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BOOKISH SUNSHINE GIRL? CHECK.  
DESTRUCTIVE SECRETS? CROSS-CHECK.

# *Icing* HEARTS



**J.J. WRIGHT**

Icing Hearts

A Young Adult Hockey Romance

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*Icing Hearts is a work of fiction from my own mind, not influenced by real events. All ideas are my own.*

The background of the book cover is a close-up, high-angle shot of an ice hockey rink. The ice is a mix of light blue and white, with visible skate marks and a hockey stick lying diagonally across the frame. The stick's blade is in the upper left, and its shaft extends towards the bottom right.

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## Dedication:

To the girls who keep their walls up. Unless he's a grumpy, tall, biker, hockey star who loves all things cinnamon...  
...because, come on.



# Playlist

Check out my playlist on Spotify entitled “Icing Hearts by JJ Wright”. I’ve included songs that inspired me while I wrote this book and specific songs that are referenced throughout the book!

# Content/Trigger Warning

While Icing Hearts is acceptable for Young Adult (14+) audiences, according to current industry standards, the book includes the following topics/events that may be triggering or upsetting to some readers:

Smoking, vaping, drinking, getting drunk, violence, fighting, mild language, sexually suggestive language, physical abuse, threatening, death threats, references to weapons and murder, car accident, death of a parent, death of a grandparent, peer pressure, groping, lying, groveling, and mean behavior.

Some are passing references, some happen on page, and some off-page but are discussed. If any of these concern you, please reach out to me and I'll give you more information to see if it will impact your reading experience.

Please note: there is NO cussing or spice.

# Romeo + Juliet

## Act 5, Scene 3

A glooming peace this morning with it brings.

The sun for sorrow will not show his head.

Go hence to have more talk of these sad things.

Some shall be pardoned, and some punished.

For never was a story of more woe

Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

-William Shakespeare

## Prologue

A girl doodles and scrawls in History class. She's reading Romeo & Juliet in English and can't shake the poignant lines from the forefront of her mind. She draws roses on thorny vines and hearts that don't know what's good for them.

She practices her cursive and calligraphy dozens of times until she's happy with the iterations.

Love can be icy.

Love can be a warm whisper.

Sometimes it is both simultaneously. Sometimes, the boy you've been in love with since fifth grade loves you back but you don't know it or don't want to know it. Sometimes love is unrequited for many reasons and also for none. She ponders these things as she writes.

A bell rings and the girl tears the notebook paper from her binder. Such frivolity has no place alongside serious study. It crinkles against her palms and ping-pongs against the sides of the black, plastic trash bin by the door. She skips toward her friend down the hall, giggling at her own gaiety.

The boy is the last to rise and the last to leave the room. But before he does, he reaches into the trash bin and pulls out the crumpled sheet, covered in purple ink. He unfurls the parchment, smooths it out with care. It smells faintly of her. Lavender.

He lets out a smile, catches it and wrangles it, shoving it back down deep inside. The boy folds the paper with delicate movements and places it in his pocket. His fingers toy with the edges all day, tattering them. That night, he puts it under his pillow and prays that someday she will be his and not just a dream.

Little do they know; they are about to embark upon their own tale of star-crossed lovers. Remember, the night is always darkest just before dawn.

# Chapter 1

## Clara

Beauty. I'm not the natural kind of beauty. I'm fabricated. Created. I'm beautiful, sure, but only with bangs to hide my forehead, a contoured nose and face, and overlined lips. It is what it is, and I'm content with myself. I make the most with what I've got, and if anyone has a problem with that, then that's *their* problem, not mine.

But I'm not like him. No, he's the kind of beautiful that brings women to their knees. And I've been in love with him since fifth grade. Since the day he tackled me just a little too hard in flag football and didn't help me up, but shoved the other boy who did. He's the natural kind of beautiful. A ten out of ten. He has millions of followers and is scouted by modeling agencies and division one hockey teams alike.

And he hates me.

He hates his name, too. I think it's as beautiful as he is. Victory Winner Amato. His parents actually named him that. Everyone calls him Vic, Victor, or Amato. Never Victory and never Tory, as I've taken to calling him. He hates that, too. But I love him—love him and let him know it.

He thinks my shameless flirting is a satirical joke and hates me more for it. But I don't care. At least he sees me. Better than all the girls who fawn all over him and don't even get a glance—or a glare, as I often get.

I'd rather he hate me than be indifferent toward me. We could never be together anyhow. So it's safer this way. I always play it safe. Safe keeps me from getting hurt.

He's the one boy I could never be with. So he's the one boy I push away.

We have history class together. It's the only class we have in common. I'm in all honors classes, and he's in the general courses, except for history, somehow. Such is the curse of being a dumb jock. He's not *dumb*, dumb, though. I could never be with someone like that. Tory is the kind of dumb that just has different priorities. Hockey is his priority. I wish *I* was at least

number two on his list of priorities. But I probably don't make the cut in any favorable ranking of his. Meanwhile, history is my favorite class.

My locker flings open with a metallic clank as my friend, Jack Olson, thuds his book against the back with a toss. I kiss the poster of my queen.

"Must you do that every single time you open your locker?" he asks with a sardonic eye roll.

I hold my fingers up to the ears of the woman on the poster. "Don't listen to him, Taylor Swift. You're a mogul and an inspiration, and that monster deserves a 'Dear John' letter."

Jack isn't my best friend. We hang out more than any of my other friends at school. There's a certain level of comfort in that. But I don't have best friends. I have school friends and friends that I hang out with from time-to-time outside school. And then there are people I can hop in with for a ride to a party. But no sleepovers. No friends to bring on vacation. No one I have hour-long video calls or inside jokes with. Not that my police chief father brings me on vacation or would ever tolerate an hour-long video call.

So, no one ever gets too close. Just the way I like it. The way I need it.

"Can you grab me that body spray?" I ask Jack as I re-apply my Buxom lip gloss in the vanity mirror. Locker mirrors, or really any magnetic mirror, are one of the best inventions known to humankind. Who wants to shuffle into the bathroom during passing times like chattel? Not I.

"I thought you didn't use crap like this," Jack remarks as he tosses the spray straight up.

I pluck the amber glass bottle from the air with surprising grace. "This is made from essential oils. All natural, baby."

"Whatever—" Jack starts, but he's interrupted by a group of uncultured swine.

Henry Mavis leans against the locker beside me with a smarmy grin.

"Clara," he drawls, oozing his self-inflated ego all over my pastel Mary Jane platforms.

Silence.

Eye roll.

"What do you want, *Henri*?" I sass, using the French pronunciation of his name because that's the class we share together. He's been attempting to cheat off my tests all year.

"You," he replies with a nonchalant shrug. "Will you ever stop stalking Amato and give anyone else a chance?"

“Oh, hitting on me and insulting me in the same sentence. Bravo.”

“What? I like freaky girls, and your obsession with him is likely transferable, so I’m shooting my shot.” Henry shrugs and looks away, appearing quite bored with not only my presence but the entire conversation. How flattering.

I glance over at Henry’s cronies standing on the opposite side of the narrow hallway, eavesdropping.

“You know what, Henry?” I gear up, “Tory is a higher-value man than you could ever dream to be. But if I find myself ready to slum around with uncultured swine, you’ll be my first call.” Henry’s buddies chortle at his embarrassment. I should turn on my heels and leave him in the dust, but I make the mistake of dwelling to walk with Jack.

Not one to let his embarrassment linger and bruise his fragile ego, Henry shoots back, “Maybe you should take another look in the mirror, because the only pig I see is the one hiding behind all that lipstick.”

Henry’s friends really holler this time, and I feel my cheeks and ears flame crimson. I shove off the bank of lockers to have another go at him just as a deep voice booms behind me.

“Shut up, Mavis.” It’s all velvet and cigarette smoke and blasé indifference.

In a word? Tory.

He’s come to my rescue.

I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face and now my cheeks are pinking for a different reason. Though, you’d never know because of my foundation. My mask hides many sins, and I manage to keep my squealing internal.

Henry slinks off in silence as Tory walks by without a glance. That’s the thing about Tory. No one crosses him. No one challenges him. His word is gold.

He wants to leave a party? The party is now over. In fourth grade, everyone wore Heelies. You know, the massive sneakers with wheels in the bottom. Total death-traps, but they had a moment in elementary pop culture. Well, Tory’s dad wouldn’t risk his junior hockey star breaking an ankle, so he prohibited Tory from wearing them. That weekend, there were suddenly dozens of Heelies on the shelves at the local Goodwill. I’m pretty sure the local newspaper did a write-up on the anomaly. But it wasn’t an anomaly. It was Tory.

“Clara, you have to stop provoking the meat heads,” Jack admonishes as he slams my locker shut and hands me my history binder.

I shrug my shoulders and force an easy grin. “But it’s so fun, Jacky. Toodles.” I pat Jack on the head and skip to Tory a few paces down the hall.

My blonde curls bounce against the back of my pastel cardigan. Since the ninth grade, I’ve curled my hair nearly every day for school. I get up early, I curl my hair and do my makeup. I usually wear a ribbon or bow and pick out a carefully curated outfit that compliments my soft girl aesthetic. My aesthetic and my love for Tory make up most of my public identity. These iconic factors have been intentionally chosen to keep prying eyes at bay. Not that I’m complaining. Skirts, dresses, sweaters, soft fabrics, and floral prints? They have my heart. They have my soul. And I won’t let anyone sway me.

The commercial-grade carpet muffles the sounds of my skipping feet, but I know Tory hears me. And I know he knows it’s me. The quirk of his head in my direction tells me so. For a moment, just before I link my arm with his, I need to catch my breath. Not because I’m winded. Granted, I don’t do nearly as much cardio as I should to maintain proper heart health, but skipping down the hallway isn’t enough to get me winded.

Tory *is*.

His beauty steals my breath every time I see him. I had the wind knocked out of me in that fifth-grade flag football game. Seeing Tory is a bit like that, but on a smaller scale. As if the air just gets vacuumed right out of my lungs.

Tory is too perfect for this world. Jawline sharp enough to cut glass, nearly always peppered with day-old stubble. Square chin. High cheekbones and a straight nose with impeccably arched brows.

He’s Italian, of course, a rarity in our Minnesota town where most of us are fair and blonde, myself included. The Amato’s are probably the only Italian family in town. They moved to the area in second grade to increase his chances of making it to the NHL. Tory’s dad owns a tech firm of some sort, and they are absolutely loaded.

Tory is a swarthy breath of fresh air. Plus, there’s his stereotypical hockey player hair—mahogany in color and easily pushed back or left to fall in his eyes. And it’s the eyes that get me. Brown. Deeper than the Marianas Trench. Soulful and ready to speak volumes when his lips refuse to do so.

I’m such a goner. Oh, well.

When we’re side-by-side and walking in step, I’m reminded of just how



tall he is. My head lines up perfectly with his bicep, and I'm tempted to rest my cheek on his arm. But I refrain.

The warmth of his skin seeps through his hockey hoodie as his scent swirls around me. Cinnamon, mostly, but also earthy and fresh. Like that first sniff of a newly bound book.

"My honey-tongued valentine has rescued his fair maiden," I say as I match his pace and add dramatically, "You're my *hero*."

"Shut up, Charity," he shoots back, colder than frost in January.

But he doesn't pull his arm away.

He never does.

That delicious warmth uniting us doesn't last nearly as long as I wish it would because he pauses at the door to our class and lets me walk through first.

Tory can be cruel. But he never takes it too far. He plays the game, feeds into my overtly flirtatious persona by jibing back. If he flirted back or just got bashful, it would ruin the schtick.

A small part of me thinks he does it for my benefit. And a *big* part of me wonders why he cares.

## Chapter 2

### Clara

It's time to pick partners in history and my hand shoots up—a rocket between white cinder block walls and desks.

“Oh, oh, I must have Tory as my partner. Please, I'll just implode if I don't.”

Mr. Macintyre looks at me bouncing in my seat, waving my hand in the air like I'm landing a plane. Then, over at Tory who rolls his eyes and shakes his head vigorously.

“What say you, Vic?” our teacher asks unnecessarily. “Wanna partner up with Clara?”

“Mr. M, I'd rather bathe in a cocktail of bleach and cyanide than be partnered with Charity.” He juts a thumb in my direction, emphasizing the nickname he's given me in retaliation for the one I've given him. None of the other girls get nicknames, though. Just me. He says it's because I'm a charity case. “She's been harassing me since the fifth grade—referring to some unfortunate flag football incident as our meet-cute.”

My hands rise to cover my heart in a faux swoon. “I love when you tell people our story. So romantic,” I call toward the back of the room where he's attempted to hide. The rest of our classmates snicker in response.

“Perfect!” Mr. M claps his hands together at the front of the room. “The last two projects I assigned weren't your best work, so let's see how you do with a straight-A partner you apparently loathe. Maybe it'll motivate you to do the work.”

I gasp and clutch my hands beneath my chin this time. “Mr. M you're a gentleman and a scholar. I'll name all our future children after you!”

This schtick keeps me going. When everything else goes awry, I've got this game with this boy. Deep down, I think he inherently knows I need this. So, he tolerates it.

Tory groans and lets his head fall to his crossed arms on the desk. I jump up and begin dragging my desk to the back of the room.

“That’s really not necessary, Clara.” My teacher makes a feeble attempt to stop me.

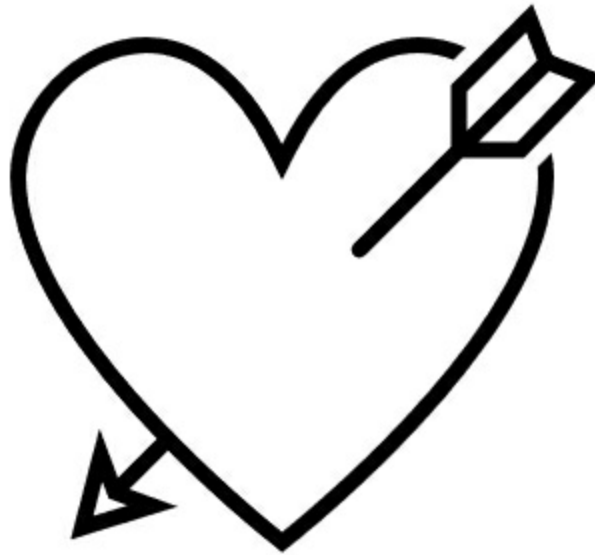
“Too late, Mr. Mac! Clara’s on the move.”

I plop down next to Tory with my desk bumped up against his. “Howdy, partner!”

Groan.

“Where are your manners, young man?”

“Left ’em at home, grandma,” he mumbles through his arms.



I waltz over to Tory’s table at lunch, emboldened by the valid excuse to converse with him and bouncing with exuberance. In all our years, we’ve never been assigned as partners on a school project. In fact, this history class is the first we’ve had together in high school.

He’s surrounded by the hockey boys and a bevy of beauties. Luckily, he’s ignoring the ladies and they’ve moved on to the other guys. I get lost in thought, wondering if they’ve all seen the movie *A Beautiful Mind* and are enacting the theory discussed in the dance hall scene. I cock my head to the side, pondering. Probably not. Most seventeen-year-olds aren’t familiar with a 2003 film about a brilliant mathematician, even if it won multiple Academy Awards.

I shake the thoughts from my head, zeroing in on my target.

“What do you want, Charity Case? Here to harass me some more? Or are you just gonna stand there like a voyeur?” Tory addresses me without so much as a glance.

I turn to perch my rear on the edge of the table and clutch my books to my chest. I’m the picture of a blushing schoolgirl and tsk at him.

“You rude boy. If this was voyeurism, then *you’d* be half-clothed, and *I’d* be receiving some sort of inappropriate gratification and we are neither. Furthermore, I hate to disappoint, but I’m here on business, not pleasure.”

One of the hockey boys, Vince Culbertson, gives me an eyebrow wag, and I shoot him a wink and a flirtatious wave. Vince is cute in a goofball sort of way. The hockey-boy archetype personified.

Tory smacks my suitor, then eyes me with a modicum of intrigue as he leans back in his seat. “Out with it.”

“We need to set a date.”

“That’s not business, Charity.”

He wipes a hand down his face and looks infinitely bored. Not of me—for I’m certainly the only source of real entertainment in his life—but bored of his surroundings. His friends, the scene, all of it.

“Not a date-date. We need to get together to work on our project. Although I’m free Saturday for the former.”

“I have a game Saturday.”

“Fine,” I sigh in faux exasperation. “We’ll go on a date Sunday; I’ll just have to move some things around.” I inspect my signature petal-pink manicure. I’ve become quite adept at making my nails look as good as the girls who get theirs done at the salon.

“We’re never gonna date.”

I huff. “Mark my words, Tory, that statement won’t age well.” I turn and make eye contact with several of the other boys. “You all bear witness to this historic moment. Tor—”

“Victor,” he insists. He always tries to pull that with me.

“Hush darling. Don’t interrupt me. *Tory Amato* and I *will* get married and have adorable babies, all of whom must now be named after our history teacher. Sorry about that, my pet.” The boys nod, their eyes sparkling with mischief while Tory groans loudly. “Let’s meet at your house tomorrow,” I suggest, not really believing he’ll go for it.

“Not my house.”

I sigh dramatically. “Fine, mine then. But I have to warn you, the only

seating in my room is under the covers.” I give him a cheeky wink.

Of course, I could never have him come to my house. If my father found out, it would be World War III.

He loosens a deep breath and looks out the window. “Library. After practice.”

“Fine, tomorrow. Bye boys!” I sing.

“Bye Clara!” Vince bellows.

I pivot from the table, adding a little sway to my step for Tory’s viewing pleasure. I turn quick and see that he was, indeed, watching me walk away. “Caught ya!” I call back toward the table.

He shakes his head and cups his hand around his mouth so the whole lunchroom hears, “There’s a stain on your skirt, Charity!”

My cheeks bloom red, I cover my rear-end with a book, and rush to the bathroom. Nothing is there, of course.

## Chapter 3

### Clara

October in Minnesota is a series of extremes. Mild during the day, freezing or near-freezing at night. Tonight is a freezing sort of night.

All day I counted down the hours, minutes, seconds until my library date with Tory. Now that it's upon me, my nerves are in overdrive. It's silly. I'm silly.

Before class today, I overheard Tory trying to convince Mr. M to assign him a new project partner. It didn't work. It didn't hurt my feelings, either. I do bedevil the boy, after all. Aside from parties at the Amato residence that garner nearly the entire student body, Tory and I don't associate outside of school. The chief wouldn't approve. But a school project is the perfect excuse to get some extra face time. If Tory ever shows up.

The sharpened graphite breaks off on a second pencil in response to my restless tapping. I switch to the eraser side. He's late. Tory said he'd be here after practice. I don't quite know when practice ends, so I guess it's feasible that he isn't actually late. But it's dark, and the library is empty, save for a few librarians who gab over their Tupperware dinners. They aren't even trying to be quiet, and I sigh at their oxymoronic behavior while relishing the smell of old books.

Order and rules bring me peace. Control is my love language. It's why I love Tory. He'll never love me back. He tolerates my flirting and joking. It's easy. Predictable. Dependable. In fact, him being overtly nice to me would be the most shocking thing he could do.

I tap my phone, avoiding the large crack down the middle to check the time again. That makes twenty-seven time checks. I tried to do my homework, but my focus was everywhere but the black words on white paper.

I'm about to shove my books and pens into my bag, assuming he's a no-show. I glance back up, my eyes land on the thick mop of hair slowly bobbing up the steps to the second floor. Immediately, I straighten, as if the

Queen of England has emerged. Tory wears a hint of annoyance as he runs a hand through damp hair before shoving it into the pocket of his hoodie.

His eyes never quite find mine as he walks, but he strolls to my study table, nonetheless, moving at a treacherously sluggish pace.

One of the gabby librarians drops her fork into her glass travel dish with a clatter when she spots Tory, and I stifle a giggle. I get it. Her reaction mirrors my own feelings whenever he enters the room. The way people respond to him strokes Tory's ego on a near-constant basis.

I remain unconvinced that anyone actually gets accustomed to his beauty. It's my steadfast theory that the humans who interact with Victory Amato on a regular basis simply learn to suppress their reactions—their natural instinct to gawk. Sometimes I enjoy watching people lay eyes on Tory for the first time. New students at the beginning of the school year. Spectators at hockey games before he puts on his helmet. Those with perfect speech stutter and stumble over their words. Cheeks, necks, and ears bloom pink, peach, or mauve.

He's not the kind of beauty that one can get used to. The kind where one wakes up one day, looks at the person they previously found perfect and notices the bags under their eyes, or that their ears stick out too far. Victory isn't the kind of beautiful you forget about. There are people who are gorgeous, yes, and maybe initially you swoon, but, over time, they become just another attractive person. Someone you can actually have a conversation with.

Well, that's not Tory.

Tory is so beautiful that it violently smacks you in the face every single time you look at him. The kind of beautiful that makes people squirm with discomfort.

He's rugged, yet angelic.

Poetic, yet blasphemous.

Unkempt, yet meticulous.

Looking at Tory is like looking at the sun. Life-giving, yet utterly destructive.

These are the thoughts swirling through my mind when he finally reaches me. Tory drops a greasy paper bag on the study table before plopping into the scratchy, cushioned chair with a huff. I force an exasperated breath through my teeth.

"Tory," I say by way of greeting.

He stares at me. I stare back.

Seconds tick by and he says nothing, just holds my gaze in some sort of predatory stand-off. I blink a few times and give in. “Uh, it’s kinda late. I assumed practice would end earlier.”

“Practice ended at five.”

“It’s after eight. The library is closing soon.” I motion to the giant ticking clock on the wall.

“Look who knows how to use a big girl clock.”

“Where have you been for three hours?” I probe.

“With Tiffany Kennedy,” he drawls her name with an accompanying smirk, and it eats a hole in my stomach.

“Wasn’t she Miss Teen Minnesota last year?”

“She *is*. Currently. Her reign lasts until the next pageant.”

I want to slap the smirk off his face. Something about his insouciance suddenly irks me to my core. I shake my head as I open my history binder, now back out and residing between Tory and me, and pull out the assignment description.

But I look up and he’s staring at me. Studying with an intensity that sends goosebumps down the back of my neck. And I’m suddenly ill at ease under his inexplicable scrutiny.

I swallow and attempt to begin our work. “So, I was thinking we can divide the readings in half and you can do two and I’ll do—”

“Do you drive?” he interrupts.

“I have my license, but I don’t have a car. So, you can read two and—”

“Why not?” His question cuts me off again.

“I’m saving up for one.”

“Your dad won’t buy you one?”

“No.” Even if we had the money, the chief wouldn’t buy me a car. Not a new one. Not a beater that was born before me.

“Why not?”

I shrug.

“Where will you go when we’re done?”

“I’ll walk down to the station and wait for the chief’s shift to end.”

“Isn’t that, like, three miles away?”

My eyes dart from his face to the fast food he’s taking out of the white bag. The wax-covered paper crinkles quietly as he unwraps a cheeseburger that smells heavenly.



“I could have taken the city bus if we were done early, but you were late so...”

“What time does his shift end?”

“Midnight.”

My stomach growls loudly in response, and I clamp my arms over my abdomen, praying he didn’t hear. Though, I think even the librarians heard. When I’m hungry, my stomach growls louder than a freight train. Back when my mom was alive, we used to go to church. Service ended at 12:30, but I always ate lunch by noon. By the time final prayer and benediction rolled around, I was smashing a hymnal into my belly button each week in an attempt to muffle the rumbling.

“Have you eaten?” He doesn’t look concerned and asks the question as if it’s just another one to add to his list.

“No, *Tory*, I’ve been waiting for you while you’ve been gallivanting with a lady and wasting our work time.”

“Jealous?”

“Annoyed.”

“Look, no one stopped you from getting something delivered here while you waited. That’s your own fault.”

“It’s fine. I can usually scrounge something up from the break room or the vending machines down at the station.”

“That’s not a proper dinner.”

“It does the trick.”

“Does he ever make dinner for you?”

“The chief? No.”

“Who does the shopping?”

“Me.”

The queries keep pouring out of him as he eats his stupid, delicious-looking burger. It’s as if the questions have been building up for years and all these intrusive thoughts are bursting out of him at once.

“It’s just you and the chief? No other family?”

He knows the answer to this question. Everyone knows. I’m the sad girl whose mom died in eighth grade. I shrug, willing the odd interrogation to end. “I had an aunt. Haven’t seen or heard from her since the funeral. And sometimes he has girlfriends. Well, he’s had a few, at least.”

“What happened to them?”

“The aunt or the girlfriends?”

“Girlfriends.”

Discomfort weasels through me like a weed in a vegetable garden. The chief has no trouble scaring off women.

“They break up.”

“Why?”

“You’d have to ask him, Tory.” I sigh in exasperation. “Now can—”

“I’m asking *you*, Charity.” His eyes finally meet mine and they bore through my entire existence. I feel naked. Like I’m sitting here, in the middle of the public library, without a stitch of clothing. Like every question has removed another layer and I’m just sinew, muscle, bone, and marrow, laid bare in front of him. I’m tempted to look down because my mind has me convinced I’m feeling a draft on my chest. So, I cross my arms and push back.

“Why?” I lean forward, tossing a question back, engaging in a proverbial ping-pong game. He leans away, slouching in his chair as if he hasn’t a care in the world. “What do you mean, why?”

“Why are you asking me? If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to get to know me, Tory.” I wag my brows at him.

“Think of it as an anthropologist studying an indigenous people group.”

If there was a list of words, I never thought I’d hear Tory Amato utter, “indigenous” and “anthropologist” would be at the top. There’s an announcement over a loudspeaker that the library is closing in ten minutes and to bring any desired books to the circulation desk. So much for getting work done.

His probing questions have me itching with hives, but I tell him, “I’m happy to be your specimen, then. Can I ask you a question?”

“No,” he responds, tone leaving absolutely no room for argument.

“Why not?” I freeze, stunned by his response, holding my notebook midair.

He shrugs. “I’m private.”

“And a hypocrite, apparently.”

“Apparently. Tomorrow? Back here?”

“Fine. But be on time. Please,” I beg half-heartedly.

What I don’t tell him is that I can’t afford to sit around waiting for him for three hours, and that it’s rude of him to make me wait to begin with. Because, while he may be a hypocrite, I’ve got no backbone. I’ve also got an empty bank account and an emptier stomach.

He nods once and stands up. “Here,” he says, nudging his fries toward me. At that, Tory Amato walks out of the library with nary a glance.

I wait until his head disappears down the steps to begin gobbling up his leftovers. Normally, I wouldn’t eat fast food. But I’m desperate. I eat the fries until the librarians start turning off the fluorescents.

## Chapter 4

### Clara

Today, Tory shows up to the library at 5:30. He has a hickey. It doesn't bother me like I thought it would.

Anyway, I'm distracted by his face and the way his muscles ripple beneath his white shirt. The white makes the warmth of his skin so appealing that I just want to curl up inside his arms and wear him draped around me like a shawl.

He is offensive in his beauty, as usual. How dare he be so stunning? Even with his wet hair and his hickey and smelling of cinnamon and bad decisions. It's just plain rude.

But he is mine. Not mine in the true, real sense of the word. Mine in the purely delusional sense.

Tory tosses a brown paper sack between us on the table and plops down on the seat, bouncing once before settling into the cushion.

"How much do you have saved up for a car?" he blurts out.

"Greetings to you too," I snap back. He's so rude. It's actually embarrassing. At least he doesn't eat with his mouth open like some of his friends.

His voice comes out urgent and demanding. "How much?"

Tory's family is rich. Like, the kind of rich that gifts a sixteen-year-old a G-Wagon and a Yamaha R1 motorcycle on his actual birthday. But I don't think they were always rich, so maybe he doesn't know that asking someone about money in this manner is gauche.

I attempt to wave him off because this really isn't a flattering subject. No one knows about the money. I've been meticulous in my efforts to maintain my family's image after my mom died. The Goodwill one town over has excellent options, and I don't run the risk of accidentally wearing anything that used to belong to a classmate.

"Oh, Tory, it's imprudent to discuss one's finances."

He rolls his eyes, not bothering to hide his perpetual annoyance. "You

and your rules, Charity.”

“If you’re referring to my superior etiquette and manners, then thank you.” I think he’s going to leave it at that because he goes silent, bouncing his knee against the table. I ignore the laminate wood jiggling my arms as I sift through my binder for notes.

Finally, he pulls his own work out and I’m relieved to find that he’s taken notes on at least one of the assigned readings for the project.

“Oh! You did the work?”

“Yeah, sorry, I only finished one of the readings. I had to work out after our session yesterday and then Coach has us doing two-a-days this week until the first game tomorrow.”

“No, it’s fine. I didn’t think you were gonna do anything, to be honest.”

“Wow. Okay.”

“Sorry, I—”

“Don’t be. Anyway, I was thinking, you should become a manager for the hockey team. One of the managers graduated last year and Coach Anderson hasn’t bothered to find anyone. You go to all the games, so I’m guessing you know the sport pretty well. You’re already obsessed with me. Plus, it’s a paid position.”

“It’s paid? How much? You should’ve led with that.” I play it cool, but my heart flutters. Despite the fact that I pester Tory with over-the-top flirting, I do care about him.

“I thought you didn’t discuss money.”

I give Tory a leveling look, and his lips twist into a smirk. “Trust me, it pays enough.”

“Would you actually be willing to spend more time with me, Tory? I didn’t think you’d be that easy to win over.” I check a nonexistent watch. “Only two total hours of working on this project. Might be a new record for me.”

“Forget I said anything.”

“Nope. Too late now. You want to hang out with me. You *love me*.”

Tory hangs his head back and covers his face with a groan. “What have I done?”

“I’ll tell you what you *should* do.”

His mouth gapes as his eyes fly to mine, a knowing smirk across his lips. “You got a dirty mouth, Clara.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter. That’s not what I was going to say,

Tory. I was simply going to request that you speak to your coach on my behalf.”

“I have a feeling I’ll regret this.”

“Please?”

“Fine. But keep this between us, Charity. Can’t have anyone thinking I’ve gone soft on you.”

Given how my father feels about the Amato family, hiding this will be in my best interest as well.

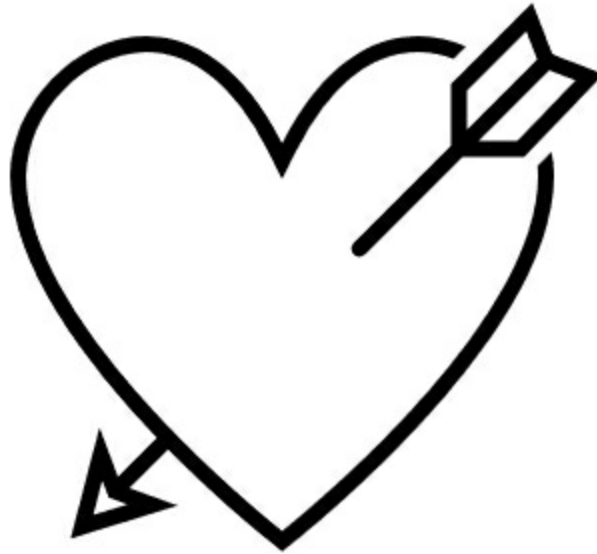
I clap twice and say, “It’ll be our little secret, then. How fun!”

“Oh, joy.”

We spend the next two hours working on the project and make a good bit of progress. One more session and we will be done. In hindsight, I should have dragged this out. It was foolish to focus on our work when the object of my desires is dangling in front of me like a carrot. When it’s time to go, he waits for me to pack up my things and says, “That’s for you, by the way.” Gesturing to the paper bag from earlier.

I look inside. There’s a fruit bar and a banana. My words feel strangled in my throat, and I flush from my collarbone to my ears, but I manage to choke out, “Oh, thanks, Tory.” He hikes one shoulder to his ear, and we walk out together. Tory doesn’t offer me a ride. Not that I expect him to, but pulling up to the station with him would be too risky.

The three-mile walk to the station passes in a blur. Despite the chill of the onyx evening, my insides are warmer than Boca Raton in July. All season with Tory? Plus, I get to be away from home. As delightful as this all sounds, I’m also apprehensive. Part of why this works so well is that my behavior pushes Tory away, discourages him from getting to know me on any real level. Things are nearly perfect the way they are. But I need the money. And it sounds fun. And I do love hockey. I might have started watching for Tory, but I’ve stayed a fan for the sport itself. I’m sure it will all work out fine.



It's game day. The first game of the season, actually. Everyone in school is buzzing. Of course we're going to win. It's a Friday and the whole county will be at this game. There's a party at Tory's afterward, and tomorrow afternoon, we're meeting to finish our project.

Today is my first official day as a hockey manager. I'm not really sure what I'll be doing, but I know I need to be at the rink an hour before the game starts and to ask for one of the other managers named Clover Williams. My name should have been Clover. My mom was quite the hippie. She would have loved the name Clover.

I got to school early to put a care basket in Tory's locker and decorate it for game day. The cheerleaders are supposed to do it, but last year, I convinced Tabitha Nelson, his assigned cheerleader, to give me the job. She was dating a senior on the basketball team, so she really didn't care about hockey anyhow. Even though she's single now, she's made no effort to pick up the task and I'm perfectly happy to continue. But I made her promise not to tell Tory or anyone on the Cheerleading squad.

When I walk into the cafeteria for lunch, I immediately look over at the hockey table. Four steps in and Tory's gaze is on me. They travel in a pattern.

Eyes.

Lips.

Eyes.

*Smirk.*

That's Tory. The way he subtly greets me. If I wasn't looking, every single time... if his wasn't the face I searched for in every room...I would miss it. And it's not even a full smirk. More like a "smir." It only happens to one corner of his smooth, plump lips. The gentlest uptick. His whole body stills. Then it's: Eyes. Lips. Eyes. "Smir".

And then he goes right back into whatever mundane activity he was partaking in. But I'm looking every single time. And he does it every single time. So, I see it every single time. Like my existence is his own little inside joke with himself.

Presently, he goes back to devouring one of the treats I put in his care basket. This week, I made protein cookies in the shape of his jersey number: twenty-four.

Once I have my lunch and I'm on my way to meet Jack and the girls at my lunch table, I hear Tory cuss loudly. I skip a step, lingering a bit to eavesdrop.

"When I find out who my locker fairy is, I swear I'm gonna open-mouth kiss them."

"Good?" Vince asks.

Tory nods his head earnestly, swallowing his bite. "Unbelievable. Every. Single. Time." The basket of goodies I packed him sits on the lunch table. It's mostly intact. That's what he does, he works on it little by little.

"What if it's Trent?" Vince asks. Trent Jones is the only boy on the cheerleading squad, and I angle my head as I circle their table, eager to hear Tory's answer.

"My statement stands," he insists. "Whoever it is, I'm laying myself at their feet and they can have their way with me. Someone figure out who it is."

"What if it's your stalker? I heard she's a manager now."

Tory waves his hands in front of him as if refusing a gift. "I take it back, I take it back," he says with a hearty laugh. "Knowing my luck, it would be her. She just can't get enough of me."

My heart plummets to my stomach and I feel my cheeks heat as I rush toward my seat, not wanting to hear the rest of their conversation. Then, I remember who I am and spin on my heels.



## Chapter 5

### Clara

Vince cusses as he sees me looming over Tory's shoulder, which I tap aggressively. "Excuse me, but you could only be so lucky as to have me as your locker fairy, you...you...derelict!"

Usually, my quips are effortless. It's the way I've kept the judgment at bay for my obsession with Tory. Most girls would be mercilessly mocked for such behavior. But not me. A few well-phrased insults rolled off the tongue with violent precision and no one bothered me about it after freshman year.

"Derelict? Look at you, all red and fuming. You just love finding excuses to let me have it, don't you, Charity?"

"Shut up." How original.

"Make me." He leans back in the plastic cafeteria chair, spreading his legs wide, and does the eyes, lips, eyes, thing again. It renders me speechless, and I know he's won this round. Not because formulating words when he looks at me like that seems unattainable at the moment, but because he is completely willing to let this escalate into a scene. And he knows I...am not.

Tory knows that if he trades in his lackadaisical, seated posture for one more vertical, all eyes will be on us as he stares me down. His word is gospel in these hallowed halls. He'll be in control and able to present the situation any way he wants. A fate worse than death.

I grunt and storm off. I'm not even that mad, but hate letting him have the upper hand. Truly, I fell right into this one. Not to mention, I already feel a bit indebted to him after he got me the manager job. Being at a disadvantage when it comes to Tory, or anyone, really, is dangerous.

But I need the money. Desperately. Plus, I need to beef up my high school resume for college applications next year.

School takes nearly all my focus, so I haven't been able to pick up any babysitting gigs, especially ones within walking distance. There will be absolutely no out-of-pocket payment for my college. I had a college fund, once upon a time, but that was drained by the end of sophomore year.

*Thanks, Dad.* You'd think being the chief of police would dissuade him from spending most of his free time at the local off-track betting establishment. So, I need perfect grades, volunteer work, and clubs. Everything is in line to get me a full-ride, at least at a state school. I don't need anything fancy, just somewhere away from home.

Away from him.

I toss my tray onto the gray, laminate lunch table, muttering an apology for interrupting one of Jack's speeches about student government drama. He's the junior vice president. Jack is smarter than people give him credit for. His friend group is exclusively female. As a straight man, he's perfectly positioned himself as a trusted friend who is the go-to recommendation whenever an adjacent friend needs a date for a pal.

"Victor troubles?" Jasmine Moore chimes from beside me. She twists one of her mahogany braids, angling her head so I have a full view of her brilliant smile.

I shrug. "It's nothing."

"At least he talks to you." Her expression is decidedly sympathetic. Jasmine is a self-proclaimed empath. I mean, she's right, she definitely is one, I just wish she wouldn't talk about it so often.

We fall into a comfortable chatter about the first hockey game and the party after. Britt Davis, a shoo-in for the class athlete superlative, tells us she'll be driving her family's SUV so we can all carpool after the game. She's almost always the designated driver because she, like me, has a lot riding on a full scholarship. Hers will be for hockey, just like Tory. Sometimes it feels like everyone here plays hockey. Such is the blessing of living in the state that produces the highest number of NHL athletes every year.

The conversation drifts to makeup products I can't afford and TV shows I haven't watched. Over the years, I learned how to stay abreast of the major plot points by searching up episode summaries. I laugh and comment at all the right moments, but even if I had the streaming subscriptions, which my dad would never pay for, I wouldn't have time to watch.

Our school's hockey rink is adjacent to the gym with a locker room and weight room connecting the two buildings. The rink is three times larger than the school. Rumor has it Tory's dad paid to have the old one demolished and a new arena with stadium seating built in its place. I guess he didn't want his star playing in an old rink.

The locker rooms and training facilities are brand new, too—complete with ice baths, cryotherapy, hyperbaric chambers, and a sauna. When you walk from the gym into the weight room, it’s like walking from one era to another. The gymnasium is scuffed and even the painted cinderblock walls have those black marks made by kicking rubber soles against the ground.

The vestibule between the two facilities is pristine, complete with the school mascot tiled into the floor, up-lit trophy cases, and TVs playing past-season highlights. I stayed after school and worked in the library until it was time to walk over to the rink. Timidly, I peer through the door into the locker room and see the cheerleaders finishing up signs made of multicolored posterboard. They’re frantically scooping up markers and glitter pens, clucking about needing to vacate before the players come in to suit up. I notice a neatly folded jersey on each stool in front of the gear lockers, each labeled with a player’s name and number. Some of the cheerleaders have already donned the jersey of their assigned hockey player to wear during that game—a tradition.

A boy walks by holding a six-pack of green water bottles and a clipboard. I tell him I’m looking for Clover, and he beckons me to follow him into an office. He introduces himself as Thomas Schmidt, a freshman who loves the sport but can’t play due to his “hardware”. When I give him a confused look, he lifts up the pant leg of his khakis and shows me his prosthetic. I nod, understanding. He says he could technically still play with it but his mom won’t hear of it, so he’s relegated himself to the sidelines with hopes of being a coach someday.

A girl who I recognize as a senior is sitting behind the desk typing. She shoos off Thomas to finish filling the water bottles and introduces herself as Clover. Clover is about half a foot taller than me but shares my skin and hair coloring.

Growing up, most of my classmates looked like me, courtesy of the state being a prominent destination for German, Swedish, and Norwegian immigrants back in the day. It’s gotten slightly better in the last few years, but our area is significantly lacking in diversity. Tory must have felt like he’d stumbled upon a cult when he first moved to town.

Clover finishes typing up the starting roster and prints it out. On our way to deliver it to the announcer’s booth, she gives me a tour of the facilities. We’re allowed to work in the coaches’ offices on hockey stuff during practice and before games. She shows me the athletic director’s office with the ice

maker and sink used to fill the water jugs and make ice packs. We pass by a set of narrow cubbies used as mailboxes for all the players, managers, and coaches. One of them already has my name on it. We come here to get notes that allow us out of class early on away game days or hand in permission slips for bus trips. I don't ask but assume that this is also where I'll pick up my paycheck each week.

After delivering the roster, we walk back through the locker room and into the offices to finish up a few things. Tory and the other captains are in their assigned spots, donning their pads. I get an eyeful of a *very* scantily clad Tory the second I walk in and drop the clipboard in my hands with a clatter that echoes through the room.

## Chapter 6

### Clara

My mouth gapes. I can't help it. I really try, but my goodness, the man is in nothing but boxers and butt pads. To make matters worse, my feet decide to cement themselves to the floor. Tory looks back at me. He does the eyes, lips, eyes thing and shakes his head slightly while pulling a white compression shirt over his chiseled, tattooed back and shoulders. I knew he had tattoos from his copious shirtless photos on social media. But seeing them in real life is a different matter altogether.

"Stop drooling, Charity," he mocks me with a self-satisfied smirk.

I sputter momentarily until I pull it together and tap into the detached overt flirting that typically colors our interactions. "Then stop being so beautiful, you devil." Clover giggles as I stoop to pick up the clipboard and flip my curls over my shoulder.

His gaze sears through me as I follow Clover into the office. We greet the visiting team and show them to their locker room. A few of the guys are nearly as dreamy as Tory, and I'm more than happy for the distraction. Jermaine Miller, senior captain of our opponents, makes a few self-deprecating jokes as he peg-walks in his skates toward the ice to warm-up with his team. I recognized him from hockey articles I've read in the local paper and introduced myself when we showed his team to the locker room.

Jermaine is tall and cute and has the longest lashes I've ever seen in my life. He knows they don't stand a chance to win, and I can't help but giggle when he contemplates faking an injury to avoid Tory's wrath.

"Or maybe I should just pass the puck right to him, save myself the trouble. What do you think?"

We pause at the open rink doors.

"It would definitely throw him off. Certainly worth a shot. Amato takes everything too seriously," I remark.

"Okay, here's the plan. We let Amato run up the score by ten in the third so we can get out of here early and I can take you out. Deal?" He smiles

unceremoniously, which tells me he doesn't truly believe this interaction will result in a date. Just some harmless flirting. All in good fun.

"Tempting..." I drift off as I glance toward the ice. My intent is to be mysterious and flirtatious, but instead I shift uncomfortably. Tory looks toward me, skates immobile, from the center of the ice, wearing a look of pure hatred.

Jermaine follows my gaze, catching an eyeful of what, or rather, who, has stolen my focus. He cusses under his breath and mutters, "Never mind," before forfeiting the plan with a half-smile and joining the rest of his team.

When I walk through the locker room to get a team sweatshirt from the supply closet, I see Tory's jersey sitting on his stool and remember his assigned cheerleader was out sick today. For half a second, I debate leaving it. But after the weird look he gave me, I grab the jersey and pull it over my sweatshirt.

Already the stands are packed with people decked out in school colors. I spot Tory's family a couple rows up behind our bench. His mother wears a black faux-fur jacket and Cartier jewelry, and she oozes new money. Beside her is Tory's older sister with her daughter and Tory's dad in the next seat. You'd think he would be cold and detached, a drill-sergeant ready to critique his gifted offspring. While his all-black designer outfit is certainly intimidating, he wears a warm smile and looks genuinely happy to be here.

Tory and the team come to the bench, and he sits beside me, taking off his helmet and funneling a stream of water. Out of my peripheral vision, I see him look me up and down and give a slight nod. He doesn't demand that I remove the jersey. Somehow, deep down, I knew he wouldn't. One of the other guys sees the jersey and makes a kissy sound but Tory levels him with a look.

Tory takes the ice, skating backward while staring at me with a faint grin. Silently, I curse the butterflies flapping wildly in my abdomen. He lines up at right wing on the far side while Jermaine takes his place at center for the face-off. The crowd roars at the puck drop and just like that, the first game has begun.

When Jermaine wins the face-off Tory guns it for him, slashing his stick, without even pretending to make a play for the puck. The referee blows his whistle and ushers Tory into the penalty box for a two-minute penalty... ten seconds into the game.

Our opponents are on a power play because we're down a player. I look

over at Tory and find that he's staring me down, a sinister smile across his lips. A minute later, there are raucous cheers from the visitor's bench when they score on our goalie.

His eyes never leave me for the entirety of his time in the penalty box—not even when our opponents score. I have the distinct feeling that he's issuing a warning. It's undeserved and overstepping and sends chills down my spine, but it's happening, nonetheless.

"What is his problem?" Thomas asks me. I shake my head because, truly, I have no clue. Or maybe I do, and I'm lying to myself. But then I remember his words from lunch, and I'm mad and confused.

All I can do is watch in horror as Tory goes after Jermaine—in what can only be described as an attack—as soon as he's out of the penalty box. He sails toward Jermaine, slamming him up against the glass. The brutal sound of bodies hitting fiberglass echoes throughout the rink. This time, the hit is legal because Jermaine had the puck, so he gets away with it.

Another minute goes by and Tory slashes again. Penalty number two. Back in the penalty box.

This time, my eyes stay glued to the puck. I've watched Tory play hockey dozens of times, but I've never seen this. He's...psychotic, making personal attacks like he has nothing to lose. Even the announcer comments on his behavior. I find myself shrinking, trying to make myself smaller, like his name on my back is now a target.

Tory's back in the game for all of three minutes. He doesn't even attempt to score. He follows Jermaine around and, while I can't hear him, I can tell he's chirping, goading Jermaine unfairly. Finally, Jermaine halts, cutting the ice with his skates and turns toward Tory. Their helmet cages smack together, and the last thing I see is Tory's bright, white smile before he tosses his stick and gloves and becomes a blur of fists.

To his credit, Jermaine holds his own and even gets in a few blows of his own until Tory gets him off-balance and pummels him. It takes both referees and a couple teammates to get Tory off Jermaine.

That's a major penalty. Five minutes in the box.

It's also when I lose my patience.

Tory skates toward the box, his face void of emotion save for a spark in his eye. Screw that.

When he gets close, I stand up, lean over the wall, and grab his face mask; I yank him toward me, throwing him off-balance. He manages to stay

upright, but now he's grinning broadly, despite the shock painted across his features. I grab his jersey with both hands and...

Let.

Him.

Have it.



# Chapter 7

## Victory

She thinks she's not the prettiest girl in school. I think that's pretty stupid.

My jersey is all twisted in Clara's little viselike grip; she's red and screaming in my face, and it's completely unintelligible and completely beautiful.

And I'm so in love it makes me sick to my stomach. Absolutely disgusting. I'm utterly ashamed at my level of bewitchment.

I don't care about the score, the number of penalties I've incurred pursuing a personal vendetta, or the tongue lashing I'll be getting from my coach later. All I care about is what's going on in front of me.

Her. Her. Always her.

We are almost never this close, and I can smell that lavender oil she wears, and I'm higher than any drug could ever get me.

She should be illegal for every man, but especially for me. She should come with a safety warning. *Caution: do not operate heavy machinery or attempt rational thought when Clara is near.* My eyes dart from one ocean-blue eye to the angry furrow between her brows to the other ocean-blue eye, down to her lips, and back up again.

Eye. Furrow. Eye. Lips.

Eye. Furrow. Eye. Lips. Lips. Lips.

Teeth bared.

*Bite me. Please?*

Over and over. Again and again. My delicious slice of torment pie.

It's unfair, and I'm reminded for the umpteenth time that I quite literally never stood a chance when it came to Clara Rachel Larsen.

Her name should be Clara Rachel Amato.

Or I can be Victory Amato Larsen. I'm not picky, and I'd love to get rid of at least one of my stupid names. Speaking of stupid, I wonder if her horrible father is around. Surely, he'll find out and—if history is any

indication— have some very strong feelings about this little display.

She releases my jersey with a hard shove and a hammering smack to the side of my helmet. My dignity blames her violence for the stars swirling in my vision—not the sight of her yelling at me.

Truthfully, I don't know what the hell she just said to me. But it makes me want to get out here and play the best hockey of my life. And also, maybe the worst, so she'll get that close and passionate again.

I'm officially adding "find ways to make Charity yell at me" to my to-do list .

## Chapter 8

### Clara

When we sit down, me on the bench and Tory beside me in the penalty box, both our chests heave. Be it from the adrenaline or the proximity of our bodies, I'd predict his heart is pounding in time with mine. We don't look at each other for the duration of his penalty. The other team scores twice. The Timberwolves are down: three-zip.

After five agonizing minutes, Tory skates back onto the ice. Not only does he ignore me, he ignores Jermaine as well. The way he turns his emotions on and off is terrifying. If someone was arriving to the game right at this moment, they'd have no clue that Tory had been doing anything other than playing the best hockey of his life.

Watching Tory is like watching poetry on ice. He moves with graceful precision that maintains a certain level of brutality. Whenever Victory steps onto the ice, the crowd grows a little quieter—out of instinct. Even they know that they're watching something special, even if they do not know him in particular. He carries that sort of power in his back pocket. And he wields it with reckless abandon, never thinking of how it will impact those around him. Because he's never had to. That's the beauty of such power.

I think it's a contributing factor to my sick fascination with him—one of the motivators behind my shameless flirting.

Tory scores. Then, he scores twice more and has two assists. A five-point night for him. We win the game. With Tory back on the ice, it wasn't even close. If anything, Tory's erratic start added to the suspense, making the win that much more rewarding. He's craftier than I give him credit for.

After the game, I throw his jersey into his locker with disgust and walk straight through to the office, knowing he'll see it as soon as he sits down to disrobe.

Thomas, Clover, and I break down the equipment and clean the water bottles. Several minutes later, we're tossing the hand towels into an industrial washing machine beside the coaches' office when we're jarred by the sound

of the office door slamming shut.

For a few long moments, no other sound comes from the direction of the office, but we're frozen, waiting for *something*. And boy does Coach Anderson deliver. He flawlessly launches into one of the most aggressive verbal lashings I've ever been cursed to overhear. Immediately, I know he's laying into Tory. He talks about leadership and setting an example and college scouts. Above all, he stresses how disappointed he is and that he won't hesitate to bench Tory and revoke his captain status if he ever pulls another stunt like that.

Tory accepts his fate, and we don't hear him even attempt to mutter a word through the closed door. That is, he doesn't say a word until Coach mentions me. My face and neck flame as Thomas and Clover stare at me with eyes as wide as saucers.

"If this girl is going to be an issue for you, I'd be more than happy to find another manager. They're a dime a dozen in this school. I let you find someone because I trusted your judgment Amato, and now I'm seriously questioning that trust."

"No," Tory says with force behind his voice. "Don't punish her because I was an idiot. She loves hockey, and she's gonna do a great job. I know her. She's so excited about being the manager, you can't do that to her. Don't you know anything about her...past?" Tory struggles a moment for the right word. A word that means her mom is dead, and her dad is the police chief. It probably means more, but I don't know how much Tory really knows about me.

Coach Anderson takes a calming breath, but his voice is still gruff. "I don't care about her situation. I have a team to get to Nationals. Both of you are on thin ice and it's your fault, Amato. One wrong move and she's gone, and you're benched. Got it?"

"Won't happen again. Can I go?" Tory says curtly. He's clearly done with the conversation.

Thomas and Clover look down at the remaining towels, pretending to be busy, but enjoying every second of the drama. They must have had a very boring season last year. Before they can say anything, the office door flings open, and the three of us look down at our work while Tory walks by without a second glance.

Once they're sure he's out of earshot, both of them grill me with questions. They aren't convinced that nothing is actually going on between

Tory and I. Clover thinks he's a jerk who wants to keep our relationship secret so he can continue to play the field, and I'm a naïve, idiot who takes whatever he's willing to offer. Thomas all but nods his agreement—a peanut gallery of one.

As promised, Jasmine and the lunch girls are waiting for me in the parking lot. I hop in the front seat, and someone hands me a burger. I wolf it down, not having eaten since lunch. Even then, I only had an apple because my account got too low, and I refuse to eat one of the conciliatory PB&J sandwiches in front of my peers.

Based on the chatter from the other girls, it seems they couldn't really tell that Tory's odd behavior during the game was directed toward me. No one noticed him glaring at me, and they all assume I yelled at him as a passionate fan. They tell me most people in the stands were lamenting the fact that they couldn't smack sense into him themselves. But I'm still worried about the optics of his behavior, especially if it were to ramp up in subsequent games. While he sounded sincere in his promise to Coach Anderson, I've observed this boy for years, and I know he isn't easily controlled. In fact, he's virtually untamable.

While we drive, I touch up my makeup and twin Dutch Braids, tied with satin bows in our school colors—ice-blue and red. I left my team sweatshirt in the supply closet and changed into one of my flouncy signature skirts in a floral print that matches our blue school colors. This one is my favorite because it has shorts underneath so I can dance to my heart's content without worrying about revealing my London britches to anyone. If I get too hot, I can take off my cardigan because I wore a tank top underneath. Basically, I'm completely prepared for anything the night could possibly throw my way.

With Coach Anderson's threat still echoing through my mind, I'm wary about my behavior at the party. But, I can only control myself, and if Tory is the problem, then removing him from the equation is the solution, right? So, I decide to take an algebraic approach and subtract the constant...by ignoring him.

## Chapter 9

### Victory

Four deep red, fresh, angry bruises dot each of my knuckles, and I flex my fingers with pride. I relish the dull ache from my fight. While fighting in high school hockey doesn't warrant an ejection, it's uncommon. But I *like* fighting. Which is why I'm eager to bypass college altogether and go right to the NHL after graduation. I'm sick of playing with boys. There's nothing like getting rocked by a six-foot-plus Canadian to make the weight on my shoulders a little less distracting. No one seems to notice the evidence of my violence as they flood into the house with clownish smiles.

Parties are frequent in the Amato residence. Nearly every weekend, either my parents or I are hosting, though for very different reasons. Sure, I like having parties and the perks that come with hosting—sleeping in my own bed, for example. But I have *one* reason to throw parties.

A few months after her mom died, I started an argument with Clara. I was mad about everything and at everyone. Life felt so futile.

Clara said the new science teacher was cute but that he wore a toupee. I may or may not have been jealous, so I bet her she wouldn't go up and tug on his hair during recess. It was back when everyone had recess together and back when there was still recess in middle school. Stupidly, or maybe unstubidly, I let her set the stakes. It was a few weeks before the end-of-year dance. The *only* dance we had in middle school.

Her terms were such: if she pulled the teacher's hair, I had to dance with her one time. But not only at the end-of-year dance—any time there was dancing at any event, in and out of school I'd be cursed to dance with her for a single song. Music to my juvenile ears.

Naturally, I jumped at the chance, even though I hemmed and hawed in the moment. Looking back, the stakes were probably way too high to justify the risk. But, then again, she likely could have gotten suspended for the offense. Though, Clara was getting a free pass for *everything* at the time. I've never been so elated to lose a bet. Seeing her pull the teacher's hair was a

thing of beauty. Sweet Clara just smiled up at him, patted his shoulder and walked away with an impossibly smug grin curling at her lips.

