

Book Three



Breakaway

Ballad University

T.D Lua

Breakaway

Ballad U Series # 3

T.D Lua

Copyright © 2023 by T.D Lua

All rights reserved.

No parts of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to any person, living or dead, or any event or occurrence is purely coincidental. The characters and story lines are created purely by the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Cover Designer: Sammy-Jo Laws

Editor: Marissa Shaw at Shawsome Reads Editing Services

Dedication

To the ones who had to lose themselves to find a better version. Know that starting over is okay and never too late.

"Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves."

— *Henry David Thoreau*

Krissy,

I made your dream man, you're welcome.

Playlist

Keeping Score- Dan + Shay, Kelly Clarkson
blame's on me- Alexander Stewart
Bad At Love- Halsey
I'll Be Waiting- Cian Ducrot
Save Myself- Ed Sheeran
Forget Me- Lewis Capaldi
Locksmith- Sadie Jean
Forever and Ever and Always- Ryan Mack
Start over- Jessica Baio, Mykyl
QUARTER LIFE CRISIS- Taylor Bickett
Heartbeat- James Author
Hate myself- Tate McRae
Into Your Arms- Witt Lowry, Ava Max
Stay With Me- ayokay, Jeremy Zucker
Mercy- Shawn Mendes
Only Love Can Hurt Like This- Paloma Faith

Sundown- Nic D, Vwillz

Miss Us Then- Leah Marie Mason

Love is Gone- SLANDER, Dylan Matthews

Never knew a heart could break itself- Zach Hood

Favorite Song- Toosii

Maybe Next Time- Jamie Miller, Moira Dela Torre

Your Bones- Chelsea Cutler

Dial Drunk- Noah Kahan

Something to Remember- Matt Hansen

Author Note

Hi everyone,

First off I want to thank you for giving Breakaway a chance. I have been so excited to write Lilah and Nix's story since the second I met them in Freezing the Puck. If you are familiar with the Ballad U series you know that it's based in a college setting, so Breakaway will have scenes and chapters from Li and Nix's time in college, but the majority of the book will take place post-graduation for both characters. I hope none of you find this disappointing. I contemplated so many times if this book should stay in this series and the final decision came down to, it should, for so many reasons. The biggest one being how much the story is interconnected with the last two and from the start it was always supposed to be this way. Li and Nix changed their whole story on me, and it is better suited for them to complete their journey and the Ballad U series in the Pro league.

Next, I would like to formally state that although the Pro league mentioned in my story is similar to the NHL, it should not be held to a comparable

standard and in no way should anything in this book of fiction be a form of representation of the National Hockey League.

So now that I have rambled on, let me introduce you to the dynamite couple.

Contents

Prologue

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Epilogue Part One

Epilogue Part Two

The End

Acknowledgments

More By T.D Lua

Prologue

Lilah

It's the night of the costume party and here I am standing off to the side, watching the world go by around me, something I have done since I was a young girl. Swirling my vodka-cran around in my red cup, I feel the tiniest bit of sweat running down between my cleavage—I swear it's a hundred degrees in here with everyone packed into the Hockey House like sardines in a tin can.

Pulling at the tight material of my skimpy light blue dress, I'm trying to force some airflow up my skirt. Happy I decided against the white gloves, even though Mar said they would have completed my sexy *Cinderella* costume, I would have been a sweaty mess with those things on.

The feel of vibration coming from my handbag that's sitting on my shoulder stops me from finding an ice bath and jumping in it. I'm sure it's Lottie looking for us. She didn't even want to come to this party, but Mar and I begged her to because as soon as the school year starts, she'll be fully focused on school, and seeing her will happen less and less. Although all three of us take school seriously, Lottie is on another level. Scanning the room, my eyes land on the makeshift dance floor where I catch Mar seductively rolling her hips on Chase Newman, a hockey player on Ballad U's team. With her arms locked around his neck, she's staking claim and hoping to go home with him tonight. Chiral says Chase is bad news, but Mar is only looking for a fun time; although I know in her heart she wants to settle down and find a good guy that will make her happy. Unlike me—not that I don't want to find a nice guy, but I can't.

A second buzz pulls me away from my best friend and to my phone, digging it out instant chills run down my spine as I stare at the screen. The very baggage I was just speaking of.

Micha.

Micha: Li, please. Just come see me.

Micha: Or send me some money and I'll come see you. I need you.

I can't help the feeling of frustration, exasperation, and heartbreak from reading these texts from my first and only love.

Micha was my everything at one point. We were best friends growing up. Many nights consisted of sneaking off to the pool house when our parents were too drunk and busy socializing to notice we even existed. To getting drunk ourselves for the first time, to later on taking each others' virginities on a warm summer night up in the Hamptons: he was my constant, the light of my life, the one who was there for me when no one else was, until he wasn't.

I'll never forget the day of the accident during our junior year of high school, one bad hit out on the ice and everything changed for him, for us. Breaking his femur and ankle took him out of the game, the game that gave him life. He always used to say, *All I ever need is you and hockey, nothing else matters to me.*

But that was before and now all he needs is his next high.

"Who do I need to beat up?" A deep, authoritative, and honey-covered voice pulls me from my thoughts. Tucking my phone back into my bag and looking up and I mean way up to see who the voice belongs to.

He's leaning against the wall in that sexy kind of way—with one arm resting above me, caging me in, but still enough space between us where if I wanted to walk away I could or if I took one small step to the right, I would be engulfed by his very large, muscular body.

"What makes you think I need saving?" I ask while taking that small step to the right. Phoenix Dumbrowski is the definition of sex—he's tall, has dark locks that I want to run my fingers through, and eyes that are so captivating. I've wanted to sink my nails and teeth into him since my freshman year when

I first met him through Chiral. They play hockey together and have become the best of friends.

But I don't do relationships; one heartbreak was enough, and I can't drag another soul into the drama of my life. So, the best way to stay out of one is by not even tempting that line. That doesn't mean I can't enjoy the yummy eye-candy in front of me.

“A pretty girl like you shouldn't be standing off to the side with a sad look in her eye, so tell me who needs their ass kicked?” Nix looks over his shoulder before leaning in, just close enough his lips brush the outer part of my ear. “Just point the guy out and I'll take care of him.” There's a hint of playfulness to his voice now and as his breath skates across my skin, I'm feeling too hot for comfort, even more so than I was earlier.

Running my fingers up his arm, scraping my nails against his toned bicep, I pull him a hair closer to me, so now it's my lips brushing against him. “How about instead of beating him up, we make him jealous instead?”

Nix doesn't have to know that there is no guy—well technically no guy here—for him to beat up or help me make him jealous, because after tonight Nix will be nothing more than a little fun.

Tucking a loose strand of my blonde hair behind my ear, he then cups the side of my face, his rough fingers sending bolts of electricity through me. Locking onto his gray orbs that remind me of dark thunder storms—my favorite kind of weather—his tongue slips out running across his bottom lip, and I can't help but want to reach up and follow the path with my own.

I've never been one to shy away from what I want, and right now I want to get hot and sweaty with a very sexy hockey player. Locking my arms around Nix's neck and dragging him down to my five-foot-five self—thanks to the three inch heels I have on—I brush my lips just briefly against his. His other

hand wraps tightly onto my hip and before I know it, his mouth is fused with mine.

The fullness of his lips overpower my own and boy, can this guy kiss. I don't know who opens up to who first, but the moment our tongues slide against one another, I feel my lady bits light on fire like it's the Fourth of July. Just like his lips, his tongue conquerors my mouth, licking and lapping at every small space. His thumb sweeps across my cheekbone, making this super sexy kiss feel slightly more intimate.

Feeling bold, I wrap my leg around his waist, forcing him to step in closer to me. The roughness of his blue jeans rubbing between my thighs create an even more delicious ache, especially when he wraps his big hand around the back of my knee to hold my leg in place, the little movement caused his very hard dick to hit my clit. I moan into his mouth which has yet to leave mine. He pulls back enough to nip at my bottom lip, and I dig my heel into his ass. A little bit of pain always makes the pleasure more fun.

“Think that made him jealous?” Nix asks with a heaviness to his tone. His hand that's wrapped around my leg gives it a tight squeeze. I'm pretty sure if someone stands close enough to us, they would see my pink panties, but thankfully Nix's body shields me from everyone else in the room.

“You know what would make him really jealous?” I ask while lacing my fingers into the strands of his dark brown, almost black, hair at the base of his head. Nix lifts an eyebrow, encouraging me to answer my own question. “If he saw me go into your room.” Quickly his other eyebrow joins the first, raised up on his forehead, probably shocked by my forward gesture.

“Yeah?” is all he says, and I give him a flirtatious wink. Dropping my leg from around his waist, I adjust my dress back into its sexy, but more modest, place and grab Nix's hand. I have no idea where his room is, but I've been

coming to these parties enough to know that most of the bedrooms are upstairs, so I make my way there.

One night. I'll give myself one night with this extremely hot man, let him ruin my pussy for all I care, but it can only be for this one night.

Prologue

Phoenix

Lilah walks into my room like she owns it, but that's what is so enticing about her. She has this vibe that commands your attention. She's like the most beautiful sunset you've ever seen, and even if you take a picture, it's never as beautiful as the real thing.

I've admired Lilah from afar for three years and since that moment, I knew I was head over heels. I've kept my distance because she just seems so unattainable for me. She was the city girl that had more money than anyone knew what to do with, and I was the cowboy from a small town in Texas but tonight I decided to shoot my shot. I couldn't stand the look on her face, like she had a personal storm cloud over her head. I always want to see the sunshine rain upon her, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to keep it there.

Chiral—one of my best friends and teammates—grew up with her and always talked highly about Lilah. She's like a sister to him but always said I should keep my distance because Lilah doesn't do relationships, and he knows that I'm looking more for the future and want an exclusive relationship with someone I could grow old with.

I had my fun but the random hooks up get old real fast. Now I want that everlasting kind of love, wake up and smile, steal my breath and heart kind of love. There's just something about Lilah that makes me think she could be the one, even if she's the city girl and I'm the small town boy; I just feel it. So fuck Chiral and his opinion because tonight I'm going to shoot my shot.

“Are you just going to stand there and stare at me or are we gonna get to the fun part?” she asks, while leaning against my desk, playing with the straps of her dress. I take in the masterpiece in front of me: her blonde hair is tied up into a bun, and I can’t wait to rake my fingers through the strands that I’m sure are soft as silk. She has a body that’s full in all the right places, tits that make my mouth water, and a smile that could shatter any man’s heart.

“What, my presence isn’t fun enough?” Walking towards her, keeping just enough distance between us to draw this out a little bit longer. If Chiral is right about her not wanting to be tied down to anyone, then I’m going to make the most of this night with her. Letting go of her straps, they slide over her shoulder, and my hands cup the sides of her neck, my thumb finding her pulse that spikes as I press my hips into hers.

She lets out a sigh when my dick—that’s harder than a block of ice—makes contact with her stomach. Moving my hands away from her neck, tracing the outline of her body: from her neck, to her shoulder, to the side of her tits, to the curve of her waist, trailing down her thighs till I’m met with the hem of her skirt.

“Do you mind?” I ask as my fingers keep sweeping along the hem, wanting so badly to hike her dress up and see all the beautiful parts of her; which is every single part.

“If you don’t, I will.” She narrows her gaze at me, as if she’s challenging me. What Lilah James may not know is that I’m always up for a challenge... and I always win.

Dropping to my knees, I kiss each of her legs, then work my lips up her thighs right to her skirt. Looking up at her, I see the need and fire behind her blue orbs that remind me of the hottest parts of a flame. I wrap my hands around her thighs, slowly moving them up, bringing her skirt along, until it

wraps around her waist. She's wearing bright pink panties, the color of bubble gum and boy do I want to take a bite. Hooking my fingers into the thin straps of her underwear, I pull them down, and she rests her hands on my shoulders as I maneuver the fabric around her heels.

Unable to hold back any longer, I run the tip of my nose between her legs. Her intoxicating smell surrounds me. Nipping the top of her mound, she lets out the smallest whimper. Giving her no time to prepare, I suck her clit right into my mouth. Her nails dig so hard into my shoulders, it wouldn't surprise me if she broke the skin, but I would rather bleed out than stop devouring the most delicious pussy I have ever had the pleasure of tasting.

"Nix, oh my, just like that, please don't stop." Her words make me release a moan, sending the vibrations right to her pussy, making her rock her hips forward.

Pulling back, licking her wetness from my lips I say, "Don't plan on it till you come, Sunshine." She grabs ahold of my hair and practically shoves my head back to her center. I let a laugh slip past my lips, someone's a little needy. Can't say I blame her; my dick is leaking with pre-cum and is so hard that if I don't do something about it soon, I'll have the worst case of blue balls known to man.

Reaching for her ankle, I pick her foot up to rest on my shoulder, the heel of her shoe digs into my chest and the bit of pain just adds to the pleasure. Releasing her clit, I let the pad of my tongue run through her folds, earning me another whimper. I do this a couple more times, until she's shaking; she's close and I need to fucking get her there. I grab onto her ass, forcing her to rock her hips back and forth, encouraging her to take what she needs from me and she doesn't take long. She's riding my face like I'm her own personal stallion, and I'm sucking and nipping until the most beautiful noise releases

from her throat. With one final lick, I collect all her juices, not missing a single drop.

“Holy fuck,” Li huffs out, releasing her hold on my head. “I get why guys like girls on their knees now, that was so hot.”

“I’ll always get on my knees for you, Sunshine.”

“Sunshine?” She lifts one of her eyebrows, quizzing me on my nickname for her. Standing to my feet, I wrap my hand around her throat, not tight enough to lose her airway, but enough to bring her full attention to me and keep those pretty lips shut for a second.

“Yeah, Sunshine, because when you walk into a room everyone has to look; your smile brings so much life to others, your laugh is musical, you’re what we all orbit.”

“Someone is poetic.” She lays her hands on my waistband of my cut off shorts. I dressed up like a farmer for this costume party—it wasn’t hard to put an outfit together seeing as I really am a farmer in the summertime on my parents farm.

“So this mouth is good for more than just eating me out, it can make me swoon too.” That earns her a smirk. I don’t just plan to make her swoon; I’m going to sweep her off her feet.

“Want me to show you what the rest of my body can do?” That was cheesy as hell and I know it, but that fire is back in her eyes and I already know my answer. I pick her up by her waist and throw her over my shoulder, and she lets out a laugh and starts to squirm. Walking the three feet over to my bed, I lay her down gently, crawling over her body. I brush my mouth across hers, letting the tip of my tongue out and allowing it to get acquainted with this set of lips, but the little minx has other plans when she sucks my tongue into her mouth, pulling on the muscle. If she can suck my tongue like this, I can’t

imagine how good her mouth will feel wrapped around my cock. Her hands slide down to my waistband, undoing my belt and button. Instead of watching her struggle due to our size difference, I help her. I swiftly remove my shorts and briefs and toss them on the floor.

Before I replace my body on top of hers, I retrieve a condom out of my bedside drawer. Ripping it open with my teeth and taking the rubber and placing it on my dick, I give myself a few measured strokes and pray to the sex gods I don't cum in the first two seconds.

Li removes her dress and bra, sitting forward to unbutton my plaid cut off, and as she releases each button from its hole, I take each of her breasts in my hands giving them a firm squeeze. They're so full they almost spill out of my huge hands. I clamp my thumb and pointer finger around her nipples and tug on the flesh.

"Nix," she yelps, but there's a tone of pleasure there, so I keep playing. Ignoring my dick that I think will explode in just another second. "Please, fuck me, I need you inside me."

"I like it when you beg." I give her a wink, but I won't deny her anything, I line my dick up with her entrance and push my hips forward. "Fuuucckk," I moan.

"I..I want you to put your hands around my neck again, like earlier, but this time squeeze harder." I didn't take her to like breath play, but I'm all about it. I like control in every aspect of my life, on the farm I control the crops and livestock, I'm the playmaker on our hockey team, controlling where the puck goes, and in the bedroom I like to control my partners—of course to their level of comfortability.

"Have you ever done that before?" I ask while continuing to move my hips in a slow motion. She shakes her head no, and I can see the uncertainty that

falls on her expression. “Then we will take it slow, at any point you want to stop, say so. Got it? This only works if we’re both honest with each other and trust each other.” I emphasize the word trust because when you take someone's ability to breathe away even if it’s for a short moment, it’s important they know just because one has the power to do it, the other has the power to stop it.

“Okay,” she mumbles, but picks up my wrist and places my fingers on her neck. Squeezing my fingers lightly around her throat, not enough to even be considered breath play, I move my hips faster, driving deeper into her.

“Harder, fuck me harder,” she cries out and damn, is it music to my ears.

“You got it, Sunshine.” I take this moment to flip her around and pull her to her knees, flushing her back to my front, reentering her from behind. I trail my hand up her center flicking her clit, moving up to her belly button circling around, dragging my fingers higher up until I find her nipple, hard as stone—like my cock that is moving in and out of her at a torturously slow pace, making this last forever may be impossible but I am sure going to die trying. Twisting her nipple one final time, I move my hands up until they’re around her neck again. Squeezing a little tighter this time.

“Tap my thigh two times if you want this to stop,” I whisper into her ear, before I bite down onto her lobe. “Do you understand?” I can feel her swallow, and it only makes me harder.

“Yes, tap two times to stop.” She lays her head back onto my shoulder, panting. I lock eyes with her, thrusting my hips harder, the only sounds filling the room are skin slapping against each other and the mixture of our pants and moans.

“Good girl,” I growl. Tightening my hand around her throat just a little more, at this point she’ll feel the restriction of her airway. Taking my other

hand, I find her clit, circling the little bundle. She's so wet that I slide into her slick heat with ease.

"Nix, I'm... I'm.."

"Let go, Sunshine." Her release floods out onto my dick, flowing down to my balls and it's my last straw. I come so hard I swear the room around me spins.

All it takes is two taps against my leg to pull me from my high. I pull both my hands instantly off Lilah and remove my softening dick out of her.

Lilah bends over at the waist gasping for air. "Oh my god, Lilah are you okay?" She lifts her head, and the few blonde strands that have come out of her bun fall into her face.

"I'm more than okay." She gives me a smile, and I release the breath I was locking in. I run my finger through my hair, easing the spike of anxiety. She crawls on the bed to me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Nix, stop. That was hot and I've never come so hard in my life." She gives me a quick kiss, then gets off my bed and gathers her clothes. "We should probably head back to the party."

"Yeah, yeah, okay." I pick up my own clothes and getting dressed quickly. "So, mind if I get your number?"

She turns around with a small look of panic. "I don't do relationships, so if that's your intention..."

The feeling of disappointment washes over me, but I refuse to give up just yet so playing it off seems like the best choice. You never charge at a lioness, slow and steady. "I mean, we could just keep doing this," I say as I point between the two of us.

Her teeth sink into her front lip, I can almost physically see the gears turning in her head, before she reaches for her purse pulling her phone out

and passing it to me. I raise an eyebrow at her, almost questioning her, but I'll never look a gift horse in the mouth. I add my contact and send a text to myself so I have her number.

“This is just the start, Sunshine.”

Chapter 1

Lilah

Looking up into the stands, I'm not surprised to see my parents are missing; they had texted me earlier in the week telling me they wouldn't make it, something about needing to be at a fundraiser. Although they said I could go buy myself a new car as a graduation present. I roll my eyes again at the thought of their *kind* gesture.

I know my parents only had me because they felt like they had to. You know the whole perfect life facade they try to up-keep: get married, have a kid, and live happily ever after. I guess they missed the memo on the part when you have a kid you're supposed to you know... parent them.

But if I have learned anything, it is that blood does not make a family; it's the people who love you regardless, who support you through the highs and lows, who show up for you during your biggest moments. So when I look up and see Nix, Chiral, Liam, and sweet Lani cheering for me, Lottie, and Mar as we walk across the stage. I can't help but feel so full of love I might burst. They are my family.

Nix was never supposed to happen, I was never supposed to fall for him, but I did, and oh so fucking hard. Here we are a year and a half later, still going strong, who knew a silly costume party at the Hockey House would have led me to the man of my dreams. But, Micha is still out there somewhere and I have this nerve-wracking feeling he's going to pop back up. Over the last year, his texts have gone from needing me, missing me, and asking for money to downright scary. Every chance he gets, he reminds me I am only his and no one will come between us. I've tried every tactic to get

him to back off, but I'm scared he will make good on his threats of tracking me down.

He doesn't know I'm in Boston—just an easy car ride from the city. For the last four years, he's thought I was at Michigan State and honestly that's where I should have gone. I know I should have moved farther away for college, but Ballad U was always my dream and when I decided to go here four years ago, I still had hope for Micha—I still had hope for us to work out. It wasn't until the summer after my freshman year and the first time Micha had overdosed that the dream of him and I died.

Micha is the reason why I keep Nix at arms length, and I hate it. I hate that I'm hurting Nix by not telling him what's going on, but I know he would hunt Micha down and do God-knows-what to him. I don't want him fighting my battles, especially not now. He's about to finish his first year with the Knights, and he's been on fire out on the ice. I don't need him fucking his life up for me. I'm not worth him losing everything, despite what he thinks, I'm no one special, exhibit A my own parents couldn't give two shits about me.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't even realize the ceremony had come to an end; everyone was on their feet throwing their caps in the air, celebrating their big achievement. I get up from my chair and squeeze past some people hugging in the aisle. Lottie, Mar, and I are going to meet up at the last row of chairs and then head outside to our family.

As I continue to make my way down the middle aisle, I get this uneasy feeling that someone is watching me. I look around but there is no one alarming to me. In my moment of distraction, someone wraps their arms around me. Scaring the daylights out of me, quickly turning around, I see it's just Lottie and Mar.

“Sorry, Li. Didn't mean to scare you,” Lottie says. She rubs a comforting

hand up and down my arm. The bright lights of the facility reflect off her wedding ring. Liam and Lottie had the most beautiful beach wedding in Hawaii and in normal L&L—what I like to call them—fashion they did it all on a whim. They were only supposed to get engaged, but Liam, the impatient guy he is, just couldn't wait to claim his girl forever.

“It's okay, you just caught me off guard. Are we ready to head out?” The girls nod their heads, and we make our way to the exit. The uneasy feeling is still lingering around me, but this isn't totally un-normal for me with Micha loose.

The situation has become so out of hand that I turned to Chiral's dad, Theo. He's been using his techy skills to keep track of Micha for me, making sure he stays in the New York area, and giving me updates whenever he can. Chiral is the only one who knows about Micha, because they were once teammates and friends. He saw how things imploded after the injury and how over the last year, things with Micha have escalated to threatening texts, calling me from blocked numbers, and threats of finding me. Chiral begged me to go to the police, but when I wouldn't he told me to at least ask his dad for help and if I didn't he would. In exchange, I told him if I went to his dad, he wouldn't tell Nix anything.

I'm pulled from my thoughts as a gust of wind hits me as we finally make it out the door and we find our boys. They all look dead tired; they're in the playoffs right now and I can tell the constant travel back and forth to Florida is starting to catch up to them. But Nix told me he wasn't missing this day for anything, and he never breaks his promises.

The second he spots me among the masses, the biggest smile breaks out across his face. He's the most handsome man I have ever laid eyes on: his dark brown, almost black, hair is perfectly pushed back in that effortless way,

his gray eyes that somehow always draw me in, and his muscles—I drool every time I think about those strong arms wrapped around me, and he’s a giant, and that’s not just because I’m short; he’s six-foot-four, and he’s a walking sex god.

The moment I’m at arms length of him he pulls me right into his chest, nuzzling my neck with the tip of his nose.

“I’m so proud of you, Sunshine.” Nix has been my biggest supporter over the last year and a half, holding me accountable and pushing me to achieve all my dreams.

I’m not 100% sure what I want to do with my marketing degree yet—maybe work in fashion or for a big corporation—but right now I’m not too worried about finding a job, which I know is a privilege many don’t have. I want to enjoy this summer with my best friends and Nix. I’ll worry about my responsibilities later.

I’ve even considered taking Nix up on his offer to move into his house that’s located in the Knights Kingdom, a secluded area where many of the players have homes. But that nagging feeling still sits in the pit of my stomach and keeps me from moving our relationship forward.

“Thank you, I couldn’t have done it without you,” I whisper in his ear, as he starts to kiss up my neck.

“Of course, you could have, you’re Lilah James. You can do anything.” He gives me a quick peck on the lips and then wraps his arm around my shoulders, and I use him as my personal support beam. Wearing these heels was a bad idea, they’re killing my feet. But, beauty is pain.

Theo walks over to us and Nix lets me go to give him a hug. He’s become a father figure in my life. Even though Theo is intertwined into the elite world

as my parents are, he's always made sure Chiral was loved, and he's extended that love to me, too.

"I'm so proud of you, Li."

"Thanks, Theo, any update?" I whisper, while he still has me in a tight hug. He knows what I'm asking about without going into detail.

"No, Li. I'm sorry, but it's like he's fallen off the face of the Earth. His parents haven't mentioned anything since the last time I saw them. There is a chance, Li, that he may have succumbed to his addiction and we just haven't found him yet. I'll keep looking until we do though."

The thought of Micha lying dead somewhere brings on a sadness and hurt I didn't fully expect, not that I'm a heartless person. I don't know...I also thought a sense of relief would come with it.

I give Theo a nod to let him know I heard him, and he pats my back before letting go.

"Alright everyone, let's go celebrate," Theo hollers out to the group. He rented out the local Italian place that's close to BU that we all love.

I turn back to Nix and wrap an arm around his waist. "I'm going to head back to my apartment and change out of these shoes, want to pick me up from there so we can go together?"

"Sounds like a plan, babe. I have to run back to the house, so give me thirty minutes."

"Works for me." He gives me a quick kiss and makes his way to the visitor's parking lot, and I make my way to the back parking lot. Naturally, I was running late today, so I had to park as far away from the building as possible because all the other parking spots were taken by the time I got here.

I can't wait to get out of these heels—moving my gown to the side to dig out my keys from the pocket of my dress is no easy thing. Finally freeing my

keys, I unlock my car and slide in.

“Hi, Lilah.”

No. It can't be possible. Looking at the passenger seat, a chill runs down my spine.

“Micha? What are you doing here? How did you get in my car?” My phone is in my other pocket and because of the stupid gown, I can't reach for it. I need to run, I need to get out of my car, but it's like I'm super glued to my seat.

“You stopped responding to my text, so I came to find you instead.” Micha's eyes which normally are blue-green are overtaken by his pupils, but I can see the anger behind them.

I go to respond to him, but no words come out. I reach for the handle of the car, but even though he's high, he still has his quick hockey reflexes and wraps his fingers around my arm.

“There's no point in running, Li. I'll always find you. Now tell me, who was that guy with his hands on you?” The mention of Nix, makes my blood boil. “No answer? That's fine, I already know the answer. Phoenix Dumbrowski, plays right wing for the Knights. But what I don't seem to understand is why the FUCK he has his hands on you, Lilah!” Micha's voice booms through my SUV, and the added pressure of his hand on my arm causes me to squeal.

“Micha, you need to leave right now,” I sternly say back.

“No can do, Li. You obviously forgot who you belong to, and I'm here to remind you. Now you're going to follow everything I'm about to say or the asshole will never skate in another game again.” At that moment, Micha lifts his shirt just enough to show the gun that's hidden in his waistband. A gasp falls from my lips.

“What do you want, Micha? I’ll do anything, just please, please leave Nix alone. He didn’t do anything wrong.” My plea comes out as a whisper and I can feel tears start to well in my eyes. This is exactly what I was afraid of.

“HE DIDN’T DO ANYTHING WRONG? He took everything that was mine: my girl, my best friend, my team, he fucking took it all.” He lets go of my arm to pull at his dirty hair, his once bleach-blond strands are now almost a shade of brown from dirt, I assume.

“Just tell me what you want me to do, Micha.”

“First you’re going to leave him, you will never speak to him again, and, Li, I will know if you do and I always make good on my promises.”

No, no, no!

You have to though, you have to save him.

“O...okay” I wipe the tears as they fall down my face. “What else?”

Micha only smiles at me, and I think I’m going to be sick.

Chapter 2

Phoenix

Once I'm at Li's apartment, I shoot her a text to tell her I'm here. I stopped to pick up a bottle of her favorite wine so it took me a little bit longer than planned, but I'm hoping tonight will be an extra special night. I feel in my pocket for the little black box, it might be over the top because inside it doesn't hold a diamond ring—that's back at the house hiding in my safe—no, this is a key to my house. I'm going to beg Li to move in with me tonight. We've talked about it a little bit already, but she always diverts the conversation.

Kind of like everything else that is remotely serious in our relationship. I stopped asking Lilah to be my girlfriend a while ago and just assumed she is. I know commitment scares her, and I get it. Her parents are terrible and she's never really known what it was like to have someone who was always there for her, to love her the way she deserves, to prioritize her. But I will change all that for her, if she lets me. I want nothing more than to show her what it's like to be loved properly, to share my amazing family with her. Fuck, I just want her to be mine forever so she never has to second guess anything ever again.

I've been sitting here waiting for her for about ten minutes now. She normally is running late for everything, but she was just changing her shoes. Turning my car off, I get out and walk into Li's apartment building, nodding to Norman the doorman and walking right to the elevator.

Something feels off. I can't explain it, but it's making my heart race. Once the elevator doors open, I'm practically running down the hall to her front

door.

It's open.

Lilah was always paranoid about her door being locked.

Something is wrong. I push the door completely open and step inside.

"Lilah," calling out but there's no response. As I walk further into her apartment, I see a piece of paper on the counter and notice Li's handwriting.

Picking up the paper I read,

Nix,

I have to leave and I need you to promise you won't come looking for me. I need to do what's best for me and right now that's being alone. I know this won't make any sense to you, but just know that if love was enough, your love would be what kept me here. I love you, Nix, more than you will ever know.

Love, Lilah

What the actual fuck?

I reach in my pocket for my phone only to realize I left it in my car. I run out of the apartment, having no patience for the elevator I go for the stairs, taking the steps as fast as I can until I hit the main lobby.

"Norman, did you see Lilah leave?" I huff out.

"No, Sir. I did not."

Without thanking him—knowing my mother would be disappointed in my lack of manners—I dart towards my car.

Picking up my phone, I pull up Li's number and call her, but no answer.

"Fuck!"

I need to call Liam; he will know what to do.

After the second ring, he answers, "Hey man, where are you guys?"

"Liam, Lilah is gone. She left a note saying she needed to leave, and I tried to call her and she didn't answer I don't know what the fuck to do."

“Whoa, whoa, whoa slow down! Lilah is gone?”

“Yes,” I can hear my voice break, the pain in my chest grows.

She’s gone, she’s really fucking gone.

She left and took my shattered heart with her.

“Nix, listen to me. It’s gonna be okay, where are you? I’m coming to get you.”

“No, Liam, just stay there. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Before he can fight me on it, I hang up.

I try to call Li one more time and it goes straight to voicemail. “Li, Sunshine. Please whatever is going on we can figure it out, and we can work through this. Please, Lilah, I’m begging you please don’t do this. I love you so fucking much, please.”

I throw my car in drive. I can’t give up. I have to go get my Sunshine, because without her there’s no sun, there’s no happiness, there’s no one else for me.

Lilah

Sprinting into my apartment, I grab only the necessities: passport, other important documents, phone charger, and a single change of clothes. Right before I leave my room, the two picture frames catch my attention. I grab them and it's the thing that breaks me.

The tears I've been holding back finally break free. I pull the picture of me, Lottie, and Mar to my chest like it will somehow make the pain in my chest stop and when it doesn't, I bring the picture of me and Nix on top of the other frame and again it does nothing to stop the feeling of my heart breaking; it only intensifies it.

Before Micha left me in my car, he made one final threat. Either I leave and never come back or I return to him. I begged him to make sense, of how my leaving changes anything, and all he did was laugh and say *so you can feel as alone as I felt when you left me*. He then went on to threaten not just Nix's life, but everyone I love.

He knew too much. He knew all their names, he knew about Lani. And I can't figure out how. It's like he's been watching my every move. Nothing is adding up, but all I know is that I have to leave.

I pack the picture frames away and head to the kitchen to find a piece of paper. Nix will come looking for me. He'll want to find me and fight for me because that man would fight every demon if I asked him to, and that's why I love him so much.

I sob at the realization I never told him how much I care about him or love him, always keeping him at arms length to prevent this very thing from

happening. But he was so hard to keep away completely. He made me feel alive and loved and oh so fucking special. For the first time in my life, I felt like I actually mattered to someone. It was selfish of me to let things get this far knowing Micha was still out there and becoming a loose cannon.

I write a quick note to Nix to hopefully deter him from coming after me. As I write my final words *I love you, Nix, more than you will ever know*, I let the final tears drop.

I sprint out of my apartment, taking the stairs to the back entrance so there is no chance of running into anyone, and run to my car. As soon as I'm on the road to the airport, I know I have to make one more phone call, to warn the people I love. To protect them.

After a few rings, he finally picks up.

"Hey, Li."

"Chiral, I don't have time to talk. It's Micha. He showed up at the graduation and he was making all kinds of threats. I just went to my apartment and packed some stuff, so, Chi... I have to leave, I have to leave to protect you guys." I start to cry again, my throat constricting my airways. "Chiral, promise me, promise me you won't tell Nix. He'll do something stupid and Micha has lost it. He.. He..."

"Whoa, Lilah, slow down, what?"

"He has a gun, he's going to hurt Nix, please, Chi, promise me."

"Where are you?" I can hear the frustration in his tone. He and I have been friends long enough that I know he's two seconds away from losing his shit, but I need him to focus right now, I need him to be strong for me, like he always has been. We grew apart when he left for college a year ahead of me, but we made a pack when we were kids that we would always show up for

each other, always keep each other secrets, and protect one another no matter what and I need him to stick to that now more than ever.

“I’m leaving and that’s all I’m telling you for now.”

“No, Li, don’t do that. I’ll be right there.”

“Chi, I love you; you have always been like a brother to me and I am forever grateful for that. Please take care of Mar and tell her and Lottie I love them more than anything. I promise to call you when I’m safe. But get your dad on Micha ASAP.”

Before I hang up, I hear Chiral trying to stop me, but it’s too late. I have to do this, I have to protect the only family I have ever had, even if that means I have to lose them in the process.

Chapter 3

Lilah

It's been one and a half years since I left. One and a half years since the day my life was ripped apart. Now all I have are pictures to remind me of my life full of friends, family, and love.

Laying in bed while I scroll through Instagram, I see a post from Mar; it's a picture from a recent Knight's game. In it is Lottie, Lani—who has grown so much since I last saw her—and another girl who I have cyber stalked more than I care to admit: Evalina Kelson. She has over five-hundred thousand followers on Instagram, runs her own PR company, has lilac colored hair, and has taken my place among my friends and boyfriend... ex-boyfriend's life.

I toss my phone to the side, refusing to start my day on a sour note. I climb out of bed and walk out onto the balcony of my flat here in Paris.

The city of love they call it, and that's the furthest thing I feel. Over a year ago I left my whole life behind because of one vile man. Micha got his wish, I lost it all, but at least everyone is safe. I still talk to Lottie and Mar here and there, but they have become frustrated with my lack of answers of my whereabouts and the little information of what led me to leave. So slowly over the last year, the phone calls have shortened, texts have become less frequent, but they're not to blame. It's me. I'm the one to blame.

They tried, but I forced them to throw in the towel, pushed them so far away that they wouldn't try to find me, but even then they still love me.

The beeping from my coffee machine pulls me from my thoughts, and I return inside to my small little flat that I pay for completely on my own. Moving to Paris was a new start for me and one that didn't include me living

off my parents anymore. I'll never forget the last conversation I had with them when I told them I was leaving; I told them everything, I told them about Micha and the threats he was making, told them how I was scared hoping they would do something to help me but the only *advice* they offered me was, *Maybe you should try to help him, his parents are greatly worried about him and his ability to take over the company.*

It was that moment that I knew my parents only ever saw me as their next big profit. They always wanted me to marry Micha to merge our fortunes and companies, and I guess even though he's addicted to drugs and threatened my life and the people I love most, my parents can't see past the dollar signs.

So when I moved to Paris, I blocked their numbers, cut up my credit cards and found a job working in a Marketing company. It's the only good thing to come out of this: the freedom I feel from cutting ties with them.

After pouring my coffee and grabbing my overnight oats from the fridge, I lay back in bed. When I let my mind wander, it always ends up in the same place: a pair of dark stormy eyes, dark hair, and a smile that still makes my stomach flutter even if I haven't seen it in over a year. Nix stopped trying to call me about four months ago. Finally giving up on me or maybe it's because he moved on. I guess I'll never know, because I have one rule with the girls: when we do talk, I don't want to talk about Nix. It's not because I don't miss him or that I don't want to know every second of every part of his day, I just can't. I can't handle knowing he's either happy or heartbroken over me leaving and I know this makes me sound like a selfish bitch, but my heart truly can't handle it.

My final alarm clock goes off, and I know I have to get moving otherwise I'll be late for work and my monster of a boss is not someone I like to piss off.

As I'm sliding into my pencil skirt, my phone starts to ring a specific ringtone I have set for one person. I slide the arrow across the phone to answer the call.

"Lilah, how are you?" Theo's deep voice comes through my phone. He calls every few days to check up on me and update me on Micha as much as he can; he's also the only one who truly knows where I am. A secret he promised to keep.

"Hi, Theo, I'm doing okay. Getting ready for work." I huff out as I try to zip up my skirt, but the zipper is currently caught on the fabric.

"Sounds more like you're wrestling a bear, are you sure everything is okay?" I noticed the humor in his tone that he tries to use to cover up his worry for me.

"Yep, just fighting a zipper monster. Any updates?"

"Not much of an update, his phone last pinged in SoHo last night, so I checked his parents security system and found he was at their place for roughly an hour, when he left he looked very pissed off. Lilah, you know it's not too late to go to the police with all this."

I reach for my black kitten heels and let out a soft sigh. I know Theo is right, that I should have just gone to the police. But, in my moment of panic running just seemed like the best option for me. Now I question if it's even worth going back and facing the people I left with little to no explanation. Everyone has moved on and Micha is still in the city far from them.

"Lilah?"

"Sorry, I was just putting my shoes on. How is Chiral?"

"Nice topic change, but I'll let it slide." Theo lets out a chuckle that eases my nerves. "He's good, I'm sure I'm not supposed to tell you this, but he's

going to propose to Mar soon. We're all so excited for them. You know he'd like to hear from you, you were always like a sister to him."

The feeling of hurt washes over me and I can feel tears start to prick my eyelashes—another important thing I'll miss out on. "That's amazing, I'm so happy for them. But, I have to go otherwise I'll be late for work. Thanks for calling, Theo."

"Of course, Li but one more thing, you know you can come home. We will do whatever it takes to protect you." He tells me this almost every time he calls, and I don't know if it makes me happy or hurts me more.

"I know, but I'm happy out here and it's for the best." Choking on the last part, because it's the biggest lie I've ever told.

