



LUCKY HIT

BOOK ONE

HANNAH COWAN

THE SWIFT HAT-TRICK TRILOGY

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ONE

OAKLEY

As my team skates off the ice for the final time this season, I choose to stay behind to do one last lap around. For most of my teammates, this is just the end of another winning year. But this is the last time I will ever skate in this arena, as not only a player but also the Captain of my hometown team, the Penticton Storm. I'm allowed to feel a little nostalgic. This arena has been my second home for the past three years, after all.

The bitter cold nips at my skin through my thick jersey as I stare at the empty stadium. Endless rows of uncomfortable brown seats look back at me as my eyes try to memorize every last inch of space. This place helped me rediscover my passion for hockey. It's where I watched my mom and sister scream at the top of their lungs while waving around their cheesy signs at every game. It's where I met so many special people and created insane, long-lasting memories that will stay with me forever. It's the place that showed me that I could be a leader—a real force to be reckoned with.

Lines of fluffy white snow trail behind me as I skate around the rink—the only sound to be heard comes from the ripping of the ice under my skates and my short, ragged breaths as I push myself around the boards. It's peaceful. It's rarely this silent. Quite a contrast to the screaming crowds during a game or our coach's angry screams after a heart-wrenching loss.

I reluctantly step off the ice after a few more minutes and walk down the long hallway leading to our muggy, sweat-

ridden locker room. I pull the door open, nearly smacking into Andre, my best friend.

He turns and slaps me on the back as we walk over to our cubbies. “So, that was it, eh? Our last practise together?”

“I guess.” My shoulder’s drop when I see the hurt flash across his auburn coloured eyes. “You won’t miss me that much; you boys can carry your own,” I add hastily to lift our spirits.

He raises his eyebrows and laughs, “Has anyone ever told you you’re way too humble?”

“Last time I checked, you preferred it when I’m humble. Something about it letting you have a chance with the ladies?” I tease, sitting down on the bench in front of my cubby.

His eyes widen for less than a second before he covers his shock with his trademark cocky smirk. “I just tell you that to make you feel good, buddy.” Sitting down beside me, he unlaces his skates. “But, I will admit that I’m slightly worried I’ll lose my touch without my number one wingman.”

I roll my eyes and scoff lightly. Andre doesn’t have any issues in that department. I’ve known him for fourteen years, and I’ve never seen him with the same girl twice.

“You know you don’t need my help in that department, but hey, maybe this is a good thing? It might give you a chance to pay attention to the stuff that matters. The team is going to need a new captain.”

The sudden panic in his eyes is unmistakable. “Don’t even start with me. You know how hard It’s going to be to fill your shoes. I’m already trying to get the defensemen to spend less time chirping and more time defending. I get a headache just thinking about keeping that entire shitstorm of a team focused.”

I squeeze his shoulder. “Think about it, man. You know you have my vote.”

“Don’t start with the sentiment bullshit, Oakley,” he chuckles. “I’ll see you Thursday, yeah? Don’t you dare bail on me!” Standing up from the bench, Andre hikes his hockey bag over his shoulder and heads to the door.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. See ya, man.” I wave him off, not missing the eye roll he throws my way before he leaves. As I’m yanking my jersey over my head, Coach yells for me.

Once I’m out of my gear, I head into his office. “What’s up, Coach?”

He sits back down behind his desk and motions towards the grey two-seater couch resting against the opposing wall.

“Hell of a season you boys played. You’re not the same kid you were three years ago, thank God,” he beams.

I flop down on the couch and place my hands behind my head. “I think you owe yourself a clap on the back for that one, Coach.”

His contagious laugh fills the room before he settles back against his leather chair. “Sure as shit, I do. I take full responsibility for your success as Captain.”

Ah yes, the joys of being Captain. Don’t get me wrong, I love my team, and I’m honoured to have been the guy everyone looked up to this past season, but it gets draining. Both physically and emotionally.

“Don’t go getting cocky now, old man,” I snicker.

Looking over at all the team pictures scattered across the room, a burst of pride shoots through my chest. I spent the last three years of my life playing with the same guys, all of us learning from each other as we dealt with the encouraging wins, and the unbearable losses until we eventually moved on to win our first major championship together this season.

I’m going to miss it.

“Do you know what team you’re heading to yet?”

“Yeah, Vancouver. Not too far from mom or Gracie. It seemed like the right fit.” I look down at the pen on his desk

and study it like it's the most exciting thing in the world.

I look up in time to catch his pointed look. "Vancouver? I thought you wanted to go out to Ontario? You know your mom wouldn't want you to give up your goals for her or your sister."

I groan internally. Of course, he isn't going to leave it alone. "It doesn't matter what my mom wants. They need me," I say shortly. This is the last thing I want to talk about right now. When my father passed away when I was thirteen, I had to take over the responsibility of taking care of my mom and little sister, Gracie.

A twenty-two-year-old driving home from a party—drunk as all hell—ran a stop sign and rammed into the driver's side of my dad's truck.

He was killed on impact.

Watching my newly widowed mom struggle to keep her family above water was hard. But the decision I made to help her no matter what wasn't. I couldn't watch her struggle any more than I could lose the ability to play hockey. I live and breathe the damn sport. It was, and always will be, my passion.

I get that from my dad.

I remember sitting on the couch with him, eating pizza and watching a game every Saturday night in our Vancouver Warrior's jerseys. The silly old man never could pick a good team to cheer for. Even at the age of seven, I knew they were a shitty team, but they were his favourite, and that's the only thing that ever mattered to me. Some days are harder than others, but we make do.

"Oakley? Are you listening to me?" Coach asks, annoyance written clearly on his worn-down features.

"Sorry, Coach. What did you say?"

"I *said*, what do you plan on doing once you have been drafted? You know you're going to have to leave them at some point. This is your dream." He's giving me that familiar determined stare, trying to convince me to change my mind.

Too late for that.

“I haven’t thought that far yet,” I say, looking down at my shoes. I am far too drained for this conversation. “I really need a shower, Coach. I’ll be back this week to get all my stuff. We can talk about this then.” Or not.

He lets out a long sigh but nods reluctantly. “Go on. I’ll see you then. You did good tonight.” I force a small smile on my lips and give my head a nod before quickly rising from the sofa and leaving the office.

TWO

OAKLEY

The sun has just about set by the time I park outside our small two-story home in my beat-up white Chevy. Our house is not grand by any means, but it's home. A small porch with old wooden steps sits in the centre, featured with a bright red door that Mom painted with Dad shortly after buying the home. It is chipped and peeling now, but Mom refuses to repaint it.

A bay window sits on the right side in the middle of the living room, along with a wooden flower box that lies underneath, filled with yellow daisies—Mom's favourite.

I stare at the water pelting down from the grey, puffed filled sky and groan. It has been pouring rain ever since I left the arena, which isn't that much of a surprise. April in British Columbia is nothing but God damn rain.

I grab my hockey bag from the passenger seat, throw it over my shoulder and head inside.

"I'm home!" I yell as soon as I open the door. I kick my sneakers off and quickly haul my bag up the stairs to my room before Mom has a chance to lecture me again about the rancid smell.

After dropping my bag on the floor, I shut my door and plopped myself down on my twin bed. My long frame makes it nearly impossible for me to keep my feet on the narrow bed as they dangle almost comically off the edge of the frame.

I look up at the door when Mom knocks, catching her as she leans against the frame.

"Hey, sweetheart. How was it?"

My mom looks exceptionally young for her age. Maybe it has something to do with how she always has her

short blonde hair done up, or maybe it's how her crystal blue eyes haven't lost their sparkle, even after all of these years.

I got most of my features from my dad. From the dark brown hair that swooped at the back of his neck, his never-dulling green eyes, and especially his towering height, we could have been twins.

"It was alright. It was sad to say goodbye, but I'll be okay," I admit. "I have to stop by the arena this week to pick up the rest of my stuff before I leave on Friday." I don't mention the party Andre refuses to let me skip because knowing her, she'll push me to go harder than Andre himself.

My supposed going away party is on Thursday night—despite my adamant protests. Hockey parties have never been my thing, especially since I became Captain. I always end up dealing with a bunch of girls who only take an interest in me so they can tell all their friends they slept with Oakley Hutton, Captain of the Storm. I'm not saying that I haven't given in a few times. Admittedly, I'm no saint. I just don't want my last night with my team to be such a clusterfuck of drunken mistakes.

"I would be worried if you weren't the least bit sad, honey. But you should be excited; you're so close to your dreams." She sits down on the edge of my bed and gives me one of her famous Anne Hutton smiles, her blue eyes bright. "I am so proud of you. I know your father would be too."

Mom always has a way of smiling and lifting people's spirits. Dad always called it her superpower. I didn't understand how a smile could be someone's superpower until after he died. Her smile was one of the only things that got me through it all. So, I guess that really does make her a superhero.

Our superhero, at least.

I sit up to look at her properly. "I *am* excited. What about you guys? Will you be okay? I'll try to come home as often as I can." My promise is evident in my words—even though I'm not sure I can keep it. My new schedule is going to

be crazy, but I would do anything for my family. I know that for sure.

Mom clucks her tongue against the roof of her mouth and shakes her head. “You need to stop worrying about your sister and me. You’re going to get grey hairs before you make it to twenty-one. We will be *fine*. You go and find yourself someone of your own to take care of.”

I chuckle, “Sure, Mom, I’ll get right on that.”

I’ve never actually brought a girl home before. Not as my girlfriend, at least. I’ve never had the time. My life is crazy enough without adding a girl into the mix.

“Good! It’s about time you finally bring a girl home. I’m getting old here!” She leans over to kiss my head before making her way to the door. “Anyways, I know you’re probably tired, but there are leftovers in the fridge if you’re hungry. Goodnight, I love you.” She leaves my room, shutting the door gently.

“Night, Mom, I love you too,” I speak into the now quiet room.



Friday morning comes quicker than expected. My going away party was shockingly a lot of fun despite my previous reservations. Andre kept the guest list pretty small and I successfully managed to stay away from the possibly awkward morning encounters. Saying goodbye to the team afterwards, on the other hand—not so easy.

When I first joined the team, I used to act like I single-handedly hung the moon. And yeah, I had the skill to back it up, but my attitude cost us way too many games.

Coach was the one who knocked me down a few pegs. I learned the hard way that being the best on the ice doesn’t mean anything if you don’t have the team’s respect behind you. That realization was why I worked my ass off in the

second half of my first season to do exactly that. Then, during my second season, I earned the privilege of having the beloved C on my jersey.

I can happily admit that all the work was worth it considering I just came out of this season as the number one goal-scorer in the Junior league.

I load the last box into my truck's bed as Mom comes outside to say goodbye.

"I wish I could be coming with you, but you know I have to work." Her eyes shine with unshed tears, and the sad smile tugging on her usual red lips makes me want to unpack and stay here, but I can't.

"I know you would if you could, Mom. But I'm a big boy. I'm sure I can handle it," I say, trying to lighten the mood before the waterworks start. Suddenly the front door slams shut. I whip my head up to see Gracie come running down the steps like a complete lunatic in her pyjamas.

"Why didn't anybody wake me up?" she scolds, rolling her eyes. I let out a loud laugh at the sight in front of me. Gracie has her hands on her hips and her eyebrows raised, trying to be intimidating. I laugh again, and her scowl deepens.

Gracie ended up looking just like Mom—blonde-haired and blue-eyed. If you didn't already know we were siblings, chances are you wouldn't even be able to tell.

"I did wake you up, sleepyhead. Three times. You kept going back to sleep after saying something about a boy band?"

Her whole face lights up as she no doubt recalls her dream. "Oh! Well, I can't say I'm sorry. You don't wake somebody up from a good dream. It wouldn't have been worth it for me. No offence," she shrugs.

I fake a laugh as reality sets back in. I let out a deep sigh, "I hate to be a downer, but I gotta go. I'm meeting my new coach at twelve, and if I don't leave now, I won't make it." I take a final look around at our quiet neighbourhood and smile at the two women in front of me. "I will be back as soon as I can. I promise."

Mom is the first one to reach out and hug me. “Drive safe,” she murmurs, squeezing me so tight that she practically cuts off my circulation. “And let me know when you get there. Have fun. I love you.” She slowly pulls away and makes room for Gracie.

“Bye, big bro. I already miss you driving me wherever I wanna go,” Gracie laughs as she wraps her arms around my waist and sets her head on my chest. “I’m joking. But I will miss you. Love you.”

“Goodbye, you little shit. Don’t give Mom too much trouble, please. Love you too.” I return her hug and plant a kiss on the top of her head. Turning around and heading to the driver’s side of my truck, I give them both a wave before I get in, start it up, and head for the highway.

Goodbye Penticton, Hello Vancouver.

THREE

OCTAVIA

“Ava, get your ass moving! The game starts in an hour!” Morgan yells, pounding on my bedroom door.

As I finish getting ready, I do a quick once over in my full-length mirror. Although I can't say that my black hoodie plastered with the ugly Saints logo and ripped skinny jeans are going to drop jaws, I'm damn comfy. I scrape my long dark brown hair up into a high ponytail with a sigh.

Morgan and I live together in a small two-bedroom apartment about fifteen minutes away from our Vancouver University. It isn't anything special, but it's enough for us.

The kitchen has a small island with light granite countertops to go with the light wood cabinets and stainless-steel appliances. The living room is on the opposite side of the room, lit up by the sunlight that barrels through our floor to ceiling windows.

Morgan waits for me on the couch, scrolling through her new iPhone and probably gushing to her boyfriend, Matthew, about how excited she is to watch him play tonight.

Her platinum blonde hair is curled loosely, sitting just below her shoulders, and her long, thick eyelashes cover her blue eyes.

Since Morgan's boyfriend is the starting goalie for the Vancouver Saints hockey team, I, *unfortunately*, end up getting dragged to every single game. And as much I enjoy hockey, sometimes a girl just wants to sit at home in her bed.

“Are we leaving or what? I've been waiting forever for you,” I tease, heading towards the front door.

“Shut up.” Rolling her eyes, she gets up off the couch.

As we get inside her Jeep, she looks over and gives me a hopeful smile.

“We’re all going out after the game tonight since it’s the first game of the season and all. You’re coming, right? It won’t be the same without you. Plus I heard the new guy will probably be there.”

Ah yes, the infamous Oakley Hutton. Rumours have been flying around campus about the city’s new hockey God since he moved here a couple of months ago. For a guy most people haven’t seen before, he sure has quite the fan base already.

“I haven’t met him yet, but Matt says he’s amazing on the ice. He came from Penticton or something.”

“If Oakley’s anything like the other guys on the team, I’m going to have to pass on that one. You got the only decent one. As for the party, I guess I’ll come. Oh, the things I do for you,” I snicker as we head off towards the arena.

Once we find an empty parking stall outside of the rink a short twenty minutes later, I start to prepare myself for the screaming crowds of fans and the constant groups of girls that are going to be lingering around, searching for their next hormone-driven victim.

Puck bunnies.

The desperate, excitable group of girls that only want to hook up with a guy because he plays hockey. What beautiful, exquisite, feminist creatures they are. *Not*.

Having spent the past few years being hauled to game after game, tournament after tournament, you learn to keep away from the locker rooms directly afterwards unless the smell of lust and clouds of expensive perfumes is what you crave.

As soon as we get through the doors, I can barely hear anything Morgan says past all of the “Let’s go Saints!” chants

and other screams that I try and tune out. I end up ducking my head and let her pull me through the crowds to our seats.



There are twelve minutes to go in the second period and the Saints are up by a score of three to two. When an arrogant defenseman from the opposing team illegally cross-checks Braden Lowry, our defenseman, I notice Number Eleven, Oakley Hutton, for the first time.

I watch anxiously as he skates over and grabs the back of the player's jersey before forcefully spinning him around. Oakley drops his gloves and sends a hard-right hook straight to the defenseman's jaw. Before the poor guy can get a hit in, Oakley is throwing another punch, this time at his opponent's abdomen.

He continues his brutal beat down, his lips moving as he says something to the losing instigator. I can't help but notice just how tall Oakley is as he towers over his opponent on the ice. I can't get a good view with all of his hockey gear in the way, but by the strength of the hits and the fact the Eagle's player is now being carried off the ice towards the dressing room, I get the feeling he does not lack in the muscle department either.

I feel someone lightly jab me in the side and see Morgan leaning towards my ear. "That's the new guy I was telling you about! Boy sure knows how to fight." She stares at me with a playful glimmer in her eyes before her features tighten up in anger. "What the hell? He's being ejected from the game!"

I jerk my head forward and am immediately met with a pair of raging green eyes. His eyebrows are deeply furrowed, mouth is in a tight line as he furiously stalks down the hallway towards the dressing room. My eyes are locked on his until he disappears from view, leaving my mouth unbelievably dry. He's pissed about the referee's call; no surprise there. We all are.

“Do you two know each other or something?”

Glancing over at Morgan, I roll my eyes as she wiggles her eyebrows suggestively. “Don’t even start. He’ll be lucky if he doesn’t get suspended for that,” I state matter-of-factly and try to shake the last few minutes out of my memory. “Any chance you can go without me tonight?” *Please say yes.*

Morgan lets out an exasperated sigh, “You’re joking, right? They so deserved it. And no way. You’re coming. It’s about time you got back on the horse again.” I feel my muscles tense up at her words, causing the hair on my arms to rise. “David was a total prick. He’s been out of the picture for a year now. You can’t let what happened keep you from trying again,” she finishes with a sympathetic look. I know she wants to help, but it isn’t that easy.

David was my high school boyfriend, although our relationship carried into my University experience as well. We dated for three years, and let’s just say we didn’t exactly have the cleanest breakup.

“Do you ever think maybe it isn’t even David keeping me from a relationship? What if I just want to focus on school? Why do I have to have a guy in my life? Let alone another hockey player who doesn’t even know who I am,” I snap. “Just because you got lucky with Matthew doesn’t mean that I want what you have.”

She flinches back at my harsh tone, and I let out a loud sigh, reluctantly deciding to suck it up for one night.

“But for you, and *only* you, I will go. But only for an hour. Then I’m leaving. Got it?”

“Okay, okay. I got it. I’m sorry, babe.” She reaches over, squeezing my hand.

FOUR

OCTAVIA

Morgan and I are the first to arrive at Lucy's Diner after the game, and I can whole-heartedly go for a strawberry milkshake. Maybe even with a little something extra in it to get me through this dinner with Mr. Hotshot-Fighter.

I take in the immediate aroma of greasy burgers and coffee, and my stomach growls as soon as we walk in. This place has been my favourite diner since my dad started bringing me here every Friday night after my adoption. We would sit in a booth for hours, talking about everything from what homework I had to what the new drama was in school. I miss those days.

Everything was so much easier back then.

We find a teal blue booth resting in front of a big window and slide in while we wait for everyone else.

"Matthew texted. He just pulled up outside with Adam and Tyler!" Morgan shouts excitedly about ten minutes later while anxiously staring at the door. That guy always seems to turn her into a giddy schoolgirl.

Adam and Tyler are probably the only other two players on the Saints that I would consider my friends. While Adam and I are close, I can't say the same about Tyler and me. Not due to lack of trying on my part either. He's just a much tougher nut to crack than Adam.

Just as I open my mouth to reply, I hear the bell ring on the diner door and see the three guys walk in.

Confidence oozes off of them as they make their way to our table. All three are sporting slightly damp hair and fancy suits, courtesy of well-needed showers and their game-day uniforms. Adam stands the tallest, at his six-foot-two height, followed by Tyler, and then Matt.

When they reach our table, I look up at them slyly. “Bout time you boys showed up. You should know it’s never nice to keep people waiting.”

Adam sits in the booth beside me with a smirk on his face and slings his left arm around me, giving me a quick side hug.

“Funny, we didn’t know that we were keeping anyone waiting. Did you, Tyler?”

“Can’t say that I did,” Tyler mutters and sits in the seat beside Adam.

Rolling my eyes, I turn my attention to Matthew as he slides in beside Morgan and kisses her head while sliding his arm around the back of the booth. “Hey, babe.”

She grins, locking her crystal blue eyes with his darker ones. “Hey, Matt. You boys were awesome tonight! Where’s your fighter?” she asks, kicking my foot under the table.

I glare at her as Tyler turns around and jerks his head towards the door. “Walking in as we speak.”

The familiar striking green eyes catch my attention first, the depth of them sending me reeling backwards. A seemingly unknown, unfamiliar emotion pours out from behind the glassy gaze.

Realizing that I’m openly staring into Oakley’s newly vacant eyes, I force a cough and tear my own away before letting them follow the sharp lines of his jaw.

I’m shamefully mesmerized by the beauty of the powerful, chiselled features. From his slightly crooked nose to his plump lips, he looks like God himself carved him. *Cliche, I know.*

The endless sleeves of black tattoos covering his forearms catch my attention next as he reaches up to the baseball cap covering his ashy brown hair. He removes it only to run his fingers through the messy locks before slapping it back on, his biceps flexing. I was right earlier when I guessed he was ripped. As I watch him walk towards the table, my

mouth dries, a sudden need to see what he's hiding beneath his white dress shirt completely overwhelming me—

I force myself to stop gawking at him and look around the room. I try to focus on anything but the guy who just so happens to be staring at me with a playful smirk resting on his lips—my cheeks flame when he reaches our table.

“You can have the window seat, Oakley. I prefer the middle seat anyway,” I hear Morgan insist as she shoves Matthew out of the booth before getting out after him, motioning for Oakley to slide into her previous seat. I plaster a tight smile on my face and mentally plan her slow and all so painful death while she slips back in the booth.

“Do you always check out guys like that, or was that just for me?” I hear a raspy voice whisper. My head snaps up in the direction of the voice only to see Oakley leaning across the table.

“I would say just you, but that would be a lie,” I declare with as much fake confidence as I can muster up and push myself further into the seat.

He chuckles, “You gonna tell me your name, or do I have to ask your friend?”

“Octavia!” Morgan practically shrieks. “Her name is Octavia.”

“It's Ava, actually,” I correct her, trying to look as bored from the conversation as possible. “I already know yours. You seem to have a special way of introducing yourself to everyone, Oakley.”

“It needed to be done. I just happened to be the guy to take care of it.” He simply shrugs—as if beating the crap out of a total stranger is normal. Although, for him, I guess it is. “That team is a bunch of little bitches, anyways.”

He drops the topic and turns his attention to the menu in front of him. Is it just me, or does the famous hockey star not like talking about himself?

“I can't believe you got ejected, bro. That team was playing dirty all night. Even Coach agreed they had it coming.

How are the knuckles?” Matthew puts in, grinning widely.

I let my eyes wander to the hands holding his menu and notice his right hand is wrapped tightly in a white bandage.

“Hurt like a bitch,” he cringes before Matt speaks again.

“I have one question, though. What did the guy say to you out there? None of us could hear.”

Oakley sits silently for a few seconds before shrugging. “Just some bullshit about the team.” He clears his throat and swiftly changes the subject. “Who’s hungry? I know I am.”

As if on cue, the waitress finally tends to our table. She looks to be around our age. She flips her shoulder-length, brassy hair over her shoulder and eyes us warily. She pushes a strand behind her ear nervously, her cheeks pink. It’s not hard to tell she’s nervous—presumably because of the gorgeous male specimens waiting to order. Can I blame her? Absolutely not.

“Hi! I’m Jenny and I’ll be taking care of you tonight. What can I get you?” she asks, her pen floating over her notepad.

“I’ll have a vanilla milkshake, a cheeseburger, and an order of curly fries, please. Thank you,” Oakley speaks kindly, although he doesn’t look up from his menu. I didn’t think he noticed me gawking at him until I hear him chuckle under his breath.

The waitress raises her eyebrows at me expectantly, but Adam orders for me before I can fumble together a coherent sentence.

“Two strawberry milkshakes, a double cheeseburger, and two orders of fries. Thank you.”

I smile at him. “You remembered.”

“Of course, beautiful,” he grins and rests his arm around my shoulders again. I catch Morgan’s raised brows and shrug slightly. She stares at Adam and me, seemingly bemused

by the odd show of affection. I tilt my head and look across to Oakley. He watches us curiously, but he looks away as soon as I catch him.

The tension dissipates when our food arrives. It even sparks an argument about onions of all things.

“I’m just saying, onions are disgusting. There’s something seriously wrong with anyone who enjoys them,” Oakley says, shrinking away from the onion I’m dangling in his face.

“Well, I happen to love them.”

“I should have known. Now I get it,” he teases, winking flirtatiously. I feel my face turn red and immediately look down at my lap, hoping that he doesn’t pick up on my embarrassment.



Morgan links her arm in mine as we leave the diner an hour or two later. She shoots me a smug look, winking before sending a nervous pang to my stomach.

“Hey, Ava!” she shouts. “I have to drive the guys to the gym. Oakley, would you be able to give her a ride home for me? I won’t have enough room in my car.”

Why am I not surprised? Morgan *would* pull something like this. Going to the gym? At eleven o’clock at night?

“I don’t have to go. I can walk home,” Adam shrugs. “You’ll have enough seats then, right?”

Morgan immediately narrows her eyes on Adam’s stoic expression, silencing him.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Oakley insists, to Morgan’s delight—and my not-so-well hidden dismay.

“Thank you, Oakley,” she says through gritted teeth, squeezing my arm way too tight.

“We’ll see you guys later then.” Oakley eyes me curiously before offering me a comforting smile when I continue to avoid eye contact. “Thanks for the invite. See you at training tomorrow, Matt.” He waves at the rest of the group, then gestures to a white pick-up truck parked a few feet away.

More confused than ever, I raise my eyebrows questioningly at Morgan. She rolls her eyes in response and blows me a kiss.

Oakley waits by the passenger door of his truck once I choose to join him. “You know I can open my own door, right? I have two working arms.” I wave my arms around to emphasize my point.

“Oh, I have no doubt. But unless you feel like trying to jump in, you should let me help you,” he laughs lightly.

Without warning, he grabs my waist, forcing a gasp to escape my previously closed lips. With what seems like no effort at all, he lifts me and places me neatly in the truck’s cab.

“Lucky for you my mom taught me always to help a beautiful girl in need,” he flirts confidently before heading to his door.

Pity that she didn’t tell him flattery won’t get him very far. Not with me, at least.

“So, you’re from Penticton?” I ask a few minutes later when the silence becomes too much in the tight confines of the truck.

He looks over from his seat and smiles. “Yep, born and raised. Have you always lived in Vancouver?”

“Yes, but I don’t plan on staying once I finish school. I can’t stand this rain.” I look away, choosing to study the large water droplets on the windshield instead.

“I get it. I don’t want to stay here either. I want to go somewhere warm. So, tell me something,” he adds, clearing his throat.

I force a laugh and shrug. “That’s vague.”

“Okay then. What’s your lifelong dream? Your big goal?” he asks, and my eyebrows shoot up in surprise. Diving right in, are we?

“Social Work,” I reply without hesitation. “That’s the dream, anyway.” I wait nervously for his response as his gaze remains locked on the winding road in front of us.

“Beautiful *and* kind.”

“Smooth,” I tease. *Real smooth.*

“Do you want to go somewhere with me?” he mumbles, his eyebrows furrowed as if he’s thinking hard about something. It’s questions like this that made me wish I could read minds. Unfortunately, though, I lack that superpower.

“Promise me this isn’t a part of your secret plan to kidnap me? I’m way too young to die,” I murmur playfully, a smile playing on my lips.

He holds his pinky out to me. “Pinky promise.”

I lock my finger with his and meet his eyes. “Then what are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

FIVE

OAKLEY

There's something special about Ava that I can't quite put my finger on. Not only is she drop-dead gorgeous, but there's something about her that I want to know more about. Something I *need* to know more about. From the moment I saw her in the stands at the game, she intrigued me.

Right, the game. The game tonight did not turn out how I wanted it to.

When I saw Braden get hit from behind, I was pissed. Nobody hits my guys like that and gets away with it. But I was only going to shove the little shit who hit him around a bit to teach him some manners. Then he started running his dirty mouth about my sister—my fucking sister of all people. He got a lot more than he was expecting but not nearly as much as he deserved. However, it didn't look great on my part. The fact that I was the only person on the ice that could hear his vile comments didn't overly help my case.

I peer over and see Ava's head resting on her left palm, eyes closed with her elbow leaning on the armrest that separates us.

"I hope that you're still awake. We're pulling up," I say gently, desperately trying to keep my focus on the gravel road ahead of me. I quickly park the truck in the only acceptable parking space and scope out the familiar area.

"A river?" she asks, confused. I look away when she starts to stretch. She eyes the wooded clearing suspiciously. "I'm not skinny dipping with you," she adds, and I laugh.

I reach into the back seat and grab the heavy woollen blanket I carry with me.

"I found it a couple of days after I moved here. It's a perfect place to think when I'm not spending all of my time

shoving guys into the end boards and shooting pucks around.” Since I moved here, I think I’ve been here almost every day. The quiet reminds me of home.

“Well, should we sit down?” She smiles up at me and I give her a slight nod. I lay the blanket down on the mossy, damp grass. Why is everything in Vancouver always so *damp*?

“It’s your turn to tell me something about yourself,” she adds a few seconds later.

We both plop down on the slightly scratchy material, and I have to force myself to ignore the tingling sensation that runs up my arm when it brushes against hers.

“What do you want to know? I’m an open book.”

“What’s your favourite food?”

Starting easy, I like it.

“Anything Italian. My mom makes the best Italian food in the world. What’s yours?”

“Mmmm, probably going to have to go with popcorn,” she answers with a proud grin.

“Popcorn? Talk about boring.” I send her a wink and watch as her cheeks turn the light shade of pink that I’ve noticed a few times tonight.

“You wound me, Oakley!” she gasps, bringing her hand up to rest against her heart as if I hurt her feelings while a loud laugh breaks through her smile. There’s that sound again, the intoxicating sound of Ava’s contagious laughter.

“It’s your turn to ask.”

“Right,” I cough. “How long have you and Morgan been best friends? Matthew talks about her all the time. The dude is completely obsessed with her.”

She starts picking the black nail polish off her fingernails as she answers, “About five years. We went to high school together.”

I sit patiently as she smiles to herself before continuing, “She’s really in love with the guy, so I’m glad to

hear that it goes both ways. In all honesty, I was quite worried in the beginning. No offence, but I'm sure we can both agree that athletes have a certain way with people—women especially.” She punches my shoulder lightly.

“Sounds like you have some experience in that department. With athletes, I mean.”

Does she? From the slight change in tone, I'm guessing it wasn't a pleasant experience.

“Not all of us are the same. Just most of us.” I flash her a goofy grin.

Honestly, most of us *are* the same. But for some reason, I just don't want her to think that I'm like the rest of them.

“Yeah, he plays on your team. David Remer,” she spits, as if the mere thought of him burns her tongue.

Hearing David's name doesn't surprise me. Remer is a first-class douche canoe, but there is something else there. I can tell by how quiet she's getting.

“Yeah, I know him.” *Unfortunately*. The guy is a pylon. “What happened? If you don't want to tell me, you don't have to, but I hear I'm a pretty decent listener.” I lean back on my hands and raise my eyebrows.

“I was just young and stupid,” she replies shortly, staring at the blanket's red plaid pattern.

“Want me to kick his ass?”

The confident question earns me a giggle as she brings her eyes back up to meet mine.

“No, I'm a big girl. I can fight my own battles, but thank you.”

She holds my eyes captive in hers. Staring into her eyes is proving to be dangerously addictive. I feel myself starting to inch forward, getting closer to her. *Snap out of it*, I tell myself sharply. Luckily, it's Ava who breaks eye contact with a shrug as she changes the subject.

“I’ve been wondering something ever since I heard you joined the team.”

My interest sparks at her words, a smirk spreading across my lips. “Keeping tabs on me, hey?”

Her cheeks flush once more as she tries to hide her obvious embarrassment. “It’s hard not to when the entire campus is gossiping about the new hockey star in town.”

“What is it you’ve been wondering about, Octavia? Ask away.”

Her arm brushes mine once again as she places her hands behind her. She cocks her head to the side and stares at me through narrowed eyes. “Why Vancouver? I’m sure you had much better offers than our crap team. We haven’t won a championship in... I’m not even sure how long.”

My body tenses. Her question is causing a familiar ache to reappear deep in my chest. It’s far too personal.

“I just wanted to stay close to my family. That’s all,” I push, my words sounding vague and dull. She nods, her eyes comforting as they melt away one of the many walls I’ve just put up.

“How long have you been playing? You’re really talented.”

“Since I was five. So, fifteen years. I can’t say I plan on stopping anytime soon, either.”

“So that’s the dream then? Going professional?” she asks.

“Yes, gotta make my momma proud.” I’m sure my chest puffs out a little as I say that. I do everything for my mom.

“I think she’s already proud of you,” Ava says casually as if it is the most obvious thing in the world. With a small burst of confidence, I reach for her hand. Without looking at her, I lace our fingers together while laying them on my thigh. I can feel my own face getting warm.

I swore I wouldn't let anything or anybody distract me from making this year all about hockey, but I can't find it in myself to care at this very moment. Not when this girl is smiling at me the way she is.

SIX

OAKLEY

I groan as my alarm pulls me out of my dream and back into reality. Reaching my arm out to my nightstand, I root around until I find my phone. Grasping it between my calloused fingers, I swipe across the screen until the buzzing stops.

All I want to do is stay in my warm, cozy bed and sleep all damn day, but I know if I bail on Matt at the gym I'll be in for a long practice tonight filled with complaining, and I am not in the mood for that today. I'd had it all week since game night—the night I met Ava.

We stayed awake far into the morning, watching the sunrise above the crystal-clear river, both of us never running out of things to say. It wasn't until I started to notice Ava falling asleep against my shoulder that I decided I should probably get her home before she passed out on me. We haven't seen each other since then.

Maybe I would have texted her had I thought to get her number. It wouldn't have been challenging to get it either, considering our coinciding friendships; but an extremely irritating voice in my mind is holding me back.

I shake my head as if to clear it as I drag my lazy ass out of bed. I have too much going on right now to be sitting around worrying about girls, especially this early in the hockey season.

The tiles lining my bathroom floor are cold under my bare feet as I head to the tub and turn the shower on. The water sputters out of the rusted showerhead as I let it heat up. I scratch at the stubble on my chin that I've been way too lazy to shave as of late. I know full well the minute my mother sees

me, she'll shove me into the bathroom to get rid of it. That reminds me, I should call her.

Once I'm out of the shower, I throw on the closest clothes and slip my sneakers on before heading out the door. To my relief, Mom picks up on the third ring as I climb inside my truck.

"Good morning, sweetheart! How are you doing? You're still coming home next weekend, right?"

How she manages to be this high energy in the morning is beyond me. I guess it's a mom thing.

"Morning, Mom. I'm good. A little tired, but what's new there? Yes, I'm still coming. Is Gracie excited for her first solo routine?"

Gracie has been doing ballet since she was seven. The first round of competitions this year starts on Saturday, and she has her first-ever solo performance. It's all I have been hearing about during our phone calls for the past month. I wouldn't miss it. I would never hear the end of it if I did.

"That's right, you have never really been a morning person," she laughs. Only now do I realize how much I missed hearing her laugh. "I don't think she can be more excited. It means the world to her that you will be here, honey."

I pull my seatbelt over my shoulder before clicking it in place and starting my truck. "I wouldn't miss it. I have to go, though—early morning gym session with the guys. I'll see you on Saturday morning."

"Good luck in your next game, Oakley. Drive safe. I love you."

"Always do. Love you too, Mom. Bye." I hang up the phone and mentally prepare myself for this gruelling workout I am being forced into.

"About time, bro. I was starting to think you were bailing on me. Hurry up I need a spotter!" Matt shouts the minute I walk through the intimidating doors of our team's training facility.

“Dude, there are four other guys here that can spot you.” I shake my head but make my way over to the weight bench all the same. “Come on then. I don’t have all day.”

As I take my spot behind him and grab onto the weight bar, I decide now is a good time as ever to ask him more about Ava.

“How well do you know Ava?” I attempt to ask casually.

He gives me a pointed look from the weight-bench before settling back in his position and finishing his reps. “Be careful with her, man. Morgan would have my balls if I let any of the guys fuck around with her again.” *Fuck around with her?*

“What do you mean? Is this about that Remer guy?”

“It’s not my story to tell. Just be careful, Lee. She’s a sweet girl,” Matt insists, his affection for Ava clear in his serious expression. “She’s been through way more than anyone should have to go through.”

“Gotta say though, I was shocked to see her giving you any attention the other night,” he continues as he finishes up another set. He hands the weight off to me and sits up. “How *did* it go, by the way? Morgan said she didn’t hear Ava get back until really late, and you haven’t brought it up.”

How was it? We don’t have the time to talk about how great it went.

I set the weight bar down in its resting place.

“Gee, thanks. You really know how to crush a guy’s ego,” I roll my eyes. “It was good. We just hung out and talked. She’s great. Super down to earth and an awesome listener.” Beautiful and crazily intelligent too. “I think I want to hang out with her again. I just don’t know if I can make that kind of commitment yet. With hockey and my family.”

“There’s nothing wrong with hanging out with her again. You can always be friends. Invite her to the game on Monday,” he shrugs, the corners of his lips twitching as though he’s trying not to grin.

“Yeah, I guess. Do you have her number? I forgot to ask for it.”

“You forgot to ask for a girl’s number? She had you out of it, hey?” he laughs loudly as we make our way over to the treadmills.

“Yeah, yeah, shut up. Just give me the damn number.”

“Just don’t make me regret this, dude.” He pulls out his phone and I copy Ava’s number into my own quickly.

“Yeah, yeah. Enough girl talk. Start running,” I tell him and reach over to turn the speed on his treadmill up.



When we make our way back into the beating sunlight, a familiar white Jeep waiting in the gym parking lot catches my eye.

“Couldn’t even drive yourself here this morning, buddy?” I tease, my eyebrows raised as I watch Matt hold back his grin.

“If I did, then I wouldn’t have been able to make this work,” he smirks, pointing to the brown-haired girl being dragged around the front of the Jeep by a very forceful Morgan.

“Was this your idea or hers?” I turn to raise an eyebrow questioningly at him. He shrugs in response, but the smirk on his lips gives me the answer I want. He definitely did this. For someone who warned me not to date Ava, he sure is keen on getting us to spend time together.

I watch as Ava says something to Morgan. It’s easy to tell that she wasn’t expecting to be dragged here as she tries to plant her feet to the cement in hopes of halting her involuntary movements.

Matt is the first to speak up when they come into earshot. “About time, baby. I was worried you got lost or something.”

My attention hasn't moved away from Ava as she finally brings her eyes to mine, a shy smile on her face. I offer a nervous grin of my own and shove my hands in my hoodie pocket. I'm not used to being nervous around girls, clearly. It's nearly embarrassing.

"We would have been here sooner if it wasn't for Ms. 'I 'm-not-leaving-the-house' over here,'" Morgan huffs and drops Ava's arm. She walks past me and over to Matt, his arm wrapping around her shoulder instantly. How can two people possibly be so comfortable together? It blows my mind every time I see them together.

"Always a pleasure, Morgan," I tell her, my voice dripping in sarcasm. "It's good to see you again, Ava," I add, my grin returning. My heart contracts when her eyes light up and she smiles reluctantly.

"You too, Jeff."

What? Who the hell is Jeff?

Matt sputters a laugh, not being able to hide his amusement as she tears down every inch of my confidence with three simple words. I'm sure my face is priceless as I continue to stare at her now, open-mouthed and confused.

"Relax, Oakley. I'm just playing," she smirks, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

The two onlookers laugh loudly at Ava's attempt to rile me, and I can't help but be impressed with her. Not to mention weirdly attracted to her surprisingly cheeky attitude.

I immediately return her mischievous smirk and shrug. "Ha-ha, very funny. You can't tell me that I look like a Jeff, can you? Jeff sounds like a football player's name. Not a hockey player's name."

"Maybe I'm into football players," she shoots back, her head tilted slightly.

My ego gets the best of me as I take a bold step towards her. "You ready to prove it, beautiful?"

Morgan detaches herself from Matt and responds before Ava can even open her mouth. “Okay, Casanova. Save it for after the game tomorrow.”

“You guys are coming to the after-party then?” I ask, hopeful.

“Clearly,” Morgan scoffs.

“I don’t really have a choice in the matter,” Ava murmurs, her eyes darting anxiously between Morgan and me.

“Say goodbye to your boyfriend, Matt. We’ll be waiting in the car.” With a suspicious glance in my direction, Morgan takes Ava’s hand and leads her over to the waiting car.

