before rising and looking around the kitchen.

She watched me with hazed-over eyes before noticing the disaster we’d left the space in. She sat up. “Shit.”

I leaned in and kissed her forehead before stepping away. “I’ll clean it. You get some rest.”

She looked at me with sad eyes but nodded, and I helped her off the

counter, watching her pull her shirt over her head.

“Good night, Lucas. Thanks, I guess.” She swallowed hard and kept her gaze averted.

Her tone was bland, transactional, and I wanted to haul her against my chest and make her see every way I wanted her, but I stood frozen, watching her leave.

The click of her door latch followed her, and my chest caved in, muscles rioting to go to her. To beg her for forgiveness... I wanted things to go a million different ways. But they didn't. I was responsible for Marcus's death, and she'd never forgive me if she knew.

My stomach recoiled, knowing I shouldn't have touched her tonight but knowing just as much that I'd do it again if she asked me to.

TWENTY-THREE

PIPER

I slammed through the back door, pushing the loose strands of my sweat-soaked hair off my face, and sat on the entry bench. Muttering under my breath, I jerked the laces out of my running shoes, ignoring Lucas when he pushed past me and headed straight to his room without a word. I ground my teeth. Like hell I'd be the one to speak first.

Nothing like a refresher on just how cold he could be to let it sink in that I was a complete idiot for thinking that maybe, just maybe... It had been two nights since the kitchen incident, and I thought things would change, even a little. He kissed my freaking forehead, for Christ's sake. It wasn't like I wanted to fall back in love with him, not after I'd spent the last year trying to shove all my memories and hopes and dreams into a tiny box. Then I took that box, locked it, and dumped it at the bottom of the sea where it was too cold and deep for anyone to reach.

At least, that was the plan. Then one orgasm had me melting into a puddle, only to have him shut me out for several days without saying anything. Not. A. Single. Word.

Then, he had the audacity to show up on my run, nothing but the sound of his footsteps behind me, like it was completely normal.

I ripped the fridge open and grabbed a bottle of water, proceeding to drain it in a few gulps. I would have to switch to night runs if it was going to be hot like this. It didn't help that each hit of Lucas's pounding feet sent my heart mad in anticipation of him saying something. *Anything*.

I slammed the fridge door shut and spun around at the sound of Jax entering the room.

"Easy there, Pipsqueak. The fridge didn't do anything." He smirked, his

lips thinned like he was holding back from saying more. He held a whiteboard about a foot wide and the length of his arm.

I rolled my eyes and leaned against the counter, covertly looking him over while feigning interest in my water bottle. You wouldn't know he'd come home smashed out of his mind the other night by the spring to his step, but now that I knew what to look for, I could make out the shadows under his eyes. He wore a haunted look that felt entirely too familiar. I was going to have to watch out for him more.

"About the other night..." I let my words linger, hoping to encourage him to pick up the subject.

He put on a wide smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Right, embarrassing as fuck that I puked everywhere. Good thing I've got you."

"You do have me. You know that, right?" I lowered my tone, making sure he knew I meant it.

"I'm good. Just had a little too much fun with the guys. College hockey parties are wild." He shrugged dismissively, and I let it go for now. It wasn't that I didn't know college guys partied. There was just something off, and Lucas had noticed it too. Jax was family, and we took care of each other.

He raised his brow, and I changed the subject.

I gestured to the object in his arms. "What's with the board?"

He held it up. "You don't recognize this?"

"Should I?" It didn't look like anything special.

He shrugged, walking to the wall and pulling down a piece of art I had no doubt was left by the previous owner. He replaced it with the mysterious board. That was when I caught the letters at the top. The Hunt.

Jax wrote each of our names. Jax, Alex, River. I swallowed hard when he wrote Lucas next. He switched from a blue marker to green and started adding numbers under the guys' names. My chest burned from holding my breath, and I didn't release it until the spot under Lucas's name remained empty. I took another drink of my water, and Jax chuckled, giving me a knowing look that had a blush crawling up my neck.

He then put a green six under his name twice as large as the others.

I choked on my water. "You're disgusting. It hasn't even been a week."

Jax waggled his brows. "Some girls know how to share."

My nose scrunched. "Gross."

My attention snapped to Lucas as he stepped from his room, wearing a pair of black basketball shorts, a gray shirt, and a backward cap. I swallowed

against my dry mouth, suddenly thirsty, before noticing the gym bag hung over his shoulder.

He didn't look at me, instead giving Jax a dismissive wave. "I'm out."

"What's your count?" Jax called to him before he could leave.

Lucas turned back, the tendons in his neck pulled tight. "What are you on about?"

"The Hunt, asshole. I'm putting up the score." Jax turned back to the board and wrote Piper in clear letters, and my eyes went wide when he marked a one underneath.

Lucas made an almost pained sound before bursting out of the back door toward his car and slamming it shut hard enough that the board rattled on the wall.

My mouth hung open, but Jax's laugh snapped me out of it.

"What the hell are you doing?" I got up to wipe the number off, but he moved in front of the board to stop me.

He tilted his chin down and raised his eyebrows in a look that was just shy of condescending. "You went on a date?"

"Yes." I shook my head. "Jax, I didn't sleep with Eric."

"No shit." He choked out a laugh.

"What?"

"You'd have to be an idiot to think you were actually playing this game." Jax bit his smile, and his dimple deepened. "Thank fuck he's an idiot."



I arrived at my Supply and Logistics class and dropped down into the seat beside Sidney. The room was quickly filling up. I'd been running late after taking an entirely too-long shower thinking about the other night. It definitely should not have happened, but I had to admit I needed it.

For a brief moment, I forgot all the crap around us and let Lucas take me over the edge. And God, did he ever. That man knew exactly how to pull me apart. Unfortunately, that included physically and mentally.

"Morning." Sidney smiled at me. She'd already set up her desk in the precise way she liked.

I went to ask her about last week's notes, but Eric sat in the seat beside

me. The floor dropped out of my stomach. How did I forget about Eric?

I faced him, and he gave me a brilliant smile, sending guilt tumbling through me. Shit.

He searched my face. “Everything good?”

Good? Yeah, great. If you didn’t count the fact that after our date, Lucas gave me one of the best orgasms of my life in the kitchen. I tried to fake a smile. “Yeah, just a bit tired.”

He tilted his head, then nodded. “We still good for Friday?”

“About that...” I looked at him, scanning over his mussed hair, glasses, and high cheekbones. Theoretically, I knew he was attractive, but unlike with Lucas, I didn’t feel...well, anything around him. After Lucas being ice-cold this morning, I desperately wanted to be the girl who’d just get over him and under the next guy. But no matter how many times I wished for that, I just couldn’t do it.

Before I could go on, Eric cut in. “We could go to the game? That way, you won’t get too distracted by your phone.” He smirked, and it was cute, but it didn’t warm me the way Lucas’s did.

“I’m sorry, I can’t... Honestly, it wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“It’s the guy from your house, isn’t it.” He didn’t sound accusatory, more like he already knew.

I huffed out a breath. “Unfortunately.”

He looked away and nodded. “I’m not going to lie to you, Piper. That sucks, but I have tickets to the game already if you want to come as friends.”

I twirled my pen on my desk. “I...I don’t think that’s a good idea. It still feels kinda date-like.”

Sidney leaned closer and smiled at Eric. “My roommate, Mia, would love to go.”

I sighed in relief, but Eric jerked back in his chair. “I don’t think I’m at the stage of desperation.”

Strands of striking white hair were revealed when Sidney lifted her hair into a high ponytail. “Listen, she’s hot. I promise.”

“I can just sell—”

I cut Eric off. “I was planning on going with my roommate. We can make it a whole double-date-type thing so it’s less awkward.”

Eric laughed. “That should hurt, you know? The fact that you’re so uninterested that you’ll accompany me on a blind date.”

I grinned. “It probably should hurt, but does it? Plus, I hear she’s hot.”

“Okay, yeah,” he replied to a now smiling Sidney.

The professor walked in, effectively cutting off our conversation, but I caught Eric glancing over at me. If only it sent a thrill through me.

The cafeteria was packed, the noise from the students echoing off the walls and the delicious smell of greasy food filling my nose. I grabbed a burger and fries, swiping my food pass at the counter before heading into the chaos.

Shana waved from where she sat at a round laminate table in one of the four seats.

“Girl, you need to spill everything. I can’t believe you’ve been living there all this time and haven’t given me any details,” Shana said, barely giving me enough time to sit before grilling me.

“Nothing to tell. Our dorm floor is shut down, and the guys offered me a place to stay.” I left out Lucas’s and my food fight, knowing she’d freak out. I wasn’t ready to talk about it, especially because I knew she’d be worried about me. Shana had gone away for school, but that didn’t stop her from checking in last year.

She raised a brow over her deep brown eyes. “Uh-huh. How’s Lucas?”

A flash of frustration coated me. “Still a dick.”

“Still a dick you want to fuck?” Shana grinned.

I couldn’t stop my laugh, and my cheeks heated. She knew me entirely too well. “Unfortunately.”

Her voice turned serious. “How are you after the fire? You haven’t talked about it much.”

I shrugged, putting on a face. “Fine. My nerves were shot at first, but no one got hurt.”

She didn’t know about my nightmares. No one did besides Lucas, and he hadn’t helped me with them for a while. If it wasn’t for Anon13 messages waking me up, I’d still be lost to them every night. I fought back a blush as the memory of what happened after the text woke me up flooded into my brain. Who baked in the middle of the night? Apparently, Lucas.

“I spoke with Hailey about you staying with us for a bit. Her parents went home over the weekend.” Shana put it out there casually, having no idea the

internal crisis it caused.

She was offering me the solution to all of my problems, but it forced me to face the very real reality that I didn't actually want to move out. I swallowed hard. "I'm good. I want to keep an eye out for Jax for the next bit."

"That's the only reason?" Shana sounded disbelieving.

"Of course. What else would it be?"

She sighed dramatically. "I'm going to let this slide. For now. There's a party tonight at one of the players' houses. Want to go?"

"You do realize it's a Thursday?"

"You do realize it's college, right? What time is your class tomorrow?"

"Not until noon."

She gave me a mischievous smirk. "Perfect."

The Uber dropped Shana, Misty, and me off at the party. It had been a blast getting ready with these two at Shana's place. Shana was dressed in bootcut jeans and a black dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up; she pulled off sexy masc like the boss that she was. Misty was in a super-cute black romper that opened up to bare her back, and I'd opted for a basic look of a simple baby blue sundress. Shana gave me shit for dressing like someone out of an antidepressant commercial. Something about how I could be twirling in a field of flowers, but I felt good.

The music from inside was so loud I could make out the words to "Truth Hurts" by Lizzo clearly from the porch, and the second we opened the door, the smell of weed and stale beer made me scrunch up my nose. It had been a while since I'd attended a house party, and the smell was definitely something I didn't miss. I pushed down the twitch of pain at the memory of what had happened at the last one and entered the room.

The space wasn't much different than the guys', but I couldn't make out many details through the crush of people.

"Let's get a drink," Shana yelled, but I could barely hear her.

"What?"

She entwined our fingers, and I grabbed Misty's hand before weaving

through the crowd to get to the kitchen. This place was older and didn't have an open-concept design, which I was grateful for because it was significantly quieter here.

"What will you have?" a blond I recognized as one of the guys' teammates asked from behind the counter. "We've got Coors Light? Or you can grab a cup from the cupboard, and I can mix you a drink."

Misty made a choked-off squeak sound from beside me, and I turned to grin at her. She was a brilliant shade of pink, eyes round on the player. "You're...you're...Cane."

He wet his bottom lip and smiled at her. "Well, aren't you gorgeous?"

I rolled my eyes, but Misty's excitement was almost palpable. "I'll grab two."

He popped the top and handed me the drinks, and I passed one to Shana before turning to my roomie. "You good here?"

Her gaze snapped between mine and the temporary bartender, and she nodded a little too aggressively.

I squeezed her shoulder. "Don't leave without telling me, okay?"

"Don't worry. I'll take care of her." The guy was leaning over the table, a wide smile taking over his face.

I walked back toward the crowded living room. "Have fun!"

Misty flushed bright red. I stopped at the door, where I spotted River. He bent his head so he could hear me over the music. "Is that guy okay?"

River nodded. "He's good."

"Keep an eye out for her, 'kay?" He raised a brow, and I laughed. "What? Do you want me to believe you're going to be out here mingling? Honestly, I'm surprised you're here."

"Fair. Jax, Lucas, and Alex dragged me out."

My lungs emptied, and my eyes scanned the room, but I didn't spot the Huskies' star defenseman. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

River gave me a knowing look and shoved me toward the crowd. "I've got her. Go have fun."

Even though he was the quietest of the bunch, River was really growing on me. He wasn't standoffish so much as reserved. I'd only heard him laugh a few times, and they were all because Alex was doing something stupid.

Shana and I made our way through the shifting bodies to a small space by the front. There was barely an arm's distance between us and everyone else. I leaned into Shana. "Why do we come to these again?"

Her mouth pulled to the side, and she bit back a smile. “Cause, girl, you need to get laid. And if I left it up to you, it would be years.”

“Hey, you’re Piper, right?” a deep, gravelly voice asked from behind me, and I found myself taking him in in slow motion. He was at least six feet tall and two-hundred-plus pounds, and he topped it off with sandy-brown hair and baby blue eyes a few shades darker than mine.

I swallowed hard. “That’s me.”

He pointed back toward the opposite side of the room and smirked. “I’m Ethan. Your friend thought we should meet.”

I looked over and spotted a grinning Alex, quickly followed by a scowling Lucas. My gaze caught on his as he looked me over with heated eyes before downing half his beer. I spotted Jax’s back beside them, where he had some girl pressed against the wall. Ew.

“Do you play hockey with the guys?” Thank God for Shana stepping in to fill the awkward silence.

“I’m actually a quarterback.”

Drawn back into the conversation, I asked, “Football?”

“Not gonna lie, I’m a little sad you didn’t recognize me.” He chuckled, clearly kidding.

I grimaced. “Hockey fan, sorry.”

“That’s okay. How about you come to a game? You never know, you might be more into football than you know.” His voice was laced with innuendo, and my eyes darted to Lucas, but he was no longer there.

I stared up at Ethan. He was hot and clearly interested. I let out a breath and straightened my shoulders. I could do this. “Want to dance?”

“Hell yeah.” Ethan guided me toward the makeshift dance floor, and Shana twiddled her fingers, grinning like a freaking fool.

I mouthed, “It’s just a dance.”

She huffed out a laugh, and I was pretty sure she replied, “He’s hot. Fuck him.”

He was surprisingly agile for his size, moving perfectly with the beat as we danced song after song together. I let myself go with the music, enjoying the freedom of just being for a minute. Warm tingles traveled up my spine, raising the hair on the back of my neck, and I turned. I’d felt like I’d been watched several times tonight, but no one was ever looking.

The quarterback trailed his fingers up my arms, but instead of the warm fuzzies I’d expected from his touch, my blood cooled.

Dammit. This guy was a star athlete, admittedly superhot, and moved like the devil incarnate, and somehow, my body was reacting like he was my long-lost cousin. The thought made me scrunch up my nose.

“What’s that face for?” His low voice vibrated against where my hand rested on his chest, and I locked it in place as he went to step forward.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t tonight.” I stepped back, and he didn’t try to stop me.

“Can I get your number?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so, but see you around, ’kay?”

He bit the side of his cheek and tilted his head, obviously not used to a girl turning him down. It looked for a second like he was going to decide to chase me, but his attention quickly moved through the crowd.

I patted his shoulder. “Good luck tonight.” If giving the guy I’d considered sleeping with—well, not really, but it still counted—a hookup pep talk didn’t mean it was time to go, then I didn’t know what did.

It didn’t take Shana long to catch up to me when I left Ethan and made my way through the crowd toward the kitchen to find Misty and let her know I was headed out.

“What happened? You guys were hot out there,” Shana piped up, joining me on my quest to find my quirky roommate. Hopefully, she had better luck than I did.

“I wasn’t feeling it.”

“Okay, I may be gay, but even I can admit that guy is a ten. What the hell happened—” We turned the corner and were met with an effervescent Misty, saving the day. Her green hair was wild around her head, and her lips were swollen and red.

“Misty!” I quickly checked that I wasn’t interrupting, but the guy wasn’t around. “Have fun?”

She smiled wide, then bit her bottom lip, cheeks blooming pink. “Might be the best night of my life.”

“That-a girl. At least one of you has their priorities straight,” Shana said, and Misty looked toward me.

I shrugged, not wanting to get into it. “So where is he?”

“He had to go, but I gave him my number and...” She held up her phone. “He already texted.”

Her excitement was contagious, and I found myself grinning back as she practically vibrated with energy.

“We’re going on a date next week.”

Shana whooped and tugged Misty in her arms. You’d think those two had been friends for years instead of meeting today. Alcohol would do that for you. “Alright, let’s get out of here before Misty here picks up any more guys.”

She blushed from head to toe, then looked down at her phone, which had just lit up with another message. “Yeah, let’s go.”

A loud bang followed by laughter yanked me from my sleep. I jolted upright, straining my ears to make out the voice, and blew out a breath when I recognized Lucas and Alex slurring their words.

I lay in bed smiling as they moved through the house with the lightness of a herd of elephants. There was a dull thump, followed by Lucas’s laugh, and my guess was he’d tripped into the wall. I bit back a smile at the sounds of them no doubt making a disaster in the kitchen, cupboards slamming shut and the sound of water running.

I smothered my giggle with my palm when Alex slurred, “Love you, man.”

And Lucas’s muffled reply. “You too, buddy.”

Pounding feet marked Alex heading up the stairs to his room, but I didn’t hear Lucas’s door open. Instead, a quiet thud landed on mine. Air sucked from my lungs as moments ticked by without him moving.

Tension tightened my stomach when the doorknob twisted, and I buried my face into my pillow, closing my eyes right before the door creaked open. I should be one hundred and ten percent getting up and yelling at him to get out of my room. At the very least, I should redirect his drunk ass to his own, but I lay there completely still, waiting to see what he did next.

Lucas stumbled closer and stopped when his knees hit the edge of my bed. I had to work to steady my breath as my body sent adrenaline pumping through my veins. A voice in the back of my brain screamed that I was mad at him, but nothing in this world could convince me to stop this moment.

Callused fingers trailed over my cheek and slid my hair behind my ear. My eyes burned with the gentleness of the touch. Lucas bent over, and his

lips grazed my forehead, sending warmth flooding through me. I'd craved his touch, and the tenderness was damn near my undoing.

My breath hitched when his weight pressed down on the mattress, and the length of him pressed along my back. His nose buried into my neck, taking a deep breath in, and his arm locked me against his chest.

"I miss you." His words broke around the vowels, and I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth, my body tensing against tears. I took shallow breaths, surrounded by the smell of beer, cinnamon, and sandalwood. I knew he wouldn't be here if he was sober, but I couldn't stop myself from enjoying this moment, even if it was the only one I had.

His breath evened out, and his chest rose and fell against me. Was I really going to let him sleep in here? I shifted away, and his grip tightened, pulling me closer. I guess I was.

He sat up suddenly, and I reached out to stabilize him as he struggled to rip his shirt off. I smothered my laugh and helped guide it over his head, revealing corded muscles highlighted by the dim window light. He collapsed back in the bed, his hand tucked below the pillow, leaving his tattoos on display. My fingers itched to trace the design along his ribs that I'd only glanced at before. Lowering my hand, I ran the pad of my finger over one of the lines, and his side erupted in goose bumps. I followed it around his side to a small cursive tattoo. I leaned in closer and gasped.

Always. 07-24-2004

He'd gotten a tattoo of my birthday? I snapped my face to his, expecting him to be asleep, but I was met with his eyes already on mine.

"I don't understand." My voice was barely a whisper.

He cupped my jaw and ran his thumb over my cheekbone. I leaned into his touch, unable to help myself.

"I wish this was real," he said before wrapping an arm around me and pulling me into him. I lay there silently with my head resting on his chest as his breathing settled and he drifted off to sleep. A million questions tumbled through my mind, but he traced slow circles over my spine, and the heavy weight of sleep pulled me under.

TWENTY-FOUR
LUCAS

My pulse pounded in my head, sending shards of pain through my skull. I opened my eyes but immediately closed them against the sunlight streaming through the window. I groaned and covered my face with my arm.

“Rise and shine, cupcake.” Jax’s cheerful voice came from directly beside me, grating against my scalp.

“Fuck off.”

“Oh, no. It’s fucking payback for all the times you woke me up hungover.” He shoved my shoulder, and I slit my eyes open.

“Where the hell am I?”

“Apparently, you spent the night in Alex’s room.” He sounded entirely too amused.

My brows pinched, and I fought through my muddled thoughts before jolting up. “Piper!”

“Took you long enough.”

“Fuck.” I rubbed my palms over my face. “Did she sleep here?”

“Not from what I can tell.” He shrugged. “At least, she wasn’t here when I got up.”

I collapsed back on the bed, immediately regretting it as a sharp pain pierced behind my eyes. What the fuck was I thinking? Images of Piper pressed up against the quarterback and smiling up at him filled my brain. I had to fight against the need to pull them apart. To claim her as mine in front of everyone, but I knew I couldn’t do that. I knew I wouldn’t back that up, and I’d be an asshole to block her. But fuck, every fiber of my being supported being an asshole. Instead, I downed my weight in liquor and barely remembered the night.