"Okay, Li. Talk later." He thankfully hangs up the phone before I can respond. I wipe the tears as they fall, throwing my head back pleading with any god that will listen to just make them stop.

This is for the best.

Chapter 4

Phoenix

“Number 63 two minute minor penalty for roughing.” The ref's voice booms through the sound system as I'm being skated over to the penalty box.

“Dumbrowski, if you don't cut your shit, we're gonna give you a game suspension,” the lineman says as Chiral passes me my helmet and gloves that I threw off before I decided to deck Chastman in the face. He had it coming for cross-checking Nolan Zimmerman—our captain—in the back. As the door to the sin bin closes, I see Liam and Chiral having a little huddle, probably trying to figure out the best way to prevent the other team from scoring while I sit here and twiddle my thumbs for the next two minutes.

Before Liam takes center ice, he locks eyes with me and I can see the frustration and disappointment. He shakes his head and moves over to take his place. I know he's worried—about me, about my spot on the team, about Lilah, fuck. I told myself I wouldn't think about her. She doesn't deserve my thoughts because she was once my sunshine until she became the worst storm I would ever have to bear.

The banging of glass from behind my head drags me back to a safer place. The ice. It's the only place I feel like me, feel like I'm whole. It's also where I can get all my aggression out, which has landed me in the sin bin more than I care to admit and in my coach's office even more, but I can't help it. I can't help the feeling inside me that's brewing. Every day I tell myself it's time to let this shit go. She left you, she won't answer my phone call or text, and our friends all claim to have no idea where she is or why she ran—which I don't know if I believe any of them, and it's caused a big strain in our friendship.

When Li left, she took my heart with her. I'm a shell of a man compared to who I used to be and, honestly, I don't give a fuck.

When I look up I catch sight of the girls, they're giggling about something and not even watching the game. They say they come for moral support, but I really think they come for the snacks, which I don't blame them for. The Knights Arena has great vendors. I see Eva throw her head back laughing like it's the easiest thing to do, and I guess for people who don't have a shattered heart...it is.

Eva is my personal assistant and close friend; despite what everyone thinks, she's really just my friend. Yeah, I take her as my date to events that I'm forced to go to, but that's just because there's no one else I'll put up with at those things and apparently it's frowned upon to show up alone.

Don't get me wrong. Eva is beautiful; she's spunky, funny, and wicked good at her job, but she's not Li.

No one will ever be Li. No one will ever make me feel the way she did and even if there was another person out there, I refuse to open myself up to heartbreak like this again.

Just as I was about to fall deeper into my thoughts, the door to the penalty box is open and I'm skating back out to the ice. Tracking quickly where the puck is, I see Liam on a breakaway and I try to catch up to cover him. Right as I'm about to enter the defensive zone, I'm hit by what feels like a bulldozer.

Falling to the ice, sprawled out like a starfish, all I can do is let out a groan of pain.

"How does it feel to be hit with a cheap shot, huh, Dumbrowski?" Evans—the bruiser from the other team—yells into my ear. Just as I get to my knees, he's already hopping over his own bench. Liam shoots the puck and it slides

right past the goalie's blocker, another goal, another win, where I didn't do jack shit to help.

The buzzer officially goes off ending the game, and here I am still on my knees like a fucking idiot.

"You good, man?" Chiral asks while offering me his gloved hand to help me up. Despite my shitty attitude and even asshole remarks to Chiral, he hasn't wavered. He's still there for me even when I don't necessarily want him to, but he knows I need him anyway.

I let out a grunt in response to him and get to my feet on my own before skating towards the entrance to the tunnel that leads to the locker room. I can already see Coach Thatcher is going to want to talk with me about tonight.

"I'll be in your office after I change coach," I mumble as I walk by.

"Make it fast, Dumbrowski."

Liam and Chiral join me on the bench in front of our lockers. I know they're having a silent conversation over my head. I can sense the tension radiating off of them, but their concern is unwanted and unnecessary.

Pulling my jersey off and slipping out of my pads, I ignore them both. My skates and pants go next, and I find my shower kit and walk away from my friends without a single word.

Finding an empty shower, I turn the water to scalding hot. I look down at my tattoo-covered arms looking for empty space to fill and come up with none. My mother threatened that if I get any more tattoos she would hit me with a wooden spoon, like she did when I was a kid.

I'm not huge into art; I pretty much show up to the shop and let the artist do whatever they want, but the pain that comes with it—that's what I'm after, it's what I crave.

Finishing up washing the sweat from my body and hair, I grab my towel

and dry off my body before wrapping it around my waist. I find my clothes in my locker and quickly change; Liam and Chiral must still be in the shower so I beeline it to Coach's office. A single knock on his open door and he waves me in.

"We're just waiting for Zimmerman to join us," Coach says without making eye contact. This can't be good.

Nolan Zimmerman walks in a few moments later, shutting the door behind him. He takes the seat beside me, gives me a head nod, and we both wait for Coach to start the conversation.

"Alright, Dumbrowski. What's going on?" Coach locks eyes with me, and I swear this man can see deep into my soul.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about?" I play dumb because if I'm about to lose my spot or worse, get traded, I'm not going to start the conversation off with putting my skate in my mouth.

"Nix, we're a month into the season and you've spent more time fighting and in the box than you've played, let alone make any goals. Your first season with us you were on fire, you won Rookie of the Year, but these past two seasons all you want to do is go out there and drop gloves." He raises an eyebrow at me waiting to see if I offer up a response, I don't. "Look, I like a good fight as much as the next guys, but I like to win more, so what the hell is going on with you?"

Besides my heart being broken and the girl I love running away from me, not much. "Nothing is going on coach, I've just been playing more aggressively is all."

"That's what I have him for," Coach flicks his eyes towards Zimmerman who has yet to say a word. "You are supposed to make plays and score goals,

and if you can't do that for me then we might need to talk about your future with this team."

There it is. I'm about to lose the only thing that truly matters to me right now. Taking deep breaths to settle my racing heart before I speak. "I'll work on it, I'll stay out of the box the best I can. I promise."

"Don't make promises you can't keep. I know something is going on and if you don't want to tell me, that's fine. But, I mean it, Nix, get your act together or you can kiss this team goodbye. Are we clear?"

Without hesitation, all I can say is, "Crystal." Coach gives me a nod and waves his hand at me dismissing me.

I grab my duffle bag from my locker and swing it over my shoulder. No one is left in the room, so I take a moment to look around.

I can't lose this.

Chapter 5

Phoenix

“Nix, you did all of this?” Lilah’s voice fills the cab of my truck. Her eyes are bugging out of her head at the small surprise I have for her.

“It’s nothing too special, but I thought it would be nice to get away for a bit.” I get out of my truck and circle to the passenger side, helping her out, along with stealing the basket from her. I lace our fingers together and walk her over to the little picnic table I set up. This is one of my favorite spots to go to clear my head; it’s tucked away in a park that overlooks the Boston harbor. I reach for the flowers I left here and give them to her.

Her blue eyes begin to glaze over, creating the most beautiful color.

“This is so sweet, thank you.” She brings the bouquet to her nose, inhaling the floral scent.

I take the food and wine out of the basket and spread it across the table for us to enjoy. The sun is just about to start setting creating this warm glow around my Sunshine.

“This is the nicest thing someone has ever done for me.”

“Well get used to it, cause us southern boys know how to wine and dine a lady.” She lets out a laugh at my exaggerated Southern accent. I just want to make her laugh like that forever.

Buzz, Buzz, Buzz. My phone continues to vibrate on my nightstand next to me, pulling me from such a perfect dream... or maybe a nightmare.

“What?” I ask, my voice laced with animosity into the phone.

“Well good morning to you too, asshole,” Eva laughs.

“Eva, it’s Sunday. Sundays are for sleeping in,” I groan out.

“Did you forget what today is?”

“It’s Sunday, that’s all I need to know.”

“Phoenix Michael Dumbrowski, your best friend is proposing today so get your lazy ass up and meet me outside in twenty minutes,” Eva screeches and that alone makes me want to roll back into bed. But I promised I’d help Chiral set up for his proposal.

“Fine, I’ll be right down. You better have coffee for me.”

“Already got it. Kisses, see you soon.”

I let out a sigh before tossing the covers off my body, still fully dressed in my suit from the game yesterday.

Now that I think of it, how the fuck did I even get home last night?

After the game and meeting with Coach, I hit the bar. The guys invited me over to one of their houses to hang out, but I declined. I knew Liam and Chiral wanted to talk to me, to check in, but I just wanted to drown my sorrows in the bottom of a bottle. So, I went to see the one person who I knew wouldn’t ask questions and would let me just be: Jimmy.

I’m sure when I was past the point of driving he called someone to come pick me up—who, I don’t know.

I make fast work in the bathroom, knowing that even though the last thing I wanted to do today was celebrate love, I would show up for Chiral and Mar. I’ve been a shitty friend and they have all given me way too much grace, so this is the least I can do.

Stepping through my front door, I see Eva’s lilac hair flying around her as the wind sweeps by.

I was introduced to Eva at a team event; she took one look at me and said *You look like you need someone's help, here's my card*. I brushed her off completely, who honestly says that to a stranger as a business pitch?

But she wasn't wrong. I needed help with my schedule and brand deals. I figured having someone that blunt and honest in my corner wasn't a bad thing. Our friendship grew from there and it was nice to have someone around me who didn't know who Lilah was, who accepts me for who I am now.

"Hey! Let's go!" Eva yells from where she's leaning against her car, waving her hand at me to hurry up. I walk at an even slower pace just to ruffle her feathers a little bit, and she just rolls her eyes at me.

"Coffee? You promised coffee."

"It's in the car. Come on, we have to hurry." I let out a gruff and wave my hand in front of me for her to lead the way. Once we're secured in her car, she passes me the biggest cup of coffee and I hum in my appreciation for her.

"So, how are we feeling this morning?" Not missing the mocking tone laced in her voice.

"I'm assuming you picked me up last night." Not really a question and more of a statement.

"That would be correct. Jimmy called and said you were slumped over and two sheets to the wind."

I don't respond to her, just nod my head as memories slowly seep back in from last night. I swore I saw Lilah at the bar, but it was just another blonde chick, and it was enough to send me down memory lane and further down the end of a bottle.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I ignore her question and continue to sip my coffee and stare out the window. Eva is used to my silence and thankfully she never tries to push me to converse, it's one of my favorite things about her.

The rest of the drive we remain quiet, just the hum of her music in the background, until we finally show up to Chiral's mom's house in the Cape.

Lillian comes running out of the house like a mad woman on Black Friday trying to score the best deals. I know how important this is for her; she and Chiral have finally worked through their problems and felt this was a perfect place to confess his lifetime commitment to his girlfriend.

“Nix, oh thank God you’re here. I swear Theo is going to hurt himself, please come help!” Lillian is yelling through my closed door. Quickly stepping out and placing a swift kiss on her cheek, I make my way inside.

It looks like a flower shop threw up in Lillian’s house. There are flowers on the floor leading to the outside, an arch of flowers over the door frame, and flowers in vases. If Mar doesn’t know what she’s walking into after she takes a step in here, I don’t know what will.

“Uncle Nix!” Lani comes running at me, and I scoop her up in my arms.

“Hi, baby girl, how are you today?”

“I’m not a baby, Uncle Nix. I’m a big girl now!” Lani places her tiny hands on my cheeks and her big personality—a lot like Liam’s—and her sweet gestures are really the only thing that can warm my soul now.

“You will always be Uncle Nix’s baby girl. Where’s your dad at?” Lani points out the door, and I set her down with the ruffle of her hair. She gives me a toothy grin before running off somewhere.

Ducking under the flower arch out to the patio where there are even more flowers, I see Liam and Theo trying to hang—shocker—even more flowers around the arch that is placed in the sand down by the water. Chiral is lucky that we’re having a warmer year, with only a slight chill coming off the moving waves.

Walking over to the guys, I tap Theo on his shoulder. “I got this, old man.”

“Watch who you’re calling old, kid,” Theo laughs out but gets off the ladder he was using. Moving the ladder out of my way, I reach up to finish

securing the flowers to the arch while Liam works on adding the lights.

We work in silence, which isn't normal. A lot like his daughter, Liam can't help but fill a space with some kind of noise. Feeling the tension brew, I decided to be the bigger man.

"So about yesterday's game, I'm sorry for leaving you guys weak on the ice, but hey, you made that shot. Always the winner," I say, adding an awkward laugh at the end.

"Not the point, Nix, and you know it." He stops messing with the lights, standing to his full height and staring me down like I'm a child. "Look man, I get it. You don't want to talk about Li, but you don't seem to want to talk about anything anymore. I don't exactly know what you're going through, but I know heartbreak. You don't have to isolate yourself, and you most definitely don't need to risk your career for stupid penalties."

"Yeah, I know," is all I'm able to say past my steadily constricting throat.

"We're family; we win together, we lose together, and we fight together. Stop pushing us away. Also, you may have lost the love of your life, but Lottie and Mar also lost their best friend—their sister—so lean on them if you can't lean on me and Chiral."

Liam grabs me by my shoulder into a hug; he's squeezing me so tight it's like he's trying to squeeze out the pain; it doesn't work, but I pat his back.

"Awhh are you two testing out the arch?" Eva yells from the porch, standing next to Lottie, who seems to have tears in her eyes.

"Is Lottie okay?" I ask Liam as we break away from our hug. He looks up to his wife with this twinkle in his eye.

"Yeah, she's alright. More than alright, actually." I give him a quizzical look knowing he's keeping something from me. Catching my stare he rubs

the back of his neck and lets out a cough. “We didn’t want to take away from Mar and Chiral’s day, but Baby Van Spyker #2 is in the net.”

“No way, man, really? I’m happy for you guys!” I wrap my arm around Liam’s shoulders, bringing him into another hug.

“Are you two going to continue your bromance all afternoon or finish up with those lights?” Eva yells at us again. Liam and I both laugh, and it feels like the first time I’ve laughed in over a year.

We make quick work of the lights and the girls come down to lay out tea lights and place the framed pictures of Mar and Chiral over the years into the sand. Stepping back, it looks pretty nice, but my mind can never truly let me enjoy anything because waves of Li come back and I’ll never get to do this with her. Never make our friends run wild throwing flowers everywhere just so I can tell her how much I love her and want her to be mine forever.

I’ll never get that.

Chapter 6

Lilah

I'm pacing my flat like a crazy lady because I refuse to fall asleep. I'm sure my neighbors are going to start pounding on my floor here soon.

Lottie promised they would call me, though, so I'll pace all night if I have to and drink all the coffee in France tomorrow to stay awake at work. I may be forever away and hours ahead, but I'm not missing out on my best friend getting engaged.

Maybe I should text them? It was supposed to happen over an hour ago.

Me: Hey, just checking in. How did it g

They didn't forget about me, right? The unsettling feeling grows in the pit of my stomach.

I know I should be there, but Micha.

Micha is still out there, and he seems to be doing worse with each passing month, making me more scared of him than ever.

Before I get too pulled into my thoughts, my phone starts to ring with a video call from Lottie.

"Hey, Li! Sorry, it's been crazy around here. Let me go find Mar and Chiral." Before I can say anything, Lottie is walking and I can hear all the excitement surrounding her. Familiar voices come through the phone, causing my heart to contract just a little bit more than normal.

"Mar! Mar, Li... umm phone for you." I sense the hesitation in Lottie's voice announcing my name. I'm sure Nix is there.

Just turn the camera towards Nix for just a second, my subconscious begs.

But quickly the screen is filled with brown curls and a set of blue eyes.

“Hey, let us go inside real quick, it’s a little loud out here,” Mar says and again I’m being carried, this time away from the noise. But I hear someone calling Nix’s name with laughter and my blood instantly starts to boil. It’s a voice I’m not familiar with, but it’s definitely a female.

Deep breaths, Li. You left him, you can’t expect him to wait around for you.

“Sorry about that, Li. How are you?”

“We’re not here to talk about me. Let me see the ring!” I yell way too loud for it being 3:00 am my time, but I don’t care. Mar lifts up her hand showing off the ring and it’s absolutely beautiful. I can see the excitement in her eyes and Chiral looking lovingly at his future bride.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Mar asks before a swift kiss from Chiral.

“It’s perfect, I’m so happy for you both.” The tears I promised I wouldn’t let fall betray me and slide down my cheeks.

“I miss you...we all miss you. Li,” Mar says in a whisper. “You know we will help you. Just come home please,” Mar muffles through her own tears. I have nothing to say to her; I refuse to promise her anything that I won’t keep, but I’ll make an exception this one time.

“I mean, am I not invited to the wedding?” I laugh making light of the situation, even though it hits me like a brick wall. I can’t miss their wedding, maybe by then I’ll have things figured out.

“Invited? You’ll be in the damn wedding party!” Mar lights up like a Christmas tree, and I want to keep that look on her face forever.

“Chiral, do you want another beer?” That voice, it’s the first time I’ve heard it in over a year besides my dreams.

“Yeah, I’ll be right there,” he replies back to Nix. “Talk later, Li. Thanks

for calling,” is all Chiral says to me. I know he’s upset with me, but I’ve never been on the receiving end of his cold shoulder and let me tell you it’s not a fun place to be.

“Li, please talk to me, it’s just me.” The plea is prominent in Mar’s voice and it almost causes me to crack.

“There’s not much to talk about; I’m doing okay. I promise.” I give her my best award-winning smile, but I know it’s not working as she narrows her eyes at me. I feel the pressure of it all coming down on me along with the lack of sleep. I have two options, break and talk or hang up. “I’m... I... well... I’m.” The words stuck in my throat are suffocating. “Go get Lottie, please.”

“Okay, I’m going to set the phone down, just please wait. I’ll be right back, I promise.” I nod at her and now I’m staring at the ceiling of Chiral’s mom’s house.

You can do this, they’re your best friends, and it’s time that they know where you are. Even giving them the country will suffice for now; it’s not like they can look all over France for me.

“Oh, Lottie left her phone here... Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know this was on.” Lilac hair and brown eyes fill the screen—it’s Evalina, the woman I want to hate so badly, looking as beautiful as ever.

“Um, yeah. Actually, I have to go. Can you tell Mar I’ll call her later this week?” Just as I’m about to hang up, Evalina rolls her eyes and it stops me in my tracks altogether.

“Do you actually mean that or am I just telling another lie for you?”

“Excuse me?” Lost for all words by the daggers infiltrating me through the screen.

“I know all about you and the damage you have caused these people. I

refuse to be your scapegoat, so if you mean it, you'll call them or you'll just continue to be the shitty friend that leaves them all hanging, but I want no part in this." Before I can get in another word, the call is disconnected.

Her words hurt, but they're true. Which adds to the conflicting feelings I already have for this woman.

Climbing into bed, I think over my life and how I've always let everyone decide what's best for me. How I've never been in the driving seat of my own wants and dreams. It's time I start.

I just hope it's not too late.

Before I drift off to sleep, I go to my voicemails and click on the last one he left me.

"Li, I don't think I can do this anymore, if you're not willing to even answer the phone so I know you're okay, then I know how much I mean to you. Because my Sunshine would never hurt me like this, my Sunshine would have never left, but here's the thing, Li, maybe you were never truly mine. You tried to tell me not to get attached, I guess I should have listened, but love has a heart of its own and there's nothing I could have done to stop myself from falling for you, but I guess I'll have to learn."

Clutching my phone to my chest, I let all the hurt I feel consume me.

It can't be too late.

Chapter 7

Phoenix

“Dumbrowski, nice play!” Coach yells to me from the bench. I get back in line with Chiral and Liam.

“Nice job, buddy.” Liam pats me on my shoulder and Chiral taps me with his stick. Things have eased up between the three of us since Chiral’s proposal about a month ago. I’m still working through my shit, but I’m trying to be better for them.

We run our last drill before heading into the locker room. I collect my things before walking into the shower. My newest tattoo stings just a little as the water hits it; I probably should have kept it wrapped, but oh well. It’s a hummingbird with blues and yellows throughout it. Back on the farm, we always would leave out nectar for the tiny birds, so it reminded me of home.

Before I’m out, there’s a knock on my stall. “Nix, marketing needs you upstairs to sign those sticks,” Zimmerman says through the wooden door.

“Okay, give me ten.” I finish my shower and quickly dress in my joggers and T-shirt.

My legs are still burning from practice, so I opt to take the elevator, and just as I step on my phone rings.

“Hey Chi, I just stepped on the elevator.”

“Nix we need—” The call drops as the elevator starts to move upward.

Getting off onto the marketing and HR floor, I pull my phone out to text the group chat, rounding a corner. I run right into someone.

“Shit, I’m so sorry I wasn’t... Lilah?” I must have wrapped my hands around her arms to prevent her from falling, as the same tingles and fire from

the past travel from my fingertips up the rest of my arm, like my body knew who it was before my brain did. I let go the second my mind catches up.

Not a single thing has changed about her; her blonde hair is a tad darker than what it once was, her blue eyes reflect her emotions as they always did—currently, they look like a set from a deer in headlights—and she looks like she’s on the slimmer side compared to before.

“Nix, I... umm... hi.” She tucks a loose strand behind her ear, one of her telltale signs she’s nervous. She looks me over from head to foot, stopping at my arms which are now covered with tattoos that were not there when she saw me last.

“Hi? That’s all you have to say after all this time?”

“No, it’s just I wasn’t expecting to see you,” she mumbles the last bit, knowing she just put her foot in her mouth.

“You didn’t expect to run into me where I work?” The venom I’m trying so hard to not unleash is slipping through my tone. I’m livid, but I refuse to make a scene here. I’m still on thin ice with my coaching staff, and I don’t think they would appreciate it if I had a full-on argument with my ex-girlfriend.

“No, that’s not what I mean. I just didn’t expect to run into you right this moment, I was hoping to call you and expla—”

“Call me?” I bark out, losing all sense of control. “I’m happy to know your phone does actually work, but here’s the thing, Lilah. It’s a little too late for a phone call.” Turning on my heels, I see Liam and Chiral rushing off the elevator and stopping in their tracks the second they see me.

“Did you two know?” By the way, both of their faces contort, it answers my question. Storming past them, I know they’re trying to talk to me. I can hear their voices, but my brain isn’t registering anything they’re saying.

They knew she was back. They knew and didn't fucking tell me.

Lilah

Well, that could have gone better, like way way better. I just wanted to get settled in before I said anything to anyone. I guess that was the wrong move...again.

The look of shock and utter disbelief on Chiral and Liam's faces says it all. Neither of them have blinked since they laid eyes on me, almost like they're worried if they do I'll disappear...again.

"Hi guys," is all I managed to get out, along with offering them a little wave.

I hate this feeling, especially with Chiral. He was always like a brother to me, my best friend through it all, but he doesn't handle things like this well. It all stems from when his mother left him and even though they have fixed their relationship, I guess the feeling of abandonment will always haunt him.

One blink, two, and three is all I get from Chiral before he turns on his heels and walks towards the elevators. I know he needs time to adjust, but I'm not going to give up, not on him, not on Nix, not on my chosen family, not this time.

Liam turns around, and I'm prepared for him to follow Chiral; I wouldn't blame him. "Chi, just wait man." Chiral locks eyes with him and then looks at me and shakes his head before stepping onto the elevator. Liam runs his fingers through his hair, turning back to look at me. We stand in silence for a few short moments; it's unnerving, but at least he's still here.

"Um, my office is right around the corner if you want to come in and talk."

“Your office? So Theo was right, you got a job here?” I don’t know what to say, so I just give him a nod and a round gesture to follow me back down the hallway. Once Liam is inside he shuts the door behind him, taking one of the brown leather chairs that sits in front of my desk. He looks around at the few pieces of artwork I hung up today after meeting with Betty, the head of marketing; most of the paintings I had bought in France.

“Li, what’s going on? Where have you been?”

Taking my seat behind my desk, I fold my hands together, thinking of where to start or even what to say and only two words come to mind.

The truth.

I spend the next twenty minutes telling Liam everything: graduation, Micha, France, and how I ended up here today. He sits and listens, not once interrupting me or judging me. He nods as I talk, so I know he’s listening.

“That’s everything. I know I fucked up and I don’t expect any of you to welcome me back with open arms, but I hope at some point you do.” I say, feeling defeated at the seemingly futile wish.

“Lilah James, you would be an idiot to think we wouldn’t welcome you back; you’re family.” Liam is always the reasonable one, always the calm in any of our storms, and I know he means well and may even mean what he says, but I don’t think his two best friends would agree.

“I appreciate that, but let’s be honest here. Not everyone will feel the same.” He leans his head back probably thinking over what he’s going to say next.

“Yeah, you’re not wrong. You really hurt him. Nix... he’s not the same anymore. It’s like he hates the world and the only thing keeping him afloat right now is hockey, and even that is slipping through his fingers. I don’t know where you and him will end up...I really don’t know if his heart can

take being hurt again.” Liam looks at me, making sure his words are not causing me damage. I must put on a good face because he continues. “Just remember nothing worth having comes easy. If you want him back you’re gonna have to work really hard and you have to accept that even if you give it your all, it may not be enough.” Liam is wise, but also a straight-shooter, but that doesn’t mean his words come easy to me; it more feels like I hit a brick wall at full force.

“I know. I just need him to understand what I was doing was for him,” I mumble, fighting back tears that are desperate to escape.

“Well, how about you start tonight? We’re having a family dinner at our house, come over. I know Lottie and Mar will want to see you.”

“I don’t know, Liam, I still have to unpack and... I don’t want to push him too fast.”

“You don’t think getting hired where he works was already too fast?” There’s a lightness and joking tone to his words, but he’s also not wrong.

“It was good money.” He raises an eyebrow calling me on my bullshit without saying a single word. “And maybe I was hoping to get him back in my life.”

“You are a piece of work, you know that right?” Liam stands and rounds my desk, pulling me into that warm brotherly hug. “The offer stands. I’ll shoot you the address in case you forgot it.” He lets me go but keeps a hand on my shoulder. “And one last question, does Lottie know you’re back? Cause you know we don’t keep secrets in our marriage.” I shake my head no and bite down on my lip.

I had this all planned out. I know the girls meet up every Saturday for brunch at Bells, and I was going to surprise them there. Just to give myself a few days to settle in and gain the courage to do it.

But I'm sure Chiral probably already told Mar; it's only a matter of time.

"I'll give you twenty-four hours to tell them or you could just come tonight." He winks at me and starts to walk towards my office door.

"Liam, how did you and Chiral know I was back."

Liam raised an eyebrow, like it's almost silly of me to ask and a second later it clicks. "Theo called us in the dressing room saying that you were back in Boston and more specifically you took a job here. We knew he was keeping tabs on you, so we made him promise us if you were ever back, he had to tell us." He walks out after that. Leaning back in my chair, I can't get Nix's words out of my head, and I know I have to do whatever I can to fix this.



Pulling up to the Knights Kingdom where a lot of the guys from the Knight's team live, I have the sudden urge to do a 180 and just drive back to my small apartment. But Liam's text from earlier when he sent me the address replays in my head. *Just rip the band-aid off. If you keep running, you'll end up in the middle of nowhere.*

Look, he's a great hockey player, but he should have used that Psych degree.

I take a deep breath as I pull up to their house.

Just rip the band-aid off, Li. The worst that can happen is they slam the door in your face. I grab the bottle of wine from the passenger seat of my rental car. It's a cheap bottle, but it's the thought that counts. I wiped my

savings clean to move back to Boston, along with renting out the cheapest apartment I could find.

Once I build my savings back up with my new job at the Knights, I'll be able to move and my car should be here in a few weeks.

I get out of my rental car and walk to their front door. Before, I would have just walked in—we were always those types of friends—but now, I don't even really know.

I ring the doorbell, already hearing laughter and chatter from the other side. I hear Lani yell to someone about the doorbell. My heart almost burst with excitement to see her.

The door starts to swing open and I prepare for the worst, but even with my preparation nothing could prepare me for this.

“No fucking way.”

Chapter 8

Phoenix

“Eva, who is at the door?” Lottie yells from the kitchen where she’s mixing a sauce together. I just came inside from their deck where Liam is grilling steaks for everyone.

Next thing I know, I hear Mar scream at the very top of her lungs, everyone rushes to the front door, Chiral practically taking out my legs to get to his fiancée.

Once I’m in the foyer all I see is a jumping Mar with her arms wrapped around...you have to be fucking kidding me.

I quickly turn to walk away running right into Liam. “Let’s go back outside,” he says in a hushed tone. He grabs me by my shoulders and leads me back through the sliding doors right as I hear Lottie join in the screaming fest. Shutting the slider behind me to block out the noise, I start pacing the length of the deck. Liam goes back to his grill turning the burners off, passing me my beer I left on the picnic table.

I take the bottle from him, chugging what’s left, needing to calm my racing heart. She really thinks she can just come back and act like nothing changed, like what she did didn’t fuck up my whole life.

“Nix, she’s family. I know that’s hard for you to hear right now, but I need you to understand we don’t know the whole story, there had to be reasons.” Liam gathers the steaks from the grills, placing them on the sheet pan.

“There is no fucking reason in this world that would justify what she did to us.” I want to add *to me*, but I don’t want anyone thinking I’m still hung up on her—at this point Lilah James doesn’t exist to me.

“You know I love you; you and Chiral are my brothers, and I’d go to war for you both, but how I feel about you two is how Lottie and Mar feel about Li. We have to respect that. Just sit down, eat your damn steak and if you’re that mad, you can leave. Just try for us.” He takes the sheet pan with the meat and starts to head inside.

“Liam, did you guys know she was back before today?” I ask because I know he won’t lie to me.

“No, we didn’t. Theo called us while we were in the locker room and we ran to find you;

we would never hurt you like that.” He leaves me out on the deck feeling like the biggest dickhead.

“Hey,” Eva says. I didn’t even hear her come out. She wraps her hand around my bicep, resting her head just above it. “Want to leave?” This is why I needed Eva. Not just for my PA shit; I needed someone who didn’t know Li, who didn’t care if she was around or not. I needed someone who was just in my corner, as selfish as that may sound.

“Yes,” I say gruffly, itching for the whisky I have at my house, but I don’t want to disappoint Liam. “But we should stay, at least for dinner.”

“If that’s what you want. The food does smell pretty good.” Eva tries to laugh at her comment, but we both know it’s a fake laugh.

I wrap my arms around her shoulders, pulling her into my chest. “Thank you for always looking out for me.”

“Always, Nix, I’m always here for you. You know that.” She grabs my hand like she always does and pulls me back into the house. Everyone is sitting at the dinner table, passing dishes around. I take my seat next to Chiral and Eva sits next to me instead of her usual spot across from me because it’s currently occupied by the ghost of my past that made its way into my present.

I lay my arm across the back of Eva's chair and try to avoid any eye contact with Lilah, but it's hard when the aura she always brought to any room is now filling the space again. I can see out of the corner of my eye that she looks over at me and Eva.

Chiral nudges my arm to pass me food and as I take it, I look at him and I can tell he's just as uncomfortable with Lilah being here as I am, but this is neither of our homes and we're both too stubborn to just leave.

Once everyone has food on their plates, the conversations slow down and the room fills with clanks of silverware. I feel Eva place her hand on my leg; it's only then I realize I've been bouncing it up and down. It's one of her pet peeves. I look at her and give her a smirk in the form of an apology.

"So, Li, where were you?" Chiral asks with a hint of anger flowing through his words.

"Chiral," Mar barks at him.

"No, it's okay, Mar." Lilah lays her fork down and again looks my way, probably trying to assess how I'm feeling, but all she's going to find is disinterest. "I was in France, specifically Paris. I was working for a marketing firm out there." Out of the corner of my eye, I watch her rub the spot where she once wore a silver ring encrusted with diamonds she would twist around whenever she was thinking or nervous. "Look I know I owe you all a lot of explanations." I let out a grunt at that statement, stopping Lilah in her tracks, but I hear her take a deep breath. "In time I'll explain everything," she mumbles.

"We understand, Li, it's just we were all so worried about you, you disappeared out of thin air. We...we just want to make sure you're okay," Lottie says in a concerned voice.

I hate that I know Lilah's rattled right now, that I can feel she's on the

verge of crying, and I especially hate how it pulls at my damn heart just a tiny bit.

Lottie and Mar get up from their seats and wrap their best friend in a hug. Having hushed conversations amongst each other. I look over to Eva and see her eyes are locked onto the trio, with a look of worry.

“Hey.” I nudge her so she’ll break eye contact away from the girls; I’m sure she’s feeling left out. Eva has opened up to me about her life and she has always struggled with making friends, so I’m sure right now she’s wondering if her place in this friend group is going to be lost with the arrival of Lilah being back.

She finally looks at me, giving me her smile she uses when she feels overwhelmed and is trying to hide it.

I don’t really have words of encouragement for her, so I place my arm around her shoulders and pull her into my chest. I lean down to whisper into her ear, “Want to get drunk tonight?”

She lets out a laugh and smacks my chest, pulling away from me. “I think you did enough of that for the both of us last night, but yes.”

Returning back to my plate of food, I catch Lilah’s eyes locked on me and Eva. Her face is a mix of frustration and confusion.

Ignoring her completely, I finish off the rest of my food and stand to bring my plate to the sink. I gather the rest of the dishes and start washing them. My mother always taught me when you are in someone else's home, you leave it nicer than when you came and maybe I’m just wanting to avoid the dining room for a little bit longer.

I still can’t believe she’s here; I have so many questions, but the anger in me won’t allow myself to ask her. I can’t open myself back up to her again.

Lost in my thoughts, I don’t even realize I’m no longer alone. She’s leaning

her hip against the island, arms crossed over her chest. I can feel the hostility all the way from over here.

“Are you even going to give me the chance to explain?” Lilah asks with frustration laced in her tone.

Drying my hands with the paper towel that’s next to me, I walk towards her. I lock eyes with her, refusing to allow myself to drown in her baby blues, like I have done a thousand times before.

“I loved you more than anything else in this world and you fucking left me with no explanation. You made your choice then to not explain to me, to not give me a chance. So, no you don’t get a chance now.”

I walk past her and even though I didn’t think it was possible, another part of my almost nonexistent heart breaks again.

Chapter 9

Lilah

“Nix, oh God that feels so good.” My moans fill the room of my sorority room. Nix has his head between my legs, and I am thanking every God in this universe for all the cardio workouts because this man never comes up for air.

I grind my hips against his face, the little bit of scuffle he has right now is rubbing deliciously against my inner thighs. His tongue circles my clit again before pulling it into his mouth, sucking on it like it’s his favorite type of candy. Reaching down, I pull on his hair; I’m on the cusp of a cumming, and I know he won’t quit until I do. He grabs onto my hips, digging his fingernails into my skin, sending me right over the edge.

“Li, are you awake?” Lottie’s voice comes through pulling me out of my dream. Covering my head with a pillow, I mumble some kind of response to her. I hear her open the door and soon there is a jumping bean in my bed.

“Aunt Li-Li wake up!” Lani sings out. I reach out and pull her under my blankets snuggling her little body close to mine.

“Aunt Li-Li loves you so much, but we have to use soft voices right now,” I whisper to her under the covers. She places her small hands on my face and brings her nose to mine.

“Okay, but it’s wake up time,” she whisper yells back to me.

Soon our blanket fort is ripped from us, and Lottie reaches for her little one and kisses her cheek before putting her on the ground.

“Go find Daddy. He’ll make you breakfast.” Lani runs out of the room yelling for her dad to make her pancakes with extra chocolate chips.

Lottie lays on the bed next to me. I had too much wine last night, so she let me crash in her guest bedroom.

“I’m so happy you’re home, Li.”

“Me too, thank you for letting me stay here. I didn’t mean to get that drunk.” I give her a shy smile, a little embarrassed at my behavior from the night before.

“You always have a space here, you know that. We do need to get moving, otherwise, Mar will be here yelling at us to hurry up, and you know her wake-up calls are worse than Lani’s.” We both laugh at that because it’s true. Mar has just as much or even more energy than Lani.

“I brought you some clothes to borrow, get up and get dressed.” Lottie slides off the bed and leaves the room.

I wish I could return to my dream. I knew things with Nix were not going to go well; I knew he would be upset, but nothing prepared me for how vile he would be. I’m not even mad; he has every right to treat me the way he did yesterday, but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt any less.

I drag myself out of bed and go into the bathroom down the hall, brushing my teeth and hair, along with wiping off the remaining makeup from yesterday.

Just as I walk downstairs, Mar is walking in and she pulls me into another hug.

“Good morning, ready to go?”

“How am I the only one hung over?” I rub at my temples to help push the pain that is throbbing in my head away.

“Cause you are the only one who drank a whole bottle of wine last night.” Mar snickers at me.

“Are you ready to go?” Lottie asks as she stands next to me.

“I’m so excited for brunch. I’m starving!” Mar yells out before turning on her heels and walking out the front door.

Just as we walk over to Lottie’s car, Nix exits his house from across the street with Evalina attached to his arm, wearing yesterday’s clothes.

He pulls her into his chest wrapping her into a hug, and it’s like watching a car accident: no matter how badly you want to look away, you can’t.

He’s in nothing but a pair of gray sweatpants, chest is bare for all to see. I can’t make out the designs but like his arms, his chest is nearly covered in tattoos. He lets her go and before I see them kiss, I jump into Lottie’s car because no matter how strong I may be, my heart can’t handle that.

I haven’t been with anyone since Nix because no one will ever be able to make me feel the way he does. I just wish he would give me a chance to explain everything; but even if he did, it looks like my chances with him are no longer an option because he’s moved on.

Mar turns around from her seat in the front and nothing has changed; Marina wears all her feelings on her face. The look of worry and concern forms a crease between her eyebrows.

Before she can say anything, I just shake my head begging her to just let it go. To let me feel this pain.

Lottie pulls out of her driveway, and I take one final peek at Nix’s house and see he’s leaning into Evalina’s car. Is he kissing her? Is he saying the sweetest words to her? Telling her how much he’s going to miss her when she leaves?

“So, Lilah, what was it like living in France? Was it as amazing as I’ve always imagined?” Lot looks at me through her rearview mirror waiting for me to respond.

Throw on your mask, Li, this isn’t about your sob story.

“Yeah, it was definitely an experience. The views were beautiful.”

“Ugh, I’m going to beg Liam to take me there for our babymoon.”

“WHAT!” Mar and I both holler at the same time.

“Oops, I wasn’t supposed to say that—pregnancy brain is already kicking in.” Lottie gives us both shy expressions. “Surprise you’re going to be Aunties again.”

“I’m so excited for you two,” I say while reaching and squeezing her arm lightly.

“Well you two better get on it, my kids are going to need cousins sooner than later.”

I roll my eyes at her because last time I checked, I couldn’t get myself pregnant.

“Chiral and I are going to try after the wedding; try to plan it out so we’ll have the baby in the off-season.”

“The best way to do it, honestly. Awh, you two are going to have such a cute baby. Imagine your curls and his eyes!” Lottie practically squeals.

I’m so happy for my two best friends; they’re getting their happily ever after, while mine is moving on with someone else.