I nod my head at Ava when she looks over her shoulder at me and Matt. She gives me one more small smile and jumps into the car with Morgan.

Matt, grinning over at me like a complete fool, pats my shoulder. “You think you can handle waiting until tomorrow, buddy?”

Chuckling, I shake my head and clap a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll see you, man. Thanks for that. I guess I didn’t need you to give me her number after all.”

“You got that right. See ya, dude.”

SEVEN

OAKLEY

The locker room is buzzing.

It's our first game of the season against the Kelowna Wolves. And although I've never played against them, it's common knowledge that they are our biggest rival—making this game one of the most important this season.

I need to show our team and the opposing team that I'm a better hockey player than they think I am. Just because I'm not Captain of this team—yet—doesn't mean I don't have to play my best.

As I finish putting on all my gear and tie the last knot in my skates, Coach walks in and yells for everyone's attention.

“Tonight is big, you all know that. We need to show those guys that we're coming out hot this season. Got it? We might have lost our Captain, but that doesn't mean that we're at a disadvantage. We have the number one goal scorer in the league.”

I stare down at my skates as Coach turns his attention to me.

“Lowry and Brown keep Oakley clear. They're going to be on him all night. Stay focused and keep it clean. Don't fall for their bait. Beat them on the scoreboard, not in the penalty box. Now go kick some Wolf ass.”

The team erupts into cheers and howls of excitement. Matt shoots a smug grin at me through the crowd as we head out of the dressing room.

“You good, buddy?” he asks, bumping my shoulder with his glove.

“Good as ever. You? We need you on your A-game tonight.”

“Don’t worry about me,” he replies confidently and falls in line behind me.

There is nothing that can hype you up more than skating out onto the ice and hearing your name and number being called into a full arena. It’s one of those surreal moments where you want to take a minute just to stand and soak it all in. But you never can. There’s never the time to.

As I finish my final warm-up lap, I see Ava sitting in the front row, her lips spread into a wide grin as her eyes closely follow my movements.

Having a beautiful girl smiling at me in the stands while sporting my team’s jersey is the shit that I live for. I send her a flashy wink and bump my shoulder against the glass as I skate by. That damn smile is branded in my mind as I head for the centerline.

Getting in position to take the first faceoff of the game, I look over at the two wingers beside me, Tyler and Adam, and give them both a head nod. My heart pounds as the ref drops the puck on the ice.



With thirteen minutes left to go in the game, we’re tied with three points each. Our team is exhausted from playing defence most of the game—thanks to our hot-headed defensemen not taking an ounce of smack talk from the opposing team.

It also doesn’t help that I’ve spent most of my remaining energy manoeuvring around their killer blueliners while slapping pucks at their goalie whenever I have a chance.

My helmet knocks against the boards when a defenseman hits my shoulder. A hiss of pain escapes my lips,

and I regain my balance, shaking off the ache in my shoulder. I turn and give my missing cover man a death glare.

“Fuck sake, Braden,” I growl under my breath.

I see Matt in front of me as he stops the puck behind his net and gets ready to pass it off. I slap my stick against the ice to let him know that I’m open. Doing a lap around him, I start skating back towards our zone.

He passes it off to me swiftly before the other center reaches him. As soon as I hear it clap against my stick’s blade, I push off my feet. I only make it a few feet ahead before another Wolves defenseman heads straight in my direction.

Fortunately, this time Braden does his job and watches my back. He throws his body against the player—*hard*.

I skate past the pair and run straight into the second defenseman. Spinning around, I move around them and sneak a quick look behind me to see Braden lose his edge on his player.

It’s now or never. I wind up and slap the puck hard, successfully sending it five-hole. The red lamp goes off and my teammates immediately tackle me in a fit of hugs and punches.

After a few pats on the back, I head back to the bench and sit down beside Adam. I spot Ava and Morgan standing in their seats, cheering loudly. Both of them have a big white sign in hand. I read Ava’s sign and grin.

“GET THAT TOUCHDOWN JEFF”



Once I’m showered and dressed in my grey suit, I say my goodbyes. I leave the dressing room in hopes of getting out of the arena as fast as I can. Unfortunately, I don’t make it very far. I’m stopped by a crowd of under-dressed women waiting by the locker room for their next victim which apparently and unluckily, turns out to be me.

“Hey, Oakley! You did amazing tonight. Are you going to the after-party?” I hear a nasally voice ask. The culprit is a thin blonde with heavily drawn on eyebrows. I think her name is Amanda? I’m not sure.

“Don’t waste my time asking questions you already know the answer to, Amanda,” I say, making it clear I am not in the mood.

She moves out of the group and stalks towards me, swinging her hips from side to side. If only Andre were here, I could have easily handed her off to him and fled.

“Oh, Oakley. I knew that you would remember me.” The flirty remark makes my skin crawl, and I’m suddenly regretting using her name at all.

I tense my jaw, ready to reply with yet another one of my sarcastic remarks when a small arm wraps itself around my side. I automatically relax as I breathe in the intoxicating smell of Ava’s perfume.

“Hey, babe. Ready to go? Everyone’s waiting,” Ava sings, looking up at me with round green eyes. She runs her fingers up and down my chest, sending a shiver down my spine.

My mind blanks on whether I should whisper a simple thank you, or push her up against the wall to shield her when I see the Paris Hilton wanna be standing with her fists clenched tightly at her sides. If looks could kill, Ava would be six feet under right now.

“Yep, good to go. I guess I’ll see you *ladies*, later. Have a good night.” I grab Ava’s hand and drag her as far away from them as possible.

It’s still surprising that they never seem to understand that my answer will be the same every time they bombard me out here. *No thanks.*

“Thank you. You have no idea how uncomfortable they make me.”

“No worries. I figured you probably got swarmed. Being the star of the night and all.” She nudges me with her

arm and giggles.

I smile and let her lead the way out of the arena. “I had a reason to play well tonight. I loved the sign, by the way.” My smile turns into a grin when she flushes.

“Hurry up, Ava! We have to get ready!” Morgan yells, half hanging out the unrolled window of her Jeep.

“I’ll see you in a couple of hours, Mr. Hockey-God. Don’t miss me too much.” Ava sends me a teasing smile and gets in the car.

“Morgan told me to warn you not to fuck up tonight,” Matt says without preamble when I get into his car.

Can’t say I didn’t see that one coming. I would expect nothing less from Morgan.

“She doesn’t have to worry, man,” I say, and I mean it. Ava Layton, prepare to be wooed.

EIGHT

OCTAVIA

I run into the apartment and head straight for my cramped closet. The celebratory party tonight is being held at Adam's house. As usual, his parents aren't home. And while I guess it's great for the team, I can't help but feel for Adam. I know what it's like to be lonely, and I know he is. Whether he chooses ever to admit it or not.

Luckily, my constant need to prepare for everything has saved me from a night of flying clothes and frustrated groans. I thought ahead and planned my outfit before we left for the game.

I slip a black bralette over my head, the lacey material scratching my skin. I pull the off-the-shoulder, cropped shirt on and tug on high-waisted leather pants, which—according to Morgan—help accentuate whatever curves I have.

“Looking totally do-able, girl. Loverboy won't be able to keep his hot self off of you,” Morgan states happily, strolling into my room. I shrug her off and lace up my strappy heels. Now wouldn't that be something?

“Now c'mon. Tell me how I look.” Morgan does a twirl in front of me and I sigh. It's times like these that I am completely and utterly jealous of her.

She's wearing an oversized Metallica shirt with frayed shorts that show off her slim, tanned legs. Black thigh-highs and an oversized jean jacket finish the look.

“Do you even need my validation?” I raise a brow and watch her give herself another once over in the mirror.

“You're right. I know I look hot.”

Her confidence never ceases to amaze me.

“I need to do a shot before we leave,” I declare with a huff. Heading into the kitchen, I pour both of us a shot of Tequila.

“We’re all meeting at Adam’s. Do you still have clothes there or do you need to grab some?” Morgan asks. Usually, we all end up crashing in one of the spare rooms after a team party.

“I should have some still. If not I’ll just steal Adam’s. You ready?”

“I was born ready.” I lock the front door behind us with a grin and link arms with Morgan as we head downstairs to our Uber.



When we arrive, the music is so loud I can feel the bass pulsing in the soles of my feet through the concrete as soon as we step out of the car. I look up the winding driveway and feel my jaw slack. The sight of Adam’s parents’ mansion never fails to amaze me.

Floor to ceiling windows, tall, strong arches covering the exaggerated cobblestone walkway, and elaborate filled flower boxes that would make any florists mouth water. The house is a sight to see, that’s for sure.

Now my parent’s house is by no means *small*. It’s quite large compared to most homes, but they decided that they would rather spend their money on my brother and me rather than having a bunch of unnecessary valuables and decor. To each their own, I suppose.

We walk past the countless drunks who are already throwing up and stumbling around in the well-groomed bushes. The frat boys are playing beer pong on one of the large white tables scattered along the driveway, making me cringe.

“To the kitchen!” I yell over the music as we fight our way out of the sticky crowd. I have to force myself to keep

walking and not turn and run while I still have the chance. I always forget how much I dislike these parties until I'm dragged into one.

After an awful lot of struggling, we make it to the kitchen.

“Finally! I almost suffocated in that damn crowd. I need a drink.”

Morgan heads off to the drink table while I look around. I spot a grinning Adam leaning against the back wall and wave.

Of all people, it would be Adam that would wear a hoodie at least one size too small and cargo shorts to his own party.

His dark brown hair is hidden under a tight fitted baseball cap as his shining chocolate eyes light up when they meet mine.

Morgan hands me a cup full of what smells like a vodka drink as we head towards our friends. Matt greets his girlfriend by pulling her into him and whispering something in her ear, making her face turn bright red.

“Damn, sexy. What’s your name? Do I know you?” Adam asks with a smirk and trails his hand down my back. I roll my eyes but decide to go along with his little game.

“Oh, my God! Are you Adam White? *The* starting left-winger on the Saints? I just loved you in tonight’s game.” I twirl a lock of hair around my finger and his smirk turns into a grin. I reach out and grab his massive bicep, squeezing the hard muscles twice.

“You had me at the beginning. But no puck bunny would know that much about hockey. Solid effort, though, babe.” He pulls me in for a hug, and I lean into him without hesitation.

Adam’s hugs are the best hugs. I rest my head against his chest and wrap my arms around his waist with a quick squeeze.



An hour, five shots of tequila, and two rounds of beer pong later, we've managed to move out to the massive backyard.

Matthew and Morgan are lying together on a hammock strung from a large oak tree while Adam and I sit beside the house, arguing whether or not pineapple should be allowed on pizza. Adam scrunches up his nose and gags dramatically.

I nod my head fervently. "You can't honestly tell me that fruit belongs on pizza? With meat?" I scoff, "Tomatoes will forever be the only exception."

"That's because tomatoes go on everything, gorgeous," he snorts, leaning back on his hands and tilting his head.

"You don't always have to be right, you know?"

"What's the fun in being wrong?" he throws back, a smug grin growing on his lips.

My smile grows as I shake my head. "Always the smartass."

Adam doesn't respond; he's too busy glaring at something over my shoulder instead. I turn to look at whatever triggered his drastic mood-change and feel my face flush.

I trail my eyes up two very long legs and grin up at Oakley's chiselled features. A plain navy-blue t-shirt hugs his chest, leaving almost no muscle to the imagination. I stare, mouth hanging open rather unflatteringly.

I hear Adam mumble something about going to talk to one of his friends, the sharp tone of his voice taking me by surprise. When I turn around again to say goodbye, he's already halfway across the yard.

I shake it off and shift my attention back to Oakley as he stares intently down at me. I know I'm wearing a huge grin as I push myself off the damp grass and throw my arms around his neck.

If I didn't have an ample amount of alcohol in my system, there would be no way in hell I would jump on a guy that I barely know. Thankfully though, he responds almost immediately and wraps me in his arms. He holds me there against him before I can pull away and hide from overwhelming embarrassment. I step away from him after a few seconds and grin broadly.

“You came. I was starting to worry you stood me up.”

“Wouldn't dream of it. I got a call from my sister on the way here. I just had to take care of some stuff.”

“Is she okay? Nothing bad I hope.”

He shakes his head and grabs my hand, surprising me. “She has a new boyfriend. Surprise, surprise, as soon as I'm not there to scare the kid. I called my buddy to check him out for me.”

I burst out laughing at his overprotectiveness. “Brothers.”

“What? It's our job,” he shrugs with a grin.

“Alright, let's save this conversation for a later time. Come dance with me, hotshot,” I demand.

“Yes, ma'am.”

NINE

OAKLEY

Once again, parties aren't my scene. The whole idea of them brings back memories that I try to keep buried as much as possible, but seeing Ava let go like this and be herself is beyond worth it.

Ava dragged me onto the dance floor what seemed like hours ago. Since then, I've watched her down a crap ton of tequila shots and completely let loose. The happy glow in her eyes as she looks up at me is exactly why I pushed myself to come to this party in the first place.

We're dancing to some random EDM song that I've never heard before, and regardless of the several drunks slamming into us, I wouldn't rather be anywhere else.

Ava has her arms looped around the back of my neck, and her ass pressed flat against my crotch as she moves her hips to the beat of the music.

With my arms resting lightly on her hips, I gently spin her around so that we're face to face. Our eyes meet as I pull her closer to me, letting my gaze drop to her mouth when she takes her bottom lip between her teeth, slowly gnawing on the pink skin.

Somehow, she has *no* idea how stunning she is.

My hand moves and before I register what's happening, my palm rests against her cheek as my thumb runs along her bottom lip.

"Don't bite your lip, Ava." The statement ends up coming out as more of a growl than anything, but when her pupils dilate, I know that she doesn't mind.

I didn't realize how close we were until I yank myself back a few steps, reality hitting me like a truck. She's drunk.

I see the rejection flash through her eyes immediately.

“Ava I-”

She holds up her hand and presses it against my chest, silencing me. She takes a deep breath and looks at me with a newfound fire in her eyes.

“Why won’t you kiss me? I know you are attracted to me in some way. So why won’t you just do it?” Her arms flail around while she tries to tell me off, the action only making her look more adorable than angry. God, she’s a breath of fresh air.

The shit-eating grin on my face only seems to add fuel to the fire. Ava lets out a loud huff, her eyes narrowing into slits before she turns around, marching towards the kitchen.

Unfortunately for her, my legs are much longer than hers. I catch up and throw her over my shoulder swiftly before she gets very far. Once I get to the front yard, I set her down on her feet gently.

“I’m not leaving until you kiss me, dammit!” she yells, jabbing her finger into my chest.

“Looks like you don’t have a choice now, do you?” I smirk, crossing my arms. The frown on her face is enough to make me wrap my arms around her waist and pull her close.

“I’m not going to kiss you when you’re drunk. It isn’t because I don’t want to. I’m just trying to be the good guy here and not take advantage of you,” I murmur. Ava rolls her eyes.

“Okay, that’s sweet and all, but I can make my own decisions. I want you to kiss me.” She pulls back and places her hands angrily on her small hips.

“I know you can, but your judgment is clouded right now. Will you let me take you home?”

“What about Morgan? I have to let her know I’m leaving.” She turns to head back inside, but I take her wrist lightly. “I’ll text Matt and let him know where you are. Now

let me take you home. My trucks down the street. Can you walk there or do you need another ride?”

“I could sure use a ride, just not on your back,” she slurs.

“Good to know,” I smirk, leaning down to pick her up and carry her bridal style to my truck.



I pull up outside of my apartment and gently shake Ava awake.

When I texted Matt, letting him know that I was taking Ava home, he was adamant about me not taking her back to her place, but to mine so he and Morgan could be *alone*.

Considering he lives in a beyond crowded dorm, I can't blame him. Besides, I don't mind having Ava at my place. It was an easy decision.

“Leave me alone. I'm sleeping,” she whispers, making me shake my head comically. With a sigh, I unbuckle her seatbelt and carry her up to my apartment. Setting her down on the brown carpet outside my door, I unlock it and help her inside.

“Sit on the bed while I find you some clothes to change into,” I say as I lead her into the dimness of my room. I grab a T-shirt and a pair of the smallest sweatpants I can find. “You can change into these. I'll be in the bathroom until you finish.”

She takes them from my arms without hesitation. I turn and head to the bathroom to get ready for bed. Five minutes later, I hear her yell through the door. I walk out to the room and do a double-take.

She looked beautiful earlier, but I think I'll take this any day.

Ava's lying on her back with her ankles crossed and nothing is covering her pale skin but my old hockey shirt and a pair of red lace panties. My wide-eyes move from her crossed

ankles to her long, toned legs and over the teasingly hard nipples poking against the thin shirt's fabric. I watch as she rolls over and props herself up on her elbows.

Damn, she's been checking me out too. And from the fuck-me-eyes she's giving me, at least I know that she likes what she sees.

I rip my eyes from her body and cough to tear through the sexual tension-filled air. "Time to get in bed. It's *way* past your bedtime."

She looks away, smirking. She turns around and bends over, reaching for the covers. I can't help but stare at her ass as she shakes it playfully while pulling back the covers.

I was wrong when I called them red panties; they are not panties. They are nothing more than a strip of fabric—a strip of fabric I want to rip to shreds.

"Ava. Under the covers now," I groan, my self-control diminishing faster by the second. How could it not when I have to stare at her in nothing but my shirt, shaking her perfectly round a—

"Fine," she sighs and crawls under the blankets, flopping down on her back with a loud huff.

I walk over beside the bed and lean down to kiss her forehead. "Goodnight, beautiful." I turn to leave the room and hear her mumble a soft goodnight before she starts to doze back off.

Deciding to set up my bed on the couch, I grab an extra blanket and pillow out of the closet. I lay down on the couch and try not to think of the beautiful woman sleeping in my bed.

TEN

OCTAVIA

When did my bed get so comfy? Why does my pillow smell so good?

I peel my eyes open, expecting to see the light pouring in through my sheer curtains, only to find nothing but darkness. Either I changed my cheap curtains out for blackouts when I was drunk or this isn't my room.

It all comes rushing back in a head pounding wave. Oakley! That's the smell. Also, bacon? I can definitely smell bacon. I frantically lift the blankets. A sigh of relief escapes my lips when I see the shirt I am wearing. That would have been awkward. Looking around the room, Oakley is nowhere to be found.

I prepare myself for the cold that will hit me as soon as I leave the bed's warmth and run to the door that I can only hope leads to a bathroom.

After stumbling the entire way, I finally make it into what thankfully turns out to be a bathroom and not a secret sex dungeon. I find a spare toothbrush sitting by the sink, courtesy of Oakley, I'm guessing.

I guess I should try to make myself look like something other than a raccoon that just crawled out of a garbage can. With the hair tie on my wrist, I sweep my knotted hair into a messy bun on the top of my head and manage to wash away the remnants of eyeliner and mascara around my eyes with cold water.

I look down at my outfit and sigh. I can either put on my clothes from last night, or I can keep wearing his shirt. It's not like it isn't long enough, the damn thing goes down to my knees. Okay, shirt it is.

I close my hand around the cold, brassy knob—and pause. I can hear Oakley talking to someone through the door.

“Thanks, Mom. I know you guys would have been here if you could. I love you too.”

Now, I know you shouldn’t eavesdrop, but I can’t help it! He’s a mama’s boy. That’s adorable.

I wait until he hangs up to open the door. I walk out into the main room, and my mouth falls open.

Oakley is wearing nothing but a pair of baggy grey sweatpants, standing in front of the oven making breakfast.

Oh, sweet baby Jesus. I can’t see what he’s doing from where I’m standing. All I can see are his incredibly defined back muscles flexing with every move he makes. A large tattoo on the back of his neck catches my eye. It intrigues me with its intense designs as it continues across his broad shoulders, expanding until it reaches the middle of his back. I’ll have to ask him about it later.

“Good morning.”

Oakley jumps and swears under his breath in surprise. I laugh as he turns to face me.

His face lights up. “Morning, beautiful. Coffee?”

“Yes, please. Black. Also, do I smell bacon?”

He hands me a red mug, a similar shade to his cheeks. I’m getting the impression he doesn’t usually make girls breakfast. Great, there are those damn butterflies again.

“Yeah, figured you were going to be hungry. Bacon is one of the best hangover foods. From what I hear, at least.”

I walk over and wrap my arms around his waist and place a kiss on his tattoo. “Thank you.”

Woah, when did I become so bold?

I feel him shudder and hear the sharp intake of breath he takes as he pours his coffee. “Uh, yeah. Of course.”

It’s good to know that I affect him when I’m sober too.

Unfortunately, I remember everything that happened last night. I wish I had forgotten some things to avoid the inevitable embarrassment I know I'm no doubt going to feel. I feel my face getting warm just thinking about my little ass shake stunt last night.

I pull my hands from around his waist and quickly move towards his kitchen table. Before I sit down, I notice him staring oddly at me. Great, I probably still have black smudges around my eyes or something.

“Do I have something on my face?” I rub under my eyes in hopes of getting rid of whatever's there.

“No, you just look good in my clothes,” he winks and turns back around to get our breakfast.

“Oh.” I stare down at my feet as the heat comes rushing to my cheeks.

Got it.



I put the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher as Oakley boldly pulls me into his chest and kisses the top of my head. “Are you busy today?”

“Other than a class at three, no. Why?” I turn around so I can look up at him and lean my back against the counter.

“Let me take you on a date.” His voice sounds more profound than usual—more intense. His arms are on either side of me now as he leans in closer, trapping me. The burning intensity in his eyes is enough for me to know he can hear my erratic breathing. I'm panting like a dog in heat for crying out loud.

“Um yeah—yes. Sure. Sounds good to me.” *God, I sound like an idiot.*

“Yeah?”

My heart picks up when a giant grin spreads over his chiselled features.

“I can take you home in a couple of minutes so you can change? I mean, unless you wanna wear just that on our first date?” he offers and leans down to press a gentle kiss on my cheek.

“Yeah, I bet you wouldn’t mind that, would you? I’m just going to put my clothes back on and then we can head out.” I give him a shy smile and duck under his arm to put some much-needed space between us.

“I definitely wouldn’t mind. Just wear the sweatpants I gave you last night. If you want to put them on this time.”

Right, the sweatpants I didn’t wear so that I could shake my ass at him. The cocky smirk on his face is well earned. This conversation just got really embarrassing.

“Shut up. I was hot,” I mutter.

“Yeah, you were.” His smirk returns. “You can use my room. I’ll change in the bathroom after I shower. Just let me grab some clothes.” He wastes no time and heads to his bedroom.

A few minutes later, I pull on the sweatpants that I have to roll up five times and the same shirt from earlier. I sit on Oakley’s bed and scroll through my phone while I wait for him. Sooner than later, he comes strolling confidently out of the bathroom.

He’s wearing beige khakis with a teasingly tight white, long sleeve shirt. Not that I mind. His hair is swept up behind a backward grey baseball cap like usual and I can smell his musky body wash from here as it wafts greedily over me.

“Are you done examining me? Do I fit the part?” He lifts a brow as he watches me practically eye-fucking him again. I seem to be doing that a lot.

“No, actually, I don’t think I am,” I state while biting my lip—a habit I seem to have recently picked up.

Oakley makes a noise between a growl and a moan, and I bring my eyes up to meet his. His pupils dilate as the tension rises in the room. Maybe he'll finally pounce on me.

Nope, who am I kidding? He abruptly coughs, throws a Saint's hoodie on and leaves me alone in his room. "Ready to go? It's ten, so we still have plenty of time."

I sigh and nod once. "Yep, let's go."



Surprisingly, there had been no awkwardness on the way over to my apartment. That was until Oakley and I walked in and saw Morgan and Matthew making out on the couch without a care in the world.

"Guys! Didn't you have enough time last night? Please tell me you weren't just about to have sex on *our* couch!" I shriek. Oakley covers my eyes from behind and chuckles in my ear.

They jump apart and Morgan reaches for the blanket lying beside her before covering her and Matthew up.

"You could have given us a heads up at least, ass hat," she glares while Matt laughs at her embarrassment.

"Bro, go get dressed. Not everyone wants to see... all of *that*." Oakley waves his hands in front of Matthew. As soon as both of them head to Morgan's room to get *decent*, I tell Oakley to sit anywhere *but* the couch while I get ready.

Half an hour later, I'm ready to go. Oakley informed me on the drive over that we are going to the rink since the team doesn't have practice today. I decided not to tell him that I am, in fact, an excellent skater, mainly because I didn't want to have to bring up the fact that David was the one who taught me.

Plus, I would much rather have him close, *teaching me*, than farther away. When I reenter the living room, Morgan, Matt, and Oakley are sitting on the couch. The boys are

watching whatever hockey game is on TV, while Morgan has her head in Matt's lap, scrolling through her phone.

“Good to go?” I ask loudly. The three of them look up at me. Matthew smirks, Morgan grins, and Oakley stares blankly.

He stands up from the couch and makes his way over to me. He wraps his arm around my waist and leans down to whisper in my ear, “You look beautiful.”

I shiver from the warm breath trailing down my spine and unconsciously lean my head to rest against his. He pulls back slightly to place a gentle kiss on my cheek before pulling away entirely and grabbing my hand, lacing our fingers together.

You would think I would be used to the shocks I feel every time we touch by now, but I'm so not.

“You kids have fun, but not too much. Don't do anything that I wouldn't do, Ava,” Morgan says firmly.

Matt chuckles. “So nothing?”

I roll my eyes and drag Oakley out of the apartment as quickly as I can before Morgan tries to embarrass me further.

“Yeah yeah, see you later, Mom!” I shout and hurry out the door.

“What's the rush, speedy? Can't wait to get me alone?” Oakley wiggles his eyebrows.

“In your dreams, hotshot.” I keep my head down as I answer in hopes that he won't see my red cheeks.

“You're right. We *are* alone in my dreams.”

Surprised, I snap my head up to look at him only to get a simple wink and his cocky smirk just as we reach his truck.

ELEVEN

OCTAVIA

“Here we are, M’lady,” Oakley declares as we pull into the rarely empty parking lot of the Saints Arena.

“I have a quick question that I probably should have asked before we left, but what skates am I using?” I certainly didn’t bring any.

Oakley scratches the back of his neck nervously. He reaches behind him to the backseat and grabs what I’m assuming is his hockey bag.

“I may or may not have looked at your shoe size before we left my house. Coincidentally, you and my sister are the same size so I grabbed the skates she uses when they come to visit me. I hope that’s okay?”

His nervous rambling is adorable.

“Yeah, of course! Thank you.”

“Stay there,” he demands and hurries out of the truck. He runs around to my side and opens my door for me. I feel flushed as he waits for me, holding his hand out for me to take.

I place my hand in his as he helps me down and shuts the door behind us. He slides his arm around my waist and pulls me into his side as we walk into the arena.

The difference a crowd of people makes in the arena is insane. It’s odd being here without shouting fans—peaceful even.

I let Oakley lead the way to the team locker room. He lets go of my side when we reach a bench sitting in front of a small row of cubbies on the far side of the room. As I sit down, I decide that since I let him think I don’t know how to skate, I might as well act like I don’t know how to lace up

skates. Honestly, I just really don't want to. It's a serious pain in the ass.

I watch as he unzips his hockey bag and pulls out both sets of skates before turning to the cubby directly behind us and setting his bag down on the bottom shelf. The bold letters placed above the cubby make me smile.

Oakley Hutton #11

He doesn't seem to keep a lot in his cubby. Not on a day off, I guess. The only things he has in there are a few of his jerseys and an extra pair of hockey socks.

In record time, Oakley sits down beside me, has his skates tied, and is on his knees to lace mine. When he slides off my sandals, I try not to focus on the burning trail of electricity his fingers leave behind or the shiver that runs up my spine as he flashes his pearly whites at me. Who turned up the temperature in here?

I watch as his fingers quickly and skillfully loop the laces through each hole. And in no time, he has the other skate in his hand and quickly slips it on my other foot.

“All done, princess. They feel okay?”

I snap out of my trance and realize he's standing over me with a gentle smile.

I stand up and wiggle my toes in the skates. Grinning broadly at him, I say, “Perfect. Thank you.”

He helps me wobble to the hallway that leads out to the ice. I purposely stumble a little as we make our way. Oakley slips an arm around my waist to steady me. I have to make my lie believable, after all. Nobody can walk on skates perfectly the first time they wear them. That's a fact.

As we reach the rink, I take a long look around. I've never actually seen it empty before. There are no goalie nets, only markings where they should lay. No referees are skating around blowing whistles as opposing players push and shove each other around. Gone are the groups of people sitting in the ugly blue seats that make up half the arena, filling it with ear-piercing screams.

“Peaceful, isn’t it?” He turns to face me. “Don’t get me wrong. I love playing hockey, but sometimes it’s nice just to skate. There’s no pressure when you’re just skating.”

I look over and see his mossy eyes flash with an emotion I can’t decipher.

“You ready? I promise I’m a fantastic teacher.” He steps onto the ice and holds his hands out.

Slowly, I make my way to him and grab his hands. As Oakley slowly guides me step by step, I begin to wish he was teaching me how to skate for the first time.

For the next few minutes, we do slow laps around the boards. Oakley skates backwards, watching me try to make it look like I’m struggling on the ice.

“When were you going to tell me you already know how to skate?”

I let out an awkward giggle and reluctantly meet his gaze. The idiot breaks out laughing and pulls me into a tight hug. I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. With a grin, I pull away and skate backwards away from him.

“What gave it away?” I shout when he slides towards me with a smirk.

“Babe, I’ve taught people how to skate before. You caught on way too fast. You could have just told me you already knew.”

Yeah, I know, I just didn’t want to. Suddenly the small cuts on the ice seem really interesting.

“Maybe I just wanted to replace those memories with new ones?” It comes out as more of a question than an answer, but oh well. I want today to be the first thing that pops into my head when I think of skating, rather than all of the times David taught me.

I don’t realize that I’ve stopped skating until Oakley gently lifts my chin. His eyes burn into mine, and he pulls me tight against his chest.

“I think I know something that might help,” he almost whispers, leaning in so close his breath stirs my hair.

My heart pounds painfully against my chest. “What?”

“This.”

Without warning, his lips are on mine. I stand there, rigid and taken aback until his grip tightens around me, ripping through my surprise. I reach up and wrap my arms around his neck, my fingers tangling themselves in his hair. I try to pull him even closer as I kiss him back with every pent up emotion inside me.

Suddenly the tenderness of the kiss is replaced by hunger—a wild, seemingly insatiable hunger. Oakley nips my bottom lip as his mouth desperately meets mine once again. I trail my hands from his hair, down his back, and under his shirt. I lean into him as my fingers trace the indents covering his skin. A low moan escapes Oakley’s lips, urging me to press myself closer to him.

He presses me softly against the boards before detaching his mouth from mine to leave a trail of wet kisses along my jaw. He’s lit a fire in me. One that only he can put out.

Oakley gently presses our lips together one last time before pulling away. Stepping back, I meet his eyes and attempt to hold back a proud grin. His eyes are dark with a desire that I have no doubt matches my own.

I rest my forehead on his shoulder as we both try to regain our ability to breathe. I lift my head and look at him.

“That did help,” I giggle.

We both burst out laughing but don’t make any move to pull away from each other.

TWELVE

OAKLEY

I can't say that I have the best track record when it comes to girls. Well, there isn't a track record at all. I think that's the problem.

I have no idea what to do when it comes to dating. I've avoided it at all costs, not wanting anything to take my attention away from my family or hockey. I guess that's what's biting me in the ass when it comes to Ava.

The feelings I have when I'm around her are so different from anything I've ever felt before. Sure, I've had my fair share of one-night stands where I maybe got a little giddy from their company. But those slim encounters don't come close to the kind of electricity that jolts through me when Ava so little as smiles in my direction from across a crowded room.

Her down to earth personality will be the thing that drives me to my grave. I have no doubt about that. After spending so many years being surrounded by status-hungry airheads, meeting a girl like Ava who doesn't just see me as a one-way ticket to money town is a massive breath of much-needed fresh air that I don't want to miss out on.

It's only been three days, and I already miss her. Hell, I missed her the minute she stepped out of my arms. I'm turning into such a pussy and it downright terrifies me.

What makes it even worse is the fact that I'm pretty sure she's avoiding me. I took the plunge and reached out first after our date only for her to kindly shove me off. If that doesn't make me look like a desperate fucker then I don't know what does.

I know that our schedules don't exactly match up as much as I would hope due to hockey, but something feels off.

Asking Matt about it was pretty tempting, but I decided to wait until after I got back from Penticton.

Today is the first time I'm seeing my family in one immensely hard month and I couldn't be any more excited. I pull up outside our house at noon. I even went as far as to time my arrival specifically for lunchtime hoping that my mom would have missed me enough to cook me a hearty meal. I'm a starving boy these days.

Gracie wrenches open the front door and runs straight for me as soon as I hop out of my truck. I drop my overnight bag down beside me and my sister crashes hard into my chest.

“Hey, kiddo, I missed you too.”

“Duh. We haven't seen you since August. Are you too good for us now or something?” I roll my eyes and tuck her under my arm. I use my fist to mess up the smoothed down hair on the top of her head.

“Hey! Knock it off!” she shrieks, elbowing me in the gut until I let her go.

“Are you ready for this competition or what?” I ask as we make our way up the sidewalk.

She opens the door and holds it open for me as I let my bag fall to the floor with a thump and hurry into the living room. I flop down on the couch and stretch out my legs. Gracie sits down with an exaggerated sigh.

“More than ready. I've been spending every spare minute I've had in the studio.”

She does look exhausted, and it doesn't surprise me by any means. Being over-committed to things we love runs in our family.

“Yeah, you do look like shit. You should get some sleep before you end up turning someone into stone.”

She gives me a nasty glare, leans forward and punches my leg.

“You know, you’re a real ass sometimes,” she scoffs. “My boyfriend seems to think that I look just fine. Thank you very much.” Wearing a smug expression, she crosses her arms. Now it’s my turn to glare.

“Ah, yes. Your *boyfriend*.” The corners of my lips quirk up. I cross my arms and lean back against the armrest. “Jacob Lane. Seventeen-years-old. He plays on the Minor hockey team and drives a fancy BMW. Am I right on the money?”

Her smugness vanishes. It’s quickly replaced with one of pure rage. “You looked him up? Are you kidding me,

Oakley? He’s a really nice guy! Mom thought it would be nice to have you both meet him tomorrow at the competition, but now I don’t think I even want you to meet him at all.”

Okay, maybe I shouldn’t have said that. But in my defence, Gracie never gets this mad. Usually, I just get a lecture about letting her live her own life or whatever she wants to draw on about.

I put my hands up in surrender in an attempt to calm her down. “Is it serious? You know you always have my support, Gracie. I just don’t want you to get hurt. I want to meet him. I promise I’ll behave.”

She stands up, lets out an exasperated sigh and runs her hand through her long blonde hair. “Yes. I happen to like Jacob. He’s not a bad guy.” Taking a deep breath, her face morphs into a look of consideration. “Okay, fine. But the minute that you say anything rude, I’m punching you in the face. I’m serious.”

“Have a little faith in me. I can behave when I want to.” As long as he’s as serious about her as she is about him, we won’t have an issue.

“Mm. Sure. Anyway, I have rehearsals in an hour, and I need a ride. Wanna get ice cream first?” She grabs her dance bag from the rack by the door and slips on the pair of biker boots that I bought her last Christmas.

“Do I have a choice? Where’s Mom?” When I talked to her yesterday she said she’d be here.

“Oh, right! I forgot. She got called into work—said she wouldn’t be home until dinner. Are we going or what?”

I get up from my comfortable position on the couch—unhappily, I might add—and meet her in front of the door. After putting my beat-up trainers back on, I open the door and hold out my arm in front of me.

“After you, Princess.”



“Oakley! My man!” Andre shouts from across the freshly rained-on football field.

After I dropped my sister off at the dance studio, I invited Andre to throw a football around at the small field we managed to get blessed with in this tiny town. I could really use an old friend to talk to right about now.

“Hey, buddy. What did you do to your hair? It looks sick.”

Slapping our right hands together, we lean in for a one-handed hug. Andre’s head of onyx coloured shaggy hockey hair has been cut to a medium length, styled up in a slight swoosh with short shaved sides.

“Figured it was time I stopped looking like a total douche. Got it cut a few days ago.” He runs his fingers through the top a few times before spinning the old, faded football in his hands.

“About time.” I give us a few yards of distance and clap my hands in front of me, signalling for him to start throwing the ball.

“How do you like your new team? I hear you guys have been kicking some serious ass this season. You’re putting us to shame.”

“It’s good. Different, but good.” I don’t notice my body tense or the change of tone in my voice until Andre does.

“Something you wanna talk about, man? I’m all ears.”

I throw the ball and run a hand across my jaw. “I met a girl.”

He laughs and throws it back. “Wow, you met a girl? Who would have thought?”

Catching the ball again, I throw it with a little more force and roll my eyes. “I mean, I *met* a girl, dude.”

Emphasizing the word seems to do the trick because he misses the ball entirely. The leather ball hits him straight in the stomach, and a loud *oof* escapes his lips.

“Ow! Did you have to throw it that hard?” Rubbing his belly, he grabs the ball off the grass and launches it back at me. “I never thought that I would live to see the day. Who is she? And what about her makes you look hella constipated?”

Ignoring his insult, I say, “Her name is Ava. She’s fucking great dude. I took her out a few days ago, and it went better than I expected.”

There’s no stopping my smile as I remember how adorable she looked when she stumbled around on the ice, pretending not to know how to skate. I figured out that she knew how the minute she stepped on the ice, but I decided to go with it. And I made the right call.

“Yo, you still there, Oakley? Damn, you’re pussy whipped already.” He makes his way over to me. “You still haven’t told me what’s bothering you, though. Is she not into you or something?”

“It’s about her ex-boyfriend. I know something’s up but I haven’t brought it up. I don’t want to fuck anything up, and I get the sense it isn’t something that she wants me to know about.”

Andre sits down on the grass and pats the spot beside him. I sit down as he furrows his brows. “What about him? Something serious?”

If it weren't serious, Matt wouldn't be so protective, and I don't think she would have such a problem talking about it.

"I just have a bad feeling. The whole thing makes me want to beat his face in. He's on the team too. There's bad blood, I know it. My buddy Matt and his friends avoid him at all costs." Realizing my fists are clenched, I unclench them and run them through my hair instead.

"I think you should formally introduce yourself to the guy." He looks over at me, his lips pulled in a sneer. I know exactly what he's suggesting, and it isn't going to be an enjoyable introduction. Not for David, at least.

"I think I'm going to do that. Thanks."

"No worries. I expect to meet your girl, though. I have to know what kind of girl it takes to tame the great Oakley Hutton."

"I have to get her to be my girl first." I let out a chuckle as my phone vibrates in my pocket. Gracie's demanding text makes my eyes roll.

"I gotta pick up the princess from practice. I'll see you again before I head back, yeah?" Standing up, we both brush grass off our jeans. I text my sister back, letting her know that I'm on my way.

"Yeah, I better," he warns. "Tell the devil spawn I say hi. See ya, man!"

Waving, I set off in a jog towards the parking lot.

THIRTEEN

OAKLEY

Mom pulls me into a hug as soon as Gracie and I get back home. “Oh, my baby. I missed you so much!”

“I missed you, too, Ma.” More than she knows.

She quickly drags me to the kitchen table and pushes me down in one of the chairs before sitting in the one across from me.

“Catch me up. I want to know *everything*. How’s the team? Have you made any new friends? How’s your apartment?” My heart warms at her huge grin.

“One question at a time, Mom,” I laugh as she waves me off.

“Fine, fine. How’s the team been? Have you been keeping your temper at bay? And don’t you lie to me!”

“As much as I usually do when I play. Only a couple of fights so far,” I assure her. She raises her eyebrows and I shrug, sending her an innocent smile. “The team’s awesome. The skill is a lot better than the Storm, but we already knew that. I think I have a good shot for Captain next season.”

Being Captain is a huge deal. I thought it would be nice not to have the responsibility of for a season or two. However, now I know just how badly I need it.

Having the responsibility keeps me focused. Not to mention, I miss bossing everyone around. I’ve been staying on the ice after practice and coming in on my days off. For weeks I’ve been pushing myself to show Coach and the team that I can be their leader. The leader they want and *desperately* need. I can only cross my fingers now and hope that my work ends up paying off somehow.

“Of course you do! You’re the best hockey player I’ve ever seen,” she beams and sits up straighter in her chair.