I've held my end of the bargain.

Clara and her acquaintances walk in a few minutes after things really get rolling. I'd call them her friends, but they aren't. Each of the girls she arrived with greets me and I give them all a polite head nod while scrolling through my phone. My ears are trained on the back of the line of ladies, waiting for Clara's signature scent to engulf me. But when finally look up, she's completely ignored me and is already on the dance floor with a drink in hand.

A total rebuff. How petty.

When Clara dances, she *really* dances. She eases into it but within minutes she's cleared a six-foot section of space to do leaps and spins and pirouettes. Not to mention twerking, the running man, and snow angels on the carpet. She's still in her signature skirt, but she wears shorts underneath for the occasion. And she dances all night long, only taking short water breaks. Halfway through the night, when she's glistening with sweat, her hair usually goes up in a bun that resembles a pineapple.

Clara is typically so impeccable and meticulous when it comes to her appearance. But when dancing is involved, she doesn't care that she's sweating and her makeup is smearing around her under-eyes. Because she's having a great time and, for once, she lets her façade go and she's just... herself. For however long the music lasts, Clara just *lets go*. And she does this at *every* event with a dance floor. Sometimes, if there isn't a dance floor, but the music is good, she makes her own.

Maybe she does it so she doesn't have to socialize. Clara's an expert at the shallow and superficial. She knows everyone's names and a few anecdotes about each of her peers. But that's about it.

Except for me. She knows almost everything about me. I know almost nothing about her.

And I hate it.

But I love watching her dance.

An hour later, she's still dancing and still pretending I don't exist. Clara has danced approximately 2.75 times with three other guys—one of whom only made it through 75 percent of the song before giving up on trying to temper her moves.

I go outside to smoke and finish my drink. My parents don't know I

smoke. Neither does Coach Anderson. But I'm nothing without for my select vices. Clara, alcohol, smoking, my bike. All bad for me. All necessary distractions from the truths that plague me.

By the time I come back inside, Clara has vacated the dance floor. Surprisingly, she's made her way over to chat with some of the hockey guys. In an attempt to forget her, and keep myself from doing something I'll regret, I go to the kitchen and play a few drinking games, earning myself a strong buzz.

My liquid courage has me seeking out Clara for one of the first times in my life. I make my way over to the group she's still conversing with, and they immediately open their circle to let me in. She laughs touching Vince's arm, and I nearly choke on my drink. He's saying something about how great of an addition she'll be as a hockey manager while playing with one of her ribbons. The sight gives me lots of ideas of things I want to do to him, even the least of which is a jailable offense.

"Let's get our dance over with, Charity," I cut in. Vince's hand drops to his side, and he seems to notice me for the first time.

Clara looks up and brushes me off. "I'm good," she says, but her gaze stays on me.

I roll my eyes. "Fine with me." I spin on my heels to walk away from her, knowing she'll follow. Once I'm in the middle of the dance floor, I turn and, unsurprisingly, find Clara half a dozen steps behind me. A satisfied smirk rolls across my lips. She'll always come when I call. Half of me feels sick at the thought—the power I have over her feels unfair to wield. The other half is relieved; I need her like I need air, even if I can't have her the way I want.

My movements are exaggerated but even half drunk, I'm exponentially more graceful than most of the clowns gyrating around us.

Clara crosses her arms and taps the toe of her boot on the oriental rug. Her hips rock back and forth, unable to resist the throbbing bass. I hold up my index finger and make a circle in the air, indicating that I want her ass in my lap and her mouth away from my ear. Reluctantly, she rotates, and I let her back up into me, taking a drink as I do.

The lights are low, and I enjoy the neon blue, green, and pink strobe lights from the DJ dance across her curls. It makes me want to pull the ribbons from her braids and make her do that pineapple bun thing, but I keep my hands to myself as usual.



Suddenly, she whirls around, nearly whipping me in the face with one of those braids.

“I’m mad at you,” she growls. But her hips keep moving, and I keep following.

What she doesn’t realize is that I can’t handle her like this. So close. Smelling so wonderful. Confronting all our lies that we tell ourselves, and each other, with nothing but her ocean eyes—which are now quite sharp—consuming me.

So, of course, I look away. Even though all I desire is to get lost in her. In her eyes, her lips, her hips...

“How will I *ever* survive?” My tone is scathing, but she’s undeterred.

“Feel free to explain yourself.”

“I’d rather not.”

“What the heck happened to you? Personality fracture? Break with reality? Roid rage?”

“Let it go, Charity,” I sigh.

“Not a chance.”

I raise her hand and spin her around, attempting to muffle my tortured groan with a deep draw of the liquid sloshing in my cup as she rolls her hips against me. The less this cruel, torturous woman looks at me, the better.

Indignant, with her and our circumstances, I begin to say, “What the fu—”

She cuts me off with a scolding, “Language!”

“What? Why?” I ask, furrowing my brow with mystification.

She tuts at me, but it’s hard to hear over the roar of the part. It being the first party after our first home game win, everyone has turned out, even some kids who graduated last year. My parents don’t mind the parties, and after the game they went to my older sister’s townhouse downtown to visit until everyone clears out.

“Aaron Warner doesn’t like cussing so neither do I,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Who is Aaron Warner and why should I care what he thinks?” I ask while she pushes off and does some sort of pirouette, then jogs around me in a big circle. I suppress the urge to laugh, to show that I’m entertained and delighted by her antics .

“Only one of the best book characters of all time,” she huffs.

I roll my eyes. Of course, she’s talking about a boy who lives in the

pages of a book. “Never heard of him.”

“Figures.”

“So, what the *hell* do you want from me?”

“A genuine apology would be a good start. Maybe some groveling.”

“Sorry,” I whisper, and I hope she picks up on my sincerity. I’m not sorry I did it. I mean, I should be slightly remorseful for my behavior, but I’m not. But I’m sorry I made her mad. “It wasn’t even about you, anyway. Jermaine got himself on my hit list last season, and he knew exactly what he was doing by talking to the manager of my team right in front of me.” It’s a lie. A bald-faced lie at that. Jermaine is one of the nicest guys in all of high school hockey. It’s one of a plethora of lies I’ve told Clara over the years. “Anything else?” I ask.

She taps my bottom lip with her index finger. “Yes, now that you mention it, I want that bottom lip. I think I’m going to steal it to use as my pillow tonight and every night thereafter.”

“Promise?” I whisper. But the music is loud, and I look away, so she doesn’t catch it. She never does when I mutter such confessions. And if she does, she pretends she doesn’t, so I pretend I don’t say it. I pull my bottom lip in and bite the part she grazed, as if, by some miracle, I’ll be able to taste her the way I desire .



I'm always capricious, a bit given to malice, if you will, after a party—after having her so close for such a fleeting period. Tonight, my irritability sets in early, and I disappear to my room immediately after our dance ends, only returning to kick out the stragglers a couple hours later. The ghost of her touch, the swirl of her hips, the vibration of her words so near to my skin—it will haunt me for days. And by the time my physical longing fades enough to function normally, it will be time for the next party.

For some time now, I've been well-acquainted with my masochism. There can be no other explanation for such self-punishing behavior. Because, though I dread every single party she attends, I find any possible excuse to host them.

# Chapter 10

## Clara

Tory doesn't seem like much of a reader. I always picture him sitting in his living room watching hockey games or maybe his own highlights. He certainly doesn't do much homework when he's not training, if his grades are any indication.

For that reason, I wasn't terribly surprised he is unfamiliar with Aaron Warner. Sometimes I wonder what he does outside of hockey, partying, and dating beauty queens.

He shows up to the library on time and clean shaven, despite the purple semi-circles beneath his storm-filled eyes. Without a word, Tory shrugs off his black, puffy jacket and backpack. He pulls out his ear pods. To my chagrin, he's wearing gray hockey sweatpants and a long-sleeved tournament t-shirt. I don't know what it is about seeing a man in long sleeves, but it drives me absolutely crazy. I think it's something about the way it hits their wrists with only their hands popping out.

I perk up when he slinks into the polyester chair across from me. It's that scratchy woven material that's like burlap in a lovely, rotted cranberry color.

"What's eating you, Gilbert Grape?" I ask, twirling one of my curls. I did my hair today because I knew Tory would see me. Otherwise, I wouldn't have bothered because I would have been hiding in my room all day.

Tory sighs. "Only you would reference an antiquated nineties movie, Charity."

My head bobs with fervor as I argue back. "It's not antiquated. That movie was groundbreaking. Have you even seen it?"

"How else would I know it's antiquated?" he sasses.

"One of the actors, Darlene Cates, died the same way her character did. She even got healthier before passing, and her character had vowed to do the same. Quite the poetic tragedy, I think."

"Which one did she play?"

“The mom.”

He nods, but his head is on the study table. The library is warm today, like someone caught a chill and turned the heat too high. It’s a bit stuffy and, between Tory’s behavior at the game and the party, the walls seem to be closing in on me. I can’t stand it.

“About last night—” I begin.

Tory’s sharp tone cuts me off abruptly. “Say another word about *anything* that happened after school dismissal yesterday and I’ll walk out of here. I won’t hand in the work I’ve done for this stupid project, and we’ll both fail.”

He’s resting his head on his arms, eyes now focusing anywhere but on mine. Tory’s posture is in such sharp contrast to his statement. For someone who has it all—money, dalliances, family, a future—he always seems to be bothered by *something*. How sad.

Tory flips open his laptop, clearly ready to move on. I do the same with my written notes, the flutter of the pages rustling my tendrils.

We spend nearly an hour finishing our assignment, but it gets done. Considering his grades, Tory did a lot more than I thought he would. While I realize that having a partner who completes their share of the work is the bare minimum, it feels like more coming from Victory Winner Amato. He never has to work for anything.

I pack up my things and he half packs up his. Tory lingers, moving slowly, lazily, seemingly reluctant to leave. So I flip my phone over, lean my crossed arms on the table and tell him, “I’m glad Mr. M paired us. It wasn’t so bad, after all, was it?”

“Far worse.” Something in his tone is gravely earnest.

With that, I get up to leave, but he pinches the corner of my pink JanSport bookbag. His lips are sealed, but those chocolate eyes harbor many untold secrets.

I sit back down with a huff. He doesn’t speak. But he looks at me—really studies me. Tory’s lips purse, like something is on the tip of his tongue, but the jaws of life couldn’t wrench the words free, even if his heart wants nothing more than to be unburdened.

So I offer up my own divulgence in hopes it will open the floodgates. “You’re different outside school. You speak differently. I never dreamed you were so eloquent. Sometimes, you’ll say something and it’s...practically Elizabethan.”

“Yeah, Charity, I don’t just speak jock, after all. Shall I call you Lady Montague?”

“Why not Miss Capulet? Juliet’s the star after all,” I argue. “Hey, that would be such a cute couples costume.”

“Couples costumes are dumb.” His retort is quick, and the secrets in his eyes vanish—the usual playfulness taking center stage. “Plus, she dies at the end.”

“True—the dying part. You couldn’t be more wrong about couples costumes.” I quirk my head. “So why haven’t I noticed before?”

Tory gazes off toward the stairs, suddenly miles away. “We’ve never been alone,” he lies.

And just to make sure he knows that I know it’s a lie, I say, “We were. Once.”

Tory pauses so long that I think he’s dropped the conversation. I’m suddenly aware of the stale smell of old books and the hum of a heater.

And then he breaks the silence with a whispered, “Yes. That one time.” Tory’s voice is distant and small—reminiscent. He scribbles something on the lacquered wood study table with his pencil. I resist the urge to swat his hand and scold him for the delinquency.

“You’d forgotten?” I ask. As soon as he pulls away and leans back in his chair, I swipe my eraser across his doodle. It was a tiny ribbon, tied into a bow, identical to the one in my hair.

“Not forgotten. Blocked from my memory.” He inhales deeply. “Or rather, buried deep down. Down beneath the soil, loam, and bedrock. In a sealed coffin, no less. Lamented over with a flowery eulogy.” Tory pauses, staring at some spot on the table, the moments playing over his face like a movie screen. “It was beautiful. But brief. Devastatingly brief. A moment born and dead on the same day.”

“You rigged that game of Spin the Bottle,” I whisper, each word full of meaning and reminiscence from my own point-of-view. What I wouldn’t give to relive that moment—*our* moment from inside his mind.

And suddenly, I’m back in Judy Theil’s basement a month before her family moved to Texas. Dank and musty. The walls weren’t sheet rocked. We all gathered on a carpet remnant leftover from a renovation. It still smelled like chemicals. We sat around a coffee table that she’d spilled nail polish on and then tried to remove, but it had just stripped the finish in a big blobby circle. I thought...I thought it meant something .

My mother died three weeks later.

“Based on what evidence?” he scoffs, “If you’re going to make such an accusation you need proof, Charity.” He finally looks into my eyes, and it sucks the air from me with such violence, I’m surprised I’m still vertical.

But I hold his gaze as I breathe, “Intuition.”

He shakes his head with a ghost of a grin and murmurs, “That’ll never hold up in court.”



Monday rolls around and it’s positively frigid. I wear my fuzzy boots, knit tights, corduroy skirt, and a chunky sweater that has a blue pumpkin on the front to school . Usually, I try not to wear such easily identifiable pieces, but this sweater was such a good deal. Monday is ponytail day, and my ribbon matches my ice-blue skirt. Upon entering history class, I notice my skirt, pumpkin, and ribbon match Tory’s hoodie and Nike’s. It’s kismet.

I volunteer to present our project first, and Tory only grumbles for a moment before rising to cue up our slideshow. We absolutely kill it.

When I forget to mention a minor point, Tory picks up the slack. When he fails to mention a key player in the historical context of our research, I find a way to do the same for him. We are chemistry embodied. It’s a thing of beauty. Neither of us is surprised when Mr. M ceremoniously hands us his completed grading rubric and we’ve earned ninety-seven out of one hundred

points. I practically float to my seat, soaring high with relief and gratefulness at another hard-earned A.

Tory holds out up his hand, and I slap his palm in celebration. Nearly the same moment I make contact, he pulls back and shoves both hands into his hoodie pocket. But he leans forward on the desk, smiling up at me as if there's no game between us, almost as if we're...friends.

Throughout class, we joke and chat in whispered tones. It almost makes me forget that I need to be careful. No matter how natural or comfortable or *right* it feels, I can't get too close to Tory Amato—or anyone else, for that matter. But especially him.

But I let myself enjoy his physical and companionable closeness for the duration of class. When the period ends, Tory roots around in his backpack and I see him pull a bottle of painkillers from the bottom out of the corner of my eye. He attempts to open the lid, and I promptly smack the bottle out of his hand and on to the floor with a rattle. To be fair, I don't really mean to hit him that hard. But in the split second we make contact, I am reminded of just how warm and pleasant his skin feels, and I don't regret it.

Tory's mouth gapes and he looks at me sidelong. He's trying to be serious, but I know he's at least mildly amused because one corner of his lip twitches north ever so slightly. "Did you have a break with reality, Charity?"

"You can't take that," I blurt.

"Why the *hell* not?" he demands.

"That bottle, Tory Amato? Equals toxic. Homeopathy is a much safer route. I'll drop a tincture off at practice if your muscles are feeling sore." I add even louder, "Heaven knows I wouldn't mind massaging out a few of those kinks myself." A few classmates snicker as I make heart-eyes at Tory, hands folded under my chin.

He rolls his eyes. "I don't want your *tincture*, Clara, or your hands anywhere near me."

And then I smile. I smile so broadly I'm certain I resemble a chipmunk who has their cheeks stuffed with goodies. Because Victory Winner Amato actually referred to me by my true name. He probably just did it to throw me off-balance, but I recover quickly. "Plus, you can't just take meds at school. It's against the rules. You have to go to the nurse."

Mr. M and the rest of our classmates clear out. "You're such a goodie, goodie." He shakes his head at me, picks up the bottle. The way he says it feels less like an insult and more like a compliment. Either way, I'm not



entirely sure how he intended the statement, so it's my turn to roll my eyes at him.

As Tory slings his backpack over one shoulder, he stalks toward me. When he's close—scratch that, entirely too close—I can smell his cinnamon gum and his shampoo or cologne. Whatever it is, it makes me feel dangerous and heady.

His breath tickles the baby hairs by my ear when he leans down over my desk and says, "I'm beginning to think I might just be the most dangerous part of your life, Charity." His voice is all velvet and smoke and promise.

Several moments pass and he draws back, strolling for the door as if he didn't just send cataclysmic shock waves through my entire existence. But I'm Clara Larsen and no boy is allowed to best me, not even him. So I scurry along behind him and when I'm within ear shot I freeze and counter, "And I'm the most exciting part of yours, Tory."

Before he has time to turn around, I peel off toward my locker, leaving him to stew over my words. Because they're true, both his statement and my own.

And that's exactly what terrifies me the most.

# Chapter 11

## Clara

Two days later, it's the second hockey game of the season. There's still an excited buzz, and I baked Tory black bean brownies for his care basket. Black bean brownies might sound gross, but after you puree everything and add maple syrup and dark chocolate for sweetness, they're truly amazing—healthy and loaded with protein and perfect for high-performing athletes.

Coach gave us managers crewneck sweatshirts to wear on game days. I wore mine with a white tennis skirt and ice-blue knee socks with my black Mary Janes with the T-strap. These aren't just for the aesthetic, though. Last year, I saved up for months and bought a second-hand pair with a zero-drop heel and wide toe-box. They're the most comfortable shoes I own. Perfect for a twelve-hour day inside the same four cinderblock walls.

The managers are allowed to use the weight room, but the rest of the student body has to use the old one above the gym. I decide to stroll through on my way to the locker room to scope out the scenery and get comfortable with the equipment before committing to a workout under prying eyes.

Big mistake.

Huge.

Because the scenery in question is none other than Tory Amato. Sitting in an ice bath. Shirtless.

My ability to catch him half-naked is uncanny, astounding, really. I must be a masochist because I seem to enjoy torturing myself.

He's been cold and distant since we finished our project, barely responding to my shameless flirting. In short, he hasn't been playing the game, and it's infuriating.

As a result, I barely afford him a side-eye glance and dart straight to the locker room through a swinging door on the opposite wall. All the while, despite the temperature, his scorching gaze follows my every step.

The locker room is calmer than last time. It's earlier in the day, when most adults are still at work, and a midweek game, so the crowd won't be as

big. There's no party tonight, either.

Tabitha is frenzied, though. Tory's assigned cheerleader walks around, frantically digging through the players' supply lockers. She mutters and cusses and complains about how she isn't going to have time to finish her sign at this rate.

"Has anyone seen Vic's jersey?" she shouts across the locker room.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She finally notices me, grabs my face and says, "Yes! Stalker girl! Perfect! Where is Vic's jersey? I can't find it anywhere. Did you steal it to use as a pillowcase or something?"

"What? No." I laugh nervously because if I'd had the idea myself, she wouldn't be too far off-base. "I'm not that crazy."

We all help her search, but it doesn't turn up, so she wears a blank one that Thomas digs out of the supply closet instead.

Thomas is one of those people who is easy to learn about. With enough silence, he starts talking and doesn't really stop. Maybe it's a social discomfort. Some people don't like dead silence, but I don't mind it. I have no problem filling my mind with all sorts of distractions.

We empty out the industrial dryer of new hockey merch that will be sold at the concession stand. The art club makes most of the designs and screen prints the t-shirts or sweatshirts. But we need to wash, fold and restock shelves. Thomas is pretty good at using the blue shirt folding device and tells me about how he lost his leg after he teaches me proper technique. To be fair, I didn't ask him about it. Personally, I feel that Thomas is more than his accident and while it was a defining moment in his life, it doesn't have to define him as a person unless he wants it to.

"So, you're still able to skate?" I ask.

"Not in the traditional sense. To do that, I'd have to get a custom prosthetic made 'cause they aren't really standard. I read about a former pro player who did it, but I use a sledge like the Paralympic athletes use. I want to go out for a squad, but my mom is crazy over-protective after my accident."

"You definitely should. I feel like the more you push her, the more comfortable she'll get with it. Though I'm sure it's still scary for her."

"She treats me like a glass boy. It's annoying, but I get where she's coming from." He gives me a look and says, "Moms."

I smile just enough to be polite, though it must present more like a wince

because Thomas's eyes go wide. It's a look I've had the displeasure of witnessing dozens of times. He's just remembered that he complained about his mom to the girl with the dead mom. Girl with the dead mom. I've worked so hard to not be that girl—to shuck that label.

I'm not that girl.

I'm the girl who gets good grades.

I'm the girl who wears pink and bows.

Most of all, I'm the girl who shamelessly flirts with the most intimidating boy in school. The most talented boy. The most beautiful boy.

These are the labels that define me because these are the labels I've chosen to define me. Would I rather be the Peace Corps girl or the girl who discovered a star? Sure. But those labels are harder. These are the ones I can manage and navigate.

Sadly, I'm still the vindictive police chief's daughter. While it's a secondary label, not as dominant as the ones I've chosen, it still lurks in the background. And I can't wait to run from it—to never look back. Earning a full-ride to college with an academic scholarship—that's the goal. Or at least enough to get me started. I'm more than capable of finding work once I start school.

It's so very odd that such immense shame comes from both of my parents for such vastly different reasons. Thomas is blessed to have a living mom. Even if she's over-protective.

So I give him a true smile, taking the t-shirt he's folded with military precision and adding it to the pile labeled L for large. "My mom would be impressed by your folding abilities."

"We don't have to talk about it," he sputters through crimson cheeks. If only they blushed because he was trying to mask a crush, or because it was too hot. But they aren't. They're red because my mom is dead, and he keeps saying the wrong thing. He's only saying we don't have to talk about her because he's uncomfortable doing so. I wish someone—anyone—would hold space for me to talk about her. Maybe someday.

Guilt niggles the back of my mind when the tears don't prick the corners of my eyes.

Later, when I'm walking to the office to help Clover compile last year's stats for the local sports columnists, I decide to check my mailbox for my first paycheck. It's there, but I don't see it right away.

Because, stuffed into the four-inch slot, is a hockey jersey. I unfurl the

garment and see the name AMATO printed across the top, along with the number twenty-four.

Tory's jersey.

## Chapter 12

### Clara

I dig through the cubby, reaching my fingertips all the way to the back to see if there's a note or anything. All I find is a white envelope with a cashier's check in it for sixty dollars. My first paycheck, it seems.

The internal debate lasts half a second. I only wore the jersey for the first game because Tabitha was out sick. This is different. This is intentional.

This. Is a statement.

I'm left to question why on earth Tory is choosing now—this year, this game—to make such a statement. Why he's taking down a brick in a wall I've painstakingly built between us. Even if it's just a step toward friendship, it still doesn't add up. Not that I expect him to open that stupid, beautiful mouth and explain himself. That sort of hope is a fools' errand at best.

I carry two sets of filled green water bottles with orange lids out to the bench. Tory's eyes find me almost immediately, and I shrink beneath his gaze and, for once, wish it was anywhere but on me. He slices up the side of the rink until he reaches me. I glance over and feel my cheeks flush when I realize he's staring, while keeping pace with me as I walk.

Suddenly, Tory smacks his stick against the fiberglass and shouts, "Put it on!"

My heart pounds at the shock of the noise, and my nostrils flare with indignation at the fact that he thinks he can order me around. I raise my chin and keep walking, stashing the bottles under the bench and plopping down next to Clover. She eyes me with suspicion, and I shrug her off. This isn't something I want to discuss. Tory won't take the hint.

He skates up, taking his place at left wing, which just so happens to be the closest position to the bench. Instead of lining up, though, he leans over the half wall and says, "Not gonna score a single goal until you're in my jersey, Charity."

"Stop lying."

"Try me." He wags his brows.

The referee blows the whistle, Vince wins the face-off and sends the puck toward Tory, setting up a quick play to move it up the ice. Unfortunately for our side of the scoreboard, Tory cuts in toward the crease. But he's slow and his stick handling makes the shot predictable and the goalie freezes the puck with ease. It was all sloppy—or so I think. Tory glides down the ice and pops into the bench box for a line change.

“Could've been one-zip,” he whispers.

My mouth hangs open and I snap it shut. I convince myself that he's lying.

Two crappy passes and three missed shots later, the first period ends. I'm no longer convinced he's lying, especially when Tory stares me down as the team skates toward the locker room. A sick feeling twists in my stomach as I refill water bottles with Thomas and Clover.

Coach is red in the face when the team comes back out. He puts in the second line, so Tory is on the bench. Thomas tries to sit next to me but Tory glares. Poor Thomas is completely befuddled so I elbow him and finally gets the hint. Our temperamental star sits next to me and fiddles with the corner of his stick tape. Second line will only be out for another half a minute at the most.

“Done playing games?” he says.

I cross my arms. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“Please, Charity.” Tory looks at me and I peer, side-long at his earnest expression.

A resolved sigh escapes me and I know I'll give in to him. That I always will. But I won't make it easy.

“Score a goal and I'll reconsider,” I tell him.

First line flies out onto the ice and our goalie sends the puck to defender. After a few quick passes, Tory is in possession. He dances around an opposing forward, then an opposing defender then passes to Vince. Vince shoots and the goalie butterflies his pads. The puck rebounds and Tory slams it in the five-hole with expert precision.

Tory eyes me triumphantly and I shake my head. Annoying and unpredictable don't even begin to describe our star player. This is just who he is. He's either violently cut-throat, or irreverent to the point of obnoxiousness. There's no in-between.

With a huff, I scurry along the front of the stands and dart into the locker room. In a flurry, I wrench the jersey from my mailbox and hastily pull it

over my head, not bothering to straighten my hair back into place. I'm too ruffled, both in and out. All because of Tory.

Upon walking out to the bench a second time, Tabitha gives me a funny look through the glass and purses her lips. I make a mental note to defend myself to her later, when she can actually hear me. She isn't the type to gossip in the meantime, and if she whines to the other cheerleaders, oh well. She's been letting me do the grunt work for a year while she gets the glory of wearing the jersey, so she doesn't have room to complain. Tory is one of the only players who hasn't figured out his locker fairy because the cheerleaders pull names from a hat for that.

Tory skates backward, slowing just long enough to get an eyeful of me in the jersey. A lopsided grin ghosts across his lips. He gives an approving nod before pivoting to rocket down the side of the rink. Still, his expression screams that he knows something I don't know. I brush off the notion and focus on stats and anything but his sultry eyes peering through that helmet for the next hour.

Before the cheerleaders leave, I jog out to the bleachers and tell Tabitha about finding the jersey in my mailbox and that I have no idea why it was there. She nods and raises her eyebrows like she knows why and tells me I'm a fool if I don't. But she understands I didn't pull a fast one, and that's all I care about.

The conversation delays me enough that most of the players have cleared out of the locker room. Coach saves the post-game analysis for practice if it's a midweek game. I'm on my way to find Clover and Thomas so we can finish up our work for the night. There's a big physics test I need to study for and...

"Clara!" Coach Anderson bellows from his office as I attempt to scoot by. I halt. "Please come in here."

I obey because it's Coach and we aren't very close, but he is very intimidating, especially after hearing how he had yelled at Tory. In the five steps it takes to backtrack, my heart rate doubles, then triples when I see who else is inside the office.

Tory sits in one of the cheap waiting-room-style chairs, leaning back with his hands laced behind his head. Across from him is our history teacher, and I panic.

"Mr. Macintyre. What are you doing here?" the words tumble from my lips and I frantically add, "We didn't cheat!" Because why else would Mr. M



be in here unless he somehow thinks we cheated on our project—and that’s when I see Tory’s parents wedged into the corner behind him. What in the great lakes is going on?

My eyes dart from person to person, starting and ending with Tory and his insouciant grin.

“Clara, have a seat.” Coach motions for me to sit in one of the empty chairs across from Tory. It appears to have been plucked from an obscure supply closet for the occasion, based on its mismatched wood and cracking pleather seat.

Tory smothers a laugh with the back of his hand, and I glare at him, eyes wide with mortification.

“I’ll start,” Mr. M speaks up. “You two did an excellent job on your project. Victor has never been so knowledgeable in class, and it was clear that partnering the two of you was a great idea on my part.” He pauses to smile, and it feels like Mr. M is congratulating himself for cracking some sort of code.

“What is this about?” I ask no one in particular.

Tory huffs and crosses his arms. “Would you just let him finish, Charity?”

I snarl at him, and Tory’s mother lets out a low chuckle. “Sorry,” I blurt.

“Don’t stop on my account,” she tells me, hands raised by her shoulders. “He needs it.”

“Geez, Ma,” Tory groans, and it takes every ounce of self-control not to burst out laughing at the realness of the moment.

Immediately, I warm to his mom. I give her a broad grin as Coach clears his throat.

“Enough histrionics, kids. Clara, Tory needs a tutor. We’d all like it to be you. Now, I’m sure you’re busy with your own stuff so as an incentive, the Amato’s have graciously offered to pay you forty dollars a session. We’d like you to tutor Tory after school for an hour, twice a week. Take the next couple days to think about—”

“I’ll do it,” I cut him off. My eager response gets a laugh from three out of the four adults and a groan from Tory. But it’s really a no brainer. At least, it should be. I mean, seeing Tory more, plus I get paid to do it? Win-win, right?

On paper, it is. But as I walk out of the office and the locker room, tossing Tory’s jersey into his supply locker, I can’t seem to shake an

impending sense of doom.

Maybe not doom, exactly. More like one of those yellow warning signs on the road. The ones that tell you to proceed with caution.

That's Tory, for me. A walking, yellow caution sign

# Chapter 13

## Clara

The rest of the week moves by in an excited blur. I start tutoring Tory next week. It's Saturday. Halloween isn't until next Friday, but tonight is Tory's annual costume party. His family doesn't actually celebrate Halloween because they're Catholic or something, so there's never the usual spooky stuff and it's always off by a week or so. But Tory never misses an opportunity to party.

This year I dress up as Barbie. Luckily, I already have a lot to work with. My mom's old closet usually produces a few treasures, and she had a sleek, black one-piece bathing suit stashed away. I stole some pink felt from one of the art classrooms and cut it into the word BARBIE to stick across the front. Paired with pink tights I already own, old knee socks I cut into leg warmers, and sneakers, it made for the perfect Jazzercise Barbie costume. I got ready at Jasmine's house with the other girls from the lunch table, and she drove us to Tory's house. I throw on a pink zip-up hoodie that I'll wrap around my waist at the party.

When we pull up, at least a dozen other kids from school are sprinting into Tory's house. It's freezing, and none of us want to make our grand entrances wearing parkas, apparently. As soon as we enter, we split up. I find a drink and the dance floor. Tory catches my eye, and we toast from across the room. I tap my imaginary wristwatch, reminding him that we have a dance date, and he should just get it over with.

After a few songs, I go over to Tory and Tiffany and get a good look at their costumes.

Anger flames in my veins as I realize what that prick has done.

They're dressed as Romeo and Juliet. The Claire Danes and Leo DiCaprio version. Clearly, the idea came from our conversation at the library last Saturday. I didn't even know they were that serious, though, I guess I should have, given the hickies.

My face falls, and I can't help it. Tory has had plenty of girlfriends

throughout our one-sided love affair. Usually, it doesn't bother me. But this time, considering his recent actions...well, I don't really know, but it just feels wrong. It feels like sometimes, I'm able to see his private story on social media and sometimes he has me blocked, for lack of a better analogy.

Tory gives me a knowing look when he catches me glaring. This is deliberate. He's offended me with intentionality, and I can't figure out why. It certainly doesn't resemble our typical tit for tat.

"Something to say, Charity?" he asks with a mischievous smirk.

I cross my arms and scowl. A scowling Barbie must be quite a sight because he actually giggles. It must be the alcohol. His eyes are bloodshot and glassy—his typically graceful movements are a bit sluggish and exaggerated. And then, he does the unthinkable.

Victory Amato steps away from his girlfriend, the beauty queen, and wraps one arm around my bare shoulders, pulling me in for a hug. I've seen him hug plenty of other girls. But he's only ever hugged me of his own volition on one other occasion. At my mother's funeral. And that was a pity hug, so I'm not sure that it counts. I've hugged him plenty of times, but he never reciprocates, only tolerates.

Usually, he gives other girls a side hug and a kiss on the cheek, and I'm left feeling jealous, wishing I could push my cheek against theirs to get the kiss to transfer. It doesn't work that way, but a girl can dream.

The chain metal shirt of his costume is cool against my bare skin. While I don't get a kiss on the cheek, when he pulls back, Tory's eyes rake down my body as he gestures for someone to hand him two shots. He definitely doesn't do that to all the other girls. My skin tingles under his lingering gaze.

I step closer, seeing that Tiffany is busy flirting with one of the other hockey captains. Perhaps they aren't exclusive after all.

Tory hands me a shot of something amber that smells of cinnamon and bad decisions. Just like him.

Everything about him is cinnamon. He chews cinnamon gum. His vape is cinnamon-flavored. And, apparently, he drinks cinnamon whiskey. Everything but the gum reeks of risk, and I fear I'm playing with fire.

He hands me a shot and taps the plastic cup against my own. "To charity work."

As I stand there awkwardly, Tory does two more shots with his buddies, and I realize how drunk he is. He stumbles a bit and leans against the back of a couch for stability. Tiffany finally turns to him and begins dancing on him.

They don't actually dance together. Tory isn't a big dancer. He only dances with me because of the lost bet. Otherwise, girls just dance up against him. It's weird and awkward. But I guess guys like Tory get away with stuff like that.

Tory pulls out his phone and records what I can only guess is a very drunken Instagram story. When he pans down to Tiffany, gyrating against his lap, she knocks his phone out of his hand and stands upright, yelling at him. He cusses loudly, expressing distaste for the situation. Though, I would probably do the same if my drunk boyfriend started recording me in a suggestive position. He's an idiot.

They argue back and forth for a minute, and I walk away, finding a couple of my lunch girls to dance with. A few minutes later, Tory and Tiffany get loud. I walk closer because I'm totally nosy and live for the drama. It sounds like they're still fighting about the video he tried to take.

"You better not post that on the internet. Someone with my title can't be seen dating an alcoholic," Tiffany snaps. One point for Tiffany.

Tory leans on the back of the couch, clearly inebriated, a sinister grin plastered across his face. "Didn't you only get the title because the first-place winner failed a drug test?" He laughs. Wow. Below the belt. Three-pointer for sure.

She slaps him without a second thought. Dang. Five points, easily.

Those who witness the affront suppress their "oohs." It's Tory after all. You don't react when Tory gets knocked down. You look away in deference to his social standing—his status as a high school demigod. Unless you're me. I don't mind seeing him knocked down a few pegs.

He laughs harder and turns the other cheek. Literally. "Get me on this side for good measure." Oof. Two points. That was unexpected.

"I want to leave." Unoriginal, Tiffany. Come on, you got more fight in you. One point.

"Already ordered you an Uber, darlin'." He holds up his phone and waves it in her face. "Uber XL to match your vanity." With that, my mouth drops in shock. Four points. Scathing. Sometimes, I forget just how ruthless Tory can be. I expect it on the ice. But in social situations, it's unsettling.

Tiffany stalks off toward the foyer and Tory calls after her, "Maybe next time don't flirt with my friend all night!" That was petty. Minus a point.

Final score: Tiffany seven, Tory eight.

The prince wins by a hair. I wish he didn't. Though, no one has come

that close to humbling him in quite some time.

I turn to walk away but I feel a tug on the back of my unitard and turn back. Tory peers at me through hooded eyes. “And where do you think you’re going? I owe you a dance.”

He slurs his words, and I suddenly feel like I have better things to do than be his second choice of entertainment for the evening. Plus, his actions toward Tiffany leave a bad taste in my mouth.

“I’m good,” I tell him. But he takes my hand and holds tight.

“Nonsense!” he barks, turning to drag me to the center of the living room. “I’m a man of my word.”

“You certainly aren’t a man of honor.”

“I honor the honorable,” he drawls.

“Like you’d know.”

Three minutes of arguing later, I pull a reluctant apology from Tory and finally respond to him reeling me in with an imaginary fishing pole. If only to keep our streak going.

Halfway through an upbeat song, someone turns out the lights. Everyone cheers, and I’m tempted to roll my eyes, but Tory wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me close. Closer than we’ve ever been.

Far closer than we should be.

And then he stumbles backward, knocking into two girls. One of them goes sprawling and Tory asks if she’s looking for something on the floor.

“Help her, you drunk idiot!” I demand and he drops to his knees and leans in to kiss her.

He lays down and rolls to his back. I crouch down and tap his cheek a few times. He pokes my nose and says with a drawl, “Idiot? That’s the best ya got? I’m disappointed, Charity. Usually your insults are so poetic.”

I yank Tory’s chain mail and convince him to rise to his feet once again while I scold, “I didn’t mean help her like that.”

Tory apologizes and slurs, “At least I went ninety and waited for her to go ten.”

With a dramatic eye roll, I loop Tory’s arm around my shoulders. He has to get out of here. For all my playfulness, I do care for Tory, and I don’t relish in the notion of him engaging in more self-humiliation than he’s already endured for the evening. There’s something off-putting about someone like him imploding that rocks the social stratosphere.

Though, nothing seems to stick to the great Victory Winner. He’s

committed some heinous social indiscretions, but no debt was ever collected. At least none that I saw. While the rest of us are held accountable for our actions, the beautiful, powerful, or talented are sadly...not. In many cases, anyway.

We move through the throng of people until I'm staring up the plush, creamy carpeted curving staircase in the foyer. Suddenly, he goes limp. His arm slides from my shoulders, and Tory falls, sprawling at the base of the stairs. He's a mound of clothes, muscle, and indiscretion. I roll him over and smooth his hair off his forehead, letting my hands frame his face. "What's wrong, Tory?"

"I think I'm gonna puke," he sings quite loudly, eliciting cheers from some wildly unhelpful partygoers.

"Get up," I groan.

Somehow, I manage to get him up the stairs and into his room. At that point, he stumbles the last few steps and lands on top of the covers—no puke in sight, thankfully.

Several long moments pass, and I simply stand there, frozen in place, debating my next move. It's Tory's room. I'm standing...five steps into Victory Winner Amato's bedroom—a place I never dreamed I'd be. On the one hand, snooping is wrong. On the other hand, I'll never get the chance to poke around again. I don't like to waste in any form, including once in a lifetime opportunities to poke around my lifelong crush's room. The reasoning is flawless, scientific even. So I straighten out my swimsuit-turned-costume and turn to the wall on my right with the plan to work in a counterclockwise motion around the room and—

Holy...*books*.

## Chapter 14

### Clara

The entire wall is a bookcase filled with hundreds of books. Shakespeare, Nietzsche, and C.S. Lewis join the likes of Dasher and Collins.

There's a groan from behind me. I whirl around and blurt, "I thought you didn't read."

"What made you think that?" he asks, rising from the bed with zombie-like movements.

"You didn't know who Aaron Warner was..." I say while he rummages through a bureau and grabs a change of clothes.

"Just 'cause I don' read your kind of books, doesn' mean I don' read," he draws from the open door.

"Apparently," I mutter.

I tilt my head, thrumming my fingers along the spines as I read the titles for a few minutes. Until...my mouth drops in shock.

He has the *Shatter Me* series in a boxed set. The spines are worn until halfway through the six novels and five accompanying novellas. He isn't finished.

"I thought you didn't read my kind of books," I call out as he emerges from the ensuite bathroom. Tory's face is glassy with some sort of skin care product, hair pulled back with a black fluffy headband.

His wobbling gaze follows my outstretched arm to the series and shrugs. "You aren't the first girl to ever mention *Shatter Me*. I wanted to see what the fuss was about."

"So you bought the box set?" I raise my brows with suspicion.

He nods and slumps back down onto the bed, rubbing the back of his neck. If we were in school, I'd offer to give him a massage with a cheeky grin. But there's no audience here—no one I must prove something to. No one I must convince that I'm okay. That it's all a joke.

"Are you okay?" I ask him. "I haven't seen you this drunk...ever."

"This, too, shall pass, Charity. You're a dream for getting me up here."



“No problem.” I pivot on my heels, turning toward the door. “I’ll see you—”

“Sit.”

“What?”

He looks at me like I’m a fool. “Bed. Please.”

I comply. I wouldn’t for anyone else. It kind of bothers me, the hold he has over me for no real reason—only reasons I’ve foolishly built up in my head. He doesn’t say anything, so I offer, “Let’s get you tucked in, Romeo.” And I watch as this lithe giant crawls under the covers and lets me tuck him in properly.

Tory lies on his back, knuckles a breath away from my scantily clad thigh.

“I like your books, Clara. And I liked being your partner. I think it’s funny to make you mad. That’s why I picked these costumes. Every time you look at that wrinkle between your eyebrows, you’ll know it’s from me, and I’ll see the mark I’ve left on you.” He laughs sardonically, and I don’t see the humor.

“So, you enjoy my discomfort? How kind. In that case, I’m glad I got to see Tiffany dump you in front of everyone. Feel free to take credit for my laugh lines, I’ll be cackling about that little display until I’m old and gray.”

“I like your laugh, too. Would you laugh for me, Clara? I need to hear something beautiful to color my drunken dreams before I pass out.”

“Oh, don’t toy with me. You’ve been doing it since last week and it’s terribly unkind.”

He looks up at me, brows knit together. “How horrible have I been that you mistake my sincerity for jest?”

“Quite.” I intend the word to be said playfully and cross my arms in a show of juvenile defiance. An attempt to keep things light.

But he refuses to play along, brown eyes full of depthless sincerity. Tory reaches up. I feel the heat of his finger by my ear, but it never quite reaches my skin, as if he got ahead of himself and thought better of it. “I’m sorry, Charity,” he whispers.

I huff. “Coquet.” I hope that calling him a flirt in such an archaic term will distract him but, of course, he’s undaunted.

“Then flirt back with me, and give me one of those hearty Clara laughs,” he whines. “Would it help if I say ‘please?’”

“Why don’t you try and find out?” I tell him. Though I know I’ll relent.

He likely won't remember this tomorrow, or at least will only be able to recall vague generalities.

"Please, laugh for me." He drags out the E in please and leans over toward his nightstand—toward my knees. His waves tickle my skin.

"If I'm to laugh a true laugh, then you must amuse me, Tory. Tell me a joke."

Several seconds tick from the large decorative clock above a desk—both of which I've seen in a PB Teen catalog. I raise my brows impatiently.

"Victory Winner Amato," he blurts, then bursts out in a sardonic laugh, slapping the mattress and leaning back onto the pillow. "That's it. That's the whole joke. I should take my routine on the road and just stand there on stage in silence."

My face falls. I thought he had it all together. I thought he was sure of himself. I thought a lot of things. But just now, with one poorly timed joke, Tory has opened a door to an insecurity that I'm certain few have ever been privy to. His eyes are misty, and he clears his throat. I want to hold him. I want to cross this line and share a truly vulnerable moment with him—so badly, I want to be that person for him.

But I can't. It would be one-sided, and I could never truly open myself to him in the same way he's done for me.

So I don't.

Instead, I rest my hand on his forearm. Tenderly, cautiously, like I shouldn't even be doing this, even though it's the way you sit with a sick grandparent. I choke back the bit of emotion fighting to break free and hold his gaze in earnest. "Victory. Winner. Amato. You are not a joke."

Tory pulls his arm away abruptly. This time, his tone is biting. Punishing. "Not good enough for you? How about this one? I hate you, Clara. Do you know that? I loathe you so passionately I can feel it poisoning my marrow." The level of hostility that pours out of him takes me aback both physically and emotionally—wounding me to my core.

Hurt and anger flower through my veins in equal measure. "I'm undeserving of your cruelty," I choke out, rising to leave the drunken fool.

But even in his stupor, his reflexes are sound as he grabs the sleeve of the hoodie I wrapped around my waist.

"Don't go. You haven't even heard the punch line." His tone is light again—deceptively teasing. "I hate you...because I can't have you. Because I can never have you, and you parade it in front of me incessantly. All the

flirting. The joking. Day in. Day out. You're a merciless harpy."

"Stop, Tory."

"Not a fan of dark humor?" He pulls her back down and laughs the laugh of a drunkard. "Okay, here's one—"

"Well, now I'm in a foul mood," I shout. "I don't quite feel like laughing."

"Let me fix it?" He bats impossibly long lashes my way.

"You ought to. You caused it after all."

"Will a song help?"

I grimace, rubbing at my dry eyes. My contact lenses have been in since this morning. Without the distraction of the party, I'm reminded at how uncomfortable they've gotten.

"Please don't sing. I have a thing about people singing. It makes me incredibly uncomfortable, and I don't know what to do with myself." I rise and cross the room, flicking the light on in his bathroom. He protests but I wave him off. "I mean, do you look at them? Do you look away? Do you clap along?"

While I pull a travel-size bottle of contact solution from my purse, I marvel at the touches of cinnamon everywhere. Cinnamon diffuser. Cinnamon lotion. Cinnamon body wash. What guy uses body wash? "My rhythm is always off. Does anyone really want to hear my off-beat clapping while they sing? I'm borrowing this book, by the way," I say as I detour past his bookshelves and return to my patient's bedside wearing my glasses, contact lenses safely stowed in a case in my bag. It's one of the *Shatter Me* novellas that I wasn't able to get my hands on.

Tory's eyes are closed when I return, and I think he may have fallen asleep until he drawls, "Are you nearly finished with your diatribe? It's entertaining but there's no need to fret, I won't sing. I'll play a song." He opens one eye, squints and searches his phone for a song. "Music has wondrous mood-altering capabilities." He cues up Taylor Swift. When he looks up at me with that one bottomless, brown eye he says, "You're wearing glasses," as if it's the most novel thing he's ever seen.

I nod. "I didn't know you were a Swiftie."

"I'm not. But you are. Let's not breeze over this glasses thing. How long have you been wearing them? How come you don't wear glasses at school? What's your prescription?"

My eyes drift to my hands, twisting in my lap. "In order, I started

wearing them in seventh grade. I don't wear them in school because I was embarrassed about it as a kid. I'd take them off before I got on the bus. And now? I have contact lenses obviously. I mean, they kinda ruin my aesthetic. My prescription is one point five. Not sure why you need to know—"

"You're not still embarrassed about having glasses, are you?" His sloppy question cuts me off.

I pause for a moment and throw my hands up. "I don't know, maybe, my gosh, Tory. I'm just not comfortable wearing them to school. It's stupid, but whatever. Leave me alone."

"You're not stupid," he slurs, poking my forehead. "You're smart. Nuts. But smart."

A few seconds later I see the time and say, "I'd like to hear the joke. It's getting late, I need to go."

"Then I'll be delaying the telling of the joke for the foreseeable future to ensure you never leave my side. Or at least until morning so you'll stay all night." He drawls the word all extra long.

"Tory," I groan.

"Alright, alright, but only a small fraction of people actually understand this joke."

"Try me."

"There's a fine line between a numerator and denominator."

A smirk cracks at the corner of my lips, and I let out a small laugh. It grows, and he laughs too, seeming to relish the levity of the moment. "That shouldn't be as funny as I'm finding it," I tell him.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." I grab him a glass of water from the bathroom and leave a homeopathic hangover remedy on his nightstand. "Dissolve three tablets under your tongue every four hours."

"Why did you bring this? Planning to over imbibe, were you? Did I miss out on drunk Clara?"

"I brought it in case someone else needed it."

"That was kind of you." His fingers drift dangerously close to my knee, and I stand to avoid his touch.

"I'll see you at school," I tell him, crossing my arms over my chest and squeezing hard.

"Must you go?" His eyes hold a type of desperation I've never seen from him before. It's far more terrifying than his earlier hostility.

I nod.

He gives me a wan smile and asks with resignation, “Back to the old shtick on Monday, then?”

I smile back. “I certainly hope so. Night, Tory.”

“Goodnight, Charity.”

Tory rolls over and pulls the comforter tight around his shoulder. Just before my fingertips meet his doorknob, I hear his pained whisper.

“Charity?”

My turn is slow, and while I move, I question the judgment of the decision not to keep walking out the door—not to pretend I don’t hear him. When our eyes meet, years of unspoken promises and impossibilities pass between us.

But all he says is, “I can’t do this much longer.”

That night, when I go to sleep, I’m restless. There are people I could talk to—people I could ask for advice. But I won’t. We really aren’t close enough, though, and I don’t want to confide in Jack, or Jasmine, or Thomas, or Clover, or any of the lunch table girls. I want my mom. Or maybe even a dad who cares enough to listen.

The final thought that crosses my mind as I drift off is that the story of Clara and Tory, will surely be...

...a tragedy.

# Chapter 15

## Victory

After six days, Clara hasn't mentioned my drunken shenanigans, so I think I'm in the clear. It's Halloween. Kids dressed up. Clara wore cat ears, drew a black triangle on her nose and whiskers on her cheeks. I want to be her mouse.

It's Friday night and our first official tutoring session was supposed to begin right after dismissal. Tomorrow morning, we have an away game so there's no practice today, and Clara demanded we meet in the school library.

Three minutes later, I couldn't even hear her talk over the growling of her empty stomach. She didn't eat lunch today. I always notice. Sometimes, I'm able to get in line ahead of her and slip the lunch lady a few dollars to put on Clara's account. But my science test ran long, so I was too late. Maybe if her useless, idiot father decided to spend his money wisely, instead of gambling it away, she'd have money for basic necessities. Both of our lives would be so much easier if he just...disappeared.

I digress.

It took another seven minutes to drag her out to my car. I only accomplished this by taking all her belongings and sprinting to the parking lot. I threw her crap in the backseat and blocked the door until she relented and buckled up in the front. Then, it was another three minutes getting her to admit where she'd like to eat. This was only accomplished by threatening to take her to McDonald's which is, apparently, a fate worse than death for the health nut.

So here we are, outside a little smoothie shop on the town green during the first week of November in Minnesota. How very Clara.

"What do you think?" she asks as I sit on a neon lime bench, digging into my acai bowl.

"I'd rather be eating ice cream," I grumble.

"Not me, I don't eat dairy." She taps her straw on my knee several times to push the other end out of the paper. It's one of those biodegradable straws

so it bends and cracks, creating a little slit in the side but she doesn't seem to notice or mind. Clara groans with satisfaction as she pokes the straw into the top of her cup lid. "Ugh, I just love that sound," she says before taking a big swig. Air whistles through the crack. "Don't you love that sound? When the straw slides into the lid."

It's beautiful, really. The way she doesn't let little things steal her joy. Sometimes I worry it's all a façade and something is gravely wrong. Well, her dad sucks, but I think she's just happy she still has one parent.

"Never thought about it. Only pussies use straws." I pop the lid off my green juice and toss it in the garbage, kicking back a hearty gulp. I light up a cigarette and take a long drag—the one benefit of being outside.

Clara's eyes go wide, and she gives me a look of utter horror. Her lips tighten into a thin line, the impact of which is intended to be scolding. It works.

"Sorry. Only...poltroons use straws," I say. "Better?"

She considers, then nods. "If anyone's lily-livered, it's you. Sitting there with a cigarette and a green juice? You're an oxymoron if I've ever seen one. Or maybe just a moron."

I take another sip and a few more drags before putting out my cigarette on a brick beneath my feet. To my chagrin, this healthy drink actually tastes decent. But I won't give Clara the gratification of my admitting such.

"Since when are you dairy free?" I'm surprised I didn't notice. Perhaps I've been so focused on making sure she eats at all, after that first night working on our project, that I haven't noticed what she ate. "Are you one of those 'Oh, I'm DF/GF' girls?" I mock, because I just want an excuse to cling to any shred of disdain for the goddess before me.

Though, in reality, every layer I uncover makes me love her more. Screw Clara Larsen and her wiles.

"Are you one of those spineless recreants who has to insult the dietary choices or requirements of others to feel like a big man?" Her head bobs with sass.

"Well, I'm certainly cowardly." I glance up and see one of my former flings walking down the sidewalk with a couple guys from the football team. We aren't terribly good friends, but if they see me, they'll stop, and I'll be caught. Word gets around in a small town, and I've already been too reckless. The chief is bound to be breathing down my neck soon.

"Be right back," I mutter and speed off toward the bathroom.

When I return, we finish our drinks and head out. Clara makes me pick up my cigarette butt and throw it out. I would have done it, anyway. I might be a smoker but I'm not a wastrel.

As we drive down the road back toward school Clara snags my phone and chooses a song. "People Watching" by Conan Gray plays over the speakers. She pumps up the volume and sings over the music, using her hand as a microphone. At a red light she holds the invisible microphone in front of my mouth, and I grab her wrist. I guess I'll blame instinct, or maybe temporary insanity for what I do next.

My intention is to brush her skin against my lips and maybe kiss her, and I'm halfway there when my eyes go wide, and I halt. My heart is so far ahead of my mind. What am I doing? What are we doing? Taking her out to eat? Getting her to manage the hockey team?

My resolve is crumbling. Disaster is the only possible end to the path I'm on, as sure as the rising sun, it looms on the horizon. But I've been fighting this for so long. I'm exhausted.



# Chapter 16

## Victory

“Uh, Tory? You good?” Clara’s voice interrupts my thoughts, and I realize I haven’t moved for at least half a minute and it’s getting weird.

I choke out a laugh push her hand into her lap. “Don’t distract the driver.”

She looks through her phone for a few minutes and asks, “How many followers do you have?”

“Which platform?”

She rolls her eyes.

“Why does it matter, anyway?”

“Just wondering what fuels your massive ego.” I see her shrug and smirk out of the corner of my eye.

I wag my brows. “Ego to match my IQ.”

“Mmm, I don’t think so.” She shakes her head and narrows her eyes, clearly fed up with me. “If I wanted to die, I’d stand on your ego and jump to your IQ.”

A deep rumble of a laugh starts low in my gut and builds on its way out of my mouth until I’m hunched over my steering wheel. I glance over at Clara who is decidedly proud of herself for one, insulting me with such asperity, and two, making me belly laugh—a rarity.

I sigh, catching my breath and answer, “I don’t know, Clara. I stopped keeping track when I started getting paid. Nearing a million on TikTok, but that’s not saying much because it’s easier to grow a following on that app. Twenty thousand on Instagram, maybe?” I smirk, eyeing her as I flick on my blinker and turn down the street. “You should know, anyway. You comment on every video I post.”

She has the window down, arm out, hand surfing the wind. When she’s like this, I can almost envision her on my motorcycle wrapped around me like a backpack.

Maybe someday.

But today, it's cold, so I blast the heat to counteract the open window. She didn't ask to open the window, and I didn't tell her not to. We're far too familiar—too comfortable. Being with Clara would be so natural, effortless—like breathing. My heart twists with a violent strike of pain. Such occurrences are frequent, and the only way I cope is to escape into an imagined future with her.

"I comment ironically, Tory," she responds, hair whipping around. It's half-up today, in a yellow ribbon. She doesn't usually wear yellow.

"You comment, but you don't follow. Why is that?" I ask.

She shrugs and says matter-of-factly, "You don't follow me."

"I don't follow anyone."

"Well, you asked, and that's my answer." Sass drips from every word and I fight the smirk tugging at the corner of my lips.

"Noted." But something has been nagging at me for a while, so I ask the question, "How come you go dark for weeks at a time?"

"None of your business," she spits. Her tone is uncharacteristically sharp, and I rear back slightly.

Though shocked, I press forward. "I texted you once, about our project. But you didn't answer, so I called. A recording told me your number was out of service."

She looks down and smooths her signature skirt. It doesn't need smoothing. She's perfectly kempt. As usual. "Sometimes my dad doesn't pay the bill."

"Because you get grounded or something?"

She shakes her head with vigor, clearly horrified at the notion.

