

JEN ROWAN

*Mutual*  
BENEFITS



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BENEFITS

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*To anyone who feels like their place in life is in the background of someone  
else's story.*

*Don't sell yourself short. Your story deserves to be told.*

## A Note from the Author

Hello Readers,

I'm incredibly grateful that you picked up this novel. Writing this book has been an amazing journey and I can't wait to take you on it.

That being said, this book deals with topics that you might not be comfortable with. If by chance, you aren't comfortable reading about past physical and emotional abuse, mentions of past sexual assault, anxiety, panic attacks and other mental health struggles, this book might not be the one for you. It is highly recommended that you are over the age of 18 as there is a lot of sexual content.

If there are any warnings I have missed, please reach out to me so I can keep it updated. Your safety is a priority.

Enjoy!

xoxo

Jen Rowan

*Catalina*

“And how are we doing today, Catalina?” My therapist Courtney asked me, as she had every Friday morning for the last three years. I sat on her cream-coloured couch, taking in her freshly painted beige walls, filled with pictures of her family and her certificates that brought me here to her. My legs crisscrossed in front of me as I let out a sigh.

Courtney’s office wasn’t the only thing that had changed. She had cut her usual dark brown hair to her shoulder and straightened. Her lipstick was a darker mauve today, and her eyeliner was perfectly winged. Her outfit looked new. Courtney wasn’t one for change. She made that clear to me in the first year I started therapy with her. I think it was to put me at ease, the more I think about it. Courtney knew I needed consistency, especially when my life was filled with so much uncertainty.

I had been here all of five minutes. I knew that by looking at the big clock on the back of her wall. Needless to say, today was not one of those days I wanted to be in a therapy session.

“Your silence speaks volumes, Cat,” she let out a light chuckle, making a note of it on her notepad. I rolled my eyes knowingly before shrugging my shoulders. “Why don’t we start with what’s on your mind right now?”

Courtney had a way of working things out of me. I was sure we were going to get through this by the time the big hand reached the twelve once more. “I’m wondering why you decided to get a clock the size of the Big Ben.”

“You don’t like it?” She cocked her eyebrow with a smile. I shook my head. “Why?”

Oh, this was the route we were going today. “Feels overwhelming,” I



said. “Like it’s about to be the longest hour ever or we won’t have enough time.”

“Which one is it for you today?”

“I’m not quite sure,” I nodded, pulling my braided hair to the right side of my head. The one thing I liked about Courtney was that she constantly made me feel like my answers were valid, even if they were not what she was searching for when she asked them. This was a safe space, something she repeated consistently when I first started coming here. I had no idea how much I needed her to say that.

She placed her notepad down on the arm of the chair next to her before leaning forward, pulling out a purple, green and salmon pink box. *My box*. It seems like just yesterday she brought in a box she picked up at Michaels and told me that we were going to paint it while we had our session. My first session.

That day, I was absolutely terrified and I think she knew it. Reaching out to work through what I’ve been through was a huge step for me. Something I never saw myself doing. She introduced herself to me and handed me my box. My box to place my thoughts, goals, dreams; everything, keeping them safe.

“Do you remember what you put in here last week?” She continued as she placed the box on the table. This was a way to keep the conversation going. This was her way of getting me to talk when I didn’t know how to start the conversation. “If I recall, it had something to do with your dream.”

Right.

My dream.

Write a novel and become a published author. That dream.

“How is the writing going?”

I shook my head. “It’s not,” I began. “I don’t know, it’s like I can’t sit down and write like I used to. The ideas that I had floating around my head consistently have vanished. I know writer’s block is a thing, but I’ve never had it *this* bad before.”

She listened to every word, nodding her head as she let me go on about my extensive case of writer’s block that had consumed me for the better part of the last eight months. I used to be someone who could sit down in front of a laptop and pound out a nine-thousand-word word fan-fiction about how sexy Dean Winchester was. I wrote daily for years on end, never running out of ideas. I felt like I would never have enough time to write all of my ideas.

Now, I was lucky if I got an idea at all. I felt so lost. Writing was who I was. It was my outlet. My way of dealing with all of the shit going on. Whether I have a bad day or a good day, I always have my keyboard and an idea to work with to create this story to take my readers on an adventure. I didn't have that ability anymore and I felt helpless. I felt like my luck had run out. That I had written all the stories I had left in me and there was nothing left to share.

"You're putting a lot of pressure on yourself to try and write," she pointed out with a knowing smile. "Have you thought that maybe you've pressured yourself so much that it's only making it worse? That you're subconsciously taking the fun out of writing in hopes of making it your day job?"

She had a good point. "I... want out of that cafe so damn bad, Courtney. I want to have a job I love to fall back on and know that I'm going to be okay. I want away from the unrealistic pressure my boss pushes on me, and the friendships that eat away at my self-worth. I want to finally feel like I'm on the right track."

She nodded knowingly, before averting her eyes back to the box on the table in front of us. "And what good is it to put all of that pressure onto writing a novel?"

"And as my therapist, what do you suppose I do?" I asked as I leaned back against the couch.

She smiled, and I wasn't sure if it was my response or something else that had her grinning. "Well, you could start by actually having a bit of fun for once," she shook her head. Here we go. "Catalina, you are twenty-six years old and you spend your entire life working. Whether you are at the cafe or trying to make yourself write. You are missing out on all the experiences that could motivate you, challenge you and change you.

"You are at a standpoint right now, not moving from where you're firmly planted," she pointed out. "You need to start living your life instead of hiding from it."

I protested, uncrossing my legs to lean forward. "I'm not hiding."

"You are not living either. You haven't been since you were sixteen years old," she stated, taking me back. "You haven't been living your life for ten years, Catalina."

Granted, she was right. I had been hiding out since then, afraid of the world and what it might do to me once more. It was what happened when you

were hurt. It was what happened when you were sexually assaulted by someone who thought your only purpose was to pleasure him.

Needless to say, that was why I was in therapy. It was why I didn't have a boyfriend, hadn't had a boyfriend since, and why I had issues trusting anyone, especially men. I was getting better. Courtney made sure of that when I walked in here three years ago, knowing I needed to get through this once and for all. I was getting there. I would get there.

Eventually.

I didn't have nightmares anymore. I didn't have as many panic attacks from issues relating to that. The issue was that hadn't moved on fully. I still avoided personal relationships with men. Sure, I flirted with them, especially when they came into the cafe. Then, anytime something got even the slightest bit more than flirting, I backed off. I had no idea why.

"We have danced around this topic a lot in the last three years," she began, pointing to the box. "I'm sure you've mentioned it here too. You're a romance writer. You crave the love that you give your characters for yourself. You told me that when I asked you the reasons why you wrote. Why not go out there and give it a shot?"

Because I'm terrified that I'll never measure up. I'll never be enough to keep someone. I haven't kept anyone so far.

"What if I'm not ready?"

She smiled. "What if you are and you're just scared?"

I was definitely scared. Who wouldn't be after what I had been through? "But what if I'm not ready? What if I'm not meant to find someone? What if there isn't someone out there for me?"

"You won't know unless you try," she assured me. Although, I didn't find it all that reassuring. She meant well, and in a way, I think I knew deep down that she was right. She usually was. I just had a hard time believing her. She was always encouraging me to step out of my comfort zone. She had been since I met her. Sometimes I did it, and it helped me heal. Other times, I wondered why she made me do something so silly. I didn't want to ruin how far I had come for something I wasn't sure of.

"Tell ya what," she paused. "I won't give you any written assignments this week. Instead, I want you to call your friends and go out sometime this weekend. Put yourself out there, even if it's just a little. Baby steps, right?"

"Baby steps," I repeated for what was probably the millionth time in this room.

“Next week, we’ll talk about how it went and we’ll go from there.”

The big hand was slowly approaching the twelve once more, and that meant I had to be on my way if I was going to make it to my shift on time. A shift I didn’t even want to work but I needed the money. I always needed the money.

I shifted myself off of the couch, straightening out my charcoal grey work shirt, making sure it covered the top of my jeans. She cleared her throat. “Before you go, I want you to know that you will get your writing back. This writer’s block you’re experiencing isn’t going to last forever. Good work today.”

“I know,” I nodded with a hesitant smile. “See you next week.”

“See you next week.”



How in the hell was I supposed to go out and socialize?

The thoughts were swirling around in my head as I made my way down the sidewalk of downtown Stonebridge. Population: 9,489 people. Give or take a few. Needless to say, it was a small town. Everyone knew everyone. The chances of meeting someone I didn’t already know were slim to none. If I didn’t know them, someone I was friends with probably knew them. Or in most cases, slept with them.

Stonebridge was a nice town. Don’t get me wrong. You could walk around it for hours and never see the same view twice. The scenery was something special, as was the food and the local business that wasn’t taken over by big corporate companies. Well, all but Poysen Entertainment anyway.

Rumour has it, that one of the businessmen higher up was set to take over it by the end of the year. Chris, the man in charge as we like to call it (more make fun of because he was the last person who should run a company) was in a bit of a financial situation. I was sure his wife found out that he cheated on her with Olivia Carlson, one of my co-workers.

The walk from my therapist’s office to my workplace was twenty-two minutes. Just enough for me to take in the riverfront, and grab a bite to eat before spending eight or more hours behind the counter, serving coffees for

the rich, the rude, and the regulars that kept me on my toes. God, I hated my job.

I reached into my back pocket, trying to pull my phone out to see if I had missed anything during my session. I had two missed messages from my manager, which was normal. Three from my assistant manager, all of which have nothing to do with work. One from my mom, which usually resulted in a live picture of the cat and one from my online best friend. I was popular this morning.

I turned to head down Front Street, the street where Misery Business Cafe was located. Another hundred metres and I would arrive at my destination. I opened up my mom's text, seeing the live picture of the cream tabby Birman curled up on her side of the bed. Could my mom's cat get any cuter? I don't think so.

I sent her the heart emoji before typing how cute he was when my body collided with something solid and scalding hot. I yelped, jumping back before I landed straight on my ass with my heart beating a mile a minute.

"Shit, I am so sorry."

A hand reached out to help me up. My eyes averted up, meeting with a tall gentleman I had never talked to before. I could feel the panic rising in my chest. I was alone. No one knew my exact location. What if something happened? What if he was offering his hand before his white van showed up, kidnapping me and I was never seen again?

It was just a hand, I had to remind myself. He was a stranger in the middle of the street, trying to help me up. He wasn't going to harm me. Stop freaking out. You're passed this.

Letting out a shaky breath, I placed my hand in his, letting him help me off of the ground. "I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

I stood tall, straightening out my now soaking-wet shirt. Thankfully, it wasn't nearly as hot as what I usually got at work. But it still stung a bit. Not to mention, I was now laced with the smell of coffee and whatever else he took in it and knowing my luck, there was cream in his coffee.

He was a good bit taller than me and given that I was five foot three and a half, everyone was taller than me. He had to be over six feet. His hair was a soft brown, coiffed slightly to the right and the sides a bit shorter. It felt like I had hit a brick wall and no wonder. His shoulders were broad and his body was lean. He had an athlete's build for sure, or he just knew how to take care of his body better than the average man. He filled out his black dress pants,

and his blue button-down shirt fit perfectly beside the huge coffee stain in the middle. All I needed was for him to roll up his sleeves and lean against a doorframe and he was the perfect writing inspiration.

What surprised me was the look of concern on his features. His eyebrows knitted together and his lips frowning.

“I should have been looking where I was going,” I told him, giving him a weak smile. He made me nervous. I know I was supposed to be working on that, but it was hard when a literal stranger damn near took you out on the streets and he was looking at you the way this guy was. But it also wasn’t fair to lump him in the category of assholes when he was a stranger. Not everyone was out there to hurt me. I had to learn to start giving people a chance.

Focus Catalina. Look for the positives instead of convincing myself that everyone was a dick.

He was cute. His eyes were a warm green in a different way than mine were. He helped me off the ground. That’s more than any of my friends would do without laughing first. He was still standing in front of me, apologizing. He hadn’t run off, or worse, yelled at me for spilling his coffee, even though I wasn’t looking where I was going. He was really cute though, an attractive cute that made you want to know just a little bit more about him. The kind of cute that would result in a first-grade crush and make you want to give them the best Valentine of the pack and extra cinnamon hearts.

He was definitely crush material.

Which meant he was so out of my league that I didn’t stand a chance.

*Austin*

“I should have been looking where I was going.”

This was not how I thought my day was going to go. I stared down at the girl in front of me now soaked in a large coffee. She couldn't have been that much taller than five feet. A lot shorter than my six foot one. Her reddish-brown hair was tied back in a braid from what I could see and her face was a little flushed with embarrassment. She wasn't the only one who wasn't paying attention.

“I should have been too,” I told her as I threw my cup into the empty trash bin a few feet to my left. “Are you okay? That was hot coffee.”

She nodded her head, giving herself another once over. I couldn't help but do the same. “I'm used to it. I work there.” I didn't even put two and two together. She had the logo of the cafe on her shirt, along with a name tag next to it written in white chalk pen.

Catalina.

The name suited her, even if I didn't know the first thing about her. You know when you hear someone's name and you see them and you put together why they are called that? You know, Karen's are usually uptight and rude. Chad's are generally assholes. This girl was pretty like her name was. She probably had no idea she was.

“Are you okay? You got some on your hand?” She asked me and I glanced down. Shit yeah, I did, but I certainly didn't feel it.

“I'm okay,” I nodded. “Believe it or not, this isn't the first time I've spilled my coffee. First time onto someone though.”

“Ahh,” she giggled, crossing her arms over her chest. I sensed a bit of

nervousness when she did that, almost like she was trying to close herself off. Did she catch me accidentally checking her out? Okay, it wasn't accidental and I had to give her a once-over to see if she was okay while checking out her insanely attractive body. The girl had curves in all the right places.

"You're one of those people."

Despite her nerves, she was trying to ease the tension by joking. An effort I appreciated in a moment like this. This could have gone an entirely different direction and she could have been swearing at me for spilling my coffee on her, or rude for that matter. She should have been mad about it. Anyone would have been.

I decided to keep the conversation going her way. She was nervous and I was a stranger and a guy. "I know. Doctor says I'm incurable. Isn't that awful? I'm going to have to live the rest of my life with this condition."

She let out a laugh, making me smile. Her laugh was beautiful, and if I was staying in this town for the next little while, it was a sound I wanted to hear again. Maybe Stonebridge wasn't bound to be all that bad? Maybe I stood a chance at actually having a bit of a life here? At least the women here were beautiful.

"I'm Austin Sawyer," I introduced myself, though surely, she knew who I was. Who didn't know the star right winger for the Long Island Manatees? My face had been on the news more often than not this year.

She reached her hand out, taking mine. "Catalina."

No last name. Fair enough. She was playing it safe and I couldn't blame her. In the world we live in today, a girl like her could never be too careful. What surprised me was that she had no idea who I was, and for the first time in a long time, I liked that someone didn't know me. Someone didn't recognize me for my name in the tabloids or my NHL status.

"I see that," I pointed to her name tag. Shit, don't look at her tits, you fucking idiot.

"I'll replace your coffee for you, free of charge. Since I took part in spilling this one," she shrugged her shoulders.

I shook my head. "No worries," I assured her. "I should head to work. It's my first day and I don't want to be late."

"Shit," she muttered. "I ruined your shirt on your first day of work!"

"Don't worry about it," I protested. "These things are bound to happen. I have a sweater in my bag." I glanced down at my shirt, seeing the three or four specs of coffee against the blue material. I would survive. "Although,



maybe you need it more than I do. You got the worst of it. I have a few spots.”

She smiled. A genuine smile before she glanced down at her feet. A stray piece of her dark red hair fell in her face and she quickly moved to tuck it behind her ear. I liked this girl, I thought to myself. There was just something about her —other than her killer body— that drew me into her. Thank god, I knew where she worked so I had a chance to see her again after today. Maybe I would take her up on that coffee after all.

“I’ll be okay,” she nodded her head. “We’ve got extra shirts in case this happens. Trust me, it happens a lot. Thank you though. Good luck on your first day, Austin.”

Yeah, I needed to see her again.

“I hope your day improves after this, Catalina,” I grinned, nodding my head in the direction I was going. “I’ll see you around, kay?”

I stepped around her, making sure she had her space before walking once more. And like any normal guy does when he finds a female attractive, I glanced over my shoulder, taking her in from behind. God, she was hot. Her curves were phenomenal and that ass? Holy fuck!

Respectfully. I was checking her out respectfully.

Maybe this little town wasn’t going to be so bad.



It felt like I had sold my soul to the devil.

The second I walked into Poysen Entertainment, I knew I never wanted to step foot here again. For years, I walked into arenas filled with screaming fans, whether they were there to support me or there to boo me, the energy when I walked in was ecstatic. It was excitement. Everyone wanted to be there. Everyone wanted their ice time. Everyone wanted one team or the other to win.

Here? It felt like I was walking into a final exam that I crammed for all night but nothing sunk in. Forgetting all the diagrams I studied eighteen thousand times and the quadratic equation for that matter. Who gave a shit about what Hamlet said in Act I Scene III. That was the energy I got when I walked in.

No wonder this company was failing miserably. This place was supposed to create masterpieces. Some of the greatest apps came from this company. Some of the best developers in the world worked for this company. Now, this branch? They were lucky to even get an app done a year.

From what I heard, it had to do with the running of this sector company. Chris Johnson. My head hockey coach's idiot little brother and the reason why I was here.

From what I was told by my agent, I was here to help with a new app in the works. According to him, it was more or less a way to gain further insight into sports replays seconds after they happened. It was supposed to be able to tell which player needed what improvements and how to get them there. Honestly, it sounded like a bunch of bullshit. Since I was still off on the long-term injury reserve and this had to do with hockey, Coach Johnson practically twisted my arm to help out until I was approved by the doctor that I could play again.

If that day ever came.

It wasn't lost on me that everyone was waiting for some news on me. Austin Sawyer, the pro hockey player nearly died in a collision with a drunk driver. When will #36 be back on the ice? Will he be back on the ice? Will he ever fully recover?

These are the questions that had been floating around since the day after the accident. My Instagram DMs were filled with the same words. Everyone wanted to know where the alternate captain was and all the gory details of what happened that night. I got sick of it pretty quickly. Thankfully, Joel, my agent, had taken care of all of the PR shit and let me recover in the privacy of my home. Not worrying about the press wanting statements and the outside world was exactly what I needed. Being so in the spotlight during the season takes a huge toll on me mentally.

After Coach Johnson reached out to Joel about me doing this here in Stonebridge, he thought it was a good idea for me to get out of the city for a bit. I wasn't a big household name here and I couldn't be more grateful for it. Stonebridge was a tiny town with a population of under ten thousand. Enough for me to fly under the radar. It made this part of my recovery a little easier.

While I was here, I was focusing more on the mental recovery from the accident. Not that I hadn't been seeing a therapist since my first week home after the accident. It took a while to find the right therapist for me. Eventually, I found someone who worked for me and their practice happened

to be here. After months of doing therapy over FaceTime, I was finally getting the chance to sit on the couch and talk about anything and everything in person. Not to mention, it was part of the deal of me playing again.

Joel walked through the door of the building, pulling his black aviators off his face before tucking them in the front of his black henley t-shirt. He gave me his signature smirk when his eyes met mine. I got up from the chair I was sitting in, meeting him by the elevator. “You handsome son of a bitch.”

“Why do I get the feeling that this was a big mistake?” I said to him, my brows knitted together as I looked at the mirrored elevator doors. Joel was a good bit shorter than me and it was moments like this that I realized just how much taller than him I was.

He chuckled. “Probably because there is a chance it will be.” His replies were always honest, I’ll give him that. “You grow a goatee from working here, Sawyer and I will never make another deal for you again.” He pointed his finger as the elevator doors opened. “God, this place is like a knock-off Stark Tower filled with Saturday morning detention vibes.”

I knew I wasn’t wrong with my vibes.

The elevator doors shut and he reached for fourteen. “Remember, you’re only here until December. Three months. That’s it. That’s all we can give. You’ve got a doctor’s appointment scheduled in a few weeks to see if you’re eligible to skate again. That is your career.”

Did he really think that this app was going to be figured out at that time? In my opinion, that was more wishful thinking than anything else. Either way, that’s why Joel was here. He was making sure my contract was set in stone. No funny business. No hidden agenda.

Joel walked ahead of me as we made our way to the end of the hall on floor fourteen. Heads were poking out of their offices, looking to see who was headed down the dreaded hallway to the boss’s office. I was sure everyone knew who was expected to enter the building today.

We stepped foot inside the oversized office and were met with a man who looked nothing like my head coach. Unlike Carter Johnson, a tall man with a full head of chocolate brown hair, his younger brother was balding at the front of his hairline. He had to be shorter than Joel and would be lucky to see his toes, let alone his dick past the beer gut sticking out. The gaps in his dress shirt suggested that it was one or two sizes too small.

He gave off the same energy my asshole father did if I was being completely honest. He had this toxic aura to him that I tend to pick up easily

from people. He knew he was the boss — the one running the show— and he used that to his advantage. The whole “I’m in charge and you do what I say” vibes radiated extensively off of him. He thought he was better than everyone. No wonder his empire here was cracking.

“Austin Sawyer!” He greeted me loudly, getting up from his desk with his arms wide open. “Just in time! The staff is looking forward to meeting you! C’mon! Let’s head to the morning meeting!”

I side-eyed Joel and I knew he was thinking the same thing I was.

No wonder Coach Johnson didn’t speak to his brother. He was a nutcase.

“Shouldn’t we go over the contract first?” Joel cut him off, cocking his eyebrow.

“We’ve got all day.”

*Kill me now.*



I was bored out of my mind.

That’s how I described listening to Chris talk. He stood at the front of this large conference room, talking a bunch of nonsense. The man didn’t know a word of what he was talking about and it was clear as day when he brought up two completely different graphics and called it the same. I was getting a migraine and it wasn’t even noon. Granted, I hadn’t had my morning coffee yet. I’d take spilling it a million times over if it meant I didn’t have to listen to this idiot ever again.

And if it meant a few more minutes with that Catalina girl. Damn, she was fucking fine. There was no way in hell a girl like that was single. Hell, she was probably engaged to some douche in this room now, and he probably didn’t even fuck her right. A girl like her deserved every inch and curve to be worshipped.

Fuck, I needed to get laid.

I needed to stop thinking about her before my dick woke up. I wasn’t wearing tight enough boxers to hide him if I got up in front of everyone.

“That brings us to our next topic of conversation,” he cleared his throat as he clicked to the next slide. “As all of you know, our annual fundraiser is coming up and this year, only this year, it’s being held in New York.” A

taller woman stood up, making her way to the front of the room with him. Her pencil skirt was shorter than my boxers and her blouse was tight to her tiny figure. She turned to face the room and my heart damn near dropped out of my ass.

Lyndsey Griffith.

What in the actual fuck was she doing here? She was in New York City last I heard. Then again, she was a freshman while I was a senior. It didn't stop everyone from knowing her name and who she was. Lyndsey had a reputation, especially with the hockey team. By the time December of my senior year, she had fucked half the hockey team, and the other half had at least seen her naked. Thankfully, I was not one of those who had been involved with her, but my best friend wasn't so lucky.

And that was why I hated her. Lyndsey didn't take no for an answer and thought she was entitled to use us as she saw fit. She had no boundaries when it came to the lengths it took to get what she wanted. And I mean no boundaries. She was the reason why I never fucked anyone intoxicated.

Now here she was, staring me down like she had many times before. Things hadn't changed. She was still the same girl and I could see it in the way her eyes traveled over me. And I wanted nothing to do with her.

"This year we're in charge of the fundraising. After taking a vote, we're holding an auction," her high-pitched voice filled the confined space. Her eyes hadn't left me. Not for a second. She could take a damn picture and it still wouldn't be long enough for her. I crossed my arms over my chest. "A date auction."

"You all know we have been graced with one of the NHL's best, Austin Sawyer," Chris added, making my stomach drop. I didn't sign up for this shit. Absolutely fucking not! "The notorious ladies' man will be available for one night and one night only and to the highest bidder."

No, the fuck I'm not.

"This was not part of the deal!"

Joel had been cursing Chris Johnson out for a good ten minutes now. The contract that was sent said nothing about being a part of their stupid 'date auction'. If there was, I wouldn't have agreed to any of this. I was not selling myself to some random woman or man for money. Yeah, I may have a bit of a reputation but I would never do anything for money. I drew the line there.

"Fine," Chris shouted out, shrugging his shoulders. Something told me I

wasn't going to like the next words to leave his mouth. He had that same look my dad had when he knew he was about to get his way. It was the manipulator's way. "You don't want to do it. Fine. I don't care."

Here we go.

"It's not going to take much for me to reach out to a couple of news outlets to let them know all about you, Austin Sawyer. What's putting a few ideas about a DUI on your behalf? Or even a sexual assault allegation from back when by your good pal Lyndsey? None of that shit would fly. What's to stop me from making you look like you don't give a fuck about your eight-year contract, especially when you're not playing. Not a good look for what was one the best players in the league."

This mother-fucker. Two can play at this game.

"Don't forget who my brother is!" He mentioned casually as if he didn't just threaten my career if I didn't do what he wanted. "I hold all the cards here."

"It's not happening," I stated calmly. Almost too calm for someone whose career was just threatened by a piece of shit businessman. "I'll take pictures and sign autographs for your auction. I don't have a problem with that. What I do have an issue with is you disrespecting my girlfriend. That isn't happening." Where the fuck is this coming from? What am I doing?

"You don't have a girlfriend."

I shook my head. "The fuck do you know about my life?" I declared. "There's a reason why I've been out of the public eye for so long. I have a very serious girlfriend."

"Bullshit." He snapped. "Absolute bullshit. You're reputation as a man-whore is—"

"Is old news," I cut him off. "Even the fuckboys have to settle down sometime."

"Then end it."

"Not happening," Joel piped in. "What he has to offer is all that's on the table. He's not ruining his life to keep your side of the business up and running."

"It wouldn't be an issue if I believed it," he growled, making his face go beet red. "There is no way in hell a man like you settles down."

"It's his offer. Photos and autographs and he'll even bring her along the night of the auction," Joel offered. Fuck me. "That's it or he walks and I'll make sure Carter knows exactly what went down. Especially when I've been

recording this conversation since we walked in.”

Chris’s face didn’t budge.

“Sawyer can get his girlfriend to buy him at the auction if he’s going to be so prissy about it. It’s not going to stop me from advertising him, and it’s fair game if his little puck-bunny can’t come up with enough money.”

This guy was a fucking asshole.

“You work for me now, Sawyer,” he declared, shaking his head. “You’re here because you fucked up and drove drunk. You’re not getting special treatment because you’re some hotshot hockey player.”

I didn’t drive drunk.

“You’re lucky your brother is who he is, or else you’d have no one to advertise for a sector of the company run by a balding prick who can’t even see his dick over his beer belly,” I interjected. “You might be the one running the show, but you’re sadly mistaken if I’m not the one in charge here.”

“You’re a prick.”

I couldn’t care less. My issue was finding someone to be my serious girlfriend by the night of the auction.

It wasn’t like I had an ex to call either. I was close to one female and she was head over heels for my best friend. Not to mention, it would be extremely weird to ask my coach’s daughter to fake date me. My coach’s daughter and his niece. That was a disaster waiting to happen.

Why couldn’t things be easy? Just this once. That’s all I was asking for.

*Catalina*

I gave myself a once over in the mirror, feeling a sense of defeat wash over me.

The girls from the cafe wanted to do a girl's night tonight. Girls' night typically meant bar hopping until one or more of them were too drunk to walk, let alone function. It wasn't really my thing, but I was following Courtney's suggestion and going out this weekend. This had to count, even though I was going to hate every second of it.

To make matters worse, I ordered some new clothes a few weeks ago. A few fall fits that I was excited to wear. Two new button-up plaid shirts, a soft material sweater and a new pair of jeans. I didn't want to go all out, but I needed some new outfit choices. I was tired of repeating the same five shirts. I decided to put on one of the plaid shirts, only to button it up and see the huge gap between the buttons on my chest, making it look stupid.

"Fuck!" I hated my boobs. Nothing ever fit right and I looked ridiculous. Completely and utterly ridiculous. As if I wasn't already self-conscious about my looks, this shirt had to send me reeling down the rabbit hole of self-hatred.

Why couldn't I be thinner like the other girls? Why did big boobs have to run in my family? I was one of the bigger girls that worked at the cafe. While most of them had tiny waists, I had a soft stomach. My thighs rubbed together when I walked. I wasn't overweight, I was just curvier than the other girls I was surrounded by. As Olivia always told me, nothing a few miles on the treadmill and healthy eating won't fix.

I ripped the shirt off of my body, tossing it across the room in a fit of



rage. I wanted to skip going out and hang out here. I had Disney+ waiting for me anyway and it wasn't like I wanted to drink, let alone hang out with them. Olivia and Lyndsey were going to make comments about whatever outfit I chose to wear and how I did my makeup. My hair will be judged not to mention what shoes I had on my feet.

Haley, my best friend, was probably going to invite her college friends to join us which meant I was going to be by myself for most of the night. What fun was it sitting in the corner listening to other people talk knowing you weren't included in the conversation?

I wasn't going to chicken out. It would give me something to talk to my therapist about next week. I walked over to my closet, pulling out one of my favourite maroon shirts and my black jacket, knowing it'd cover up enough and show off enough at the same time. The perfect amount of cleavage to say I have boobs but I want to keep them covered.

I paired it with my go-to dark blue skinny jeans with a rip on each knee. I wasn't the kind of girl who wore heels and that was mostly because I could barely walk in them. Hell, I could barely walk in flat shoes without bumping into an attractive stranger and spilling his coffee. I reached for my knee-high boots, knowing they would pull my outfit together... at least I hoped it did.

It was close to nine by the time I walked into Jonsies. The local hotspot that served the best fries and beer for six bucks. It was a family-owned bar that was the most successful in this little town. It had a space for everyone. Half of the bar was reserved for those here watching sports. Hockey and basketball are the two big ones, but it could get a little loud during baseball season too. There was a section for the ladies for bachelorette parties and what have you. Then there was space for the rest of the patrons, ready to socialize, get drunk and dance.

I guess I fell in the latter category tonight.

I head to the bar, ordering a beer before scanning the room for my friends. It didn't take long to find the bleach-blonde head of hair. Haley, my best friend. Surrounding her was Olivia, who no one really liked because she was a bitch in all the worst kind of ways. Her best friend Lyndsey was exactly like her, but she was more desperate for male attention than her bestie, Olivia. And unfortunately, I was right, Haley brought all of her college friends. Nikki, Colleen and Montana.

If I didn't go over there, I'm sure they wouldn't even notice that I didn't show up. That's who I was. Invisible unless needed. That was my purpose in

the group. A supporting character ready to back up whatever the main character said. The one they only interacted with if they needed a scene filler.

God, it sucked feeling like I wasn't important to the only people in my life. Knowing that I wasn't my best friend's first choice, but she was mine would have made a great starting sentence for a book titled '*How to Break Your Own Heart*'. She was my best friend but I wasn't hers. I was nobody's best friend.

I watched them laugh together, heads thrown back in the process. Not a single one of them looked around for me. I cast my head down as I turned back to the bar, ready to tell the bartender to forget about my drink so I could head home.

"Hi stranger," a deep voice filled my ears. I glanced to my right before looking up. I was met with a pair of green eyes that seemed oddly familiar. However, the grey hoodie and baseball hat were a change. "Fancy running into you here."

"I could say the same about you," I nodded my head as my beer was placed in front of me. Shit. There goes the idea of leaving now that I had a drink to pay for. I reached into my bag, searching for a few bills.

He ordered himself a beer before stopping me. He tossed a few bills on the counter, covering both of our drinks. "Thank you."

"Makes up a little for ruining your shirt today," he said confidently. "You here with anyone?"

"Kinda," I shrugged, looking over my shoulder at the group once more. "Although, I think the party started without me."

He shook his head. "Nahh. I think they're just warming up the table for you."

He had no idea how wrong he was. My eyes averted back to his and I prayed he couldn't see the defeat in mine. "You meeting friends here?"

"Something like that," he nodded with a smile. I knew that look. Chances were he was looking for a hookup for the night. He had his choices set out for him. Olivia would do anything to sleep with someone. Lyndsey was just as bad for throwing herself at any available man who even looked in her direction. "What's with that look?"

"What look?" I furrowed my brows.

"I don't know exactly," he chuckled. "I just know that you were thinking of something there and I'm curious."

I sighed, leaning my back against the bar. "Something like that usually

means you're looking for a hookup," I pointed out. "No offence, but you do strike me as the type. No judgments, of course. It's your life."

"You playing wingman for me?" He cocked his eyebrow playfully, mimicking my posture before bringing his beer up to his lips.

I scoffed. "I prefer wing woman, actually."

"Apologies," he said innocently, making me smile at his willingness to continue having this ridiculous conversation with me. "Now who do you deem as worthy?"