“You have to say that. You’re my mom. But I appreciate it.”

The timer on the oven buzzes loudly. Mom jumps out of her chair in surprise as she stares at the clock hanging on the kitchen’s far wall. “Oh, no! Is it six already? Go get freshened up before Gracie’s boyfriend gets here.”

“Her boyfriend? I thought we weren’t meeting him till tomorrow?” I stand up from the chair and watch with a chuckle as she flails around the kitchen, whipping open cupboard after cupboard on the prowl for something most likely already in plain sight

“You were, yes. *Before* Gracie called me from the studio to let me know she thinks it might be better for you to meet him in more of a private place. With fewer people watching,” she adds, her tone dripping in sarcasm.

I smile serenely at her before heading towards the stairs and yelling, “Oh, how lovely. I’ll go get changed then!”

Once I get to my room, I close the door behind me. I grab a pair of jeans out of my duffle bag and slip them on. Mom would have a fit if she saw me sitting at her kitchen table for dinner in baggy shorts. I switch my Saints hoodie for a plain black t-shirt and grab a baseball hat from the large stack resting on my old dresser. I head downstairs to watch the Warriors game before Gracie’s boy-toy gets here.

As soon as Vancouver takes the lead just twenty minutes later, the doorbell rings. As I move to open it, Gracie comes barreling down the stairs. She shoots me a glare and, standing in front of the door, takes a deep breath. I can smell her fruity perfume from here and wrinkle my nose.

“A little overkill on the perfume, Gray,” I cough.

“Behave Oakley, or I swear to God you won’t be able to play hockey ever again after I’m done with you,” she hisses and pulls the door open. I roll my eyes and turn my attention back to the game.

“Hey, babe.” I hear from the porch, followed by a girly giggle. “You look beautiful, Gracie.”

There’s that giggle again. What the hell? Since when does my sister giggle? Cackle like a witch maybe, but never *giggle*.

The door closes and I hear the sound of feet padding across the wood flooring towards the living room. Gracie coughs loudly, signalling for me to finally say hello.

I tear my eyes away from the game and turn to give the guy a once over. Slowly squaring my shoulders, I wear an impassive expression and take my time examining him.

The kid’s pretty tall—but not as tall as me. I have a few inches on him, but he towers over my sister. He’s dressed in dark jeans and a button-up plaid shirt. Shaggy blonde hair falls carelessly in his face before he reaches up and pushes it back nervously. He looks like a loser.

“Oakley. The big brother.” I hold my hand out in front of me and wait to see if he has a weak handshake, the same as the last guy she brought home. Dad always said a handshake is the most crucial first impression you can give.

“Jacob Lane,” he nods. “The boyfriend.” Much to my surprise, he shakes my hand with a firm grip. “Is that the Warriors game? I only caught the first period before I had to head over. Are they winning?”

Okay, so he’s got confidence. He’ll need it when it comes to my sister or she’ll eat him alive.

“Yeah, they got two goals in the second period. As soon as they stopped racking up the penalty minutes they started making moves.” Sneaking a glance at my sister, I catch the proud smile she’s wearing before she sneaks into the kitchen, leaving us alone. “Make yourself at home. I’m sure Mom will be out soon.”

I return to my spot on the couch and risk sending a text to Ava to brag about the fact that I have yet to punch Gracie’s boyfriend in the face. What’s the worst that can happen? She ignores me again?

After sending the text, I slip my phone back in my pocket and turn my attention to the game once more as the Warriors manage to slip another puck into the opposing team's net.

“Yes! Let's go!” Jacob shouts from the opposite end of the couch. My head snaps up in surprise. When he catches me staring at him, mouth slightly agape, his cheeks flush. I get the idea he hadn't meant to say that out loud.

Chuckling, I decide to ease his embarrassment a bit. “Relax, dude. We're a hockey family. If you don't lose your voice by the end of a game, you weren't loud enough.”

He lets out a relieved sigh and nods his head at me. His eyes dart around the room awkwardly. “Um, I just wanted to say that you're a legend in the locker room, man. My buddies were so jealous when I told them I was going to meet you.”

I nod my head at him. “Appreciate it. Thanks.”

“Do you think you could like... sign something for me? For once you're in the big leagues?” His face is bright red. I would be lying if I said I wasn't sincerely flattered by his question.

“Yeah, sure. Did you bring anything with you?”

Jacob's face lights up before he frowns. “Shit. No. I didn't think that I would get this far. Everyone says that you're a serious hard-ass.”

“Don't let tonight fool you. I am, just not as much when I'm around my family,” I tell him firmly. “I keep all of my old sticks in the basement. Will that work?” His mouth falls open before he nods fervently. “I'll make sure you get one before you leave tonight.”

Our conversation is interrupted when Mom comes prancing into the room. She does a double-take at the view in front of her, shock written all over her features. I guess I would be shocked too. Sharing a couch and watching a game with my sister's boyfriend is entirely out of character for me, let alone having a civil conversation with the poor bastard.

Jacob shoots out of his seat when he notices Mom and goes around the couch to stand in front of her. Poor guy is so unprepared for what's coming next.

Holding his hand out in front of him as I had done not long ago, he introduces himself. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Hutton. I'm Jacob."

A huge smile spreads across her face, and she grabs him tightly in a bear hug. I chuckle to myself as he relaxes in her grip. "We're a hugging family over here! And please, call me Anne."

The ding of my phone distracts me from the awkward situation in front of me. Glancing at the screen, I see a message from Ava. My chest tightens. "*Can I call you? Please.*"

I let Mom know that I'll be in my room and head up the stairs. As soon as my door clicks shut behind me, I dial Ava's number.

She answers on the first ring, "You didn't have to call me if you're busy, I understand."

There's something off in her voice. Gone is the cheerful tone I've become accustomed to. It's been replaced by a dull, vacant one—one that makes my stomach ache.

"I'm not busy. What's wrong?" Moments pass before I hear anything other than her quiet breathing. "Ava? I'm right here. You can talk to me."

A few more seconds pass by until her voice—wavering and cautious—cuts through the silence. "I... I didn't know who else to call. I could have called Morgan, but she's with Matt, and I just didn't..." she trails off. Her soft cries seem to slice through both my phone and my erratically beating heart.

"Octavia, listen to me. It's okay. Where are you? Are you at home? Tell me what happened." I don't know how much more of this silence I can take. I want to be there helping her.

"I'm at home. My mom called me—well, actually, my foster mom called me ..." she breaks off, and I find myself

getting more confused as the conversation goes on. “I was going to tell you soon. I just didn’t know if you were going to stick around. I still don’t. But I guess that I don’t have a choice now.”

“I’m not going anywhere, okay? Please tell me what’s going on. I’m going crazy over here.”

Ava sighs and begins to tell me everything.

FOURTEEN

OAKLEY

Ava spent fifteen years of her life in and out of different foster homes, never knowing her real parents or why she didn't have the same family that her classmates did.

A huge-hearted married couple, Lily and Derek Layton adopted her days before her sixteenth birthday, seemingly saving her from what could have been an even more so lonely and heartbreaking life.

“So that leads me to tonight—to now. My mom called me an hour ago to tell me that my birth mother showed up at their house this morning. She was demanding to know where I was.” *Is that even legal?* “Who does she think she is? She threw me away like fucking trash twenty-years-ago to drown her sorrows with vodka and heroin. Now she wants to *know* me?” More cries echo through the other end of the line.

My eyes attach themselves to the family picture sitting proudly on my desk. I thought I had it rough with losing my dad, but I can't even begin to imagine never having had him in the first place. Or my mom. I'm at a loss for words. My heart hurts. All I want is to wrap her in my arms and help wash away all of the heartbreak that she's feeling.

“I'll be there in four hours. Don't leave the apartment, okay? Just wait for me.”

I don't know what is driving me to make such a reckless decision. But I know I won't be able to sit here for another two days wondering if she's okay.

Gracie is going to kill me.

“What? Oakley, no. Your sister has her recital. I'll be fine. I just needed someone to talk to. You're not driving four hours in the dark because I'm a cry baby.”

Her protests don't change my mind. I've already shoved all of my stuff back in my bag by the time I answer her.

"Too bad. Good luck with changing my mind. Us Hutton's are stubborn. Four hours and I'll be there. Then we can talk about it all. Should I get Adam to stay with you until I get there?"

God knows I don't want Adam anywhere near her, not alone—and certainly not when she's in a vulnerable state—but he is one of her best friends so I'll have to suck it up. I can pretend for one night that he isn't in love with my girl.

"You're ridiculous. And no. Please don't. I don't need anybody else worrying about me."

Too late, I already texted Adam and told him to get his ass over to Ava's. She doesn't need to know that, though.

"Okay. I'm going to hang up now so I can start driving. Stay calm, okay?"

"Drive safe. Thank you."

"Always. See you soon, beautiful." By the time I end the call, I've already made it down the stairs to see Mom setting the table.

She looks at me, grinning until she sees the bag slung around my shoulder. "Where are you going? What's wrong?" she asks, obvious concern in her eyes.

"I know it's last-minute, but a friend needs me—a special friend. I wouldn't be leaving unless it was important," I plead, hoping she'll read between the lines since I don't have time to explain to her who the "friend" is.

"Of course, sweetheart, I understand. Is she okay, at least?" *Bingo.*

"For now. I sent one of our friends over to check on her until I get there. But I'm worried," I manage to choke while fiddling with the strap of my bag. This helpless feeling is so foreign to me. Mom walks over and rubs her hands up and down my arms.

“Where’s Gracie? She’s going to hate me, isn’t she?” I ask, the guilt starting to eat away at me.

“Outside with Jacob. She’ll understand, Oakley. Just tell her what you told me. I’ll record the whole thing for you tomorrow.”

With a nod, I open the back door and welcome the cold September wind that bites at the skin not covered by my thin t-shirt. Gracie is sitting on the wooden swing hanging from our big oak tree.

“Hey, Jacob, mind giving me a minute alone with my sister?” My wording is polite, but the tone in my voice is a silent challenge.

“Oh yeah, of course. I’ll be inside.” After placing a kiss on my sister’s cheek, he gets up and makes his way to the back door.

Once he makes it a safe distance away, I sit down beside her. “He’s crazy about you, you know?”

That may be one of the only reasons I took it easy on him. It’s evident to everyone who sees the way he looks at her. It’s like he would move galaxies just to see her smile.

“I’m crazy about him too. Thank you for being nice to him.” She lays her head against my shoulder and sighs, “Something’s wrong. What happened?”

“That obvious?” I run a hand across my face as she nods. “I’m leaving tonight—like right now. Something came up. I understand if you’re mad at me for missing your recital. I know how excited you were for me to be there.”

“You idiot. Don’t worry about it. It’s a girl, isn’t it?” My cheeks grow hot as Gracie shrieks happily. She grabs my forearm and squeezes. Quite hard, I might add.

“Ow! *Gentle!*” She loosens her grip on my arm. I quickly move to rub at it, hoping to soothe the sting. “Yes, it’s a girl. I promise the next time that I come I’ll tell you all about her, okay? Promise you’re not mad?”

“I promise. Trust me. I’ve been waiting for this day for ages. You’ll finally have another girl to worry about, so maybe I’ll be able to breathe freely,” she grins wickedly. “I’ll get Mom to record the whole thing for you. It’ll be like you’re in the audience. Hopefully, she’ll keep her thumb out of the way this time.”

We both laugh as I help her up off the seat and wrap her up in a hug.

“Don’t get your hopes up, Gray. I’ll always keep an eye on you. And before I forget, there’s a pile of sticks downstairs. Make sure to give one to lover-boy tonight.” She pulls out of the hug, a gentle smile on her lips as she nods. “You rock, kid. I love you.”

“Love you too, big bro. Now go get your girl,” she winks as we reach the house.

Following Gracie inside, I grab the takeaway box of food off the counter and meet Mom on the porch. “I love you. Please drive safely and call me tomorrow. Good luck.”

After receiving one more hug, I turn my attention to Jacob. I slap our hands together and pull him close to me. I linger for a few extra seconds and lower my voice into a low growl.

“I might be able to stand you, but the minute you hurt my sister in any way, I won’t hesitate to break both of your kneecaps. Got it?” I pull back and smile innocently as he gulps, nodding his head frantically. “Awesome. I better head out then. Thank you both. I’ll call you guys tomorrow. Good luck, Gray. Wipe the floor with your competition.”

“I will,” she promises as I open the door.

I wave and head back out into the cold weather. Once I’m ready to go, I send Ava a quick text and glance briefly at Adam’s response before I start the truck. I send him a simple thank you for checking on her and pull out onto the road.

FIFTEEN

OCTAVIA

I used to wonder what it was like—experiencing the bond that you can only share with your biological parents. I remember spending countless hours—days even—watching happy families run around outside together and filling the bright yellow jungle gym across the street from one of my several foster homes with high pitched, heart-tugging laughter. I don't remember which house it was, I lost track somewhere around my tenth placement, but I've never been able to forget the vibrant shade of yellow paint that coated that damn playground.

Every kid licking a perfectly swirled ice cream cone while being pushed on that rickety old swing set brought forward a storm of agony that made me wish I could turn it off. I wanted every tormenting, heart-breaking emotion to disappear. I wanted to feel numb, to be nothing more than an empty shell. I wanted anything, anyone, to stop the pain. But nothing came. Nobody came.

I sat in my makeshift bedroom and stared longingly out the window—day after day—night after night. I relished in my loneliness while pleading that by some wicked chance, my mother would realize I was more important than the feeling of getting high, and my father would suddenly wish that he had stayed to take care of me, knowing that my mother couldn't. But that day never came. Not until today.

Over time, my sadness started to morph into anger. And that anger started to fuel me. I lost myself in the worst way possible. My wish to feel numb became nothing more than my greatest mistake. I wanted to feel something again—anything but the rage sizzling in my veins.

When Mrs. Taylor, my social worker, told me about Lily and Derek, I burst out laughing for the first time in

months. I remember telling her not to get her hopes up. That I was going to be eighteen in a couple of years, and then I would be able to take care of myself. But I had started to trust her, against my better judgment at the time, so I agreed to meet them. Thank God I did.

They are the closest thing to biological parents—a real family—that I could have asked for. The minute I walked through the front doors of their large home, I was met with the faint scent of flowers and whatever Lily was baking in her chef's kitchen. Two smells that I had never been accustomed to. The same two smells that still waft through that house.

Their son, Ben took the older brother responsibilities in huge strides—welcoming me as his little sister the second that we met. He protected me from everyone and everything until he went off to university, a year before I did.

Lily and Derek like to keep the subject of my biological parents safely tucked away. They know it's still a challenging topic for me. That is why I was completely blindsided when my mom called me this evening. She called to tell me that Rebecca—my biological mother—showed up at their house last night.

The first thing I felt was anger. White blistering hot rage. Who did Rebecca think she was? Why show up now?

Then, the heart-wrenching sadness that I had managed to push down and hide for the past four years clawed its way back up to the surface, bringing back every cold, depressing memory and feeling that I worked so hard to lock away. All of the therapy sessions, the anger-fueled fights, and regretful mornings, all for nothing.

I don't know what compelled me to call Oakley. I could have called Morgan. She would have forgotten about whatever she was doing with Matthew the minute I asked. But I think I just wanted to hear his voice. He has a calming effect about him. I've seemingly become far too addicted to it.

Although I did not expect him to come home for me, that took me by surprise, and I'm still not sure if I cried solely because my deadbeat mother was demanding and forcing her

way back into my life—or if it was because of his overwhelmingly sweet gesture.

Guilt washed over me as soon as he hung up the phone. I had, shamefully, been avoiding Oakley for the past few days. Truth be told, he scares the shit out of me. Not in the real sense of the term, but in a way that feels even more dangerous.

The feelings he sparked from inside the dark hollows of my heart were meant to stay hidden, especially after what happened with David last year. Unfortunately for me, though, Oakley seemed to weasel his way in too fast for me to stop him.

To add to my dismay, Adam showed up about twenty minutes after Oakley and I got off the phone. I didn't need a babysitter. Although, I would be lying if I said it didn't warm my heart to think Oakley called in reinforcements to check on me. And I mean, at least Adam had the right idea when he came strolling into my apartment with a bag full of all my favourite snacks.

“You better be ready to spill to your best friend what’s going on, sweet-cheeks!” he exclaims as he flops down on the couch beside me. He sets a steaming popcorn bowl down on the coffee table in front of us and stares at me expectantly.

“Nah, I’m good. But thanks for the popcorn,” I say and grab the bowl. Adam huffs and pulls my legs towards him, resting them on his and sits on the far end of the couch. I can tell by the hunch of his shoulders that he’s worried.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now, Adam. Can we please pretend that you just came over to watch movies?” I plead.

He clenches his jaw. The gentle expression on his face is replaced by one of contempt. He seems annoyed—*angry* even.

The next words come out in a sneer, “Why do I, your best friend, not get to know, but you so easily spew it all out to Oakley? Some *guy* you hardly know? You should have called

me in the first place. You know I would drop whatever I was doing and come here.”

His words hurt, and I don't hesitate to flinch away from him, narrowing my eyes. “What is up with you lately? Since when do you talk to me like this?”

I lift my legs off his lap and pull my knees up to my chest.

Guilt flashes in his brown eyes. He shrugs his shoulders and runs a hand through his hair, making it stand up. “Let's forget it, okay? Pick a damn movie.”

“No, Adam. I'm not going to just leave it,” I scoff. “Drop the act and tell me what's up.”

He remains silent, staring at the potted cactus in the corner of the room as if it's about to grow legs and start walking towards us.

With a sigh, I scoot closer to him and slowly lay my head on his shoulder. “Is it your parents?”

His shoulders tense as he sighs, “I'll tell you if you tell me.”

“My birth mom is back,” I murmur, not making eye contact with him.

“What?” he exclaims, tightening his features further.

“Yeah. messed up, right?”

“How? I thought the foster system didn't give out that information? Isn't it like, super creepy for her to even know where to look for you?”

I groan. “Yeah, Lily's trying to figure this whole mess out.”

Adam rubs my arm soothingly. “I'm sorry, Ava.”

I shake my head, forcing away the burn in my eyes before I change the subject. “It's your turn.”

His loud groan forces a laugh out of me. “Dad's trying to get me to join the law firm—regardless of my *constant*

protests. It's never too late for law school." He emphasizes the last sentence, imitating his stuck-up father perfectly.

"Tell him he can shove it. You would be an awful lawyer," I tease with a grin.

"Oh?" He raises his eyebrows.

"You're too much of a joker. You'd end up getting kicked out of the courtroom for making an inappropriate joke or something."

"You know me too well, babe. Now only if you could use your powers to convince my dad."

"I could try," I offer, and my grin returns.



Hours later, a raspy voice pulls me out of a patchy sleep.

"Is she asleep?" *Oakley?*

"Yeah, she passed out a couple of hours ago."

"Thanks for staying with her."

"No problem. Night," Adam says shortly.

I open my eyes and stretch my legs out along the couch as soon as the front door clicks shut. I roll onto my back and watch an exhausted Oakley drop a bag down on the floor. I push myself up and sit cross-legged. He flops down beside me and lets out a gentle sigh.

"Hey, beautiful. Come here." As I move to sit beside him, he lifts me and places me in his lap, resting his chin on the top of my head.

"Thank you for coming. You didn't have to. You must be exhausted." The soothing motion of his hands running up and down my back is starting to make me embarrassingly sleepy.

"It was worth it. Trust me." He presses a kiss on the top of my head. "Do you want to talk about it?" he prods and

silently waits for an answer. I shake my head and force myself to stand up and stretch out my tired muscles.

“Not tonight. I just want to sleep,” I insist, and he nods his head, standing up. I grab his hand and lead him to my bedroom.

Once inside, I grab a pair of fabric shorts and a baggy shirt. I stop rustling through my drawer when I hear a grumbled cough and dart my eyes towards my door. My face is hot in an instant.

An uncomfortable, red-faced Oakley is leaning against the door frame. He is now shirtless and offers me the shirt he had been wearing just seconds prior. I spend way too long staring at him, attempting to memorize every detail of his beautifully sculpted chest before wrenching my eyes away when I feel the corner of my mouth become wet. *Drool?* The thought makes my cheeks thump with embarrassment.

“Wear this.” I raise an eyebrow at his command. “My pride can’t take you wearing Adam’s shirt again. So please, take it.” He doesn’t have to tell me twice.

“Do I sense some jealousy?” I reach out to grab the shirt from his extended hand and head for the bathroom.

“Hell yeah, you do. Is it a bad thing that I only want my girl to wear my clothes?”

My girl. My face flames as I fiddle with the soft material hanging between my fingertips.

“No, it’s not a bad thing,” I reply, grinning from ear to ear before all but sprinting into the bathroom and shoving the door shut behind me. I quickly change into my shorts and slip Oakley’s shirt on, breathing in the smell of his cologne like a total creep.

Opening the door again, I see Oakley sitting on the bed, texting away on his phone. He’s slipped off his jeans, leaving him in nothing but a pair of black boxer shorts.

How did I get so lucky?

He looks up at me and grins. His gaze sets my skin on fire as he inspects every inch of my body. His hungry gaze doesn't fail to make me feel way more beautiful than I am.

Fully aware of how red my face must be, I walk to the light switch and quickly flick it off. We both crawl under the covers and Oakley reaches over to immediately tuck me into his side. I lay my head on his chest; his arms wrapped tightly around me.

“Goodnight, Ava.” He places a finger under my chin and leans down to give me a quick kiss.

“Goodnight, Oakley,” I whisper, letting the sound of his heartbeat lull me to sleep.

SIXTEEN

OCTAVIA

The early morning sunshine rather irritatingly shines through the sheer curtains hanging above my bedroom window. I'm not usually a morning person, but apparently my body didn't get the memo today. Or maybe it's just not used to a total hunk of a man taking up most of my bed. Yeah, it's probably that.

Speaking of a total hunk.

"Go back to sleep," Oakley grumbles and tightens his python-like grip around my waist, making it nearly impossible for me to move away. I love being this close to him, but I also love being able to breathe. I turn my body carefully and look down at him as my lungs fill up with air.

The first thing that catches my eye is the scruffy, light brown stubble covering his lower jaw. I allow my eyes to take in every mark and blemish to be seen.

From the inch-long scar above his right eyebrow to the small freckle beneath his left ear, I find myself wanting to know everything about him. Every dark, unwanted hidden secret and heart-warming memory that makes him who he is. I'm falling helplessly further into his all too addicting trap with no escape in sight.

"You know that I can feel you staring at me, right?"

The heat creeps up my face immediately. I'm not sure if it's from being caught staring at him like a creep or from the low, sexy sound of his sleepy voice either.

I shove his shoulder and scoff, "Cocky much? For your *information*, I was staring at you because you're drooling."

What a lie. I'm pretty sure I'm the one drooling. He chuckles and uses the tree trunks that he calls arms to flip us

over. His beautiful smile shines down at me as his arms rest on either side of my head.

“You’re so beautiful, Ava.” He presses a hand to the side of my face. His dazed, green eyes shine down on me as his sweet words pull me further and further into his grasp. He leans down and I meet him halfway, our lips meeting in a gentle yet urgent kiss.

Before the kiss can turn into anything more, I pull back and lie back against my pillow. As much as I would love to make out with Oakley for hours on end, I’m fully aware of my less than appealing morning breath and our lack of clothing. He pouts, and I can’t help but giggle at how adorable he looks.

“Morning breath,” I inform him with a wince.

He rolls his eyes and leans down to kiss me again—only to meet my cheek. Groaning, he rolls onto his back and turns his head to look at me.

“I don’t care about morning breath, Ava. Let me kiss you.”

“I promise that you can kiss me as soon as I brush my teeth. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to shower.” I kick the blankets off but before I get very far, his arms circle my waist and yank me back into bed.

“Can I at least have one before you go?” Oakley pleads. “Or better yet, I can just come with you. Two birds with one stone. ya know?” he all but begs.

I roll my eyes and peck his lips. “There. Happy? I am going to shower. *Alone.*”

His smug grin is replaced with a frown as he huffs, throwing his hands up in surrender when I quickly slip out of the bed and sprint to the bathroom.

I sigh as I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My hair is an unruly mess and my eyes are red and puffy.

Yesterday’s events flash in my mind as I remember why Oakley is here in the first place. I’m dreading explaining

all this to him. What I told him on the phone was the cliff notes version, and I know he must have a shit ton of questions waiting to be answered.

After I attempt to scrub yesterday away, I stand in the stream of scalding water and try to develop a plan. Before yesterday, I gave up all hope of ever seeing my mother again. Now that she's looking for me, I need to know why. Does she need money? Somewhere to stay? Is she dying? It must be something of the sort. It's been twenty-years without as much as a card in the mail.

When Mom called yesterday, I could hear the worry in her voice. I tried to reassure her, but there's nothing that I can say that will help settle her fears. When Lily and Derek took me in, they were told my birth mom would never be involved. Nobody even thought they needed to worry about it. We were all wrong.

Lily was the one who showed me what a mom was. She was there to hear me gush about my first crush. Lily was the one who stayed up late to help me with my homework and teach me how to drive. She taught me how to look at life in a different way than how I had been programmed to. She took me in and showed me what it felt like to be loved—to be wanted. Lily made me who I am. Nobody, especially not my pathetic excuse of a birth mother can take that away from her.

I finally drag myself out of the shower and come to the sudden realization that I didn't bring any freaking clothes with me.

Perfect. Great. Awesome. Splendid.

I take a deep breath and prepare to leave the bathroom in just my hot pink towel. I manage to slip out the door and go to my dresser without Oakley seeing me.

“About time. Did you have a nap in there or somethi—” he stops abruptly as his mouth falls open. The laugh I manage to scrape out is nothing but an obvious nervous reaction. I force a smile and slowly turn around.

“If you wanted me to come onto you, all you had to do was ask, sweetheart.” And just like that, my fake smile turns into a glare.

“Keep dreaming, hotshot,” I mutter and hold my clothes against my chest to shield myself before running back inside the bathroom.



“We need to talk about yesterday, Ava,” Oakley says as soon as we sit down on the couch half an hour later.

I raise an eyebrow and shrug. “Do we? There’s not much else to talk about.” Of course there is. But I don’t particularly want to talk about it. The Devil’s in the details, right?

“I just want to help.” He grabs my hand and rubs his thumb back and forth across my knuckles in a soothing motion.

I let out a huff and nod reluctantly. “What do you want to know?” I ask quietly, deciding to give him the floor. He looks at me with worried eyes, as if he’s trying to avoid asking something that will upset me. “Just ask me what you want to know. I’ll try my best not to get upset.”

His worried expression quickly turns into one of curiosity. “Okay. You were adopted and have never met your birth parents, right?” I nod my head, and he continues, “And now your birth mom is trying to contact you?” I nod again. “Why did she give you up?” He furrows his brows and purses his lips.

Although I was expecting him to ask, I can’t help but feel the sadness sink its claws into my ribcage.

“She was an addict. Or at least that’s what all of the social workers told me. My deadbeat father ran off when he found out she was pregnant. Maybe that’s why she thought she didn’t have any other choice.”

“What bullshit! There’s always another way,” he hisses, clearly very upset.

I squeeze his hand, trying to pull his attention back to me.

“Not in Rebecca’s head,” I shrug and stare at the family picture leaning on the television stand. It was taken during my first Christmas since being formally adopted.

Mom declared it as a day to be remembered. She pushed us all in front of the fireplace, propped her camera up on the coffee table and set a timer before running over to stand in her spot beside Dad. I remember how it felt at that moment, looking around at my new family. For the first time in my life, I was completely and utterly happy.

“What was it like? In foster care.”

I blink back the tears that are beginning to cloud my vision. I let out a slight cough, trying to clear my throat.

“It had its good moments. But it isn’t something I would wish upon anyone. I spent most of my childhood in all-girl group homes. I only stayed with a few different foster families.”

“Did you ever... were there ever abusive families?” His eyes widen instantly, almost as if that wasn’t what he meant to ask. “I mean, I’ve heard the system isn’t always the greatest.”

“It’s okay, really,” I promise and continue, “It’s common knowledge that there are some not-so-great foster parents in the system. I was one of the lucky ones, I guess. I wasn’t physically abused.”

He remains silent. I peek over at him and sigh. Great, I’ve freaked him out now.

After a few moments of tense silence, a low growl escapes his lips. “Physical or not, that will *never* happen to you again. I promise.”

I can’t seem to move when we lock eyes again. The determined expression on his face surprises me. He doesn’t

want to head for the hills? Or is he just being nice? He seems to read my expression all too well and shuts down all of my negative thoughts in two sentences.

“I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me, sweetheart.” He pulls me into his side and kisses the top of my head. “Can I ask you something else? It’s a little off-topic, but it’s been bothering me for a while.”

I nod my head, too consumed by the comfort I was feeling by being in his arms.

“What happened with David?”

I tense. The feeling of comfort and happiness leaves me and is replaced by rage and betrayal. Too afraid of what will show if I pull away from him, I stay put.

“Ava?” he prods, rubbing his hands up and down my frozen back.

I know he isn’t going to drop it, so I nod and decide to tell him *something*. “We dated for three years.”

“Why did you break up? I just want to help.” The kindness in his voice hurts.

“Mutual decision,” I say shortly. “We just knew that it was time to go our separate ways.” The lie burns my throat.

“Okay.” The tone of his voice tells me he doesn’t believe me. I mean, I wasn’t very convincing, but it’s what I have to do. Maybe I’ll tell him someday. It’s just not the right time. It’s too early—too embarrassing.

“Enough of the serious talk. Let’s go do something,” I blurt out and pull myself away from Oakley so that I can look at him properly.

“Are you asking me on a date, Octavia?” he teases, eyebrows raised.

“Yes. Yes, I am. Shall we go?” I stand, offering him my hands to pull him up. He takes my hands and I yank him up.

“We shall,” he winks and swiftly laces our fingers together.

SEVENTEEN

OAKLEY

Ava lied to me. I know she did.

I've already put enough pieces together to know that her breakup with David was not a mutual decision. Nor was it for whatever bullshit reason she tried to sell me yesterday. He did something to her, and I intend to find out what—by whatever means necessary.

Looking around the locker room, I finally spot the guy I've been looking for since practice ended.

“Remer, come here for a second, would you, buddy?”

His head snaps up in my direction and nods as he swaggers over to me. I realize just how short he is the closer he gets.

“Hey, Hutton. You need something?”

I want nothing more than to knock the helpless grin right off of his fucking face.

“Yeah, actually, Coach needs us to grab some shit from the storage room,” I lie.

“Oh yeah, sure,” he nods and slaps a hand against my shoulder.

Self-restraint is not one of my specialties, and boy do I have to force myself not to rip his slimy hand clean from his arm.

I follow him to the storage room, a couple paces behind him. He twists the doorknob and holds the door open for me. He stares at the shelves, waiting for me to tell him what Coach wanted from the room. I shut the door behind me and cross my arms against my chest. When I turn to him, his calm expression is replaced by one of confusion. He moves a

few steps away from me and squares his shoulders. I do the same, making our height difference evident to him.

“Clearly, Coach doesn’t need anything. But I, on the other hand, do.”

He raises his eyebrows, eyeing the closed door. “And what is it that you need, Oakley?”

“I want you to tell me what you did to make Matt and Adam hate you so much.” My words come out strong and demanding.

“Those two buffoons? I have no idea,” he mutters with a shrug. “Matt doesn’t know his head from his ass, so no. I have no idea.”

I clench my fists so hard that my nails dig into my palm. “And Adam?”

A glimpse of a dark, well-hidden emotion flashes across his face as he swallows visibly and looks away from me.

“I get what’s happening here. I saw Ava’s little sign for you at our last game. She’s beautiful, isn’t she? Too bad she’s a damn prude.” His lips curl into a smirk.

I force myself to stay still in an attempt to stop myself from throwing him against a wall and beating the shit out of him. *Nobody* can talk about Ava like that.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.” I play dumb, trying to bait him.

“Oh, you know. Green eyes. Long, brown hair. *Phenomenal* ass,” David adds with a wicked grin.

Any and all self-control disappears as soon as the words leave his lips. Within seconds my arm winds back, and my fist crashes against his nose. A loud crunch rings in my ears.

“You prick,” I snarl and throw another punch. This time I’m making contact with his jaw. He stumbles backwards and crashes into the shelves behind him, sending buckets of hockey pucks crashing to the floor. As he tries to regain his

balance, I turn to sneak a glance at the door. It's still closed, keeping us hidden for now.

I turn my attention back to David a second too late. He catches me off guard and his fist connects with my face. I can feel the skin above my eyebrow bust open. Warm, crimson blood drips steadily.

"You have a strong will, buddy. Don't let her take that from you like she did to me," he sneers. I launch myself at him again. All conscious thoughts dissipate as we hurtle towards the ground. I use all of my body weight to pin him to the ground. I pull my arm back to throw another punch and—

"Oakley." I hear, even over the pounding of my heart and the strong ringing in my ears.

"I'll find out what you did, Remer," I spit through clenched teeth as strong arms wrap around my waist.

"*Oakley!* Oakley, that's enough!" Matt pulls me off of David with a strength I didn't know he possessed.

"You'll understand soon enough. She'll suck the life out of you," David spits.

Adam makes his broody self known to us as he roughly yanks David away from me, effectively shutting him up.

"Fucking hell Oakley! What the *fuck* were you thinking? You'll be lucky not to be cut from the team!" Matt snaps.

"He deserved it," I reply shortly as a sudden and heavy exhaustion comes over me. I unclench my fists and the pain in my hands worsens. I look down to examine the damage. The all-too-familiar cuts now seep a metallic, red liquid. I groan and let out a hiss of pain.

"Do you not *seriously* think I've wanted to do that to him since the day I found out what he did? Ava is going to kill you," he sighs and runs a shaking hand through his hair.

She's going to be pissed.



An hour later and I'm finally blood-free.

A few cuts on my knuckles had to be stitched up, along with the split skin above my eyebrow. This meant we had to go to the team medic, who was luckily still there, and listen to her scold me like a damn child.

Matt didn't tell me where the guys took David, just that they were taking care of it. As far as I know, Coach isn't going to find out the fight took place at the rink. I don't know what he's going to be told, and I could honestly care less.

As of right now, I'm sitting in Matt's truck listening to him reprimand me. He refused to let me drive myself home and promised to return my vehicle to me by tomorrow.

"Hey, man. Thank you. For everything today," I mumble when we pull up in front of my apartment.

He reaches over and slaps my shoulder. "Don't worry about it. You're one of us now, and we take care of each other around here." I smile gratefully, grab my duffel from the backseat and head outside.

Once I reach the door to my apartment, I go to unlock it—only to realize that it's already unlocked. I furrow my brows and shake my head in bemusement.

I push the door open and am immediately attacked by a storm of brown hair. Ava jumps and wraps her legs around my waist. She twines her arms around my neck, and plants kisses on my cheeks.

"Oh my God! Are you okay? Morgan called and said Matt told her you were in a fight. He said you were with a *medic*. What happened?" It all comes out in a jumbled mess, but I catch enough of it to answer her questions. I pull away from her and her eyes widen in shock as she examines the nasty marks and bruises on my face.

"It's not as bad as it looks. You should see the other guy," I joke.

She threw her arms up in exasperation. “This is not funny. You could have gotten seriously hurt. Who did you fight?”

Shit. Morgan didn’t tell her.

“Promise me you won’t get mad and leave.” I’m sure desperation is written all over my face but I don’t care. I don’t want her to storm out, not after the progress that we’ve made.

She nods her head, reluctantly. “I promise.”

“I just wanted to talk to him,” I begin, watching her cautiously. “David took it upon himself to start the fight.”

She closes her eyes and sighs as if in pain. “Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“What were you even doing with him in the first place? He’s a prick,” I scoff and clench my jaw.

“Let me guess; he baited you? Talked badly about me?”

I nod and look away. “Apparently, you’re going to suck the life out of me like you did to him.”

“Classy. Fucking classy,” she snarls and I look at her in surprise. “I don’t suppose he happened to mention the three other girls he was sleeping with while I was sucking the life out of him, did he?”

“What?” My mouth falls open as she lets out a cold, mirthless laugh.

“Of course not.” She turns away and leans over the kitchen island.

“What happened, Ava?” I press and lean over the opposite side of the island to look her in the eye. “Let me in.”

“Three years of commitment means nothing to a guy like David. Not when you’re not putting out for him,” Ava says bitterly.

“He cheated on you because you weren’t having sex with him?” I force out the question and bite my tongue to stop myself from letting my anger speak.

“Among other things,” she shrugs.

“Well, now I wish I would have nailed a kick to his tiny dick before Matt showed up.”

“You didn’t have to hit him, you know? David is nothing more than an awful memory to me now.”

Shrugging, I give her a small smile. “It was worth it. Trust me.”

She moves around the counter to wrap an arm around my waist. Leaning into me, she hides a smile. “You’re a goof.”

“A *hot* goof, right?”

“Whatever helps you sleep better at night, baby,” she teases and rests her head on my shoulder.

“What if *you* help me sleep better at night?” I flirt. Her adorable giggle rings in my ears as her grip tightens on me.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you what happened sooner. In all honesty, I was embarrassed. I mean, come on. Who doesn’t know they’re being cheated on with three other girls?”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Ava. You didn’t know because you shouldn’t have had to worry about that happening in the first place,” I scoff. “I can’t change the past, but I can promise that I will *never* do that to you.” I let out a deep breath and tilt her head up so her eyes meet mine. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m crazy about you, Octavia Layton.”

“I’m crazy about you too, Oakley Hutton,” she whispers and stretches on her tiptoes to pull me down so I can press my lips to hers.

My arms find their way to her waist and I press her against me. I kiss her back—hard, letting her know that I want this as much as she does.

I slowly drag my non-stitched hand up her body. My fingertips brush against the material of her shirt that lies beside her left breast. She shivers, making my confidence grow. My hand finally reaches its destination, grabbing the back of her neck in my large palm and wrapping my fingers in the hair

resting there. A quiet moan reverberates through the silent apartment. A jolt rushes down to the hardness building in my jeans when I realize that the noise came from Ava.

I push her back against the island, our mouths connecting at a surprisingly fast pace. I move my knee to rest in between her legs, pushing against the heat radiating there. Her hands move from my neck to the hem of my shirt, gently yanking on the material. I unlatch our lips to pull my t-shirt off and throw it across the room.

I grab under her thighs, effortlessly lifting her small body so she can wrap them around my waist. I carry her over to the couch and gently lay her down, resting my body over hers.

I start to plant wet kisses down her neck and make my way back up to claim her lips with mine again. Her fingers trace the stiff muscles of my abdomen. A low groan escapes from my throat. She takes a turn gliding her lips down my neck, sucking hard enough underneath my jaw to leave a mark. I pull back slightly and try to get my breathing under control.

“We have to stop now,” I manage to choke, already kicking myself in the ass.

She nods her head in understanding and leans up to give me a quick kiss. She drops her head back against the couch and closes her eyes, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

“Can we watch a movie?”

“Of course. What do you want to watch?” I move off of her and quickly adjust the bulge in my pants. I grab the remote from the coffee table and turn on the T.V.

“Surprise me,” she murmurs.

I end up picking the first movie that pops up on Netflix. I move around so she can rest her head on my chest. My eyelids droop as the opening credits begin to play, and I fall into a long, peaceful sleep.

NINETEEN

OCTAVIA

Morgan and I are in our usual seats by the dressing room as we wait for the game to start. When it's time for Oakley to do his warm-up laps around the rink, I make sure to stand with my back to him so he can see the name written on the jersey that hangs loosely from my shoulders. The proud smile that lights up his face is enough to make me momentarily forget where I am.

“Oh my God! Did you see his abs when he lifted his jersey? I think I need a fan to cool me down,” says a voice behind me. Being my nosey self, I don't hesitate to listen in on the girly giggles.

“Oh, that's enough out of you, young lady. Tyler Bateman is far too old for you.” The second voice is far more mature than the first one and makes me turn my head in search of the two mystery ladies.

I spot a woman two rows back who looks to be in her early forties. She sits comfortably beside a much younger, almost carbon copy of herself. Both women are beautiful, with crystal blue eyes and light blonde hair. The kind of hair that girls like me pay hairdressers hundreds of dollars to have.

The younger girl has the longest eyelashes I think I've ever seen: a small nose that fits her face perfectly, and sleek, sharp cheekbones that I would die for. Both of them are sporting matching Saint's jerseys, although I can't see who they are cheering for from where I'm sitting.