Finally, we make it into downtown Boston and seeing the city fully again brings back some comfort I didn’t know I missed.

Nothing about it has changed; although, the traffic actually seems worse than before. After circling for what feels like the hundredth time, we finally find a parking spot and make our way inside the cute little restaurant that the girls always go to for brunch.

“Hi, ladies, welcome! No Eva today, I see.”

“Nope our friend Lilah is home, and we’re treating her to the best brunch in town,” Mar speaks to the older gentleman who leads the way to a small table

in the back of the restaurant. He places our menus in front of us with promises to return with coffee and water.

Looking over the menu, this place reminds me of a little bistro I went to in Paris. A young couple, who became good friends of mine, ran it and would let me sit in there all day sipping away on coffee and tea for as long as I wanted. I stumbled upon the place when I first moved there, looking like a lost puppy. They brought me in and always welcomed me with open arms. I miss Eléa and Mathéo, and it reminds me I should text them soon.

“The pancakes are to die for, Li,” Lottie mentions to me, pulling me from my thoughts.

“No, you should try Anna’s breakfast platter. It’s so much food, but seriously the absolute best,” Mar adds.

“I think I’ll just go with a bagel and cream cheese.” It’s really all my bank account will allow right now, but I don’t want to tell them that. I know they wouldn’t judge me, but I’m still getting used to the whole *not really having money* thing and I don’t want them worrying about me even more.

“What, no! Try something else at least,” Mar pleads.

“I’m not that hungry,” I laugh off as my stomach betrays me and rumbles.

Soon the older gentleman returns, who I learned his name is Joseph, and takes our orders, but he refuses to let me just order the bagel, telling me he’s treating me to Anna’s special and it’s on the house.

I sheepishly thank him and pass him my menu. As soon as he is out of earshot, I see Lot and Mar share a look, and I know the questions are coming.

“Just ask what you want to know,” I say while sipping on my cup of water.

“We know about Micha,” they both say at the same time, releasing the tension in their shoulders. That’s not what I expected them to lead with, but I guess that’s a start.

“Chiral drunkenly told me one night, not really everything, just the cliffs notes version, but he also told me he made you a promise to not say anything, and he didn’t remember saying anything the next morning so... I just pretend he didn’t,” Mar says as fast as possible, obviously this has been weighing on her.

“Okay and what do you know about Micha?” I know they don’t know about how he showed up and made threats at graduation because there is only one person who knows that and Theo would never betray my trust like that.

“Li, just talk to us,” Mar says softly while placing her hand on top of mine.

I clear my throat taking a few deep breaths and tell them. I tell them everything from the start of Micha and I.

How we fell in love, how he was my first, how he was hurt, how he allowed his addiction to hurt us, and how he showed up at graduation. I think I talk for a solid twenty minutes and with each passing moment, their jaws become more slack until they're both gaping fish.

Joseph returns with our plates of food and both the girls thank him, but neither picks up their fork. I quickly fill my own mouth with a heaping amount of food trying to avoid vomit anymore.

“Lilah, why didn’t you tell us?” Lottie has this softness about her that I have always loved.

Swallowing the food in my mouth and washing it down with a sip of coffee I reply, “I didn’t want to drag you into my drama...”

“I’m just going to say it, that’s bullshit. To quote Kevin Hart, *your bullshit is my bullshit* and you should have known we would have helped you and supported you through this.” There’s a bite to Mar’s tone and honestly, I don’t blame her because if the roles were reversed, I would have felt the same way.

“I know, I know that now. It’s why I came back. I just didn’t want you guys to be in danger because of me. And I really thought Micha was just going to leave me alone. I never in a million years expected him to show up and make threats like that.”

They both nod their heads like they’re trying to wrap their brain around what I’m saying.

“I’m assuming Nix doesn’t know any of this?” Lottie questions.

Shaking my head no, I can feel tears prick my eyes because I now realize how much of a mistake that was, if I just told him, he would be mine or Micha would have made good on his threats; it was a dangerous game to play, and I made the best choice I could make at the moment. “I really thought I was doing what was best,” choking on my words and my throat tightens. The girls just share a look before they’re out of their seats wrapping their arms around me. Holding me while I sit here and sob for a man who won’t even look me in the eye anymore, who I desperately love so much. I would give anything to go back and fix all of this.

Chapter 10

Phoenix

“So are we going to talk about how you’re feeling, or are you just going to keep pretending Lilah isn’t back?” Liam asks beside me from the bench. We just finished up one hell of a practice and I’m exhausted because the person I will not name has been invading every single dream of mine, causing me to avoid all sleep.

“Nothing to talk about,” I say with needles lacing my tone.

“Nix, we both know you need to talk this—”

“Liam, drop it.” I gather my shower stuff and head towards the showers before I say things to him I don’t mean.

“Dumbrowski, get your ass up to marketing and sign those damn sticks. If I have one more email from them about it I will lose my shit,” Coach yells at me from his office door. I throw him a thumbs up and head towards the shower. They have also been emailing me since last week, but I’ve been avoiding the marketing department like the plague since no name showed up.

Taking longer than necessary in the shower, the water starts to run cold and I take that as my cue to get out and face the music. Changing into my Knights sweats and tennis shoes, I opt to take the stairs—even though my legs are killing from practice—just to prolong this for a little bit longer.

Maybe she’s not even up there. It’s well past seven at night, and she probably works eight to four or something.

Stepping out onto the floor, most of the lights are off, and Sabrina the receptionist isn’t at her desk. I round the corner looking for someone to get

this over with. A light comes from the office to the right. I knock against the door, waiting for whoever is still here.

The door flies open and standing there without shoes on, with her hair tied up, and shirt slightly wrinkled, is no name.

She's just as beautiful as she is in my dreams, even with the purplish bag under her eyes.

"Hi," her voice is barely above a whisper, "are you here to sign the sticks for the donation?"

I don't say anything to her, just nod my head. She walks into her office, and my feet stay planted in the doorway, refusing to move me. But my eyes, they're doing enough moving for the rest of my malfunctioning body.

My eyes start at her head and work their way down, seeing the length of her neck, where I see a little tattoo pop out from the collar of her shirt. I can't make it out. Because my eyes have a mind of their own, they travel down to the dip of her back, to the round of her ass that's covered by a simple black pencil skirt, down to her stocking-covered feet. She's bending at the waist trying to pick up the five hockey sticks that are leaning against her office wall.

My brain finally catching up, I walk towards her and reach around to take the hockey sticks from her before they all slip from her hands. It isn't until the familiar smell of her perfume surrounds me that I realize this was a mistake; being this close to Lilah will never be easy, no matter how many unsettled feelings I have towards her, she will always somehow pull me under.

"Thank you," she mumbles before turning and walking over to her desk, returning to the small table she has off to the side where I've laid out the sticks that are covered in several different signatures. She passes me a silver

marker to sign my name, and I get to work signing each stick as she stands off to the side. I can feel her eyes on me like someone is holding a lighter to my skin.

When I finish the last stick, I get up. I look at her and we stand there in silence. Just staring at each other. I can tell she wants to say something, but she's twisting her nonexistent ring around her finger.

"Is that everything?" I ask while rubbing my hand across the back of my neck.

"Umm, no sorry. These need to be signed, too." She turns around and grabs a stack of team photos that are also scattered with signatures. I take the seat next to the table, pushing the sticks to the side. She busies herself with picking up each stick and leaning them back against the wall. There have to be fifty pictures here. I let out a deep breath and get to work. I can see out of the corner of my eye that Lilah keeps checking the watch on her wrist.

"I can just take these home and do them if you have somewhere to be." I don't mean for my words to come out harsh, but they do. She obviously has somewhere to be, and I don't know why that pisses me off, but it does.

"No, no, it's fine." She sits behind her desk looking at something on her phone, before letting out a quiet sigh that I'm sure wasn't meant for me to hear.

Just to be an asshole, I move at a slower pace.

After another thirty minutes, I'm finally finished. "Here." I pass over the pictures and start walking out towards her door.

"Thank you," she says before I walk out. I reach for my phone to turn on my car to have it start warming up, but I don't find it anywhere. I must have left it in my locker. I take the elevator down and head towards the locker

room, finding my phone exactly where I thought I left it. I open the app that connects to my car and start it, then head out to the player's parking area.

My car is the last here beside one blacked-out car I haven't noticed before, but the guys are always getting new cars so I don't think too much about it. I slide into my sports car, trying to get the most use out of it before I have to put it into storage for the winter. I roll down my window, taking in the crisp cool fall air. I try to push the smell of Lilah's perfume out of my nostrils, but it's like it's embedded. As I pull out onto the street, I'm stopped at a red light. As I start to connect my Bluetooth, I notice blonde hair waving in the wind.

Is that...? Leaning over the passenger door to get a better look. What the fuck is she doing?

I take a turn instead of going straight like I normally would, pulling up onto the curb in front of her. I can see that my car with blackout windows startled her. She starts to walk down the sidewalk. Before she gets too far, I roll down the passenger side window.

"Lilah," I yell out to her. She stops in her tracks and looks back at the car, and when she doesn't come closer, I get out of my car and stand on the curb, leaning against the passenger door "What are you doing?"

"I'm... I'm... ummm, just waiting," she says as she walks closer to me. I can see she's freezing, only having a blazer to cover herself.

"Waiting for what?"

Why do you even care?

"My ride..." There's a level of hesitation in her tone. Is a guy picking her up?

"Okay, well where is it?"

She pulls out her phone and looks at something. When she looks back at me, I can see defeat written all over her face. "I'm not sure, there was

someone on the way, but they just canceled.”

“They canceled?” Who fucking cancels and leaves a girl standing alone this time of night in Boston?

“I’ll just order another one, it’s fine. You... you can go.” Her voice rattles, but I’m not sure if it’s from being cold or from something else.

“You’ll order another what?”

“*Uber*,” she says with a level of hesitation.

“An *Uber*? You’re waiting for an *Uber*? Why?”

Again why the fuck do you care? My subconscious replies to itself and says, *because you’ll always care when it comes to her.*

“I don’t have a car right now... I had a rental, but I had to turn it back in... It’s fine, you should go.” She tries to dismiss me, but the way she hugs herself tighter to try and warm herself up proves otherwise.

Fuck, my mother would kill me if she ever found out I left her here, even if Lilah isn’t necessarily her favorite person.

“Get in,”

“No, it—”

“Lilah either you get in, or I pick you up and put you in myself.” I raise my eyebrow up at her, challenging her.

She looks around her, like some other option will appear and when she comes up with nothing, she walks towards my car.

She opens the door, sliding into the passenger seat—so much for getting her scent out of my nose; it’s now filling the space of my small car.

She buckles herself in and leans her body towards the door as far away from me she can be. I turn up the heat, reaching over to her side to make sure the vents are pointed at her. She wraps her arms around her body and curls into herself.

“Thank you,” she says softly. This was never Lilah before; she was never timid or shy. It, for some reason, just adds fuel to my fire of anger.

“What’s your address?”

When she doesn’t answer right away, I look over at her and she’s chewing on her bottom lip. “I’m not going to stalk you if that’s what you’re afraid of, but I need to know where to drop you off.”

“No, I know.” She rambles off her address; it’s an apartment on the other side of town, and I hate knowing it’s not the best part of town. I wonder what happened with her parents, did she stop talking to them? Did they cut her off when she just up and left?

I don’t say anything, just put the address into my car’s GPS and pull back out onto the road. Neither of us say anything as I drive down the streets of Boston. She looks out her window the whole time, watching the world go by.

The silence is killing me; we were never like this before. We always had something to talk about, and always had an easy flow of conversations but that was before.

After what feels like a lifetime, but in reality only a twenty-minute drive, I pull up in front of a run-down apartment complex.

There’s no fucking way she lives here. She hasn’t moved since I pulled up and when I look over at her, her head is resting against the door frame; she’s fast asleep.

I know I should wake her up, tell her to get the fuck out of my car, but instead, I take a moment to just look at her. She’s different; the light she once radiated has dimmed. The more I stare at her tonight, the more evident it becomes how tired she is, how run down she is, how she isn’t my Sunshine anymore.

I don’t even realize my hand is moving until I have a loose strand of her

blonde hair between my fingertips. Silky smooth still, and that small thing warms just the tiniest part of my shattered soul.

Until she is screaming and swinging her fist at me.

“Lilah, Lilah, it’s just me.” She frantically looks around the car trying to remember where she is, and once she acknowledges she’s still in my car, she clutches her hand to her chest, taking a few steady breaths.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you,” I say in the softest tone I have used in over a year.

“No, I’m sorry. I’m... thank you for the ride.” Before I can get another word in, she’s jumping out of my car and running toward what I assume is her apartment building. I stare at the worn-down wood for much longer than necessary.

What happened to you, Lilah?

Chapter 11

Lilah

Once behind my door, I slide down the wooden frame, trying to calm my breathing. The anxiety engulfs me and if I don't stop it, it will consume me. While in Paris, Theo made me see a therapist to talk out everything. I then saw a Psychiatrist, who diagnosed me with BPD- Borderline Personality Disorder.

I'll never forget that day; it felt like such a weight was added to my shoulders—which seems confusing now thinking about it—but the more she talked about the symptoms and my reactions to situations, it slowly started to make sense. Due to my upbringing, I struggle with relationships, and maintaining my emotions and honesty, so many people see me as this rich girl. How can I possibly have issues? Well, trauma and lack of love and support will do that to you. Everything I have gone through with Micha was my tipping point. My therapist works with me, giving me tools to manage the anxiety and depression that is so often seen with this disorder. My psychiatrist also gave me medication to help.

One, two, three, four.

Deep breath out.

I repeat this another ten times, but it still feels as though my heart is racing. When Nix woke me up in his car, I was having a terrible nightmare of Micha showing up and chasing me through the woods.

I feel like such an idiot.

There's a knock at my door, and the anxiety creeps back up. No one knows where I live, I've never talked to my neighbors, well because I almost never

see them. I know they're there because I can hear them fighting most nights.

So who is at my door?

"Lilah." A deep voice comes through and the fear in me is rising.

I run to my kitchen where I keep my pepper spray.

I try to be as quiet as I can be, but the floorboard squeaks as I move from room to room, loud enough for whoever is standing on the other side of my door to hear.

"Lilah, it's me. Open the door."

Nix? Why is he here? Why is he at my door? I knew I shouldn't have let him drive me home, but I missed the bus and there were no ride shares close by. I turned in my rental a few days ago, I couldn't afford it anymore and my car is still being held overseas waiting for shipment.

I slowly make my way to the door, unlocking the extra locks I put in place, but honestly, with a forceful kick, the door would fall off its hinges.

Opening the door just enough to see if it's really him, I clutch my pepper spray even tighter in my hand.

When gray eyes and disheveled black hair come into view, it's like I can finally breathe again.

"Nix, what are you doing here?" I don't open the door any further. I don't want him to see the shithole I call home. Once I save enough from my new job at the Knights, I'm moving somewhere nicer, but I'm making entry-level money so that's going to be awhile.

"I..." He runs his hands through his hair pulling at the strands. "I just wanted to check on you. You practically ran out of my car and before that you were hysterical." I wince at his choice of words.

I put on a smile to mask any kind of emotions that are running through my body right now. "I'm okay, sorry about that. Just startled is all."

“So why are you clutching that pepper spray like your life depends on it?” He raises a perfectly groomed eyebrow at me, and it reminds me of the time he let me pluck his eyebrows and he practically cried. Trying to hold in the laugh that is ready to bubble up over the memory is difficult.

“I just don’t have visitors often, so I was being prepared. You know, be ready for anything.” I shrug my shoulders, hopefully playing it off well.

“Lilah,” he says my name like it causes him actual physical pain. I know he doesn’t want to be here, he doesn’t want to be checking on me. But he’s Nix, and he can cover his skin in all the tattoos he wants, acts like he doesn’t give a fuck anymore, but he will always have a heart of gold; he will always be deep down inside the most loving and caring man to ever walk this earth, at least in my eyes.

“I’m okay, Nix. You should probably go, it’s getting late. You have a morning skate tomorrow.” I reach for my ring that is no longer there. I had to sell it to help with my move, but I always mindlessly go to turn it.

“You begged to talk to me and now that I’m here you’re just pushing me away again. Noted.” His voice is laced with venom. Before I can explain, he’s already halfway down the hall and quickly out the main door.

I shut the door and relock it quickly. Pacing the length of my living room going over everything that was said between us for the hundredth time. I know I messed up. He was right there...right in front of me and if I just opened up a little or even just told him everything maybe we could have started to work towards, I don’t know...being friends, because he has Evalina now.

Once my legs start to ache from all the walking, I opt for a shower. The water never really gets hot here; honestly, I’m lucky if the water gets warm.

The icy mist is waking my body up further, so I know I'm not getting much sleep tonight.

I lay down on my mattress that is currently lying on the floor. I stare up at the ceiling, lulling my brain to relax, it's now two A.M. I have to wake up in two hours to catch the bus to work.

I reach for my phone and before I even know what I'm doing, I'm sending a text to the last person who probably wants to hear from me, especially at this hour.

Me: Thank you for the ride home and for checking in on me. I'm sorry I made you feel like I was pushing you away. That wasn't my intention. I hope for us to be able to sit down and talk sometime, but I'll respect your wishes if you choose not to. Just know I care about you, and I did what I did because it was for the best.

I put my phone back on the charger and think of Nix and his smile and laugh. I remember when he told me he first loved me and it scared the shit out of me, but for the first time in my life, I felt it. I thought I really loved Micha, but I now know that it was just us being young and both wanting the same thing—to get out from under our parents' thumbs. Nix was the all-consuming kind of love. The kind that made you do crazy things.

Just as my eyes start to close, my phone pings with a notification. When I pick up my phone, my jaw almost drops. Why is he up?

Nix: It wasn't the best for me.

The sobs break from my chest. I know I hurt him; I know I may have even broken him, but I'm going to fix this. I have to for the both of us.

Chapter 12

Lilah

The next morning comes too fast, and I'm running out of my apartment like it's on fire and end up bumping into a bystander off to the side of the road.

“Watch where you're going,” the guy says, his voice is oddly familiar but I don't have time to care about that. I see the bus pulling up, and I pick up my pace, I cannot be late to work today. I have to be ready for the meeting with the rest of the department to discuss marketing points for the next three months.

I make it to the bus, pay my fare, and see there are no seats left. I find a spot to stand and reach for the handle above my head. I get a few looks from people from around me, but I try to ignore that.

I finally make it to my stop and have to walk three blocks to the Knights Arena. As I round my final corner, I swear I see the guy I ran into earlier.

It's just my anxiety, I tell myself.

I finally make it to my office just in time to get my stuff prepared for the meeting; this is an important meeting. The Knights organization is a very inclusive team, so some of the players come in to discuss what the plan is—to get their thoughts and opinions on some of the promos we will run.

I make my way down to the boardroom and find a seat off to the side; I am here just to take notes and look over any scheduling conflicts that may arise. Sabrina offers me a small wave from across the table. She and I have become friends since I've started here. We keep meaning to meet up for drinks, but our schedules always conflict somehow.

Betty walks in with her arms full of papers, and I quickly get up to help her before she drops them all.

“Thank you, Lilah,” she says in her heavy British accent. She takes the head seat and starts to lay out pictures of the players they took from the start of the season. I skim my eyes across the photos until a pair of stormy eyes stop me. Nix in full uniform, with a puck in one glove and his hand wrapped around his stick. He’s not smiling; it’s honestly more of a scowl. I want to rub my thumb over the photo, to somehow wipe the look of frustration from his face, but Betty will raise hell if I ruin her photos.

Soon everyone else from the department joins us, and we’re just waiting for the players to show up. They had an early morning skate, so they’re probably just getting ready now.

I can hear laughter coming from the hall heading our way and in comes Liam, Chiral, Jaxon, and Nix. As they filter in, I see a flash of purple hair: Evalina.

“Sweet Eva, I didn’t know you would be here today.”

“Oh you know, Miss Betty, just looking out for my boy.” Eva’s voice rings through my ears causing me to wince unintentionally.

“Well, let’s get this going. I know you all are looking forward to your mini break coming up with Thanksgiving.” Betty rambles on for the next forty-five minutes, explaining the Thanksgiving and Holiday promotions. She wants a few of the guys to dress up in Santa Claus costumes which earns her a groan, but when she flashes them her deep brown eyes, everyone falls silent.

I want to be like Betty. She walks into any room and commands attention; she’s strong, organized, and overall badass.

I’m typing away all the details and checking everyone’s schedule for the

shoot when Betty directs her attention to me.

“Lilah, any notes?” Betty looks at me with a comforting stare, but I know she’s challenging me, seeing if I can keep up and be an asset to her team.

“With everyone’s schedule, we should be able to host the shoot on November 14th—”

“Nix and Liam already have prior commitments,” Eva says as she stares me down. I sit up taller and give her a stare right back.

“As I was saying, we could do November 14th or December 1st, but I’m willing to be flexible.” I bat my eyelashes at her. She may have Nix, but I refuse to let her come in here and make a fool out of me.

When Eva just nods at my statement, I move along with a few other ideas I have. When I share my last thought, Betty gives me an approving nod and wraps up the rest of the meeting.

I gather my things and beeline to my office, not wanting to be in Eva’s presence for longer than necessary.

Once I’m secured behind my door, I see there’s a bouquet of flowers waiting for me. I examine them for a card and there is none. I set them off to the side and get back to work finalizing my meeting notes before sending them off to Betty.

It’s not until my stomach rumbles that I realize I have worked through lunch. I pick up my phone to check my bank account to see that my first paycheck from the Knights has cleared, and I feel a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I treat myself to a food service order consisting of fries and burgers. Don’t get me wrong, the food in Paris was amazing, but I missed a decent cheeseburger.

Once the notification comes through, I make my way to meet the delivery person in the lobby. I find Chiral standing off to the side on the phone. This is

my chance.

I walk over to Chi and tap him on the shoulder, he looks down at me and says goodbye to whoever he is talking to.

“Hey, mind if we talk?” He looks deep into my eyes, so hard a wrinkle forms between his eyebrows and I can feel the anxiety rising in me.

He nods his head, yes, and I can visibly see his walls coming down.

“We can sit down here; I’ll even share my french fries with you.”

“Deal,” he says in that light-hearted kind of way and even gives me a smile.

We find a table off to the side away from anyone; it’s a nongame day so the lobby isn’t very busy, just cleaning staff.

I pull out my fries and pass them to Chiral, and he lays them out in the middle for both of us to pick from. I quickly put fries into my mouth to give me a second to collect my thoughts.

“I never meant to hurt you. I never meant to hurt any of you. I am really really sorry for how I handled things, and I just need you to hear me out.” He gives me an encouraging nod to continue. I tell him about Micha. Chiral was the only person I called that day so he knows a little bit of the story already, but he doesn’t know about the threats.

As I go further into detail the color just continues to drain from his face. “That’s everything...that’s why I left. It was the only way I could protect you all. Chi, you are my brother, truly the closest thing I have to family. You have to know it broke me to do this, but I felt like I had no other choice.” I don’t even realize I’m crying until he reaches over and wipes it away from my cheek.

“Lilah, I wish you would have told me. We would have figured it out.” The gentle tone he’s using just shows how much he has grown and changed, and it warms my heart.

“I know that now, but at the moment I just panicked. Chi, he had a gun, what was I supposed to do?”

He just nods his head slowly, wrapping his brain around my words. “So why did you come back?” I know he doesn’t mean for his words to hurt, but in some ways they do. I ask myself every day if I made the right choice. I came back knowing Micha was out there, but Theo is watching him closely. I came back knowing I left the most important people in my life high and dry, and they still have every right to not welcome me back. But, like the big brother he is, he reads all the worries and concerns on my face. “Not, that I’m not happy you’re back and I know my dad will do everything he can to keep Micha away from you, but I’m just wondering why now?”

I let out a deep sigh, and I can feel myself soften. “It was because of you. Knowing I missed such an important day in your and Mar’s life, I just didn’t want to keep missing stuff.”

He gives me a bright smile, one he normally only reserves for Mar, but once in a while he graces me with it. “Happy to know I mean that much to you, but let’s be honest here Li. I’m not the only reason you came back.” Chiral always saw past my bullshit and always made sure to call me out on it.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I play coy. I’m not ready to talk about Nix, especially after last night.

“Fine, but just so you know, he does miss you. He’s hurt right now, but you will always be his *Sunshine*,” he drags out the last word in a mocking tone.

“I really need to get back to work, but thank you for talking with me. I’ve missed you more than you know.” I stand from my chair and Chiral meets me on the other side, wrapping me in a bear hug. Once he lets me go I promise to come over and hang out with him and Mar soon, but just as I’m about to get on the elevator, I see him racing towards me.

“Lilah, hold up.” I let the other people on the elevator go, not wanting them to wait for me. “We all rented a cabin in New York, the Adirondacks area. We started it as a tradition for Thanksgiving every year. You should come.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Yes, you’re family. I know Lottie and Mar were going to invite you anyway, but I want you there, too.”

I nibble on my bottom lip already knowing the answer, but my loose lips can’t contain my questions. “Will he, you know...Nix, he’ll be there too? And with Evalina?” I don’t know if I can be in the same space as both of them for that long.

“Yeah, they will be, but you have nothing to worry about with E—”

My phone starts to ring and it’s a video call from Theo. I show Chiral my phone screen and then slide the arrow to answer. Chiral squeezes his face next to mine, so Theo can see us both.

“Well, look at you two together.” Theo laughs at his own words.

“Hi, Dad. I’m no longer upset with her,” Chiral says like a five-year-old telling his parents that he’s not mad at his baby sister for breaking his toy anymore.

“I told you, you shouldn’t have been from the start. Maybe you should learn to listen to your old man for once.” Chiral rolls his eyes at his dad but says goodbye and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Hey, Theo, I have to get back to my office, but is everything okay?”

“Yeah, so far his phone is still tracking in the city. I was just calling to check in on you, but I see things are going well.” His bright blue eyes that match his son’s light up a little more with happiness for me.

“Yeah, mostly everyone is happy to have me back and has allowed me to talk about what happened.”

Theo being one of the smartest people I know doesn't miss what I'm saying between the lines.

"He'll come around, Li. I know I don't know Nix super well, but I know what I saw when you two were together. Give it time." I nod my head and look to the ceiling wishing the tears to go away.

"I don't know, but even if we're not back together I just want us to be civil."

"I know, just keep being your honest self. It will all work out." I give him a smile but say goodbye and head back to my office.

Once locked behind my office door, I drown myself in work till the late hours of the evening. Anything to distract me.

Seven-forty-five comes around, I pack up my things and rush downstairs to catch the bus back to my apartment.

Of course, the second I'm outside it starts to drizzle with rain, and my coat—if you can even call it that—isn't going to do much to protect me from the cold and wetness.

"Lilah James?" An older man asks me from inside of a white BMW.

"Yes?" I don't approach the car, because you know stranger danger and all that jazz.

"I'm here to pick you up?" I didn't order an Uber, although I wish I did now.

"I'm sorry you must be mistaken, I didn't—"

"A Mr. Dumbrowski hired me to drive you home,"

Nix? Did he order me a driver?

"Ummm." Lost for words, I don't know what to do.

"Ma'am please get in, we don't want you catching a cold," the older gentleman starts to yell at me, and the rain goes from a drizzle to a full-on

downpour. I guess I'll take my chances tonight. What's the saying, don't look a gifted horse in the mouth?

Once I'm secured in a warm car, I pull out my phone and send Nix a text.

Me: Thank you for the ride home, you didn't have to do th

Nix: You shouldn't be out this late by yourself waiting for a bus.

I don't know what to say back; he refuses to acknowledge my existence, but this is Nix and his golden heart.

Me: I promise to pay you back

Nix: It's not about the money.

I want to ask him what it's about, but the driver pulls up to my apartment and I rush out of the car and into my building. I look over my text with Nix and decide to leave the conversation so I don't put my foot further into my mouth.

But I can't deny that the butterflies slowly reappear after being dormant for the last year. Maybe there is still a possibility for us.

Chapter 13

Phoenix

Due to years on the farm, I've always been an early riser. I'm already over halfway to the cabin and everyone else is probably still asleep. The snow is falling, which isn't uncommon for us New Englanders to experience a light dusting of snow by Thanksgiving, but the further North I go the worse it seems to get, but not completely unbearable.

I'm in my truck, and I don't feel it's completely unsafe. So I keep moving forward. This is my favorite tradition that we started as a group last year. We always rent the same cabin; it has five rooms, a hot tub, a fireplace, and most importantly it's in the middle of nowhere.

We all get to completely unwind and disconnect and just enjoy each other. Although this year will be different, Lilah will be there.

I don't know how I feel about it—to be stuck in the same house with her for the next five days—but the guys convinced me and pretty much forced me into it by telling me I need to accept the fact she's back. Thankfully the house is big enough that we should be able to avoid each other, and I'll just hang out with Eva the whole time if I have to.

Lilah texted me for the first time since I sent her the car service, to tell me her car is finally here from overseas and she no longer needs the driver to pick her up anymore. She again told me she would pay for his services, and I reminded her again that it wasn't about the money.

I don't really know why I did it in the first place, but I chalk it up to the fact that if anything happened to her the girls would lose their shit, especially with me knowing she was waiting for the bus late at night in the middle of Boston.

After a few more hours, I pull into the large circle drive to the cabin and someone is already here. Who the hell beat me here? It's only nine in the morning. I don't recognize the car at all. It's a black Genesis with paper plates on it... that can only mean one thing.

Fuck, it's Lilah.

I could just turn around, go find a bar to hide out in until someone else shows up, but the weather is getting worse and I don't think it's a good idea to even attempt driving anywhere. I pull my cell out and call Chiral.

After a few rings he answers, "Nix? Where the hell have you been? Why haven't you texted us back?"

"I'm at the cabin, how long till you all are here?"

"Dude, we texted in the group chat that we're not going? It's dumped like five-feet of snow in the last hour. You must have missed it. What time did you leave?"

"4:30. So you're telling me you guys are not coming? What the fuck am I supposed to do?" I pull at my hair, this can't be happening.

"Well the cabin is still ours for the next five days... I guess enjoy it? If the weather lets up, we will meet you up there, but the storm is coming your way."

"Chiral, I can't fucking stay here."

"Why? You love the cabin, and you'll have it all to yourself. It's perfect for you."

"Because I'm not alone," I practically bark out.

"Who else is there? Who the hell would be up earlier than you?" Picking up on social cues has never been his strong suit. From my tone alone it should have given it away who was here. And just like someone finally switched the

lights on in his brain, I get a long “ohhh” before a laughter follows it. “Li is there? Dang, dude, talk about fate.”

“This isn’t fate, this is my own personal hell.”

“Well neither of you should leave; it’s a big house. Just avoid each other,” Chiral says so matter of factly that if I could reach through my phone, I would wrap my fingers so tightly around his neck until he turned blue.

Just as I’m about to lose my shit on him, Lilah comes out of the house, standing out on the deck that leads to the front door. Covering her eyes to see who it is, I somehow forget all the insults I was about to throw at Chiral. I don’t even say bye, I just hang up on him.

I get out of my truck and walk around to the covered bed and start pulling out the coolers of food. The girls do all the shopping, but I always bring all the food up because I can fit the most in my truck. I guess this really was fate, in some sense because at least we won't starve to death out here.

“Do you need help?” Lilah calls out to me. I take a deep breath, reminding myself that it’s only five days.

“No, it’s too cold. Go back inside,” I yell back to her just as a big gust of cold air comes by.

But because Lilah has always been stubborn, she’s at my side looking into the bed of the truck. “Exactly why I should help you. Here pass me those bags.” She points to the grocery bags to the left.

“Lilah, go inside. You don’t even have a decent coat on.” I’m trying everything to keep my voice even and not let my emotions get the best of me, but she makes it so damn hard.

Lilah looks down at her jacket and a look I’m not familiar with crosses her face, but it almost looks like embarrassment; just as I get a read on her, she

changes completely. Lifting her chin in that way when she's ready to put her foot down.

Before I can stop her, she climbs on to the gate of my truck and reaches for the bags. But quickly realizes she's having a hard time scooting herself back off. I stand back and just observe. She got herself into this, she can get herself out of it.

She looks over her shoulder at me, still laying flat on her stomach. I raise an eyebrow at her, challenging her to ask for help.

But of course she does the opposite. She shimmies down to the edge with both hands wrapped around the bags, until her feet are just a few inches off the ground. Letting go of the groceries, she hops down with a look of success written all over her face and grabs the groceries to start making her way indoors.

I just shake my head at her and grab the large cooler that has the meat in it and follow after her. Once inside, I notice the temperature hasn't changed that much.

"I couldn't find the thermostat to turn it on," she mumbles from inside the cupboard where she's putting the canned goods away.

"That's because there isn't one. There's only the fireplace."

"Oh, well I don't know how to start a fire." The pink tint to her cheeks from the cold turn a little bit brighter.

"That's fine, I got it. I'll bring in the rest of the food, you can put it away, and then I'll start the fire."

She gives me a two finger salute that I almost laugh at. I head back out into the cold, taking a moment to look out at the landscape. Tall pines fill in all the space so anyone driving by down the long road below has no chance of looking in, and the snow is falling faster and covering every surface, giving it

this winter wonderland look to it. I can hear birds chirping from the tree tops and because life hates me, a loud crash from inside ruins the moment.

Turning quickly on my heels without slipping, I rush back in. Lilah is no longer in the kitchen so I turn left towards the living room where I find a distressed woman. She's on her knees trying to pick up a few pieces of wood that she dropped, while huffing and mumbling to herself. I look up at the wooden ceiling and start to count to ten before I speak.

“What are you doing?”

She looks over her shoulder at me while still trying to balance the pile of wood in her hands. “I was trying to help; I saw the stack outside under a tarp, and I figured I could bring some in and... you know...” She shrugs her shoulders. Lilah is the most uncoordinated person I know, and that obviously hasn't changed.

“Just stay in the kitchen before you hurt yourself.” I don't mean for my words to come out as razor blades, but they do and I can see them clearly slice through her. She drops the logs next to the fireplace and with a look of determination on her face she marches towards me.

“Look, I get it. You don't want me here, but you don't have a right to treat me like I'm a child, Phoenix.” She marches past and goes off down the hall, slamming the door to a bedroom I assume.

This is going to be a long five days.

Chapter 14

Lilah

I pace the length of the bedroom I claimed, well I guess I technically claimed it now.

But it was the closest room I could find to trap myself into, so it's mine now since clearly no one else will be coming.

I check my phone for the first time since I got here to see that there is a text in mine, Lottie, and Mar's group chat.

Besties for the Resties

Lottie: Li, the roads are really bad in Boston right now, We don't think we'll be able to get out of the city.

Mar: It's really bad, if you make it to the cabin. You probs should just stay there. Don't turn around

Lottie: Yes, yes stay at the cabin.

I send back a quick text back in our group chat saying that I made it and that hopefully the roads clear up soon and they can join me.

I barely slept last night, due to the excitement of this trip getting the best of me. So when four in the morning rolled around, I decided to hit the road and get up here, which now I don't know if that was a blessing or curse.

Because now, I'm stuck here with my ex-boyfriend who hates my guts with no one else as a buffer for the foreseeable future.

"Why is he such an asshole?" I groan out to no one but the four walls that incase me.

Because you broke his heart, you idiot.

I take a deep breath and remember what Janice told me: "*You can do whatever you put your mind to, even more so for the things you don't want to do but have to.*"

I don't want to be trapped here with Nix. *Yes, you do*, my subconscious speaks up. Okay, maybe I do just a little bit, but not like this. Not with him hating me, I want him to at least try to make things work with me, just for the sake of being stuck here.

I take ten deep breaths and walk back out into the kitchen, I find it covered in coolers and luggage. Nix is standing in front of the fridge putting food away. I don't say anything, but by the way, his back goes rigid, he knows I'm here. I silently open up the coolers and bags and start working on putting food away as well. Neither of us talk for what feels like a lifetime, just mindlessly working around one another.

Normally the silence would kill me, but I prefer this to us spitting hurtful things at each other. Once all the food has been tucked away, Nix makes his

way into the living room, to start a fire, I assume. I take this opportunity to grab my bags and head back to my room. A long hot shower will ease my nerves and anxiety... at least I hope.

Once tucked behind my closed rustic wooden door, I pull out a long-sleeved and pants lounge set and undress myself. I pack away the clothes I wore on the drive up here and hang up my coat. I turn to the bathroom that is connected to my room, but then remember I need my speaker out of my backpack. Bending over and searching for the damn device, I hear the door behind me open.

“What are you doing—”

“Oh my God!” I scream out, picking up my backpack and using it to cover as much of my naked body as possible. Nix stands in the doorway with his mouth gaping. “Nix, get out!”

“You’re in my room!” he yells back.

“I was here first, now leave! I’m naked!”

“First off, I claimed this room last year. Second, I’ve seen you naked before Lilah, so don’t act bashful on my account.” I can see a hint of a smirk form on his lips. Fine, two can play that game, Dumbrowski. I drop my protective shield of a backpack and stand on full display for him.

I watch as his eyes roam my body from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, seeing him visibly swallow. I raise my eyebrow at him, waiting for his rebuttal.

“I’m going to use the shower, so if you don’t mind.” Forgetting about the speaker, I turn and walk to the bathroom. Leaving the door open behind me, just to piss him off a little more.

I turn the water on as hot as it goes and step beneath the shower head. I have no idea where Nix is, but I refuse to let myself care. Until I hear the

sounds of bags being dropped onto the ground in the room.

You have to be kidding me.

I finish up as fast as I can because the noise of rustling around from the bedroom is ruining my shower, anyway. I step out, grabbing the towel that hangs up on the wall next to a robe, and dry myself off before covering myself with a fluffy white robe.

When I walk back into the bedroom, I truly can't believe my eyes. Nix, in nothing but a pair of gray joggers—every woman knows that's lingerie for men—is laying across the bed typing away on his phone with his bags scattered across the room.

“What are you doing?”

“Laying in my bed, what are you doing?” Nix asks like he's not being a total jerk right now. He never takes his eyes off of his phone.

“Nix, you can't be serious right now?”

“Oh, but I am.” He looks away from his phone for the first time since I've reentered the room and the look in his eye is never one I've seen before. “This is my room, on my trip. You have already upturned every other aspect of my life. I refuse to let you ruin this too.”

I'm stunned, absolutely stunned. I don't know what to say or really do besides grab my things and leave the room.

Before I close the door behind me, I take one look at the man who I loved with every part of me, I just don't see that man anymore and the only person to blame is myself.

“I know you don't want to hear a damn thing I have to say, so I'll make it quick. I never meant to hurt you and one day when you are willing to hear me out, you will realize why I did what I did and I hope you feel like the ass you're acting like right now.”

I don't give him a chance to respond, I shut the door behind me and find a room across the hall. If tears weren't already brimming my eyes, I would find the furthest room in this house and spend the rest of the trip there.

I climb into the bed and cry myself to the point of exhaustion, and I allow the dark cloud to overtake me.