I cackled, mostly because none of them were worthy. But I wasn't about to tell him that. I couldn't do that to him, even if I wanted to. Austin was hot and he knew it. He knew how to get the attention of the room without even trying. He was the type of main character that women fought over, wanting their own love story with him. He was Prince Charming.

"Well," I paused, glancing over at my friends who were yet to notice me. "I would steer clear of the one with black hair 'cause I'm not sure she's been tested lately."

"I don't want to know how you know that," he let out a laugh. "What about the one whispering in her ear?"

Lyndsey Griffith. "Absolutely not," I protested.

"How come?"

Because you could do better. "I just don't like her."

It wasn't a lie. I hated Lyndsey for a lot of reasons. Starting with the way she pronounced my name. Cat-A-Lean-A. She never shortened it like everyone else in my life did. She made it a point to say my name every time she spoke to me. She was one of those girls who thought she was better than everyone else because of the way she was popular with guys. Constantly being surrounded by them gave her this false pretence that everyone wanted to be her best friend, even though she'd put you down the first chance she got.

I didn't have the easiest time making friends and it had been that way since kindergarten. Before that, I was friends with all the kids on the street and spent quality time with them up until that first day of school. There's a picture of me sitting at a table by myself while my best friend and next-door neighbour was surrounded by everyone else. I didn't fit in. I never had and I probably never would. People like Lyndsey and Olivia made sure of it.

"I don't like her either."

My eyes widened at his confession. Inside, I was a little shocked but at

the same time, I was doing a little happy dance. Finally, someone who wouldn't fall for her flirtatious personality. I was scared he was going to walk over there to see her, knowing that he'd never speak to me again if he did.

"I'd better go," he chuckled. "My umm — friend just got here."

"Right," I nodded. "Thanks again for the drink."

That was my queue to head over to that table and pretend I didn't hate myself as much as I did. I watched as Austin headed to the table in the back corner with a shorter man dressed in more business casual over one or the other. It was none of my business. Not to mention, he said something about today being his first day so it could be a friend from work.

The group table was crowded, leaving barely enough room for me to take a seat. Haley gave me a nod to greet me before continuing in her conversation about some project she and Montana were working on. The table top was filled with shots of what looked like tequila, only there were two left. Never mind, make that one no thanks to Lyndsey.

"Hey," I greeted the table. "What did I miss?"

Silence.

"Did you see who walked by?" She slurred to Olivia as I got seated.

"Austin Sawyer."

Olivia scoffed. "You don't stand a chance."

"We have history," she beamed, making me want to roll my eyes. "He wanted me so bad in high school but I turned him down for his best friend. He works in my building now and he's got a girlfriend according to Chris."

"Mmh, Chris," Olivia giggled.

"He never said I couldn't break the two of them up by sleeping with him," she wiggled her eyebrows. "He told me he'd give me a raise if I made sure he and this girlfriend of his break up by that auction."

"Auction?"

"The one you fucked Chris at last year before his wife found out?"

*If he had a girlfriend, then why did he let me play wingwoman back there?*

And this was a perfect example of why I hated this group. Between those two idiots and the fact that Haley had made it a point to exclude me from whatever conversation she was having, I wondered what was the point of even being invited to come out tonight.

I pushed my chair back and headed to the back where the bathrooms were. I needed a breath of fresh air. Actually, I needed to go home. Screw

this night and being constantly left out. I definitely had enough material to talk to my therapist about next week, starting with feeling like I don't belong anywhere I go. If this was how I felt with my friends, lord help me if I ever started dating again.

The line to the bathroom was about ten minutes long and for the first time, I really didn't mind the wait. The longer I was gone, the sooner it was until I could slip out the front door and make my way home.

I stepped into my stall, leaning against the wall to take a breather. Beside me, I could hear someone crying, which wasn't what I wanted to hear at all. Especially in the bathroom of a bar on a Friday night.

"Did you see what she was wearing?" A familiar voice filled my ears. Olivia. "Talk about attention seeking."

"As if anyone would sleep with her," Lyndsey's voice added to the mix. "She's about twenty pounds too heavy for any man to ever look at her."

I peered through the tiny crack between the stalls. Olivia laughed hysterically as she fixed her hair in the mirror. Her makeup was jet black and over the top. Her top was low-cut, showing off whatever she had as she adjusted them to look better. "I don't even know why Haley hangs out with her."

"To make herself look good. I mean, Haley is hot. She's got a killer body and standing next to Catalina, she looks even better."

I didn't want to let any of it get to me. Not when I didn't like these two to start with. Olivia was thirty-four years old and still acted as though she was twenty-one. She thrived on drama and making herself feel better about the fact that no man has ever stuck around long enough to want to put a ring on her finger. Lyndsey was twenty-five and was dating her step-brother at one point. I couldn't let their opinions of me dictate how I felt about myself, even if it was really difficult not to. Who was I kidding? It was impossible.

*You're never going to be good enough* flashed like a neon sign in my head. Over and over again.

I waited until they were done in the bathroom to step out. It was after ten and I knew I could sneak out of here safely and head home. It wasn't too late to make a snack and curl up on the couch watching *Wizards of Waverly Place*.

I stepped out of the bathroom, colliding with something hard instantly. For a second, I thought I had opened the door incorrectly and walked straight into it. Wouldn't be the first time. When I looked up, I was met with the very

same green eyes I already bumped into today. “We meet again.”

“In the same way as before,” I said shyly once I realized his hands were on my body. I hadn’t realized how my entire body had tensed up, or the way my heart began to beat rapidly in my chest. My fight-or-flight senses had been triggered by something as simple as accidentally bumping into a man. A man I knew by name.

I knew he felt it too by how quickly removed his hands from my biceps. He gave me a small, reassuring smile before taking a step back. “You want to come have a drink with me?”

“Umm, why?” I furrowed my brows. Instead of saying yes like any normal fucking person would. Of course, I had to question it. “Aren’t you with your friend?”

“You look like you could use one,” he shrugged with a half-smile. “Not to mention, Joel had to head out and I don’t want to drink by myself. You’re the only person I know in town.”

“Besides Lyndsey,” I threw in there.

“Please don’t remind me,” he protested with a frown. “C’mon, have one drink with me before I walk you out of here and wait for a cab with you.”

That was new. Unless he was meaning that he had intentions of taking me home with him. In that case, he could stick it where the sun didn’t shine. Then again, Lyndsey mentioned something about him having a girlfriend. Maybe this was just a friendly interaction.

I nodded my head and let him lead me over to his booth. He kept a bit of space between us and I wasn’t sure if he did that for my benefit or his. The last thing he needed was for his relationship to end and for Lyndsey to swoop her way in and get a raise in the process.

“Dare I ask how your first day of work was?” I started as soon as he ordered us two more beers.

He shook his head. “Would you believe me if I told you that spilling my coffee was the best part of my day?”

“Possibly?” I shrugged my shoulders. “Would it have anything to do with Lyndsey being offered a raise to break you and your girlfriend up?”

His face fell. To be fair, I was certain he wasn’t supposed to know any of that information, but the last thing I wanted was for her to get her way. He tensed up and his jaw clenched, making me a little nervous. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. “Who told you that?”

“They were talking about it at the table after you walked by,” I shared,

not daring to meet his eyes. Instead, I nervously intertwined my fingers together, trying to ease the growing tension in my chest. He was nice, I reminded myself. “You might want to warn your girlfriend about it.”

“Speaking of,” he chuckled. “Should I be worried about your boyfriend coming to kick my ass?”

I let out a dry laugh, shaking my head. I needed to fake my confidence and pronto. I was acting like my anxiety ruled my life, and I couldn’t let it. I had to pull my shit together and make it seem like I wasn’t in therapy once a week for something that happened ten years ago. “Nahh! No boyfriend. Too much of a headache.”

Two beers were dropped off at the table and we thanked the girl at the same time. At least he was polite enough to thank the wait staff. Most guys wouldn’t even give them a second glance.

His lip curled up before he took a swig. “So wingwoman. You need a wingman?”

“No thanks,” I rolled my eyes. “Have you seen half the men in this bar?”

“Fair point. Even though the bartender was definitely checking you out earlier,” he teased, wiggling his perfectly shaped eyebrows. “Could be a nice quick and dirty in the back room, you know.”

“You’re gross.”

“I know,” he chuckled.

I took a sip of my beer, knowing full well I wasn’t going to finish this one. “So, I have to ask,” I said, playing with the table on the bottle. “Why was I playing wing-woman when you already have a girlfriend.”

I could tell my question caught him off guard. He let out a dry laugh before his eyes went soft. He looked directly at me before leaning over. “It’s a long story.”

I didn’t like his answer, let alone how he had to lean in to tell me. My mouth went as dry as the Sahara desert. No amount of water would fix it. Especially not sitting next to him. It wasn’t that he made me uncomfortable, but he didn’t exactly make me feel comfortable either. I had seen enough episodes of *YOU* to know to trust my instincts. Would he hurt me? No, probably not. Was he telling me the truth about things? No. Definitely not.

As hot as he was, the truth would always settle in. He was a ten without even trying. Tens weren’t even associated with sixes. It’s just how it was. I didn’t want to be associated with him and whatever he was involved in. I didn’t want to be a part of any of it.

I went out. I socialized. I failed. So be it.

Just another topic to discuss with my therapist on Friday.

“Well, as fun as this night was. I should get going,” I nodded. “Thanks again for the drink.” With that, I slipped out of the booth. My eyes fell on the empty table where my friends were sitting. I reached in my bag for my phone, seeing that I didn’t even get a text about them going. Right.

*Don’t forget, you’re invisible, Cat.*

Suddenly, the room felt like it had gotten fifty degrees hotter and I felt like I was suffocating. My clothes were clinging tightly to my skin as I weaved through the groups of people, trying to get outside where the air was fresh.

The second I stepped outside, a strong sense of relief washed over me. I finally felt air entering my lungs after what felt like a lifetime without it. I brushed a stray piece of hair away from my face, feeling just how sticky my forehead was with sweat mixed with the foundation that I had on since eight this morning.

The stars were out tonight, making it the perfect night to walk down the street to my apartment. It was the little things. Walking down the street by myself was one of them. I made the left turn, heading down the sidewalk with my head held high.

“Wait up!” A deep voice filled my ears, making my body tense once more. Please, please, please don’t be a creep from the bar. Loud footsteps followed, making me want to walk even faster, doing nothing to put any space between me and whoever was following me. “Catalina!”

“Are you following me?” I snapped, clutching my phone in my hand.

“A little,” he nodded, keeping six feet between us. “I live this way, first of all. And second,” he paused, holding up a finger. “Can I walk you? I’d feel a whole lot better knowing you got home safe. Especially since I’d probably be the last person to see you and they’d accuse me and I’m too cute to go to jail.”

I giggled. He wasn’t wrong. His face wouldn’t last a day in prison.

“There she is,” he smiled, taking a small step forward. “I promise, you have full permission to kick me in the nuts if I do anything to make you uncomfortable, Catalina.” He put his hands up, taking another step. “Not to you know, sweeten the deal or anything, but you’re my only friend in this town. Friends have to stick together, right?”

“Right.”



That's what I was? His friend. Did he consider me his friend? I highly doubted it, but I'd take it. Considering my friends left me behind without a word and this one was walking me home? I'd take him — a complete stranger — over them right now and that was saying something.

*Catalina*

*What a night*, I thought to myself as I got up the next morning.

Austin walked me to the building where I found out he just so happened to live too. But, being the safe and careful twenty-seven-year-old girl I was, I made him wait a whole five minutes before entering so he wouldn't know which apartment was mine. Was I being paranoid? Yes. But I couldn't be too careful with someone I just met and knew very little about.

Well except that he had a girlfriend, yet I was playing wingwoman.

I didn't like that information.

Austin was a nice guy from what I could tell. He was confident in a way that wasn't arrogance. He didn't think the world owed him something or that he was the hottest thing to walk the Earth. He was a bit cocky, but I was sure he grew up playing some sort of sport. That kind of mentality stuck with you well after you stopped playing. I remember guys in school used to talk the way he did. Smooth, yet a little unimpressive. At least to me.

Either way, I wasn't about to judge. Not when he was the only friend I had at the moment. It was nice to not feel entirely invisible for once, and even more so from someone as attractive as him. And Lyndsey and Olivia wanted him but he didn't. That was my favourite part of it all.

I reached for my phone as I made my way into the tiny kitchen of my apartment. I clicked on the screen, seeing more notifications than I have ever received on my lock screen. Messages from Haley, Olivia, my mom, my dad, and a few random numbers I didn't have saved in my contacts. There were missed calls, Instagram notifications, tweets. I had no idea what was happening. I hadn't received this much attention since I started posting fan fiction on the internet.

I decided to open up my Mom's message first, only to find that there were ten messages. As my eyes adjusted to the screen, all I saw were heart-eye emojis.

**Mom: why didn't you tell us you had a boyfriend???**

**Mom: he's cute!!!**

**Mom: Please tell me you're bringing him home for Thanksgiving??**

**Mom: Shit. I meant Christmas!**

**Mom: I forgot you don't get Thanksgiving off with that tyrant of a boss**

**Mom: Call me when you get a chance!**

**Mom: I want details!**

**Mom: I can't believe you finally have a boyfriend!**

**Mom: Heart Eyes**

What the fuck was going on!?

**Dad: Your boyfriend is the alternate captain for Long Island?**

**Dad: Marry him!**

**Dad: I approve!**

**Dad: Wait! When is he allowed to play again?**

**Dad: Ask him for me, would ya?**

Again! What the fuck was going on?!

I decided to check my Instagram first, knowing that there was a good chance I would find out what was going on from there. It wasn't like I was the most popular on there. A solid four hundred followers was everything I needed. I clicked it and saw that four hundred had turned into ten thousand.

I had never switched my account from public to private so quickly.

I skimmed through the notifications, seeing that a few of the new followers had gone and given my photos some likes and comments. Then there were the comments on photos I had been tagged in.

I searched through it and found at least a hundred posts of the very same picture. A picture I had no idea existed until it was all I saw. There I was in the booth a Jonsie's bar next to Austin. Our casual conversation is well in progress. Nothing looked abnormal about it. Except I was tagged and apparently so was he. And curiosity got the better of me.

**AustinSawyer36 — verified**

*One million followers.*

Austin was number thirty-six for the Long Island Manatees. The NHL team. As in Austin played in the NHL. This meant I had a drink with him at the bar last night and everyone, including his girlfriend, had seen this and I would be known as a home-wrecker.

I go out one fucking night and I ruined someone's relationship and my future career. Who was going to buy a romance novel by a girl whom a famous hockey cheated on his girlfriend? I sure as hell wouldn't.

I exited out of his profile, not wanting to see any of the pictures on his account in case I found his girlfriend. I had a bunch of comments under each post, wondering how long we had been together. A few said we made a cute couple. A few others were vile and definitely violated Instagram's terms and conditions in some way. Mostly though, they said things I knew were already true. What would Austin see in a girl like me?

I couldn't look at it anymore and left my phone on the counter before making my way over to the kettle to start my morning tea. I opened up the cupboard, reaching for my favourite mug, with a blue and green pattern on the outside, one I had for years. I placed it on the counter, grabbing a teabag from the box. The box slipped out of my hands, landing too close to my mug and the next thing I knew, it was smashed on the floor. I let out a shriek in shock before tears filled my eyes.

Maybe I should have stayed in bed.

Three loud taps made my ears perk up, followed by a deep voice, asking if everything was okay. I cleared my throat, trying to rid of the huge lump growing right by my uvula. I reached down, picking up what once was the handle of my mug, slicing my finger in the process.

"Fuck!" I cried out, jumping back on my feet to rinse my now bleeding finger.

"Catalina?" The voice called out. "Catalina, is that you in there?"

I shook my head, "Who's asking?"

"Probably the last person you want to see right now," he called back. "It's Austin."

I grabbed the tea towel from the stove, wrapping it around my finger before I strutted towards the door, unlocking the three locks before throwing the door open. He stood there sheepishly on the other side of the door in a pair of black sweats and a white fitted tee. His hair was a mess on top of his head and he didn't have any shoes on.

“Shit, you’re bleeding,” he pointed out as his eyes glanced at the towel. “I heard a scream and came running. I had no idea you lived next door.” Austin lived in the apartment next door... great.

“Broke my favourite mug,” I breathed out, trying and failing to keep the emotion out of my voice, motioning to the kitchen. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“So you’ve seen it all, I take it,” he said sheepishly, shoving his hands in the front pockets of his pants. “For the record, I’m sorry. I have no idea who leaked the pictures or why they had to drag you into it.”

I nodded.

“I can explain everything.”

I made sure the towel was wrapped around my finger before I crossed my arms over my chest. Quickly, I realized that I didn’t have a bra on, making me even more self-conscious than I was before. I made sure that my nipples were covered, hoping that my silence would urge him to continue.

“Can I come in?” He cocked an eyebrow.

There goes that plan. I stepped to the side, motioning my head for him to enter before I closed the door. He stood on the other side of the counter, looking down at the mess of my mug on the hardwood floor. “So talk,” I urged him.

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” he stated, looking up at me with his soft green eyes. Thank fucking god for that. “But I need one.”

“I’m not following.”

He let out a sigh before he bent down, picking up a big piece of shattered glass off the floor. “You know who I am now, right?”

“Vaguely,” I shrugged. “I clicked your Instagram profile and read your bio. That’s as far as I got.”

He nodded his head, swallowing hard. “Long story short, I was in a car accident at the beginning of this year and I haven’t played since. My coach sent me here to help out his idiot brother, which I found out was all a ploy to auction me off for a date with the highest bidder. I didn’t want to do that so I said I had a serious girlfriend when I didn’t so I could get out of that portion of the auction. If I had to guess, whoever sent that picture of us is in on this whole thing and wanted to catch me cheating.”

“Lyndsey,” I muttered. “She works in the same building and she was there last night.”

Music filled my tiny apartment before Austin reached into his pocket, pulling out his phone. He answered it immediately, bringing it up to his ear

before he began to pace. I didn't want to listen to his conversation, even if it was happening in my apartment. He was talking to someone about the news that was released, which hopefully would get sorted so my name and social media would stop being spammed.

"I'm in the apartment next door with her," he replied, hanging up the phone. The next thing I knew, he was heading for the apartment door, letting someone else in. Someone I had never seen before. Great, two strange men in my apartment and I was already bleeding and didn't have a bra on. Could this day get any worse?

"Hi," the shorter man greeted me. "You must be Catalina Jackson."

"Yeah."

"I'm Joel Bailey," he held his hand out. "I'm Austin's agent." I nodded, slipping my non-bleeding hand into his.

"So what's happening?" Austin asked, placing both of his hands on my countertop. "Any idea who leaked the photos? What is being said? Anything?"

"You wanted a girlfriend," he pointed out before shrugging his shoulders. "You got a girlfriend. News outlets, Hockey Central, TSN, Sports Net, they all think she's your girlfriend. Since you've been radio silent for the better part of the last eight months, they are running anything and everything on this story," he paused, looking between us. "The way I see it. We should play into it."

"Don't I get a say in this?" I questioned, furrowing my brows. "This is my life too."

"She's right," Austin added in.

He shook his head. "We don't exactly have a lot of choices here. Chris thinks you have a serious girlfriend and after being seen with her at the bar, and all the articles. Finding someone else would be a one-way ticket to date night with Austin, and whatever else he wants to say about you. She's our only option."

I scoffed. "I am standing right here. Don't pretend like I'm not in the room." I did not like this Joel guy. He screamed sexist pig if I was being completely honest. He was making sure Austin was protected. That was his job. He was paid for that. Me on the other hand? He couldn't give two shits about me, my privacy or my protection. He would sooner throw me to the wolves if that meant he could run a tragic story that Austin's girlfriend died.

"Let the professionals talk, kiddo," he side-eyed me. "If you hadn't

wanted his attention last night, you wouldn't be in this mess."

"Excuse me?" Austin said before I had the chance to. "Don't talk to her like that. I'm the one that talked to her last night. Stop being a dick to the only person that can help this situation."

He turned to face me and his face softened. He gave me a sweet smile, kind of like the one he gave me yesterday when we met on the street. Not even twenty-four hours later, here we were, in a situation I never would have dreamed about.

"She has to be your girlfriend," his agent stated. "There's no way around this now that the pictures have been leaked. There's another one circulating of the two of you walking together but the team is working hard to keep that one under wraps until we figure this shit out."

"So what do you suppose we do then?" He questioned as he walked over to my floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. I nervously looked away, hoping he was just another dumb jock who didn't read, and prayed he had no idea that half the books on that shelf contained various amounts of spice.

Joel let out a loud sigh, making me want to roll my eyes at how dramatic he was being. "Well, I suggest writing up a contract stating she's yours with conditions until at least a month or so after the auction."

"Again, don't I get a say in this?" I interrupted. "After all, I'm in this mess because of you. My life is now very public because of this."

This time, he scoffed, as if my presence was an inconvenience for him. "You know what, you two figure it out," he demands, pointing between us. "All I need is you to have her as your girlfriend, which you could do so much fucking better when you walk out of here. Make sure you're public once in a while so people know you're together. Put it in writing. Sign it. Done deal. I've got a flight to catch and a meeting with your other half. Email me it when you're done."

With that, the asshole walked out of my apartment, slamming the door behind him.

"I don't like him," I declared, loud enough in hopes he heard it from the hall.

Austin chuckled. "He's a good agent for someone who isn't good with people."

I nodded my head, removing the towel from my cut finger. Thankfully, the bleeding had subsided and it was just a nick, but damn did it hurt. I needed a bandaid on it. And a new mug.

“We should probably clean you up first,” he said, pointing to my finger. I shook my head. “It’s not so bad. Needs a bandaid so it doesn’t get infected though.”

“You do that and I’ll clean up your broken mug.”

Perfect. Gave me a chance to grab a sports bra on the way to throw on.

The problem with my apartment was that it was entirely an open concept. The only door I had for privacy was for my bathroom, and even then, it wasn’t much to go off of. I stepped up into my bedroom, grabbing my black lounge bra before making a beeline for my bathroom.

In the distance, I could hear the sound of glass being dumped into the trash. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, or what I was going to do. By the sounds of it, I didn’t really have a choice. All because I decided to follow my therapist’s advice and went out. If I hadn’t done that, I wouldn’t be in this mess with no solution to fix it. I was stuck with this man; this stranger, for who knows how long. Not to mention, he was a professional hockey player. They had a reputation with women, which was probably who commented on my photos. Austin was a good-looking man. There was no way he wouldn’t have women following his career in hopes of getting with him.

I was never going to be one of those girls and I had a history of trauma the length of my arm to back that up. He couldn’t have picked some other girl? Some other girl who was surely hitting the jackpot by being his girlfriend. Why me? What was so special about me?

I quickly pulled my bra over my head, making sure I was all tucked in before my shirt was overtopping it. I had a bandaid on my finger, hoping that I would no longer feel the heartbeat in it in a minute or two.

Austin was leaning against the back of my sectional couch, facing my bedroom area. His palms rested on either side of the couch and a smile played on his lips. I halted in place, meeting his eyes with a sheepish smile.

“I like your place,” he said, glancing around the entire apartment. “Feels very... you.”

“Thanks,” I breathed out. “I think.”

He let out a chuckle. “It was a compliment,” he clarified as his hand came up to his hair, running his fingers through the longer pieces. “I’m sorry I put you in this situation.”

“It is what it is, unfortunately.”

He shrugged his shoulders before his smile dropped. “I need you to



pretend to be my girlfriend until at least the middle of January. The auction is December 10<sup>th</sup> and we can't break up after it because of suspicions and I don't want to have more bad publicity than I already have."

It was September 18<sup>th</sup>. That was four months of us together. Four months of someone consistently in my life. So what was supposed to happen in the next four months? "And what exactly does that entail?"

"I guess, relationship stuff?" His brows knitted together. "I've never had a girlfriend so I'm not exactly sure about the details here. Kissing, hugging, and shit."

*Reassuring.*

"I mean, I'm sure you're capable of faking that shit," he let out a dry laugh. Nope. I wasn't. I could barely be comfortable around a man let alone date one I didn't even know. "And obviously, no one can know that this is an arrangement."

"Can I at least tell someone who is legally obligated to keep things between us?" I furrowed my brows. "Like my therapist for instance?"

"No one can — wait, you speak to a therapist?" He changed the subject.

I nodded. "Consistently for three years now." It wasn't something I shared with people. I mean, I told Haley once, and she told me it was good because I clearly needed one. Not exactly an encouraging comment to get from someone you consider to be your best friend. "I'm not going to lie, this probably isn't going to work between us."

"Why not?"

Why? "There are better people out there for this. Hell, this is some girl's dream to be taken by you."

"You and I both know that we are past that point. They saw you," he pointed out. None of those words were that he wanted it to be me to do it. None of those words consisted of me being a choice for him. He was obligated to make me his girlfriend. Soon to be legally contracted to be in a relationship with me. None of this was ever going to be by choice. I was never a choice anyway.

So I nodded my head. "Whatever. Just draft the contract so we can get this over with."

**Note to self:** *call the therapist as soon as he leaves.*

He pulled out his phone and started typing. His asshole agent had already sent him an outline of a contract to fill out. Out loud, he stated that it was mandatory for him and me to go out on public dates. For him to post about

me on Instagram. Kiss me. Hug me. Hold my hand. All of which I wasn't the most comfortable with.

"Sex?" He mentioned next. My heart dropped to my stomach. "Joel mentioned that on here."

"Absolutely not," I said coldly, turning away from him. "Remove it now."

"Done before I even asked it," he stated before I heard something behind me. Footsteps filled my ears before Austin stood in front of me, taking a seat on the step to my bedroom. "Someone hurt you, didn't they? I can tell by the way you've tensed up. Someone has hurt you."

I shook my head. "I don't want to talk about it. Not with you."

"Well, we're stuck together for the next four months," he half-smiled. "If you change your mind, I'm here to listen."

His words were sincere and for the first time, I wanted to believe that someone meant them. That someone cared enough to pick up on something and want to listen to you talk about it. It was so rare and often, made you second guess yourself and the other person's intentions.

"Since you're doing this for me," he started. "What is it that I can do for you? Make this beneficial for both of us."

"What?" I furrowed my brows, unsure if I even heard him correctly.

He urged himself up, standing tall before me. "This is never going to work if there is only something in this for me," he told me. "You're going to resent me in two weeks if that's the case. We need to work this out so you get something out of it too."

"Like what?"

"I don't know! Anything!" He threw his arms up. "Take me home to meet your parents or whatever."

I swallowed hard. Hell no. "No. Not happening. The last thing I want is for my parents to get attached to the person I'm not really dating. They've been waiting forever for it and I don't want to give them false hope. Even though they already know of you," I paused. "They told me about you and I."

"You haven't dated in a while?" He asked softly, kneeling so he was at eye level with me. I shook my head. "How long?"

"Eleven years."

"Better than nothing at all, like me," he chuckled, clearly trying to lighten the mood. "Maybe we could learn together? You know, with a safety net of a contract to catch us when we fall."

“When we fail you mean?”

He furrowed his brows, shaking his head. “No. More like the contract holds us accountable to one another. Meaning we can’t just give up because things get hard.”

He had a point. Wasn’t that one of the things I was afraid of? Having someone give up on me because fighting for me would be too hard for them? God knows, no one fought for me anyway. I was one of those people that everyone was better off leaving behind.

Maybe this contract wasn’t such a bad idea. I mean, yeah it was a terrible idea. I knew he and I would get close at some point and I’d get attached. It was setting me up for heartbreak. But it was also a trial run to see if maybe I was ready to be with someone again. Not to mention, it could inspire me to write again.

Oh my god, I could use this contract to help me write this book.

“Okay,” I nodded, swallowing hard. “We learn together. That being said, I would like permission to use potential moments between us for my writing, if that’s okay with you.”

“You writing a book?” He grinned widely. I nodded my head. “Hell yes, you can use me!”

“Okay. Then it’s settled.”

“I’ll work on the contract and the rules and I’ll get back to you later today, okay?”

Rules?

“See you in a bit!” With that, he was out of my apartment without another word.

I stand by my first statement. I shouldn’t have gotten out of bed this morning.

*Austin*

I hated to admit it, but I was nervous.

My first week in Stonebridge hadn't been the easiest, let alone the smoothest. Here I thought I was staying low-key when I got here. A small town with a population under ten thousand. What could possibly go wrong? Until it all went wrong and now some poor girl was contracted to my ass until well after the New Year.

Needless to say, I was holding up my end of the other — much easier — contract. I was in and headed to my therapist's office. The therapist who worked in this office temporarily, as he put it. I was just happy to finally have one of those in-person talks instead of over shitty wifi.

The office was nothing like I expected. Granted, most of my expectations have come from countless movies and not from personal experience. His office was a warm, cream colour with multiple paintings hung up on the walls. He had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, which reminded me a lot of my fake girlfriend's apartment, only these were self-help books and not the romance ones I saw on hers.

The couch was a beige brown colour and made of faux leather, pillows and all. The coffee table was glass with a bowl of mints on a place mat in the middle. A purple box of Puffs Kleenex was placed neatly beside it. It was very organized but in a way that felt too much.

I took a seat in the middle of the couch, pulling at the thighs of my sweats to make everything more comfortable as I leaned back. The nerves were slowly building, even though I had countless sessions with Doctor Wyatt. None of these were ever in person.

The door creaked open, revealing a tall man with sandy blonde hair. He

was lean and trimmed to my broad and muscular build. Clearly, ‘cause this man was in school getting his Ph.D. while I was enjoying my time in the sin bin for a dirty hit. He gave me a welcoming smile, which I recognized from our Zoom calls each time he had called.

“Hello Austin,” he grinned, taking a seat in the big, dark brown leather chair. He had a clipboard with papers on it, and his famous green pen that he had ever session since we started this. “How are we doing today?”

I chuckled. “Not great. I’ve been here a week and somehow managed to make everything more complicated for myself and someone else.”

“Go on.”

I explained my situation with my head coach’s dumb-ass brother and that my big mouth got me into a serious fake relationship with a woman who very clearly was not one hundred percent okay with it. Hell, I wasn’t sure if I was okay with it either. Even if we had come to terms that we both agreed on, it didn’t feel right.

“Explain to me what about this relationship makes you uncomfortable,” he asked me as he wrote something down on his page.

“I’ve never had a girlfriend,” I stated.

“And that makes you uncomfortable?”

I shook my head. No, that part didn’t make me uncomfortable. “Can we come back to this question later?”

“Sure,” he nodded, scribbling something else down. “But before we do. Does this have anything to do with your life growing up?”

I furrowed my brows.

“You’ve played hockey your entire life, Austin,” he began. “You started because you loved it and you continued because it was a way to get away from your parents. Parents that didn’t provide you with the most stable home life and didn’t offer you the same affection other parents did. As you told me, they were constantly gone.”

“Maybe,” I admitted with a defeated sigh. “I don’t want to hurt this girl and I know I’m going to because of who I am. I don’t know the first thing about loving someone.”

He nodded his head with a smile. “Loving someone? I thought this was all an arrangement?”

“It is,” I quickly corrected myself. What the fuck was I saying? “I meant on her part. Four months together, exclusively. She’s a romance writer of all things.” I paused for a moment, thinking back to her bookshelf filled with

romance novels. “This with me for her is practice ‘cause she hasn’t been with anyone in over a decade and the last thing I want is to hurt her.”

“And what if she falls for you?” He pointed out. “What if she sees the man you are outside of hockey? Or what if you fall for her? Is that the direction this is going in?”

“No,” I protested. “No. Definitely not.”

“I don’t think you’re being honest with yourself, Austin,” he sighed, putting his clipboard down. “We’ve danced around the topic of relationships for the last few months and one of the things we’ve mentioned is that your future is up to you. It doesn’t have to be one or the other anymore. You’ve said so yourself. Your teammates have wives and girlfriends and they can manage both.”

“What if I can’t?” I breathed out. “What if I’m just like my parents who couldn’t care less about me? Or worse, say if I do and I even up abusing my kid or cheating on my wife like they did?”

“Your future is up to you,” he declared, leaning forward. “You will never be like them because you don’t want to be like them.”

“How do you know that?”

He smiled softly. “Because we’re having this conversation.” He grabbed his notepad once more, writing something down before turning to me once more. “You know, the key to a successful relationship is communication. Talking and listening. That’s my advice to you. Real or pretend.”



The conversation I had with Doctor Wyatt weighed heavily on my mind well after I walked out of the office. All in all, my first in-person session was a lot more intense than I thought it was going to be. Then again, I thought he was going to go easier on me and that was my first mistake. I felt drained in more ways than one.

It was just after nine and a big part of me wondered if my fake girlfriend was around, or if she was at work. I couldn’t walk into the cafe and check without someone noticing, especially if she wasn’t there. I also didn’t want to wait for her all night in case she was working until late. We never thought to exchange numbers when we signed our agreement last week and now I was

kicking myself for it.

I decided to hell with it and made a detour towards Misery Business Cafe. A locally owned coffee shop with a pop punk, alternative theme. I mean, it was a nice place, and the coffee was great compared to some of the name-brand stuff you got. It wasn't Starbucks, but it was good and for half the price.