“Whatever, Mom. Just because I have a boyfriend doesn't mean that I can't look at other eye-candy.”

“Where did I go wrong with you?” her mother laughs, making my heart clench. I turn back around in my seat in fear

of getting caught eavesdropping. However, the woman calls me out before I can escape.

“Oh dear, I am so sorry for my daughter’s lack of manners. I hope we didn’t disturb you.” She glares at her daughter, who is now texting away on her iPhone.

“No! You weren’t. I was just looking for...for my friends! They’re not here yet!” I stammer awkwardly, desperately trying to take myself out of this uncomfortable situation as quickly as possible.

“Well, I hope they get here soon. The game’s about to start. We just got here a few minutes ago ourselves. I hate missing the warm-ups! I’m Anne, by the way.” Her mother-like tone warms my heart. I can’t help but smile at her.

“I’m Ava. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Mom, stop freaking out the locals,” her daughter groans and puts her phone away, turning her attention to me.

“Sorry about her. She doesn’t get out much. I’m Gracie.” She swings her biker boot-clad feet onto the empty seat in front of her and gives me a friendly smile.

“Ava, the games about to start. Tell your new friends that you’ll see them some other time,” Morgan chides and elbows my rib cage. I roll my eyes and let out a harsh breath of air as my side rovers from the aggressive attack.

“I hope you guys enjoy the game. It was nice to meet you both.” I wave at the two of them and sit down in my seat to watch the lights dim.



Halfway through the second period, Oakley skates full speed down the ice when one of the opposing defensemen rams straight into his back. My heart falls and I shoot up out of my seat.

I watch with wide eyes as his chin collides with the ice and his right shoulder catches the rest of his fall. The team

medic blocks my view as he runs onto the ice beside their coach—carrying a stretcher. My hands shake as I try to move past the shocked onlookers. I don't even notice Morgan holding my hand until she pulls me through the growing crowd. When we finally reach a clearing, my jaw drops.

Oakley is lying on his back, clutching his right shoulder and grimacing in pain. He yells at the ref—blood flying from his mouth and splattering the ice around the puddle that rests beside his head. His coach turns to the ref, his face red with anger.

The medic kneels beside Oakley and tries to get him to sit up. The arena is dead silent in anticipation before Morgan calls my name, capturing my attention. I wrench my eyes away from Oakley to look at her. She is staring past me at the fight now taking place on the ice.

Tyler has the player who hurt Oakley by the throat, punching him again and again. He knocks the opponent's helmet off and kicks it off to the side with his skate. The remaining referees frantically try to rip Tyler off, without much luck.

Adam shouts to get his attention and Tyler drops the player so quickly you would think he was on fire. Tyler spins around and heads off the ice. When he reaches the hallway beside us, he nods his head at me. I watch as he stalks down the hallway, out of sight. I look back to the ice—but Oakley is gone.

“Go. He'll be in the medical room. Find Tyler, he'll be able to take you to him. I have to wait for Matt. I'll meet you at home,” Morgan rushes, all but shoving me out of the crowd.

I make it to the main ground of the arena and hurry towards the locker room. My hands are slick with sweat and I have to repeatedly rub them on the smooth material of my leggings in hopes of calming myself down.

He has to be okay. He'll be out for maybe a couple of games, and then he'll be fine. It'll be like nothing even happened. I blow out a breath of air and thank my lucky stars

that it's empty up here. The last thing I need right now is to be pushed and shoved around by passionate hockey fans.

I reach the dressing room, and my heart picks up at the sight of Tyler waiting by the door. He's still wearing all of his gear as he leans against the black painted wall. His eyes are closed, and long hair hangs carelessly in his face. His lips are turned downwards, and his bushy eyebrows are pulled in tight. He's more than just a little upset. I drop my eyes to his knuckles; the once white bandages are now stained a deep red.

"Hey," I breathe. I move in front of him and wrap my still shaky hands around his waist. The friendly hug starts quite awkward, probably because Tyler isn't much of a people person, let alone a hugger. After a few seconds, he relaxes and wraps his massive arms around my narrow shoulders. He leans into me and I smile. "Are you okay?"

If I've learned anything about Tyler over the past two years, it's that although he has no problem standing up for his friends and teaching some asshole a lesson, he'll always beat himself up afterward. He doesn't open up much, but I know that his home life isn't the best.

"Yeah. I didn't get a scratch on me. Unless you count my fists." His gruff voice cuts through the silence as he pulls away from me. His eyes dart down to the bandages that need to be changed. "I'll take you to the medical room. I'm sure lover-boy is losing his shit without you around."

Tyler's deep chuckle makes me smile. And before I know it, we come to a stop in front of a white door with the word *medic* plastered on the front in bold red letters.

"I'll leave you to it. You can just head in. I'm sure they're expecting you."

I smile again and let out a little laugh. Tyler nods once and turns around to make his way back to the locker room before he stops short and looks around awkwardly.

"Oh, and thank you. For earlier." He rocks on the balls of his feet, ready to bolt at any moment.

“You don’t have to thank me, Tyler. We’re friends and that’s what friends do.” I give him a small, gentle smile and watch as his own grows, making a rare appearance. He nods his head and turns around once again, walking away.

With as much confidence as I can muster, I pull the door open and walk into the room. I’m hit with the smell of disinfectant instantly, forcing my nose to scrunch up in distaste. I hate the smell of hospitals.

Oakley is sitting on a makeshift hospital bed in the middle of the room, annoyance written clearly on his face. A sling is wrapped around his neck, holding his right arm up. A white bandage is pulled tight across his chin, and an ice pack is taped across his lower back.

I gasp, “What happened out there? One minute you were skating, then the next you were on your back and then Tyler was throwing fists. When I turned to look at you again, you were gone! I was so worried!” It comes out all in a rush, and I’m panting by the time I finish.

He’s staring at me with wide eyes, his mouth hanging open slightly. He laughs airily, his lips curling up in his usual smirk.

“Mom and Gracie, this is Ava—my girlfriend.”

I whip my head up to see the mother and daughter from earlier sitting in two chairs pushed up against the wall.

Holy shit, this is so not happening right now. Heat creeps up my neck as I wave at them awkwardly.

“Oh my! It’s so nice to see you again, dear.”

Gracie snickers to herself when Anne jumps up from her seat to greet me. She rushes over and pulls me in for a hug. She smells like peppermint and fresh linen, instantly reminding me of my mom. I look over her shoulder at Oakley. He seems confused, presumably as to how I already know his mom and sister.

“I knew I had a good feeling about you,” Gracie smirks.

“Uh, is anyone going to explain this to me? I’m confused,” Oakley puts in suddenly. I smile shyly while Gracie explains.

“I was just talking to Mom about how hot Tyler looked before your game started. Mom started embarrassing me, and then we met Ava. Mom just introduced herself like a total weirdo.”

“Tyler is not hot. He is way too old for you,” he glares.

Gracie rolls her eyes and crosses her arms. “Is that the only thing you took from that? You are ridiculous. I don’t know why you’re putting up with him, Ava. He is a real ass.”

They continue their banter for a few minutes while Anne and I stand back and watch. He’s extremely protective of his sister, but he doesn’t need to worry about Tyler. I don’t know much about his type, but I doubt he’s into underage, sixteen-year-old girls.

“Okay, that’s enough. We have company!” their mother shouts, breaking them apart.

Oakley gives me a swoon-worthy grin and holds his good arm out in front of him for a hug. I shake my head gently, not wanting to intrude on their family moment. He rolls his eyes and stands up off the bed. He walks over and pulls me into his side with his uninjured arm. My entire body relaxes instantly at his touch. I, very gingerly, wrap my arms around his neck to return the gesture.

We hug for what feels like hours, trapped in our little world. My worries and nerves finally leave now that I know he’s safe and okay. The sound of the soft *click* of the door pulls my attention away from him.

“Finally,” Oakley heaves a deep sigh. “I didn’t want to ask them to leave but I’ve wanted to do this since the minute you walked in here.”

I open my mouth to ask him what he’s talking about when he presses his mouth against mine. I stand up on my tiptoes and lean into the kiss, relishing in the calm, dizzy feeling that takes over my body whenever we touch.

I remember I still have no idea what happened or how he's doing and pull away frantically.

“You never answered me when I asked you what happened out there. So? What's the diagnosis?”

He sighs again and pulls me over to one of the chairs resting against the wall. He sits down on one and pats his leg.

With slight hesitation, I sit on his lap. He wraps his good arm around my waist and leans forward, chin resting on my shoulder.

“I didn't see him coming. I know I should be more aware—being public enemy number one to every player and their dog—but I didn't see him. Regardless, it was a dirty hit and it sent me on my ass. I have a bruised tailbone and a dislocated collarbone. I could do without the scrape on my chin and the sore tongue, but it's nothing serious. I'm lucky.”

I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding. “How long are you out for?”

“I'll be riding the pine for three to four weeks—if I'm lucky,” he grumbles, his grip around my waist tightening.

“At least it's just the beginning of the season. You'll be playing before you know it.”

I know my words don't do much to lighten his mood, but I would do anything to cheer him up.

“Thank you, beautiful. You always know what to say,” he murmurs, rubbing his thumb against the skin beneath the jersey I'm wearing.

This might not be the ideal situation, but sitting here with Oakley is the only place that I want to be.

EIGHTEEN

OCTAVIA

The bitter wind rushes over my skin, goosebumps rising along my arms under my thin sweatshirt as I hurry towards the coffee shop. The air is not as warm as it was a few weeks ago, seeing as it's now the beginning of October.

I woke up this morning with the mother of all crinks in my neck. Half of my body was dangling off the couch because Oakley took up the whole thing. He woke up shortly after me and after some convincing, released me from his grasp long enough for the blood to rush back to my limbs.

He didn't seem overly thrilled with me meeting Adam at the coffee shop after my classes, but he didn't have a choice in the matter. It did little to stop him from spending an hour trying to convince me to stay in bed with him all day, though. I nearly gave in and was left with only twenty minutes to make it to my Addiction seminar.

At least Oakley was enough of a graceful loser to give me a hoodie to wear in the cold since me being me, left my apartment yesterday in nothing more than a long sleeve shirt and a pair of thin leggings. I can't say I'm ready to walk the runway in a hoodie that reaches my knees, but I'm semi-warm.

I reach the coffee shop right on time and look through the glass window. Adam is sitting at our usual table with two white cups in front of him. The bell over the door jingles as I step through the door. Breathing in the smell and taste of strong coffee, I reach our table and pull my chair back. Adam's head snaps up, the screech of the chair on the wood floor catching his attention. His lips stretch into a broad grin.

"One pumpkin spice latte for the lady." He pushes the cup towards me and takes a sip of his plain black coffee.

I smile at him. "Thank you, kind sir. How was class?"

He rolls his eyes, blows out a loud huff and slumps back against his chair.

Adam is studying kinesiology—which is a fancy way of saying that he’s learning how the human body moves. I know he doesn’t plan to use his degree, however. I’m pretty sure he picked kinesiology as a *giant* “fuck you” to his dirt-bag dad.

“I was too hungover to pay attention to anything other than how painful Rackham’s voice ringing in my ears is. That woman’s voice is the equivalent of nails on a chalkboard, I swear.” He shivers dramatically, and I laugh—a little too loudly, apparently.

The devil herself, Beth Winston, shushes me from her nearby table. She pushes her round glasses up her small nose and shoots me a glare. If looks could kill, I would have died a long time ago.

I met Beth at the beginning of last year when I had just started at UBC. I was in this very same Starbucks. I tripped over my untied shoelace and spilled my cup of fresh, piping hot black coffee all over her light pink sweater. I apologized profusely, of course, and even offered to buy her a new sweater. But she wasn’t having any of it and shooed me away before stalking out of the coffee shop. She’s made her hatred of me very clear since.

To make matters worse, she’s had a crush on Adam since elementary school and hates me even more for being his best friend. According to Adam, they were *somewhat* close in high school. But she never got the hint, and eventually, he completely distanced himself from her.

I roll my eyes at her like the child I am and stick my tongue out.

“Just ignore her, O,” Adam urges. “She’ll get over it eventually. It’s not like you purposefully dumped your coffee on her last year.”

I shrug my shoulders and look away from her. I turn back to Adam and catch him watching her, an inquisitive

expression on his face.

“She *does* seem to have gotten hotter over the summer break, though. In a sexy nerd kind of way, eh?” Adam adds, cocking his head to the side as he stares.

I roll my eyes and look back over at Beth. He’s not totally wrong. The waist long, unruly brown curls that used to fall in her face have been cut and straightened, left to rest at the base of her neck. Her defined cheekbones and large chest seem...*new*—probably a courtesy of her rich father. The only thing that seems to have stayed the same are her piercing blue eyes.

“Don’t even think about it. You’ve done enough damage to the girl. Plus she’s pure evil.”

He turns back to me, shrugging. “I was just saying Beth didn’t use to be that hot. Anyway, how were your classes? You had your Addiction seminar today, right?”

I groan in response and he snickers, “That good, hey?”

I nod and slump in my chair. “It was brutal. This year might kill me. To think I still have two years of this torture makes my head hurt. If that isn’t bad enough, I have to start looking for somewhere to do my placement next year.”

After I graduate with my Bachelors in Social Work, I’m taking an extra two years to specialize in child welfare, which means that on top of the two years of schooling, I also have to find myself a placement in one of the specialties to go along with child welfare.

If I don’t, I won’t be able to graduate.

“Have you decided what you wanna do? You still have a while to figure it out. Stop stressing,” he reassures me, knowing how in my head I can get. It’s a blessing and an even bigger curse.

“I’m leaning towards child services but I also want to work with teens. I just want to make sure that I get the spot I want and not procrastinate.” I stop to narrow my eyes at him, then continue, “Or by my luck, I’ll end up with the only one I don’t want.”

Adam places a hand on his heart and looks as if I've hurt his feelings. "Uncalled for, O. I never procrastinate," he says, and another loud laugh escapes.

Without preamble, Beth shushes me again.

Fed up, I turn and give her the finger. She scowls.

"Your mouth is going to get stuck in a permanent scowl if you don't sometimes smile, Beth," I sing. I can practically *see* clouds of dark grey smoke shooting from her ears.

"I'd rather have a permanent scowl on my face than have to look like you, Octavia," she shoots back.

I bite my cheek when Adam snickers, trying desperately to hold back his laughter.

"Are you sure about that? Cause if you looked like me, it would be you sitting here with Adam. We both know how badly you want that."

Adam's loud laughter cuts through the tension like a knife.

I watch as her anger is quickly replaced by fake glee as she turns her attention to him. "Oh! Hi, Adam," she gushes. "I didn't see you there. You know there's an empty seat beside me, right? You don't have to sit beside her."

His laughter stops immediately at her sneering tone, and his eyes narrow. "You do know I got here before you, right? I didn't see you making any move to sit beside me. Lay off of Ava," he snaps, then raises an eyebrow at me. "Are you ready to go? I don't want to be here anymore."

"Yeah, sure. Let's go." I stand up from the table and throw my empty coffee cup in the trash bin on our way out.

Once we get into his shiny Mustang, he sighs. He turns to face me and takes a deep breath, fiddling with the steering wheel.

"I'm sorry for how I treated you the other night. You were upset and I was a total douche bag."

“It’s okay. I just don’t understand what the big deal was with me telling Oakley,” I confess. His attitude *has* been bothering me since, in all honesty. “I hadn’t even told him the whole story when he decided to come back.”

Adam can be the most confusing guy, sometimes. I swear he PMS’s more than I do. Ever since David and I broke up, he’s been keeping a constant watchful eye on me. And as much as I appreciate it, it gets incredibly annoying sometimes.

“We know nothing about the guy other than he’s a fantastic hockey player and moved from Penticton. Do you even know anything else about him? Or does he just know all about you? I don’t want you to get hurt again, O.”

Adam’s words hurt because as much as I don’t want to believe them, I know that they’re right.

How can Oakley expect me to show him every skeleton in my closet when I haven’t seen a single one in his? I know they’re there. I’ve seen the sadness in his eyes and how *bad* his knuckles looked last night.

“I just want you to be careful, Ava,” he whispers and squeezes my hand.

“I know. Thank you. Can you drive me home? I have a lot of homework to finish before your game.” It’s not a total lie. I do have homework to do, just not tonight.

“Yeah, sure. I love you, O.” He gives my hand one final squeeze before starting the car.

“I love you too, A.”



“I’m home, Morgan!” I shout, closing the door behind me.

“Hey, girlie! How was class?” she calls from the kitchen. I join her next to the stove as she stirs something in that looks kind of like macaroni?

“Don’t wanna talk about it. What are you cooking? It looks...interesting.” I scrunch up my nose and turn to the fridge to grab a bottle of water. I twist off the cap and take a sip.

“That good? And Hamburger-Helper, are you hungry?”

“Obviously. And no thanks. As much as I would love some of that, Adam and I already ate.”

“Oh, okay. More for me!” Morgan exclaims, grinning.

I sneak away and speed walk to my room. I pull out my phone and send Oakley a quick text about Morgan poisoning me with her cooking.

I set my phone down on my dresser, swap yesterday’s leggings with clean ones and leave Oakley’s sweater underneath Adam’s jersey. My phone buzzes while I’m throwing my hair up into a ponytail. I can’t help but giggle at Oakley’s reply.

”The horror. Can I drop by on my way to the rink? I have something for you.”

My brow cocks as I reply.

”You have no idea. And of course. I’ll be waiting.”



Half an hour later, there’s a knock on the door. I spring off the couch and launch myself at the door. Opening it, I look up at Oakley with a wide grin. He grins back at me and lifts me off of my feet, making me giggle.

“You look beautiful,” he murmurs and gives me a quick kiss. I jerk my head towards the living room and point at the couch. “You wanna sit down for a minute?”

When I don’t get a response, I turn to face him again.

“Are the only clothes you own Adam’s?” he grumbles, glaring at the jersey.

“I’m wearing your sweater underneath! This is the only jersey I have,” I explain, raising my eyebrows in bemusement.

“Not anymore.” He reaches into the bag hanging off his shoulder and pulls out a black and red Saints jersey. He hands it out to me and smiles. “Now, you can wear mine.”

My cheeks flame as I reach out and take it from his hand. “Thank you,” I manage to mumble.

“Promise me you will wear it? I need my girl wearing my jersey in the stands or I might lose the game.”

“I promise,” I assure him with a nod as his phone goes off.

He lets out a muffled curse and looks back at me. “I gotta go before Coach benches me. I’ll see you there, baby.” He pulls me towards him for another hug and places a kiss on my head.

“I’ll be screaming your name from the stands,” I tease.

“That’s not the only place that you’ll be screaming my name, sweetheart.”

I roll my eyes and with a final goodbye, close the door behind him.

TWENTY

OAKLEY

“This fucking sucks,” I grumble again. The buzzer sounds, signalling the third consecutive Saint’s loss in the past two weeks.

“I know, but it’s only for another two and a half weeks. Then you can start practicing with the team again. Try and think positive,” I hear Ava reassure me from her seat in between Morgan and me.

“Don’t you think I’ve been trying that?” I accidentally snap at her, my words spilling out before I have a chance to stop them.

Her hurt expression is like a knife to the side. As much as I try to remind myself that she’s just trying to help, her overbearing need to always see the cup half full is starting to drive me crazy.

“Hey, asshat. Knock it off. Maybe if you weren’t such a baby she wouldn’t have to console you all the damn time,” Morgan seethes. She grabs Ava’s hand and yanks her out of her seat. “We’re going home. Find your own ride home.”

Before I get a word in, Morgan has already dragged Ava into the sea of people who, just like them, want to get out of here as fast as possible.

“Dammit.” I drag my good hand down my face, scratching at the beard that’s starting to cover my jaw. I wanted to shave it off when the scruffy stubble began to morph into a full-on beard, but Ava insisted that she liked it, so I kept it.

It’s no secret that I’ve been letting my temper show more often than I should, specifically towards the one person I never wanted to see it. It kills me to know that she’s upset with

me, especially with how understanding she's been about this whole thing. Morgan is right. I am a giant baby.

Dragging my ass out of my seat, I head to the parking lot and wait for Matt to come out and beg him to drive me and my shit attitude home. With my old ride no doubt dragging my name through the mud to my girlfriend, he's my last hope.

"You're lucky you're my bro. Morgan is going to kick my ass when she finds out I gave her current enemy a ride," Matthew states as he starts up his F-150 a few minutes later.

"Thanks again, dude. I appreciate it," I say again, leaning back in the seat with a sigh.

"Don't mention it. But a word of advice. Knock it off. Every girl has her limit, and if I know anything, it's that you don't want to reach it."

It's not like I don't already know this, but I appreciate it nonetheless. I nod my head once. I stay quiet and listen to the music softly playing from the speaker system the whole way to the girls' apartment.

OCTAVIA

"That boy needs a good ass whooping for talking to you like that. I would have done it myself but there were too many witnesses!" Morgan shouts, waving her arms around theatrically as we sit on the couch in our living room.

A rerun of some home improvement show is playing on the television, but neither of us pays attention.

"It's so frustrating," I admit at last. "I've been as understanding as I possibly can be. I just don't know what more Oakley wants from me."

Huffing, I throw my head back against the armrest. I've been listening to him complain about not playing because I understand where he's coming from. Hockey is his life, and I know he's struggling. I couldn't imagine having my passion ripped away from me. But I'm also not an emotional punching bag.

Morgan nods her head fervently. "I'm going to kick his ass the next time I see hi—" A knock on the front door cuts her off. "Perfect! Speak of the devil, and he shall appear!" she yells excitedly, looking through the peephole in the door.

I jump up from my spot on the couch and grab her shoulders before she can rip Oakley a new one.

"Go to your room. I can take care of this," I say gently and push her down the hallway to her room. After a few seconds of fighting, she huffs and crosses her arms.

"Fine, I'll go. Just shout if you need me. I have my own boyfriend to yell at right now." *Uh oh.*

I unlock the door and pull it open to reveal a very sullen looking Oakley—his mouth set in a frown. The sight of him makes me want to wrap my arms around him and hold him close, but I don't.

"Before you say anything, I want to start by giving you these." He pulls out a bouquet of white roses from behind his back and holds them out to me.

I can't fight off the small smile that spreads across my lips. "Thank you."

My thanks must help relieve some of his nerves because his lips turn up slightly, and a slight pink flush covers his cheeks.

"The main reason I'm here is to apologize. I shouldn't have snapped at you like that earlier, and I definitely shouldn't have been so hard on you these past couple of weeks. I like you so much and I don't want to do anything to damage that." He bites his bottom lip as he waits anxiously for my answer.

"It's okay. I just want to help, is all. I don't mean to overstep."

“You’re my girlfriend. You can’t overstep.”

“You sure about that?” I cock my head to the side and move closer to him.

He swallows visibly, his Adam’s Apple bobbing up and down.

“I think so,” he says quietly. He drops his eyes to my lips and watches my tongue glide across my bottom lip.

My fingers itch to reach out and touch him, the close proximity teasing me. He turns me into a damn kid in a candy store.

“Good to know.”

His eyes light up, letting me know that I’ve succeeded in provoking him. He grabs hold of me, throwing me over his shoulder. I let out a squeal as he carries me to my bedroom.

“Let’s go test it out,” he growls playfully and slaps my ass, letting his hand linger before giving it a rough squeeze. I let out a giggle and press a sloppy, open-mouthed kiss to the skin beneath his jawline.

I feel his pulse beneath my lips, and I fill up with a sense of pride when I feel it thump harder, quicker. His grip on me tightens when he throws open my door, not waiting to close it again before I’m being tossed on the bed. Excitement swims in my belly as I watch him stalk towards me, a predatory smirk on his lips, and a fiery blaze sparking in his lustful gaze.

My heart thumps against my ribcage when he moves on top of me, placing his weight firmly on the two hands now resting beside my head. We’re so close now, his breath fanning across my parted lips, his body heat enveloping me like a blanket.

I don’t realize that I’m tracing my fingernails along his chest until I hear his groan of appreciation, my cheeks going pink. Swallowing my nerves, I slip them under his t-shirt, nearly melting when I feel the deep, hard ridges on his abdomen.

He leans down, capturing my lips with his, swallowing my sigh when he grinds his arousal between my legs, making my jaw slack, mouth falling open. My core throbs from the contact, leaving me breathless and wanting more—*needing* more. Reaching down, I grab his hips and pull him closer, giving him permission to keep going before he pulls away.

I can feel the thick, long outline of his erection against me, and I nearly orgasm from the thought of having him inside me. I know it's too early, but that thought is fading in my mind, leaving me tainted with dirty thoughts that make me meet his thrusts and reach for the button on his jeans.

“Ava.” He lets out a throaty groan, the sound itself making me shiver with need. His tongue slips into my mouth, playing with mine in a way that should be illegal while he pushes down the waistband of my biker shorts, rubbing his thumb on my hip bone. He's putting all of his weight on his forearm, yet his arm doesn't shake, the corded muscles holding himself up with ease. Shit, that's hot. Too hot.

We're grinding on each other like teenagers in the backseat of a beater car, but I don't care. I can't find it in me to stop once I've unbuttoned his jeans and pulled down the zipper, tugging on them until he reaches down and pulls them down to his thighs for me before pressing against me again. I can feel the wetness from his arousal through my thin shorts, and I roll my hips against him, cooing his name.

Without stopping to give myself a chance to back out, I reach down and grip him in a tight fist, my eyes shutting when he throbs in my hand.

“Baby, we don't have to go further than this,” Oakley groans half-heartedly, letting his forehead drop to rest against mine, our dewy skin making them stick together.

I slip his underwear down his thighs and grab his bare cock, giving it a quick jerk. “I want to.”

“Okay.”

He nods, almost to convince himself it's okay to go further before he does just that. My shorts are quickly shoved

down my legs before a long finger traces my slit, meeting the pool of arousal that's soaked through my panties. His mouth finds my neck: kissing, sucking, and biting on the sensitive skin as I plead for him to touch me—to really touch me.

My eyes roll behind my eyelids, my thighs spreading when he pushes my panties to the side and pushes a finger inside me, moving it in a wide circle while his thumb pushes up on my clit.

I tighten my grip on him and pick up my pace, letting my thumb drag along his wet tip with every pull. He's pushed another finger into my core now, jerking them around, hitting my special spot over and over until I'm crying for more, begging for him to make me come.

He starts to thrust himself in my hand the second I feel my stomach tighten, my walls gripping onto his fingers as spark after spark shoots through my core. I'm arching my back off the bed, pushing my chest against his.

“Fuck, Ava. You're gonna make me come,” he growls, seconds before his fingers are pulled from me, my shirt now being pushed up my stomach. It's less than a heartbeat after my skin is exposed that I feel hot, thick ropes of cum decorate my stomach.

“Holy shit,” he whispers, smiling a wide, white smile down at me, still holding himself up. I giggle when I notice his biceps wobbling slightly. “You are something else, Octavia Layton.”

“A good something I hope,” I reply breathlessly as I pull my short back up.

“A *very* good something.” He places a gentle kiss on my swollen lips before pulling back and pushing himself back on his knees. “Actually, you're *everything*.”



“I have a question,” Oakley murmurs as we lay in bed. I can’t read his expression in the dark. The only source of light in my room is the TV. A particularly gruesome horror film is playing, but I’m not paying enough attention to know what is happening.

I look up and attempt to meet his eyes. “I might have an answer.”

He runs his hand through the length of my hair, sending shivers down my spine when he toys with the damaged ends.

“Who’s going to be at dinner on Friday? I feel like I need to be doing my homework so I don’t jam my foot in my mouth or something,” he lightly chuckles.

I push out a gentle hum and smile to myself as I think of seeing my family again at Thanksgiving. It’s a casual holiday in our house, but the idea of having Oakley there makes it feel as exciting as Christmas.

“My mom and dad, my brother Ben, and his girlfriend, Sydney.”

Although we all live in the same city, I don’t see them as much as I would like to. I envy Oakley and his family for that. Even though they live four hours away from each other, they still manage to see each other every few weeks.

My brother lives in Ontario for school. He only ever comes home for the holidays. And my parents both have jobs—incredibly busy jobs—so we don’t get to spend a lot of time together. I hate it, but it makes the time we do have together that much more special.

“I can’t wait to meet the people who helped shape you into the amazing woman lying beside me,” Oakley mumbles into my hair, the gently spoken words vibrating against my skull. His words hit me hard, and I suck in a sharp breath as my heart starts to go haywire in my chest.

In an attempt to move the attention from myself before I hyperventilate, I ask him the same thing.

“What about you? Who’s going to be at your mom’s?”

“Mom, Gracie, my buddy Andre, and Gracie’s boyfriend, Jacob. I’m thinking of asking Tyler as well. He mentioned something about not having thanksgiving dinner a couple of days ago, and my mom loves feeding hungry boys. I think it’ll be nice.”

My heart flutters at how much he cares for everyone around him. And I have to agree. Tyler could definitely use some Anne Hutton love.

“I think that’s a great idea. Gracie’s boyfriend is going to be jealous, though. Your sister practically idolizes Tyler,” I add, smirking when Oakley tenses.

“On second thought...” he trails off, and I swat at his chest, making him laugh. A soft sigh escapes my lips when I move closer to him, letting my breath fan his chest as I trail my fingers along the hard muscles resting under my cheek.

“I can’t wait, baby,” Oakley murmurs as my eyes begin to droop.

Me either.

TWENTY-ONE

OAKLEY

I'm not usually someone who gets nervous, considering that I work best under high-pressure situations. However, this morning I did indeed wake up with a stomach full of nauseating nerves. The culprit—meeting Ava's family.

A faint tap on my truck's window makes me jump in surprise and smack the top of my head against the roof. Rubbing my injured crown, I roll my window down. Ava is standing by my truck, her arms crossed.

“Were you planning on staying out here all night?” she teases. The mischievous glint in her eyes seems to dance playfully as I curse myself. I have been parked in front of Ava's family home for the past five minutes, daydreaming. What a great first impression.

The relatively large yet homely-looking house sits at the top of the cobblestone driveway. The light brick and massive floor to ceiling windows contrast perfectly. The lawn is neatly trimmed, despite the weather and time of year. The cobblestone driveway is illuminated by garden lights, all the way up to the porch.

“Maybe I was just waiting for you to come outside to greet me?” I say, my voice dripping in sarcasm. Ava rolls her eyes at me in response. I grab my keys from the ignition and pick up the flowers that Mom insisted I bring from the passenger seat.

Ava's eyes widen in surprise. “Good call with the flowers. How did you know to get daisies?”

I hop out of the truck and smirk, oddly proud. “Have a little faith, babe.” She raises an eyebrow accusingly, unconvinced. “Fine. My mom told me to get them. Happy now?”

She lets out a light laugh and laces our fingers together. Leading the way up the driveway, she takes the flowers out of my hand, looking over at me curiously.

“You ready?”

“Let’s do this, baby doll.”

Ava wrinkles her nose and shakes her head. Squeezing my hand, she pushes the door open.

“Always the confident one.”

As soon as I step inside, the smell of turkey makes my stomach growl.

Similar to my house, Ava’s has a very open floor plan. Straight across from the front door is the living room, with a fireplace resting in between two built-in bookshelves. The kitchen is directly beside us. It’s beautiful, with its light oak cabinets, marble countertops that nearly match the floor to perfection.

“Take your shoes off,” Ava giggles, snapping me out of my reverie. I quickly do as she says and let her lead me past the kitchen and over to a lavishly decorated dining room.

Sitting in two of the eight chairs at the white wooden dining table is Ava’s mom and who I’m guessing is her brother’s girlfriend.

“Mom, Sydney, this is Oakley,” Ava says confidently, not letting go of my hand. Sydney gives me a simple wave of her hand while Ava’s mom stands with her hands on her hips, her brown eyes narrowed.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Layton.” I swallow past the lump in my throat and offer her my hand.

“You were right when you said he was handsome, Ava baby.”

My eyes widen as Ava’s cheeks flush. Lily lets out a loud laugh, her long auburn waves swinging behind her shoulders with the action. “Put that hand away and hug me. Save the manners for my husband,” she insists and pulls me in

for a tight hug. “Oh, and call me Lily. *Mrs. Layton* makes me sound like my crazy mother-in-law.”

“Sounds good, Lily,” I chuckle and wink at Ava over her mom’s shoulder.

“Where did dad and Ben go?” she asks as soon as Lily releases me.

“Oh, you know them. Ben insisted on your dad helping him fix the piece of crap car that he still refuses to sell.”

As if on cue, loud footsteps sound from somewhere down the hall.

“Son, that thing is a piece of shit. You’re going to end up stranded on the road in no time,” a gravelly voice chides, getting louder the closer they get to us.

“It’s my baby. No way in hell am I giving her up,” a younger male voice says quickly.

The arguing men enter the dining room and I raise my eyebrows. Despite the apparent age gap between the two, they are almost identical: exceptionally tanned with chiselled features, tall frames, and light eyes. The older man—Ava’s father—is taller than her brother. He is easily the same height as me. His eyes are slits and his lips are pulled tight into a straight line. He stares at me intently for a few moments, trying to intimidate me. I stare back, unaffected. He nods slightly and looks away.

“Oakley, these two *teenagers* are my dad and brother.” Ava shoots both men a warning look as if daring them to insult me. She’s so cute.

Like I did with Lily, I offer her father my hand and wait for him to take it. He takes my hand almost immediately and grips it tightly. I smile and shake his hand firmly. He nods his head in approval.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Mr. Layton,” I say in a firm, steady voice, my nerves dissipating.

“Nice to finally put a name to the face, Oakley,” he says roughly. “Hope you’re hungry. Lily made enough food to

feed an army.” He drops his hand to his side and stands next to his wife, his other arm tight around her waist.

“Um, hello? I’m still here. Nice to meet you, Oakley,” Ben jokes. He shakes my hand with a firm grip, like his father.

“Likewise.”

“Okay, introductions are over. Help me set the table, Ben,” Lily orders.

Ben rolls his eyes, and I feel an immediate fondness for him. “Why do I always have to set the table?”



With food piled on our plates, we eat in a comfortable silence. Ava stares at me through her lashes, a small smile lighting up her face. I lift a brow and raise my glass to my lips.

“Oakley, Ava told us you play hockey. Is that something you’re serious about pursuing permanently?” Lily asks with genuine curiosity, tearing my attention away from her daughter.

“Yes, I do. And absolutely. Hockey is something that I want to do for as long as I can,” I reply, my voice strong and steady.

“So you plan on making it to the big time? You want to play in the major league?” her dad asks, unhelpfully.

I can’t say I didn’t see this one coming.

“Yes, Sir. Quite a few teams have already approached me. It’s been my dream since I was little,” I admit. His jaw clenches as he leans closer to the table, his fiery gaze unwavering.

“You and Ava have talked about what’s going to happen when you’re jetting off all over North America while she’s still in college then? You’re serious enough about my daughter to come back for her?” His words are harsh, and I don’t miss the annoyance in his tone.

I turn to look at Ava as her fork clatters on her plate. Her hands are shaking, cheeks pink. I rest my hand on her thigh and rub my thumb back and forth in an attempt to soothe her.

“What is your problem?” she snaps at her dad through clenched teeth.

“I can assure you that I’m very serious about your daughter. I wouldn’t be here if I weren’t,” I promise, my hand still on Ava’s thigh.

“Are you ready for that, Ava? Never seeing him because he’s constantly hopping around from city to city? You deserve better than to be left in the dust until something better comes along,” he says, blatantly ignoring what I just told him.

“Sir, with all due respect, I don’t plan on *leaving Ava in the dust*. Nor do I plan on being gone for long periods of time. I’m also confident that I’m not going to find anyone better,” I tell him firmly, trying very hard to reign in my rising temper.

“And we’re supposed to trust you on that? I can’t just believe what you say with blind faith,” he snaps back. His words cut through me like knives as the room becomes dead silent.

Lily stares at her husband, open-mouthed as Sydney raises an eyebrow and takes a sip of her drink. Ava simply looks furious.

Ben glares at his father and shakes his head. “Dad, this isn’t the time or place. Drop it.”

“Ben’s right. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we’ll be upstairs,” Ava growls.

She shoots up from the table and storms out of the room, dragging me with her and leaving our half-eaten meals behind. Her breaths come out as short, angry puffs. I have no idea what to say. I simply follow her up a grand, spiral staircase.

I don’t blame her dad for asking those questions. Yes, they could have been phrased differently, but I would have asked the same things if I were in his position. The part that

sucks the most about what just happened is that he wasn't wrong about anything. Well, other than me finding someone better. I don't think that's even a possibility.

Ava comes to a stop outside of a white painted door at the end of the warm, inviting hallway.

"This is my room. Make yourself at home." She pushes the door open and I hesitantly make my way inside.

Her room is exactly the opposite of her other room at the apartment. The room is clean and sleek, without a single thing out of place. The walls are painted a cool teal—matching her bed covers—and every piece of furniture is white. A neat, tidy desk sits under the window. The two white doors on the opposite wall must lead to a closet and bathroom.

My eyes follow Ava as she crosses the room and flops onto her bed. I sit down beside her on the edge of the bed and rub her leg.

"Are you okay?"

"He's not usually like that. I'm sorry," Ava sighs, staring at the pictures and prize ribbons hanging on her wall. "I don't know what his deal is."

"Don't apologize. I'm a big boy. I can deal with it. It wasn't that bad."

A few moments of silence pass between us before Ava speaks again. "Do you think what he said will happen?"

My mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water as I try to respond. The last thing I want is for Ava to start doubting this—to start doubting us.

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to be gone most of the time and I'm just going to be.. well *here*. Hockey is the only thing keeping you in Vancouver. What happens when you aren't here anymore?" she mumbles, her voice barely audible.

"Come here," I plead gently, my arm held outstretched. Slowly, she sits up and comes to sit beside me. She tucks her face into the side of my neck and wraps her arms tightly

around me. “You’re insane if you think hockey is the only thing I have here.”

She draws in a shaky breath and nods her head as she leans into me, sighing. I rub my arm up and down her back and clear my throat.

“Besides, the odds of me being drafted at the end of this season are extremely slim. I’ll most likely be here for another year. There’s no use in worrying about it now.”

Ava nods her head again, and we just sit together in silence, both of us wishing that my words were true.

TWENTY-TWO

OCTAVIA

“So let me get this straight. Your dad pretty much ripped the skin off Oakley’s back cause he wants to play pro?” Tyler asks, seemingly gobsmacked as we come close to the end of our four-hour drive to Penticton.

“Pretty much. Talk about a great first impression.”

I tried to ignore Dad the next morning, but I was cornered on my way out of the house.

He demanded we sit down and talk, looking more stern than I’m used to. He wouldn’t take no for an answer, so I caved and decided to let him speak. Already pissed, I only got more annoyed when he used the whole ‘just-looking-out-for-me’ speech as his apology.

I rolled my eyes, crossed my arms and let his words go in one ear and straight out the other. Not wanting to argue, I nodded my head and said goodbye. He was utterly unfair the night before, and if I’m honest, seriously embarrassing too. A simple apology to me isn’t going to be enough.

“That’s rough. How did Oakley take it? I would have been pretty pissed.” Tyler shrugs his shoulders, his eyes glued firmly on the road.

“He played it off for my benefit. We haven’t had a chance to sit down and talk about the whole pro-league thing since,” I state with a sigh.

Hopefully, that will change tonight.

There are so many unknowns in our relationship hanging over my head, taunting me day and night. The biggest one being, what do we plan on doing if he *does* get drafted early? Just sit and hope for the best? Every inch of me needs to have answers, and it pains me that I don’t have them.

Are we setting ourselves up for failure? Can we even make this work when I'm stuck here and he's all over North America? Surrounded by beautiful women at that.

Will we crash and burn like a tragic love story? Everything in my brain is screaming at me to run away before things get messy—and most importantly, I get hurt again.

I swore I wouldn't give anybody the power to break me ever again, but I did. Oakley can't just break me. He can destroy me.



We pull up outside Oakley's house shortly after noon. I can feel my heart contract as I study the house in front of me. You can almost *feel* the love radiating through the front door.

“Ready to head in?” Tyler's powerful, gruff voice cuts through the comfortable silence.

I open the car door and step out into the freezing October air. Luckily, I decided to dress weather appropriate and have quite the cute look going on with Morgan's help. Much to her despair, I went for a simple outfit; a loose blush blouse and dark skinny jeans. It's perfect.

“Ready as I'll ever be.”

Tyler snorts and falls into step beside me as we walk up the steep sidewalk. When we reach the front door, Tyler raps on the door three times to announce our arrival.