“What the hell is wrong with you? You acted like you were being tortured because Piper danced with someone else.”

“I don’t know what you’re on about.” I couldn’t look at him when I said it.

“Lucas, you’ve been a brother to me for a long time. You are fucking up here.” He ran a hand through his hair and looked at the ceiling before his gaze bored into mine. “Why are you doing this to her?”

I should’ve lied—hell, I wanted to lie, but the truth slipped from my tongue. “Because I fucking love her.”

Jax’s eyes widened, and the muscles in his neck stretched. “Then tell her.”

“You don’t understand,” I hissed, keeping my voice as low as possible.

He shook his head at me. “Just talk to her, man.”

If only it was that simple. “This isn’t the kind of thing you fix with a conversation. She can never know.”

He grunted and shook his head, like I was some kind of idiot he couldn’t believe. “So, what the hell are you going to do, just fucking watch her date other guys?”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing. This shit is going to die with me, and it better die with you too.”



It took three bottles of Gatorade and countless ibuprofen to get my ass ready for the game. The guys looked good on the ice for warm-up, but I was dreading this next part. This was the home opener of the year. Every game before this was an exhibition, which didn’t count toward our final points. This game fucking *mattered*.

I stood in the middle of the room and cleared my throat. “Alright, boys. Listen up. As your captain, I want to share a few words with you before we hit the ice.”

My teammates went silent and took a seat at their lockers, all of their attention on me.

“First off, I want to say that I’m proud to lead this team. We’ve been working hard to prepare for the start of this season, and I know we’re capable

of great things. Today, we have the opportunity to show everyone what we're made of."

I glanced over at Coach, who leaned against the wall with crossed arms and a small curve tipping the corner of his mouth.

I took a deep breath. "Remember, hockey is a team sport. Every single one of us has a role to play out there. Whether you're on the first line or the fourth, we all have to work together to achieve our goals. We win as a team, and we lose as a team."

"Hell, yeah," Alex cheered.

"Let the rush of adrenaline when you step onto the ice feed your game. I expect each and every one of you to grind out there and play tough. We need to fight for every loose puck, every rebound, every inch of ice."

Nerves pricked under my skin as I let myself be vulnerable in front of my guys. "Lastly, I want to tell you that I believe in each and every one of you. I know that you have what it takes to win this game. So, let's go out there and own this shit. Are you with me, boys?"

"Hell yeah," chorused around the room.

I glanced around at the hardened faces of my teammates, each one of them hungry for the win. "Circle up." We all huddled together, shoulder against shoulder. "On the count of three. One, two, three."

"Let's go, Huskies!" Their shouted voices echoed against the walls, and I tapped each one of them on the helmet as they filed out.

Jax was the last to leave and gave me a mischievous smile. "You sounded like a real captain there. Tell me you googled that speech."

"Fucker." I looked away because we both knew I did.

Jax grabbed the back of my helmet and pulled my visor against his. His voice was dead serious. "He'd be proud of you."

A knot formed at the back of my throat, and I blinked back the sting in my eyes. "You're going to make me fucking cry."

His dimple indented his cheek, and he headed toward the rink, shouting back, "Least I can do, Captain."

The crowd was wild, face paint, airhorns, and signs everywhere. The only thing crazier than a home opener was a playoff game. I took the ice, doing a few laps to get a feel for the newly cleaned surface, still wet from the Zamboni. It would be slick for the next few minutes until it froze over.

I scanned the stands and tried to pretend I wasn't looking for a certain blonde in the crowd but skated to Alex and River when I didn't spot her.

The first line always stood for the national anthem, leaving Jax, Alex, River, Cane, and me lined up on the blue line. The crowd stood at the beginning of the song, and my gaze caught on Piper.

I stiffened, and Jax followed my gaze.

“Fuck,” Jax said from under his breath.

Piper’s roommate was on her left, fully decked out in Huskies gear, including teal and yellow stripes on her cheeks. It wasn’t her that had me grinding my teeth. The guy from the other night stood to her left, and he was looking down at her with soft eyes. *Look at the fucking flag, asshole.*

I was a hypocrite, but fuck him. “I thought she wasn’t supposed to date the same guy twice.”

Jax choked on a laugh. “Did you really think she was participating in the Hunt?”

I didn’t think of it at all for the sake of my sanity. “I’m guessing she’s not?”

He looked back at the flag, keeping his voice low. “Not a fucking chance.”

My shoulders tensed, and my ribs tightened until it was hard to breathe. “So, she likes this guy?”

“Looks like it.” Jax glanced my way, his mouth in a flat line. “It’s not too late.”

“Yeah, it is.” Self-loathing burned in my chest. This was exactly what needed to happen, but I fucking hated it.

I funneled my rage into my game and annihilated the other team. Some idiot thought it was a good idea to go after Alex and checked him against the glass, throwing punches to the back of his head. I reached them in four strides, pulling the player off, and slammed him into the ice. It only took a second for me to mount him, pin him down, and pound my fist into his face until I felt his nose crack.

A ref stepped in. “Alright. Break it up.”

“I’m fine.” I skated to the box, slamming my stick down with enough force to snap the end, and sat.

From my spot in the box, I had the perfect view of Piper. She watched Jax and Alex run the puck up the center of the ice and pounded her fist on the glass when they scored. Piper’s date leaned down to say something to her, and she smiled up at him.

The sight of them was a gut punch that had my ribs caving into my lungs.

I ground my teeth together and gripped my stick as the seconds ticked down in the period. She threw her head back in a laugh that I couldn't hear, but I knew exactly what it sounded like, and it was like bands were tightening around my chest each time she spoke to him.

This was my future. A million tiny knives cut me as I watched my girl with another guy. I took steadying breaths, but each one came out harder than the other. I couldn't fucking do this. The buzzer rang, ending the period, and I busted out of the penalty box but bypassed the bench to head straight to the hidden door beside Piper.

She smiled at me, but it melted off her face when I banged on the glass and pointed at the board. "Open the door."

Piper's eyes rounded, and she took a tentative step toward the metal handle on her side of the glass. "Why?"

"Just open the fucking door, Piper." I bit out each word, struggling to keep my shit together as rage, loss, and fear mixed in my blood and flooded my veins. I was a bastard. I wasn't fucking ready for her to move on.

She pressed down, and the door swung outward, allowing me to step through.

"What's going on?" Piper stepped in front of me, but I bypassed her in two steps and glared down at the guy she was with.

"You don't fucking deserve her." The guy's eyes went wide, and his mouth dropped open, but before he could say anything, I slammed my hands into his chest. He stumbled backward, and I followed. I threw my gloves down and gripped his shirt, yanking him closer. I lost connection with all rational thought, words tumbling out of my mouth with a speed I couldn't stop. "You don't even know her. But *I* do. I know what cereal she likes, that her favorite movie is *Pride and Prejudice*, her favorite song is the ten-minute version of 'All Too Well.' I have spent my entire life loving her, and it'll be a cold fucking day before some asshole brings her to *my* game."

Piper's sob broke me out of my daze, and I spun to look at her, but she was already running toward the exit. What the fuck had I done?

Her date shook his head at me. "You're an asshole, you know that? You had the perfect girl, and you left her, and now you pull this shit?" He pushed past me and followed her out.

I turned to leave, but Misty stood in front of the door to the ice. "You need to do better. She needs you to do better."

I swallowed hard. "I don't know how."

She placed her hands on her hips, blocking me. “She loves you.”

I closed my eyes, and my breath burned in my lungs as I let her words slip over me. There was nothing like hope to drive a knife through your chest.

Misty placed a hand on my shoulder, drawing my eyes open, and said, “It’s not too late. Go get her.”

The adrenaline of the last few minutes evaporated, and my shoulders dropped. I guided her to the side, and pain laced my words. “Yes. It is.”

Coach benched me for the last period after my display of possessive boyfriend. It was for the best—I’d been likely to take someone’s head off if I’d gotten back on the ice.

We won four to two, and the locker room was lit up with excitement. I packed my shit and moved toward the exit, but River stepped in front of me.

“Either claim her, or let her the fuck go.”

“What are you, her keeper?” I hissed.

River lowered his voice so only I could hear. “One of us needs to protect her.”

He might as well have hit me with how bad that stung. I couldn’t fucking do this. I moved past him and into the night air. I needed to get the fuck out of here.

I pushed through our front door and dropped my bag on the entry floor, too tired to drag it into my room.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Piper hissed from the kitchen, and my gaze snapped to hers.

She stood there, gold hair wrapped around her shoulders, wearing one of my shirts that engulfed her past her thighs. Her eyes were rimmed red, making her already bright blue eyes shine.

I stepped toward her and spoke in a calming tone. “Hey, what’s wrong.”

“What’s wrong with me?” She took two steps forward, and I could see the muscles in her neck strain. “You had no right to speak to Eric like that.”

“Like fuck I don’t,” I growled, the anger from earlier reigniting under my skin.

She hit her fists against my chest as tears pooled over her lashes and down her cheek. I spread my arms out, giving her a bigger target. She needed this.

“You abandoned me.” Her fists rained down, but I couldn’t feel it through the pain in her eyes. Her chin trembled as she yelled at me. “You can’t say things you don’t mean just because you think I’ve found someone else!”

I wrapped an arm around her, pulling her into my chest, and pinned her arms between us. “I fucking meant it, Piper.”

“You. Left. Me.” Her chest rose and fell with her labored breaths, and her lips wobbled.

Piper trembled in my hold, and I ran my thumb along her cheekbone, stroking her hair from her face. “Babe, I could never stop loving you.”

The air charged between us, and her gaze searched mine for several seconds, looking for the lie in my words. She wouldn’t find it.

Her mouth crashed against mine, and she bit my bottom lip until I opened for her. The second her sweet taste hit my tongue, all hesitation vanished, and any control I had disappeared. I devoured her mouth with desperate, needy pulls, drawing out whimpered sounds from her.

I thrust my tongue deeper, and the world disappeared when she sucked on it. *Fuck*. I grasped the back of her head, holding her against me, not willing to break the moment in case reality slipped in.

“I lost my mind when you showed up with him.” Reaching under her thigh with one hand, I hauled her into the air so she could wrap her legs around me.

She smirked. “I wasn’t with him. He was on a date with someone else. I went with Misty.” My mind was still reeling from that confession when she pivoted her hips, and her cunt dragged over my hard cock, drawing a low groan from the back of my throat. I’d dreamed of having her like this, pressed into me, demanding more. I shifted my hand up her smooth thigh and grunted when I palmed the naked cheek of her ass.

“You’re not wearing shorts.” I breathed the words, cock aching as it throbbed between us.

“Thong.” She bit my bottom lip before pulling it into her mouth.

I followed her lead and guided her weight against me so that she rocked her core over my length until we were both panting with need.

Her eyes were a stormy blue, and in that moment, I didn’t care about anything else besides her. I walked us to the couch and laid her down before

following on top of her.

I gripped her knee, pushing her hips open as I rocked into her, only the thin fabric of my shorts and her thong between us. Fuck, it felt good. Her heat wrapped around me had my eyes rolling back and my arms shaking.

Piper gripped the back of my neck and pulled me down until our mouths connected in a clash of tongues and teeth. I circled her nipple through her shirt and consumed her gasps when I pinched them lightly.

My hands ran up the outside of her thighs, squeezing her hips before breaching the bottom of her shirt. I dropped my forehead to hers, drawing slow circles with my thumbs on her stomach before easing my hands higher.

“Please,” she begged.

I palmed her breasts, squeezing them together, and she arched into my touch. I groaned, kissing down the column of her neck, and nipped at the delicate skin, making sure to leave marks. I hovered my mouth over her pink nipple, letting my warm breath fall over her, and met hooded blue eyes before licking the peak and drawing it into my mouth.

She keened and canted her hips against mine. My balls pulled tight, and my dick wept with how close I was to coming. I released her nipple with a pop and lifted my hips from hers.

She whined and tried to pull me back, but I pushed her hips down as I moved down her body. “I’m going to come if you keep doing that, and I need to taste you first.”

I pressed my nose along the soft seam of her core, breathing her in through her panties. My dick twitched, aching to be buried inside her. I shifted the thin material to the side, and my eyes rolled back when my fingers slid through her soaked pussy. I bit the inside of her thigh. “You’re so fucking perfect.” Her hips tilted, searching for my mouth, and I gladly gave it to her, sucking her clit between my lips until she squirmed against me. I licked her, ass to clit, dick aching as she cried out. I was going to come from eating her out, and I didn’t fucking care.

“Please,” Piper cried, and although I wanted to slow down and make this moment last, I could see the pure need in her eyes. I filled her with two fingers, thrusting them as I sucked, licked, and bit her clit. She pushed my head down until I couldn’t breathe, and I’d die fucking happy. I curled my fingers as her movements turned desperate, chasing her orgasm. She arched, and her body trembled, and a moan pulled from her chest with her release.

She collapsed, and I took my time, placing slow, lazy kisses up her

stomach, and met her hooded eyes. I leaned down, resting our foreheads together, and brushed my lips against hers as her breathing calmed.

I swallowed hard when I met her open gaze. There were emotions there that I couldn't face. Fuck, she was perfect. She looked at me with warmth, and all at once, I saw the love there that I was sure was gone, and it sent ice-cold water splashing over me. I yanked back, ignoring the throb of my cock. "We have to stop."

Horror crossed her face as she sat up, watching me step away. She shook, her face flaming red, and snatched my wrist in a tight grip before I could leave. "You are not doing this again."

"I have to tell you. You need to know." My voice trembled as I forced the words out. She'd never look at me like that again. Selfishly, I leaned down and took her mouth, memorizing her taste and the sweet sounds she made when she relaxed into me before pulling away.

Her eyes were soft, full of trust, and she grazed my jaw with her fingers. "Tell me."

My heart pounded against my ribs as I slowly ripped my chest open with each word. "I killed your brother."

Her brows pinched together, and she shook her head. "What are you talking about? He died in the car crash."

I stood straight and evened out my voice. "Marcus caught me leaving the guest room that night."

Her chest visibly caved. "What?"

"We fought. It was bad." My mouth trembled as reality started to settle over her. I tried hard to let ice take over, but all my defenses were ripped apart. "He got in the accident because he was angry at me and not paying attention. It's my fault."

Piper's eyes were soft as she scanned my face. "That's why you stopped talking to me? That's why you cut me out of your life?" She stepped forward and palmed the side of my face, running her thumb under my eye.

She swallowed before shifting closer and placing a delicate kiss on the side of my mouth. "You should've told me."

I shook my head. "I couldn't tell you. How could I?"

"You are such an idiot." Her words were softened by a sad smile. Her gaze bored into mine, and her voice dropped low, serious. "You didn't kill Marcus."

My ribs tightened over my chest, but I couldn't let her deny it. "I did. I'm

the reason he got into an accident.”

She shook her head and wrapped her hand around the back of my neck, pulling me closer. “I was talking to him on the phone when he crashed. I was explaining that I loved you.” Tears overflowed and wet her lashes. “Do you think I killed my brother?”

The world tipped on its axis, and the ground fell from under me. I searched her gaze for the lie, but she met mine full-on. Everything I’d believed for the last year was bullshit, and clarity settled over me because I’d been so fucking wrong. “No. Of course I don’t.”

She held both sides of my head between her hands. “Then why do you think you did?”

“It’s different.”

“How is it different, Lucas?” Her gaze was open and raw. So different from what I expected.

“He told me I couldn’t be with you.”

Piper’s lips tipped up at the corners. “And he would’ve gotten over it. He knew you’d always take care of me.”

Like a knife to the gut, my stomach wrenched because I’d done anything but take care of her this past year.

“I thought you’d hate me, and I’d never survive it.” I laid my forehead against hers. Weight lifted from my shoulders, and it felt like I could take my first breath in a year as hope filled my veins. I didn’t kill her brother. She didn’t hate me.

Piper placed her hand over my heart. “I could never hate you. I’ve loved you since I was seven.” She gripped my shirt, pulling, and her lip trembled. “You told me you didn’t want me. You made me think I was just a part of some stupid game.”

“I’ve always wanted you. Always.” My gaze pleaded with her. “I’m so sorry, Piper.”

She lifted her face, and the despair pierced my ribs. “How can you say that after abandoning me?”

“Because there’s never been anyone else.” I guided a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “For either of us.”

She stepped back, mouth dropping open. “Since when?”

“Two years ago.”

Tears streaked her blotchy cheeks, and her face crumpled inward. “You decided I wouldn’t forgive you. You decided we were over. You decided it

was your fault, and you let *me* go.”

I searched her eyes, and realization sank in. I broke this. I broke us. “I’ll fix this.”

“How?”

I faked a smile. “You’ll see.”

TWENTY-FIVE

PIPER

I hesitated before sitting beside Lucas at the kitchen island. After promising he'd fix everything between us, he kissed between my brows and returned to his room. I stood stunned for several moments before a slow smile curved my lips. I didn't know how to trust him not to break my heart, but I trusted that he'd do everything he could to make it happen.

"Morning, beautiful." He gave me a warm smile before sliding an already poured bowl of Froot Loops and a carton of almond milk my way. The act was so familiar I didn't realize how much I'd missed it. I leaned into Lucas and bit the corner of my lip as his gaze dropped to my mouth.

"Oh, you two look close." Jax rubbed his hands together, practically giddy, and crossed to the opposite side of the island. "Lucas finally get his head out of his ass?"

"Fuck off" was Lucas's reply before going back to his cereal.

It shouldn't have stung. He was just keeping things simple, but it was a stark reminder that I'd always been a secret. Lucas had never admitted his feelings about me to anyone. I shifted in my seat, suddenly not hungry, when strong fingers laced with mine.

"What's wrong?" Lucas questioned, searching my gaze.

My vision caught on our connected hands, then went straight to Jax.

"Fucking finally." He gave us a lopsided smile before shoveling cereal into his mouth.

Tension flooded out of me, and I leaned into Lucas, who kissed my temple before nudging me to eat my breakfast. Everything about this was surreal.

My phone buzzed on the table, and I snatched it, hoping it was Anon13.

He hadn't answered yesterday, and a sinking feeling was settling into my stomach.

I ignored my disappointment when it was just an email from the dorm administration. My back straightened as I read it, then read it again.

"What's it say?" Jax mumbled around a mouthful.

Gross. I scrunched my nose at him and let out a breath. "Rooms are ready. I can move back today."

There were several beats of silence where I looked at my phone before Lucas spoke beside me. "That's great. I'm sure Misty will be excited."

My head snapped up, and my mouth opened, then snapped closed. "You're happy I'm moving out?"

"No. I'm happy you get to spend more time with your friend. Plus, it gives me more time to plan how I'm going to woo you."

I mouthed the word *woo*.

It only took an hour to get ready and pack up all my things. I grabbed the bag full of my clothes and hooked my overstuffed backpack over my shoulder before stepping out of my borrowed room.

"Let me take that." Lucas immediately grabbed my bag from my shoulder and led the way to my car, placing my things in the back seat.

"Um, thank you." I felt frozen in place as an unsettling feeling came over me. What if I left and he changed his mind?

Lucas leaned in and placed a soft kiss to the side of my mouth. "I'll see you tonight."

I nodded and sighed. He seemed to know exactly what was going on in my neurotic brain. "What's tonight?"

He cupped the side of my cheek and guided my chin up. "Night one of me proving to you just how much you mean to me."

"You don't have to—"

He took my lips in a long, slow kiss. "I want to."

My head pounded from my Economics 101 class. The mind-numbing drone of my professor took every ounce of my willpower to listen to. How could someone be so acclaimed while simultaneously be so boring?

Thank God I had practice—surefire way to clear my head. I threw on my practice jersey, already running late because my class went over, and slowly opened the door. All eyes turned to me when I stepped onto the court. *Oh, shit.* I glanced around, spotting Shana, who stared at me wide-eyed.

“I’m glad you could join us.” Coach Keller smiled at me, and my shoulders relaxed. Okay, maybe I wasn’t in trouble.

She clapped her hands. “Now that you’re all here, let’s get back to it. Our first game’s this Thursday, and it’s against the Panthers. They’ve historically been the best team in the league, but this year, we’re taking them down.” There was a burst of cheers before she continued. “Starting line Shana, Julia...” She went through names, and even though I was happy for them, I couldn’t help the disappointment I felt knowing I’d be benched. “Piper, outside hitter.”

Shana cheered, and my attention shot to Coach Keller. “Can you repeat that, please?”

“You’re starting.” She gave me a smile, then went back to calling off the rest of the names like she didn’t just blow my mind.

The rest of the practice went by in a blur. I knew we did drills, but I couldn’t tell you what. I was starting. I was playing Thursday. I hadn’t ruined my career.

“I knew you’d do it!” Shana’s arms wrapped around me and hauled me off my feet.

I huffed out a laugh. “I’m glad one of us did.”

“Oh, come on. It was definitely happening.” She pushed my shoulder and grinned. “I cannot freaking wait to own them on Thursday.”

I checked my phone when I got back to my locker.

Lucas: I swear time’s moving in slow motion, babe. I can’t wait to see you tonight. Make sure you’re hungry.