The bell dinged as I entered the building. A few customers were sitting at tables and by the looks of the books in front of them, they were students. I hesitantly made my way to the front counter, trying to see if I could spot a red-haired girl in the back.

"Make sure you leave on time," a woman called out from the back of the store. Her voice grew louder as she grew closer. She couldn't have been much taller than Catalina. Her hair was dark brown and shoulder length. She was older. I could tell by the lines by her eyes and the strands of gray mixed in. "I mean it, Cat. Not a second later. I don't care what she says, you are leaving on time."

"I know," she replied, making my ears perk up. "I will. I promise."

"Okay babes," she smiled as she walked out with a tray in her hand, two coffees sitting on opposite sides. "Love you so *mich*."

"*Mich* more!"

Clearly, she had a good relationship with this woman. I could hear it in the way they spoke to one another that they had more than the typical workplace friendship that you got in most places. This was warm and welcoming; loving even. It was something that went beyond.

She smiled at me as she passed me, and I knew then she knew who I was. It was a knowing smile. One that said I've got my eye on you in case you hurt my friend 'cause I know you're capable of doing so. Moments later, the bell dinged once more and I took another step to the counter.

Catalina stepped out a second later with a container labelled iced coffee, placing it on the back counter before putting what looked like a best-before sticker on it. As soon as she turned to the counter, a startled look took over her expression.

"Hi," I greeted her. I instantly kicked myself for sounding like an idiot. Why was I so nervous? Was it hot in here? She was just a girl. Another female. I had talked to girls my whole life. Yeah, but I've never dated one.

"Hey," she breathed out before a small smile appeared on her lips. She took a step forward. "What are you doing here?"

“I wanted to see you.”

She looked taken aback by my confession. In a way, so was I. I meant it though. I wanted to see her, especially after my therapy session. As mentally drained as I was, my mind drifted to the girl who was literally holding my career and life in her hands and I was to trust her not to destroy it.

She nodded her head. “Would you like something to drink? Maybe something to eat?” She offered. “I don’t recommend any of the danishes ‘cause they taste like fake processed cheese.”

That made me laugh and clearly, that made her smile widen. “I’ll take a coffee with two creams in it. As for food, whatever your favourite thing is,” I told her. “And whatever you’d like to drink.”

She shook her head. “I get drinks for free while on shift. Thank you though.”

Good. I’m glad her drinks were free. No point in working in a cafe if you didn’t get free shit. “And for future reference, what is it you like to drink?”

She glanced down, trying to hide her smile from me. I had no idea why, but I liked it and hated it all at once. It was cute, don’t get me wrong. But it was almost as if she felt like she had to hide it like it was something to be ashamed of. “I don’t drink coffee,” she began. “I drink tea instead. Orange Pekoe with two milks.”

Easy enough to remember. She looked like the kind of girl who liked tea. It kind of fit with the vibe of her apartment. She was hard to figure out though. She didn’t give me any glimpses of her. Yeah, sure, she smiled and laughed. She got a little angry and a little upset. She kept a hundred-foot wall between us and I had a feeling that there were more walls behind that one.

Then again, it took one to know one. She was in therapy too, and most people went to therapy to work through some shit. She had been through some shit. No girl as hot as she was didn’t date for eleven years just because. She had been through it, somehow, someway. She had that look to her; that distance she needed to have between her and the world. The same way I did, but I was sure it was for an entirely different reason.

At least, I hoped her dad didn’t get drunk and beat the shit out of her. That was mine.

“What time do you finish work?” I asked her, trying to get out of my head and back to reality.

She handed me my coffee and what looked like a muffin before I handed her a twenty. “I close up at ten.” She rang through my order, handing me the



change back and I motioned for her to keep it.

“You mind if I stay?”

“No,” she shook her head. “I wouldn’t mind the company.”

She walked over to the small gate to get behind the counter and opened it up. I certainly wasn’t expecting it, but I couldn’t say I didn’t enjoy it.

“You’re not going to get in trouble for this, are you?”

She giggled. “Everyone else does it.” She pointed to an empty countertop, motioning for me to make myself comfortable there. “I’ve lost count of how many times Olivia has had men behind the counter. My friend Haley has her friends come by too. My manager’s daughter sits there. If they can, so can I.”

I brought my coffee to my lips, tasting the much-needed caffeine kick I needed. She continued to wipe down the counters, letting me enjoy my snack and drink without pressing for conversation. Then again, I didn’t know what to bring up first either. I knew by looking in the back that she was alone until closing time. The customers sitting down were way out of earshot and had headphones in to drown out the noise of the radio playing in the overhead speakers.

Catalina looked cute in her uniform. The charcoal gray Misery Business tee with her blue apron wrapped around her waist. Her hair was tied back, as it usually was from what I could tell. I was yet to see it down come to think of it. Regardless, Catalina was damn fine.

“How long have you worked here?” I asked as I popped the top of my muffin in my mouth. Chocolate hazelnut... no wonder this was her favourite. It was fucking incredible.

“Three years,” she nodded, tossing the pale cloth in the red bucket next to the sink. “Which is how long I’ve been living here too.”

“On your own, I’m guessing,” I cocked my eyebrow. She nodded her head. “Fresh start?”

“Isn’t that what moving to a new town on your own means?” She shrugged her shoulders with a sad smile. “I mean, unless you’re you that is. You’re more of a get into a fake relationship with the first girl you meet, kind of fresh start.”

I laughed, knowing she was absolutely right about that. “Why here?”

She smiled, looking down once more. God, I wish she’d let me see it. “I love the water. Always wanted to live near the beach. You don’t exactly get that an hour away from Chicago.”

She was a long way from home.

“And your family?” I cocked my eyebrow, knowing that I was asking a loaded question.

“They are still there,” she nodded. “Mom and Dad still live in my childhood home and have been happily married for thirty-one years. My sister and her husband live not too far from them. I go and see them every once in a while too. I just — I don’t like being there is all.”

Understandable. Chances are her trauma stemmed from there, much like mine did in my hometown. Which is why I upped and left the day after graduation and haven’t been back. It was bold of me to assume anything about her, and I knew I shouldn’t be. For all I know, it could be a breakup that went sideways. But my intuition told me it was more than that.

“So Haley,” I changed the subject, hoping to lighten things up. More so in my head than in conversation that is. “She’s your best friend?”

“Kind of.”

My brows knitted together. “What do you mean ‘kind of’? You’re either best friends or you’re not!” My mind thought back to that night in the bar when her friends left her there without saying a word. Her friends walked out of the bar and left her behind. Was Haley one of them and that’s why? She was surrounded by a lot of girls at that table. One of them was for sure Haley. I recognized her from the first morning I walked in here. The petite blonde.

“Yes, she’s my best friend,” she answered as she began to take things out of the shelf, placing them in a large clear container. She let out a little giggle, making my eyes lock on her figure. “What’s with the twenty questions?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Just want to know you, is all.”

“You don’t have to,” she furrowed her brows before crossing her arms over her chest. “Look, we’re in this for four months. It’s pretend.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning we don’t have to do this... get to know one another,” she said calmly, keeping her voice light and her tone positive. Almost like I should have known this already and she was just reminding me of that fact. As kind as she was, I was taken aback.

“What if I want to?” I questioned before bringing my coffee up to my lips. “What if I want to know everything there is to know about you?”

“I’d say you’re wasting your time,” she stated bluntly, officially catching me off guard. “I’m nothing special, Austin. You asked me to do this, and I agreed because it’s pretend and I can fake it with no problem.” I sensed a but coming and one I wasn’t going to like. “But getting to know me involves

getting to know you, and I didn't sign up to grow attached to someone who is going to walk out of my life in four months. Surely you understand that."

Unfortunately, I completely understood where she was coming from. She was only protecting herself and I couldn't blame her for that. She sighed up to help me and she was doing that. She didn't agree to be the best of friends. We also never agreed that we were parting ways in four months. Then again, I never thought about what was about to happen when the contract was done. A part of me hoped she'd still want to be a part of my life, even if it was crazy sometimes. I'd never forced her to be a part of it, but that wasn't to say I didn't want her to be a part of it. I wanted to be a part of hers.

"I do," I nodded. "But I want to be a part of your life, Catalina. I want you to be a part of mine."

This honesty thing felt great! Terrifying as fuck, but great.

"So tomorrow night, what do you say I take you out on a date?" I offered as my heart stammered in my chest. Is this what the other guys felt like when they asked a girl out?

"A.. a date?" She stuttered as her features softened.

"Yeah," I grinned. "I know you don't trust me, Catalina. And that's fine. Trust is earned, not given. Give me a chance to earn your trust."

She nodded her head before swallowing hard. "Please don't make me regret this," she shook her head. "—'cause every part of me is screaming at me to say no."

Every part of me was screaming that I was going to end up hurting her. It was embedded in my brain to think like that. But nothing was going to change if I didn't do something about it. I was never going to see myself any differently if I didn't change my pattern. Catalina was doing me a massive favour. The least I could do was treat her like a queen and be the goddamn gentleman I wish I could call myself.

"C'mere," I motioned to her, scooting my butt to the edge of the counter. Her arms fell to her side reluctantly before she stepped closer to me. I ripped a piece of my muffin off, holding it up for her. Surprisingly, she let me feed it to her without hesitation. I wanted to pull her into me, but she wasn't ready for something like that. Not yet. So my hands stayed on my thighs as I looked into her green eyes, not needing to bend down this time. "The last thing I want is for you to regret this. Or better yet, regret me."

Her eyes softened at that last part. "Then it's a date," she whispered as a smile spread across her lips. "Now quit being a distraction. I've got work to

do.”

She walked back to the display, continuing to remove products from their shelves. I finished off my coffee, tossing it in the garbage close to the sink. We still had half an hour to kill before she was done.

After a minute or so of silence, I threw random questions her way in an attempt to get to know her on a surface level. Her favourite colour was green, but when she was a kid, it was purple. She’s the older sibling. She’s a cancer and her birthday is July 6th. And of course, she’s an aspiring author hoping to publish her first novel sooner rather than later.

A novel I was going to read the shit out of and pray she signs my copy.

I wasn’t so sure at first but after this, I knew I had the right girl in this with me.

I don’t know how I knew, but I knew.

*Catalina*

I let out a sigh as I glanced up at the crackled ceiling for what felt like the fiftieth time in the last five minutes I had been here. I was waiting for Courtney to walk through the threshold with her coffee and notepad in hand, ready to get today's much-needed session started.

It had been an entire week since my world had flipped. A week this morning I ran into the tall, green-eyed man on the street. The last thing I ever expected was to be in a pretend relationship with him. Which is why I couldn't wait for this session. I needed it. I wasn't getting through this relationship without her.

Courtney walked in with her mug and notepad, as she did at the start of every session we've had since I met her. She offered me a warm smile as she took her respective seat across from me.

"You're anxious," she pointed out as she pushed her glasses up her nose. "What's got you anxious, Catalina?"

Where do I even start with this?

"I'm pretending to date an NHL hockey player for the next four months."

She looked taken back before she cocked her head to the side, almost as if to say did I hear you correctly. "You want to explain that to me?"

I told her everything. From the moment I met him and every interaction I had with him. I didn't want to miss a single detail, in case any of them were important enough for her to grasp the entire picture of what was going on in my life. The more I shared, the crazier the idea of pretending to be someone's girlfriend felt. Especially someone who clearly had experience with other women, and didn't need someone like me. I was only picked because we were seen together. It would be every girl's dream to be in my position.

But it wasn't mine.

"How do you feel about this?" She questioned as she scribbled down something in her notepad.

That was a loaded question. "Nervous. Scared. Anxious. You name it and I probably feel it."

She smiled softly. "What about happy? From what you said, Austin is attractive."

"Yeah, he is," I nodded. He was damn fine, actually. "But that's not the point. I'm not actually with him. He's not actually with me. It's not like he saw me and was instantly attracted to me. It wasn't a case of attraction and acting on it. He doesn't actually want me so how could I be happy?"

"Did he say that he wasn't attracted to you at all?" She questioned.

"No."

"Then how do you know he doesn't find you attractive?" She furrowed her brows. "He had to think you were if he's pretending to date you. Even more so given that his life is so public and people are going to see you."

She did have a point. Not that I was going to give her the satisfaction of agreeing with her.

"Why did you agree to pretend to be his girlfriend?"

I let out another sigh before licking my bottom lip nervously. "Because if I didn't, he was going to be auctioned off for a date by his coach's psycho brother. His body is not something to be auctioned off."

She nodded her head. "Does that remind you of your past in any way? Of feeling like your body wasn't yours at one point?" She was full of great points today. In a way, her bringing them up made me feel heard. Sure, I paid her to listen to me, but it's nice to know she actually remembered what I shared with her. "I know we've talked about it early on when we were working through the aftermath of your assault."

"In a way, yeah," I shrugged my shoulders. "It felt like he wasn't allowed to refuse without a good enough reason. Like his body was owned by someone else. By auctioning him off for a date, it almost feels like the buyer, especially someone who would really want him, would pay a pretty penny and use that to their advantage."

"Let's talk about a different kind of taking advantage," she said, placing her notepad on the table next to her. "This is the first time since the assault that you have been with someone. Have you thought of maybe taking advantage of this situation in terms of healing?"

“What, like fuck him?” I furrowed my brows, swallowing hard. “I —“  
She shook her head in protest. “I meant more like growing comfortable. Taking advantage of having a pretend boyfriend who has no real expectations.”

The thought had crossed my mind. Given that our relationship is contracted and that we said we’d take this time to learn how to be with someone, it didn’t seem like a terrible idea. The issue came down to feelings because I knew the second the walls came down and we got to know one another, I would develop feelings for him. It was hard enough that he was attractive in a way that was very much real and not fictional. There were a lot of red flags going off in my head about the potential heartbreak I could face come January.

“Would it be wise?”

“It wouldn’t be the worst thing,” she shrugged. “You have someone you are tied to. You have time. You could use it to your advantage. A trial run of an adult relationship. My advice would be to talk to him about it. Communication, no matter how difficult it may be, is the best thing for relationships of any kind, and that includes fake ones.”

Maybe it was the right time. Maybe it was finally time to take a step forward. As scared as I was, we did have the contract to fall back on. He was mine for four months and he did have a charming way about him. He said he was going to earn my trust. What could be the harm in letting him in a little? After all, he did say he didn’t want me to regret him. Not many people said things like that.

“All I’m asking is that you try, Catalina,” she added, jotting something else down before pulling something out of the back of her book. *Homework*, I groaned internally. “I want you to fill in pages seven to fourteen. You can have Austin help you, or you can do it alone. We’ll discuss it next week.”

With that, the timer went off. This week’s session was done.



It was after six when Austin’s Instagram message request popped up on my phone screen. I furrowed my brows as I opened it. I hadn’t bothered to follow him yet, but he had gone and followed me the morning after everything came

out. I opened it up, nervous to see what it said.

**AustinSawyer93:** Hey Catalina! I'm sorry, I'm stuck in a meeting 'til seven. Any chance we can have our date tonight instead? Let me know. I can drop by as soon as I'm done with some food and we can watch a movie or something.

On the plus side, he wasn't cancelling on me. He was stuck at work and boy did I know that feeling. There were days when my boss would keep me standing there for an extra forty-five minutes after my shift was done just to talk and it was the most irritating thing.

I appreciated that he reached out and told me what was going on instead of leaving me in the dark about it. This saved me from getting ready and waiting impatiently while my anxiety levels spiked.

**Me:** Thanks for letting me know! Come by when you're done. Dinner and a movie sound great! Don't bother picking up something though. I'll cook! Food allergies?

It was seen right away. He started typing instantly.

**AustinSawyer93:** No allergies! See you soonish, pretty girl :)

My cheeks warmed while reading his words. Maybe Courtney was right about taking advantage of this opportunity. Learning how to be in a relationship while pretending to date him was getting more and more appealing.

I had over an hour to get dinner started and if I was being honest with myself, I wanted to make him something good. Something to make a good impression. I was no Bobby Flay or Guy Fieri, but I knew how to cook well enough not to kill someone with salmonella.

I decided my mom's chicken stir fry recipe was my best bet. It was also one of my favourite meals and it made enough for leftovers for a good four days. I started with the pot for the rice, letting it heat while I began chopping up my vegetables. This was the first recipe I learned from my mom before I left for school. I knew I wouldn't be back to visit often so I made it a point to learn it. I had a fear of missing out on it when I was gone.



I cooked the rice while starting on the chicken. The one problem with this was that I didn't have enough hands at once, so it took a bit longer to gather everything I needed to cook. As I was adding the chicken flavouring to the broth, three loud knocks filled my ears. I hadn't even realized the time.

"If it's Austin, it's open," I called out as I stirred the vegetables in the broth. The door opened up, revealing a tall man with a handsome smile playing on his lips. From the looks of it, he had changed into a pair of jeans and a fitted Long Island tee with I'm assuming his jersey number. In his hand, he had a reusable bag, making me furrow my brows.

"Hey," he greeted me as he kicked off his shoes. "It smells fucking incredible in here. What are you making?"

"Chicken stir-fry," I shared. He joined me in the kitchen, placing the bag on the other side of the counter.

He opened it up, pulling out a bag of cool ranch Doritos, peanut M&Ms and a pack of chocolate-covered Oreos. "I wasn't sure what you liked so I picked up a few of my favourite things in hopes we have something in common."

"I do like cool ranch Doritos and peanut M&Ms," I told him. "Oreos aren't my favourite, but I can eat 'em."

"Two outta three ain't bad," he nodded in approval. "You need any help?"

"You could grab the plates and cutlery," I nodded. "They are on the right over there. Top for plates. First drawer for cutlery."

Without hesitation, he did exactly that.

The downfall of a tiny apartment meant I didn't have enough space to have a proper kitchen table. Sure I had three stools set on the other side of the counter in case anyone came over, which was rare. Typically, I sat on the couch while I ate. For the most part, it really depended on what I made that night.

"So I have to ask," he said as he placed two plates down on the counter next to the dessert he brought. "Do you like the open concept of your apartment? You literally have no doors!"

I giggled at his curious tone. "I have a bathroom door."

"Thank god for that," he teased playfully.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I mean, it was the only apartment available in my price range when I got here. It took a long time to get used to everything being on display. With a little work on making it my own, it started to feel

more at home than the Museum of Catalina. I definitely miss having doors though.”

He nodded his head with understanding. “It is a nice apartment. Especially compared to mine next door,” he pointed out, glancing around the place. “You know I found an old sock in the corner when I moved in. Smelt like my best friend’s hockey bag when he was fourteen.”

“Gross,” I fake gagged. “You do know who lived there before right?”

He shook his head. “I know a handful of people in town... oh my god, it’s someone I know isn’t it?”

I poured the cooked chicken into the mix, stirring it in evenly. “You have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“So we’re one of those couples who have secrets with each other,” he beamed. “I like it!”

I rolled my eyes at his playfulness. Inside, I appreciated his humour. It put me at an ease I didn’t know I needed. Even with him. He was still a stranger, and he was a stranger in my safe space. It was not something I was used to. He was making it easy for me.

“Chris, you know, the one who’s high up at your company,” I began as I started to dole out a pile of rice on each plate. Austin’s eyes never left me. “Well, he and Olivia had a thing going on probably about six months ago. Little did any of us know, he was married or he was anyway. He had that apartment —“

“Oh fuck no,” he groaned. “Please don’t tell me that he —“

“He put the apartment in her name for obvious reasons. Not that she knew at the time,” I explained. “But I’ve heard terrible things.”

This time, I was sure he gagged for real. Not that I blamed him, especially now that he was living there and the sock he found. Olivia did live there for a while. Until she found out he had a wife who came snooping and found her. I had only heard bits and pieces of what happened through conversations at work and when she was at the table when I decided to join them. As far as I knew, Chris and his wife were working through their issues. But with Austin coming in to try and gain some traction for the company again, I had a feeling it was a last-ditch effort to save his ass with a paycheque to satisfy his wife into staying for a little while longer.

“I knew he was a dick.”

I poured a good helping of the stir-fry over his plate, making sure he had enough to eat. Given he was an athlete and a good bit taller than I was, I

knew he'd be able to eat. My portion was significantly smaller than his.

I grabbed my plate, knife and fork and headed to the couch, motioning for him to follow me. He placed him on the table before walking into the kitchen, filling two cups with water before bringing them back.

"I don't understand what she saw in him," I added. "It's not like he's even remotely attractive. He's an asshole on a good day, and he smells like he showers maybe once a month."

He let out a laugh. "You're definitely not wrong on that one." He brought his fork up to his mouth, taking a good bite out of the stir-fry. "Holy fuck, Catalina! This is fantastic!"

Our dinner continued with casual conversations about our days. For him, he mostly talked about how much he hates being in that building for extended periods and how much he can't wait to get out of there. I told him that my day was boring, and it was. Nothing exciting to report, unfortunately.

The conversation drifted into what were going to watch before I settled on putting season three of *Wizards of Waverly Place* on, as I usually did around this time of day. Austin had seen the entire series from what he told me, movies included. He missed out on half of it growing up thanks to hockey practice. He got injured in January and had all the time in the world to catch up on everything he missed.

Sitting with him felt natural in a way I never expected. I wasn't one to invite people over to sit and watch movies with me. This was an activity I did on my own, as were most things I did these days. It had been like that for a good majority of my adult life. I strived for my independence until it became something natural. Something I expected to have.

There he sat, leaving a decent amount of space between us as he watched the screen mounted to the wall. A part of me felt bad because of how boring was I that I actually enjoyed this. But him? He was the alternative captain for the Long Island NHL team. He was used to a different bar to celebrate wins and a different woman in his bed each night. He was the complete opposite of who I was.

And for the first time in a long time, I found myself wishing I was more like him. I wished it was easier for me to make friends and feel comfortable going out. I wish I didn't have the issues I did with people because of my past. I wished I was normal. Someone worth crushing on and having people want to be around me. Maybe even standing a chance at fitting in with someone like Austin it looked like we were meant to be a couple. Not this

huge gap between us. He was the popular guy and I was the nerdy girl that faded into the background.

“Have you always been able to cook?” He asked as he placed his now empty plate on the table.

I shook my head. “Not always. I only took an interest when I moved out for college and have been learning ever since.”

“I can’t cook worth shit,” he said. “Especially not like you. That was the best meal I’ve had in months.”

“Thank you,” I smiled, accepting his compliment wholeheartedly. “It takes practice. The same goes for baking, although I am definitely not as good in that department as I’d like to be.”

“So you write, you cook and you bake?” He chuckled. “Should I just ask you to marry me now, or is that too soon?”

“Shut up,” I rolled my eyes as I got up, taking both of our empty plates with me before making my way into the kitchen.

“Oh no you don’t,” he stated, taking both plates out of my hand. “You cooked. I clean. It’s only fair. No way in hell you are doing both.”

“I don’t mind,” I assured him, reaching down for the Dawn dish soap.

“Well, I do,” he protested. “Sit your cute butt on the other counter while I clean up.”

There was no fighting him on this and I knew it. He already had the water running in the sink, ready to get started on it. I knew if I stepped a foot closer, he would remove me from the kitchen himself. A six-foot-tall hockey player versus a five-foot-three curvy girl? I didn’t stand much of a chance.

I hopped up on the other counter, staring at his muscular back in his fitted shirt. He had strong muscles under there and that had to be from years and years of conditioning, training and of course, time at the gym. He was a professional athlete, and if I had to guess, a damn good one. His waist was narrow compared to his shoulders, and his ass, especially in those jeans, looked damn fine. You couldn’t even see it to the fullest extent ‘cause they weren’t tight jeans on him. His dress pants, however, would be a different story.

“I can feel you checking me out,” he called out without so much as glancing back.

“Sorry,” I replied sheepishly.

He chuckled. “Don’t be sorry. You can stare at me for as long as you want, sweetheart!”

I felt my cheeks warm at his nickname of choice. I had to tear my eyes away from him, not wanting them to linger any longer than they were allowed to. Even if he did look incredible from my position. “Can I ask you something?”

“—‘course you can,” he nodded, turning around to face me with the dish towel in hand.

“When are you able to play hockey again?” I brought up as I placed both my hands in my lap. “I know you said you’re out due to injuries from a car accident. From what I see, you seem to be okay now.”

He smiled softly, taking a step closer to me. “I have an appointment this week to see if I have the okay to skate again,” he shared. “And just between us, if it goes well, I’ll be back playing in January.”

I felt my heart sink a little. Austin was only here temporarily. I mean, yeah, a part of me knew he wasn’t going to be here forever. I never expected him to only be here for the four months we were pretending to be together. After the New Year, he would be back in Long Island full-time. Not only would it be over between us, but I’d never get to see him again.

“Don’t make plans for January 5<sup>th</sup>, okay?” He winked before turning back to the sink. Did he just subtly tell me I was going to his first game back?

“I don’t know the first thing about hockey,” I confessed sheepishly. “I know whatever is written in romance books and that’s my extent on the subject.”

“Good thing you’ve got a hockey player boyfriend to teach you then, huh?”

He was confident in a way that didn’t come across as too much or too aggressive. I’m sure he could get cocky, especially when he was in hockey mode. But there wasn’t any indication that I picked up on that he was one of those assholes who played. I could tell by the way he didn’t judge me for not knowing anything about his sport. More so when I said I had read romance books with it. He was uncharacteristically kind for an NHL player.

“I have to ask,” he breathed out, not bothering to look at me this time. “Did you Google me at all?”

“No,” I shook my head. “I thought about it and decided against it almost instantly.”

“Why?”

Easy. “I didn’t want to get to know you through information I found online, especially when some of it might not be true. Not to mention, Google

isn't going to tell me that you run your fingers through your hair when you're nervous or that you believe the one who cooks doesn't have to do the dishes," I pointed out with a soft smile. "You deserve the chance to let me get to know you on your terms."

"I don't run my hand through my hair when I'm nervous," he protested as he turned to face me.

"Yes, you do."

"No," he scoffed as he mustered up his best poker face. "I don't get nervous."

"Liar."

"Whatever," he rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. "You refuse to make eye contact when you're nervous."

"Yeah. And?" I cocked my eyebrow.

"And... It's cute the way you smile and think I can't see it," he declared. My cheeks warmed instantly and I knew he was going to be able to see it. "You're cute when you blush too."

I glanced down, smiling to myself before realizing exactly what I was doing. Was this flirting? Were we flirting? No. There was no way. This felt natural. This felt like a friendship was forming. In no way was this flirting. Friendly banter was more like it. Two people who had to get along for the next four months.

But I sure did like it.

"I appreciate that you didn't look me up," he said, taking another step closer. "And your attention to detail."

"I want to avoid the internet as much as I can," I admitted. "People twist the narrative to their liking. It's easier not to give them more ammunition to work with, you know?"

"We are going to have to share a few things here and there," he swallowed hard.

I nodded my head, remembering the contract. "I know. As long as they are authentic. I don't want to share anything we had to fabricate. Even if we go out and hold hands or something, all we'd have to share is our hands together. Or even you from behind doing the dishes."

"Almost like we aren't lying to the world?" He put it together. "I like that."

"Keeps our story straight," I told him. "And we have control of what everyone sees."

He nodded in agreement as he threw the towel over his shoulder. “And not share too much either. No healthy relationship is plastered over the internet.”

He had an excellent point. No healthy relationship was seen all over the internet. The last thing you wanted to see while scrolling was couples kissing every day. Thankfully, he could share the pictures on his story for it to be seen for twenty-four hours before it disappeared forever. We were on the same page about how much we wanted to share and I couldn't have been more relieved about it.

I had a good feeling about this with him. He was much easier to get along with than I was anticipating. It made the conversation I had with Courtney in therapy a lot more realistic. A trial run of an adult relationship was possible with Austin, especially if I grew enough courage to talk to him about it. Much later on of course. We still had to get to know one another.

“Hurry up on those dishes, *babe*,” I teased, earning a light swat from the dish towel. “We've got more of season three to get through.”

“You got it, *sweetheart!*”

*Austin*

I paced back and forth through my apartment with my phone up to my ear. My head coach was on the line, yammering off about everything I needed to know for this week's check-up. Essentially, he was making sure that I wasn't going to lie about my progress and where I was in my physiotherapy. I was slotted to set foot on the ice in January, but that also depended on how Friday's physical exam went.

I had already been through this very same conversation with Joel yesterday. Thankfully, he wasn't the one taking me to the appointment. Lucas, my best friend, demanded he be the one to find out the news first. As any best friend would. Not to mention, I hadn't seen him in a few weeks and we needed some catching-up time.

Three taps on my door filled my ears. It was just after eleven on a Sunday morning and the only person who truly knew I lived here was the beautiful red-head that lived next door. I headed over to the door, unlocking it quickly before my eyes were met with a soft, yet almost nervous smile.

I held up a finger before motioning for her to step inside. She nodded with a smile before entering the threshold. I could see her taking in the place, for all that it was worth; which wasn't much. It barely looked like I lived here.

"Coach, I gotta go," I stated, hoping to wrap up this conversation that I was sure to have again on Friday. "I'll see you later on this week."

I hung up the phone right after that, tucking it into the front pocket of my jeans. Catalina had taken a seat on the kitchen counter, facing me. Her hands were in her lap and I quickly noticed she was wearing a pair of dark blue skinny jeans with a rip in one knee and a warm pink long-sleeve, showing off



her curves just right. Her hair was up in a messy bun, as it usually was. I was yet to see her hair down, come to think of it.

“Good morning, pretty girl,” I greeted her. “To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing you today?”

She grinned up at me. “Well, my handsome fake boyfriend,” she began. “I was hoping that you’d be up for a little date today. Since you’re new to town, I was thinking I could show you around. What do you say?”

She was asking me out on a date. I thought it was my job to do the asking, but man did I like that she took matters into her own hands. “I would love to go on a date with you,” I nodded my head.

“Okay good,” she giggled. “—‘cause a new book came out at the local indie bookstore and I don’t really want to go alone.”

There she was. She looked so excited and I couldn’t deny her, even if I wanted to. I definitely didn’t want to. The idea of spending the day with her sounded more appealing than anything. Not to mention, it would give me a chance to try and earn even the slightest bit of her trust. Maybe even let me in the perimeter of her walls so I could get to know the girl inside.

“I see how it is,” I playfully rolled my eyes. “Trading me in for fictional men, huh?”

“Absolutely,” she nodded firmly. “They know how to do it better. Sorry, Mr. whatever position you play in hockey.”

“Right-wing,” I stated with a chuckle. “And I’m ninety-nine percent certain I’m a better boyfriend than any fictional man you’ve read about.”

She smirked and I knew I was in for it by the look on her face. “I find that hard to believe given you’ve got no evidence to back it up.” She was trying to provoke me and it was kind of working. I did agree to let her use moments between us for her writing, and she was writing a romance. I had a feeling she was trying to get inspiration from this date today, and I wasn’t going to deny her it. If she needed a romance novel boyfriend, I was going to be just that. But I wasn’t going to do anything I wouldn’t already do. Like she told me the other night. She wanted this to be authentic and quite frankly so did I.

This was a test run for me to see if I’d actually make a good boyfriend someday, ‘cause I couldn’t help but think about it more and more over this last year. I was tired of a revolving door of women and one-night stands. I wanted someone to come home to and that was something that had been on my mind for a while now. Not to say I was ready to admit it out loud. Hell, I hadn’t mentioned it to my therapist since March and I thought it had

something to do with the accident.

But lately, it had nothing to do with the accident and more to do with a genuine want to share my life with someone. I wanted to have that consistency I had never had in my life. Sure, Lucas had been my best friend since the third grade and we had been through a lot together. He was my family. He was my only family until we both got drafted to play for Long Island. Even then, guys were traded and contracts ended. Hell, it had been two years since Kingston retired and the team hadn't been the same since.

I was closing in on twenty-nine pretty damn quick and I had been feeling it more and more lately. More and more, I look at the girl sitting on my counter and realize I'm not nearly as scared as I was. I could make a relationship work 'cause I was in a good place for it. I wasn't trying to score a full ride to get into college in case hockey didn't work out. I wasn't working my ass off to get drafted into the NHL and I just signed an eight-year, seventy-five million dollar contract last October. I was more than comfortable with where I was. I couldn't hold back forever.

And not every relationship was destined to be as toxic as my parent's marriage was. I wasn't my father, and I'd never be him. I'd made damn sure of that. I just had to be sure I was capable of being in a relationship.



Given that Catalina had lived here for three years, she knew the best places for everything. I hated to admit this but Stonebridge was surprisingly beautiful for a tiny town on the East Coast. I didn't want Long Island to hear me if I said it out loud. I was used to the hustle and bustle of the busy city. I loved it that way and I always had. Even if it was a constant state of bumper-to-bumper traffic. This here, was a little too quiet for my liking, but it more than made up for it with the views.

I slipped my hand into Catalina's as we stepped foot on the riverwalk, wanting to sell our relationship to anyone who saw us. Her hand instantly tensed, as if she was unsure at first. Then again, she hasn't been in a relationship for a long ass time. She wasn't used to any of this. That was what I was here for. She had to let me in enough to achieve that. But as someone who was kicked around growing up, being wary of other people touching you

with the uncertainty of what comes with it is something that constantly plays in your head.