After a few seconds the door flies open, revealing an extraordinarily handsome Oakley. Dressed in a black button-down and a pair of very tight dark wash jeans, he looks good enough to eat. His usual cap covered messy hair has been trimmed and slicked back, and don't get me started on the beard that now covers the lower half of his face.

“Hey, baby. You look gorgeous,” I hear him say with a strong sense of approval.

I drag my eyes away from his gorgeous body and up to his even prettier eyes. They glimmer with happiness, and I can't help but smile.

“Hi,” I squeak, wishing Tyler wasn't standing beside me so I could pounce on my man.

As if on cue, Tyler scoffs, “Hello? I'm literally right here.”

Oakley smirks and opens up the door wider so Tyler and I can make our way inside.

“Hey, buddy. Glad you could make it.”

“Thanks for having me. I don't remember the last time I was in a house that felt so warm.”

I look for the hidden sadness in his words, but don't find any.

“Where's that lovely mother of yours? I was promised quite the feast,” I tease, hoping my comment will bring back the playful banter from before.

“And a feast you will get, my dear. Oh, don't you look beautiful!” Anne exclaims, bustling into the entryway. An apron is tied around her neck, over her dress. Written across the front of the apron is *World's Best Mom*. It fits her perfectly.

I beam at her. “So do you! I love your dress!”

The black dress comes to a stop a few inches above her ankles, and beautiful yellow daisies are splattered across the silky material.

“Oh, no need to flatter me. I already like you,” she grins before turning her attention over to Tyler.

“And you must be the infamous Tyler that Gracie won't stop talking ab—” she trails off when her very annoyed teenage daughter storms into the room, her boyfriend hot on her heels.

“Mom!” Gracie shrieks, hands on her hips. Her cheeks are already turning bright pink.

“I mean, *Oakley* has told me so much about you,” Anne corrects herself, wearing a sly smile.

A wide-eyed Tyler just lets out an uncomfortable laugh as he quickly eyes up a very embarrassed Gracie.

“Hey, Gracie, why don’t you give me a tour of the house?” I pipe up. Oakley opens his mouth to protest, earning himself a glare. “You don’t mind, do you, babe? I’m sure Jacob would love to hear about your team.”

He gulps. “Right, yeah. Go ahead,”

“Perfect! Let’s go.” I link my arm through Gracie’s and pull her away from the uncomfortable situation her mother unwittingly created.

“You’re seriously a lifesaver,” Gracie breathes when we make it to the back of the cozy home. The smell of turkey roasting in the oven wafts over us, reminding me of my mom’s fantastic cooking.

Gracie and I hurry past a honey-coloured wall decorated with countless pictures. Each one is placed perfectly beside the other—not a single out of place—years worth of memories, proudly on display for everyone to see. A picture of little Oakley ice skating makes me smile. Oakley was just as adorable when he was a kid as he is now.

“Don’t worry. In a few minutes, Tyler won’t even remember what your mom said,” I assure her hurriedly.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” she mumbles.

I can’t help but feel her pain. Being a teenage girl and crushing on an older guy they know they can’t have isn’t easy. What girl hasn’t been there? According to Oakley, she’s been fantasizing over Tyler since the first team practice she watched almost six months ago.

“Tell me about that boyfriend of yours. You’re into blonde’s, hey?” I smile to myself as her frown turns into a cheeky grin. “He’s good looking,”

“I guess I am.” Her usual giddy attitude returns and when she giggles, I give myself a mental pat on the back.

“And I know, believe me.”

TWENTY-THREE

OCTAVIA

“So glad you could make it.” Oakley fist pumps who I assume is Andre and pulls him in for a hug.

Andre is maybe an inch or two shorter than Oakley and truly does live up to the hype appearance-wise. He reeks of *Playboy*, which is no surprise from what I’ve heard.

“Dude, I wouldn’t miss meeting the girl who managed to tame my best friend.” The two guys laugh together. I simply stand back and watch them interact with a small smile.

Oakley seems so at ease in his childhood home, surrounded by the people he loves most.

“Ava, this idiot is Andre,” he grins, his hand on my hip. “Andre, this is my girlfriend, Ava.”

Andre slowly looks me up and down before sending me a wink. “You forgot to mention that she’s a fucking smoke show.”

His way too blatant attempt at flirting rubs not only me, but Oakley the wrong way. He steps in front of me, using his body to shield me from Andre’s wandering eyes.

“No,” Oakley states simply, as overprotective as ever.

Andre’s chest shakes with silent laughter. “Woah. Stand down, doggy. I’m harmless, I promise.”

Oakley hesitantly moves back to his place beside me. With an arm grips my waist, Oakley presses me against him pointedly. You would think by now he would know he has no competition when it comes to other guys, much less his best friend.

“Damn, girl. Tell me, what’s the trick? I’m sure you can already imagine the line-up of girls that would love to

know how you did it.” His words sound teasing, playful even, but unfortunately, this joke also doesn’t sit well with me.

“Andre,” Oakley growls as soon as we all sit down in the living room. He pulls me onto his lap, and I fall forcefully onto his thighs, gasping in surprise.

“Oakley,” Andre beams, flopping down on the only remaining seat beside Oakley. Does this guy have a death wish or something?

“What do you mean by *line-ups of girls*?” I ask, my voice low.

Andre’s face lights up as he clearly revels in his ability to get under Oakley’s skin.

“Oh, Oakley here has always been quite the hot commodity. Lucky for you, though, he never gave them any attention. Not many of them anyway,” he adds and offers Oakley his fist to bump. Oakley just glares at him.

My stomach flips as I get the overwhelming need to punch something. I’m not naive. Obviously, I know Oakley’s a catch and that he’s been with other people. It just freaking sucks hearing it come out of someone else’s mouth. Especially someone as close to him as Andre.

“Don’t listen to him, Ava. He wouldn’t understand the word relationship if it bit him in his dick,” Oakley insists, his grip on my waist tightening. I try to will the overwhelming bad thoughts away, to no avail, as we wait for dinner.



“That was delicious, Anne,” I say truthfully, patting my now bloated stomach happily.

“Thank you, sweetheart. Will you help me with the dishes?” Her eyes shine with happiness. I nod and start to collect the plates. Once all the dishes are gathered, we start washing. Anne fills the sink with warm soapy water, a light

hum filling the peaceful space as I start loading the dishwasher.

“I’m so happy you could make it today,” Anne says kindly.

“I’m thrilled to be here. You cook a fabulous turkey.” I place a glass bowl on the top rack with a smile.

“You’re too sweet.” She drops a pair of gravy dishes into the sink. “I heard things didn’t exactly go to plan the other day?”

“Yeah, you can say that,” I shove a fork harder than necessary into the utensil holder.

“I hope I’m not overstepping here, but I wanted to say that if my son weren’t serious about you, he wouldn’t have asked you to come here today. Believe it or not, you’re the first girl he’s ever brought home to meet me.”

That spikes my interest.

“Really? Andre didn’t make it seem that way earlier.”

She gives her head a shake and clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “Oh dear. Don’t listen to a word that comes out of his mouth. I love him like my own, but that young man never knows when to stop talking.”

“I figured as much. Andre seems to have a set of loose lips.”

Her soft, warm laugh fills the room. “I agree with you. I hope he didn’t end up getting that from me after spending so much time over here. His mother didn’t have anything to do with it. She’s as quiet as a mouse that one.”

Yeah, that doesn’t sound like Andre.

“My poor daughter has to deal with me embarrassing her all of the time. Is she mad at me? For earlier?” Anne asks, her hands submerged in the soapy water as she stares out the window above the sink.

“She’ll be fine. She’s tougher than she looks.”

Anne nods her head, her eyes still staring into space.

“Can I ask you something?” I mutter, my cheeks flushed. She turns to me with a gentle smile and pulls her hands out of the sink. “Do you ever worry about when he’ll be gone? It seems to be all I can think about since the other night.”

She raises a now dry hand to her neck and grasps a locket dangling on a chain in a tight fist. “Of course, I do. But I know he’ll always be here when we need him. My boy has been taking care of Gracie and me ever since his father passed away. It’s time he did something for himself.”

Time seems to slow as I drop the plate I’m holding. It shatters against the tiles as I stand frozen, my mind reeling. Anne calls my name and asks if I’m okay, but her voice sounds far away. I can barely hear her over the pounding of my heart. I nod my head numbly, a cold, bitter feeling sweeping over me.

I’m officially the worst girlfriend ever. How did I not know something like that? I figured his dad was maybe out of the picture by how little he talks about him, but I wasn’t expecting this. He avoids the topic of his dad at all costs, always changing the subject or getting frustrated and stomping off.

Why didn’t he tell me? He knows everything about me. Every hidden secret, every memory I’ve tried so desperately to forget. I showed him everything about me and I get this in return? I get to find out his father passed away from someone else. I’ve known him for months, and he has never said a thing about his father’s passing?

“Ava! Baby, are you okay?”

I feel two hands on my shoulders as familiar tingles rush through me. I focus on the soft green eyes staring at me expectantly.

Oakley is crouched in front of me, rubbing his hands up and down my arms. I shrug him off and stumble out of the back door. I can hear his footsteps behind me as I lead the way outside. I come to a stop in the centre of the garden, barely noticing the damp grass wetting my socks.

“What’s wrong? What happened back there? Answer me, baby. *Please*. I’m freaking out,” he pleads, keeping a safe distance from me. “Did Andre say something? I swear to Go —”

“When did your dad die?” I whisper, both furious and sad. My hands are shaking, my heart’s still pounding furiously in my constricted chest. He draws in in a sharp breath and I stand still, waiting for him to answer me.

One minute. Two minutes. Three minutes. *Nothing*.

I shiver as the harsh wind nips at the bare skin on my face, but I hold firm. Then again, standing out here freezing my ass off is pointless if he’s not going to talk to me. I turn to head back inside when he finally speaks again.

“When I was thirteen,” he chokes out. Silence fills the bitterly cold air.

My questions die on my lips, yet my curiosity is unrelenting, nagging me to ask him what happened. My heart aches, guilt starting to bare its ugly head, silently punishing me for being so selfish.

“Car crash,” he breathes, answering my unasked question. “He was hit by a drunk driver.”

I blow out a long, drawn-out sigh and observe him, noticing his harsh swallows and rapid blinking.

“I don’t want your sympathy, Ava. I’ve had enough sympathy to last a fucking lifetime,” he hisses, the harsh words seemingly directed more so at the world than at me.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” I ask, my tone firm but gentle.

“Of course, I was. But it’s not something I tell just anyone!” Oakley grumbles, raising his voice slightly towards the end of his sentence. His eyes widen and he swears under his breath when he realizes what he said.

A mirthless laugh escapes past my lips before I can stop it. “*Just anyone? Really?*”

Oakley rolls his eyes, incensing me further. “You know that’s not what I meant, Ava.”

“I don’t think I do. I don’t seem to know anything about you,” I scoff, my voice rising with my temper. “You know, Adam warned me about this. I brushed him off because I thought that once you were done getting me to open up and tell you everything about my past, you would want to tell me about yours. I guess I was wrong. You’re such a hypocrite!”

“Of fucking *course*. Adam certainly didn’t waste any time before trying to turn you against me. Are you seriously so naive that you can’t see how obviously in love with you he is?” he snarls, throwing his arms into the air in exasperation.

“Don’t turn this on Adam. I don’t know what personal vendetta you have towards him but you need to knock it off,” I growl, making it clear that he has crossed a line.

“Are you serious? A personal vendetta? The guy is so desperate for your attention and you’re the only one who doesn’t see it. Why do you think he gives me dirty looks? Why else was he so upset that I was the one who took care of you that night you found out about your birth mother showing up? He looks at you the way only *I* should look at you.”

My jaw drops as I just stare back at him, gobsmacked. I don’t want to believe him, but I would be lying to myself if I said it doesn’t make any sense.

“This is about you and me. Not Adam,” I manage to scrape past my burning throat.

This is not how tonight was supposed to go. I look away from him as the tears start blurring my vision.

I refuse to cry. Not here, and certainly not like this. I need to go inside and ask Tyler if we can go home. We were supposed to stay here tonight but I can’t. Not anymore. I need Morgan.

The Oakley I know isn’t here. He has been replaced by an aggressive, hot-headed version of himself. All I want to do is bring my knee straight up to his groin. I turn away and take massive, fast strides to the door.

“Where are you going? We’re not done here,” he snaps in evident frustration.

Welcome to the freakin’ club.

“Home. Don’t follow me. We can talk once you get your head out of your ass.”

And I do the same.

My words hang in the air between us as I walk inside, my head held high. I say my goodbyes and thank Anne for the lovely dinner after apologizing profusely for the extremely embarrassing show in her backyard.

As Tyler drives us home, I desperately try to stop our fight from repeating over and over in my head.

TWENTY-FOUR

OAKLEY

I'm such an idiot. I don't know why I didn't tell Ava about my dad. Maybe it was the fear of seeing her look at me with pity, or perhaps I just hadn't had the guts to be so open. Either way, she was right.

I am a hypocrite.

It seems like everything is starting to come apart—and the issues just keep piling up. At what point does it stop?

The fight at my mother's house was two days ago. If I don't talk to her soon, I think I might explode. The restlessness from my injuries isn't helping with the pain that comes with not talking to Ava, either.

I texted her that night and asked her to let me know when they got home safe. But it was Tyler who texted me four and a half hours later to let me know he dropped her off.

The next morning I got a simple "*hey*," followed by a lame attempt at a conversation before she stopped replying altogether. I know we're both hurting, but it doesn't make any of this any easier. It sure as shit doesn't help my mood. I'm surprised Matt hasn't socked me one yet for my piss poor attitude.

The medic cleared me to join the team on the ice again just in time for our game tonight. We won by a blowout score of seven to two. When I scored the final goal, I spun around searching for Ava, only to be hit with the harsh reality that she hadn't come.

My stomach dropped when I saw that a skinny guy had filled her usual seat beside Morgan. That was when it hit me. This has to end. We have to fix this.

“Dude, you’re going to be with Morgan the whole night. Why the hell do I need to come?” I ask, not trying to hide my annoyance. The last place I want to be at a party—especially one of Adam’s.

Matt rolls his eyes and shoves me through the door and into the crowded living room. “You needed to get out of the damn house. You’re wasting away in there.”

“It’s only been two days,” I grumble, shifting my eyes around the humid room as I feel Matt scurrying away.

I spot Tyler sitting on one of the leather couches in the far corner. I drop into the seat beside him and take a long swig of the bitter liquid Matt gave me. “Hey, man.”

Tyler looks over at me with raised eyebrows and bloodshot eyes. He nods and takes a sip of his drink. “She was in the kitchen with Adam the last time I saw her.”

My eyebrows shoot up into my hairline. “She’s here? With Adam?” The thought makes my head spin.

I didn’t expect her to be here after she didn’t show up to the game. Tyler nods again and drains his cup. He gets up—stumbling slightly—and slaps my shoulder before walking towards the sea of drunks. Clearly, it’s been a rough night for him too.

The sudden overwhelming smell of perfume makes me cough. A small body collides into my side, knocking the air out of my lungs.

“You’re Octavia’s boyfriend, right?” The mystery body asks, judgement clear in her slurred words.

“Yeah,” I reply with a shrug. “Oakley Hutton.”

“Well, this party sucks. I would grab her and get out of here before these freaks suck the life right out of you. I’m pretty sure she’s outside with Adam.”

I cock my head to the side and consider her through slitted eyes. Why does it seem as though everyone is keeping tabs on my girlfriend? And why does she always have to be with Adam?

“Thanks,” I grumble. “You got a name?”

She rolls her piercing blue eyes—which are wide behind her thick black-rimmed glasses. She blows a bubble with her gum and lets it pop with a loud *smack* when she speaks again. “Beth Winston. I’m surprised Ava hasn’t told you about me.”

From this chick’s apparent ego, it isn’t hard to guess why I haven’t heard about her.

“Well, thanks, Beth. Get home safe.”

“You too, Oakley Hutton,” she sighs and flops back against the couch cushion.

I stand up and push my way past the herds of incompetent drunks swarming around me. Swinging open the back door, I take a deep breath and allow the fresh, crisp air to calm me. I lean against one of the many brick pillars and groan. I shouldn’t have come here.

My head snaps up at the sound of Ava’s laugh. It rings in my ears teasingly. There she is, standing in the middle of the small group I call my friends.

My eyes zero in on her smile and I can feel myself smiling like an idiot almost immediately. Her long hair has been pulled up in a beautifully messy bun. I laugh to myself, knowing full well that she had probably gotten sick of it blowing in her face and pulled it up.

“When are you going to admit it to yourself?” Morgan asks from beside me. I jump in surprise, making her grin.

I scoff, “Admit what, Morgan?”

“That you’re in love with her.”

I choke on my drink and burst into a fit of coughs. “Where did you get that idea from? You need to stop watching so many romcoms,” I tease as soon as my coughing subsides.

“Oh, cry me a river, Oakley,” Morgan snaps, smacking my arm. “You’re standing in the shadows, all alone, watching her with a shit-eating grin. Either you’re in love with Ava, or

you're planning on kidnapping her. Personally, I'm hoping for option number one. "

I don't say anything in response as she elbows me in the side. "Don't stand in the shadows for too long. She's been struggling too. Go talk to her." And with that, Morgan walks away.

Am I in love with Ava? We've only known each other for a couple of months. Is that even long enough to fall in love with someone? All I know is that I never want to be away from her.

She's ignited feelings inside of me that I never knew existed. I would do anything for her without question. Anything to keep that perfect smile on her face. Is that what love is like? Hell if I know.

A sudden buzzing in my pocket snaps me out of my daydream. I pull out my phone to see my agent's name written across the small screen.

"Hey, Will. What's up?" I ask, curious as to why he is calling me this late. As much as I enjoy having Will's rough, unimpressed voice ringing in my ears, I can't say that I'm pleased to hear it right now.

"Oakley! I've got fantastic news. 2020 is your year!" he practically shouts on the other end of the phone.

"What do you mean?" My words come out slow and careful. My heart starts to pound, and my hands are slick with nervous sweat.

"You'll be in this year's draft, dumbass. I got the call this afternoon!" Will exclaims, no doubt giving his head a shake.

"Are you serious?" I blurt, dumbfounded. I knew it was possible when I had scouts watching me back in Penticton, but I had no idea it would be so soon.

"Dead serious. They're projecting you first round. That's all I know for now, but I wanted to tell you as soon as possible."

“I don’t even know what to say. Thank you.” I grin, still in shock. He hangs up after a gruff goodbye and I breathe out a sigh of disbelief. This has to be a dream. It can’t be real. I have to tell Ava.

The giant grin doesn’t budge the entire way over to my girl. At this exact moment, I don’t give a shit about our fight. All I care about is sharing one of the best moments of my life with my girlfriend.

I push past Adam, shoving him to the side. I chuckle when I hear him scoff as I finally reach Ava. She doesn’t have time to ask any questions by the time I wrap my arms around her waist and lift her. I spin her around and she lets out a surprised gasp.

“I did it, baby. I did it. I’m going to play with the pros,” I murmur into her ear and cover her face in kisses.

She pushes me away suddenly, her eyes wide with shock. Everyone is dead silent as they wait to see what’s going to happen. Is she going to shrug me off? Slap me? Tell me to leave her alone? To my surprise—and delight, her bemused frown turns into a beam. She jumps into my arms and wraps her legs tightly around my waist. I breathe a sigh of relief and bury my face in her neck.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so proud of you. I knew you would,” she beams, pride swimming in her shining eyes when she looks at me.

We stand there in silence for I don’t even know how long. I just stare at her with a huge, goofy grin until I can’t hold back any longer. I lean down and plant my lips on hers.

She smiles against my lips and leans up to kiss me back. This kiss feels different. It tells each other everything we can’t bring ourselves to say out loud. Words would just complicate things even further. This is easier and more meaningful.

An annoyed grunt pulls us back into reality. I—very reluctantly—pull away. Ava’s cheeks turn red when she

remembers we have an audience. She drops her legs to the ground and hides her face against my chest.

I can't hide my smug smirk when I realize it was Adam who broke us apart. His eyes are dark as he glares at me. Yeah. She's mine.

"Do you need us to leave, or?" Matt jokes, breaking the silence.

"Actually, we're going now. Have a good night, guys," I chuckle and wave at them lazily as we leave the party. "Can we go back to my place? I have something I want to show you."

Her eyes widen as she raises her eyebrows. "Is this your way of getting me in bed? Because it's so not going to happen."

I laugh when she folds her arms across her chest. "Keep dreaming, princess. It's important. I think you'll like it. Please?" I plead, hoping she'll just agree so we can get out of this damn cold weather.

She nods in reluctant agreement. I lace our fingers together for the first time in what feels like forever and follow her lead. Even just being with her, I feel lighter and more content than I have in weeks.

I squish myself in the front seat of her car and push the seat as far back as possible. She shakes her head in amusement and laughs—adorably, might I add.

"You look ridiculous," she giggles as she cranks the heat up.

"Hey, it's not my fault you drive a clown car," I tease.

"She's not a clown car! Don't hurt her feelings like that," she scolds, leaning over to swat my arm.

"Okay, okay. Whatever you say." I place my hand on her thigh as she pulls out of the parking spot.

TWENTY-FIVE

OAKLEY

“Do you want anything to drink? I’m sure I have some food if you’re hungry. Are you warm enou—”

“I’m perfect. Calm down and come sit with me,” Ava urges, cutting off my nervous rambling.

My hands shake and my heart pounds a million miles a minute. Quite the opposite of Ava’s calm demeanour. She looks so relaxed from where she sits cross-legged on my worn couch.

Calm down? Right, I can do this. I choke out a nervous chuckle and swallow past the lump in my throat.

“Right. Okay.” I move towards her and almost trip over my own feet. Avoiding eye contact, I grab the back of my hoodie and yank it over my head.

“What are you doing?” she shrieks, eyes wide. “When I said you weren’t getting me into bed, I was serious!”

“Relax, sweetheart. If I wanted to get you in bed, I’d do a lot better than this,” I tease, watching the blush spread across her cheeks. She hasn’t taken her eyes off my now-naked chest since the minute I took my hoodie off. I contemplate teasing her about it, but I think I’ll save that for later.

“Do you ever get tired of teasing me?” she mumbles. I sit down on the carpet in front of her and shrug off her question. She already knows the answer to that.

Her fingers start to trace the tattoo on my upper back, making me flinch.

It’s the tattoo I got for my dad. And until now, the only people who knew the meaning behind the intricate designs

were Mom and Gracie. I never thought I'd want anyone else to know.

I remember being so pumped the day Mom took me to the tattoo parlour. It was my sixteenth birthday and after three years of nagging every day for her to let me get the damn thing, she finally did.

The tattoo artist and I had spent hours redrawing the design until I decided it was good enough. I'll never forget Mom's face when I showed her. Her eyes welled up the second they landed on the paper.

The tattoo is a scene of sorts—a memory. It is set in the middle of winter, with piles of fluffy, white snow and tall, bare trees sitting along the banks of a frozen lake. A young boy dressed in full hockey gear is winding up his hockey stick, ready to shoot the puck into the nearby net. Hutton is written across the back of the boy's jersey, above the number eleven. My dad's lucky number.

Yet the most meaningful part of the tattoo is the cross hidden between the trees and behind the snowbank. It's hidden because written on the cross is the date my father passed away.

“I got it for my dad. The tattoo,” I tell her.

Ava draws in a sharp breath and leans her chin on my shoulder.

“It's beautiful.”

Her fingers haven't stopped their gentle movements across my skin. I lean back into her touch, finally letting her give me the comfort I need.

“Tell me about him,” she whispers, her tone gentle.

“His name was Jamie,” I manage to blurt out, but Ava gently squeezes my shoulder and cuts me off.

”*Is*,” she murmurs. I turn my head slightly so I can meet her gaze, confused. “His name *is* Jamie. He never left. Not really,” Ava explains. It is a simple statement, yet the words make my head spin.

I'm suddenly aware of how fast and hard my heart is thumping against my ribcage as I stare into her eyes. I'm overwhelmed with the urge to be closer to her. She never fails to amaze me with how she always knows exactly what I need to hear her say.

It's now that I know the words are there on the tip of my tongue.

I love you.

It shouldn't be hard to let them slip past my lips. I need to let Ava know how deeply I genuinely care for her and tell her how she makes me feel. I need to let them speak as my promise never to leave her. But I don't say them. Instead, I nod my head and turn to face her.

"He was my hero," I pause, taking a deep breath before continuing, "he was a contractor for a small construction company. His job came in handy when it came to working around the house, too. My mom would make him tear down almost every wall in the house just to paint the new ones every ugly colour you can think of. She always felt like the house needed a *change*, but I never heard him complain. Not once."

Ava chuckles and leans forward, letting her arms hang down on both sides of my neck. "It sounds like he loved her a lot."

I let myself smile at her comment. "Even from a young age I could feel the love radiating off of them. Once he was gone, though, that's when I realized how much they loved each other. He was her whole world, and she was his." My eyes burn, but I swallow back the tears and speak again.

"Mom struggled. It was hard watching her hurt the way she did. I would wake up in the middle of the night and hear her crying in their room. After the first few nights, I started getting up when I heard her cry. I would just hug her until she eventually fell asleep."

Arms squeeze around me and I realize tears are streaming down my cheeks. I try to wipe them away quickly, but when I feel the tightening in my throat, I know it's too late.

My shoulders drop, and I put my head between my knees as the heartache rips through me.

The tears only fall faster as every deeply hidden ache and pain takes hold of me. I try to cover my face with my hands, but Ava is there before I get the chance. She crouches in front of me and takes my hands in hers, not allowing me to pull away and hide like I want to.

“I’m here. Let me be here for you. You don’t have to hide from this anymore,” Ava whispers and pulls me towards her, wrapping her tiny body around mine until she’s the only thing I feel.

My body shakes as I let out gentle sobs, finally giving in to all the built-up emotions that I’ve held in for so long. We sit there in silence, the only noise in the room comes from the sounds of my erratic breathing as I try and calm myself down. And once the tears let up, I try to get my breathing under control again and wipe my face dry.

“You know he’s proud of you, right?” Ava murmurs gently, kissing my cheek.

Is he? I like to think so. I’ve tried to be the best man I can be, not wanting to let him down. Let’s hope he’s up there with a smile on his face.



“What team are you hoping to go to?” Ava pipes up from my lap, her hands on either side of my neck.

We’ve moved from the floor to the couch. Her head is in my lap as my fingers run through her soft hair. Her favourite movie is playing on the T.V, and although I put up a bit of a fight, it’s not half bad.

“Vancouver would be my top choice, but it all depends on what spot I go,” I reply, moving my gaze to her.

She tilts her head towards me. Her cheeks are tinted pink, and her bottom lip is pulled tightly in between her teeth.

“Vancouver sucks. I would hate for you to get stuck on a bad team just because you want to stay close to your family.”

I raise an eyebrow, questioning her. “I hope you’re including yourself in my family, baby.”

She shrugs off my comment. “What happens when you get stuck somewhere in the states?”

That question is something I’ve been thinking about consistently since dinner with her family. I think I finally have come up with a solution. Or at least a temporary one.

“I’ll keep my place here and I’ll fly back and forth. I’ll facetime you every chance I get,” I explain confidently.

She scoffs, gently shoving my chest. “You’re not keeping a place in a city you’ll barely be in! Don’t be ridiculous.”

“What do you mean, ‘rarely be in’? I plan on being here every chance I get,” I argue, not liking her unconvinced tone. “Anyways, it’s still like nine months away. I still have plenty of time to convince you.”

She sighs loudly.

If I had it my way, she would be waiting for us in *our* place while I’m gone. I don’t mention that, though. I know that would only freak her out. Hell, it freaks *me* out and I’m the one who thought of it in the first place.

But if I’m honest with myself, she’s it for me. I think I’ve known that since the moment I first saw her. Maybe it’s ridiculous to say that considering I haven’t even said the dreaded L-word to her yet. But I don’t plan on ever-changing my mind about her.

Octavia Layton is the girl for me and I will happily shout it from every single skyscraper in this city.

TWENTY-SIX

OCTAVIA

“Thank God! I thought you would never get home!” Morgan shouts as soon as I shut the front door behind me.

“I was gone for one night,” I groan, shrugging off my jacket.

“Okay, whatever.” She waves me off before grinning, oddly excited. “Let’s hang out today. I miss you.”

Guilt washes over me. I know she doesn’t mean anything by it, but it hurts. I’m aware that I haven’t exactly been spending a lot of time with her lately—considering everything that’s been going on with me. I’m totally the world’s worst best friend.

“Yeah, sounds good to me. What do you wanna do?”

“Well...” she hesitates slightly, sticking her bottom lip out in a pout. *Oh no.* “As you know, it’s Matt’s birthday next weekend and I *have* to look hot as hell,” she hints, batting her eyelashes.

I shake my head so fast the room spins. “Nope. No way. We are not going shopping.”

Shopping with Morgan is pure torture. She’s one of those girls who has to stop at every single store in the mall to try on almost every single article of clothing. I would rather spend an entire day watching paint dry.

“Come on, Ava. Please? For me?” Shit, her puppy dog eyes are starting to wear me down.

I huff and swear under my breath. “Fine, but we’re not spending the entire day there! And you have to buy me lunch.”

“Yay! Hurry up and get ready—you smell like a guy,” she cringes, pushing me in the direction of my bedroom.

“Okay, okay, you crazy-woman. I’m going.” I shove her hands away and hurry into my room.

After spending way too long in the shower, I get out and slip on a robe. Morgan comes barreling into the room—right after I pull my nice-ish underwear on.

“You’re seriously not ready yet? Hurry the hell up.”

“Um, in case you didn’t notice, I’m half-naked,” I inform her, gesturing to my body.

“And? We’ve been skinny dipping together,” she shrugs, plopping herself down on my bed. She eyes me up with a grin. “Cute set, by the way. Are you planning on getting laid or what?”

I spin around, wide-eyed. I pull Oakley’s hoodie and leggings on with a sigh. “A girl can wear cute underwear for herself, you know,” I grumble.

Okay, maybe I have been trying a bit harder lately, but that’s none of her business.

“If you say so. I still don’t understand how you haven’t hopped on that yet. God knows I would have. The guy is smokin’ hot.”

I flip her the middle finger. She should be nagging Oakley about that. He’s the one who constantly stops us.

“Focus on your boyfriend, M. He’s not exactly ugly either,” I point out while carefully filling in my eyebrows.

“Oh, I know,” she smirks. I catch her wink in the vanity mirror and put a finger in my mouth to gag at what she’s insinuating. Morgan has never been *subtle*.

I stand up from my chair and notice one of Morgan’s shoes lying on the ground. With a mischievous grin, I pick up the high-top sneaker and whip it at her head.

“You bitch!” she screams, her head snapping up in my direction. She reaches up and rubs the spot where the shoe hit her. “What the hell was that for?”

“I had to get your attention somehow,” I tease. “You coming or what?”

“Remind me why I’m friends with you again?” she asks with a glare.

“Cause I’m just so damn lovable?”

“You’re funny. Let’s go.”

She grabs my hand and drags me out of my room. She opens the front door and smacks my ass. I send her my own glare, grab the same coat as earlier off the coat rack, and slip it on before heading out.



“What about this one?”

Morgan opens the changing room door and walks out in a black mini dress covered in holographic sequins. It stops just below her butt and her boobs are practically spilling out of the plunged neckline.

“I didn’t know we were in Skanks-R-Us. Go change.” I shove her back towards the room and get a growl in response.

“You’re such a prude,” she says once she’s behind the closed dressing room door again.

“Matt would burst into a ball of fire if you showed up to a party wearing that.”

“Fine. This one’s better. Just gimme a minute.”

I stifle a laugh when I hear a bang and a muffled “ouch.” The door swings open soon after and Morgan stumbles out, attempting to do a dramatic twirl.

“What do you think?”

My eyebrows shoot up, jaw dropping. The maroon coloured lace tank top has a deeply scooped neckline. The colour contrasts nicely with her tanned skin and shows off her chest quite nicely. She’s paired the top with a skin-tight leather

skirt that clings to her small waist and reaches her knees. The whole outfit shows off her body in all the right places.

“You look perfect, M.” I give her an encouraging smile.

She jumps up and claps her hands in excitement. “Yay! Okay, I’m going to get this one. Wait for me while I change,” she commands, heading off to change again.

Ten minutes later, we’ve made our way out of the mall and into the safe confines of Morgan’s Jeep. Some catchy pop song is blasting through her speakers and it’s only a matter of seconds before we’re both singing along shamelessly to the cheesy lyrics.

Eight songs later and with our throats sore, we pull into our parking spot a few feet from the side door of our apartment building. I didn’t realize how much I missed her—even if she did make me go shopping.

Morgan goes to the backseat to grab all of her shopping bags while I head inside. I get to our floor and push the heavy metal door open.

When I see a woman leaning against the wall opposite my apartment, I pick up my pace, hurrying down the hallway as curiosity gets the better of me. If this is one of Adam’s one-night stands I swear I’ll kill him.

As I get closer, I realize she’s way too old to be a one-night stand. Or at least I would hope so.

The woman’s hair is scarily thin. It is a dark shade of brown that highlights just how pale her skin is. Her green eyes are bloodshot as they move to stare back at me, hauntingly vacant.

“Hello? Do you need something?” I politely ask the woman.

She pushes away from the wall and stands up straight, brushing her hands across her torn clothing. The sweatshirt she’s wearing isn’t exactly the most eye-pleasing piece of clothing I’ve ever seen. It’s stained, faded, and the yellow material hangs loosely on her thin frame.

“You’re beautiful,” she whispers, her voice rough and faraway. I raise my eyebrows and take a cautious step back from her, gripping my keys tight in my hand. What the...

“Do I know you?” I murmur, panicked and unsure of what to say. The woman flinches back at my question. I want to ask her more but decide against it.

“You don’t know who I am?” she asks in disbelief, which only confuses me more.

The sound of the stairwell door slamming shut makes her jump. She steadies herself against the wall and looks in the direction of the noise.

I take my gaze off the woman to see Morgan making her way down the hall, her hands full of shopping bags. Her eyes widen in surprise when she notices our visitor. Glancing between the two of us, she mouths something at me that I don’t understand before dropping her shopping bags and whirling on the woman.

“Who the hell are you?” she hisses. Morgan crosses her arms and narrows her eyes at the nameless woman. She gets no response from her, just an emotionless expression. “Well? Do you speak?” Morgan asks again, clearly losing her almost nonexistent patience.

Still, the woman doesn’t speak. She just stares at me. I begin to feel even more uncomfortable when she bravely places her hand on my forearm.

I cringe and pull away. I smack against the wall behind me as I stare back at her with wide eyes.

“Can you just tell us who you are?” I try to plead with her and smile in an attempt to seem friendly.

“I want to talk to you alone. Without her,” she adds in a sneer, not hiding her dislike for Morgan.

“Yeah, right. Not happening,” Morgan laughs and points her house key at her. “I suggest you scurry away back to whatever hole you crawled out of. I’ll call my friends if I have to. My friend’s boyfriend here is quite the fighter, and you really wouldn’t want to be on the opposing side of his anger.

Or mine for that matter!” she snaps, throwing her arm around my shoulders and pulling me close.

The woman flinches and takes a step back. She regards Morgan with cautious eyes before turning her gaze back to me.

“Is that what you want, Octavia?”

How does she know my name? My heart pounds in fear, hands beginning to tremble.

“Who are you talking about? We don’t even know an Octavia, you wack job,” Morgan lies smoothly. She steps in front of me, as if to shield me, and pulls her phone out of her coat pocket. “Last chance. All I have to do is send one message, and you’ll be in for a whole world of trouble.”

“Just take this. I’m sure I’ll see you soon.” The woman reaches towards me and holds out a small piece of paper.

Against my better judgment, I grab it with my trembling hands. She gives me one last look and turns around to walk away.

When she disappears, I peel open the folded paper. I take in a sharp breath as I read the messy writing scribbled on the paper, feeling the bile rise in my throat.

I’ve missed you, baby girl. Love, Mom.

TWENTY-SEVEN

OCTAVIA

Parties are by far the most overrated part of college. I mean *honestly*, does anyone enjoy spending hours surrounded by drunk guys who can't keep their grabby hands to themselves?

Do people really like watching half-naked college students dance around on wobbly tabletops? I don't, that's for sure. Not anymore, anyway.

But unfortunately for me, when it comes to events like Matt's birthday party, I don't have a choice but to go. He is my best friend's boyfriend, after all.

"You're not coming back here tonight, right? I have some special things planned that I would rather you didn't interrupt this time," Morgan says from the bathroom as she finishes getting ready.

"Trust me, the last thing I want is to come home to whatever the hell you have planned," I shudder, pulling myself onto the bathroom countertop and grabbing my phone to read Oakley's text.

He is outside, waiting for us. And since he doesn't like to drink, he volunteered to be the designated driver tonight. "They're here. Ready?"

She smears more lip gloss on and rubs her lips together. "Woah, wait a minute. When did you get an ass?"

I spin around to see a shocked Morgan staring wide-eyed at my backside. "It's probably the pants."

Turning my body in the mirror, I look at the more notable than usual bump in my skinny black jeans. Unlike Morgan, I kept it simple tonight: a pair of high waisted black

skinny jeans and a black crop top to go underneath my red leather jacket.

“Well, you look *good*. Maybe you’ll finally get some action tonight?” she teases before shoving me out of the bathroom. My phone vibrates in the back pocket of my jeans.

“Please tell me you’re on your way down,” Oakley pleads, panic evident in his voice when I answer the call. “Matt is drunk off his ass already and driving me insane.”

Morgan sashays out of her bedroom with her jacket and strappy heels on.

“We’re leaving now. Stay strong, babe.” I hang up and slide my shoes on. Morgan meets me by the door and we head downstairs.

“Have fun tonight, Ava. Please? You’re going to a party with your friends and stud of a boyfriend. Just forget about all the other shit for one night,” Morgan says gently. She puts her arm around my shoulders as we walk down the sidewalk to Oakley’s truck.

I know what she’s talking about. Ever since Rebecca showed up at our house last week, I haven’t been able to shake it from my mind. I called my mom as soon as Rebecca vanished. Through my shaky sobs, I managed to explain what happened. To say she was pissed would be a vast understatement. But there isn’t anything we can do right now except to wait and see if she makes another appearance.

I can’t pretend like I don’t want her to show up because I do. I have so many questions that I need the answers to. And she’s the only one who can answer them for me. I also can’t pretend her still using doesn’t hurt me. It’s been so long and she’s still an addict.

I don’t know what she was high on that day, but she sure wasn’t clean.

“You’re right. I’ll try and have fun.”

She turns her head and raises an eyebrow at me.

“I promise.” I slap on a smile and she thankfully leaves it alone. When we reach the truck, Matt opens the passenger door. He topples out of his seat and falls face-first onto the wet grass.

“You dumbass.” Morgan rushes to help him and tries to help him up, to no avail. “A little help here, Oakley,” she snaps, letting out a huff. She takes off her heels, the bottoms now coated in rich dirt, and scoffs.

Oakley chuckles and grabs Matt’s hand, yanking him on his feet and helps him into the backseat. Morgan climbs into the backseat, swearing.

Oakley turns to me, and his jaw slacks. His eyes trace over every inch of my body slowly. The intense stare makes the hair on my arms stand straight up and a heat to build between my legs.

“You are so beautiful, Ava. Not to mention sexy as hell,” he groans, taking a step towards me. He pulls me against his hard chest and kisses me passionately. I melt into his touch and shivers trail down my spine. All too soon, he pulls away and drops his hands from my neck.

“We should stop before we give Morgan and Matt quite the show,” he insists quietly. I can only nod my head in my dazed state as he laughs airily. He moves away and opens the passenger door for me. I hop up and put my seatbelt on.

“Happy birthday, Matt,” I say, leaning around my seat to send him a smile.

“Thanks, Octavia. Hope you’re ready to get crazy!” he roars, making the three of us laugh at the dopey grin he’s wearing. Matt is a crazy person when he’s drunk.

Oakley takes my hands in his and rests them on my thigh. I can’t seem to keep my eyes away from him the entire drive to the party. His beard has turned scruffy and his hair has grown a little since Thanksgiving, making it the perfect length to wrap my fingers in. The jeans he’s wearing are not hiding his noticeably large bulge either.