A slow smile curled my lips, and I typed out a quick reply.

Me: Can’t wait.

He was taking this wooing thing seriously, and it sent a thrill of tingles down my chest into my lower belly. Next, I pulled up the Grief Anonymous app and typed out another message.

Me: I moved back into the dorm today. Oh and I need to talk about Lucas.

There still wasn’t a reply when I checked my phone after showering and getting dressed. I’d sent Anon13 four unanswered messages in a row. This

wasn't like him. I swallowed back the panic. There was no other way for me to get a hold of him, but he'd better have a good excuse for going MIA.

I used my key card to open my dorm room and was immediately encompassed by a cheerful, green-haired demon. I squeezed her back. "Hi there."

She let go of me and did an adorable little jump. "I cannot believe we're back."

"I missed you too."

She beamed at me before grabbing her coat. "Okay, I seriously want to catch up, but...I have a date with Cane!"

"The guy from the party?" I smirked.

"Yup!" She popped the *p* and kissed my cheek before bounding out of the room. "Don't wait up."

She shut the door behind her, and I groaned, looking at my bed. I'd only had enough time to drop my stuff off this morning, leaving me the task of unpacking everything now. Screw it. I pushed my stuff onto the floor and collapsed backward onto the mattress.

Today felt like a crazy whirlwind. Between Lucas's promise to woo me, the dorm opening, and making it onto the starting line, my head spun. I rubbed my face as the sense of this being too good to be true started to invade my thoughts. I took a deep breath and reminded myself that feelings come and go, but they aren't who we are. Not every worry was worth holding on to.

A soft knock sounded on my door, and I pulled myself up, opening it to a smiling Lucas. He leaned against the frame as his eyes trailed over me and caught on the hem of my dress. "Have I told you the absolute chokehold these dresses have on me? I'm pretty sure my self-restraint from not pinning you to every surface has taken years off my life."

I laughed, stepping back to let him in. "I'm not sure that wasn't the goal, if I'm being honest. Not gonna lie. I'm not mad about it."

"You're evil, woman," he said in a low growl, and I instinctually took a step back. He prowled toward me until the back of my knees hit my bed

before kissing my temple. “I missed you.”

“You just saw me.”

“You seem to think that matters.” He stepped to the side, setting his backpack on the bed, and proceeded to remove containers one after the other. “I have a lot of catching up to do.”

I collapsed on the bed as the sweet smell of curry filled my nose, and I hummed in the back of my throat.

He looked at me with hooded eyes. “Babe, if you keep making noises like that, we aren’t going to be able to eat.”

My mouth snapped closed, and a blush crawled up my neck as I remembered just how it felt to be touched by him. I could only hope that orgasms were included in his plan to “woo” me.

“Fuck, you’re pretty when you blush.” He straightened, reaching out a hand to cup my jaw before guiding my mouth to his. The slide of his tongue met mine, and he groaned. “I have plans, Killer.”

I laughed and dropped back on my elbows, enjoying the way his eyes traveled over me splayed on the bed. “What sort of plans?”

“To feed you, then make you orgasm so hard you forget your own name.”

“Okay,” I breathed, heat flooding between my thighs and my panties grew wet.

He smirked at me before running his thumb over my bottom lip. I reached out with my tongue, dampening his skin, and a low sound reverberated in his chest. “Eat first.”

The sound was primal, and I nodded, barely understanding what I was agreeing to. “Eat.”

He set a container in my lap, and I looked at it before smiling at him. “How did you remember this is my favorite?”

Lucas met me with serious eyes. “I remember everything about you.”

My heart stuttered in my chest. I was completely and utterly lost to this man. I took a bite and did my best not to moan as the sweet and savory taste hit my taste buds.

“How did you even get this?” I asked and took another bite. The restaurant was local to Sarnia, and it shouldn’t be possible.

He shrugged, then glanced away, almost shy. “I skipped class and met my dad halfway.”

“You did what?” I twisted to face him so fast I nearly dropped the container.

He raised a brow. "Wooing, remember?"

"You drove over an hour each way to get my favorite dinner?" *Consider me wooed.* I kissed his jaw and whispered in his ear, "Thank you."

A shudder ran through him, and he turned a knowing smile my way. "Eat up, babe. I want to show you what's next."

I savored every bite, enjoying the way Lucas watched my every move. It wasn't lost on me that I'd been the only one getting off lately. I placed my container on the nightstand and smiled. "What's next?"

He pulled his laptop out of his bag and leaned against the headboard before turning the screen to me. *Pride and Prejudice* was loaded up, and I made a happy squeal sound that would have made Misty proud.

I raised a brow at him. "You hate this movie."

"You love it," he said matter-of-factly and hit Play.

I moved to crawl to his side, but he grasped my hips, lifting me to settle between his thighs with my back against his chest. I held my breath as his warmth enveloped me and dropped my head back to his shoulder, taking in deep breaths.

I felt his chuckle vibrate against me as he placed the computer on my lap and caged me in with both his arms.

I tried to focus on the movie, I really did, but then he dropped his mouth to the curve of my neck, and all thoughts were lost to him. His lips grazed my sensitive skin as he slowly drew a path to my shoulder. He caught the thin strap of my dress between his teeth and pulled it over my shoulder. My skin burned where he placed open-mouthed kisses on my bare flesh. I shifted, moving to turn, but he nipped my earlobe before sucking it into his mouth.

"Watch the movie," he rasped in a low command, and a shiver trickled down my spine, sending goose bumps erupting over my skin.

I settled back and rested my head on his shoulder. "You're distracting."

Lucas kissed my temple, and I could feel his smile. "Good."

My eyes stayed on Mr. Darcy, but my mind was caught on the way Lucas was grazing his fingers up my arms with a featherlight touch. The weight of his hands settled on either side of my neck, and I couldn't hold back my moan when his thumbs dug into the sore muscles. I sucked in a breath and moved forward to give him more space. He slid my remaining sleeve down, then ran his nose along my neck.

"You smell like green apples."

"It's my bodywash."

“I know. I bought the same kind because it drove me crazy missing it.”

“What?” I snapped my head to the side, but he bit the back of my neck, stilling my movement, like he was a predator and I was his prey.

He hummed and massaged the bite with his thumb. “I’d use it to jack off in the shower. Fuck, you have no idea the hold you have over me. The things I would do for you.”

I felt my thighs grow damp from the image that was placed in my mind. Water streaming over carved muscle and the veins in his forearm as he gripped his cock.

He shifted behind me and reached into his bag.

I didn’t bother turning to look, now understanding that I was to stay facing the screen. “What are you doing?”

He adjusted himself back in place. “I brought some supplies.”

Supplies.

The sound of a cap flipping caught my attention before Lucas’s warm, slippery hands returned to my shoulders. My eyes rolled back as he massaged the oil into my neck, over my shoulder, and along my collarbone.

My dress, no longer held on by straps, fell around my waist, exposing my front completely. I sucked in a breath when he applied pressure and ever so slowly trailed his hands down my chest, guiding them to my sides and grazing the edges of my breasts. My nipples pulled taut, aching for his touch, and I leaned back, allowing him to reach lower. My eyes shut as his oil-slick hands bracketed my rib cage before traveling over my navel and grazing the top of my thighs, sending a flare of heat straight to my core.

“That feel good, baby?”

“Yes.” I sucked in a breath as he dipped closer to where I needed him, then groaned in frustration when he guided his hands back up.

“You’re not doing a good job watching your movie,” he rasped in my ear.

My eyes peeled open. My mind was completely lost. I’d completely forgotten and hadn’t noticed he’d moved the laptop off my lap and onto the floor.

He squeezed my breasts, thumbs and forefingers teasing my nipples. “What’s got you distracted?”

“You,” I breathed out, struggling to pull air into my lungs. My skin burned with the need to feel him everywhere.

“Best fucking answer.” He rolled us until I lay flat on my stomach, and he

pulled my dress the rest of the way off before straddling just below my ass. There was something deliciously indecent about being bare when he was completely clothed.

Cool air trailed down my spine, quickly replaced by the heat of Lucas's hands. His fingers dug into my muscles in expert moves as he took his time working out the permanent knots in my neck.

He worked down my back, along the sides of my ass, and I leaned into him. He shifted back and cupped my cheeks, stroking his thumbs along the line connecting them to my thighs. His grip tightened, and he pulled them apart. "Fuck, babe."

I moved under him, rocking my hips into the mattress, desperate for more. Lucas chuckled deep in the back of his throat and slid his fingers over my hole. I gasped and arched back, but he pressed me down with a firm hand between my shoulder blades. "Breathe. I'll make you feel good."

I took a deep breath, and my eyes rolled back when he sank two fingers into my core. I tried to shift back, but he held me firmly in place, locking my legs between his. "Soaked."

His hands left me, and a pained sound escaped my throat. I lifted to see what he was doing.

His hand came down lightly on my ass before gripping the back of my neck, holding me in place. "Patience."

I swallowed hard, unable to stop myself from writhing beneath him. I could make out the rustling of his bag. His weight shifted, and he pressed forward, teeth grazing my ear. "I picked this up today."

My confusion didn't last long as the telltale buzz of a vibrator filled the air. I stiffened, unsure how to respond. He was edging my boundaries. He placed the toy between my shoulder blades and leisurely drew it down my spine. His slow pace killed me, and my hesitation turned to need.

He widened his legs, giving me space. "Open."

Shit. I spread wider, and my mouth dropped open on a silent cry as he slipped the vibrator through my folds and circled my entrance. I ground my teeth against the teasing motion, fighting back the urge to beg him. I liked the control he was taking.

I cried out his name when he finally dipped the smooth silicone head into my core, and I rocked back against his hold.

"That's it, baby. There you go." He worked it an inch inside me before pulling it out, repeating the motion until the only thing I could think about

was the way he made me feel. I jolted when he traveled to my clit, and the intense sensation had me bucking away from it.

I gasped. "It's too much."

He moved it to the side so that I could still feel the vibration, but the intensity was no longer overwhelming, and he kissed my shoulder blade. "Take a deep breath."

I followed his instructions, filling my lungs, and didn't flinch when he moved it directly over my clit. Electric energy crawled up my back with the force of my building orgasm. He adjusted the toy until he was satisfied with its placement and pressed down on my tailbone, pinning it between me and the mattress. I struggled against the overstimulation, shifting my hips but unable to move, then froze when Lucas plunged two fingers inside me and pulled out painfully slowly before thrusting back in.

His other hand stopped holding me in place, but it didn't matter because there was no chance of me trying to escape. A trickle of oil dripped over the seam of my hole, and all my muscles tightened. Lucas pressed the tip of his thumb against the tight entrance while continuing to move his fingers inside of me, and my head went fuzzy with the onslaught of sensations.

My hips rotated, and a shiver ran down my spine when he breached the edge. My clit pulsed, and my muscles ached with how tight they were drawn against my impending release. My stomach tightened, and pressure grew until a cry ripped from my chest, and my body shook with my orgasm. He continued to stroke until the last shudder of my orgasm passed before pulling away completely and lowering his chest to my back. His weight grounded me in place, an anchor to this world. I had no idea it could be like that.

Lucas placed gentle, barely there kisses along my nape, seeming to understand every touch felt like too much.

After several moments of catching my breath, he rolled us over so that I was tucked into his side. His cock tented his pants, and I moved to take him in my hand, but he interlaced our fingers, bringing them back to his chest.

"What about you?" I asked.

"Not until this is real. Not until you completely trust me."

TWENTY-SIX
LUCAS

I knocked on Piper's door and was immediately greeted by her grinning green-haired roommate. She called over her shoulder into the room. "He's back." Then her eyes went round on the vase full of flowers in my hands. She squealed and clapped. "And he brought flowers."

"Hi, Misty. Is Piper around?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yup." She opened the door wide, a grin splitting her face.

Piper stood in the middle of their room, dressed in casual jeans and a puffer jacket. Her gaze met mine, and the sweetest flush took over her cheeks. God, I hoped she was thinking about last night because it played on repeat in my head. It took all my willpower to leave after, but I was sticking to my plan.

She seemed to want everything to be okay between us, and I was so fucking thankful for that. But I'd really fucked up. I left her when she needed me, and if I wanted what I knew we could be together, then I needed to show her unequivocally that I never stopped loving her.

I handed her the flowers and kissed her temple. "Ready to go?"

She raised a brow. "Go where?"

I grabbed her bag from the floor and hefted it over my shoulder. The thing had weight. "I'm walking you to school."

"Why?"

"Because I want to."

She bit her smile and ducked her head.

"Swoon," Misty squealed, clasping her heart and falling backward onto her bed.

Piper laughed, and I tucked her into my side. I was going to have to do

something nice for Misty. Piper deserved someone cheerful in her life.

Piper reached for her bag when we got out of the dorm, and I swung it out of the way. “Not a chance, babe.” I leaned down and took her mouth with mine until she pressed both hands against my chest and her breath came out in shallow pants. “I’ve wanted to carry your backpack since we were seven. You think I’m giving up the chance now?”

She scrunched up her nose. “Seriously? You do realize you terrorized me on the daily?”

“I’ve always been a little obsessed with you.” I kissed her forehead and entwined our fingers. “Fuck, I wish we didn’t have away games this weekend.”

Piper stiffened and looked up at me with round blue eyes. “What day do you leave?”

“Thursday afternoon. It’s in Thunder Bay,” I replied and squeezed her hand when disappointment crossed her face. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m on the starting line for Thursday night.” Her voice was flat like it was no big deal, but I wasn’t letting her get away with that. I knew how much this meant to her.

“That’s amazing. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.” I swung her into the air and soaked in her laughter as I spun her around.

She blushed a fierce red. “You can be very distracting.”

I stepped into her, brushing my lips over hers. “Is that right?”

A group of guys walked by, and one of them hollered, “Kick some ass this weekend, Knight!”

Piper jerked back, and I could’ve killed him. The walk from the dorm to the main building was less than ten minutes, and I was already regretting not convincing her to skip out with me. I couldn’t imagine three nights without her. “Will they stream your game?”

She laughed. “It’s women’s college volleyball. What do you think?”

“That people are idiots and women’s sports are amazing.” I didn’t let her hand go, even as the moments ticked by. “Come out with us tonight?”

“With who?”

“The team. We’re going to watch the game at the Brewhouse.”

She raised both her brows and pointed at herself. “And you want me to come.”

I cocked my head to the side, scanning her. “Yeah, why wouldn’t I?”

“I just thought...” She bit her lip, and I cupped her jaw and stroked my

thumb along her cheek.

“Thought what?”

“Isn’t us hanging out with the guys...more official? You never brought girls around before.”

I straightened and took a deep breath. “Do you not want me to bring you around them yet?”

She huffed out a laugh and tipped her head back before looking at me. “I just didn’t think you’d want me to.”

“Why?”

She raised a brow, and my chest constricted.

“You thought I’d want to keep this a secret?”

“Kinda.” She shrugged. “You’ve never been big on PDA.”

“Oh yeah? What’s this?” I circled her waist and pulled her chest against mine. She giggled, the sweetest sound I’d ever heard, and I dropped my forehead on hers. My tone turned serious. “Do you want to come with me to hang out with the guys?”

“Yes.”

Her smile grew, and I couldn’t stop myself from leaning down and kissing her. “Then I’ll pick you up after practice.”

“Okay.” Her fingers dug into my shirt, and she kissed me again, until I was the one who struggled to breathe.

“There’s that PDA thing you were worried about.”

She huffed out a breath. “You love it.”

I ran my thumb over her bottom lip. “Yeah, I do.”

I patted Cane’s shoulder. “You’ve really nailed down the power play kill. Good job.”

“Thanks, Cap.” You’d think I’d just told him he made it to the NHL from the way he beamed at me. It was his rookie season, and he had a lot to learn, but he was getting there.

Alex came up beside me, already changed into his street clothes. “Captain suits you.”

It was kind of fucked-up how I became captain instead of him. He

definitely deserved it. “Sorry—”

“Fuck off with that. Coach made a good call.” He smirked and raised an eyebrow. “You know you’re completely losing the Hunt.”

“I was never playing to begin with.” I leaned back and crossed my arms.

“Does Piper know that?”

“She does now.”

“About fucking time.” He slapped my back. “You bringing her out tonight?”

Warmth filled my chest. “I’m never doing anything without her again.”

I grabbed my shit, already looking forward to picking Piper up, when I saw the Grief Anonymous app notification on my phone. My chest tightened, knowing I needed to tell her, but how the hell would I explain she’d been sharing everything with me for the last year? Including how much what I did hurt her. How could I explain that even knowing what was happening, I still stayed away? Because it only made sense at the time; now I realized I was a fucking asshole.

I would tell her. Just not yet.

I was not prepared for Piper stepping out of her dorm. Her golden hair was around her shoulders, and she wore a deep purple, thigh-length dress that swung at the bottom and was tapered at the waist. I swallowed hard and clenched my teeth, resisting the urge to push her back into her room and pull it off her.

A slow grin curled my lips, and I wrapped her in my arms. “You look good, baby.”

Piper cleared her throat. “Hi.”

I kissed her forehead. “Hi, beautiful. How was the rest of your day?”

“Oh, it was fine. This guy kept texting me when I was in class though.” She pulled her lips in, fighting against her smile.

“Is that right?” I ran my nose along her neck, kissing the trail of goose bumps, and pulled her earlobe between my teeth. “Needy, is he?”

She sucked in a breath and tilted her head to give me more room. “Mmhmm, barely tolerable.”

“You love it.” I repeated her words back to her. She stilled, and my gaze snapped to hers, realizing what I said. “Don’t say anything.”

She rested her hand over my frantic heart. “You mean, do I love that one of the star hockey players has turned into an absolute simp for me?” She raised a brow playfully. “Yeah, a girl could get used to it.”

I captured her mouth in a desperate kiss. “You fucking better. Now, come on before I change my mind and we stay in tonight.”

She didn’t look completely opposed to that idea but headed toward the elevator without complaint.

Piper stared out the car window the entire fifteen-minute drive to the Brewhouse. Her shoulders pulled inward, and her hands wrapped around her elbows. I reached for one and entwined our fingers, kissing her palm.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Her eyes darted to mine, and they shone a little too bright. “I’m happy.”

I stroked my thumb over her wrist in an arc, resting against her pulse. “Isn’t that a good thing?”

“I’ve been happy before. It’s kinda terrifying.” She sniffed. “What if it all falls apart again?”

“It won’t,” I replied, squeezing her hand.

“But what if? What if you realize whatever this is wasn’t what you actually wanted and—”

I kissed her words away and dropped my head to hers. “You have every right not to trust me, but baby, I’m going to fix that because there will never be anyone else for me than you.”

She pulled back and scanned my face before nodding. “Okay.”

“Okay.” I got out of the car and rushed around to her side, pulling it open and taking her hand, leading her to the restaurant’s door. “Ready?”

She took a deep breath. “How much shit do you think they’ll give you?”

I scoffed. “The better question is how much shit have I already gotten?”

Her gaze darted to mine. “Everyone knows?”

“You know that hockey players are the biggest gossips on the planet. From the second you showed up on our doorstep, there’s been bets going on

about when I'd cave and beg to have you back."

"And you're fine with that?" Piper asked.

I guided a strand of her hair behind her ear. "What? Everyone knowing I'm gone for the hottest girl here? Yeah, I'm fine with that."

She tilted her head and smiled. "I like that."

"You better." I kissed her, dragging my tongue along hers, and got lost in her taste.

Her laugh vibrated against my chest. "Did you want to go to your place instead?"

I groaned and rested my chin on her head. "I do...I really fucking do, but I want to show you off even more."

The place was packed, and from the roar of noise, the team was located in the back corner. It was an older bar with wood tables, perfect for getting together with friends. I guided Piper to where Jax and River sat in the corner booth, and Alex leaned against the wall, making out with a girl with long red hair.

The team went silent before an uproar of questions came through.

I raised my hand and silenced them. "This is Piper, and all you need to know is she's special to me, and if you do anything to piss her off, you'll be bag skating for the month."

That was met with a mix of chuckles and low groans. Bag skating was basically just skating until you couldn't breathe, recuperating only to do it again. They knew I'd do it too.

Jax got out of the booth and pulled Piper into his arms. "You came!"

She tilted her head. "Did you know I was coming?"

"Oh, I knew Lucas was asking you, but I sorta hoped you turned him down. I'm enjoying watching him suffer now that he finally pulled his head out of his ass," Jax said, then proceeded to rub his hand over her hair and muss it up.

Piper squealed and wiggled away from him, and I pulled her into my chest, flattening her hair with smooth motions. "You're gorgeous, babe."

She took Jax's spot and shifted further into the booth, and I followed after her, wrapping my arm around her back. If there was any hint of question that she was off-limits, everyone knew now.

"Glad you two worked it out," River said and took a drink of his beer.

I shook my head, and he dropped the topic, his eyes catching on Alex before he lifted the menu. "Feel like pizza?"

“She can’t eat cheese,” I replied.

River’s brows pulled together. “Oh, shit. I would’ve picked you up special stuff when I grabbed groceries if you’d told me.”

“Someone beat you to it.” She glanced at me, but I just shrugged, playing it off like I didn’t know what she was talking about.