"Noted." I read between the lines. He doesn't pay the bill. He lets his teenage daughter walk around without a dependable source of communication. What if she was stranded somewhere? Or got into trouble? The thought of her not being able to get help makes my stomach churn. She looks at me with alarm, and I realize I've allowed my foot to go leaden on the gas pedal.

We're still in the center of town, and I know what that means. I tap the brake, bringing my speed to a safer level. My eyes peer in the rear-view mirror. I didn't see a squad car, but there's always someone posted up around here. Like clockwork, the inevitable red and blue lights flash. Perfect.

Clara notices a second after I do, after I slow even more to pull over. "Tory," she gasps, grabbing my forearm. "I...my dad."

“It’ll be fine, Clara. Just hop in the back and hide under my coat. The blackout windows prevent anyone from seeing in, so they won’t know to look for you.”

“But you’ll probably get a ticket.”

“I got this. Go ahead.”

She unbuckles and dives toward the back seat, crouching on the floor and covering herself with my coat.

The officer comes to my window, and it’s someone I don’t recognize. Double perfect. There’s one officer who knows my father, and this isn’t him.

I hand the officer my paperwork and answer the cursory questions. He’s in the process of writing me a ticket when Officer Paulman walks up and pulls him away. Looks like Lady Luck is on the roster after all. Officer Paulman gestures with his hands and the newbie walks back to his squad car with a nod.

“Thanks, Paulman,” I mutter, worried about what Clara will think and praying he keeps his mouth shut.

“Anytime. How’s your father?”

“Good, good.”

“Now, you know I got you if I’m on shift and I hear your plates get called in. But you gotta be careful, Vic. Especially tonight. Get home and stay in. We’ve had reports of kids getting into trouble already.”

“I got it.”

“And uh...” he pauses, not wanting to ask the question outright.

“I’ll make sure my dad knows you helped me out.” I don’t relish speaking the words. Being my father’s errand boy or messenger is pretty low on my list of desired occupations. But it comes with the territory of being an Amato—a lot of people owe us favors.

Paulman and the other officer drive away. Clara climbs in the front seat. She fixes her hair and re-applies lip gloss in the mirror.

My eyes roll back. This is the lip gloss that makes her lips look good enough to bite. I want nothing more than to grab the back of her head and steal a taste just to see if she’s as delicious as I’ve built her up to be in my head. With my luck, she’s probably better.

Her existence is the distraction I never wanted—never anticipated—never want to be rid of.

“What did he mean when—” she starts.

I panic and cut her off. “Hey, do you need a ride tomorrow morning?”

We have to be at school before the sun rises for the team bus to the game.

She shrugs. “I was going to see if the patrol on duty can give me a ride.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll pick you up,” I hurry to say. “You like Marilyn’s?”

Marilyn’s is a local haunt. The owner is a New English transplant. From the looks of it, you’d think she’d plucked the place straight from Gilmore Girls and plopped it in Minnesota. My mom and sister streamed the series dozens of times on the family TV growing up. I’m pretty sure my five-year-old niece came out of the womb singing the theme song. Marilyn’s is open from 5:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. and makes the most indulgent sandwiches imaginable with fresh bagels and sourdough—breakfast in the morning, traditional vittles in the afternoon. The statement “everyone goes there” is anything but hyperbole.

“Um, yes. Duh.”

“Alright, miss, geez. What’s your favorite?”

“I don’t get to go very often, but if I do, I get the egg BLT on her sourdough bagel.”

“Is your dad going to be home?” I ask. It’s an important question. Every time I see his squad car, I’m tempted to drag him out of it and beat him to a bloody pulp. Not sure I’d be able to handle seeing it in their driveway, knowing the piece of garbage is taking up space inside, especially when I’m trying to keep our budding...whatever this is...under the radar.

“No, he’ll be at the station already. I wouldn’t let you pick me up if he was going to be home...” her voice trails off.

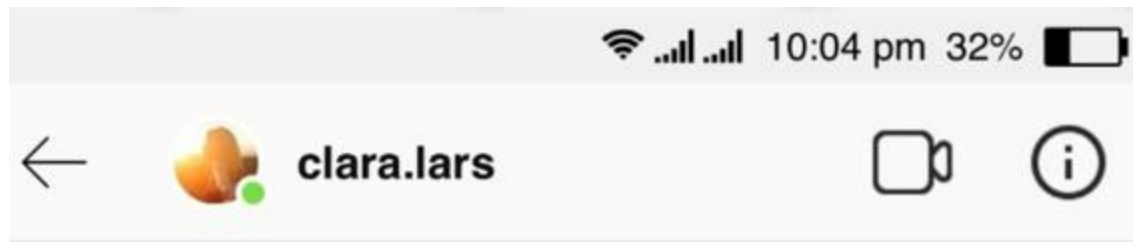
I nod, unwilling to find out why she wants us separate from her side of things. I know why I don’t want to be caught anywhere near Clara by Chief Larsen. But it makes me wonder what lies he may have told her about me. Or what truths he may have told her about my father to make her feel the same way. I shake the thoughts away. If he told her anything, she likely wouldn’t be speaking to me right now. No, if the truth about my father’s business was revealed to Clara, I would have detected some sort of behavior change in her when it happened.

“Then I’ll be in your driveway at 6:15.”

She gives me a small, bashful smile. “Thanks, Tory.”

That night, after much internal debate, my heart wins out, and I follow her on all social media. It’s dangerous. Just as dangerous as everything else I’m doing. She follows me back soon after.

I send her a direct message.



What's your favorite flower?



Ranunculus



Of course it is



You know it?

Do you *\*think\** I know it, charity?



You seemed familiar...

Now, I don't usually send women paragraphs over DM. But it's Clara. So, I break the rules, as I can't seem to stop doing lately—or ever, when it comes to her.

It wasn't that. It was the fact that it's you and of course you wouldn't love roses or daisies or anything common. You'd love a ranunculus. I don't even know what that looks like but I'm quite certain that, once I look it up, I'll find a beautiful and uncommon bloom because that's what suits you



Are you calling me odd?



A sigh escapes me and I roll my eyes, despite the fact that a smirk plays at my lips. My feet, crossed at the ankles, bob mercilessly as I quickly respond—another out-of-character move for me. Usually, I let responses sit for hours, or even days. I can't be bothered. But again, it's Clara and she has my kicking my feet and giggling.

Charity. Is that all you gleaned from my statement?



Uncommon and odd are not the same

Miss Perfect-PSAT-score should know better than that



My scores weren't perfect

Close enough



Whatever. See you in the a.m.  
handsome! 😏 🍷



Message...



I want to tell her I can't wait. I want to give her a smooth line that would truly make her swoon. But I exit my app and plug in my phone instead, counting down the seconds until morning.

# Chapter 17

## Victory

Clara's house is small. Humble but well-kept. In the summer, the lawn is always mowed. In the spring, perennials pop up in the front garden bed. In the winter, the driveway is always shoveled. And now, deep into fall, the leaves are raked and neatly piled by the edge of the curb, ready to be vacuumed up by the town's maintenance department. I don't know if it's Clara who does it all, to keep the illusion alive, or if her dad does just enough to keep people from asking questions.

He has a gambling problem. I only know because I started tailing him as soon as I got my license. Something never sat well with me about him. Then, after her mother's funeral, he went out of his way to confirm at least some of my suspicions. That conversation with him always remained in the back of my mind. Then, when I got my license, I started driving by her house. I'd imagine what she was doing inside, what books she was reading, the tears she was crying. I found it odd that he was almost never home. So one day, I waited by the police station and followed him after his shift, all the way to the off-track betting place a town over.

He went four more times that week. Enough to tell me it was a pattern and a chronic problem. It's why she never has what she needs. What I can't figure out, though, is how he's making ends meet at all. There's no way he's winning enough to break even. I'm sure of it.

She bounces out of the house in a parka and pink scarf, tote bag slung over her shoulder.

"Morning, Romeo!"

"Miss Capulet. I come bearing gifts."

I hand Clara the brown paper bag with her breakfast sandwich in it, my home jersey, and a thick, black cardboard box.

She holds up the box. "What is this?"

"You know what it is. I think you're aiming to ask why I handed you an activated phone along with my jersey and your breakfast."



“Correct.”

“Atta girl.”

“Spill it.”

“You’re my tutor now. I need to be able to contact you for help with homework or scheduling...without the whims or irresponsibility of your father interfering with our communication.”

“So, you’re...giving me a phone?”

“Precisely.”

“Um, I obviously can’t accept this,” she tells me. Though, she doesn’t hand the box back. She opens it and turns the phone on.

“It was an extra.” I wave my hand flippantly.

“You just have extra phones lying around?”

“My father owns a highly successful IT company. We have many phones lying around for business, not to mention the three I received as favors at my Country Club Cronies’ birthdays. It was no trouble at all. Walking around without a working phone is dangerous. Your father should know that.”

“This is way nicer than my current phone...”

“Cool.”

“If I use two phones, people are going to think I’m a drug dealer...or worse.”

I laugh heartily. “I doubt that.”

“And the jersey?” she asks.

It’s a question I’ve been waiting for so I’m ready with a sufficient response. “The game you wore my jersey was my best in a long time.” I hike up my right shoulder, eyes glued to the road. “I’m superstitious.” I’m not. Not at all. But at least 90 percent of the guys on the team would do the same thing and they won’t question it, even though it is quite a statement.

The truth is that I’m being pulled in two opposite directions. I want Clara. I need Clara. I’m in love with Clara. I have been for years. But there are external factors keeping me from expressing my heart’s desires to her. Truly, I believe she feels the same way for me, but she’s held up by external factors of her own. At least that’s what I tell myself. If all of her theatrical flirting has been in jest, I don’t think I’ll ever get over it. But in order for me to find out once and for all, something has got to give. Basically, I need to make a move, or move on. Though I don’t think I could, even if I wanted to. It’s not like I haven’t tried.

When we pull up to the school, other guys are parking and getting out of their cars. Most of them drive luxury cars or SUVs. Between the gear and rink fees, hockey is one of the more expensive sports. That's why I convinced my parents to start an anonymous scholarship fund for my old club team a couple years back. Right before I got to high school, I found out one of our best defenseman wasn't going to play because his parents couldn't afford it anymore.

Hockey is a notoriously expensive sport. Sticks alone can cost hundreds. Plus helmets, pads, jerseys, skates, pucks. And that's not even taking into account registration fees for teams and tournaments. But I think hockey is for everyone. I shouldn't be the best simply because my family has more money than anyone should.

Gifted players bowing out due to money will never sit well with me. So, we did something about it. It's also why they funded the new facilities at school and pay for away game buses. They're even funding the team going to a week-long tournament in February, and now, the managers will be going, too. Including Clara.

I park in the back, hoping to avoid having anyone see me arrive with Clara. To my dismay, Vince pulls in next to me and gives us both a funny look with arched brows when he sees her climb out of the passenger's seat.

Vince got dumped a few weeks ago and I swear he's been eyeing Clara. In fact, he's always had a soft spot for her, but I'd assumed it was platonically motivated since he was absolutely obsessed with his ex-girlfriend. Now, I'm noticing the changing tide.

We've played hockey together for years. Even during the year Vince was in high school while I was in eighth grade, we still played on a travel team together. He's not terribly attractive but his over-inflated sense of self and baffling level of confidence more than makes up for it. In addition, he's weirdly competitive with me. It started as soon as I got to high school a year after him and has persisted on and off the ice.

Sure enough, he quickly sidles up next to her and offers to carry her bag. I mentally kick myself for not thinking to do it, and physically kick him in the back of the leg to show my displeasure at his feigned chivalry. Vince could not be further from gallant.

I snicker as he nearly goes down. Vince is a senior captain, so he has age on his side as well as being an inch taller than me. I notice Clara tuck her hair behind her ear. It's red. I don't know what the hell he's saying to her, but

she's blushing. Vince is like a dog with a bone. Once he sets his mind on something, the jaws of life can't pry him away from his goal. On the ice, it's a fantastic quality. In real life, it makes me want to choke him 90 percent of the time.

We meet in the locker room with Coach Anderson and the Assistant Coaches to go over last-minute plays and strategy. I hear the managers gathering supplies and heading out to the bus. The team pours onto the bus a few minutes later, gear in hand. Thomas and Clover sit together like usual, but Clara is by herself.

Vince runs onto the bus in front of me and plops down in the seat next to Clara. She smiles. It's not just a polite smile—it's beautiful and genuine. Panic shoots through me. No way in hell am I letting this happen. I've accepted my jealous streak, and I usually keep my anger in check thanks to hockey. For all Vince knows, Clara is nothing but an annoyance—though with a generally pleasant demeanor. The girl who shamelessly flirts to get a rise out of me. However, I mistakenly believed I'd staked my claim over her—no matter how unjustified, with the great jersey fiasco. Clara wears my jersey now. That means something. Not just to me, either. A girl wearing your jersey is a monumental statement—a branding. A sentencing. Until jersey reclaiming do we part.

So, I do what any unreasonable, love-sick man would do.

# Chapter 18

## Victory

I grab Vince's phone out of his hand, fling it the back of the bus, and tell him, "Fetch boy." He has a military grade case so I'm not terribly concerned it will break. If it does, I'll give him another one. It's only fair and, unlike Vince, I play by the rules—even if only by my own.

"Tory," Clara scolds loudly. Her eyes go wide as saucers, and her mouth drops in shock.

"What the hell, Amato," Vince yells, but he has a hint of a grin on his face, clearly thinking this is a prank.

I wait until Vince passes with his gear, sighing all the way, and slide in beside Clara. Vince chases down his phone and by the time he finds it under one of the seats I'm settled in quite nicely beside her. I smile up at him when he returns to re-claim his spot.

"Move, Amato," he demands gruffly.

I beam and say matter-of-factly, "Make me."

He rolls his eyes with a huff and smacks the back of my sweatshirt hood, pulled tight over my head. I always dress down for long bus rides if I can help it. Today I'm in navy fleece joggers and one of my dozen team hoodies. My mind drifts to how cute Clara would look in one of them. I'm lost in thought, wondering if I could find an excuse to give her one when I look over and see her glaring at me with crossed arms.

I beam wider. Really, my cheeks feel unnaturally tight due to the broadness of my grin. She's so pretty when she's mad. If I play my cards right, I might get her to grab my shirt and smack my helmet again.

"What's the matter?" I ask, angelic.

She's seething. "You can't do that."

"Do what?"

She pokes my shoulder, and I already feel myself simpering. "You know what. You can't stop guys from talking to me."

"I didn't stop him from talking to you...he just would've had to do it

from two rows away. You know what they say: if he wanted to, he would.”

She huffs and faces forward without a response. We sit in silence for a few minutes, but I already don't like it. What's the point of fighting my way into a seat next to her if she refuses to interact? It was a dick move. Vince is a misogynistic douchebag, but she's technically right.

I groan and turn toward her. “Look, I'm sorry, Charity. It was rude. I'll do better.”

Clara ignores me, thumbing to her place in the next *Shatter Me* book that she swiped from my bookshelf, face expressionless.

“Come on, talk to me.”

Nothing.

“I'll bring you green juice every day for a week if you talk to me.”

She inclines her ear toward me but still doesn't respond.

“Are you really gonna give me the silent treatment this whole three-hour ride?”

Clara shrugs.

“I'll buy you a car.”

She ignores me.

“The silent treatment is toxic, by the way. I thought you were above that. Guess you're a walking red flag.”

She almost laughs. Almost. I'm being ridiculous, of course—reversing our roles is absurd. We have our system. Charity loves our system. I'm the grumpy one. She's my sunshine.

A few minutes later, Clara puffs her cheeks out in annoyance after searching her bag for something.

“What's wrong?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

“No.”

“Charity.”

“I forgot my headphones at home.”

I groan in feigned irritation, pull out my own earbuds, open the case, and hold it out toward her.

“No thanks. If I see your earwax all over that earbud, it'll shatter the illusion of your perfection, and I prefer to live in a fantasy world.”

I chuckle. “You're in luck, Charity Case. These are brand new. Haven't even used them yet. I just opened them today.” I hand her one and smile.

“Illusion intact.”

She stares and reluctantly takes it. “You better have good taste in music.”

I put on something loud and derogatory. She gasps and scolds me.

“I’m kidding. Here.” I play a soft and soothing song instead—something conducive to a long ride on uncomfortable bus bench seats. Her shoulders relax almost immediately.

“Do you always have to have the newest and best thing?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“You’re the problem with this country. Chronic consumerism is going to be the death of the economy. Buying less seems counterintuitive but there are far too many people in debt to sustain the current level of material consumption.” Her eyes flame with passion.

“Hm...”

“I’m serious,” she urges.

“I believe you.”

“Why weren’t you answering?”

“I was listening to you, Clara.”

This statement seems to remove her words altogether, which was certainly not my intent. I love listening to her talk. She’s brilliant. She teaches me things. She makes me laugh. Her viewpoints are practical and often profound, but I think most people miss out on that side of her because they don’t actually listen to her. They focus on the show she wants them to see, not who she is inside. Clara doesn’t make it easy for people to get to know her beyond the façade. I’ll admit, I still miss a lot. But when I do listen closely, I learn. And the more I learn, the more I love. Which is exactly the problem. If I didn’t love her so much, I could stop pining after the one girl I can’t be with.

“So, I’m perfect?”

She nods. “Perfectly horrible.”

Clara says the words with heavy lids. I lean toward her ever so slightly and she rests her head on my shoulder. I don’t stop her. I never do.

A cornerstone of Clara’s flirtations include physical touch. In the wild, she’s been frequently observed twirling her finger in my hair, pinching my cheek, fixing the tags on my shirts when they stick out—which happens at an unnaturally frequent rate. Oops.

So, I let her.

I say what I need to say to push her away. To keep her affections as a pasquinade instead of authentic. Because I think it's what we both need. But the more time marches on, the more I know I'll need to end the back and forth sooner rather than later.

With Clara's head resting on my shoulder, I'm thrilled I wore such a thick sweatshirt for her to snuggle into. I freeze, too scared to move and scare her off. Watching her yell at me is good. But this is way better. Lavender wafts from her hair and it takes every ounce of self-control not to nuzzle my nose in her blonde crown. Yeah, this ambiguity needs to end.

Clara turns and wraps her hand around my bicep, snuggling in further. And I've officially died and gone to heaven. When I'm sure she isn't going to wake up, I snap a few photos of us. In the last one, I hold up my middle finger and send it to Vince. I hear him cuss from the back of the bus, and I snicker lightly, not wanting to awake her.

The power of physical contact is not lost on me. Feeling threatened by Vince's interest in Clara left me tightly wound. Now that the weight of her is on my shoulder, her hand on my arm, I feel relaxed and ready to play hockey.

# Chapter 19

## Victory

“So that’s how it’s gonna be?” Vince chirps.

He holds up the picture of Clara and me on his phone as we don our gear in the locker room. Vince stands next to me in all his pads. Coach Anderson finished his pre-game pep talk and most of my other teammates are trudging out to the rink. Vince and I clearly dawdled, both looking to have this confrontation. That’s one good thing about Vince, he doesn’t let things sit.

I let out a whistle of approval. “Wow. I look really good in that photo. You should set it as your lock screen.”

What can I even say? Yes, idiot, I’m in love with her, back the hell off. No, I know I pretend to only tolerate her. Yes, I said she was an annoying stalker among many other unsavory terms over the last few years. But...what is that you say? I don’t have a leg to stand on? If I feel this way, I should have made my move already? Hm, well then, you’d be right. I can acknowledge all of this in my head. Putting it into practice and acting accordingly, is nearly impossible.

“Look, I like her. She’s cool. She’s cute. She likes hockey.” He pulls his jersey over his shoulder pads.

Cute. Cool. How profound.

All at once I’m painfully aware of just how undeserving Vince is of Clara’s company. Perhaps even less so than I am.

“Okay.” I tug my hockey pants over my shin guards, tightening the strap and tucking it into the belt loop.

“Okay? So, you’re cool with it?”

“Cool with what exactly?”

“Me asking Clara to hang out.”

While the timing is...odd to say the least, I have a feeling Vince sensed that I was warming up to her publicly and has decided to make a move now, before he lost his chance .

She’s had other boys before. Dated here and there, I guess. But nothing



more than a few kisses in the hall or sitting together at lunch. As far as I, or anyone else knows, she hasn't been in a committed relationship. To be entirely truthful, based on her behavior, I thought her to be disinterested in anything beyond playful flirtations with me.

To the best of my knowledge, that's still the case. I guess I'll know for certain when she either accepts Vince's pursuit or flat out rejects him.

If only it could be me...

But it can't be. Because of two. Major. Barriers.

Our fathers.

"That's it?" I ask. "Hang out?"

Vince shrugs, pulling his jersey over his pads. "Yeah. I'm not really looking for a girlfriend. It's my senior year. Been there, done that."

"Why wouldn't I be cool with that, Vince?" I quickly strap on my shoulder and elbow pads, the sound of Velcro echoing around the now empty locker room.

"Because you guys have some weird thing going on that I won't even attempt to understand." Vince gestures side to side, miming an unbalanced scale. "Like, she flirts, but it seems like a joke most of the time. And you flirt only sometimes but it never seems like a joke. I mean, she's wearing your jersey for crying out loud." He cusses softly under his breath as he laces up his skates.

I respond solidly, "That's not going to change."

He gives me an odd look. "The flirting or the jersey?"

"Both." My voice is firm, leaving no room for argument as I tug my white jersey over my head.

Vince wraps some tape around his socks, just under the knees and tosses me the roll. "Whatever. I'm just letting you know 'cause I don't wanna step on your toes or anything."

"Yes, you do," I shoot back as I catch the tape. I lace up my skates rapidly so we can walk out to the ice together.

He looks at me, dumbfounded as he stands, grabs his helmet, stick, and gloves. "What do you mean?"

"That's exactly what you want to do." I don't bother looking up as I finish lacing up my skates, then set about wrapping the tape around my socks.

"Amato, I—"

"It's fine, Culbs. Go ahead. You won't be offending me at all. Pursue her to your heart's content."

“Really?” His eyes light up, and he’s all excited. For a fraction of a second, I fight the nausea welling in my stomach, but the feeling fades, and I commit to not being a total dick. At the very least, Vince’s pursuit of Clara will take any heat off me while I secretly do the same.

“Absolutely.”

Vince smiles warily. Maybe he’s not as thick-headed as I thought. Either way, he’s wise to doubt me. “Thanks, Amato.”

I give him my best Boy Scout grin back. “Don’t mention it.”

“Hey, does she like being called Charity?” he asks, furrowing his brows.

I grin widely as we peg walk on our skates out of the locker room, hockey sticks tapping the floor. While I can’t do anything to stop Vince from pursuing Clara, I’m not above a little sabotage. I’m only human after all. “Loves it.”

“Wow, man. I thought this was gonna turn into some weird competition.”

“Competition? No, Vince, it’s not a competition at all.”

For it to be a competition, my opponent would have need a fair shot. And Vince, decidedly does not. Regardless of the feelings that may or may not develop between Vince and Clara, he won’t stand a chance against me. Especially not while I’m benefiting from him acting as a human smoke-screen to keep the chief and my father’s eyes off of us.

Vince and I catch the tail end of warm-ups. I’m tempted to hang near the bench, near Clara, but I need to focus. My conversation with Vince threw me. Maybe I’ll finally be having an off-game, both on and off the ice.

## Chapter 20

### Clara

We won the game, no thanks to Tory. He was just...off. When Coach benched his line for a few shifts Tory didn't even seem to notice. He parked his behind beside me and barely watched the game. We joked around and laughed a lot.

Tory doesn't laugh enough. Not his real laugh. He has two laughs. One laugh is for others, I think—cursory and polite. Sometimes loud, but never full—the laugh of a movie star being interviewed. It'll win awards and hearts, but not the right ones.

His other laugh is true and melodic. Deep. Uncontainable. It shows all his teeth—even the back ones because he tosses his head back. It shakes not only his shoulders but his whole body.

On the bench, while laughing true, his eyes had this tortured sparkle to them. Twin sad stars that know they're burning out but wants to enjoy every moment of their final glow.

I'm wearing jeans tonight, a fluttery white, long-sleeved crop top, and shacket . My curls were falling, so I French braided my hair and tied a ribbon at the end. Vince tugs the tail of my braid. It's cute.

We briefly greet Tory, and he gives me a withering look. I don't know what to do with that, especially since we were getting along just fine during the game and after on the bus but I brush it off. Vince peels off to hang out with the hockey guys.

Jack finds me by the snack table, and we chat for a while with the lunch table girls. We take a few photos together and do a "Shot Ski" of tequila.

Tory's parties are notorious for the "Shot Ski"—an old wooden ski with half a dozen divots whittled down the center for shot glasses. A couple guys spend the whole of every party marching around yelling "Shot Ski." If they stop in front of you and your friends, everyone has to take a simultaneous shot from the glasses. Tonight, Henry Mavis is one of the "Shot Ski" boys.

He sidles up and gives me a one-armed hug. This week in French we

were partnered on the classwork. He made an effort and didn't say anything terribly annoying. When he's alone and not trying to impress his friends, he's semi-okay.

"Be my pong partner?" he asks.

"Sure, Henri," I agree, using my best French accent.

Henry grabs my hand and leads me into the kitchen and I survey the space for what feels like the millionth party. Tory's house is a bit over-the-top. Everything is grand, ornate, gold, and mahogany. It reeks of new money. Not that I'd know, personally.

We chat about French for a minute while waiting for opponents to materialize. Henry's definitely feeling the booze. He tells me how difficult our last test was three times in as many minutes and he reaches for my hand, interlacing our fingers while we talk. I don't like Henry romantically. Not at all. But the alcohol makes it hard to care and my figurative laces are loosening.

"Let's play," Tory growls from behind me. I turn to see him glaring at Henry and my hand, still connected.

"Nice," Henry shouts a bit louder than necessary, directly next to my ear. I elbow him in the ribs, and he groans before pinching the back of my arm. I shove him off. Tory seems less than entertained, keeping a murderous expression directed toward us both.

"Who's your partner, hot stuff?" I ask Tory, alcohol-fueled mischief in my eyes.

He doesn't even pretend to crack a smile.

The party has grown loud, and the DJ is officially set up. Neon lights dart about the living room and the main lights are off. Dozens of people dance in a veritable mob.

Tory sighs, looks around, spots a victim. Without a word, he snaps his fingers and crooks his finger toward himself. Seconds later some senior girl materializes, all smiles.

"Partner?" Tory asks. She nods eagerly and says something low and sultry that I don't care to hear.

Tory holds up the ping-pong ball and his partner smooches out her lips to blow on it. She's staring at him, but he looks at me, eyes full of punishment.

So that's going it's going to be, I guess.

Tory's first throw taps along two cups and plops into a third. All three

get removed from play and they're officially destroying us fifteen seconds into the game. Is there anything he does badly?

I shuck my shacket and drape it over a chair, along with my bag. Henry cusses when he sees my top and grabs my hand to spin me around, letting out a low whistle. Tory isn't so amused. I'm half-convinced he's going to leap over the table and strangle Henry. I like it.

We both shoot and make it. We're one cup behind them. Tory sinks his next and his partner misses. She pouts. When Tory angles his head down to give her a pep talk, she looks up at him with doe eyes and flutters her lashes. I groan out loud.

"Let's get on with the game," I tell them, letting my jealousy get the better of me.

Tory glances over, feigning innocence. "Which one?"

The double entendre is not lost on me. I suck in my cheeks and raise a brow in challenge. "The one you're about to lose," I shoot back as I throw my ping-pong ball across the table.

Of course I miss, but Henry's goes into one of the back cups. He hollers, picks me up and spins me in a circle. One of his hands lingers on my waist when he puts me down but I'm finding it hard to care. When Tory's eyes dwell on the spot where Henry's body meets mine, I know I'm winning the game that truly matters.

The senior makes her next toss and wraps her arms around Tory's neck to celebrate. She's steady on her feet, so I surmise that she's completely lucid when she plants a long kiss on his lips. My mouth drops.

Initially, Tory recoils. Though he doesn't break contact, he sees me glaring from the corner of his eye and changes his reaction completely.

Self-control is a gift of mine. Usually. Right now, I feel it crumbling faster than my resolve to stay away from the one man who has the power to ruin me. I should pretend I don't care. But the jealousy spreads across my face before I have time to wrangle it. And Tory sees.

Everything goes fuzzy. I've seen Tory kiss plenty of girls. But it has never bothered me as much as this does. He glares at me as he angles his head, relishing my reaction before he pulls away.

This wasn't a moment of passion. It started as an unfortunate happenstance and morphed into a calculated, tactical move.

Anger sings my neck and ears. I kick back another shot with Henry and his friends. Cinnamon whiskey.

“Take your shot,” I manage to grit through the burn.

Tory’s smirk eats away at something inside me as he stands there, legs wide, arms crossed over his broad chest—challenging. He wipes some lip gloss from the corner of his lips with a thumb. Then shoots. Scores.

“What was that you said about me losing, Charity?”

A drinking game has never made me want to cry. Until now. Because we haven’t been talking about a stupid drinking game and this whole exchange is a painful reminder of that. Tory and I are playing a game with much higher stakes. In our game, the rules are unclear. But I’m certain, no matter what, I’ll lose.

Tory might win in theory, but I think we both see that he’ll be losing, too. It’s Russian Roulette, and no one is willing to pull the trigger. Maybe that’s a terrible analogy, but my vision is blurry around the edges and I don’t know how much more I can take.

Henry and I miss our next toss. Tory and his partner make theirs. Two cups left. They’ll win. It’s obvious. I can’t aim for my life when I get this tipsy. I decide I’m done. With all of it.

“You win,” I call across the table, spinning on my heels to push my way to the dance floor. Someone’s hand closes around my elbow. I guess Tory wasn’t expecting my departure.

But when I turn, it isn’t Tory.

# Chapter 21

## Clara

Vince sways with a lazy smile. I look beyond him and see Tory glaring at us.

Maybe it's because he's drunk, but Vince has stated that he hates dancing, so when he asks, I'm pleasantly surprised.

People push against us as I lead Vince to the center of the room and clear out a space for us. For someone who doesn't dance, Vince does a good job following my lead. It's fun and sweet, and when he kisses me for the first time, I kiss him back.

Then the song ends, and I see a tall figure out of the corner of my eye, almost as tall as Vince, but far more menacing.

"My turn." Tory's sharp voice cuts through the roar around us.

Vince sloppily bows out and he kisses the top of my head before he goes to the kitchen.

I cross my arms. "Maybe I don't want to dance with you."

"Well, I do, and I tend to get what I want."

My brows furrow, and I wish I could blow steam out of my ears like in cartoons.

"That right there is your problem"—I poke the center of his chest with my index finger—"Maybe it's time you start living in the real world and stop acting like an entitled brat."

He stares down at the digit still poised against his t-shirt. "Oh, I'm a brat?"

"Yeah," I shout.

"What are you gonna do about it?" Tory takes my hand and moves it to the back of his neck.

When my fingers touch the ends of his hockey-boy hair, I soften immediately. My voice comes out more teasing this time. "Mess around and find out, Tory." My words bely the fact that I'm melting—twisting my fingers in his waves like I can't help myself.

He quirks his head. “That’s a lot of talk from a girl who got a new phone today.” Tory leans back slightly and gives the DJ a nod.

“Tumblr Girls” comes on over the speakers. The mix is deep and throbbing—slow. Tory hooks his thumbs into the belt loops above my back pockets—thumbs grazing my skin. We start moving, and I’m not sure when it happened, but there was a cataclysmic shift in our dynamic. He changed the rules and I’m playing catch up.

“You okay?” Tory asks a minute later. He sounds sincere. My stormy thoughts must be seeping out onto my face.

People bump into him from behind but he’s a fortress, immovable against the pressure.

“Like you care.”

Tory sucks his teeth and spins me around. I wobble, thanks to the numbing effect of the alcohol, but his steadiness makes me look graceful as we move to the music. Tory hugs me tight around the waist, looking beyond my shoulder, lips close to my cheek when he says, “I think you know I do, Clara.”

“Actually, it’s really hard to figure out what you want sometimes. Your actions are totally confusing, and if I wasn’t so tipsy I’d have a bigger word to say.”

“So much to say about my behavior, but what about yours?”

“What about mine? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“That wasn’t a tantrum you just threw at the pong table?” He raises his eyebrows at me, thinking he’s making a point.

I shrug. “No. We were gonna lose, and I wanted to dance. It was a completely reasonable response.” Except I slur my words, and “reasonable” comes out more like “reap-able.”

Tory snorts a laugh and I spin to face him, curling my lip in annoyance. “Sorry,” he says. “I mean, come on.” His eyes plead with me to see the humor, but I don’t want to. “Can you just dance, please?” he asks, and I realize I’ve stopped moving.

Please is the magic word, and when it passes through Tory’s lips, I melt. Every single time. It doesn’t hurt that he looks sweet enough to bite and gives me puppy dog eyes. I want to smack him for unraveling me and sending any bit of resolve I muster into vapor.

But I wrap my arms tighter around his neck and let him hold my hips against his so firmly I think I might crumble into dust.



My fingers find their way back to his hair, just above his neck. His sure hands send my skin abuzz, and my heart pounds in my ears in time with the bass. I close my eyes and focus on his touch.

No one moves like him. Vince let me lead, but not Victory Amato. When we dance, he is in charge. I think it's that swarthy Italian thing. All that passion has to go somewhere, and he's always so grumpy, I guess it goes to his hips...and hands.

"I'm still mad at you, you know," I tell him with a poke to his nose when the song ends. We sway slowly, foreheads nearly touching.

"Mmm." He nods, unsurprised. "I can handle your anger, Charity."

Henry stumbles over and yells, "Clara, dance with me." He holds onto the second a in my name for a few beats too long. This boy is drunker than me by a long shot. But we're having a good streak of niceness, so I indulge him.

I give Henry my left hand, but Tory holds onto my right. He looks concerned. "It's fine. Go enjoy your party, Amato."

Wrong move.

Wrong word.

Wrong everything, apparently.

Tory wraps my braid around his wrist and pulls my face to his chest. He leans down beside my face and growls, "Don't. Ever. Call me. Amato."

"What?" I manage to gasp.

"You call me Tory. Only you. That is all you call me. Not Vic, Victor, or Amato. Tory."

My brows furrow in confusion. He relaxes his grip, but not the tense set of his jaw. "Since when?" I ask. "I thought you hated it."

"Since right now."

And...Henry Mavis is now dancing with my left arm like it's a piece of limp spaghetti. In fact, all of me feels like limp spaghetti and if Tory's free hand wasn't holding me up, I'd have dropped to the floor due to the deep timber of his voice.

Then he releases me and takes an ominous step toward Henry. "Find someone else."

"Come on, Amato," Henry pleads. "You can't hog her."

Tory huffs. "I'll do whatever the hell I want."

My eyes dart around the party, looking for Vince and finding him by the kegs in the open concept kitchen. He doesn't look over.

“Tory, it’s fine. I’ll dance with Henry. One dance,” I say, trying to mitigate the mounting tension.

He turns and looks at me like I’ve just shot a dart through his heart. “Whatever, Charity.”

“Let’s just dance, Henry.”

My new partner sloppily pulls me in tight. He mutters, “Finally.” Seconds later, Henry’s hands cup my butt and I inhale sharply.

I try to shove him away again as dull panic seeps through my heavy limbs. Henry sways with sloppy inebriation but he doesn’t release his hold on me.

Time seems to slow as I see Henry’s eyes go wide, though I’m sure only milliseconds pass before he backs away slightly. Tory blurs by me, shoving Henry in the chest forcefully, sending him flying into several girls dancing nearby. The music cuts out and everyone rights themselves, including Henry who foolishly puffs out his chest.

Everything else fades away. The music cuts out. Someone flicks the overhead lights on. Everyone is staring.

“You should run, Henry,” I tell him. He doesn’t listen.

“Didn’t I tell you to leave her alone?” Tory asks the question like it’s rhetorical but Henry answers, anyway.

“N-No.”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Fine, I will. Relax, Amato,” Henry says, digging himself deeper.

“Not good enough,” Tory growls.

All eyes are on us and I hate it. No one is in control and this situation could be interpreted several different ways—none of them flattering. I take a step closer to Tory’s back, which is facing me. “Please, don’t start something.”

He turns toward me, one side of his lips quirked up into a lopsided smile. “I’m not starting anything, Charity.”

Tory waves a lazy hand toward himself, egging on Henry. “You get one shot, Mavis. You’ve been messing with my girl for weeks. I’m coming for you either way so you better get one in while you can.”

“I’m good,” Henry says and tries to take a step back. He must realize what’s about to happen. This situation is spiraling. Fast.

Tory steps forward. His voice echoes around the room. “Hit me.”

Everyone shrinks, but it jars Henry who reluctantly punches Tory in the

mouth with a swift smack. The crowd reacts with an audible wince. Henry is a little smaller than Tory, but he threw all his weight into that punch and Tory did absolutely nothing to defend himself. The impact threw Tory's head back. When he twists around to face Henry again, his shoulders shake with laughter.

Nothing is funny.

Nothing is funny, and this boy is laughing.

Everyone's focus is on Tory and Henry. Vince finally pushes through the tight crowd but Tory waves him off.

Tory half-turns toward me, swiping the blood on his lip with a thumb. "See? I didn't start anything. He hit me first. But I'm sure as hell gonna finish it."

## Chapter 22

### Clara

Tory rears back and lands a solid blow against Henry's jaw, though I'm certain he holds back. Henry goes down, and in a flash, Tory is on him.

Punching.

Punching.

Punching.

Two. Three. Four times.

Henry sputters blood as his legs struggle for leverage to buck Tory off. But all I hear is Tory's sinister laugh.

He pulls back, this time with his left arm, and I dart forward. As soon as my hands wrap around his wrist, Tory's fisted fingers relax.

"Get off him, Tory," I demand, grabbing the collar of his flannel and yanking hard until he rises to his feet.

For a moment, Tory just stands there, glaring at Henry while I tug and tug. He doesn't even sway, and it's clear that when he finally does move, it's only because he wants to.

I grab a box of tissues from a nearby end table and yank Tory's elbow toward the front door. He chirps over his shoulder at Henry as we tear through the captive audience and right out the front door. The salted steps crunch under our shoes, and Tory shakes me off before leaning against the brick exterior of his house.

"Why did you do that?" I shout, rushing forward with the box of tissues. "You went too far."

Tory swiftly smacks the box out of my hand. "What is your problem?" I toss my arms out to the side.

"You," he says. "You're the problem, you're the solution. You're everything." It's clear he wants to yell back

"Screw you,"

"If you had all this heat, Charity, why didn't you use it on Henry Mavis?"

I cross my arms over my chest. Everything is frigid. The air, his eyes. He leans back against the brick exterior of his house. Both of our heaving chests begin to relax as silence stretches between us.

Tory pulls a box of cigarettes and a lighter from his pocket. The bubble of the last month bursts in time with the spark of the fire igniting.

He blows a plume of smoke up into the air through pursed lip. “No, you don’t want anyone to see that side of you, do you? That’s your whole thing, isn’t it? Dance with boys you don’t want touching you. Make your little jokes. Repeat your anecdotes. Keep things surface-level.” He points at me with the two fingers holding that stupid cancer stick, glowing in the night. “You’re shallow, Charity.”

Anger wells within me, swirling deep in my stomach, radiating out into my limbs. He doesn’t mean it.

I turn to storm back into the house. But Tory’s free hand darts out, grabs my back pocket and spins me toward him. It’s all I can do to stop from bracing myself on his chest.

“Don’t run. Tell me how you feel. Give me something, Clara. Something real.” His eyes dart back and forth between mine.

I open my mouth to speak but realize there are no words that desire to seek form. None of them fit—square pegs in round holds. So I snap my teeth shut and glare.

Tory takes a single step closer. “For the record, he had it coming.”

Another step forward. I step back. He smirks, and it teases my nerves in a most unpleasant manner. Annoyance itches at the tips of my fingers.

“Well, I didn’t need you,” I lie, jutting out my chin defiantly.

“Oh yeah?” He gives me a look. That look. The look that says he doesn’t believe me, and he knows exactly what he’s doing. That I did need him. I always do.

But It’s smug and I hate it a little. Smoke swirls from his smirking lips in a slow dance through the frigid night air.

This is all just a game to him. Or maybe it isn’t, but he’s still toying with me.

“You want real?” I ask him.

“If you’re even capable of such.” Tory lets out a sardonic laugh.

Blood heats my neck, spreading into my cheeks. Such audacity.

My hand flies up, a soft smack sounding in the night when I make contact. My eyes go wide in surprise at my boldness. It was symbolic. Not

enough force to knock over a blade of grass.

But he smirks. “Good start.”

Something unreadable is etched across his face as he traps my wrist with a grip that’s just a bit too firm. My pulse throbs against his fingertips. We stand there. My chest heaves but his breaths are even, steady, unbothered.

Tory’s lips part ever so slightly. As he brings my hand closer to his face, I extend my fingertips. He shivers just before I graze the sharp point of his Cupid’s bow. The wintry night doesn’t touch me.

Light emits as Tory takes a drag of his cigarette and holds the smoke. The flare of the burning end heats the palm of my hand, just to the cusp of pain, but I don’t pull away. When I trace the outline of his Cupid’s bow, Tory lets his chin go slack, lips gaping further.

It’s an invitation.

I accept, slowly moving my thumb past his lips, relishing the scrape of his teeth and the wet, hot of his tongue. Velvet smoke swirls past his mouth, twisting around my thumb as he releases his breath in soft pants.

Tory’s reaction overwhelms me.

He’s longing for this and enjoying it in some sort of tortured way.

I try to pull back, but his grip turns punishing as Tory lowers my palm and wraps my fingers around his neck. I drag my thumb down his lower lip as I go and find that it’s just as pillowy as I dreamed.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I’m absolutely certain anyone within a ten-mile radius can hear it. The bass from the music inside pulses all around me. Neon lights reflect off his cheekbones through the vast windows of his family’s mansion.

Tory wraps his own fingers around mine and applies pressure. I feel his Adam’s apple bob against my palm. His pulse throbs against my skin and I find that it rivals the hammering of my own heart.

“Do it. Hurt me,” he grits out, sounding just as angry as me. “I deserve it.”

“Why?”

“There’s a lot about me that you don’t know. For a long time, I’ve been convinced I couldn’t reveal certain...aspects to you.”

“Tell me now.”

Tory’s fingers are still wrapped around my wrist, and he uses the leverage to pull me into him. The cigarette gets tossed to the mulch beside the house and Tory wraps both hands around my waist. I brace myself against his

chest. He turns his head away from me and releases that final stream of smoke. “Do you not realize that when you’re close, I am mere moments from spontaneous combustion?” Tory says, a secret spilled to the night, rather than me.

“That is not how it seems,” I tell the white t-shirt he wears under the flannel.

“Oh, please, inform me. How does it seem?” Tory whispers, tracing the edge of my ear as he smooths one of my tendrils back. I tremble at his proximity.

“Arctic.”

“You lie,” he hisses, voice thick with attitude. Faster than he attacked Henry Mavis, Tory spins me, pressing my back against the cold brick. He boxes me in against the house with his arms and lets out a gritty whisper. “How does it feel now?”

“Pretend,” I whisper, cursing my trembling lip. My eyes dart to my shoes, then up to his hips, inches from mine and growing more distant by the second. Fingers itching to hook into his belt loops and jerk him closer get clasped behind my back. I’ve had too much to drink. Everything feels fuzzier now that we’re out here. The streetlights have softer, broader glows, and the music takes on a sinister beat.

“Let’s get you back inside,” he says.

His impossibly long lashes flutter closed as he takes my hand and moves to kiss each of my fingertips with a featherlight brush of his lips. Then he drops my hand abruptly, and the moment is over. I twitch my fingers, scarcely believing they were just on Tory’s skin. On his teeth. His tongue.

But they were.

And he liked it.

And...he called me his girl.

One of his many secrets, I suppose.

## Chapter 23

### Clara

He didn't mean it the way it sounded. I say the words over and over in my head. A broken record re-playing the same part of a song. He didn't mean it. He didn't mean it.

I leave Tory at the door and head to the kitchen. A few minutes later, I'm tossing back my second shot and Vince grabs my hands. Anything to forget whatever just happened outside.

"Your little fingers are like icicles," he tells me.

I smile when he puts my hands against each of his cheeks. He's sweet, but something nags at me.

"Hey, why didn't you come looking for me outside?"

"Like, when you and Tory went out there?"

I nod.

"Seemed like you had things under control. You two are weird together."

"Huh? What does that even mean?" I furrow my brows, shaking my head and feeling inexplicably offended. Maybe even a little self-conscious and nervous that Vince has figured something out that I don't even want to admit to myself.

"It means I don't understand your relationship. But nothing has changed in the last three years I've known the both of you, so it probably won't change now."

"That's true," I agree as Vince steps away and takes a red cup from some senior girl who's handing out concoctions. He hands me that one and grabs another for himself. He's right. Even if my dynamic with Tory has changed, our relationship will never truly evolve beyond what it is right now. It can't.

"You wanna dance, Charity?" Vince asks.

I recoil. Why would he call me that? Only Tory says that. Tears prick the corners of my eyes. I shake my head, kicking back my drink and folding



my arms across my chest. People are starting to clear out, and Henry ruined dancing for me tonight. “Not anymore.”

Seven games of Flip Cup later, I’m stumbling through the nearly abandoned party. My opponents filter out the front door, and Vince pulls me along to the living room couch.

“I’m drunk. Gonna crash here,” he mutters, falling onto the cushions with a bounce.

“Here?”

“Mm, like right here. I don’t feel like walking home. It’s too cold.”

Vince was my ride here. So I guess I won’t leave, either. Anyone who was sober already left. Poor planning on my part, but it’s nearly 2:00 a.m. Staying in one spot sounds good, actually. If I stop moving, maybe the room will stop spinning.

Suddenly, I feel hot and sweaty. The main house lights are on, and the DJ is long gone. Vince takes up the whole couch. There’s no room for me, so I grab a throw pillow and toss it onto the carpet.

My brain swims in a soupy mess as I lay down on the pillow, draping an arm over my eyes. It’s too bright, and the floor won’t stop moving like I’m in the middle of the ocean.

The light infiltrating my closed lids dims, and I open my eyes.

Tory. Is standing over me. Looking like an angel with a halo of light surrounding his head.

“Tor—” I whine.

He hushes me. “I got ya, Clara.”

One hand under my knees. One under my shoulders. And I almost retch when he hoists me up far too fast.

“Don’t puke.”

I close my eyes against his shoulder and focus on not getting sick all over him. “Don’t jostle me, you rakehell.”

His laughter jiggles me more, and I groan. Tory mutters an apology, and I feel my legs bob as he ascends the stairs. Everything quiets once he shuts us into his room.

My head finds its place on his pillow. I call out, “My contacts.”

But he’s there on the edge of the bed saying, “Already on it.”

Tory holds out a case with contact lens solution in each well. It takes me a few tries, but I manage to get them out and Tory secures the lid on each side. Wearing contact lenses to bed sucks. Wearing them to bed when you’re

drunk...unthinkable.

He rolls me to my side and reaches for my braid, unweaving the plait, then rubs my scalp at the base. I groan. "My gosh, you're an angel."

"Not a rake?" he asks on a laugh.

"Not rakish in the least."

I'm returned to my back and feel something wet against my face. Then something warm. A few drops land. One on each cheek and one on my forehead. Tory's fingers smooth whatever it is along my skin in and upward motion. Then it's something ice cold and divine.

"Is that a jade roller?"

"Mhm. Would you prefer gua sha?"

"Not tonight. How are you doing all this? Aren't you drunk, too?"

"No, Clara. I stopped drinking when you started. Should I help you to the bathroom to brush your teeth? I have an extra."

"Please."

I stumble past Tory and brace myself against the bathroom vanity. It's then that I see the tiny fridge where he keeps his skin products. Of course he does.

"Do you need help getting changed? I have clothes you can wear," he says from just outside the bathroom door.

"No, just bring them here."

Tory leaves the door ajar while I change. I look at his cinnamon soap, cinnamon hand lotion, cinnamon diffuser.

"Hey," I call from the bathroom. He's at the door in a heartbeat, arm outstretched to lead me back to bed.

"You want that tincture?" he asks. "I still have it."

I nod, feeling my consciousness slip through my fingertips like smoke. Tory's bed is perfection. Not because I'm drunk. Because it's a great bed. Perfectly luxurious in every way, including the sheets. I wonder if this is what Egyptian cotton feels like.

"What's with the cinnamon?" I try and fail to keep my words from slurring. "Cinnamon everything. Everywhere. Why? Spill one of your big secrets, pretty boy. You're so pretty, so pretty, Tory. It's so annoying."

And he fluffs his hair and smiles his pretty boy smile. I groan.

He huffs a laugh. "It's not a big secret. Cinnamon reminds me of my Nonna. She died two years ago. She made this crazy good tiramisù. But I didn't like the espresso or unsweetened cocoa powder when I was a kid so

she'd make a special version for me with hot chocolate mix and cinnamon. I ended up loving her traditional tiramisu, but she always made the special kind for me. She made cinnamon biscotti for me and my sister all the time. She'd"—he cuts off to laugh then continues—"She'd stuff them in our pockets before mass, and we'd sneak chunks when my parents weren't looking. My mom always wondered why we had crumbs in our church clothes."

"That's—that's actually really sweet. I think I'm gonna cry." Tears threaten to break free, but I choke them back. I take Tory's hand and kiss the back of it before curling up with it under my cheek and falling asleep.



The next morning, I find him sleeping on the floor, up against his bedroom door. He stirs when I nudge him with my toe.

"Morning, handsome."

"Charity," he groans and climbs to his feet, still graceful even though he stumbles about. Seemingly on instinct, he reaches out and wraps his broad arms around my neck, pulling me in for a hug. "Good morning," he mutters and plants a kiss on the top of my head.

That's new.

Tory zombie-walks to his bed and pulls off the comforter I just neatly tucked in, an attempt at politeness.

“Hey, can I hold on to this?” I ask him. One eye cracks open, and I gesture to the hockey sweatshirt he gave me last night. Paired with my jeans from yesterday, I don’t look like a totally hungover slob, despite feeling that way.

“You’re leaving?” His eyes spring open, seeing me for the first time and realizing I’m pulled together enough to face the public. My bag is over my shoulder, neatly stuffed with my shacket, phones, and glasses. I left the toothbrush and contact case. It felt weird taking them.

“Uh, yeah...what else would I do?”

His mouth hangs open a moment and a ghost of confusion crosses his face. “I just thought—” he shakes his head. “Nothing. Never mind. Yes. Keep it forever for all I care. If Vince and the guys already left for the diner, come back up. I’ll give you a ride.”

“Okay. Thanks for taking care of me last night.”

He waves me off. I creep downstairs to find Vince and his friends getting ready to leave. Vince pulls me into a bear hug, and they razz me for being hungover. I don’t bother asking if he was going to come looking for me before he left.

We go to a diner downtown, just like Tory said, and I eat a load of greasy food before Vince drops me off at home with promises of future dates.

It’s all fun and fine and good. I laugh my real laugh and genuinely enjoy myself.

But I don’t pretend I’m not haunted by the smell of cinnamon on the hoodie from the boy I don’t understand .

## Chapter 24

### Clara

Cinnamon surrounds me. I detect his scent before I see him, and I'm powerless against the flutter in my stomach. But when I slam my locker shut and meet eyes with the man leaning against the locker bank, something doesn't compute.

Because it's Tory.

But he's in glasses.

Tory. Amato. Is leaning against the neighboring locker. Wearing bookish, wire-rimmed glasses. And looking absolutely delectable.

"Morning." He smiles smugly and hands me a matcha iced latte. "Don't worry, it has almond milk. No dairy."

Some sort of choking, stuttering sound comes out of my mouth while I absently take the clear cup of green frothy goodness from his hand. The ice makes that incredible sound against the sides of the cup when I swirl it. He pops a straw into the lid.

"What—" I begin. But my shock strangles the words in my throat.

Some girls walk by and compliment Tory on his new accessory. He gives them a slight nod but never breaks eye contact with me.

"Is this all it takes to get you to shut up for more than ten seconds? I should have worn these a long time ago."

My eyes narrow. "Um. Rude."

"It speaks."

I shake myself back to reality. "Why?"

"You're my charity case. I'm going to wear these as long as it takes you to feel comfortable wearing yours. We can match."

"Since when do you need corrective eyewear?"

Tory simpers. "Since forever. Contacts are just easier with all the hockey I play."

He holds out a small plastic, lidded container next. I raise my eyebrows in question.

“Avocado toast on sourdough. My mom made bread this weekend,” he tells me. “And the latte has a scoop of protein so it’s a nutritionally complete breakfast.” He smiles in that self-assured, self-absorbed manner. “You can say ‘thank you.’”

I stutter, “I—I, yes, thank you,” pulling a Kristen-Stewart-in-Twilight-squint-and-headshake.

Tory tips his chin and saunters off toward his class. He has science first.

“Who says I didn’t already eat breakfast?” I call after him.

He turns and walks backward a few steps down the sterile hall. Students part around him, moving the way a river does around a rock. All he says is, “See you in history, Charity.”

“Uh, bye, handsome!” I shout after him.

Jack strolls up on my left. “Vic’s wearing glasses?”

“Apparently.”

“So, he’s into you...”

“What makes you say that?” I ask, a bit flustered by Jack’s statement. “He mostly tolerates me. We’re kinda becoming friends. I don’t know, and then he’ll randomly get jealous.”

“Because he’s into you.”

“Vince has been chatting me up quite a bit, too. He tried to sit next to me on the bus, but Tory stole his spot and then we went to Tory’s party together and went out to eat beforehand. Then for breakfast the next day. He and Tory are pretty competitive.”

“You and Vince had a sleepover?” Jack raises his eyebrows.

“No, actually. I slept in Tory’s room. But nothing happened.”

“Vince wants you too? Since when are you so popular with the titans of high school?”

I grin and smooth my hair back with my wrist, heading toward class. Jack opens the to-go box and holds it while I eat the avocado toast. “Being hockey manager has its perks. I’ve got my pick of the dapper darlings.”

Someone clips Jack’s shoulder, and he weaves around them to keep up with me after falling behind a couple paces. “But you’ll choose Amato, obviously. You’ve been obsessed with him for...forever.”

“I don’t know that Tory is mine for the taking, Jacky Boy.”

He scoffs loudly beside me, and I look over as we turn the corner. I smile and greet Clover who is walking alongside Vince. They’re both seniors but I didn’t know they were friendly enough to walk to class together—or

even through the halls side-by-side for any length of time. She grabs my elbow as we pass by one another and says, “Hey, sit with me at lunch today.” Her broad smile is sincere, and I nod excitedly, “Of course, girly.”

Vince calls after, “See you then!”

Jack eyes me with an I-told-you-so expression plastered across his face. “Looks like you have a lunch date with Vince.”

“You better not desert me.”

“Um, Clover is my literal dream girl so I won’t be missing out.”

“Perfect. You can see how Vince acts and get a read on the situation.”

We shuffle into class and take our seats next to each other. Jack and I made sure to get seats together on the first day of math this year. We’re both in a senior class.

At lunch I make my way over to Clover’s table. Jack joins me and Vince is soon to follow. A couple other hockey players sit down beside me at the long rectangular table, and I marvel at the odd little crew. Some of Jack and my usual lunch table buddies jump at the chance to sit with senior hockey players.

Vince’s knee brushes mine, and I pretend not to notice. He’s one of those people who always has a body part bouncing. Either his fingers are tapping, or his head is bobbing, or, like now, his knee is shaking against mine. I act as though it doesn’t affect me, but it does. I’m nervous and warm and want him to keep touching me.