“Y’all need to get it on already. Your sexual tension is making me very uncomfortable,” Morgan puts in from the backseat, disrupting my filthy train of thought. I whip my head around and glare at her. I can’t seem to find any words, so I sit there opening and closing my mouth like an idiot as I try to think of a witty response.

Thankfully Oakley saves the day yet again. “Matt, buddy? Are you doing okay back there?”

“You know you have lots of garbage back here—oh! A donut!” he shouts with glee.

Morgan lets out a loud shriek as he tries to shove the mouldy thing in her mouth. The loud noise makes the truck swerve to the left, veering us slightly off the road as Oakley gets taken by surprise.

His hand is ripped out of mine while he jerks us back. He mumbles a string of curse words, panting. I gently unpeel his right hand from the steering wheel as I take it in mine, pulling him back to reality. He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. And for the next ten minutes, we desperately try to ignore the noises coming from the backseat.

Matt grins when we get to the party. He pulls the seatbelt off and hops out of the truck. “I thought we would never make it. My audience is waiting!”

Morgan squeezes my shoulder and rolls her eyes. “I’ll see you guys in there. Have fun.” She hops out in search of the birthday boy.

Oakley gazes at me with a half-smile playing on his lips. “You ready?”

“Are you okay?” My tone is gentle but my words are beyond serious. “Because it’s perfectly okay if you’re not. I’m the last person who is going to judge you.”

“Yeah,” he nods. “It just freaked me out for a second.”

“I know.” I smile at him and rub the back of his neck.

He rolls his eyes but allows the corner of his mouth to tilt. “Shall we? I’m sure Matt is in desperate need of our

company.”

I’m not sure where the sudden boost of confidence comes from but before I know it, I unbuckle my seat belt and lean over the center console. “I think he’ll survive without us.”

His eyes widen when I bite my lip and he lets out a soft moan. Not being able to wait any longer, I press my lips to his.

He responds instantly, moving his mouth against mine while pulling me onto his lap. He pushes the console out of the way and nips my lip. I feel the hardness building in his jeans as I start grinding down on him, trying desperately to get rid of the ache between my legs. I let out a squeak when he lays me down on my back, my head resting by the passenger door as he crawls on top of me.

Our lips reconnect as he pushes against me. His mouth latches onto my neck as he sucks the skin under my jaw before claiming my mouth once again. He uses one hand to hold himself up while the other trails down my body, greedily touching as much of my skin as possible. He grabs the hem of my shirt and pulls away from me so he can look in my eyes, silently asking for permission. I nod my head quickly, and he lifts the material up and over my head.

His eyes darken as he looks at my chest, memorizing every inch of my now exposed skin. The moan that escapes his lips makes me buck my hips against his crotch to create some much-needed friction.

“Patience, baby,” he growls, bringing a shiver over my exposed skin. He leans over me and puts his mouth on mine, his hand pushing my bra up. Without breaking the kiss, he brings his large hand to the warm skin.

My moan cuts through the tense silence, causing him to grind his crotch harder against mine.

“You’re killing me,” he manages to choke out. He presses his forehead against mine and takes laboured breaths, matching my own.

“Let’s ditch the party then. They won’t notice,” I insist from underneath him. The last thing I want to do right now is

stop.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. Take me back to your place,” I say, stern and quick, before I have a chance to overthink and back out. I want this. I want him.

We pull up outside of his apartment fifteen minutes later. To say we are both still hot as hell would be an understatement.

As soon as the truck is turned off, Oakley rushes over to my side. He pulls open the door quickly and picks me up with strong arms. I wrap my legs around his waist as he slams the door shut and pushes me up against the cold metal. He kisses my neck and a loud moan escapes in my mouth.

“Inside. Now,” I growl. Oakley gently sets me down and leads us over to his apartment.

He unlocks the door and shoves it open. I follow close behind him as he flips on the light and turns back around to face me.

Our eyes meet and I feel my throat close up, making it hard to breathe. An intense emotion I can’t describe washes over me.

His eyes soften as he watches me, making my heart speed up. I slowly start walking towards him, my eyes not leaving his. He takes a step towards me, closing the gap between us and cups my face in his hands, stroking my warm, thumping skin with his thumb.

“I love you,” he says softly, his eyes unwavering and steady.

Love. That’s what it is. The feeling that’s swallowing me whole. The feeling I get every time I’m with—or even think about Oakley. It’s always there, lurking. That’s it, the way only Oakley can make me feel.

“I love you,” I say clearly, and confidently.

His eyes widen in surprise before he slowly beams at me. I can feel myself grinning back at him. His eyes gleam

under the fluorescent lights, and he wraps his arms tightly around me. He kisses me and I smile against his lips, overwhelmed.

“Say it again,” he grins, pulling away ever so slightly to see the words slip past my lips.

“I love you, Oakley Hutton,” I chuckle, stepping forward and resting my head on his chest.

“And I love you, Octavia Layton. More than you know.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

TWO MONTHS LATER

OAKLEY

I've learned very quickly that Christmas is Ava's favourite holiday. The past few weeks have been packed full of shopping, decorating, and prepping for the annual party the girls are hosting tonight. I don't think I've ever been so happy *not* to see the inside of a shopping mall in my entire life.

I guessed it's a tradition to get the group together before Christmas to open gifts and spend the night watching Christmas movies. This year it's the girls' turn to host—not like Ava would have given them any other choice. She has an adorable—and sometimes infuriating—need to be in charge of absolutely everything at all times.

“Babe, did you pick up the food? The guys are going to be here any minute,” she huffs.

I can't help but laugh as Ava runs around frantically, switching on the Christmas lights that hung all around the tiny apartment. She puts her hands on her hips and lets out a deep breath.

She went a little overboard when we were shopping. There were very few decorations that she didn't end up tossing in the cart. The sparkle in her eyes as she walked up and down the aisles made the countless hours spent shopping beyond worth it.

“It's all in the fridge. Relax, babe. Everything will be perfect.” I get up from the couch and walk over to her as she fiddles with the candy canes hanging from the tree.

I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her into my chest. I kiss the top of her head and gently pull her away from the perfectly placed decorations hanging from the green

branches. Her shoulders droop and her head falls back against my chest as she relaxes against me.

“You’re right. Thank you.” She shifts in my arms to give me a grateful smile. “What would I do without you?”

“Mmm, let’s not find out,” I mutter, my heart contracting when she leans up to peck my lips.

“You’re a goofball,” she laughs and presses play on the Bluetooth speaker. Christmas carols fill the room.

“Isn’t that why you love me, though?” I raise an eyebrow. She opens her mouth to respond when we are interrupted by a sharp rap on the front door.

“Sure, we’ll go with that,” she giggles. The bells hanging from the doorknob jingle as she pulls open the door. She beams at the guests waiting on the other side. “Hey!”

“Merry Christmas, beautiful.” I hear Adam say. As soon as I’m out of sight, he pounces. *Really?* I clench my fist and hurry over to Ava.

I pull her into my arms and kiss her cheek as the guys watch the exchange with amusement. “Isn’t she? That’s what I told her after we got ready together—and every other second of the day.”

I feel my chest push out when his face falls. He straightens up and walks past us both to sit down on the couch. Ava glares at me and shoves her elbow into my ribs. I smile innocently down at her and kiss the top of her head.

“Well, hello to you too, Oakley. Where should I put these?” Matt steps forward, holding a massive bag out in front of him.

“Are those presents?” Ava asks, her smile growing. Matt nods his head in response.

“He almost forgot them. We were halfway here when we had to turn back around,” Tyler puts in.

“Hey, way to throw me under the bus. I got them here, didn’t I?” Matt rolls his eyes and sits down beside Adam.

“Did I hear something about presents?” Morgan asks as she comes strolling out of her bedroom. Matt smirks, eyeing her up like his next meal. I wonder if that’s what I look like when I check Ava out.

“Not for you. You didn’t help get this ready at all,” Ava declares from the kitchen. She stands beside me with a plate of gingerbread cookies in her hands.

“Like you would have let me help anyways.” Morgan swipes a cookie off of the plate and moves over to sit down on Matt’s lap. Ava rolls her eyes, sets the cookie down on the coffee table, and sits down next to Adam.

Yeah, right. I don’t think so.

I pull her onto my lap before she can argue and wrap my arm tight around her waist. Adam glares at me in response.

“You all make me feel insanely single,” Tyler groans, sitting down on the floor in front of Adam.

“C’mon man, you know if you wanted you could have had a girlfriend by now,” Matt says, taking his attention away from Morgan for the first time since joining us.

“Always the jokester, dude,” Tyler replies sarcastically. “That’s the last thing I need right now.”

“I’m not joking. From what I hear, Oakley’s sister would move mountains for you,” Matt teases, his eyebrows raised as Morgan slaps his arm.

“Shut up. Over my dead body would I let Gracie date a guy like Tyler,” I growl.

“Woah, offence taken.” Tyler places a hand over his heart, theatrically, pretending to be offended. “Plus, I don’t date crazy. Especially not underage crazy.”

The thought of my sister even thinking about one of my friends that way makes my skin crawl. No way in hell would I ever let that happen. Not in this lifetime, at least.

“It’s just a cute, harmless crush so don’t you go teasing her about it. Any of you,” Ava threatens, pointing an accusing finger at the guys.

“I agree. I had a crush on Ava’s brother for like two years,” Morgan says with a shrug.

“You *what*? Why didn’t I know about this?” Matt demands, his eyes narrowed.

Ava laughs, covering for Morgan while she stumbles for an explanation. “I think all of my friends liked Ben. Don’t worry, Matt.” Ava reaches over Adam and pats Matt on the arm. “Plus, I think he’s going to propose to his girlfriend soon.”

“Damn, actually? That guy is finally growing up,” Adam says, finally deciding to join the conversation. Does he know Ben? Does he know her whole family?

“Is she nice? Do we approve?” Morgan asks from Matt’s lap. He doesn’t look as happy since the Ben comment.

“I guess. In the two years they’ve been together, I haven’t learned that much about her,” Ava shrugs and leans back against me, her arms looped around my neck. “Maybe I should make more of an effort to get to know her?”

“You have time,” I remind her reassuringly and rub her thigh.



“Open mine first!” Morgan shrieks, shoving a small gift wrapped in neon pink paper in Ava’s lap.

“Did you forget it was Christmas or something? What’s with the pink paper?” Tyler snorts.

Morgan rolls her eyes and shoves his shoulder. “For your information, *Asshat*, Ava used all of our festive paper.”

“Maybe if you didn’t wait until the last minute to wrap your gifts you could have used some.” Ava grabs the square box and tears the paper away excitedly. “You didn’t!” she squeals, staring down at the two pieces of paper in her lap.

Morgan smiles smugly. “We’re going to see Ariana Grande! Good luck beating that, Oakley.”

I scoff at her boast, “Watch and learn, Morgan. Watch and learn.” I pick up the small square package and offer it to Ava.

Her face flushes just like mine, and with a small, shy smile, she carefully unties the bow. She rips the snowman wrapping paper off, displaying the Pandora box underneath.

Her eyes meet mine excitedly, almost as if she’s asking for permission to open it.

“Go on,” I urge gently, trying hard to fend off my nerves. When the box is opened, I feel my heart rate pick up. Her jaw drops and I hear her gasp.

“Oakley,” she whispers, her voice barely audible over the rest of the group’s chatter. She beams at me once again, and an unexpected wave of happiness comes over me, lighting me up instantly. She picks up the bracelet and examines the charms dangling from it. With some help from the Sales Assistant, I managed to pick out four charms I thought were perfect for her.

First, I chose a ruby heart to represent not only her birthstone but my love for her. Yeah, I know, gag. The second one I picked out was a Converse shoe because we all know she doesn’t go anywhere without those. The third is a bucket of popcorn. That was the hardest to find, but it was worth it. The fourth is a hockey skate with my birthstone in the center.

“Do you like it?” God, I hope she does.

“Are you kidding? It’s amazing. Thank you.” Ava throws herself onto my lap and clings to me. I twine my arms around her, keeping her in place. She pulls back too soon for my liking, but gives me a quick, gentle kiss.

“Wait here,” she whispers and pulls away from me. She climbs off of my lap and heads over to the tree. My eyebrows shoot up as she saunters back over with a giddy expression.

“Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

She chews her bottom lip and slowly pulls the gift from behind her back, revealing a new hockey stick. She did a great job picking it out—Matt must have helped her with the sizing, but I know the colours were all her—our team colours. The crimson accents stand out perfectly against the matte black body.

“I know you said you needed a new one since you’ve snapped so many this month. I asked Matt what kind you like and well... here,” she rushes and pushes the gift in front of me.

I reach out for her and pull her onto my lap again, grinning from ear to ear. I take the stick in my hands so I can get a good feel for it.

“You’re the fucking best, baby,” I murmur in her ear and playfully bite her earlobe.

“I have something else for you, but I want to give it to you in private,” she whispers through a quiet giggle.

My dick jumps at that, mind going straight down the gutter. “Is that so?” I place an open-mouth kiss on the nape of her neck.

A shiver trails down her spine but she shrugs me off, wiggling in my lap. “Mmm, not that kind of present.”

I push back the moan that’s threatening to escape from my throat. “It will be if you move like that again.”

“Don’t kiss me like that then,” she warns and leans into me, torturing me even more.

“When are they going to leave? You can always just give me my present now.” I trail my fingers up and down her thigh.

“Not soon enough. We still have to watch movies. Hands off, buddy.” She swats my hand away and jumps off my lap. “Who’s ready for movies?”

“Finally,” Morgan huffs, unlatching herself from Matt’s mouth.

“I’m picking the first one!” Matt yells, rummaging through the Christmas movies Ava laid out in front of the T.V.

Well, this should be fun.

TWENTY-NINE

OCTAVIA

I sigh in relief as soon as the door shuts behind our guests.

“I’ve never been so happy to have some peace and quiet.” The clock’s hands above the T.V point to midnight, meaning that I successfully kept Oakley away from Adam for a whopping six hours. It was a more difficult task than I thought it would be.

“I think I’m in a food coma.” I shift my eyes from the glimmering lights on the Christmas tree and to Oakley. He runs his fingers through my loose curls, and I let my heavy eyes fall shut.

“You wanna go to bed?” he asks gently.

“I almost forgot about your other present!” I mentally scold myself and jump up from the couch, almost tripping on the coffee table. I hurry into my room, Oakley trailing closely behind. “Where did I put it?”

Of course I would forget where I hid it.

“Are you looking for this?” Oakley asks, holding the box wrapped in Santa Claus wrapping paper. He sits on the edge of my bed and waves me over. “It was on your desk.”

His hands tear through the paper eagerly when I nod. The tissue paper crinkles as he pulls it away, revealing the Vancouver Warrior’s jersey under it.

“Flip it over,” I mumble, my voice quiet and unsteady. He carefully pulls out the jersey and turns it around. A solid two minutes pass in silence. I bite my lip and bounce my leg on the hardwood floor. “If you hate it, I can return it,” I blurt out nervously.

“Hate it? I’m trying not to cry.” Oakley’s voice cracks. “This is the best gift I’ve ever gotten.” He stares at the back of

the jersey, his mouth agape. He runs his finger over the embroidery that reads, *Jamie #11*.

My heart flutters in my chest, and I blow out a massive sigh of relief. “You do? I didn’t want to upset you.”

I really didn’t. I just wanted him to have something to remind him of his dad that also reflects what he loves. My goal was to help him see that he can think of his dad’s passing in a way that isn’t all heartbreak. He can look at this jersey as a way to remember all of the good memories.

“I don’t think I could be any more in love with you even if I tried,” he says with so much conviction my heart swells, making me question whether or not it’s actually possible for one’s heart to literally burst through their chest.

“Wanna try?” I inch closer to him and wrap my leg up around his waist. I run my arms up his arms, paying extra attention to his overly large biceps.

His eyes darken and he leans in to whisper, “You’re playing a dangerous game here, Ava,” in my ear. His eyes travel up and down my torso until they come to a stop at my cleavage—then he bites his lip.

I brush my lips across his, making the pulled lip slip from his teeth. “Who doesn’t like a little danger every once in a while?”

He groans, holding me tighter. “I can’t promise I’ll be able to stop this time.”

“So don’t,” I breathe and tug his hair slightly.

He grabs my hips and puts his mouth on mine at last. I gasp, surprised by the ferocity of the kiss. His fingers dig into my hips as he nips at my bottom lip.

“Morgan’s not coming back home tonight, right?”

“No. Now stop talking,” I command.

He flips us around and lays me down on my bed. Oakley positions himself over me, using his elbows to hold himself up. He grabs the hem of my shirt and pulls it over my

head. My body aches for him to touch me where I need him most, but he continues to tease me.

He kisses my neck and murmurs filthy things in my ear, only irritating me more as I can feel the hardness in his jeans when he grinds against my thin panties. Growing far too annoyed by the lack of skin-on-skin contact, I grab the buckle of his belt and undo it with trembling fingers.

“You first,” he growls, swiftly pinning my wrists above my head.

He pulls my skirt down my legs and throws it somewhere on the floor. His breaths are ragged as he stares at my near-naked body, and I watch in awe as his eyes darken with clear desire.

He ducks his head to suck at the pulse point in my throat, no doubt leaving marks for me to deal with tomorrow. Amid the assault on my neck, I buck my hips as he rips my bra off. A moan escapes my lips when I feel a sudden hot, wet heat on my nipple.

He uses his other hand to finally give me what I need. I arch my back and moan again, unable to stop myself. He uses his thumb to rub small circles against my clit, and I bite my lip to stifle the moans. He slowly drags my underwear down my legs and drops them onto the floor.

With my body bared in front of him, nerves come over me in a fury. I haven't been with anyone in a year and I can't even imagine how many girls Oakley has been in that time.

What if I freak out? Or it's not the same as it used to be? What if it *is*? I'm not sure which thought is scarier.

Sensing my worry, he pulls himself back and cups my cheek gently. “We can stop. If not, don't overthink it. I'm not going anywhere. No matter what you choose.” The sincerity in his tone strengthens my resolve.

I cup the back of his neck, his silky hair tickling my fingertips.

“I love you,” I breathe, our eyes locked before I bring my lips to his.

His hand travels down to the throbbing between my legs. He swallows my gasps when he kisses me again, more urgent this time.

With nothing left between us, his fingers find my bare skin. Another moan slips past my lips as he explores my body—bringing forward a wave of unfamiliar feelings as he does so.

My back arches at the sudden contact, and my bare breasts brush against his chest. My lips part from muscle-quivering pleasure when his finger finally slides inside me. Using his thumb to put pressure on my clit, his finger slowly pumps in and out of me

“You’re so tight,” he chokes out. The burning sensation in my abdomen builds as he continues to bring me closer to the release I so desperately need.

“Let go, baby. Let go for me.”

His words bring me over the edge. My eyes roll to the back of my head, my pleasure reverberating through the room.

“That’s my girl.”

“It’s your turn,” I giggle, beaming at him with flushed cheeks. I reach down and unbutton his jeans.

“Are you sure? We don’t have to go further than this.”

I shake my head. “I want this. I promise.”

He moves off of me and steps off the bed. He takes a deep breath and pulls down his jeans and boxers. My jaw drops in shock. I’m still not used to the sheer size of him. I wrench my eyes away and look up. A cocky grin plays on his swollen lips.

He laughs breathlessly at my evident shock and retrieves a condom from his wallet. He rolls it on and positions himself on top of me. I squeeze his shoulders, practically panting in anticipation.

“If you feel uncomfortable in any way, just tell me to stop, okay?”

I nod, gnawing on my lip.

He stares down at me, moving between my thighs. The tip slips in quickly and once I've taken all of him, I grab his biceps and squeeze tightly to ease some of the discomfort. He slides out of me and thrusts back in.

Soon, the discomfort turns into an indescribable pleasure. He's good at this—not like I had any doubts.

He takes my hand and laces our fingers together. I'm getting close and I know he is too. His eyes meet mine and he looks at me with a burning desire that sends bolts of electricity straight to my stomach. I feel myself starting to lose control as he keeps his eyes on me.

“That's my girl. Let go,” he coaxes, his warm forehead pressed against mine, our sweat-soaked hair rubbing together. My body goes rigid and finally, release rips through me. My vision blurs and I almost don't make out Oakley's expression as his release rushes through him.

Afterwards, he climbs off of the bed and heads to the bathroom to throw away the condom. He returns with a damp cloth and a crooked grin.

“Let's get you cleaned up, beautiful.” He uses the fabric to wipe away what's left of my release and tosses it into the laundry bin. He pulls his boxers on and tosses me his shirt from earlier. I smile at him and throw the shirt over my naked body.

Crawling back into bed, he pulls me into his side. I rest my head on his chest and intertwine my leg with his.

“You know you're the only girl I've ever made love to,” Oakley says a few minutes later, breaking the comfortable silence. I lift my head to look at him with wide eyes, unconvinced. “I wasn't a virgin, but I might as well have been. I'm glad it was you.”

I flush. “I thought what I had with David was love but now I'm not sure. I think I loved him in a way, but not like this. I was a different person back then.”

I lie back down and trace circles on his peck. He tenses, arms tightening around me.

“How did you find out?”

My jaw clenches and I squeeze my eyes shut. The forever burned image of the naked girl stretched across our bed, David sprawled on top of her fogs my mind. I suppress a shiver of disgust and shake my head.

“I caught them in bed. Well, one of them, at least. The other two names fell out of his mouth before he realized what he was saying.”

“I’m sorry,” Oakley mumbles, venom clear in his tone.

“It’s okay. It’s been a while. I just wish I wasn’t so naive.”

I know I shouldn’t blame myself for what happened, but I can’t help but feel like if I had just paid more attention I wouldn’t have been so blindsided.

He played me like a fool and I let him.

He saw me as some poor foster kid who was abandoned and just wanted to be loved. God, it burns just as much now as it did a year ago.

“Trusting your boyfriend not to cheat on you isn’t *naive*,” he scoffs and kisses the top of my head. “He never deserved you.”

“Thank you,” I murmur and cuddle into him. My eyes suddenly become too heavy to keep open.

“You don’t ever have to worry about that again. I promise,” he says with even more conviction than before.

His promise is the last thing I hear before the world goes black.

THIRTY

OCTAVIA

With Christmas come and gone, life continues on just like it always does. Students start returning to their classes and everyone goes back to work. New Years brings in exciting resolutions for everyone to commit to until February when they begin to neglect them. Christmas trees are shoved into their boxes and hidden somewhere until next year. No more joyful music plays in coffee shops.

The world has gone back to normal, whether I like it or not.

The hockey season is now in full swing. Playoffs are approaching at an alarming rate and tensions are at an all-time high. The Saints are holding the top spot in the league—for now, that is. The only thing that could make the team stronger is if the tension between two of their starring forwards finally dissipates, which is why I'm visiting Adam.

Nervous butterflies flutter in my stomach as I will myself to knock on Adams's door. I take a few deep breaths, desperately trying to relax before my fists meet the wood. I'm not sure why I'm so nervous; Adam is my best friend, not some serial killer.

The door swings open, exposing a dishevelled Adam. His eyes widen at the sight of me on his parent's doorstep. To be fair, I usually only come here when he's having a party.

I raise my eyebrows pointedly at his appearance. He's only in a pair of plaid boxers and white socks—quite the outfit.

“Who is it, babe?” a vaguely familiar voice squeaks from somewhere in the huge house.

Adam pushes past me, closing the door behind him and leads me out onto the driveway. “What are you doing here?”

I smirk, wiggling my eyebrows suggestively. “Who was that?”

“Nobody, just some girl from the bar,” he stammers, not maintaining eye contact. “Why are you here? We don’t have plans, do we?”

“No, I came here to talk. If it’s a bad time, I can come back,” I offer, feeling hurt and dismissed. Adams’s never usually so *cold* towards me.

“No, it’s fine. Just let me change and we can go get coffee or something,” he protests, making his way to the door. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.” He rushes inside, disappearing from my view before I can suck in another breath.

What the hell just happened? He’s never had any problem parading his conquests before. Why is he being so dismissive and secretive?

The door swings open again and I have to suppress a gasp.

“You,” the girl sneers, stepping out onto the patio. Beth Winston is the last person on earth I expected to come out of Adam’s house wearing nothing but a baggy t-shirt.

I scowl at her. “Beth Winston, what a pleasant surprise. I thought I recognized your squeal.”

“You should have been here last night then. You couldn’t have missed it.”

I don’t know whether to laugh at how she agrees that her voice sounds like a squeal or gag from the mental image of what they did here last night.

“If you wouldn’t mind, I have something important to talk to Adam about. If you could scurry off I would appreciate it,” I say coldly, crossing my arms against my chest.

“Adam can decide that for himself,” she protests, smiling smugly.

“Beth, leave. I’ll call you later,” Adam says from the doorway. He’s fully dressed now, in his usual jeans and long sleeve combo.

I stifle a laugh when she flushes.

“Please. I’ll call you tonight,” he promises, sincerity colouring his tone. What is going on with him?

“This isn’t over, Octavia.” She glares at me and stalks off towards her car, still in Adam’s t-shirt. *Classy.*

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” I huff and push past him through the open door. With a sigh, Adam leads the way through his house.

“Want anything to drink? We have Ginger Ale.”

“Of course.” I follow him into the industrial style chef’s kitchen. I sit down on one of the leather bar stools in front of the marble island and crack open the can handed to me, taking a gulp.

“She’s not that bad,” he says after a few moments of uncomfortable silence.

I snort and shake my head. “You’re kidding, right? She’s the child of Satan.”

“I think I could like her.” He scratches the back of his neck awkwardly. “She’s different when you get to know her.”

I am having trouble grasping what he’s saying. Different when you get to know her? This coming from the guy who used to tease her and had shunned her all those years ago? Not to mention how awful she is. Isn’t there a best friend code for not fraternizing with the enemy or something?

“If you say so,” I chuckle, taking another drink of my soda.

“Can you please just be supportive?”

I snap my head up in his direction, incensed. “Supportive? Like you’ve been so supportive of *my* relationship?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he snaps, his tone icy.

I shoot up, my stool screeching against the expensive tile floor. Adam glares at me, his cheeks flushed in anger.

“Don’t play dumb. I’m not a stranger. I know when something’s up with you. So, spill it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he spits out, emphasizing each word.

“So you don’t have feelings for me? That’s what everyone else seems to think!” I yell at him, unable to stop my anger from boiling over. As soon as the words tumble out of my mouth, I wish they never did.

The look on his face kills me. He looks so unbearably sad as he takes a deep breath and shakes his head.

“I did,” he says so quietly, I barely hear him. “At least I think I did.”

My heart falls as I let out a shaky breath. I didn’t want Oakley to be right about this. I can handle ‘used’ to, though. I can deal with that. It doesn’t have to change anything.

“Did? You don’t anymore, right? You’ve moved on?”

I put a hand on his shoulder in an attempt to comfort him. He tenses under my touch and clenches his fists.

“I don’t know. Sometimes I think I’m in love with you, and sometimes I think I’ve moved on. I thought I was content with just being your best friend until Oakley came along. He didn’t even have to do anything and you were jumping into his arms.”

I look away from him so he won’t see the hurt in my eyes.

“I hate seeing you with him. He doesn’t know you like I do. He doesn’t deserve you,” he adds, his face twisted into an expression of contempt at the mere mention of Oakley.

My sympathy slowly morphs into anger and I’m doing everything I can to not lash out at him. It’s a sensitive issue, and I don’t want to make it any worse.

“This isn’t his fault. You’ve always been my best friend, Adam. That’s all.”

“Do you love him?” Adam asks quietly, his voice sad.

“I never wanted to hurt you. I didn’t know you felt like that,” I add to change the subject. The last thing I want to do is hurt him even more. I can’t believe I was such an idiot.

“Do you? I need to know,” he asks desperately. “I know *he* loves *you*. It’s pretty obvious.”

“I love him,” I mutter, my eyes locked on the countertop.

“Does he make you happy?”

My voice shakes when I answer him. “Very.”

“Then I’ll lay off. I’m sorry,” he says ruefully and drops his head in his hands.

Guil, shame, and embarrassment wash over me. How could I not have known? I was so oblivious to it. What if that made it so much worse for him?

“I don’t want to lose you,” I whisper. My heart aches at the thought of not having Adam in my life.

“You’re not going to lose me,” he says without preamble and squeezes my hand. “But I need time.”

I nod my head, not knowing what to say.

“I should probably get some training in. With the playoffs coming up and all,” he says, ending the conversation for me.

“Okay. But I’ll see you soon?” I ask as he walks me to the door.

“Yeah, of course,” he says, wearing a tight smile.

“Oh, okay. Bye then, I guess,” I stammer awkwardly and hurry over to my car. Blinking furiously, I swallow past the lump in my throat and start my car. I have to get out of here.



I'm home alone tonight since Morgan has dinner with her parents and Oakley has a late practice. At least now I can finally catch up on all of my assignments. That's the plan, anyway.

After far too many months of deliberating, I finally decided where I want to do my placement. Child Welfare is something that always stood out to me. I guess the overwhelming need to protect all of the unwanted, lonely children stems from my own experiences. Now the next step is finding somewhere to take me on.

A knock on the door startles me. Closing my laptop, I head out of my room. I look out the peephole in the front door, and my stomach drops.

It's Rebecca. Of course, it would be. After three months of waiting she's finally decided to show up.

I take a deep breath and slowly open the door.

The first thing I notice is the brightness to her skin. She looks healthier? Her sallow skin isn't as pale. Her cheeks are plump and flushed with a rosy glow. Her hair is clean and shiny. She isn't wearing dirty clothes either. And her ratty sweatshirt has even been replaced by a thick, grey, woollen coat.

Instead of stained, ripped jeans and filthy sneakers, she wears flared denim jeans and shiny brown boots. Her eyes are no longer crazed and bloodshot. And the most surprising change is that her hands aren't twitching at her sides.

A few moments of stunned silence passes before she speaks. Even her voice sounds better, clear and steady.

"Hello, Octavia."

"What do I owe the pleasure, Rebecca?" I ask dryly and lean against the doorframe, my arms crossed. "Why are you here? I figured you disappeared again."

She smiles ruefully and bows her head. "I'm sorry it took me so long to come back. I wanted to get better first."

I scoff at her and roll my eyes. “I’m sure that’s not the first time you’ve said that.”

She winces slightly but recovers quickly with a warm smile. “Can I come in?”

I think about it for a second. Do I turn her away or invite her in? I decide against it.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Her smile falters for only a second. She pulls a battered old cell phone out of her pocket and flips it open. “Can I have your number, at least? We could get coffee this week?”

I guess I can go for coffee with her. It will be in a public place at least, and I do have questions for her. Whether I like it or not, I need answers—and closure.

I take the phone from her and type my number in hastily. “Just text me when and where.”

She beams at me and inches closer—as if to hug me, but thinks better of it. “I’ll see you soon, Octavia,” she says firmly as she walks towards the staircase.

We’ll see about that. Promises have never been your thing, Mother.

THIRTY-ONE

OAKLEY

To say my mom is surprised to see me on her front step with my head in my hands would be an understatement.

“Oakley? What on earth are you doing here?” she yelps in surprise.

I rush off of the steps to take the grocery bags she is carrying from her and lead the way into the house, not speaking. I carry the bags to the kitchen and set them on the countertop.

“I needed to talk to you and I didn’t want to do it over the phone.”

She gestures for me to take a seat at the kitchen table, and I collapse into the chair gratefully. She sits opposite me and takes my hands in hers, her lips pursed.

“Oh dear, those aren’t words I like to hear.” Her eyes fill with worry. “You’re not in trouble, right?”

She always assumes the worst.

“No, I’m not in trouble, Ma. Not yet, at least,” I chuckle and she relaxes in her chair.

“What do you mean not *yet*? Did you get into another fight? Oh God, you did!” she adds in a shout and I hold my hands up in surrender.

“No, Mom. Calm down or I won’t tell you,” I threaten, and she just rolls her eyes. “My agent called me today,”

Her face lights up. “That’s good news, isn’t it? Is it really happening? This is so exciting!” Her excitement only makes me feel worse. When I don’t respond, her face falls. “Why aren’t you happy? You’ve been waiting for this your whole life.”

“I’m projected fourth, Mom,” I mumble, resting my head in my hands.

“I’m confused. Fourth is amazing. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, honey,” she says gently and takes my hands away from my face.

“I’m not ashamed of fourth. I’m fucking hyped about it.”

“Then why did you come all the way here so upset? What’s going on?” she asks, her tone gentle but still firm.

It takes me a few seconds to come up with the right response. I never thought I would be drafted in the top ten. Just being drafted in itself is my dream, let alone so high. I just wish I was as excited as I should be. Instead, I’m confused and conflicted.

“Do you know the teams who have the most chance of picking in the top five?” I don’t wait for a response. “All American teams. Not a single Canadian team. Will said I’m most likely going somewhere on the West Coast.”

Mom sighs and squeezes my hands. “We always knew it was a possibility, sweetheart. You’ve always been ready for this. You *said* you were ready for this. Gosh, you used to go on and on about it,” she adds with a smile.

I nod my head reluctantly.

I *have* always been ready. I prepared for years for this exact moment, yet it feels like I’m making a mistake. Since the minute I got off the phone with Will yesterday I’ve felt sick to my stomach. I didn’t even tell anyone I was coming here. I’ve been ignoring Ava’s texts and since I didn’t show up to practice, Matthew’s too. Even Morgan’s texted me. I just don’t know what to say to them; I don’t even know what to think. How can I explain it to them?

“This is about Ava, isn’t it?” Mom murmurs.

Is it about Ava? Everything was planned perfectly before I met her. I never had a doubt in my mind about what I wanted for my life. Then I fell in love with her.

Fuck. It is about her. “What am I supposed to do?”

“You need to tell her. If it’s meant to be, it will be, baby. You know that.”

For once, her words of wisdom do little to make me feel better.

“Can I stay here for a little while? I’m not ready to go back yet,” I confess and heave a sigh.

“You don’t have to ask, sweetheart. You’re always welcome here.” She stands up with a small smile. “I’m just going to start dinner and put these groceries away. Your sister should be home soon, relax.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I reply before getting up, pushing my chair in and heading to my room.



I’m woken up the next morning by someone jumping up and down on my bed. Without opening my eyes, I pull Gracie’s ankle and she falls right on me.

“Fuck!” I yell out in pain, clutching my pulsing nose. “Like I haven’t broken my nose enough times.”

A disgruntled Gracie rights herself and sits down next to me. “Don’t yank people’s ankles then, dumbass,” she says matter of factly.

“How about next time you just wake me up nicely? What time is it anyway?” I ask through a yawn.

“Nine. I have big plans for us today,” she chirps, practically jumping up and down with excitement.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“Did you hit your head or something? It’s Saturday, you tool. Get dressed. You have ten minutes!” she exclaims, ruffling my hair. The door slams shut behind her and I groan. I guess I know what I’m doing today.

I grab my phone and unlock it to see tens of angry text messages, but I only care about a few of them, including the ones from my furious girlfriend describing her strong distaste with my decision to run off without a goodbye.

I let out another groan and send a group message to let them all know I'm okay. I guess I could have been a *bit* more considerate. Especially with Ava, but I can't. Not until I figure things out.

With a sigh, I get ready quickly before Gracie rushes me even more. I knock on her door and pull it open. The strong, potent smell of perfume makes me sneeze as soon as I enter the small, pink room. Pink? I look around her newly decorated room and raise my eyebrows. It looks like a barbie threw up here. Gracie has never liked the colour pink. This is *so* weird.

I lean against the door frame and watch as she dabs makeup on her face at her vanity. "When did you paint your walls pink?"

She turns around with a hopeful smile. "During Christmas break. Do you like it?"

"Oh yeah, sure," I lie. "It's really...bright."

"I know, right?" she chimes and leads the way downstairs. "Mom, we're going out!" Gracie yells when we reach the bottom of the stairs.

"Have fun, be back by dinner!" Mom calls from the kitchen and is rewarded with an eye roll from Gracie.



As Gracie and I were on our way out of the mall, we were bombarded by Andre. After receiving a lecture about not telling him I was in town. He invited me to a party that he's throwing tonight, no surprise there. I refused at first, but I've never been able to say no to my best friend.

He now greets me at his front door with a crooked grin. He's in his typical douche attire: khaki pants and a white polo.

“Hey, buddy, the whole team decided to come out to see you!” Andre shouts over the loud music blaring from the speakers scattered around the packed living room.

The potent smell of sweat and pot is enough to make my stomach twist. For such a small house, Andre has never had a problem fitting hundreds of people in here. Not even the multiple visits from the police and their warnings to keep it down have stopped him—or even phased him, for that matter.

“Awesome, it's been a while!” I shout back as I look curiously around the room. The flashing lights make it hard to make out the faces we walk past. I can already feel the beads of sweat drip down my neck, and my heart hammers against my chest.

Well this is bringing back memories I would have liked to stay forgotten.

Andre slips away, leaving me to remember the names of half of the people here—a task that I am not cut out for. The music drops suddenly, and his voice blares from a microphone plugged into the main speaker.

“My boy is back in town! Let's give him a big welcome!” He winks at me, waves at a few girls, and drops the mic.

The music returns all too loudly as he approaches me again, and I groan. Annoyance is written clearly on my face as I shove his shoulder lightly. “You know I don't like attention, you prick.”

“Oh, loosen up, Lee. Let's get you a drink,” he says and drags me over to a bar area before I can protest. Andre gets two red cups and fills them both up with a brown liquid. He hands me one and I take it from him with a shrug.

Someone bashes into my back and the drink spills down the front of my hoodie. I turn to see a blonde girl about my age giggling beside me, trying to keep herself upright.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to do that,” she slurs, her cheeks flushed. I sidestep around her and glare at Andre. I am not in the mood for this shit.

“It’s okay, beautiful. You don’t mind, do you, Oakley?” he asks smoothly, shamelessly flirting with the drunken girl. He slinks an arm around her waist and squeezes. I tense and eye his arm warily.

“Yeah, no worries,” I mutter and push through the crowd to find somewhere quiet.

I only get to the other side of the room before someone claps my shoulder. It is one of my old wingers, Jason. Or at least I think it is. It’s nearly impossible to tell who is who in here.

“Hutton!”

I open my mouth to reply but he grabs my arm and drags me over to a group of vaguely familiar people before I have the chance to speak. He pushes me down on one of the couches beside a pretty brunette.

“So, what’s good?” he asks.

“Hey, Jason. Just the usual shit. You?” I ask politely, staring into my half-empty cup.

He throws an arm over the back of the couch and eyes the chest of the girl next to me. “That’s not what we hear.”

I furrow my brows in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t want anyone to know about your girl or what? It isn’t every day that the great Oakley Hutton gets tied down,” he laughs, earning giggles and a few scoffs from the girls scattered around the circle.

“Yeah, Oakley. Last time we checked, you didn’t have time for anything but a hookup,” a voice in the corner puts in, and I automatically roll my eyes.

“Sounds like someone’s still bitter, Layla,” Andre teases, pushing his way into the group.

“Not bitter. It’s not like the sex was any good anyway. I feel sorry for the girl,” Layla responds from her spot against the wall.

“That’s not what you told us before,” one of the other girls chimes in. Layla glares at her.

Layla is one of the puck bunnies I did end up hooking up with. I’m not exactly proud of it, but she was beautiful, and I was a drunk sixteen-year-old. Am I really to blame?

“I didn’t think I needed to talk about my girl,” I say with a shrug.

“Is she hot?” Someone on the other side of the room asks. I whip my head in the direction of the voice and shoot daggers at the brave prick.

My vibrating phone pulls my attention before I spit out the insult resting on my tongue. I hurry over to a somewhat quiet area and pull out my phone. It’s Tyler.

“Dude, please tell me you’re not out there with a bunch of girls,” he says gruffly. “You might want to get your buddy to stop posting pictures of you and a bunch of chicks when you’ve been ignoring your girlfriend all day.”

“What pictures? I haven’t even been with any girls,” I almost snap at him as my temper rises.

Tyler sighs, seemingly making no effort to hide his annoyance. “Just talk to her before she gets the wrong idea.”

I groan and rush back into the party.

Andre, you’re in for it.

THIRTY-TWO

OCTAVIA

The movie playing in front of us does nothing to distract me once Tyler slips out of the balcony, phone in hand.

As per Morgan's request, we're huddled up in our living room watching a bunch of horror movies. Movie nights have been Morgan's thing all for as long as I've known her. Sometimes they cheer me up, but not tonight.

"Where are you going, man? This is the best part!" Matt yells and throws his hands into the air.