Piper shifted closer and rested her head in the crook of my arm. The crisp smell of green apples filled my senses, and I kissed her temple, contentment filling my brain. Jax brought over a round of drinks and an assortment of appetizers, including several dairy-free options, and within minutes, our table was packed with players.

Their voices turned to a muted hum in the background. My focus was caught on Piper. The way she lit up when she laughed or her cheeks tinged pink whenever anyone mentioned me. My gaze roamed over her features, and my ribs contracted until it felt impossible to breathe. I was so fucking in love with her. I wished Marcus could’ve seen it because he had nothing to worry about. I would never hurt her again.

Piper glanced up at me, and her eyes widened, noticing I was already looking at her. “You’ve been quiet.”

I circled her thigh just below the hem of her dress and lightly squeezed. “I’ve been thinking about you.”

“Cheesy,” she laughed, but her cheeks flushed red as I moved my palm an inch higher on her bare thigh.

I dropped my mouth to her ear and grazed it with my teeth. “I’m working on it.”

She sucked in a deep breath and tucked her chin into my chest. I arced my thumb over the soft skin of her thigh in agonizingly slow motions as I barely paid attention to the conversation around us. Within the hour, the guys’ eyes turned glassy, and their focus turned to the girls lined up for their attention.

I shifted my hand under the fabric of Piper’s dress and dragged my fingers up the inside of her thigh. She stiffened, sucking in a breath, and I paused for several moments until she sank further into my side. I bit back my groan when she spread her thighs just enough for me to reach higher. Fuck, my dick ached it was so hard.

She watched everyone around us, but I watched her. The way her breaths froze when I grazed over her panties and her sharp inhale when I slid my fingers under her panties and into her soaking wet core. A silent growl vibrated my chest, and I whispered in her ear. “You like me touching you

with everyone here?”

Her cheeks flamed red, but she gave me a barely perceptible nod. That’s all I needed. I filled her slowly until my fingers bottomed out and my palm pressed against her clit. This was somehow the worst and the best idea I’d ever had.

River shifted his back toward us and took a long sip of his beer. It provided us extra coverage, and I was going to have to buy the fucker a drink before we left.

I took my time working her slowly, paying attention to each of her reactions as I built her orgasm higher. I knew she was close when she trembled beside me and buried her face into my chest. Keeping the same rhythm, I curved my fingers, searching for the soft spot at the front of her walls, and inwardly groaned when she moaned into my chest.

I captured her mouth with mine, capturing her needy sounds so they were just for me. Her walls began to pulse around my fingers, pulling them deeper, and I ground my palm into her clit. She sucked in a breath, her body stiffening before she collapsed against my side.

I scanned the area. None of the guys were paying attention to us, and River was still facing away. His cheeks were tinged pink. Fuck.

I passed Piper a beer, and she drank half in two gulps. I chuckled. “Easy, Killer.”

She looked up at me. “Take me home.”

“Gladly.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

PIPER

When I asked Lucas to bring me home last night, I didn't expect him to leave me at the door with a peck to the side of my mouth. Thoughts of his hands under the bar table flooded my brain, and my cheeks heated.

"Whatcha thinking about?" Misty asked from her bed across the room.

"Nothing." I took a deep sip of the coffee she'd brought me and fought down my embarrassment.

"Uh-huh." She let it go, changing the subject, and I was struck by just how much of an amazing friend she was. "So, you excited for tonight?"

Somehow, my heart both soared and plummeted at the same time.

"That's not the look I was expecting," she said in a serious tone and leaned forward, scanning me.

I sighed. "I'm excited. This is a huge game. Just because Coach is letting me start doesn't mean I've secured the spot."

Misty raised a brow. "But?"

"But I wish Lucas was going to be there." My cheeks heated, knowing what an idiot I sounded like.

"He's making me take videos so he can watch them on the bus," she squealed, and my eyes snapped to her grinning face.

Warmth flooded my chest, and I absolutely hated that I wouldn't be able to see him this weekend. My phone chimed, and I finally got a response to my proof-of-life request.

Anon13: I'm alive. Can't talk.

That's it? I swallowed hard. After a year of messaging daily, there was a piece missing in my life now that he'd disappeared. One that Lucas had an uncanny ability to make me forget. I was going to have to tell him about my

anonymous friend, but there didn't seem to be much urgency since he'd completely ghosted me. That stung. Anon13 had been the one to talk me through when Lucas had done the same. Maybe he had a girlfriend who didn't like him talking to some random on the internet. I would totally understand that, but he needed to own up and tell me.

I was startled when my phone buzzed in my hand and my mom's number popped up. What now? My parents only called me to ask for something, and I was already living off the bare minimum of my savings.

"Hi, Mom," I answered.

"Hi, sweetie. I'm calling you because...I wanted to say I'm sorry." Shuffling came through their end.

"We're sorry," my dad chimed in from the background.

I let out a breath. "It's okay, Mom. It's been a hard year."

"Yes it has." She audibly swallowed. "Your dad and I have made a necessary decision."

The way she said it had my hair standing on end. "What is it, Mom?"

Several moments passed before she replied. "We're selling the house."

I choked. "What?"

"Your dad secured a new job, and we're stabilizing, hon, but it's a large place for just the two of us and..." She paused, gathering herself. "We need a more affordable mortgage."

A sob threatened to break free, and I fought it down. "When?"

"Next weekend."

This time, I wasn't able to fight it back, and my lip trembled when I said, "That's soon."

"I'm so sorry, Piper. I know what this house means to you. Someone put in a *really* good offer, and that was their only condition."

Rationally, I knew they needed that money, and it didn't actually matter when they left, but that didn't stop my chest from caving in and trying to strangle me. I swallowed several times before replying. "I'll come down and help you move."

"I think that's a good idea. You can grab any of Marcus's things—" She broke off on a cry before sucking in a breath and continuing. "I'll be happy to see you. I miss you."

"I miss you, Mom. Tell Dad I love him too. See you next weekend. Love you." I hung up the phone before she could answer, needing it to end. I shut my eyes and took several deep breaths before opening them to a very

concerned Misty.

She put her phone down and crossed the space between us, wrapping me in a hug. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yeah.” I gave her a watery smile.

“I’ll make more coffee.” She went to her small Keurig station, making two cups before handing one to me. “Now, spill.”

I told her everything. From being in love with Lucas since I was a kid to finally feeling like I had him. I cried through the entire part about Marcus’s death, and she rubbed my back in slow circles before I could continue. She cussed out Lucas appropriately when I told her how he treated me after. She didn’t know what to say about Anon13’s disappearance except that there must be some reason for it. Then she giggled through my entire retelling of Lucas’s plan to earn my trust back and be mine again.

“So they move next weekend?” She took my empty mug and placed it on the nightstand.

“Yup,” I agreed, fingering my blanket.

Misty ducked her head to catch my gaze. “Are you going to go?”

“Yeah, I need to say goodbye to it. You know?”

She nodded. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“I think it’s better if I go by myself, but thank you... You’re pretty amazing, you know that?” I smiled.

She beamed. “I knew I’d grow on you.”



The second the team cleared the locker room, I leaned over the garbage and vomited my supper. What if I couldn’t do this? What if they have to pull me at the beginning of the game?

“Breathe, Piper. I need my fearless partner to help me demolish them.” Shana’s calming voice filtered in, and she rubbed circles into my lower back.

I chuckled and stood. “We’ve got this.”

“Hell yeah we do.” She handed me a bottle of Gatorade, and I swished some around my mouth before spitting it out.

I scrunched my nose. “That’s disgusting.”

She grabbed my arm and started pulling me to the door. “This is where I

add all the positive speeches about how some of the best players in history puked before games.”

I chuckled. “Do you know of any?”

Shana gave me a crooked smile. “No, but I know they exist.”

Volleyball wasn’t like hockey. We didn’t draw big crowds, so surprise filled me when I pushed through the door and was met with loud cheering.

I stood stunned, a smile curling my lips as I spotted them in the stands. The entire hockey team was there, all dressed in our colors and their faces painted in some way. My gaze met Lucas, and he gave me a devastating grin.

I ran up to him, shaking my head. “What are you doing here?”

“Misty told me about your parents. Are you okay?”

It was easy to fight against the sadness threatening to pull me down when he was standing in front of me. “I’ll be fine, but you, on the other hand, are supposed to be over an hour away by now.”

“Misty told me what happened, so I convinced Coach that it was good school spirit to cheer you on.”

She gave me a wave from beside him, and I smiled. “And he believed that?”

“Doubtful,” Lucas replied, “but it helped that Jax, Alex, and River backed me up.”

I grinned over at them, then laughed when I saw their matching painted faces.

“Kick their ass today, Pips.” Alex called out.

Lucas turned and showed off the back of his jersey, my last name clear across the top.

“How did you get that?” We didn’t sell merch.

“Shana was able to find me an extra-large jersey, and there’s a place up the road that does the names.” He wrapped his arm around my waist and tugged me closer.

“You made my jersey today?” I breathed out the words, unable to fight the sense of wonder.

He brushed his lips against mine. “I couldn’t come to your game without it, could I?”

My breath caught in my chest, but a loud whistle pulled me back to the moment. Coach Keller was calling a huddle.

“You better go, babe.”

I raised onto my toes and pressed a kiss against his mouth, not giving a single shit if I got into trouble. “Thank you.”

The game was neck and neck the entire time, and I could feel sweat dripping down my spine. We were tied, and whoever got this last point won. I met Shana’s determined gaze, and she nodded. *We’ve got this.* The ball came hurtling over the net, and a player at the back rebounded it to Shana, who set me up perfectly for a spike. I slammed my hand against the ball and barely registered the stinging in my palm as it crashed into the hardwood floor on the opposing side.

The crowd erupted in cheers, the hockey players proving to be the utmost best cheerleaders. Shana grabbed my shoulders and shook me. “We did it!” she screamed before flitting off to celebrate with another teammate.

Strong arms lifted me from behind, and the spicy scent of cinnamon and sandalwood filled my senses. “Fuck, it’s hot watching you play.”

Lucas set me on my feet, and I twisted to face him, smirking. “Oh yeah?”

He groaned and kissed my forehead. “You have no idea how much I wish I could stay. I’m proud of you, Piper.”

My chest constricted as I watched him and the other guys leave. I was still scared he’d hurt me again, but there was no way I was giving him up. Some things in life were worth the risk.

“The ACL is one of the major ligaments in the knee joint that plays a crucial role in providing stability and preventing excessive forward movement of the tibia.” The professor droned on. I tried—really tried—to pay attention, but I couldn’t stop the thoughts of Lucas from flooding into my head.

The way his eyes darkened when he looked at me, the feeling of his rough hands traveling over my sensitive skin. Fingers slipping under my skirt inch by inch under the table where anyone could’ve seen us.

I flushed beet red and tried desperately to focus on this class, internally grateful when the professor closed it out early.

I dumped my bag the second I shut my dorm room door behind me. It had been a long-ass day, and I couldn’t wait to take a hot shower and curl up on the couch.

“You know he loves you, right?” Misty said from her bed, removing her headphones and pointing at the tulips on my counter in a beautiful crystal vase.

I ran my thumb over a petal and smiled as my chest expanded twice its size. God, he was killing me. I looked over at my roommate, unable to hide my smile, and she squealed, wrapping me up in a hug. “You are so freaking lucky!”

I cocked my head. “How are things going with Cane?”

“They aren’t. Turns out he was just a fuckboy hockey player like the rest of them. Well, except Lucas.” She said it like a joke, but her shoulders curled in.

I squeezed her tighter before letting her go and grabbed my shower kit. “That’s the nice thing about hockey players. There’s plenty of them to go around.”

She laughed and gave me a mischievous grin. “I’ve been chatting with the captain of the Bandits.”

Pride filled my chest. Of course she was picking up a guy from the Huskies’ rival team.

“Vicious. I like it.”

I pulled the shower curtain taut behind me and moaned as the hot water relaxed my muscles. The feeling brought up memories of strong fingers massaging me, and heat flooded between my thighs. I ran the soap over my breasts and down my stomach, imagining they were Lucas’s hands, stopping just above my apex when a group of girls came into the shared bathroom.

“So what was it like?” a high voice asked.

“Honestly, way better than I expected. I kinda thought they’d all be selfish in bed, but Alex was fucking amazing. The only problem was he basically escorted me out immediately after, and when I went to hand him my number, he wouldn’t take it.”

The taps were running, and I couldn’t make out who was speaking, but it was pretty easy to determine they were talking about the hockey team.

“He’s still available, then?”

“I guess so, but don’t expect him to stick around.”

“You never know. I could be the one to catch him.”

I debated popping my head out and explaining there wasn’t a chance of that and they were all a part of the boys’ fucked-up game but paused when another girl spoke up.

“I want to land Lucas. Rumor is his dick is huge. Like can’t wrap your fingers around it huge.”

My back stiffened. How the hell did she know that? This was quickly becoming the least relaxing shower ever.

“It’s really too bad he doesn’t sleep with anyone. I know—I tried,” the first girl said, and I let out a breath.

“I’m going to bid on him at the auction.”

Dread settled in my stomach. I’d forgotten about the Northern Lights charity gala. This year’s big event was auctioning off dates with the hockey team.

By the time the girls left, my skin had pruned, and the water was getting cold. Misty wasn’t home when I returned to our room. I scanned the empty space, suddenly wishing she was here. I slipped on Lucas’s jersey, which I’d picked up at the last game, grabbed a bag of caramel popcorn, and climbed into bed with my laptop.

Unlike volleyball, every hockey game was live streamed. The announcer called out his name, and my eyes were riveted on him skating across the rink. I didn’t think I’d ever get used to seeing him geared up.

It felt like seconds before the game ended, and I swore I barely breathed the entire time. They needed to beat this team in order to land a spot in the playoffs in February, and the entire game was neck and neck. At the end, it was a turnover by Lucas and a smooth pass to Jax that earned the tiebreaker point of the night.

My phone rang with a video call almost immediately, and Lucas’s smiling face stared back at me when I answered. The craziness in the locker room made him almost impossible to hear, but his eyes were glued to my jersey.

“That better be mine.”

I smirked, fighting the urge to tease him, and turned to show off his name on my back.

He rubbed his thumb over his bottom lip. “Fuck, I love you with my last name.”

Heat flooded my cheeks, but before I could say anything, Jax was popping his head into the frame. “Did you watch us, Pips? Fucking killed it.”

The way Jax beamed when talking about hockey released some of the tension I’d been carrying. He was still as messed up as I was, but he was going to be okay.

“Nice goal at the end.”

He winked at me. “Please tell me you didn’t give up on us?”

I laughed. “Never dream of it.”

Lucas pulled the phone back to himself.

His face was smooth, and his gaze roamed mine. “I miss you, babe.” The noise in the locker room rose to a roar, and I could barely make out what he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I nodded, my chest too tight to say anything.

The phone went black, and I collapsed back. I had no idea how I was supposed to wait.

TWENTY-EIGHT
LUCAS

I flew off the bus the second we pulled into the parking lot. I clapped Jax on the back and hollered at him, not slowing my strides. “Grab my bag, buddy.”

He just smiled at me. “Tell Piper I said hi.”

It took less than ten minutes for me to travel from the arena on the other side of school to the dorms. Even though I’d spoken with her last night, I still craved being near her. It was like the year I’d spent away from her like an asshole had built up to the point that it was physically painful to keep my distance.

I knocked lightly on the door, a smile already growing on my lips, and listened to the rustling sound of her getting up. Her blue eyes met mine, but instead of clear and bright, they were muted. I cupped her jaw and stroked over her cheekbone. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

She wrapped her arm around her waist and leaned into my touch. “Nothing I want to talk to you about.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, searching her face. Her skin had a worrisome gray tint to it.

She scrunched up her nose. “Women stuff.”

I raised a brow and wrapped my arms around her lower back, tugging her closer. “You’re on your period?”

Pink stained her cheeks. “Can we not talk about it?” She grimaced, and my hands tightened.

“Does it hurt?”

She rolled her eyes, some of her usual life coming back. “Yes, cramps hurt.”

I led her back to her bed and pulled the comforter over her before placing

her laptop beside her. “I’ll be right back, okay? I’ve just got to grab something, and we can hang out here tonight.”

Her eyes lowered, and she nodded. Her voice was so soft I barely heard it. “Okay.”

“Hey.” I tilted her chin so she’d look at me. A hint of a smile curled her lip, and I leaned down to kiss it. “I’ll be right back.”

I walked down the pharmacy aisle and rubbed the back of my neck. I had no idea what I was doing. I sent Jax a quick text.

Me: What do girls need when they get their period?

Jax: How the fuck would I know?

Jax: You are such a simp.

Me: Listen dickhead. One day a girl’s going to knock you on your ass and I’m going to thoroughly enjoy rubbing it in.

Jax: Never. Gonna. Happen.

I called the only person who could help me with this.

“Lucas, what’s wrong?” my mom asked as soon as she answered.

“Can’t I just want to talk to you? I miss you.”

She sighed. “I miss you too. Now, quit trying to butter me up and tell me what you need.”

I laughed at how well my mom knew me. “What do girls need when they get their period?”

“Do I even want to know?”

“Honestly? I think you might be happy. It’s Piper.”

I could hear her smile when she replied. “Thank God you finally got your head out of your butt. I thought your dad and I were going to have to stage an intervention.”

“Mom. You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“There’s nothing in the parenting guidebook that says anything about agreeing with your son when he’s being an idiot. Now, tell me what you need.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t know. When I went to see her, she looked bad, Mom. She fucking grimaced and held her stomach.” My gaze skimmed

over the countless pain medicine options.

“That’ll happen. I’ll send you a list.”

Relief flooded me. “Thanks, Mom. And I do miss you.”

“That’s why you’re my favorite son.”

“I’m your only son.”

She laughed. “I’m happy for you, Lucas. You two were meant for each other.”

When I knocked on Piper’s door, she somehow looked worse than she did before.

“Hell, woman, I can’t leave you alone for a minute,” I said, kissing her forehead, then walking past her to set my bag down on her bed.

She climbed in and eyed the bag as I started taking things out. I cracked a bottle of water and handed it to her, followed by two Midol. “My mom said this was the best for cramps.”

Piper’s brows raised, and she mouthed, “Your mom?” before swallowing the pills.

Holding up a few chocolate bars, I said, “I got these. I figured I would give you options.” Lastly, I pulled out a hot pack, and she hummed when I settled it over her stomach.

“You didn’t have to do this, Lucas,” she said and slipped a piece of chocolate between her teeth.

“I wanted to. I’ll always want to take care of you.”

Her eyes went shiny, and I kissed between her brows. “None of that.” I crawled onto the bed, careful not to jostle her, and lifted her laptop over my lap, pulling up *Pride and Prejudice*.

She huffed, curling into my side. “Don’t get me wrong. I really enjoyed the last time we tried to watch this, but I’m just not up to it tonight.”

I tightened my arm around her and played with a piece of her honey-blond hair. “I’m not here for that. I just want to be with you.”

She buried her face in my chest, making a content sound. “Thanks...for everything.”

“From now on, I’m always going to be here when you need me.” I kissed

the top of her head and hit Play on the movie.

Piper rested her head against the passenger-side window as we drove down the four-lane highway back to her parents' place. She hadn't looked up from the frost-covered countryside since we left.

Despite our conflicting schedules, I'd made sure to walk Piper to class every morning this week, hating that I didn't get to see her more, but with her volleyball season ramping up and hockey doubling down, I was lucky to see her at all some days.

Piper wrapped her arms around her middle and curled deeper into the door.

"You okay?" I reached over the center console and entwined her fingers in mine. We'd gotten up early in order to make the two-hour drive home.

"I think so. It's just hard knowing they won't be there anymore. I have a lot of good memories in that house." She wiped her eyes. "I'm being silly. My parents are making the right decision."

I squeezed her fingers. "Two things can be true. You can be sad and understand the reasoning."

"So, are you going to explain to me what's happening or what?" Jax piped up from the back, his voice lighter than the look on his face.

Piper stiffened, then looked back at him. "I should've told you."

He cocked his head to the side. "Whatever it is, just tell me now."

"My dad lost his job after Marcus...after he was gone. My parents were barely able to make ends meet. I worked all last year to help out but haven't been able to send money home since going to school."

"But you said you went on a gap year?" I watched in the rearview mirror as my friend struggled with what she was saying. He ran his hand through his hair. "You told me about all the places you went."

"I told you all the places I wanted to go. Places that I thought would help heal me. But really, I just needed to be near you."

Jax rolled his eyes. "Fucking buttering me up won't get you out of this."

"I'm so sorry, Jax. I just couldn't tell anyone. We were all already carrying enough." She didn't bother apologizing to me since I had actively

avoided her during that time.

Jax huffed, then smiled. “You can always stay at my place if you miss the neighborhood.”

None of us talked about the undercurrent of feeling like we were letting a part of Marcus go.

“You mean my place,” I said, trying to raise the mood.

“Do I though? Pretty sure I’d enjoy living with Piper,” Jax replied, and Piper chuckled beside me.

“Fuck off, dickwad.”

Piper choked on a laugh. “Oh, now you think my insults aren’t too immature?”

I smirked. “It’s a safe bet that if I teased you about something, I actually felt the complete opposite.”