Then Tory sits down across from me, and I suddenly feel like I’ve betrayed him—or rather that I’m in the midst of the betrayal. Tory looks down at the table, as if he can see through it, at Vince’s leg against mine.

I move away.

“What’s with the glasses?” Vince asks Tory around a monstrous bite of his turkey sandwich.

“Ask Charity.”

Everyone looks at me. I try to kick Tory under the table, but he wraps his ankles around mine. A sweet prison. He leans back in his seat, maintaining his secret hold on my leg, and laces his fingers behind his head.

“Um...well,” I stammer. How exactly do I explain that Tory saw me in my glasses in his bedroom without any follow-up questions? I mean, Vince must have known I slept up there, but I don’t really want it broadcasted at the lunch table. He smiles, and it’s vindictive and I want to kick him with my other leg but he probably wouldn’t even give me the satisfaction of a

reaction.

Sometimes his unflappability enrages me. Or maybe it's when he chooses to be unflappable versus when he's fiery. Tory is just so darn calculating—keeping every little show of emotion under wraps until he decides to let it out. I wonder if he's ever actually let anyone in. Maybe his walls are as high as mine. Maybe he has a lot to hide too.

“I simply mentioned to Tory that I have glasses so we joked that everyone who has glasses should wear them.” I sound stupid.

Ronnie Bertram, the goalie of our hockey team, leans forward. “Mmm, I'm not really getting the funny part.” I look back at his spectacled face. He wears glasses every day, and he's right, wearing glasses isn't funny.

I look to Tory for support and find none. He's beaming now. Jack and Clover are next but they're both just as befuddled about where this pointless conversation is going and seemingly unaware that something deeper is going on.

“And I think you're forgetting some things about the interaction, Charity. I saw you in your glasses, remember? A couple times, silly. You're so forgetful sometimes.”

“No, I'm not. I just...” I flounder for a few more seconds, and it's Vince who saves me.

“Well, whatever,” he says. “I'll wear mine tomorrow, too. I think you'll look cute with glasses.” He gives my shoulder a bump with his and I return the gesture.

“She doesn't,” Tory says, full of venom.

I give him the finger. I know I don't cuss as a rule, but this situation warrants the crudity.



## Chapter 25

### Clara

Vince offers to walk me to class after lunch. Our school schedule rotates so I have history next. I let him carry my backpack, and we chitchat about this week's hockey game. It all feels very eighties rom-com.

Tory trails behind us and Jack a few feet behind him.

When Vince drops me off at my locker, he turns, slaps Tory on the shoulder, hustling off to civics before the bell rings.

"Wow," Jack mutters. The din of the hall grows quieter as he switches out his books.

"What?" I ask, checking my teeth in the mirror and kissing my queen.

"Seriously, Clara? Did you not feel the tension you just orchestrated? It looked like Tory was going to launch over the lunch table like that scene in Mean Girls. I could practically feel the anger rolling off him as he trailed behind you and Vince."

"But I don't think he actually wants to date me. Even if he did, he wouldn't. I wouldn't. I mean, I can't." I lean against the locker bank, handing Jack my math binder. The cool metal against my sweater does me some good.

"I can't tell if you're in denial or just really socially stupid."

"Hey!"

"Or maybe you like the game a little too much? I mean, you're the only girl who gets away with treating Vic the way you do. Was this your plan all along? You know, obnoxiously flirt with him all this time get him to fall in love with you, only to toy with him and then date someone else." He rises to his feet and tugs the zippers of his book bag closed.

I clutch my books to my chest. "Jack, that's not—"

"It's kinda genius when you think about it." Jack points at me, insinuating he's cracked some sort of code.

"You must know I'm not that conniving."

A deep sigh seeps from Jack and he looks at me squarely, pinning me with his eyes. "Then, can you be honest for once? I mean I get your whole

‘not wanting to let people in thing.’ It’s why our friendship works. I haven’t asked you for more than that. But for once, can you be completely real with me and tell me what the hell you think you’re doing? Vic has been dropping hints that he likes you for weeks. He’s very clearly jealous of your little budding juvenile romance with the human refrigerator. What gives?”

My stomach drops. I didn’t realize Jack was perceptive enough to denote that I held people at arm’s length let alone any of the other intricate interpersonal dynamics. I won’t make the same mistake twice. I need to be more careful when it comes to Tory and Vince.

“That’s quite a reductionist view of Vince.”

“Okay. Never mind.”

Jack slams the locker harder than necessary and heads toward his class. The bell rings, and we’re both officially late. A few stragglers scurry down the hall, and a couple teachers chat by the copy room. But we’re mostly alone.

I dig the toe of my sneaker into the carpet. I’m wearing jeans and sneakers today, a rarity. “You want honesty?” I call after him.

He turns back, one strap of his tangerine backpack slung over a shoulder. “Yes. Just once. I swear I’ll never ask this of you again.”

“People with orange hair shouldn’t have orange backpacks. It clashes.”

“Thanks, Clara.”

I take a few steps toward him. “Look, the truth is, if Vince asks me out, I’m going to say yes. My relationship with him is simple. It’s straightforward. He doesn’t seem to want more than I’m willing to give, emotionally, and he’s tolerant of my situation with Tory.” I twist my hands against my waist, looking anywhere other than Jack’s eyes. “Things with Tory are... complicated. I think it’ll always be that way. Sometimes, when he looks at me, I feel like he has this special key that allows him access to every part of me. And he wears it around his neck or twirls it on his finger, as a constant reminder that if he wanted to, he could use it. So, yes, I push him away. But my resolve is crumbling so... then there’s Vince.” The thought of Vince plants a warm smile on my face. “That sounds like a cop-out, but I swear it’s not.”

Jack nods once. “No, it’s not a cop-out. You’re making a choice to protect yourself. Personally, I’d rather experience something so powerful it could break me.”

“I’ve already been broken, Jack. Clinging to the pieces is all I have

now.”

He gives me a knowing nod. “I get it. I mean, I don’t...but I can’t hate on your motivation. However...”

I open my mouth to protest, and Jack holds up a finger, raising his eyebrows to his hairline. “I’m gonna go out on a limb here and say that I want to be your friend. Your real friend. I care about you, Clara. I want to be real friends, not just school friends. You are definitely mucking up this situation, and I don’t think you should do it alone. At least let me be a listening ear and whatnot.” Jack waves his hands around like a clucking hen.

Discomfort worms its way through my guts. True friendship shouldn’t be so daunting. I’m fairly certain I grimace externally, and Jack lets out a soft giggle. “Okay,” I grit out. “But on a trial basis and only because you already figured out my wiles.”

“You have such nice wiles. Have a good class, friend.” He gives my chin a gentle pinch, and I scurry into history.

Tory ignores me throughout class. At one point, he excuses himself and is gone for a long time. As soon as the bell rings, he bolts with nary a glance. It’s not until I notice a flower stuck to my locker that I feel my heart sink.

There’s a note:

*Uncommon and beautiful. Just as I suspected. -T*

Tory doesn’t show up to our tutoring session before practice. I sit in the stands for two hours, doing homework and watching the team run drills and scrimmage. Several times, I hear Coach Anderson scream his whistle, and lay into Tory.

Tory’s behavior is becoming erratic. One minute he seems fine with Vince and I, the next, he’s scowling. Sometimes he seems like he’s into me, and others, like I’m the bane of his existence. Saturday is the perfect example. In the morning, we’re laughing on the bench together and at night, he’s acting tortured by my presence in some masochistic way after knocking out Henry Mavis on my behalf. And now I’m left with emotional whiplash. That’s the danger of not telling someone how you truly feel.

## Chapter 26

### Clara

Vince gives me a ride to the station after practice. He asks me to hang out, but I'm really not in the mood so we make a date for tomorrow instead. So I sit with Marcia, my favorite receptionist and get the latest update on her grandkids. She shows me pictures of them from the lake this summer, and I realize I haven't spent much time at the station since school ended last year. My father has gotten worse, and I've been avoiding him at all costs. It's just easier to stay out of his way most of the time.

Marcia brought homemade split pea soup and fresh sourdough. She heated it up in her slow cooker for everyone in the breakroom, and we wolf it down at her desk. My homework is done, and I've outlined an essay that's due next week. I studied for a test that won't happen for two days. There are a few extra laptops that the detectives use to take people's statements in private rooms, and I use one to look at colleges. After reading about various academic programs at in-state schools, I find my focus drifting toward hockey team rankings.

Boston University is ranked number one. Minnesota a close second. I wonder where Tory will go. He always wants the best, gets the best. My heart trips over an uneven beat when I realize he'll probably go out of state.

"Watcha doing?" Marcia asks, peering over my shoulder.

"Just looking at colleges." I give her a small smile. Small because my grades will gain me entrance at most institutions, but I'll be limited to where I can gain a full scholarship.

"Have your sights set on any?"

I shrug. "Somewhere in state."

Marcia rattles off half a dozen follow-up questions. She has six children and fifteen grandchildren, a few of whom have already gone through the college application process. I imagine she's gained a lot of knowledge on the topic, perhaps at her family's weekly Sunday night dinners. She said she makes three pounds of ziti and thirty meatballs every week. She lost her

husband to cancer a few months before my mom died.

That's likely why she's become so loyal to my father. She thinks they've been through the same thing. Sometimes I wonder if she'd even believe me, were I to blurt out the truth.

"Do you have much interest in college hockey?" she asks, gesturing to the pictures still displayed on the screen.

I exit from the windows and lean back in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest protectively. "Well, I like hockey, and I'm managing the team now."

"That Victor Amato sure is a looker, isn't he?" She eyes me warily over her third mug of soup. The metal spoon clinks against the chipped ceramic rim as she stirs and blows steam from the surface.

"He is." There's no denying it, and if I tried, Marcia would certainly grow suspicious.

"You've been wearing his jersey."

Oh. So she's digging. "I have."

"I hope your father doesn't find out."

"He doesn't go to the games. I don't see how he would."

Marcia sighs and abruptly rises from the chair across from the table I've been sitting at, leaving her soup mug and a couple wayward green plops behind. She returns moments later with a folded-up newspaper and drops it on the desk beside my hand.

I unfold the paper, my eyes immediately zeroing in on the large, color photo on the front page of the sports section. Two figures wearing AMATO jerseys sit close together on the bench. One wears their blonde curls in a ponytail with a ribbon. She's looking at the boy beside her. Smiling broadly, like she's...in love. The boy's head is tossed back—mid-laugh, but you can't see his face. It's grainy, but it's very obviously me and very obviously him.

"Did the chief see this?" I ask casually. It may seem weird that I call him "the chief" but I started doing it after my mom died, and no one said anything about it. I don't even call him "dad" to his face. He doesn't deserve the title.

Marcia shakes her head. "No, I pulled that page from all the copies before he could see it. He usually only reads the police reports and the breaking news, anyway." She folds and re-folds a soiled paper towel on the table, her knobby fingers deft.

My eyes narrow with suspicion. "What made you do that?"

She glances behind her, careful to make sure no one will interrupt us and

overhear what she's about to say. Marcia rests her hand on my forearm, and I lean forward to listen closely.

"That boy is trouble, Clara."

"He's not—"

"I know you think you know him, but you don't know his family. It's no secret that your father dislikes him. But it's for a good reason."

"What's the reason?"

"Now I can't tell you that, honey, and don't go trying to sniff it out for yourself. I'm serious. I can't have it getting back that I even mentioned this to you. I know that boy is as handsome as they come, but don't be blinded to it like all the other girls. He'll just break your heart. It's in his nature."

"How could you possibly know that? Have you ever even spoken to him?"

"Don't need to."

Just then, my father raps on the door. I'm certain Marcia is about to jump out of her skin. She isn't a very good spy, or double agent, or whatever she was just trying to be.

"Ready to go, Clara?" he asks. Asks. As if I have the choice. The warmth in his smile is fake. He looks constipated. I'm sure it's Marcia's blind loyalty that keeps her from seeing. The refusal of Marcia, and everyone else on the police force, to see through his façade makes me question everything. Including the validity of whatever vitriol she just spewed about Tory.

Marcia smiles at me and says, "I packed up a container of soup for you and Dad and put it in your backpack."

"Thanks, Marsh," the chief says, sliding his jacket on. He puts a heavy paw on my shoulder and leads me out the front door. I used to wince when he touched me, but I learned my lesson pretty quickly.

On the car ride home, I steal a glance at the chief. Deep bags line his eyes, and I think he's aged ten years in half as much time. I think he would have been a good father if my mom hadn't died. Or at least a halfway decent one.

I don't ask him about his day. I answer any questions he asks respectfully and with just the right amount of detail. Not enough, and I'm rude. Too much, and I'm annoying. It's a delicate balance, but I manage.

Accidentally slamming the car door shut was never something I thought about before. I do now. I'm careful to close the passenger side gently, but with enough force to actually seal it. Inside, I quickly sort the mail and ask,

“Would you like me to heat you some soup on the stove?”

Nervously wringing hands get hidden behind my back. The chief doesn't like fidgeting.

Specifics are helpful. Heating something in the microwave when he wanted it from the stove or oven is bad. The opposite mistake is even worse. I make the soup. Deliver it in a large mug with a handle, in case he wants to eat it on the couch. The television blares and he mutters a “thank you.”

Then, I disappear. I clean the dishes and tidy up quietly. Nothing loud like the vacuum. Nothing that would cause an inconvenience like mopping. Those get done when he's at work. I skip the stair that creaks and get ready for bed.

The chief sleeps in the primary bedroom with an attached bathroom, so he doesn't use the one in the hall. Even so, I keep my products in my room to prevent him from thinking I'm a spendthrift.

If you look around my house, you'd think I died when my mom died. Aside from my bedroom, and the washer and dryer on laundry days, there's virtually no evidence that a teenage girl lives here.

No photos of me grace the walls after age thirteen. Most of them are of the three of us, or me and mom, or the chief and my mom. None of him and I from any age. Based on the way photos of me stop, you'd think I'd died right alongside her.

But he never comes in my room. So it's my sanctuary. I've turned it into one. It's pink. Always has been. I put up fairy lights that one of my neighbors was throwing out and tacked some fake ivy along the walls. A soft girl's oasis.

Tory's hoodie still smells like cinnamon, and I put it on, dreading the next wash day.

# Chapter 27

## Victory

Looks like I've sufficiently mucked things up with Clara. We've been seated at a table grouping in an empty classroom for three minutes, and she hasn't looked at me once. Three minutes might not sound like a long time, but when you're waiting for something, it's an eternity.

Henry Mavis wasn't at school today. I talked to him yesterday, and he isn't going to press charges or anything. He was understandably upset until I explained to him, in full detail, what he was doing to Clara. By the end of the conversation, he realized it could have been much worse for him. Nothing was broken, and his parents grounded him after I convinced him to tell them why they shouldn't be irate with me. If there's anything I won't do, it's take the fall for a scumbag. I really don't think he'll be bothering Clara again, especially now that I had his parents call the school and transfer him out of Clara's French class.

Today is a mandatory team study hall day. The rest of the team is crammed into one of the health and wellness classrooms by the gym, but Clara and I get a room to ourselves so we can focus.

"Can we talk?" I ask her, feeling bold after the weekend. Clara leaving with Vince threw me for a loop. Perhaps I was wrong to think things would be any different in the morning. Our circumstances haven't changed, after all.

"About?"

"Us."

"I swear, Tory. Are there any lengths you won't go to in order to avoid doing work?"

"Very few, actually."

"Such as?"

"Torture. Definitely torture."

"Funny, that's exactly how I'd describe this impending conversation."

"Unsurprising."

She rolls her eyes, and I nearly split in two. It's distracting. She's always



distracting. My favorite detour.

“Do you have any tests we can make flashcards for? Coach gave me some supplies for our session...”

“Things have changed between us.”

“Actually, I think I forgot them in my locker.” She laughs nervously and stands.

“Sit, Clara.”

She looks like Cher or Deon from *Clueless* today. Plaid miniskirt with cable-knit tights and lug sole loafers. The skirt bells out when she plops back down, neck flushed deep red.

The room is cold, be it the lack of bodies or lack of a functional radiator. Goosebumps pepper her forearms and chest. I toss my hat onto the desk in front of me and yank my quarter-zip sherpa over my head. The hat returns to my head, and I hand her the extra layer before straightening out my remaining t-shirt. Clara pokes her arms into the sleeves, letting her fingers poke through the hand-holes, but doesn't pull it on all the way over her head.

Her voice comes out small. “Why?”

“Why what?” I ask.

“Why did things change? I didn't change anything. You changed the rules, Tory. You always do. I didn't want anything to change. I was perfectly content with things exactly as they were, and you act like you can just do whatever you want with no concern for anyone else.”

“I didn't mean to, Clara.”

She sighs, a heavy pall spreading over the room—over us. The weight of the moment is surprising, but I welcome the raw, real version of her.

After a long moment passes between us, I ask quietly, “Were you truly happy with the way things were?”

“Yes,” she answers immediately.

I wait again, giving her more time to sit with the implications of the conversation. Then, I say, “Are you lying?” To me, or herself, I don't specify. Both, perhaps.

“I don't think so.”

“What would you say if I asked you out on a date?”

“I would say no.”

“You'd say no.” I nod slowly, pursing the corner of my lips. They don't know what they want to do. One corner wants to smile. The other is frustrated.

“Correct.” She nods, resolute, then looks at me and says firmly, “I would say no, Tory. For many reasons, the least of which not being that you only seem to be showing interest now that Vince and I are involved.” Her knee bounces, shaking the desk in front of her.

“False. We’ve been flirting for years.”

“Double false. I flirted. You’ve been...vicious.” She shudders when she says it, as if reliving some of my most scathing remarks. “You sure are eloquent, but you’re also venomous.”

“I am.”

“You are.”

I sit back in the chair, balancing on the back two legs. There are tennis balls on the bottom. Usually, such inventions are for chairs on tile floors but this one is gray, berber carpet so the green orbs are matted with hair and lint. It’s disgusting. “Yes, Clara, my eloquence primarily emerges when I find myself particularly enraged. My focus narrows to the jugular and the sharpest words available spring forth on my tongue like quicksilver.” My casual posture starkly contradicts my words.

“An accurate summation if there ever was one,” she agrees.

I lean forward, bringing my chair back down and my lips close enough to brush the tendrils of hair by her ear. More goosebumps. This time along her neck and not because of the temperature.

Some of the guys walk by, laughing and engaging in some sort of horseplay. No one in the world knows that we’re having a monumental shift in our paradigm in this room. “But it’s not just that. There are many other reasons we can’t be together,” she says.

I nod, slowly again, and sigh deeply. “I don’t know your reasons, but I have my own. They aren’t my reasons but they’re on my end. It sounds like there are reasons on your end, too...” I trail off.

“On my end and also my reasons,” she says.

“Such as?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she says quickly, waving a hand between us and shattering the tension. “That’s neither here nor there. The point is, it can’t happen. If we open that door, it’ll ruin everything and create a lot of problems.”

“Fine. Friends.” I say it in the next heartbeat. I had a feeling this would turn into a negotiation, and I already expected to counter. Clara changing her mind is like turning a very large, very determined ship. It happens slowly.

She wrinkles her nose. “Friends?”

“Friends.”

“You’re being serious?”

“Why do you always think I’m insincere? It’s highly unflattering.”

“You are confusing.”

“I’m sorry.” I’m not terribly sorry, and I get the distinct sense that she doesn’t believe me, but I say it anyway.

“How good of friends? Because Jack already got me to agree to being his friend this week and—”

I slide in close and whisper, “Best friends.”

She blushes ear to ear and looks over at me shyly. Her hands have been pinned under her thighs, but now they’re twisting in her lap. “I’m not really good at the whole friends thing.”

I give her a devious smile. “Neither am I.”

So, Clara and I are friends. Just friends. For now. She doesn’t want to admit that, but it’s fine with me. I actually feel a sense of relief. We’re something. Even if it’s not the label I desire, it’s a label I can live with. For now.

For now, I’ll do the tutoring sessions. But I’ve got a plan for all of it. Can’t do much tutoring if I do my work at home the night before. Usually, my free time is spent on girls and my bike. Well, riding season is nearly over and women? No interest. When it comes to Vince, he serves an important role in my plan. A false flag if you will. While everyone focuses on their relationship, I’ll be working in the background to win her over. Our chemistry is undeniable. There’s no risk of being in the friend-zone permanently.

Tutoring will end early when my work is done and then we’ll talk. Exist in proximity. Grow closer in a more meaningful way. More time for me to enjoy the way her hair reflects light and the smell of her skin. I didn’t think a human could genuinely smell nice, but she does. Maybe it’s pheromones or those compatibility genes that Swiss zoologist studied in the nineties. If Clara and I were in that experiment, I have no doubt we would have picked each other’s t-shirts.

“So...buddy ole pal, what do you have to work on?” she asks me.

“Lab report,” I tell her, pulling out my laptop. Half of it was finished last night, and the work I have left will be quick and easy to talk around. “Can you read off my notes while I type them up?”

“Sure.” She gives me a relieved smile, and I can tell she’s nervous to come up with things for me to do during these study sessions.

Through the rustle of my spiral-bound notebook, I hear her stomach growl. Did she eat lunch? I think back, trying to picture what she had. Was it a bagel with peanut butter? Those are only a dollar...

“Earth to Tory.” Clara waves a hand in front of my face. I shake my head and smile. Before she has a chance to start reading off my notes, I dig into my backpack and hand her a couple grass-fed beef sticks.

She attempts to wave me off. “Oh, that’s okay. I don’t want to take your food all the time.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but listening to your stomach growl and knowing you’re hungry is...distracting.”

“Distracting. To you?”

I nod.

“Sorry,” she mutters.

“It’s just,” I pause, worried about finishing the sentence. Scaring her off is always a possibility, especially with the tentative nature of this phony “friendship” label and the fact that I want to lay her across the desk and—“I worry.”

“About me?” She looks surprised.

“Yes.”

“In a friendly way?” she teases.

I lean in, tracing the line of my lips with a fingertip. “In a decidedly unfriendly way. Possibly the unfriendliest of ways.”

“Oh.” She looks down at my blocky handwriting on the notebook in her lap. I stare beyond her at the poster of a kitten that says, Hang in there.

“If it makes you feel any better. I bring extra snacks for the guys, too. A bunch of the sophomores are always hungry after the weight room, and they never have anything.”

Clara huffs a laugh, and I know my words have helped. “It does.”

She peels open the wrapper and munches away while reading off my notes.

As I planned, the work I brought takes about forty minutes, and we have ten minutes left to hangout. While we worked, I made her laugh approximately six times and blush twice. Don’t want to overdo it with the innuendos, after all. With my laptop secured and my books put away, I rest my elbow on the gray, wobbly desk and angle my body toward her. Clara

does the same, and we smile. Real smiles. I trace the heart someone etched into the desk and begin to ask her if she needs the next book in the *Shatter Me* series.

“So did—” Unfortunately, Vince walks in, boisterous as ever, and completely foils my attempt.

“Well, if it isn’t my two favorite people,” he bellows, flicking off the light and diving onto the grouping of desks in front of us. He props his head up with his fist and strikes a pose. “Has anyone told the two of you how sexy you are?”

“Not today,” I answer.

Clara just giggles. It annoys me that Vince makes her shy. If I said the exact same thing to her, she would’ve had a snide quip in her back pocket. But with him? She blushes and giggles, and I swear her finger itches to twirl one of her curls.

Makes me sick.

“Hey, Clare Bear, we still on for tomorrow? Coach needs me after practice, but I could scoop you up by six.”

Planning a date right in front of me. No thanks.

“Sounds good,” she tells him.

I stand up and grab my bag, pulling a white envelope from my pocket and putting it on her lap discreetly. She slides it into her own backpack without breaking eye contact from Vince. I decided to pay her for tutoring in cash since I don’t have to hide the fact that I’m paying her.

Between tutoring and managing, she’s making over a hundred dollars a week. It’s not enough, but anything else would raise suspicion.

As I reach the door, Clara calls my name, and I turn to see her holding up my quarter-zip. “Thanks for letting me borrow this.” Then to Vince, as if she needs to explain, “I’m always chilly.”

“Anytime,” I tell her. “So, tutoring on Thursday after practice?”

She smiles and nods. Vince holds out a fist, and I knock mine against his before meandering out the door. Despite my casual pace, I’m itching to be free of them.

Breathe, I remind myself as I walk down the hall to put my books away. When I’m sure they aren’t following behind, I shove the shirt against my face. Soak in every bit of her that I can while chastising myself for being the orchestrator of my own agony.

This too shall pass.

## Chapter 28

### Clara

Vince is six minutes late. While I don't really consider that late, the chief does. I knew he'd be home tonight, so I asked for permission to go out with Vince, as opposed to doing what I want like usual. Going through the motions is tiresome. When the chief isn't around—which he often isn't—I mostly do what I want.

The chief didn't ask to meet Vince this time but made it clear that it's expected in the future. The chief likes the Culbertsons. Vince's aunt is on the force, and my father has known her for years. So that's a check in the pro column for him which makes Vince a safe prospect for me.

Tonight seemed like a good night for my lucky pink jeans. I've heard things about boys and the movies and skirts. You can never be too cautious. The chief doesn't give me any money, but I sneak a bag of baby carrots and hummus for the movie.

Vince pulls up in his silver Jeep. It's one of those big ones that can seat a bunch of people, not the two-door kind. I don't know what his parents do for work, but I know they all drive nice, new cars and live in the same neighborhood as Tory.

I bid the chief a farewell, not breaking eye contact as he enacts an eleven o'clock curfew and says to tell Vince no more weeknight dates

The heat in the car is low, but it's not too chilly. Vince is beaming, and I can tell he made an effort. The strong scent of cologne hits my nose as soon as I slide in, and he's done something different with his tawny hair.

"Did you decide on a movie?" he asks after our greeting of a "hi" and a hug.

"Yup. The rom-com. No horror for me." There was still a horror movie playing at the theater—a Halloween leftover. But I don't like horror, and I know boys use it as an excuse to be heroic when girls get scared. If the girl in question is the type of girl to get scared—like me. But I'm not at the point where Vince is the boy I want comforting me. In fact, I doubt he ever will be.

“Sounds good. Oh, before I forget, this is for you.” Vince reaches in the back seat and reveals a sunflower. “You just seem like a sunflower kinda girl.”

“Thank you, that’s so kind.” I hug him around the neck, careful not to crush the yellow bloom. “I love sunflowers.” It’s not a complete lie. Sunflowers are just dandy in my book. Just not my favorite.

We chat about today’s practice and hockey for a few minutes and then the conversation lulls. But it’s a comfortable quiet and, while I don’t feel pressure to fill the space, the movie theater is in the next town over. I decide now is as good a time as any to head off the thing with the chief.

“Hey, whenever you meet the chief, don’t mention me tutoring or managing. If the chief finds out I’m making some money, he’s gonna take away my allowance,” I lie. I feel like it’s believable and something that a normal parent might do.

“You call your dad ‘the chief?’” Vince asks. One of his hands is on the wheel and the other rests on the shift. Bear paws seems a more apt description, though, when it comes to his hands. They’re almost too big.

I give him a rehearsed laugh. “Yeah, that’s pretty much all I call him, actually.”

Vince laughs too, clearly thinking it’s some sort of tongue-in-cheek joke. “That’s kinda weird, Clare Bear. But don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

And I believe him. For all his unseriousness, Vince just feels like the type of person who can be trusted with little secrets. Certainly, I wouldn’t divulge anything of substance, but something like this, I don’t worry about.

At the theater ticket counter, I slowly pull out my wallet, not knowing if he’s expecting me to pay my way. If he does, then I’m certainly not going on another date with him. But that doesn’t mean I want to make the rest of this one awkward. I went on a couple dates with a guy this summer who made me pay. It just wasn’t worth it.

Vince notices and says, “Do you think I’m gonna make you pay?”

“I don’t know.”

“I would never ask a girl to pay for a date. What kind of guy do you think I am?”

“I guess I’m trying to find out.” I smile awkwardly.

He shakes his head and wraps a heavy arm around my shoulders. I hide the way it makes me flinch and grab the tickets from the clerk. Vince steers

us toward the concession stand.

“What’s your snack approach? You a salty or sweet kinda girl?”

“Well, I don’t eat dairy and avoid artificial dyes so there aren’t a lot of options I’d be able to have here.”

His mouth drops like I’ve just committed sacrilege. In the teenage world, I kind of have. But I’m not going to apologize for what I choose to eat, and I won’t judge anyone for what they choose to put in their own body either.

“I snuck a snack in my purse, though,” I whisper to him, concealing my crime from the theater staff who probably couldn’t care less .

I drum my fingers on the glass snack case as Vince orders a large popcorn and a blue Slurpee.

“But sharing popcorn is half the fun of a movie date,” he tells me.

“Don’t worry, I’ll have a couple handfuls before the night is through.”

As a winning smile takes over his face, Vince immediately walks over to the butter dispenser and proceeds to absolutely soak the popcorn. Never mind. I try to keep the comparison from popping up, but it’s a virus on an unprotected computer.

Tory always remembers. The snacks he gives me are always dairy free. He gives me egg BLT bagels and almond milk matcha lattes.

Tory.

Always.

Remembers.

Vince forgot immediately after I told him. Immediately .

Once we’re seated in a perfect middle row set of chairs, he angles the popcorn bag toward me. I shake my head and pull out my own snack.

“I thought you were gonna have some.” He frowns.

I chuckle, feigning ambivalence through my annoyance. “That was before you loaded it up with butter.”

“Aw my bad. I totally forgot. You want a water?” he asks. Before I have time to answer, Vince blurts, “I’m gonna go get you a water.”

At least he remembered that I avoid dyes.

The theater is nice. It was remodeled a few years ago, and the seats are spacious and recline. Our particular theater is mostly empty with, maybe, a dozen other patrons that funnel in over the next few minutes. I check my phone and see a text from Tory.

**Tory: Have fun on your date.**



Followed by a barfing emoji.

I don't know why but it makes me laugh. Like, a lot. Enough that I'm looking around to see if anyone is staring at me. The text goes unanswered, and I stow my phone before Vince gets back and plops a bottle of water in my cup holder. I crack the lid and take a few sips as the condensation drips onto my jeans.

"Thanks," I say, curling my legs under me and shifting closer to the arm rest.

"Anytime, pretty lady."

As the opening credits roll, Vince whispers, "I propose a kissing game."

"Oh?"

"You know those drinking games where you have to drink every time someone says or does a specific thing?"

"Yeah, like 'drink every time someone says the word drama' on a reality tv show."

He nods. "So same thing, but kissing. Every time the actors kiss, we kiss."

"I think I like this game."

"I was hoping you would."

"Oh, and let's kiss every time they should kiss but don't," I whisper.

Vince looks elated. "Good one."

We shake hands.

This is fun. Vince is fun. He makes up kissing games and drinks blue slushies. Tory doesn't seem like the type to make a game out of kissing. But he's not here. So the kissing game I shall play.

## Chapter 29

### Clara

Five minutes in and the meet-cute happens. Vince gives me a questioning look—as if to ask, “Should they have kissed?”—and I lean in, taking his stubbled cheek in my hand. It’s a quick and tame kiss. A little sweet because of the Slurpee. Not earth-shattering by any means, but my stomach does a little skip. It’s enough.

We don’t talk much, but laugh at the same funny parts, even if they’re corny. After Vince finishes his popcorn and Slurpee, I hear a metallic ting and take one of the mints he offers me. It’s the green kind. Not a favorite of mine, but it’s better than carrot breath and definitely better than popcorn breath.

Halfway through, the big kiss happens, and Vince doesn’t hesitate. It’s new and comfortable all at the same time. We’ve kissed before but not this long and not this sober.

There’s no denying it. Vince is a good kisser. He knows where to put his hands and how much tongue is too much. Mostly, he lets me take the lead and responds appropriately. We kiss for a long time and it’s nice. When I finally pull away, I immediately miss how quiet my thoughts were for those minutes we kissed. There was nothing and no one else. Just kissing. Mindless kissing.

We kiss two more times but they’re shorter. I’m the one who reaches for his hand as we walk out, but he doesn’t let me go until we’re back at the car, and he gives me a little spin and kisses me against the passenger door.

Before we get to my house, Vince pulls off into a parking lot and says, “Can I be honest with you, Clara?”

“Sure,” I say.

There’s a shop sign still aglow that illuminates his face. I’ve never noticed Vince’s eyelashes before. They’re incredibly long and create spiked shadows on his eyelids that disappear into his brows. They move rapidly as rambles, “Look, I really like you. You’re cute and smart and funny, and I like

those ribbons you wear.”

I giggle at the ribbons thing. “I like you too, Vince.” The words don’t feel foreign coming out of my mouth like I thought they would. “I mean, I kind of guessed you favored me, you know, with all the kissing.”

Vince laughs, and it’s a stereotypical guffaw that makes me laugh in turn and then we’re just laughing together. Our bodies lean over the arm rest between the front seats of his car. I run my fingertips over the pebbled black leather, just beside his forearm. Vince wore a navy and hunter-green striped rugby shirt. I think he’s one of those people who is always warm because his jacket never made its way back to his body after the movie, and he’s pulled his sleeves up. He has nice forearms. Thick, corded. The kind you want to hold on to as he walks you to class.

“But—”

“There’s always a but.”

“Life certainly feels that way sometimes. The thing is, I dated my last girlfriend for two years. She went off to Michigan State. We were gonna do the long-distance thing. I was totally committed to making it work.”

I vaguely remember Vince’s ex-girlfriend. She was a cheerleader. But she was a senior last year, and I was a sophomore so we never really crossed paths. I just remember her painting his number on her cheek every game day and sitting on his lap at lunch. They were cute. He definitely had heart-eyes for her, so I believe every word he’s telling me.

Tentative fingers move from the leather to his arm. I feel his muscle relax beneath my touch. He’s nervous.

“You don’t have to tell me what happened.”

“I do. I don’t feel it’s fair to continue down this road with you without providing some context. Basically, she got to school and two days later slept with someone else. Totally her choice, and I respect that, but I don’t respect the fact that she strung me along all summer.”

“I’m so sorry, Vince.”

“Don’t be. It was for the best. I never would have walked away on my own. But getting dumped like that really hurt, and I’m just not in the right headspace to jump into another committed relationship. My heart needs to heal this year. And I don’t want either of us to be strung along. Like, if we don’t see things continuing, I want to end it before it gets too far, if that makes sense.”

“So you want to date, but not be exclusive boyfriend/girlfriend?”

“Yeah. Is that something you’d be open to?”

“Sort of like an open relationship?”

“Exactly.”

“I think I’d be open to that.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ve never really had a serious boyfriend. I don’t think I’m cut out for it. Not in high school anyway. But someone to hang out with and go on dates with sounds just my speed.”

A relieved breath leaves my lungs in a whoosh. This is perfect. Actually perfect. An open relationship doesn’t come with all the expectations of exclusive dating. Vince won’t be expecting to hang out at my house or have family dinners with the chief. It sounds fun. Surface. My specialty.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” He nods once, pulling out of the parking lot and continuing toward my house.

“Why did Tory kind of...warn me about you?”

Vince huffs a laugh. “Did he now? I’m not surprised. He knows a different side of me. I haven’t always been the most...respectful guy. Especially before I had my heart broken. But feeling that hurt firsthand has definitely changed me.”

“Good to know,” I tell him.

When we pull into my driveway, I tell Vince we shouldn’t kiss, in case the chief is being weird and looking out the window or something. Inside is completely dark, and I use my phone to find my way upstairs after locking the door behind me.

As I rest my head on my pillow, I play the date over again in my head, start to finish. I’m happy with the things I said and did. Sometimes, when I replay moments, I’m filled with regret and those moments get stuck on a loop for hours.

This isn’t one of those times.

My mind is completely...

quiet.

## Chapter 30

### Clara

On Monday, Jack corners me before math class. Well, maybe the term corners is a little extreme. But he turns sideways and looks me right in the eye at close proximity. I certainly feel trapped—a wild animal with nowhere to run. Something in his eyes tells me he's about to break his "no deep questions" promise.

"So, I was thinking," he starts. Jack went to the party this weekend, but I stayed home. The chief was off for once and after the midweek date, I felt like it would be pushing it to go to a party. I had lots of reading to catch up on, anyway.

"Good morning, Jacky."

"Actually, I've been thinking about your conundrum all week. Vince annoys me so I'm trying to find a way to not sit with him at lunch anymore, and I'm not gonna bail on you, so I'm stuck until I find a way to get rid of the ogre."

"Why does he annoy you? How was the party? Any juicy drama?"

He ignores my questions and steamrolls forward. "Let's go back to last weekend's party. You slept in Victor's bed."

Was that only last weekend? I feel like so much has transpired since then. "I was drunk, and he helped me upstairs so I could sleep it off, yes."

"What did Vince think about that?"

"Like I said, we left together the next morning and went to the diner with his friends, so he didn't say anything. Plus, we had a great date last week."

"So you mentioned," he waves away my statement with his hand, clearly trying to redirect the conversation where he wants it. "And what did Victor think about that whole scenario?"

I shrug. "Don't know."

He raises his brow at me and humphs in my general direction. A chastisement if I ever heard one.

“What?”

“I didn’t say anything.” His mouth may not have said anything, but his face certainly is. Judgment and disappointment are written all over his features, and I’m second-guessing the whole friend thing thanks to my absolutist tendency.

“Fine.” I finish unpacking my materials and set my sparkly pencil pouch on the desk. I’ve had the same one since third grade. Everyone else had those Lisa Frank brand technicolor cartoon animal pencils and cases and folders, but we couldn’t afford name brand anything, even back then.

“It’s just...” Jack starts. There it is. He’s going to push me, and I’m going to hate it. “Did Victor seem hurt when you left with Vince? Has he acted jealous at all?”

I think back to the confused look on Tory’s face when I had been leaving that morning, and the fact that he basically tried to ask me out last Tuesday. “Maybe. He also may have alluded to wanting to date me last week.”

“He what?” Jack’s eyes go wide.

I angle my body and bring my face close to his so the seniors around us don’t eavesdrop. “So, here’s the thing. Tory didn’t actually tell me how he feels. He threw something out as a hypothetical, and I said no. Because it can’t happen, regardless of what either of us want. And maybe I haven’t asked Tory how he really feels because I don’t want to know. Whatever his answer is, I don’t think I could handle it. After all this time, he might just want something casual like Vince does, and if that’s the case, I would be gutted.”

“But on the flip—”

“I’m getting there. If he professed his love for me, I wouldn’t be able to handle that either. Because then, I would know what could be, but I would never be able to act on it. For me, when it comes to Tory, it would be all or nothing. And since it can’t be all, I choose nothing.”

“Why the hell can’t you have a serious relationship with Tory?”

“That, Jack, is far too deep for me to divulge. But you need to believe me when I tell you there are reasons why I keep Tory Amato—and everyone else for that matter—at bay. The status quo is currently all I can manage . . . That’s where I’m comfortable.”

Jack nods, absorbing my words, digesting them like a Thanksgiving dinner. “Okay. I can accept all that. I think you’re making a mistake, and it’s

clear as day that Victor likes you. But it's your life."



The next day at lunch, Vince pulls me onto his lap like he used to do with his ex-girlfriend. It makes me uncomfortable, both literally and figuratively. Not that there isn't enough space, Vince's thighs look like tree trunks. But I basically get left sitting side-saddle and twisting to eat my lunch. Plus, I don't like the way everyone looks at us. Too many eyes and not enough control over the way I'm being perceived. I'm secretly relieved when a teacher walks by and says everyone needs to be in their own seat. I swear, sometimes teachers secretly know a student doesn't want to be in a situation and makes themselves the bad guy so the student doesn't have to be.

At least I'm in pants. I'm wearing a tan pair of old corduroys that used to belong to my mom. The knees wore thin, so I sewed on a couple of heart-shaped patches and wore a matching sweater and pink, pearl barrettes.

Most of lunch is spent with Vince and Clover trying to convince me to work out with the team.

"Come on, Clare Bear. It's perfect. You tutor Amato and then come workout with us."

I look to Clover for support and find none. "Don't look at me. Thomas and I work out with the team. It's actually weirder that you don't."

Tory is quiet. Has been during the whole lunch wave, though in history

he was in a bit of a playful mood. We sit next to each other now. Every single class with our desks pushed up against one another. Everyone else sits in neat rows but every day one of us, whoever gets there first, pushes our two desks together. Mr. M gave us a weird look the first time, but Tory just smiled and said he needed to be close to his tutor. Today he passed me a note with a cartoon hockey puck on it. It had eyes and a smile, and he drew an arrow with a label that said hockey puck because he's not a very good artist.

"Help me out, Tory," I plead, stabbing at my side salad. My sandwich is long gone by now. I thought my lunch account was running low, but the lunch lady didn't say anything when I went through the cashier today. A miracle of Maccabee proportions, perhaps.

"No ma'am. By the time we're through with you, you'll be lining up at goalie and Berty will be out of a job."

I shake my head. It's hard to look at Tory straight on. He's wearing his glasses again. If I look at him, my eyes linger too long on the way his lashes dust the lenses and how beautiful that would feel against my cheek. Vince hasn't worn his like he said he would, but I don't really expect him to. He was just being supportive in the moment.

But Tory has worn them almost every day. I haven't worn mine yet.

"Fine," I tell the table. "You guys are lucky I have gym today or else I wouldn't even have workout clothes to wear."



# Chapter 31

## Clara

Tory was extra, *extra* playful during tutoring today. Borderline inappropriate, now that I think about it. Talking about exercises he recommends and breathing and positions. Maybe I read into the innuendos, and it was completely innocent, and it was actually my thoughts that were inappropriate. Either way, the whole exchange was totally obscene, and we didn't get much work done. Although, we checked Tory's most recent grades and nearly all of them improved. I guess a win is a win.

Clover finds me in the study room as Tory and I are leaving, and we all head toward the locker rooms. Clover and I walk through the guys' locker room with our heads down and Tory veers off toward his supply locker.

Once we're in the hallway that has the coaches and trainer offices I say, "Hey, let's stop at our mailboxes, I wanna see if my check is there."

"Check? Like, money? What check are you expecting?"

"Our paycheck for managing. I forgot to look for it this weekend before the game."

Clover gives me a strange look. "Girl. What are you on?"

I laugh and pull out the white envelope sitting in my mailbox. "Nothing, obviously. What are you on? Did you not get yours?"

"Let me put it this way: I have never received any monetary compensation for managing the hockey team. Neither has Thomas. I know some high school managers get paid, but we certainly don't."

"That's weird. Tory told me it was a paid position when he asked me to manage."

"Hm."

"What?"

"Tory asked you to manage?"

"Yes."

"And told you there'd be compensation as an incentive to get you to do it?"

“Well, now that you put it that way...” I trail off. “I think I need to have a little chat with Tory. Excuse me.”

“Tell him I want my cut,” she calls after me.

My heart is pounding, and a cold sweat breaks out along the back of my neck as I retrace my steps down the hallway. There’s no way he’s behind this. But who else could it be? Maybe it’s a new policy but that still wouldn’t explain Clover and Tommy’s lack of payment.

I pace in the hallway outside the locker room, waiting a few minutes until all the other guys have cleared out. Vince must have already been in the weight room because I didn’t see him head that way with the others.

The lacquered wood door slides against my palm as I slowly enter the locker room. A beautifully sculpted back and beautiful tattoos greet me and I smooth my expression.

“Tory,” I grate.

He doesn’t turn around to face me but his tone is forcefully jovial. “Charity.”

Focus, I remind myself as I make a long arc around his bench to face him head on. Those tattoos and muscles aren’t doing my brain any favors.

I cross my arms. “Managing the hockey team isn’t a paid position.”

He blanches for a breath before a look of cool calm returns to his face. That’s all the answer I need. He did this. Tory has been giving me money for a volunteer job.

“You get paid, don’t you?”

“Yes, but—” I begin to argue.

“Then I guess it’s a paid position.”

Why would he do this? Tory doesn’t do things like this for people. The question answers itself and I realize he’s likely been paying me for the same reason he wore glasses today.

He stuffs his head and arms into a white, long-sleeved compression shirt but leaves his pectorals and abs exposed—likely for my benefit. I huff while he sits on the bench and laces up a sneaker.

“Can you finish putting your clothes on? Gosh.”

Tory stands up to his full height. Leans to the side and rests a forearm on the edge of his supply locker. If his upraised arm was holding mistletoe, we’d have a compelling reason to kiss on Christmas. We’re close enough that it could happen in less than a heartbeat. Some part of me wishes it would.

“Why?” He beams. “Am I distracting your tirade?”

“Oh, you’d love that, wouldn’t you?”

“Indeed.”

“Where is the money coming from? Clover and Thomas don’t make anything.”

Tory shakes his head, pursing his lips, as if he thought I would actually just accept this and move on. “Why does it matter?”

“Because I shouldn’t be getting money if it’s not a paid job. It’s not fair.”

“If I tell you, will you quit managing the team?”

I ponder a moment, ignoring the look of annoyance in Tory’s downcast gaze. “No. I like managing. Clover and Thomas are cool. We’re kinda... getting friendly.”

Tory lets out a mocking gasp as he crosses one ankle over the other. “Heaven forbid she makes friends.”

He still hasn’t pulled his shirt down and between that and the compression boxers stretched taught over his hips...the combination is deadly. He knows it, too. My eyes travel north, thinking I’ll be safer, but he chooses now to shake out his hair and pull a thin headband up from his neck to keep the soon-to-be sweaty strands out of his eyes.

“Plus, I get to see Vince more.”

Tory rolls his eyes, and I relish the imminent return of the upper hand.

“Ew,” he mutters.

“Tell me.”

Tory reluctantly admits, “I have an LLC.”

“You have an LLC?” I ask in disbelief. “You’re seventeen.”

“So what?” He shrugs.

“Aren’t you too young for that?”

“Clearly you have a lot to learn about business. You can open an LLC at sixteen in Minnesota.”

I nod, twirling a curl with my fingers, contemplating. “So...I’m on your payroll? Does that make me your...employee?”

“Hm, yeah, now that I think of it, you’ve been insubordinate. I’ll be expecting you in my office at the end of the day for a formal reprimand.” Endless teasing colors his tone, and I’m tempted to smile.

“Did you start an LLC just to be able to say that?”

“No, Clara. I pay a virtual PA to manage some of my social media stuff. Check my taxes. It’s been around for a year.”

“Well, stop paying me.”

“Is this your formal resignation? Company bylaws state that you need to put in two weeks’ notice. This is super unprofessional.” He sighs. “I cannot, in good conscience, give you a glowing recommendation.”

“Shut up, Tory.” I shove his shoulder, and he uncrosses his arms.

“I’ll give you a raise if you start obnoxiously flirting with me again.”

“You’re in quite the cheeky mood today.”

“Guess you bring it out of me.”

I reach out with both hands and pull down his shirt so his midriff is covered.

Tory puts his hands up in the air and loudly calls out, “This is unacceptable. I’m going to HR.”

“I could do a lot worse.”

“Somebody’s feeling bold.”

“You started it.”

“How mature. I’m not gonna stop paying you. I told you it was a paid position, and I meant it.”

Two can play at this game. “Fine, then you have to start paying Clover and Thomas, too.”

“How much money do you think I’m pulling in?”

“Enough to pay all three of us. Consider it groveling for being so mean to me all these years.”

“Fine. Go get changed, Charity. Company meeting after our workout so I can tell the rest of my staff.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I sing.

“Get out of here before I take my shirt off again.”

## Chapter 32

### Clara

“What—what is this place?” I stutter, eyeing the muscled men in various forms of physical exertion. Tory still has on his compression shirt, but it’s pulled halfway up his chest. Likely, he’s done it intentionally because he saw how flustered this particular look got me in the locker room.

Sweat dots his abs and obliques. One or two errant drops make their way over a tattoo on his ribs that disappears under the shirt and ends just before the line of his underwear. That one might be my favorite. It’s a date in thick, black roman numerals. I don’t know what it’s for, but I know the date. When he first got the ink, he posted a photo of it, and I searched for the translation. It’s a month and year that haven’t happened yet.

Oddly, the day isn’t included. Just the month and year. June 2027 . It’s the month we graduate. But I don’t feel like that’s the meaning of the tattoo. Someday I’ll ask him.

Clover gestures with her hand, waving it over the room. “This, my friend, is the weight room. I call it ‘Hockey Boy Heaven.’ It’s glorious, isn’t it?”

“Clover,” I playfully scold and nudge her with my shoulder. It feels weird because she’s got about five inches on me, and I nudge her mid-bicep. “Who knew you were boy crazy.”

“Not crazy. I’m boy sane. I need boys and their delicious muscles and testosterone to feed something inside me. In my house it’s all Girl Scouts and bows and makeup. My parents are divorced. I have four sisters. I need stuff like this to balance the estrogen overload.”

I nod. “Makes sense.”

She looks at me and startles. “Nothing against hair ribbons, though.” Clover gestures at the ribbon secured at the base of the hair I’ve gathered into a high ponytail.

“None taken,” I tell her. “You mind showing me the ropes? I’ve never really lifted before.”

“I would, but I think you have two studly hockey boys vying for your attention.”

That’s when Vince catches my eye. He’s bicep curling a forty-five-pound dumbbell. After three more reps, he hops up, and my eyes go wide at the sight of him in gray sweatpants. Goodness gracious. I remind myself to keep my eyes above the belt.

He bops up with enough pep to put the Energizer Bunny to shame. “Clare Bear,” Vince exclaims, smiling ear to ear before lifting his t-shirt to dab the sweat from his face.

Vince is a young senior, still seventeen like me. But you wouldn’t know it by looking at the weathered skin of his torso and the very happy happy trail disappearing into his waistline.

Vince lays a heavy arm on my shoulders and plants a kiss on my head. “What do you wanna start with, pretty girl?”

“Well, as far as fitness goals go, I want to work on my glutes, arms, and definitely my stamina,” I tell him.

Someone snorts behind me. I whirl around to see Tory nearly drop the barbell he’s repping onto his chest. One of the guys who is spotting him makes a grab for it.

“Something the matter, Tory?” I twist to face him fully.

He clears his throat, an odd look on his face, and I don’t miss the way his eyes crawl down my body, full of teasing. “Uh-uh. Nope. Stamina is good. Very important.” Tory can barely get the words out without giggling and, despite his playfulness today, I’m momentarily taken aback by his uncharacteristic immaturity.

“What the hell, Amato.” Vince scolds from behind me.

Tory puts his hands up from his seated position on the bench. “Sorry, I just—sorry.”

“Whatever,” Vince grumbles.

We turn to walk away until Tory chirps from behind us, “I mean I’m sure I could help you with your stamina.”

Maybe the innuendos from tutoring weren’t all in my imagination.

Vince takes a step closer to the bench and Tory rises to meet him. They’re nearly eye to eye. Vince has about an inch on Tory and some more bulk but in a fight, they’d be evenly matched.

“Are you really gonna flirt with Clara right in front of me?”

“Absolutely.”

Vince inches closer. “Kinda rude, don’t you think?”

“It’s nothing I won’t do behind your back, Culbs. Just trying to keep things above board.” Tory quirks his chin side to side, as if he’s savoring every bit of this.

I step between the two of them, feeling Vince’s chest softly rising behind me and Tory’s chest heaving in front of me. “Maybe don’t,” I tell Tory.

“Try and stop me.” Though his words hold challenge, his smile feigns innocence. Then his gaze is back over my head and drilling into Vince when he says, “I feel like I made myself clear on this, didn’t I?”

Vince cusses quietly from behind me and let’s out a deep breath against the crown of my head. “Whatever,” he says. “Let’s, uh, let’s hit the treadmill, Clara.”

He takes my hand, and we head to the row of cardio machines. There are a dozen treadmills and stationary bikes lined up against the wall with a view of the rest of the weight room. Vince shakes off the interaction with Tory within seconds and he’s back to his jovial, exuberant self. His emotional recovery time sets me at ease, but sometimes I wish he would care more. We do a five-minute warm-up and I’m panting like a dog.

After our warm-up, Clover steals me away, and I work out with her and Thomas while the players do their assigned routines. Tory and Vince keep a healthy distance from one another but both of them steal looks toward me. Frequently. I don’t even know who I’m supposed to be looking at, so I let my eyes feast on both. No law against looking and Vince and I are non-exclusive. Why punish my eyes for Tory’s indiscretions?

Clover and Thomas really destroy my glutes. I didn’t know there were so many muscles powering my butt cheeks, and I wish I could go back to the time that I was blissfully ignorant to that fact. Squats. Lunges, Russian deadlifts, Bulgarian split squats, single leg RDL’s—you name it, I did it. But by the end of the workout, I feel stronger and happy I came, even though I’ll be paying for it tomorrow.

The three of us grab a few yoga mats to stretch and watch the players finish up their own exercises. I have a feeling I’m in for some grilling, and I’m not wrong.

“So...looks like you’ve been hiding some things from us, Clara,” Thomas says. He leans forward and uses a resistance band on his left leg, saying he needs to even out the muscle exertion after doing so many single

leg exercises on the other side.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I lie on my stomach, propping myself up on my elbows. The mat has some divots in it, and I trace them with my finger.

“Spill it,” Clover adds.

“I don’t want to,” I say.

“Come on. I’ve never seen Tory so crazy over someone,” she argues.

“He’s not crazy over me.”

“What’s it like in the land of delusion?” Thomas sasses. He rolls to his back, stretching his legs with the band, one at a time. Each movement is varied to accommodate his prosthetic.

“Shut up, Tommy. Aren’t you only in tenth grade?” I ask, trying to cut him down a notch.

“Don’t deflect. I’m old enough to hear the drama,” he tells me.

“It’s true,” Clover insists. “This kid is a vault.”

Thomas nods. “That’s why all the upperclassmen hang out with me.”

I look between the two of them, clearly outnumbered. My resolve is already weak thanks to Jack’s inquisition, so I don’t hold out long. An old, rickety fan blows loudly, arcing over the room. Every time it reaches us, my tendrils of hair rise like wings on either side of my face.

“Vince and I are casually dating. Tory and I are friends. That’s all there is to know.” I pull all my hair over my head and in front of my face, creating a curtain of privacy.

“Can I practice my braiding?” Thomas asks.

I nod, handing him a large section of hair.

“But...Tory started wearing his glasses for you,” Clover comments.

“And I saw that flower he put on your locker last week,” Thomas adds.

I ask, “How’d you know that was him?”

“I have my ways.” He shrugs. Apparently, his lips are the only ones that are allowed to be sealed in this scenario.

“Well, we aren’t more than friends. Whether either of us want that or not.”

“But if he wanted to be more, you’d do it, right? I mean he’s gorgeous. And I can tell you from experience that he is just as good as he looks.” Clover wags her eyebrows.

“No, I—wait. What do you mean by that?” I ask her.

Thomas answers from beside me. “They used to be friends with



benefits.”

“Really?” My head ping-pongs between the two of them in disbelief.

Clover nods. “That boy is the real deal. We hooked up all last year.”

“I think I’m gonna be sick.” I shove my face into my crossed arms.

“Yeah, that feeling means you like him,” Clover tells me. She rolls onto her back and laughs at my misery. “Sorry, girl. I assumed you knew. I thought everyone knew.”

“Whatever,” I groan. “I don’t wanna talk about this anymore.”

We sit there, in various states of wind down. Thomas comments on the discomfort of his prosthetic and how he needs to get fitted for a new one now that he’s hit a growth spurt. He and Clover chitchat over my head until a velvety voice tinged with smoke has my eyes darting north.

“Perfect, you’re all gathered for our first company meeting.”

When Tory’s eyes meet mine, he must see something concerning because a shadow of disconcertion crosses his eyes, and his lips tighten for a moment. I look down at his shoes and rest my chin on the heel of my left hand while I untie his shoelaces with my right.