Tyler ignores him and shuts the balcony door, being as secretive as ever. Over the past few months, Tyler and I have become pretty close. Well, as close as one can get to him since he isn't exactly a people person. And from what I've learned, he isn't a sharer.

"Shut up!" Morgan snaps at Matt, staring at the T.V in anticipation.

"You shut up!" Matt shoots back.

As much as I *love* listening to their bickering, I try very hard to tune them out. I need to think. The past twenty-four hours were torture.

When I got the call from Matt last night asking if I'd seen Oakley, my mind went into overdrive. *Where could he be? Is he okay?* Nobody seemed to know where he was until this morning when he finally had the decency to let us know he's alive. How gracious of him.

I spent today trying to stop myself from calling him and giving him a piece of my mind. To distract me, Morgan suggested a movie night.

"Oh, my God! You dumbass!" Morgan screams and throws a handful of popcorn at the T.V in frustration. "Did you

see that? How many times does a dumb blonde have to run *towards* the killer and *die* before they know they shouldn't? These girls make us blondes look bad."

Matt and I lock eyes, laughing to ourselves. Morgan is too precious for this world.

I stare out at the brooding man on my balcony. Tyler is leaning forward, his forearms resting on the balcony, a lit cigarette hanging from his lips. I let out a sigh and move to join him.

The quiet click of the door closing behind me catches Tyler's attention. He looks at me with raised eyebrows and sends me a nod by way of greeting.

"You really shouldn't smoke," I murmur and join him by the railing.

His low chuckle fills the small space. He takes another drag and blows smoke out in front of him. "I know."

I frown in bemusement. "So, why do it?"

He takes another drag and sighs. "It helps me calm down."

"Why do you need to calm down?" I ask and curse my lack of self-control.

It takes him a few seconds to respond, but I don't miss the way he tenses.

"When's the last time you talked to your boyfriend?" he grits out.

My stomach sinks the second his words slip past his lips. I scowl at him. "When he texted the group chat this morning, why?" I'm sure Tyler can hear the worry in my tone.

He takes a final drag from his smoke and stamps it out on the railing. He wipes his hands on his jeans before running them through his hair. "I think you should call him."

My stomach jolts. "If you know something, you need to tell me, Tyler. Is he okay?"

“He’s fine. Just call him, okay? I’m already more involved than I want to be.” He pushes himself off the railing and awkwardly pats my shoulder. “I’ll leave you to it.”

I wait for him to go back inside before I turn my phone on. No missed calls from Oakley pop up on my screen. Maybe I should take the hint and not call him? What if he doesn’t want me to? It isn’t like he’s been responding to me lately. I’m ridiculous—I need to just do it. He’s my boyfriend.

He picks up on the third ring—at least I thought it was going to be him.

“Oakley’s phone,” a high pitched voice sings over the electronic music booming in the background. Is he at a party? Are you kidding?

I clench my teeth and try hard to keep my cool. “Who are you?”

“Layla. Who is this?” she demands snarkily.

“Who is it? Give it back,” Oakley slurs in the background, the vacantness in his tone making my stomach hurt.

“Give the phone to Oakley,” I practically growl at her.

Giggles erupt on the other side of the line. Multiple female voices blend together. I listen in on the chatter, trying to make sense of what is happening.

“He’s a little... *preoccupied* right now. Call back later,” Layla giggles and the line goes dead. Before I can even take in what just happened, I get a text message from Oakley. It’s a picture of him. My blood boils as I stare at it.

Oakley is sitting on a torn-up couch with a bottle of whiskey in his hand. He’s with a girl. The girl—Layla, I’m guessing, is sitting on his lap with his arm wrapped around her waist. Her lips are pressed against his cheek. He’s grinning, his eyes are dazed, unfocused. I squint to get a better look at the picture and notice the black ring around his left eye. Even in the photo I can see how bruised and bloody his knuckles are.

I grip the phone in my hand and march inside with it still open on my screen. The door slams behind me and the three of them look at me in surprise.

“You okay? What were you even doing out there?” Morgan asks from her spot beside Matt.

“Where is he, Tyler?” I ask through gritted teeth.

He swallows visibly. “He didn’t tell you?”

“How could he? He’s *preoccupied!*” I snarl and throw my phone at him. He catches it and stares at the picture with wide eyes.

“Doing what?” Morgan jumps up from the loveseat and glowers at Tyler.

“Have you known where he was the entire time?” I snap. “So help me, Tyler.”

“You’ve known where he was the entire time and you didn’t say anything? Ava’s been worried sick!” Morgan shouts, and Matt takes her hand in his—presumably so she can’t throw herself at Tyler claws first.

“Shit, let him speak,” Matt warns. Morgan gives him a death stare in return.

“I only found out he’s in his hometown this afternoon. Gracie posted a picture of him this morning. Then Andre posted pictures of him at a party. That’s all I know. I had no idea this was going on, Ava,” he adds, his eyes flooded with guilt.

“What are you guys talking about? Let me see it.” Morgan rips my phone out of his hand. Her whole body goes rigid, and she whirls on us. “Who is that girl? I’m so going to kill him.”

I feel sick. My anger is slowly turning into a horrible sadness. It is a familiar feeling, and I hate it. I knew our relationship was too good to be true. This shit doesn’t happen to me. I don’t get lucky. I’m meant to feel like this. It’s all I’ve ever known.

“Well if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to sleep. Hopefully, when I wake up this will all just be a nightmare,” I mumble.

My nose stings and my eyes burn. My chest feels tight. I know what’s about to happen, and I don’t want my friends to see it.

“Ava—” Morgan begins but I hold a hand up to cut her off.

I lock my bedroom door and collapse onto my bed. I bury myself under my covers and finally let the tears out. The pain is overwhelming as I let myself drown in it.

Why me?

THIRTY-THREE

OAKLEY

I get off the phone with Tyler and immediately set out to find Andre. After what feels like hours, I see him in the kitchen. He's leaning against a wall, his eyes fixed on a girl's chest. I storm over to him and grab the collar of his shirt, dragging him away from the girl and out onto the patio with little effort.

I drop him onto the ground and he stares at me, incredulous.

"What the hell, man! I was about to get laid," he huffs and hastily picks himself up—what a dick.

"So you go around posting pictures of me avoiding random girls now? Is that a thing you do now? Or did I miss the memo?" I growl.

Andre looks taken aback at my sudden outburst and takes a cautious step back from me.

"Yo, Lee, I didn't mean anything by it. You weren't even doing anything with them. What's the issue?"

"The *issue* is that my girlfriend has no idea where I am and you're posting pictures of me living it up with a bunch of fucking puck bunnies!" I yell at him, not caring who hears us. He knew what he was doing. I know that much. Andre always gets like this when he's drinking. I have to remember that.

He snorts, smirking at me now. "That sounds like a great opportunity to me. What she doesn't know won't hurt her."

"Do you not realize how much of an asshole you're being right now?" I snap at him.

"You've never seemed to have an issue with it until now. Ava must have one tight pussy," he scoffs.

The breath leaves my lungs, my vision turning red.

“I’m going to give you one chance to take that back and apologize. Otherwise, I’m going to shatter your jaw. You’re drunk, Andre. Go upstairs to bed.”

He throws his head back and laughs. He takes another step towards me, closing the gap between us.

“Ava must have one tight pussy—”

A sharp pain shoots up my arm when my fist connects with his jaw. He stumbles slightly, looking more shocked than hurt. He narrows his eyes at me and spits blood at my shoes.

“Go back inside and go to bed,” I plead. I don’t want to fight him but I won’t hesitate to wipe the smug grin off his face if he speaks her name again.

His fist connects with my eye before I even know what’s happening. I reel back and smack the back of my head against the brick wall. Pain travels down my body. My vision blurs, and my ears ring. It takes me a few moments to recover as I blink past the blood dripping steadily down my face and look around.

Andre’s gone.

“Fuck!” I shout into the empty backyard. I place my fingers tenderly on the lump forming on the back of my head, swaying slightly as I stand up straight and head back into the house. The heat hits me like a wave as soon as I get inside. I make a beeline for the bathroom.

I lock the door behind me and lean on the counter to stare at the large bruise forming around my eye. At least Andre was drunk. If he were sober my eye would be swollen shut by now. He’s got an even better arm than I do.

When I’m done cleaning myself off, I hurry out of the bathroom to make it out to my truck. Once again, I’m stopped by an old *friend* of mine.

“You’re not leaving already, are you? I’ve missed you,” Layla purrs in my ear. She grabs my bicep with her bony fingers, letting the long pointed nails dig into my skin. I shake

my arm out of her grasp and pull away, trying to put some distance between us.

“I’m tired, and fed up, Layla. Leave me alone.”

“Just one drink, Lee-Lee? Then I’ll leave you alone,” she begs, inching closer to me.

“Don’t call me that,” I snap.

She rolls her eyes and bats her lashes at me. “Please, Oakley?” She holds out her cup and smiles warmly.

With a groan, I grab it and down it to get her to leave me alone.

“Now I’m leaving,” I say firmly.

She grabs my wrist before I can slip away. Another girl with bright green eyes takes my other hand and stares up at me. I don’t even know who she is. Layla presses her body against mine.

“Just come sit with us for a few minutes.”

I shrink away from her and grimace when she leans up to nip my earlobe. I spin away from them and almost fall over. How much have I had to drink?

“No, Layla, I’m serious.”

“At least let me call you a cab. Let Brit help you over to the couch,” Layla coos.

I collapse onto a soft surface and wince when my head hits the wall behind me. I wrench my eyes open and groan. Familiar faces stare down at me, and I can’t make out a word they’re saying.

“Where am I?” I blurt out.

“God, how much did you have to drink?”

“Where’s Andre?” I ask.

“Let’s not worry about him. I brought you the drink you asked for, handsome.” Someone sits on my lap and puts a heavy, glass bottle in my hand.

I take a long swig from it and cough away the burn in my throat. “What is this?” A sharp ringtone rings in my ears—*my* ringtone.

“Oakley’s phone,” Layla says in a singsong tone. I murmur something and try to reach for it, but I’m ignored.

I lie back in defeat, too tired to put up a fight.

“No, no, Oakley! Wake up. Look who we found!”

I open my eyes and lean forward. I beg my eyes to focus on the guy standing across the room. I let out a low chuckle at the sight of my best friend. All of a sudden, my vision blurs. I can’t make out the figure coming towards me before the world goes black.



It feels like a jackhammer is pounding my skull as soon as I wake up. I rub my temples in hopes of easing the pain, but it only worsens. I pass a hand over my eye and hiss in pain.

What the hell? I peel my eyes open and blink rapidly to clear my vision. Thankfully, I’m in my old bedroom—not a ditch. I pull myself out of bed and stumble into the bathroom.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, open-mouthed. A large blue and purple bruise rings my left eye. I guess the pain makes sense now. I turn the tap on to see my bruised, cut knuckles.

Shit.

Andre. The fight last night flashes across my mind. Andre has said his fair share of shit things to me, but last night takes the cake. He knew what he was saying. And he knew how I would react.

The last thing I remember is Layla giving me her drink. It was most definitely laced with enough drugs to erase every memory of the night. Who even brought me home last night? How did I get into bed?

The sound of the doorbell echoes through the house. I hurry into my room to throw some sweatpants and a hoodie on. I toss my hood up to hide my eye and head downstairs. I open the door to a busted Andre. The purple shadows under his eyes stand out vividly against his sallow skin. I gesture for him to come upstairs, and he follows me into my room before standing awkwardly by the door.

“Hey,” he breathes, eyes on the carpet.

I sit down on my bed and raise my eyebrows. “What happened last night? Why did you guys *drug* me?” I demand, not wanting to beat around the bush.

His eyes widen, and he shakes his head. “I didn’t. I stopped it. I had no idea Layla was going to do something like that.”

I laugh mirthlessly. Andre stares bemused.

“Maybe if you weren’t such a prick, you would have been there to stop it *before* I was high out of my mind.”

He frowns and rubs the back of his neck nervously. “I know. I’m sorry.”

I scoff at him and cross my arms. “Sorry isn’t going to fix anything. You crossed a line, Andre. If you were anyone else, you wouldn’t be able to walk right now. I thought we were best friends, but apparently, I was wrong.”

“I’ll make it up to you. I promise,” he says solemnly.

“Don’t. Just tell me who brought me home last night,” I tell him coldly.

He winces at my harsh tone but I brush it off. I don’t have the energy to feel bad.

“Yeah...about that.”

If he drove me home drunk, I’ll punch him again.

“What did you do? You didn’t drive, right?”

“No. Of course I didn’t. I, ugh, may have called your sister to come and get you,” he stammers.

I groan. “You *what*? I’m going to hear it now for sure,”

“I wasn’t about to send you home in a cab, so it was her or your mom.”

“How did that happen anyway? Where did Layla get the drugs?” I ask him, genuinely confused as to where she managed to get enough drugs to knock my two hundred and thirty-pound ass out cold.

“She’s been hooking up with some drug dealer from Kelowna. When I went back downstairs and watched you pass out on the couch with her in your lap, I lost my shit,” he spits. I roll my eyes. “Oh, before I forget.” He tosses me my phone. “It’s been blowing up all morning.”

Nerves—and fear—wash over me as I scroll through all of my missed calls and messages. Every one of Ava’s texts hurt more and more. Then I find the messages about a picture. A seemingly shameful picture.

“What picture are they talking about?”

Andre’s face falls. “I’m sorry, man. If I got downstairs a few seconds earlier...”

“What picture?” I ground out through gritted teeth.

“Layla sent it to Ava,” he mumbles.

I pull open my conversation with Ava and find the picture, bile rising in my throat. This is bad. Really bad.

“No, no, no,” I grunt and dial Ava’s number. Straight to voicemail. I try again and again and again, to no avail.

“She’ll forgive you. You just have to explain,” Andre mutters.

“For your sake, you better be right.”

THIRTY-FOUR

OCTAVIA

I wish I had the time to lay in bed for days and drown in my own self-pity, but sadly life goes on. Between dodging Oakley's phone calls for two days and eating my feelings in chocolate chip cookie dough, I've managed to fall behind in my school work.

My second semester is already more challenging than my first and I am nowhere near caught up with my assignments. I've just had so much to deal with lately, especially with my new found "relationship" with my birth mother.

I got a text from her last night in the middle of my *Friends* marathon. She suggested we meet at a coffee shop this morning and after some thought, I agreed. I'm regretting it now that I have to walk in the freezing cold, however.

I make it to the coffee shop early, a habit I picked up from Lily, and order a black coffee before sitting down at one of the few empty tables that face the busy road to wait for Rebecca.

An older couple sits at the table across from me. The man takes his wife's hands in his own and raises them to his lips, a sight that makes me think about all of the times Oakley has done the same.

Maybe I'm overreacting. I know he probably has a logical explanation for the picture and for why he left in the first place. But it isn't just the party incident that's upsetting me. It's that I know this isn't going to stop. There will be more parties and more girls when he gets drafted. How am I supposed to be able to deal with that? It feels like a never-ending battle when it comes to us. I don't know how much more I can take.

The screech of a chair being pulled across the hardwood floor snaps me out of my reverie.

“You look beautiful,” Rebecca says excitedly as she takes her seat opposite me. She drops her designer handbag onto the vacant chair beside me and smiles broadly.

“Thanks. Uhm, so do you.”

It’s true. She does look beautiful—quite a change from the first time I saw her.

Her long brown hair is twisted into a neat knot at the back of her head and her makeup is glowy and airbrushed. She is wearing the same wool coat, but with different jeans and boots.

She looks surprised by my compliment but hides it well with a smile. I gulp my coffee as I try to think of something to say. Thankfully, Rebecca speaks first.

“So, tell me everything about you. I want to know everything about my little girl.”

I wince slightly at her pet name but decide to let it go. The last thing I want is to let my feelings ruin the opportunity to get the answers I deserve.

“Where do I start?” I ask, forcing a smile.

She smiles warmly. “Are you going to school here?”

“Yeah, for Social Work,” I mumble awkwardly.

Her smile falters. Oh well, she should feel guilty.

“That’s awesome, Octavia.”

“Call me Ava,” I say hurriedly. “I prefer it.”

Hurt flashes across her features. “Octavia is such a pretty name. You should be called by your real name. I chose it because—”

“Ava is my real name. Octavia reminds me of a time I don’t want to think about,” I say bitterly, cutting her off. I try to feel bad for being rude, but I don’t. I find it hard to feel sympathy for the woman who abandoned me.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to overstep,” she says quietly and stares down at her cup. “How’s that big scary boyfriend of yours doing?”

“Let’s talk about something else,” I almost snarl at her, unable to help it. I don’t want to talk about Oakley. I want to talk about her.

“Where have you been for the past twenty years?” Fire burns in my veins, and I can feel my face flushing in anger. I don’t know where this is coming from. Well, I do. I just thought I would be able to keep it under control.

“It’s a bit of a blur. But after your father left, I moved from place to place. Then I found Link, my boyfriend. He has a place here in Vancouver. I’ve been staying there for a while now.”

Ah, *Link*. The rich guy she’s taking advantage of has a name. How *nice*.

“How long have you been clean?” I ask pointedly, my voice strong and steady.

“Since I came to see you for the first time,” she sighs and looks up from her cup.

Her blazing, emerald green eyes burn into mine. We even have the same eyes, how comical. I vaguely wonder what features I get from my birth father.

“Why come back now? After all this time? Is it money? Are you sick?”

She shakes her head and looks away from me once again.

“I don’t need money, and I’m not sick. I just wanted to see my daughter. It’s been so long.” Her voice cracks.

“Daughter?” I echo incredulously. “I’m not sure who you think you are, but you are not my mom. You’re nothing more than the woman who dumped me in the system before I was out of diapers!” I hiss and take a deep breath before continuing, “Do you have *any* idea what my life was like

growing up? Do you ever think of the damage you've done? Do you even *care*?"

"Ava, can we please go—"

"Outside? Sure!" I make a beeline for the door furiously. Her heeled boots click annoyingly against the tiled floor as she tries to keep up with me. I rush out to the side of the building and whirl on her.

"You have to understand, Ava! I wasn't ready to be a mom back then."

I laugh humourlessly and cross my arms. "And that was my fault? Because *I* was the one who was punished for you not being able to keep your legs closed. *Not* you."

She flinches, her mouth agape.

"If you came here with hopes of being a parent, you're about twenty years too late. I already have a mom—a mom who took me in and loved me when you abandoned me. Lily and David gave me everything I always wanted. They cleaned up your mess for you. You're too *late*!"

"I know," she whispers. She seems so heartbroken. "You got the life you deserved."

"*After* I spent fifteen years being moved from house to house and being seen as nothing more than a paycheque! *After*, I spent hours every single night crying myself to sleep because my mom left me. I spent fifteen years believing that I was the problem. You might be happy with your life now, and I'm happy for you, I really am. But I don't want to be a part of it."

She stays silent, eerily so. I blink away the tears rapidly and clench my fists so hard that my nails puncture my skin.

"We might share the same blood, Rebecca, but you're not my mother and I am not your daughter. You don't get to decide when you want to be a part of my life. I'm not going to play happy family just to make you feel better about your shitty life. I'm done making excuses for you. I deserve better. And because of you, it has taken me far too long to realize that."

I ignore the expression on her face and spin on my heels. I walk away from her with my head held high, just like my real mom taught me.

THIRTY-FIVE

OAKLEY

I don't think I have been this nervous in a long time. The past few days have been torture. With what happened at the party, play-offs coming up, and of course, Ava, my nerves have sky-rocketed. Ava is the only thing that calms me, but I haven't heard from her at all.

I've tried to give her some space and it's worked. If you don't count the several voicemails and text messages that I've left over the past three days, that is. But in my defence, I've never been a patient guy.

I thought that after the first day she would break and pick up the phone—even to dump me and put me out of my misery. But she hasn't and I can't wait anymore. I need to tell her what happened before I lose my damn mind.

Spending these past few days knowing that she's been sitting at home thinking I did anything with another girl is eating away at me. I would be damned to ruin what we have for some casual hookup. She needs to know that she's it for me—*forever*. Or as long as she'll have me.

That's why I've been staring at her door for the past ten minutes. I practiced my speech in the car the entire way here and was confident that I could get my girl back, but that flew out the window the second I stepped inside her building.

My hands are clammy, and my heart is pounding. *Do it*, I tell myself firmly and rap smartly on the door.

Moments pass and nothing—then I hear hushed voices coming from behind the door. I hear Ava's voice and my breathing starts to slow. That is until a furious Morgan opens the door. She opens her mouth to hurl insults at me, but I look past her into the apartment.

I spot my girl standing with her arms crossed, leaning against the back of their couch biting her nails. She pushes herself off the sofa and walks over to us. She stops a few feet away from me, not maintaining eye contact.

Her hair is thrown into a bun on the top of her head, and her face is makeup-free. *Just how I like it.* I find it difficult to breathe when I take notice of my Saints hoodie hanging carelessly off of her shoulders. That’s a good sign, right?

When our eyes meet, the urge to rush over to her and wrap her up in my arms is overwhelming.

Morgan pulls me inside and slams the door shut behind me. “State your business before I drop-kick your ass to Mexico.”

I roll my eyes and turn my attention back to the girl I came here for. “I need to talk to you.”

Ava scoffs and puts her hands on her hips. “*Now* you want to talk, Oakley? You didn’t have a problem with ignoring me before.”

“Okay, I deserved that. Just let me explain. Please?” I beg.

“If she wanted to talk to you, she would have,” Morgan jabs, and I glare at her.

To my surprise—and delight, Ava says, “I got this, M. We need some time alone.”

Morgan glowers at me on her way to her bedroom. “Just yell if you need me.”

Ava sits down on the far side of the couch, crosses her legs and looks up at me expectantly. “Well? Explain.”

Do I sit beside her? Did she sit on the far side because she doesn’t want me to sit close to her?

I shake my head as if to clear it of these stupid questions and make my way to the couch. I sit in the middle, leaving some space between us for her sake.

“It wasn’t my intention to disappear like that. It just happened,” I say quietly.

She scoffs at my words and I have to bite my tongue to keep myself from making a sarcastic remark.

”*It just happened?* It isn’t hard to send a damn text message! You could have been lying dead somewhere for all I knew!”

“I know, okay? I’m sorry. I just needed to talk to my mom about something and get away from here for a couple of days,” I confess and instantly curse myself.

Ava frowns in bemusement. “What was so important you had to go all the way home for, then? Or do I not get to know that either?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I grumble. “What does matter is you knowing what happened at that damn party.”

She rolls her eyes, unconvinced by my noticeable subject change, but shrugs her shoulders all the same.

I blow out a sigh of relief and lean back against the cushions. “I was only at that party because I wanted to clear my mind and see a couple of friends. Not to get laid by some random girl.”

Ava stays silent. Her body is rigid and her eyes are locked on the T.V. She’s not showing any sign as to whether or not she believes me so far, which only adds to my panic.

Come on, Oakley, man up.

“The last thing that I remember is fighting with Andre. Everything else is a blur. We’re pretty sure I was drugged. I need you to believe me, baby. I woke up in my bed, alone. Andre said he got me a ride home as soon as that girl answered my phone,” I explain. My body yearns to move closer to her and wrap my arms around her.

“Okay. I believe you,” she mumbles and her shoulders relax slightly. Relief washes over me—until I catch the unshed tears in her eyes. “But you need to tell me what was so important. Why did you need to clear your mind? I think I

have a right to know when something important happens to you.”

She’s right. She *always* is.

“I’ll tell you, but you have to promise that you won’t get upset.”

She bites her lip and nods reluctantly. “I promise.”

“My agent called me that morning to tell me where I’m predicted to go in the draft,” I mutter and look away when her face falls.

“And?” Her voice shakes.

My stomach jolts. “It’ll be somewhere in the United States, baby.”

I keep my gaze on her and when her lips wobble, I pull her close, as if on instinct. With her back in my arms, I feel myself relax for the first time in three days. I bury my face in her warm neck and breathe in the familiar smell of her shampoo.

“I’m so proud of you,” she whispers, effectively making me feel worse.

“It doesn’t have to change anything. I already told you I’d keep my place here and just travel back and forth.”

Her back stiffens against me, making my nerves return instantly. “We both know it will change things. It isn’t as easy as just keeping a place here, Oakley,” she counters, shaking her head at my suggestion.

I know what she’s trying to do. She wants to run.

“What if it wasn’t just mine? What if it was ours? Would that make it easier?” I murmur and push down the excitement bubbling inside of me at the mere thought of it.

She moves around in my arms and looks at me with wide eyes. I shrug and cup her cheek, letting my thumb brush across her soft skin. I want nothing more than to plant my lips on hers. I’ve missed her.

“You’re ridiculous,” she says and pulls away from me. I hate the empty feeling that swallows me whole when she returns to the opposite end of the couch.

“I just want this to work. I don’t know if you do anymore, though.” My jaw clenches and I shut my mouth before saying something I don’t mean out of hurt.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ava demands, scowling at me.

“You know exactly what it means,” I say quietly. “It sure feels like you’re looking for something to use as an escape route.”

“I have too much to deal with right now.” Her sudden change in tone tells me everything I need to know.

Suddenly, a loose thread on the couch becomes the most interesting thing in the room. “What do you mean?”

Her change in breathing makes me look at her again. Tears fill her beautiful green eyes, and I want nothing more than to reach forward and wipe them away. But I stay still.

“Let me help you deal with it then. That’s what I’m here for.” Again, she doesn’t say anything. “What if I wait until you graduate? Will that make it better? Just say the word and I’ll wait,” I plead.

A slight shake of her head is the only response I get. Pain rises in my chest and I blink rapidly.

“You’re really going to sit there and not say anything? How do you not have anything to say? I have a lot *I* want to say.”

I’m angry now. Her silence is only hurting—and frustrating me even more. “Why are you running away from this? Is it just that I’m being drafted, or have you had this planned for a while?”

“Of course I haven’t been planning this!” she snaps, furious. “I just can’t do it. I can’t be that girl again! What happened at that party will happen over and over again. I know you didn’t do anything with that girl, I believe you, but

it's just going to get worse! I can't deal with it. I'm not strong enough!" she adds in a shout with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I'm not letting you run away," I say desperately—and I mean it. "I love you, and you love me. That's all that matters."

She shakes her head again and walks into the kitchen. "You're being naive, Oakley."

"I'm not being naive. I just don't want to lose you." I follow closely behind her and grab her arm, closing the space between us. "Please don't do this. Don't push me away right now."

Her eyes dart around the room, looking everywhere but at me. "I need to do this."

"No, you *don't*. The only thing you need to do is have faith in us. Let me take care of the rest." I would get down on my knees and beg her not to walk away if that's what it took.

"You're making this harder than it needs to be, Oakley. Please, just stop," she breathes out.

I almost grasp at my chest in hopes of taking some of this pain away. This can't be happening.

"Tell me you don't want this anymore and I'll leave. But you have to tell me, Ava. Loud and clear. You have to know that it was you that pushed me away, not the other way around. Days from now, when you're missing me, remember that *you* who ran away," I add bitterly, my anger and hurt getting the best of me as per usual.

I drop her arm and wait anxiously for her reply. If she tells me to leave right now, it'll ruin me. She's become one of the most important parts of my life. I don't know what I'm supposed to do without her. This is exactly why I didn't want a fucking relationship.

"I don't want this anymore." Her words cut through the tense silence and my remaining resolve.

I try to speak, but my words come out in a jumbled mess. I feel like I'm choking on air.

"Okay," is the only thing I manage to say. I'm halfway to the door when I stop dead in my tracks and turn around to face her one last time. "You're making a mistake."

I turn back around without staying to see her reaction. I feel like I'm on autopilot as I leave her apartment. As if in a dream, I hurry outside.

The sun beams down through the thin clouds, making my eyes burn. I have to look away from the bright light before I let the tears fall. I hurry into my truck and finally let myself process what just happened.

This whole thing is almost comical. Everybody kept warning me not to break her, and in the end, she broke me.

THIRTY-SIX

OAKLEY

I feel the familiar burn in my knuckles as I continue to take my anger out on the punching bag in front of me. The ceiling shakes from the force of my blows and for a slight moment, I wonder if the whole place is going to come collapsing down on me. Oh, the irony.

The potent stench of sweat is thick in the tiny boxing gym I had managed to find after having my heart ripped clean from my chest a few hours earlier. I needed to hit something, and it was either come here or get into a bar fight.

I never said it's a healthy coping mechanism.

I can already feel the aches building in my muscles, but it does little to slow my pace. I've lost track of how long I've been here. The only thing I know is that I've managed to lose the love of my life in the span of a few hours.

I haven't been able to stop Ava's words repeating over and over again in my head. Her voice, void of all emotion as she tells me she doesn't want to be with me anymore echoes in my eardrums.

My harsh breathing cuts through the silence and blends in with the sound of my fists as they collide with the swinging leather bag. Sweat soaks my t-shirt and I can almost hear my heart pounding. I slow my movements long enough to yank the wet material over my head before crashing my fist against the solid surface once again.

I would have given it all up for her. God knows I could have waited. I would have waited. All she had to do was ask. Why couldn't she just ask me? Why did she have to run away?

The slam of a door catches my attention. A tall guy walks towards me, and I groan loudly when I recognize him.

“Oakley?” He seems genuinely confused to see me here.

I drop him a nod. I can try to be civil. We are “friends” after all.

“Adam.”

We share an awkward glance before he drops his bag a few feet away from mine and pulls out a set of boxing gloves. I watch curiously as he pulls them on and tightens them around his wrists. He looks completely relaxed as he takes a long swig of water and launches his first blow at his punching bag.

“I haven’t seen you here before,” he grunts.

“It’s my first time.”

I can hear his gloves slapping against the leather in an oddly calming rhythm and can’t help but look over and watch him. It’s obvious he comes here a lot. I come nowhere close to his impressive skill.

“How often do you come here?” I ask, not missing how his shoulders tense whenever I speak.

“Every day.” He doesn’t stop his dangerous assault on the bag. “Lately, it’s been twice a day.”

I’m not naive; I know what happened between him and Ava. My guess is that’s why he feels the need to come to this shithole twice a day.

“Why are you here?” he grunts.

“Same reason as you,” I mumble and throw a punch so hard it makes me hiss in pain.

He chuckles and takes a step back from the punching bag. He rips his gloves off and sits on the bench behind us. He pulls out his water bottle again and takes a long sip of it.

“I heard. Matt keeps secrets like a teenage girl.” He pulls his shirt up to wipe away the sweat on his forehead and looks at me without his usual cocky grin.

I unwrap my knuckles and sit down beside him. “Don’t I know it.”

“If it makes you feel any better, she’s probably regretting it already.”

Although we haven’t exactly been the best of friends, I can’t help but feel an odd appreciation for the guy. It takes a lot to sit and try to comfort someone you can’t stand.

“Thanks. I can’t say I’m so sure about that,” I sigh and lean back against the cold, cement wall behind us.

“I know we’ve never really seen eye to eye, but trust me, she’s crazy about you,” Adam says with a long, drawn-out sigh. “This is just what she does. You scare her.”

I stare at him in confusion. The last thing I expected tonight was for Adam to be giving me relationship advice.

“Scare her?”

He nods his head before glancing around the empty gym. “C’mon. *Everyone* knows she’s terrified of what’s gonna happen when you leave.”

“I’ve already told her I’ll fly back and forth whenever I can,” I say weakly.

“You’re an even bigger idiot than I thought you were if you think that’s the only reason she’s so worried,” he laughs, stands, and raises his arms behind his head, stretching.

“What do you mean then?” I huff, feeling myself getting more annoyed. Then again, that’s the usual feeling I get with Adam.

“It’s the girls and fame she’s scared of. Your little *stunt* only made it worse,” he replies casually and slips his hands back into his gloves.

My stomach drops. I mentally kick myself in the ass for being such an idiot. How did I miss that? It was so obvious.

“Don’t let her run away from you. A girl like Ava only comes around once in a lifetime,” he mutters. A flash of pain

passes over his face.

He turns away from me and goes back to punching the bag mercilessly, signalling the end of the conversation. My phone rings, making me groan. I wrench my gaze off of Adam and reach down into my bag.

“Hey,” I breathe after I accept the call.

“Where are you? I’m outside your place and you aren’t home. You okay?” Matt’s booming voice cuts through the phone.

I roll my eyes and toss my hand wraps and water bottle back into my bag.

“I’m fine,” I answer gruffly.

He scoffs and I know he’s rolling his eyes at me too. “Where are you? I’m outside your place with a twelve-pack of brewskis.”

“I’m at a gym I found. I’ll be there soon.”

“Hurry up before I drink them all,” he warns and hangs up.

With a huff, I grab the strap of my bag and toss it over my shoulder. I offer Adam my fist, unspeaking. His eyes move to my hand as he raises his eyebrows. He slowly hits his gloved fist against mine.

“Thanks, Adam. I appreciate the advice.”

“Anytime. Good luck,” he adds and I’m startled as his lips turn up slightly. With that, I give him a small smile before heading for the door.



Matt’s truck is parked out front when I pull up to my apartment. I join him on the pavement and chuckle at the beers in his hand.

“I see you brought the good shit.”

“Nothing but the best for my main man,” he winks and slaps my ass as we head out of the cold.

“Thanks.” I unlock the front door and flip on the lights.

“What gym were you at? You smell like my hockey bag.” He scrunches up his nose and flops onto my couch.

“Some boxing gym. Don’t know what it’s called. I’m going to go shower,” I add, heading towards my room. Matt turns the T.V on and gives me a thumbs up in response.

Ten minutes later, I rejoin Matt in the living room to watch our game tapes, and he rolls his eyes.

“You know I don’t appreciate you showing me up all of the time. Go put a shirt on before you hurt my ego anymore than you already have.”

I pretend to blush and throw a wink at him on my way to my room to change.

“Better?” I motion to the shirt now covering my chest and plop down beside him, taking a beer from the case.

“Much.”

I turn my attention to the T.V to study all of the wrong placed passes and missed goals from our last game. “Lowry needs to step it up. He’s gonna lose his spot if he keeps letting them slip past him.”

“Tell me about it,” Matt scoffs. “If he’s not going to block the shots he needs to move out of the way and let someone else do it. He keeps standing right in my line of vision.”

“Tyler’s really developed. Did you see that? His dekes are out of this world now!” I shout in excitement, pride filling my chest.

We continue watching game tapes for the next few hours. When we run out of beers, we move to my liquor cabinet. The more drinks I have, the less I feel. And I love it.

THIRTY-SEVEN

OCTAVIA

I'm a complete idiot. As soon as the words slipped out of my mouth, I knew I'd made a mistake. But I'm stubborn—way too stubborn to ever admit that to anyone. Now here I am a week later, without Oakley, a birth mother, and utterly miserable.

I know I should call him and tell him I made a mistake. But I can't. I don't know why, but I can't bring myself to. Not right now. Because even though I regret what happened, I can't help but think maybe it was the right thing to do.

As soon as Oakley told me he would play in the United States, my heart broke. I wasn't ready to hear that. As selfish as it seems, I just don't know if I could have dealt with it. Just the thought of what happened when he was in Penticton happening over and over again pains me. I don't know if I'm strong enough for that.

I let myself become too caught up in being with him to think about anything else. He made me forget about all the what if's, and it ended up hurting me in the end. Like I knew it would.

"Room for one more?" Morgan asks gently, peeping around my bedroom door.

"Yeah," I breathe and make space on my bed for her. I yank my blankets up and tuck them under my chin as Morgan gets comfy beside me.

"Have you seriously finished watching *Friends* in under a week?" she asks incredulously, her eyes wide.

I shrug in response, not taking my stinging eyes off of the screen. She sighs, wraps a small arm around me, and pulls me into her side. "You don't have to go through with this, you know."

I pull away from her slightly. I don't want to hear this right now. "Yes, I do. It would never have worked out."

She leans her head against mine and sighs through her nose. "How do you know that? That's just fear talking. I thought you loved him."

I'm taken aback by that and lift my head off her shoulder to glare at her. "Of course I do."

She raises her eyebrow. "Then why isn't it worth it? You know he would never do anything to hurt you. You're worrying about nothing."

I know she's right. My heart aches for Oakley, I've just been doing a great job fighting it off since the minute he turned away from me. Hiding feelings and self-destructing are things that come naturally to me.

"It's too late now. You should have seen his face, Morgan. He hates me," I mumble. The look on his face when I ended our relationship flashes in my mind.

"He was hurt, Ava. Just like you were. You never know unless you try," Morgan says quietly, surprising me. She's not exactly Oakley's biggest fan.

"Since when did you get so wise?" I tease, laughing for the first time in days.

She grins broadly. "What do you mean? I've always been this way."

That only makes me laugh harder.



I press the doorbell and can't help but laugh at the cheesy ringtone. That's a new one.

My dad opens the door. He looks at me, shocked.

"Ava? I didn't know you were coming!" His eyes are wide and what looks like engine oil is smeared across his hands and forehead.

I give him a half-smile and throw my hands up into the air in exasperation. “Surprise.”

“Hey, I’m not complaining. I missed you, sweetheart.” He grins crookedly and pulls me in for a tight bear hug.

The sudden comfort takes me by surprise. It takes less than two seconds for my nose to sting and my eyes to burn. Dad moves to pull away, but my grip on him tightens. He lets out a throaty chuckle.

“You gotta let me go so we can get inside, honey. It’s freezing out here. Why did you ring the doorbell? You should have a key,” he teases, his tone light and airy.

Reluctantly, I pull away and try to push the oncoming tears away before he can spot them. “Right. I just missed you guys. Where’s mom?”

We walk through the open door and I sigh when the instant warmth radiating from the lit fireplace warms up my frozen body. I miss having a fireplace.

“Is that my baby? What a surprise!” Mom comes rushing towards us. She throws her arms around me instantly, and that is the last straw. My walls come tumbling down—*fast*.

Uncontrollable sobs rack through my body. I cling to my mom, wanting nothing more than to be comforted right now. A surprised “*oh*” spills out of her mouth, and her arms squeeze tighter around me.

“Oh, baby. I’m right here,” she murmurs in my ear. She rubs a hand up and down my back to soothe me. I catch Dad’s panicked expression over her shoulder and bury my face in her neck.

There’s something about your Mom comforting you when you need it that strips you of your defences. It’s a special feeling that only a mother can give you. It’s *amazing*. I didn’t realize how deprived of it I’d been until Lily hugged me for the first time so long ago.

“Mom, I messed up,” I tell her, my chest rising and falling rapidly. My throat is dry and scratchy, my head pounds,

and my heart hurts so badly. *Everything* hurts.

Mom pulls away long enough to lead me over to the couch in front of the armchair. I sit down beside her and pull my legs up into my chest, leaning into her.

“What happened, Ava?” Her tone is warm and gentle, but inquisitive.

“I’m broken,” I say miserably and feel a hot surge of anger towards myself. “I pushed him away. What’s *wrong* with me?”

“You are not broken, sweetheart. There is absolutely nothing wrong with you,” she scolds, tightening her grip on my shoulders. “Tell me what happened?”

After taking a few deep breaths, I work up the strength to tell her without crying. “I got scared. Everything Dad said was right. I’m not strong enough to wait around at home for him while he’s surrounded by everything I’m not.”

“Octavia Layton, that is the biggest load of shit I have ever heard!” Mom scolds, her tone sharp enough to cut through my quiet sobs.

“You’ve been through too much to try and convince me that you’re not enough. You’re the strongest person I’ve ever met. From the minute you walked into this house, I knew you were going to be trouble.” Her arm tightens around my shoulders as she lets out a chuckle. “You came waltzing through that door like you owned the damn place. I remember looking at your dad in shock. This little hotheaded fifteen-year-old girl with worn-down boots and a superiority complex that terrified me to no end was exactly who we were warned about.”

I shake my head at that. I do remember that day. It was the day that I finally agreed to meet with the family, who was *apparently* so eager to adopt me.

I didn’t believe my social worker and decided to give them one hell of a first impression. I shoved on my boots, lined my eyes with way too much eyeliner and even went as

far as to push my septum piercing back in with hopes of scaring them away. Thankfully, it didn't work.

The thought of it makes me laugh shakily. "I still remember the look on Dad's face when I put my boots on the coffee table. He looked like he was going to pop a blood vessel."

Dad hurries into the living room with my favourite mug in hand. "Do you still remember what we told you before you left that day?"

"Of course I do," I reply gratefully and take the mug of hot chocolate from him. I take a sip of it, and warmth spreads through me, calming me instantly. They both sit silent as they wait for me to speak again.