She hit my arm, and Jax groaned. “No foreplay in front of the kids.”

The mood lightened for the rest of the drive until we pulled onto her street. There was a moving truck parked in front of her house, and all of our parents were standing in the driveway.

Piper’s mom smiled at us. She had the same blonde hair as Piper but cut into a chin-length bob. “Great, the cavalry is here. Boys, I’ve already got the heavy boxes marked in the living room. Piper, I left your room untouched in case there was anything you wanted to grab.”

Several hours later, I placed the last box from the living room into the moving truck and wiped my sweat from my face. Even in the winter weather, I was already overheating. Mrs. Adams was standing in her kitchen, looking through the window over the backyard, when I approached her.

“That’s it for down here. Where next?”

She cleared her throat before looking at me with red-rimmed eyes but no tears. I couldn’t imagine what this past year had been like for them. She gave me a knowing look and nodded toward the stairwell. “Go check on Piper.”

I took the stairs two at a time and headed straight for her bedroom but stopped when I heard her muffled cry from down the hall. Piper sat on Marcus’s bed, holding one of his championship trophies on her lap.

I sat beside her and wrapped my arm around her shoulder, pulling her weight against me. A sob broke free from her throat, and I rubbed her back gently. After several moments, her breathing calmed, and I lifted the trophy she was holding.

“I remember when we won this. He pulled off a beauty of a goal in the

last five seconds of the game.” I stroked her arm and continued. “He gloated for weeks after. Wouldn’t shut up about it.”

She huffed out a laugh and took the trophy back, running her thumb over his name. “He could be pretty full of himself.”

“He earned it.” I laid my head against hers as we sat together in silence until Jax stepped into the room, and his face crumpled the second their eyes met.

Jax sat on her other side and pulled her into a fierce hug. His shoulders shook with the force of his tears. I got up and walked over to his other side and wrapped my arms around him as tears pooled in my eyes.

We’d lost someone irreplaceable, but we still had each other.

Piper was the first to stand, and she looked around the room for a final time. “It’s surreal to leave this behind.”

“Is there anything you want to take?” I wrapped my arms around her and rested my chin on her head.

She nodded, breaking free, and picked up a large jar Marcus had filled with countless rocks over the years. No one knew how he got into it, but he never went anywhere without grabbing one.

Piper turned it in her hands before facing Jax and me. “I’d like to make a stop before we head home.”

Goose bumps ran up the side of Piper’s neck as she stood at the cliff’s edge. Memories of how different our lives had been the last time we were here flowed through my head as Jax and I flanked her.

She opened the lid to the jar and made a quiet, pained sound before emptying its contents over the edge. “I miss you, Marcus.”

Jax wrapped her up in a hug and led her toward the car, but I stayed, still looking over the water at where ice clung to the steep banks. My eyes burned, and I blew out a breath, not sure how to start. “I’m so fucking sorry, Marcus. I’m sorry we fought the last time we spoke. I’m sorry I went behind your back instead of explaining to you just how much I fucking love her.” Tears froze my cheeks, and I wiped them with my jacket sleeve. “I’m sorry I didn’t take care of her for you this past year. I promise I won’t make the same

mistake again.” I tossed a stone into the water and watched the small splash.
“I love you, man.”

TWENTY-NINE

PIPER

I scrolled through my phone, searching through #huskieshockey, and ignored the pounding rhythm of my heart. There were countless posts of girls getting ready for the Northern Lights charity gala. They were decked out in stunning dresses, with their hair swept up and pinned in place.

Meanwhile, I was in my comfiest outfit, consisting of a pair of black leggings and one of Lucas's oversized hoodies. I'd pulled my hair into a messy bun that flopped a little to the left and just embraced the mess that I was.

Just because I knew the gala was for a good cause didn't mean I had to like it. Not when the main event was auctioning off a date night with a hockey player.

Even thinking about it made my stomach roll and my nails dig into my palms. It wasn't like I thought Lucas would step out of bounds on the date, but even the idea of it made me want to break things.

I guess he wasn't the only one with a jealous streak.

I grabbed my purse and a small blanket, all set to go to the show with Misty as soon as she got home. We decided the best way for me to survive this without going crazy was a girls' night topped off with ice cream and a bottle of wine.

There was someone else I desperately wanted to talk to, but when I swiped my phone open, Anon13 still hadn't answered my last three messages. Pain lanced my chest, and I blew out a breath. He'd held me together when I desperately needed someone to care, knew my darkest secrets and my deepest hopes. Even though we'd never met in person, he'd become essential to my life. What if something had happened to him and I

didn't know? His last message was so short it was like a completely different person wrote it.

I typed out another message, not caring that I looked desperate.

Me: Please message me back.

An eye indicating that he'd seen the message appeared to the left, and I waited for a reply that didn't come. I fought back the burning in my eyes. Tonight was an absolute disaster.

The door unlocked with a click, and Misty entered with a bright smile on her face. Her eyes shone and crinkled at the side.

I raised my brows. "You look entirely too excited to watch this movie."

"Don't hate me, but...we aren't going to the show." Her smile was all teeth, and she sucked in a breath.

I tilted my head to the side. "We're not?"

"Nope. We're—"

She was cut off by a knock on the door and swung it open with a beaming smile. "Thank God. We have next to no time."

Two girls came in, both trailing what looked almost like luggage cases behind them, but the squared-off edges and silver metal detail made that unlikely.

"Hi." I gave a shy wave, a little overwhelmed by the additional people in our small place.

Misty gestured to the girls. "This is Ashly and Becca. They're seniors in the Beautician department."

My brows pulled together as they started opening their cases. I stood and whispered into Misty's ear so only she could hear me. "What's happening?"

She grimaced. "I was kinda hoping you'd just go along with it and not ask questions."

"Questions about what?" I gripped the strap of my purse, worried I already knew the answer.

"They're here to help us get ready for the gala."

"I'm not going." I gave the girls an apologetic smile, but my voice stayed firm. "Listen to me, Misty. When I say I'd rather cut off my own arm than sit through that auction, I'm not lying."

One of the girls stepped forward, Ashly, I think. "Unfortunately, with the late cancelation, we won't be able to provide a refund."

Misty smiled at her. "We aren't canceling." Then to me, she said, "You aren't going to make me waste money, are you?"

She wasn't playing fair; she knew how I felt about that. Misty raised her brow and placed both her hands on her hips. I was quickly realizing the concept of choice was an illusion in this conversation. In one last desperate attempt, I said, "I can't afford this. I won't be able to pay you back."

She grinned at me and sat on one of the folding chairs the girls must have brought with them. "I guess it's a good thing it's already covered."

I shot her a glare and collapsed on the chair beside her. "You're buying drinks tonight. I'll warn you in advance I'll be needing lots of them."

"We'll see." There was a glint in her eye, but she turned toward the girl in front of her.

I didn't have to see. It was fact.

The stunning esthetician stood in front of me and scanned over my features like she was studying for a test. "I think a light smokey eye will bring out your eyes perfectly. Pair it with natural makeup and a nude lip." She nodded her head like she was agreeing with herself and started pulling items from her bag.

I glanced over at Misty and widened my eyes. She just raised her chin to give her makeup artist a better angle and said, "Just relax, Piper. We're going to have fun. Promise."

Relax...

She wasn't the one who was about to see her boyfriend be auctioned off to another woman. My thoughts stalled on the word *boyfriend*, and tingles spread through my chest. There wasn't any doubt in my heart that Lucas loved me, and I trusted him. Before the night was out, I would make that perfectly clear.

I settled in my chair and closed my eyes, ready to face whatever happened at the gala because Lucas was coming home with me.

The girls were fast, and within an hour, Becca handed me a mirror. I sucked in a breath as I took in the old-Hollywood waves of golden hair that framed my eyes. She was right—the makeup made the blue in my eyes shine.

"Thank you." They were already packing up by the time I stopped staring at my reflection. I stood, and she grabbed my chair.

“Have fun tonight, ladies, and make sure you tag us in any posts!” Becca called over her shoulder before walking out.

Misty grinned at me. “Lucas is going to lose his freaking mind.”

“Lucas is going to be busy,” I reminded her.

She huffed and shook her head, and I swore I heard her mumble, “Delusional,” under her breath.

She pulled out an emerald-green dress that matched perfectly with her hair and slipped it over her head. She did a little spin. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re gorgeous, but Misty, I don’t have anything like that.” I ran through all the clothes I’d brought, but the closest I had was a simple calf-length black dress. My shoulders slumped.

She choked on a laugh and shook her head at me. “Have you not been taken care of so far?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts,” she cut me off and headed to the door. Nothing she said made any sense, and it was only made worse by her leaving.

She opened the door, and my breath caught in my lungs at the sight of Lucas standing in the hallway, wearing a perfectly tailored suit. He walked in, trading places with Misty, and stood so close his shiny dress shoes nearly touched my toes. I closed my mouth and swallowed hard, my eyes still wide as they traveled over him.

He leaned in, and his lips grazed my ear, sending shivers through me. “I love it when you look at me like that.”

He lifted a garment bag—I hadn’t noticed, too busy staring at the way his pants outlined his muscular thighs—and opened it, revealing a stunning indigo-blue gown.

My mouth dropped open, and I trailed my fingers over the smooth satin fabric that caught the light as it moved.

A low laugh rumbled in Lucas’s chest. “You like it, babe?”

My gaze snapped to his. “Huh?”

His smile turned devious. “I asked if you liked the dress.”

“If I liked the dress?” Somehow, I was unable to form words that weren’t a direct repeat of his.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He handed me a small black shopping bag with the name Agent Provocateur printed on the side. The kind only supplied at high-end stores. “You’ll want to put these on first.”

I carefully unwrapped a black bra that had sheer cups with flowers

overlaid to provide coverage. From touch alone, I knew it must have cost a fortune. I glanced at Lucas, but he just nodded at the bag. Next was a matching set of panties with the same sheer fabric and flower print. I'd never felt anything that decadent. I breathed out, "These are gorgeous."

"Put them on," he rasped and sat on my bed, his elbows on his knees as he watched me.

I'd changed out of his hoodie earlier before Becca started on my hair into a front-close shirt. I reached for the bottom button and popped it through the hole. Lucas's eyes darkened with every new inch of exposed skin.

I stripped out of my bottoms and stood in my mismatched cotton underwear. There was a stark contrast between me and Lucas in his suit.

He raised a brow. "Off."

I reached behind me and unclasped my bra, letting it drop to the floor, and warmth flooded my chest as his eyes hooded at the sight of me. Without looking away, I lowered my underwear and stood bare for him.

He swallowed hard and licked his lips. "Come here."

I sucked in a breath and stood between his thighs. With his height, he easily took my mouth with his own, and my lips curved at his full-body shiver.

"What next?" I whispered.

Lucas reached for the sheer panties and gently gripped my calf just above my ankle. I lifted it, and he slid the fabric over one foot, then the next. I couldn't breathe as he guided it up my thighs until they fit snugly over my hips and leaned over to place a kiss on my apex.

My head rolled back, sucking in air, and I would've collapsed if Lucas hadn't been holding me.

"Perfect." His words soaked through the sheer fabric. I whimpered when he pulled back, and he grinned up at me. "I'm not done giving you your present."

I swore my heart skipped a beat when he reached back into the bag and pulled out a garter and stocking. His fingers trailed over my sensitive skin, his eyes focused where we touched, and I'd never felt this attractive in my life. He made me feel like I was sex incarnate. He kissed my thigh above each band, then stood and slipped my bra over each arm, turning me to do up the back.

"All I'm going to think about all night is peeling these off of you." His hand splayed over my naked stomach, sending heat flooding my core. His

heart pounded against my shoulder blades, and I couldn't for the life of me remember why we weren't doing that right now. I was burning from within, closer to combustion with each touch.

He moved from behind me, and I followed him as he picked up my dress, holding it open for me. "Hold my shoulders and step in." I followed his direction, suddenly wanting to do anything he told me to.

The fabric felt cool against my heated skin, and I sucked in a gasp as he zipped it up.

The dress fit me perfectly, hugging my curves and dropping to the ground with a short train. Lucas stepped back and ran his thumb over his bottom lip. "Nearly perfect."

My mouth popped open. "Nearly?"

He pulled something from his pocket, and I gasped when he held a white-gold necklace in front of me. There was a quarter-sized sapphire in the middle flanked by what I could only assume were diamonds.

I shook my head, barely forming words. "It's too much."

Lucas lifted my hair and clasped the necklace around my neck, and it fell perfectly above my cleavage. He lifted my chin and placed a gentle kiss on my lips. "Nothing is too much for you."

I rose onto my toes and kissed him deeply until we both gasped for air. "Thank you."

He kissed my forehead. "Come on, your car's waiting downstairs."

I tilted my head to the side. "Car? Am I not going with you?"

He stroked my cheekbone with his thumb. "I have to go with the guys."

What was going to happen tonight assaulted my thoughts, and I pulled away and bit out, "Oh, right. The auction."

"Are you jealous, Killer?" His smirk told me he knew I was.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't get jealous."

"Sure you don't." He chuckled.

We held hands down the elevator and out the front doors to where a black town car waited.

He pulled me into his arms, kissing me soundly. "Save me a dance."

I grinned. "Maybe."

He groaned and nipped my bottom lip before opening the car door. "I'll see you soon."

I slid into the back seat, and he shut the door behind me. I watched as he jogged toward the parking lot.

“Oh. My. God. You look amazing,” Misty squealed from beside me, and I turned to her, a smile taking over my face.

I would get through the gala living on the knowledge of what I would do to that man tonight.

The hotel lobby was lavishly decorated with two rows of enormous bouquets made up of white and pink flowers that lined the path to the ballroom entrance.

Although this year’s main event was the auction, the host was the hotel itself. An Italian hotel family from Boston had purchased the building last year and completed renovating this past summer.

The double wide oak doors opened to the gala hall, where the auction was taking place. There was a black stage set up at the front of the room and countless round tables filling two-thirds of the floor, with the remaining third left open for dancing.

But it was the wall lined with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the river and the Detroit skyline that caught my attention.

“Gorgeous.” A breath fanned over my ear, and a shiver tingled down my back when I turned to find Lucas.

“Shouldn’t you be backstage or something?”

He smirked and nodded. “Definitely, but I saw you come in and had to see you.”

“I’d wish you luck, but I’m kind of hoping no one bids on you.” I smiled when I said it, but I’d be a liar if I said it wasn’t true.

One of his eyebrows raised. “You’d rather have me up there embarrassed than have me go on a charity date?”

I could feel my cheeks pinken. “If I say no, will you believe me?”

“Not a chance.” He pulled me into his arms and kissed the top of my head.

Jax poked his head through the curtain beside the stage. “What are you doing?”

Lucas brushed his lips along my ear. “I’ll see you when it’s over.”

A tall man in a classic black suit walked up to the mic and tapped it. Even

though his tone was even, there was something menacing about him. “Everyone, please be seated. We will begin in five minutes.”

Misty hooked her arm through mine and led me to the table closest to the window. There were name cards as well as a wooden paddle with a number on it for each place setting. Mine was thirteen; it wouldn’t surprise me if Lucas had somehow planned it that way. My seat faced the stage, and Misty sat on my right.

I ran my finger along the top of my card. “How did they know I was coming?”

She gave me a wicked grin. “Lucas asked me weeks ago.”

“Traitor,” I mumbled.

She bumped her arm into mine, and something sparked in her eyes. “Come on. It’ll be fun.”

I flagged down a waiter who was holding a tray of champagne flutes and grabbed two, ignoring the judgmental look he gave me. If I was getting through tonight, I was going to need a little liquid courage. Moments after she said it, the light dimmed low, and a spotlight illuminated the stage. A woman with brilliant red hair stood in front of the mic and gave us a wide smile.

“I’m going to start by saying thank you for joining us tonight. I’ve been a part of the Northern Lights Foundation for the past few years now and have personally seen the change it makes in the world.”

A blond, tatted guy whooped from the back, and she rolled her eyes at him before continuing. “Tonight, we’re going to have some fun and hopefully spend some money. The Huskies hockey players are definitely worth your time. Who knows? You might be lucky enough to land more than one.”

A man covered in gray tattoos and styled brown hair brought her a blue file. She gave him a warm look that made me sure they were together.

“Okay, we’re starting tonight off with starting forward Alex Grayson. He’s six foot four, made up of pure muscle, and has a total golden-retriever vibe going for him. Just my type.” She gestured to the side of the stage, where Alex walked up, giving the crowd a wide smile. He lived for this type of thing.

The auctioneer straightened her shoulders and spoke into the mic at a ridiculously fast speed. “Starting off the bid at five hundred dollars.”

I jolted in my seat, hearing the opening bid. I thought that was going to be the final for each player. I was very quickly proven wrong when four women

went into a bidding war.

“One thousand dollars. Do I have a bid for fifteen hundred?”

The crowd went back and forth like that until a girl two tables behind me bid five thousand dollars.

Alex’s grin was beaming, and by the way he bit his lip looking at the winner, he wasn’t disappointed by the outcome.

There was a buzz through the room as guy after guy was auctioned off, and I found myself smiling. Misty raised her brows at me. “See? I told you it would be fun.”

And it was until Lucas stepped onto the stage.

The auctioneer gestured to him and listed off his stats, but all I could hear was static and the sound of my pulse beating in my ear. I downed my second glass of champagne and desperately wished I’d grabbed a third. I couldn’t do this. Pushing back my chair, I started to stand, fully planning to hide in the hall until this was over, but Misty clasped my arm and yanked me down.

Her grip tightened. “You are not chickening out.”

I glared at her and then faced the stage, ready to have every nerve in my body rebel. Lucas was already looking at me, a cocky smile on his face. Whatever look I gave him didn’t have the desired effect. I could see his chest shaking with his laugh. He would pay for that.

The bidding started off at five hundred again but quickly climbed to five thousand. There was a bidding war between three women, each raising their paddle quicker than the next.

When it hit ten thousand and no one raised their paddle against the woman in the stunning purple dress, my ribs compressed around my chest. The other two bidders sat back in their chairs, lips tipped down. That was a lot of money for a good cause, but why couldn’t she be ugly?

“Ten thousand. Going once, going twice—”

The redhead was cut off when Misty stood up, shouting, “Fifteen thousand.”

The air was sucked from my lungs, and my mouth dropped open. “What are you doing?”

She scrunched her nose. “Winning. What does it look like?”

The red-dress woman raised her paddle, raising the amount to seventeen thousand. I thought that would be the end, but Misty jumped it up again to twenty-two. The bidding was going by so fast I couldn’t keep track of the numbers until the auctioneer shouted, “Sold to paddle thirteen for twenty-five

thousand.”

I yanked Misty down, grasping both her arms in my hands, and struggled to speak. “What the hell are you doing? That’s my paddle.”

“Yes.” She looked entirely too calm for someone who’d just dropped that kind of money.

I leaned in close, suddenly worried that she’d lost her mind. “Misty, can you even afford that?”

“No.” She stretched out the word, and then her lips formed a catlike smile. “That’s why Lucas is paying.”

I reeled back. “What?”

“You didn’t think he was going to let anyone else win, did you?”

In the end, Jax went for the most money at a whopping thirty thousand dollars. The auctioneer called the auction to a close with a beaming smile. “Thank you for your generosity. Before you start dancing, one of our guests has a special announcement.”

Lucas strode to the mic and tapped it once before leaning into it. “My name is Lucas Knight. Some of you may know me as the captain of the Huskies.”

“Go, Huskies,” a guy at the back shouted.

“Thanks, man.” Lucas chuckled, but his gaze turned serious. “Last year, one of the best men I’ve known passed away in a car crash.”

His eyes met mine, and I sucked in a breath, pressing my hand against my chest.

“He was so passionate about hockey that you couldn’t help but be swayed to play. Hell, he’s the reason why Ryder and I are here today. Marcus’s respect for the game transcended from standard teenage competitiveness to a true love of the sport.” Lucas sniffed, and my eyes welled with tears. I blinked furiously. “It’s because of that love that I’ve started the Marcus Adams grant. It funds underprivileged kids in the community to be able to play.”

He explained how the funding would go to gear and ice time. How there would be more accessibility to camps that were previously only open to those whose parents could afford them. My heart swelled in my chest until it felt like it would burst out of me. I loved this man so much.

There wasn’t a dry eye when Lucas finished his speech to a standing ovation. I wanted to go to him, but he ducked back through the curtain.

Music started playing, and people gradually got up to mingle or made

their way to the dance floor.

The hockey player from the other night walked right up to Misty and held out his hand. “Will you dance with me?”

I glanced her way, knowing that not everything had worked out between the two of them, just in time to see her cheeks pinken. She laced her fingers with his and gave me a wink. “I’ll see you later.”

I was still watching them go when arms wrapped around me from behind, and I took a breath of Lucas’s spicy scent. I twisted in his arms, tears already streaming down my chin. “Thank you.” This man, this incredible man, was going to be the death of me. “You didn’t have to do that.”

He cupped my jaw in both hands and stroked his thumbs over my cheeks, wiping away the tears. “I wanted to.”

I wanted to. That wasn’t the first time he’d said those words, and they started to wrap around my heart. I searched his eyes, and all I saw was warmth before lifting onto my toes and pressing my mouth to his. “I love you. I trust you. Please don’t make us wait anymore.”