I had no idea why she hadn't been in a relationship in that long, and quite frankly, it was none of my business unless she made it otherwise. It didn't mean I wasn't a tad bit curious though, especially when it could be countless reasons why. From her not wanting to, to the worst of the worst. I hoped it was the first and none of the latter. The thought that someone could hurt her and still be breathing was enough to boil my blood.

She relaxed after a moment, squeezing my hand as we walked. Looking at her like this, I really noticed how much shorter she was to my six foot two. And honestly, I liked it.

I had one other female friend and she was much taller at five foot eight. I also never saw her the way I saw Catalina. She was my best friend's type and he was hers. I had no doubt in my mind that if the two of them met, they would be the best of friends.

"So why Stonebridge of all places?" I asked her as we passed the gelato shop.

She smiled, glancing out at the water and the large bridge in the distance. "Honestly," she paused, turning to look up at me. Her eyes brightened in the warm September sun. "I just wanted someplace low-key after I graduated college. I wanted a fresh start somewhere that no one knew me and I could gain my footing."

"Is it someplace you can see yourself growing old in?" I followed up.

"I don't know," she shrugged, giving my hand another squeeze, albeit not intentionally. "I don't exactly want to spend the rest of my life serving coffees to the 9-5s, the drunks and the working moms that look down on me every time I call out their order. I only took the job to help me get by, not wanting it to be a permanent thing."

There was so much I wanted to say to her, but it wasn't my place to say it. I wanted to believe that she knew she deserved much better than a crappy cafe job that paid minimum wage. "Well, you are going to be a best-selling author one day," I reminded her. "I'm going to be asked in interviews later on what it was like to date a famous author."

She giggled. "More like I'll be asked if my inspiration for a certain scene was based on my relationship with NHL star right wing Austin Sawyer."

She wasn't wrong.

"And then you can tell them hell yes," I beamed. "It'll do my reputation

wonders!”

She shook her head with a smile, something I was growing to like more and more. She understood my sense of humour, I thought. She wasn't like a lot of the women that threw themselves at me. Catalina knew more than what I gave them. It wasn't much, but it was something that made conversations comfortable. It made them feel natural. Not forced whatsoever.

“Mister ladies man,” she giggled as she stopped at the entrance of a small shop. River Reads.

I reach for the door, opening it up for her to enter first. I was instantly hit with the smell of books and a hint of coffee, which grew stronger the deeper into the small shop I stepped. I followed Catalina as she led us both to the romance section.

Her eyes danced over the shelves and I recognized quite a few from her shelves at home. She was taking everything in and not in search of anything in particular just yet. It was clear that this place was one of her favourites. She wanted to be on these shelves one day. I wanted to see her on these shelves someday.

“So have you always wanted to be an author?” I asked, taking a look at the back of one of the books.

“Kind of,” she answered as she read the back of another. “I've always been into writing. Started with *Supernatural* fan fiction, actually. I guess somewhere along the way, I gained a bit of interest from readers, and a whole lot of confidence and a love for writing. It's definitely how I express myself the best.

“Then at some point, I fell in love with reading and now I kind of hope that I have enough talent to pull it off without imposter syndrome getting in the way,” she told me, not daring to part her eyes from the book in front of her. “Was it always hockey for you?”

I placed the book back on the shelf. “In a way, yeah,” I nodded. “I've always loved hockey. Ever since I could skate, I loved it. I didn't start playing until I was about five though. My mom wanted her boys to play sports, as it was kind of a family tradition on her side.

“My brother played until he was about twelve. Stayed in house league and then quit,” I shared. “I didn't have the best home life growing up, and my relationship with my parents wasn't the greatest at the best of times, so hockey was my way of getting out. I knew I was good enough to go pro and it helped that my best friend was on the same journey as I was. I'm even

luckier than Long Island signed both of our asses.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Austin,” she frowned, reaching her hand over to my forearm. It was more than I had shared with most people. I gave her a vague amount at that, and I found myself holding back. It’s not like women liked to hear that their boyfriend didn’t speak to their family anymore. Especially when some wanted to have relationships with their potential in-laws. Something struck me with Catalina that she meant it, and not in a way that she pitied me. It came across as if she pitied my family. Then again, it could have been wishful thinking on my part.

I gave her a small smile, trying to keep things light. “Thanks, Jacks.” She furrowed her brows. “Jacks?”

“Your last name is Jackson and everyone calls you Cat,” I shrugged. “Is it okay if I call you that?”

She nodded her head with a smile. I took note of the pink hue deepening on her cheeks. She was blushing and it was damn adorable. Hell, I wanted to add to my list of accomplishments given how hard it was to get close to her.

“I like it,” she admitted, not daring to look me in the eyes just yet. I was definitely scoring big in the boyfriend department today. It wasn’t even like I was trying all that hard to do either. It felt natural to fall into that role and it helped that the person I was working with gave me a little to work with. “Do you have any nicknames?”

“My teammates call me Birdie after I score a good goal,” I told her with a shrug. “—‘cause I fly like a bird.”

Her smile reached her eyes before she looked up at me. “I don’t think I’m going to call you birdie,” she giggled, scrunching up her nose. “What’s your middle name?”

I paused for a moment, ducking my head down. “Eugene.”

She shook her head. “You sound like you’re not the biggest fan of it, so I won’t use your middle name for your nickname.”

“Whatever you like, Jacks,” I assured her. Quite frankly, she could call me anything and I’d be okay with it.

She walked along the aisle, taking in the books around her. I loved seeing her here. It was clear that this was her space and she felt the most comfortable here. Books clearly made her happy, especially romance books from what I could see.

“I’m sorry this isn’t the most exciting thing,” she frowned as she looked back at me. If she thought I was bored, she couldn’t be more wrong.

I gave her a warm smile. “Oh sweetheart, watching you look for books is the farthest thing from boring.” I stepped towards her, seeing a book in her hand with a purple animated cover. “Pick out some books and I’ll buy them for you.”

“I can’t ask you to do that,” she protested. “This is my date idea.”

“I’m offering to buy you them,” I assured her. “Books make you happy and I want you to be happy.”

She cocked her head to the side with a soft expression playing on her features. I felt a strange sensation in the centre of my chest. She was looking at me with this look that I’d never been given before and I had no idea if there were words to describe it nearly good enough to come close to how it felt. She was looking at me like I had two heads, but those two heads were the best thing she had ever seen. “I think that’s the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

I’d buy her a thousand books just to see that look on her face again. Even more to have that feeling in my chest again.

*Catalina*

I let out a shaky breath as I gave myself another glance in the mirror. I had on one of my long summer dresses, a soft pink, floor-length dress with discrete pockets. Even if it was the beginning of October, it was still warm enough to get away with it, thankfully. I was comfortable in it. It was flowy enough to not be clinging to all of my body. It showed a soft amount of cleavage and paired well with my worn-out jean jacket. Which was the exact look I was going for tonight.

I kept my hair in a messy fishtail braid to the right of my head, making sure it was at least a presentable amount of messy and did not look like I slept in it and walked out like that. My makeup was light. A single layer of tinted moisturizer and a light coat of mascara. Nothing over the top. Then again, that was close to my normal makeup look. Winged eyeliner was damn near impossible to do evenly. Lipstick was out of the question for the evening. Besides, I was sure I looked presentable for my date.

Austin was taking me on a date tonight.

When he asked me two days ago if I wanted to go on a date with him, I laughed a little. We had our first dinner date in my apartment, did we really need to go out and flaunt it? He shrugged his shoulders and said it was more or less so we were seen out together. It gave us a chance to practice how this fake relationship was going to work. He then mentioned it was a good chance for him to hold up his end of our arrangement.

Whether it was fake or not, this was my first date.

Needless to say, I was really nervous.

I had spent a grand total of maybe six hours with Austin from the moment I met him to now. This arrangement had been official for two weeks.

Granted, we did go to the bookstore together on Sunday, and he bought me six books, and a cup of tea and went halves with me on a Nutella croissant. He wasn't the worst company in the world. I had more fun with him in two days than I had with my friends.

It brought me a lot of comfort to know that we had a contract in place as I got ready for the evening. I knew that even if I royally screwed this up, he was stuck with me until the contract ended. He didn't have the choice to avoid me like the plague when we had a relationship to sell. That's what tonight was about. I knew that.

I smoothed out my dress once more, giving myself one last glance before stepping into my bedroom to grab my jacket off the end of the bed. I had no idea what Austin had in store for the two of us tonight. If I had to guess, it was dinner, like his original plan that changed thanks to his meeting running late. He did say to dress comfortably.

Three loud knocks filled my ears. Seven o'clock. Right on time.

My heart was racing and my palms grew sweaty with every step I took. My fake boyfriend was standing on the other side of the door, ready to take me on my first date, and he had no idea. I reached for the lock before twisting the knob, opening up the door to reveal the tall hockey player I was spending my evening with.

He stood tall in a white dress shirt that fit perfectly to his broad shoulders and black dress pants. His hair was brushed back save for one piece that was left hanging on his forehead. He had a soft smile playing on his lips as he greeted me, making my stomach feel funny.

"Hi Jacks," he breathed out. I could feel his eyes travelling over my body, taking me in. Then again, I was standing here doing the same to him. "You look beautiful!"

I smiled shyly, unable to take his compliment. If I accepted it, I would be considered full of myself and I really didn't want to come across that way. "So do you, Austin," I grinned, stepping aside to let him into my apartment. "So where are we headed?"

He chuckled, making me furrow my brows as he leaned against the kitchen counter. In his hand, he had what looked to be an envelope. "I've got a bit of night planned for you," he revealed with a shrug of his shoulders. "My fake girlfriend deserves the whole nine and I won't accept anything less."

"Austin," I started to protest, only to have him shake his head.



“Nope,” he stated. “You need inspiration to write, remember?”

“Yeah.”

He smirked. “Well, I’m better than any of your book boyfriends, Jacks. And I’m about to show you just how much better I am.”



I was grateful that I wore comfortable shoes to walk in. It wasn’t too much of a surprise that we were walking, given that Austin was here and in the mess he was because of a car accident. I didn’t know the extent of the accident but considering he was here in Stonebridge and not getting ready for the start of the hockey season was enough to tell me it was a bad one.

The sun was setting over the water, leaving an orange and pink hue in the sky. Austin had his hand in mine as we made our way to the riverwalk.

“All right,” he stopped, turning his body to face me before holding out the envelope he pulled out in my apartment. “Open this up.”

I cocked my eyebrow at him as I took the small envelope from his hand, opening it up with ease. Inside was a queue card with some scribbles on it. When I pulled it out, I realized those scribbles were upside down.

Head to 458 Riverfront Street (flip the card)...

Along the way, tell each other three things about yourself that no one knows.

Was he really going all Naley on me? Even if he wasn’t — though he definitely was— my heart was still racing. Even though this was a fake relationship, he was putting in the effort that was rarely seen in men.

I looked up, my eyes meeting with Austin’s before I smiled. This time, I reached for his hand, slipping my fingers between his. “This is a really sweet idea,” I said as I squeezed his hand as we continued to walk.

“Well, to start,” he chuckled. “I’ve never actually done this whole date

thing. Not like this.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve never gone out of my way to plan an evening like this.” There was something in me that calmed as soon as those words left his mouth. He was just as new to this relationship thing as I was. Knowing that he went out of his way to make this a good date warmed me. The effort was there. It brought me back to the idea that if he wanted to, he would. And he did.

I let his words linger in the air, trying to rack my brain for what I could possibly share with him that no one else knew about me. “In theme with your reveal,” I breathed out, turning my head to look up at him. “This is kind of my first date.”

“No one has ever taken you out on a date before?” He cocked his eyebrow. “Jacks, you’re kidding me. Not one of your previous boyfriends has taken you out to dinner or a movie?”

I shook my head. “It’s always been hanging out in whoever’s basement, watching whatever on TV with whatever snacks were upstairs,” I told him with a shrug of my shoulders. “I’ve never had the kind of date where I get all dressed up and are picked up at my door like tonight.”

“Well, I am glad to be your first, Jacks,” he beamed. “And I’m glad you’re mine.”

I nudged him as we walked passed the gelato shop. The smell of fries and garlic bread filled my nose. My stomach was growling, and I prayed that one of those cards was the address to a place to eat. I didn’t eat a whole lot throughout the day because I was nervous about this date and didn’t want to risk my stomach betraying me on this date with a reappearance of my lunch. I regret that now.

“I’m terrified of spiders,” I blurted out. “It’s not exactly a secret, but it’s not taken seriously enough by some people. It’s a huge fear of mine. I can’t kill them. I can’t look at them. I don’t want to be in the same place as them. I have many other fears but they take the cake.”

He nodded his head before his lips curled up into a smile. “I’ll kill all the spiders for you, sweetheart. Promise.”

*Sweetheart.*

Fuck, why did I love that?

Why did it sound so good rolling off his tongue?

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” I teased.

He gave my hand another squeeze. I was quickly growing comfortable with his hand in mine. It felt natural. It also made me realize just how fucking

touch-starved I was. I couldn't remember the last time I had even accepted a hug from someone, let alone held someone's hand like this.

"I'm terrified of clowns," he confessed with a light chuckle. "Like absolutely terrified. Have since I was at a birthday party when I was seven. I can't watch anything with clowns, and I avoid carnivals and shit so I don't have to see any. They are just really fucking creepy with the makeup and the huge smile and the killer look in their eyes."

I tried my hardest not to smile. He was absolutely right. Clowns were scary creatures and I sure as hell wouldn't want to be suck with one anywhere at any given time.

"I know, it's kind of funny," he shrugged. "You can laugh."

I shook my head. "It's not that. It's just... kind of surprising. You're this six-foot tall, with strong shoulders and honestly, a little intimidating at first. I would think clowns would be scared of you."

He let out a laugh. "I'm going to take that as a compliment, Jacks."

"I meant it as one," I smiled softly, tucking my chin down to hide my face. "Clowns are creepy though."

"Right?" He beamed as he came to a halt. I glanced around, realizing where we were before taking in the address. We were here. The River Reads bookshop. My favourite place in all of Stonebridge. He headed over to the large plant next to their sign, pulling another envelope from the side of it before handing it to me.

Head inside and pick out your favourite book for the other person (flip card)...

Tell them why the book is your favourite before heading to the next destination.

My heart was fluttering in my chest. Every nerve I had before stepping out on this date had disappeared the moment I read those words. Austin listened and it was clear by the way he planned this date. He made sure there was something in it that I would like.

"Even if it's a romance?" I cocked my eyebrow at him.

He nodded his head. "I'm trying to get to know you, Jacks. You have

these large walls up, keeping everyone out. I just want to get to know the person behind them. I want to know you.”

I nodded my head, offering him a small, weak smile. He was right. I kept a lot of myself behind these walls because it was easier than getting my heart broken every time I put myself out there. It was easier to hide out than deal with the rejection from others. I had been hurt too many times before. I didn't want to feel that hurt again.

“C'mon,” I motioned to the door. “We've got books to pick out.”

He reached for the door, opening it up for me to step inside. The smell of books filled my nose instantly, bringing me a sense of home. Austin's hand slipped into mine once again, leading me toward the romance section.

I froze as soon as I glanced into the section. How the hell was I supposed to pick my favourite book when I couldn't decide which one was my favourite? I loved too many of them. Any book that pulled some sort of emotion from me automatically became a favourite, and I was an emotional person. Needless to say, my options were unlimited.

I headed down the aisle while Austin headed down another one in search of his favourite book. I needed more than a few minutes to search for the perfect book that could pass as my favourite. Maybe I could get away with my favourite from an author's collection?

I reached for the light blue cover, deciding on that story before I changed my mind. I was sure Austin wouldn't hate this book when he read it. As I made my way to the end of the section. Austin was making his way over to me with a book in his hand. “Ready?”

“That was one of the hardest things to do,” I giggled as I led the way to the cash. I was trying my hardest not to sneak a peek at what book Austin chose as his favourite.

He chuckled. “Considering how many books you have in your apartment, I bet.” He stepped up to the counter first, placing the book on the counter before pulling out his wallet. The lady scanned the book with a smile. “I'm paying for her book too.”

“Austin,” I protested.

He shook his head. “The card said to pick out your favourite book. Not pay for it, sweetheart. My date idea, I'm paying.”

“But—“

“Nope,” he smiled as he pulled out his card. “Don't even think about it.” She rang him through with a knowing smile playing on her lips. She

handed him his receipt and another envelope, telling both of us to have a good day. He thanked her, taking the bag from the counter, and turning to face me. He opened up his arm, allowing me to loop mine through as we walked to the exit.

We stepped out onto the riverwalk, heading over to one of the small tables not too far from the bookshop. He placed the bag down on the table, opening the bag up to pull out the book he picked out. I instantly recognized the green cover before even reading the title.

“*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*,” I breathed out, taking a look at it.

He cleared his throat. “I know you’ve probably read it, but I didn’t see it on your shelf when I looked.”

“I have,” I nodded, not daring to take my eyes off the tall man. “Why did you pick this one?”

“I read it my senior year for one of my assignments and it was the first time I read a book that stuck with me,” he began. “You know how it was in high school and the books you were supposed to read. I never finished any of them, until this one. I was going through a lot at the time with my home life, and everything else going on. It made me feel seen in a way that I never knew I needed.”

I smiled, knowing exactly what he meant about finding that book that really stuck with you. The book that made you feel like you were less alone in the world. Like you weren’t the only one out there suffering. It was an empowering feeling to know that you weren’t entirely abnormal and there was a place for you in the world. It was one of the reasons I loved reading so much.

“I get it,” I nodded. “The book I picked is about a girl who describes herself as a background character. Her sister is always the main character and she fades into the background. She feels like the supporting character, and all she wants is to feel like the main character for one moment in her life. It made me feel seen when I read it. Like I’m not the only one who feels like they are forgotten about because there is someone better out there.”

“Jacks—“

I shook my head. “What’s in the next envelope?”

He handed it to me with a sheepish smile before taking the book I picked out from the bag. I ripped open the envelope, trying to ease my slow-building anxiety from the centre of my chest. Did I get too personal too quickly? Did I say too much? Did I say the wrong thing?

Head to 418 Grace Street (flip over)...

Order each other your favourite appetizer and share one of your favourite memories.

Austin got up first, holding his hand out to me so we could get going to our next destination. The night was quickly filling the sky, the sun disappearing in the distance. I was grateful I wore my jean jacket. It was cool without the sun in the sky. It helped that Austin ran hot and his body next to mine radiated the heat. His hand alone was warm.

“The third thing that no one knows about me is exactly what happened the night of the car accident,” he said quietly before clearing his throat. “Not even my best friend knows what happened that night and I’m not sure I’m ever going to be ready to talk about it.”

I turned to look at him, seeing the distant look in his eyes. “Why do you say that?”

He shook his head. “—‘cause it’s a dark chapter in my life and I don’t really want to go down it again, let alone drag someone down it with me. It’s not fair.”

I felt a lump forming in the back of my throat. Did he feel that way about all trauma or just his own? “I disagree,” I breathed out, unable to believe that the words slipped out. My cheeks warmed as I avoided his gaze. “I don’t think you’re bringing someone down by talking about something as traumatic as that. Especially if it’s someone like your best friend. Sure, opening up to a stranger is different. But if you have someone out there who cares so much about you to want to know about the things that keep you up at night, then I wouldn’t consider it dragging them down.”

“Then what would it be?”

I turned to face him, offering him a soft smile. “A shoulder to lean on. A hand to pull you back from that dark path. A reason to not feel so alone.”

“And how well has that worked for you?” He cocked his eyebrow.

I chuckled. “I don’t have anyone I trust enough to be my shoulder to cry on. I never have.”

“You don’t have a best friend you tell your deepest darkest secrets to after

the naked pillow fights?” He teased, clearly trying to lighten the mood from the dark path we were going down. “Not even that Haley girl?”

I stopped in my tracks, leaning against the wooden banister that overlooked the river. I glanced up at his tall frame, taking in his deep green eyes in the evening light. “There are some things you can’t trust just *anyone* with, especially when it comes to girls. You never know who is going to stick by your side or who will take the nearest sharp object and stab you in the back with it.”

He cocked his head to the side, giving me a sad smile. “Would you ever tell me your deepest darkest secrets?”

“Depends,” I smirked. “Would you think I’m dragging you down a dark chapter of my life if I did?”

He shook his head instantly before his throat jumped. “I see your point now.” He paused, taking a small step forward. “And no. I wouldn’t think that you were dragging me down if you ever shared your dark chapter. Would you?”

“Not for a second,” I stated. “It’s an honour to be someone’s shoulder to cry on.”

The address he had written down took us to one of the finer dining restaurants in Stonebridge. I had never been so grateful for the dress I was wearing. Austin asked for a private booth, hoping to keep us a little more hidden for privacy and they were happy to oblige when he mentioned the reservation name.

He held his hand out, helping me to sit down in the booth before he took his seat on the other side. I had never eaten in this restaurant before. It was on the more expensive side, and who could afford that while working a minimum-wage job? It smelt incredible and my stomach was practically dancing in excitement.

The waitress came over, taking our drink and appetizer order. I settled on a four-cheese spinach dip while Austin went the shrimp after asking me if I liked seafood. Either way, we were sharing each one.

She came back with our drinks, along with a small loaf of bread, telling us our appetizers would be here shortly. “You know, the lasagna sounds amazing,” Austin pointed out as he continued to look over the dishes. I was right there with him but I also couldn’t take my eyes off the Alfredo. I didn’t even care how many carbs I was having tonight. I wanted to eat.

“One of my favourite memories was the first time I scored a goal,” he

began as he closed up his menu. “I was maybe three years old. Two years before I really started playing. I told you the other day it was a family tradition on my mom’s side. It was something to do with teaching discipline or something. She made my dad build a rink in our backyard every year until I was maybe fourteen. That’s where I scored my first goal,” he paused, licking his bottom lip. “I remember both of my parents being so proud of me. They made such a big deal over it and I remember feeling so happy in that moment. I never wanted it to stop. I never wanted there to be a moment where my parents weren’t proud of me.”

I swallowed hard, knowing that he didn’t have a relationship with his parents anymore. Somewhere between that moment and now, his parents stopped being proud of him, when they definitely shouldn’t have. He had made it so far in his life and he was still going strong, even without them.

“I’m proud of you,” I said softly, nodding my head to back myself up. He furrowed his brows towards me, clearly not believing a word that came out of my mouth. I understood where he was coming from. After growing up not hearing those words from the people you needed to hear them from, it was hard to believe it when it was coming from someone else. I decided not to push it, in case I did what I did best and pushed him away.

“One of my all-time favourite memories had to be when I was maybe six or seven. We had just been hit with this huge snowstorm. My dad was out every hour that day, trying to clear a foot of snow from the driveway the best he could. At one point there was so much, that the passenger side of his car was completely buried beneath the snow. The morning after, he got dressed up in his gear to finish off the driveway and when he was done, he asked me if I wanted to build a snow fort. We were out there for maybe four hours, digging through snow, and creating our fort. It had a place to climb, to jump off and he even built a tunnel for us to climb through,” I smiled to myself. “Everything was so much simpler back then. I didn’t have to worry about a job, paying the bills, or what to cook for dinner. It was me and my dad spending time together and that’s what I wanted more than anything. I miss being carefree like that.”

He chuckled. “I think both of us miss that. Things were a lot simpler back then.”

“I miss it,” I admitted, taking a sip of my iced tea. “I miss not worrying about what other people thought of me. I miss being carefree and living my life one day at a time. Everything was so much easier when we were kids.”



“I think you just answered the third thing no one knows about you,” he pointed out. “It sure doesn’t seem like you talk about this kind of stuff very often.”

I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders. I really didn’t. It was one thing to share something with someone, but it was another thing to have them listen. Really listen. It wasn’t often that anyone wanted to know anything remotely personal these days. Most friendships were surface level and no one really gave a shit about things no one knew. Not if it meant uncomfortable conversations about deep thoughts and personal desires. “We’re just talking, right?”

His lips formed a line. “Maybe?” he shrugged. “Maybe it’s something more. Who knows. All I know is that I know more about you from this date alone than I did before. A lot more.”

“You know things about me,” I corrected him.

He nodded with a warm smile that seemed to melt something inside me. “I already told you, Jacks. I want to know everything about you.”

This time, I smiled. “I might just let you. Might.”

He shook his head with a laugh. “No, you won’t. Not easily like that. I know that now. But you should know, I don’t back down from a challenge. Especially not one where I get to see the real you in the end.”



Austin had one final envelope as soon as we finished dinner. As we were walking back to the apartment building, hand in hand, he kept the conversation light. Mostly, it was him answering any questions I had about hockey and what his life was like as a player of that calibre.

I could sense a bit of hesitation when he spoke, almost like he was afraid to dive deep into the topic, knowing that he hadn’t been cleared to play just yet. It was a question everyone was asking. Will he get to play again? Will he be as good as he was before the injury? Will he still have the same skill set he had last year when he hadn’t practiced in that time? They were all valid questions and hearing him voice them aloud made me realize that he’s more human than I could have imagined.

Even though his life was still more put together than mine, he still carried

the same doubts as I did. He still worried about the same things and he wasn't afraid to admit them out loud. He wasn't scared to be open with me that way. A part of me felt like he trusted me, even just a little bit. Fake dating or not, it meant a lot to me.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," I smiled up at him as we stood outside my apartment door. He reached his hand in his pocket, pulling out the envelope I had forgotten about along the way home.

On a scale of 1 - 10, how much did you enjoy our first date? (Flip over)

Do you kiss on the first date?

My heart dropped. Shit. I wasn't prepared for that. I should have been. It was normal to kiss on the first date, especially if it was a good first date like this one. I wasn't ready for that. I hadn't kissed someone in a really long fucking time. It wasn't like I didn't want to. I did. But I wasn't prepared for the aftermath of what the kiss brought. I still barely knew him, and I was enjoying getting to know him. I didn't want a kiss to ruin everything I had built with him so far, even if we did have a contract in place as a safety net. A safety net couldn't hold up years of trauma. It was impossible.

"I would give it a solid nine-point five," I nodded nervously. "I had an amazing time, Austin. I appreciate the effort you made to make this evening incredible."

"I'm glad you had a good time," he smiled.

I let out a shaky breath. "I don't kiss on the first date."

He nodded. His smile never faded. I looked up at him, feeling my palms growing sweaty. "That's okay. Me either," he chuckled. "I do, however, offer friendly hugs, if you're up for it that is. If not, I'm totally cool with a fist pump, high five or even a handshake if that's your thing."

I couldn't help but smile. This man was used to more than just a friendly hug or handshake. He had a reputation with women. A reputation that I couldn't compete with nor did I want to. But here he was, offering to end the night in whatever way made me the most comfortable. That alone told me

more about him than anything he could have said tonight. This told me he was a man worth letting in, little by little.

And I could really use the hug.

“It’s been a while since I’ve had a hug,” I admitted almost sheepishly.

He practically gasped. “Touch starvation is a crime, you know.” He took a step forward, opening up his arms for me. As soon as they were around me, my face was buried in his chest and my arms were around his back. “No, no,” he protested. “Arms around my neck, Jacks. Trust me.”

I took a step back, giving myself enough room to do as he asked. His hands slipped around the small of my back, pulling me tightly against him. I was on my tiptoes and my head rested against him as I breathed him in. A wave of comfort washed over me in a way I wasn’t expecting. He was right. Touch starvation was a crime, and I was feeling the consequences. For the first time in a very long time, I felt safe in the presence of someone else. I knew that he wasn’t going to take things any further than this.

I never wanted to let go.

“Not yet,” I protested. “Just a little longer.”

He chuckled. “Take as long as you need. I could do this all night.”

*Austin*

I was finally headed back to a bit of normalcy.

I had boarded a plane, heading to Long Island for a few days for some much-needed recharging. Not to mention, I had a physical to endure and a few other tests before I was given the final okay to lace up my skates again.

I prayed that I would be back on the ice tomorrow for an impromptu practice. I needed to be back. I needed to glide along the ice, feeling like I had never left. I needed to hear the slapping of the stick when it hit the puck. I needed to feel like I had a sense of home again. I think I was more homesick than anything. Stonebridge just wasn't doing it for me. If anything, being there reminded me a lot of what it was like after leaving the hospital.

Only it had Catalina there. She was the only reason why I hadn't upped and left without a second thought. Screw Chris and his egotistical bullshit attempt at saving his sinking ship. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to tell him to shove it up his ass and leave. Even if I was contracted until the night of the auction. Something I was going to bring up to my coach tomorrow.

I should. Leave behind it all. Including her.

It would be the smartest thing to do for both of us.

But I was already in too deep. Catalina was a constant thought on my mind. Including at this very moment as I stared out the tiny window of the airbus. I had no idea what it was about her that had my full attention. I had been with countless women and none of them even remotely caught me feeling the way she did. I never wanted anything. Relationships were a complicated thing and something I wasn't ready to tackle. Especially not with being off the ice for the last ten months. I didn't want to be tied down. I

didn't want anything if it wasn't for an hour or two maximum.

Then I met her. Reddish hair, green eyes, and a curvy body made my pants tighter more often than they should have been. It's not like she had made any indication that she wanted me in any way. In fact, I was sure she thought I was some womanizer but she was too damn polite to say anything. She was definitely Miss Commitment. She was a goddamn romance writer for fucksakes. She believed in happily ever afters and Prince Charming. Not that there was anything wrong with that. It's what made her who she was and I liked who she was. I wouldn't change anything about her.

I was the farthest thing from Prince Charming and there was no such thing as a happy ending. Not where I came from anyway.

But then I looked at her in the kitchen while she was making dinner the other day and I found myself thinking; where has this girl been all my life? I had never been close to girls, not in the way I was with Jacks. Not even in high school. My focus had been hockey. Hockey and practice and then more hockey. Anything to get me the fuck away from my father as often as humanly possible.

She was this beautiful ball of fire once her initial wall came down. She had a great sense of humour and this incredible laugh that was like music to my ears. And that was just the start of it.



I arrived at JFK right on time. I grabbed my bag from the overhead compartment, slinging it over my shoulder before beginning my journey through the crowded airport. Thankfully I didn't have any more baggage, I thought to myself when I saw the long lines everywhere.

I kept my hat down and my head forward, wanting to make it through without any press getting wind of me. Everyone was dying to hear from the man who seemingly disappeared after the accident.

I arrived at the pickup, smiling like a fucking idiot when I saw the sign held up by an even bigger idiot.

Mr. Hugh Dong.

My best friend, ladies and gentlemen.

He stood there with a shit-eating grin on his face. His usual dark hair was

slicked back and a little blonder than I last remembered. It had been over three months since I last laid my eyes on the guy, and I knew how training camp was. That had to be when his usual chocolate brown turned bleach blonde bimbo. He wore our team sweater and a pair of joggers. He was in shape, hell, probably the best shape I've seen him in in a while. He looked good. Happy.

"Nice of you to notice," I smirked at the man, pulling him in for our usual *bro* hug.

He shook his head. "If you thought I was going to pick you up from the airport like a normal person, then I don't think you know me very well, Aussie."

"I know you better than anyone, Harry Johnson!" I replied, shaking my head too. "Classy as always, my friend."

"You fucking know it," he grinned widely. "You look good, man. I mean it."

"Yeah. Yeah."

"Yeah, yeah nothing," he protested, turning to head to the doors. "Let's go find out how you're really doing. I need that ass out on the ice with me ASAP."

Lucas Collins was my best friend and had been since the third grade. I couldn't quite remember how it came to fruition, all I know is that he's been in my corner, backing my plays since then. It was the same the other way around. He was the one person in the world I trusted with my life. He had seen the worst parts of me, the parts I never let anyone see. He had heard the conversations and confessions I'd regret come the morning. He knew every fuck up. Every accomplishment. Everything.

Except one thing.

He didn't know all the details about the accident. And he wouldn't. I still remember the look on his face when he walked into that hospital room. I've seen Luke cry hundreds of times over the two decades we have been friends. I had seen him at his lowest. But even in my drug-induced state, I vividly remember how he completely broke down. We were family. He was my only family for the longest fucking time. I was lucky and I knew it. I wanted to leave it at that with him. I didn't think he needed to know all the gory details when I was okay.

I knew he was dying to know more. I knew it every time he asked. I wasn't sure I was ever going to be ready to talk about it.

We hopped in his black jeep he had been driving since high school. One of his prized possessions that he had worked his ass off all summer at the local McDonald's to get. One thing I admired about him was his determination. Once he had his heart set on something, he worked his ass off to get there. He rarely ever failed and if he did, he took that for what it was. He didn't get bitter. He didn't get offended. He accepted it and used it as something to improve on so he wouldn't fail the next time. He had been like that for as long as I had known him.

I asked him about it one time. Back when we were in high school. We couldn't have been older than sixteen at the time. I asked him where the hell he got his motivation. How he was able to strive without quitting. He laughed for a second before he went silent.