Phoenix

I'm wincing at my own words as they replay in my head. I didn't mean to say what I said. She just got so far under my skin and I lost it, but it's still not an excuse. I'm a grown man, I know better; my momma raised me better than to ever talk to a woman like that.

Laying here, I look out the window to the right of me; it's why I picked this room. It covers the whole wall of the room, giving me the best view of the landscape of the backyard. I watch as the snow flurries around in the wind. It reminds me of the night Lilah and I went out at two AM to watch the first snowfall of the season...

3 years ago

"Nix, wake up!" Lilah hush-yells while jabbing her tiny fingers into my side. We just had a crazy round of sex that put me right into a deep slumber.

"Sunshine, give me ten minutes and we can go for another round," I mumble, while trying to drag her back to my arms to snuggle.

"No, it's snowing. Come on, we have to go outside!"

I look at the clock I have strategically placed across the room and see it's five minutes to two AM. I groan into my pillow, this girl will be the death of me, but fuck if she wants to go watch the snow fall this early in the morning, I'll do it. I'll do anything for her.

I pull back the blanket and reach for my hoodie that is on the floor, Lilah practically squeals jumping out of my bed. She runs into my closet putting on

a hoodie, but it's three times too big for her. I love it when she wears my clothes; I don't know why exactly other than it makes it really feel like she's mine, especially when it's something with my name on it.

Call me a caveman, but I like claiming my woman, even if she won't let me officially. I have been trying to broach the 'what are we?' conversation with Li for the past few weeks but every time I do, she diverts. Normally by stuffing her mouth with my cock, which at first I didn't give two fucks about, but now I'm starting to wonder if Chiral was right. She doesn't do commitment, but I'm not giving up, not now, not ever.

"Come on," she whines while pulling me by my hand through my bedroom door. We make our way down the stairs of the Hockey House and out the front door.

"Fuck, it's cold." I go to pull her into my chest to prevent her from getting the chills, but she runs down the stairs out into the middle of the yard. She throws her arms out to the side and tilts her head back, embracing the cold.

Her blonde hair flies in the wind and every time I think I've seen every beautiful part of her, she surprises me with another.

"Nix come here," she yells too loudly for this time of morning, but I go and wrap my arms around her waist. She twists in my arms and wraps her's around my neck.

I start to sway us to the music in my head and think about how I want to do this with her for the rest of my life.

"Are we dancing to nonexistent music?" She laughs, but follows my lead as I spin us around.

"When you laugh like that, it's all the music we need." She snuggles her head into my chest and we continue to dance, until I feel her start to shiver.

"Come on, Snow Queen, it's time we head inside and warm you up." I pick

her up and she instinctively wraps her legs around my waist. Supporting her with my one arm, using my other hand to cup her jaw, I give her the smallest kiss, but Lilah never does anything small. She pulls me back to her and kisses me again, breaking the seam of her lips with my tongue. She moans into my mouth which I happily swallow down.

I carry her back inside, never breaking our kiss, until we get to my bed, where I undress her and warm her up properly.

Remembering that night and how I made love to her into the early hours of the morning, plus the image of her naked earlier, has me tenting in my joggers. I lower my hand down my abs, going below my waistband, and finding my hard cock, I wrap my fingers around it. I'm met with the cold metal of my piercing, another thing I did in hopes that the pain it would cause would push out the pain in my chest. Stroking myself slowly, just enough to tug on the barbell. I close my eyes and imagine it's her hand covering my cock right now.

She always knew how to get me off, get me to cum so fast I swear she had a magic spell on my dick. The way she would suck me down until her nose brushed my pubic bone, how her tits would bounce when she would ride me, the way she would beg me to choke her, how wet she would get when I would tell her how much of a good girl she was when she would let me fuck her rough, and how she took it so well.

My hand is moving at warp speed, I'm right there. The final thought is what sends me replaying the sounds she would make, the moans, the pants, the way she would call me hers. I'm not fast enough to pull my jogger down, filling the inside of them with my hot cum.

Shit.

I jump out of bed and walk into the bathroom, turning the shower on to

clean myself off and hopefully cool myself down. Lilah is always the center of my fantasies, but normally after I get myself off to thoughts of her, I'm filled with rage. Not this time, this time there's a new feeling.

A feeling of longing, of missing her, missing us.

Chapter 15

Phoenix

I haven't seen Lilah since she left my room yesterday. It's early in the morning now, but I didn't even hear her leave her room to get something to eat last night. I guess the best peace offering I can give her is breakfast.

I start to brew some coffee and get to work on scrambling some eggs and cooking up some bacon. She always used to love breakfast; it was her favorite meal of the day, hopefully, that hasn't changed. Once the bacon is done, I pour the eggs into the same pan, just the way she likes them. The first time I made her breakfast, she said that if I made her breakfast like this every day she would never leave me.

So I did, but we all know how that turned out.

Pushing those thoughts away, I told myself last night after my shower—which ended up being longer, because the smell of her shampoo still lingered from her own shower causing me to rub another one out—that I was going to try and be civil with her.

We're stuck here and I refuse to let my temper ruin it, which also means I need to apologize to her for what I said and move forward.

Once the eggs are done, I set the table and make my way back down the hall to her bedroom.

I'm just about to knock on the door, when I hear her talking to someone.

"Janice, I don't think I can do this." I can't hear what the woman says, but I hear Lilah snifle. "But, I'm trying. I'm trying so hard with him and it's like the harder I try the more he pushes me away. I'm fighting a losing battle here."

Is she talking about me? If so, who the hell would she be talking about me with? I filter through my brain for any recollection of a Janice and nothing comes to light.

“Okay, I know. Yes, but how do I do that?” A few more minutes go by where Janice must do most of the talking, because Lilah hasn’t said anything further until I hear her say goodbye to the woman on the phone.

I knock on her door, not wanting her to catch me out here eavesdropping on her conversation.

“One minute,” she calls out and after what feels like forever she comes to the door, opening it the same way she did the night I showed up at her apartment. Just enough, but not all the way. I take a moment to look her over, she has dark bags under her eyes, and blonde hair pulled into a ponytail, and she’s obviously been crying, and that only furthers my guilt.

“What do you need, Nix?”

“I made breakfast. Come eat.” There’s a finality in my voice that I don’t mean to be there, but she needs to eat and we need to talk.

“I’m not hungry,” she hums out.

“Yes, you are. You haven’t left your room and I know that all the food was untouched this morning. Come on, I made the eggs you like.” I can see the smallest smirk form on her lips, and I know I’ve won her over.

“Okay.” She opens her door further and I move out of her way to let her through, which was a terrible idea. She’s wearing these tiny white shorts that show the bottom of her ass, and I know later on it will be the center of my focus while I work myself through another orgasm.

We sit down at the table, plating our food in silence, she never makes eye contact with me. Keeping her stare locked on her plate. I take a few bites of

food and think about what I'm going to say next. The puck is in my zone, I know I have to make the first move.

"Lilah," I say softly, hoping it will encourage her to look at me, and when she does I see the panic. Taking a deep breath, I start with the simple part. "I'm sorry." She begins to shake her head at me, but I continue on. "I'm sorry for what I said to you yesterday, it was uncalled for and I didn't mean to lash out. This has been hard for me to adjust to, you being back." I let out a deep breath before continuing "Look, I don't know if I will ever be ready to talk about what happened the day you left, but I'm going to try to move forward."

"Nix," she says my name in a pleading tone, she moves the leftover eggs around on her plate, and I can almost physically see the gears shifting in her head thinking of what she's going to say next. "I really hope you give me the chance," is all she says before getting up from the table and walking to the kitchen.

Standing from my seat, I follow her. "Do you really think telling me would make a difference?" I can feel my anger getting the best of me again, as it always does when she thinks a simple conversation would change what she did.

"Yes, I do!" Now she's yelling. Great, this is not how I planned this going.

"I find that really hard to understand, because there is not a Goddamn thing in this world that would have pushed me away from you. So please excuse me that I have a hard time believing whatever you are going to say will change my mind." I run my fingers through my hair, pulling at the strands; I guess it's now or never to lay it all out there for us to hash it out. "Then you have the audacity to come back and come back to MY JOB, the one place I would go to get away from thoughts of you. Of questions of why you wouldn't pick up the damn phone, why you just left me there when I was

going to ask you to move in with me, when I had a fucking ring to propose with. So, Lilah, tell me, tell me why you did what you did!”

“I did it all for you!” I scoff at that. She can’t be serious. “You want me to get on my knees and beg for you to listen to me, because I will. If you want me to quit my job, I will. You want me to scream from every rooftop in the city how much I fucking love you and how sorry I am? I will because I’m not giving up, I’m not running anymore, because you Phoenix Dumbrowski are the one for me whether you like it or not, and I will fight every day even if you never choose me again. Because you are the light of my life, you are the calm to my chaos, you are my only and everything, and that’s why I did what I did...because he was going to kill you, Nix!”

Her words threw me off balance, and I don’t know what part exactly. The part where she just told me for the first time from her own mouth that she loves me or the fact that someone was trying to kill me.

Before I can even get myself figured out, Lilah drops to her knees, putting her head in her hands, and lets out a sob I have never heard come out of anyone before.

I don’t even think, I just do. I lean down and pick her up from the floor, cradling her to my chest. I bring us into the living room and sit down on the brown leather couch with her in my lap.

“He was going to kill you, Nix. I had to leave to protect you,” she says through broken sobs. I rock her back and forth, gently shushing her to help her calm down.

“Breathe, Li, breathe for me.” She takes in a shaky breath, but it’s not good enough. I pull her out of the fetal position in my arms and have her straddle my leg. Placing both of my hands on either side of her face, forcing her to look at me.

“Breathe with me, Sunshine.” I don’t even mean to use her nickname, it just slips out and it makes her cry even harder. “Come on, in,” I take a deep breath in to help coach her, “and out.” I let out the air in my lungs and she does the same. “Good and let’s do it again.” It takes ten more times until she’s finally calmed down. She goes to move off my lap, but I secure her in place by putting my hands on her hips.

In over a year and a half, I feel like I’m looking into her eyes for the first time; I tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear and she lays her hand into my palm. Moving my thumb in a sweeping motion across her cheekbone.

“Start from the beginning,” I whisper. I can see the pain overtake her eyes, but she nods her head and starts.

After what feels like a lifetime and almost losing my breakfast twice, Li tells me everything. She tells me how Micha was her first love until he wasn’t, how he’s hooked on drugs, how he had been harassing her for years and the day he showed up at her graduation. I don’t know what I feel the most right now, but I do know if I ever find this asshole I’m breaking every single one of his bones and leaving his broken body in the woods for the wolves to find.

“I did it for you, Nix. I never wanted to leave you; I love you so much, but that’s why I did it...to protect you and it’s also why I always kept you at arms length. I’m so so sorry for that, but now I’m here to fight for you, for me, for us.

I look into her blue fire orbs and can see she means every word.

Chapter 16

Lilah

He just keeps looking at me and as intimidating as I may find it, I refuse to break eye contact. I feel like he is searching for any inconsistencies or any lies I may have told. But everything was the truth.

I'm done hiding from him; I'm done being the cause of his hurt.

I place my hands on his tattoo-covered biceps and give him a small squeeze to get some other kind of reaction out of him. He blinks, one, two, three times. He finally moves his hands from my jaw and wraps it securely around my waist. I don't know who moves first, but before I can even wrap my head around it, his lips are pressed to mine. Just like always, fireworks spark between us and before I know it, his tongue invades my mouth. It's like our bodies never missed a second with each other, still moving fluidly like they always did. His hands travel from my waist down to the curve of my ass, just trailing his fingers, from where my exposed flesh is coming out of the bottom of my shorts.

He nips at my bottom lip before moving his mouth to my jaw down to my neck. I know we should talk more, but I've missed him too much to stop.

"Sunshine," he moans out. I never knew a single word could cause so many emotions within me. The feeling of love and loss, the feeling of comfort and anxiety, the want to cry both happy and sad tears because I never thought I would hear that silly nickname again and now that I have I want to hear it every day for the rest of my life.

His hands travel up my back until they're in my hair; he pulls his lips away from my body and his eyes are a swirl of emotion, just like the perfect storm.

“We have so much to talk about, but right now I need you more than my next breath.” His words are filled with such a level of demand, that I can’t ignore it.

“Please,” I say, begging. “We have four more days to talk.” I smirk at him. Nix stands and I instinctively wrap my legs around him. He carries me past the kitchen and down the hall until we end up in his room. He lays me gently on the bed and returns his mouth to my own, devouring me like I’m his last meal. His fingers find the hem of my shirt, dragging the material up. He sits back on his hunches and pulls me to sit up with him, removing my shirt where he finds me completely bare. He traces the outline of my collarbone, down to my breast, till he pinches my nipples between his thumb and forefinger, erupting a moan from deep within my chest.

“Always so responsive.” He smirks at his comment; he always knew how to play my body like a fiddle. He pushes me onto my back, latching his lips around my pointed nipple, and while his hands work on pulling my shorts down, he lets go of my nipple with a pop and then removes my shorts from around my thighs, throwing them off the bed.

“So fucking beautiful,” he says before leaning forward and laying his tongue flat onto my hip bone, sucking on the flesh. The idea of him marking me sends a level of electricity through me and I can’t help the goosebumps from erupting across my skin. He moves to my center, wasting no time; he gives me a single lap right up my center, before sucking my clit between his teeth. He looks up at me, watching me as he continues to devour me. He lets the bundle of nerves go before licking between my folds, and I can’t help but throw my head back and moan out his name.

“That’s it, baby, give me all those sweet sounds. Fill this house with them.” He adds one of his thick fingers into the mix and it’s been so long since I’ve

been touched like this. Add in his dirty mouth, and I'm already falling over the edge, flooding the sheets below me. Nix continues to lap up as much as he can, and I swear if I let him he would suck my juices from the fabric beneath me.

I reach for his shoulders dragging him up my body, which he willingly complies with because let's be honest, I can't make Phoenix Dumbrowski do shit; he's like three times my size. I fill my hands with his dark locks and bring his lips back to my own—tasting myself on his tongue makes me wet all over again.

I dance my fingers down his arms, over his abs, following the sexy V line, hooking onto his sinful gray joggers and trying to pull them over his ass. He laughs against my lips, because my arms are too short to even attempt.

He removes his body from my own, and I can feel the pout form on my lips.

“Do you want these off or not?” He raises an eyebrow at me.

“Yes, just hurry.”

“Always so needy and bossy. Not a damn thing has changed about you.” I just wink at him and wave my hand to move him along. He pulls his pants down, bending at the waist to slip his feet through the fabric, but nothing prepared me for when he stood to his full height.

“You did not.” I gasp. There standing naked as the day he was born but with an added addition. A silver barbell sits through the skin of his cock, taunting me to run my tongue around it. I crawl on all fours to the edge of the bed, pulling him forward by his thighs, I come face to face with his piercing. Observing it's like a science experiment.

“You can touch it; he won't bite,” Nix laughs.

“You think you're so funny, huh?” Before he can say another word, I wrap

my lips around the tip and suck it further into my mouth. The cool metal, running along the top of my mouth, causes me to moan around the head of his cock.

“Fuck, baby.” He tangles his hands in my hair, pulling on the strands with just the right amount of pressure. I draw his member deeper down my throat to the point I’m gagging around him. Is it possible his dick grew? I breathe in and out of my nose, working him over and bobbing my head a few more times. The noises coming from his mouth tell me he’s close, but I want more. I want him to take over my body like he used to. I pull my mouth off of him, looking up at him through the curtains of my lashes.

“Fuck my face. I want it like you used to.” He blinks at me like I just spoke a foreign language, so I lick his angry red tip. “Please.” His hands tighten in my hair, adding that delicious level of pain.

He nods his head and I move my mouth back to his cock, hollowing out my cheeks and he pistons his hips forward, making me choke on his dick. He pulls halfway out before he does it again.

“That’s it, baby, take my cock. Show me how much you love it.” The mouth on this man alone is sending me over the edge. I can’t help but find my clit and rub it in fast tight circles. Letting my moans vibrate against the flesh in my mouth. “Fuck, Sunshine. I’m so close.” I take my other hand and reach between his legs, finding his balls that are so heavy in my hand, and give them a tight squeeze, before lightly massaging them. I continue this pattern until he’s a panting mess.

“Li, I’m... I’m..” I suck him harder, wanting him to fill my mouth with his cum. Right when his dick twitches in my mouth, I’m cumming, my hand covered in my wetness, and just as I’m working through the wave of my own orgasm, the hot liquid is sprayed into the back of my throat. I swallow down

every last drop. I lick him from root to tip, working him through his own high.

I let his softening dick fall from my mouth and even though my jaw is in some serious discomfort, I can't stop the smile from forming on my face. Nix takes my hand which is still covered in my own cum and licks it from palm to fingertips.

I fall onto my back, throwing my arm across my eyes, trying to catch my breath. We didn't even have sex and I'm exhausted. I hear Nix laugh, but his footsteps grow distant until I hear the sound of water running in the bathroom.

"Come on, Sunshine." He's peeling my arm away from my face, and I let out a groan.

"No, it's nap time," I say while keeping my eyes closed. But Nix being Nix, doesn't take no for an answer. He puts his arms under my legs and shoulders, bringing my body to his chest.

I open my eyes to see him staring down at me like the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. All traces of anger and resentment are long gone from his face and for the first time since I've moved back, I recognize the man in front of me.

He carries me into the bathroom where I see the giant tub filling with steaming water, I feel the shift in his weight as he steps and lowers us both down. I snuggle in between his legs, laying my head back against his shoulders, allowing my eyes to close.

"I missed you," he whispers into my ear, placing a small kiss right below my ear.

"I missed you too, every day I missed you." I open my eyes to look over every small feature of his. There's a scar above his right eyebrow that's new.

“Why Paris?” he asks while reaching for a bottle of soap. Dripping the liquid into his palm and lathering it together, before rubbing it into my shoulders. It’s the same body wash he used in college and never did I think pine needles and citrus could make me feel so happy. I hum in appreciation as he circles his thumbs into my muscles.

“You always wanted to go to Paris and Greece. The faster flight was to France, so it seemed right.”

He doesn’t respond, and I know there are more words that need to be shared between us. Moving out his grasp, I turn around in his lap, placing my legs on the outside of his. I copy his actions and take his body wash, pouring it into my own hands before rubbing it in small circles over his chest and arms.

“Why all the tattoos and the... ya know.” He smirks at my reference to his dick piercing.

“I like the pain, it... it helped me forget the pain that was brewing in my chest.” I nod at that and how I wish I could go back in time. “I also noticed you have a tattoo.” He gathers my hair in his hand brushing it off of my back onto my shoulder, where his thumbs rub over the little sun I had printed on my skin.

“Yeah, I got it my first week there.” I lean my head against his chest so he can see that I embedded a part of him on my body, as he did my soul. What I didn’t expect was for him to laugh at it. “What’s so funny?”

“I have the same one.” He pulls me back so he can point out the little basic outline of a sun on the left side of his body, right by his heart. “I was drunk when I got it. I was so pissed the next day.” I laugh at his remark, but bringing up his drinking reminds me of a conversation I had with Lottie a few months back,

“Are you still drinking a lot?” I ask softly, not sure if this is a sensitive

topic or not, but Lottie told me that they were starting to become concerned about Nix and his alcohol consumption.

I can see the embarrassment overtaking his features, this is obviously something he's not proud of. "I'm not judging, but I want to help you if you need the help." I lace our fingers below the water.

"My Sunshine is back to chase the dark clouds away. I think I'm already back to a better place, but thank you." The smile that breaks across my face is going to split my head in two, I swear.

"That was so cheesy, but kind of cute." I give him a quick peck on the lips. "I mean it though. I'm here, I'm not going anywhere. If you need help, let me help you."

He wraps me in his arms, causing water to flow over the sides of the tub, and we just sit like that for a while longer.

"I love you, too. I didn't get the chance to say it back to you and I want you to know, despite everything, I never stopped loving you. You are still the air that fills my lungs, still my sunshine on cloudy days; you always have been and always will be the only one I love."

My heart could almost burst from all the love I'm feeling, and I hope I never have to go without it again.

Chapter 17

Phoenix

I lay here and watch as Li's chest slowly inflates and deflates, still in disbelief she's here in bed with me naked, of course. After our bath yesterday, we were curled up all day in the living room as the fire crackled away. She told me all about her time in Paris, how she made friends with a couple that ran a cafe, how her boss there was a monster, and why she returned to Boston. She also told me about how she cut her parents off and that explains her living situation.

To say I'm proud of her is the biggest understatement. Throughout our time together she was under so much pressure with her parents and the whole asshole—I refuse to say his name—I don't know how she held herself together so well. But, now she's free and living her life the way she wants to with no one to control her.

My Sunshine is shining brighter than she ever did before. I know we have more to talk about, and I'm not even fully sure where we stand—a sense of *deja vu* sets in with that thought—but for right now, I just want to soak up this bliss we're in and worry about the semantics for when we go back to Boston. The snow is still coming and I'm not sure when it's going to let up, but if it keeps me cooped up in this cabin with Li forever, it can blizzard till the cabin is buried for all I care.

I twirl a piece of her hair between my fingers, remembering the night in my car, and I wonder if she has nightmares or if it's a trauma response because of the fear the asshole put in her. God, I want to track him down so badly, but I plan to call Theo this week and get an update. As long as I am breathing,

Micha will never get close to her, he will never lay another finger on her. Because just like how she did everything to protect me, I would lay my life in his hands to protect her.

“I love you,” she mumbles in her sleep. Three words, eight letters, is all it takes to wash every bit of resistance I had towards her.

“I love you, too.” I kiss her forehead and she snuggles in closer. The fire must have gone out overnight; I was too busy with my face between her legs to keep it up.

I pull her tighter to me and despite it freezing in here, I can feel my heart start to melt.

Buzz, Buzz, Buzz.

I groan, reaching over to ignore whoever is calling me because the most important person is beside me, and everyone else can wait.

Buzz, Buzz, Buzz.

“You should probably answer it, someone was calling you last night, too,” Li says as she tucks her toes under my legs, searching for warmth.

Picking up my phone and not even checking who it is, I hit the answer button with more force than necessary.

“What?”

“Well good morning to you, too,” Eva’s voice fills my ears and I feel a slight bit of remorse at my tone with her. Lilah's head shoots up and looks at me with utter disbelief. I give her a confusing look back before returning to my conversation with Eva.

“Sorry. What’s up?”

“Just calling to check in on you. Hoping you haven’t tried to do something stupid like drive to escape the *She-Devil*, Lottie told me the snow was really bad up there.” Fuck, the look on Li’s face says she definitely heard that. I pull

the phone tighter to myself to try and block Eva's words from escaping past my ear. It's already too late, Li is climbing out of bed, rushing around the room gathering her clothes.

"Eva, can I call you back?" I don't even give her a chance to answer before I hang up. Li is walking out of the room, and I hear a door slam. Rubbing my hands up and down my face and taking a few deep breaths. I find my own clothes and put them on before walking out of my room.

Across the hall, I can hear Li talking to herself through the door. I open the door forgoing knocking because I know she won't answer. She's pacing the length of her room until she senses my presence.

"I'm such a fucking idiot!" Pace. "No, I'm not an idiot. You're just a lying cheater." Pace. "Oh my gosh, you're a cheater. Nix, what the hell! You have a girlfriend and you... you."

"Spent the better part of my day between your legs yesterday? Or that I already confessed you're the only one for me?" The smirk forming on the curve of my lips is definitely not going to win me brownie points right now.

I know Lilah thinks Eva is my girlfriend, and I may have played into that a little bit when we had dinner at Liam's house that one night. I know, a dick move, but at the time I figured let her think what she wants because I didn't care.

"Oh my gosh! Nix this isn't funny. I'm not that type of woman. I mean I really don't like her, but still. Women stick together regardless and I am not going to be your... your *sidepiece*." The way she says sidepiece has so much disgust laced through it I can't help the chuckle that slips my lips. I stalk towards her, with every step I take forward, she takes one step back, until her back hits the dresser. Placing both my hands on either side of her waist, trapping her in.

“Nix, stop. I can’t even look at you right now. How are you laughing? You just cheated on your girlfriend!” She looks away from me, like if she can’t see me then she can’t feel the guilt that’s festering inside of her. I wrap my hand around her neck, forcing her to face me. I can feel her breath hitch in her throat. Still like breath play, I see.

Leaning forward, until my lips brush the outer part of her ear, I tighten my fingers just a smidge more around her neck. Her pulse starts to race, only encouraging me to squeeze a little bit more.

“I don’t have a girlfriend, Sunshine.” Kissing just below her ear, before sucking in the flesh. I covered her thighs, stomach, and hips in plenty of hickies last night, but I left her neck alone, knowing it’s her favorite part to be marked and teased with.

“Yes.. yes you do?” It’s not a statement anymore and her voice is wavering. She’s fighting back a moan that so badly wants to escape.

“Unless you are finally going to give us a label, I.” Suck. “Don’t.” Lick. “Have.” Bite. “A girlfriend,” I say with enough finality she has no room for argument. I pull back and shift my hand from her neck to her jaw. She takes a deep gasp as her chest is heaving. “Eva is my friend and PA. That’s it, I swear on everything. I’ll call her back right now, and she’ll tell you.”

Li searches my eyes for any lies, but she finds nothing.

“Well, I’m sure she would love to talk to the *She-Devil*, herself.” She rolls her eyes at the little nickname Eva uses for her.

I can’t blame Eva for not liking Lilah; she was my confidant. I shared all the bad and ugly about my feelings for Li with her. Something I know I will have to handle at a later date.

“Are you done with the freak out now, or do I need to put you over my knee and spank it out of you?” Her eyes widen and fill with lust and I think

it's the very thing I need to do. I need to claim her just as much as she needs me to prove to both of us that this is everything it always was before but even more now.

I pick her up by the waist and throw her over my shoulder, walking back into my—our— bedroom. Sitting on the edge of my bed, I pull her shorts down before placing her over my knee. Li discovered she has a degradation kink after we became a little bit more serious in college. She likes it when I take her choices away: her choice to breathe, her choice to cum, her choice to do anything. It gives her a sense of freedom from having to always be perfect—her words not mine, cause to me she is always perfect no matter what.

“How many spanks till you can calm down? I’m thinking of five.”

She doesn’t answer, which she knows better than not to. I spank the side of her thigh earning me a yelp out of her. “Lilah, the rules haven’t changed. You answer when I talk to you.”

“Yes, yes five.”

Five is light compared to what we used to do, but it’s been a while... Well, I hope it's been a while. The thought of anyone else doing this to her lit a fire in me. Pulling my hand back, and the first smack landing on the lower part of her ass. She jumps, but remains over my lap.

“One,” she says.

“Good girl, baby.” I land another smack after my endearment. This one landing on her left cheek.

“Two.”

Smack.

“Three.”

Smack.

“Four.” She starts to rub her legs together, knowing she’s starting to get

wet. I can feel her warm heat through my joggers.

Smack.

“Five.” This time it’s a full moan. Looking to see her perfectly round ass covered in my handprint. If I had a tattoo gun I would trace the outline, because it’s my favorite sight to see.

Pulling her up to straddle my lap, I wrap her hair around my fist, pulling her head back to expose her neck to me. I lick from her collarbone up to her ear. “Do you understand now that I don’t have a girlfriend, unless it’s you. I haven’t even touched another woman since you left, haven’t looked at another woman in the same way I look at you since you left. You are the last pussy I tasted over a year and a half ago, until last night. I want you and only you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She emphasizes her words, by grinding her pussy over my hard dick, sure to leave a wet spot on my pants.

“Can you say the same thing or were you a bad girl and let another man touch what’s mine?” I know this isn’t the time to ask, but I need to know.

“Yes, Nix. There hasn’t been another man to touch me since you.” The feeling of relief and animalistic possession washes over me.

“Good.” I fall to my back, dragging her forward so her legs rest beside my ears like earmuffs, and I reward my girl.

Chapter 18

Lilah

Waking up next to Nix will never get old, especially after I have gone so long without his warm skin next to mine, to the peaceful sounds of his breathing, to the funny things he says when he's sleeping.

I have to get up for my session with Janice, but I much rather just stay here cuddled up with my love, but she agreed to keep me on as a client and I really don't want her to regret doing that. I give Nix a soft kiss on the cheek and wiggle my way out of his grasp. We spent most of the night tangled up with each other, causing him to sleep in a little bit. We still haven't had sex. I don't know why exactly other than we're moving at a slower pace.

Tip-toeing to the room across the hall, I hop on a video conference with Janice. We haven't talked since the morning before I told Nix everything—and to say I was a hot-mess-express in that phone call is an understatement—so the look of surprise on her face isn't completely unwarranted.

“Well, you look... happy?” She's treading lightly, not wanting to put her own foot in her mouth.

“Yeah, I am. I told Nix everything and we've been... rekindling.” I can sense the blush creeping up onto my cheeks, and I have to look away from the screen.

“That's wonderful, my dear. I can see that makes you very happy, although remember what we talked about. A person can only contribute to your happiness, but they are never the sole reason for it, that's completely up to you.” I nod at her advice and take a moment to go over words that she has so many times told me before. With BPD, I struggle with relationships:

depending on them too much or not at all. It can really be complex and finding a balance with Nix will be crucial.

“Yes, I’m going to talk it over with him, explain my diagnosis, and how it’s important we take things at a slower pace.”

We continue to talk for the next thirty minutes, her giving me some more tools to ensure my anxiety stays at a minimum. Just as we’re saying goodbye, Nix walks through the door, yawning while stretching his arm over his head. My God, how does someone look that sexy just having rolled out of bed?

“Shit, sorry I didn’t know you were on the phone.” Nix walks back out the door, shutting it behind him.

“Well, he sounds hunkey?” Janice wiggles her gray eyebrows at me, and I can’t help but laugh at her comment.

“He’s pretty handsome.”

“And he’s very charming and hungry,” Nix calls from the other side of the door, obviously eavesdropping on my conversation.

“Au revoir,” Janice says before disconnecting our call.

I take my phone and before I can even open the door myself, it’s flying open. Nix swoops me up into his arms and snuggles his face in the crook of my neck.

“I was hoping to wake up and have my dessert this morning.” The lust is thickly laid in his voice, and boy does it make my lady bit tingle to life.

“Sorry, I had a session with Janice this morning, otherwise I would have stayed in bed and listen to all your nonsensical sleep-talking.”

“I do not talk in my sleep, and you have yet to prove it.” He kisses down my neck, wrapping his arms tighter around my waist.

“What do you want me to do to record you sleeping all night? You just randomly say things like *‘Time to go round up the cows and flip the tractor*

on its back.’” I do my best Southern accent, which is no Dolly Parton.

“Babe you may look like a Southern bell, but no matter how hard you try you will never master the Southern drawl, so you should probably just give up.”

I lean in till my lips brush the outer part of his ear, nipping at the flesh, “At least I know how to ride like a cowgirl.”

“Fuck,” is all he says before he lowers his hands down the middle of my ass where his fingers graze my center. I’m sure he can feel the wetness that’s collecting in my panties right now.

But his stomach makes its presence known, grumbling loud enough to rattle the cabin. “Come on cowboy, let’s make breakfast then start working on that turkey dinner.”

He lets out a moan telling me he rather be feasting on me instead of food, but I’m also starving and from the way he finger fucked me last night, my vagina needs a little bit of downtime.

Nix walks us into the kitchen where he places me on the cold countertop. “How do pancakes sound?”

“Perfect.” If I ever get the chance to meet Nix’s parents I will be sure to thank his mother for teaching him how to cook, because I grew up with nannies who prepared all my meals, so my cooking skills go as far as the microwave and even then I still burn shit.

“So who is the woman who thinks I’m hunkey?” Nix repeatedly raises his eyebrows at Janice’s comment.

Pulling my bottom lip between my teeth, I try to decide how to explain this all to him. I feel like I keep dropping these big bombs on him; which in traditional Nix fashion, he takes them all with ease.

“Sunshine, you promised no more keeping things from me, but if you need

time to tell me that's okay." Damn, this man is being so sweet and understanding.

"No, it's okay. Janice is my therapist. I started going when I moved to Paris. She has really helped me sort stuff out and helped me understand my... diagnosis."

Nix looks away from the batter he's mixing up, and the fear in his eyes rattles me a little until I can read where his train of thought is.

"I'm not dying Nix, not that kind of diagnosis, I... well you see here..." Why is this so hard? I mean this man has taken me back after I told him someone almost killed him because of me. But maybe it's because this is about me, about how I'm not *normal*—Janice would scold me for saying that—but it's true. There is no cure for BPD, only ways to manage it and live with it. "I have Borderline Personality Disorder, which the name doesn't really make a ton of sense, but it pretty much means I struggle with regulating my mood, maintaining relationships, the fear of being neglected, and self-image," I say the last part in a whisper because no one looking at me would ever suspect that I hate myself, I loathe the very being I am, and that sometimes I just wish I never existed.

Nix nods his head, dissecting the words I just put out and the longer he takes, the more worried I become thinking he's going to find this all to be too much, that I'm too much.

I start to twist my nonexistent ring again, really needing to find something to replace it, "I understand if this is all too much for you." I give him an out because I wouldn't blame him for not wanting to handle any of this; I don't even want to handle any of it.

He neglects the batter and nudges his way between my legs, wrapping his big warm hands around my jaw, wiping away tears I didn't even know fell.

“Sunshine, this changes nothing, not a Goddamn thing. Just tell me how I can help you?”

Wrapping my arms tightly around his neck, I will never take this for granted again, his unwavering love. “Just by being you, Nix. That’s the best thing you can do for me.”

He pulls back, placing the softest kiss on my forehead, before resting his against mine. “I can do that, but you have to promise me if you ever need anything more, you’ll tell me.”

“I promise.” He lets me go and goes back to making us breakfast.

I once heard in a movie *You like because, and you love despite. You like someone because of all their qualities, and you love someone despite some of their qualities.* I didn’t understand it until this moment.



Nix and I just finished Thanksgiving dinner. It was absolutely way too much food for two people, and even though he eats enough for two people himself, there were still way too many leftovers. But I’m not complaining because I haven’t had Thanksgiving like this in years. My parents can’t even remember my birthday, let alone any other family holiday.

“I’m so full, I might have to be rolled into bed.” I huff out from my spot on the couch. My head is in Nix’s lap, and he’s mindlessly playing with my hair; if he keeps it up, I’ll be out cold soon.

“Well you know what that means?” Nix speaks up, pulling his hands from my hair and standing up all together. He disappears down the hallway before

I can even question what he means. Returning quickly with two pairs of skates in hand.

“What are you doing with those?”

“We’re going skating on the pond out back, It’s frozen over. I checked it this morning when I was getting more wood.”

“Did you forget I’m the most uncoordinated human being on the planet?”

“Did you forget you’re dating a professional hockey player who will never let you fall?” The corners of his lips turn up just a tiny bit at his rebuttal.

“I didn’t know I was dating a professional hockey player?” I wink at him before ungluing myself from the warm leather cushions.

“Oh we’re dating, babe. I’m too old to play that game of just hanging out and hooking up.” He places air quotes around his hanging out and hooking up statement.

“Nix, you’re twenty-three, that’s not even old.”

“Old enough to know what I want, and I want you. Only you, Sunshine. So you’re mine and I’m yours, there’s no ifs, ands, or buts about it.” Nix emphasizes his words with a forward step towards me until he is close enough to wrap his hands around the small of my back and pulls me flush against him.

“Okay,” is all I’m capable of saying because the way he has invaded my space it’s like my brain can’t come up with a coherent sentence to save my life. But, in my heart I know this is all I want, to be his. Officially, proudly his.

“Good, now that we got that out of the way, let’s go!” He swats my butt before pulling me towards the back door where our coats are. The snow finally let up, but the freezing temperatures stayed behind. Nix pulls his coat around me, knowing my thin jacket is not suitable for these temperatures.

“You can’t just wear a hoodie, Nix.”

“Baby, I promise after a few laps, I’ll be warmed up.” Once the rest of our winter gear is in place, he’s pulling me out the door.

Nix’s footprints from earlier are still present, so we just step in those to what I assume is the lake. After about a five-minute walk, I am engrossed with the most beautiful scene I have ever witnessed.

A small pond, surrounded by large pine trees, with the sun setting behind them. It’s absolutely beautiful. There are a few benches sitting along the pond and Nix clears it from the snow that’s covering them. He helps me put the skates on, as I have only gone skating a few times in my life. Once he’s laced up, he grabs the shovel he brought down with us and heads out onto the pond clearing as much snow from the ice as he can. Once he’s content with the amount of space he clears, he comes back to the edge grabbing my hands and pulling me onto the pond that resembles glass.

“You’re sure this is safe?” I cling to his arms like it’s my personal life raft.

“Didn’t you just watch me skate around this whole thing? I promise it’s safe.” He pulls away from me, but holding my hands. Skating backward with ease and pulling us around the ice.

“You know I watched your games when I was in Paris. You’ve become quite the fighter, Mr. Dumbrowski.”

“Yeah, I know. My coaches pretty much told me to cut my shit, or I’m getting benched or traded.” I can see the flash of worry cross his face. I know the Knights were not his first choice, but he seems to really enjoy it now, especially because he still gets to play with Chiral and Liam.

“Well if you need encouragement we can always set up an arrangement.” I wink at him.

“Hmm, what do you have in mind?” He pulls me closer to him, wrapping

his arms around me, pretty much holding me up at this point.

“I’ll let you take all that pent-up energy to fuck me instead of fighting.”

“That’s a deal I can get behind.” He lowers his mouth to mine, sealing the deal with a heated kiss that if we’re not careful will melt the ice below us.

“What do we have here?” The sound of Chiral’s voice drifts on the wind carrying it to our ears.

Nix and I both look and see Chiral, Mar, and the rest of the gang on the edge of the water line. Nix picks me up, throwing me over his shoulder and skating as fast as he can towards our friends.

Once we’re standing in front of them, Nix puts me back on my skates, wrapping his arms around my shoulders.

“What are you guys doing here?” I ask.

“The roads cleared up, and we thought we would come to check to make sure you haven’t killed each other, but obviously the drive wasn’t needed,” Lottie says from where she’s standing next to Liam who is carrying a sleepy Lani. “Sooo care to explain what is going on here?” Chiral asks.

I look up to Nix who is already looking down at me, this is my chance to prove to him that I’m serious about us making this work.

“Nix and I... well we talked.”

“Looks like you did a lot more than talking; it actually looks like maybe you have done less talking and more fu—”

“Child is present, Chiral,” Lottie scolds him. Ignoring both of them, I try to finish what I was saying, although the death glare from Eva is making it difficult, but I can’t let her or anyone get between us again. “Nix and I talked and we are together now.”

“Together how?” Mar asks with a twinkle in her eye like a kid in a candy store.

“We’re dating,” I say proudly and it feels so good. Nix kisses my cheek and wraps his arms around me.

“I told you, Lottie. You owe me a hundred bucks,” Mar yells and jumps around.