The other two managers hum their greeting, and I see them making eyes at me in the periphery. I ignore them.

“Did Clara tell you the good news?” Tory asks. He sits down and lifts his legs, resting an elbow on each knee. I keep fidgeting with his laces, but he doesn’t say anything.

I shake my head, and Thomas asks what Tory’s referring to.

“Well, Charity here discovered that I’ve been paying her for being a manager and won’t let me keep paying her unless I pay the two of you.”

“She probably doesn’t want you paying me anymore,” Clover chirps, shrugging a shoulder with pride. I’m not mad at her. I’m really not. She can do what she wants and so can Tory. But that doesn’t make me feel any less crummy. Picturing them together is...horrible. Jealousy is a witch.

“No, Clover. It’s fine. Just no end-of-season bonus for you.” I wrap one of Tory’s laces around my index finger like a spool of thread.

He just stares at me.

Analyzing.

Fitting the pieces together.

I shake off the jealousy and perk back up. Mostly to make Tory stop looking at me so intently.

“Welcome to the company,” I tell them.

## Chapter 33

### Clara

After I change back into my school clothes, I tell Vince I'll meet him out in the parking lot and head to my locker. I need to get my backpack and books for home. Plus, there's an Italian right wing with a funky name who has been particularly playful today, and I wouldn't mind seeing a bit more of him. Even if it's just for a confrontation.

Sure enough, Tory is leaning against the glossy white cinder block wall adjacent to the visitors' locker room when I exit. Waiting. Sometimes I feel like there's a brain wavelength and we're the only two on it.

As I pass him, he reaches out and hooks an index finger in my palm. Just that simple, small point of connection sends tingles up my arm and down my spine. It's one of those touches I know will be invisibly branded on me for the rest of the night.

I pull him along behind me for a few steps before dropping it and tell myself it's to earn that raise. The thought makes me giggle.

Tory follows.

A sidelong glance in the reflection of a trophy case tells me he's about six paces back. He follows through the gym and into the main part of the school building. I slow down. He slows down—maintaining those six paces of space.

But all the while, I feel his sizzling gaze on the back of my neck the entire way. Blood heats my ears, and I know I'm blushing.

Down one hall and up another, until I reach my locker. I try to enter my locker combination. But I'm flustered. After three tries, Tory hip checks me out of the way and puts in the correct combination.

"How do you know my locker combo?"

"I pay attention." He leans a shoulder against the locker beside mine while I crouch down and unzip my backpack. "You gonna tell me what's wrong or do I have to dock your pay?" He tries to joke.

I'm not having it. "I didn't know you and Clover were such bosom

buddies.”

Tory looks at me, slightly confused and cocks his head. He says slowly, “We aren’t.”

“Maybe not now, but you certainly were,” I quip.

He shakes his head, realization seeping into the tilt of his head. “We never were.”

“I consider friends with benefits to be pretty tight, Tory.”

“I don’t.”

“Is that the type of ‘friendship’ you want with me?” I finally look up at him, trying and failing to school my expression into neutrality. I’m being a complete hypocrite. I know it. He knows it.

“No.” He shakes his head and looks at the carpet. “No, it isn’t. In fact, she and I weren’t so much friends as we were benefits.”

“You’re disgusting.”

His voice rises an octave. “Don’t slut shame me.”

My cheeks pink, and I dart my eyes to the floor, ashamed of my hypocrisy. I would never say such a thing to a woman, and I shouldn’t say it to him. “I didn’t mean it. I’m n—”

“If you’re jealous, just say that, Clara. But don’t attack me when I did nothing wrong. She and I had an arrangement last year during the hockey season. Nothing happened after March, and nothing has happened since.”

I attempt words but only manage to produce sputtering noises and basic utterances, at best. There’s definitely a “psh” and a “well” somewhere along the way.

Tory smirks and rolls his eyes. My noises stop. He hooks a finger into one of the belt loops on my corduroys and pulls me closer.

Just an inch.

Just enough to matter.

“You know what kind of friendship I want with you, Clara? I want lying in bed, clothes on the floor, talking until 3:00 a.m. I want to teach you how to ice skate, because you’re inexplicably inexperienced on the ice, despite growing up here. I want dancing that’s more than just dancing.”

Tory leans in close, lips dusting the tendrils by my ear. My heart hammers, and I can’t help but lean my shoulder into his chest. The desire to be nearer is overwhelming. His voice takes on a tenor that makes me squirm when he says, “And I want to know what every inch of your skin tastes like—to memorize the map of your body with my hands. With you, Clara, I

want the friendship first. But make no mistake, I want friends that are so much more than friends.”

“How do you even know to say such things?”

“Books, Clara. Books,” he says, wistful.

“I can’t give you that, Tory.”

“At this point, I’ll take anything you give me, Charity.”

“Well instead, you get nothing.” My eyes drift down to the fingers still connecting us. Quickly, I add, “Nothing other than friendship.” Because I need something. I can’t have what I long for, so I’ll settle for something far less.

“Are you truly mad at me because of this in particular? Because of Clover?”

“I don’t know what I’m mad at, but you said you could handle my anger so please handle it.”

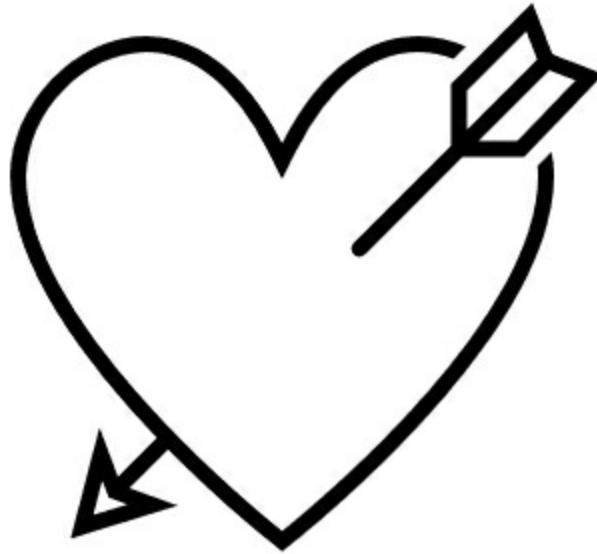
“Okay.”

“Yeah?”

He hums an “mhm” and nods. “I got you.”

I guess I have my answer about how Tory truly feels. If only it made a bit of difference. But it doesn’t. And I think that hurts even more than not knowing. Now, I have to look at him every day, every game, every tutoring session, and know we could have so much more.

The only thing that keeps me from professing my love is knowing that I’d have to tell him everything. My grip on the façade of my life is so tenuous. I’m barely holding everything together by a million threads attached to a million balloons. If I let go on this one thing, I’ll lose my grip on all of them.



As Vince drives home, we hold hands on the center console in his car. There's some mindless chitchat, and I stay just present enough that he won't ask if something is bothering me. Because if he does, the floodgates will open, and I'll be a blubbing mess over another boy in front of him. Kind of unforgiveable if you ask me. I want to be confused. But I'm not. I have complete clarity on this situation. Casual with Vince. Keep Tory as a friend. It's the only option. Yet all I feel is conflicted. Because my brain is making a decision that my heart is rebelling against.

# Chapter 34

## Victory

Friday night home games have a life of their own. Energy pours into the rink with the addition of every new body entering. It's palpable. When people talk about a Friday home game, they talk about it like it's a person—an entity. It kind of is. Pressure builds in time with the expectations of the fans and fuels me. Some of my teammates hate it, but not me. It's one of my favorite parts of the game.

Clara and Clover painted their faces with the cheerleaders before the game. Tabitha wears a nameless jersey. Thomas is in his usual shirt and tie with his own jersey over it. He always looks like a little coach, walking around with his clipboard. Thomas knows the game well and sees things about our opponents that others miss. When he gives me a tip, I listen. Clara wore yoga pants and Uggs today. Her hair was down, but I saw Clover braiding it in the laundry room earlier. Now it's in two French braids with blue ribbons woven through—our team colors.

Some players blast music and get introspective before a game. Vince is one of those players. The only time you'll ever find him being remotely serious is in the twenty minutes before warm-ups. I'm not one of those players. I can shotgun a beer with a gun to my head and play the best hockey of my life immediately thereafter. It's a gift. Almost nothing gets me rattled.

It also allows me to flirt with Clara while Vince bobs his head and stares at the floor of our bench box.

I twirl the end of a braid with my ungloved hand. She swats me away, leaning on the boards with her elbows. I'm on the ice doing the same from the opposite side.

“How many goals are you gonna score today?” she asks me.

“Good question. How many do you want me to score?”

Clara pretends to think hard for a moment, twisting her pursed lips to the side and tapping her chin. “Hat trick would be nice.”

“That's too common. Give me a number. Something crazy.”

“What’s your record?”

“This season?”

She nods.

“Shouldn’t you know that? You’re a team manager. I thought stats were part of the deal.”

“I probably should. But contrary to popular belief, I’m not obsessed with you, Tory Amato.”

“Ouch. Shot to the heart. Just for that I’m not scoring you any goals.”

“Please?”

“My record this season is four.”

“So give me five.”

“Six. Double hat trick.”

Coach yells at me to get my butt in gear and warm-up. The rest of the team scooted by me onto the ice and have been running drills for a few minutes now. But...priorities.

I rise from my leaning position and slowly skate backward, relishing the slice of metal on ice. With my face cage in place, both gloves make their way to my hands.

“You think you can do that?” she calls out, still leaning on the boards.

I shrug. “Guess we’ll find out.”

After warm-ups, I toss Clara one more smile and look into the stands for the scout who said they were going to be here. It’s just a college scout, but college scouts are friends with NHL scouts, so everyone matters. Instead, my eyes land on the absolute last person I could ever hope to see.

The chief.

While I’m not sure how long he’s been here, the expression on his face tells me he’s been here long enough. Coupled with the tense cross of his arms and the fact that he’s glaring at me with pure hatred, it sends a shudder down my spine. Clara doesn’t seem to have noticed his presence.

The whistle blows, and I spring into action, forcing my focus to the puck and the players and nothing else. Six goals. Three periods. Two goals per period is the easiest way to make this happen. Otherwise, I could top load and get as many as possible in the first period, then relax the rest of the game. A good plan before the goalie figures me out. I watched some game film this week, and the opposing goalie likes to drop down to the ice early. Best bet is to fake and pop the puck up and over one of his legs. With my plan of action in place, I weave around an opposing forward to set up a play.

Sometimes music pounds in my head as I play. It's weird. Like an internal pump-up playlist, but one song and one segment over and over. Today's song segment comes courtesy of Stefflon Don's "16 Shots", the tat, tat-tat, about thirty seconds in. Vince goes down but sends the puck up the boards before he does and I sail after it. Flying is more like it. I scoop the puck six feet up from the center line and slice at a hitch toward the seam. Zero in on goal. Everything goes silent for half a heartbeat, then I pop the puck up and over into the net.. Just like I planned.

One down. Five to go.

Two more in the first, just like it. Then the opposition gets my number and does anything to stop me. They learn my play and counterstrike. I relax for most of the second, letting them think they've sufficiently hindered me.

I get an assist with my other wing, a small senior who is lightning fast. Pretty sure the scout is here for him, too, so I'm happy to help him look as good as he is. Hockey is a brutish dance. Big moves, fast plays, but with a level of finesse that rivals ballet.

To his credit, Vince is an excellent center, and I wouldn't have half the stats that I do without him. He's got an eye for the game—sees the potential outcome of a pass several moves out. He knows where to put the puck, and I benefit time and time again. I get one more goal at the end of the second.

Our opponents only scored on us twice in the first two periods, but that doesn't mean they aren't good. We're expecting a fair number of shutouts this season. Already had two.

Between periods, I sit away from Clara, down next to the coaches and Thomas. A sidelong glance tells me she's still peppy and jovial. Seems like she still hasn't noticed the chief's presence.

I venture a peek behind me toward the top row. He stares me down, a look of venom in his eyes with his uniform and his undeserved swagger.

Already I know he'll be waiting for me after the game to lay into me. I'm dreading it. Hopefully, I'll take enough time with the reporter and the scout that he won't stick around. My parents never do. They hug me on the way to the locker room and we meet at home.

The rest of the game goes off without a hitch. I get my fifth goal at the top of the third period. But then I get a penalty for slashing which eats up some time. While I sit in the box, I steal a look toward Clara. She and Clover write something down on their clipboards, and she smiles at me. I raise my brows, hoping it's enough to warn her that her dad is here but she just



chuckles and goes back to writing. Vince joins me for high sticking. We have thirty seconds of overlap, but I'm not terribly concerned because we've been strong in the penalty kill this season.

"Did you see the chief's here?" I ask.

"He is?" Vince cusses, his chest heaving with exertion. "Perfect game to draw a high sticking penalty. Good going, Vince. I don't know what it is, but there's something off about that guy."

"Agreed. Are you giving Clara a ride home?" I ask.

"I think Clover was gonna bring her and Thomas home to get ready before the party."

"Okay, good. Next time, save the high sticking for when I'm back on the ice, okay?" I tell him as I rejoin my team on the ice.

With Vince in the box, our opponents are still on a power play, and we're outnumbered.

For a couple minutes, the puck alludes me and, while we focus on keeping it out of our end, I'm worried I won't get that sixth goal.

With two minutes left, Vince is back in and loaded for bear. Box time always gets him revved up and tonight is no different. He flies into the other team's right wing upon his return, steals the puck and sends it my way under heat from two defenders with the seconds ticking down.

This time, I don't hesitate. My whizzing slapshot sails through traffic into the back of the net.

We play with the puck until the final buzzer sounds and have a modest celebration on the ice before tapping gloves with the opponents. Before I make it back to the bench, I see the chief tapping on the glass. Clara turns and drops a water bottle when she sees him. He motions for her to go around and speak to him. She's careful not to look my way, but I'd imagine that she's resembling a ghost right about now.

Chief Larsen's lips are set in a tight line, and his mouth barely moves as he talks to her with his hands on his hips. Typical. Clara nods a few times before returning to the bench to gather up supplies.

Coach finishes up his post-game spiel, and we file out of our bench box onto the ice. The chief stands by the exit, eyes darting to me as I skate by. The level of respect people show him as they file out of the rink grates against me. Because I know how he really is.

And that he'll be waiting for me.

# Chapter 35

## Victory

A shadowy figure leans against my car as I approach in silence through the black night. Neither of us speak. History has taught me to never turn away from an enemy. Always face them. I'm careful not to lose him from my periphery while I put my gear in the trunk.

My hands sink to my pockets, and I press the button on my key fob that closes the trunk. The asphalt of the parking lot scuffs against my sneakers as I round the passenger's side. This wasn't a good parking spot. My car is far from any spot lights, completely cloaked in darkness. In another tactical move, I hit the automatic start button. This provides minimal lighting from the car and a quick exit if need be. Tense situations like this are all about small measures to gain an advantage. Same as hockey.

I square my stance and cross my arms, rising to my full height before him.

"Let's hear it, Chief." My tone is bored but this man's sheer presence makes me uneasy. He's slimy, oily. A snake. Something that slithers around and strikes at ankles when you least expect it.

"Looks like you and Clara are close. Care to explain what I saw tonight?"

I sniff and spit at the ground, pulling my lighter and box of cigarettes from my other pocket. He grows visibly irritated as I take my time to light up and pull a long drag. "Not really."

He advances a step, and I release the smoke, sending it into his face. A warning. The chief steps back. "Should I ask her instead? Maybe share some things she likely doesn't know about you."

There it is. The threat. Stay away or else.

"We're friends. That's it. We've known each other since fifth grade. She's dating Vince Culbertson."

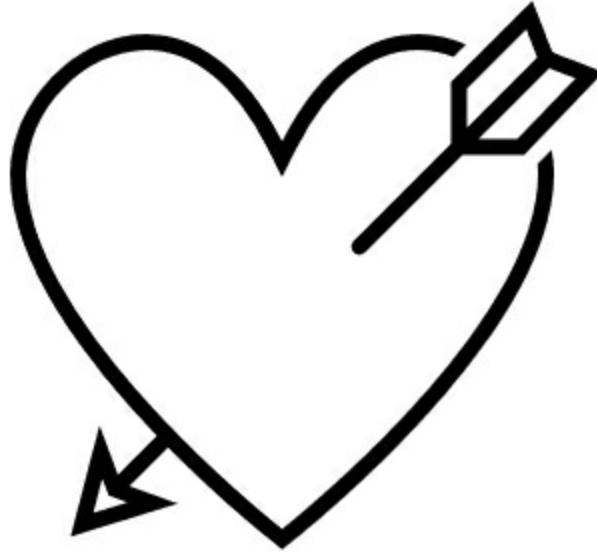
"I know that won't stop someone like you."

"So what if it doesn't? Maybe I'm not scared of you anymore. We're

graduating next year and—”

“You really want to go down this path again?”

Again. That one word brings me right back to middle school.



My family was in Miami for spring break. I was staring at my lox and cream cheese bagel. I hated capers. I told the waiter I didn't want capers but when the meals arrived, there they were. My parents told me not to complain, and my mom scolded Nonna for scraping them off and told her that fussing would make me soft. I was old enough to do it myself.

Mom gasped when she got a notification on her phone. “Are you friends with Clara Larsen?” she asked. I nodded. Truth be told, I didn't really know what we were. We had been in a closet three weeks prior during a game of Spin the Bottle that I managed to rig, but I didn't mention that. I also didn't mention that I loved Clara. I thought they'd laugh at me or patronize me, and I wasn't in the mood to hear it. Especially not from my sister.

“Her mom died last night. Car accident.”

“What?” I asked. Her words were loud and clear, but my brain still asked the question in disbelief.

My dad cleared his throat and excused himself. At the time his cold reaction seemed odd. My friend's mom died, and he just pulled out his phone and disappeared. He was gone for a while and his face was tight and pinched

when he returned.

“Oh, that’s so sad,” Giulia said. “She’s the chief’s wife, right?”

I nodded. The chief’s wife, yes, but more importantly, Clara’s mom.

“I want to go to the funeral,” I told my mom. She searched online and told me I wouldn’t be back in time. The funeral was scheduled for Friday morning and our flight back wasn’t until Saturday.

“Please let me go back early. I’ll pay for my ticket. I have money saved from my allowance and birthdays. I haven’t spent any yet on vacation so it should be enough.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” my mom told me.

Nonna just put her hand on mine. She saw the sorrow in my eyes, the desperation. That’s the thing about me. When I want something bad enough, absolutely nothing and no one stops me from getting it. I’m like a dog with a bone. One of those junkyard dogs that doesn’t stop until someone is dead.

By the afternoon, my mom was crying, and Nonna and I were packing to go home. I felt bad about disappointing my parents but not showing up for Clara would have been unforgiveable.

Dozens of kids showed up at the funeral. Clara’s hair was messy. Shoved into a ponytail like she’d done it as an afterthought. She sat in the front next to her dad. My friends and I were three rows back. I avoided making eye contact while I waited in the receiving line. Most of the girls hugged her but the boys shook her hand. Some of them put cards in a basket. I didn’t bring a card, but my Nonna did.

I’ll never forget the weird black dress pants Clara wore that still had the department store folds in them. Or the look in her eyes when they met mine—both red and raw. But hers were shattered. Somehow, they looked like the ocean froze and then splintered into a million pieces. I knew she’d never be the same.

She’d hugged me. She hadn’t hugged any of the other boys but she’d hugged me. And didn’t let go for a long time. People shifted awkwardly behind me. Some of them skipped Clara, shook her dad’s hand and moved along. Neither of us spoke. We didn’t need to.

The chief ignored me. I didn’t think much of it at the time, because I’d held Clara so long.

My classmates and I lingered while our parents talked. There was a reception in the church fellowship hall afterward. Piles and piles of donated food. Several dozen people stayed, half of which were kids in our class. Clara

and I didn't really talk much, but I didn't leave her side. Once, when one of the grown-ups came and told her how much she looked like her mom, she reached her hand out behind her, and I took it in mine. She squeezed so hard I nearly winced. I handed her a tissue to dry the fresh tears.

At the end, I went to the bathroom. I didn't want to leave her and said I'd be right back. That's when her father cornered me.

My hands were still wet from those ineffective brown paper towels in public places. Places that are too old for hand dryers. As soon as I stepped out of the bathroom, his hand was on my shirt collar, dragging me to a darkened corner by the stairwell. The bathroom was down a hall and out of the way. No one saw. I probably would have been scared if I wasn't so startled.

He bent down so he was at my eye level, tear-stained eyes inches from mine. "You stay away from her." A whisper has never been so loud. "You stay away from Clara, boy."

"What?"

"Don't you play stupid. I saw you up there. You don't go near her again or I swear I'll tell her all about your family. This is all your father's fault."

I didn't know what he meant about it being my dad's fault, but I knew some things about my family's business dealings and that Clara would care about a thing like that.

So I listened.

I manufactured distance between the two of us even though it broke my heart as much back then as it does today. Because I was scared of her finding out the truth about my family.

It wasn't until two years later that I found out what he really meant about Mrs. Larsen's death being my dad's fault. When I learned the full truth was so much worse than I ever could have dreamed.

Even now, it makes me sick to my stomach.

Then, when I turned sixteen, he took me on a trip and told me the truth. Told me why I'd been taught to shoot a gun when I was nine and why we'd really moved.

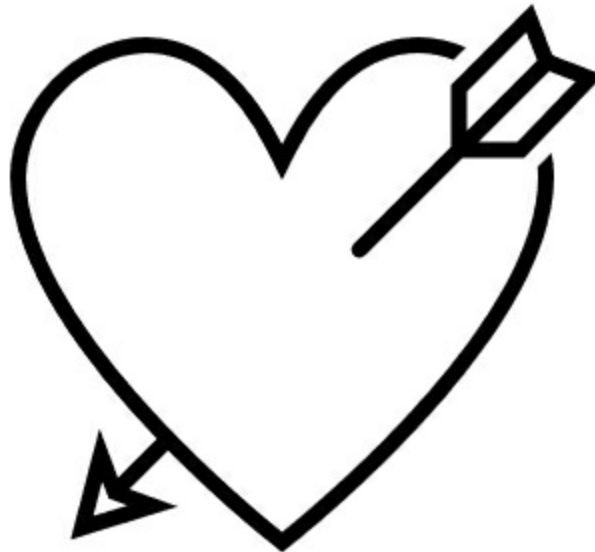
That's when I asked him about what the chief had said to me about staying away from Clara. He didn't give me any details other than this: it was an accident, but it was his fault Clara's mom was dead.

It was around that time I'd thought Clara might just understand about my father's work if I explained it to her. We were sixteen—old enough to know that some people did bad things to make money.

But then, he took me on that trip. And—with the weight of his admission on my shoulders—I knew Clara and I could never be together.

When I first got my license, I had followed the chief to the off-track betting place, so I wasn't surprised when my dad told me he had a gambling problem. What did surprise me was that my dad bailed Chief Larsen out of a bind by making his debt disappear with a few hundred lines of code. No proof, no debt.

But then Chief Larsen decided to go after my dad. It was stupid and he must not have realized how powerful my father is. One of my dad's guys was supposed to send a message. Mrs. Larsen got the message instead.



But I know the chief is reminding me that he'll tell Clara everything—things I don't even know myself—if I get too close. Reminding me that the truth really is that bad and that Clara will never forgive me if she knows.

Bile rises in my throat, and I choke it back down. "I got it, Chief."

Clara doesn't go to the party that night. Vince tells me her dad made her stay home. I kick everyone out early and sulk in my room, but not before getting absolutely obliterated.

## Chapter 36

### Victory

Our tutoring session today was productive. After the chief so graciously reminded me what's at stake, I stopped doing all my work at home. Now, Clara and I have enough to focus on during sessions, that I don't even have time to be overly friendly. But the more I think about it, the more certain I am that I need to tell Clara everything. Even if for the sole fact that I can't live much longer with her father holding the truth over my head.

I decide not to offer Clara a ride after the team workout, and I overhear her tell Clover she's going to wait for her dad to pick her up. When I walk by her, waiting in the glass-walled vestibule that leads out to the student parking lot, I say goodbye.

But something tells me not to leave. I move my car to a poorly lit area of the parking lot that gives me a decent vantage point to view where she sits in the vestibule. There are no benches or anything, so she sits on the floor with a book.

An hour goes by. She keeps checking the time. Makes a phone call.

Someone else walks down the six steps into the vestibule, and I know almost immediately that it's Vince. Good. He'll bring her home, and I won't fall victim to her charm.

They talk for a few minutes, he gives her a side hug and a quick peck on the lips, then leaves her. I groan out loud.

See that's the thing about Clara. You can't rely on what she presents at face-value. Her pride won't allow her to be honest sometimes. Vince accepts everything she says as fact. He doesn't push deeper. So from my vantage point in the parking lot, it looks like she waves off his offer to give her a ride. But he should be looking at the time and realizing that she does need one. At least, that's what I would do.

It gets darker.

She keeps waiting. Checking the time.

No one comes.

Finally, after another hour, I pull around and get out of my car. Should I stay away? Absolutely. What I'm about to do spells sure disaster for me. But am I going to do it anyway? Yes. Because I'm not going to let her sit here in this vestibule all night waiting for someone who doesn't care enough to show up. It used to be easier to steer clear of my feelings for Clara. But now that I've let her in a little bit, it's grown immensely difficult to keep her at arm's length.

The salted pavement crunches under my shoes, and I fiddle with my keys. When I near the window, I stand motionless for a moment—watching her. Watching the way she moves her head while she reads. The way she's folded her legs under herself and the drops of tears on the page. She's crying.

My stomach twists and I'm overwhelmed with the beauty of her heart. How deeply she must feel to cry in this cold, metal vestibule over a familiar green book. The feelings from reading that exact book are fresh in my mind, and I'd imagine those same pages are stained in my own copy.

To avoid spooking her, I slip in through the door and approach within her line of vision. Clara's eyes rise to meet mine. They brim with tears as she pulls one of her headphones free to hear me. She quickly swipes at the tears welling in her eyes and lets out a breathy little laugh.

Wordlessly, I crouch and take her hand, hook my fingers under hers and bring it to my lips. Without freeing her eyes from mine, I kiss the tears away and say, "Chapter fifty-four?"

"How'd you know?"

"I cried too."

I use my grip on her hand to help her to her feet.

"You didn't want to have someone on duty bring you home?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I'm only comfortable with a few of the officers. They're older and we've known each other for years. They watched me grow up. The new officers, I don't know from a hole in the wall."

I'm tempted to tell her Paulman is someone she could trust to bring her home, but I'm not even sure of that myself. "Well, I'm always around if you need me, and I like to drive."

"Thanks, Tory."

"Can I watch you read chapter fifty-five?"

"No way. I've heard all about that chapter."

"Oh please, Clara. Don't deny that we'll be tandem reading spicy books together in the not-so-distant future."



“I will admit to no such thing.”

We spend the rest of the drive talking about the love story detailed in the book on her lap. When a book means something to you, it’s hard to put it away. So I understand why it’s on her lap and not stowed in her backpack. At each stoplight, I watch the red glow turn to green against her cheekbones. I don’t bother watching the lights. I just watch her, the change in hue upon her skin telling me when to go.

Her house windows are black and the place is empty. No sign of life to be found. Not even a motion-detected security light. Without her dad around, she has no one. She never talks about any other family members. No grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. A thought takes form in my head, and I ask the question before I have time to second-guess myself.

“Hey.” I stop her from exiting my car both with the word and with my hand that has found its way to the space between her knuckles and wrist. She sinks back into the seat and closes the door, sensing that this “hey” is meant to be more than a parting word. “Do you guys do anything for Thanksgiving?”

She looks out the front window, at the lifeless, cold house. Cold in all senses of the word. Oppressive when compared to the glowing homes lining the street. “Um...” She trails off, pausing, deciding what to share. How much to share. It’s a straightforward question. No one would need to think about the answer, unless they didn’t want to share the answer. “No. No, not really. The first year, we kinda tried, but it wasn’t the same. Last year, the chief got himself scheduled to work. It was easier that way. There was an excuse. He’s working again this year.”

“Come to my house. I’ll pick you up.”

“Tory, I don’t want to crash your family dinner.”

“Stop right there. We get it catered. And it’s not just family. My dad’s four friends and their families all come over. There’s a bunch of kids and my niece. It’s fun, but it’s not like a close-knit family thing.”

What I don’t tell her is that two of my dad’s “friends” are bodyguards, and the other two are business associates. Black Friday is a big day for them, and they always have work to do on Thanksgiving. It’s easier for them to sneak off into the office if they’re already at our house with their families.

“What if Vince asks me to come over for Thanksgiving?” she says.

I shrug, toying with the set of keys in my lap. “Then you’ll have a choice to make, Charity.”

She huffs a laugh. “Thanks, Tory. Seriously.”

My tone is far more casual than I feel when I say, “Anytime.” What I want to say is, all the time. Clara, you can be with me all the time. Every day. All day.

But I can’t. So, I don’t.

Before she slides out of the seat, she leans in. For a moment, I’m convinced Clara’s coming in for a hug and devising ways to stretch it out—make it last. Instead, she flips my tag back inside the collar of my shirt, clucks her tongue and reaches for the door handle.

## Chapter 37

### Clara

One week later and I'm wearing a hole in the floor of my room. Vince half-heartedly asked if I had plans today an hour ago. This was three texts before he mentioned that his mom ran into his ex-girlfriend at Target and invited her over. Whenever he talks about her, I feel like I'm intruding somehow. I don't want tickets to that show.

But do I take Tory up on his offer? On the one hand, he certainly seemed sincere. But on the other, it feels inappropriate to go to someone's house on a major holiday when you've spent virtually no time with their family.

Maybe I should stay home and watch TV. The cable is out, but I had enough money to cover the Wi-Fi bill this month. Plus, I have a stack of books I want to read. But Tory has the last book in the *Shatter Me* series, and I really want to read it.

Before I lose my nerve, I text Tory, telling myself it's because I don't feel like cooking, and I want that book. Not because I'm eager to spend more time with him. These last few weeks have been dream-like. I never thought we'd get to a place that wasn't one-sided and sportive.

"So...what's the dress code for Thanksgiving at the Amato residence?" I hope he doesn't think I'm silly for asking.

He texts back almost immediately. "Good question. We usually dress nice for dinner and then change into comfy clothes after. I'm in a button-up, sweater, and khakis, if that helps."

"It does."

"How much time do you need to get ready?"

"An hour," I type back.

"Sounds good. I'll be over in an hour."

Then another message buzzes through. "I'm happy you're coming."



Exactly one hour later, the doorbell chime sounds through the house. It's one of those novelty musical sounds that takes me by surprise. My mom had my dad switch out the traditional doorbell for this one. No one usually rings the bell anymore, so I'd forgotten about it until now. A blade of sorrow bolts through my chest as I picture my mom dancing around the kitchen to the bell when I was a kid, and a friend would come ask to play. She'd tell me to be back for dinner, and I'd run off to play. I wish I had stayed home.

And right now, I'm wishing I didn't tell Tory I'd go to his family's house for Thanksgiving. Because all I want to do is curl up in bed. Mourning is weird like that. You'll be fine for a long time and then something reminds you of the person you lost. And that something brings you right back to the trenches—only to realize you never made it out in the first place.

That's exactly what I plan to tell Tory when I open the door. I'm sorry but something came up. I need to stay home. Then, I see his smile. It's a tidal wave and I'm a helpless sand crab scuttling about while it crashes over me. So all I manage is a small "Hey."

"Hey!" The way he says it is just as musical as the stupid doorbell. Better when coupled with the smile.

It doesn't hurt that he looks unfairly handsome in his fancier clothes. Tory shifts on his feet.

“You could have texted. I would’ve come out,” I tell him, lingering in the doorway because he’s making no effort to move.

“Uh, can I see your room?”

“What?” I crinkle my nose and quirk my head to the side, eyeing him and his nervous demeanor. I almost laugh. Almost.

“I just wanna see what your room looks like. You’ve seen mine.”

“Sure.” I move to the side and Victory Amato walks inside my house. The door clicks shut, but I don’t bother locking it.

“Should I take my shoes off?”

“No, that’s okay.”

He looks side to side, surveying the living room to his left and a small den to the right, before following me up the centrally-located staircase.

Tory walks to the center of my room, circles once, eyeing the walls up and down. He zeroes in on a couple photos, and I hope he doesn’t notice his sweatshirt draped over the back of my desk chair.

He smiles again and says, “Nice. Very Clara.”

Then I’m grabbing my tote bag with cozy clothes and locking the door behind us as we leave. Two steps out the door and Tory scoops the bag from my shoulder. “I got it.” He walks with me to the passenger’s side and opens the door, like usual.

Foliage passes us by in a blur of sunset-orange, cinnamon, and gold with pops of orange-red—like the Crayon color. Halfway there, I ask, “What exactly should I expect? I haven’t talked to your parents much, and I don’t think I ever formally met your sister.”

“Lots of kids. There’s like a dozen kids between the three families. Plus, one guy and his girlfriend who is wearing a cocktail dress and heels. I don’t think he did a good job sharing about the dress code, but she laughed it off.” He chuckles to himself.

“Speaking of which, how’s my outfit?” I ask, gesturing to my burnt-orange miniskirt and cream, chunky sweater. My hair is curled, half-up, and secured with a matching ribbon. I wore a crimson lip stain that I know from experience will hold out all night.

“Perfect.” He gives me a quick, approving glance. “We’ll hang around for an hour or so and eat when my sister gets here. I usually sit at the kid table to avoid talking to the adults.”

“Sounds good.”

Man, Tory was not joking about the kids. As soon as we walk in the

door, a couple of elementary-aged boys try to tackle him at the knees. Tory manages to drag them along while he introduces me.

A few minutes later, Tory sets me up on the couch with a plate of appetizers, and I'm happy I didn't have to wade through everyone to do it myself. We chitchat with a few of the kids about school until someone lays on their car horn from the driveway.

"That's Giules. Be right back." Tory hops up from his seat and bounds out the front door. He returns with his niece in one arm and a re-usable grocery bag—filled to the brim—in the other. His older sister, Giulia, follows him with two more bags and kicks the door shut with her thigh-high, heeled boot. Marcia calls those "do-me" boots. She's wearing a bright red, short sweater dress, and her makeup is immaculate.

Giulia drops her bags and rushes over to sit next to me.

"Hello," she says, long and slow with a smile that rivals the Grinch.

I shoot Tory a look as he scoops up the bags and heads toward the kitchen. He gives me a nod and mouths the words, "She's fine," which sets me at ease.

"Hi, I'm Clara."

"I know. I'm so excited you're here."

"Happy to be here."

She smiles at me creepily for a few torturous seconds before Tory returns and boots her from his spot.

"Stop being weird," he tells her.

"I'm just happy you invited her, Vic. Clara, this is my daughter Rainey..." Her voice trails off as she looks around the room. "Where is she? Rainey, come over here. Get your finger out of your nose." Giulia scoops up Rainey and balances the toddler on her hip.

I wave at the little girl who is a spitting image of Giulia and Mrs. Amato. She nuzzles her face into Giulia's shoulder shyly before being released to play with the other kids in the rec room downstairs.

We join the kids a short while later. The rec room is a haven. Pinball, basketball, air hockey, ping-pong table, virtual bowling—you name it, they've got it. "Why don't you let people down here during your parties?"

"I don't want anyone breaking my toys." Tory sidles up next to me as I run my fingers across a Star Wars themed pinball machine, studying the various details before I start it up. He hooks a finger into one of my belt loops, and I feel his hooded gaze drift down my neck. His smoky, velvet

voice tells me, “I’m very protective of what’s mine.”

Oh, gosh. He’s trying to kill me. My pulse races, but I ignore his double entendre and start the game. We play a couple games against each other and then I watch Tory play knee hockey with a few of the kids. They use mini hockey sticks and mini goals, and I giggle at how hard he tries. There’s no middle ground with Tory. Not on anything. Which is why I wonder why he offered to be my friend and nothing more. It’s not his style.

During dinner, we sit at the kids’ table. The older kids help the younger ones get servings of all the various side dishes and turkey. Tory gets Rainey’s plate situated while I manage my side of the table.

When Tory sees my sparse plate, he blurts out something about side dishes and disappears into the kitchen.

“I couldn’t get everything without dairy, like the mac and cheese, obviously, but this is still a good assortment.”

He places half a dozen small containers of hot food in a semi-circle around my plate. “You were able to get all this without dairy?” I ask, eyeing the mashed potatoes and some sort of wild mushroom veggie medley.

“Yeah, after I invited you last week, I called the catering company and had them make some stuff without dairy, in case you came.”

I clear my throat, working hard to draw out the words that desperately want to remain stuck inside. “Thank you. That was...really kind of you.” A warm smile overtakes me, and I give his knee a squeeze under the table before digging in.

“No thanks needed. It would be kinda witless to invite you over to eat and not actually feed you food you can eat.” He shrugs, slicing off a piece of turkey with gravy.

Vince always forgets.

Before I can argue, Mrs. Amato sets a bowl on the table full of steaming, freshly-baked bread. “Everyone, don’t forget to try Vic’s sourdough .”

“Tory made this? Did you two make it together?” I ask.

“Oh, no,” she chirps. “I can’t cook or bake to save my life. The men do, though. Victory still uses the starter he got from my late mother-in-law. My boy is so sentimental.”

“Geez, Mom.”

“What?” She gives his shoulder a loving pinch before striding off to set a similar bowl on the adult table.

“You make sourdough?” I nudge his forearm with mine.

He shrugs. "Maybe."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Thought you'd make a big deal about it."

"I won't. But I will be expecting bread as a tip for my tutoring services."

"Whatever, Charity." His smile tells me he'll do it.



## Chapter 38

### Clara

After dinner, Tory and I head up to his room and take turns changing into our cozy clothes in the bathroom. I don a buttery soft lounge set. Before I can reach the door to go back downstairs, he says, “We can hang out up here. I think I got, like, three bruises from those guys.”

“What time will everyone head out?” I ask.

“Probably around midnight. Most of the kids will crash in the rec room with a movie while the parents keep things going. My dad and his colleagues have work to do so they’ll sneak off downstairs with Giulia.”

“Is she in IT as well?”

“Yeah, she’ll be taking over when my dad retires.”

“Cool.” I nod.

“Yeah.”

“So...what are we gonna do?”

He gives me a sheepish grin as the seconds tick by and reaches out to play with the hem of my sleeve. “Netflix...no chill?”

“Sounds good,” I say.

“Unless you’re ready to revise the policy on ‘chill’.”

“I’m not. Actually, before I forget, I need the last *Shatter Me* book. I really liked reading your margin notes in this one,” I say, reaching down and pulling the finished book from my bag.

“Did you make any of your own?” he asks. “I’ll skim through it again if you did.”

“No, I didn’t feel like I should cause it’s not my book.”

“I don’t mind. Mark the last one up. What do you think of the series?”

And with that, the floodgates open, and I begin to gush. We ping-pong back and forth about all the books we’ve both read, Shakespeare, and book to movie adaptations. Then, he takes me on a shelf tour through his favorites.

By the time we’re through, I have six more books weighing down my tote bag, and we’re settled on his bed picking out a movie.

“Oh, have you read the book for this one?”

“*To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*,” he reads off the screen. “No, is it good?”

I gasp. “It’s my absolute favorite. I read the trilogy, like, three times all the way through. I’ll give you those in school on Monday. We have to watch the movie.”

“Won’t it ruin the books?”

“This one really doesn’t. And you totally give off Peter Kavinsky vibes. He’s the best book boyfriend ever.”

“Better than Warner?”

“They’re different. You’ll see.”

Being under the covers feels too intimate, so I lean back against the pillows lining the headboard—on top of the comforter. He queues up the movie and tosses a throw blanket over my legs from the end of the bed. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Tory shift almost imperceptibly closer, crossing his arms over his broad chest. He’s wearing flannel pajama bottoms. Navy and hunter-green with some red and white. I want to reach out and squeeze his bicep, straining against his stone-colored, long-sleeved Henley.

He scoots closer again, and his left hand comes down to rest in the space between our bodies.

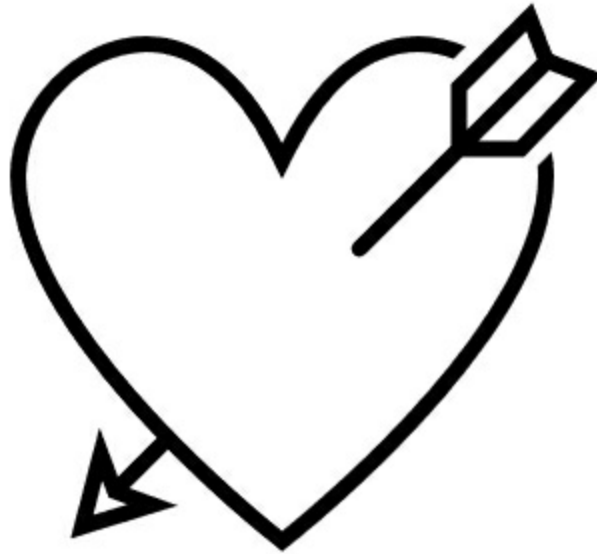
Would it be weird to hold his hand? Of course, I chide myself. What am I thinking? But they’re so tempting. Big and strong. Veiny. Just rough enough to give solid evidence of his prowess in the weight room. Smooth, olive skin. I let the intrusive thoughts win and reach out to trace one of his knuckles. It has a faint scar. A few of his knuckles do. Fighting.

He glances down at the point of connection but doesn’t move. “That’s quite...friendly.”

“Lots of friends hold hands all the time,” I say.

Before I think better of my behavior, I fan the blanket over our laps and erase the space between us. His left hand finds mine, and we interlace our fingers under the covers. His hand is warm and large and somehow feels like coming home.

We shouldn’t. But we do. If we can’t see it, then it doesn’t count, I tell myself. Friends hold hands all the time, after all.



Sometime during the movie, I fall asleep on Tory's shoulder. Amid the trips to away games, it has become a bit of a habit. He never wakes me unless he has to, like when the bus pulls into the opposing school. When I awake, the movie is over and Tory's reading a book in his lap.

"Sorry," I mutter.

"For what?"

"I fall asleep on you all the time."

"And?"

"Isn't it annoying? I mean, you can't really move or else I'll wake up so then you're stuck in an awkward position."

"I like it. It means you're comfortable.."

I sigh, long and loaded. I don't tell him I fall asleep with him because I feel safe. Despite everything. Instead, I tell him, "Sometimes I think you're too good to be true."

"Too good to be true? I flirt with you in front of the guy you're dating. I've insulted you countless times both behind your back and to your face. I haven't ever shown proper appreciation for the care baskets."

"You know?"

"I've known since last year ."

"Maybe *I'm* too good to be true."

“Now that’s something we can agree upon.” He gives me a warm smile. A smile that makes me think he believes I’m special, even if I don’t.

“But you’ve also fed me countless times, got me the manager job and the tutoring gig, took care of me when I was inebriated, defended my honor on numerous occasions—including getting into a fight.”

“Twice.”

“The first was superfluous—doesn’t count. You gave me a phone.”

“All the better to stalk you with, my dear.” Tory wags his brows.

“And I have a sneaking suspicion you throw five bucks on my lunch account every so often.”

“A gentleman never tells.”

“All I’m saying is, the good far outweighs the bad.”

“Then I’m glad the scales are tipping in my favor. Remind me again why you aren’t my wife?”

“We’re seventeen.”

“Semantics.”

“And there’s Vince. I mean, we aren’t exclusive, but he’d probably be a little sad if I got married.” I let out an awkward laugh. Speaking Vince’s name feels so wrong in this moment.

“Hearing his name cross your lips is growing awfully tiresome, Clara.”

“Then I guess you can sleep on my shoulder.”

## Chapter 39

### Victory

It's late when I get back from bringing Clara home. Nearly 2:00 a.m. One of my father's men is waiting for me in the darkened living room.

"Your father's waiting for you in his office. Downstairs," he tells me.

His girlfriend is curled up on the couch with her head in his lap. There's a plush blanket over her legs and he plays with her hair, draped over his mammoth thigh. I wonder if she knows how dangerous he is. This man in particular has choked someone to death while I listened in the other room.

No one knew I was there. I was thirteen and threw up every night for a week straight until my dad finally learned what I'd seen. We talked it out. I think he gave me some Benadryl to help me sleep. Then I started stealing from his liquor cabinet. I was coping with a lot at the time.

My father has two offices. The upstairs office is in the main part of the house that everyone has access to. He rarely uses it, and it serves more as a shrine to my sister and I. Loaded up with hockey photos and some of my trophies. The other half is my sister's accomplishments in the tech world. She's invented a few successful apps and is raising the coolest toddler around by herself. So I guess that half technically belongs to Giulia and Rainey.

Downstairs houses the second office, behind two sets of fingerprint-activated locks. The door to the tech wing, as I call it, is unassuming. When you first open it, it looks like an empty closet. Most people open it, see that it isn't the rec room bathroom and close it again. But if you step into the closet and look left, there's a doorknob upon a door that swings into a hidden hallway. In that small hallway, there's a security camera and the first fingerprint-activated lock. The whirring of that camera sounds quietly as I go through the door to the sitting room. No one sits at the desk. It's mostly for show. But sometimes people sit in the waiting-room-style chairs. They wait to strike deals or—unbeknownst to them—die. To be clear, they don't die here. They get taken elsewhere to die. At least after I heard the Hulk upstairs killing someone that time.

The second office looms on my right. It's fancy. All mahogany and rich, oriental rugs. No family mementos, though. Not down here.

Ignoring my father upon entry is key to establishing a necessary show of dominance. Upstairs, my father is gentle and caring. Down here, he's a villain in a lair. Cold. Calculating. Demanding. Down here, he means business.

First up, alcohol. I choose a crystal decanter at random. Something deep amber will do. He sighs dramatically from behind me, the sound breaking the solitude of crystal on crystal and liquid. I kick back my first pour, relishing the burning sting and hating him for dulling the luster of the evening. I refill the glass and sit in the chair across from him. He's still in his Italian suit. It fits with the downstairs office. Not upstairs. Upstairs he wears Italian sweaters. Cashmere, mostly.

Second step to establishing dominance: don't speak first. To really tick him off, I pull out my phone and scroll on social media, chuckling softly as I go.

"Victory."

Uh-oh. Full name.

"What's up, Dad? Thanks for the booze."

"Why was Chief Larsen's daughter in my house today? On Thanksgiving, no less."

I keep my eyes glued to my phone screen, sipping the liquor slowly. "Eating dinner and hanging out with your handsome and talented son."

"Don't be cute."

"Aw, Dad."

"What the hell are you doing with this girl? Spending all your free time with her, bringing her around for family dinner? I told you to be careful when that girl became your tutor. I knew you'd take things too far. You always do."

"She has a name." I finally look at him and inhale deeply, leveling a glare. Setting the tone. "You've called her 'Chief Larsen's daughter' and 'girl'. Her name is Clara. It would behoove you to refer to her by name."

"You haven't answered my question."

I exit out of the app I've been scrolling, put my phone to sleep and slide it in my flannel pocket. I kick back the rest of my drink and place the glass down on the desk with a loud thunk.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

“It looks like you’re trying to have a relationship with Clara.”

“How astute.” I cock my head—a young lion eyeing the aging pride leader.

“That can’t happen.”

I huff a laugh. “I’m going to make sure that it does.”

“How would that be possible once she finds out about our family?”

“I intend to tell her first, head it off. I’ll tell her the truth about her father as well.”

“If you tell her the truth about her father, he’ll tell her the truth about her mother.”

“He won’t have the chance. I’m going to tell her everything, Dad.”

“What if she reacts badly?”

“She will.”

“What if she gets the idea to tell someone?”

“She won’t.”

“You know what I’ll have to do if she does.”

I laugh heartily at the open threat. “Like hell you will.”

“I’d have to, Victory. She’d become a liability. This kind of thing is all about who strikes first. I can’t risk her going to the police at large.”

“If you think I’d let you harm her, you’re more deranged than I thought you were. You seem to forget who raised me. I know how to disappear.”

“She’ll want nothing to do with you.”

“I wouldn’t give her a choice.”

“So, what? You’ll kidnap her and flee the country? Give up everything you’ve worked for? I never expected you to take over when I retire, but hockey—”

I lean forward, rocking in my chair. My index finger smacks the desk, punctuating my fervor. “Hockey means nothing if I lose her. There is absolutely nothing—no amount of money, no threat, no sport, no level of success—that is worth losing her over.”

Unspoken words cross between us. My father looks at me and he knows. He knows I would choose Clara over my family, too. I would never let her betray my family, but I will cut them off if she asks me to. If it means we can be together. That’s why I need to tell her the truth at the tournament. I have a month to lay the groundwork and build up my courage.

Because this will change everything.

# Chapter 40

## Victory

Clara was supposed to bring me books on Monday. But she didn't show up to school. Vince was clueless, as usual. On Tuesday, I asked Jack about her absence. He said she was sick. Vince overheard and texted her to see if she needed anything. I tried to reach out, but she completely ignored me. Wednesday made three days of withdrawal from the only drug I've ever been addicted to: her smile.

Thursday morning, I find her at her locker. "Where have you been?"

"Morning, Tory."

"I was worried. Good morning."

"Just sick." She shrugs, but it feels like forced nonchalance.

"That's it? Vince said you wouldn't let him come see you, and you didn't even answer me. Jack was the only one with anything useful to tell me." I cross my arms, working hard to dial back my indignation. She doesn't owe me an explanation, but that doesn't make it hurt any less.

"I'm just one of those people who likes to recover in solitude. I think one of the kids at Thanksgiving gave me something."

"Oh...okay. You look adorable, by the way. Did you do something different with your hair?"

She smiles, and, from my position studying her profile, I notice how the action pulls her nose down into a curve. Clara uses makeup to make her nose look smaller. I like looking at her from the side. When her nose curves down, I know it's a real smile and not one that's been rehearsed in the mirror dozens of times.

"Nope," she chirps.

"New outfit?"

"Tory," she whines teasingly.

When she finally looks over at me, she pushes them up the bridge of her nose with an index finger. My bottom lip finds its way between my teeth.

"Took you long enough to wear them."



“You said they looked bad,” she shoots back.

“I lied,” I say quickly. “I love them. Wear them every day,” I plead.

She shakes her head and huffs a laugh. “Not gonna do that.”

I toy with a keychain hanging off her pink backpack. It’s a rubber flower. Totally meaningless, but somehow totally Clara. Her hair is half-up in a pink, pastel claw clip—also in the shape of a flower. She wears a tight, pink dress with spaghetti straps and a white mock-neck underneath. The dress has tiny rosettes stitched all over it. “Then I guess we need to start having sleepovers so I can be with you when you change into them for the evening.” I sigh dramatically.

“In your dreams, Tory.”

“Be nice, Charity. I missed you.”

“Liar.”

“You wound me, Clara.” My tone is playful, but I use her real name to send a message.

She looks over then, sussing out my level of sincerity. Finding me serious, she turns back to her locker, kisses the picture of Taylor Swift, and flings it closed.

I take her books from her arms and carry them to history. A bleary-eyed Mr. M gives us a one-over and comments on how we’re two peas in a pod as I shove our two desks together. Clara wordlessly sits beside me after tucking my shirt tag back into my neckline. This morning, I dug through my bureau until I found a shirt with a tag. When she isn’t looking, I flip it back out.



The next two weeks are a blur. Between hockey, tutoring, and training I barely have time to sleep. Friends. That's what I told her I wanted, and she agreed. She must take after her father's poor betting habits because that was not a deal she should have taken. At least not if she wanted to remain aloof to my advances. I fell for her a long time ago. But in the weeks leading up to the hockey tournament, I can tell she's opening her heart to me as well. It's terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

As an athlete, I'm no stranger to practice. Preparing what I'll say to Clara during this tournament is no different. I practice in my head during class, out loud in my room at night. I have the speech planned out perfectly. Now, I just need to get the guts to deliver it and pray she'll forgive me for keeping the secret as long as I have.

# Chapter 41

## Victory

Clara sits next to me on the flight to Florida. Vince's parents got him an upgrade to business class for a Christmas present and he talked about it nonstop on the ride to the airport. Fine with me.

Since my mom oversaw booking the flights for the team, I made sure she sat Clara and I beside each other. So we're currently buddy reading the orange *ACOTAR* book. And by buddy reading, I mean Clara is reading it and I'm looking over her shoulder. She finished the *Shatter Me* series last week, and we spent an entire tutoring session discussing it.

Now, she's back to the popular fantasy romance series. When I saw that the book she was crying over in the vestibule was a library loan, I bought her the box set for Christmas. I gave it to her before we left on break so she wouldn't have to lug them all onto the plane today. We both read the blue book during the last few days off school, texting updates back and forth. She got mad because I was blowing through it a little too fast.

Rumor has it, this book is the spiciest of the entire series, but we're over a hundred pages in and nothing has happened yet. The sum of money I'd pay to watch her squirm while reading a spicy scene is unspeakable. These are the thoughts that distract me from what I know I'll have to do during this trip: tell her the truth about my father's involvement in her mom's death.

It's not fair of my father to put me in this situation. Sometimes I wish it was her dad who died. I liked Clara's mom. She carried candy in her purse and always knew what was going on in school. And she was everything to Clara. It's wildly unfair to Clara for her mother to be ripped away unnecessarily. These are the weights that rest on my shoulders day in and day out.

But it's real. And it's happening. I've been working up the nerve for a year, I guess. When I found out last year, I knew I'd have to tell her someday. Sometimes, I wonder if it would have been better to have told her as soon as I found out. But we didn't even have a friendship last year. How do you say

that to someone you barely even know? Hey, my dad had your mom killed. Don't worry, though, it was meant to be your dad because he has a gambling problem and tried to go after my criminal father. There, there. It's okay. Insert awkward shoulder pat and an immediate trip to the authorities.

No. I'm doing this the right way. I've laid the groundwork. She trusts me. At least, I think she does. Best case scenario, she forgives me for keeping the secret and the truth helps her heal. Maybe she'll even disown her father since it was all his fault to begin with.

Worst-case scenario number one: she freaks out and tries to go to the authorities. Then, I'll have to do anything I can to keep her safe.

Worst-case scenario number two: she never speaks to me again. Honestly, that's the worst of the worst.

I'm vaguely aware of her flipping pages beside me and have let my thoughts distract me from reading. Rightfully so. But then she lets out a little gasp and I zero in on the words. She slams the book shut.

"Uh-uh. Open up, Charity."

"Tory," she whines.

"Do it."

"I'm too shy."

I pluck the book from her hands and open up to the page she was last reading from. "We're gonna fix that shyness. I can promise you that. But for now..." I give her a devious brow wag. "I'll read it to you."

Clara's jaw drops, eyes going wide. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely."

"We land in fifteen minutes."

"I'm a fast reader. You can close your eyes and picture me, if you want."

"I won't."

"Liar," I hiss close to her neck.

Clara stares straight ahead as I read the sultry words, letting my voice go deep and filling with intent. Every word on the page is a promise.

As long as we can get past the horrible truth of how her mother died.

# Chapter 42

## Victory

Too many thoughts swirl in my mind. I'm the type of player who can block everything out with relative ease. But some thoughts I don't want to block out. Reading a spicy book scene to Clara on the plane is one of those thoughts.

Seeing her stare straight ahead, digging her nails into my leg got my pulse racing faster than any cardio workout I've ever done. I'm surprised I didn't bruise. Two paragraphs in, she was biting her bottom lip, and I imagined how sweet it would taste. If I play my cards right, I'll know for certain.

So I let myself be distracted. Keep the image in my mind. Because it's way better than hockey.