His eyes bored into mine, and his voice cracked. “I have loved you since the day you moved in next door. I’ve spent my time loving you when you weren’t looking, afraid that if I had you, I wouldn’t survive losing you.” His hands dipped into my hair and held me in place. “I will never do that again. You make me strong, Piper. You’ve made me see that life isn’t worth living without you by my side.”

I kissed him, but instead of the rushed, desperate kisses we normally shared, this one was tender, slow, and full of everything we didn’t know how to say. I sank into his touch, wrapping my hands around his neck. He dropped his forehead on mine. “Dance with me.”

But instead of leading me out onto the dance floor, his arm tightened around my waist, and he pulled me flush. We stayed like that, wrapped in each other, and swayed to the music, lost to each other as the party went on.

I ran my thumb over his bottom lip. “Take me home, Lucas.”

THIRTY
LUCAS

Piper turned toward the lobby but stilled when our arms stretched out between us. I tightened our clasped fingers and tugged her back to me, leaning down to capture her lips in mine. I smiled against her mouth. “I got us a room.”

Her lips curled, and she hummed in the back of her throat. “A little presumptuous of you.”

I rested my forehead against hers and cupped her cheek. “You’re worth the risk.”

Her fingers traced the buttons of my shirt and popped the first one through, revealing the hollow of my neck. She lifted onto her toes, running her tongue along the newly exposed skin, and my cock grew painfully hard.

There was a loud whistle from behind us, and Piper and I spun to see a grinning Alex. “Be safe tonight, kids.”

“Fuck off, Alex.” I bent down and hooked one arm under Piper’s knees and the other around her back before standing with her pressed into my chest.

A laugh burst from her, and she steadied herself with a hand on my shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Getting you out of here before the rest of the cavalry show up.” I strode across the marble-tile floors directly into an open elevator and hit the top floor before sliding her feet to the ground. Every angle of her was reflected back to me in the mirrors that lined the walls. Delicately, I threaded the strap of her dress through my forefinger and thumb. “You look stunning in this, babe, but I can’t fucking wait to peel it off of you.”

Piper’s cheeks pinkened, and she bit the side of her lip. I made it my new

mission to make her blush like that every day. I clasped the back of her neck, capturing her mouth in mine, and groaned deep in my throat when she sucked my bottom lip between her teeth.

Tightening my grip, I tugged her head back gently and dropped my mouth to her neck. I inhaled her apple scent as I placed open-mouthed kisses over her sensitive skin on a path up to her ear. Piper fisted my shirt tugging me closer, and I sucked on her earlobe, letting my breath fan over her ear. “I love you, Piper.”

Blue eyes met mine, and she grazed her fingers over my jaw. “I love you, Lucas.”

Piper gasped when the elevator stopped and the doors dinged open directly into our room. She walked in, mouth half-open as she took in the space. I’d checked it out earlier when I dropped off our things. Her eyes roamed over the luxury room with wall-to-wall windows and a full set of living room furniture, but my gaze never left her. The way her eyes went bright as they took in every small detail and her smile grew when they spotted the bouquet on the counter had my chest growing warm, and when she looked back at me, smile beaming, I couldn’t fucking breathe with how lucky I was.

I wrapped my arms around her from behind and rested my chin on her head. “Do you like it, baby?”

“Lucas, this is too much...this must have cost a fortune,” she whispered like she was afraid if she spoke too loud, she’d upset the room.

“It’s worth every penny for the things I’m going to do to you,” I rasped low into her neck and kissed the goose bumps that erupted across her skin.

She turned slowly in my arms and met me with a heated stare. “Now what?”

Fuck, she was sexy when she looked at me like that. I trailed my fingers from behind her ears, down her neck, following the path to her shoulders. She shivered in my arms, and I leaned down to kiss her. “Now I’m going to unwrap you.” I slipped her dress straps over her shoulders, placing kisses over her bare skin.

She stepped back, her eyes hot on mine as she reached behind and lowered her zipper. She let the loose fabric fall to her waist, leaving her in the sheer black bra I’d bought her. Fuck, past me was a smart fucking man.

I leaned forward and sucked her nipple between my teeth through the fabric, eating up her sounds of pleasure. I pulled down the cups, working one

nipple with my mouth and the other between my fingers until she begged me for more. The dress clung to her hips before dropping to the floor with a simple tug.

Piper's mouth broke from mine. "Did you just rip my dress?"

"Maybe." I took a step back and bit my fist as I took in the sight of her. She was saying something about her dress, but all I could focus on was her in that sheer bra and panty set. My gaze traveled down to where the garters held up her pantyhose, then further to her heels, which were several inches high. I groaned in the back of my throat, thanking every deity in existence for whoever had brought her to me.

"Lucas, are you listening to me—"

I sank to my knees in front of her, cutting off her words. "I know you're pissed about the dress, but I will buy you a hundred dresses. I will give you whatever you want." I placed a kiss on her inner thigh. "I'll gladly get on my knees for you." Another kiss a few inches higher. "Grovel at your feet." Piper sucked in a breath as I kissed her directly over her clit. "I'm fucking obsessed with you."

Piper's knees buckled, and I steadied her as she swayed on her feet. Once she was stable, I skimmed my fingers down the back of her calf, lifting her heel until it rested on my chest, and held her gaze as I unclasped the strap before slowly sliding her shoe off. I guided her foot back to the floor, waiting until she was steady before lifting the other for the same treatment. "I need to taste you."

I hooked the sides of her panties and snapped the thin bands, removing them completely but keeping the garter on. "Fuck, I need you like this every day." I dropped my mouth to her core and licked over her clit, humming at the back of my throat at my first taste. "That's my girl."

"Lucas. Lucas, please," Piper cried as I flattened my tongue.

I pulled away and stood, running my nose along her throat. "Please what?"

"Hurry." She breathed the word, her body trembling in my arms.

"Have I been good to your body?" I asked in a low, raspy voice.

"Yes." She nodded.

I took a deep breath and pushed the words out of me. "Do you trust me?"

She stilled, striking blue eyes holding mine, and smiled. "Yes."

The force of her smile went through my bloodstream, burning me from within. "Good, because we're doing this my way."

Her head tilted, and she mouthed the word *what?*

I stepped back and popped the shirt button on my wrist, rolling the crisp fabric over itself up to my elbow before switching to my other arm, enjoying the way her eyes tracked the movement. I pulled at my tie, loosening it from around my neck. "I'm going to tie you up, Killer, and then I'm going to make you come so many times you beg me to stop." She swallowed hard, gaze dipping between the silk in my hands and my face.

"Do you want that?" I pulled the fabric taut, and she bit her lip.

"Yes."

"Good. Take off your bra." I watched as she slid the straps from her shoulders and it dropped to the floor. "Come here." I held out my hand, and she stepped into my chest, looking up with those wide eyes. "Get on the bed."

Her mouth opened, then shut, and she nodded, walking through the open bedroom doorway. She climbed onto the bed, fingers gripping the deep navy comforter.

"Face the window and kneel for me, baby."

She adjusted herself so she faced away from me and sat back on her ankles. Her bare ass bracketed by the garters had my cock aching to fill her pussy. I trailed the backs of my knuckles down her arms and gathered her wrists in my hands, holding them together at the small of her back. Careful to keep the tie flat, I wrapped it around her wrist several times before securing it in a knot. I slipped my finger between her skin and the silk, making sure there was enough space for circulation before tugging down on her hands. "Fuck, you're pretty like this," I whispered in her ear, then guided her down so her face pressed against the mattress and her ass was in the air. She swayed, balanced on her knees, unable to support herself with her hands.

I dragged my nails over her stockings and up the back of her thighs before palming the sides of her ass and running my thumb through her core. My eyes rolled back as her wetness covered me, and I turned my hand in order to dip my fingers into her entrance. She soaked it immediately and moaned into the mattress as I stroked her slowly. "Dirty girl, I knew you'd like this."

I stroked her in and out as she made whimpering sounds. The position I'd placed her in left her unable to shift back against me. She had to stay where I put her and take what I was giving. I slipped my fingers out and circled two around her clit, listening to her breath catch to match the perfect rhythm. When she was gasping and sucking back air, I removed my hand. She

growled at me. "I was so close."

"Patience, Killer." I went back to circling her clit in a slower pattern, building her back up until she struggled against her binds. I steadied her with one hand and pressed down on her clit, keeping the same pace that had her moaning my name until she stiffened and a shudder ran through her. "That's one, baby."

She gasped for breaths. "Untie me, Lucas."

"Not yet." I smacked her ass, and she groaned as I rubbed the sensitive skin, giving her a few seconds to adjust before starting again. When her breathing evened out, I pushed down on her spine, raising her ass further into the air, and ran my tongue along her seam. I chuckled when she squirmed as my tongue pressed to her clit. She was sensitive, but I wasn't done. I traced her clit, the same as I did with my fingers, until her breath caught in her throat. I gripped her ass, lifting her higher so I could take her clit between my teeth and suck.

"That's it, baby. Come for me." She squirmed against me, crying that she couldn't come again, but I knew she could. I worked her with my mouth, switching between licking, sucking, and biting until she was shaking in my arms, mouth open in a silent cry as her release crashed over her. "Two."

She would have collapsed if I wasn't holding her. I didn't let her rest, plunging my fingers into her core, biting her ass when she screamed. I watched where my fingers disappeared inside her, and my cock wept at the way she was exposed to me. Her clit was too sensitive to touch, but there were other ways to make my girl come. I worked my fingers into her, curling them against her inner wall and listening to the hitch in her throat that told me she was close. Her muscles pulled taut, and she shivered with the force of her impending release. I stroked her closer and closer to the edge until every one of her breaths came out on a moan. "Please. Please."

"Please what?" I asked.

"More."

I trailed my other finger over her core, soaking them before pressing one to her asshole. She stilled.

"Breathe for me," I commanded into her neck.

She took a deep breath, and I pressed into her, breaching the tight rim. "That's it, baby." It only took her a moment to relax, and then I matched the pace of my finger in her ass to the ones in her pussy. She broke apart immediately, screaming my name over and over. Piper turned to Jell-O, and I

bound an arm around her, keeping her upright.

“That’s three.” I loosened the knot at her hands and guided her to her back. I lifted each wrist, kissing the marks left from my tie. She watched me with hooded eyes.

“You’ve ruined me,” she said with a dry, raspy chuckle.

I stripped out of my shirt and undid my pants, letting them drop to the ground. She wet her lips when I freed my cock from my boxers.

“I’ve only begun.” I climbed over her and hooked my arm under one of her knees, lifting it to her chest, and buried my cock into her pussy. A guttural moan pulled from my chest. “You’re so fucking tight.”

I rocked in and out, slowly moving until she adjusted to my size before plunging back in, making her call out my name. I thought I’d built up the night we’d been together in my imagination, but my memories didn’t compare to the real thing. Her pussy tightened around my cock, and my hips jerked with the need to spill into her.

Piper raked her nails down my back and grasped my thigh, pulling me harder against her, and something in me broke free. I dropped my forehead to hers, our breaths intermingling as I set a grueling pace, rutting into her, and the sounds of my hips colliding with her filled my ears. She met me thrust for thrust, digging her fingers into my skin, urging me faster. Pinpricks formed in my spine as my muscles pulled taut.

Piper turned her head and whispered in my ear, “Come for me, Lucas.”

My orgasm ripped from me as if she owned me, and I came apart for her, body and fucking soul. I trembled to hold myself up as the strongest release I’d ever felt filled her. I collapsed on top of her, burying my face into her neck, desperately trying to breathe. “Fuck, woman. You’re going to kill me.”

“But what a way to go.” She chuckled, and I rolled onto my back, taking her with me so that she lay on my chest.

Her blonde hair spread out around her, catching the moonlight, and I stroked my fingers through it as we calmed. She lifted onto her elbow and looked around the room. “Lucas, this place is amazing.”

I couldn’t tell you what the style was, but even I could tell this place was nice. I rose and placed a kiss on her bare shoulder, smiling against it. “I’m glad you like it. There’s something else I wanted to show you.”

She snapped her head toward me. “You can’t possibly top this.”

I got out of bed and lifted her in my arms. She squealed and clasped both hands around my neck. “Where are you taking me?”

“I’m not done worshipping you yet.”

Piper’s mouth dropped open when I stepped into the bathroom, her gaze focused directly on the tub. It was at least seven feet long and easily big enough that it would fit both of us, but I knew that wasn’t what captured her attention. It was pressed against a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the river. The lights from the skyscrapers across the river blinked at us, creating an almost artlike view.

Piper turned wide eyes on me, and I kissed her between her brows. “I told you you’d like it.”

“It’s gorgeous.”

I hummed my agreeance, not giving a single fuck about the view while she was in my arms, and balanced her on the edge and turned the water on. She shivered, goose bumps rolling over her skin, and I grabbed a navy silk robe printed with pink flowers from the hook and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“Better?” I asked, tying the rope.

She kissed my chin. “Everything I could want.”

Her words penetrated my chest, wrapping around my heart, and held me in place. I’d been an idiot for waiting so long. I gripped the side of her face, tilting it, and captured her mouth in a slow, possessive kiss filled with everything I didn’t know how to say. By the time we broke free, we were both gasping, and she held on to my shoulders for support. *Fuck me.*

She took her time untying the belt and pushed the robe off her shoulders, revealing her perfect breasts, which were marked from where I’d kissed them. My cock grew hard again, and I lifted her from her perch, wrapping her legs around mine, and sank us both into the water.

Piper’s eyes fluttered closed, and she moaned as the warmth surrounded her skin, but all I could feel was her straddling my lap. She hadn’t taken the robe all the way off, so it clung around her elbows, and the navy turned into a pure black where it floated in the water behind her. Her gold hair fell over her shoulders, the ends dipping in. She looked like a siren tempting me into the cliffs.

I placed a palm on the small of her back and the other one between her shoulders, encouraging her to lean back and exposing her breasts to me. She placed her hands lightly on my shoulders, trusting me completely to hold her up, and I sucked the tip of one into my mouth, twirling my tongue around her nipple. She shifted in my lap and rocked when my cock lined up with her clit,

gasping for breath. I savored the taste of her other nipple while she ground her hips down and searched for release from the tension building within her.

Her nails dug into my shoulders, and I lifted her hips, lining my cock with her entrance before lowering her down onto me inch by inch. Our movements were slow, languid, as our hands roamed over each other. She dropped her face into the curve of my neck, trembling as she rose, then ground her clit into me with each thrust. I grasped her hips, repeating the motion when she trembled in my arms. I was so fucking close, but I needed her to plunge off the edge with me. I dipped my hand below the water, circling her clit with my thumb, and she began to circle her hips on my cock.

“There you go, baby, that’s it,” I encouraged her as she chased her release. Each of her breaths was more ragged than the next until she broke apart in my arms. I let her rest for a moment before lifting her out of the water so she sat on the edge. I dropped my forehead to hers, pounding my hips in a punishing tempo and groaning against her lips as I filled her with my cum.

She collapsed, and I pulled her back into the water, discarding her robe over the side of the tub, and gently rubbed circles into her back. Her eyes closed, and her breaths grew even as she fell asleep.

I lay like that, breathing in her apple scent for several minutes before lifting us both, careful not to wake her, and walking us to the bed.

I wrapped myself around her, pulling her back against my chest, and nuzzled her neck.

“You’re mine now, Piper, and I’m never letting you go.”

THIRTY-ONE

PIPER

Warm and tired, I fought against the sun shining through the window, not wanting to risk waking from this dream. Lips trailed over the curve of my neck, and I hummed in the back of my throat as Lucas splayed his hand over my stomach, tugging my back against his chest.

“Morning, Killer.” Lucas’s breath grazed my ear, and his touch traveled lower. I arched against him as his fingers pressed against my clit, and he ground his cock into my ass.

“Morning,” I whispered, breath catching when he sank two fingers into me.

His groan vibrated against my back. “Fuck, you’re already ready for me.”

I shifted, needing more than his fingers, but just as he lined us up together, the elevator door dinged. I sat up, pulling the sheet over my chest, then looked back at Lucas.

“People can just come in here?” I said, glad that the bedroom door was shut.

He kissed the top of my head before getting out of bed and pulling a pair of sweatpants from a bag beside the bed. “I ordered room service.”

I pulled a thick white terry cloth robe from the closet and wrapped it around myself. I waited until I heard the ding of the elevator leaving before I stepped out of our room.

In the bright light of the day, I could appreciate the stunning space better. It was decorated in a mix of modern lines and comfortable furniture. The curtains were pulled back, revealing a bright morning sky. “What time is it?”

“Almost ten,” Lucas replied from where he was sitting at a round wood table. There was an assortment of breakfast items—eggs, toast, bacon,

biscuits, and muffins. I sat across from him in an oversized chair and picked up a piece of bacon. I hummed at the salty flavor taking over my mouth as I took a bite.

Lucas's eyes went dark, and he leaned across the table. "Keep making those sounds and your breakfast is going to go cold."

I smirked and took another bite before sucking on each of my fingers. "So what are your plans today?"

His gaze searched mine, and his fingers trailed a path over the inside of my wrist. "I booked the room for an extra night, so we can stay here all day if you want."

"Oh yeah, and do what?" My cheeks warmed, and a flush crawled up my neck.

"There's countless things I've been craving to do to you," he rasped, his voice full of promise, and a shiver ran through me.

Okay, yeah, I could get down with that. I poured a cup of coffee and blew on it before taking a sip. My face scrunched up as I grimaced at the bitter taste.

"That's disgusting."

Lucas took it from my grasp and shuddered at the taste. "I'll run down and grab us some coffee from the shop at the corner."

He disappeared into the bedroom and reappeared wearing a hoodie and ball cap. My breath hitched, wanting nothing more than to push him onto the couch and curl into his lap. He stopped in front of me, guiding a hair behind my ear. "I'll be right back."

After a few moments, I grew restless and hunted for my phone. I couldn't remember grabbing my purse last night, but I found it on the small entry table. I returned to my spot at the table and sank my teeth into a chocolate chip muffin, humming in the back of my throat. A girl could get used to this. I curled my feet underneath me, tucking the robe closed, and flipped through the notifications on my phone. I sent quick messages to Misty and Shana, telling them I'd fill them in when I got back. Then I ran my thumb over the Grief Anonymous app.

Me: I can see you look at these, so I just wanted you to know that Lucas and I are finally together and I'm so happy. I wish I could tell you all about it.

Lucas's phone vibrated and lit up beside me, and I couldn't stop myself from leaning over and seeing the notification. An unread message from the

Grief Anonymous app took up the top of the screen. My brows pulled together as my mind swirled desperately, not wanting this to have been happening.

Me: Is it you?

Lucas's phone lit up again, and my chest caved. The truth snapped into place like puzzle pieces fitting together. He'd been lying to me this entire time. I pressed my palm into my chest at all the things I'd told him. My eyes burned, and I stood from my seat, determined to get out of here before he came back. I wasn't ready to face this.

I searched through the bag Lucas had packed and found one of my dresses and a cardigan sweater. I pulled them on, along with a pair of black boots he'd included, and hit the elevator call button. My toe tapped restlessly on the ground as my hand tightened on my phone. *Come on. Come on. Come on.*

The door dinged, and I let out a sigh of relief, but it caught in my throat when Lucas stood in front of me. His head tilted to the side as his gaze roamed over me, but he froze when he saw the tears pooling in my eyes. Lucas's hand reached up to cup my cheek, and I flinched away.

His eyes widened, and he went to move closer, then jerked to a stop when I stepped back. "Baby, tell me what happened."

I sniffed and raised my chin, eyes locked on his expression. I freaking dared him to lie to me. "You should have told me who you were."

"You know who I am." His brows pulled together.

"Oh yeah? Well then, I guess Anon13 should've told me who he is."

"I can explain." His face fell, and he took a step closer.

"Explain, then. Explain how you told me I could trust you while you've been lying to me for a year." My voice grew louder with each word until I was just shy of screaming.

"I...I can't." His shoulders slumped, and his chest caved as the words left his lips.

"That's what I thought." I ran my hand through my hair and ground my teeth as he stood there silent. My gaze snapped to his. "I told you things I never would've. That you didn't have the right to know. Oh God. I told you everything—you knew." I sucked in a breath that burned my lungs as the truth settled over me. "You knew how much I needed you. How bad it got, and you didn't come back."

Lucas stepped closer, his hand ghosting over my cheek but not touching

me. "I tried to be there for you the only way I could."

"You let me worry about him... You...you haven't been answering." Tears flowed over my eyes, and I slowly built a wall, blocking my emotions, cutting each one off one by one.

He shook his head. "I didn't want to lie to you anymore."

I straightened, facing him dead-on. "Were you even going to tell me?"

"I don't know." His words sealed the wall inside me shut.

I nodded and stepped around him, happy that the elevator was still waiting on our floor. I didn't look back as I stepped in, and he didn't try to stop me.

The moment the doors closed, I crumpled to the floor, taking in ragged breaths as everything I wanted crumbled around me. I pulled out my phone and texted Shana. I was going to need somewhere to stay that Lucas wouldn't find me.

Shana opened her door and immediately wrapped me in a hug. "Are you okay?"

I shook my head and let her go. "Can I stay here? He doesn't know where you live."