“Wait, you guys betted on us?” Nix asks what I was just about to ask, but then it all clicks into place.

“You set us up, didn’t you? Is it even snowing in Boston right now as bad as you guys were making it out to be?” I ask with a raised eyebrow at our best friends and the look on their faces says it at all. “You are some manipulative ass-”

“CHILD!” Lottie screams, but the rest of us just laugh.

Nix and I get off the pond and change out of our skates into our boots, and we all head back inside the cabin, laughing the entire way.

Liam and Lottie put Lani to bed and the rest of us enjoy spiked Christmas in a cup thanks to Chiral and Mar.

Looking around at all my friends in the same place, wrapped up in the love of my life's arms, I couldn’t be happier.

Evalina is giving me a rather intense look, but other than that, everything appears to be alright for the first time in a while.

Chapter 19

Phoenix

It's our last day here and man does it make me sad. We're heading out early tomorrow morning and although I'm excited to get back to the game, I'm not excited to go back to my empty home. I want to ask Li to move in with me, but I don't know if she's ready for that. A part of me feels like we're just picking up right where we left off, so it doesn't feel too soon.

Lost in my own thoughts, it's not until I feel her touch that I notice my sleeping beauty is awake. The ponytail she put her hair in last night, slightly lopsided now, her sleepy expression, and the small smear of black below her eyes from her leftover makeup, and despite all that, she is still the absolute most breathtaking woman.

"Good morning, Sunshine." Turning my head to lock my lips onto hers, only anticipating a small kiss turns intense quickly; she opens for me willingly, my tongue seeking out hers, to tangle in a dance of smooth slides and light strokes. I wrap my arm around the small of her back to pull her as close as possible. Her hands stroke through my hair and the small swivel of her hips, and my cock goes from a small chub to a full-on boner.

I'm the first to break for air and she lets out a small giggle that I want to record and have on constant replay. "Good morning," she whispers. My fingers trail down over the length of her ass.

"Think we have tim--"

"Uncle Nix, Aunt Li-Li, breakfast!" Lani's voice rings from the other side of the door. Thank god we remembered to lock it last night because I am not

about to explain to my two-year-old niece why her aunt and uncle are naked beneath the sheets.

“Coming, Sweetheart,” I yell back to hopefully encourage her to run away.

“She really loves you, doesn’t she?” Li asks while detangling our limbs from one another.

“Yeah, she tells me I’m her favorite Uncle,” I say proudly. Pulling myself out of bed and begging my dick to go down, but one quick look at a naked Li, does the opposite to my aching cock.

“How much candy did you have to bribe her with for her to agree to that statement.”

Sucking in a dramatic gasp I say, “Lilah James, I’m offended you think I would buy our nieces love like that.”

Li, now dressed, turns around and has the biggest smile on her face, “I like it when you say *our* like that.”

Pulling my t-shirt over my head, and walking around the bed, I pull her small frame towards mine. “Everything is ours now, baby.” Placing a small kiss on her temple, I grab her hand and pull us out of our room. Everyone is in the kitchen sitting around the massive wooden table, and the smell of savory and sweet food fills the air.

“Look who finally decided to leave their cave,” Chiral mockingly says. As I pass him on the way to the last two seats next to him and Mar, I flick him on the back of the neck. “Ouch, that was unnecessary as—”

“Language, Hall,” Liam firmly says from his spot across the table.

I laugh at Liam scolding Chiral; nothing has changed between the three of us and now that I don’t feel like a miserable blob of a human and Lilah is back, everything can fully go back to normal.

That thought quickly vanishes when I lock eyes with Eva across from me.

She hasn't spoken a single word to me since they arrived, and I can sense her anxiety from here. I didn't mean to put her on the back burner, I've just been trying to make up for lost time with Li.

"Hey Eva," I say and when I can practically feel both her and Li stiffen in their seats, I know this is going to be a sticky situation.

"Hi," Eva mumbles before stuffing her mouth with pancakes. I can feel Liam and Chiral's eyes locked onto me watching how I'm going to handle this, but deflecting seems like my best option right now.

"So what's the plan for the rest of the day?" I ask no one in particular.

Always the savior in any situation, Liam speaks up, "I was thinking we go sledding down the hill out back, the snow is finally melting a little and it makes for perfect sledding conditions."

"That sounds like so much fun!" Mar squeals and everyone nods their approval. Everyone but Eva.

I don't know why she's so stand-offish; I figured her dislike for Li would disappear once she saw how blissfully happy I am, but I guess I was wrong.

After breakfast, we all help clean up and head to our own rooms to gather our winter gear to head outside. Li is shifting through her suitcase, looking for her long socks.

"Can I talk to you about something?" I ask from where I sit on my side of the bed.

She turns around, noticing the nervous tone that's slipping through, and in seconds the socks are all but forgotten and she's sitting beside me. Her icy blue eyes locked onto mine, and her bottom lip pulled between her perfectly white teeth. I hope what I'm about to say goes my way because if it doesn't, I really don't know what I'm going to do.

"What's up?" She reaches for my hand, lacing our fingers together. Li was

always affectionate, but I've noticed that now it's like she always needs to be touching me and I don't mind it at all, but it's almost like she does it to make sure I don't run away from her.

"You..." letting out a deep cough trying to break the unsettling tone. "You don't mind me being friends with Eva, right? I know you two are not on the same page, but I really think if you put your differences aside you could be good friends."

Li does that really cute thing where she tilts her head, her blonde hair falling down her back in the process. "I will never tell you who you can and can't be friends with Nix, you know me better than that." She's deflecting, not wanting to share her true feelings.

"That's not what I asked."

I can see her shoulders drop just a smidge and I can sense that I already know the answer without her even having to say it. "I worry her feelings for you are not as platonic as you may think they are, and I don't want to be in a constant battle with her. But, she was there for you when I wasn't and she seems to really care about you. As long as she understands you are mine, then I don't mind."

I can't help the grin that spreads across my face when I hear the word mine fall from Li's lips. It will never get old to hear her claim me so proudly.

"Okay, but just to be clear, Eva does not have feelings for me, I promise."

Li pats my arm, like you would pat a dog's head. "Nix, call it women's intuition, but she has feelings for you." She goes back to her suitcase on the hunt for her socks again.

My brain shifts through all the interactions I've had with Eva and she's never made advances on me, friendly flirting, sure, but nothing ever more than that.

I push the thoughts to the back of my head and find the rest of my things to venture outside.

Chapter 20

Lilah

It's been a week since we left the cabin and as much as I love the city, I miss seeing Nix every day and waking up next to him. He hinted at me moving in with him and as much as I love the idea, I still just feel like maybe we should slow down just a teeny tiny bit.

I want us to move at a pace where we work through all of our issues because I know even though he says he's fine and accepts my million and one apologies, I still want to make sure we're not looking through rose-colored glasses. My diagnosis is a lot to take in for someone who has never faced it, and I want him to be certain that he can stand beside me when something surfaces.

There's a knock at my office door, and I call out to whoever is on the other side to come in. A freshly showered Nix walks through the door with a black bag in his hand, and I couldn't be more excited to see him. A few strands of dark hair fall onto his forehead and a ghost of a five o'clock shadow is present along his sharp jawline. Just looking at him causes a wetness to occur between my legs.

"Hi, Sunshine." He strolls in and walks around my desk, placing his two big hands on each side of my face, and leaning down to give me a gentle kiss. But Nix never does anything gentle because it quickly turns into a full-on makeout session within seconds. His tongue cressing mine, sliding against one another doing a dance only they know. He's the first to break, and I can't help but notice the giant grin on his face.

“I have something for you,” he says while putting the bag he was carrying on top of my desk.

“You don’t need to buy me anything, you know that.”

“Yes, but I wanted to and you need this.” He pushes the bag closer towards me, and I can’t help but roll my eyes at him as I pull the bag into my lap. Pulling out the black tissue paper, I find a black and gold Knight’s jersey. Turning the fabric around, I’m not at all surprised to see Nix’s last name and the number sixty-three. It’s two sizes too big for me, but he knows that I like my jerseys oversized. “Figured you could wear it to the game tonight.” He leans down and kisses right below my ear, a spot he knows I love to be touched before he whispers. “Then later tonight I can fuck you while wearing it.”

Pushing on his shoulder to move away from me, a laugh slips past my lips. Nix and I still haven’t had sex and we haven’t been intimate since we’ve been back from the cabin. I chalk it up to us both being busy and living in two different places, but in the back of my head alarm bells ring.

“We’ll see about that.” I wink at him, we didn’t have plans to spend the night together but honestly, it sounds amazing.

“Hmm, we sure will, Sunshine. I emailed you your ticket, you’ll be sitting with Lottie, Mar, and Eva. Best seats in the house.”

The idea of being in Eva’s presence for more than thirty seconds doesn’t thrill me, but I told myself after the cabin I was going to make an effort with her, for Nix’s sake, but I see the way she looks at him, how she always feels this need to touch him. I was never a possessive woman, always confident in my relationship with Nix when we were in college where there were puck bunnies throwing themselves at him left and right. But, there’s something

about Eva that I can't shake. Maybe it's just the fact that she's the one he turned to when I left, that she was able to be there for him when I couldn't.

"Li?" Nix says my name like he's already had to say it a few times.

"Yeah, sorry. That sounds great, I can't wait." Smiling as big as I can to avoid my thoughts and feelings appearing on my face.

"Okay, I have to run and go start my pregame ritual, I'll see you after the game." He kisses me on my forehead in the sweetest way and gosh can this man make me swoon without even trying?

He walks to my office door before turning the knob. He turns back and smiles at me, "I love you."

"I love you, too." I can feel the heat flood my cheeks, I'll never get sick of saying those three words to him.



"Oh good you made it," Lottie says as I take the seat next to her.

"Yeah, sorry, work got away from me." I had to finish the contracts with the photographer for the holiday shoot, along with answering what felt like a thousand emails. Then I quickly changed into my new jersey and leggings I had packed for the game tonight.

"How are you liking the job so far?" Mar asks from the other side of Lottie, the lights above flashing off her beautiful engagement ring. Beside her is Eva, typing away on her phone.

"It's good so far, I'm learning a lot, for sure." Before Mar can reply, the announcer comes over the speaker system to announce the lineups for the night.

“In the Goal, tonight for the Knights is PARKER ADAMSSSS”

“Oh my gosh, they pulled Parker up tonight?” I squeal. I haven’t seen Parker, Preston, or Tate since graduation. Parker plays for the Knight’s AHL team and Tate and Preston went to play for the New York Stars.

“Yeah, Swayzoski—Sway for short—was hurt last game, so they pulled Parker up to replace him tonight,” Mar says.

The rest of the team skates out onto the ice. Liam, Chiral, and Nix all make their way over to Parker who is scraping the crease, preparing it for the game. They pat him on his helmet and it looks like they’re chatting.

A pile of pucks are thrown onto their side of the rink and they start practicing a drill, taking shots at the goal. Parker stops most of them and from the looks of it, he’s even better now than he was back in college.

“Where is Lani tonight?” I ask Lottie who is nose-deep in her phone, I catch the familiar sight of her scrolling through a book. “Really, Lot you’re reading while at a hockey game?”

She gives me a sheepish grin and tucks her phone away, “I only read when they’re not playing. And Lani is at my parents' house, they were whining that they didn’t get to see her over Thanksgiving, so they demanded the weekend with her.”

The crowd starts to count down with the clock on the jumbotron telling everyone the game is about to start. Liam, Nix, and Chiral are out on the ice ready for their first shift. The referee stands between Liam and the Dallas center with the puck. Before the puck can drop, the Dallas defender is dropping gloves and charging towards Nix.

“What the fuck?” I mumble. The defender must call something out to Nix because he snaps his head up, but instead of dropping his gloves, he skates backward and throws his hands up, like you would when surrendering to the

enemy. The defender doesn't stop, charging right at Nix, who continues to keep skating away from him.

"Nix's hit laid him out at their last match-up. Looks like Tyson is back for revenge," Lottie says quietly to me. "I haven't seen Nix back down from a fight in a while," she adds.

Once the refs and linemen notice that Nix doesn't want to fight, they stop Tyson. No penalties are given, but everyone gets back into their spots and the first puck is dropped.

Liam wins the battle, which Lottie loudly praises her man for. A laugh slips past my lips because, before Liam, Lot wouldn't be caught dead at a hockey game. Now, she's at every single home game.

Liam passes the puck off to Chiral, who moves as fast as lightning, dodging the defenseman and beelining for the goal. He pulls back his stick, but instead of sailing the black disk into the opponent's net, he changes gears quickly and slides the puck over to Nix, who passes it back to Liam. Then in the blink of an eye, the disk is sent through the five holes.

All of us girls are on our feet, yelling for our boys. I have a sense of déjà vu from college when Lottie almost gave birth to Lani at their playoff game, thankfully she's too early for that to happen again.

The guys give celebratory hugs to one another before heading to the bench, where they change shifts before the start of the next play.

Nix looks over his shoulder, looking right at our section. I can see him scanning looking for me and once he does, he points a finger at me, then takes his glove-covered hands and tries to make a heart. I laugh but return the gesture to him. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Eva roll her eyes and slide further down into her seat.

"You still need to give us all the details of what happened between you two

at the cabin,” Mar says with a wink at me.

I just shrug my shoulders and return my eyes back to the game. I can hear Mar and Lot having a hushed conversation, and I know it’s about me and Nix as I catch our names.

Soon the the first period comes to an end.

“Snack time!” Lottie and Mar yell in unison. We all stand from our seats, Eva included, and I can’t help to see that her jersey matches my own.

“Doesn’t she have other clients on the team?” I quietly ask Lot. She travels my line of sight to Eva’s back.

“Yeah, but she and Nix are close,” Lot says hesitantly. “Just remember he’s your one, he loves you, Li, not her.” I nod my head and follow the girls to the hallways that are lined with food vendors.

“I’m going to go to the bathroom, mind getting me a pretzel?”

“Yeah, but use the bathrooms upstairs where the boxes are, they’re nicer and have shorter lines.”

I nod to Mar and make my way through the masses to the third floor of the arena. Once at the top of the stairs a man in a black suit who looks like he should be protecting the president and not the private suits of a hockey arena. I flash my work badge to him and he lets me by. I find the bathrooms down the hall, but it’s completely empty.

Going into the first stall, I shut and lock it. I hear the main door open and close. I see a pair of black boots stop right in front of my stall and my nerves skyrocket. They don’t move and all I can hear is the faint noise of someone breathing.

“Hello?” I call out, but there’s no response. My bag is hanging off the stall hook. I reach for it and pull out my phone. I’m not sure who to call, Nix is in

the locker room and I can't pull him away from the game, I don't need Mar and Preggo Lot storming in here, and Theo is all the way in New York.

The person finally steps away from my stall, but I don't hear the main door open so they're still in here. The water at one of the sinks starts to run and then the black boots appear back in front of my stall again, before pounding on the door.

I let out a scream that deafened my own ears, and it was not too long after that the main door opened and closed. But what if they didn't really leave, what if it's just a ploy to get me to leave my stall?

My phone starts to buzz in my hand, looking down I see it's a text from Lot asking where I am. I listen and the only noise is the water still running at the sink. I peep through the cracks and I don't see anyone.

Who was that?

It couldn't be Micha, he's still in New York according to Theo when I spoke to him yesterday.

My heart races.

Who would want to scare me, threaten me, if it isn't him?

Chapter 21

Phoenix

“Parker, it's so good to see you, man,” Liam says to our college buddy from across the booth in Shooters, the local bar we've been going to since we were old enough to drink. Parker lives down in Rhode Island with the AHL team, so not too far from us, but with both teams' crazy hockey schedules, it's hard to find time to see each other.

“You played one hell of a game tonight, stopping thirty-two goals,” I say adding a low whistle.

“Thanks, guys. It feels good to be back on the rink with you, but you have some really good goalies right now.” Parker isn't wrong; the two goalies we have are killer, but Parker is just as good. If an NHL team could have three goalies on the active team roster, he would be up here with us. Maybe next year when trades happen he can finally secure his spot.

“How is Elara?” Lilah asks from beside me and Parker tells her all about his girlfriend and his plans to propose soon.

Lottie shot me a text saying that after the first period, Li seemed off and to check in with her because she just kept telling the girls she was fine, but so far she doesn't seem fine. She waited outside the locker room for us and wrapped her arms tightly around me the second I was in reach.

After the cabin, I've been doing some research into her condition, and mood swings are common, so maybe it was just that. I make a mental note to talk with her about it tonight. The further I dug into my web search about BPD, the more my heart broke for Li. How can such an amazing, smart, beautiful girl feel this way and fight these demons in her head? All I know is

that from here on out, my life goal is to make sure she knows she's never fighting alone; I will make sure every day she knows how much I love her and she's worth every good thing in this world.

"Parker! Kid, congratulations on one hell of an NHL debut," Jimmy says while patting Parker's shoulder, and somehow balancing a tray of drinks.

"Thanks, Jimmy. How are the boys?" Parker and Chiral chat with Jimmy. I turn to Li and wrap my arm around her shoulder.

"Doesn't this feel like old times?" I ask her.

She looks at me with a bright smile and my worries from earlier completely disappear. "It does. I never thought I'd miss this small college bar so much until I walked through the door."

"Well isn't this a sweet sight to see," Mary, our usual waitress, says while wrapping her arms securely around Jimmy's waist. I'm happy those two finally saw what the rest of us saw since our sophomore year of college. They make a good match.

I give Mary a wink and Li stands from her chair, giving her a big hug.

"Nix, don't forget about our meeting tomorrow," Eva says from across the table from me.

"Pinky promise I won't." Eva nods her head and again making another mental note to chat with her tomorrow about the situation between her and Li.

Finally, around midnight we all decided it's time to head out, well, more like Liam and Lottie start to leave and the rest of us just follow. We all give Parker a hug, and he reminds the guys of our yearly fishing trip down in Florida with Tate and Preston.

Li is hugging everyone goodbye and Eva is standing off to the side. I walk over to her, wrapping my arms around her, and pull her into a tight hug.

“Everything okay?”

She lets out a deep sigh, and I can feel her shoulders drop like she’s releasing a large amount of tension. “Yeah,” is all she says. Dropping my arms, I get a good look at her face, even in the dim lighting I can see something brewing behind her eyes.

I figured this isn’t the time and place to push for answers. “Alrighty, I’ll see you tomorrow.” She nods her head and walks off to the parking lot to her car.

“Ready to head out?” Li’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. Tucking her under my arm, I walk us to my truck that’s parked on the side of the road.

After helping her into the vehicle, I round the bed and get into the driver’s side. “I can’t believe you still have this thing and it’s still running.”

“Hey, Betty is a champ and I take good care of my baby.” Her laugh fills the cab of the truck. God, I wish I could bottle up the sound and hear it forever.

Shifting the gear into drive, I head off towards the Knight’s kingdom. “Umm I need to stop at my place first.”

“I have clothes and an extra toothbrush,” I say eagerly, I just want to take her home and spend the night absorbed in each other.

When she doesn’t respond right away, I take a quick glance at her, her plump bottom lip pulled between her teeth, her thumb tracing over the nonexistent ring. “I... I have to get my meds. I take them every morning,” she said just above a whisper, a hint of hesitation in her voice. Reaching over the center conceal, lacing our fingers together, giving her a squeeze for comfort.

“No problem, Sunshine.” Turning around in the next parking lot, I head to the other side of town.

Once we’re parked outside, she jumps out of the truck. I follow closely

behind her, double-clicking the key fob to make sure I lock it. The moment the front main door is opened to the building a terrible stench seeps into my nostrils, trying to school my features to avoid embarrassing her, but my thoughts of getting her out of her intensifies.

“What the hell?” Li mumbles more to herself than me, but it doesn’t take me long to figure out why she’s questioning. Her front door to her apartment is open.

“Stay right here,” I demand of her. She gives me a nod and I slowly walk into her home.

I don’t know if I’m more shocked or pissed off by what I see.

Red paint is splattered everywhere, all her dishes and cups are shattered on the floor, and her clothes are scattered around the room, some covered in the paint.

“Oh my God,” Li says from behind me.

“Where are your meds?” Doing everything I can to keep my composure.

“Bathroom, in the mirror cabinet.”

Turning around, I pull her further into the room, not wanting to leave her out in the hallway. I walk through her destroyed space and find her bathroom. Thankfully the room looks untouched, I find her meds and grab her toiletries. She’s not coming back here; she can fight me all she wants, but this is no longer an option.

I find Li, shifting through her clothes and I can hear the sniffles escape her throat. “Everything is ruined,” she says between sobs.

“Sunshine, come on. We can call the cops from the car.” I reach for her hand and pull her to stand up.

“Nix, they won’t do anything, they never do anything. Every time I would call about my neighbors, they either wouldn’t show up at all or be here for

two seconds and then leave. They don't care about people from this side of town."

Even though her words are heartbreaking, it's her tone that cuts me. The sound of helplessness seeping through.

"Is there anything else that's super important that we need to grab?" I show her what I have in my hands, and she shakes her head. Wrapping my arm around her shoulder I walk us out of this place for the last time.

As we step outside, I'm hyper-aware of my surroundings. This had to be Micha, but why didn't Theo alert us that he was here? Something is off, but I'm not sticking around to find out right now.

The whole drive back to my house was filled with silent cries from Li, and all I wanted to do was pull her into my lap and hug her to my chest, but I needed to get us to the safety of my home. The best part about living in the Knight's Kingdom was that it was a gated community with security at the entrance. This is the safest place for her right now.

Once inside my four walls, I pull Li to my chest and her tears soak through my dress shirt. "It's going to be okay, I promise we will figure this out." I pull her away from my body, cupping her jaw with my hands wiping the tears that keep falling.

"This is what I was trying to avoid." Her tone is filled with regret.

"Sunshine, you and me avoiding each other is like telling two magnets not to connect: impossible. I would rather you be here with me where I can protect you."

She nods her head and turns to kiss the inside of my wrist. "Come on, it's late." I pick her up bridal style and walk up to my bedroom, making sure to grab her meds on my way.

Once inside my room, I set Li down on my bed. I leave her to go inside my

closet, grabbing one of my old Ballard U t-shirts for her to sleep in. Tomorrow I'll have Lottie and Mar take her shopping to buy new clothes.

I find her looking around my room, realizing she's never been in my house before, even though it feels like she was always supposed to be here.

"Here, do you want to take a shower?" I offer up the shirt. She holds it up examining the fabric and for the first time since we left her apartment, she smiles.

"This one is my favorite." Memories of Li wearing this specific shirt many times filter through my brain. I never let her take it home, calling it her sleepover shirt.

She reaches for the hem of her jersey, pulling it over her head. I'm a strong man, but seeing Lilah James in any kind of undressing will always be my weakness. Crowding her space, I reach around her back and unhook her bra for her, letting the straps fall down her arms. I want to devour her breasts, but she's had an emotional night, even though my dick doesn't seem to care as he hardens behind my dress pants.

Helping her into the shirt I gave her is my silent memo to my cock that he will not be slipping into her sweet heat tonight. *Soon, Buddy, soon.*

Once she's situated in the bed, I walk into the bathroom and splash cold water onto my face before I take off my game day suit and slip into a pair of gray shorts.

I grab my phone and shoot Theo a quick update, telling him he needs to call me first thing in the morning.

I meant what I said when I told her earlier I would protect her with my life, and I will hold myself to that promise till my dying breath.

Chapter 22

Lilah

A stream of light is coming through the large windows in Nix's room, causing me to stir awake from the best sleep I've had in well over a year.

All night, he held me. Comforted me when the reality set in that Micha was most likely back and with a mission in place: to make good on his threats. Things are not adding up, but I know someone who would hopefully have some answers for me: Theo.

I roll over to see Nix is not there, but he's always been an early riser, even in college he would be up way too early, and many mornings I would find him just watching me sleep. Pulling the covers back exposing my skin to the cool air, I make my way into the bathroom.

On the bathroom counter that holds his and hers sinks are all my toiletries, along with my meds and a bottle of water.

Picking up the little orange bottle, there's a yellow sticky note underneath it.

To my Sunshine,

I love you more than any words will ever describe, and in the wise words of Christopher Robin, "You're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think." Take your meds.

XO Nix.

My heart swells and tears start to brim my eyes. I look to the ceiling to avoid them from falling over the edge. I will never deserve this man, but I promise to everything in this world I will do whatever it takes to keep him.

Once I've composed myself, I work through my morning routine, brushing my hair out, washing my face, and brushing my teeth. Despite the chaos, I feel more at ease than I truly should.

"You can't be serious!" A voice yells from what sounds like downstairs. It was definitely a female voice.

My curiosity gets the best of me, and I tip-toe out of Nix's room and down the hallway to the staircase. Careful to not make a noise, I wait at the bottom of the stairs.

"Eva, listen to me. It's different this time, I promise." Nix's voice sounds strained, and I can envision he's running his fingers through his hair.

"Really, Nix? She's been back for two minutes and she's already moving in? How can you be so sure she's not going to leave again?"

"Because I know her!"

"You thought you knew her the first time around, too." Evalina's voice is laced with the most potent venom, and I can't help but flinch at her words. "Look, I've tried to just sit back and let you do your thing, but as your friend and PA I can't watch you destroy yourself over her again."

"Eva, you don't even know her."

"I know everything you have told me, Nix, so don't be offended that I'm not her biggest fan because you were the one who painted her in a way that made me despise her."

"I was hurt...no, I was fucking broken over her."

"That! That is exactly my point. I refuse to see you that way again, and I absolutely will not see you throw away your career over her; you almost did the first time."

What does she mean, throw his career away? I mean, yeah he was fighting more in games, but it's hockey; they always fight.

Nix lets out a deep sigh, one that sounds like it takes all the air out of his lungs. “Look, I know you just want to protect me, and I appreciate it more than you know and everything you have done for me, but she’s *it* for me. One day she will be my wife, and I need you to either accept that or don’t.”

“What are you trying to say here? Either I pretend like I didn’t have to put back the pieces of you she broke back together or we can no longer be friends? That’s a pretty shitty ultimatum, Nix.”

My phone starts to ring in my hand, giving away that I was just eavesdropping. I decided to make my presence fully known, by walking around the corner. I look at the pair in front of me. Nix looks completely distraught and Eva looks more than pissed off.

Silencing my phone, whoever is calling can wait.

“Li—” I throw my hand up to pause whatever Nix was about to say and zone in on Evalina.

“You have every right to hate me; I hate me for what I did to him. But, I have nothing to prove to you, he”—I flick my eyes over to Nix—“is the only one I have to prove anything to.” I walk further into the tension-filled space. “But I do owe you this: thank you. Thank you for being there for him, thank you for fixing what I broke. I will forever be indebted to you.”

Before anyone can say another thing, my phone is ringing again. Looking down, I see it’s Theo. Walking out of the kitchen and into the living room, I answer the call.

“Lilah!” Theo barks into the phone.

“Theo, hi,” I say casually, I know he’s mad I didn’t call him sooner.

“Why didn’t you call me last night? I wake up to a text from Nix about what happened, but you promised you would call the second something like this happened.”

“Theo, take a breath. I’m sorry. I was exhausted and felt safe enough at Nix’s that I didn’t want to call you in the middle of the night.”

“Lilah,” Theo sighs out, using his dad's tone with me. I respect him as if he was my own dad because honestly he’s been more a father to me than my own ever has. “You know you can call me at any point.”

“I know.” My voice is soft, mimicking a small child.

The weight of the couch shifts, and Nix wraps his arms securely around my waist. I move the phone away from my ear and put it on speakerphone. “Theo, Nix is here and listening.” I don’t know why I feel the need to tell him that Nix is now listening, maybe because this was just my and Theo’s issue to handle for so long.

“I have a bone to pick with you Dumbrowski, but that can wait.” I can hear the faint sound of typing in the background. “Alright, I had parameters set on Micha’s phone to alert me if it was ever taken out of the city or near an airport. It looks like it last pinged at his parent's house, two days ago around one in the morning. He must have ditched the phone and made his way to Boston. How he knows you’re back is still in question, but I’ll do some digging.”

“Okay, and there’s one more thing I need to tell you... both.” I lock eyes with Nix. His stormy eyes are a mixture of clouds and dark skies. “When I was at the game last night, I used the bathroom, and well, someone followed me in. I couldn’t see who, but they were wearing black boots and standing outside the stall. They eventually left.” I’m met with silence. I can see the wheels turning in Nix’s head, and I’m sure the same goes for Theo.

“Why didn’t you say anything last night?” Nix is the first to speak.

“I didn’t want to ruin the night, we were with our friends celebrating. I’ve been alone for so long that I just wanted to forget and be with everyone. Then

the whole apartment thing happened.”

Nix places his hands on my shoulders, rubbing lightly into the muscle there. “Your safety is my number one priority right now if something happens to you...” Looking up I see tears start to brim his eyes. “If something happened to you, it would ruin my life. Do you understand me? You have to tell us everything, it’s the only way we can keep you safe.”

“He’s right, no more hiding anything. The second it happens, you tell us. You still have your necklace on right?”

Touching the pendant that lays between my collarbone, rubbing at the cool metal. “Yes,” I say in reply to Theo.

“Good. Now let me talk to Nix alone for a minute.” I nod like he can see me.

“Love you, Theo.”

“Love you too, Li.” Passing the phone to Nix, I walk out of the living room, finding the kitchen empty. Evalina must have left, but the tension from early still resides. I don’t know if she and I will ever see eye to eye, but for Nix, I’ll try. I work on making breakfast, keeping my mind busy.

By the time Nix enters the kitchen, I had flipped the last pancake. He comes up behind me, wrapping his large frame around my own, kissing the spot where my shoulder and neck meet.

“I love you,” he whispers even though we’re the only two people here.

“I love you, too. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I was going to, it’s just you were in the middle of a game, then we went out and—”

“I know, but from now on I don’t care where I am, what I’m doing—you tell me.” I nod my head in agreement. “Theo is sending someone over on Monday to install a security system. On days we both work at the arena, I will bring you to and from work and when I’m away I’ll have Gerald, the

driver I sent before pick you up.” There’s a familiarity to his tone, no room for argument, so I don’t even try.

“I guess this means I’m moving in huh?” I try to keep my tone light, to cut through the tension. I know Janice would say I’m deflecting and not working through my feelings, but for right now I just want to bring some normality back.

“Oh you’re moved in, babe. I’ll become a beast and lock you up here if I have to.” Nix laughs at his *Beauty and the Beast* comment and the sound of his chuckle brings an instant calmness to the room.



“Where is she?” Mar’s voice rings from the entryway filled with panic. I guess Nix told Liam and Chiral what happened. Nothing in this little family stays a secret for long.

“I’m in here,” I yell.

Laying on the couch, where I’ve been since after breakfast. Nix is sitting at my feet as he reads something on his phone.

“You told them didn’t you?” I jokingly scowl at Nix.

“We’re family, and we all need to look after one another, you know that.”

I do, but Lottie and Mar are well... overprotective, but we all are. I would do anything for those two, but it’s been a while since I’ve been on the receiving end of their worrisome.

“OH MY GOSH!” Mar screams as she pulls me from the couch. Wrapping her arms tightly around me, I can feel Lottie’s small baby bump at my side, before her arms join Mar’s.

As soon as they let go of me, the questions start flying from both of them.

“Guys, guys. Guys!” Finally, after the third time of saying it, they both shut their traps. Letting out a deep sigh, I can feel a set of strong hands grip each side of my waist, pulling me back into his embrace.

“Why don’t you both take Li shopping?” Nix says and then a shiny gold credit card is in my line of sight.

Turning around and looking up at my sweet boy, I place my hands on his biceps. “Nix, I’m not taking that.”

He leans in to kiss my cheek, placing the card in the pockets of my leggings. “Just take it, Sunshine.”

Before I can argue, he walks out of the living room, looking back at both of the girls; they have swoon eyes.

“I forgot how cute you two truly are,” Lottie comments. “Literally like the couples in the books I read.”

“Seriously, you two are meant for each other and you are so using that card.” Mar laughs to herself, and I just roll my eyes at her.

Before I can even think, both of the girls grab my arms and pull me out of the living room. Before we’re out the main door, Nix is calling me.

“We’ll meet you in the car,” Lottie says.

Nix stares at me with a level of anxiety that makes me nervous.

“Stay with Lottie and Mar the whole time. If anything feels off, you leave and call me.”

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth, but nod at him.

“We’re gonna find him, but until we do you have to be alert at all times. Promise me, Li.” A crease forms between his eyebrows; reaching up and rubbing it away, I give him a soft kiss.

“I promise.”

Chapter 23

Phoenix

The second Li is out of my sight, an uneasy feeling spreads through my body, but Theo told me to let her live her life as normal as possible; she doesn't want us breathing down her neck and the only way to find fuck-face is if we let him get just close enough to come out of hiding. I don't love the idea, but Theo promised me nothing would happen to her. Pacing the length of my kitchen. I need to workout this energy, a good run will do me good.

The Idiots

Me: Anyone want to go for a ru

Chiral: I'm down.

Liam: *Yeah, me too. Give me 10 to get Lani ready.*

Heading up to my bedroom to change into shorts and a gray hoodie, I send Li a quick text that I'm heading out for a run, but to call me if she needs me.

The intrusive thoughts keep circling around in my head. I can't shake the idea of Micha getting his hands on her.

But I repeat what Theo said to me in my head. *We will find him and when we do it will all be over with even if I have to put a bullet between his eyes myself.* The minimal shock I had when those words came out of his mouth was not at all surprising. Chiral has told us a little about his dad and how he is a genius computer wiz, but he's also tied to other things, things that even Chiral—the guy who shares his bowel schedule with us—was too scared to say.

After putting my running shoes on, I walk out into the cold air. After the huge storm we had over Thanksgiving, we've only had a light dusting of snow since. This isn't normal New England weather. Last year we were hit with so much snow this time of year that a few games had to be canceled due to driving conditions.

Chiral is the first to meet me outside, doing his odd stretches before he's running over to my house.

"Hey," he says as he's bouncing on the balls of his feet, trying to stay warm.

"I spoke to your dad this morning." I had to tell the guys because if Micha was keeping to his original plan, then we were all in danger. "He said he's sending some guys to keep an eye on the girls." Something Theo told me not to share with Li; he wants her to do her best at having a normal life, but wasn't going to let Micha get close to any of us.

“Yeah, he sent me a text too. He mentioned that they were going to keep 24/7 surveillance on all of us. He’s also working hard to track Micha down. He’s really pissed at himself,” he says while rubbing the back of his neck.

“He has no reason to be mad at himself; he can’t control everything.” Before Chiral can add anything else, Liam's garage door opens across the street from us. Lani is all bundled up in her stroller, waving to Chi and I.

“You guys ready?”

We run over to Liam’s side of the street and take off on our run.

As my feet hit against the pavement, it’s the only noise along with Lani’s chatter that surrounds us. I look at my two brothers and can sense the tension. We’re all worried for our little family.

Although I still don’t agree with her actions, I understand now more than ever why Li ran. She wanted to protect us all, but what she failed to understand that as a family we would do anything for each other, even if that means facing the devil head-on.

“I don’t really know what to say,” I start off. Slowing our pace to talk. “But, we’re gonna find him and we’re all going to be okay. The only one going down is him.”

Liam pats my back, reading between my words as he always does. I’m not really apologizing for Micha’s actions because those are fully his responsibility but still, he’s coming after my family because I love Li, and that guilt is killing me.

“You don’t own this, Nix. This isn’t your or Li’s fault. You know we have your back, no matter what.”

Chiral nods in agreement with Liam, and I can feel a small weight fall from my shoulders. Not my brothers by blood, but by choice, and that makes the bond between us even stronger.



Theo texted me that he's sending a guy to come set up security systems at all of our houses. The probability of Micha getting past the guards at the gate is unlikely, but Theo isn't taking any chances and neither am I.

I checked in with Li, and she said they're on their way back from shopping. It's late into the afternoon now and every second she's been away I've been worried, but I didn't want to rush her. The run with the guys did very little to calm my nerves, but I don't want to be an anxious mess when she comes back. I need to be strong for her. With Christmas right around the corner, I get an idea. Jumping on my computer and pulling up flights back home, I book two first-class seats. I probably should run this by Li first, but I think some time away from the East Coast for a few days will do us good.

As I'm just about to call my parents to tell them about my plans to come home, I hear the front door close.

"Nix?" I can hear Li holler from downstairs. Rushing out of my office and down the stairs I see my Sunshine, looking relaxed as ever. Her arms are full of shopping bags and when she catches me looking at all the clothes she bought, I can see her clam up.

"I'll pay you back, I swear," she mumbles.

I cover the space between us in three long strides, cupping her jaw and tilting her head back so she's forced to look at me. "The only way you are paying me back is with you promising me to stay here, got it?" She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, before nodding her head yes.

I know how she's feeling right now because the roles used to be reversed. My parents did the best they could, but farming can be a hit-or-miss industry. Some years the crops were great and our animals produced all that we needed from them, and some years my parents were scraping by. Li used to pay for things for me no matter how much I begged her not to, and now it's my turn. Even if she didn't help me back then, I would still help her now because you help those you love no matter what.

"I'm going to put these away." She glances down at all her new clothes, but before she can step around me, I pick her up along with all her bags. She lets out a musical laugh, and I kiss the top of her nose.

"You know better, you don't carry a thing when I'm around, Sunshine."

"That includes myself?" She raises one of her blonde eyebrows at me.

"Definitely includes you, if it was up to me, these pretty feet of yours would never touch the ground."

"Did you gain a foot fetish while I was away?"

"No, I've always had a Lilah James fetish though; if it's a part of you, I love it, including these tiny little things." I glance down to her feet.

"Everything compared to you is tiny, so don't make fun of my feet."

I just laugh and shake my head at her and make my way to my—our—bedroom. Once past the threshold of the doorway. I set her down on the bed, I started to make space for her in my closet and dresser, but after seeing all the clothes she bought, I'm going to need to find more space.

"I made room in half the closet so start putting stuff away there, and I'm going to move my suits to the guest room."

"Are you sure? I can put stuff in there, too."

"No, I only wear them for game days and events. It's fine, I promise." I gather all my suits that are tucked away in dress bags and start moving them

across the hall, repeating this process a few more times until they're all moved over.

Returning to our bedroom, I walk in on Li holding up a lacy garment with a pink bag beside her that I've seen many times before. "I better be the only person to ever see you wear that."

She must have not heard me come back into the room because she turns around quickly, trying to hide the fabric that was just in her hands back into the pink bag. Leaning against the door frame, I can feel a smile stretch across my face as I see a hint of pink spread across her cheeks.

"I... well... you know we haven't... you know... so I thought if I bought some nice sets you would want to... you know." The more she speaks the redder her face gets and I can't help but find that so damn cute.

"I don't know actually?" Playing coy. I know exactly what she's talking about and so does my cock as he starts to grow behind my athletic shorts. "What is it you're trying to say, Sunshine?"