*"I don't know," he shrugged as he placed the video game controller on the coffee table. "I guess I don't want to do anything half-assed. What's the point if you're not going to give your everything?"*

He pulled up to the medical building, parking right out front. I wasn't sure I was ready for this. The appointment with the specialist who had looked at my injuries in depth over the last ten months. If he told me I couldn't play, I don't think I'd be able to stomach it.

"You want me to come in there with you, bud?" Lucas offered, patting my shoulder. I could sense the hesitation in the eyes. He was just as nervous as I was for this.

"I think I'll be okay," I nodded. *God, I fucking hoped so.*

"I'll be out here then."



"So how does it feel, man?" Lucas asked me as he held up his pint of beer. We were in one of our favourite bars in all of Long Island. Lucas came here so often, he had a table reserved just for him. Although, I was sure it had something to do with the bartender as well. Thankfully so, because it was away from the crowd and prying eyes. It was also a Monday night and no one went to bars on Monday nights unless you were celebrating something. "You're back in the fucking game. I can't believe you're back in the fucking game. This is the best damn day of my life!"

I think Lucas was more excited about it than I was, and I didn't think it was possible.

"Feels like I'm finally getting my life back," I answered, taking a swing from my large glass. "Feels like coming home."

"The guys are going to be stoked, dude!" He beamed before downing half his beer. "I'm so fucking stoked. Right winger back in action!"

Fuck, it felt great to hear that. It felt fantastic to be called right winger again, even more so by my linesman who had to step it up significantly more without me. He had to learn to play with another right winger and learn that language he and I spoke so fluently.

I knew Coach was going to ease me back into the first few practices, and he was going to have to work around this stupid thing I had going on with his idiot stick of a brother. I just wanted to lace my skates up and glide along the ice for hours on end. I needed that feeling more than anything.

"How long do I have you for, Sawyer?"

"Three days," I sighed, reaching for one of the nachos on the plate we ordered. "And man, I can't wait to sleep in my own fucking bed. I can't wait to be in my apartment again."

"Homesick, huh?"

I scoffed. "You have no idea." Shaking my head, I glanced up at him. "I didn't think it was possible for me to feel homesick, you know? Given what my life was like growing up."

He shrugged his shoulders, dipping one of the nachos in the spicy habanero cheese dip. "You've got a pretty great life going for you, Austin. Given what you grew up with, you finally have a home to go to that doesn't have a dad waiting for you with a bottle of scotch in his hand and a belt in the other," he pointed out with a sad smile. "You're one of the best players on an NHL team. That's your dream and you worked damn hard for it.

"You're always telling me how determined I am," he chuckled. "But every once in a while, you should take a look at yourself and what you've accomplished with your determination and your strength," he half-smiled as his eyes welled up with tears. "Motherfucker! That dip is fucking spicy. What the fuck!"

I stifled a laugh, shaking my head at him. He never changed.

"Thanks, man," I nodded. "Kinda thought I was going crazy for missing it, ya know?" He downed the rest of his beer in response before panting with his tongue sticking out like a dog. Thankfully, the waitress came over and



refilled his beer.

“So,” he breathed out once he finally had a hold of himself. “How many girls have you met and or given the Sawyer Special to?”

I rolled my eyes. “None.”

“Who the fuck are you, dude?” He frowned. “You skip town to some tiny town in the middle of buttfuck nowhere, leave me here alone, and you don’t even have any good fucks to tell me about? Not even one?”

“Nope,” I repeated with a shrug. “I haven’t gotten laid since before the accident. Not really feeling it anymore actually.”

“Who are you and what have you done with my best friend? Is everything okay? Your dick didn’t get damaged in the accident, did it? I mean it’s okay if you lost a few inches. Ladies will still love ‘im!”

I shrugged my shoulders once more, swallowing hard. I could have tried my best to muster up some line to feed him, but being friends for over twenty years made it hard to lie to someone. Especially when this was the one person who knew you better than anyone. “I don’t know,” I bit my bottom lip. “I don’t like the idea of settling down, but I’m just fucking tired of one-night stands, and people thinking I’m just that.”

“Does this have anything to do with the auction you told me about?” He questioned, cocking his dark eyebrow at me. His tone went from joking to serious in an instant.

“Maybe a little,” I admitted, preoccupying myself with a speck on the table. “I have this reputation. The Sawyer Special. I’ve slept with countless women and for a while, it was great. But in this small town, everyone knows everyone’s business, including mine.”

Lucas chuckled. “Who’s the girl?”

I furrowed my brows. “What?”

“Don’t bullshit me. Who’s the girl?” He tried once more before letting out a sigh. “You know you’re going to settle down at some point. Hell, I know you’re going to before I do. It’s one part of you that you’re missing because you’ve never had it. It’s been the Sawyer Special since before you lost your fucking v-card. A way to protect yourself from all the other shit, and you’ve had every right to do so. So don’t make me ask again. The girl?”

I had no idea why I was friends with this guy.

“Her name is Catalina,” I reluctantly told him, finishing off my beer a second later. “She’s the first girl I met and I spilled coffee on her before I even knew her name.”

“Is she pretty?”

“She’s fucking beautiful,” I smiled to myself, thinking back to her in her apartment this morning before I left. She was wearing these cute purple and white thin striped pajama pants and an oversized navy blue sweater. Her hair was in a messy bun on the top of her head and she had not a single ounce of makeup on her face. And the girl hated wearing socks when she was at home. Claimed they made her feet cold if she wore them. *Weirdo*.

She wanted me to come by before I left and she handed me over a little lunch bag packed with a bagel, some chopped-up fruits in a little container and one of her favourite chocolate hazelnut muffins from the cafe.

What got to me was her telling me to have a safe flight before she wrapped her arms around my middle, initiating a hug for the first time. Progress. Damn, good progress at that.

“Don’t hold back now, dude. Pics please!”

I pulled out my phone, pulling up her Instagram quicker than I would have liked to if I was being honest. I pulled up her most recent picture that she shared a few days ago. She was sitting by her laptop with her mug in her hands. A few strands of her dark red hair framed her face perfectly.

Lucas scrolled through a few of her photos before a soft smile appeared on his lips and he shook his head. “You’re right. She’s a babe,” he let out a laugh. “And she is so far out of your league.”

“Hey now!”

“I’m just saying,” he threw his hands up. “She’s a fucking ten. Respectfully, those curves are — holy fuck!”

“Trust me, I know.”

“Tell me more.”

I did.

I filled him in on all of the details that had happened since I met the girl. Including the auction and her agreeing to pretend to be my girlfriend, which I swore him to secrecy if he told anyone. The thing about Lucas was that he was never really that good at hiding how he felt when he reacted. It wasn’t so much the words as it was his facial reactions. I knew how he felt before he even expressed it, and I knew he thought the whole pretend dating thing was bullshit.

“Do you think it’s going to work if you bring her as your girlfriend to this thing?” He questioned as he damn near dipped another nacho in the spicy dip.

I shrugged as I finished munching on mine. “I hope to god it does. Chris

is a fucking idiot. The exact opposite of Coach, dude. He's a fat, lazy, arrogant bastard with Lyndsey's hand on his dick."

"God, I hate that bitch," he muttered.

"I know you do. Rightly so."

"I still think you should just play things out with Catalina instead of faking it," he pointed out. "You're Austin fucking Sawyer. No woman has ever faked it with you before and they sure as hell shouldn't start now. Not to mention, you already want to fuck her so why not?"

"It's complicated," I swallowed hard, debating on how much I could tell him. "She's been through some shit. I don't know what. I'm treading lightly and being as patient and respectful as I can be."

"You're a good man for that. You're a good man, period," He smiled proudly. "Seriously. As complicated as it may seem now, I'm sure it will get easier with time."

I sure as fuck hope so.

"Listen," he beamed. "Bring her to the party next month. I want to meet this girl."

"I don't know." My thoughts flew back to Catalina eyeing my best friend through the Instagram picture. Not that I ever thought she would do anything about it, but the thought occurred to me.

"I have to meet the girl who makes you want more," he winked. "Oh and then for fun, have her bring her equally hot friends too."

"You're such a perv."

He rolled his eyes. "I know. Don't actually though."

"You and Jade —"

He nodded. "Avoiding each other like the plague." His face fell and I knew something wasn't right. The situation with Jade was complicated since she was Coach Johnson's daughter. Off-limits. Even thinking it would be the end of the world and our careers.

Jade was a very good friend of mine, and she spent a lot of time with me when I was recovering. She was the little sister I always wanted. She and Lucas had a complicated relationship and by that, I meant there was sexual tension so thick you could cut it with a knife. Nothing has happened, but they both desperately want it to.

"But I'm going to try to talk to her sometime this week," he shared. "I miss my friend, ya know? Both of my friends."

"Well, I'm here for three days," I reminded him. "Enough to do a bit of

damage.”

“Fucking right.”



## Austin

Home sweet home.

God, I missed my apartment so damn much while I was away. The bright walls filled with pictures of my life throughout the years. Friendships that I've formed over time. Group photos of all the hockey teams I had ever played on. This place was my home. My safe space. The part of myself that I made mine.

The walls were painted a light, almost cream in the main tv area of the apartment. I wanted to keep it light and warm in that space, along with the massive built-in fireplace I kept going when the Long Island winters got to be too much. I had a huge sectional in the middle of the room that I had spent more than enough nights on when I was recovering from the accident.

The kitchen was darker with the tile backsplash on the walls. The countertops were just a little bit darker than that. It helped that I had under-cabinet lighting to keep the kitchen bright. Catalina would strive in this kitchen space. She had tons of room to move around and prepare her meals before cooking them. I had space to move around with her.

Hell, she'd love it here. She was a homebody. She lived in her comfortable pajama pants and her oversized sweaters. She liked comfortable and calm, instead of loud and overstimulating. I could see her curled up on the couch with her book and a blanket.

What the hell was happening to me? This girl had been in my life for a month and here I was, smitten as hell with her. I couldn't put my finger on why either. I had been racking my brain for weeks, wondering what it was about Catalina Jackson that was so different from other girls. What was it about her that made her a constant thought in my mind? Why did I want to bring her here, and have her curl up on my couch?

I slipped into the kitchen, filling up the kettle with water before flicking it on. I grabbed my favourite mug from the cupboard and a bag of peppermint tea, wanting to settle down with that before I headed to bed. It had been an eventful day, and I needed to wind down.

The water boiled and before I settled down with my tea, I grabbed a piece of dark chocolate from the fridge. I decided to take a seat on the couch for a little while. It was only after eleven and I wasn't ready to head to bed just yet.

I had the fireplace going, and the tv on with the end of *The Breakfast*

*Club* playing. Instinctively, I reached for my phone, tapping the screen to see if I missed anything. My heart fluttered when I saw Catalina's name next to the green text icon.

**Jacks: The apartment building is so quiet without you. How's NY?**

She sent it over an hour ago. *Fuck!* I hoped she was still awake.

**Me: I bet. NY is good but I think it's missing you.**

I waited for a response. Two minutes turned into five, which turned into ten. I figured she went to bed. She did have to work from what she told me this morning. Her boss coerced her into taking an extra shift to cover for Olivia calling in. She wasn't happy and I didn't blame her one bit. She hated that job at the cafe, even if she pretended that she liked it.

**Jacks: See, I've never been to NY so I doubt it misses me. But you on the other hand...**

**Me: You caught me haha! Guess I kinda miss the hot girl next door.**

*Shit.*

Maybe I shouldn't have been that blunt with her. I saw the little read beneath my text, followed by a text bubble. Well, at least she wasn't completely thrown off by it. She could be getting used to how I was.

The text bubble disappeared. I wanted to tell her she could say anything to me and I wouldn't take it the wrong way. I wanted to assure her she was safe with me, but these were things that would develop over time. A few words didn't mean anything unless my actions followed them.

My phone buzzed in my hand.

**Jacks: Can we talk on the phone instead?**

I didn't bother answering. I had never pressed the call button so quickly in my life. It rang once, and then twice before she picked up. I heard shuffling in the background, meaning she had to be getting comfortable first.

"Hi," she breathed out, her voice soft; tired almost.

“Hi sweetheart,” I greeted her, smiling to myself.

She giggled. “What are you wearing?”

“Catalina Jackson!” I let out a laugh, making her laugh. “Well, I’ve got on the same jeans you saw me in this morning. The same shirt too. No shoes or socks though.”

“Sexy,” she teased. Her voice was not nearly as confident this time around. She sounded tired. She did have to work today after all. She had to be tired of being on her feet all day. “How did your appointment go?”

I swallowed hard. As happy as I was that I was given the okay to play again, it also meant I was one step closer to leaving Stonebridge. One day closer to leaving her there without me. That was something I was a lot less prepared for. “Good. I’ll be back on the ice tomorrow morning for practice.”

“Austin, that’s amazing!” she exclaimed. I could practically hear the smile in her voice. “You must be through the roof about this.”

“I am,” I half-smiled. “You’re coming to my first game back. I hope you know that. I will drag you there myself if I have to.”

“I wouldn’t want to miss it.”

There was something in her voice that told me otherwise. Something was off about her in general. She was enthusiastic about my results, but she wasn’t full of the normal energy I was used to. There was almost a sadness lingering in her tone. Why would she want to talk on the phone if she was tired like this? It was late after all.

I debated on whether or not I should press the issue. If I did, there was a good chance she’d lie and tell me she was fine before making up a quick excuse to go. I didn’t want her to go just yet. “What did you get up to tonight?”

She went quiet for a moment. I had to check to see if she hung up on me. “I just got home from work an hour ago,” she let out a sigh. “And I had a bad day.”

I frowned. That wasn’t what I wanted to hear. “You had a bad day,” I repeated back. “No wonder you sound so sad. Are you okay?”

She sniffled. Fuck me for being six hundred miles away. “Not really,” she answered. “Work sucked more than usual today and I guess I can’t shake it off the way I normally do. My boss was in for most of the day today. Everything I did, I did wrong according to her. I got yelled at time after time for stupid things. By eight, she told me I was easy to replace and I should be grateful to her for giving me this job.”



My jaw clenched. She didn't deserve to be spoken to like that by anyone. Especially not her employer. No wonder she had a bad day. "I'm sorry, Jacks," I swallowed hard. "You don't deserve to be treated that way."

"How do you deal with it when you lose a game?" She questioned. I could hear her shifting in the background once more.

I smiled at her question, thinking she was trying to work her way through this instead of letting it consume her. "I remind myself that the game is over, and it's pointless to dwell on something I couldn't change. I have to accept that loss and try to do better next time. It's not entirely in my control sometimes. Sometimes we lose. It's hard to do in that moment though and I can't imagine it would be the same in the third round of the Playoffs or during the Stanley Cup final."

She went silent for a moment, but I knew she was still there. I could hear her breathing as she tried to work through it. I think she needed a bit of a distraction more than anything. Something to take her mind off of her workday.

"Can I be honest with you?" She began.

"—'course you can." Suddenly I got nervous. My chest grew tight at what she could want to say to me. Part of me was happy that her walls were crumbling down and she was slowly letting me in. Another part of me was terrified because it was a huge responsibility to not hurt her. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her.

"It sucks not having you here," she confessed. "I thought if I heard your voice, that maybe it'd be okay, but it's not the same as when you're in the room with me. I know we're just pretending but there's a part of me that hopes we are friends beneath it all."

Fuck. I was not expecting that. My palms grew sweaty as my heart rate increased. Was she finally warming up to me?

"I'm going to be honest with you," I played, keeping my voice low.

"Mmh."

Here goes nothing. "I wish you were here."

"Me too," she whispered. My heart did another leap in my chest. "I'm tired of being afraid of people walking out of my life."

Her honesty meant the fucking world to me. The vulnerability in her voice was more than enough for me to realize that it was part of what made me attracted to her. She was so locked up some days that I was sure I'd never be let in there. But those tiny glimpses into the girl she had hidden in there

gave me hope. I just wanted to protect her castle. Not destroy it with a wrecking ball.

“You don’t have to be afraid, Jacks,” I reassured her. “Not with me. I am your friend. You’re one of my best friends.”

A big part of me was hoping that she was going to continue to open up to me, even if it was only a little bit more. I could listen to her talk for hours. She had this soft, adorable tired voice at this time of the night. Something that would be even cuter if she were here with me, curled up under the blanket with a mug of her favourite tea. Something told me she’d like that.

“I’m trying not to be,” she said. “It’s just hard sometimes.”

“You’re right. It is hard,” I agreed with her. “It’s hard when you’ve done everything to protect yourself from getting hurt in the first place. Even more so when you’ve been through some shit that hurt you.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m hurting myself by doing it,” she began. I swore my heart skipped a beat. I wasn’t about to get ahead of myself though. “You try your hardest to protect yourself and you guard your emotions for that not to happen. But then you miss out on all these great things if you do. When the walls come down and you finally branch out to someone, nothing prepares you for the hurt you feel when you’re rejected, or left behind. No one prepares you for the moment you give them love and they don’t give you an ounce back. That moment when you’re left standing there, completely dumbfounded by it, replaying every single conversation you had. Just trying to pinpoint the exact moment that could have possibly made them realize you weren’t enough for them.”

She knew pain. She knew it by its first fucking name. It made my stomach drop.

“I get it,” I swallowed hard before bringing my tea up to my lips. Here goes nothing. “My dad made me feel like that. The more I think about it, my mom did too.”

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “Austin, that couldn’t have been easy for you growing up. And playing hockey too. Wanting your career to get you out and trying not to let the rest of it get to you.”

“It wasn’t,” I informed her, shaking my head. *Too much for me.* It wasn’t that I didn’t want to tell her, although, I didn’t want to. It was hard to admit some of the things that happened to me growing up. It was hard to talk about when some of the emotions were still a little raw. Even then, something told me that Catalina would understand. “This isn’t really a conversation I want to

have on the phone though.”

She let out a dry laugh. “I agree. Not exactly an ideal topic of conversation.”

“What did you want to talk about then?” I inquired with a small smile playing on my lips.

She went quiet again, only this time, I knew she wasn’t thrown off. She was simply there, just like I was. She was on one end while I was on the other, enjoying her company, even if it was through the tiny device in my palm. I wasn’t about to rush her for an answer. She could take the whole damn night to think of a topic and I’d be okay with that. I was the one she was spending her night with. I was the one on the phone with her. I had her attention.

I wanted her attention.

“Why don’t you date?” She asked me after a minute or two.

An honest question that she was curious about. I was surprised she hadn’t asked me sooner. It was a question I got more often than not. *Why haven’t you settled down Austin? Why are you seen with a different girl each time? Don’t you want to get married and have kids?* All from prying ears and reporters begging to get the scoop first.

I wasn’t against it. It wasn’t like I had some specific reason for not dating. I didn’t have a terrible breakup that left me heartbroken. Truth be told, I did want it but I wanted to be ready when I got there. I didn’t want to end up in a loveless relationship like my parents had, and then take it out on my kid later on in life. I didn’t want to be exactly like my father, who abused the hell out of his son before cheating on his wife.

I also didn’t want to be the part-time boyfriend who constantly left his girlfriend for hockey. It was hard to do both, which is why I didn’t date in high school. I needed that scholarship to get me away from my parents if the NHL didn’t work out. I needed to put myself before everyone else.

Now I was at a point where I was financially stable. My career was about to be steady again. I had a beautiful apartment in one of the most beautiful cities in New York. But I was still recovering from the accident. I had been all year, and I would continue to be for a longer than that. Not even sex had interested me this year. At least, not until I met Catalina and even then, that was a sore subject.

The worst part was that I didn’t know how to explain any of that to her. Reporters were happy with the ‘*I’m too busy*’ excuse I ran every time. She

was asking because she wanted to know. She was asking because she was technically my girlfriend and chances were, she was preparing herself for what the next few months could have in store.

“Hockey mostly,” I answered as I ran my knuckle over my jawline. “And I guess it was easier to hook up. I didn’t have to worry about disappointing anyone when hockey was my top priority.”

“Makes sense,” she breathed out.

The words left my mouth before I could even think about them. “Why haven’t you dated since you were younger?” This was it. She was going to close up and hang up on me. She wasn’t going to answer that.

She let out a shaky breath, making me hold mine. I could feel the tightness settling in my chest. “It’s complicated,” she admitted. “The not-so-complicated part is that I have tried, but for them, it’s always been for sex. We’d start talking and the conversation would almost instantly turn to sex and it’s not enough for me. I don’t work like that. I can’t.”

I think it was at that moment that I knew she was letting me in. That I could slowly stop fearing her closing up with each question I asked her. “You like to have a connection,” I added.

“Sex is a big deal for me,” she confessed quietly. “And sometimes I wish it wasn’t, but it is. It’s intimate and vulnerable. It’s scary as hell. I know women are supposed to enjoy it, but finding someone who also sees it that way is rare,” she paused. “I don’t even know why I’m telling you any of this,” she let out a dry laugh.

“—‘cause I told you. I’m here to listen,” I reassured her. She definitely hadn’t had the best sex of her life yet if she was talking like that and that’s a damn fucking shame. “You can complain about the male upstairs and downstairs brain all you want.”

“You’re a little different though,” she giggled, making me furrow my brows. “You’re patient, especially with me. You respect boundaries. —‘m starting to feel safe around you and it sucks ‘cause you’re leaving me too.”

“Jacks.”

“—‘m getting a little tired, Austin,” she yawned, making the cutest noise in the fucking world in the process.

Fuck.

“Okay, sweetheart,” I nodded, swallowing hard. “We’ll talk more about this when I get back, okay?”

“Mmkay.”

“Get some rest,” I breathed out. “G’night, Jacks.”

“Night Austin.”

I hung up the phone, tossing it to the empty side of the couch. Some of the pieces were starting to come together. I was starting to make out what the picture was creating. She had been tricked one too many times by guys who said they wanted more with her when they only wanted her for sex. I wouldn’t know for sure until Catalina put it all together for me, but I had a pretty good idea of it.

Someone had hurt Jacks. Hell, by the sounds of it, there were multiple people throughout her life that had. And she was preparing to add my name to that list. She kept me at arm’s length because she knew I was going to be right here in four months. She knew she shouldn’t be getting attached or open herself up for that.

The thing is, I didn’t want to walk out of her life now that I knew her. I wasn’t that kind of person either. I never had been ‘cause I knew how it felt. I knew what it was like to feel like you weren’t good enough. Reason enough alone to not want to be in a relationship. With her, I didn’t feel that way.

With her, I wanted more.

Yeah, I wanted to fuck her. God, I wanted to fuck her so damn bad. I wanted to taste every inch of her and hear her scream my name as she came on me or around me. I wasn’t picky. I could do her any way she damn well wanted me.

It wasn’t just sex for me though. It was the friendship that came with it. Jacks was my friend above everything else. The way I could hang out with her and laugh. She wasn’t the kind of girl who threw a fit when I was late or became a bitch when something didn’t go her way. She was guarded and now I was really starting to understand why.

I flicked off the TV, along with the fireplace. It was just after midnight and I hadn’t even realized I talked to her for that long. I had to get a bit of sleep before the early morning practice. Not to mention, if I spent any more time thinking about Jacks, I’d end up jerking off and that wasn’t a road I wanted to go down tonight.

Ten minutes later, I was standing in front of my bathroom mirror with my shirt off. My tattoo looked darker in the lighting here than it did in Stonebridge. That also meant the scar looked a lot worse. My stomach still dropped when I caught a glimpse of it and the reminders it came with.

Fuck, the team was going to see it tomorrow and there was nothing I

could do to hide, no matter where I stood and what angle they looked at me from. It was just there. Red, white and bumpy.

I placed my palms on the edge of the counter, looking down into the sink. The longer part of my hair fell over my face. I shouldn't have even been driving that night. I was supposed to be safe at home by then. I was safe at home. Until she called and ruined it all. And she didn't even dare to come and see how I was doing after it. Not once. No wonder I was screwed up.

My phone buzzed in the pocket of my sweatpants. Catalina's name caught my eye first thing.

**Jacks: I'm sorry I dumped my bad day on you. It was supposed to be a good day for you. I feel bad for being a downer on your day.**

Without even thinking, I typed my reply.

**Me: Talking to you was the best part of my day, Jacks. The only thing that could make it better is if you were here now.**

A text bubble came up almost instantly. The tightness in my chest was easing at the sight of it.

**Jacks: Thanks for saying that.**

**Jacks: Felt nice to talk to someone after a bad day. Was definitely a benefit of being yours. Night, Austin.**

**Me: Told ya, I'm always here to listen. Sweet dreams.**

I glanced back up in the mirror, taking in a deep breath. Tomorrow was the start of a new chapter. I had hockey again and a way to centre myself. Things would feel better tomorrow. I would be okay tomorrow.

I would be.



## *Catalina*

For the middle of October, the weather was gorgeous. A little too gorgeous. The mix of orange and red leaves filled the city streets. The flowers that once decorated the riverwalk were now shrubs of green and brown. It was usually a lot cooler around this time of year, not high seventies to low eighties. I was left feeling like it was a hot summer day, not like Halloween was fifteen days away. I was more excited about it in September than I was now.

I had been in a bit of a funk for the last little while, and I couldn't quite shake the gloomy feeling. Even though the sun was shining brightly, and I could get away with wearing my flip-flops outside right now; I felt like something wasn't right. It was like I was trapped in a loop of constant dread for the last week. It wasn't even like anything significant had happened.

Olivia had been off all week so I didn't have to see her or hear her for that matter. Kayley, one of the part-timers, had called in sick three of her five scheduled work days. My boss granted she was a huge bitch to me last week, hadn't been in this week. Sabrina and Haley were working with me now and that was nothing out of the ordinary.

The two of them had been bantering back and forth for most of the day, as they always did. Most of the time, it was about the stupidest topic. Typically because Haley had said something and Sabrina had to argue it. It was how their relationship went and I was usually only involved if one of them needed me to pick a side or confirm what the right answer was.

That's how it was today. The two of them were behind the counter, bickering about something while I portioned out cookie dough onto baking sheets. I was thankful to be the one baking today, even if we were short-staffed thanks to Kayley.

From where I was standing, I could gauge Sabrina's slouching figure, along with her dark hair, tied back into a neat bun like it always was. Haley was six feet away from her with her arms crossed. She had her black baseball cap on, covering her long blonde hair. I could faintly hear them discussing some sort of agreement to go out, making me roll my eyes.

Sabrina always got what she wanted. Whether it was her choice of breakfast, a customer's phone number, or the bar she wanted to drink in. She had that main-character energy to her that drove me away from her. She



always got her way. She never lost. She never even came close to it.

She reminded me a lot of my high school days. She had to be the most popular one. The most liked one.

I didn't have to focus on that, thankfully. Being away from them meant I had time to think about other things. Usually, it was storyline ideas that I worked through in my head for over eight hours. I wish that were the case today. My mind was somewhere else.

Austin was coming home today.

The same Austin I had spent every night on the phone with since he left. My fake boyfriend and my not-so-pretend friend. I never thought sending him that text the first night would have started nightly calls between us. Hell, I had to work up the courage just to send it. I didn't want to bother him when he was back home. His whole life was there, including his friends. He just got the okay to play and I didn't want to take away from that because I had a shit day.

Then he replied and the dam broke. I had no idea how I was going to deal with when he moved back because not having him next door sucked. I liked knowing he was right next door. Then I knew I was safer with him there. He was someone I could call and I knew he'd drop everything to come help me. Not to mention, eating dinner alone wasn't ideal when he usually came over one night a week to eat with me and watch *Wizards of Waverly Place*.

This week was different. I wouldn't admit to him, or anyone for that matter, that our conversations meant the world to me. It was a reminder that he was putting the effort in, and even then, he didn't have to go as far as he did. But he did. He talked to me every night before we went to bed, and he spent that time getting to know little things that he wanted to know.

There was a new level of comfortability that had formed for me. I just had to wait to see if it translated into our in-person conversations. One thing was certain. Austin Sawyer, an NHL star for Long Island, was genuinely my friend. And that meant a lot to me.

I finished cleaning up the back of the cafe from my day's work. The dishes were clean and put back where I got them. The floor was swept and mopped right after. I couldn't wait to get out of here and for good reason.

I walked over to the oven, pulling the cookies out, one tray at a time. The smell of chocolate filled my nose, making me smile. God, I loved the smell of chocolate chip cookies fresh out of the oven. It didn't get much better than that.

“Catalina,” a voice shouted, grasping my attention. It was Sabrina’s. Instead of coming back to where she knew I was, she expected me to drop everything and come to her. Something I should be used to by now.

I let out a reluctant sigh, suppressing an eye-roll as I headed out to the front of the store where she was with Haley. “Could you stay a few hours extra today? I want to head out of here early.”

“Uh no,” I shook my head. “I can’t. I’ve got somewhere I need to be.”

“Like where?” She furrowed her brows.

None of her business. “Places. I’ve worked every single day this week. I’m on eight days straight right now. I deserve a break.” Not to mention I had an extremely hot hockey player coming home to me today. I deserved a break from this shitty cafe.

“Grocery stores are open until nine,” she pointed out, trying to weasel her voice into my head to make me give in. It was Sabrina making sure she got what she wanted, as always.

I shook my head, shrugging my shoulders. “Doesn’t mean I am,” I stated. “I’m done in ten minutes and I’m leaving in ten minutes.” I turned on my heel, heading into the back of the cafe once more.

I wiped down my countertop once more, making sure every crumb was off of it so it didn’t give Sabrina a reason to bitch at me for it. I caught blonde out of the corner of my eye the second I turned around.

“You want to talk about it?” She asked me. “I can come over tonight and we can —“

“I’m busy tonight,” I said with a smile, stopping her in her tracks.

“Austin’s coming home today.”

She smiled knowingly. Even though I had been very vague on the details I shared about him, she knew I was seeing him and I left it at that. “Oh, I see now. Understandable why you don’t want to stay.”

“Exactly,” I nodded with a shrug.

“Well, we should get together sometime soon. It’s been a little while since we’ve hung out,” she said. “Maybe sometime this weekend?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I’ll let you know.”

She flashed me another warm smile before she headed back out front. There was an unspoken tension between us that had been there since that night at the bar. We hadn’t talked a whole lot since then, and it was generally on both parts. I constantly felt like I had no idea where she and I stood.

I wasn’t mad at her, but I wasn’t exactly thrilled either and it was for that

exact reason. More often than not, she made me feel like our friendship wasn't best described as best friends. It was something I had been avoiding for a long time. For the longest time, I just assumed it was how our friendship was going to go. She would keep me at arm's length, so I did the same. She didn't check in so I didn't check in. She shut me out, so I did the same. It wasn't always like that on my behalf and I can't quite pinpoint when it changed, I just know it did.

One of my many issues was that people didn't really like me. I was never the popular girl in school. I didn't have a million friends. Hell, I barely had one when I needed it the most. I was never wanted on teams, or hit on at the bar. I was a background character. I was the type to be blended into the background so the main character could shine. I was the unlikable one. The one that everyone seemed to find a flaw in. I was the one who was constantly left behind. Haley was a constant reminder of all of those feelings that I tried desperately to bury deep down inside me.

I just wanted to know when it was my turn to be the main character. At this point, I was sure it was never going to happen. I mean, I was me. I wasn't enough. I was a plot point. A stepping stone. I wasn't the Disney princess, ready to marry her Prince Charming. I was one of the ugly step-sisters with feet too big to fit in the glass slipper. I was the lamp that held the most powerful genie to grant everyone their wishes. I was the poison apple that damn near killed Snow White.

Even villains fit in more than I did.

Then again, villains brought something more to the story. Me? I was an object to further along the plot.

Four o'clock hit and I gathered my stuff from my locker, throwing them in my bag before tossing it over my shoulder. I couldn't wait to get out of here. Austin was just getting in now and by the time I got home, I'd have maybe half an hour to pull myself together until I saw him.

I stepped out front, fixing the stray strands of my hair as I walked towards the exit. I stopped dead in my tracks when I caught a glimpse of a six-foot-two hockey player with an adorable smile on his lips.

"You're back!" I beamed, making my way around the counter. I threw my arms around his neck, pulling him into me as quickly as I could. He smelled of his normal masculine cologne mixed with a hint of coffee. His usual coiffed look was slightly messy, and the sides were shaved down a little more than I was used to. He had a bit more stubble covering his cheeks,

making me smile. He looked happy. Not just happy to see me happy. He genuinely looked lighter, like everything in his world somehow fell into place for him. His arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me snugly into him. I missed this guy.

“Caught an earlier flight,” he told me, giving me another squeeze before he let go. “I wanted to see you sooner.”

“Here’s the drinks, Austin,” Haley’s voice filled my ears.

“Thank you,” he grinned. “I got you a tea, Jacks.”

God, it was great hearing that in person again.



Austin decided to tag along with me to the grocery store, which wasn’t exactly the plan but I wasn’t complaining. He claimed he had a few items to pick up, but I knew him. Austin survived on frozen foods or my cooking. He wasn’t a huge cook himself, and he had no problems eating out. Hell, he could eat three times more than I did and not gain a single ounce. I hated him for it.