We checked into the hotel and settled in for a couple hours. The team is all on the twentieth floor and I had to trade rooms with two people to make sure Clara and Clover's double was next to my single. I prefer my solitude at the end of the day. Several hours later, and we're at the rink. Though it's not a rink. It's a stadium. The Tampa Bay Lightning stadium to be exact. The tournament games are on off times so we're all cleared out well before or after Bolts games. One of the perks of the tournament is that we all get to go to a Lightning game. But for right now, it's the first game on the first day and everyone is buzzing.

What I'm not anticipating is how aggressive our first opponents are. A few hard hits in, and I pull myself out of my thoughts and into the game. It's all I can do to avoid the cheap shots the enemy takes at our top scorers—especially me.

Eight minutes into the first period, Vince goes down and stays down. Once I'm close, I slide over on my knees and kneel over his helmet, waving over the trainers. Hockey includes injuries. It's the nature of the sport. But Vince is usually an exception to that rule. In the five years I've played with him. I've never seen him get hurt. Not that he doesn't take big hits. I've seen

the guy slammed into the boards more times than I can count. But he always pops back up. Seeing him lying here, eyes closed, is unnerving.

“Vince. Buddy. Wake up,” I call down to him. His eyelids flutter, and my heart rate starts to even out.

Ice chips melt beneath my ungloved hands. I keep them planted on the ice, so I don’t touch Vince and potentially make something worse.

A lazy smile tugs at the corners of his lips, revealing a gaping hole where his front tooth should be. Shoot. His mom is gonna freak.

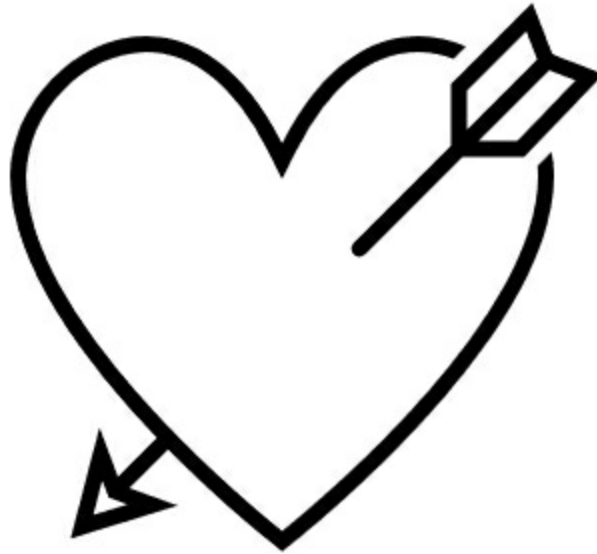
“Amato. Didn’t think you cared.”

“Of course I care, you idiot. You got your tooth knocked out. You look like a hick. Why don’t you wear a mouth guard?” I scold him while the trainers do their work of checking him over.

I land some of the most savage hits I’ve ever delivered in my life. One of them gets a player on the bench, and I’m about to level another. Screw these guys and their bad attitude. Not that my attitude is much better. But they hurt my teammate. Just because I’m mad at him, doesn’t mean I’ll tolerate such behavior.

After one of our Defenders gets leveled, I fly across the ice, aiming to strike. I’m seeing red, so singularly focused that I don’t notice one of the guys on the other team skate up on my left side.

Then everything goes dark.



When I come to, all I can think of is the dull throb in my head and Clara. A trainer helps me off the ice. I'm whisked into an office, and the trainer does some preliminary tests. I feel myself fading again as she tells the assistant coach that I need to go to the hospital to get checked out for a concussion.

"Clara," I say. "I need Clara. She knows all my medical info. I need her."

Then, I go out.

When I wake up again, I'm in a hospital bed, a smaller, warm hand in mine.

I'm unfocused but I know she's here and smiling at me and cute. "Hi, pretty."

"Tory." She squeezes the hand. I'm surprised to see it's attached to me. That's special. "I was worried about you. I'm glad you told them to bring me along."

"So pretty."

"Thank you. How are you feeling?"

"So good."

"Oh, gosh." She presses a little red button. Round like a ladybug.

A doctor comes in with Coach Anderson, and I clap for the two of them. "Clara. You should stand."

“Why?”

“The guest of honor just walked in. He deserves a standing ovation, Silly.” Tory giggles.

The doctor speaks up. “He’s showing symptoms of the concussion. We did an MRI when he was unconscious. Everything checks out. He just needs to take it easy for the next three days. No hockey. No screens, For the next forty-eight hours, he needs to be woken up every three hours when he’s sleeping, and a few test questions asked. The nurse will be in later to go over everything. Is there someone who can monitor him?”

Coach looks at Clara. Clara looks back. Nods. Impressive how they can talk without words. I’m jealous.

“Clara can. She’s one of the managers. The three of them can split the duty.”

“I can handle it on my own,” she tells him.

He says, “I’ll check in with you in the morning.”

“Time for a sleepover with my nurse!”



## Chapter 43

### Clara

Coach helps me get Tory into his room and onto the bed. I bid him farewell and return to the bed. When my fingers guide his head down onto the pillow, I feel a huge knot at the base of his skull.

“Oh no, you have an egg.”

Tory flips the corner of the blankets off his legs and looks around the bed. “I do? Where? That’s so baby girl of me.”

“What does that even mean?”

He tries to recline on his back, but his head bumps the pillow. “Ow. I don’t know, Clara. I’m concussed. Good grief, I can’t be held accountable for any thoughts, words, or actions.”

“Whatever you say, baby girl.”

“Actually, come closer, I’m gonna kiss ya on the lips,” he says with a British accent.

“Oh boy. Let’s get you to sleep.” I rise from the bed and shut off all the lights except for a small desk lamp.

“Oh, Clara,” he calls from the bed. “I’m a sick, sick man.”

I rush over and sit on the edge of the bed. “Is it the concussion? What are your symptoms?”

“My heart. It feels as though it’s cleaving in two. My stomach is constantly aflutter as though I’ll vomit at any moment.” A bottomless, teasing smile takes over his face. He’s quite self-satisfied when he says, “And there is a sickening void on my lips the shape of yours.”

“Close your eyes and go to sleep.”

He takes my wrist in hand. “Please, Clara, I need you. Clinically. I’m parched and you...” Tory reaches up with his free hand and tucks my hair behind my ear. “You are my oasis.”

He gets close and asks if it would shatter the illusion if he kissed my cheek.

“Definitely,” I tell his deep brown eyes. So he takes my hand and brings

it to his lips, planting a very chaste kiss upon my knuckles.

“Thank you for taking care of me, Charity. Will you tell me a bedtime story since I can’t watch Netflix?”

“Sure, Tory. Close your eyes.” I reach out and stroke his mahogany waves until he drifts to sleep.

## Chapter 44

### Clara

Three days later, Tory is cleared for practice. He's healed beautifully from his concussion and is eager to get back on the ice. But tonight, a bunch of us are hanging out at the hotel hot tub. It's a big one. Easily large enough to fit ten people in it. That's about the size of our group, including our goalie, Clover, Thomas, and a few players from other schools.

Then, Tory joins us.

I was so scared to see his feet. Scared they'd shatter the illusion. Not just his feet. His thighs, his butt, and anything else that isn't appropriate for general audiences. Really, I'm scared to see anything that may potentially and permanently shatter the illusion—anything that might ruin him. Though, I was especially terrified of the feet. You see, I hate feet. And what if his looked like Frodo feet? What if he didn't take care of them? What if they looked like fish bellies or were...dirty? My fear was for naught. Because while, as a rule, I do hate feet, I can't find reason to hate his. Tan, well-kept, straight, even toes, nice arches. Many a man has been ruined for me because of their lowest extremities.

But alas, nothing can ruin him for me. Never has such a perfect distraction existed in all of time.

He's a caricature. His perfections exaggerated, and his flaws nonexistent. That's how I've always viewed him.

Tory looks me in the eyes as he takes off his shirt. He turns slowly to descend the stairs into the hot tub and for a moment, I'm unable to process what I'm looking at. There's a tattoo down his spine. A newer one. I just saw his bare back...what was it? A few months ago, now?

I forget my manners and turn my head to the side, side-eyeing the quote scrawled down his back in delicate, handwritten script. There's something so familiar about the letters.

*Under love's heavy burden do I sink.*

My hand slaps over my gaping mouth. "What is that?" I shout through

my fingers.

“Like it?”

Tory gives me a knowing grin that answers my real question as he takes a spot on the opposite side of the hot tub. I don’t ask. I don’t need to ask. That smile is all it takes to answer the unspoken questions.

Questions like:

Is that a temporary tattoo? No.

Is that a quote from Romeo & Juliet?

Yes.

And is it in my handwriting?

Also, yes.

Victory Amato has my favorite quote, inked down his back in my handwriting.

I don’t know how he attained the image. I guess it’s irrelevant. But we read Romeo and Juliet freshman year for the first time. But in honors British lit this year, we did an in-depth analysis right when school started. I was scrawling the quote all over the place. I’ve always loved the tragedy and promise it held.

The blue-white glowing lights of the hot tub dance across his statuesque features. They illuminate his marble jawline and high cheekbones in a way that makes me want to glide my tongue up one side and down the other.

Our group thins down to five, and Clover proposes we play Truth or Dare. Tory’s arms rest along the concrete lip surrounding the blue, up-lit hot tub. The king of his domain. A gold chain with some Catholic saint hangs from his neck. Water droplets slowly meander down his striated chest.

At the end of the game, someone asks him, and he picks truth. They ask, “What is one thing you want right now?”

He looks at me and in my wildest dreams I think—hope—he’s going to say my name. Or he’ll say something that’s hurtful to me but intentionally vague toward everyone else.

Instead, he surprises me and says, “Peace”—he checks his phone—“And solitude. Everyone go. Now. Rest up for tomorrow.” He waves his hand. a petulant prince dismissing his subjects.

At first, no one moves. A couple seniors grumble, and Tory levels them with a look. So we slowly rise to our feet without another word.

I’m a few paces away when I hear from behind me, “Clara?”

## Chapter 45

### Clara

I turn to find his face streaked with boredom and something else I can't quite place. To my utter shock he says, "Not you. You stay."

"Why?"

"You are my peace."

Warmth spreads through my chest, prickling my skin as I sit cross-legged on the edge of the hot tub. I look at the dancing bubbles, the swaying palm trees, a flickering light far down the walkway to the ocean. Anywhere but at Tory, even while I feel his eyes drilling into me. When everyone has cleared out and the echoes of laughter and horseplay fade, he says, "Come in."

"Excuse me?" I balk.

"You heard me, Clara. Get your ass in here with me."

"I don't have my bathing suit on."

"Do I look concerned?" he drawls.

"But—"

"Feel free to strip down."

"No."

Tory sighs. "Charity. I'm not going to ask again."

"Fine, but I'm not stripping out of anything you little imp."

My shoes join his and a stack of towels on the concrete edge of the hot tub. Somewhere down the beach the throbbing bass of a song booms out of someone's car speakers, and I feel it pulse in time with my heart. I seem to have a drumbeat everywhere on my body at the moment. In my ears, my bottom lip, fingertips. All places eager for his caress. Still, I could be dreaming. In the back of my mind, I still doubt his intentions. Doubt the hooded gaze boring through me and the way he sucks in a tight breath through clenched teeth when I rise from the water. My black Henley clings to every curve and divot .

"Let's play a game."

“We already played Truth or Dare. That’s what got us in this odd situation you contrived, puppet master.”

“Question Game.”

“Me first. Why do you have a tattoo in my handwriting?”

He shrugs. “You have nice handwriting. Why are you wasting your time with Vince?”

“He’s nice to me. Unlike some people.”

“I prefer the villain character arc. Much more interesting.”

“Where did you even find that quote written in my handwriting? You have to be truthful. It’s a rule.”

“Is it?”

“No answering questions with a question. That’s another rule.”

“Rules are more exciting when broken.”

“Answer or you lose.”

“I’ll answer. Though, I feel I’ve already lost quite a lot.” He levels me with a look and the air shifts, buzzing with golden possibility and midnight doom and starlit promise. Tory’s eyes never waver from mine as he says, “You scrawled notes all over a piece of scrap paper in history one day. You must have been reading Romeo and Juliet in English class. I saw you toss it, so I took it out of the bin.”

“My turn. Did Vince invite you over for Thanksgiving?” Something like hope blooms in his eyes.

I look at him for a long time, knowing that I don’t want to tell him, but that I have to. That it will change things again and give that hope something to hold on to. I nod.

He lowers his head, an entirely new emotion taking over—darker, sultry, and victorious. Tory’s top lip lifts, almost in a snarl as he says, “Use your words.”

“Yes,” I breathe. “He—he invited me over late.” I pause, knowing I can stop there. The game doesn’t require an explanation. But something inside me needs to tell him. So I say, “I picked you.”

His mouth parts, corners pulling into the most heavenly smile I’ve ever been blessed to witness. I think he’s going to respond to my admission. But instead he says, “Your turn.”

“When did you get the tattoo? I’ve seen you without a shirt an inordinate number of times and this is new.”

“Right after Thanksgiving.”

He rises to his full height, stalking closer through the swirling bubbles. Tory laces his fingers through mine and pulls me to my feet. The movement is painfully, tantalizingly slow, but brutish and rough.

“Do you want to see it more closely?”

“Sure.”

Tory turns away, and I study him without him doing the same to me. When my fingers absently rise to trace the letters, his back arches ever so slightly in response to my touch.

It’s beautiful. He’s beautiful.

My heart pounds in my ears as I ask my next question.

“Tory.” I pause. “Why did you get a romantic tattoo of a romantic quote I scrawled on a piece of paper two months ago?”

Tory turns to face me, goosebumps erupting along his collarbone in response to a gentle breeze against wet skin. “Do you really need to ask?” he says. His toned abdomen presses into mine, and I let my hands slither up his chest and around his neck, hooking his nape at my elbows.

“That was the second time you answered a question with a question. You lost the game.”

He breathes a laugh through a crooked smirk. “I wanted a piece of you on me. Forever.”

Those lips creep so close to mine. My eyes long to shutter because I know what happens next, and when you kiss someone, you’re supposed to close your eyes. But I can’t. Because he smells of cinnamon and culmination. He feels like breaking family expectations and starting to think for myself. All I want to do is stare. Maybe if I just keep my eyes open, I’ll be able to replay it over and over again until the day I die. Even if I live to be old and gray, it won’t be enough.

It’s possible that I’m shaking. Maybe trembling. Because the anticipation of what’s about to happen is so completely beautiful and overwhelming and tantalizing.

I want to stop.

Hit pause.

Step outside of this moment and watch it inside a fishbowl. This moment deserves to be frozen and commemorated.

Then he smiles.

He smiles, and I feel the curve of his smile against my lips. And we haven’t even kissed but our lips are touching, and I can’t move. My chest

flutters wildly. The trembling is likely obvious. So I dig my fingertips into the fleshy muscle of his triceps, clinging desperately as if someone is trying to drag me away from this moment—from him. Him. Always him.

And when I do that he makes this sound.

This *sound*.

Although calling it a sound really does it a disservice because it's... music. Unabashed laughter, rain in the summertime, the crash of a mighty ocean, Mozart's Symphony No. 40. They all pale in comparison. Because this—this little part moan part gasp that drags from his mouth on an inhale—it is absolutely the dreamiest melody I've ever been blessed to witness.

I resolve to make it my life's mission to elicit this sound from him as many times and as frequently as possible until the day I die. And if he never makes it again, I'll regret my failure to record it for the rest of my days.

So when—just before he kisses me—his eyes flutter to slits as he part moans, part gasps on an inhale, it does something to me. That something rolls up my arms, causing the roots of my hair to prickle and reverberates deep in my chest, settling into the depths of my stomach where it swirls like smoke. My ribs shudder and my ears tickle like when someone whispers too close. This gentle gasping moan cleaves my heart—because it sounds like he can't believe this is really happening—and I want nothing more than to hand him the pieces.

For keeps.



## Chapter 46

Clara

“Please, make that sound again. I beg you.”

“What, this?” And he does it. Close to my cheek this time. I feel my knees falter, and I sway backward. But he steadies me with one hand on the small of my back and the other gripping the base of my ponytail. When he finally seals his pillowy lips against mine, I’m certain the sound makes him taste better. Sweeter. Mine.

It’s utterly shameful that I cannot package up that sound in a pristine white box with a pink satin bow.

And then his lips meet mine, and he breathes quite deeply and quite long against me. It’s so long that I’m nearly convinced that will be that, and he’ll move away. One taste and then he’ll be rid of the urge for good. Morbid curiosity sated. But then his lips move against mine and the fit is that of a glove.

Soft. Exquisite. Natural.

For the briefest instant, all is right and I’m vaguely aware of fireworks going off somewhere, maybe only in my imagination or in my chest. I forget about the circumstances. Neglect the monumental issues keeping us apart.

We kiss.

It’s slow and tentative at first. As if neither of us believe it’s happening and he’s savoring the monumental lip lock as much as I am. His lips are soft and precise. They are sure and definitive, knowing exactly what they want to do and how to do it.

My heart leaps from my chest and takes flight, expanding and wrapping around me like a warm blanket. The way his hands roam, from the small of my back to my hips, to the back of my neck tells me he’s hungry. The kiss builds, and he grips me tighter, thumbs along my jawline, fingers pulling me close by the back of my neck. I let my mouth drift open, and his tongue finds mine, teasing relentlessly.

My fingers lace through the back of his hair, and I tug. Tory moans a

cuss, and the realization that I caused it sends a shiver straight down my spine.

And that's what leads me to ruin everything. For the first time.

He leaned his head back when he moaned and I say, "Surely that concussion is worse than we thought."

"On the contrary, my mind has never been clearer."

Tory leans in again, lips hovering over mine. Against all reason, I place my hand on his chest to stop him, feeling the heat emanating from his body and the droplets dotting his skin. He halts.

"Not here," I whisper, gesturing to the hotel room balconies wrapped around the courtyard, towering twenty floors into the air. Kids from our team and others are gathered, sneaking booze and who knows what else. The hot tub that was previously soundtracked by crickets and waves now hums with the sound of voices and exaggerated laughter.

Tory nods. "Stay with me tonight. I'll behave. Promise."

"Must you?"

"No. I can be as bad as you want me to be."

We grin in unison and I'm still in disbelief that this is happening.

He wades past me and leisurely climbs the blue-lit, concrete stairs out of the hot tub. Water trickles down his back in delicate streams, coursing over the tattoos.

Over my tattoo. My mark on him.

The same mark is on me, but on my heart where I don't let anyone see it.

Tory reaches back for me and says, "Come."

He hands me a towel before wrapping one around the shorts slung painfully low on his waist. Though he promised he'd behave, my heart thumps a hazardous rhythm. I'm about to spend the night with Tory. His intentions, and admittedly my own, are far from platonic. We're lost in the moment, riding the wave of adrenaline from the kiss, and I giggle as we grab our belongings and skitter off to the elevator.

We stand side-by-side as the metal box climbs the floors at a snail's pace, dinging every so often. At the fourth floor, the doors spring open and Thomas climbs on. I nearly jump out of my skin, but Tory's eyes only shoot to the ceiling, a smirk playing across his lips. He's delighted to be caught.

"Amato. Clara," Thomas mutters the greeting. That's what I like about Thomas. No shock. No questions. Just a quiet acknowledgment that he

knows.

I giggle. "Hi, Tommy."

"Schmittty."

The elevator hums back to life and with the lurch upward, I wrap my arm around the front of Tory's waist and rise on my tiptoes. I start a path at the base of his neck and run my lips up and across his jawline. He cusses low in his throat, and I swear his posture falters for a second. The move almost backfires because it makes me so heady.

Thomas shakes his head and gets off on the next floor, departing with, "You two are ridiculous."

As soon as the doors close, Tory is on me, spinning me in a rush and pinning my wrists above my head against the faux-wood paneling.

"Think you're cute, huh?" he croons.

"I have my moments."

Tory's hands run down my arms, my sides, and settle on my hips. His nose grazes mine, and he speaks against my chin, low and smooth. "You're peculiar, you know. You have many," he kisses my left temple, hair wetting my brow, "...oddities."

"I'm aware." I look up as he stares down at me. Those bottomless, brown eyes see nothing but mine. They are glued to me, as if they'll never open again and they need to soak in every facet, count every one of my lashes.

One of his brows quirks down. "What do you think of them?"

I shrug. "I've come to terms. What do you think of them?"

"What do I think of your delicious little oddities?" he asks. Tory's fingers entwine with mine.

I nod.

"I think I just revealed that particular little oddity about myself, didn't I?"

"You find them delicious?"

Tory kisses a different place between each word. "Devious." Chin. "Delicious." Cheek. "Delightful." Nose. "Among other adjectives." Brow.

"And how do you find me?" I ask when his path slows.

"D. All of the above."

I smile. Beam. Soar. Simper.

The elevator dings and the doors groan open. Floor eighteen.

His fingers are hooked into the belt loop of my jeans at the base of my

spine. I feel his thumb graze my skin as he pushes me in front of him, toward our rooms.

“We could get caught,” I mutter. “Coach will kill us if he finds me in your room.”

“He won’t.”

It’s then that I panic. When I remember why I’m in long sleeves in the first place and why I’ve been denying this for so long. I panic because I don’t know exactly what he expects or how to keep things from unraveling.

“Maybe I should—” I start, aiming toward my own door. But he reels me back, planting me in front of his room instead. My stomach sinks. Reality sets in and the levity from moments ago vanishes. I wish they were butterflies, or even a hummingbird flapping around in my abdomen. But it feels more like swirling poison, thick as tar.

Something slides into my back pocket. He’s only inches away, and his breath teases the back of my neck mercilessly. A chill shakes down my shoulders. I lie and tell myself it’s the artificially cool hallway. Tory’s hand crawls around my waistband, and I shudder as he traces the number eight around my belly button and the top button of my damp jeans.

“Clara.” He breathes my name against the back of my ear. Tory is a man, dying in the desert, and he speaks my name as if it’s a cry for a single drop of water.

I reach back and the cool plastic of his room key sticks out of my pocket. Decision time. Either recant, hand it back and walk away. Or swipe to open the door that belongs to the man I’ve loved for most of my life. The man who is currently distracting me from rational thinking by running a single delicious digit along my waistband.

So, I tell myself that I can control this. I lie to myself, even though I’m fully aware that Tory is the only thing in my life that I cannot control.

And I swipe the card.

## Chapter 47

### Clara

We float into the room, and he comes to me, cups my face, and plants a gentle kiss against my lips. I savor his taste. He's better than I dreamed he'd be.

If our lips meet again, I know it will be all over. That there will be no going back. That he'll find out. I can still salvage this.

So I pull back.

"You're too good at this."

"Clara, I do not need you to tell me where you want to be kissed—where you need to be touched. I have been mapping your body for years, watching where the goosebumps form, the places you touch absentmindedly. You are my favorite subject of study—and I am a scholar in the field."

"Uh, I'm kinda cold."

"I can fix that."

He tries to lift my shirt, but I stop him.

"Can we turn the lights off or something?"

"I've waited years. I want to see you, Clara."

"Tory. I'm nervous."

"Why? It's me."

"That's exactly the problem."

"There's nothing that could make this moment any less than perfect."

"What if I want to stop?"

"Then we stop. You're in control."

"I'm...gonna go to the bathroom."

"Okay. I'll be here."

The door clicks softly behind me, and I flick on the water to drown out the sound of my pacing.

I can't take off my clothes. I would do almost anything with him, as long I stayed covered. Cool water splashes against my face from splayed hands. The hotel towel is dry and fluffy and luxurious. When I crack the

door, Tory is seated on the edge of the bed. He's changed into dry clothes. Black Lululemon shorts. Socks. No shirt, despite the frigid air conditioning. The lights are low but not low enough. I shiver.

"Let's get you into something dry."

"I'll go to my room."

"It's fine, I have stuff."

He rummages in a large gray suitcase. The kind with four wheels and a hard outer case that claims to be indestructible. Expensive. He holds out a t-shirt and pair of shorts.

I can't wear these. My hands remain at my sides. I'm frozen. Goosebumps erupt on the tiny bits of exposed skin. "I can't wear that." My eyes focus on a scuffed part of the wall. It's such a nice hotel. Aesthetically pleasing in all the right ways. It presents well. But there are still scuffs. Still scars. There always are. Nothing is perfect and even less is what it seems.

Tory angles his head and narrows his eyes. They're calculating. Working something out. The panic is back. I pinch my lip with my thumb and forefinger.

"Let's finish our game."

"I already won."

"Why didn't you want to go swimming with the rest of us?" he asks.

No.

No. No. No. He suspects something.

I work very, very hard to remain casual. "Didn't feel like it."

He narrows his eyes, seeing straight through my façade.

"How's your head?"

"Perfect. Yours?"

"Swimming. What's your favorite color?"

"Morally gray. You?"

"You've been reading too many books. Pink."

"Not possible. Clara..." he trails off.

Here it comes. I'm on the train tracks, staring down the blaring light from the train, trying to convince myself I'll jump out of the way in time. "Last week you said you were bringing a different bikini for each day. You said you couldn't wait to lay out on the beach and get a tan." He says the last part slowly. Too slowly. Slow like someone who is putting the wrong puzzle pieces together.

"What's the question?"

“You’re in long sleeves and pants.”

“Still not a question.”

“It was eighty-five degrees out today.”

It’s then that I’m certain, my feet are tied to the tracks. The rush of the wind from the train kicks up my hair. And I brace for impact.

“Ask me a question, Tory.”

## Chapter 48

### Victory

Seconds tick by. She's terrified. It's the last thing I want. I work a different angle, just like in hockey. "Tell me, Clara, why do you work so hard at school?"

"Wanting the best for myself isn't enough?"

"You can't answer a question with a question. It's in the rules."

"Since when do you follow rules? You've been breaking them this whole game." I've been breaking them for a lot longer than this game.

"I always follow my own rules. Answer the question. There's more to it than that. I can tell." My impatience gets the better of me and I ask, "What are you not saying?"

"At home...it's a—a bad situation. I want out."

"You dropped the water bottle."

"What?" She furrows her brow and shakes her head slightly.

"At that game your dad came to. When you finally saw him, you dropped the water bottle on the ground." Wrong puzzle pieces fall into the right places, forming a picture I don't want to believe—don't want to be true. Have I known all along and refused to admit it? "You...you flinch when Vince puts his arm around you. You're shivering, and you won't just change your clothes."

Alarm bells go off in my mind and several pieces suddenly come together. Inherently, I know. I know, and I'm silently praying I'm wrong, but I know I'm not.

By all intents and purposes, my dad is a villain. We didn't just move to Minnesota for me to play hockey. The heat was on him in my hometown, and we had to get out.

There is one thing that sets him apart from most men in his line of work and that is the way he views and treats women. He has standards, and I've witnessed him personally commit heinous acts against men who don't share his views. Hell, once I watched him put a gun in the hands of a woman so she



could shoot her narcissistic husband between the eyes. She didn't even hesitate.

One thing he taught me is this: if a woman says she's in a bad situation, it usually means one of two things—someone is cheating, or someone is abusive. In Clara's case, it must be the latter.

"Clara. It's eighty-five degrees out today."

"Yup, feels like summer!"

She's nervous. She knows she said too much, and she's guessing what I'm about to say. I position my body between her and the door. There's no escaping this.

"You're in a dark, long sleeve shirt."

She shrugs. "Since when do you care about my fashion choices?"

"Take off your shirt, Clara."

"Oh, now you want me?"

"Take off the shirt."

"Tory."

"Unless you want me to tear it from your body, lose it."

"You wouldn't."

I step forward, invading her space. "Wouldn't I?"

Tears stream down her face. She knows this won't end well. There's no going back after this. "Please," she begs me.

"NOW."

She jerks back, turning around toward the windows, black with night save for the lampposts along the walkway far off by the ocean. It's bitterly cold in the room thanks to the air conditioning, and she's in damp clothes. No sane person would refuse to change.

Slowly, as if she can make time halt or slow down—delay the inevitable, she lifts the shirt over her head. She drops it to the floor with a wet flop, takes a steadying breath and turns to face me.

Never have I gone from such heights to such depths in such haste. The kiss is forgotten. When I see the marks on her body, I want to claw my eyes from their sockets. But that just won't do, because then I—unaccustomed to blindness—would be unable to gut the person responsible for hurting Clara. At least not with any semblance of a proper torture strategy. And I—the son of a ruthless criminal—am no stranger to torture strategy.

My eyes dance over her body, immediately zeroing in on the bruises on her arm, ribs, and collarbone. A trio of blooms. Angry, pocked red in the

middle, radiating, and fading to pink at the edges. In the shape of a hand on her forearm, a fist on her collarbone, a...a shoe on her ribs.

My lip starts to tremble, but I square my jaw to steady it. I take a step away, then back, raking a hand down my face, trying to process this level of fury. Flying off the handle would not bode well for me at this moment, no matter how angry I am at the person responsible for hurting Clara. She needs me in control.

The words are calm, measured. “You likely already know what I’m going to say next, and I likely already know the answer. But I’m going to ask, anyway.” I try and fail to mask the violence in my tone when I say, “Who did this to you?”

She twists her hands, a pained expression across her face. Several long moments pass, and I wait in silence.

Finally, she says, “The chief.”

Not “dad.” Never “dad.” Because a real father would never do this.

A sharp intake of air fills my lungs. Exactly as I suspected a moment ago. I should have known. This is all my fault. I knew he was horrible. I should have dug deeper, sooner. Should. Should. Should. The word screams through my mind, drowning everything else out until I meet her gaze and see the tears streaming down her cheeks. I see red, but I need to hold it together to be strong for her.

I nod and step closer, she inhales sharply. I try not to take it personally. She’s scared, and it’s likely a trauma response. Her comfort is what matters right now, and she needs to be out of these damned wet clothes.

“Let’s get you changed,” I whisper, gesturing with my finger for her to turn. Clara hangs her head low as I unhook her bra. Six inches remain between us while I work, sliding the straps down her arms. When she’s exposed to the window, her arms cross over her chest until I get the t-shirt over her head. I drop to my knees, and the dark carpeting digs into my skin. It’s damp where she’s been standing, dripping, desperate to hide the truth.

Fifteen minutes ago, I thought I’d be doing this for a completely different reason. This should have gone differently—a profession of love, apologies said, promises made. And then...just us.

When I move to lower her the zipper of her damp jeans, she says my name. She—she says, “Tory,” in a pained voice as though she believes I expect something from her in this moment. As if she’s sorry she’s disappointing me by turning me down. And I’m disgusted at myself for

misrepresenting my character so gravely that all I can do is hold up the pair of gym shorts in my hand to share my intentions.

She looks relieved. Relieved.

After I've just learned that her father is abusing her, Clara looks relieved that I'm not expecting to get lucky. It's then that I realize I have a lot of work to do. Trust is multi-faceted and just because I earned enough to know this, doesn't mean I have it all.

I hook my fingers in her waistband, and she shimmies out of the damp denim and underwear while I keep my eyes glued to her perfectly manicured toes. They're pink. They're always pink. Everything about her is always pink and fluffy and happy—all while she's been hiding this.

She kicks the pants away and braces her hands on my shoulders while I hold out the athletic shorts for her to step into. Heat radiates from her hips, warming my cheek. Once they're up and over her hips, I wrap my arms around Clara's thighs, relishing the way her delicate fingers weave through my hair. They're deft, as if they've performed the act so many times it's become second nature—as if this isn't the first time.

Then I steel myself with a deep breath before capturing her ocean eyes with mine. They never waver as I shift to sit on the edge of the bed and pull her close.

I lift the shirt hem, forcing my hands to make the gentlest of touches, lest I remind her of him. With the whisper of a butterfly's wing, I brush my lips along her bruised ribs in a featherlight kiss. She lets me pull her close, no choice but to straddle my lap. I kiss her forearm in the same manner—replacing his touch with mine.

She shivers as I kiss her collarbone and whisper, "You are a treasure. Anyone who harms you, doesn't deserve to walk this earth."

"Thank you." She says it politely. It's cursory, like she doesn't believe me.

"I mean it. Look at me, Clara." When she meets my eyes, I make her a promise fiercer than any I've ever uttered.

"He's never going to hurt you again."

She slumps against my chest and begins to sob. Not the cries of someone in mourning. She sounds relieved. She sounds like someone who got taken by a mass murderer and somehow managed to escape. It's the sound of the cry they let out as they're limping away and see help just over the horizon.

I stand, and she wraps her legs around my hips instinctively. This doesn't feel like the first time either. It feels like coming home—like she is my home, and I'm her safe place, and there's no one and nothing else but each other in this moment. As if no peril will befall us if we just stay here.

I ease back against the headboard, careful not to bump her injuries and wrap a blanket around both of us.

Through her sobs she says, "I try so hard. I just thought—I thought, I mean she was perfect. I thought if I was perfect like her, he would stop."

I stroke her hair. "I know, Clara. I know. It's not your fault. None of this is your fault, and there's nothing you could have done better. You didn't deserve this. He's just...evil."

Clara cries hard for a while. She grows quiet just when the night is at its darkest. We listen to the distant waves in silence. "I never thought you'd get close enough to see. No one ever has."

And in this moment, I'm so immensely sad for her and so incredibly guilty; I vow to protect her for the rest of our lives. "I see every part of you, Clara. Every piece. Every facet. I promise I'll do whatever I can to help you through this. He's never going to hurt you again."

There's a lot more that I don't tell her.

I don't admit that I did rig that game of Spin the Bottle. I don't tell her that I still believe that night could've been the start of something. I don't tell her that I had planned to walk alongside her every step of the way while she grieved her mother's death. And I certainly don't tell her what her father said to me at the funeral.

I don't tell her it makes my heart soar when I see her in my jersey, or that I flip my shirt tags out so she has an excuse to touch me. I don't tell her that I threatened my teammates to make sure we sat next to each other on every bus ride, or that I only throw parties to dance with her. Or any of the other million ways I've let her take root in me.

I don't tell her I'm in love with her.

And I don't tell her that I learned to shoot a gun when I was nine and that I plan on putting this skill to use against her abusive father.

## Chapter 49

### Victory

I don't fall asleep. There's too much inside me that needs to get out. I'm a tremoring volcano that doesn't want to explode on her. So I slide out of the bed and scribble a note on hotel stationary, telling her I'll be back soon, if she wakes. I slip out of the door and pad down to the elevator. It's not until I'm descending to the lobby that I realize I forgot my shoes. These socks will be burned. In fact, I want to burn everything that I'll associate with what Clara revealed tonight.

As soon as the elevator doors crank open, I gun it for the lobby restroom. Nausea pushes at the back of my throat, and I barely make it into one of the stalls before I retch. Over and over. Some player from another team is washing his hands at the sink. He laughs and tells me to enjoy my hangover tomorrow morning before departing. I spit into the sink and lock the door behind him before the next wave of nausea hits. I felt sick to my stomach as soon as I saw those bruises, but I refused to let myself be emotional in the moment. She needed a rock.

After I've sufficiently emptied my stomach and cleaned myself up, I do the only thing I can think of.

I call my father.

I tell him everything. Everything starting with her mother's funeral until now. He tells me some things, too. Very important things. Things that would have changed everything if I had just gone to him in the first place.

When I hang up, I'm shaking, maybe convulsing. Everything could have—should have been different. It's all too much. Too many realizations, epiphanies. Too much sinking regret for one night.

I shove my hands through my hair and dig them into my lap. I look down and see matching tufts sticking out from between my fingers, and I realize I've pulled it out of my head. But I felt nothing.

My chest heaves, faster and faster. The sorrow and sickening feeling of being too late are poison in my stomach. They fight for release, and I know I

can't hold it together much longer. I have to get out of here. I have to leave. I have to go somewhere. Somewhere no one will hear me. Bother me.

The crank of a hand towel dispenser echoes in the empty bathroom. I scrape the crunchy paper down my face and walk.

Walk through the lobby.

Past the pool.

Run down the stairs to the beach.

Sprint toward the water.

Waves crash around me. Cool water swirls around my ankles. And I scream. Scream. Scream. Until my lungs give out, I scream. Let the poison leech from my body.

But it's not enough. I crumple to the sand, relishing the way it grates against my bare knees and forehead. On the next scream, everything goes silent aside from a ringing in my ears. So I pound the sand with my fist, an outlet for rage, and despair and all the other wildly overwhelming emotions surging through me. When my right arm tires, I switch to my left until I'm sweating and gasping on the sand.

I should have known. There were signs. Signs I missed. Or didn't want to see.

I'm far from composed, but I must go back. There are promises I need to make. Things to undo and do that I should have done before.

## Chapter 50

### Clara

“I’m going to fix this,” he whispers from his spot kneeling beside the bed. Upon seeing Tory’s puffy, bloodshot eyes and mangled hair, I spring up on my knees and pull him by the shirt onto the mattress.

Tears spring anew as our fingers interlace. I don’t miss the thick, sandy, half-dried blood on his knuckles. “Tory, what did you do?”

“Doesn’t matter.” He takes my face in his hands. “Please, let me fix this. I want to fix this. Please. I promise, I’ll make it better. I’ll fix it, Clara. Please,” he says frantically. The pleading in his voice, his face, in the tense set of his muscles, is palpable. And it’s heartbreaking. I didn’t anticipate this side of sharing my secret with someone. Dealing with and processing their response to my hurt wasn’t even on my radar until I see the agony etched across the most solid person I know. The person who never loses control, unless it’s a calculated decision.

“Tory, you can’t. You can’t fix it,” I tell him. The disappointment stretches his beautiful features taut with anguish.

“Why not?” he wails the words, raking his hands through his hair.

“It already happened. I’m too broken.” The tears stream down my face, paths memorized from years of practice. His match mine.

“But I could have done something. I could have stopped it. I could have. I’m too late. I’m too late.” One bloodied fist presses against his mouth so firmly I’m sure his teeth are slicing his lips. The indents will be there for days. “Why can’t anything ever be easy for us? There’s always something,” he tells the walls. I shake my head in response. I don’t have anything else to say. I’m not even entirely sure what he means. He must mean us as in the two of us pursuing something romantic. Because he can’t possibly think that his life is difficult.

“I’ll never forgive myself.”

“You have to.”

“He could have killed you.”

“He didn’t,” I say firmly.

“I’m sorry I woke you.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“You’re a good liar, Clara. Always have been,” he says, more calm now.

“I prefer to think of myself as an Academy Award-worthy actress.”

He pushes a forceful breath through his lips and wipes a hand down his face. It’s still beautiful, somehow. The raw emotion only makes him better. I long to taste that emotion straight from his lips.

“Why don’t we get you cleaned up?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna go shower. You okay, here?”

I shake my head. “I said we should get you cleaned up.”

Realization dawns and Tory raises his eyebrows in surprise. His mouth opens and closes several times. “Together?”

I nod, tracing his wrist bone with my finger. “Just a shower, though. I don’t want to be alone right now. I—I want to be close to you, specifically.”

Tory almost smiles. Almost lets both corners of his lips quirk north instead of one side twitching slightly. “Was that hard for you to say?”

“Yes.”

He bites his lip and looks at the ceiling. “You are just…” he pauses, and I brace myself for whatever he’ll say next. Tory laces his fingers with mine and pulls me up from the bed. “Just so charming.”

I let him lead me to the bathroom and realize how much we both need it. The ends of my hair are crunchy with chlorine. And his hands. All that sand. I can only imagine what he did, and I’m praying he’ll be okay to play tomorrow. With the way he’s looking at me, it seems like hockey is the absolute last thing on his mind.

Tory kisses away a wayward tear, and I kiss his palms before pulling his shirt up and over his head. We keep the lights low and I’m certain he’ll pounce at any moment. But Tory is a model in restraint. Gently taking my face in his hands and kissing me long and slow. His shorts go next and I’m about to remove the ones I’m wearing when we both seem to remember I’m only wearing his shorts and shirt.

When I hesitate, he turns the bathroom light off, only leaving a small sliver of light through the cracked door. The little that I can see of him in the steaming shower is…magnificent. Sometimes I think guys with long hair are handsome but then they get their hair wet, and I see their forehead and they aren’t so cute anymore. Not Tory. Tory has a nice forehead, and he looks just



as delicious when I push his hair back.

He lets me dab away the sand and blood from his hands and doesn't wince. I let him wash my hair. Tory only puts the conditioner on the ends. We kiss each other everywhere, and it's sweet and beautiful and feels like coming home.

Tory wraps me in plush hotel towels. We turn out the lights, and we sleep the most peaceful sleep I've ever slept. I didn't realize how poor my sleep has been the past few years. How unsafe I've felt.

Until the streaming, too-high sun wakes me the next morning. And pounding on the door.

# Chapter 51

## Victory

Coach has a vein popping out from the center of his red forehead. He isn't sunburnt. I think he spends every free second going over game footage or video chatting with his kids.

We're walking to Coach's room. He busted in, yelling about how we're late for the bus and in huge trouble.

"Tory," Clara whispers from beside me. Her voice trembles, and she squeezes my fingers, interlaced in hers.

"Is there anyone we can call who will pretend to be your dad?" I ask. A last-ditch effort to salvage the situation.

"I'm sure there is but I doubt either of us will be doing the dialing and we don't have enough time to warn someone," she hisses.

"Okay. It's okay. I've got this."

She tugs in his shirt. "Tory, I'm scared."

"It's going to be okay, Clara. I have a plan. I made you a promise, didn't I?"

She nods as I hold her face.

"You need to trust me, Clara. I'm not even asking. I need you to trust me. Period. I have a plan. I'm done letting him dictate my life."

"Who, Coach?" she asks right as they enter the room, and I don't have time to answer.

Coach informs me that we'll be calling our parents in order to share the compromising position we were found in. Perfect.

My parents are up first. My dad laughs and hangs up on me. Guess that backfired. Next up is the chief. This is the phone call I take a deep breath for.

The line rings four times before there's an answer.

"Hello, Chief," I say by way of greeting, after Coach said there's something I need to tell the chief and that we're both in trouble.

"Amato?"

"Yup."

“Yes, sir,” he corrects.

I let out a sardonic laugh. “Not a chance. Actually, the fact that I’m not blasting you right now is pretty damn respectful so be grateful for what you get.”

“Is Clara there?”

“I’m here,” she says. Her voice is small and shaking, and I want to strangle him through the phone for breaking her so thoroughly.

The chief’s gruff voice barks out, “Amato. Take me off speaker.”

I comply.

“I’ll start by telling you nothing happened. I’m being honest about that. But Coach found Clara and I together.”

“I thought I was clear about you staying away from her.”

“You were. I didn’t listen.”

“You know what that means don’t you?” he growls menacingly, and I’m glad he’s not on speaker phone anymore.

“Look, when we get back, you and I are gonna have a chat to clear the air. I’m gonna hang up now, Chief. Don’t bother calling Clara. She’ll speak to you when she gets back.”

Clara leaves and in her absence, Coach attempts to lay down the law.

“You two are not to be alone for the duration of this trip.”

“I won’t agree to that.”

“It’s not up for debate, Amato. I’m your coach,” he seethes.

“Absolutely. And on the ice, I’ll defer to your authority. But to be honest, this is a complex situation, and she needs me right now.”

“What’s the situation?”

“I can’t tell you, Coach.”

“Oh, I’ve heard kids say crap like that before.”

“You don’t have to believe me. Doesn’t change a thing.”

“Just because your family paid for this tournament doesn’t mean you can walk all over me.”

“I’m not. I’m setting a boundary. And I’m doing it respectfully.”

“You’re benched for the next game for violating curfew rules.”

“I understand.”

Concussion—missed games. This—missing games. For Clara? Worth it. So, I walk out with my head held high.

## Chapter 52

### Clara

One place I never thought I'd be is waking up wrapped in Victory Amato's corded arms. I always say you can tell if someone is muscular by looking at their forearms. Some people don't look muscular at first glance. Maybe they have baggy clothes on or just aren't flexing. Then, you look at their forearms. Thick and round is indicative of the rest of their body. That's Tory. Though he doesn't hide his physique, it's easy to forget just how muscular he is when he's in clothes.

But with one of those veined, striated forearms wrapped around my chest and the other acting as a pillow for my head, his physical prowess is inescapable. And there's no other prison I'd actively choose to lock myself away in.

A looming, terrifying thought with claws and fangs hides deep in the back of my mind, waiting to tear all these moments to shreds. We're in a bubble this week. But when we get back, we have to face my dad and the repercussions of our actions. What if it all falls apart and the bubble bursts? Isn't that exactly what I've been trying to prevent all along? The heartache?

Tory groans behind me before planting a kiss on my bare shoulder. He wraps his leg around mine and squeezes me tighter against him.

"I haven't even seen your face yet, and I can already tell you've got a busy mind."

"How?"

"Tension. Your whole body tightens up, starting with your shoulders." As the words tickle the peach fuzz on my back, I shudder with delight, angling my head to give him better access to my neck. In response, he says, "And that is how you tell me the way to fix it. But I have some tricks of my own, too. In order to enjoy them, you have to let your body...relax."

He's careful around my bruises, but everywhere else—my neck, shoulders, chest, hips—eagerly accept his lips. Warm hands apply gentle pressure in key places down the length of my body. It's not a massage, it's

something...different. Like he knows my own personal pressure points. The thoughts are still present, but they quiet a bit so I can focus on feeling.

“Will you tell me what’s on your mind?” he asks.

“Everything. You know everything now, and I don’t want to leave this trip. I don’t want to go back home and face him, especially after Coach caught us. It’s like none of the consequences are real until we go back.”

“Is that everything?”

“Mostly.”

“What else are you willing to share?”

“It’s stupid.”

“Anything that concerns you, Clara, isn’t stupid. And even if it is, it’s important to me.”

“I just wanted to swim with everyone and lay out on the beach and now I can’t. People can’t find out, Tory. It would be so much worse than it is now.”

“Gotcha. What if there’s a way for you to go out on the beach and still keep it a secret?”

“What do you have in mind?”



An hour later, Tory is pulling me from my empty breakfast plate in the hotel event room where all the teams converge each morning. Our team

doesn't have a game today, and everyone is planning to spend the day at the beach and pool before going to the pier tonight.

"Come on."

"Don't you have to eat?" I ask him.

"Already did. Make haste, Charity."

I bid adieu to Thomas and Clover, and let Tory bring me back up to my room. He strides into the bathroom with me in tow, and unloads items from a small black-and-white, striped bag, lining them up on the vanity counter.

"You bought makeup?"

"Yes." He points to a tube of makeup in my shade. "This is the stuff my mom makes me wear to cover my tattoos for family portraits."

"Okay..."

"And the rest is just your top-of-the-line primer, translucent powder, and setting spray. This spray is bionic. You can go swimming and everything."

"So, you want me to cover up my bruises?"

"Yeah, so you can swim. I mean, your tan lines will be blotchy but if you aren't ready to let people know, this is a way you can still enjoy yourself."

"That's genius. I'm not sure I'm gonna be able to reach everywhere, though. The one on my ribs goes around my back."

"Allow me."

Without hesitation, I strip out of my shirt, remaining in my bra and jeans. Tory starts on my collarbone, carefully applying the primer and then the makeup with a wet blending sponge. I'm surprised he knows to use a damp sponge instead of a dry one, but I don't ask questions. I watch him work in the reflection of the mirror, in awe. He's near enough that I feel the heat of his body emanating, focus unwavering.

"Powder," he calls out, a surgeon in the operating room.

A ghost of a smile plays on my lips as Tory taps the edge of a fluffy brush and then dots the powder along my skin.

After the setting spray is applied, he turns me toward the mirror. I can't tell where healthy skin ends, and bruising begins. Not anymore.

He works on my arm next and then moves to my ribs. "Um...so this one...goes under your bra..."

"Take it off."

He nods. "I won't look."

"I want you to."

It's not lost on me, the way Tory takes a sharp intake of air when my unclasped bra drops to the floor. He sits on the toilet lid, hands on my hips and looks at me, bared before him. He allows himself a single, lingering look through hooded eyes that sends his breathing into an unsteady cadence. This wasn't the right moment for me to do this. But I cut myself a break for being an opportunist when I've been longing for him often—for as long as I can remember. Because seeing the way he begins to unravel when he looks upon my bare chest, is an image I'll remember for the rest of my life.

"You're..." The knot in his throat bobs. "Perfect."

That lovely lower lip of his disappears between teeth, and he bites down. Hard. As if doing so is keeping him focused on the task at hand.

"Arm up."

Once that single look is over, Tory pulls himself back together and sets about completing his work. A vision of professionalism. There's no flirting or teasing in his eyes or his touch.

At least, not until the end. The rib bruise ends low on my back. To avoid crouching awkwardly, Tory sinks to his knees. He holds me longer and more intimately than he should, one hand wrapped around my inner thigh even when he applies the final mist of setting spray.

Tory looks up at me with longing for a moment. "Enjoying the view?" he asks, words accompanied by a gentle smirk.

I weave my fingers into his waves. "You? On your knees? Definitely checks a few boxes."

"Clara," he breathes. "I never would've dreamed you had a dirty mind."

"I don't."

"I beg to differ."

Then he rises from his knees. Our bodies press together, and I wish his shirt wasn't between us. Those strong hands grip my hips.

He does that eye, lip, eye thing and says huskily, "Just so you know, I have a few boxes I'd like to check that also involve me on my knees before you."

Then he clears his throat and backs away. Leans against the bathroom counter, head bowed, and hands me my bra.

## Chapter 53

Clara

It's New Year's Eve.

Vince has been off with some girl from another team all week and, honestly, I'm not even mad about it. He's been weird and distant since Thanksgiving. We go back home tomorrow. I've been sneaking into Tory's room every night. I don't think I've felt safe since the day my mother died. Until that first night with Tory.

In our blissful bubble.

Tonight, everyone is having balcony parties. Apparently, the only thing to do when a bunch of teens are confined to their rooms on New Year's Eve, is to go on the balcony and do some parallel partying.

Vince is three rooms over. The only people who know where I sleep each night are Coach Anderson—oddly—and Clover.

"I wonder if Clover thinks it's weird that I stay with you every night," I muse to Tory as we lounge by the pool with a few of his buddies from other teams. They've been going to the same summer hockey camps and played each other for years, so he's been happy to reconnect with them.

The sun is high and hot, despite being fairly early in the season. But it warms me to my bones, and I soak in the much-needed vitamin D that will be in short supply in Minnesota for another four months.

He turns to me. "She doesn't. She's hooking up with a goalie from Texas. I think she's got a thing for goalies."

"Goalies and right wingers, apparently."

"Hey!"

"How do you know she's been hooking up with someone?"

"When I went to your room to check your makeup color, she was in there sleeping with a guy."

"Did she see you?"

"Yup. She gave me the finger and shoved him when he said hi to me. I've seen him around. He's crazy. Most goalies are."



“You’re such a little gossip.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“That’s it. You’re going in.”

“Victory Amato, you better not!”

“Dang, pulling out the full name. Better watch out, Larsen.”

“Make me,” I call after him as he tackles one of his buddies into the pool.

Soon after, I hear, “Clare Bear!” across the courtyard. Vince strides up, covered in sand with a towel around his shoulders. The girl from one of the other teams trails behind him.

Tory gives Vince a head nod and eyes us warily but stays in the pool.

“I feel like I’ve barely seen you all week.” He plops down on the lounge chair by my knees.

“I’ve been around. We’ll catch up when we get back home. It’s been a busy week.” I give him an authentic smile. I still like Vince. I really do. He’s sweet and irreverent and there are pros to that.

But he’s not Tory.



That night, after the balcony parties and the echoes of people screaming “Happy New Year!” subside, Tory and I lay in bed with the lights low.

We're nearly nose to nose, and I fight not to get lost in those endless brown eyes.

"So, for when we get back home—"

"I have a plan," he jumps in.

"What is it?"

"Clara, you'll probably fight me on this, but it's nonnegotiable. I have to talk to the chief, especially after Coach called him."

"And say what?"

"I need to inform him of what will happen if he ever puts his hands on you again. Obviously, I don't want you anywhere near him, but you refuse to move in with me."

"Of course I do."

"So no fight about me talking to him?"

"No."

"Good. When that's through, we can focus on us."

One thing is for certain. As the hours tick down I can't ignore that I'll be seeing the chief for my day of reckoning. The closer I get, the more certain I am that nothing will work out for me. At least not the way I want it to. It's too unlikely. My father staying away from me for good, and Tory and I being together? Far too good to be true. The other shoe will drop, and I'll be left at a loss.

Just before we board the plane, Tory takes my hand and pulls me into an alcove.

"Do you have any idea how good this feels?" He plants a chaste kiss to my nose. One arm rises on either side of me. Tory is painfully close but doesn't touch me.

"Mm, actually, I've been thinking about it. You're quite the coward for never speaking up and telling me how you felt—never trying to decipher how I felt for you and realize that none of it was in true jest." The words seem cruel and calculated, but he takes them and twists them into something better—closer to how I mean them.

"Oh yes, I certainly am a coward. For that and for the fact that—since we started this nebulous little thing of ours—I've dreamed of my lips destroying yours in a blissful embrace. But I've never so much as touched you. A coward indeed. When you look up coward in the dictionary, you'll simply find my headshot."

"At least the coward is beautiful." I twist my hands behind my back and

jut my hips forward while he cages me in.

“No,” Tory argues. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I am the beholder and you’re my beholden,” he swoons.

I love when he talks like this. There’s just something about a tattooed, brutish man speaking so softly and reverently that makes me forget the anxiety of returning home. I think that’s why he’s doing it. To keep me focused on him and us.

“Stop speaking in riddles and kiss me already,” I demand.

“Oh yes, a coward indeed. And a fool as well.” He drifts closer.

“As am I. But a fool only for you. You mustn’t worry, I’ll be gentle.” I mimic the accent of a typical 1950s starlet—drawling, seductive yet innocent all at once.

“I won’t be. Five seconds. You have five seconds before I perish without your touch, Clara. Do you really want my blood on your hands?”

“So dramatic,” I tease, gliding a finger down the center of his chest.

“Skin,” he demands, his voice full of cunning and velvet.

I trace his jawline with a whisper of my knuckles, and he shivers. “Such power,” I giggle.

“Such responsibility.” His brows furrow, and he gives a quick shake of his head. “Wield it wisely.”

“I won’t.”

His mouth crashes into mine, searching every part of me. I nearly let him find me. But I’m not ready yet.

When we finally separate, he sighs. “It’s like breathing. Maybe easier.”

“Certainly easier.”

He is enchanting. In this moment, there is nothing and no one other than him. And then, a few hours later, it all comes crashing down. This is the last truly easy moment I’m going to have before everything shatters. Into a hundred. Thousand. Million pieces. Everything I want is right at my fingertips before it’s all ripped away.

## Chapter 54

### Tory

Clara looks at me, eyes full of trepidation as we pull up to her house. A few lights are on, seeping a warm glow out onto the snow-covered ground. She looks like she wants to be anywhere but here. Including, but not limited to, the bottom of the ocean and Inside a deep freezer.

I give her hand a squeeze and lean in close. “You don’t have to say anything. You don’t even have to be there. You can go upstairs.”

She nods. “Okay. You’re gonna do this.”

“I’ve handled worse villains, Charity.”

“Maybe on paper.”

I force a chuckle. Little does she know. Not only have I faced a few formidable villains, I was raised by one.

He’s on the couch, watching a game with a beer. Barely looks up when we walk in. His head whips toward the door when he hears my voice, hopefully picking up on the menace the leeches out of me.

“Hello, Chief.”

The chief’s gaze darts between the two of us as he rises to his feet. Clara shifts uncomfortably beside me. I squeeze the side of her hand between my thumb and forefinger. “You need help with your bags?”

She shakes her head, and I tell her I’ll be up in a minute.