It's not that I haven't wanted to be back in my favorite place on earth, right between her thighs. I just wanted to take things slow, make sure not too much has changed about us, even though in my heart I knew it hasn't; I know she's still the same ol crazy girl who makes my knees weak and heart race, but my mind has put up guards, reminding me that being careful isn't a bad thing.

But as I look at my girl, I see the hesitation written all over her face and maybe a little regret.

"This was silly. I... I'll return it." She stumbles to her feet. I catch the sight of tears start to brim her beautiful eyes before she turns away from looking down at the dresser.

"Sunshine." My tone is soft, trying to convince her to turn around. When the slight shake of her head, telling me she's not going to turn around. I know

what I have to do.

It's not until this moment that I realize I fucked up; I didn't communicate to her, tell her why I've been holding out since the cabin and now my Sunshine feels... unwanted?

Damn, that breaks my heart.

Pushing off the door frame, I close the distance. With her back still to me, I wrap my arms tightly around her waist. Pulling her flush against my front. Using my nose to nudge the hair out of my way to kiss the side of her neck.

"Li, baby, I want you so bad. Do you not feel how badly I want you?" Pressing my hips forward so she can feel my hard as a board cock at this point. "And I want to see you dressed in that lacy contraption."

Li turns in my arms and looks up at me. Her bright sapphire orbs searching my eyes for any hint of a lie. "I mean it, Li. I was just... I guess trying to take it slow, make sure we still worked you know before we got caught up in lust, cause I know one thing's for sure is that our bodies will always be compatible, just had to make sure our hearts still felt that same connection that we always had before too."

She nods at my words and wraps her arms securely around me, resting her wet cheek against my bare chest. Kissing the top of her head and leaning further down, I brush the golden strands away. My teeth graze the outer part of her ear.

"Will you show me what's in that pink bag of yours?" My voice is far more husky than I anticipated.

"Nix, we don—"

I grip Li by her ass, and she squeaks before the rest of her words can slip past her lips. "You must be confused, because that wasn't a request, Sunshine. Go change and put on a show for me, like the good girl I know you

are.” I give her a swift slap to the ass before picking up the pink bag and place it in front of her to take. She grabs it with a smile on her face and my Sunshine is back.

Chapter 24

Lilah

Looking at myself in the mirror, I see a girl I once knew. She looks happy, and despite the red in her eyes, she has a flush on her cheeks, and a smile that was missing for over a year and a half. This is who I want to be.

Even though Micha is back, I won't run again. I refuse to go back to the shell of a person that I was in Paris.

I slide my fingers down the lace and satin material that clings to my body—a soft yellow that compliments my skin. The straps that lay across my chest make my C cups look even fuller. Fluffing my hair a tad to give it more of that sexy volume.

This is it. Nix and I are finally going to be intimate on a physical level, and I feel the jitters like it's the first time we have ever done this.

One last glance at myself, and then I'm going to get my man.

When I walk out of the ensuite, I find my hot-as-sin boyfriend sprawled out on his bed, laying flat on his back, hands behind his head. He's only wearing a pair of navy blue boxers, his massive thighs on display, and his shorts from earlier are laying amongst the rest of the bag of clothes I need to put away.

I take a moment to appreciate Nix in all his glory, following the lines of the details of his tattoos, tracing them down to his ribs where right by his heart is a little sun. I want to trace each of his tattoos with my tongue, memorizing them all.

“You can stand there and drool, or put that gaping mouth of yours to good use.” Nix has his stormy eyes—that are a hint darker due to the lust that is dancing in them—locked on my body.

Taking my time, I stride over to his bed, leaning on one of the wooden bed posts, hooking my thumb onto the straps that are covering my breast, and pulling the material down.

“Still bossy in the bedroom, I see.” I taunt him. Nix has always been demanding in the bedroom, taking what he wants, but always giving me just what I need. Before I can make another snarky remark, Nix has his hands on me, pulling me onto the bed.

Hovering over me, he leans in just close enough that his lips lightly touch my own. His hands travel from my hips, up to my breast, until one hand is securely around my neck.

“And it seems you forgot how this works, Sunshine.” He tightens his fingers against the flesh of my neck, not enough to stop the airflow, but enough to create a wetness between my legs.

“Then remind me, Nix.” He lets out a growl at my words, pushing his hips between my legs, rubbing his covered cock right over my clit, making me whimper like a needy whore.

“On your knees, face on the pillow. I’m turning this perky ass of yours red, see if that jogs your memory at all.”

He moves away from my center, already missing his dick. But, this is how we are, cat and mouse until neither of us can hold out anymore.

I do as I’m told and turn around, bending at the waist until my face lays against the pillow he uses every night, the smell of his shampoo and cologne heighten my sense, dragging me deeper into the pillow, until a hard hand smacks my right cheek, followed quickly by another one this time to my left side.

“Two,” I muffle into the pillow, moaning when a third one comes right in the middle. I can hear Nix mumbling words, but I’m so encased by the smells

around me and the sting radiating from my ass I can't focus on what he's saying.

Some might find this degrading, but it's my escape. Nix takes away my demons, and my overthinking, and allows me to just be here in the moment and fill all those empty spaces with love and lust.

A harder smack hits me and I realize I stopped counting. "Four," I say before another moan slips past my lips.

His large hands knead my tender flesh, giving me a small break, but I know the spanking is far from over and it only makes me drip between my legs more.

Nix's fingers move from my ass down to my core. I specifically bought this set because of the crotch cut-out, hoping it will prevent Nix from going all caveman and ripping it from my body.

His fingers circle my clit, before pinching the bundle of nerves, causing me to arch my back, begging for more.

"Not yet, Sunshine," he says, while going back to lazy circles, enough to draw me in, but not enough to send me over.

After five more swift smacks to my ass, Nix pulls me up to my knees, flushed against his front. I can't help but grind my aching ass into his groin where I can feel how rock-hard he is. His hand returns to my neck, tilting my head back where his lips finally lock with my own. His tongue invades my mouth, dancing along with mine. We devour each other's moans and he tries to stop my swiveling hips, but I defy him.

I don't know where I want his cock first, my mouth, my pussy, or my ass but I need it somewhere, now!

"Nix, please," I beg.

"I love it when you beg for my cock, baby." He flips me on my back. The

way he manhandles me like a rag doll is always such a turn-on for me.

He gets off the bed and stands at the head of the bed, sliding down his boxers. The light from the bedside table reflects off the tiny metal that's pierced through his dick. My mouth waters at the idea of how good that's going to feel inside of me.

He grips my jaw between his thumb and pointer finger and I know what he wants. Turning my head, the tip of my tongue slips out, circling his piercing before taking the tip into my mouth completely.

Looking between my eyelashes, I take in the beautiful sight before me. Nix has one hand resting on the bedpost and his head thrown back. I can't take it any longer, I need some kind of relief. Reaching down between my legs, I circle my clit, but before I can drag my fingers inside of me, Nix smacks my hand away. Replacing my fingers with his own. He gathers up the wetness before trailing it back to my clit, hard punishing rubs against the bundle of nerves that set my insides on fire.

I take his cock as deep as I can, the metal brushing against the back of my throat, wanting to trigger my gag reflex, but instead I take a deep breath through my nose. Bobbing my head the best I can, this position limits my ability to move much, but by the way, Nix is moaning, I think I'm getting the job done.

I'm so close; I widen my legs, wanting him to fuck me with his fingers, but he continues to play with my clit teasing me till I'm begging.

The slight twitch of his cock tells me he's close, too, but I know he doesn't want this to end just yet by the way he pulls his cock out of my mouth at lightning speed.

He brings his fingers which are coated in my wetness to his lips, sucking them clean right before me.

“The sweetest taste,” he says before he climbs back onto the bed, wasting no time before finishing his dessert. His head is between my thighs before I can even catch my breath. He laps between my folds, sucking on my clit, and fucking me with his tongue in a way that blinds me with stars.

He uses his broad shoulders to keep my legs open, but I just want to lock my ankles around his neck and keep him here for hours doing this. Nix brings me right to the edge before he gives me one final lap and backs off.

I can feel the pout overtake my facial features; the edging is the worst but builds up to the best release.

Nix winks at me when he sees I’m being a pouty brat. “What baby? You want to cum?” He leans in, kissing me softly, allowing me to taste myself on his lips. “Patience,” is all he says, before he wraps his fingers tighter around my neck, this time blocking a bit of my airway. Raising my hips, I search for the friction I’m so desperate for.

“This little cut out isn’t enough for me.” He traces the fabric that surrounds my pussy. I swallow the saliva that builds in my mouth, Nix gives a little tighter squeeze to feel my throat work.

Before I know it, the sound of ripping fabric fills the air around us. I squeak—the only sound I’m able to make with my throat being restricted—in protest.

“Shhh, I’ll buy you a new one.” Rolling my eyes at him, because he just bought and destroyed this one in less than six hours.

He catches my eyes rolling, and that earns me a tighter grip from his fingertips and a slap to my pussy. “A year away and you forgot all your manners. I guess I just need to fuck them back into you.”

He lets go of my neck, and taking in a large gulp of air, he pulls me to a sitting position, pulling the rest of my lingerie off my body. He fills his hands

with my tits, pulling and playing with my nipples. Throwing my head back, I let out a moan that can be heard throughout the house.

Nix pulls me into his lap, kissing down my neck, I can feel his fingers between us, holding his cock at my entrance. I slide the tip in and the cool metal makes goosebumps appear on my skin.

Inch by inch I take him further inside of me, keeping our eyes locked on each other, all the feisty and bossy demeanor is gone, this is love. This is home.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you, more.”

The stretch is intense, it’s been so long since I’ve had a cock inside me—my poor pussy is going to be aching tomorrow for sure, but it will all be worth it.

“Good girl, you’re taking me so well, Sunshine,” Nix whispers into my ear as he wraps his arms around the small of my back. “Move up and down a little, let my cock slowly open you up baby, you don’t have to take me all at once,” he says between wet hot kisses to my neck.

I do as he says, slowly moving up and down, each time taking him a little further in. His piercing is dragging against my inner walls cooling the hot flame that is burning as he stretches me further.

“Fuck, baby you feel so good, so damn good. This pussy is the best, I can feel it stretching around me, greedily wanting to take all of my giant cock.” The mouth on Nix always sends me over the edge.

“Yes, God it feels so good.” Now that the burning is subsiding with the help of his piercing constantly rubbing that little spot inside me, I start to move more, riding him fully.

“I can feel you dripping down my cock, you’re so wet.”

“Hmm, but you know what will have me squirting?” He looks at me with a devilish glint in his eye. He flips me onto my knees, never disconnecting us. He fucks me just the way I like, hard, rough, and brutal.

His thighs piston, his lower abs hitting against my ass, while his hand skates around to my front, playing with my clit and the combination of it all does me in.

The amount of cum that drips from me is insane, and I swear I cum to the point of blacking out. The only thing that alerts me back to life is the spray of hot cum inside me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Nix falls on top of me, his cock going slack inside me and this might sound odd, but I don’t want him to pull out just yet; I want to stay connected to him for as long as I can.

Nix’s hand is trapped beneath me, and I don’t know if he’s on autopilot or what because he keeps playing with my oversensitive clit causing me to squirm.

“Give me one more.”

“Nix, I... I can’t... I’m way too sensitive.”

“Yes, you can and you will.” He shifts his hips forward, even with his dick going soft, it still fills me and that damn piercing is right where I need it. His lips lock on to the flesh where my neck and shoulder meet, sucking and biting, and even though I can feel myself feeling all too much, my insides tighten and another orgasm happens.

“Such a good fucking girl, Sunshine.”

He climbs off of me and I whimper when his dick leaves my cunt. I roll to my side and catch sight of Nix looking between my legs, where I can feel our mixed fluids escaping me.

“I still have my IUD.” Assuming he’s panicking over the fact he just came inside of me.

“Well that’s a fucking shame,” he says with a wink.

I sit up straight so fast that my head spins—or maybe it’s Nix’s words that do that.

“Excuse me?” Nix has always wanted a big family but wanted to wait till he was more established in his career, so this is pretty shocking to me.

“How long till you can get it taken out?” His eyes go back to between my legs and he reaches out with his hand, collecting the cum that’s dripping out of me.

“Umm... the start of December is when I need to take this one out.” He nods his head before sucking off the cum that was on his finger. Then he picks me up and brings me to the bathroom.

No further questions are asked, only the sound of the bath running, and for now that is more than enough.

Chapter 25

Phoenix

“Pass. Pass. Pass,” I yell as I slam my stick against the ice trying to get Liam’s attention. He slides the puck right to the center of my stick and before I can even think, I race off. The only noise is the grind of my blades against the ice, the cool breeze hitting my damp skin, my legs pumping as fast as I can, and then the lights go out.

A deafening scream breaks out. My Sunshine?

“Li!” I yell for her. “Li, where are you?” I spin around, but it’s pitch black I can’t even see two feet in front of me. “Liam, Liam where did you go?” He was just right here, we were in the middle of a game... where is everyone?

“Nix, help!” Li screams echo off the concrete walls and frozen ice. I go to skate, to get off the rink, but my blades are stuck.

Li’s screams intensify, causing my heart to race even further. I have to save her, I promised I would always save her.

“Lilah!” My voice becomes raw from the scream and falling to my knees, feeling helpless and defeated.

“Nix, shhh. I’m right here, baby.” I hear Lilah. I can feel a cold hand against my wet skin, and it takes me a moment to realize that it was all a terrible nightmare.

I blink a few times until my Sunshine comes into view, unharmed and in my arms.

“It was just a bad dream, I’m right here,” she says in a soothing tone while running her nails across my scalp.

I pull her as close as possible to me, resting my head on top of hers as she peppers my neck in soft kisses.

After a few moments and my heart starts to slow down, I release my death grip on her and she sits up, holding my hand in her lap.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Letting out a deep sigh trying to understand my dream. “You were screaming, like a scream I’ve never heard before and I couldn’t get to you. I couldn’t...” I say, swallowing to get the knot in my throat to pass. I sit up and hold Li’s face in my hands. “I couldn’t save you. That nightmare is my biggest fear. What if I can’t protect you, Li? What—”

She places her finger against my lips to stop me from talking further. “Nix, I love you and I love how much you want to protect me, but I can protect myself too. You have to remember this is my fight, not yours. No more *what ifs* I—we—are gonna come out on top. I promise.”

I nod my head as I process her words; she’s right... at least I hope she is.



“What are you doing for the holidays?” Liam asks while we have our before-game practice.

“Mar and I are going on a trip with my mom and stepdad.”

“Where are you guys going?”

I zone out from the conversation; I still haven’t been able to shake my nightmare. I trust Li—I trust her with my whole life, but I just don’t have as much confidence in the situation as she does.

Asshole AKA Micha is here somewhere, and the fact I can't personally track him down is eating away at me.

Before I can get too lost in my thoughts, my shins are taking a beating from someone's stick. Looking up, I see Chiral trying to get my attention.

"Earth to Nix," Liam says with a concerned look on his face.

"Sorry, what's up?"

My two best friends exchange a look I know all too well; they are worried about me and the situation.

"What are you and Li doing for Christmas break?"

"I bought us plane tickets to visit my family."

"Really?" Chiral asks with a raised eyebrow. "Does your family even know Li is back?"

I know what he's trying to say. When Li left, I was obviously a mess and my family witnessed me falling apart over her. My mom didn't take it lightly that her baby boy had his heart broken so deeply. I guess I didn't think this over very well, because to say Li is on my mother's nice list is farfetched.

"Umm no, I haven't mentioned it to them. It'll be fine though." I hope so at least.

Before either of the guys can say another word about my lack of thought process, Coach calls us all to center ice to go over tonight's game.

"Lineups will look a little different tonight," Coach Thatcher starts off. "Dumbrowski you will be on the first line with Zimmerman and Loktov." I look over to the captain and one of the assistant captains of our team. This is unusual; normally, I'm on the same line with Liam and Chiral. But, I don't argue. I look up to both Zimm and Lokie. They've been in the game for a while now and even though they're polar opposites in personality—

Zimmerman is as grumpy as they come and Loktov makes Chiral look tamed—they're the best pair in the league.

I give a head nod to both of them. "Sounds good, Coach." Thatcher continues on with the rest of the lineup and information about tonight's game against the New York Stars.

They are our biggest rivals in our conference, but we're looking strong this season and we plan to wipe the ice with them. Even though our old college buddies and teammates play for the Stars, there's no such thing as friendship when you're playing against them.

"Alrighty, go home and rest up, be here tonight by four ready to kick some Star's ass." All the guys collectively give a *yes sir* before we head off the rink.

Once in the locker room, Chiral, Liam, and I take a seat on the bench in front of our cubbies.

"My dad said the security guy is all set at our houses, and that he will call each of us to go over how to program it," Chiral says in a hush tone.

The bliss I was just feeling is gone and the worry sets in again.

Catching the change in my demeanor, Chiral places his hand on my shoulder. "It's going to be okay, I promise. My dad still has guys watching the girls at all times. There's nothing to worry about. Micha is a fucking idiot if he thinks he'll ever get close to Li again."

"I know I need to trust what you, your dad, and Li are saying, but man I can't shake this feeling. Like he's just lurking around waiting for the one time I have Li out of my sight and he's going to pounce." Running my fingers through the wet strands on top of my head, I let out a deep sigh.

"Look, the reason the three of us are so sure is because we all know him. He's all talk, Nix."

“You didn’t see what he did to her apartment or the fear in her eyes when she told me someone stalked her into the bathroom. I know I don’t know him, but he doesn’t seem to be all talk, man.”

“Look, Li is my family too. None of us will let anything happen to her.” Over Chiral’s shoulder, I see Liam nod in agreement.

I have to trust my brothers, I have to trust Li—it’s the only option I have.

After getting dressed, I head up to Li’s office. Knocking on her closed door twice before her sweet voice comes through telling me to come in.

Li is behind her desk, hair tied up in this twisty knot thing with a clip, the glasses she wears to avoid headaches from looking at screens all day, with a pen between her fingers. She is completely breathtaking. All sexy and focused on her work, I just want to bend her over her desk and fuck the daylights out of her.

“You look like you’re about to devour me.” Li’s words snap me out of my dirty trace.

“That’s because I want to.” My tongue licks my lower lip.

“I have no time to play, Mr. Dumbrowski. I have to finish up the details for the holiday shoot.”

“There’s always time to play, Ms. James.” Before she can argue, I cross the room in three quick strides, turning her chair around away from her computer. Placing both of my hands on the arms of her chairs, I lean forward pulling her bottom lip between my teeth. Her little whimper does little to deter me from my mission.

Falling to my knees, moving my hands to her knees, I spread her legs to accommodate my body. Never have I been so damn thankful for a single article of clothing as I am right now for the pencil skirt she’s wearing.

“Nix, I’m at work,” she whisper yells.

“Then you better be quiet, Sunshine.”

Traveling my hands up her skirt and being the good girl she is, she lifts her hips on cue. As much as I want to take all the time in the world and devour her properly, I know our time is limited. Sliding her panties to the side, I nuzzle her clit with the tip of my nose before latching my lips around the bundle of nerves.

“Oh my, Nix,” she moans. I give her a swift slap to her outer thigh.

“Didn’t I say you need to be quiet? Do you want us to get caught?”

“Yes... no. I mean no I don’t want us to get caught. Just please keep doing that.”

“My pleasure,” I say with a wink before getting back to her sweet pussy that tastes like honey. Lapping at her clit in fast flicks. Looking up, I see Li throw her head back against her office chair. Her hands have a death grip on my hair but just like her, I like pain with my pleasure.

It’s what makes us a dynamic pair in the bedroom, and I guess office, now.

“Nix, that feels so good baby. I’m so fucking close.”

Li’s praise eggs me on; my only goal right now is getting her off, taking care of her will always bring me a sense of peace that nothing else can.

Looking up she has her bottom lip between her teeth trying to muffle her moans. I lap, suck, and bite, doing whatever I can to get her over the edge. Just as her eyes roll back, her office phone rings.

Li lets out an annoyed huff. “You better answer that,” I say, and her eyes grow three sizes as I go right back to her core.

“Nix, you have to stop. I can’t answer the phone while you’re doing that.”

“You can and you will,” I order her. “Better hurry before you miss the call.” She rolls her eyes at me and I bite her inner thigh hard enough to leave a mark and she bucks her hips, but reaches for her phone.

“Lilah speakinggg-” She drags out the word as I go back to her cunt, slowing my licks to drag this out. If looks could kill I would be dead, but I would die a happy man.

Li’s knuckles go white with her grip on her office phone. “Yes, of... of course. No, I’m fine, yesss I’ll send that right over. Okay, thank you. Bye.”

“You are a devil.” She scowls at me.

“Would the Devil let you cum?”

“I swear, Phoenix, if you don’t make me cum after making me do that, I’m withholding sex for a week.”

Ignoring her threat I get back to work, this time including my fingers, pushing them in and out of her, curling at the end to find the spot that drives her wild. I have to throw my arm over her waist to keep her from bucking too much where she risks falling out of her chair.

Sucking her clit deep into my mouth is her undoing, and she cums all over my face and I suck up every last drop of her sweetness that I can. Giving her oversensitive clit a small kiss before putting her panties back in place, I stand to my feet.

She slumps in her chair, letting out a deep breath. I run my thumb across my chin collecting the juices that are smeared there before sucking it off.

“Better get back to work—don’t want your boss to think you were *playing* around in here.” I give her a quick kiss before I head over to the couch she has in here and make myself comfortable.

On game days, everyone in the office gets out early, so Li only has another thirty minutes left in her shift so we can drive home together.

I mindlessly scroll on my phone while she types away on her computer. A text pops up from Eva, and I realize it’s been a few days since we’ve talked

and that was uncommon, but I've been busy and we haven't really made up since our fight about Li moving in.

Eva: Hey

Me: Hey. What's u

Eva: Nothing much, just wanted to go over your schedule and check in.

Me: Yeah, want to come over tomorrow and we can go over everything? I'm going out of town after the photoshoot.

Eva: I don't know if meeting at your place is the best idea.

Letting out a sigh, I don't know how to manage this. I don't know why Eva can't just trust me and understand I know Li, and that she's not running again. That Eva won't have to put me back together again. Looking over at Li, she's already looking at me with a questioning look.

"Everything okay over there?"

"Yeah, it's just work things."

"You mean Evalina things?" she questions with a look of concern.

"How'd you know?"

"Just a hunch." She raises and drops her shoulders like it's not a big deal.

"She's just being... difficult. She'll be fine soon."

Li doesn't respond, just nods her head and looks back at her computer.

Me: Eva, Li isn't going anywhere so I need you to accept th
please. For n

Eva: It's not that easy for me. But we can meet at your place tomorrow if you really want to.

Me: Thank you. See you tomorrow.

I wish I could tell Eva the real reason I want to meet at my place tomorrow is because I don't want to leave Li when I don't have to. But telling Eva that means telling her everything, and I don't want to give her more ammunition to hate Li.

I have no idea what I'm going to do when I have away games because after Christmas break we have a week of away games on the west coast.

That's when I get a bright idea and quickly start searching.

Chapter 26

Lilah

“You two did what?!” Lottie squeals from her side of the couch.

“In your office? That’s so hot!” Mar adds.

“Yeah, and he made me take a work phone call.” Both of the girls gasp, and I can feel my cheeks turning red.

Last night Nix told me that Evalina was coming over to go over his schedule, and I decided I didn’t want to stick around for her to shoot daggers at me all morning, so I came over to Lottie and Liam’s house and Mar decided to join. We all stayed out way too late last night after the guys kicked the Stars’ ass. With Tate and Preston in town, we acted like we were still college kids with no responsibilities, especially when Gemma, Chiral’s step-sister, showed up and demanded we all take shots with her. Seeing her all curled up with her man was so cute, but it was even funnier the way Chiral kept interrupting their make-out sessions.

I had to remind him several times that they live in two different states and barely got to see each other and to just let them be.

Which he completely ignored until Mar sat on his lap taking away all his attention.

“Dang, I wish I could do wild shit like that, but you know working in a children’s hospital kind of prohibits that kind of thing,” Mar says, dragging me back to the conversation.

“How are you feeling, Lot?” Changing the conversation off of myself. She places her hand on the top of her small bump.

“Good, the morning sickness is finally starting to kick in and it’s killing me. Lani heard me the other day and asked Liam if I was going to puke up the baby.”

Mar and I practically fall off the couch laughing.

“She’s the funniest kid I know, I swear.”

“She gets that from me,” Liam says as he walks into the room, giving his wife a quick kiss. “I’m heading over to Nix’s real quick to chat with Eva.”

“Okay, can you run to the store after? I’m having a chocolate and spicy chips craving,” Lottie mentions.

“Of course, babe. Lani is up in her room watching cow videos.” Liam laughs before kissing Lottie again and leaving the living room.

“So that’s why you’re over here this early on a Saturday instead of tossing in the sheets with Nixy,” Mar remarks.

“Ugh, yes. I didn’t want to spend my morning with dirty looks and passive-aggressive comments.”

“You still think she’s secretly in love with Nix, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do but honestly I have bigger issues to deal with than her bullshit right now. So as long as she keeps her hands to herself, I don’t really care.”

“Speaking of, how are you?” Lottie asks, softening her tone.

I never know how to answer this, because in some ways I feel like I’m on cloud freaking nine with Nix and how everything has been going for us, but then there’s Micha. He’s ruining my fairytale again, and I know that was always his intention. I’m praying that Theo finds him before he finds me.

“I’m okay. I’m just taking it day by day. I’m more worried about all of you,” I say my deepest fear, which by saying it out loud makes it feel more real. My friends—no, my family—are in danger all because of me, and this was what I was trying to avoid all along.

“Everything is going to be okay, Li. We’re all going to be okay. I promise,” Lottie says while reaching for my hand and Mar takes the other.

God, I hope they’re right. I would never live with myself if something happened to them.

“So are you excited for your trip with Nix?” Mar asks, always the one to help lift up the energy; it’s one of my favorite qualities about her.

“What trip?” Lottie and Mar exchange looks. “What trip?” I ask again.

“Umm no, wait I’m confused... I meant Lottie. Lottie, you’re going away—”

“Marina soon-to-be Hall, you are a terrible liar and you know it. What. Trip?”

“NixPlansToTakeYouBackToHisHomeTownOverChristmas,” Mar rambles out before bringing her coffee mug to her lips to avoid letting out any more information.

“Do you mind saying that slower?”

Before she can repeat herself, her phone rings.

I hear Lottie say, “Saved by the bell,” and Mar leaves the room to take the call.

When I look to Lottie to spill the beans, she’s already shaking her head. “I know you weren’t here to witness it, but I’m not getting on your boyfriend’s bad side.”

“You know he loves you,” I say while batting my eyelashes hoping my puppy dog eyes still work on her.

“And I want to keep it that way; also sorry, Li, I’m a mom of a toddler now—puppy dog eyes don’t work on me anymore.” Lottie pats my leg before getting up and going to the kitchen, probably in search of snacks.

Fine, I’ll go ask Nix myself.

The girls watch me leave, not even bothering to ask where I’m going

because they know when I want to know something, nothing will stop me.

Walking across the street, I burst through the door but am stopped by the sounds of... crying?

Like my feet are super glued to the ground, I can't move.

"Don't you see everything has already changed?" Evalina says between sobs.

"Eva that's not true and you know it. I mean yeah, I've been a little busy but you're still one of my best friends."

"Best friends? How can you be so fucking blind?" Her words ring throughout the house. I have no idea if Liam is here or not, but I need context ASAP.

"Eva—"

"No, Nix. I have been there every step of the way, making sure you don't get lost in the bottom of a bottle. Helping you keep your dream job, supporting you, and fixing a heart. That. I. Didn't. Break. And yes, you are my best friend, but I didn't just do this because we're best friends; I did this because I'm a fucking idiot who fell madly in love with you and here I am standing in your house that you share with *her* and you still don't see it."

OH. MY. GOD.

My heart and head are so conflicted, but I know I need to leave before either of them catch me. I trust Nix, he loves me and this revelation coming from Evalina doesn't change anything between us.

I hope at least.

Phoenix

“Eva, I... I really had no idea.” I’m completely at a loss for words. Did we sometimes flirt back and forth? I mean yeah.

And maybe I’m foolish to think it was just kind of like joking flirty banter, nothing more. I never picked up on the vibe she had actual feelings for me.

“That’s because, Nix, she was always the one. I didn’t understand it until I saw the two of you together. I’m not even mad. You two have something special, but I just wish it was me you looked at like that. Lottie and Mar would always say that if you needed to know what love looked like, you two were the picture-perfect definition. I just foolishly figured she was gone and maybe once I put your heart back together, you would see me.” She drops her shoulders as if a ten-pound weight has been lifted from them. “Look, I’ll get over it. I’ll get over you. I have to because I don’t want to lose you, either.”

Nodding my head, Eva is right. I have only ever had eyes for one girl, and I only ever will. “You are an am—”

“Please don’t finish that sentence. I know I’m fucking amazing.” Eva laughs at her own comment, and I can see the hint of a smile reach her eyes.

“Well you are amazing and I’ll never stop telling you that. I don’t want us to stop being friends either, but Eva, if we’re friends that means you gotta accept Li is around. You said it yourself, she’s the one for me and always will be.”

“I know. I’ll put the claws away. But, if she does anything to hurt you...”

“She won’t.” There’s a finality to my voice. Li has said it over and over again to me: she’s here and not going anywhere, and I trust her.

“Good,” Eva says as she stands from the bar stool at the island and starts to gather her laptop and notepads she uses when she works. Tucking her things in the big black bag she brings everywhere with her. “I’ll send you over your schedule, let me know if anything needs to be changed.”

“Will do. And Ev I mean it, thank you for everything. I owe you so much more than four simple words, but I wouldn’t have made it through the last year without you. And one day you’re gonna find a really lucky guy or girl to love you.”

“Thanks, Nix.”

I walk her out the door planning to walk across the street and find Li sitting in her car typing away on her phone. Walking over to her car door, I tap my knuckles against the glass.

She looks up, and I can tell she knows something by the look on her face. She must have walked in and heard us fighting.

She opens her car door and gets out.

“Hey,” she says softly.

She’s wrapping her arms around her small frame as she’s in just a hoodie and leggings and it’s freezing out.

I pull her into my chest and kiss the side of her head.

I get this overwhelming feeling of love and security with her in my arms.

She is my one and only. Forever

Chapter 27

Phoenix

“Great game tonight, gentleman. You all deserve this holiday break off, but for the love of god lay off the cookies and hit the gym at least once or twice for me,” Coach says to all of the guys.

“The only exercise I’ll be getting is between the sheets with my sweet European ladies.” Lokie smirks to himself; his brain is already in vacation mode because he knows the coach doesn’t condone that kind of behavior as a father of three girls.

Zimmerman smacks his best friend on the back of the head and walks away to the showers.

“Have you told Li yet about your trip?” Chiral asks from beside me where he’s half undressed from his game day uniform.

“No, I was going to tell her tonight after dinner.”

“Oh... okay.”

“Why?” The tone in his voice is telling me he’s keeping something from me. Chiral looks to Liam like he’s going to bail him out. “Talk, Hall.”

“Mar may have said something to Li by accident.”

“You two are the biggest blabbermouths I know!” I run my fingers through my hair. Now it makes sense why Li was acting off this morning when I found her sitting in the car. I assumed maybe she heard Eva yelling, but I’m positive this is the reason, now.

“Hey, she didn’t mean to. You know how Mar gets when she’s excited about things.” The way Chiral defends his girl, I swear he would help her

bury a body and lie through his teeth before he ever gave up on that woman, but I know Liam and I would do the same for our girls too.

“Oh, but you two could keep your little fling in college a secret just fine, huh?” Liam adds.

“That was different and also like forever ago, get over it, Van Spyker.”

“Okay, will you two stop? Help me figure out a cute way to tell her so it’s still special!”

“You could hide the tickets in a cake then give her the cake?”

“Chiral, that’s a terrible id—”

“No, that gave me a good idea,” I quickly cut Liam off. “See ya assholes later.”

I grab my bag and suit jacket and head out into the hallway. I instantly spot Li’s golden locks amongst the crowd of people. I sneak up behind her and wrap my arms tightly around her waist, lifting her off her feet, and twisting her in my arms until our noses touch.

“Nix,” she says my name in a breathy whisper. “You scared the daylights out of me.”

“Sorry, Sunshine.” I give her a quick peck on the lips, then throw her over my shoulder. “Bye, Lottie, bye blabbermouth.” I give the girls a wink and walk down the hallway with the sounds of cameras clicking and Li’s laugh bouncing off the concrete.

I hated being in the media spotlight over the last year; maybe it was because it was always about how I was fucking up. Now if they want to snap pictures of me with my sunshine then, they can go right for it and post it everywhere. Because I want everyone to know my heart is stolen, and I’m as happy as I will ever be with her by my side.

As we make it out into the freezing cold, little white flecks fall from the

sky, a week till Christmas. As we take our seats in the truck, memories of our first Christmas together flood my brain.

“I don’t want you to leave,” Li says as she nuzzles in closer to my chest.

“I don’t want to leave either, Sunshine, but my family needs me back on the farm.” Wrapping my arms tightly around her body. My bed is big enough that we each could almost sprawl out completely, but we always end up in a tangled bunch.

“I knowww.” She draws out the word, leaning back she places her tiny hand against my cheek, rubbing her thumb across my cheekbone. “My sweet cowboy slash hot hockey man. How did I get so lucky?”

Flipping her onto her back and climbing on top of her, I can’t help but think the opposite. I’m the lucky one because even though she refuses to fully acknowledge what we are, this beautiful, smart, kind girl is here with me. A small-town boy from Texas who just so happens to be good on skates.

“It’s okay. We have tonight, which reminds me I have a present for you.” Climbing off of her, I reach under my bed for the gift I bought for her. Li has everything she could ever want, so I knew I had to give her something that meant more than just a price tag.

Passing her the little black bag, she looks down at it and then back at me. I nod my head to encourage her to open it. First, she pulls out the small black photo album with our initials carved into the leather. Flipping it open, she finds all the pictures we have taken together, with many blank pages to fill.

“I love this and I can’t wait to fill it with more memories.”

“Me too. There’s more.”

She reaches back in the bag and finds the certificate that I put in a frame. Watching her eyes move across the words printed onto the paper stating we own a star that I’ve named Sunshine.

“You are the brightest star in my life, you are my Sunshine,” I speak the words I had added under the picture of the star we own.

Finally looking away from the picture frame, her eyes are glassed over. “No matter where either of us are, we can always look up and find a piece of each other.”

It’s crazy that at the time when I said those words to her it was because I thought I was going to go across the country or, hell, even Canada to play hockey; but never in a million years did I think I would be searching the night sky because she left me.

“What are you thinking about?” Li asks from the passenger side of the truck.

“Nothing.” Reaching for her hand over the center console, she laces our fingers together.

My daydream must have lasted longer than I realized because we’re already at the gates of the Knight’s Kingdom. After being waved through by the guards, I’m quickly pulling into our driveway.

Once we’re inside, I turn off the alarm to the security system. Li heads into the kitchen.

“I have to get something from the garage, mind throwing the pizza in the oven?”

“Yeah, do you want a beer with dinner tonight?”

“No, water is fine.” As she busies herself, I sneak away to the garage, pulling out my telescope. It’s nothing super fancy, but I bought it drunkenly one night when my heart ached a little more for her. I often would set it up, finding our star.

Quickly but quietly making my way inside without catching her attention, I head out to the back deck, setting it up to the right coordinates.

“What are you doing?”

Fuck. “Umm. Well, it was supposed to be for after dinner, but come here.” I extend my hand out to her and she walks out into the cold. Once she’s close enough, I drag her body to mine, placing her back against my front so she’s standing in front of the telescope.

“Look into here,” I instruct her.

She lines her right eye with the eyepiece. “Wow, it’s beautiful.” There’s the perfect break in the clouds for her to see our star.

Leaning over her shoulder, placing a small kiss behind her ear. “It’s our star,” I whisper.

“Like it’s really our star? The one you bought for me for Christmas my junior year?”

“Yeah, Sunshine.”

Pulling out my phone and opening up the website from where I bought our first star, I place the phone in her opened hand. Thankfully buying a star takes literally two seconds, and I was able to do it before I left the locker room tonight.

When Li feels the weight of my phone in her hand, she steps away from the telescope and looks down at the open screen.

“You bought us another star?”

“I did, but this time I’ll let you name it,” I say to her as I wrap my arms around her shoulders, pulling her flush to my body.

“Hmmm, how about Cinder? From the night we first met, remember I was wearing the trashy Cinderella costume? “

“It wasn’t trashy, it was hot. I like that.”

“Can you show me this one?” she asks before returning to the eyepiece.

“I can in two days.”

“Why in two days?”

“Because you can only see it from Texas,” I sheepishly say.

Li steps away from the telescope again and turns to face me. “So Mar wasn’t lying. You’re taking me to Texas... to meet your family?”

“Only if you want to. I know it’s intimidating to meet the parents, but I figured getting out of town for a while could be a good idea. Especially, because when the break is over, I’ll be on the road for a week and a half.”

She nods her head to me, pulling her bottom lip between her white pearly teeth. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

“Really?”

“You’re right, it might be best to leave the city for a bit.” I can see the hint of concern take over her features as we both know the purpose of leaving town means... to get as far away from Micha as possible.

Cupping her jaw, I bring my lips to hers and she’s quick to respond. The slow movement between our mouths is sweet and sultry and my favorite way to kiss her.

To think a year ago I was standing in this very same spot looking up at my Sunshine, to now having her back in my arms. I couldn’t be happier.

Chapter 28

Lilah

“Holy shit, you live on an actual farm,” I say as Nix drives down a long dirt road in the middle of nowhere. All that can be seen for miles in crops, the strong smell of cow manure, and straight ahead I see a beautiful farmhouse. White siding, with black shutters and a front door for contrast, and wooden pillars and a wrap-around porch. There’s even a porch swing off to the side and sitting there is a woman who looks to be sipping on tea.

“Yes, Sunshine. I actually grew up on a farm and later I’ll even show you the actual farm animals we have on our farm.” I smack Nix on the shoulder at his sarcastic reply.

Once he parks the rental car behind a big silver truck, the knots in my stomach reappear. I’m about to meet his parents for the very first time in person. I’ve video-chatted with them on a few occasions, as they couldn’t ever afford to fly all the way up to Boston. That was all before I broke their son’s heart.

“They’re going to love you, I promise,” Nix says as he squeezes my thigh, and then he’s exiting the car.

“If you say so.” I take a deep breath and follow Nix’s lead and get out of the vehicle. I can’t hide here forever. Just as I step out, Nix’s mother’s voice carries over to us.

“There’s my handsome boy.” She gets up from the swing, but Nix is quick to meet her before she can even get to her feet. He offers her hand, but she quickly swats it away. She’s slow to her feet, but as soon as she’s up her arms are tightly around her son who dwarfs her.

I take in the pair of them. She and Nix share the same dark hair, hers is much shorter than the last time I saw her on the phone. Her eyes are a shade of light blueish gray enhanced by the dark purple rings below them.