He offered to push the cart for me while I added things in. I added in all my fruits and vegetables first. The meat and grains were added shortly after. Every so often, he held up something random, making me shake my head with a smile. He had a playful nature to him that I didn’t have myself. He could be silly and goofy, wanting to make everyone around him laugh. It was a side of him that had just recently come out which made me wonder if he was starting to trust me too. Was he starting to let me in the walls he put up?

I hadn’t picked up on it at first. Austin came across as this happy-go-lucky guy. Always smiling. His confidence level was through the roof. He had himself and he knew it. He knew he was attractive, but didn’t play into it. He was just one of those guys that you knew was self-assured in every way possible. There was no denying it.

The more I got to know Austin, the more I saw him. He was still this confident, cocky guy with a very successful NHL career thus far. But he was an overthinker, just like I was. He displayed the same tendencies I did when it came to people. I kept them at arm’s length physically because of my past. He kept them at arm’s length emotionally because of his. This was something I think really took a toll on him this year without hockey. His accident did a

number on his body, but it made me wonder if it did more than that to him. It put his career on hold, and that was the most important thing in his life. The brief glimpse I got into his family life told me they were no longer in the picture for him. His team was his family.

He didn't want anyone to get close to him and I wanted to know why. Just like I was sure he wanted to know why I was hesitant with him at first.

This week of phone calls didn't do either of us a favour and I knew that now. If I was so in my head about this, it meant he was in there already and he was going to be hard to evict out. I was getting attached to him and I knew what that meant for me. I was going to start falling for him more and more the deeper I got to know him and there was nothing fake about it.

We turned down the feminine products aisle and suddenly I got a little embarrassed about what I needed to pick up. I knew I couldn't not pick up the box of pads I was desperately going to need this week, and I had no idea if I was going to have time to get some at a later date. I could feel my heart rate picking up the closer I got to them.

I knew I shouldn't have been embarrassed by this. It was natural. I was a woman after all. He knew that. Any health class would have educated him on the female reproductive system on a biological level. His reputation spoke for itself on his knowledge of the female anatomy. Periods grossed guys out though.

"Ten bucks for a box of pads?" He called out, furrowing his brows as we stopped at the section. I felt my cheeks heating up as I searched for the ones I used. "That's fucking unreal for something you have no control over."

I shrugged, reaching for the box I needed, and adding it to the cart where he couldn't see it. "I know. But it's necessary. These are on sale."

He scoffed. "It's bullshit, Jacks."

There he goes again with that fucking nickname that made me melt. He stepped over to the next shelf of items, which happened to be condoms among other intimate items. He wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "I pay ten bucks and these last me a lot longer. How is that fair?"

For the first time since I met him, I felt a little inadequate. Seeing him looking at a black, discreet box of condoms made my stomach sink. He had been with so many women. I had been with one guy and I could hardly count sex at fifteen a whole lot of experience. I wouldn't compare to any of the women he had been with, appearance-wise and physically. Sure, it shouldn't matter because we weren't really together, and sleeping together was most

definitely out of the question.

I guess I was just reminded that he and I were so different from one another in so many ways. He had no problem going out and having sex with someone he just met. There was nothing wrong with that, especially for him. But for me? I knew I could never do that. I could never be that bold or confident. I was also hit with the realization that Austin would never enjoy sleeping with someone who had no idea what they were doing.

“To be fair, I’m sure you’ve gone through quite a few boxes,” I teased, giving him a nudge.

He chuckled. “Yeah. Yeah. I know I’ve had my fair share.” He leaned down. His lips came dangerously close to my ear. “But I’m not the one with all the spicy books at home now am I?”

My jaw dropped as I looked at him. Playfully shoving him away, I tried to hide my smile and failed miserably. “Leave my spicy books alone,” I stated with a wide grin this time. “There is nothing wrong with enjoying a book where the characters fuck.”

“And there is nothing wrong with fucking outside of a book either,” he reminded me. His tone was slightly sharper than I had anticipated. I swallowed hard, instantly wondering if he didn’t take my comment as a joke. My heart sank to my stomach.

“I’m sorry,” I frowned, taking a few steps back from him. “I didn’t mean —“

“Jacks, it’s fine,” he smiled his confident composure back up and running. “Let’s just finish up and head out, okay?”



## *Catalina*

I started putting the groceries away as soon as I stepped foot in my apartment. Austin had gone to his apartment to put his bag in his room and to grab a change of clothes so he didn't smell like airplane food as he put it.

There was a tension that had grown between us ever since that stupid comment I made and it was eating me up inside. The last thing I wanted to do was add Austin to the list of names of people who stopped liking me.

This was such a constant feeling for me. I could never say the right thing. Hell, I couldn't even make a good joke without it going completely sideways and hurting someone's feelings because of it. I had no idea what I was doing wrong. If anyone else would have made that joke, it would have been hilarious. But this was me. The background character. The one who could never do anything right, no matter how hard I desperately tried. I was never meant to be the main character.

Without giving it a second thought, I abandoned the groceries on the kitchen counter and pulled my phone out of my pocket. I pulled up Courtney's contact, praying she could get me in for an emergency session as soon as freakin' possible. I was spiralling and I needed someone rational to talk me through this.

The phone rang and rang, making the tension in my chest grow tighter with each passing second. I felt a lump forming in my throat as I paced back and forth, trying to calm myself in the most irrational way possible. I was doing nothing good for myself at the moment. I needed her to answer. She had to answer.

And then it hit me.

Courtney was on her honeymoon this week. That's why I didn't have a scheduled session until next week.

I hung up my phone, shoving it back in my pocket before taking a deep breath. All I had was me and I had to figure this out. Legally, Austin and I were contracted to one another until January so even if I brought this up, we had the contract to fall back on and he couldn't end things with me. That was comforting.

We would eventually have to get over this to sell our relationship for the next few months. Also very comforting.

The door to my apartment crept open, letting out a tiny whine in its wake.



My head darted up, watching the tall figure make his way into my apartment. He had changed from his flight clothes and into a pair of dark blue jeans with a rip in the knee, a Led Zeppelin tee and a maroon zip sweater. His hands shoved in the front pockets of it.

Instantly, I wanted to apologize to him for hurting his feelings with the joke I made. I wanted to take it back and assure him it wouldn't happen again. I wanted to make it better so that we could go back to being friends again because this feeling that weighed in my chest was suffocating and I desperately wanted it to go away.

Two strong arms slipped around my waist, dragging me in closer until I was pressed against him. The smell of his cologne filled my nose and a sense of ease washed over me. My arms wrapped around his shoulders, closing whatever space was left between us. Even though this was the fourth hug we shared, this one felt different. This one wasn't a hello or goodbye. They didn't signify the same protectiveness as this one did. He was comforting me. And I liked it. "You feel like getting a bit of fresh air?"

"Yeah," I breathed out.

He squeezed me tightly, not letting go for a moment. It was one of the best, most satisfying hugs I had received in a long time. I had no idea I needed this hug this fucking bad. Was I that touch starved? Of course, I was. I hadn't let anyone close enough to touch me in a really long fucking time.

"Why don't you go get changed into something comfy and I'll put the rest of your groceries away?" He suggested, keeping his tone light and calm. "Then we can head out."



When Austin said we were getting fresh air, the first place I thought of was the beach. A place I was sure he hadn't seen yet, and a place I hadn't been in a little while now. We got in my Hyundai Elantra and drove the eight miles to the beach.

The radio played quietly in the background. A song I didn't know and didn't quite care to focus on as I backed out of my parking spot and made a left turn onto the street. His eyes were on the road in front of us, as were mine for the entirety of the drive. The sun was beginning to set, which happened to be the perfect time to go where we were heading.

The orange and pink dressed along the horizon as I put the car in park, cutting the ignition. I let out a shaky breath, feeling a lump forming in my throat as I glanced down at my lap. I was still a little overwhelmed, even if his hug helped me. I couldn't help but think about how I said the wrong thing. He didn't seem mad, or even upset. It didn't erase anything though and it didn't ease the guilt I felt.

I kicked my car door open, stepping foot out of it and onto the sandy pavement. I removed my shoes, one foot at a time before moving forward towards the big open blue ocean with a sunset on the horizon. Probably the last I was going to watch here for the year. The weeds were overgrown with the warm weather, making the path a little more difficult to move through compared to how it usually was.

When I was satisfied with how close I was to the water, I took a seat in the sand, burying my feet in front of me. Two long legs joined me moments later, feet digging in next to mine. The soft sounds of the water crashing to the shore were enough to soothe my rapidly beating heart. It was hypnotizing; watching the water slide along the sand before receding home.

An arm wrapped around my shoulder, edging me closer to him. I wasn't sure if it was in case anyone saw us together. If I was being honest with myself, I hoped it was because he wanted to. I wanted that continuation of affection he gave me in my apartment more than I wanted to admit.

"I never took you as a beach girl," he said with a soft chuckle.

"I do like the beach," I admitted. "But when it's quiet like this and when the sun is going down. I like the colours reflecting on the water and the sound of the waves. This was one of the deciding factors when I was looking for places to start fresh."

"I can count on my one hand the amount of times I've been to the beach," he confessed. "Growing up in the city doesn't give you this luxury."

"Playing hockey can't help with that either," I added before letting out a sigh. I felt the tension growing between us. I didn't like it and I didn't want it to be there. I wanted that comfort between us that I had grown so accustomed to over the last month. "I'm sorry for what I said in the grocery store, Austin. I didn't mean to make you feel like there was something wrong with having sex with multiple people 'cause there isn't."

He shook his head. "You didn't do anything wrong, Jacks."

"But you kind of came across as if you were upset about it," I told him. "Your tone changed after and the last thing I want for you to think is that I

think you're some sort of man-whore."

He tightened his arm around me, pulling me in a little closer. "It had nothing to do with what you said, Jacks. It's not like it's some secret that I've had a lot of one-night stands."

"Then why?"

He swallowed hard, resting his head against mine. "It got me thinking."

"Me too," I muttered under my breath.

He chuckled. "Jacks, you haven't dated anyone since you were sixteen. When we talked a few days ago, you told me sex was complicated. So I have to ask. Are you a virgin?"

Honestly, I wished I could have answered it with a yes. It would have been a million times easier to lie to him about it and leave it at that. But I didn't want to lie to him, especially not with the soft tone he spoke towards me. His tone change made sense to me. It was almost as if he was trying to steer the conversation into sex to assure me that there was nothing wrong with it.

I also wasn't sure I was ready to have this conversation. Then again, I was never going to be ready to have it. But if I were to tell anyone, he would be at the top of that very very short list.

So I shook my head. "No. I'm not a virgin, Austin," I breathed out, feeling my chest constrict as I thought about the words that were about to leave my mouth. They couldn't leave my mouth. *I was raped when I was sixteen.* But the words wouldn't leave my lips.

His body went rigid and I felt his jaw tense against my head. He pulled back a little and I could feel his eyes on me. He knew. Without me saying it, he fucking knew. "Is he still breathing?"

I nodded my head.

"In jail, right?"

Tears threatened to spill over my waterline for a moment before they cascaded down my cheeks. "He got away with it. His word against mine," I told him.

"Jacks," he frowned.

"I'm not ready to talk about it in full detail with you, or anyone. Even saying those words out loud carries a lot of weight to them."

He nodded softly. "I'm listening, okay? Whenever you want to." He was pissed and more so than I thought he would be. But worse, his voice cracked as he spoke. As if he felt even the slightest bit of what I felt constantly.

“Jacks, I’m so sorry someone hurt you like that. That someone violated you in the worst way possible. *Fuck!*”

I stayed silent for a moment, not trusting my voice just yet. It was a big deal for me to tell him, even if I didn’t actually tell him. He was the first person I told by choice. He wasn’t my therapist and he wasn’t the school principal who brushed it off. He was someone on my side.

“Is that why you see a therapist?” He asked me, giving me a bit of a nudge.

I nodded my head.

“I’m proud of you,” he said softly, nudging me again. “Takes a lot to talk about shit you don’t want to talk about. Therapy helps.”

“You too?” I managed to get out.

He chuckled. “Every Thursday since the accident.” His arm reached over, scooping my legs up and over his lap before he pulled me in for a closer hug. His cheek rested on my head and for a moment, I just let myself breathe. For a moment, I let my guard down, knowing that someone was here to protect me. Someone was finally on my team.

“You’ve been through some shit, haven’t you?” I pointed out. “With your parents and the accident.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “I come from a family of surgeons. On my dad’s side anyways. Playing sports was a waste of time in his eyes. Even with my success, I’m still a failure in his eyes. Told me that when I was in the hospital after the accident.”

“Austin.”

“He told me that he was grateful he wasn’t called in for my surgery ‘cause he would have refused to save my life,” he shared, making me pull my face away from his chest. His eyes never tore away from the water in front of him. Something told me this wasn’t something he wanted to share.

I reached my hand up, hesitantly cupping his cheek, urging him to look at me. I had no idea where my sudden burst of confidence came from, or even what I was going to say to him. All I knew was that I needed to try and comfort him the way he did for me.

His eyes locked with mine before he melted against my touch. Was he as touch-starved as I was? Did he need that same affection that I craved? “Your dad clearly isn’t a very good surgeon if that’s his response. If that’s how he sees things then I’m glad he’s not in your life. I might not know much about hockey or your career but I do know you have to be insanely talented to be

missed from the ice as much as you are. You might not be a surgeon like your dad wanted. You are starting your own legacy and you hold all the cards in your hands now.”

He took my hand away from his cheek, pressing his lips to my palm for a moment before settling with his in my lap. “I hope so,” he said. “The last thing I want to be is like my dad. I think that’s what I’m the most scared of. He cheated on my mom with multiple different women. Drank way too much and beat the shit out of me. He’s a piece of shit.”

“You are the farthest thing from being like your dad, Austin,” I stated, even though my voice was shaky as hell. *His dad used to beat him.* I didn’t want to screw this up and make him regret opening up to me. But the thought of him being a scared kid, hiding away in his room so his dad would hurt him more brought tears to my eyes. “You’re never going to be like your dad.”

He nodded his head, swallowing hard. “I guess I kinda understand why I get how you are sometimes,” he said softly. “I know that my dad kicking the shit out of me had nothing to do with me being an awful kid. It had to do with him and his unrealistic expectations that he had no right to place on my shoulders. It’s something you have to heal from.”

“I’m working on it,” I nodded. “I’m not scared of you.”

“Good,” he smiled. “But eventually, you’re going to be with someone more than you are with me. A not-so-fake boyfriend.”

I nodded in agreement, even though I wasn’t so sure about it. Yeah, I have been in therapy for years now. I was yet to put myself out there for real ‘cause I knew I wasn’t ready. Conversations through Instagram DM’s were hardly considered trying, especially when the guys only wanted sex. The idea of being in a relationship with someone with the trauma I carried was terrifying. Not everyone was able to handle a relationship with someone who had a history like mine. Not everyone had the patience for it.

Then there was how I felt about sex. I had no idea what I was doing or what I liked. I had no confidence when it came to it. I wasn’t ready for it and I wasn’t sure I would ever be ready for it. I’ve had sex twice in my entire life and neither time did I enjoy it.

“Better hope he’s as patient as you,” I chuckled dryly.

He squeezed my hand. “I know we agreed on no sex,” he said, pausing for a moment. “But if you decide that you’re comfortable enough and you want to without hesitation. Ask me, okay?”

I furrowed my brows. “But what about the no-sex thing?”

“I wouldn’t want this to be part of the contract,” he shook his head. “This is between friends and there is nothing wrong with one experienced friend showing his friend what she likes. Like you said, I’m patient with you.”

My heart fluttered in my chest.

“And you’re very patient with me too,” he said lowly, giving my hand another squeeze. “I’m sorry that I upset you earlier with my tone. I will try my best not to do it again. That being said, if I ever do anything to upset you, call me out on it, okay?”

I nodded my head. “As long as you do the same for me.”

“Deal,” he grinned. “And one more thing.”

“Okay?” I furrowed my brows.

“No going to bed angry,” he declared, swallowing hard. There was that feeling again. The fluttering sensation in my chest.

This was what it was like to have someone care. This feeling; this open communication without a fight. This was what it was like to have a two-way relationship. This was what it was like to have someone fight for you. My heart began to race and I felt this overwhelming sense of calm wash over me. The world didn’t end because I spoke up. Things were fixed. Things were better than before.

I knew he cared about me and not because of some contract.

“No going to bed angry,” I breathed out. “I like that a lot. Just like how I like that you opened up to me tonight.” I settled my head down on his shoulder. “Means a lot to me that you did.”

“It means a lot to me that you told me about your past,” he muttered, holding me tight to him. “I wish it never happened to you, Jacks. If you ever want to talk about it more than that, I’m here to listen, okay?”

“Thank you,” I nodded. “And if you ever wanted to talk more about your childhood, or even the accident, I’m here for you.”

“Got it,” he winked, releasing his hold on me. He stood up, wiping his hands over his ass to remove the sand. “All right, enough of this dark stuff for one night. Let’s go act like a couple of kids in the water. The last one there gets dunked first.”

Before I could even protest, let alone get up, he had taken off towards the water.

His sweater was discarded before he stepped foot in the water. I kicked off my shoes and tossed my phone next to his. His blue jeans were darker and his shirt had drips on it. The smile that was placed on his lips was contagious.

After talking about some very dark topics, it was like he was a child again. Trying to fight away that darkness with laughter. I didn't even think twice about joining him, letting the waves crash against me as I made my way towards him.

"That was not fair!" I protested.

He let out a laugh. "You're right. It wasn't." He held his hands up in surrender. "Go ahead, dunk me first for cheating."

This man was over six feet tall and probably over two hundred pounds of pure muscle. His thighs confirmed that, as did his perfect perky ass. How I was going to dunk him in the water was next to impossible. But I was sure as hell going to try.

I wrapped my arms around his torso before trying to push him over. He was laughing hysterically, making me laugh in the process. I could barely move him and laughing made it ten times harder. I gave him one more shove, losing my footing instantly, and going down with him.

We continued to try and take each other down. Although, he was definitely going a lot easier on me. Water was everywhere as he flicked and kicked it towards me and I countered with the same move.

Laughter ripped through us until my cheeks and stomach hurt. I could feel tears threatening my eyes. I couldn't remember the last time I laughed this hard and felt this light. These were the moments I loved the most. The ones you couldn't capture. The ones you looked back on and smiled.

He held me against his chest with his hands on my waist. My heart raced once more as his tongue darted across his lips. I had no idea if he was thinking it, but I was. I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted him to kiss me so fucking bad.

Who was this man and what had he done to me?

The last man I found attractive was fictional. A man I stood no chance with. I hadn't been attracted to someone like this in longer than I could remember. Austin was hot, attractive and everything in between. It was a feeling I was welcoming. It was almost like it was my confirmation that I wasn't nearly as broken as I believed I was. I didn't want to be broken.

Austin's grip tightened around me before one hand came up, cupping my cheek. My body was tingling in the best way. I didn't want to close my eyes in fear of missing something in his. His gorgeous green eyes had me questioning whether or not this was a contract between us 'cause there was nothing fake feeling about this moment.

He inched closer as his thumb brushed over my cheekbone. I was screaming internally for him to kiss me. Call it practice, whatever he wanted. I just needed him to. “Look at the happy couple,” a familiar voice called out.

I turned my head, seeing a tall blonde and a short, dark brunette standing at the edge of the water with their phones out. Fucking Olivia and Lyndsey. Of course, they had to ruin the moment. My moment.

“Careful kitty Cat,” Lyndsey smirked. “Might not last between the two of you.”

“Yeah,” Olivia added in. “You’re a little too vanilla for his flavour of the week. He’s a little more... *adventurous*.”

I rolled my eyes.

“He’s —“

“He’s my boyfriend, so leave him and us alone,” I stated. “Our relationship does not involve you, your opinions or your rumours. Worry about your own.”

“Ready to go, Jacks?”

“Happy to.”

We retreated from the water, grabbing both of our phones, shoes and his sweater before heading to the car. Austin draped his sweater over my shoulders. I reached over, slipping my hand in his, giving them one last thing to look at.

I couldn’t care less about what they posted or shared. Nothing would ruin the night we had. Nothing was going to change the conversation we had or the closeness we created. Nothing was going to ruin this night for me.

“You want to drive?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “Not ready to yet.”

“Okay,” I nodded, squeezing his hand.

I just hoped he would tell me when he was ready. After tonight, I had a feeling he might just.





## Austin

I paced back and forth by the massive window in my office. I had a stress ball shaped like a hockey puck in my hand, squeezing it every so often. It was a nice day for the last week of October. The sun was shining and there wasn't a cloud in the sky that indicated that there was a massive rainstorm heading our way towards the end of the weekend. Halloween was going to be a wash on Monday. Not that I had any plans for it.

In fact, I wasn't the biggest fan of Halloween. Never had been come to think of it. I didn't mind the dressing up part of the candy for that matter. I just hated the way my dad complained about taking me and my little brother out every year. I hated the way he'd eat half of our candy when he was drunk. I especially hated the way my mom would make us buy the lamest costumes because she didn't want to spend money on them. It wasn't like we were a poor family growing up either.

I grew up in the richest neighbourhood in town. A gated community and a property that I never got the chance to fully explore it was that big. My dad was a surgeon and my mom was an ER nurse. They met in college from what I remember, but I don't know many of the logistics of it. They never really gave me a straight story when I asked as a kid. After a while, I just stopped asking questions about them period. From an outsider's perspective, I had a luxurious life.

Inside, not so much.

I didn't want to go down that path this morning, but that's where it led me. I paced back and forth while I waited for my assistant to walk in my office door with whatever Chris dumped on me for the day.

Thankfully, most of the office staff had stopped gawking over me every time I walked in. Most of them still stared, but I wasn't getting nearly as many hockey questions or autograph requests. It helped that I showed up early most days, avoiding the ones that liked to stare a little bit longer. The only one I wanted staring at me for long periods didn't work here and lived in the apartment next to mine. She could stare at me for as long as she wanted and I wouldn't have a problem with that.

"Mr. Sawyer, I have your paperwork for the day," Georgina's soft voice filled my ears. I glanced over my shoulder, seeing the short, long dark dark-haired woman. Her complexion was much darker than mine thanks to her

Jamaican roots on her mother's side. Her lean figure entered my office, placing the papers on my desk with a soft smile on her lips.

I shook my head with a smile. "I thought I told you to call me Austin, Georgina."

"Sorry," she giggled. "It's hard when everyone else wants to be called by their last name." She took a seat on the chair in front of my desk, letting out a loud sigh. "I hate this office."

"You and me both," I chuckled, taking a seat on the chair next to hers. Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes today, which was unusual for her. She was a tough girl who didn't let anything get to her. Not in public anyway. "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing," she shook her head too quickly for my liking. She knew I wasn't buying into her bullshit. "It's Lexi. She's going out on a date with yet another douchebag guy tonight. Not only am I going to hear about it before she goes. I'm going to hear her during it, and then again after it."

I felt for her. She had been in love with her roommate for years now. Hell, ever since they met in college and became best friends, she had been holding the torch for her. Of course, she had no idea if she was even into girls like she was. She was always too scared to ask that question, in case it wasn't the answer she wanted to hear. Her heart couldn't handle that.

"I'm sorry, Georgie," I frowned, knowing how hard it was for her. Catalina had never brought someone home or anything like that, but it was nerve-wracking when she closed herself up. I thought I'd never get her to open herself up to me. "Have you talked to her about any of this at all?"

She gave me a dirty look. "Of course, Sawyer. We have open heart conversations about how I'd love to fuck her and spend the rest of my life with her," she spat sarcastically.

"All I'm saying is that you can't expect her to stop this if she doesn't know that it upsets you," I told her. "She's just going to keep doing it."

"And what if I tell her and she moves out and never wants to talk to me again?" She argued. "She doesn't know I'm gay, Sawyer. No one does."

I furrowed my brows. "But... how come I know?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, bouncing off her seat to pace this time. "I — I don't know why I told you. Maybe because you're leaving and I'll never have to see you again after it?"

"Gee thanks," I chuckled. "I just want you to be happy, is all. I don't like seeing you sad."

“I know.”

I pushed myself up off the chair and leaned against the edge of my desk, facing her once more. “You don’t have to do it all at once. Baby steps are just as good. Progress is progress, and it’s entirely up to you on how you want to do it. It’s your life.”

“What about you and that girl from the cafe?” She changed the subject, putting the spotlight on me. “The girl that made you change your non-exclusive ways. How are things with her?”

“Great,” I beamed. Thankfully this time, I wasn’t lying about that. “I’m heading to the store after work to buy her some flowers.”

“A true romantic,” she rolled her eyes. “It’s disgusting, actually.”

“Someone’s a little jealous,” I teased. She stuck her tongue out at me in response. “She’s a romance novel writer. I have to step up my game if I want to compete with the fictional men she reads and writes about.”

She scoffed. “Yeah, good luck with that one. There is no way in hell you’re going to match with one of those guys.”

“The fuck I am,” I protested, crossing my arms over my chest. I wasn’t threatened by fictional men. Not in the slightest. I knew I could hold my own, and I knew what I was capable of. Not to mention, no one made me do anything I didn’t want to do. If I wanted to step up my game, I could do that. But it wouldn’t be because she asked me to. It would be because she deserved the effort I put into it and she deserved to feel like she was in a romance novel every once in a while. “I’m a million times better than any fictional man. One hundred percent all real!”

“I look forward to meeting the girl that puts up with your annoying ass,” she rolled her eyes. “Just so I can apologize for what she has to endure every day.”

With that, she grabbed the rest of her papers and headed out of my office, rolling her eyes as she shut the door behind her.

For a moment, I forgot all about the auction and bringing Jacks as my date. This whole thing started because of it and now it was the last thing on my mind. It was a little over a month away and I had a lot to think about until then. Especially when I was back and forth between here and Long Island for practice, which I had this week for three days. I had this weekend to spend with her before I took off on Wednesday until Sunday night. Of course, I had hopes that when I got back late on Sunday maybe she’d be open to letting me spend the night with her. I didn’t have high hopes, given that we were merely

friends with this odd, semi-romantic chemistry that neither of us wanted to dive into.

Okay, maybe I wanted to dive into it. Only a little.

I had a feeling we weren't quite there yet. She was slowly opening up to me and I didn't want to do anything to jeopardize that. I knew one of the biggest traumatic parts of her life and that didn't come easy and it certainly didn't come wrapped up in beautiful wrapping paper. She was still very much dealing with that and the deep scars it left behind. But I couldn't help but notice she was a little lighter after she told me. Her smiles were more sincere. Her nerves around me had disappeared. She was growing more comfortable.

Baby steps.



I was halfway home with a small bundle of flowers I picked up for Jacks when my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a little after seven and it was now almost fully dark outside. A big difference from two weeks ago when she and I were on the beach together at this time. I reached into my pocket, seeing her name on my screen next to the green icon.

**Jacks: Are you home yet?**

I smiled like a fucking idiot as I typed my reply.

**Me: Almost. I'll drop by your place first.**

If that didn't make me walk a little quicker I don't know what did. I practically raced to the apartment complex and took the stairs in twos just to get to her as quickly as possible. I was a little out of breath by the time I arrived at her apartment door. I knocked twice before twisting the knob, letting myself in.

"Jacks?" I called out, glancing around her slightly messier-than-normal apartment. I cocked an eyebrow, trying to figure out if her closet threw up or if she was donating to a clothing drive. Out of the corner of my eye, she appeared in this beautiful black dress that came down to her knees.

“Oh good! You’re here!” She beamed as she skipped over to me. “Can you zip me up, please?”

I grinned, not even thinking twice about it. She turned her back to me, revealing her open back to me. I swallowed hard, putting down the flowers I got her before taking the zipper. I felt my dress pants growing a little tighter and I thanked the lords above for making me choose my best pair of boxers today so I wouldn’t show it.

I dragged the zipper carefully up her back, covering her up. “Thank you, handsome,” she said as she turned around. God, she was a fucking sight. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever laid eyes on. Her dress accentuated her curves and her tits looked incredible. Her legs looked longer than normal and her hair was down for the first time. I had never seen it when it was like this. It was always in a braid or pulled back in a bun. Today, it was long with a few waves, framing her face perfectly. Her makeup was soft, highlighting her features more.

“You look stunning,” I pointed out, taking hold of the flowers I picked up for her. “These are for you.”

“Austin,” she breathed out, taking them in her hand, bringing them up to breathe them in. “What are these for?”

“Just because,” I nodded, taking her in once more. “Now, where are you headed tonight ‘cause you look damn fine, Jacks.”

She rolled her eyes. “Girls night. We’re going bar hopping. Haley’s idea.” Her voice wasn’t filled with its usual excitement. I knew she loved her girls’ nights with her best friend from what she told me earlier this week.

“You don’t seem too thrilled about it,” I frowned as I leaned against the back of her couch, watching her move to the kitchen to put the flowers in water.

“I’m not,” she admitted with a sigh. “You know me, Austin.”

“You wanted to do something else,” I put together.

She huffed, crossing her arms over her body. “It was my turn to pick the girls’ night activity. I had everything planned. I even have the food to prove it. Then at work today, it became this night of bar hopping. It’s not even just me and her either. Sabrina and Tracey are coming, which means that Haley’s college buddies are also going to somehow join us tonight too and I’m just not in the mood to be left out of everything.”

I furrowed my brows, not liking the words that came out of her mouth. “What do you mean left out of everything?”

She shifted her weight from foot to foot for a moment as she played around with the flowers. “Whenever someone else is there, I tend to get pushed to the side. Sure, Sabrina and Tracey are best friends so that doesn’t bother me. But when Haley invites the rest of her friends who don’t exactly like me, I get pushed to the side as if I’m the last choice.”

I shifted off the couch and moved around the counter, pulling her in close to me. “Do you really have to go if that’s the way you feel?”

“If I don’t, then chances are, they’ll talk shit about me or next time, I won’t even be invited,” she let out another sigh.

I shook my head. “Tell you what. Text me SOS and I’ll call you, making up an excuse for you to leave. Then we can watch a movie here or something.”

“Yeah?” She smiled up at me.

“Of course,” I half-smiled as I slipped my arms around her waist. “Gotta give you something to write about in your book. Your knight in shining armour saves the princess from her dreadful enemies just in time.”

“You’re a sucker for a happy ending and you know it,” she smirked, leaning into me a little more. Her chest pressed against mine as she looked up at me with those gorgeous green eyes.

I rolled my eyes playfully. “Maybe you’re just rubbing off on me, Princess.”

“I highly doubt that,” she whispered, leaning in a little closer to me. Her tits pressed perfectly against my chest, making my breath hitch. “But whatever you say, Sir Knight.”

This woman was going to be the death of me.

“I should probably get going,” she breathed out. “As much as I don’t want to. You can stay here if you want to. I know you don’t have much in your apartment, given that you aren’t staying.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded her head. “I’m just going to see you after anyway, right?” She put it together. “Gives me something to look forward to; coming home to you.”

My heart began to race as I looked down at this girl. It was taking every ounce of strength I had not to lean down and kiss her hard. I had no idea where the fuck she came from, but holy fuck, I was starting to believe that I wasn’t going to be able to live without her. My world is just so much better with her in it. Even more so when she’s in my arms like this, looking up at

me as if I was her world.

I wanted to be her world.

“I’ll be here,” I nodded.

She pulled away from me, turning on her heel to give me the perfect view of her from the back. She opened up a drawer, pulling something out. “Here.”

I held out my palm and she placed a key in my hand. She was giving me a key to her apartment. It hit me then. She trusted me. Catalina, the girl who kept the world at arm’s length, trusted me.

“So you can go home and change and whatever,” she confirmed with a soft smile playing on her lips. “Anyways, I should go. I’ll see you in a little while.”

“Okay,” I nodded. “Try and have some fun tonight, Jacks.”

“I’ll try.”



I headed back to my apartment to shower and change into my comfortable clothes before settling down in Catalina’s apartment. I sat in her spot on the couch with the hockey game on the TV. Lucas was on fire tonight. He had one goal and two assists tonight, which was a fucking incredible night for him. They were kicking Toronto’s ass and at home too. I could see them getting frustrated on the ice. Smith was on Lucas’s ass after that last goal and we were just entering the third period.

God, I couldn’t wait to be back on the ice playing again. I needed to be on that ice with them. It didn’t hit me until now that I really fucking missed it. Then again, this was the first game I managed to watch after the accident. It was too hard when I didn’t know if I was ever going to make it back on there.

Now, I couldn’t fucking wait.

Right as the game ended, I heard the key in the front door before it opened up. Catalina tiptoed her way inside, trying not to make any noise, which I found highly amusing. She closed it quietly, locking it up before she turned around, stopping dead in her tracks when she caught my eye. Her face was flushed and her balance was slightly off. She had been drinking all right.

“Austin!” She beamed. Oh yeah, she was drunk. This was going to be good. She struggled to kick off her shoes, tossing them somewhere near the



door before she stumbled over to the couch. I could smell the beer on her before she sat down next to me. “You’re here.”