"Of course. I already set the guest room up when I got your message."

"Thanks." I fought against the tears, but I was barely holding myself together. "Can I...can I go there now?"

Shana searched my face and gave me a small nod. "Yeah. Yeah, of course you can."

She led me through her home, explaining that her girlfriend was out of town for the weekend and I could stay however long I needed. I vaguely heard her mention the bathroom and kitchen, but my vision was too blurred with tears to see anything. She opened the door to a bedroom and ushered me in.

"Do you want me to stay with you?"

"I just need...I just need a little space to try to understand what happened."

She gave me a soft smile and closed the door behind her. I didn't bother

to take off my cardigan, instead curling into a tight ball on the bed, wrapping my arms to brace myself from my bone-deep sobs. I couldn't make sense of my thoughts. Didn't have the energy to decide if I was being rational or not. All I felt was betrayed. I thought Anon13 had ghosted me, but it was Lucas making me feel that way again, all the while telling me how much he cared. Pain I hadn't dealt with after Marcus's death mixed with how worried I'd been that something had happened to my anonymous friend. I didn't realize how scared I was until I knew for sure he was fine. I closed my eyes and fought against the thoughts. I needed time.

Four days later, there was a knock on the bedroom door. "I don't want company." I felt bad turning Shana away in her own home, but I couldn't talk about it.

The door opened, revealing a green-haired pixie with one raised brow. "Well, you're getting it whether you want it or not."

She sat at the end of my bed and looked me over. "You look like hell."

A laugh bubbled out of my chest, and a small smile curved my lips. "Yeah, having your heart ripped out will do that to you."

"I know, sweetie. And I'll kick his ass later for you, but now you've got to get up." She stood from the bed and placed one hand on her hip and held the other out to me. "Shower. Now."

I let her haul me to my feet and drag me to my shower. As I was closing the door, I heard Shana say, "Thanks for coming. I didn't know what to do."

I washed my hair three times and let the hot water rinse away some of the weight I'd been carrying. It was like waking up from hibernation, my body stiff from where I'd stayed still for too long. I climbed out, putting on the clothes Misty had brought me, and pulled myself together for the conversation I knew they were about to force me to have.

I stepped from the bathroom, and both my friends were already waiting for me.

Shana started first. "We're having an intervention. You cannot stay in that room for some boy."

I huffed out a laugh. "I'm not sure he's just some boy." My voice turned

serious. "I'm also not sure that's all this was about."

"Okay, then tell us."

We sat on the couch, and Misty brought me warm tea and tucked a blanket around me before placing her hand on top of mine. "What happened?"

I told them about Lucas's being Anon13 but how it was worse because I'd been worried about him and been burying that feeling for weeks. I told them about telling Lucas deep, intimate things and him not even telling me who he was. I needed him.

"Was Anon13 there for you when you needed him?" Misty asked from her spot beside me on the couch.

I nodded.

"If you'd have known it was Lucas the entire time, would you have still talked to him?"

Would I have? The question tumbled through my thoughts, finally landing on an answer. "Yes, that's all I wanted."

Shana leaned forward, eyes on mine, and said in a soft voice, "Do you think that's what he wanted too?"

I'd spent the last year thinking he'd used me, but really, he'd believed he was the reason Marcus died. He believed that I would never forgive him. I believed he believed that. So, if he really did love me that entire time, was him reaching out the only way he could really that bad?

"I need to see him."

"He's been blowing up your phone." Shana held it out to me, and I took it, eyes wide on all the messages.

He'd written me as both Anon13 and himself. A million different ways to say he was sorry. That he'd do it all differently if he could. That he was just desperate to find a way not to leave. I inhaled deep into my lungs before letting it out and wrote him back.

Me: We'll talk soon.

I stood up. The Huskies were out of town this weekend. "Who's up for a road trip?"

A wide smile formed on Misty's face. "Hell yes!"

THIRTY-TWO
LUCAS

“It’s going to be okay, man.” Jax sat down beside me on our team’s Greyhound bus just as we entered London. Every minute of the two-hour drive had felt like my life was being stretched out. It had been days since Piper walked out, days since my life had fallen apart, and the only place I wanted to be was with her. The only reason I was even on this bus was because Piper had made it very clear that she didn’t want to see me.

“How? Because from where I see it, I just fucked up my entire life.” I’d spent that first night camped out in front of Piper’s dorm room, thinking if I could just see her, I could get her to understand. Then Misty came home and took pity on me, opening the door. Piper wasn’t there. Her drawers were empty, and none of her school supplies were out. I swear to God, I felt like my chest cracked open, realizing I’d fucked it all up.

Jax leaned back and pulled a piece of licorice out of his backpack at his feet and took a bite. “Just saying, she’s forgiven you for all the other stupid shit you did.”

I groaned and rubbed my palms over my eyes. “Exactly. Why the fuck would she keep doing it?”

Jax’s tone lost all hint of teasing, and he placed a hand on my shoulder. “Breathe, man. Piper isn’t the type of person not to try to understand, and even though what you did was an asshole move, even I get it. Sort of.”

I huffed out a breath and faced the window. “Gee, thanks.”

“Listen, blowing up her phone isn’t going to make her come around sooner.” Jax snatched my phone, and I glared at him.

“Give it the fuck back.” He didn’t know I wasn’t sending her messages; I was reading old ones.

He held it in the air over the aisle. “Not a chance. Get into the right headspace for the game, then we can both go over there and beg her to forgive your stupid ass.”

“You’ll come help me get Piper back?” My head snapped back in surprise.

Jax smirked and handed me my phone. “Of course I will. You two are fucking meant for each other. Now, chill the fuck out.”

The phone buzzed just as it transferred from him to me, and I swiped up to see the message.

Killer: We’ll talk soon.

Jax grimaced. “Not gonna lie. That’s ominous.”

I swallowed hard and ran my thumb over the message. “No shit, but...if she wants to talk, I at least have one more shot to fix this.”

I jumped onto the rink for our ten-minute warm-up before the game. My blades cut into the ice, and for a split second, I felt some of that numbness I’d been chasing last year. Fuck, it was its own kind of addiction not to have to deal with anything, but the difference was I wanted to feel everything when it came to Piper. Even if that meant feeling my heart ripped out.

London’s arena was packed tonight, the fans all decked out in black and yellow. As our biggest rivals, whoever won this game would move up in the standings. My gaze darted between the seats, searching for golden-blonde hair I knew wouldn’t be there.

A shoulder slammed into my arm, and I dropped to my knee, pain ricocheting up my thigh. Even with the knee pad, the force still hurt like a bitch. “What the fuck?”

A cocky guy missing his front tooth smiled back at me. “You took out my little cousin in your last game. You are gonna pay for that tonight.”

I stood and moved closer to him, anger practically radiating off my tense muscles. I was barely holding it together without some idiot giving me a spot to direct all my anger toward. “Do not fuck with me tonight.”

He laughed. “I’m not giving you a choice in this. You’re going down in the first period. Better let your coach know to sub you out.”

I swung my arm back to lay him out, but it was caught behind my back.

“Relax,” Alex said, dragging me backward. “You know anything that happens at warm-up is a multigame suspension. Leave it till the game.”

I shrugged off his hold but followed him to the side our team was practicing on. Jax and River were running through plays, and I grabbed a puck, quickly passing it to Alex, who tossed it over to River and back. We went through the gameplays that had been drilled into us until they were pure muscle memory and zero thought. When I missed my third pass, I slammed the blade of my stick down. *Fuck.*

Alex skated up to me and gave me a cocky smile. “You’re playing like absolute shit.”

I raised a brow. “You look pretty fucking punchable right now.”

Alex laughed and shifted away, holding his gloved hands in front of him in retreat. “I think I know how to snap you out of it?”

“How?”

“Her.” He pointed behind me, and I snapped my gaze to follow him. All the air left my lungs as I met sky-blue eyes.

Piper stood at the glass, wearing my jersey and the number thirteen painted on her cheek. She smirked at me as I skated over to her, and my heart pounded in my ears, blocking out all noise. I shook my glove off, placed my palm on the glass, and sucked in a breath when she overlaid hers on the other side. I shifted my gaze to her face, where she was already looking at me with warm eyes.

“I’m so sorry.” My voice cracked as I pushed out the words I’d sent her in countless messages.

She nodded, the corner of her mouth curving. “We’re okay.”

“What?” I wanted to break the board so that I could hear it again.

Her smile widened, and she shouted, “I said we’re okay. We’ll figure it out.”

I collapsed against the glass, damn near falling on my ass as her words wrapped around me. *We’re okay.* Vaguely, I could hear the guys getting off the ice and going back to the locker rooms, but I couldn’t leave her. I ripped my helmet off and leaned my forehead against the glass. Piper had to stand up on the ledge in order to bring her face level with mine.

“I love you, Piper. I’ll just change and be out in a minute.” I didn’t give a single fuck about hockey. The coach could kick me off the team if he wanted to. All that mattered was that Piper and I were okay.

“Are you kidding me?” She gestured to herself. “I’m all decked out to see you win this game. Don’t let me down, Knight.”

I searched her face, and a lightness filled my chest. This girl was perfect for me. I brought my mouth close to the glass and huffed out hot air until a section the size of my head was fogged over, then drew a heart with a P + L in it.

Piper traced the letters from her side of the glass and bit her lip before her eyes met mine. “Go kick their asses, then take me home.”

It was like she breathed life back into me, and adrenaline built inside my veins. I skated backward toward the bench and said, “This one’s for you, baby.”

THIRTY-THREE

PIPER

My gaze tracked Lucas as he skated down the rink from my spot next to the glass. He'd been on fire the entire game, and it was obvious his energy as the captain was thrumming through his team. As a defenseman, his job was to keep the puck on the opponents' side of the blue line, and he hadn't let up the entire last period.

Both Jax and Alex scored twice, leaving the board at four to zero for the Huskies.

"Hey, you can't be here wearing that shit." A hand landed on my shoulder, and I turned to see a giant of a man sneering down at me. You'd think university-level hockey would be pretty chill, but clearly not.

"I came up to see the other team." I shrugged, but his hand stayed on my shoulder, pushing me back.

"Then wait for them outside." He directed me toward the stairs and forced me down several steps.

"Back off, buddy." Misty tried to come between us, but her tiny size made her more adorable than threatening.

This guy wasn't letting up, and there was no way I was getting into it with them. I'd just have to wait by the bus until the guys came out. "Fine, whatever."

"Next time, don't bring your puck bunny ass down here." He slurred his words, and the hair on my neck stood as the realization that this asshole was drunk sank in.

I lifted my hands in agreement. "Okay, I'll leave, and I won't be coming back."

"You fucking better."

I startled, and the man let me go when the boards shook with the force of Lucas banging on them. “Get your fucking hands off her,” he growled, and I was pretty sure the only thing stopping him from attacking this guy was the glass between us.

The fan looked between Lucas and me and let me go. Lucas ignored him completely, his eyes catching on me. “You okay, babe—”

A player slammed into Lucas from behind, driving his head directly into the glass. It snapped back with the impact, and my heart stopped as his eyes glossed over and he collapsed in front of me. The force of my pulse came back with a vengeance, pounding in my ears with each second that Lucas didn’t move.

“Get up. Get up. Please get up.” I chanted it over and over again, but he didn’t move. My eyes burned, and my ribs felt like they cut into my lungs when the medics got to him and he didn’t respond when they flashed light into his eyes. “Please, Lucas.”

The crowd was silent as we all watched them lift Lucas’s unconscious body onto the gurney. I focused on his chest, trying to make out any sign he was breathing, but the layers of padding he wore made it nearly impossible. *No, no, no, no.* This couldn’t be happening. I just got him back. I sucked in a wet breath and begged him to stay with me, but my words were lost to him.

Distantly, I could feel Misty wrap me in her arms and whisper in soothing tones, but I couldn’t focus on anything but the scene in front of me. My strong, smart, wonderful man was laid out, and there was nothing I could do to help him.

The medics lifted the board between them and carried him carefully off the ice. I was running before I could process it and was pushing through the doors that led to the dressing room before anyone could stop me.

They were already hauling him toward the open exit door, and the night flashed bright with the red and white lights of the ambulance. I had to get to him. I pushed my way past his coach. “I’m coming with you.”

The medic raised a brow. “I’m sorry, miss, but only immediate family can come in the ambulance.”

“I said. I’m. Coming. With. You.” I growled out each word.

Before I could step forward, I was hauled off my feet and pressed against a solid chest. “We’ll go right to the hospital, Pips,” Jax said in my ear, and my heart rate started to calm. I turned in his arms and met his wet eyes.

“He has to be okay, right? He has to be.” I buried my face into his shirt,

and he tightened his arms around me. He must have ripped off his clothes to be in his hoodie and joggers already.

“He’s going to be fine. Just another day for a hockey player.” He tried to make a joke, but we’d both been around the sport long enough to know that a blow to the head had serious consequences.

Jax grabbed my hand and led me toward the front. “Wait. You didn’t drive.”

Misty popped around the corner and held out her keys. “Let’s go.”

If the drive to the hospital felt like torture, the wait felt like purgatory. It had been at least two hours since we’d pulled into the emergency room only to be told no one could go in. My head snapped up every time a nurse came by just in case they had news, but no one stopped.

“Here, I thought you could use this.” A coffee came into view, and my gaze snapped to River’s. I didn’t even realize he and Alex were here.

I took a small sip of the coffee. “Thanks.”

“I grew up here and know one of the nurses. She said Lucas is stable, and once the rounds are done, she’ll let you go in there.”

I jumped to my feet and wrapped my arms around his waist, barely avoiding covering him with scalding liquid. “Thank you, thank you, a million times thank you.”

He stepped back and met my eyes. “Piper, there’s something you need to know. He still isn’t conscious, and they don’t know what state he’ll be in when he wakes up.”

My gut clenched, but I didn’t have the energy to comprehend what that meant. I just needed to get to him. “Take me.”

River walked me over to a woman dressed in blue scrubs who was giving me a sad look. She reached out and squeezed my hand. “I can take you to see him.”

I followed her into the room, my body on complete autopilot as my brain struggled to keep up. It wasn’t until I saw him that I took a breath. He looked better—the ashiness that had taken over his face had been replaced by warmth. I walked forward and interlaced our fingers before looking back to the nurse. “Do you have a guess on how long he’ll be out?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know anything more, but the doctor will come by as soon as he wakes up to explain everything.” The nurse left us alone, and I dragged a chair to his bedside. The lights were dimmed in his private room, and I tracked the graph of his heartbeat as it skipped evenly along the screen.

Resting my head on the bed, I quietly sobbed. I needed him to wake up. I had so much I needed to say. Fingers grazed my hair behind my ear, and I gasped, shooting up off the bed. Lucas searched my eyes for several seconds. “What happened? The last thing I remember was some asshole pushing you.”

I collapsed back in my chair, letting out a breath. “You were hit from behind and slammed into the boards. Lucas, you scared the crap out of me.” My chin wobbled, and Lucas interlaced our fingers.

“You’re here,” Lucas said, eyes still searching mine, and tears spilled over my cheeks as a sob escaped my chest.

“Are you kidding me? Don’t you ever do that to me again.”

He ignored my words, cupping my cheek and brushing my tears away with his thumb. “I thought you were done fighting for me. You have every reason to be. But you’re here. Fuck, I’m so sorry, Piper. I should’ve told you.”

I nodded and leaned into his hand. His eyes landed on where we were connected and widened with what looked like awe. “I can’t say I’m exactly happy with how you handled things, but I think I understand.” I took a deep breath. “I really needed you, and turns out I never completely lost you. It’s sweet in its own messed-up way. It took me a bit to understand all the things you did, but honestly, my heart just breaks that you blame yourself.”

His jaw clenched before he said, “Piper, I know you don’t think so, but I was why he charged off.”

I cut him off, needing him to understand how wrong he was. “I was on the phone with him, and Lucas, it wasn’t your fault. You were his brother, and he just needed to calm down. He understood—he just didn’t see the car. It was an accident.”

Lucas sucked in a shuddering breath and dropped his forehead to mine. “I’m so fucking sorry. I never should have left you like that. It wasn’t just guilt that I caused Marcus’s crash... I was terrified if you knew, you’d hate me. I can live through a lot of things, but I couldn’t live through that.”

He lifted his head, and whiskey eyes met mine. “The grief app... I went looking for you, and when I saw your username, KillerB, I couldn’t stop myself from reaching out. It didn’t take long until I was sure it was you. I know it’s fucked-up, and I should have told you sooner. The things you said, I couldn’t stand knowing you were alone. That not even your parents could help you through. It was the only way I could think of to be there for you.”

“You could’ve stayed. I needed you to stay.” I swallowed hard, finally saying it out loud.

“I’m a fucking idiot.”

I smiled at that, and he bored his gaze into mine, waiting until the moment went back to being serious. “I will regret not staying for the rest of my life. I’m done making decisions for you. I thought I lost you this time. Never again. I can’t promise I won’t fuck up, but I’ll promise to never keep it from you.”

I covered his hands with my own and forced him to look at me. “Listen, we’re going to fight—that’s just a part of us, but we will always be together. We will always be worth fighting for. You will always be worth fighting for.”

“Fuck, I love you.” His mouth crashed onto mine, and I hummed at the back of my throat as he swept his tongue against mine.

We jerked apart when someone cleared their throat loudly. “I’m glad to see you’re awake, but I’m going to have to run some tests now.” The nurse from earlier smiled at us, and I could feel my cheeks turning crimson.

I pushed the chair back and moved toward the corner of the room, not wanting to be in the way but also not willing to leave.

She let us know the doctor would be in shortly, and the guys entered the second she left. Jax came in first and immediately wrapped Lucas in a hug. “Thank fuck, man. I’ll fucking kill you if you do that to me again.”

“I’ll try not to take an illegal check to the back next time.” Lucas huffed out a laugh, but Jax turned serious.

“I should’ve been there to stop it.”

“Fuck off. It wasn’t even your shift.” Lucas pushed Jax away with a friendly shove, and both friends smiled at each other. “I’m fine. Probably head home tonight.”

The doctor walked in, holding a clipboard. “Mr. Knight, you won’t be going anywhere tonight. You took a severe hit to the head and have a concussion. Although your alertness and speech pattern are all a good sign; I’ve got you booked in for a CT in a few hours. If it’s clear in the morning, you can head home. Now, I hate to do this to all of you, but visiting hours are over, and I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Alex and River both said something quietly to Lucas that I didn’t make out before leaving, quickly followed by Jax. I stepped up to the side of the bed and squeaked when Lucas pulled me onto it, and I landed with my hands

on his chest. He leaned up and kissed me breathless before settling back. “I’ll see you in the morning, babe. Keep the boys out of trouble.”

Alex, River, and Jax ended up having to take the bus home that night. I was pretty sure Misty lost her mind when the coach said she could catch a ride so I could keep the car with me. I stayed in the waiting room the rest of the night, only catching a few minutes of sleep here and there before a nurse came and rested her hand on my shoulder, and my eyes snapped open.

A lady in her late fifties smiled down at me. “You can go in now.”

She laughed when I flew from my seat and headed straight to Lucas. He was already awake, grimacing at the green Jell-O he was trying to swallow. It wasn’t until I saw him that the exhaustion of the last twenty-four hours hit. It must’ve been written all over my face because he tugged me into his side until I was laid on the bed, half on top of him. He slid his hand down my back and cupped my waist. “Aren’t I the one who’s supposed to look near death?”

I stiffened at his joke. “Not funny.”

He kissed my head and tucked me closer. “Get some rest. I’m taking you home today.”

THIRTY-FOUR
LUCAS

Piper walked through the front door with a wide smile and a brown paper bag that was nearly the size of her torso. “I thought we’d have tortellini tonight.”

My eyes roamed over her sundress–puffer jacket combo, and I smiled. She’d left her gold hair down around her shoulders, and it haloed her face. “Sounds delicious.”

I set down the book I’d been reading—there were dragon riders, challenges, and fights to the death. Super badass—and met her in the kitchen. I grabbed the bag and tugged her closer until her lips were on mine. She made soft, needy sounds as I trailed my free hand lower on her spine and pressed her hips against me. I broke the kiss and rested my forehead against hers. “I missed you.”

“I’ve only been gone a few hours,” she said with a breathy laugh.

Piper had been at our house every day, hovering over me for the last week. The doctor said I had a low-grade concussion, and my passing out had more to do with the angle of impact than anything else. I’d be back to normal and up for game day next weekend, but that didn’t stop her from worrying.

“I don’t see your point.” I kissed her between her brows, setting the bag on the counter, and pulled out ingredients. Onions, garlic, tomatoes, and vinegar. I held up a package of premade chicken tortellini and grinned. “Isn’t this cheating?”

She grabbed it from my hand with an over-exaggerated huff. “Well, unless you want to wait the five hours it would take us to make them from scratch, that’ll have to do.”

Since the doctor said electronics were off-limits, we’d spent time daily cooking together. The guys were ecstatic at all the food, but I loved the way

she flitted around the kitchen and bossed me around.

“Fill up the large pot, and turn it up to high.”

I wrapped my arms around her from behind, burying my face into the back of her neck and breathing her in. “Yes, ma’am.” But instead of doing what she asked, I moved her hair, revealing the column of her neck, and placed slow, wet kisses there.