"You said that I didn't scare you. And that I didn't need to be scared anymore either." The words bring the familiar sting back to my eyes, and I force them away.

"We said that because not only did we *want* you to trust us, we *needed* you to trust us." Mom's voice cracks and a single tear falls down her face. "We saw the hurt inside you, but also the *strength*. We always knew you were something special. You have always been so brave, Ava, but you need to stop letting your fear of being abandoned control you. You found something good with Oakley. He sees what we do honey, don't let him go."

Her words hit me hard. I flinch back at the realization that she's right.

I've always known that Oakley wasn't like the other guys I've been with. Especially not like my last boyfriend. But I think that just made him more intimidating to me.

Knowing that he was the guy that every girl dreams of having was always sitting in the back of my mind, taunting me. But I think the only thing scarier than knowing how perfect he is, is the thought of him being perfect with someone else.

"I love you. I'm so grateful to be able to call you my family." I smile and hug them tightly.

Maybe some things are worth the risk, just like I was.

THIRTY-EIGHT

OAKLEY

“Get up, dude. It’s noon.”

The blankets are ripped from my limp body and I groan. Matt hovers over me, his eyes narrowed. “Practice starts in half an hour. If you miss another one, Coach will kill us both.”

“Yeah, I’ll be there,” I grumble and pull the blankets back over me.

Matt groans, “No, you won’t. That’s what you said yesterday, and instead of seeing you at the rink, I came home to you passed out on the couch. Get up now before I get the bucket.”

“Read the room, Matt. Just leave me alone, you prick.”

“I’m the prick?” he scoffs. “Get out of bed and have a damn shower already. You smell like a dumpster.”

“Funny, I feel like one too.” I’m about to shut my eyes again, but fingers wrap around my ankles as Matt pulls me out of bed. My ass slams against the floor, pulling a string of curses from my lips. “Fuck you. How did you even get in here?”

“If you don’t want people to come inside your apartment, maybe you shouldn’t hide your spare key under the welcome mat like every unsuspecting victim in a murder show. Now get your ass in the shower. You have shit to do today, Oakley!” Matt adds in a shout and stalks out of my room.

I lean my head against my bed frame and sigh. The last thing that I want to do today is get my ear chewed out by Coach for my lack of effort lately. The team relies on me too much for me to let them down. But hell, I have been thinking about everything *but* hockey.

With another groan, I push myself off the floor and get

dressed. With my hockey bag now in hand, I join Matt in the living room.

“Wow, isn’t this a sight for sore eyes? Get your shoes on. We’re already late,” he says firmly.

“Got it, Mom,” I scoff and slip on my sneakers.

Matt’s jaw clenches at my obvious attitude but he nods nevertheless and walks out the door. We walk down the hallway until we reach the heavy metal door that leads to the creepy staircase.

“Have you ever seen a homeless guy in here?” Matt asks as we walk down the graffitied stairway. It’s not an odd question. By the look of the chipped cement stairs and eerie atmosphere, I’m surprised that I have yet to find a guy living there.

“No. There was a raccoon once, though.”

Matt shoves open the exit door eagerly and sighs, “Did you name it?”

“Name it? You’re fucking weird,” I laugh as we make our way over to Matt’s truck. The mud covering the entire lower half of the navy paint makes me cringe. I spot my truck sitting pristinely behind it. “It isn’t hard to get a car wash every few months, at least, man.”

“I like it dirty,” he shrugs and pulls open his door.

I wrinkle my nose and hop into his truck. “Okay, I don’t need to know that.”

He snorts and starts the engine. “That’s a new one. Since when are you afraid of a dirty joke? Oh, right. I forgot you’ve become a broody bitch.”

“Whatever,” I brush him off. He has no idea what I’m dealing with right now. He hasn’t been without Morgan since he was a kid.

“No, not *whatever*. I’ve been dealing with your shit attitude and awful effort on and off the ice for too long. Just call her already. Tell her she made a mistake.”

“It’s not that easy.” I stare out the window. The buildings start to blur as Matt pulls out of the parking lot. I told Ava that if she said it was over, it was over. She chose to run away, not the other way around.

“Why not? Do you seriously think that Morgan’s never threatened to leave my ass? Because she has. She still does sometimes. But we work it out. I’m going to marry her one day, dude. But that doesn’t mean that loving her isn’t hard some days, and vice versa. It’s worth all of the fights and arguments.”

I already know that loving Ava is worth everything. I’ve known that for months. What I don’t know is why I’m the only one who feels that way. She made her lack of hope in our relationship known when she tore me apart so easily.

“*She left me*, Matt. Not the other way around.”

“And she regrets it! You’re a damn idiot if you think she doesn’t.”

I turn to look at him with evident surprise. “How do you know that? Have you talked to her?”

“As if Morgan can keep a secret.” He flips on his blinker and turns down the road leading to the arena. My stomach twists anxiously. “Look, if you want to continue to sit in your own pity, then do that on your own. But if you want to get your girl back, I’m here to help. The entire team is.”

“What?” I turn to him again, slack-jawed.

“Oh, don’t look so surprised. We all want the old Oakley back. Not to mention that Avley is *endgame*, or whatever Morgan says. We all want you to be happy.”

“Avley? Endgame? You sound like my sister,” I chuckle, grinning madly. My heart is warm—proud that I’ve managed to gain the respect and friendship of my team over this wild ride of a season. Not to mention that I’ve somehow landed a best friend like Matt in the process.

“Yeah, yeah. So, you in or what?”

I clap my hand on his shoulder and give it a firm squeeze.

“Let’s get my girl back.”

THIRTY-NINE

OCTAVIA

“I still don’t see why we’re going out for dinner. We never go out before a game,” I grumble, trailing behind Morgan and up the cobblestone leading to Lucy’s Diner.

After seeing my parents yesterday, it pushed me to concentrate more on school. I was finally catching up on my piles of homework this afternoon when Morgan decided to storm into my bedroom and launch the entirety of my closet at me.

After a torturous hour of hair pulling and being poked in the eye with my mascara wand, she had me looking good enough to be seen by the public.

She grabs my hand and quickens her pace. “Because the guys wanted to. And I’m dragging you along because I don’t want to be the only girl there.”

Rolling my eyes, I open the door for us and follow her in. “Like you’ve had a problem with that before.”

We turn the corner and I halt in my steps. I make eye contact with the one person I was scared shitless to see tonight. I don’t manage to push the butterflies down fast enough. The corners of his mouth twitch.

He smiles and I can’t help but return it. I whip my head to look at Morgan and see that she’s standing next to me with her arms crossed, smiling innocently. She ignores the daggers I’m shooting at her and drags me to the table.

“Hey, guys! Sorry, we’re late. I had my hands full getting this one ready.”

She crawls into the booth beside Matt. The only seat left is next to Oakley. Of course. Oakley coughs awkwardly, signalling for me to sit down. He moves over, leaving me

more than enough space. I smile gratefully at him and sit down.

Our arms brush when I settle beside him and I curse myself when the undeniable shiver runs through my body. Morgan snickers before I raise my foot and kick her under the table.

“You look good.” Oakley’s raspy voice snaps me out of my reverie as I find myself getting lost in how close we are.

It’s tough to keep my hands folded on my lap when I notice his lack of facial hair. I want to reach out and run my fingers along the smooth skin, but I don’t try.

“You shaved,” I choke out. That’s not a good sign. He only kept his beard for me.

“Figured it was time for a change.” His words slice through me, and I have to tear my eyes away from him before I break down in front of everyone.

I manage to avoid conversation with Oakley for the remainder of the dinner and by the time we’re all done, I can’t help but feel like I’ve really lost him.



I’ve had the inkling that Morgan has been up to something all night. The dinner I could have blown off, but this? No. Now I’m sure she’s up to something. If she weren’t, she wouldn’t be standing in the arena parking lot holding Oakley’s hockey jersey out in front of her, demanding I put it on before we go inside.

“He doesn’t want me wearing that. Trust me.” I try to get her to put it away, only for her to shut me down. Is she deliberately trying to hurt me?

“Put it on. Please? For me?” she pleads, even going as far as to pout.

I shake my head at her childish behaviour but reach out and take the silky material anyway. I’m hit with a wave of

nostalgia and have to quickly blink the tears away before they ruin the makeup Morgan spent way too much time doing.

In a swift movement, I have the jersey over my head and hanging loosely off my body. “There? Can we go inside now? Please?”

She nods her head excitedly and hooks her arm in mine, leading us into the building.

“Why aren’t we sitting in our usual seats?” I ask as soon as we get down to our ice level seats. We’ve been sitting in the same seats for the past two years, so I can’t help but be a little confused at our sudden switch up.

“These are the only ones Matt could get tonight.” She waves me off and says hello to the teenage girls beside us. I suspiciously sit down beside her just as the team heads onto the ice for their warm-ups.

I watch in disbelief as Oakley skates over to Adam, grabs him by the shoulder and fist-bumps him. Since when is that a thing?

“I was shocked too. They’ve been boxing every day together,” Morgan puts in, clearly sensing my curiosity.

The song blaring from the speaker’s changes and my favourite song starts playing throughout the arena instead. My eyebrows shoot up and I look over at Morgan to see the giant grin she’s wearing as she points out to the ice. I follow her gaze and gasp—my jaw drops.

The team has spread out in a straight line in front of us, with several players holding a paper sign in front of them.

The words *‘Ava please forgive Jeff!’* are spelled out along the line, with Oakley holding the exclamation point in his hands. I feel like I could pass out at any given moment with how fast my heart is pounding. I flush as the team points and jeers at me.

I faintly hear Morgan’s giggling from beside me, but I tune her out when Oakley skates towards the glass. My body moves on its own, getting up from the seat and stepping forward until only the glass separates us.

Our eyes lock through his clear visor. His hand touches the glass, and I giggle before raising mine and resting it over his.

“Please stay until the end of the game. I have a lot to say to you,” he declares, grinning with hope swimming proudly in his eyes.

I nod instantly. “I love you,” I state confidently, relieved, ecstatic and shocked all at the same time.

“And I love you. I have to go get ready to win for you. Meet me outside the locker room after the game,” he tells me with a beyond dramatic wink.

“I’ll be there. Good luck.”

He starts skating backward and blows me a kiss.



“So, like, your boyfriend is adorable. I’m so jealous of you!” One of the teenage girls squeals from beside us as Morgan and I make our way out of our seats.

I smile to myself. “He is pretty adorable, isn’t he?”

“Hey, how did he know to play that song? You wouldn’t have had anything to do with that, would you?” I ask Morgan as we head towards the locker room.

“You have never been one to hide your love for the *Jo Bros*,” she says with a laugh.

“I guess I should say thank you, then.” I give her a slight shove and laugh with her.

“I’m just happy I don’t have to deal with mopey ass Ava anymore. You were driving me insane.” I throw my hand to my chest in mock offence and stare at her open-mouthed.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself there. There’s still a lot we need to talk about,” I say, reminding Morgan and *myself*. She rolls her eyes and waves me off in response.

The locker room doors swing open and our boys stalk out. Morgan rushes over to Matt, and I see Adam standing off

to the side.

I can't help but beam at him. "Adam!"

He smiles and rushes over to me. "Hey, stranger."

I throw a punch at his arm and gasp—half in surprise, half in pain. His arms are like tree trunks all of a sudden. Rubbing my knuckles, I throw my arms around his neck.

"I missed you, A."

His arms snake around my waist. I smile against his chest as I feel the overwhelming happiness wash over me. I have my best friend back.

"I missed you too, O," he whispers against my forehead and pulls out of the hug. "I think you have someone waiting for you. I'll see you later, I promise." He gives me a final smile before walking away from me and towards his friends.

When hands grab onto my waist, I spin my body around. Oakley's freshly showered face greets me and I launch myself at him. He grabs under my thighs, and I jump up, wrapping them around his waist. I thread my fingers into the damp hair and sigh happily.

"Fuck, I missed you," he mumbles seconds before his lips crash against mine. My eyes slide shut and I pull him as close to me as humanly possible.

Suddenly, the crowd is gone, and it's just the two of us. It's how it should be. How I always want it to be. Screw the conversation we need to have. Right now, the only thing that matters is that I'm the one he's kissing right now. Not anyone else.

"I missed you, too," I breathe out as soon as our lips disconnect. The team appears behind us. They catcall and clap obnoxiously, and I bury my head in Oakley's shoulder to hide my flushed cheeks.

"About time! Get this mopey loser out of here!" Braden shouts from the door, and laughter echoes throughout the hallway.

“Let’s go home,” Oakley whispers in my ear, and I nod enthusiastically.



I roam around Oakley’s apartment, spotting the collection of empty liquor bottles on the kitchen counter.

“Not going to lie, I was expecting to see a way bigger mess.”

“I’m not a total slob, babe,” he teases and hangs my coat up on the coat rack beside his.

“Mhm. Sure.”

“Okay, maybe I cleaned a little before tonight. What can I say? I had high hopes.” He rubs the back of his neck, flushed. I chuckle and sit down on his couch. I fold my hands in my lap and can’t seem to keep my eyes off of him as he walks around the living room.

Locks of hair hang in his face and I watch in awe as he looks through a laundry basket in search of something. His biceps flex when he lifts the pile of clothes, and I can almost feel the drool collecting on the side of my mouth.

“Are you done staring?” he grins, coming over to me with a fuzzy blanket in his hands.

“Not my fault you’re so hot,” I mutter under my breath.

“What was that? I didn’t quite hear you,” he says with a lopsided grin.

He joins me on the couch and drapes the blanket across our legs. I curl into his side and lay my head on his shoulder, the smell of his body wash enveloping me. The flirty banter dissolves, and my stomach ties up in a giant knot as I prepare myself to talk about what happened between us. Luckily, he’s the first to bring it up.

“You broke my heart, baby,” he says gently while running his fingers up and down my arm.

“I broke mine too,” I murmur and kiss his neck. “I’m so sorry. I was scared and I pushed you away instead of talking to you about how I was feeling.”

“I’m sorry about what happened at that party. I shouldn’t have disappeared like that, and I shouldn’t have gone to that party. I know I’m sorry doesn’t cut it, but I’ll do whatever it takes to make it up to you.” I can hear the regret in every single word he speaks and I snuggle into him even further.

The truth is, I’ve already forgiven him. He may have disappeared and ran off to deal with his problems, but I ran away too. Only I did more damage than he did. It isn’t fair to put all of the blame on him when we both made mistakes.

I was an idiot for assuming the worst of him and he was an idiot for keeping his worries from me. But if I’ve learned anything from this week, it’s that I can’t live without him. So, I’ll just have to put my faith in him and our future. That’s all I can do because I can’t lose him again. I won’t.

“I think we were both complete idiots,” I chuckle and smile to myself when he pulls me closer to him.

“Is it weird I’m kind of thankful for what happened?”
Is it? I don’t think so. It did help us realize how strong our love is, and I can’t help but feel happy about that.

“No, I am too.”

“I never want to spend another day without you, Ava,” he says, his words dripping in confidence and unspoken promises. My heart swells in my chest, “We’ll get through this. I swear to you. We will beat this distance.”

I find myself nodding my head, and for the first time, I believe him.

“Damn right we will.”

FORTY

FIVE AND A HALF MONTHS LATER

OAKLEY

“Morning, baby,” Ava murmurs sleepily from her place on my chest. I place a gentle kiss on her head.

I’ve been up for a few hours now, but she doesn’t need to know that. It was nearly impossible for me to sleep last night because today is the most important day of my life.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

“Mmm, what time do we need to leave by?” she mumbles, unwrapping her legs from mine to stretch them under our silky sheets.

“Mom wants to have brunch in an hour, then we should have a few hours before we have to head to the Arena.”

“She’s probably freaking out right now,” Ava chuckles. “When she called me from our apartment yesterday, she could barely form a complete sentence.”

Oh, don’t I know it. When I sent Mom her flight and hotel information, she started crying for a good twenty minutes.

“Thank God she didn’t call me, then. I can’t take any more tears. I’m already anxious enough.”

I’ve never felt this much anxiety in my life. So many possibilities are running through my mind, and I can’t seem to shut my brain off.

“She’s just proud of you. Her son is about to be drafted into the big leagues. I know I’m proud.” She smiles up at me and kisses me above the beard she still refuses to let me shave.

“Wanna join me in the shower and show me just how proud you are?” I smirk, grab a handful of her ass and

squeeze. She lets out a squeak of surprise and playfully swats me on the arm.

“Is that a no?” I wiggle my eyebrows and throw my legs off the bed, stretching my arms above my head. I catch her eyeing my new and improved back muscles. It’s times like these I’m grateful for the higher intensity workouts I’ve been gruelling myself with for the past three months.

“Beat you there,” she winks and runs towards the bathroom in nothing but my t-shirt.

Damn, life is *good*.



“How do I look?”

I finish buttoning my dress shirt and look over at her. The wind is knocked out of me as soon as I lay my eyes on my gorgeous girlfriend. I soak in the image of her as she twirls around the middle of the room.

The dress she chose fits her body like a glove. The white material goes well with my navy suit and I find myself staring at the leg peeking through the slit at her thigh. Her shoulders are only covered by two thin straps, and she’s showing the perfect amount of cleavage.

“I think we can afford to leave a few minutes late,” I growl, not tearing my eyes away from her.

She laughs and grabs my suit jacket from the bed. My gaze follows her every move and when she bends down to pick her heels up off the floor, I have to adjust the bulge in the front of my dress pants. Her perfectly round ass taunts me, and I grind my teeth in hopes of stifling a moan.

Rolling her eyes, she hands me my jacket and sits down on the bed, slipping her heels on. “You have the stamina of a horse, I swear.”

“You’ve never complained before,” I smirk while slipping my arms into the jacket. Her phone dings from the side table and

she grabs it eagerly.

“Your mom and sister are outside. Gracie said your mom is crying again.”

“Can’t you just tell them I left early? I really can’t afford to get any more nervous.”

Something about seeing my mom and Gracie triggers my nerves and I am already far too nervous about this entire thing. I just want to make them proud.

“Like they would believe you left me alone looking like this,” she scoffs.

“You’re right. You’re not leaving my side. I’m serious.” My tone leaves no room for argument and I smirk to myself when she rolls her eyes and waves me off.

I take a deep breath and head for the hotel room door. I open it and am attacked with a hug before I have a chance to speak. Mom’s soft cries make my heart ache. I slowly wrap my arms around her.

“I swear, Mom, I am not redoing your makeup *again*,” Gracie scolds. She shoves past us and heads into the room. “Where’s my future sister-in-law?”

Girly giggles ring through the room, as I pull out of Mom’s hug. “Hold your horses, pipsqueak. You’ll scare her away.”

“If she can handle looking at you every day, I don’t think it’s possible to scare her away,” Gracie shoots back and rushes over to Ava. “That reminds me! Your new apartment is beautiful. I’m still shocked you were willing to live with that ogre, though,” she adds as they hurry into the bathroom.

“Is she trying to steal Ava for herself or something?” I chuckle.

“Who knows with your sister,” she shrugs and reaches into her purse. Pulling out a Kleenex, she wipes away the remnants of her tears. “Your dad would be so proud of you, baby.” She balls up the Kleenex and looks over at me with wet eyes.

My vision blurs when she says that, and I have to look away from her. All I ever wanted was to make my dad proud, and I know wherever he is, he's looking down at me with a grin on his face.

"If you guys are done with your sob fest, I have hot hockey player asses to look at," Gracie announces as she and Ava rejoin us.

"You aren't going to be looking at anything. Don't think I haven't noticed what you're wearing. Would it have hurt you to cover up a little?" I glare at the mini dress that leaves way too little to the imagination.

"I think you look beautiful, Gracie. Ignore grandpa over here," Ava jumps in, wrapping her arms around me from behind. She kisses the back of my neck, and all of my negative thoughts disappear.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and just like that, my nerves come barreling back.

"Shit. We need to leave, Will has interviews set up for me and we're already behind."

"C'mon, then. Time to watch my baby become the newest face of the pro's!" Mom claps excitedly.

I look at Ava as she laces her fingers with mine. I can't help but be blown away by the way she's here, doing this with me. We really did make it.



"Holy shit! That was exhilarating!" Gracie shouts as soon as we find our allocated seats in the Arena.

I can't help but nod my head in agreement. I've never had that many cameras in my face before. When Will told me I had interviews, I didn't expect to be stuck doing them for the last two hours. My brain is practically throbbing.

"Gracie! *Language*," Mom scolds from her spot on my left. My sister just waves her off and continues to eye every

breathing male in the vicinity.

As the lights dim and everyone starts to take the stage, I rest my hand on Ava's exposed thigh and squeeze. She looks up at me with a comforting smile and wraps her hand around my arm, leaning her head against my shoulder. Mom takes my free hand and squeezes it in her own.

My stomach is in knots. My legs tremble.

One by one, the first three picks are called up to the stage. My heart is hammering against my ribcage as I watch the Seattle GM walk up on stage and stand in front of the microphone.

My name is called and the world starts to move in slow motion. Both of my arms are pulled as the three most important women in my life look proudly at me with tear-filled eyes.

I make it to my feet and am immediately wrapped up in my mom's arms. I squeeze her back just as tight and whisper an "*I love you*" in her ear before the deafening sound of clapping snaps me back into reality. I pull back from her and turn around to lift Ava off of her feet.

"I love you," she whispers in my ear.

"I love you, baby," I reply and set her down to hug Gracie, who squeezes me tightly.

My body goes into auto-pilot as soon as I start making my way to the stage. Voices congratulate me and I manage to give some of them a thankful wave before reaching the stage.

The stairs disappear beneath my feet as I reach my destination. My grin gets even bigger when I reach the line of management and shake their hands.

"Thank you so much. You won't regret this," I state confidently when I reach the General Manager.

He looks at me with a grin and gives my hand a firm shake. "You're welcome, kid. We're lucky to have you as a Seattle Seal."

He hands me a jersey and my chest puffs out proudly. *Hutton* is written in white on the back, contrasting well with the navy blue and bright green silky material.

I instantly pull it over my head and grab the Seals baseball cap from another team member. Beaming, I move to the middle of the line and smile for the camera in front of us.

I spot my family across the Arena and my grin grows tenfold at the proud looks written across their faces.

I finally did it.

I made it.

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER

OAKLEY

“That’s the last of them.” Ava wipes her hands on her Seattle Seal sweatpants as she sets the last of the food down on the shiny white countertops of our newly purchased home.

The giant grin I’m wearing hasn’t seemed to budge since the moment Ava finally agreed to move to Seattle.

The past two years have been a bitch. Between flying to games and then back to Vancouver to see my family, it was a lot. The airport was practically my second—*third*—home. And all the late-night calls made Skype my best friend. Being in Seattle quickly became a gigantic pain in my ass. Of course, that doesn’t mean it was all negative. I’m living my dream. I was just living it without my other half.

“I still can’t believe this is ours. I don’t even know what to do with all this space.” Her voice echoes from the kitchen

“I’m glad you like it, baby,” I murmur in her ear when I reach her and press my chest against her back.

She’s leaning against the sink, staring dreamingly out the window at our backyard. I wrap my arms around her waist and rest my chin on her shoulder. The sight before me hasn’t stopped blowing my mind since the minute our realtor showed it to us.

The slightly damp green grass waves back at me as I stare out the paned glass. I fell in love with our vast backyard instantly. We were so lucky to find a house with this much land within city limits. The first thing I thought of when I saw it was building an outdoor rink. Ava laughed at my childish

excitement over such a lame request, but nevertheless, I got her to agree to it. Just like I got her to move to Seattle.

When Ava graduated three months ago, I did everything in my power to convince her to move to Seattle. I had been living in the same two-bedroom apartment for the past two years, and with a new contract with the Seals looming in the distance, it was only a matter of time before a decision needed to be made.

I quickly adapted to my new team. Although it was a lot more difficult adjusting to the higher level of hockey than I would like to admit, I am proud to say that I am doing exceptionally well now. I guess that's the main reason why I don't want to sign with any other team. I've grown to love it here.

I won't lie and say the move was easy on Ava. She had to find a job here in only a few months and figure out how to say goodbye to her family. I know leaving them was hard on her. Hell, it was torture for me to leave mine. It still is torture to be so far away from them, but the spam of texts I receive each day from my mother help put my mind at ease.

"Shoot! It's almost seven. I can't let them see me like this!" Ava shrieks. She pecks my lips and bolts upstairs to get ready. She still has no idea how breathtaking she already is.

We decided on throwing a housewarming party once we finally finished unpacking and all of our new furniture was delivered. It's been an intense few weeks, but looking around at the well-decorated space around me, it's all been worth it.

The doorbell rings and I hear Ava swear from our bedroom as I make my way to the entryway, chuckling as I do.

I spot Morgan when I walk past the tall window beside the front door. She stands on the porch, waiting for Matt to lug her bags up the icy sidewalk.

I pull open the door with a teasing grin on my lips. "Did you bring your whole house? I didn't know you were moving in."

Morgan scoffs before stepping inside and pulling me in for a quick hug. “You couldn’t be so lucky as to live with me.”

“Please take her!” Matt shouts from the door, trying to catch his breath when he drops the bags onto the ground beside him.

Morgan whips around to glare at him. “Where are you hiding my best friend? I haven’t seen her in forever.”

Rolling my eyes, I point to the staircase and laugh under my breath. Her eyes light up before she bolts up the stairs.

“I guess it’s just us, buddy. How was the flight?” I ask, turning my attention to Matt. I bend down and grab a few of their bags in my hands.

“Thanks, man. It was alright. Pretty quick. We could have driven.” He flings a duffle bag over his shoulder after shoving his shoes off and pushing them to the side.

“Your room is down the hall. Hopefully, it lives up to Morgan’s standards,” I joke.

Matt laughs in response as we head down the hallway. We pass one of the bathrooms and our office before reaching their room. I give the door a quick shove. It swings open, and I flip on the light before dropping their bags down beside the queen bed in the middle of the room.

“This is your spare room? It’s nicer than our bedroom back home,” Matt gasps, shock evident in his tone.

“It’s all Ava. She has a talent for this shit, man.”

She really does. There was nothing special about this room, or any of the rooms for that matter, until she started designing them.

“Send her my way sometime. Morgan’s idea of interior designing is slapping a throw pillow on the couch.”

“Remember that nasty rocking chair they had in their living room?” I ask.

Matt’s eyebrows scrunch up in disgust..

“Remember it?” he scoffs. “It’s in our spare room right now. She wouldn’t let me get rid of the damn thing.”

“It is a piece of art, fuck-face,” Morgan protests from the doorway.

My head turns in the direction of her voice in search of Ava. I find her leaning against the wall in a pair of skinny jeans and a loose tank top. Her short hair is curled loosely, and I get the sudden urge to run my fingers through it. I reach her in no time and don’t hesitate to wrap her up in my arms, pulling her into my chest.

“You look stunning.”

“Are you guys ever going to not make me want to gouge my eyes out?” Morgan huffs. She points at her open mouth and gags.

“Depends,” I shrug.

“On what?” she asks.

“If you’re going to continue to make me wish I was deaf so I wouldn’t have to deal with your stupid questions.”

Her mouth drops slightly before it slams shut, and a smile stretches across her lips. “Oh, how I’ve missed our banter, Oakley.” I shoot Morgan a wink and wrap my arm around Ava’s waist, planting a kiss on her cheek.

The jingle of the doorbell echoes through the house once again as the four of us start making our way out of the spare room.

“That’s gotta be Adam!” Ava exclaims once we get steps away from the entryway.

“Open the door and find out,” Morgan teases from behind us.

Ava whips around to narrow her eyes at her before flipping her off and turning back around to open the door.

“Oh my gosh, look at you! I missed you!” Adam falters slightly at the impact of Ava’s affectionate assault but brushes it off with a light chuckle.

“Hey O. I missed you, too,” he responds, sending me a grin over her shoulder.

“Hey, buddy.” I pull him in for a one-handed hug as soon as Ava unlatches herself from him.

“Love the new house, man. Being rich suits you,” he teases and throws a solid punch at my bicep.

“Thanks. I can’t pull it off nearly as well as you, though. How’s the business going?” I ask as I lead him to his room.

“Not many can. Don’t beat yourself up about it,” he smirks, dropping his bag down on the fluffy carpet and sitting down on the bed. “Business is good. It pays to have the newest face of the professional league promote my business.”

I can’t help but chuckle at that. Adam doesn’t even need my help. He’s made WIT a fantastic place for young hockey players to train all on his own.

White Ice Training is Adam’s training facility in Vancouver. On his twenty-second birthday, his trust fund was signed over to him, and he used it to open up his own hockey camp.

As far as I know, his parents weren’t overly supportive of his decision to blow through the entire thing on something hockey-related, but he did it anyway, and the four of us couldn’t be prouder of him. Whenever I have time I fly down and help train the kids—pretty much anything to bring business in.

“You talk to your parents lately?” I ask, not missing the anger that flashes through his eyes.

“No. My moms called a few times but I haven’t called her back,” he says quietly.

“I’m sorry. We’ll hit the gym tomorrow, blow off some steam,” I suggest.

“Sounds good.” He takes a deep breath before his eyes light up. “I forgot to ask, where’s the ring?”

I grin, my heart jumping. “In one of the old skate boxes I have shoved under the bed.”

I have been carrying the square box around with me for months now, just waiting for the perfect moment. Unfortunately, though, it hasn't come yet.

Asking Ava's dad for his blessing was one of the hardest things I've ever done. He's never been my biggest fan. It took what felt like hours of pleading before he finally gave me his blessing. As much as he would like to hate me for leaving his daughter alone for the past two years, he knows I'm not going anywhere ever again.

"You have any idea when you're going to do it? The suspense is killing me," he sighs. Honestly, I don't. All I know is she deserves nothing but the best of the best.

"No. It's got to be perfect."

He nods his head in understanding. Even though he's moved on from Ava, he knows more than anyone how special she is and how badly she deserves nothing less than perfect.

A knock on the door makes us jump.

"If you two lovers are done in there, Matt and I have something to tell everyone." Morgan's shrill voice echoes through the room. I heave a sigh of relief.

"The queen awaits." Adam stands up from the bed and slaps me on the back.

"Isn't she always?" I chuckle as I head out behind him. If time has changed anything, it skipped Morgan's personality entirely.

When we reach the main room, I spot Ava sitting on the grey loveseat and sit down next to her. I throw my arm around her shoulder and smile in contentment when she leans her head against me.

"We were hoping to do this when we were all here, but Tyler being in Europe kind of threw that out the window. Anyways, we have some big news." She looks up at Matt from her spot beside him and smiles widely at us. Grinning, he hesitantly places his hand over her abdomen.

"We're pregnant!" They shout in sync.

Ava squeals and flings herself at Morgan as I stand up and throw my arms around Matt.

“Congrats, *Dad*. That’s amazing!” I beam proudly before pulling away.

“It is. I never knew I wanted to be a dad until now.” His smile lights up the room, warming my heart.

I think we were all expecting this. It was only a matter of time before they started their own family. Everyone knows those two are *endgame*. All he has to do now is slap a ring on her finger.

I give him one more pat on the back before moving over to congratulate the mom to be.

“I knew there was a reason you were extra grouchy today,” I wink, pulling her in for another hug.

She laughs past her soft sobs and I rub a hand across her back. She pulls away, smiling up at me with her tear-filled eyes.

Ava’s eyes are bright with happiness. I snake my arms around her and kiss her cheek.

Three years ago, I never expected I would be in this position right now. As I stand here today with the love of my life and my best friends, I know that all of the ups and downs were worth it. I wouldn’t go back and change a thing.

I couldn’t be happier than I am right now. Well, that’s not entirely true.

I still have to get her to marry me.

BONUS CONTENT

OCTAVIA

“Where are we going? You know I hate surprises.”

I’m practically vibrating in my seat from my overwhelming level of excitement as Oakley drives us to his surprise location.

He showed up at my door an hour ago and ordered me to get dressed into something warm and comfortable. When I asked what we were doing, he simply said we were going to be outside.

“Oh, trust me, I know. But you have to suck it up. It’ll be worth it, I promise,” he murmurs with a light chuckle.

“Can I have a hint?” I beg, looking over at him with pleading eyes.

“Don’t start,” he rolls his eyes at me, giving my thigh a squeeze.

“Please?”

“No.”

“Pretty please?” I plead, only for him to laugh in response.

“If you ask me again, we won’t go at all.” The grin on his lips contradicts the serious tone he’s trying to use.

I can’t help but giggle. “Fine, fine.” I hold my hands up in surrender and lean back against the headrest. “But are we close?”

He gives me a pointed look, groaning lightly.

“What? Are we?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. We’re here,” he declares, turning the truck down a gravel road.

My mouth falls open in shock as I take in the scene before me. We’re in a field of all places—a beautifully decorated one.

Shimmering lights are draped from tall, frosted trees and wrapped around tall fencing. Countless rows of reindeer and blow-up snowmen steal my gaze. It's hard not to lose myself in the beauty of it all as I stare dreamily out the window. This is a winter paradise.

I jump out of the truck as soon as it comes to a stop. I pull out my wool mittens and slip them on, excitedly waiting for Oakley.

"It's so beautiful! Hurry, let's go!" I shout as soon as he stands beside me. I grab his hand and pull him toward the entrance.

"It won't go anywhere, baby. You can slow down," he laughs from behind me.

I scoff but reluctantly slow my pace to walk beside him. He throws an arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his side.

"How did you find this place?" I ask as we turn down one of the many marked pathways.

"I heard a couple of the guys talking about it in the dressing room. Apparently, it works like a charm on the ladies." He looks down at me and winks, waggling his eyebrows. I shove him lightly.

"It's beautiful," I sigh happily as I look at the Santa Claus statue beside us. "We should get someone to take our picture!"

Oakley nods his head at me, spotting another young couple walking a few feet behind us. "Would you guys mind taking a picture for us?" he asks, adorably eager.

The red-haired girl smiles warmly at us both. She nods her head and takes Oakley's phone in her hand.

"You guys are so adorable!" she exclaims, waiting for us to get into a prime photo-taking position.

Oakley beams down at me and leads us over to the Santa display behind us. He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me against his chest as I rest my hand on his chest. The twinkling lights around us reflect in his green eyes, illuminating them.

“Why don’t you look at me like that?” the girl asks her boyfriend, snapping me out of my trance.

“I *do* look at you like that!” he sighs, rolling his eyes.

“Thank you so much. Do you two want a picture together?” I clear my throat and pull away from Oakley’s warm embrace.

“If you don’t mind,” the boyfriend replies, hands me his phone, and drags his girlfriend over to the same place we were. I take a few pictures of them and give the guy his phone. With a final thank you, the couple heads off.

“I love you,” Oakley whispers in my ear before leaning down and placing a warm kiss on my lips.

“And I love you,” I sigh in content and rest my head against his chest.

“Want some hot chocolate?”

I pull myself away from him, jumping up. “Yes!”

“This way.” He takes my hand and leads us over to the hot chocolate stand by the Reindeer display.

I sit down at an empty picnic table as Oakley heads off to grab our warm drinks, leaving me to keep hold of our table. I check my phone and smile to myself as I send the photos we just took to Morgan.

I’m scrolling through my phone when someone slides onto the bench beside me. My head snaps in the stranger’s direction. A decently handsome looking guy is grinning down at me. He’s got a decent facial structure and beautiful eyes, but he doesn’t stand a chance. I raise my eyebrows at him questioningly.

“What is a girl as beautiful as you doing here all alone?” the mystery guy asks. Poor guy has no idea what he’s in for if he’s still here when Oakley gets back.

“I would suggest you leave right now,” I warn him, not bothering to look up from my phone.

“You don’t have to play hard to get, baby. Though I like a challenge,” he says flirtily, clearly not picking up on my lack

of interest. *How typical.*

“It’s your funeral.”

“Sorry, Ava, the line was insane,” Oakley sighs as he approaches the table. I look up at him and give him a grateful smile. I flick my eyes in the direction of the invader pointedly.

Oakley goes rigid. He places the hot chocolate cups in front of me and straightens up, clenching his jaw. “And who might this be?” He forces a smile and outstretches his hand.

“Uh... my, uh, name is Brad,” *Brad* stammers and reaches a hand out to shake Oakley’s steady one.

“Nice to meet you, Brad. You weren’t trying to get with my girlfriend, were you?” Oakley relaxes his jaw and smiles smugly.

“I uh, actually um, have somewhere to be!” Brad exclaims and shoots off of the bench. We both burst into a fit of laughter.

“I can’t leave you alone for five minutes without someone trying to steal you away. What am I going to do with you?” Oakley sits down beside me and takes a sip of his drink.

“It’s a good thing you’re the only one that I want then, isn’t it?” I ask, a smile playing on my lips.

“It’s a very good thing. Not like you have a choice anyway,” he smirks before placing a kiss on the top of my head.

Even if I did have a choice, there isn’t anyone I would rather have than the guy sitting right beside me.

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Prologue

Six Years Ago

Tyler

“Get your sorry ass back here, Tyler. I wasn’t done talking to you.” The gruff slurs echo around the barren room as I continue walking away from him.

“You haven’t been able to tell me what to do since I was twelve, Allen. Stop trying.” My words have a bite to them, and I flame with pride.

I notice the headlights shining through the cracked living room window and pick up my pace.

“Show some damn respect for your father, you ungrateful waste of skin,” he growls from behind me. The old torn up reclining chair smacking against the wall with a *thud* as he forcefully stood up.

My eyes roll back into my head as I come to a stop just mere inches from the front door and turn around. His long and dead, dirty black hair is slicked back, the thinness of the strands showing off the bald spot near the peak of his round head. The baggy sweatshirt that loosely hangs off his torso is a deep red color, similar to the bloodshot eyes that stare back at me, absent and dull.

The stench of whiskey seeps from his breath and ignites a gag from deep within my throat.

“You seem to have forgotten your place here. You are not my dad,” I spit through clenched teeth, broadening my shoulders in front of the sorry excuse of a man that I had come to know as my step-father.

“I think it’s you that’s forgotten your place here, boy. As long as your momma has me here, under this roof, this is my place,” the rat seethes the words, his lips pulled back to expose his decaying, yellow teeth. I almost laugh.

“The only reason you’re here is because I haven’t thrown your scum ass out on the street.”

The same menacing chuckle I used to hear from behind my bedroom door years ago, sends vicious shivers up my spine. The menacing smirk that now dances on his crusted lips used to be enough to send me running away, locking myself in my room from fear, but things change.

“If you have such a problem with how I run things in my house, then why don’t you go find somewhere else to live?” He raises a bushy eyebrow as he questions me, lips still pulled up tight.

“Wow, that’s a great idea. Too bad I’m too busy being the only one paying to keep this house from being seized by the bank to focus on finding somewhere else to live. Not all of us can rely on our drug dealing buddies to pay our bills,” I bite back.

His lips fall into a tight line, and I watch expectantly as he closes the distance between us and shoves a thin, shaking finger into my chest. “That smart mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble one day. Mark my words.”

“I’ll be waiting anxiously for the day it does. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Allen, my rides here.” I flash him an arrogant grin and take a large step back, watching the finger that was shoved into my chest fall to his side. I can feel the anger radiating off of him as I dismiss his threat, and my chest puffs.

Raising my hand, I give him a small wave before walking through the front door. The sticky heat hits me like a brick to the balls as I move down the sidewalk and to the black car waiting for me beside a busted light post. Pulling out the pack of cigarettes taking up space in the pocket of my black jeans, I peel it open and grab a single white stick, lighting it before bringing it to my lips and taking a deep puff, chemicals burning my lungs.

The car honks impatiently and I don’t hesitate to throw up my middle finger in their direction before taking

another puff and throwing the cigarette down on the sidewalk, stomping it out with my overly-loved biker boots.

Reaching over, I open the car door and inhale the thick smell of weed before shaking my head and sitting in the passenger seat. I hear the other passengers greet me, only to get a lazy, two-finger wave in return before the car takes off down the black, tar road.

Here's to another night I can't wait to forget.

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Books have always been my passion. And to now say that I have a copy of my very own book sitting on my bookshelf is a miracle in itself. But I know that without a group of very amazing people, my dream would still be that—a dream.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hannah is a twenty-something-year-old author and new mom, with a strong passion for sports and swoon-worthy romance novels. She was born and raised in a small town in western Canada, before moving to live with her fiance and baby boy.

Lucky Hit is her first published novel, soon to be followed by the second in the Swift Hat-Trick Trilogy, Blissful Hook on September 13th, 2021.

Hannah loves to hear from her readers, and can be reached on any of her social media accounts.

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