“You have fun tonight?” I asked her, turning to get a better look at her. She sat close to me, leaving virtually no space between us.

“Not really, no,” she admitted as she rested her head on my shoulder. “I missed you. Sucks when your best friend isn’t allowed at girls’ night ‘cause he’s not a girl.”

I chuckled at her. I had never seen her drunk before and it was nice to see that she was a happy drunk. Hearing her call me her best friend made my heart skip a beat. She was my best friend too and I wouldn’t change that for the world. “Other than that, did you have a good time?”

She let out a sigh. “I had a couple of drinks,” she shared. “Okay, maybe more than a couple. Then my anxiety got bad because I got scared of how drunk I was feeling and came home.”

She was an honest drunk.

“Why did you get scared?” I brought up, slipping my hand in one of hers in her lap.

“—‘cause I wasn’t somewhere safe. What if something happened to me?” She breathed out. “What if something happened again and I couldn’t fight back?”

I shook my head. “You’re a badass, Jacks. You could kick anyone’s ass if they tried to hurt you. I know it and I think you do too. I wouldn’t want to mess with an angry you and I don’t think anyone else would want to either.”

“You think?”

“I know,” I stated. “How about we go out together next time? That way I have your back?”

She shook her head. “Do your friends have your back when you go out?”

Her question struck me hard. Did Haley not keep an eye on her tonight? Did none of them keep her close by or even bother to check in with her? Did they just leave her be and not include her like she said before she went out? The more I thought about it, the angrier I got.

“They do. And when you meet them, they’ll have your back too,” I assured her. “They would never let anything happen to you. I would never let anything happen to you, Jacks.”

She let out a content sigh. “I love it when you call me Jacks. Makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside.”

Fuck, she was the cutest when she was like this.

“I love calling you Jacks,” I told her. “It’s my thing for you. Always will be.”

“I need a cute nickname for you,” she declared. “What’s your middle name again? It starts with an E.”

“Eugene.”

“Fitting,” she giggled. “Flynn Rider. Jacks and Flynn. Has a nice ring to it, I think.”

I had no idea who Flynn Rider was, but the smile on her face made me want to know everything she had going on up there. She could call me whatever the fuck she wanted to and I’d eat that up. “I love it.”

“We should watch *Tangled!*”

“Go get changed and I’ll get it set up,” I nodded. “Snacks and all.”

She let out a little squeal, making me chuckle. “You’re my favourite person in the whole wide world! Best girls’ night ever!”

She was off the couch in an instant, skirting off to her room. I glanced up, seeing her heading over to me before turning around. Her zipper. Who would have thought I would help her put it on and take it off?

She wasn’t lying when she said she bought all the snacks for a girls’ night in. She had nachos, guac, salsa, and three different kinds of chips, including her favourite dill pickle. I figured I’d leave that for another night and simply cook us up some popcorn instead. We could share that and some water for her to sip on to help her sober up. I wasn’t expecting her to last the entire movie. I gave her until about halfway through before she passed out.

She joined me on the couch not even five minutes later in a pair of purple and white pajama pants and an oversized tee that hung off her shoulder. Her hair was thrown up into a messy bun with a few shorter strands framing her face. Her makeup was off, giving me more of a view of her rosy cheeks from the alcohol. She was stunning, as per usual.

She took a seat next to me once more, instantly resting her head on my shoulder while I pressed play on the movie. She reached into the popcorn first, taking a piece, one by one.

She let out a giggle when Flynn Rider introduced himself, and somehow, I felt her nickname for me became even more fitting. Then the smoulder happened and she laughed even more. She was happy, and I knew she was. She hadn’t been this carefree in a long time and it showed. She was open. The gates to her walls were open to me, and she was letting me roam around freely. I could only hope that she stayed like this with me.

It was shortly after the Snuggly Duckling that her breathing evened out and her eyes fluttered shut. Her body was curled into mine. Her arm snaked around my waist and her head rested on my chest. She was the most adorable thing I had ever seen. I was never much of a cuddler, but this? This is something I'd never get enough of. I'd never get tired of her and how unpredictable she was. This whole new side of her was endless, and I had just barely scratched the surface with her.

I had so much more left in store for me and she had so much ahead of her. I had yet to open up to her, and the braver she got, the more I wanted to do the same. I wanted to be her Flynn Rider and never in my life have I wanted something like that. I was falling for this girl. Truly falling for her and there was nothing pretend about that. I just knew it was one-sided and even if it wasn't, she wasn't ready for anything like that. She was still working through her trauma and I wanted to let her do that before anything else.

I couldn't conflict her with a relationship. It wasn't fair for her to work through both. She was worth waiting for. I'd wait forever if she asked me to. All I knew was that she deserved the best and while I might not be the best, I could certainly try my hardest to be the best for her.



## *Austin*

“Happy Halloween!” Georgina called out from the office hallway. Seconds later, she emerged through the office threshold in a sassy witch costume that had me grinning widely. “What the hell is that? Austin, what are you wearing?”

I glanced down at myself, trying to understand what was so wrong with my normal outfit. “I don’t do Halloween.”

She scoffed and I was sure the whole office heard her. “You’re lame,” she side-eyed me. “You couldn’t even put on your own jersey and go as a hockey player?”

“Why would I do that?” I chuckled, reaching for a paper on my desk. “I already attract enough unwanted attention in this place. That would be a billboard sign stating that I’m an arrogant asshole who is all about me.”

“Aren’t you saying that enough with the expensive dress pants and shoes?” She teased, earning herself an eye roll.

“You’re hilarious,” I said dryly, turning my back to her.

“Here’s this week’s paperwork you need,” she said, placing an entire file down on my desk. “And if you’re going to see your girlfriend, could you grab me a mocha latte with extra espresso, extra mocha sauce and extra foam, pretty please!”

“You’re so high maintenance.”

“Love you too!”

It did give me the excuse to see Catalina. Not that I hadn’t seen her all weekend. I was at her place from Friday night to last night. I only left to head back to my apartment to shower and sleep. We spent a good majority of Saturday watching season three of *Wizards of Waverly Place* before sneaking out to one of the restaurants on the riverwalk that she suggested. All I know is that I had a great burger and she more than enjoyed her fries, and mine for that matter.

Sunday morning, she told me she was craving oatmeal chocolate chip cookies so she decided to make some from scratch while I paced back and forth on the phone with Coach about the upcoming week’s practice. I didn’t miss the way Jacks had her eyes on me every so often, almost as if she was silently checking in with me.

God, I wished I could take her with me this week. It would make it so

much more bearable if I had her to come home to. She was working late tonight, so I was hoping to grab a late dinner to bring over to her, along with whatever chocolate I could find to bring her. It was Halloween after all. I could bring her chocolate.

I slipped my jacket on, buttoning it up before putting my hood up. The weather was miserable today. We were getting some remnants of a tropical storm and it was hitting hard. It was days like this I wish I had grown a pair and got back behind the wheel. Walking in the storm was worth it if I got to see her for a few minutes.

I was drenched by the time I entered the cafe door. The second I stepped in, I knew something was off. The radio was off and the place was practically silent. No laughter. Nothing. I wondered if this place was still open for a moment before I glanced around and saw the usual patrons sitting in their spots.

I nervously made my way up to the counter, putting my hood down for the time being. I glanced in the back of the restaurant, seeing if I could get a glimpse of her. When I did, I felt a lump growing in the back of my throat. She was in the back, standing next to the store manager, the owner and someone holding an iPad. It didn't look good either. The look on her face said everything.

She wasn't okay and there was nothing I could do to make it better.

"What can I get for you Austin?" One of the shorter girls asked. I think this one was Tracey, but I wasn't entirely sure. She didn't wear a name tag like Catalina did.

"Coffee with two cream and an extra shot of espresso for me," I began, pausing while she typed it in. "And my assistant wants a mocha latte with extra mocha, extra espresso and extra —"

"Foam," she added as she typed the order in the register. I handed her over enough to cover it, plus a tip. "Short girl? Dark hair, coloured skin, sassy attitude?"

"That's her," I chuckled. "What's going on in here? It's tense as hell as soon as you walk in."

"Surprise inspection," she informed me in a hushed tone. "Talk about a great Halloween."

She got started on the drinks and I moved off to the side. I knew by the look on Tracey's face that this wasn't going to be a good day for any of them in there. I had no idea what a surprise inspection entailed, I just knew it was

stressful as hell. I'm sure Catalina would explain it to me when I saw her later on tonight. She had no idea what I had in store for her when she got home. I was about to score *major* boyfriend points with her.



It was after six by the time I left the office and the storm had only gotten worse since then. The winds were whipping through the trees and leaves were flying all over the place. Puddles filled most of the potholes, and the park was now flooded with water. I was drenched by the time I walked from the building to the Uber.

The beauty of the storm was that most people were hunkering down at home, leaving the grocery stores empty. It helped that it was Halloween night and I was sure parents were still daring to take their kids door to door. It made my task a whole lot easier. I managed to snag a box of Halloween candy, the kind with all the good chocolate bars. I didn't even care I was paying twenty bucks for it.

I needed all of the right snacks for the evening. I threw in a bag of dill pickle chips for Jacks, along with salsa, three kinds of cheese, and nachos. I couldn't pick between two kinds of ice cream, so I bought both of them. I was going to order us pizza tonight so she didn't have to make anything after her long day. All I needed was something for us to drink. For that, I grabbed two bottles of wine, unsure which one she would like. I still had so much to learn about her.

My shoes squeaked as I made my way up the three flights of stairs. I was soaked down to the bone from the time I got out of the Uber to the door of the building. I couldn't wait to dive into the shower to heat up. The last time I saw weather like this, I was in my third year playing pro. We were in Florida at the beginning of October. It was probably our second game when a category-one hurricane was headed our way. We had to postpone three games and couldn't leave until we got the okay to.

Jacks wasn't done work until eight tonight. Her texts today were short and sweet, which definitely meant she wasn't in the mood for chit-chat. Not that I blamed her. She had a rough day and she was still finishing it up. If I could make her smile at least once tonight, I was going to call it a win.

As soon as I stepped inside my apartment, I shed my soaking wet jacket and hung it up on the hanger behind the door. I didn't even bother to turn half the lights on as I made my way to the bathroom, tugging at my clothes until they were in a semi-neat pile on the bathroom counter. My hair was sticking up in a hundred different directions and my cheeks were pale. I felt a shiver run down my spine as I reached into the shower, turning the water on hot.

By the time I was under the hot stream, I felt the tension of the day melting away. The worst part of Halloween was over and tomorrow was the start of November. I had a little over a month left here before I was back home, in the comfort of my own bed, playing hockey again. Something I couldn't wait for. Not to mention, better water pressure in the shower too.

I got out probably twenty minutes later, wrapping the towel around my waist before heading over to the mirror. The whole thing was steamed up, making it difficult for me to look at myself in it. Not that I really wanted to see myself or my scars on this particular evening. It was something I had spent a lot of time thinking about recently, especially when it came to Jacks.

It wasn't that I was afraid she'd see them if I took my shirt off in front of her. Anyone would. I knew she wouldn't judge me and I wasn't worried about that either. It was the idea of her face falling and her eyes travelling over me as she put together where they came from. It was knowing she was eventually going to ask me what happened and I wasn't sure I ever would be able to answer her. It meant talking about the accident and every single detail that went into that conversation. It meant talking about the most terrifying moment of my life and explaining to someone how close to dying I was.

I was never going to be ready for that.

The steam faded, revealing the tiny treasure trail of hair leading down my torso beneath the navy blue cotton towel. I went about my routine, starting with the deodorant under my armpits.

After another twenty minutes in front of the mirror, the steam completely disappeared, leaving me standing there with my sweatpants hanging low on my hips. My fingers curled around the countertop as I leaned forward, checking out the stubble I had coming in. Not enough for me to shave just yet.

It was just after seven when I checked my phone. I knew I had to move myself if I wanted to get this surprise underway. Jacks would be home after eight and I wanted it to be perfect for her. I tugged my shirt over my head before running my fingers through my semi-dry hair. My phone was tucked



away in the front pocket of my dark sweatpants.

I dragged my feet towards my kitchen where I kept the four bags of stuff, along with two sets of apartment keys. My own and the one I had in her apartment. The one she trusted me to keep.

A fucking honour.

I didn't bother putting shoes on as I headed out. I was just going next door and it wasn't like I needed them at her place.

The lights were flickering in the hall from the extensive winds. I wouldn't be surprised if we lost power at some point during the night. I slipped the key into the lock, carefully opening up her door with all the stuff in my hands.

I reached for the lights, seeing how she left her apartment early this morning. She had her mug in the sink; the one she settled with after smashing her favourite one the morning we became us. Her apartment was organized more than the average person. She had a place for everything, and things rarely changed.

I placed the bags down by her couch, ready to get started settling up for the evening. I was going all out for Halloween with her. I was making a movie set up for our evening. I had blankets to hang up, creating a nice blanket fort to hide out in, and plastic pumpkins to light up around the room.

I had twenty-five minutes to do it.

And I did it in twenty.

I was adding the candy to the Halloween-themed bowl when I felt my phone buzz against my right thigh. I was hoping it was Jacks saying she was on her way home. My heart dropped to my stomach when I read it.

**Jacks: Hey... it's been a long day and I'm not really up for company tonight. I'm sorry, I know we had plans. I'll see you tomorrow okay?**

*Fuck!*

I heard the key in the lock, making my heart race. She wanted space and here I was, in her space. Yeah, we had plans, but she also had every right to change them and I should have been considerate of her feelings when I knew earlier that she was having a shit day.

I stepped out from the blanket fort, standing tall by the couch as her apartment door opened up. Her head was cast down, and the stray pieces of hair by her face were soaked from the rain. She was sniffing.

Fuck! Was she crying? Did she have that bad of a day that she was

coming home crying? Fuck that. There was no way in hell I was accepting that. I quickly made my way over to the door, keeping some space between us to give her a moment.

“Hi Jacks,” I greeted her softly.

She shook her head before her hand came up, wiping beneath her right eye. “Shit,” she sniffled, letting out a dry laugh.

“Any chance you want a shoulder to cry on?” I offered her. “I just washed mine.”

She let out another chuckle and I took that as an invitation to step closer to her. She dropped her bag to the floor and unzipped her coat, letting it drop too. “I could really use an Austin hug.”

I had never moved so quickly to her. My arms wrapped around her waist, engulfing her to me in the tightest hug I could possibly give her. Her body was so tense as if she was still feeling the stress of the day on her shoulders. I wasn’t going to let go until I felt her relax, even if it took all damn night. I hated seeing her upset like this. I hated seeing her cry.

“Deep breaths, Jacks,” I muttered to her, giving her another squeeze. “You’re home safe.”

She nodded. “I know. I just need a moment to snap out of it.”

I took matters into my own hands and lifted her from the ground, carrying her to her bedroom with ease. I placed her down at the end of the bed before kneeling in front of her, coming face to face with her glossy green eyes. She let out a shaky breath, mustering up a soft smile when she made eye contact with me.

I leaned forward, placing my lips on the top of her head. “The inspection didn’t go well, huh?”

She shook her head. Her face lightened up a little as she reached her hands out for me as if she needed to touch me. “It was a disaster,” she let out a dry laugh. “Everything that could have gone wrong, went wrong.”

I nodded, letting her know I was listening to her. “Can you tell me what exactly happens in an inspection? I want to understand.”

She reached her hand up to my cheek, giving a smile that made my heart rate pick up. Fuck, the way she was looking at me right now was doing things to me. Things that shouldn’t have been happening. I loved the way she looked at me sometimes. Like I was someone worth more than one night. Someone worth keeping. Someone good enough to be seen with a girl like her.

She let out a soft sigh and I took that as a hint to wrap my arms around her. Or maybe I just wanted to hold her and be in her personal space. Maybe I wanted to feel the warmth of her body around mine. Maybe I wanted to comfort her after her shitty day, knowing no one else had done that with her before. I just wanted to make *my girl* feel better.

Then the most wonderful thing happened.

She opened up.

My eyes never left hers as she started to explain what this inspection was like. It wasn't far off from what I expected. Someone came in and checked over everything to make sure that nothing was majorly wrong. There was a whole lot more to it though. She told me they checked the machines to make sure they were dispensing the correct amount of each dairy, sugar and whatever your drink of choice was. They checked the temperatures of items to make sure they were to standard. What really pissed me off was the spec of dirt on the floor by the emergency exit which seemed to be a greater deal than it was worth.

"They are stressful enough. Knowing that if this went south, the cafe would be shut down because it wouldn't meet the standards," she explained, shaking her head. "But my boss made it so much worse, Austin."

"That's why you came home crying, isn't it?" I gritted my teeth. "Did she make another comment towards you?"

She nodded her head. "Several." She paused, letting out a shaky breath as her eyes cast down. I leaned forward, placing another kiss on the top of her head. If she was uncomfortable with the small gesture, she sure as hell didn't show it. "Olivia didn't do a few things the night before and my boss blamed me for being careless and not paying attention to details when I should have been. I wasn't even the one baking today and the soapy water sink was three degrees colder than it should have been, which is within the grace amount given so we didn't lose points on it, but I was yelled at for not knowing better. By that point, I was already upset."

"Understandably."

Her bottom lip quivered. She didn't deserve to be crying over her job like this, especially not because of her boss. She worked in a cafe. It wasn't her career. It was a means to make money so she could have a roof over her head. It wasn't permanent. Eventually, the world was going to see how insanely talented she was and this was all going to be a distant memory for her.

"It seemed like she was coming at me every five minutes, barking at me

for anything she saw fit. I was serving one of the regular customers and she came up to me and asked me what the fuck I was doing,” she complained in frustration. “I’m not the manager there. She was nowhere to be seen. Tracey and I were trying to hold things together while getting yelled at. In the end, my boss looked at her and me and pointed to us saying she was extremely disappointed in us, and our manager stood next to her, nodding in agreement. Of course, she didn’t get in trouble even though she was hiding out, texting her boyfriend the entire time instead of helping us.”

I shook my head this time before reaching my hand up and caressing her cheek softly. “You know none of it was your fault, right? You’re one person and you are not responsible for running the entire show alone. You’re supposed to have a team, and whether they know it or not, everyone lost. You win as a team and you lose as a team.”

She smiled, rolling her eyes playfully. “You’re such a hockey player.”

“Hey, my pep talks are fantastic in the locker room,” I winked.

“Always so cocky,” she teased, nodding her head. “I think I know deep down that it’s not my fault. The wounds are still so fresh and I can’t get the way she spoke down at me out of my head. I can’t wait to see the look on her face when I hand in my notice and tell her to shove it up her ungrateful ass.”

I laughed. There was my girl. “You’re welcome to come to Long Island anytime for a getaway,” I assured her with a smile. The thought of having her all relaxed and comfortable in my home made me happy. My king-sized bed is the perfect size for a queen like her. “Not to mention, I’d love to show you my world.”

She paused for a moment, and at that time, the only sound was the rain hitting the window to my right. “What if I don’t fit in your world, Austin?” She asked as she kept her head down. “I don’t exactly scream popular like you do. I’m not the kind of person people look at and think ‘*Wow I’d love to get to know her*’.”

“I did,” I admitted, a little too quickly for my liking. “You are a part of my world, Jacks. Contract or not, you’re one of my closest friends. You will always fit in as far as I’m concerned. If there is ever a point you don’t feel like you do, I will do everything I can to make sure you do.”

“Austin—“

“I care ‘bout you, Jacks. I wouldn’t be here right now if I didn’t.” Fuck, what was I saying? Why was I saying these things out loud for her to hear? I mean, I wasn’t lying. I cared a lot for her, and if I was being honest with

myself, I wanted to keep Jacks in my life forever. But we had been under this contract for a little over a month and we had little over a month until the event. I was playing with fire here.

“Please don’t say things you don’t mean,” she shook her head. “This is a contract.”

As much as she was right, her words still stung. It was my reminder that this was a contract and what I was feeling, I shouldn’t have been feeling. After all, I was Austin Sawyer. I didn’t settle down. It didn’t, however, stop me from caring about her. I wasn’t heartless. “Our relationship is contracted. *Fake*,” I stated softly, trying to keep my tone warm, even if I was feeling a little jaded. “Our friendship isn’t. That is purely on you and me. You are my friend. I don’t just say shit, Jacks.”

“I’m sorry,” she breathed out, reaching her arms around me. I responded instantly, tugging her to me before her legs wrapped around my back. “This is usually the time people walk out on me. When they say stuff like that.”

“Not me,” I reassured her. “How about you come to New York with me in two weeks for my best friend’s birthday weekend? Lucas is dying to meet you,” I brought up seamlessly. A question I had been meaning to ask her for weeks now but chickened out each time in case it was too soon for that.

She shifted back to look at me. “Are you serious?”

“—‘course I am,” I chuckled, placing my hands on either side of her thighs. “I have enough frequent flyer points to cover your flight. Haley’s too if you want to bring her along as well.”

Her lips curled up into a soft smile. “I’ll have to see with work to make sure.”

“That’s okay,” I nodded. “You don’t have to let me know until next week.”

“As soon as I know, you’ll know,” She stated before looking down. “Thanks for this.”

I furrowed my brows.

“For being here tonight and for giving me a shoulder to cry on,” she clarified. “Means a lot to me that you did. You’re a good listener.”

She was thanking me for something so simple, yet the look on her face was as if she won the lottery. Then I remembered our conversation from our first official date. She never had a shoulder to cry on. She never trusted anyone to cry on their shoulder the way she did with me. And she was right. It was an honour. Making sure she was okay with something simple as a hug

and listening to her vent about her day was the least I could do for her. There was a whole lot more I could be doing.

“I’m not done yet,” I smirked. “Bad days require some R&R. If I recall, you’ve got a bathtub in your bathroom.”

“I do.”

“So why don’t you sit tight, and I’ll run you a bath to soak in while I make sure we have something for dinner,” I told her.

I shifted from the floor, feeling my knees screaming at me for finally moving from the kneeling position in front of her. Fuck, I was really rusty on that one. Before, I could spend a good hour on my knees with a woman’s legs over my shoulders. Now, I couldn’t even comfort my girl without them protesting when I got back up. A hand wrapped around my wrist, tugging me back.

“Do you ... do you maybe want to stay here tonight?” She asked before she swallowed hard. I felt my heart rate pick up and for a second, I wondered if I heard her correctly. But that look in her eyes told me I didn’t. She was genuinely asking. “Not for sex or anything. Just... to stay.”

I smiled softly as I looked down at her small hand on my wrist. “Yeah, I’d love to,” I nodded.



## *Catalina*

What the fuck was I thinking?

Austin turned his back to me and headed straight into my bathroom, closing the door slightly before the sound of the water filling the tub hit my ears. I asked him to stay. I asked him to fucking stay and he agreed. Why did I do that? What part of me was possessed to do so 'cause it surely wasn't my brain.

He emerged from the bathroom five minutes later with his sleeves rolled up, giving me a soft smile that made my heart flutter in my chest. The smell of lavender filled my nose, followed by the faint scent of eucalyptus. He held his hand out to me, helping me off of the bed before leading me into the bathroom.

My bathroom was tiny enough for one person, but having a six-foot-tall hockey player in there with me really made it feel cramped. I looked down at the tub, seeing bubbles forming over the edge. Six candles had been lit and placed around the bathroom, ready to replace the lights when they were turned out. He went above and beyond running this bath, and I almost wanted to question how he knew. That was a question for another day.

“Should be ready to go for you, Jacks,” he half smiled as he leaned against the counter, making his shoulders look even wider than ever. “I’m going to make you a cup of tea while you hop on in. Then I’ll order us some food.”

I smiled to myself as I cast my eyes down to the white tile floor. “Thank you,” I mumbled. “For everything.”

He shook his head, arching forward. “There’s no need to thank me for being your friend,” he whispered, reaching his hand up to cup my cheek. His hands were soft, yet a little rough with the callouses from playing again. “Anything in particular that you are craving?”

I leaned into his touch, meeting his eyes. “We should get pizza. Feels like a Halloween kind of meal.”

He chuckled. “Coming right up.”

With that, he pulled away and headed for the door, leaving me in the privacy of my bathroom. I made my way to the side of the tub, setting up my towels the way I liked them. I couldn't remember the last time I took a bath, let alone one like this. Usually, it consisted of eucalyptus Epsom salts to help



me ease congestion while I was suffering from a nasty cold. Or when I've pulled a muscle and needed to help it. Never have I taken a bath because I had a bad day, nor have I had a bath run for me by an attractive male specimen.

Which got me thinking about him even more.

I stripped off my clothes, tossing them into the laundry basket in the corner of the bathroom. I dipped one toe in the water, testing it out before the rest of me went in. The hot water brought a sense of ease around me that I didn't know I needed. All my tense muscles began to melt now that the pressure was gone. The lavender that filled the air brought a calm over me, reminding me of when I was a kid and my mom used to put a few drops of it on my pillow before going to sleep, just to keep the nightmares at bay.

Three light taps at the door had my eyes open once more. Austin stepped inside with my mug in his hand. The soft candlelight did wonders for him. The flickering flames brought out the hazel flecks in his otherwise green eyes.

"How's the bath?" He asked, keeping his voice low.

"Phenomenal," I replied with a smile. I reached up for my mug, taking it out of his hands. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he grinned. "Pizza will be here in an hour. Roads are shit so it's going to take a bit longer."

"That's okay," I assured him. Truth be told, I could spend a good hour in this bath without complaint.

Austin took a seat beside the tub, bringing his legs up to his chest before his arms wrapped around them. I suddenly became very aware that I was naked in this tub, and he was two feet away from me. It wasn't that I thought he'd try something. He would never do that. It was that I could accidentally slip and he'd see a part of me I wasn't ready for him to see. A part I never wanted him to see.

"Hey Jacks," he breathed out. "I am going to see you after our contract is done, right? We aren't just going to part ways that night and pretend like none of this ever happened, are we?"

His words cut me off guard. Usually, they were something coming out of my mouth and not someone else's. I swallowed hard, looking up at him with soft eyes. "I sure as hell hope I'll still see you," I shook my head. "Do you think it'll go that way? That we won't be a part of each other's lives anymore?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I sure as fuck hope not." I brought my tea up to my lips, tasting the perfection that was in this cup. A cup made by someone who knew exactly how I liked it. No one, and I mean, no one, knew exactly how to make tea the way I wanted it. No one cared enough to ask.

"Nothing we are doing should warrant a clean break from one another. We're friends," I reminded him. The conversations he and I had. The moments we shared. The nights we stayed up talking to one another. None of that was pretend for me, and I had hoped that it was the same for him. It may have started that way, but he and I were a lot different compared to the people we were in September. He wasn't just the man who spilled his coffee on me and I certainly wasn't the girl that shied away from him. "Our friendship isn't pretend, as you said out there. None of the stuff I've told you about me is pretend. I certainly don't want to lose what we've already built because of something as silly as distance."

He nodded his head before his tongue darted out, licking his bottom lip. Something that shouldn't have been as sexy as it was. "What's going on in that head of yours, Austin?"

He let out a shaky breath. "I really like having moments like this with you." He confessed with a sad smile. "I've never had this kind of relationship with someone and I'd hate like hell to not have it with you."

I swore my heart skipped a beat. Hearing those words meant a lot to me, but hearing them coming from him meant everything. Someone wanted me in their life and told me so. I didn't have to beg for it. I didn't have to pout or cry. There wasn't a huge fight about it. He told me in a calm, quiet moment. A moment I was going to remember for the rest of my life.

"Me too," I whispered as I placed my mug down on the perch next to the tub. I leaned over the side of the tub, crossing my arms that were covered in bubbles on the edge. My breasts pressed against the cold porcelain side.

He uncrossed his arms and his jaw clenched. "Can I show you something?"

I nodded my head, not daring to take my eyes off of him. He reached behind his back, pulling at his shirt until it was off of him. My eyes traced over him, taking in every dip and divot of his torso. He was even more muscular underneath his clothing. His abdomen was defined, but not so much as to have a full six-pack, but I'm sure at one point, he had one. He definitely had a least a four pack. He was in amazing shape given he was out for the last year. He had close to no chest hair, only the treasure trail that dipped beneath

his sweatpants.

On his shoulder, he had a huge tattoo that traced down his arm. It looked to be a wing that covered most of his bicep, stemming from his back. It was a beautiful piece of art on him, and I couldn't stop staring at him for a moment. It was mesmerizing.

What I'm sure he wanted to show me was the scars he had. He had a big one across his shoulder, just missing his tattoo, along with a few smaller ones close by it. There was another close to his ribcage that was still pink and one on his hip that was the same. These had to be his scars from the accident. There was no doubt about it.

"I'm not ready to talk about them," he mouthed. "I just wanted you to see them, so I wouldn't be so afraid if you saw them accidentally. There are a few more on my back," he paused, pointing to the big one near his shoulder. "This one goes right through to the other side."

My stomach turned at the thought. I reached my hand out, waiting for him to take it. When he linked his fingers with mine, I squeezed them. "As much as I hate what happened to you," I breathed out. "I'm glad you have those scars. They mean you're here and you survived. You fought hard to get where you are now. You don't ever have to talk about the accident if you don't want to. But if you do, and you're ready. I'm here to listen."

"I appreciate that, Jacks," he half-smiled, not meeting my eyes.

"Good," I let out a little giggle. "Until then, you should know, you look like a badass with scars like that." Now, that made him smile.

"Oh yeah?" He smirked. There was that playful nature back in his tone. "You think they make me look sexy?"

"So sexy," I let out a laugh. "So does your tattoo."

"Yeah?" He chuckled, moving his arm so I could see it better. The details that went into it were incredible. "You have any?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. Someday."

"I got this one when I was eighteen," he started, pointing to his arm. He pivoted to the other side, showing me another one on his ribcage. A Chinese symbol of some sort. "Lucas and I got these in our rookie year after one too many drinks. To this day, I have no fucking idea what it means. Some sort of meaning for friendship is what he tells me. I'm not sure I believe him. Probably means something dirty, knowing him."

I smiled at that. His confidence was back, almost like it had never left. Austin had these moments where he let himself be vulnerable with me. They

only lasted a beat or two, but in those moments, I saw glimpses of him that I was sure no one else saw. Yeah, he was a great friend and teammate. He was also sensitive when it came to other people's feelings. He was unsure of himself sometimes, and that was hard to believe when he came across as cocky. He was one of those guys that you were sure you knew until you realized you really only knew him on the surface. You knew what he wanted you to know.

The worst part of all was that I was starting to fall for this guy. As much as I was trying to deny it, I knew it couldn't. I was falling for Austin and he wasn't even mine to fall for. Tonight only sealed that fate when he pulled me in for a hug and let me vent to him about my shit day. And when he ran me a bath. I trusted him completely. He was my best friend and I was falling for him. Something I never thought would happen. He completely blindsided me when he came into my life and now I can't imagine a life without him in it.

"Anyway," he let out a chuckle. "I'm going to leave you to relax for a bit. I've got to get our movie night set up. After all, it is Halloween."

"No —"

"No horror," he smiled knowingly. "I know. I've got something in mind."

He got up from the floor, leaving his shirt on the ground next to the tub. He flashed me another warm smile before he slipped out of the bathroom. I couldn't help but notice the way his sweatpants hung low on his hips. The solid lines disappeared beneath the fabric, leaving me wondering about what was underneath. Something I should not have been thinking about.

It was the first time in a long time that I was having thoughts like this, and about someone I knew. Sure, they had come up when I binge-watched all ten seasons (at the time) of *Supernatural* in two weeks and had a *major* crush on Dean Winchester. This was a whole other ball game. I was never going to make out with Dean. My crush on him was never going to amount to anything. Austin was very real and very much in my life. And I was very much attracted to him, physically and emotionally.

How in the hell did my night end up this way? I was sad. I was having a bad day. Now I'm in a bathtub, fantasizing about possibly boning my pretend boyfriend. Sure, he offered a few weeks ago but — No! God, I couldn't even use pretend in this scenario. There was nothing pretend about this. This was something I needed to push down for the time being. It was something I needed to work through on my own before I ruined things for no reason.

Shortly after my little—okay, not so little— realization, I pulled the plug

for the bath and stepped out, wrapping a towel around my sud-covered body. I felt a million times better now than I did before getting in. Austin made me forget about the absolute shit day I had and turned it around. Now I was going to curl up on the couch with him and end my night with him.

I grabbed his t-shirt off the floor, taking it with me as I stepped out of the bathroom. I was so wrapped up in my emotions, that I forgot to grab something to change into when I finished my bath.

I came into the apartment so upset, I didn't even see what he had set up. I finally took a look over and saw the blanket fort he had created. If there was one thing about Austin, it was how much effort he put into the things he did. He always went above and beyond for me, and I was starting to feel a little guilty about it. I didn't want him to think I was taking advantage of him and what he did for me without getting something in return for it.

I opened up my drawer, grabbing a clean pair of panties and my favourite pajama pants. The second drawer had my comfortable barely there lounge bra that slipped on easy, and my oversized shirts that I liked to wear to bed. I still moved back into the bathroom to get changed, not wanting him to see anything he wasn't supposed to see.