“Like hell you will.” The chief reaches me in three strides as Clara pads up the stairs in what I now realize is years of practiced quiet.

“Relax. You look like a child.” I cross my arms across my chest and lean against the closed front door. Forced nonchalance. “That’s the problem with you, Chief. You lack control. Instead of sputtering about and going red in the face, let’s talk. Like men.”

He begins to speak, already turning red, and I interrupt, “I know that might be difficult for you because you aren’t actually a man. At least not one with a shred of honor. But humor me.”

“Listen you little criminal—”

I momentarily lose my grip on my unflappability. I grab his t-shirt in both fists and pin him to the wall. The chief isn't a small man. But he's smart enough to know I'll win if this comes to blows.

"No, you listen to me. I know what you've been doing to her. I saw the bruises with my own eyes. And before you even start, don't try to defend yourself. There's no defense for your actions. I'm just here to tell you that if you ever hurt her again..." A hint of a smile tugs at my lips, picturing the scene I'm about to paint for him. "I'll beat you to within an inch of your life, then I'll put a gun in her hand and watch Clara shoot you herself. Do you understand me?"

He nods.

"And, Chief? I will find out if you touch her. Now I'm gonna go upstairs and check on your lovely daughter."

Clara nervously paces across her room. When I crack the door, she stops short and rushes up to me as the door softly clicks closed behind me.

"How'd it go?"

"It's all set. We just talked, like I said."

"Thank you, Tory." She wraps her arms around my waist, and I fold her trembling body into my chest.

"Hey, we're gonna do two things now, Clara. Guys like him need time to adjust to the embarrassment of being called out for their crimes." She looks up at me, horrified. I immediately reassure her. "It's okay. That's why I'm going to stay here tonight. We can hang out tomorrow. Out of the house."

She nods and holds me tighter.



## Clara

My room. Is destroyed.

Trashed.

Demolished.

Annihilated.

Every penny saved, poured into making this space my own. Something I could find safety in, while in a war zone. Gone.

Fairy lights? Smashed. Ivy vines? Stomped. Gauzy bug net? Shredded. And the sight that hits me hardest. The photos that I painstakingly matted, framed, and organized into a collage. Are now shattered and sprawled across

the floor. Including the photos of my mother.

How could someone—who is supposed to love me—do this?

While the message is strong, it is also clear: it could be so much worse. Fine, he won't hit me or kick me. But he can still ruin my life. Unless I change my course of action.

All I have to do is stay away from Tory. I can do that. My shaky breath lays evidence to the lie of that statement. To my duplicity.

So I do it.

I sink to the floor, ignoring the shard of glass splintering into my legs and kiss the last nine days—and a future with Tory—goodbye. The days when the hockey star and the chief's daughter were just Tory and Clara go up in flames before my very eyes.

My trembling fingers pull up my contacts list, and I tap his name. The line rings three times before he answers.

“Hey, can we talk?”

## Chapter 55

### Victory

“Hey. Can we talk?” she says to me.

That’s never good. Those words have never precipitated or signaled anything good in the history of words. They usually mean that one person talks and the other person—the listener—must accept whatever hand they’re dealt. Reasoning and bargaining have already gone out the window when someone asks to talk. They’re really just asking if they can talk. It’s not going to be a conversation.

Plus, she’s seeking me out at my locker. Clara is going out of her way to tell me something bad. And the pitiful look on her face tells me it’s dismal. I close my locker. Brace myself. Face her. She’s beautiful. In a distracting way. In a distant way. The way she’s been distant since that night at her house when I had it out with her father.

Nothing has gone the way I wanted it to. Nothing when it comes to her. I’m so in love that it’s physically painful sometimes. And she wants to “talk.” The role of listener is silent. So I let her talk.

“Look, I just wanted to tell you myself before you hear it from someone else, or from Vincent.”

*Vincent.* Dismal indeed.

A quick inhale and then it’s all out of her in one breath. “He asked me to be his girlfriend last night, and I said yes. And, Tory, I’m sure this isn’t really what you were expecting, but I really like him and this is the best for everyone.”

Scratch goes the record in my brain. Again, and again. My psyche is a drunk DJ. He must be, because the words coming out of her mouth still don’t make sense. Nothing computes, and it’s wrong.

“No.” I shake my head. Not terribly profound but better than the high-pitched whine echoing in my skull. “No.” More forcefully this time.

She goes silent. Apparently having talked as much as she wants to about the matter.

“Is this why you’ve been so weird since Sunday?”

“I haven’t been weird.”

“Here’s the timeline Clara: Saturday night, we landed. I talked to your dad. I slept over. Sunday, we spent the day together. Sunday night, I dropped you off at home. Never heard from you, which is fine, you don’t have to text me constantly. Yesterday, you avoided me all day which was weird. But again, not trying to pressure you. Which brings us to right now, when you tell me that sometime between Sunday night and now, you and Vince—who barely spoke to you all week and hasn’t wanted anything serious—are dating exclusively. Do I have that right?”

“Pretty much.”

“So what the hell happened? Did your dad do something or say something? Because I can explain.”

“What would there be to explain?”

Okay, so no, he didn’t say anything, and I let something slip just now. But oh well, because there’s a freaking foghorn sounding very loudly in my brain, and nothing makes sense.

“Nothing.” I lean my forehead against the metal in hopes it’ll hone my thoughts and stop the feeling that I’m spiraling down a tub drain. I peer over at her, only finding steely-eyed determination where I swear there’d been love just days ago. “Is this real?”

She nods and moves to walk away.

I follow.

“It’s never going to work out,” I call after her. “He’s not good enough for you, Clara.”

She whirls around and stops short. “And you are?”

My chest heaves against hers. “Of course not. Where’d you get such an idea?”

“Well, you certainly act like you have some claim over me.”

“Don’t I? Now?”

“No, I’m nothing but a friend to you.”

“Do you believe your own lies, Charity?” I’m practically shouting. The hallway has grown more crowded now and the first bell rings, telling us we have five minutes to get to class. People slow, then halt.

Clara’s eyes dart at the onlookers. “You said you hated me,” she seethes. “Multiple times over the years.”

“Are you kidding me?” I really am shouting now but can’t bring myself



to care or stop. “I never believed my own lies. You know that.”

Jack walks up behind Clara, making his presence known by placing a hand on her shoulder. “Can you stop? People are staring.”

“I don’t care what they think.”

“I care! Okay? *I. Care.* You’re not the only one who has feelings in this equation, Vic.”

My brows shoot up and shock forces me back a step. “Vic? So, it’s like that? After everything?”

“Yeah, Vic, I guess it is.”

“Clara, this isn’t funny.” My voice reeks of desperation.

“I’m not joking.” She draws closer, hand on my wrist, looking up at me with those endless ocean eyes. “Look, I think we both know this is for the best.”

For the best? How could it be best when I feel as though she’s flaying me alive? As though my chest is constricting—the air is being choked out of my lungs.

“Jack, can you tell me what the hell is going on? Do you know what happened between us last week?”

“All I know is, she’s telling you to stop making a scene and you aren’t listening. Come on, Vic. Let it go.”

“I’m not gonna back off, you know,” I say to Clara.

Jack puts his arm around her shoulders and turns her away, protectively. She calls over her shoulder, “You should.”

And then she walks away.

And my heart breaks.

Shreds. Shatters. Cleaves. Millions of bloody bits fly to every corner of my body. But on the outside, I simply...slump.



I don’t bother going to the tutoring study room that day. I know she won’t be there. Miraculously, Clara and Vince managed to avoid me during school hours, but as soon as the final bell rings, I head to the team study room, knowing he’ll be there before weight training.

## Chapter 56

### Victory

Vince actually gulps when he sees the murderous look in my eyes. I stand by the door in silence. Waiting. The usual chatter of hockey players “studying” dies out and even the study hall supervisor looks around, wondering what’s going on.

I hover for a few seconds before disappearing from view. Vince appears in the hallway, looking ready for his reckoning.

“Hey, Amato.”

I stare. He shifts on the balls of his feet, reading if I throw a punch. I’d like to say I’ve calmed down since this morning, but that would be a lie.

“Don’t waste my time with niceties. Tell me what’s going on. She won’t just tell me what happened.”

Vince takes a step back and holds his palms up, expressing his innocence. “Look, all I know is Clara called me Sunday night and asked to come over. We talked for a long time. She said she missed me, and we decided to make it official.”

“But after the week I had with her, that doesn’t make sense. She and I were supposed to be together. We were basically together all last week. Did she tell you she slept in my bed almost every night?”

“She did.”

“And that I stayed over at her house Saturday night, and we spent the whole day together Sunday?”

“She mentioned that, too.”

“So you must see how insane this is, right?”

“Vic, I know things have always been complicated between you and her. I’ve never gotten in the way. I’ve never gotten mad. Even when I absolutely should have. Exclusively dating or not, you’ve been disrespectful the whole time I’ve been talking to her.”

“It was disrespectful for you to start talking to her in the first place, Culbs.”

“Bull. You treated her like garbage. For a long time.”

“That’s not—”

“And as soon as someone else showed interest, you flipped a switch.”

“I know what it looks like but—”

“But nothing. She’s my girlfriend. And right now, she’s your nothing. So back off.”

“Or what?”

“Come on, Vic. Don’t do this. It’s embarrassing.”

I lean back against the lockers, staring straight ahead. “I’m so far past embarrassed, Culbs.”

“You’ll bounce back. I know you’ve never really been rejected or turned down by a girl before, but I have. It sucks. I get it.”

And I just nod. I don’t tell him that he can’t possibly get it. The girl he’s in love with didn’t just stomp all over his heart and start dating his friend with absolutely no warning. I don’t tell him that I’ll never forget this or that he doesn’t deserve her.

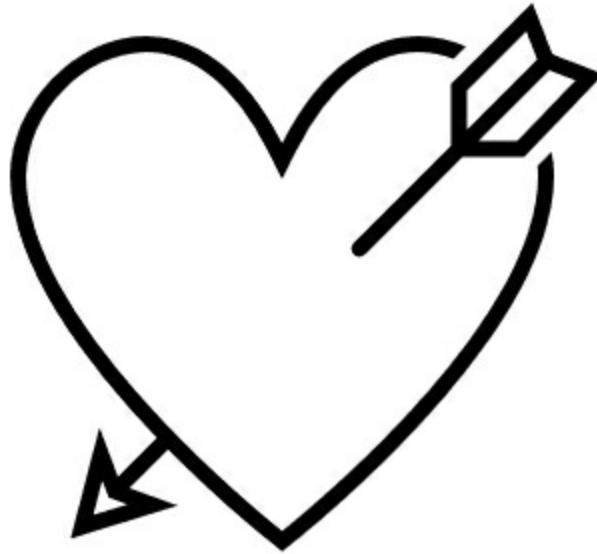
But before he walks back into study hall, I do tell him, “If you make her cry, you’ll be answering to me.”

“I’d expect nothing less.”

Practice is a waste of time. I go through the motions. Everyone can tell, but no one says anything. A couple guys pat me on the back. All eyes look at me in silence, either conveying pity or judgment, among other emotions.



Peace is a stranger. Tonight, sleep eludes me because I can't stop replaying everything through my mind. Literally, every moment from the day I met Clara up until now. I rewrite key moments and play out the conclusion to see if I could have done something differently to have prevented this tragedy. And I keep coming back to the same answer: I'm missing a piece of the puzzle.



She continues avoiding me over the next week and a half. Or maybe I avoid seeing her and Vince. In the hall. At lunch. She smiles. They look happy.

It makes me sick.

Clara doesn't sit next to me in history anymore. I don't bother taking notes. In history, or any other class. Everything feels pointless. So I pull my hat low on my brow, put my head down on the desk in each class, and catch up on the sleep that escapes me at night.

But I can't stay away. I've settled for friendship before. I'll do it—or anything else I must—to keep her in my life. So today, I shove down my feelings and plaster indifference all over my face. Clara and Jack are at her locker, switching out books before history like they usually do.

“Hey.”

“Hi, Tory,” she says flatly.

“Vic,” Jack says, making his presence clear. As if he could do anything.

I flip the bill of my hat backward and shove my hands in my pockets. Anything to keep my hand from reaching out and twisting one of her curls around my finger.

“Look, I still need a tutor. Are you available?”

“Sure. We can go back to our usual days and times. I need the money.”

“Got it. Thanks. See you after school. Bye Jack.”



We do our homework, mostly in silence. I ask her for help on a few things just as an excuse to hear her speak. Until I can't take it anymore.

“What the hell is going on, Clara?” I blurt. “After everything that happened, why would you do this?”

She looks taken aback but quickly smooths down her sweater-vest and says, “I didn't need your rescuing.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Then you better check your White Knight Syndrome. Because I don't owe you anything, much less myself.”

“That's not—”

“Look,” she interrupts, laying her hands flat on the table and looking down at the faux-wood grain swirling between her fingers. “I'm grateful for the help. But I just want to move on. Let's just be friends. We decided on friendship a long time ago. Let's not over complicate things.”

“We're so far beyond that Clara. Seven years. Seven years you've been taking root in me. I finally do something right, and it's now that you cleave me in two?”

“Don't be dramatic.”

“I wish I was. This isn't over, you know.”

“Yes, it is.”

“It isn’t. The game has only begun.”

“Is everything a joke to you? One big game?”

“Only you. You are the prize. You are the game. You are the punishment. You vexatious, shrewish woman.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

We’re painfully close, sharing air and more. I’m half expecting lightning bolts to spark between us.

“If I’m the prize, then what are you?”

“The winner.”

I never even got to tell her I love her. Just another regret in a very, very long list. I’m not sure what I was waiting for. No, I do know what I was waiting for. I didn’t want to seem like an opportunist. It was a horrible moment and, despite how raw and vulnerable we both were, I don’t want the first time I tell Clara I love her to be marred in pain. I certainly can’t do it now. She’d think it was a last-ditch effort to keep her around, call me desperate and send me on my way. Well, it’s Clara, so she’d call me loutish scoundrel or something like that.

## Chapter 57

### Clara

It's wrong, but I blame him. I hold it against him. He's undeserving, and it's likely a byproduct of my own trauma. That's what people like me do, isn't it? The damaged. The broken. We lash out at the people—or, in my case, person—who we're closest to. Our safe place. It's a punishment for seeing us at our most vulnerable. Don't get too close, because now you get the undo blame for something that has nothing to do with you. Why can't I stop myself? Why am I so scared of being with someone who knows? Maybe it's the way he looks at me—with pity.

Love, regret, anger, longing—any of those I can stomach. But it's the pity that I can't handle. The pity that brings shame. I haven't fought this long and this hard to be pitied and seen as weak. I may be misguided in my strength, but it's there, a soldier standing tall in rank beside my resilience. He said once he could handle my anger. I hope he meant even my undeserved anger.

And I hope he actually can.

But even if we were together, what chance would we stand? I'll be in college, tied to a campus, and he'll be in the NHL. Out of sight, out of mind.

He doesn't realize I'm lashing out because I'm humiliated. And scared. My father told me he'd kick me out if I continued things with Tory.

Tory was supposed to be my only weakness. One of my choosing. One that I could handle. I thought if I could hold everything together, I'd end up being okay. So I focused all my energy on Tory and school and my image. It was all just a distraction from what was really going on, and now that he knows, there's a crack in the façade. I'm grateful. But I can't get past this.

I keep tutoring. Some days it's looking the hardest thing I've ever done in the eye. Staring down the barrel of a missed opportunity. In all likelihood, Tory feels the same way. But every Tuesday and Thursday, we both show up. We do the work. His grades improve. I tell myself it's because I need the money. On a subconscious level, I know it's because I need him in my life in



some capacity.



“So, how are you doing?”

Jack sits across from me at our favorite juice bar downtown. We feel fancy when we come here in business casual clothes and leave his old Honda CRV parked around the corner. I swirl my cup of cold-pressed juice. Despite it being the beginning of February, I got a drink with fall vibes. Carrot, pumpkin, apple, Cinnamon. Jack got the Sweetheart Special—a banana, dark chocolate, raspberry, peanut butter smoothie with whipped cream and multi-shade pink sprinkles. It’s more sugar than health, but it makes him happy.

“Great,” I lie. “Vince and I just celebrated our one-month anniversary.”

“You...celebrated?”

“Well, no. It was more like, ‘hey, we’ve been dating a month,’ high five in the hallway kinda thing.”

“Hm. Nice. Things are going well, then?”

“Swell.”

I know what he’s going to ask about next. I’m ready for it. He’s learned how to ease me into difficult conversations. Start in the shallow end and slowly wade deeper. We’ve been people watching outside the large front window of the juice bar for fifteen minutes.

“How are you really doing?”

“Fine.”

“Has Tory said anything more about wanting to be with you?”

“Yeah. Last week he basically said it’s not over and he’s not going to stop fighting. I got the feeling he’ll bide his time.”

“Interesting. You’ve certainly tamed the player.”

“Not quite.”

“And then you dropped him.”

“You know I had to.”

Jack came over when my dad was on shift for the last three weekends. Helping me clean and put my room back together. Do you know how hard it is to get minuscule glass fragments out of carpet? Nearly impossible. Jack knows now. So do I. He even brought me around to six different thrift stores finding picture frames to replace the broken ones.

The chief came over early once. Jack knew everything but played it off like he didn’t. He was respectful and sociable, but I saw the fire burning in

his eyes brighter than his orange hair. He wants to kill the chief, too. Regardless, my dad trusts him now, and I basically have free rein to hang out with Jack whenever I want. So I do.

“What are you gonna do?”

“Survive, Jack. This is about survival. I don’t have the luxury of going to my other parent’s house or escaping to my grandparents. I have no other family and no money. I’m stuck. I just need to keep my head down, get perfect grades and get a full-ride to college in a year.”

“You can live with my family. I’ll talk to my parents. I know they’d be okay with it, Clara.”

“I can’t do that, Jack. I’d still see him around town. He’d lie about me to your parents and make me look crazy. Trashing my room was psychological abuse. I won’t push him further.”

“This is horrible, Clara. I don’t know what to do. I want to help.”

“I’m gonna tell you the same thing I told Tory. I don’t need rescuing. I’ve got this under control.”

“As the victim in this situation, I don’t think that’s possible. What if he hurts you, Clara? These guys always escalate. He could hit you or something.”

I don’t tell Jack that he already has. Many times. “He won’t. I’m positive. You have to trust me.”

“I certainly don’t. But I can’t force you. Just know I’m here for you no matter what.”

“I know, Jacky. It’s really okay. I’m basically always with you or Vince or at hockey.”

“Just promise me you’ll tell me if something happens, okay?”

“I promise. Thanks for looking out for me. I’m glad you bullied me into friendship.”

“Oh gosh.” He takes a final swig of the smoothie, draining it loudly to get every last drop. “So, you and Tory are...”

“Friends, I guess. I guess that’s what we’ll always be. A case of right person, wrong time.”

“I can’t accept that for you.”

I put my hand on Jack’s cheek, tears brimming in my eyes. Wish with my entire heart that I could believe the same.

# Chapter 58

## *One Month Later*

### Clara

April is a bad month. I used to like April. I liked having spring break and the promise of warmer weather in a state that likes to be frozen. But April is a bad month. And today is a bad day. It's also a tutoring day.

I don't bother getting any work done. Well, I try, but I fail. I try not to think about it, but it's all I think about. The anniversary of my mom's death. Tory can tell something is wrong. He's been extra quiet and gentle. He keeps smiling those tight-lipped smiles. The polite ones. Tory isn't usually like that, but we're in a weird place and I think he doesn't know what else to do. Doesn't feel like he can give me more than that.

When it's clear I'm a useless mess, I rest my head on my arms and ask Tory, "Do you remember my mom?"

He's silent so long that I think he doesn't or that he just won't answer. I open my mouth to change the subject and release him from the awkwardness of the moment, but he finally breaks the silence before I do.

"She used to pick you up from school barefoot." There's a vacant look in his eyes, as if he's far, far away reliving a moment I didn't know he'd lived in the first place. "And you'd take your shoes and socks off and leave them and your backpack on the sidewalk by parent pick up."

Tears spring from my eyes before I can process their imminent arrival. And for a moment, I'm not concerned with my mascara, running black rivers down my contoured cheeks.

For a moment, it's just me and a boy who remembers my mom. A boy who seems to understand more than he should. More than I've given him a right to.

He slowly pulls his bottom lip between his teeth and then he smiles faintly. "And she'd take your hand. You'd run through the field next to the school that never got mowed. The two of you would pick wildflowers. She would make you a crown out of flowers. You would leave the meadow with dirt-stained feet, holding hands."

“Those were the best days.” I go to that place—the picture he paints. The memory. “As soon as the weather got warm, she would do that at least once a week.”

“You know she bought me lunch once. When we had that field trip to the zoo in third grade. I forgot my lunch at home. It was one of those weird things you were embarrassed about as a kid but would never care about as an adult. Now, I would just say I forgot my lunch and borrow money from someone or something. But back then, I was mortified. I tried to hide it. Your mom didn’t let anyone know. She called me over to the café and asked what I wanted. I picked a turkey sandwich, chips, and an apple. She asked the employees for a paper bag so it looked like a home lunch.”

“She chaperoned every single field trip we ever had.”

“And she was the best chaperone, too. Everyone always wanted to be in her group.”

A long silence passes, broken only by the clank and hum of a boiler somewhere in the school’s underbelly. Tory wraps the sleeve of his shirt over his thumb and tentatively reaches out, blotting my tear-stained cheeks.

“Thanks.”

“Sure, Charity.” He leans forward, crossing his arms on the table. Our elbows bump, but barely, as he mirrors my posture. “Hey, today sucks. You wanna get out of here?”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind the distraction and really want to be anywhere but home right now.”

“Who said anything about going home?”

I look at him quizzically. He gets up and packs our things. “Get whatever you need and meet me in the student parking lot. Make haste, Charity.”

I giggle with a snuffle and dart out the door behind him. When we get to the student parking lot, there are still a few cars. A couple hold snogging teens.

“You ever ridden a bike before?”

“Tory, I’m not getting on that thing.”

“Why not? I’m obviously having you wear my helmet and gear. I would never let you ride unprotected.”

“Because that means you won’t be protected.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’ll be fine.”

“I’m not letting you do that.”

“Seriously?”

I nod. He looks around, one hand low on his hip and the other on the back of his head— turning in that beautiful mind of his until he blurts out, “Don’t go anywhere.”

“Where would I go?”

He holds his hands out—a zookeeper calming a lion. “Just...just don’t move. Okay?”

I laugh. “Okay, fine.”

He jogs around the school building and comes back a few minutes later holding another helmet.

“Where did you get that?” I ask. It’s cool and there’s a breeze that kicks up the back of my hair.

“What is this, the inquisition? Quit whining and hold your arms out.”

Tory puts his leather jacket on me and helps me with the helmet. He even slides a pair of gloves over my hand, fastening the straps securely.

“Is all this necessary? I think you just want an excuse to laugh at me dressed in your massive gear.”

“First of all, I don’t need an excuse to laugh at you. Second, you don’t look silly. Third, while I’d love to see you on my R1 in nothing but this helmet, you dress for the slide, not the ride.”

“If I don’t look silly, how do I look?”

“Cute.”

“Cute?”

“Shut up, Charity.” He smirks and rolls his eyes.

I force down my visor to hide the blush creeping over my cheeks. A teasing smile plays across his lips as he zips up the jacket. He flips my visor open and grabs the part of the helmet that protects my chin.

Tory pulls me close and says, “While I might play fast and loose with my own life, I would never compromise your safety.” There’s a touch of violence and a hearty dose of promise in his voice. “And you should count yourself lucky there’s a helmet between us right now.”

“I don’t. In fact, I feel that I’ve stumbled into a grave misfortune, Victory Amato. On all accounts when it comes to you.”

“As do I, Charity.” His dark brows furrow with concentration while he tightens the chin strap.

“This thing is gonna mess up my hair, you know.”

“Trust me, Charity, in a few minutes, your hair will be of no concern. In

fact—” he leans on the seat, face inches from mine, “I should warn you: this may just make you fall in love.”

“With you or riding?”

“Both.” A broad grin pulls up at his lips and his eyes dance, sparkling in the fading light of the afternoon.

I don’t tell him that it’s too late. That I’ve been in love with him for most of my life. Though, I suspect he already knows.

## Chapter 59

### Clara

Tory shows me where to sit and put my feet before hopping on. I place my hand on his broad shoulder, stomach twisting with nerves and butterflies as I gently swing my leg over. This is really happening. I'm on the back of Tory's Yamaha, about to pull out of the school parking lot, instead of finishing our tutoring session. This is certainly not how I thought today would go. For once, the walking distraction that is Tory Amato is...nice.

He twists the key in the ignition and the bike hums to life. Half a dozen different meters and neon lights glow across the instrument panel. "Two rules of riding," Tory calls out over the growl of the engine. "One: lean when I lean." He revs the throttle which revs my adrenaline.

"What's number two?" I shout.

"Hold on tight."

"I don't think—" I begin. But he jerks the bike forward once, and I sink my body into his, clinging tighter than plastic wrap. My stomach rolls. If I puke, he probably won't be inviting me for a ride anytime soon. That would probably be for the best.

Tory's deep laugh is barely audible over the engine. "You were saying?"

"Nothing."

I let out a shriek as he peels out of the parking lot a bit faster than he ought to. For a split second my nerves get the better of me, and I panic. So much could go wrong. I could throw off his balance, a car could stop short, my dad or one of his officers could see us.

Fear of the unknown, or rather, fear of the worst-case scenario coming true, has ruled my life for far too long. But I guess that's what happens when your life becomes one big worst-case scenario. I went from being happy with parents who loved each other to my mother dying suddenly and my father abusing me for the past three years. Tears prick my eyes again.

Then, my left hand drifts up Tory's chest and settles over his heart. The rhythm calms me with its constancy, and I rest my helmet against his back. A

broad hand snakes over mine, and he interlaces our fingers as we ride, cementing my palm over his heart. My other hand takes on a life of its own, slowly, timidly curling around the inside of his thigh. Tory's quad flexes in response.

Maybe I shouldn't do it. No, I definitely shouldn't do it. But I'm sick of following all the rules and second-guessing every single move I make. I'm tired of doing what's expected. For one night, I want to make questionable choices. I want to toe the line.

I want to feel.

I want to live.

I want to risk.

Everything.

What I feel is the bike thrumming beneath me and the sweet rush of adrenaline for a reason other than fight or flight. I realize I haven't felt adrenaline for a good reason in...far too long.

Wind whips by me, tossing my loose hair around my shoulders. I lean my head back, chest flush against Tory as he expertly weaves up and down side streets. We come to a stop at a red light on Main Street, and Tory reaches back with both hands, thumbs and fingers stroking soothing circle against my knees.

"How ya doing back there?"

"Splendid."

"You ready for a pull?"

"What's a pull?" I ask, already vaguely aware of what he's asking.

"Really fast for a few seconds."

My gut instinct is to say no. To giggle and caution him away from the action.

"Better decide quick," he taunts. The opposite light turns yellow and ours will be green in about three seconds. He's been keeping his speed around 30 mph thus far. But there's a straightaway up ahead. And tonight is a night for yesses.

"Do it," I tell him with resignation.

"Attagirl."

As we near the straightaway, I link my fingers around Tory's waist. He gives my knee a squeeze—a final warning.

And then he rips the throttle, shifting as the speedometer climbs.

Thirty.



Forty.

Fifty.

Sixty.

Seventy.

Tears stream from the wind whipping through my helmet. Houses and trees blur by. My heart skips a beat—then several.

Tory brings the speed back down, but I never loosen my grip. His hand covers mine once again, and we ride on for a while. Until we reach a destination that I don't recognize right away. It looks smaller now. But it isn't. I'm just bigger. This man is really trying to dehydrate me with all the tears he has me crying tonight.

“Tory...”

“Is this alright? I knew it was a risk but—”

I squeeze him tight as he parks the bike. “It's perfect.”

And it is. Because Tory brought me to the meadow where my mother and I used to dance and make flower crowns.

## Chapter 60

### Clara

It's the end of the sunset. The time of night when you can still see a sliver of light in the west and total darkness in the east. He leaves his headlight on and angles the bike toward the meadow where the grass isn't as tall as it used to be. Tory leans against his bike as I walk away, closer to the center of the meadow. A few seconds later, Taylor Swift's "Enchanted" emanates from his Yamaha R1. My makeup is smeared, and my hair is knotted, but I can't bring myself to care.

Tory tells me to take my shoes off. I argue. It's only sixty degrees, after all. Not truly spring but just a whisper of what's to come. He calls me a wimp. I sigh, drop to the ground, kick off my shoes, and then my socks.

The cool grass crunches beneath my toes when I stand. It hasn't grown lush yet and is still a bit matted from the winter snow. There are no flowers. It's too early in the spring. Maybe a few crocuses here and there, but it's not what I remember, and I remind myself that's okay.

The song is loud enough to fill the space. It encompasses me, and I close my eyes, toss my head back, and my arms out—breathing in the cool of the night. I sway slightly, surfing the familiar melody.

"Dance." His voice breaks through the happy chirp of bugs and owls and bats who don't know this is a sad day—who don't have the capacity to care.

But Tory is here, and he cares. It's clear now that he always has been, and he always has cared, and that I've made a terrible mistake. So tonight, just for tonight, I'll pretend he is mine and I am his and there's no one else. Because it's a yes night.

I don't open my eyes, just hold my hand out expectantly as I say, "Only if you join me."

"Always." He closes the distance, entwining our fingers without hesitation. Tory pulls my body to his, one arm wrapping around my waist, the other holding my hand in the air. My head finds the space between his ear and shoulder, but I have to stay on my tiptoes to maintain it. He notices and

carries me, my feet dangling as he twirls.

We laugh together and more tears fall from my eyes. He swings me round and round the middle of the field. Some songs are emotional, others upbeat. We chase and play and swing and sway.

At one point, I do a cartwheel or something of the sort. When my laughing eyes find him, his lips part with the grace of a silk chemise and his lashes flutter. As if his eyes intend to blink but refrain for fear of missing even a millisecond of the view.

But I am the view. And he's never looked at me quite like this. Like he's scared and determined and whole and captivated. Like he never wants to look away.

Yes, I've made a terrible mistake indeed. One that I do not know how to right. One that I may never right. But at least we have tonight.

When we're done, he takes me to get food at the only twenty-four-hour diner in town. My dad is due home in an hour, and I eat quickly because I don't want to risk it.

Tory crosses his arms on the melamine table. His ankles wrap around mine, but I don't pull away. I eat my BLT club happily. When the waiter took our orders earlier, Tory double checked to make sure the toast wouldn't have butter on it. He tosses down the fry in his hand, pausing a moment before he asks, "Hey, Charity? Why aren't you with your boyfriend tonight?"

I shrug, suddenly feeling a bit sick to my stomach. Though he didn't say Vince's name, I'm filled with dread at the reminder of his existence. "Because I had a tutoring session with you."

He nods and looks like he doesn't believe my answer. Or maybe he understands the meaning in my statement. Maybe he knows that I only wanted to be with him today, but the wall I've built is so stalwart I needed an excuse. In case he doesn't, I add, "He doesn't remember my mom. I asked."

Anger passes over his face like a ghost, and he looks away. I note the gentle flex of his jaw. By the time he looks back at me, it's gone.

Tory moves to my side of the booth, sliding in and letting his proximity do what his words can't.

I rest my head on his shoulder. "It's late. I should get home."

"Mm, I have a better idea. Let's stay out all night, watch the sunrise. Go to my house, play hooky, get in pajamas, and sleep all day, punctuated by all of your favorite movies."

"That's tempting, but my dad gets home in an hour, and Vince would be

suspicious if I randomly skipped school.”

“Oh yeah, Vince. Perfect.”

“Tory, come on. He’s a good guy. You’re friends with him, you would know.”

He snorts. “You don’t know him. Not like I do. You ever heard about locker room talk? I mean, he’d be ‘suspicious?’ Not worried or concerned but suspicious? Do you even hear yourself?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

He sighs deeply, and it rattles all the way into my bones. “You don’t have to say anything, Charity. You don’t owe me an explanation. And you’re right, I can’t have my tutor’s grades start slipping. I just want to do one more thing.”

I give him a smile. “Make it quick.”

Tory drops a fifty on the table and slugs down the rest of his water before taking my hand and leading me back outside. I grab the last quarter of my sandwich and finish it while he fastens my helmet.

We cruise out of the parking lot and down a side street toward my house. There’s a sense of dread—impending doom—as the night nears a necessary end.

“Do you trust me?” he calls back. Our speed is at an easy thirty. It feels faster being on the bike, but it’s comfortable now.

I give his thigh a squeeze. Words wouldn’t form even if I tried to get them out. The answer to his question is not a simple yes or no. It’s a loaded question, even if he doesn’t mean it as such in this moment.

“Close your eyes and put your arms out to the sides.”

Slowly, tentatively, I listen. He holds steady on a straightaway, and I sit up—head high, eyes closed. My arms rise, catching the wind as it lifts my flattened palms.

And I’m flying.

I sense movement in front of me and peer through slitted eyes. Tory’s arms are outstretched, just like mine. I lean forward, entwining my fingers with his. And we soar together.

It’s brief, but beautiful.

Just like us. Just like this night and all the other moments we’ve shared. Those nights at the tournament. The bus rides. The tutoring sessions. The dances at parties. Fleeting. There and gone. Transient. Tragic.

At the top of a hill, Tory brakes abruptly and pushes down the kickstand.

“Get off,” he says. I listen.

To my surprise, Tory pulls me onto the front of the bike facing him. He throws my right leg over his lap with far more grace than any teenage boy should have—and I’m straddling his lap.

When he tugs off my helmet, I open my mouth to argue. He’s unpredictable, but I’m always trying to figure out what he’s going to do next. Always trying to work out his angle. His helmet is next, and we’re both breathlessly staring at each other when he wraps my low ponytail around his fisted hand. My mouth falls open.

He pulls my head back until my throat is completely exposed. Tory whispers, “Look at the stars, Clara.”

My breath catches when his full lips get dangerously close to my collarbone. It has been so long without his touch. Without his warmth. It all feels new again. Like the first time.

“What happened to your breathing?” he asks.

“Stolen,” I rasp.

I feel his lips curve into a smile against my skin. “Is a thief afoot?”

“Just you.”

My body is tense. I’m nervous. He’s so beautiful, and he’s been so kind, and he’s telling me to look at the stars while his lips touch my skin. My mind races until—

“Just let go, Clara,” Tory whispers.

I exhale, leaning back the rest of the way. My back arches over the fuel tank. His cheek tickles mine as Tory sits up. That strong hand releases my hair, and I want to cry out in protest until both his hands find a resting place on either side of my ribcage.

More tears fall as he holds me there while we stare at the stars.

And then the proverbial clock strikes midnight, and Cinderella needs to get home.

“Aren’t I silly?” I ask the sky.

“For what reason, Charity?” the boy asks back, his voice dreamy and distant, like he, too, speaks to the sky.

“I always dreamed you’d be my first kiss.”

“Then I guess I’m sillier.” He sighs, those familiar fingers adjusting delicately.

“And why is that?”

“I always dreamed you’d be my last.”

I ask Tory to drop me off a block away, but he doesn't answer or slow down. My heart sinks when he pulls into the driveway—when I see the squad car.

# Chapter 61

## Victory

Not even two steps in the door, and this lowlife is already screaming at her. It takes all my self-control not to strangle him where he stands and bury him in a shallow grave.

“Where the hell were you—” his voice cuts off when he sees me step into the house just behind Clara.

I cross my arms over my chest and lean against the door frame. “You were saying?”

He snaps his mouth shut, turning the red of a cherry tomato with the effort it takes to remain silent. Chief Larsen certainly loves to run his mouth. When it serves him, at least.

Clara shifts uneasily from one foot to the other. She looks from me to him and back, nearly shaking with worry. I give her an easy smile, hoping it will calm her. “Go to bed, Clara. I’ll pick you up tomorrow, okay?”

She nods, and I pull her in for a hug, shoving my middle finger in her dad’s face behind Clara’s back. I snicker at how stupid he looks snarling at me but remain silent until I hear her bedroom door click shut.

“Today? You were gonna yell at her today?”

He ignores my question, his furious expression never changing as he steps closer. “I want you to stay the hell away from my family. You and your father are scum.”

“You have no problem calling on scum like me to bail you out in a bind.”

“Does she know the truth? About your family? All of it?”

“You know she doesn’t.”

“Then stay away from her, or else I’ll tell her about your little crime ring. She’ll finally look at you for what you really are.”

He shoves my shoulder and I grab his shirt collar, thinking about how easy it would be to lay him out. But he still has his gun sitting on an end table. I’m not stupid. I know how quickly things can go south when firearms

are involved. I've seen it firsthand. So I release him.

"She knows about the gambling. Just fess up to everything, Chief. The way I see it, it's all your fault. You never should've gone after my father after he bailed you out."

"I'm not telling her anything."

"Fine. But leave her alone and stop making her life a living hell. If I find out you made this day any worse for her, I'll put the bullet in your head myself."

"What's stopping me from telling her about you?"

"Fear, mostly. I think you know what will happen if you do."

"I've still got cards in hand, kid."

"But I've got better ones." I pat Chief Larsen on the shoulder and close the door.

Despite my cool approach, my heart hammers in my chest. For three years, I've been terrified for Clara to find out the truth about my family. And for the last year, I've hidden the truth about her mother.

A verse pops into my mind, thanks to my days at Catechism. John 8:32  
"The truth shall set you free."

The only card I have left to play is that he thinks I won't tell her. That I can't risk it. He thinks he can hang the truth over my head and use it to control me. He needs to keep believing the lie until I work up the nerve to tell her once and for all. Like I should have done months ago.

Then we'll both be free.



## Chapter 62

### Clara

Tory has been acting weird. Weirder than usual, at least. I don't think that anyone else would notice. But I do. I always have. It's in the way he breaks eye contact a little too soon. Or how he doesn't linger after history and take extra time putting his things in his bookbag so we walk out at the same time. In the week since Tory and I had that beautiful night on the anniversary of my mother's death, he hasn't sat with us at lunch.

Something is eating away at him. Something big. The way the secret of my father's abuse ate away at me until I let Tory find out.

Today he extends an olive branch. In history, we move our desks next to one another as usual. At least that hasn't changed. Halfway through class, he passes me a note: *Wait for me after class.*

Okay, I write back with a smiley face. A lopsided grin cracks his otherwise somber demeanor when he sees the doodle. For the rest of class, I hear him turning the note over and over in his pocket.

My mind races as I take diligent notes. Mr. M makes it easy today and writes all the notes on the board with an aqua dry-erase marker. Usually, he lectures or makes a slideshow and I have to organize my notes into a hierarchy on my own. But today, he makes an outline with bullet points and asterisks and Roman numerals. Which is good, because I can feel the warmth of Tory's left arm beside mine, while his right hand stays in that pocket—not taking any notes at all. He had started taking notes, but this week he hasn't. I've offered mine but he keeps refusing with a terse shake of his head at the end of each class.

When the bell rings, neither of us move. We both stare straight ahead—at the aqua notes still scrawled across the board. Everyone else files out quickly, grabbing their bags and engaging in horseplay.

“Do you still need these?” Mr. M asks, pointing to the board with his thumb.

Tory nods and I think the response is designed to get Mr. M out of the

room as expediently as possible. I give our teacher a sheepish grin. He casts us a sidelong glance but Mr. M has better things to do than babysit so he leaves us alone.

Lunch is next, thanks to our rotating schedule. The bell rings to signify the end of passing time and the start of the next period. Motion in the hallway subsides and I hear teachers in the classroom across the hall getting started with their lesson. A chorus of students chimes a greeting to their instructor. My stomach feels a little empty and lets out a low growl which seems to spur Tory on to action.

He turns to face me and I do the same, angling sideways in my seat so we're knee to knee. The beautiful boy leans forward and rests his forearms on his knees. And it's just us and the quiet tick of the clock, signifying the passing of time—reminding me that it's only my world that stands still when he looks at me.

“How are you?” he asks. “I mean, since last week. How are you, really?”

I sigh, knowing I can't hide from his question or give him a canned response the way I would answer almost everyone else in the world. “I'm okay. That day is always incredibly difficult for me.”

He nods and breathes in deep. “You seem back to your usual self.”

“You don't. You've been kind of distant since then.”

“I know. I'm sorry, I've had so much on my mind. It's not your fault.”

“Of course it isn't. I didn't do anything wrong.”

He lets out a breathy laugh. “Glad you're aware of your perfection.”

Tory reaches out and traces circles on my knees. He shouldn't do that. I have a boyfriend. But after that night, I feel like we're past normal rules. Vince will never be to me what Tory is to me. He'll never compare.

“Are you okay?” I ask him.

Tory takes in a sharp breath and clears his throat before shaking his head. “No, Clara. I'm not. I haven't been for a while.”

I feel my brow furrow. Secrets. He's told me he has secrets. But has he ever revealed any? “What's going on?”

“Do you have plans tonight?” he asks me.

“Just homework.”

“Can we hang out?”

The formal ask to spend time together sends the butterflies in my stomach aflutter. All other quality time has happened as a byproduct of

tutoring or me being hungry or hockey. But this is different. It makes me happier than it has a right to. My heart beats faster than it should, simply because Tory asked me to hang out.

But it's overshadowed by a deep sense of foreboding. By some secret that's causing the deep circles beneath his eyes.

Still, I smile and kick my feet a little against the carpet. "Of course."

## Chapter 63

### Victory

Ice. It's one of the few places my head feels clear these days. No family interference. No oppressive walls closing in. Only cold, hard facts. Like the ice. Everything makes sense on the ice. So I take her to the rink after a torturous week of hiding a truth I should have revealed long ago.

"Are we skating?" Clara asks.

We did our homework in the library after school. Then I took her to get dinner, not knowing if she has food at home. It's the least I could do. Finally, I brought her here.

"Not today."

I let out an intensely deep breath and inhale the cold air. Her nose pinks up. And when she looks in my eyes, I know she sees something is gravely wrong. She's suspected something over the past week but now she knows for certain and it's clear she's terrified.

Tears flood my eyes. It takes every bit of strength I can muster to hold them back long enough to get through this. Still, my voice comes out pinched. "These last couple weeks have been great, feeling like friends again. But things are gonna change again, Clara."

"No."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? What's going on?"

"Remember those secrets?"

She nods.

"I have to let them out. All of them. Too much has been hidden from you for far too long. And I know what's going to happen when I do. But before I say this, I beg you to remember that I love you. Years from now, when you still hate me and you're still angry and wishing me ill, please, somewhere in the back of your mind, know that I love you. I always have, Clara."

Tears well in her eyes. Her lips part and she says, "I love—"

“Don’t you dare say it back. I’ll never be able to do this if I hear those words cross your lips.” I cuss low and grating. My teeth grind together with the effort to keep the words locked away.

All at once, everything I wanted to experience together rush through my mind. A highlight reel of what could have been instead of what was. The way my chest wrenches, it’s quite possible that I’m dying of a broken heart at this very moment. Maybe when you die young, you don’t see your actual life flash before your eyes, but the life you could have lived.

“Just say it.” Her brow furrows, and I adjust my hands.

“I guess it starts with our parents.” I sniff, nose constricting in the cold air. One steady breath courses through me, and I focus my mind with determination. Just do it. “My dad isn’t in IT. He’s a hacker. The bad kind. I know you know about your dad’s gambling.”

She nods. “That’s...okay. Wait, what kind of bad hacker? Like, he steals people’s identities? That’s horrible.”

“Not quite. And he does far worse than steal people’s identities.”

Her gaze lowers, eyes darting side to side, then back up at me. “Is that why you could give me a phone?”

“Yes.”

“There’s more. There’s obviously more. This is weird. I mean, it’s bad, but not bad enough for you to be telling me like this. Are you part of it? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“No. Well, I’ve done...things. But that’s not what I’m telling you. Clara, are you aware that your father was in a lot of debt before your mom died?”

She swallows. Shakes her head no. Whether it’s in disbelief or acknowledging that she didn’t actually know, I’m not sure.

“My dad erased the chief’s debt. He hacked the system where the chief likes to gamble and just brought everything back down to zero. No one could prove it happened, obviously. Plus, places like that don’t really like a lot of attention from law enforcement. He erased any record that your father had ever lost a bet and not paid it.”

“Okay.” She shakes her head again, like she’s not getting how this is a big deal. She thinks this is the long and short of it. “That’s. Wow. What would have happened if your dad didn’t do that?”

Her questions are normal. Questions anyone would be asking. But they aren’t the right questions.

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I don’t know how seedy the people who run the

OTB place are.”

“So, that was nice of your dad then?”

I force my breath through gritted teeth. The only person I hate more than her father is my own. He started this stupid feud.

“My dad isn’t nice. He does stuff like that. Favors for people in power so they’re indebted to him. To keep them off his back. It’s all a big chess game to him and getting rid of the chief’s debt gave him the upper hand. But, it didn’t work, Clara.”

“How...how did it not? I mean, your dad is living quite a life, and it doesn’t seem like there are any repercussions.”

“My dad struck back. Let’s just say, he doesn’t respond well to threats or having his ego bruised. Then, yours did. They went back and forth. Minor things. Then, your dad arrested one of my dad’s men. A low-level guy. It was a message.

“So my father tasked one of his men with sending a message back. A serious one that would end things once and for all. He wanted to scare the chief out of ever coming for my dad again.” A shaking breath rattles from my mouth. I nervously swipe my thumbs across the tops of her hands. Over and over. “But there was a mistake.”

Her jaw goes slack. Clara lets out a choked whisper. “Tory...don’t.”

The look that I’ve been waiting for settles across her face. Tears spring from the corners of her eyes. Her head jerks to the side ever so slightly.

“Your mom got in the car. It shouldn’t have been her.”

“No...” Her hands release mine. She takes a step back. Away from me.

I keep talking. Keep explaining. As if that will help. As if it will make anything even remotely better. “Anyone in law enforcement would’ve known what to do when the brakes failed. They’re trained for stuff like that. He was supposed to drive to the station. It’s mostly flat from your house. The chief would’ve just pulled off into a curb and gotten the car towed or something. Your dad wouldn’t have died. It was only supposed to scare him. Your mom wasn’t supposed to take the car and it shouldn’t have gone down a hill.”

“I thought...I thought you were going to teach me to ice skate,” she whispers. Then she doubles over, turns away from me, clutches her arms around her stomach. Drops to her knees.

I follow, kneeling beside Clara and move to wrap my arm around her shoulders, desperate to stop her from shaking.

“Don’t touch me!” she screams, shoving me sideways.

It's not enough. I wish it was, but I barely move. I wish she was strong enough to bowl me over—to smash my head into the ice. Cold bites through my jeans as melting ice seeps through to my knees.

Suddenly, she turns and hugs me, arms tight around my neck, fists twisting the back of my fleece jacket. Her mussed hair gets caught in my chin stubble.

"I don't want to let go," she whispers through her tears. "I don't—I don't think I can ever look at you the same again."

A choked sob bubbles up, and I catch it before it spirals into a string of uncontrolled wails.

"My level of selfishness is unmatched. I held onto this as long as I could in order to delay the inevitable. I'm so sorry, Clara. I've failed you in every way."

"Not every way, Tory. Just the one that mattered. Everything I believed about my mother's death was a lie. And you knew."

"I'm so sorry. I was going to tell you at the tournament but—"

"But...nothing. You had a year!" Her scream reverberates around the rink—the sound sharp and guttural. She turns to leave, but I stop her.

"Wait. I need you to listen to me Clara. Listen. I know you're upset. But you cannot, under any circumstances, tell anyone about this. Do you understand me?"

She nods.

"Clara, look at me." I take her face in my hands and hold it firmly, despite her resistance. I say the words. Like how doctors have to say the words "they died" when they tell families their loved ones are gone. I say the words so she knows exactly what will happen if she tries to report this. "If you say anything, to anyone, he will kill you. And if I somehow get to you before he does, I will take you, and we will disappear, and we will never come back. Whether you want to go or not. You won't have a choice."

Her tears pool, wedging in the nonexistent space between my palms and her cheeks. "Tell me you understand."

"I understand."

I relax for a moment until she says, "Now *let. Me. Go.*"

"Clara..."

"Don't look at me. Don't speak to me. We're done. Pretend that I don't exist."

"Please, don't. *Please.*"

“Now tell me. That you understand. Tell me you understand that I will forever see the cold, lifeless face of my mother every time I’m forced to look at you.”

“I…”

“Say it,” she says through gritted teeth.

“I understand.”

It’s fitting that I did this on the ice. That I ruined everything, including the sport I loved all in one night. Every time I skate onto the ice, for the rest of my life, I’ll think about what I did to her. When I see the ice, I’ll remember the way the light flickered out in her ocean eyes. And that I’m the one that caused it. Not my father or hers. Not her mother’s death.

Me.

No matter where hockey takes me, it’ll always be synonymous with loss. Clara shuffles off the ice and walks out of the rink. The door slams shut behind her.

After the echo subsides, I’m left in complete silence, save for the roaring in my mind and the sound of my own tears melting the ice. I rake a hand through my hair. I want to scream. I want her to scream at me. I want to hold her. I want to make it better.

But I can’t.

When I walk out to my car, she’s waiting, shivering. Spring is supposed to be well under way, but it’s nearly freezing tonight.

“You stayed,” I say cautiously.

“I needed a ride.”

I nod and open the door.

“Take me to Vince’s,” she says as I pull up to the exit. I flick on my left turn signal.

Vince lives in my neighborhood, just down the street from the rink. When I pull into his driveway, I utter her name. It comes out like a plea. For what, I don’t know.

“Clara, *please*.”

The slam of the car door—so hard the whole vehicle rocks—is her only response.



# Chapter 64

## Victory

My parties aren't the same without Clara. Without our one dance that usually turned into more. With the hockey season over, there isn't much else to do on the weekends until it gets warm enough to hang outside consistently. Tonight is no different.

Late in the evening, Vince sidles up next to me, two red cups in his hands. He gives me one, and I nod my appreciation.

"She won't come here anymore," he says, words lacking emotion.

"I figured."

"She's at my house watching rom-coms with my mom and sister."

"Okay."

"So what the hell did you do this time, Amato?" Vince takes a swig of his beer as he asks the question.

I do the same before replying, "I told her the truth about something. A truth I'd long kept hidden. Because I knew it would bring about our imminent demise."

Vince looks at me and scoffs. "You gotta stop reading so much."

"Shut up, Culbs."

He strides off, shaking his head.

I wish I could walk away from myself.



Foolish isn't how most people would characterize me. Clara isn't one of those people. And now, neither am I. Because it was utterly foolish of me to think things couldn't get this lamentable. While I knew Clara going from unrequited love to bewitching nuisance to friend to lost love...was possible, I didn't think it was likely. Truly, in the deepest parts of my heart, that only she has access to, I believed she would forgive me. That she would understand why I waited. How it's not my fault, and she's angry and punishing the wrong person.

But she didn't.

Honestly, I can't blame her.

And that doesn't make it hurt any less.

I make sure to rev my bike as I roll past the high school at noon on a school day. Sometimes it's a greeting. Sometimes it's showmanship. Sometimes it's a middle finger in the air. Today, it's the latter.

Truancy has become more consistent than attendance. It's the first week of May. The last day of school is two months away. Prom is two weeks before that. Not that I'm going.

My grades are slipping but I'm doing what I have to in order to move on to senior year. The faster I'm done with high school, the better. In fact, the thought of another year seeing Clara, day in and day out, pining and longing and watching my heart die a slow, painful death? Well, it's a fate worse than death.

Everyone handles heartbreak differently. I am getting another tattoo today. A big one. Blowing thousands of dollars is easy for me. So after I eat up hours and hours getting stabbed with ink and metal, I'll buy something. Maybe I'll get Clara a car. Something sensible. Or I'll plan an end-of-year party. I'll figure something out. Always do.

I deign to show up at school the next day and it's clear that my confession has taken a physical toll on Clara. Hair in a messy bun. Yoga pants. Glasses. Barely any makeup. No nail polish. Making out with Vince in the middle of the hallway. The cafeteria. School library. While none of these things in and of themselves are wrong or unacceptable in any way—although school administration does discourage public displays of affection—cumulatively, they aren't Clara. Not the Clara I grew up with.

The level of self-loathing I feel is well-deserved. I did this. My lie changed her.

She won't even look at me.

But Vince will.

"How is she?" I ask him.

"Why do you care, Amato? You're the one who hurt her."

My heart pounds. "Did she tell you—"

"What happened? No. For someone who hates your guts, she's awfully loyal."

Loyal. Not sure if that's the right word but at least she heeded my warning about staying quiet.

“What’s going on with her?” I ask. “She isn’t acting like herself.”

“You don’t even know the half of it. You aren’t the only one who has parties, Amato. She’s getting blackout drunk almost every weekend.”

“So, why won’t you stop it? She’s spiraling. She fell asleep in class today. You’re her boyfriend, Culbs.”

“Because I can’t!” he explodes. Then quieter, “I can’t. I can’t get through to her. I tried to get her to talk to someone, but she won’t. I thought she was gonna strangle me when I mentioned talking to her dad.”

“Don’t talk to her dad.”

“Well, I’m doing the best I can to help. I make sure I’m the one to take her home every night. She stays at my house with my family more than her own. When she won’t do her homework, I do it. I mean, I don’t do a great job, but she won’t fail math, at least.”

“That’s going to mess up her GPA. She won’t get a full-ride.”

“Well, then why don’t you help me? Fix what you broke, Amato.” He spits the words like venom and guilt nearly bowls me over. “Do her homework with me. I’m not even in your grade. I know you like to act like you don’t care but everyone knows how smart you are.”

“Okay.” I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a few steps away then double-back. “Okay. I’ll handle history. I’ll email the work from her student account. If she isn’t doing her work, she probably won’t notice emails getting sent from her account.”

“Thank you.”

“We should loop in Jack, too.”

“I’ve tried. I don’t know if it’s Stockholm Syndrome or what, but he’s not trying to help her get better, he’s just there. Wallowing.”

“That’s not what Stockholm Syndrome is.”

“Whatever. All I’m saying is—”

A voice cuts through our conversation from just behind Vince. “What are you two doing?”

Vince cusses low and quiet, shifting to reveal Clara’s crossed arms and red bulging forehead vein. I never noticed it before. Probably because I’ve only seen her this mad once before.

Clara walks up and stands between us, facing Vince. It’s another after-school study hall conversation. Since the season is over, we only have them once a week. It’s Coach’s way of keeping tabs on us.

“Come on, Clara.” Vince tosses a hand toward me. “He’s my teammate.

And friend. You really think we aren't gonna talk?"

"You really think he's your friend? I thought he was my friend, too."

Knife. To the heart. I actually look down expecting to see a protruding hilt and blood seeping into my gray shirt.

Vince looks down at the floor. "He's not a great friend. I'll admit that. But he cares. And he cares about you."

Clara scoffs. Her arms are still crossed, left hip kicked to the side.

"You know it's true," Vince insists.

"Clara, I understand that you're furious with me. That you hate me. But like it or not, I'm not going to let you self-destruct. What you seem to forget about me is that I have no problem breaking rules. Except for my own. Right now, I have one rule: manage the fallout from hurting you. That includes working with Vince to make sure you don't do anything you regret."

She doesn't say anything. Doesn't turn around or even give me the courtesy of tilting her ear. But I know she's listening.

Her head tilts up to Vince. "Let's go." She takes his hand and leads him down the hallway. I hear the quiet din of his pleading voice as he attempts to convince her of something.

## Chapter 65

### Clara

The façade has officially crumbled. Finding out the truth about my mother's death was the final blow that shattered everything. Getting angry, drinking, not caring. It all came so easily. But it just made me feel worse.