She hummed at the back of her throat and leaned into my touch, causing me to smile. My girl was so receptive to me, and I wasn’t lying when I said I missed her.

“Dinner.” Her raspy breaths as I made my way over her shoulders undermined her protest.

“Fuck dinner.” I slid one hand up, cupping her breast, and lowered the other one to cup her core through her dress. She arched back, pressing her body into my hands, and ground her ass into my cock. “You look stunning tonight, baby.”

“Mmhm.” Her hands laid over mine, applying more pressure, and I wasn’t sure she even heard me. Fuck, that was hot.

I groaned, spinning her to face me and capturing her mouth. She lifted onto her toes, and the kiss turned hungry. I nipped her bottom lip before diving my tongue into her mouth and shivered when she sucked on it. Jesus. I gripped her thighs, lifting her, and placed her ass on the counter, raising her dress up her thighs so I could fit between them.

Piper braced herself with her palms and dropped her head back when I guided her pussy against my cock. “You like that, babe?”

“God, yes.” She rolled her hips, chasing the pressure her body craved.

Gripping the outside of her legs, I gradually slid my hands up her thighs and rested my thumb over her clit. Her panties were already damp, and my cock wept to be inside her. I pushed the fabric to the side and circled her clit beneath my thumb in the tight circles that she liked. Her mouth opened in a silent cry from her orgasm rocking through her. I damn near came at the sight of her grinding against me.

I was seconds away from fucking her on the counter when she pushed me, and I stumbled a few feet back. My protest caught when she hopped off the counter, dropped to her knees, and looked up at me with wide blue eyes.

I took a shuddering breath when she slowly lowered my shorts until my cock was free.

I reached down and pushed her hair from her face. My girl looked pretty

on her knees. My body jolted when she licked the precum from my seam and sucked the head of my dick into her mouth, humming around it. My knees buckled, and I had to brace my arm over her to grasp the counter as she took me further into her mouth. I ground my teeth, fighting the urge to jack into her, but lost it when she gripped my hip, pulling me deeper, and swallowed around me.

“Fuck.” I thrust into her mouth, fucking eating up the tears in her eyes as she took me deeper. A tremble ran through me as she moaned around my cock, and my hips twitched. My orgasm built in my spine, sending sparks through my muscles. My balls tightened, and just the thought of coming in her pretty little mouth had me nearly undone.

She reached up and massaged them in her palm, and my fingers dug into her hair, pushing her head down faster as I chased my release. She moaned, and my brain shattered with my release, marveling at how she swallowed every last drop.

I crouched down and lifted her in my arms, walking directly to my room. I wasn't done with her, but like hell I was going to let the guys see her like that. I placed her on the bed and helped lift her dress over her head, and removed her panties before stepping back.

She was all flushed skin and pink nipples, and there were marks from where my stubble marked her skin. “Fuck, you're beautiful.”

Her eyes darkened, and she followed my movements as I pulled my shirt over my hands and dropped my shorts and boxers to the floor. My cock was already hard again from just looking at her.

I stepped between her legs and buried my fingers into her hair, tugging her head back. Her mouth dropped open, and I didn't hesitate to capture it with mine. She tasted like me, and my hands tightened on the sides of her bare ass, hard enough to leave bruises. Fuck, the things she did to me.

I helped guide her so she lay completely on the bed and slid a hand over her lower back and the other below her shoulder blades between her and the mattress. “Lucas, fuck me.”

Yes, ma'am. I kissed her neck and down her heaving chest before finally sucking her nipple into my mouth. She arched her back, crying out from the pressure, and I held her like that, supported from underneath. I devoured her tits one after the other before kissing my way over her stomach and between her thighs.

She gasped as my breath landed on her sensitive skin. I nuzzled my nose

against her, breathing in her sweet scent, and groaned when she pressed down on my head. I ran my tongue between her folds and captured her hips, keeping them still as I licked every drop of her. Her hips moved as much as they could where I held her in place, and she made needy, pleading sounds as I took my time with her. I fucking loved this part, when I controlled every second of her pleasure, driving her higher into a stronger release.

“Lucas, stop teasing me,” she pleaded, and I sank two fingers into her entrance. I was slowly teaching her to be more verbal, demanding what she wanted.

“Is that what you need, baby?” With my hand off her hip, she was free to move and took no time to grind herself into my face.

“Make me come. Please make me come.”

I groaned low in my throat, unable to resist her pleas, and sucked her clit while pumping my fingers in harder. She clenched around me with her impending release. I curled my fingers into the soft spot of her interior wall, and she pulsed with her release. I slowed but didn't stop until every drop of her orgasm was released.

I kissed my way up her body, taking my time with her nipples, and settled my hips between hers. She ran her tongue over my chin and mouth, cleaning herself from me, and my eyes rolled back into my head. I drove my cock into her, unable to stop myself, and held myself completely buried.

I held her gaze as I rocked slowly in and out, drawing every ounce of pleasure. I pushed a piece of her hair behind her ear and grazed her lips with mine. “I love you.”

Tears pooled in her eyes as she said, “I love you too.”

I made love to her in slow, even strokes, placing kisses over her heated skin and running my hands everywhere I could touch. I increased the rhythm, and Piper ran her nails over my back, moaning into my mouth. I kissed down her jaw, under her ear, and buried my face into her neck as I moved harder, deeper, listening to the sounds she made and adjusting until I hit just right and she was calling my name on repeat. “That's it, baby. There you go, come on my cock.”

She stiffened and trembled in my arms as her pussy clenched around me, pulling me over the edge with her. I collapsed for several moments before rolling onto my back and taking her with me.

Piper rested her chin on my chest and smiled. “I think that might've been the best yet.”

“Something to top for next time.” I gripped her ass, giving it a little squeeze before smoothing my palm over her stomach and placing a kiss under her navel. “How fucked-up is it that I’m a little sad that there isn’t a baby in here.”

She laughed. “Pretty fucked-up.”

I could stay like this forever, but the front door banged in, and I could make out the sound of several people entering the house.

“Hey, what’s for dinner?” Jax called out from the kitchen.

Piper’s cheeks pinkened, and she bit her lip against her giggles.

I kissed her again, slow and easy. “You have always been mine, Piper. I’m going to marry you. You’re just not ready for me to ask you yet.”

After dinner, Piper had all four of us guys sit in the living room. I watched her as she walked into the kitchen, pulling the whiteboard for the Hunt from the wall, and stood in front of us. She was wearing my shirt, and even though I knew there were shorts hidden under it, the look of her already had my mouth watering.

“This”—she pointed to the board—“is over.”

“But—” Jax began, but Piper held up her hand.

“It’s gross and a little demeaning.”

“The girls know,” he protested.

“Oh, so you tell them it’s a competition, or do you tell them it’s for one night because those two things are very different.” She placed a hand on her hip and raised a brow. My lips twitched.

Jax actually blushed and shut his mouth.

“That’s what I thought.” Piper wiped the numbers off with her palm and beamed. “That’s better. Go find a different way to be disgusting.”

I loved it when she was bossy like this. I jumped up from the couch and lifted her off her feet, throwing her over my shoulder.

“Let me down!” Her voice was a high-pitched squeal, and I slapped her ass hard enough she sucked in a breath. “You’re going to pay for that.”

“Looking forward to it, Killer.” I rubbed the spot where my hand connected, and just before I walked through the door, I heard Alex say, “So

we all saw I won, right?”

EPILOGUE

UNIVERSITY JUNIOR YEAR

Lucas turned up to my dorm room over an hour ago and told me he was taking me on a date and to dress fancy, then proceeded to give zero other details. I glanced at him where he sat on my bed watching me get ready, and my stomach fluttered in anticipation. Unfortunately, the way his black dress pants clung to his muscular thighs and the heather-gray cashmere sweater molded his chest had me so distracted I'd spent more time watching him than getting ready.

I held a purple dress with yellow stripes up to my chest and swapped it out with a navy one with white flowers. I liked the purple dress more, but it was a little bit much for a regular night out. "Which of these do you like better?"

"Baby, I'm not sure if you realize this, but I think you're stunning in both." He stood behind me as I watched myself in the mirror and dropped his mouth to my ear, causing shivers to run down my spine. "Wear whatever makes *you* feel prettiest."

My chest warmed, and I leaned against him, resting my head on his shoulder. This man had done wonders for my self-esteem. My lips curled, and I lifted his shirt up over my head, leaving me only in a pair of matching underwear. Lucas groaned, hands flying to my hips, and his gaze darkened on me in the mirror.

He spun me in his arms, and his mouth descended on me with a hungry kiss. I moaned into his mouth when his hands gripped my ass and pressed me against him. I pulled back. "You sure you don't want to stay home instead?"

"Not a chance in the world." Lucas kissed my forehead and stepped back.

I tipped my head to the side, even more curious about what the plan was. Although his eyes were hooded with heat, there was something off about how he was acting. His hands lifted off me, and he cracked his knuckles before pulling the purple dress from my hand. “Is this the one you like?”

I ran my hand over the silk fabric. “How’d you know?”

“Your eyes lit up when you held it in the mirror.” Lucas removed the dress from the hanger and bunched it together, lifting it above my head. I guided my hands through the straps and smiled when he let the fabric fall around me.

His thumb traced the thin strap on my shoulder, then trailed down my side, over the tapered bodice, and into the flowing skirt. “You look stunning, Killer.”

His voice was a low rasp, and I stepped closer, determined to get him to change his mind and stay home. There was something about him tonight that had me wanting to snuggle into him and never let him go.

His hand cupped my jaw, thumb stroking my cheek. “You’ll need a jacket.”

“You’re really serious about going out?” I huffed out a breath, grabbing my jacket from off my dresser.

His stare deepened, holding me in place as he scanned me from head to toe and back again. “Dead serious.”

Lucas tucked me under his arm, and I wrapped my hands around his hips as we walked through the Coventry Gardens. The position made our progress slow, but he didn’t seem to mind. I’d briefly come here during the day, but nothing prepared me for the gardens at night. The winding path was lined with every type of flower imaginable and lit by small display lights that showed off topiaries sculpted into the shape of different animals.

The place was made all the more magical by the reflection of the city lights on the Detroit River that ran parallel to the path. The place was something out of a fairy tale that had me leaning further into Lucas.

His hand twitched at my side, and his chest rose in shallow pants. He wasn’t looking at me; instead, his attention was pointed toward a concrete

railing up ahead. My gaze trailed over the structure, unsure of what was so interesting when people popped out.

No, not people. Our friends. They unfurled a giant banner, and my breath caught in my chest at the writing across it: *Will You Marry Me*.

My gaze snapped to Lucas, but he was already down on one knee in front of me, looking back with a soft, loving gaze.

“Piper, since the day you came crashing into my life, even my seven-year-old brain understood the world had somehow shifted. I spent the next fifteen years figuring out what that meant. But Piper, I know exactly what it means now. It means that life without you is meaningless. No amount of money or awards could come close to the happiness you bring me. Even the thought of us being apart makes my chest ache with a hollowness that’s too painful to describe.”

My heart pounded against my ribs, and I pressed a palm to my chest, trying to hold it in. Lucas gave me a sad smile, and tears pooled in his eyes, catching the light as he continued.

“I almost lost you, and it would have been the biggest mistake of my life because, Piper, we are meant to be together. If soul mates existed, you’d be mine. I’ve spent too much time afraid everyone would discover I was broken... You looked at the most vulnerable, shattered parts of me and loved me anyway.

“I will mess up again, but I promise if you let me, I will love you more than anyone. That you will always be the most important person in my life, and I would gladly turn the world upside down for your happiness. I know we’re still young, and with graduation and the NHL coming up, things are going to be hard. But if the last years have proven anything, it’s that if anyone can do this, it’s us.

“Piper, I am deeply, irrevocably in love with you. Will you spend the rest of your life with me—”

“Yes.” Before he was even done asking, I was nodding and shouting yes at him. He stood, wrapping me in his arms and twirling around before stealing my breath with a slow, languid kiss. The crowd cheered, and I buried my face into Lucas’s chest. I’d forgotten about them.

Both of our parents were here, along with a smiling Alex and River. Misty stood by Shana, wiping tears from her eyes. My eyes caught on Jax. He was looking at Sidney while everyone was looking at us. I leaned into Lucas so he could hear me over the cheering.

“I think Jax is in trouble.”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

The night went by in a haze of congratulations and best of lucks. Lucas and Jax had planned the entire thing, and we ended the night in a venue nearby. My eyes had gone wide, and tears burned at the corners when I saw the double-length table that had all my favorite food on it, including a Froot Loop station with almond milk.

I was tucked into Lucas’s side, watching our guests dance, when Mr. Knight came up to us. Lucas reluctantly let me go so his dad could wrap me up in one of his giant bear hugs, followed by his mom pulling me in for an equally tight squeeze.

“I always said you were like a daughter to me. About time this kid finally asked you,” Mr. Knight said, pulling his son into a hug of his own. He looked at Lucas. “You better understand how lucky you have it. Most people don’t see that kind of love in their lives.” He glanced back at his wife, and there was a charged moment between them before he returned to his son. “Think of all the best ways to treat her, then double it.”

Lucas tucked me back into his side and kissed the top of my head. “You don’t have to worry. I know exactly how lucky I am.”

The Knights moved on, and my eyes caught on Jax. I tugged Lucas behind me as I weaved through the crowd to get to their table. Instantly, I wrapped Sidney in a hug. We’d only really gotten to know each other for a few months, but anyone who could make Jax look as sappy as that was already family in my mind. Jax had his work cut out for him to convince her of that. But by the way he was looking at her, he was more than happy to take up the challenge. I gave her arm a light squeeze. “I’m happy you came. Lucas told me you almost couldn’t make it.”

Jax shifted, and something dark passed over his face. Whatever had happened to her plans that allowed Sidney to come here, Jax wasn’t happy about it. She gave me a wide smile. “Congratulations.”

“Let me know if he gives you any trouble.” Jax winked at me and wrapped his arms around his date. Warmth flooded me to see my best friend happy.

“Piper,” my mom called, and I was forced to go through the crowd, mingling for the rest of the night.

I was nearly dead on my feet, exhausted from talking to so many people, when Lucas led me toward the dance floor. He wrapped his arm around my

waist, holding up most of my weight, and I rested my cheek against his chest. I relaxed into him, happy to get a moment alone, and breathed him in. As we swayed together, it finally caught up that this was really happening.

I raised onto my toes, brushing his lips with mine. “You’re going to marry me... I’m going to be your—”

“Wife.” His mouth descended on mine, and the world fell away.

10 YEARS LATER

“No, no, no. We don’t touch that.” I gently lifted the remote from Marcus’s sticky fingers. He’d just turned four on Friday and was still hyped up from sugar. I wiped it clean before setting it on a higher shelf in the family seating area. Boston was lucky enough to host this year’s All-Star weekend, which meant we got to stay in our usual clubhouse.

They’d decorated it with families in mind, since most childless WAGs liked to sit and watch the game from the stands, whereas the rest of us preferred to sequester toddlers back here, where it was easier to keep them entertained.

“Mama, I don’t like it.” Marcus looked up at me with bright blue eyes he’d inherited from me and scrunched his freckled covered nose he’d got from his daddy. He tugged his hand, wiggling his body as if I was torturing instead of removing the chocolate sauce from a donut he’d only half finished.

“Just one more second.” I used a wet wipe between his fingers while he struggled to get away and just cleaned off the last one when he let out a high-pitched laugh.

A flurry of brown curls came running in and wrapped themselves around Marcus. I skipped to where Sidney leaned against the doorframe, smiling at our kids.

I grabbed the bag from her shoulder. “How was your flight?”

“Good. The girls both napped, so it was pretty smooth. I even got to read my book.” She winked at me and walked deeper into the room. Jax would’ve come with his team last night, leaving her to do the international flight alone with their three-year-old twins. She looked around, pausing on the multi TV wall, one of which was playing some kids’ show on low volume. “This place is nice. Ottawa’s clubhouse is nothing like this.”

“You sure Jax doesn’t want to be traded here?” I smirked, and Sidney rolled her eyes.

“Ship’s sailed.” She laughed, no doubt remembering Jax’s one and only week as a Bruin.

The arena outside the door filled with music and the sound of the increasing crowd. Sidney crouched and held out both hands. “Summer, Emma, let’s go see daddy.”

Both girls spun, giggling as they ran towards their mom. The kids always found it exciting to visit new arenas. Marcus followed them out into the rink and I made my way to the playpen next to the couch.

“Up!” Where Noah sat with a gummy smile and his hands raised. His eyes were a warm brown and his dark blonde hair curled close to his head.

I scooped him up in my arms and tickled a giggle out of him. “Let’s go see daddy.”

He parroted daddy back to me and we joined Sidney at the glass. The way the stadium was set up there was a walkway between the team benches and the bleachers, leaving a four foot wide space to stand next to the boards.

Alex and River skated by with wide smiles and all four kids squealed seeing their *uncles*. But nothing compared to the noise they made when Jax and Lucas stopped in front of us.

Lucas placed his gloved hand on the glass and I nearly dropped Noah when he tried to throw himself out of my arms to get to it. “Hold on.”

I reached down, lifting Marcus so that he was at the same level as his dad, and brought them both close enough to touch the glass barrier.

I smiled at Jax’s booming laugh from beside me when Emma leaned in and blew a raspberry. The kids erupted into giggles and I met Lucas’s gold rimmed eyes. He was already watching me, a small smile on his face.

He mouthed “I love you.” before telling the kids if they’re good, they can get ice cream later. I laughed because I knew he’d be the one staying up with them. Even though both guys were pro-athletes, Lucas and Jax spent most of their time at home helping with their families. I didn’t relate to ‘my helpless husband’ social media posts because Lucas was always all in.

Marcus squirmed out of my arms as soon as Lucas skated off and was already running toward the clubhouse. “Come on! I brought toys!”

The game ran long with double overtime and the kids were all passed out on the couches like tiny drunk people at a kegger. I tucked my feet under me and smiled up at Sidney when she handed me a glass of red wine.

“So how’s work?” I asked her, and she beamed. She’d taken the full eighteen-months of Canadian parental leave and I’d never seen anyone so excited to get back to work.

She collapsed onto the couch opposite me and ran a finger through Summer’s hair. “Good, I just started on this policy—”

Music burst from the large screen in the middle of the wall. I quickly turned the volume down and spotted Lucas sitting at a table with three mics resting in front of him. I guess he drew the unlucky straw to talk to the press.

“You played great out there tonight. Hardest slapshot in the NHL,” an unseen reporter asked.

Lucas shrugged. “It was a lucky night.”

He said it like he hadn’t spent every night for the last four months working on that particular skill. He’d said he wasn’t the fastest, but he could shoot the hardest. Apparently, he’d been right.

“I saw your family out there tonight. How does it feel knowing they’re watching you play?”

The smile that took over Lucas’s face knocked the wind from me. “It’s the best feeling in the world.”

“Better than winning the cup?”

“Hands down, not even a question.”

It wasn’t long before all four guys came into the clubhouse. Lucas walked in first, wearing a wide smile after their competition, but snapped his mouth shut when he spotted the sleeping kids. He kissed the top of my head and lifted Marcus into his arms, adjusting his small head against his chest. “How long have they been out?”

I chuckled, as a drool dripped from our son’s mouth and soaked through Lucas’s shirt. He didn’t seem to notice. “They didn’t last an hour.”

“Figures.” He nodded hello at Sidney, keeping his voice soft even though we all knew once the kids were out, they were practically dead to the world.

She beamed at him careful not to jostle her daughter, who’d curled on her

lap. “You were great out there.”

“You better not be cheering on my opponent.” Jax came into the room, and walked up to Sidney until he loomed over her, tipping her head back before taking her mouth in a fierce kiss that had my toes curling.

“We don’t want to see that,” Alex said, joining us, followed by River. They took the two club chairs on the opposite side of the sofas.

Jax settled on the couch, throwing his hand behind Sidney, and gave us one of his dimpled smiles. “You guys enjoy me kicking everyone’s ass?”

“You are such a little shit.” Lucas laughed from beside me. “I had the hardest shot.”

“Yeah, but you're slow as shit.” Alex joined in.

River just huffed out a breath and shook his head at Alex.

“We need to get together more often. It shouldn’t take the all-star game to get you all in the same place,” said Sidney. She ran her hand along Jax’s thigh, and his eyes darkened on her. They weren’t going to last long.

Lucas must have noticed, because his fingers trailed down my neck, sending shivers through me. I looked up at him and he raised a brow. Yeah, we were definitely cutting this reunion short.

Alex’s phone beeped, and we all looked his way. A pink flush crawled up over his neck and covered his cheeks. He passed the phone to River, who swallowed hard and ran his tongue over his lips.

Jax was the first to speak. “So, how’s Mia?”

THE END



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THANK YOU

Thank you so much for reading Rules Of The Game. Keep an eye out for Alex, River, and Mia's story! They'll be coming to you in the fall.

If you have time to do a quick rating, every star helps! Your time and support means so much to me.

Thank you to the Hockey Hoes group chat for always being entertaining. To all of my beta readers. Without you, none of this would be possible. And to Val for guiding me through. A special shout out to Lo. Love you, darling.