Nix leans down to kiss his mother's cheek and witnessing the love between the two is something I've never experienced with my own parents.

"Sunshine," Nix calls me to join them. I run my hands down my white leggings, trying to whip the sweat from my palms before I take the first step.

Deep breaths, Li. Deep breaths.

I chatted with Janice yesterday while I packed for this trip. She constantly reminded me that it was okay to be nervous, but I need to listen to my body and try to divert my anxiety.

Before I know it, I'm standing at Nix's side. Unsure if I should offer his mother a handshake or hug.

"So this is the girl who broke my son's heart?" Her sweet southern voice masks the venom her words hold, but they still knock me on my ass.

"Mama!" Nix is quick to say.

"Is that my superstar I hear?" Nix's father, Houston, walks through the front door. He and Nix are close in height and have similar facial features, his father just has a few gray hairs and a more rugged look to him in his cowboy hat, light jeans, flannel, and belt buckle.

"Oh great, big shot is home." Memphis, Nix's younger brother, appears behind their dad and Nix quickly has his brother in a headlock, all thoughts of his mother's words forgotten.

"This big shot can still kick your ass," Nix says to his brother.

"You must be Lilah? It's a pleasure to meet you." Houston offers me his hand.

Still stunned by the comment Savannah made, I'm slow to respond. "Umm,

yes. Hi, Mr. Dumbrowski. Thank you for having me.”

“Please call me Houston, and as you know this is my beautiful wife Savannah. We are both happy to have you here, aren’t we dear?”

Houston goes to wrap his arm around his wife, but she steps away and goes inside.

“Please excuse my sweets, she’s having a rough day.”

Nix lets go of his brother and looks up at his father, concern written all over his face. “Is Mama okay?”

“Oh yes, son. Nothing to worry about, now go get your bags and bring them to your rooms.”

Rooms? As in plural? As in separate rooms?

“You do know Lilah and I live together, right? We can share the same bedroom.”

“You know your mother’s rules son, in her home unless you are married you will not share a room together and you will respect that.”

Nix rolls his eyes but leaves me and Houston on the porch as he and Memphis collect our bags from the car.

“Lilah, please make yourself comfortable in our home. We are happy to have you here, Savannah is just a little on edge, is all, don’t let her ruffle your feathers.” Houston pats my head like a dad would do to a small child and then walks inside.

Little does he know, my feathers are indeed ruffled. I knew walking into this that his mother may feel some hesitation towards me, but I didn’t expect her to flat-out ignore me. This is going to make for a long week, I can already tell.



The farm is absolutely beautiful. Nix spent the afternoon showing me around. They have several different animals, cows, pigs, chickens, and horses. He was excited to show me one horse, in particular: Waffle.

Nix told me about how they saved Waffle from an abusive situation and brought him back to health. I guess when they first brought Waffle to the farm, he was scared of everyone and everything besides Nix.

When we walked up to Waffle's stall, it was like watching two best friends being reunited after being apart for too long. It really was a sweet thing to see. Tomorrow we're going to take Waffle and Honey out for a ride. I'm equally excited and nervous, as I've never ridden a horse before, but Nix assured me that Honey was a very gentle horse and I would be safe.

"Dinner is done!" Savannah yells from the kitchen window. Nix grabs my hand and we're rushing out of the stable. He's so excited about his mom's cooking; he said it was the best part about coming home. Once inside, we head to the kitchen to wash our hands and I can't help but take in my surroundings.

The house is beautiful, with many wood details mixed in with beautiful leather furniture. This kitchen has updated appliances as do other aspects of the house, but still has that lived-in feeling. Something my family home never had.

My parents always expected our home to look more like a museum than a home. None of my childhood artwork from school was displayed, instead only thousand-dollar paintings. The furniture was never really used because

they were never home and the furniture in the Dumbrowski home shows small signs of wear or use over the years.

I take a seat next to Nix at the long mahogany dining table, on instinct he lays his arm across the back of my chair.

Quickly food is passed around and added to our plates, once everyone is settled. Houston leads the family in prayer.

“Amen, let’s eat,” he finishes with. Nix and Memphis are quick to dig in.

“So, Lilah, Phoenix here tells me you have a job at the arena?” Houston asks.

“Yes, Sir, I’m working in the marketing department. I was really lucky to land the job, especially because I was still in Europe when I applied.”

“So is that where you ran off to?” Savannah asks from the other side of the table.

“Honey, please.” Houston gives her a pleading look.

“What? It’s a very valid question.”

I can feel my heart starting to spike and a thin lining of sweat starts to form on the back of my neck.

“Mama, that’s enough. Li and I have moved on from that time in our lives. You need to, too.”

“Well excuse me that I can’t just *move on* from when I had to witness my son almost throw away everything he worked for because this young lady ran off and broke his heart.”

The tears start to form behind my eyes and my lungs start to restrict all signs of a panic attack setting in. “Excuse me,” I whisper before sliding out of my chair and walking away from the table.

I weave my way as quickly as I can through the house until I reach the guest room that was assigned to me. Slipping behind the door, I do

everything I can to ease the pain in my chest.

I know I deserve her dislike of me, but it doesn't make it hurt any less. I always wanted to have a good relationship with the mother of the man I was going to marry because I've longed for the motherly love that I never got to experience with my own. But I've messed that all up now.

A knock lands on my door startling me, and before I can reply, Nix enters and closes the door behind him.

"Sunshine, I'm so sorry. She's just a little sensitive. She'll come around, I promise."

"She has every right to speak her mind. I did hurt you and I did break your heart and that's your mother of course she's going to hate me." The words slip between my broken sobs.

Nix is quick to scoop me up off the floor and wrap his arms tightly around me as he takes a seat on the bed.

"My mother does not hate you, Li." He softly rubs my back. "Please, baby, stop crying. It's all going to be okay." His words attempt to soothe me, but it's sadly not enough. My body has tipped over the edge and the tears and pain in my chest just won't stop.

Nix just holds me, he knows words will not fix what's happening inside of me. Rocking us slowly back and forth, trying to encourage me to take deep breaths.

It's not until my vision goes black that everything just stops.

Chapter 29

Phoenix

Waking up next to Li after last night is a complex feeling because I always cherish these moments where I wake up before her and just watch her sleep for a little bit. Her full lips were slightly agape, her chest rise and fall to a slow tempo, and her blond strands often laid across her pillow.

But this morning there are dark purple circles under her eyes from all the crying. Her hair is tied up. Her normal peaceful state at this time is nowhere to be seen even as she sleeps, and I can see the tension in her body.

We came to Texas to escape the chaos that is happening with Micha lurking around in Boston; this wasn't the plan.

I was raised to never talk back to my parents, to always follow the rules they have set, and to be respectful. But, it's time they learn that I am an adult and Li is my whole world, and if they can't respect that then boundaries will have to be put in place.

I slide my body away from my Sunshine, hoping I don't wake her. I find my T-shirt and sweatpants and quickly put them on before exiting the room.

The sounds of pots and pans clicking together tells me my mother is awake. I take a deep breath before I walk into the kitchen.

Mama has her back to me, but because she's a mom and somehow can see out of the back of her head, she knows I'm already in the room.

“Phoenix, why don't you take a seat at the island.”

Doing as I'm told, I take my usual spot. “Mama we need to talk about last night.”

She turns around away from the sink. Leaning her hip against the countertop. Nodding her head for me to continue on.

“I understand you have convoluted feelings about Li, I get that as my mom you only want to protect me. But, I need you to trust that I know what I’m doing. I know in my heart, soul, and mind that Lilah is it for me. She has apologized for her actions, but Mama you don’t know the whole story. She never wanted to leave me, she had to. But, she’s back now and isn’t going anywhere. And one day when she is ready, I hope she will tell you how she was raised and why she left because you will see how amazing she is and truly has always done what she felt was best for me.” Letting out a deep sigh before I get to the hard part. “She will be my wife one day, and if I have learned anything from you and Dad, it’s that marriage is the one bond that can never waver. So if you can’t work through your distaste for her then we will have to put in place boundaries because I will always pick her, side with her, love her.”

Mama turns away from me, and I catch the snuffle that escapes her lips.

Fuck, I never meant to make her cry. I stand from the chair, wrapping my arms tightly around her. “I love you and I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, but that’s my girl.”

“I know, son. I’m sorry I put you in this position. Really, I am.” She pats my arm before stepping out of my embrace. “This is who I raised you to be and if you’re willing to stand up for Lilah like this to me, then I did a damn good job.” She breaks into a soft smile, wiping away the last few tears.

“You are the best mom I could ever ask for.” I squeeze her shoulder as I pass her to get a glass of water for Li. She needs to wake up and take her meds soon.

“I’ll make sure to apologize to her today, I promise.” She goes back to

cooking her breakfast. “But, Nix. I still don’t like you two sharing a room together, but if you must just remember the Lord is always watching.”

I laugh at her comment “Thank you,” is all I say before heading back to my sleeping beauty.

When I open the door, Li is still sleeping and I hate to wake her, but it’s important she takes her meds every day around the same time. I’ve done my fair share of research since she’s told me about her BPD and medications. I just want her to be the best version of herself and I’m willing to do whatever it takes to help her do that.

“Baby, you have to wake up.” I lightly run my hand down her exposed back. She shifts under my touch. Setting the water off to the side and sitting next to her, kissing the side of her cheek. Her pretty blues start to show as she slowly opens her eyes.

“Come on, you have to take your meds and eat something. I also have a long day planned for the two of us.”

Lilah

Since last night's dinner, I have felt uneasy and uncomfortable in the Dumbrowski household. Nix's mom hasn't said much to me, but I'd rather radio silence than passive-aggressive comments.

Memphis is sweet, he tried to lighten things up at lunchtime with jokes and telling me embarrassing stories of him and Nix when they were kids. Nix returned the favor of embarrassing his little brother back by asking about his love life—which I've gathered that Memphis' love life is nonexistent.

After dinner, I find a comfortable spot out on the porch swing. A light breeze comes through, the sun is hanging low in the sky, going to set in the next hour if I had to guess. Nix is out helping his dad in the barn. Let me tell ya, Nix the hockey player is hot, but Nix the cowboy melts my panties right off. Watching him work on the tractor covered in grease is just so damn sexy.

I've been to Dallas a few times but never out in the middle of nowhere like this. Don't get me wrong, the chaos of the city will always be my favorite place, but something about the calm out here just soothes my soul.

I was so focused on Nix and the surrounding area, I didn't notice that Savannah had taken a seat across from me.

"You know when he was a boy, he was so damn shy. Couldn't even order his own meals at a restaurant," she mentions with a distant look in her eye like her mind is somewhere else.

"Really? Nix is one of the most confident people I know."

She nods her head, bringing what I assume is sweet tea to her lips. "Yeah, he is now, but wasn't always that way. Both of my boys love me so much,

but Nix was afraid of his own shadow as a young boy, and because of that, he was stuck to me like glue.”

I don't want to interrupt her train of thought, so I just acknowledge when I feel it's appropriate. She sets aside her drink and fluffs out her skirt, before leaning in and reaching for my hand. This vast difference from yesterday is giving me a tad bit of whiplash, but I want Savannah to like me, I want her to accept me and Nix together.

“Lilah, I love my boys more than anything else in this world, they are my very reason to wake up every day and to keep fighting.” I can feel the tilt in my head as I sense that I'm missing part of the story. What is she fighting for? I again don't want to interrupt her though, even if my brain is swimming with so many questions.

“He was really hurt by what you did. He was ready to give it all up and come home. Thank the good Lord he has friends up there who care about him and told him he needed to stay and keep playing the game he loves. So you must understand from a mother's point of view that I don't care much for you, well I *didn't* care much for you.”

“Savannah, I love him more than anything else in this whole world. He is my reason, just like he is yours. I wish I could explain everything to you, but I... I just can't, but I promise you, I'd rather leave this world than ever leave Nix again.” Shifting in my seat as I think over my next words to her, I have one shot at this. “What you need to know is that I never wanted to leave him but I had to and I will always regret that time apart. It might have seemed like I didn't care, but in truth, I loved him enough to do what had to be done. He's my stormy clouds, my warm hugs, my whole entire heart and soul.”

She pats my hand that's still being held in hers, “I know and I see it now. You make him happy in a way no one else ever will. He looks at you like you

hung the sun. Just please take care of my boy.”

“With everything in me, I promise.”

She wraps her small arms around me and hugs me in a way I assume only a mother knows how, soft, comforting, and filled with love. I don’t know if she will ever understand how just this simple thing means the most to me.

“If it isn’t my two favorite ladies.” Nix’s voice fills our space and we pull apart, there is a gloss over Savannah’s eyes, one I didn’t expect to find. Nix is leaning against the wood frame of the porch, ripped blue jeans, a white shirt that’s stained with grease, and to complete the cowboy look a hat and boots to match the aesthetic.

Nix gives his mom a kiss on the head, before giving me a soft kiss on the cheek. “I’m just going to wash up my hands and face and change my shirt, then we gotta go.”

“Go? Go where?” Nix just winks at me and walks inside. Turning to Savannah she throws her hands up in surrender. Before picking up her drink and avoiding eye contact with me.

Not even ten minutes later, Nix is flying out the door. He grabs my hand and pulls me off of the swing and down the stairs to the stable. Houston is standing there holding the reins for two horses, Waffle being one of them, and Honey—who I met the other day, she is tan with black legs and absolutely beautiful.

“All yours, son, call if you need anything.” He passes the reins over to Nix.

“Thank you, Pops.” Houston tips his hat at me with a sly wink.

“Are we finally going for a ride?”

“Sure are, Sunshine. You’ll take Honey, she’s really sweet and gentle, just like you. So no need to worry with her.” I roll my eyes jokingly at Nix’s comment. Taking up the space between him and Honey, he rests his hands on

my hips, giving it a small squeeze. He ghosts his lips up and down my neck, before kissing and sucking on that spot that I love too much. I can feel him reaching around until he passes me a hard cold object taking all of my focus away from his soft warm lips.

“Safety first, babe.” He swats my ass before taking the helmet and placing it on my head and strapping it under my chin. Then he lifts under my leg and the simple gesture shouldn’t be this hot, but it’s been a long day of seeing Nix all hot and sweaty and with that simple little kiss, I’m ready to jump his bones.

His lips fall to my ear, pulling the soft lobe into his mouth, I can’t help the whimper that escapes. He lets it go with a pop and places my foot into the stirrup while lifting me up to help swing my other leg over. Sitting comfortably on the seat of the saddle, Nix passes me the reins. Honey starts to step side to side and a small amount of panic takes over me.

“Nix.” A waver in my voice.

“It’s okay, Sunshine. She’s just getting used to your weight, is all.”

You can do this, Li.

Nix hops on Waffle with so much ease and grace, that you can tell this is a part of his life.

Once we are all situated and Nix gives me some pointers on how to handle the reigns, we head off.

The sun is setting ahead of us and the sky is a beautiful mixture of pinks, purples, yellows, and oranges. I’ve never seen a more beautiful sight. Besides the trail we are on, the land is completely untouched. The grass is high, wildflowers swaying in the light breeze, and trees that are larger than life.

“This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” I say as I scan my eyes to my surroundings.

“Yeah, you are,” Nix says as he brings Waffle next to me and Honey. His stormy eyes lock onto mine. I can feel the blush rise onto my cheeks at his comment.

We ride in silence for a few more minutes. Just like Nix said, Honey is sweet and gentle, making this an easy ride.

“This way,” Nix calls to me as he leads Waffle to the right off the path. I mimic his movements with the reigns and Honey follows.

Soon it all comes into view, there’s a green and cream-colored, classic Ford pick-up truck parked in a field of wildflowers and next to a big oak tree that has Christmas lights strung around it. As we get closer, I can see the bed of the truck faces the sunset and is filled with blankets and pillows.

“Nix, when? How? Oh my gosh.” Letting go of Honey’s reins, bringing my hands to my chest. This is absolutely beautiful and my sweet man did it all for me.

Nix hops off Waffle and ties his reins to the tree, then guides Honey next to him, doing the same with her reins. The two horses nuzzle each other like they’re long-time lovers. Nix reaches up and grabs me by my waist, but before he can set me on the ground, I wrap my legs around his middle, placing both of my hands on either side of his warm cheeks.

“This is amazing, just like our first date.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking, too,” he whispers to me, brushing his nose against mine, just like Honey and Waffle were doing.

Nix carries me to the bed of the truck, sitting me on the edge. I crawl to the back of it, climbing onto the blankets. I can hear him opening and closing the front door, before joining me with a picnic basket.

He settles beside me, putting the basket between us, opening the top of it, and pulling out a few baked goods, a bottle of what I assume is his mom’s

lemonade and other snacks.

We each fill out little plates with snacks and watch the sun continue to set in silence. Before Nix silence would drive me crazy, maybe because as a kid I was left in silence, due to my parents constantly traveling without me and then when they were around I was always told *that little girls are to always be seen and not heard*. But now with Nix, it's comfortable, like the silence between us is filled with so much love and passion that words aren't always needed.

Once my plate is cleared, I take the time to look over the love of my life. His sharp jaw is dusted in dark hair, his skin has darkened since we've been out here, and his hair is unruly in the best way.

"You look like you're about to eat me alive, Sunshine." He winks at me.

"Can you blame me? You got this sexy cowboy thing going on, it's pretty hard to resist." I climb over the basket and onto his lap. He cups my face and brings our lips together, his mouth tastes of sweet lemonade, and it's an intoxicating flavor.

My body is doing things on its own accord and I practically start to dry hump Nix, but the rough feeling of his jeans between my legs sets me completely on fire.

The feeling of his growing cock tells me he's enjoying this just as much as I am. Our kiss is slow and sweet, but filled with passion.

Nix flips us, so my back hits the comfy brown comforter that I was just under. Never breaking our kiss, his hands follow the outline of my body, from my neck to my shoulder, the curve of my breast, down to the dip of my waist, over my hip bone, until he's at my core. I'm sure he can feel the moisture that is seeping through the fabric of my navy leggings.

"Please," I whisper to him. Raising my hips to meet his fingertips that are

lazily stroking me over my clothes.

He reaches for the blanket that is off to the side, covering our bodies, even though I'm sure we're far enough from the house, but better safe than sorry.

"Do you want my fingers, my mouth, or my cock first?" Nix asks before reaching behind him and using one hand to pull off his t-shirt.

"God, I wish it could be all three at the same time," I whine.

"Well, you can have two out of three. You have two seconds to pick or I do, Sunshine."

He's pulling down my leggings and panties. "One," he says in that authoritative tone I love so much. Tapping my finger against my chin, like I'm really thinking deeply over my choices. He unzips his jeans and lowers them just past his delicious ass. "Two." He doesn't give me a second to think before he sucks my clit into his mouth.

"Fuck, fuck, oh Nix." I tug at his dark locks. He licks, sucks, and laps my lower lips like he would my upper pair in a heated make-out sesh.

My orgasm hits me out of left field and with it I let out the loudest moan ever. Slapping my hand over my mouth, embarrassed by the noise.

Nix crawls up my body from under the blankets, licking his lips, before he kisses me. Tasting myself on him.

"Take me, Nix."

"Always so greedy for my cock, aren't you, baby?"

Instead of answering, I grab a hold of his hard member and line him up with my opening. Locking my ankles around his ass, pushing him into me.

"HolyFuckingShitLiSoTightSoGood." His words come out a jumble mess. "Wait, fuck. Condom."

"I'm fine if you're fine," I whisper into his ear. I had my IUD taken out before we came here and didn't have it replaced; I'm not really sure why.

Maybe it was from the night Nix came in me and was disappointed to know I had it in. I always knew I wanted to be a mom and nothing makes me happier than to think of having kids with Nix.

“Are you sure?” he asks with slow measured strokes.

“Nix, make love to me.” That is all I say.

And that he does.

Loves me in a way no one else can.

Chapter 30

Phoenix

“I can’t believe you’re leaving already?” Memphis says to me as I put my and Li’s bags into the rental car.

“Miss me already, little bro?” I joke with my brother. He shoves my shoulder and shakes his head. “Why don’t you look into transferring up to BU? They could use a good goalie, now that Parker graduated.”

Memphis looks over to our parents and shrugs his shoulders. “Fiz,” I say his childhood nickname. “They’ll be okay, they would rather you be happy. How about for spring break you come up to Boston? Li and I will show you around. I know Chiral and Liam would like to see you too.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. I’d like a first-class seat. I know your salary, big bro, you can swing it.” He pulls me into a hug and I just laugh at his comment.

“Sure, kid.”

As Memphis and I pull apart, I see Li and my mom both wiping tears from their eyes. Over the past few days, they’ve become close. Li told my mom about her relationship with her parents and my mom said from that moment on that Li was their family. I couldn’t be happier to see their relationship blossom the way it has.

I also told Li about my mom’s multiple sclerosis diagnosis, and she instantly went to my mom and hugged her, and told her if she needed her to ever come down to just call.

If I didn’t love this girl already, with that simple declaration I would have fallen in love with her right then.

As I shut the trunk, I walk over to the two most important women in my life. “Any love left for me?” I say with a joking pout.

Li gives me her soft smile, before going to say goodbye to my dad and brother. I wrap my mom in a tight hug. “I really do love her,” I say to my mom for no real reason other than just needing to say it.

Stepping out of my embrace, she cups my jaw like she has always done. “I know, Son, she really loves you too. The kind of love you two have is one many look for and only a few will find. Always fight for one another, protect the love you two have, and remember the rainy days make us cherish the sunshine even more.”

Nodding at my momma’s words. “So, if I asked her to marry me, you would approve of that?”

“I would kick your ass if you didn’t.”

“I second that,” my dad comments as he wraps his arms around my mom’s waist.

“Noted.” I laugh.

“What are we talking about?” Li asks as she steps up next to me with Memphis’ arm around her shoulders. I grab Li’s hand and pull her away from my brother.

“No touching my girl, Fiz,” I growl. Memphis being the jerk he is just laughs and I swear I catch Li winking at him.

“Alrighty, fam. We gotta hit the road.” Li and I give our final goodbyes.

Once we’re in the car, I lay my hand on her thigh. “Thank you,” I say just loud enough above the hum of the radio.

“No, Nix. Thank you. This was amazing and your family, they are just the best. When we have kids, I want us to be just like your parents.” Li has this daze in her eye like she’s in a faraway place. This is the first time she has

ever talked about having a future with me and fuck, does it make my heart want to burst with excitement.

“How many kids?”

“Four. One for each of our hands to hold.”

“I can do four and how do you feel about getting a dog?”

Li starts to bounce around in her seat. “Oh my gosh, yes! My parents never let us have a dog or any kind of pet for that matter.”

“You will have whatever you want in this lifetime with me, Sunshine.”



“Home sweet home,” I say as I disarm the alarm in the entryway of our home. I don’t know why but the second our plane landed in Boston, the worry settled back in. I spoke with Theo last night and he said he still hasn’t been able to track Micha.

He even went as far as tapping into the city street cameras and hasn’t been able to find Micha anywhere.

Before I can even get another word out, the sound of dog nails on the hardwood starts racing towards us.

“Oh my gosh!” Li squeals as the all-black shepherd races towards us.

“Heel!” A strong voice announces. The shepherd stops the second the command is given and retreats back into the living room.

“Nix, what the hell?” Li is standing behind me now, looking just past my shoulder.

I turn around to look at her with a sheepish grin, I totally forgot that I told Liam and Chiral to meet the trainer here and to let him and the dog in.

“Surprise,” I say with a shoulder shrug.

“Auntie Li Li and Uncle Nix, come meet the puppy!” Lani’s voice yells from the living room.

I grab Li’s hand and bring her to the living room where all of our friends are sitting on the couches, besides Chiral who is laying on the ground with the dog and Lani. Standing off in the corner is David, the dog trainer I have been in communication with for the last few weeks. Zimmerman recommended him and his dogs; he has one himself from David to protect his home, not that he ever really needed it, but Zimmerman is a very skeptical guy. Not wanting anyone within a fifty-foot radius of his son if possible.

“Nix, there’s a dog in our living room and a... man.”

“There is, the dog is my Christmas present to you.”

“You got me a dog?” Li asks with enthusiasm.

“I did. David here raises and trains all different kinds of shepherds for protection purposes.”

Li drops to her knees and pats on the ground to get the dog’s attention.

“You have to use the command *come*,” David says to her.

“Come,” Li says softly.

“No, you have to say it like you mean it,” David comments again. David then moves to stand behind Li. “Come!” he says with a deep voice and sure enough, the dog leaves Chiral’s side and sits beside David’s legs.

Li looks at the dog and puts her hand out for the dog to sniff. Once the dog seems comfortable, she pats her head.

“What’s her name?”

“My wife named her Stella.”

“Stella, I like it.”

Lani moves over to Li and they both start to pet Stella.

I turn to David and offer him my hand for a handshake. “You got the final payment, correct?” I ask in a hush tone.

“Yes, thank you. I’ll be back tomorrow to go over the training with you guys.”

“Sounds great.” I walk David out, but before he walks through the door I have to ask one more final thing. “She’ll protect her, right? I need to know my girl is safe while I’m gone.”

“She is the best female I have, she will risk her own life for you guys. Anyone stupid enough to walk through this door you don’t want here, she will take care of them or die trying.” Before he walks away. "But she is obedient to a fault, if she's told to do something, she will even if her instincts tell her otherwise. So keep that in mind."

I nod my head and let him leave, returning back to the living room, Li, Lani, and Chiral are all petting and loving on Stella. I take a seat next to Mar who is scrolling on her phone.

“Thanks for your help guys,” I say to my friends.

Liam wraps his arms around Lottie, who looks even more pregnant than she was before we left for Texas. “Anytime man, she’s a cute dog.”

“Dada, I want a puppyyyy,” Lani yells to her father.

“Yeah, Princess, can we get a puppy?” Chiral equally whines like our niece.

“We’ll talk about it Little Bean,” Liam says to his daughter as he stands and scoops her up. He kisses Lani’s cheek what seems like a hundred times.

“Dada stopppp,” Lani says between giggles.

“Alrighty, Little Bean time to go home and head to bed.” He sets Lani down and she runs around giving everyone goodbye hugs. Then they all leave together.

“Stella, come!” I hear Li say in a deep voice. I can’t help the laugh that

passes through my lips at her tone, but it works. Stella sits at her feet and looks up at her waiting for her next command. Li runs her fingernails up and down Stella's back.

"I can't believe you got me a dog, Nix."

"Well I'm about to be away for a week, then away for another week shortly after that. I need to make sure you're safe while I'm away."

Li looks up at me, her blue eyes are iced over and I know that look, fear. I cross the living room and sit beside her, wrapping my arms tightly around her. "You're going to be okay, you have Stella and the alarm system, plus you know Theo is always a phone call away as am I."

She lays her head against my chest and as if Stella is already attuned with Li, she lays her head onto Li's lap.

"Let's head to bed, we've had a long day. I asked Mar and Lot to go out and get everything for Stella, she has a dog bed in our room."

"Yeah, okay."

I grab Li's hand and pull her off the couch; she follows me up the stairs as does Stella.

Li instantly goes to the bathroom and the pup follows her. I take my clothes off, down to my boxers, and lay flat on my back on top of the comforter. I swear I hear a strange clicking noise coming from somewhere in the room. I get up to inspect the space, not able to pinpoint where it's coming from. But as I get closer to the windows of the room, the noise seems to intensify.

"What the fuck is that?" I mumble to myself.

"What are you doing?"

"Huh?" I turn around to find Li in nothing but her panties and clicking noises disappear from my brain. "I was just looking outside." I pull the curtains closed and stalk towards my beautiful girl.

When I'm in reach, my hands latch onto her perfect breasts, giving them a light squeeze, but before I can bend over and pop one of her nipples into my mouth, she slaps my hand away.

"Nix, our daughter is in the room."

Looking down, sure enough, Stella is sitting right at Li's feet. I let out a groan. "Li, baby, she's a dog. She doesn't know what is going on or what's about to go on," I say with a wiggle of my eyebrows.

"Phoenix Dumbrowski, she is not just a dog, she is our child now and I will not be having sex with our child in the room." I can't help but laugh at my sweet girl.

"If you think I'm not about to eat your pussy like it's my last fucking meal, you are mistaken, my love."

"Well, when you put it like that."

"That's what I thought." I scoop Li up into my arms and walk towards our bed. "Stella, bed," I say as sternly as I can. Surprisingly she listens, finding her bed in the corner of the room and curling up on a mattress that looks like it may have cost as much as my own.

I should have given the girls a spending limit, but I paid just over five thousand for the dog, so might as well treat her like the princess she already is in our household.

Tossing Li onto the bed, she bounced a little further back than I wanted her to, so grabbing a hold of her ankles, I drag her to the edge of the bed. Dropping to my knees, between her thighs, I move her silk panties to the side.

"You this wet already, baby girl?"

She's leaned up onto her elbows looking down at me and she just tilts her head to the side and blinks those perfectly long eyelashes at me.

But she knows the rules in the bedroom.

I lean back on my hunches and trail my fingers up her thighs until I'm mean with her wet heat, then I pull my hand back and smack it against her pussy.

"Ugh," Li moans out.

"Didn't I ask you a question?"

"Yes, yes I'm already this wet for you, I'm always wet for you."

"Good girl," is all I say before I insert one finger inside her. Moving it slowly in and out, curling it just at the end to hit that perfect little spot inside of her. She falls onto her back, with a sigh. "Eyes on me, Sunshine."

She sits back on her elbows and looks down at me with lust-filled eyes. Dragging my tongue through her folds and keeping up with the slow movement of my finger, she moans out in pleasure.

I suck her clit into my mouth as I add a second finger. After our night in the truck, Li was awfully sore. I didn't prep her body enough that night and I'm not making that mistake again. I mean she will always be sore after sex with me because like the rest of me, my cock isn't small, but she was in actual pain the day after and I'm not letting that happen again.

As I continue to work her over and her moans get louder and louder, I know she's close, her inner walls are clamping down on my fingers, I add a third one and that sets her over.

Her cum is seeping out of her and I catch every last drop possible. I work her through her first orgasm and when I know it's passed, I climb on top of her and kiss from her collarbone to her chin, until my mouth meets hers.

Li loves tasting herself off my lips, she moans as my tongue swirls and slides with hers. Placing all my weight onto my left arm, I reach down with my right to free my aching cock from the confines of my briefs and give myself two slow tugs.

I flip us over so Li is sitting on top of my waist, her pretty pink panties still

in place, so I reach for the side of the fabric and rip them from her body.

She rolls her eyes at me, but makes no attempt to stop me.

She grabs ahold of her breast, pulling on her nipples to the point they have to hurt, but she only moans. I fill my hands with her perfect round ass and guide her hips back and forth so her core rubs against my cock, coating it in her juices.

“Yes, Nix. God, I fucking love that piercing of yours.”

“You know I was thinking of getting another one.”

“Really, another bar?” I shake my head no at her.

“No a pubic piercing,” I say as I guide her hand to where the piercing would go. “So when you ride my dick, it’ll hit your clit every time you come down.”

“You would do that for me?”

“Baby, anything to bring you pleasure I would do.”

“You are literally the man of my dreams, you know that right?”

“I only strive to be.” I push into her again with no condom. I know this probably isn’t smart. She had her IUD removed before we went to Texas and she said she couldn’t have a new one put in place that day because of a scheduling error made at the doctor’s office, so they recommend we used condoms until they could see her again but honestly, I don’t fucking care.

I want to fill Li with my cum and her belly with my babies as soon as possible.

“Yes, fucking yes,” she moans. I meet her thrust for thrust, watching exactly where her clit meets my pubic bone and committing it to memory.

Definitely getting that piercing.

“Baby girl, you take this cock so fucking good.” I pound into her harder. My right hand smacks her ass, as my left skates up to her neck. Placing a firm

grip around her delicate throat and giving in just enough of a squeeze.

Her bouncing becomes more erratic and soon enough orgasm number two hits her, it's so strong it almost sends me over with her.

“One more baby, give me one more.”

“I... I... Nix I can't” Her body goes limp and she falls to my chest, while still moving her hips back and forth.

“Yes, you can, baby. One. More.” I announce my words with hard thrusts. I can feel her legs shake. So again I flip us, this time I put Li on her stomach, pulling her hips up. I enter her from behind and do slow measured strokes, reaching around her waist, I find her clit and play with it. Her moans are muffled by the pillow and she pushes back onto me.

When she's ready, I pull out completely and drive back home, doing it over and over until she's screaming into the pillows what sounds like my name and I fall over the edge with her this time.

I climb beside her and wrap her in my arms, pulling the blanket around both of us.

“I love you,” she says in a sleepy tone.

“I love you, too.” Just as I reach for the bedside lamp, Stella lets out a small sleepy whimper. “See and you were worried about her, she slept right through everything.”

“Fair, but she's still our baby.”

“I know, Sunshine.”

Chapter 31

Lilah

Watching Nix rush around the room as he packs his bags for his week of away games on the West Coast, normally I would find this comical, him running around, throwing things around looking for his lucky socks, and cursing to himself when he stubs his toe, but the fear is taking over everything.

Theo and I just chatted on the phone; he suggested that maybe he should come to stay with me, but I declined the offer since he has a multi-billion dollar business to run and I don't need a babysitter. He did cave and tell me that he has his *guys* watching all three of our houses. I told him that was unnecessary, but he told me it was either that or he was moving into the guest room while the guys were away.

"Li," Nix says with a questioning tone like he's had to repeat my name too many times.

"Hmm?" I mindlessly pet Stella, who never leaves my side. David came back over and taught us everything we needed to know about Stella and her training. It amazes me what she's capable of doing.

"Sunshine, maybe... maybe you should come with me." Nix sits on the other side of me and holds my hand.

"No, no, Nix. We will be fine, Theo has the house covered and Stella has the inside covered. We can't live in fear, we can't let him control our lives. It's what he wants."

The worry lines grow deeper in Nix's forehead, reaching up and running my thumb over the grooves to smooth them out before resting it against his

jaw. "I know this is hard, but I promise it's going to be okay. He's gonna pop up and when he does, Theo is ready." I'm ready, I think to myself.

I have gone over in my head a hundred times already what I will say and do when I cross paths with Micha again and no matter what happens, I'm determined to come out on top.

"Okay, but where you go, she goes." He glances at Stella.

"Promise," I say, offering up my pinky for a pinky swear. I cleared it with my job to bring Stella to work with me and I don't plan to go anywhere else, not while Nix is gone.

"Dumbrowski!" Chiral yells from downstairs where he lets himself in. Stella quickly jumps off the bed ready to go scope out who is here.

"I gotta go, Sunshine. I love you to the sun and back."

"I love you as much as I love rainy days," I whisper back to him. He gives me a kiss and we both leave the comfort of our bedroom and head downstairs where Stella is in a standoff with Chiral. She's growling at him to hold him in place.

"Nice Stella, remember we're friends. It's Uncle Chi," Chiral nervously says while he has his hands up, back against the door. "Guys, mind calling off your guard dog?" he asks once we come into view.

"Maybe you shouldn't have let yourself in," Nix says smugly. I smack Nix on the shoulder and call for Stella to come, petting her on the head.

"Bye, Li," Chiral yells before running out of the house. Nix and I both laugh then he drops to his knees, petting Stella.

"Take care of our girl," he tells her before kissing the top of her head.

Standing to his feet he gives me one more kiss and then he's gone. Looking down at our pup she tilts her head at me in that cute dog way.

"We're gonna be just fine, Daddy is just a worry wart."

Reaching for my phone I send off a text to the girls asking them if they want to do a movie night and dinner together. They both reply instantly and make plans to come over in an hour.

Stella is sitting at the backdoor, which normally means she wants to go out. Grabbing my shoes from the front door, I pick up a few tennis balls for her and we head out. I throw the first ball off the deck and she chases after it. We do this a few more times, but when I throw the last ball she's no longer interested and starts running towards the back of our fence, sniffing at the ground.

Then her stance changes, her ears are pointed, and she lets out a deep growl.

"Stella," I yell to her, but she doesn't respond. She remains in her position. I can feel my heart start to race. I call her name again and still, she doesn't come.

Her bark grows louder and more intense and I don't know what to do. I back up against the glass slider door, reaching for my necklace from Theo. Then a head pops up past the fence.

No, No, No.

This person is wearing a black hoodie, their back to me. Their hair is covered and I can't see any other features other than they're tall.

As they walk away I see the logo of the lawn care that helps take care of the grounds of the Knight Kingdom. He walks away from the fence, holding a snow shovel in hand.

I don't know what he was doing so close to our fence, as the sidewalk behind our house is easily 10 feet away.

He makes his way down the sidewalk, whistling to himself. Once he's past the next house, Stella returns to my side. I take her inside with me, making

sure to lock the door behind us.

Only able to make it to the kitchen before my legs give out, sitting in the corner hidden from all the windows, thanks to the island. Taking several deep breaths.

In. Out. In. Out. I say to myself, but the air never feels like it gets deep enough.

It was just the lawn care people, it wasn't him, it wasn't him.

Stella lays across my outstretched legs, leaning her body against mine.

After what feels like a lifetime, my breathing slows down, as does my heart.

A knock comes to my door, and I look down at my phone and notice it's been an hour and it's probably just the girls.

Getting up off the kitchen floor and sending Stella to her bed in the living room. I take a quick glance at the mirror in the entryway and follow it with another quick round of deep breaths and open the door.

Lani comes running through the second she can in search of her new best friend.

"Leilani!" Lottie yells to her daughter, which goes ignored by the toddler.

"I just want an ounce of her energy," Mar comments. I move out of the way to let the girls in.

"It's colder than Satan's balls out there."

"Wouldn't his balls be hot?" I ask Mar and she just shrugs her shoulders.

"Please tell me pizza is on the way?" Lottie moans out while flopping onto the couch in the living room.

"Should be here in ten Preggo." Mar and I both laugh.

"Hey, just you two wait until you're pregnant, then I'll be the one laughing."

"I'm pretty sure if it's up to Liam you'll be pregnant for the next ten years,

soooo,” I say to my best friend and she just smiles because we all know it’s true.

Mar and I curl up under a blanket next to Lottie. Mar starts to tell us all about her wedding plans, which we’ve already heard probably a hundred times seeing as we’ve helped plan the whole thing along with Gemma, Chiral’s little sister, through text.

“Chiral wants to wear a red suit, like an actual full red suit... with pinstripes.” The disbelief in Mar’s tone is comical.

“You do know who you are marrying right?” I say between laughs.

“Honestly, you should be happy, that’s all he’s wanting to wear. That’s pretty tame for him, like did you see the last suit he wore for game day.”

Mar rolls her eyes. “How could I forget? It was plastered everywhere for a week straight.”

“I mean the lime green really brought out his... eyes.” Lottie and I become a fit of laughs.

This feels like college all over again and I have missed it so much. Just the three of us, plus Lani who is busy with the dog, curled up on a couch together just laughing till we have tears in our eyes.

Mar’s phone dings. “Pizza is here,” she announces before jumping off the couch. I help Lottie to her feet and we all head into the kitchen eating the pizza straight from the box. I catch Lani giving Stella a few toppings from her pizza.