Vince is already at school. I woke up late, and his mom will drive me when I'm ready. Schoolwork hasn't been a priority. In fact, it hasn't even been on my to-do list. I've been avoiding checking my grades. I know what I'll find and I know I may have ruined my chances of getting a full-ride to a decent school. Maybe I'll be able to explain the dip to admissions counselors when I apply. Explain that I never properly mourned my mother, and it took me until now to start facing things.

My mom is dead. She's never coming back. The way that she died or the reason she died isn't going to change that. Nothing will. Tory didn't kill her. His father did. And my father knew all along.

There are people who deserve my anger. People I don't have to forgive for a long, long time. But Tory isn't one of them.

He's broken too.

None of that changes how I feel and how angry and devastated I am. But I need time to heal. I think I will be able to forgive Tory for hiding the truth from me. I just need time.

It will take time for me to grow, too. Time to get comfortable being vulnerable. To let someone in. Time to decide who I want to be, because it's definitely not the girl I've become.

I roll over and grab my phone from Vince's nightstand. There are text messages from Jack and Vince. Nothing from Clover, but if I don't get in by lunch, I'm sure there will be one from her, too. When my grades load on my student portal app, it takes me a few long moments to process what I'm seeing.

My grades are...not that bad. Somehow, none of my averages have fallen below a B-. How is this possible? I've missed so much work. A couple

tests, projects, and literally all of my homework since I learned the truth.

I open the itemized grade grid for math. There are grades for nearly all my homework assignments. Assignments I definitely didn't do. Then, I check history. We had a big research paper assigned on the Roman Empire that I definitely didn't hand in. Or did I? Sure enough, there's a grade for the paper.

Disbelief sets in, and I open my student email. Our school sends far too many emails. Maybe a dozen a day. Daily announcements, student government updates, clubs on clubs on clubs, and student news. I stopped checking.

At first glance, nothing is out of the ordinary aside from hundreds of unopened emails. I type Mr. M's name in the search bar, unsure of what I'll find. He's been concerned about me in class. At least to the point where he asked me if something was wrong after the third day in a row of me falling asleep with my head on the desk.

A recent email catches my attention. The subject line says: Roman Empire Essay. I open the email and see Mr. M's response as a simple: Thank you. There's an attachment and I open it up to find a completed eight-page essay.

Someone submitted the essay on my behalf. From my email account. Someone—or more likely, several someones—have been acting like Santa's elves and doing my work for me.

A few weeks ago, I would've been numb to this epiphany. I wouldn't have cared that they care about me enough to do the work so my grades don't dip too much. But now, I feel guilty.

## Chapter 65

### Clara

By the end of May, Vince taps out. All the bravado and claiming he wouldn't give up on me. Well, that lasted as long as it took for his ex-girlfriend to come back from college.

Last night was the first night I spent at home in a while. I forgot how much I loved escaping to my room. Though, it's not the same anymore. It's tainted now that the chief ruined it. Everything is tainted now. Even me.

It was a little easier when I had people in my corner for once. Even though I'm furious with Tory, he was trying to help me. He isn't even speaking to me. Though he may be just giving me space. Now I scared Vince off. At least I have Jack.

I skip class and hide under a stairwell. There are four of them in school, and if I keep my crying quiet enough, no one will bother me. All at once, the urge hits me to see Tory. But he wasn't in history today which means he's skipping school. Just as he has been for weeks, now.

We've both been spiraling in our own ways. Neither of us desire to admit it. Until now. My seams are coming treacherously loose, and I feel everything spilling out onto the scuffed, cold, tile floor.

So I pull out my phone to text him, desperate for someone to hold me together. "I hate you. But I really need you right now, and I wish you were at school."

"Where are you?" he texts back.

"Hiding under a stairwell."

Three minutes later, none other than Victory Winner Amato rounds the corner wearing a leather jacket, holding his helmet in one hand.

He sinks to the floor beside me. A sight for the sorest of eyes. It's silent for a few minutes. He listens as I cry, keeping his forearms folded over his knees. The bell rings and the noise in the stairwell grows deafening as people go to their next class. Then there are the stragglers. Then no one.

And it's just us again. A reminder of what could have been.

“What happened?” he asks.

That’s all it takes for the words to spew like projectile vomit.

“I slept with him, Tory. I slept with him, and he dumped me,” I tell him through tears that refuse to quit.

This isn’t me. Clara Larsen doesn’t cry over boys, especially not the wrong boys. Maybe I’m not crying over Vince at all. But I tried to get over Tory. Tried to move forward—make the choice that wouldn’t gut me. And it blew up in my face. So, yes, I’m crying. Because it’s so much more than getting dumped. It’s me. It’s him. It’s everything, all crashing down on me at once. It’s standing on the precipice of a life-changing moment and now knowing how, exactly, things are going to change and feeling wildly, uncomfortably out of control.

“Did he dump you right after?” Tory asks carefully, his voice cutting through my downward spiral.

“No.” I sniff. “We did it weeks ago.”

“So, what happened?”

“He just said he couldn’t do it anymore. That I’m different, and he has to focus on the end of senior year. He’d been distant since his ex-girlfriend came back home last week and they’ve been hanging out. It could have something to do with that. I don’t care.”

“I’m sorry. Was it...was that your...”

“Yes.” She looks at him. “It was my first time, and it was the wrong person. I didn’t want to—”

“Wait, did he make you?” Tory leans forward, as if he’s about hunt down Vince if I respond in the affirmative.

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

“Coerce you?”

“No, Tory. Come on, you know him. Vince would never. I...initiated, but I knew it was wrong. I needed to be in control, but it was wrong, and I can’t undo it or take it back. You can’t go back.” I choke out the last of my words in a whisper and my head drops as the tears fall onto the cold linoleum.

“Oh, Clara. Come here.” Tory scoots closer and wraps both arms around my shaking shoulders. “I’ve got you.”

“I just want my mom,” I wail.

“I know. I’m sorry, Clara. I’m here,” he whispers, stroking my hair as I bury my head in his chest. He’s so warm.



I can't take being here anymore. I wish I stayed home. "Please take me somewhere. It hurts too much."

Without a word, Tory hooks his arm through his helmet and scoops me up, one arm under my legs, the other along my back. I wrap my hands around his neck, and the pain of how much I've missed his touch gets me crying all over again. He carries me out a back exit, right beside the stairs until we reach his bike. I snifle, and he wipes my tears with his thumbs before putting the helmet on me and fastening the chin strap. This time, I don't argue about him needing one too.

"Wait here. I just need to take care of something."

"What?"

"You know what I'm gonna do, Clara."

He pulls out his phone and calls the school. "Who does he have right now?"

"Barnes."

"Room 285, right?"

I nod.

He punches in three numbers, then says, "Hi there, can you send Vincent to the main office?"

"Tory, don't."

"I promise, I just want to talk. No need to concern yourself."

"You have a habit of breaking promises."

"We all have room to grow." He hangs up the phone. "I'll be back."

We're eye to eye and he growls, "I told him what would happen if he made you cry. He won't be surprised." He brushes a wayward tear and smooths my hair behind her ear. I look down at the asphalt, full of shame. He kisses me on the cheek and then sprints back into the building.

Four and a half minutes later, Tory returns with mussed hair and red knuckles that he shoves into his pockets before he gets close. He tries to hide them, but I was searching for injuries as soon as the school doors flung open. When you know someone's appearance as well as I know his, it's easy to spot anomalies. Anything out of place stands out immediately, and the bloody knuckles are no different.

He drives me to his house. I knew he would. The middle door of the three-bay garage opens, and Tory rolls into a spot next to his car. He gracefully lowers the kickstand and slides off his seat in front of me. "It's just us. Is that okay?"

I nod, still sniffing. As he unfastens my chin strap, I take off the glove then stuff them inside the helmet which Tory then places on the seat. He looks at me, gauging his next move, so I make it a bit easier for him to discern and hold out my arms. Asking him to hold me likely isn't the best idea, given the turmoil in my heart and mind. But I just need something solid to hold on to right now, and he came for me. He didn't have to but I needed him and he was there. He's always there. Always.

Tory scoops me up, one arm under my legs, the other around my back while I cling to him. I lock my hands around the back of his shoulders and soak his shirt with my tears. Such closeness is treacherous—dangerous even. But I don't care. I hold him like he'll disappear into a fine mist if I don't.

He's careful not to bump my legs against a doorframe or errant piece of decor. The cool of his sheets meet my back.

"First things first. Do you want to change?" he asks.

I nod again. I take my glasses off and set them on the nightstand. Tory hands me a pair of joggers and a t-shirt from some hockey camp. It must be from when he was young because it almost fits. But it's soft and well-loved, so it's perfect.

"Second, are you hungry?"

"No, just thirsty."

"On it." Tory disappears into the hallway and returns a few minutes later with a water bottle and snacks. "Just in case," he says by way of explanation, coupled with a shrug.

"What else do you need?" he kneels beside the bed, ready to re-cap the water bottle after I take a few swigs.

"Sleep."

He nods and pulls the covers over my shoulders. I close my eyes, vaguely aware of Tory moving about the room. The mattress dips slightly as he sits on the other side of the bed. Pages flutter in a way that tickles my ears.

"What are you reading?" I ask the space in front of me.

"Uh, *Caraval*." Normally, he would ask the follow-up question: have I read it? This time, the answer would be no.

"Can you read to me?"

"Of course."

I roll over and rest my head in his lap. The tears are mostly dried up, but I have that bone-deep feeling of emotional and physical exhaustion that usually accompanies crying this hard for this long. Tory smooths back my

hair, hands moving deftly.

And he reads.

So I drift away, lulled by the careful cadence of his voice, into a world where magic isn't just possible, it's real.

In the morning, I don't wake until well after nine. Tory is up and waiting with breakfast. I take it with me, slide on my sneakers and make my way to the door. He doesn't stop me but asks if I need a ride. I tell him I'll walk. Judging by the warm light streaming in through his mini-blinds, it's a beautiful day for a very long walk.

"This doesn't change anything," I tell him.

"Of course not." He shakes his head and watches me from beside the bed. Tory stands there, swaying, and I feel his eyes on me.

Without turning back, I tell him, "I find myself looking for you even when you devastate me...because you used to be my source of comfort, not the source of my pain."

## Chapter 66

### Clara

Periwinkle buds bloom on trees around a small, man-made pond. This park is one of the few green spaces in town. Given that it's free entertainment and a manageable bike ride away from my house, I've found myself here many times. To escape. To ponder. To dream. But it took a year for me to work up the courage to come after my mom died. It was one of her favorite places.

Jack seems to sense the heaviness I feel. His slow, certain steps scrape along the paved path beside me. Mostly, he stares straight ahead and sips his iced mocha, but I catch him stealing glances at me from the corner of his eye. He knows I'm working up to something. Something big.

As a rule, May is better than April—though the May that just ended was one of the worst. September—with all its distractions—is better. One may think I love spring and summer. But I don't. Spring for obvious reasons and summer because there's too much time to think. During the school year, I have homework and activities to focus on. But during the summer, it's all downtime. And it's officially June.

Maybe it's the impending sense of dread I feel, as summer draws near, that leads me to where I am today. Maybe I've grown, and I'm finally ready to admit that I need help. I'd like to think it's the latter and that I've actually learned something this year about myself and who I want to be. Regardless of why, or how it happened, I know I don't want to move through life like this anymore. I'm suffocating under the weight of...everything.

Secrets.

Unrequited love.

The abuse.

Loneliness.

So, I stopped drinking after Vince dumped me. I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss him. It seems foolish—to miss the silver medal when gold is dangling right in front of you. But when I called him that night after the

tournament and told him I needed to talk, he came over immediately and picked me up. And then, when I told him I wanted to be with him, he saw the desperation in my eyes and didn't hesitate. Didn't question my true motivation. It's not that I didn't have romantic feelings for him. I did. But I needed him for reasons far beyond romance.

Vince might not be the person you spill your guts to, but he's sure as hell the person you trust to call an ambulance when they're already sprawled across the floor. The person who won't push when you won't tell him why you're in such a state in the first place.

But Tory? Tory is the person bleeding out beside you.

The person who walks with you, hand in hand through the carnage. They try to shield you, but they don't know how because they're just as vulnerable and accruing their own wounds. But you don't realize it until you look to the side and see that they're just as beat up as you are. The person that tells the paramedics to treat you first and that it will be okay.

The person who loves you so fiercely that it feels like being caught in an undertow. The person you love back.

And Jack? I guess Jack is the person you debrief with. The person you share the emotions of the story with. The one who helps you process everything without judgment.

"Let's sit on a bench by the water." I gesture toward the pond with the cup in my right hand.

Jack nods, his right hand protectively rising to my back in an absent-minded gesture. This is right. He's the right person for this. This isn't a mistake. Jack has proved himself time and again. I remind myself of these truths when everything in my nature tells me to pull away. To keep everything inside and just keep surviving. Hiding.

So I know what I have to do. I just need to work up the courage to do it. To take the step and let someone else in. To live.

I let out a shaky breath, tears already threatening to spill from the corners of my eyes. "It's time to come clean Jacky."

"I had a feeling," he says and pulls a travel pack of tissues from his jacket pocket. It's beige and corduroy, with shearling trim. A little Autumnal for spring, but Jack's never been one for fashion.

"How'd you know?" I ask.

"Your hair. No ribbons today. And your glasses. It's easier to cry in glasses."

“Jack, I’m floundering.”

“I can tell. You ready to talk?”

I sputter, and let out a little laugh. “No.”

“Clara, please.” Jack’s arm is on the back of the bench, along my shoulders and he gives me a gentle squeeze.

“I wasn’t finished. No, I’m not ready. But my secrets are poisoning me. The threads of the life I present to others are unraveling quicker than I can sew them back together. You’ve been there for me even when I didn’t want you to be.”

He nods, unwilling to talk, for fear of spooking me, it seems.

So I push forward. “The last weeks have been...tumultuous to say the least. I looked in the mirror after Vince broke up with me, and I barely recognized myself. But then I thought about it and realized I didn’t really like who I was to begin with.” I take a deep breath. “Jack, my dad is physically abusive.”

I look over at him, even though I know I should just keep explaining because the look on his face makes me want to take the admission back. Horror and something like guilt color his features.

“Oh my gosh. Clara.” Jack angles his body toward me, searching my face like he’ll find something there. An errant bruise as proof. Scars. Playfulness to suggest this is a bad joke. “Are you... okay?”

“Internally or externally?”

“Both.”

I shake my head. “No, definitely not. It happened almost a year after she died. I thought it would be the only time and that he just lost his temper. It wasn’t even that serious. But then it happened again. And again. And by the time it became a regular occurrence, I felt so ashamed and too scared to tell anyone. I realized he’d changed. He’s not the dad I grew up with. And I realized I’d changed too. The two people I loved most got ripped away from me. One by death. And the other by choice. So I started showing people what I wanted them to see and kept anyone from being able to see past that. I’ve been surviving.”

“I’m so sorry, Clara. You deserve so much more. We have to get you out of that house.”

“I know.”

“Tory’s and my dad hate each other. I can’t say much, but it’s bad. There’s a history between them that Tory hid from me.”

Jack gives me a knowing nod. “So that’s what happened with you guys?”

“Yeah, he finally told me. I wanted to stay mad at him forever.”

“Well, is he sorry?”

I nod. “He is. I know he only kept it from me because he didn’t want to hurt me. And it wasn’t even his fault. His dad put him in the situation, and he just didn’t know how to deal with it.”

“Do you think he’ll do something like this again?”

“Um…” I take in a quick breath, thinking. “No. I really don’t. I don’t believe Tory and I have any other secrets between us. I’m in love with him, Jack. I have been for so long. What if it doesn’t work out? What if I’m finally ready to have something real with him and he’s not? What if he gets hurt? He could die tomorrow. Like, a bunch of different ways. He’s not terribly safe, you know.”

“You said you’ve been surviving. But that’s not truly living. Beautiful things aren’t as beautiful without the contrast of the ugly. You’ve lived through such ugliness. Let yourself enjoy something beautiful, Clara, for however long it lasts.”

“I’m scared.”

“Do it scared.”

On the surface, Tory and I couldn’t be more different. But deep below, in the depths of our souls, we are alike. Both of us keep secrets buried if we think they’ll hurt more when shared. We’ve both let fear hold us back.

And it’s time to let go.

## Chapter 67

### Clara

Prom is supposed to be one of the best experiences in high school. Honestly, despite everything that has happened, tonight is pretty special. Jack. My one, true friend. Who has stuck by me and striven to get past my walls is my date .

My dress is an exquisite confection of tulle and silk. Petal pink with a corset top and long, draping ribbon straps that tie at my shoulders into floppy bows. The floor-length skirt fans out from my waist and floats when I twirl.

Last week, I started practicing my hairstyle. Seven tries later, it looked the way it did in my mind. Then, I did it again, every single day. Today, the double waterfall braid doesn't have a single strand out of place. Jack and I went and picked flowers last night that I wove into a crown with streaming silk ribbons. I look like a fairytale come to life. And I certainly feel like one.

Jack picked me up in a classic car that he borrowed from his uncle. Cherry-red and sparkling brighter than dreams. He pulled up like a knight in shining armor. A welcome one. We met up with the lunch table girls and a few hockey players for group photos beforehand. I didn't invite my dad. He doesn't deserve it. That sucked—seeing everyone else with at least one parent. Jack's mom doted over me. She must have sensed I needed it.

Jack has been so gentle with me this year. Allowed me to work through my struggles while remaining a steady supporter . Now that he knows everything, a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. Telling someone I trusted unconditionally was the first step toward healing for me. Everyone's journey is different. But keeping the truth locked inside ate away at me. It poisoned me from the inside out, and I'll never forget how the people who love me kept me from doing irreparable damage to my life.

My view on Tory began changing even before that day at the park with Jack when we watched the flower petals fall into the pond. Every petal felt like a spilled secret that I'd been holding onto. When I let them go, it left space for me to dwell on Tory further—on that fear surrounding a future with



him. Made me imagine how keeping the secret of how my mom died must have eaten away at him. Soured deep in his belly, kicking and screaming every time he saw me. Every time I flirted with him, he fought against that truth, trying to claw its way out. Until he felt the time was right, and he worked up the nerve to do it.

I've been journaling. Dozens of pages filled in a small, bound notebook. Raging and reasoning through Tory's silence for the past year. Time and time again, I come to the same conclusions.

One: I'm still angry.

Two: Likely, I would have done things the same way—built a relationship with someone before breaking their heart.

And three: I'm so hopelessly in love with him that it may consume me if I don't tell him.

Tonight was supposed to be the night. I thought he'd be here. The rest of the hockey team is here. But no Tory. There's only two more weeks left of school, and he's absent more than he's present. We took more pictures with distant friends and classmates upon arrival, and dinner just ended. A few couples have made their way to the dance floor while dessert is being served, and I let my eyes linger on them.

Vince brought his ex-girlfriend to prom, although it appears she's dropped the ex from the label. He never, ever looked at me the way he looks at her—the way she looks at him. I'm not mad at him. He tried to move on from her. I truly believe that. He and I did the same thing. We took a step in a direction to step away from the person we're really in love with, in hopes that it would work. He tried to get over someone who left him, and I tried to get over someone I never had anything with. But there are just some people you can't get past, and I think we both realize that now.

I toy with my clutch, opening and closing the magnetic clasp while Jack talks to Clover on his other side. He should have asked her to prom.

“Hey, Jack, I'm gonna—”

A voice full of velvet and violence, with a hint of cinnamon sounds from just above my head. “Dance with me, Charity?”

My stomach turns over on itself, and I freeze, savoring the moment before our eyes meet. Chills break out along my spine when I hear that voice.

He's here.

A hand appears beside me. A beautiful, strong, steady hand. He's reaching out, and I wonder if it will be the last time. There are only so many

times a person can reach out before they give up. Part of me thinks this very well may be the last time. Another, deeper, much more visceral part of me knows that he'll never stop reaching out. That he's as much a part of me as I am him. Our stories intersected in such a way that our DNA became interwoven and an attempt to tear us apart will break us.

Powerlessness is a feeling I hate with a passion. But I've always been powerless when it comes to Victory. I suspect he'd say the same if I asked.

So I turn fully in my seat, take a deep breath and take the outstretched hand of the most beautiful boy. It's not the first time. And I'm certain it won't be the last.

Now I need to tell him.

The song is slow. One of my all-time favorites: "Love Story". He must have chosen this song intentionally so our cheeks could find their way to each other with a valid excuse. I'm glad he did.

This is how we've always connected. In conflict and friendship. Love and hate. Our bodies say what our mouths have always failed to utter. Words we were too terrified to speak. Until now.

It's over too fast. Tory ends the song with a spin and dips me with preternatural grace. I watch his bottom lip tremble as he touches my knuckles in a petal-soft kiss.

"Thank you." The words are clipped, and I suspect it's taking every ounce of his control to not say more. His lips tighten into a thin line as he bows his head and turns to walk away. Another slow song begins as Tory's right hand rises to his face. Though his back is to me, I know he's swiftly wiping tears from his eyes.

"Wait."

Slowly, he turns, eyes full of something like hope and disbelief. His eyebrows tick up ever so slightly—questioning.

"One more?" I ask.

# Chapter 68

## Victory

Hope blooms wildly in my chest, and I can't stop the tears that gather in the corners of my eyes.

"What did you say?" I ask her.

"I forgive you."

"I love you, Clara. From the moment you were tackled in flag football, I have loved you. Maybe not love in the true and adult sense. But at every stage of life, I have loved you in the capacity I was able to at the time. My love was far more innocent back then. It's much more nefarious and selfish and consuming now. Please love me back."

"I know. I—I love you, Tory. I love you," she breathes.

I kiss her with fervor. "Say it again."

She does and I kiss her more, eating up her words with my mouth, feeling the way her lips form the phrase with my own.

"Love is supposed to be this great thing. But anyone who thinks that has never experienced unrequited love. It's like being poisoned, for years, at an excruciatingly slow and painful pace."

"You're so romantic."

"You jest in light of my agony?"

"I'm sorry. Force of habit. I trained myself to let your words roll off me."

"Every night, just before sleep takes me, I wish to go back. To face the music from the jump. I'm sorry, Clara. I look forward to making it up to you."

"So do I. Starting with some much-needed groveling."

"What do you require of me?"

"I believe groveling begins a bit further south."

"On my knees for you is the furthest thing from a punishment. But if you insist." I drop to one knee right here in the middle of the dance floor.

"Actually, since I'm down here already. You need to know that I don't want

to be your boyfriend. I want everything. Every part of you.”  
“Me too, Tory.”

## Chapter 69

### Clara

Graduation was sad for a lot of people. I wasn't one of them. I will miss Clover, especially because she'll be moving to Miami in a couple weeks. She's going to UMiami and doesn't want to miss summer at the beach. Can't say that I blame her.

And Vince? Well, Vince is Vince. In the fall, he'll be playing college hockey. After that, if he keeps improving, Tory says he has a real shot at the NHL. I hope he makes it. Overall, he's happy with his former ex, now current, girlfriend, and I'm happy with Tory. I'm happy for him, and he's happy for me. We're all just sickeningly happy.

And content.

Jack's not super happy because he shot his shot with Clover after their little hand-holding flirtation at prom, and it didn't work out. At least not the way he wanted it to. Jack is a relationship guy, and Clover isn't interested right now.

Poor Jacky.

Now that Tory and I are officially together, my brand new car sits in the driveway 90 percent of the time because I like to ride in Tory's car. He's a nice driver. Never gets mad in traffic. No road rage. Let's me pick the music and drive with the window down. He sings, too. His voice is really nice. So far, the only thing he's bad at is drawing.

Today is my birthday. My phone buzzes as I bounce down the stairs in a pink, flouncy sun dress. The chief is at work. He works almost all the time now, opting to sleep at the station most days. I open the text message, and it's my aunt wishing me a happy birthday.

My aunt.

When the school year was wrapping up, I decided I wanted to find her. She and my mom were close. My mom would have been forty-two this year. My aunt is only twenty-eight and according to both of them, my mom practically raised her. It never made sense for her to drop off the face of the

earth like she did.

Though my memory is spotty about the days surrounding my mom's death—from the grief and accompanying despair—I remembered my aunt saying she would come visit. She was pursuing her master's degree at the time so the visit was intended to occur after her semester ended a few weeks later. Instead, I never heard from her again.

In my quest for healing, I decided I wanted answers. So, Jack helped me find her. It was easy, but I probably could have found out a lot more if I'd gone to my boyfriend—who is actually a very skilled hacker in his own right. But I chose Jack. After we exchanged numbers and got to chatting, I found out that my father had threatened her after the funeral. He cut off all ties. Blocked her number, wouldn't respond to emails. He doesn't have any social media. I was only in middle school, and he was a doting husband in her eyes. She never could have dreamed what type of man he would become or else she never would have left me with him.

That's when we began to devise a plan. Tory and I promised we wouldn't keep secrets from one another anymore. Now that nearly all the details are solidified, I need to break the news to him. Today.

Jack has been giving me pep talks for the past two days, encouraging me to come clean to Tory. He's expecting an update tonight after my birthday dinner. He and Tory get along well. I know Jack has always had a soft spot for him. Just like me.

I rush out of the house as soon as Tory pulls into the driveway. Though the chief isn't home, I don't like waiting for him to get to the door. It's too long. Every second away from him is difficult now. Maybe it always was.

He catches my jump hug and spins me around as many times as it takes to get me dizzy. I keep my arms locked around Tory's neck to maintain my balance as my vision swirls. This was likely his plan—to make sure I wouldn't let go.

“Happy birthday,” Tory says, leaning us both against the car door.

The sun is delightfully warm against my shoulders and cheek.

“Thank you! Best day of the year.”

“I agree. You're my old lady now.”

I pull him in for a kiss. It's sweet and long, and I love it.

When we part, Tory says, “Hey, cut it out, cougar. I'm still seventeen.”

Another stolen kiss.

“Stop,” he protests teasingly. “I take the law very seriously. No more

kissing until I'm eighteen."

"So, I have to wait four months?" I giggle.

"Let's make it five, just to be safe."

"Yeah, you're right. Only one hug a day. To be safe."

"And no hand-holding."

"Oh, absolutely not," I agree as Tory walks me to the passenger side and opens the door. "I've always said hand-holding is the gateway drug of physical contact."

"Wow, you're so wise. Like Father Time."

I snort a laugh as he closes the car door, and I immediately open the window.

As Tory drives, I look over at him and still can't believe he's mine. Some residual anger remains. But I love him—love him and I let him know it.

"So, what's on the agenda for my birthday?" I ask.

He beams. "You're about to find out."

# Chapter 70

## Victory

For as long as I live, I won't forget the look on Clara's face when she walks into her surprise party. By my count, the whole school turned out to celebrate, and every detail is perfect.

To be fair, Jack and I started planning this party immediately after prom. It wasn't terribly easy because Clara has been with one or both of us almost nonstop since prom night.

Everywhere you look, there are flowers. Flower crowns. Flower petals blanketing the back lawn of my house. A Ranunculus flower wall as a photo backdrop.

We got all her favorite foods catered. There's a professional photographer, caricature artist, photo booth, lawn games, and a dance floor, which is currently where we're stationed. As we have been for about forty-five minutes. Good thing my conditioning is on-point. I truly don't believe anyone else could keep up with Clara on the dance floor, although she and Jack spun around for a while, so I had a break.

Sweat plasters Clara's hair and the petals of her flower crown to her forehead.

"I'm so hot," she says. "I think I need a break."

"How about we cool off in the pool?" I wag my brows at her.

"I don't have a bathing suit."

"Well," I say, stripping off my shirt. "I'm going in my underwear." I take her hand and lead her toward the pool, already teeming with people. "You can wear whatever you want."

"Wearing all my clothes worked out for me once before." She smiles.

I kick off my shoes and drop my pants. Clara is already barefoot and tosses her crown to the grass. She takes my hand.

"Running jump?" I ask.

She nods and we take off, flying into the pool with a splash.

After a bunch of chicken fights and Marco Polo, Clara and I grab towels



and make our way up to my room to change. She doesn't care that her makeup washed off or that her curls are gone. And she's beautiful.

Clara giggles as I pull her in close by the waist, cinching her against me. The way her body fits mine is anything but happenstance. We were made for one another. I've never been more certain of anything.

"Let's go upstairs," I whisper in her ear.

She nods.

# Chapter 71

## Clara

I'm nervous climbing the stairs to Tory's room. This is the first time we've been alone since the car ride. The party is a most welcome and wonderful surprise, but I need to get this news off my chest.

We kiss all the way to his bathroom, and I reach into the shower to turn on the water. Extra hot. Tory makes a spinning motion with his finger, and I turn. A shiver runs down my spine as he slowly unzips my dress.

I shouldn't have had sex with Vince. I wasn't ready. I'm still not. There are many more steps on my healing journey, and I don't want to take that step with Tory until I've worked through my trauma. Truly, I believe that sex with Tory will be so beautiful and wonderful that it could become a bandage, masking wounds that aren't fully healed. The last thing I want is for some hurt to rear its ugly head down the road because I didn't properly process it now.

But we kiss a lot. And take a lot of showers together. And sometimes we do a little more than that. This is one of those times.

But after, it's time to come clean.

I change into clothes that have found a home in one of Tory's drawers, and I make him put a shirt on when he tries to walk out with only shorts. No more distractions.

"Tory, we need to talk." I sit cross-legged on his bed and pat the space in front of me.

He blinks a few times and slowly sinks to the edge of the bed, broad legs stretching to the carpet. "Those are the five worst words I've ever heard. You know people say that when they break up with someone, don't you?"

"I didn't mean it like that. But we do need to talk about something." I take a deep breath. "So, we agreed. No more secrets."

"Correct." His eyes are wide, and he looks absolutely terrified.

"Relax," I tell him. "It's going to be fine."

"I think I'll be the judge of that."

I nod. “Um, so remember how I told you I have an aunt? Well, I got in touch with her recently. Come to find out, it was my dad who cut off contact with her and kept her away from me.”

“He’s such a dick,” Tory growls.

I nod again. “I know. So, my aunt and I have been talking and...I’m going to move in with her. Do my senior year out there.”

Tory jerks back, as if my words have dealt a physical blow. “What—where’s ‘out there’?”

“Colorado.”

“No,” he argues. “You don’t have to do that. You can move in with me. My parents won’t mind.”

“Don’t you get it? That’s part of the problem.” I stand and pace a few steps in front of him. “I don’t want to be within a hundred yards of either of our fathers.”

Tory rises to his feet and takes my hands in his. “So, I’ll come with you. You don’t have to go alone.”

“I do. I have to do this on my own. For myself. I won’t allow you to become my crutch, and if you come with me, that’s exactly what will happen. I’ll rely on you for everything: to make friends, to take care of everything like you always do, and fight my battles.”

“But I want to do all of that.”

“And I love that about you. But I have to learn to stand on my own two feet. To exist as my own person and not just...an extension of you.”

He looks out the window. At the fading light. It will be dark soon. “I understand. Don’t like it. But I do understand.”

“Thank you.” I pull him toward me, looping my arm around Tory’s taut waist.

“Long-distance is impossible for a lot of couples, Clara. What if...what if...” He doesn’t finish the question.

“We won’t,” I say firmly. “I’m going to marry you, Tory.”

A wry smile breaks his otherwise downcast expression. “Are you asking?”

“Kinda.”

“But I wanted to.”

“You still can.” I rock back and forth, taking him with me. I tease, “But I beat you to it.”

“I’ll change my name,” he tells me.

“Don’t you dare. I love your name and I want to get rid of mine.”

“I love you, Clara Rachel...” He leans in, lips brushing my temple and whispers under his breath, “Amato.”

“Nice, isn’t it?”

“Very.” We sway a few more times, and he pulls back, eyeing me suspiciously. “Wait. Did you just basically propose to me right after revealing that you’re moving to trick me out of being sad?”

I raise my brows. “Did it work?”

“Kinda,” he admits. “But this is gonna suck. I don’t want to be away from you, I literally just got you. We’ve been through so much. I was really looking forward to things being easy.”

“Well, I don’t think life will ever truly be easy. But that’s exactly how I know we’ll make it. We’ve already been through worse, Tory.”

“We have,” he agrees, nodding emphatically. “Okay. This is fine. This will be a breeze in comparison.” Then he frowns. “A stiff breeze.”

“Easy breezy,” I say.

He quirks his head back and forth, humming for a beat. “More like a hurricane.”

“Sure, Tory.”

His eyes go glassy. “With gale force winds.”

“I love you,” I say, making him go quiet with a kiss that I hope reassures him.

Then he kisses me back and whispers, “You are my favorite person. In the book of my life, your presence is woven through every page.”

“My honey-tongued valentine.” I smile and pat him on the shoulders before we rejoin the party. “Before I go, I need your help with something.”

“Anything,” he breathes.

And I know he means it.

## Chapter 72

### Clara

Two days later, we're standing in front of Clara's house. The house she grew up in. The house she shared many beautiful memories with her mother. The house where her father turned on her.

We stand for a while. By my guess, close to fifteen minutes, holding hands while Clara stares at the front door. The curtains are drawn so I'm sure her father doesn't see us.

Clara squares her shoulders and gives my hand a quick squeeze before dropping it and clenching her fists at her sides. She's eighteen now. Clara doesn't legally need to do this. But she does need to do it for herself.

Yesterday, while her father was working, we came and cleaned out her room. Everything is packed in a trailer and hitched up to the back of her car. He probably didn't even notice her room was empty.

The metal of her house key grinds against the inner mechanism of the lock, and she twists it ominously. Clara walks in first. She's dressed for the long drive already—in a t-shirt and athletic shorts. I'm dressed a bit more... tactically.

As soon as he sees me, the chief shoots to his feet, already red and sputtering mad.

"Get the—"

"Sit down," I bark, narrowing my eyes at the slab of human waste. I rest my hand on the handgun bulging from my waistband in a concealed carry holster, and he sinks back down onto the couch which tells me he's likely unarmed. I can have it out and aimed in about four seconds. His weapon is nowhere in sight, and if this goes badly, well, I'm just here to make sure it doesn't. Sadly, this isn't the first time I've been in a tense situation with an unpredictable adversary.

Clara sits in an armchair, and I stand beside her, arms crossed over my chest.

She twists her hands in her lap and finally says, "Dad, I'm leaving."

The TV blares beside us, and the chief looks too shocked to think of turning it off, so I slowly reach over and tap the power button myself.

When nothing but silence stretches between them, he asks, “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’m done being abused. I’m eighteen, and I’m moving out.”

“Oh, Clara don’t be—” he begins.

“I wasn’t finished.” Her biting tone cuts him off at the knees.

His mouth gapes. A sly grin stretches across my face. I don’t think she’s ever back talked him in her entire life.

That’s my girl.

“You’ve hurt me more than I can ever begin to express. We were both devastated after mom died. I lost a parent who loved me and gained a parent who hurt me. Over and over.” She gets louder. “You tried to break me. You may have destroyed our relationship, but I want you to know that you failed to break my spirit. For a long time, I thought you succeeded, but I was wrong. You deserve to be behind bars for what you did. I still might report you. But for now, I just want to be done with you. Looking at you sickens me, and you’re a sorry excuse for a parent.”

“How dare you? After everything we’ve been through.” He narrows his eyes, shaking his head in what seems to be disbelief.

I watch his eyes and his hands, just like in hockey. When someone is going to make a move, their eyes move first, then their hands. Every muscle in my body is tense, like a viper, coiled to strike at any moment, should the need arise.

“This is all his fault.” The chief gestures his chin toward me.

“No. It’s your fault. And I’m leaving now. Don’t try to find me. If you do, my boyfriend will kill you. Tory has a clip with your name on it, and he will not hesitate to empty it into your skull. All I have to do is say the word.”

“And I’d enjoy it,” I add.

“His father can cover up anything. Don’t push my generosity.”

“You can’t do this,” her father says.

Clara stands up and smiles. “Watch me.”

The chief leans forward to stand from the couch but thinks better of it once he sees the look in my eye. “Please. I can’t lose you too.”

“You lost me a long time ago.” She gives me a nod, and I follow her to the front door. Clara turns and looks over her shoulder. “When you wake up every day and look in the mirror, I hope you remember that you won’t walk

me down the aisle when Tory and I get married. You'll never get to meet your future grandchildren."

"Don't do this, Clara. Things will be different."

Clara ignores him and walks out the front door, leaving it gaping behind her. She doesn't look back. I keep my head angled in his direction, on guard for a last-ditch effort to hurt me, just in case. But the chief just stands and stares, hatred and hurt in his eyes.

Just before I leave, I say, "Know what, Chief? I changed my mind. If she gives me the go ahead, I'll keep you alive until Clara gets here so she can put the bullet in your head herself."

Then I slam the door.

"How do you feel?" I ask her as soon as we get in my car and shut the doors. I drove us, in case she wasn't in a position to do so after confronting the chief.

Clara waves her hands, fanning her face as I pull out of the driveway. "I—I feel...like I wanna punch a hole through a wall and also like I need to puke," she says quickly.

I nod. "It's the adrenaline."

Clara's chest heaves gently. "I think I like it."

"Oh boy." I give her a little nervous chuckle.

"What?" She looks over at me, and I spare a glance in her direction as the trees along the suburban road blur by.

"Well, the way you're feeling right now? Yeah, that's why I get in fights and ride a motorcycle. You're basically halfway to becoming a daredevil."

She lets out a throaty laugh.

A few miles down the road, I look over and see her hand trembling in her lap. I lace our fingers together and rest them on the center console. "You're done with him, Clara. Forever, if that's what you want."

"What if I change my mind in ten years and want to give him another chance?"

As much as I never want her to see him again, I tell her the truth. "You're allowed to do that. It's completely your call. I'll make sure you can make contact safely, should you want to."

"Thank you." She nods, digesting the freedom to make the choice for herself. "I'm just...so relieved it's finally over."

"On to Colorado."

We pack the last of my things, and I say goodbye to my bike, Giulia,

and Rainey. Saying goodbye to my niece is particularly difficult. Kids grow so fast, and I'll be gone nearly two months. But as I think back to my conversation on Thanksgiving with my father, I remember that it could have been a lot longer.

He stays hidden in his office. I don't bother saying goodbye or anything else for that matter. I don't have anything to say to him. He knows how I feel. Even though my mom and sister don't really grasp the depth of the situation, my father knows I chose Clara.



# Chapter 73

## *Two Months Later*

Clara

“You cannot do that, Tory.”

“Watch me.”

“Well, I won’t answer the phone. Can’t be on the phone with me all day if I don’t answer that morning.”

“Are you expecting me to believe that you won’t answer on my first day of school?”

Safe is a new state of being for me. But now I’m here, wrapped in Victory’s arms, encompassed by his broad body. So, I’m safe. As safe as I’ll ever be.

Letting go of my mask is a process. Tearing down the walls between us is a team effort. A worthy one. Now we’re fighting on the same side and presenting a united front.

“No. I’ll always answer.” I nestle deeper into his chest, and he squeezes me just a bit tighter.

My aunt has this old pickup truck that’s perfect for a warm night like tonight. We took it out to a lookout and have been stargazing among the mountains. Though, I’ve been stargazing in the reflection of Tory’s eyes.

The only real friend I’ve retained is Jack. The lunch girls fell away. So did Clover and Thomas, though we chitchat on social media. But Jack and I text almost every day. He’ll visit. We’ll make it happen.

“This year is gonna suck,” he tells me. The words swirl in the vast space just beyond our bodies.

“How many days?” I ask him.

“Two hundred ninety.”

“You know, that doesn’t even seem like a lot when you say it. Way less than a full year.”

“Oh, way less than a year. Plus, I already bought my ticket for Thanksgiving. That’s only eighty-nine days.”

“Double digits! And less than three months.”

“I already miss you, Clara. I miss you, and I haven’t left yet. How is it possible to long for someone already in your arms?”

“Preemptively, I suppose.”

“The glass really is half-empty.”

I run my knuckles along the sharpness of his jawline, careful to avoid the temporary covering over my tattoo.

He wanted to give me a ring. A big one.

I told him to wait until he signs his first NHL contract. Then, he can get me an even bigger one. One that’s as impractical as our love.

Which is why we got matching tattoos instead. A T on my left hand, between the two knuckles on my ring finger. A C on his. Tory also got my name inked on his right wrist and the words I love you in my handwriting on his left. He said he wanted my name on the right, so everyone knows who he belongs to when he shakes their hand, and I love you for all the times we’ll miss saying it in person over the next ten months. A bit overboard. But that’s Tory. Once he gets set on something, there’s no stopping him.

The moon is behind a mountain peak at the moment, and I’m grateful the moon isn’t overpowering the glow of the stars. It reminds me of the night he took me out on his bike in April.

“I’m gonna miss you so much. Who will I flirt with now?”

“Hopefully still me.”

“I can’t believe it worked.”

“I can’t believe it’s finally real.” He steals a kiss, and my heart stills.

His grin spreads wider until it crinkles around his eyes.

“Tell me. What happens in June? Other than graduation. I’ve been wondering about your rib tattoo for a long while now.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t figure it out already. It’s the next NHL draft. The one I’ll be entering. I got it so far in advance, the day hadn’t been announced, so I just got the month and year. Still looks cool.”

“Very.”

“It will also, hopefully, be the month I make you my wife.”

“Better be.”

“Before or after the draft?”

“After. I want it to be a celebration of love and hockey. I also want to be settled in knowing where we’ll end up.”

We’ve been in talks with several NHL teams. Tory has researched them all and made a spreadsheet complete with information about location, player,

and coach stats, along with where he thinks he'll be picked up in the draft. We want Canada. We're accustomed to the cold, and I want to be even further from his family. The chief lost his job, but he still roams free so the international border between us is an added benefit.

"Wow. Are you real?"

"Pinch me and find out."

He pinches the flesh of my hip under the blanket. The last six weeks have been a time of physical healing as well as emotional. My hips are wider now. A happy byproduct of my healing has been some healthy weight gain.

"Say the word, Clara. One word from you and my lips would only leave yours under threat of imminent violence."

"Kiss me."

"That was two. The one I was looking for is pl—"

"Now."

He shudders with delight. Grazes his lips against mine before fusing them together.

When we finally separate, I ask him, "Aren't you worried about other boys?"

"Not really. Not from your end, at least. I certainly trust you. But I should warn you, being the beautiful new girl will get you a lot of attention for the first few weeks of school."

"You think?"

"Absolutely. Guys will be coming at you from every angle. The girls will be mad about it. Just stay the course. If you're aloof to the boys and kind to the girls, you'll have everyone in your corner by October."

"I'm nervous. I'm still not good at the whole friends thing. I can't 'be myself' because my nature is to only show what I want people to see and keep things light."

"Honesty helps. To whatever degree you can manage. At some point, you'll have to get comfortable being uncomfortable."

"Yuck."

He huffs a laugh. "How about you set a friendship goal? You're goal-oriented."

"Good idea. I would like, maybe...maybe one good friend by Christmas. Someone I can bring to the tournament. And...hm, I'll go to two parties a month. And all the home sporting events. At least the ones the other kids are going to. Having the truck will help. I can offer people rides."

“Worked for me.” He smiles, eyes alight with mischief.

“When we get married, this is how we’ll sleep. Every night. You on my chest. Hair fanned over my shoulder. One leg on each side of my hips. It’s bliss.”

“Can’t do it when I get pregnant someday.”

“Oh, well, our marriage bed will be kept purely chaste. No need to worry about that. Cooties and all.”

I laugh and sneak my hands beneath the hem of his shirt to dance along the taut muscle hidden below. Though, there’s truly no hiding Tory’s physique. With my ear flat against his chest, I can hear quickening staccato of his heart rate as I tease along the hem of his boxer briefs.

“Teasing aside, that’s what I’m counting down the days until.”

“Until I’m pregnant? You’re off by a few thousand days…”

“No.” He flips us in a whirl. The truck bucks in response. “The practice.”

Victory interlaces our fingers and slides them high over my head, while I lock my ankles around his waist.

I sigh. “I love you.”

Tory smiles. “Say it again.”

The End.

# Happily Ever After

A gentle peace this morning brings;  
The joy-filled sun, will early show his head:  
Go hence, to have more talk of these glad things;  
Some were pardoned, and some punished:  
For never was a story of more glory  
Than this of Clara and her Tory.

Romeo + Juliet, Act 5, Scene 3, Re-written

## *Three-hundred-five days later*

A voice booms over the crowd. “With the first overall selection in the 2027 NHL draft, the Boston Bruins are thrilled to select: Victory Amato,” the Bruins General Manager says.

I smile. The nervous bobbing of my knee ceases immediately. I did it.

Cheers erupt all around me, as if we didn’t know this was going to happen. I mean, we knew I was going either first or second. Enough teams showed interest to know that much—despite being at a statistical disadvantage for failing to show my skills much outside of high school. But it doesn’t dull the shine of the moment one bit.

To my left, Clara’s hand tugs at the sleeve of my blazer as we both jump to our feet. She gets the first hug. A long one.

“I’m so proud of you,” she tells me through misty eyes.

I squeeze her waist tight to mine. “Thank you.” We kiss quick. “For everything,” I add.

My fiancé pulls away first, the diamond sparkling as she dabs at a tear with her left hand.

Giulia, Rainey, and my mom get quick hugs on my right side. Dad gets a handshake. I don’t really want to even give him that, but I do owe him.

In one week, Clara and I will be married and we’ll immediately move to our new city—which we’ve just learned is Boston. Far away from my parents. They don’t know how much she hates my father and that I’m not far behind. Things could have been different. But he chose the type of person he wanted to become and so did I.

And the type of person I am, will stop at nothing to protect Clara from the type of person he is.

This moment is monumental. Some of the best moments I’ll ever live will be happening within a two-week timeframe and I remind myself to soak it all in. I shuck my blazer and hand it to Clara, stealing one more kiss before I make my way down toward the stage.

Cheering echoes all around me, amidst the camera flashes and neon lights. The NHL Commissioner shakes my hand first, congratulating me just before I move down the line of the Bruins leadership. Someone hands me a

Bruins jersey and I hold it up. The crowd roars in response but one voice rings out amongst the rest which brings me a chuckle. It already has my last name and number on the back and I already know this particular jersey will be stolen by Clara in no time.

I'm quickly shuffled off to my first interview. After the cursory questions about how I'm feeling and what I'm expecting for myself this season, the interviewer asks me what happens next for me.

Now, I smile for a whole other reason, eager for the opportunity to share with the world. "Well, it's gonna be a busy couple of weeks. In exactly seven days, my fiancé and I will be getting married, then we're so excited to be moving to Boston and squeezing in a quick honeymoon before training camp."

"Wow, drafted one week, married the next, all before your nineteenth birthday," the interviewer remarks. She's middle-aged with deep-set laugh-line wrinkles and a wedding band. Maybe she knows how I feel because none of the expected judgement seeps into her smile.

"Yeah, June is a good month now." I smile. "I kind of wish I could hit the pause button and live inside June forever."

I want to say more because I'm bursting at the seams with love and gratitude and pure, unadulterated joy. But she doesn't ask, so I leave it at that.

Ten Years Later

## *Victory*

She still wears my jersey to every game. None of the other wives or girlfriends wear player jerseys. Well, they do, but not to every single game. It's a faux pas. But we've never played by the rules. Married at eighteen. Still married at twenty-eight. Uncommon and beautiful.

Currently, Clara—hair bedecked in red and blue ribbons—and the team mascot are on the ice with a bunch of kids. Coach finished his pep talk and I snuck out to the edge of the terminal to watch. A proud smile stretches wide across my face as Clara navigates an intense game of musical chairs on a large, red square of carpet on the center of the ice. From the looks of it, the mascot was booted early and it's down to Clara and two other kids. One of the kids is pretty young...and slow. She sweeps the girl into her arms and jogs around the chairs. When the music stops Clara plops the girl down into one of the chairs, leaving just the two kids to compete.

When her little ally wins, by some miracle, Clara jumps and hollers in celebration—bows and curls bounding wildly. She still wears those ribbons. Being free of her father and the weight of her life in Minnesota only solidified Clara's love of whimsy over the years.

During my first NHL game, she painted my number on her stomach and demanded a seat behind the penalty box. According to Clara, that's where I spend most of my time anyway so it's the best choice. Sass on sass. One of my teammates' wives on my first team appreciated Clara. They were fast friends—despite a ten-year age difference—starting at training camp and decided to sit together that season. When they went to the bathroom, someone made a snide comment to Clara about her get-up. A video of Clara going off on the person about feminism and misogyny went viral. Clara kept her cool...until the person made a jab about me being an over-hyped rookie. Honestly, I thought I was the violent one. I was wrong.

And I've never been prouder.

Something was cemented that day. No one ever bothered Clara again. Not about her eccentric outfits with team colored make-up, or when she smacks the glass and cheers every single time I fight. And not when my second team lost our Cup bid during my fourth year in the league and she cried harder than I did. Photos circulated of Clara with tears running down



her face, streaming through her make-up.

She's become the darling of the Social Media Administrators on all three of my teams—always generating content. Because the fans love her. She's approachable and gracious and loves my teams as much as they do. Clara brings as many signed pucks as she can carry in her purse to games, handing them out to fans. She's always shoving a puck and a silver marker in my face at home.

Some people connected to the team seem to think she should tone it down. But I don't let her catch wind of it. Anyone who threatens her joy, gets threatened by me. Period. Luckily, my production on the ice is strong enough that I don't get much flack.

I wrangle my smile and head back to the locker room to re-tape my stick before the third period. When the team skates back out onto the ice, she's out of sight and as out of mind as Clara possibly could be for me. That was a quick lesson learned in the NHL. The pace and pressure don't allow me to be lackadaisical like I was in high school. I kind of miss the days when I could mess around and stare at her during games. But nothing beats the adrenaline rush of being at the highest level of hockey in the world. It's more emotional than I thought it would be. I remember my first fight in the NHL.

While I held my own, I got a nice introduction to the big leagues by a monster of a defenseman with eight years and almost as many inches on me. In summation, I got rocked.

Clara's eyes looked like they'd pop right out of her head when she saw me after the game. That year, we got a high rise condo by the stadium.

We got into the shower and I knew what I needed but I was so nervous to ask. Every woman I'd ever been with expected me to be in control. To be dominant. But I had a split lip and bruised jaw. So I asked her to be gentle with me.

She smiled and said, "You want me to take care of you?"

I'd always taken care of her. It had become our default.

But that night, Clara was gentle and caring. She washed my hair and massaged my aching muscle. She kissed the side of my lips that wasn't split open and patched me up. I just stared and stared, heart pounding. She got me in bed and kissed me slowly. And I kissed her back and let her be gentle with me.

At that point, we had been married four months, but I was still nervous around her.

~~I still get nervous sometimes.~~  
I still get nervous all the time.

## *Clara*

Once, I told Tory that I didn't think life would ever truly be easy. I was wrong. He's made our lives so incredibly easy. We got a big house on acres of land in Canada and stayed there. Everyone in town wanted to work for us—best pay in the area.

Four kids under five was...not a great idea. But per Tory and Clara, once we got going, it was hard to stop. Victoria was first. She's the bossiest kid in Kindergarten. I pictured a little girl with Tory's wavy hair but my blonde and blue eyes. Wrong. She's Tory's clone. Junior looks like me, though. Tory gave me a hard time about naming our son after him, especially after Vicky was already his name-sake.

The kids and I are in our box today. It's the last year of Tory's final contract. They've got a good shot at the Stanley Cup this year. He already has a ring, but one more would be the icing on the cake to a record-setting career. But after that last game, we'll have him all to ourselves.

We fought so hard to make our way into each other's arms. Then right into the NHL and we've been going full-throttle ever since, Three teams, a dozen moves, two major injuries. But then, I count my blessings and the sadness goes away. Most players have careers that are tumultuous and riddled with uncertainty. That's never been us. Maybe it will be nice to slow down a bit. We'll travel in the fall and I can't wait. Tory's goal is to fill up our passports with as many stamps as possible.

Then we'll come back home and just enjoy our family. A happily ever after if I ever saw one.

Eighty-five years later

My sister swipes a wayward tear. We know we don't have much to cry about. Most people don't have parents who lived past one-hundred with most of their wits about them. Even fewer have parents who die while still in love. And even fewer have such wonderful parents to begin with.

We were all able to make it out here, to our childhood home. I moved in years ago with my family, so Mom and Dad could stay here and finish their days where they built a life together.

But we'll miss them. I think that's why we're sad. We count our blessings, but our parents showed us what a marriage should look like. They taught us how to love and how to be good parents to our own children. It's a lot to lose at any age.

They made things easy for us while helping us develop grit and a hard-working nature. As I look around the room at my siblings, I see the trophies won, awards earned, half a dozen degrees, certifications, volunteers. My parents did that. Their love did that.

I was fifteen when they told me everything they'd been through and why we didn't have a relationship with either of my grandfathers. My cousin Rainey lived with us for a long time. Things got too dangerous when my Aunt took over the family business so Mom and Dad took her in without a second thought. That's just the kind of people they were. They didn't even have their own kids yet.

Dad was inducted into the Hall of Fame forty years ago. At the ceremony, they played a highlight reel of major moments from my dad's career that included footage of his draft day. That was the footage that had my parents weeping—seeing themselves on the precipice of their life as a unit. Not the Stanley Cups, or the time my dad scored a shot around his back with a broken skate. It was them—Mom in her pink dress, Dad holding onto her just a little too long, like always. That was the image that held the most meaning for them.

Mom sometimes said that she felt things were too easy. That one day, she woke up and things were just...easy. It felt unfair to her. Dad would remind her that they'd paid their due—or at least she had—on their way to finding each other.

"I'm so glad we were all here," I say to my sister. I look around the kitchen at everyone gathered—the children and grandchildren of former teammates turned friends, my cousin's kids, my own kids, my siblings.

“Me too. They appreciated it,” she says.

My siblings lived all over North America. But one by one, as our parents got older, they moved back home.

Junior walks up and puts his arm around my shoulders. “I can’t believe they died the same day,” he says.

“I can’t believe they held each other all the way until the end.”

“Would you expect anything less from them?” My siblings shake their heads and someone launches into a story.

The service was beautiful. Their caskets traveled together and remained side-by-side even as they went into the ground. I imagine them still side-by-side, walking through the pearly gates of heaven, just the same way they went through life.

Right before they died, I found a box in a closet. It was full of letters they wrote one another during their Senior year of high school—the last time they were ever apart for an extended period. Many of the letters were addressed to “Romeo” and “Juliet” because my parents always said they were the Romeo and Juliet who beat the odds.

At the end, I pulled out the letters and asked if they wanted me to read them. There were hundreds. The only time there were gaps was when they were together during short visits or during school breaks.

When I reached those gaps, Mom and Dad filled them in while my siblings and I listened—entranced. Dad said he’d written out their story in a notebook and stuffed it somewhere. He planned to publish it, declaring that Mom deserved to be immortalized in a book. But they just got too busy living life to worry about that kind of thing.

Soon after I read the last letter, they drifted away, Mom in one breath, Dad in the next—as if he held on just a few minutes longer so she wouldn’t need to experience a single moment of life without him. He fought for her until their dying breath. He fought to make her life easy.

So for that reason, and or many, many others, they’re immortalized in our hearts.

Icing Hearts Reviews

If you enjoyed this book please rate it on GoodReads and Amazon. If you could leave even a short review as well, that would be greatly appreciated!

[Amazon](#)

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#### Acknowledgement

Book number five is...in the books. Wow. I started writing Icing Hearts in June 2023. It was supposed to be my summer writing project. But life got in the way and instead of pushing myself to simply get words on the page at all costs, I waited for inspiration to strike. It has become clear that I need to let the words flow and not force them.

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