Once we’re all stuffed, Lottie takes her daughter to our spare room with her tablet so she can watch her movie and fall asleep.

I’m flipping through the streaming service we have looking for a movie for us girls to watch.

“How are you doing?” Mar asks from beside me and I can feel the tension

in my shoulders rise.

“I’m good.”

“Li, it’s me. You know you can tell me anything.”

“I know, honestly I’m good.” I refuse to put my stress on them; I’ve already had to add the stress of Micha’s threats to my friends lives, and I won’t add my issues on top of it.

“Okay,” Mar says, dropping the conversation.

“Alrighty, ladies let’s get our movie marathon on,” Lotties says once she plops back into her spot.

Settling on an adult rom-com, we cozy up together with our bowls of popcorn.

It’s moments like this that make me realize coming back despite the risk was worth it. I needed my girls and Nix more than I realized.

Chapter 32

Lilah

“I miss you,” Nix says over video chat. We haven’t been apart this long, well, since I ran away to France.

“I miss you more, but you get to come home tomorrow.” The excitement in my tone is evident. I miss my sweet man, and I’m more than ready to have him back in the comfort of our own home where I can do wild things to him.

“Yeah, it’ll be good to be back in my own bed and not listen to Chiral snoring all night.”

A pillow comes flying into view, hitting Nix square in the face. “I do not snore, ask Mar,” Chiral whines like the man-child he is.

“Also about the bed situation.” I look over at Stella who is currently curled up by my feet.

“Liiii, we talked about this.”

“She’s just so cute and she sleeps at the end of the bed, you won’t even know she’s there.” I don’t want to tell Nix that although she is cute and does sleep at my feet most of the night, having her in bed with me while he’s away makes me feel safer, and more secure. “I promise when you come home, she’ll be back to her bed.”

“Good, don’t get me wrong I love her, but I’m going to need all the space for what I’m going to do to you the second I get my hands on ya.”

Another pillow goes flying and again, hitting him in the face. “Dude, she’s like my sister, I don’t want to hear about the gross things you two do together.”

“You two should not be allowed to room together,” I say in a laughing tone.

Chiral squishes next to Nix on the phone screen “Nixy-poo lovvees me,” Chiral sings.

“Bro, you smell, go shower!” Nix shoves at Chiral until he’s out of the frame.

“You just want alone time, but fine I’ll go shower and call my future wife.”

Nix rolls his eyes so hard I swear they might get stuck, but the sound of a door shutting changes his expression to the gentle and adoring way he seems to only reserve for me, and boy does it make the butterflies take flight inside me.

“Sunshine,” he says in that sultry way that makes me melt.

“Yes?”

“I can’t wait to be home with you, this time apart is just too much.”

“I know, but you kicked ass at your game tonight. You almost had a hat trick.”

“Who is teaching you hockey verbiage?” Nix laughs, he and I both know that my hockey knowledge isn’t very in-depth and I go to the games to support him and eat the food.

“Lottie, she told me that the best way to learn about hockey is by reading her spicy sports romance books.”

“Spicy books about hockey players? What are they even about?”

“I don’t know, she dropped off like ten books after the game and most of them have half-naked men on the covers... it’s pretty hot.” I wink at him, knowing I’m pushing his buttons.

Before I can say another word, Nix is on the move. He holds the phone close to his chest, so I can’t see where exactly he’s going, but I hear a door shut and then banging on another one.

“Whoa, where’s the fire?” Liam asks.

“Tell your wife to keep her naked man books to herself.”

Liam just laughs at my overprotective boyfriend, “Hey, those books are the reason why we have another Little Bean on the way.”

“Wait really?” Nix asks.

“Yeah dude, I’ve read some of the scenes, and dude it’ll make you—”

“I’m still here!” I yell before Liam spills all his dirty secrets.

“Oh, shit sorry, babe. Maybe we should read those books.”

“We?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, we. Like together, I can buy a second copy or maybe we can just read it at the same time.”

“This would be a cute idea if I knew it wasn’t just for you to get in my pants, Dumbrowski.”

“Hey, I don’t need a stack of dead trees to get in your pants, but who knows it could be a fun thing.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me and I can’t help but laugh at his antics before a yawn slips out. The time difference is killing me, but I wanted to stay up and watch his game and then talk with him before bed, but now my eyes are closing on their own accord.

“Go to sleep, Sunshine. I’ll see you tomorrow. I love you to the sun back.”

“I love you more than I love rainy days. Sweet dreams.”

“You too.”



I’m so antsy for Nix to come home, I’ve cleaned every room in the house, most things not even needing to be clean.

Stella follows me room to room always right at my side. As I rewash the kitchen sink for the second time, I think she's sick of craziness and leaves my side only to return with her leash and collar.

Looking at the clock, Nix should be home in an hour or two. "Okay, we can go for a walk before Dad gets home." I slip the collar around her neck, not that she really needs it, but I feel like it's just common courtesy to do so.

Before heading out the door, Theo's voice rings in my head reminding me to set the alarm. I quickly punch in the code and activate the alarm system, even though we're just going around the neighborhood. The Knight's Kingdom is made up of a few streets, nothing too big, but enough to give Stella a good walk-in before she takes a nap.

I feel like she really is a kid at times, she takes her nap around the same time every day and is sometimes needy for attention, but loves me unconditionally.

The January wind smacks me in the face the second I'm outside. I love the snow but really can do without the super-freezing temperatures. As we head down the road, I see Nolan Zimmerman's nanny outside with his son who is bundled up in the cutest little snowsuit. The nanny is a beautiful redhead with fair skin, wearing a green knee-length winter coat. I wave to her and make a mental note to find time to stop and chat with her.

I don't know much about Nolan other than the fact he's a super private person and doesn't like to go out in public often. Nix told me his girlfriend left him and their son, but no one knows why.

Stella and I make the final turn before we end back up on our road, quickly ending up in front of our house. Before we can make it through the front door, I see red rose petals lying on top of the snowy doorstep.

Nix must be home early. Throwing open the door, Stella and I rush in like

crazy ladies.

“Nix?!” I yell into the empty space, Stella takes off towards the stairs, I think she’s as excited as I am to see him.

Racing after her, filled with so much excitement to see my man again, it’s not till it’s too late that I notice the tone of her bark.

That’s not excitement, that’s danger.

Standing there in the middle of our bedroom holding a gun at my girl, is Micha.

“Call her off or I put a bullet through her head.” His voice is gravelly and full of hatred. The dark bags under his eyes tell me he probably hasn’t slept in days; he’s lost some weight, but I’m sure the adrenaline pumping through him or the drugs will make it possible for him to overpower me.

“You have five seconds, Lilah. Call. Her. Off.” Stella will only attack if we tell her to, it would take one single word from me and she would be all over Micha in a flash, but the idea of losing her overtakes my emotions.

“Stella, heel,” I demand and I can see the hesitation in her response; I’m not calling her off from her job, but I want her by my side.

“Did he really think getting you a *dog* would keep me from you?”

“What do you want Micha? Why are you here?” As I distract him with my questions, I reach up and hit the little button on my necklace. Theo and I knew that Micha was going to return, so he made me a necklace that has a tracking device along with an SOS feature which I just activated.

“Isn’t it obvious?” The smile on his face would make the Joker squirm. “I’ve come to make good on my promises. You see, Lilah, I thought I made myself really FUCKING CLEAR WHEN I TOLD YOU TO LEAVE AND NEVER COME BACK!”

I do everything in my power to not shake his yelling; he won’t scare me, he

won't make me feel small, because I am Lilah James and no one will ever make me feel like he did in that parking lot over a year ago again.

“I tried to warn you, that night in the bathroom, your apartment, the flowers at your work, I gave you a chance, Lilah. I GAVE YOU A FUCKING CHANCE TO LEAVE AGAIN BUT YOU NEVER LISTEN. Why? Why is it fucking fair you get to move on, live this bullshit happy life and I had to be the one to lose everything? You know it's your fault I got hurt that night, right? It was your fault because we had that stupid fight before the game. I wasn't focused, I wasn't fucking focused on the one thing that truly should have mattered because of you.” He paces to the other side of the room, twirling the gun around his pointer finger. “Then you promised to stay, promised to love me forever and you fucking lied just like the rest of them.”

He can't be serious, I was a kid. But before I say something to set him off, I take a deep breath and think out my words. “Micha, you have to let me go, you have to get help.”

“Help? Oh, Lilah, there's not enough help in this god-forsaken world, and regarding letting you go, not happening, *Sunshine*... That's what he calls you, isn't it? His *Sunshine*.” His tone filled with disgust.

“How... How do you know that?”

Micha laughs a sinister kind of laugh, the kind that makes me want to curl up in a ball and cover my ears because I know it will haunt me in my nightmares. “Do you really think today was the first time I've been in this house? See Theo thinks he's a smart man, but like his son, he's easily played like a fiddle. You see I was able to get past those idiot guards by just wearing a stupid hoodie with the lawn care logo, then I was able to deactivate your simple alarm system with the use of fingerprint powder.” He laughs like the funniest joke was told, not him sharing all his dirty secrets with me. “Then I

installed a camera, right there, I've watched all the disgusting things he did to you. Choking you like a dirty whore, spanking you like a child. Gee, if I knew you were into that shit, I would have never let you go, but I guess it's not too late now isn't it."

"What... what do you mean?"

Before he can answer, my phone starts to ring.

"You should answer that, I'm sure it's our guest of honor. He should be off his plane by now and on his way home."

With shaky fingers, I pull my phone out of my back pocket.

It's Theo; he must have gotten the signal from my necklace.

"Answer it." The change in his tone is nerve-wracking; he's all over the place and it's making me feel more unsteady by the minute.

I have to pick and choose my battles here, so answering a call from Theo seems like the right choice.

"Hello," the shake in my voice is heavier than I anticipated.

"Lilah, he's there isn't he."

"Yes," I say softly.

"Put it on speaker," Theo demands.

"Theo... I..." Before I can finish my sentence the phone is ripped from my hand, Stella is ready to launch at Micha for getting too close to me, but I put my hand on her chest to keep her put.

Micha, puts the phone on speaker and starts to pace the length of the room. I need to come up with a plan quickly before Nix gets home, which could be any moment now.

"Theo, did you really think I didn't know you and your minions were keeping tabs on me? Did you forget that I grew up in this world, that it's just as much part of mine as it is yours?"

What are they talking about? World? What world? I grew up with Micha, what could he possibly know that I don't?

"Listen here you piece of shit, you lay one fucking finger on her and I will personally rip you limb from limb myself, you hear me?"

"Hmm, well I wouldn't be so sure about that, have you heard from your guy? The one you had watching my darling girl, here." There's that smile again.

Think, Li, think.

I know I can't outrun him, but I know who can, and right now is the perfect time.

"Stella, outside." Her ears perk up and a tilt of her head. I think she feels conflicted, like she knows the threat is right here and she's not supposed to leave, but is trained to follow all commands Nix and I give her. "Stella, outside now."

I'm scared to send her outside by herself, but if anyone sees her they will know something is wrong, they will call the cops.

I hope.

Slowly Stella walks out the open door of the bedroom and soon my protector is out of my vision, and I just broke Nix's one rule—to always have her by my side.

"I'm done with this conversation, would you like to say goodbye to your sweet little Lilah? Because it'll be the last time any of you hear from her."

"Let me talk to her."

Micha throws me the phone and I barely catch it; he turns his back staring out the big bay windows. What does he have planned?

"Lilah, never forget about the apple orchard."

"Theo?"

“Lilah, NOW!”

I drop to my knees as quickly as I can and hide behind my bed.

A single gunshot is all I hear before everything goes black.

Chapter 33

Phoenix

Chiral, Liam, and I are racing through the streets of Boston. Someone called Chiral the second we landed at Logan.

The color draining from his face was enough to tell me something was wrong.

“Chiral, what? Talk to me!” Grabbing a hold of his shoulders, shaking him to the point, he stumbles on his feet.

“We have to get to Knight’s Kingdom, right now!” We all forget our bags, Liam mentioning he’ll text one of the guys to grab them. Then we’re running, ignoring our coaches and teammates as they yell after us.

Chiral’s car is pulled up to the front thanks to the valet service and he throws a wad of cash to the kid who is holding out his keys and we hop in. We’re taking as many back roads as we can, Chi even runs a few red lights at this point.

I grab my phone to call Li; I need to hear her voice, I need to know she’s safe and alive.

“Don’t call her,” Chiral demands from the driver’s seat.

“What do you mean, don’t call her? I need to make sure she’s okay.”

He sends a quick glance at me through the rearview mirror, before letting out a sigh. “Nix, he’s there. He has her phone, he’s currently talking to my dad. If he sees you call, it might just set him off. Just trust me right now, okay? Do. Not. Call. Her.”

He’s there, he’s there in my house? How? How the fuck did this happen? The alarm system never alerted me. How did he get past the guards at the

gate and the guy Theo had watching the house?

None of this makes sense.

I curl my fingers inwards until my knuckles turn white. No matter how fast this car is going, it's not fast enough.

Looking down at my feet, praying for my girl, praying we get there in one piece, praying I get to wrap my fingers around this fuckers neck and take his last breath.

“We're pulling up to the gate,” Liam warns.

“Nix, you need to listen to me clearly, my dad has this handled. You have to trust him, you can't run in until he gives us the okay. Li is only safe if you let him handle this.”

“I can't just sit back and do fucking nothing—”

“If you want Li to walk away from this, then you will. I will turn this car around if I have to. You'll both end up dead if you try to play Superman right now.” I've never heard Chiral talk like this. With such a level of seriousness, it would make me shiver if I wasn't burning up with a fire inside me that I think might burn me alive.

Chiral pulls into his driveway and none of us move until something is scratching at Liam's side of the car. I see her pointy ears before anything else. I quickly get out of the car and drop to my knees, pulling Stella close to my chest. Her fur is freezing, how long has she been out here? Why is she out here?

The amount of questions I have right now has become so overwhelming I can't take it anymore. I lay my face on top of her head and I let myself cry.

I thought losing Li the first time was the worst heartbreak I could have ever experienced, but this is a thousand times worse.

Stella pulls at the fabric of my hoodie. “We can't, we can't go save her,” I

sob to our dog. Saying the words out loud shatters the last part of my heart.

A hand lands on my shoulder, I don't have the strength to look up and see who it is. I just sit on the frozen ground, clutching onto Stella, like she's my only lifeline.

Then I hear it, the faint sound of glass breaking.

Fuck it, the guys can try to stop me, but I'll fight them if I have to. Standing up and racing to my house. The front door is open, I rush in, looking around the main floor, but Stella races by me heading up the stairs and I follow her.

There laying on the ground, white as a ghost is my Sunshine.

"No, no, no, no!" I yell into the room. I reach for Lilah, her body is still warm, and that has to be a good sign.

I hear footsteps follow behind me, quickly turning around ready to face the devil himself, but it's only the guys.

"Go get Mar, please go get her." Chiral stares at Li in my arms and I see a part of him break. This is his sister in all the ways that count. "GO GET HER!" I scream. Chiral turns and runs out.

I start to pat every part of Lilah's body not finding an ounce of blood, that has to be a good sign, but what happened to her?

"Sunshine, please, please. I need you. Don't leave me. You're my everything. There are no rainbows after rainy days if there's no sunshine," I whisper to her.

"Why don't we go downstairs," Liam suggests, but by the way he's pulling on my arm, it's more of a demand. Walking out of the room, and down the stairs. I take a seat on the couch with Li still in my arms. She's breathing slowly, another good sign.

"Lay her on the couch," Mar demands. I didn't even hear her come in. "Nix, now!" It snaps me out of my trance, and I lay Li's down onto the

couch. Mar goes into nurse mode, starts checking her over head to toe, and then taking her vitals. When she puts her stethoscope on Li's chest, Li's eyes start to flutter open.

I practically push Mar out of the way and hold Li's face in my hand.

"Sunshine?"

"Where is he? Micha? Where is he?" The panic in her voice breaks me, she's terrified.

"He's gone for good," Chiral says from beside, taking her hand.

"But, but, there was a gunshot?"

"Dad took care of it, he's gone forever, Li. We don't have to worry anymore."

Before any more questions can be asked, three men dressed in black walk into my house. Chiral gets up and goes and talks to them, nodding his head towards the staircase.

"Why don't we go to our house for the night?" Mar offers, but the way she locks eyes with me, it's more of a plea than a suggestion.

"Okay," I say before reaching down and picking Li up from the coach. I call to Stella to follow and we head over to Mar and Chi's house.

"You guys can head to the guest room," Mar says before walking back out of the front door to her house.

I carry Li up to their spare room, laying her on top of the bed, the pup taking up residence at the end of her feet.

"Nix, he was watching us, he had been in the house before, he... he..."

"Shhh, it's all over now. It's going to be okay, I promise." I pull her body close to mine, shielding her from the world. Her tears wet my shirt and I just pull her even closer to me. I have no idea what is happening at my house or even where Micha really is, but I know that Chiral has it covered.

Never did I think any of us would go through this, but I wouldn't want to go through it with anyone else. This is our family.

We win together. Celebrate together. Fight together. Always.



I am woken by the creek of a door and I jump out of bed, only to find that it's Li. Taking a deep breath to slow my racing heart. I'm still on edge from everything that happened yesterday.

"Sunshine, what are you doing?"

She looks down at Stella and then back to me. "She needs to eat and go outside."

I climb out of bed, ignoring the headache that is already there, "Let me take care of her, you just stay in bed."

"No!" Li yells at me, but the look of shock at her own tone tells me she didn't mean it. "No, I'm not a fragile glass doll, I'm okay. I can still do things, I... I can still do things." Her voice trails off at the end.

"I know you can, and I don't mean to make you feel like you can't." She nods her head at me before slipping out of the room. There's a pile of fresh clothes sitting on the dresser for me, Chiral must have brought them over from my house. I slip on the clothes and head downstairs.

The whole gang is here. I can see the girls are outside with Li through the slider door, the guys are sitting at the island sipping from coffee mugs. When they take notice of my presence, no words are shared. Only the pass of a coffee mug, taking a sip of the warm brew, slowly eases the pounding in my head.

Once I've had a minute to gather my thoughts, I break the silence. "Tell me everything," is all I say.

Chiral goes over all the details his dad shared with him, talking to Micha on the phone, how he broke into our house several times, set up cameras in our bedroom and other parts of the house, and how Micha is dead.

"How did they kill him?" The guys share a look.

"Let me talk okay?" I roll my eyes but nod for Chiral to continue. "I can't share everything with you, but you guys have probably started to put together that my dad is involved with more than just owning a tech business. He's a part of something bigger, something only a few can know about, but to answer your question, my dad had more than just a single guy watching us, honestly that guy was just a decoy, to throw Micha off. Others were lurking around, and we would have never known they were there. Well, one was hiding out in the tree behind your house, sitting in a tree stand. A sniper. My dad waited till Micha was in the right place and he could warn Li to duck, then told his guy to pull the trigger. His other guy was unconscious from a blunt hit to the head. But Micha's gone, his body is somewhere no one will ever find it, we're all safe now."

I think I can actually feel my jaw hit the floor; this sounds like some James Bond shit, like a whole ass movie, not our lives. We're just a bunch of guys who play hockey, Liam's a dad and husband. But, Chiral has ties to some secret society?

Instead of sharing my thoughts, I just nod my head and thank the universe that my Sunshine is okay, my friends are okay, and we can all move on now.

The girls come back inside and Li wraps her arms around me, and I wrap mine around her shoulders. I kiss the top of her head.

"Want to go for a walk?" I whisper to her. She looks up with her doe eyes.

“Yeah, let me get Stella.” She walks off to collect the dog, and I meet her at the front door. I lock eyes with Liam and he nods his head to me. In our silent conversation, I know he’s telling me that if I need him he will always be there.

Li comes back with Stella on her leash and we walk out the front door. The cold air still has a bite to it but the snow has stopped and what’s left on the ground has turned into brown mush.

Hand in hand, we stroll down the path together. “What now?” Li asks in a soft voice.

“Now we move on like we were always supposed to be. You are going to live without fear, we’re gonna get married, have a house full of kids, and grow old together.”

“You want to marry me?” Li stops us in the middle of the sidewalk with a twinkle in her eye and a smile forming on her face, all sadness has disappeared.

“Hell yeah, I want to marry you! I want to spend the rest of my life with you, I never want another day without you in it, Sunshine.”

Just then the most perfect moment happens, new fluffy snow falls from the sky. I take Stella’s leash out of her hand and drop it to the pavement; she just stands on guard watching our surroundings. I place my one hand on Li’s waist and the other in her hand and start to sway us to only the sound of the wind. She leans her head against my chest and just dances with me.

“Thank you for coming back to me,” I whisper into her ear.

“You’re my home, Nix. I was always going to come back for you.”

“I love you to the sun and back.”

“I love you as much as I love rainy days.”

Epilogue Part One

Lilah

“I now pronounce you man and wife!” The Minister states, “You may kiss your bride.” Chiral wraps his arm around Mar’s lower back and bends her backward putting on the biggest show for their first kiss as husband and wife.

I normally don’t cry at weddings, but maybe it’s because it’s my best friend or it could be the hormones, we’ll just blame the hormones. I lay my hand across my rounded belly, feeling our little guy kick against my palm.

Looking across the aisle, I meet my favorite pair of stormy eyes. As I look at Nix, and then at all our friends, I take a second to reflect over the last year and a half. Everything that happened that day with Micha no longer haunts me. After many sessions with Janice and Nix’s constant love and support, I... we were able to get past it.

I never asked for the details of what happened that day, but Theo and Chiral assured me that he would never be returning. Reading between the lines, I know what that means, but I don’t ponder on it any further than that.

Now, I only look towards the future with Nix, our baby boy, and the family we created with our friends. Nothing is standing in my way of being happy anymore.

The sound of music pulls me from my train of thought and Chiral and Mar dance down the aisle, with Lani following behind them, then Lottie and Liam—who is holding their sweet Lincoln, then Nix and I.

“Ready to party, Sunshine?”

“The only partying I will be doing is dancing food right into my mouth.”

Nix only laughs and we walk down the aisle all smiles.

We take our seats at the head table and the smell of the food makes my mouth water. The way I've been eating, this baby is easily going to weigh over ten pounds.

Savannah made sure to tell me that both of her boys were close to eleven pounds when they were born, and I truly can't think about pushing a baby that big out of my vagina.

"Sunshine."

"Hmm?"

"Your speech?" Nix says with a gentle pat on my leg.

"Oh, right!" Nix helps me to my feet and Lottie passes me the mic, wrapping my fingers around it with a tight grip. I didn't think I'd be this nervous, I am.

Taking a quick glass across the crowd, I find Theo and he gives me a thumbs up—a total dad move.

"Hi everyone, I'm Lilah. I've known Chiral pretty much my whole life and let me tell you, when we were kids I constantly asked if there was a return policy on friendship, newsflash there's not." The crowd laughs at my poor attempt at a joke. "But, despite him getting on my nerves almost a hundred percent of the time, he was the brother I always wanted. You see some people come into your life for a reason and some just force their way in and refuse to never leave. Those are the kind of people you want to keep around. Chiral and I have grown up together in a world that not many will understand and thanks to him, that world is a little bit brighter place. Mar and I met our freshman year during rush week of a sorority that will not be named. If you know, you know." Only Lottie and Mar laugh, but that's because they only get it. "But the one thing that came out of that phony sisterhood was a real one, Marina you are my best friend, my rock, and sometimes the instigator of

bad decisions, but I love you and I can't wait to grow old with you, sorry I forgot we're not sharing our vows right now." Everyone laughs and it gives me a moment to remember the rest of my speech, even though I've rehearsed a million times. "But, in all seriousness, I am so happy to see two of the most important people in my life come together and I just would like to add," Lottie stands up beside me, holding the mic between us as we both say, "We told you so." Mar rolls her eyes at me, but I still take credit for these two getting together.

Liam goes on to give his speech, much more formal than mine, but I wouldn't expect any less from him.

After dinner, which was amazing—I ate all of mine and most of Nix's which he happily shared with me—we make our way out of the dance floor after Mar and Chiral's first dance.

"You look really hot tonight," Nix whispers in my ear as he moves side to side, careful not to push too much on my stomach.

"Well seeing as I've been living in sweatpants and your t-shirts over the summer, I would say this is a nice change."

"I think you look hot then too, Sunshine."

He twirls me around until my back is flush to his front, his arms crisscrossed over my forearms while he holds my hands. Kissing the exposed skin of my neck he says, "But, I can't wait to strip you of this dress tonight and mark every inch of your body."

I swat at his arms, resting my head against his shoulder, and continue to sway to the soft music playing around us.

"Dumbrowski come take a shot for old-time sake," Parker yells from the bar where it seems he's already indulged a little too much.

"Go, I have to go to the bathroom anyway."

“You sure?” Rolling my eyes at his questions, I remove his arms from around me and playfully shove at his shoulder.

“Yes, go save Preston from Chiral.”

“Hey, that’s what he gets for dating his little sister. I don’t blame Chi.”

“Just go!” I say before turning on my heels and walking towards the bathroom.

After peeing for what feels like a lifetime and washing my hands, I search my purse for my lipstick.

“Hey.”

Snapping my head up at the voice that I haven’t heard in over a year, I lock eyes with Evalina in the mirror.

She remained Nix’s PA, but they have grown apart in their friendship, and I honestly hate knowing that’s because of me.

“Hey,” I respond. I have no idea how this conversation is going to go, so I’m going to let her take the lead.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you, so do you.” She does; her lilac hair is tied up in a bun that sits at the base of her neck and the orange fall color dress she has on compliments her skin.

“Umm, look. I’m not really good at these things, but I... I’m sorry. I just thought I was protecting Nix and in reality, I was trying to protect something that wasn’t truly there, at least for him it wasn’t, but umm that’s beside the point. Look, I was a bitch to you and I’m really sorry about that. Truly, I mean it.”

I take her hand in mine and give it a light squeeze. “Thank you for being there for him when I wasn’t. You will never know how much that means to me that he had someone like you in his corner.”

She blinks a couple of times, I think registering the words I just said. She probably expected me to blow her off and pretend she wasn't alive, but like I said, I'm only focusing on the future now.

"You make him really happy; he's lucky to have you."

"Let's be honest here, he's lucky to have us both. Without you, his work life would be a mess," I say trying to break the tension, and it works if the smile she's sporting now says anything.

"You're damn right about that." We both laugh and pull her into as much of a hug as my pregnant belly will allow.

We walk out of the bathroom making plans to get lunch soon, then I go find my man and have him fulfill his promises of ripping this dress off of me.

Finding him at the bar, I notice a familiar face. "Jimmy, he did not hire you to bartend his wedding did he?"

"I offered and let's be honest here, Li, no one else can keep up with you kids and your drinks like I can." I just smile and shake my head at him.

A warm pair of arms wrap around me and the smell of whiskey hits my nose, "Ready to get out of here?"

"With you? Always."

Nix and I say our goodbyes to everyone then we find Theo at that last minute. He instantly drags me into a hug.

"I'm so proud of you, Lilah," he whispers to me.

"Thank you, I couldn't have done it without you."

"Yeah you could have; never underestimate what you're capable of." He gives me a tight squeeze before he says, "Never forget about the apple orchard," before he quickly turns around and I hear a thump.

"Chiral, at your wedding?" Theo shouts as another bread roll comes flying our way.

Theo lets me go and shakes hands with Nix before we leave. Nix wraps his arms around my waist.

“You never did tell me what that saying means,” Nix comments.

“It’s a long silly story.”

“Well I got a lifetime with you, Sunshine, so I’m all ears.”

I just shake my head at him, but before I can say another word, he turns me around to face him and kisses me like our lives depend on it.

Epilogue Part Two

10 years later

Phoenix

“Pass, Pass the puck!” I yell to our new rookie. He locks eyes with me and passes the puck, but he is too slow—rookie jitters getting the best of him. Florida scoops up the puck and now my ass has to fly back to the defensive zone. Thankfully Preston is there to slam the opposing guy into the boards.

Liam skates by picking up the puck and racing back to the attacking zone. I can faintly hear Parker hitting his stick against the ice, letting us know that Chiral is about to leave the sin bin. Just as I make it to Florida’s side, Chi comes flying out, just in time for Liam to pass him the puck, and then he quickly passes it to me; pulling my stick back, I take the shot and it flies into the net.

“Fuck yes,” someone yells as they jump on my back, looking up at the clock there’s only point four seconds left, not enough time for Florida to tie up the game.

We did it! We just won the fucking Stanley Cup!

The rest of the team joins us at center ice, joining in the celebration, and the crowd is going wild. I find my brothers in the mass of sweaty smelly bodies, wrapping both of my arms around them both.

“That’s how it’s done, boys!” I yell to my best friends.

“That’s how it’s done,” they say in unison. We break apart and are joined by the rest of the guys we used to live with. Parker was pulled up to the NHL after his second year in the league, Preston was traded a few years ago, and this is Tate’s first year as a Knight. It’s wild to me how we all ended up here, together.

As they roll out the red carpet for the cup ceremony, I go find my family. My parents, my beautiful wife, and my kids.

Picking up my youngest and holding her in my arms, she puts her hands on my cheeks.

“Go, Daddy, go,” Grace—Grace Marina, named after her aunties—yells to me.

“That’s right, baby girl!” I kiss her cheek, and before I shift her to the side, I rub the top of the heads of the twins and then our oldest. They all groan, but have the biggest smiles on their faces. I pull Li by the back of the neck and kiss her in the most immodest way. All three of the boys moan out their distaste of their parent’s showing PDA.

“I’m so proud of you,” Li says once we finally come up for air.

Looking at my family, I couldn’t be happier with how everything turned out for us. I couldn’t be a happier man.

Chiral

It's been a whirlwind since we won the cup a month ago. I'll never get over holding the cup with my brothers and seeing my family in the stands—my beautiful wife, daughter, parents, and siblings. All on their feet cheering for me and the team.

But I'm excited to spend the summer off; Kora has been growing so fast and I'm starting to really hate being on the road so much. I know my time with hockey is coming to an end, Liam, Nix, and I are getting up there in age for hockey players.

“Chi, everyone is here!” Mar yells up to me; I'm still feeling pains from the playoffs and Mar being the super nurse she is, is making me rest as much as possible to heal my body.

“Papa,” Kora says while jumping onto the bed, and climbing on top of my chest. “Gracie is here and Uncle Nix said you need to get your ass up.”

“Did he tell you that now, huh?” I sit up from the bed wrapping my arms around my curly-haired girl who shares the same eyes as me.

“Yes, he did, Papa.” My KoKo gives a big toothy grin and I can't help the smile that spreads across my face.

I walk downstairs and the second my daughter sees her best friend, she practically jumps out of my arms. I sneak up behind my giant of a friend and wrap my arm around his neck and put him in a headlock.

“What the hell?”

“Think it's funny to teach my sweet little girl bad words, Dumbrowski?”

“It got you out of bed, didn’t it?” He laughs at me and before I know it, he has his arms around my neck and we’re in a headlock dance.

“Will you two cut it out, you’re worse than the kids I swear.” Li comes up to us pulling her husband away.

“You’re lucky you’ve got your bodyguard to protect you,” I say as I round the corner of the island. Mar is standing at the stove cooking her famous taco recipe. Wrapping my arms around her waist before resting my chin on her shoulder, she turns her head to offer up her luscious lips. I take them greedily and savor the sweet taste only she has.

“Hi, Princess,” I say when we finally break for air and for her to stir the black beans.

“How was your nap?”

“Would have been better if you joined me.” I smack her ass before letting her go.

“Then who would have made all this amazing food?”

“Well all I need is your pussy for dinner, so…” I smirk when she turns around and smacks my chest at my crude comment, but I don’t miss the lust that forms in her eyes.

Finally, dinner is done and we all sit down at the table, adults on one end and kids on the other.

“Is everyone excited about our annual cabin trip?” Liam asks from across from me.

“Hell yeah, I can’t wait to test out the new whip,” Nix says regarding the boat we all bought this year for the lake.

“Maybe the cabin will be our good luck charm again,” Mar says next to me. I see her smile change a little. We’ve been trying for a second child for a few years now but it hasn’t happened. Kora was conceived the first year we

stayed at the new cabin, but we've tried almost every year since and it hasn't happened for us. I grab her hand and give it a squeeze, I know how badly Mar wanted a big family; being an only child herself she worries that our daughter will feel the loneliness she felt, but the sound of laughter coming from KoKo's mouth as she hangs out with all her cousins, I truly don't think she will ever feel that way.

"Maybe it will be, Princess." But I won't crush my girl's dreams of more kids, I will always do everything in my power to give her whatever she wants because no other woman deserves the world as much as my Princess does.

Liam

“Lani, Linc, Cal, let’s go!” I yell to my kids who are dragging their feet. We need to hit the road for our summer trip to the cabin.

“They’re coming,” Charlotte says to me as she walks down the stairs. I meet her before she reaches the last step taking the bags out of her hands. After all this time she still rolls her eyes at my antics, but the smile is always there.

When she looks up at me with those blue eyes, I still melt. I lean forward until our lips barely touch. “You just love rolling those pretty eyes of yours so much, just wait till tonight.” I lock my lips with hers before she can even get a word in.

“Ew can you not,” Lani’s voice infiltrates the sweet moment between us.

“Just you wait, Little Bean. When you meet the right boy one day, you’ll understand.”

“Charlotte, do not give her ideas like that. Lani, you’re never going to be allowed to date, so don’t listen to your mother.” Just like her mother, she rolls her eyes.

Her brothers flying up behind her with their backpacks. Charlotte starts to list off random things to the kids to make sure they packed everything. Once my wife is satisfied that our children have packed enough for our week trip, we all hit the road.

“Dad, are we there yet?” Caleb asks.

“Dad, I have to pee,” Linc whines.

“Dad, can we change the music?” Lani begs.

Running my hand down my face, we're about two hours of our four-hour trip. "Pulling over at the next rest stop, everyone goes to the bathroom, get a snack," I say to everyone. Charlotte reaches over and lays her hand on my thigh. Always my calm.

The last two hours go by in a breeze; the kids play car games, watch videos on their phones, and get along for the most part.

Pulling up to the big cabin, I can feel all the stress leave my body. Nix, Chiral, and I built this cabin as a gift to our girls. As all of our families grew, we knew the old cabin we used to rent just wasn't going to work for us anymore. So we had one built instead.

Now every summer we take a week trip out here, along with a few trips in the winter months when we can. The house is located right on Lake George here in New York and during the winter the lake freezes over and we're all able to go out and skate. Lani started figure skating when she was five and has loved it ever since; all the boys have picked up sticks and play hockey with us *old men*—their words, not mine.

As the kids run inside with their backpacks, I follow after them worrying about the rest of the luggage later.

When I walk in, I see that Charlotte has already joined in on a conversation with the other two girls.

"Guys are on the deck, Liam," Li says to me, and I nod my head to her in thanks before giving Charlotte a kiss on her cheeks.

Walking out onto the large deck, Chiral and Nix are already sitting in two of the several Adirondack chairs we have.

"Heads up." Is called just in time for me to catch the beer can that's thrown at me, grabbing it before it hits me square in the face.

Taking my spot next to the guys, I lean my head back, listening to the

sound of the water crashing onto the mini beach we have, birds chirping off in the trees, and the kids laughing as they play in the yard. Life can't get any better than this.

"Man, are we lucky guys? Went from a bunch of college hockey play goons to all of this," Chiral says.

"You can say that again, we got the girls of our dreams, the coolest kids, and we play for the best team in the league together," Nix adds.

"Yeah and to think this all started because of a damn costume party we threw," I say and just on cue my wife plops herself into my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck. I kiss her lightly.

"Thank god I found you, mystery girl because you've made me the happiest man alive."

"Good thing you didn't want to just be my friend," she says as she recalls our first night together. The memory seemingly coming back to her.

"What's your name?"

"Charlotte, but my friends call me Lottie."

"Charlotte,"

"You can call me Lot-Lottie,"

"No, I'll call you Charlotte,"

"Why?"

"Because, I don't plan on being your friend, Charlotte."

And boy did I make good on my promise to her; she is my best friend, but she's also my wife, my soul, my person, she is my Charlotte.

The End

Acknowledgments

Thank you, thank you, thank you to all who have read this book, who have loved the Ballad U series, and who have supported me throughout this journey. I couldn't have done this without you. Big hugs to you all.

To my ARC, Alpha, & Beta Team: You are all amazing and I can't thank you all enough for supporting me and spreading the word about my books. I would not be where I am today without all of you.

To Sammy, you have created the most amazing covers for this series, and I couldn't be more thankful for your creative abilities. But, I'm most thankful for your friendship, you are my soul sister. Your love and support in everything I do is so appreciated, and I hope you know that I value you more than you will ever know.

To Krissy, you are my brain and motivation. I would be so lost not just in my author life but personal life as well. You are the ying to my yang. I can't believe we are on book three with so many more to go, in some sense these books are just as much yours as they are mine because without you there would be no Ballad U series or even T.D Lua. I love you and I can't wait to

see what the future in this industry holds for us. Also, I wrote you your perfect book boyfriend, so don't say I never did something nice for you, LOL.

To Jen, my fellow Michigander, the world knew I needed you. Your constant advice, support, love, and nurturing through this process has been such a big help. You are my go-to for so much and I will never take you or your friendship for granted. Your love for Liam will always make my heart happy. Love you to Michigan and back times a million.

To Andie, my biggest hype girl, thank you for always being there to chat out plot ideas, and to help me make sense of the jumble in my brain. You just get me and let me tell you, not many do and for that, I will always be thankful for you and your friendship. Love you forever, my sweet friend.

To the BBBs girls; Jenny, Rach, Desi, & Thalia, I'll try to keep this the least mushy that I can (just for you, Rach.) Thank you for being my hockey-watching buddies. Our love for the B's turned into such an amazing friendship. All the hockey watching has definitely given me so much inspiration for future books. Love you, girls.

To Kenz, thank you for always reading and helping me with the hardest part of this job, making content- lol. You always capture the best part of my books and help me display that, and I hope you know how thankful for you I am.

To Marissa, AKA the best Editor. Thank you for working with my crazy schedule and always being ready to work out my mess of a book. Truly, I am so thankful for you. Hope you know you're stuck with me for the long haul, LOL.

More By T.D Lua

Ballad University series

Freezing the Puck: Strangers to Lovers, Bookish Girlie X Hockey Captain,
& accidental pregnancy

Scoring Chance: Dislike to Lovers, opposites attract, & secret identity

Breakaway: Second Chance Romance

Ballad University: Next Season

(out in 2024)

Defensive Zone: Reverse age gap, forbidden love

Attacking Zone: Brother's best friend, Grumpy X Sunshine

Neutral Zone: Single mom

Chat with T.D Lua

Tik Tok: https://www.tiktok.com/@tdluaauthor?_t=8cfimG0aFC2&_r=1

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/tdlua_author/

Email: tdluawrites@gmail.com