By the time I came back out, there was a knock at the door, indicating that the pizza was here. I tossed him his shirt, watching him catch it with ease as he made his way to the door. I moved to the couch, snagging my spot as he came around with the boxes.

"I got two. Veggie, which happens to be my favourite, in case you were wondering," he said with a smirk. "Then I got bacon, onion and mushroom on this one. We haven't had the pineapple on pizza conversation yet so I went with that, knowing that you like all of those things."

I grinned at him, shaking my head. "Yes to pineapple on pizza."

"Thank god," he breathed out a sigh of relief. "One of my teammates hates pineapple on pizza and Lucas, refused to pass him the puck for an entire practice because of it."

"Hockey players," I rolled my eyes. "So dramatic."

I climbed into the blanket fort, taking a seat on the floor of pillows he had set up. I took a look at all the plastic pumpkins he had placed around the entrance, along with the extensive selection of snacks for the evening. Austin took a seat next to me before opening up the box of pizza. "I like veggie myself. Hawaiian too. I'm not really picky. Not unless you put olives on there. I hate olives. Haley has to eat them for me every time we go out to get

pasta. They always put them in the garden salad.”

He chuckled before handing me a plate, letting me get my slice first like the true gentleman he was. He pressed play on the movie as I did, getting the night started. I knew it was an older movie by the quality on the screen. The pixels were a little more noticeable in the beginning. Not so much during it, but it depended on the internet connection tonight given the storm.

I knew by the very beginning what movie it was.

*Hocus Pocus*. A Halloween classic.

I had seen this movie in years. I was sure the last time I watched it was when Haley and I decided to dress up as the Sanderson sisters for our shift at the cafe. A successful year, if I say so myself. We were a goddamn hit, even if she had only seen the movie a handful of times. It was a classic my mom and I watched when I was a kid. Needless to say, she loved it too.

Eventually, we stopped eating and my head ended up on his shoulder. The smell of his cologne filled my nose, putting me completely at ease. God, I hoped that he and I were in each other’s lives for the rest of them. I couldn’t imagine my life without him being a part of it. Especially after nights like this with him. Even if it meant phone calls and weekend trips when he wasn’t travelling like crazy for his dream. I could live with part-time Austin if it meant he was living his dream, playing hockey like he was meant to.

I needed out of that cafe. That was a damn fact. After how things went today, I never wanted to step foot in there again. I never wanted to be spoken to like that ever again. I had to pull my head out of my ass and write this damn novel. It wasn’t like I was strapped for ideas now. If anything, I had a million to go off of. I just needed to take the leap and start.

I had to stop being afraid I was going to fail and just do it. If I didn’t, I was failing regardless. While he was gone this week, that was my focus. Stop dragging my ass and start writing this fucking novel.



## *Austin*

Being back on the ice felt incredible.

In some ways, it felt like I never left. It was like walking or breathing for me. A second nature. Being in skates and gliding down the ice was what I was meant to do. I was meant to be here and I couldn't have been happier to be back.

Even if practices were brutal and I was exhausted after each one. I showed up an hour and a half earlier than the rest of the team did. Coach requested that I do so I can get extra time on the ice. It also meant he could work with me one-on-one to see where I was physically from the accident, and what I needed to work on.

I knew I wasn't back to the way I was before it. I still had a little ways to go before I was back to one hundred percent. My shoulder was still tense as hell and my coordination was a little off when I went to shoot. It was something I'd get back in time and I had a bit more of it until I was back on the ice full time. I had the chance to get better.

That was what I was doing now. I went from one end of the rink to the other, practicing the drill coach always put us through on the first day of training camp. God, it was awful. I hurt all over after that first day and he had us doing it over and over for an hour straight. One year, Lucas bolted and puked in the nearest garbage can. It went so hard one year that it hurt to even breathe.

That's what Coach called training. If we couldn't skate from one end to the other, then what were we doing playing hockey?

He was tough, but I wouldn't have it any other way. He was tough 'cause he cared and I didn't want to play for someone who didn't.

"All right boys," Coach called out before blowing his whistle. "Hit the showers and grab a snack on the way out. Practice starts at noon tomorrow. Hit the gym for dryland beforehand."

Most of the team went ahead of me, heading down the hall to the change room. My legs felt like jello and I could barely feel my feet. But at the same time, it felt good to feel that kind of ache again. It was a lot better than the pain from the accident. It was a great feeling that I appreciated more now than I did. I was lucky to play again. I thought about that every time I strapped on my skates and stepped foot onto the ice. I felt it when I had the



stick in my hand and even when I collided with the boards. I got to feel this again. I was lucky enough to get another chance at this.

“Sawyer,” Coach’s voice filled my ears as I stepped off the ice. He took a seat on the bench, motioning for me to join him. A conversation that wasn’t in his office was rare. He barely ever pulled us aside like this, and especially not one-on-one. He loved to yell and bitch. It was who he was. But this? This wasn’t.

But still. I sat, removing my gloves as soon as my ass touched the wooden bench. “What’s up?”

He swallowed hard, getting up to stand. He leaned his back against the side of the rink, crossing his arms over his chest. His face was blank and unreadable. That was normal for a guy like him. He didn’t wear his emotions on his face like others did. Every time you looked at him, he looked like he was pissed. He had that look to him. It was intimidating as hell. This couldn’t be good.

He cleared his throat. “How’s the shoulder?”

I shrugged. “Fine.”

“You’re fumbling a lot, Sawyer,” he began, letting out a sigh. “I know you’re just back at it and you’re rusty. Maybe I’m being a little too hard on you. But you’re a vital part of this team. These guys look up to you. The media are going to be all over you for weeks when you step foot on that ice come January. There is going to be a massive spotlight on your back and quite frankly, you’re not ready. Not even close.”

That wasn’t exactly what I wanted to hear today. I swallowed hard, trying to hide the obvious disappointment I was feeling. I also had to bite my tongue. I knew what it was like to argue with him and it got me absolutely nowhere but with my ass glued to the bench for a game or two. Depending on how much I got under his skin.

“I know you’ve got a lot going on, Sawyer,” he said. “A lot of it is my doing. You’re not here full-time like the rest of them and I did that to you by getting you tied up in Stonebridge with Chris. You’re still getting back and I understand that. But you’re making stupid fucking mistakes that aren’t you. You can’t pass. You missed every single pass yesterday and again today. You’re so far away from the net that I’m not even sure you can see it properly.”

“I know,” I nodded, letting out a shaky breath. “I’m rusty. I promise I’ll work on it.”

He sighed, uncrossing his arms, letting them go limp beside him. “Is everything else okay?”

I nodded my head once more. It wasn’t like they weren’t okay. I wasn’t going to tell him his brother was an ass or that I was worried about the way I was playing. I wasn’t going to open up my heart and cry on his shoulder like I was sure he was expecting. I was rusty as hell, but that was something I could work on so I left it at that. He didn’t need to know about the rest of it. No one did.

“You’d come to me if there was something more going on, right?”

“Of course,” I lied, getting up from the bench. “See you tomorrow, Coach.”

As I headed down the hall, the rest of the guys were leaving the locker room with the bags slung over their shoulders. Each of them gave me a nod on their way. A lot of them were older, and a whole lot wiser. They were my family and had been for the last six years. They were there for me, visiting me when I was recovering. It felt like I never left when I walked into that locker room.

I stepped inside and my eyes instantly met with Lucas’s hazel-brown ones. He was still in his gear. He hadn’t bothered to take anything off. Hell, even his gloves were still on. He gave me this sympathetic smile that twisted in my gut. He knew something was up. Of course, he did. The guy’s only known me for the last twenty-three years.

I took a seat at my locker, stripping off my gear before tossing it to the ground. He sat down at his, leaning on his elbows as he waited for me to pull myself together. I let out a frustrated sigh before my fingers carded through my hair. The sweat clung to the tips and I hadn’t even noticed. I needed a haircut but with how crazy my life was lately, I barely had the time.

“What’s going on, Sawyer?” Lucas’s voice filled the silence. “What’s bothering you?”

“My shoulder,” I muttered, swallowing the lump forming at the base of my throat. “It’s tight.”

I looked up and found him nodding his head. “Okay,” he licked his lips. “And is there anything else? Perhaps a girl or—“

“I know where you’re headed,” I stopped him dead in his tracks. “This has nothing to do with Catalina. This has everything to do with me and that’s it.”

He paused for a moment. His face contorted as he worked through

whatever was going through his head. “Have you had your shoulder looked at recently?”

I shook my head. Not by anyone other than Jacks, and that was a whole other scenario. “I just need to loosen it up a bit more.”

“All right,” he agreed. “You want to head back out there and work it out a bit? See if it helps you?”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to if I was being honest with myself. I was exhausted as hell and I didn’t want to overwork my muscles to the point where I gave out. But I needed the extra practice. I needed to work through the kinks to be the player I once was. I had to work for it ‘cause it wouldn’t come back otherwise.

We headed back out without another word. On our way through the hall, we passed the assistant coach, who only nodded at us as we headed back to the rink. The pucks were still on the ice, and the nets were sitting there waiting.

After about twenty minutes of shooting at the net, Lucas swerved around the rink, trying to time himself on how fast he could move. Something he was trying to achieve and I had no doubt he would. I knew he had every intention of going to the All-Stars this year.

We passed the puck along as we made our way down the ice and back. Passing it back and forth and if one of us missed, we had to start again. It was good work for my shoulder, and there was a lot less pressure to be perfect when it was just him watching. Not the rest of the team.

“There is something else bothering me,” I breathed out before drawing my stick back, taking a shot at the net from a thirty-five-degree angle.

Lucas stopped at the other side, sending ice flying towards the boards. “Okay. I’m listening.”

“My mom texted me. Last night around nine,” I revealed as I leaned on my stick, looking at my best friend. “Wanted to know if I was coming home for Thanksgiving to finally spend it with family.”

His jaw was on the ice as the silence filled the arena. “Are you *fucking* kidding me?”

“Wish I was,” I shrugged, reaching for another puck to play with on my stick. I flipped it up, tossing it in the air before catching it once more. “It’s been twelve years since I’ve had Thanksgiving with them. What makes her think I’m going to come home now?”

“Did you respond to her?” He questioned. I tried to look past the

sympathetic look on my best friend's face. I knew if I focused on it, I was going to lose my shit and I didn't want to. Telling him about it was hard enough.

"Nope," I stated. "And I'm not going to."

He scoffed. "Why the hell would she reach out to you in the first place? She never cared before."

"Not for a second," I added before taking another shot. The puck hit the side of the net. No wonder Johnson was pissed. I was a shit excuse for a hockey player. "I didn't even get a fucking congratulations text when I was drafted. Hell, she never once asked if I was okay after my accident. Why now?"

I had a feeling it was out of guilt. She was the reason why I was driving that night. Quite frankly, I hated myself just a little bit more for leaving my apartment and getting in my car. I should have trusted my gut feeling and I didn't. It almost cost me my damn life.

"Beats me," he shook his head. "I knew something was bothering you. Is this why your game is so off?"

I let out a sigh. "No, it really is my shoulder. Feels really tense and when I move it a certain way too quickly, it tweaks a bit. It'll loosen with time."

"Get that girl you've been thinking about all week to rub it out for you," he smirked. "Am I meeting your girl next weekend, or what?"

I rolled my eyes at his name for her. "Don't know yet. She's going to get back to me when I see her on Sunday. She has to see if she has it off work. Her best friend too."

"She better," he pointed his hockey stick at me. "I have to meet the girl that you can't stop thinking about."

"I think she's looking forward to coming, even if she won't admit it just yet," I half-smiled.

We skated off the ice, heading back to the changing room before we overworked ourselves. We had an early morning dryland session and the last thing I wanted was to be sore from today's brutal workout.

I removed my equipment with a little more confidence in me this time around. I tucked it all away in my cubby before pulling on a clean pair of boxers. I reached for my phone, seeing that I had another message from my mother, along with one from my girl. The latter makes me smile. So I completely ignored the first one and went straight to hers.

**Jacks: Thinking of you today.**

I opened the message, seeing that she sent me a picture along with it. She was wearing my sweater, the one I gave her on the beach that night she opened up to me. My heart fluttered at the sight of her in it. *She looked beautiful.*

**Me: Missing me, pretty girl?**

The little bubbles popped up at the bottom almost instantly.

**Jacks: You have no idea.**

“You’ve got it bad, man,” Lucas chuckled from the other side of the room.



Lucas wanted to do a guys’ night on my last night here and I wasn’t about to deny him that request. Even though I would see him in a week when I was back to celebrate him, he wanted his guy time.

That meant we were cooped up in my apartment playing video games. Not that I minded much. It felt nice to have people in the place. Lucas took over part of the couch while our buddy and teammate Beau sat on the other end. We were waiting for Nate to join us, but he was running late because Daddy duty mattered more.

Understandable.

Beau Carter had become a good friend of ours the year he was drafted. Two years after Lucas and I were drafted to be exact. The smug son-of-a-bitch walked into the changing room one day with this bag hung over his shoulder and smiled. Almost like his dream was finally coming true.

We got along with him instantly. All six foot two, two hundred pounds of him. With his dirty blonde hair slicked back, his bowlegs, and his grey t-shirt that I was sure he had since he was fifteen. He turned out to be a pretty great guy. A good friend too. One I was grateful to share the ice with.

“All right,” I sighed, flopping down on the couch. “Takeout will be here in thirty.”

“Hopefully Nate gets here before that,” Beau shook his head. “Dude has been through the wringer this week with practice and Zoey has been sick as a dog on top of that. I don’t know how he does it.”

“He’s a good dad,” I added in. “Considering what the man has been through, he’s in a much better place than I would be if I were in his position.”

“No kidding,” Lucas agreed as he let out a loud breath. “Has he talked about her at all since it happened?”

“Not to me. Not even her name is mentioned,” I shook my head. Beau doing the same.

In April of last year, Nate tragically lost his wife on their weekend getaway. None of us knew the details of it, and if we were being honest, we were terrified to ask. All we knew was that our season was over and he wanted to take his wife away for some much-needed time together. Coach Johnson called us two days after they left to tell us about Nate’s wife. None of us wanted to bring her up in case that wasn’t something he was ready for. If he’d ever be ready for it.

He shut down after it happened and rightfully so. Ella was the love of his life. They were college sweethearts and she followed and supported his every move while continuing on her own path. Something hard to find when you play professional hockey. Not every woman was built for a life with a part-time partner. They were a power couple though and if anyone made me want to reconsider my stance on relationships, it was those two. But him losing her the way he did, that only solidified the way I felt about them. I wasn’t sure I’d survive the pain of losing someone I loved. Hell, sometimes I wasn’t sure if he had even moved a step forward.

They had a four-year-old daughter together and she was the most beautiful little girl. Her long blonde hair reminded me of that Disney movie that Catalina made me watch one night. Her gorgeous green eyes were enough to make you dump your wallet in her hands if she so much as asked you to. She was a perfect mix of Nate, with his nose, eyes and ears, and Ella’s smile, hair and attitude. She was a daddy’s girl.

“Do you think he’ll ever move on?” Beau brought up before taking a swing of his beer.

“If I were him,” I paused. “No. I wouldn’t. Heartbreak is hard enough the first time around. Why risk going through it again?”

“Spoken from someone who’s never been in love in the first place,” Beau scoffed. “Unless you count yourself, that is.”

“Clearly, for good reason,” I argued, crossing my arms over my chest. Lucas let out a chuckle. “As if you aren’t on that path with her.”

“Who?” Beau’s eyes widened. He hadn’t been scrolling through his social media in the last month in a half. “Sawyer, are you holding out?”

I rolled my eyes, knowing full well I unintentionally set myself up for this conversation. “Austin here has himself in a relationship with some hot chick in Stonebridge.”

“Oh shit!” Beau chuckled, taking another swig of his beer before deciding to down the rest. “You sly motherfucker! You’ve been back for how long and I’m just finding this out now?”

“She’s damn fine too,” Lucas threw in there, smirking at me like he had nothing to lose. “So out of your league.”

I rolled my eyes. He wasn’t wrong ‘cause she was so out of my league. Hell, we weren’t even in the same damn ballpark. “Yeah, yeah!”

“Good lay, I bet,” Beau teased. “Never thought I’d live to see the day that Austin Sawyer became a one pussy kind of man.”

“All right, enough with that,” I shook my head, placing my hands on the counter. I could feel my heart rate picking up. “We’re going to get one thing straight. We’re not talking about her like that.” And we weren’t. I wasn’t going to stand for anyone degrading her like that. She had been through enough fucking shit already and the last thing she needed was a bunch of hockey players treating her like she was a piece of meat to me. She did not deserve to be disrespected in any way. She needed to feel safe and it was my job to make sure that happened and it stayed that way. “If you don’t like that I’m with someone, fine. But the least you can do is treat her with respect and human decency. She deserves that much from you guys.”

“Austin, I was just —“

I didn’t want to hear the excuse. “And yeah, you know what? I care about her. I know it might be a difficult concept to grasp given that I’ve fucked half of Long Island, but I do. And I’m going to do everything I can to protect her.”

Lucas shook his head. “You know I’ve got your back. That means I’ve got hers too, right?” I didn’t know it for sure, but I certainly hoped it. It was nice to hear it. “I’m glad you’ve got someone that makes you feel like this. It’s ‘bout time you had someone on your team.”

“Sawyer, I meant nothing by it,” Beau jumped in, holding his hands up in defence. “I’m just used to the locker room talk, ya know? Ya know, who got

the Sawyer Special? Not the Sawyer who's settling down. I mean no disrespect to you, or your girl. I'm happy for you, dude. She's got a good one."

"She's got one hell of a man on her team," Lucas reminded me, keeping his tone even and stern. His usual humour is nowhere near evident. "I can't wait to get to know her when she comes next weekend. I don't care if you have to kidnap her. She's going to be here."

My shoulders relaxed and my defences dropped. I hoped I didn't have to have this conversation with them again, and something told me I wouldn't. I knew I wouldn't have to have it with Nate. He wasn't like Beau, who had been through more women than Lucas and I combined. Nate was a one-woman kind of man. I don't think he's even looked at a woman since his wife passed.

"I will kidnap her if I have to," I stated as I opened up my fridge, grabbing another beer from the shelf. "Her current job fucking sucks and they don't appreciate her in the slightest."

Lucas downed the rest of his beer before joining me in the kitchen to grab another one. "I remember those days. Remember that summer I worked fast food? My manager was a cranky ol' bitch. I couldn't wait to quit." The look of pure disgust on his face was priceless.

"You working fast food is not something I ever picture, Luke," Beau let out a laugh. "They make you wear a little hairnet for that flow you got going on?"

"Fuck off, Carter." He circled the counter, heading back to the couch where he left the PlayStation controller. "I work for my money."

"Tell that to your three-game streak with no points and no assists," Beau shot back.

Fuck, I missed guys' night.





## *Catalina*

Twenty thousand words.

I smiled at my word count on the screen before shutting my laptop. It was just after eight when I checked my phone and I had to head home. I had taken to writing in the bookstore on the riverwalk. For some reason, getting out of the apartment and walking here cleared my head enough to get me to write. Clearly. I wrote twenty thousand words this week.

*Thank god!*

I was feeling good about it, which hadn't happened in I don't know how long. That confidence I once felt was back and for the first time in forever, I felt like I had a future as an author. It wasn't just a dream, it was becoming a reality.

Avery was slowly becoming my favourite fictional female character for her strength alone. She was a girl that had been through some shit, but she wasn't letting it ruin her. She wasn't afraid to put herself out there to go get what she wanted. She was everything I wished I could be and more.

Rhys was the typical dream male main character. Tall and handsome with a soft side for Avery, the new girl in town. He treated her like a Queen, in and out of the bedroom... or at least he was going to. I was only twenty thousand words in and that was far too early for them to fuck. I had to build the tension up.

The whole thing was a reminder that I needed to get laid. Or at least get myself off in the shower later.

The other issue was that Rhys was very very much based on a particular hockey player that I couldn't take my mind off. Basing my main character off of him was probably a mistake, especially when this contract met its inevitable end. In the same way, it was going to be a great reminder of what we had between us in my eyes. Austin had been great to me from the moment I met him.

I shoved my laptop into my bag before sliding it over my shoulder. I had my empty cup of tea in my hand, ready to toss it out before making my way to my apartment. The nights were getting cooler now that it was November. I had to wear a thicker sweater because my thin ones wouldn't cut it at this time of night. The sun had now set by seven, making my walk home a darker one.

I hadn't meant to stay as long as I did tonight. I just knew if I went home at six, I'd be pacing back and forth, waiting for Austin to come home. Austin was coming home late tonight and I didn't want to admit just how excited I was to see him. Especially after how we spent Halloween together.

His spending the night in my apartment had felt like our friendship had moved onto another level. It wasn't even like he spent the night in my bed with me. He slept on the couch while I slept in my bed. It was more or less him staying to make sure I was okay after the shit day I had. I felt safe with him staying there and I knew that he was on my side. He was on my team. He was my partner. I wanted it to happen again. Maybe that was where my burst of inspiration came from.

I knew it was because of him. There was no other way to explain it.

Not to mention, I was writing a romance novel. How could he not inspire me?

I made it back to my apartment building with a chill in my bones. The temperature had dropped significantly tonight. I wouldn't be surprised if it started snowing with the temperatures that low. I was used to it, especially when I lived near Chicago. It was going to make visiting Austin in Long Island a little easier.

I reached my apartment door and pulled out my keys. Only one more night and I'll see Austin in the morning. Only a few more hours. I twisted the key in the lock, opening up the door.

The lights were on and the smell of something delicious filled my nose. My eyes instantly found the tall, muscular hockey player standing in my kitchen with a navy blue apron covering his shirt. I couldn't contain my smile at the sight of him as I placed my bag down on the floor. I didn't think twice about closing the space between us, throwing my arms around his neck, and hugging him tightly. He responded instantly, wrapping his arms around my waist.

"I thought you weren't coming home until late tonight?" I breathed out, giving him one more squeeze before pulling back a little.

His smile matched mine. "I caught an earlier flight," he shrugged. "Figured I'd surprise you."

"I'm surprised all right!" I grinned, breathing him in. The familiar scent of his Tom Ford cologne filled my nose, bringing me a sense of comfort instantly. God, I missed him. "What are you making?"

"My specialty," he smirked. "Chicken tacos. You make me dinner all the

time and I thought it was about time that I made you dinner instead.” My heart swelled in my chest as I looked around, seeing the amount of effort he was putting into making dinner for me. “Why don’t you go get changed into something comfy? Dinner will be ready in fifteen.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I offered, glancing up into his soft eyes.

He shook his head. “Nope. Just need you to be comfy, Jacks.”

“Got it.”

I made my way out of the kitchen, glancing over my shoulder as I walked into my room. Watching him move around my kitchen with such ease was incredible. Not to mention, that apron should not have looked as sexy as it did on him. His hair was coiffed perfectly to the right, except for one piece that fell over his forehead. He was focused on his task at hand, and I couldn’t take my eyes off of him.

“I can feel you watching me,” he called out without taking his eyes off of what he was chopping up.

I let out a laugh. “It’s not my fault you look sexy in an apron.”

He shook his head, not daring to look up. I could see from where I was standing that he had a smile spread wide across his cheeks. I missed that smile. I missed everything about him and knowing he came home early just to spend more time with me made my heart swell. Nothing about this whole arrangement was pretending. There was no way it was with how he made me feel. Even if it was only one-sided and he only saw me as his friend. I could live with that if it meant he was in my life.

I quickly changed into my favourite pair of pajama pants and an oversized shirt that I often wore to bed. I decided it would be best for everyone if I kept my bra on. I wasn’t the kind of girl who could get away with not wearing one and not having it be noticeable.

He was just grabbing two plates from the cupboard when I made my way into the kitchen, taking him in once more. Even though he’s only been back at practice for a few weeks, I can see the difference it’s making on him. He stands up straighter and taller. His ass is impossibly perkier and his sweatpants hung off of his hips most deliciously. He looked content in a way I didn’t know he ever could be. After all, I only knew Austin, the Poysen Entertainment guy and Austin, the man I was fake dating. I barely knew Austin Sawyer, the NHL hockey player or Austin Sawyer, the man from Long Island.

It dawned on me then that there was a whole part of him that I had no idea about. I was just this tiny part of his magnificent life. I was a blimp on his radar thanks to him being here for three months.

To me, he was a significant part of my life. I could count on one hand the number of times I had friends over in my apartment. He was over almost every day these days, and I enjoyed it. His company was different from when Haley was over. We didn't have to have conversation after conversation. We could sit in complete silence the entire night and watch whatever is on TV and it would be perfect. I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders when he was around. I was going to miss that when he was back in Long Island full-time.

He cleared his throat, capturing my attention. "So, I made two kinds. The one on the left is buffalo chicken, so it's a lot spicier and tangier but I'm certain you'll be able to handle it. The one on the right is sweet and sour chicken. Both of them are equally as good. Then we've got all of our add-ons in these bowls here so you can make your tacos however you please."

He went all out for dinner. I knew he wasn't the most skilled in the kitchen, but I had no idea he could make something like this. Usually, I was the one cooking while he helped out when he could. "Where did you learn how to make this?"

He chuckled, brushing his hair away from his forehead. "When I was injured and recovering from the accident, I needed to find something to do to take my mind off of... everything. I never learned to cook growing up and I knew it was something I was obviously going to need." He shared as he made his way over to the table by the couch, placing a couple of plates down. "I started watching The Food Network at first, hoping that maybe I'd pick up a thing or two. I'm still learning and I'm not nearly as good as you, but I do know how to make this."

I smiled as I reached for the other plates, carrying them over to him. "You're strong. You know that?"

He furrowed his brows, taking a seat.

"You are," I breathed out. "I know I don't know the details of the accident and what it did to you. What I do know is that you're the kind of person who doesn't stop fighting. Your strength and determination go beyond hockey and it's embedded into the person you are. Everyone I know would have taken that accident as a sign to give up and always wonder what could have been."

He shrugged his shoulders, letting the compliment roll off of his shoulders as if he didn't believe it. "I'm not nearly as strong as you believe I am, Jacks." He reached for the remote, turning the TV on, effectively putting an end to this conversation.

I was going to let it go. For now. There was something in me screaming that it wasn't something I could just let go of. It was the first time his confidence faltered. He wasn't putting on this cocky guy facade. I didn't know if he was tired of it all or if there was something more to it. I had to find out. He wouldn't drop it if this were the other way around.



Turns out it was hard to decide which chicken tacos were my favourite. The buffalo were spicy in the best way and mixed perfectly with the cheese and veggie mix he concocted. The sweet and sour ones reminded me of a lot of summers in my childhood home. My dad's barbecue chicken to be exact. We used to sneak out back when he was getting it ready, just to steal some of his special sauce before he used it, hoping he wouldn't notice. He did every time.

He cleared up the food from the table, taking it into the kitchen. I tried to follow him, only to have him protest. He told me to sit tight and let him do it all. I knew he was just being kind, but I couldn't help but wonder if there was something more.

He had been quiet for most of dinner, but then again, it was a little messy to talk when you were eating tacos. He made quick work of cleaning up the dishes and leftovers, joining me back on the couch to continue watching *Wizards of Waverly Place*.

He took a seat close to me, making me smile at myself more than anything. I liked that he got close to me, and left no space between us when he was here. Ever since I became comfortable around him, he made it a point to be in my bubble more often than not.

"You're awfully quiet tonight," I pointed out as I threw my legs over his lap, facing him completely. "What's going on?"

He half smiled, not daring to look at me as his big hand rested on my shin. I reached my hand over his shoulder, playing with the soft ends of his hair by the base of his neck. "Just been a long ass week."

I frowned, hearing the defeat in his voice. The travel part of this couldn't be easy on him or his body. Not to mention, he probably wasn't playing at his full capacity after being off for the better part of the last year. He had to be sore.

"I'll be coming with you this weekend," I smiled, hoping to cheer him up, even if it was just the slightest amount. It earned me a warm smile, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I'm happy about that," he nodded, squeezing my calf. "I can't wait to show you some of the best parts of Long Island and have you at my place."

I beamed. "I can't wait to see what your place looks like. And meet Lucas."

He chuckled, leaning closer to me in the process. There was my guy. My happy guy. "Oh, you'll meet him. He lives in the same building as I do. You'll be lucky to get rid of him."

"Does he know about us? What's really going on?"

He nodded his head. "I can't lie to my best friend. I'm fucking terrible at lying and he'd see right through it."

I hated to admit it, even to myself, but I was a little jealous that he had someone who knew him so deeply that they could tell when he was lying. Never in my life, did I have someone that knew me that well, let alone cared to know me that well. I doubted anyone ever would. At the same time, I loved that he had someone like that. Someone he could turn to when he needed a friend. Someone who supported him no matter what.

"Well, I do hope I get a bit of alone time with you," I told him, giving him a little nudge. "I like moments like this with you."

"Me too, Jacks," he muttered.

He was tired and I could see it in his eyes. His day couldn't have been easy. I wondered if I should urge him to go home to nap or if I should offer him something. A bath perhaps or even a massage to work through his tense muscles. They had to be, given that he was just back to working them.

"Are you sore?" I asked him.

"Is it that obvious?"

I giggled, shaking my head. "I can massage you if you'd like. Work through some of that tension." I had no idea why my offer made me nervous. Maybe the idea of touching him did? I wasn't a stranger to touching him though. I was touching him now for crying out loud. "Or if you want, I can run a bath?"

“You don’t have to do anything, Jacks,” he shook his head with a smile. “I appreciate the offer though.”

“You’re stubborn, you know that?”

He shrugged his shoulders. His strong, broad shoulders that I kind of wanted to touch now that the idea was planted in my head.

I shifted off of his lap and he furrowed his perfectly shaped brows. I tugged at his hand, urging him to follow me towards my bed. If we weren’t already such good friends, I’m sure his mind would have gone straight to the gutter. “Shirt off and make yourself comfortable.”

“Jacks.”

“Nope,” I protested. “Not this time. Let your fake girlfriend take care of you for ten minutes. Can you do that?”

He let out a sad sigh. “Am I that grumpy tonight?”

I shook my head, taking a step closer to him. He took a seat at the edge of my bed, making me quite a bit taller than him. “No,” I assured him with a soft smile, reaching my hand up to his cheek. “You’re just a little off tonight is all and that’s okay.”

“I feel like I’ve been off for the past couple of days,” he admitted, letting his head drop.

I brushed my thumb over his cheekbone. “You’re allowed to have as many off days as you need,” I reminded him. “You’re also allowed to be taken care of.”

He glanced up, meeting my eyes. My heart fluttered at the look in his eyes. He was looking at me so sweetly like he had never been shown this kind of softness. I wanted him to have the affection he craved, and I didn’t want him to feel guilty for asking for it.

“You’re allowed to be taken care of, Austin,” I repeated, much softer this time; more intimately.

He shifted back before pulling at the collar of his shirt, tugging it over his head. I promised myself that I was going to be respectful and not drool over him, but holy fuck. As soon as his shirt was off, all I could see were the dips and divots of his muscles. His tattoo on his arm was a whole other reason to stare. Austin was fucking gorgeous.

“You’re staring again,” he chuckled.

“Admiring,” I corrected him. “My fake boyfriend is kinda hot.”

His lips curled upwards before he let out a laugh. I felt my cheeks heating up and I knew for a fact that they had a pink hue to them. They were even



more noticeable with the light amount of makeup I had on.

His hands reached for my waist, tugging me down onto the bed with him. I felt it again. That fluttering feeling in my chest. It only grew stronger as my back hit the mattress. He shifted next to me, glancing down at me this time. A few strands of his hair flipped forward, getting a little in his face as our eyes connected.

“My fake girlfriend is hot,” he muttered as he leaned closer. My hand instinctively reached up, cupping his cheek once more. His hand squeezed my hip, reminding me of how close he was. And he was.

This was the closest I had let someone be to my body in a very long time. The world wasn't ending. My body was responding to him. I felt a heat growing in my lower belly. Holy fuck, I was attracted to this man and it wasn't just surface level. I craved him. I needed him. I longed for him. And that thought alone was terrifying because I didn't know if he needed me in the same way.

Austin had been with countless women before me. He never wanted to be someone's boyfriend and for valid reasons. He had this amazing career that he was about to hop back into in a little more than a month. He lived in Long Island and had this whole other life that didn't include me.

Not to mention, I wasn't hot and I knew it. I had moments where I was pretty. Moments when my hair was straight and not greasy as hell. The days my makeup wasn't caked looking and my mascara wasn't clumped together on my left eye. Days where my outfit fit together and I didn't look bloated as hell. Even then, I was curvy and hated the pouch on my stomach and how my boobs weren't as perky as I wanted them to be. I was a six on a good day. Guys like him didn't settle for sixes.

I would never be his type. I would never be good enough to keep a man like him satisfied. This was an arrangement. This was contracted. None of this was through natural attraction. We were contracted to do this for his career. Just like he was helping me with mine.

A business arrangement. *Mutual benefits.*

It wasn't on equal levels. I was falling for a man who would never see me that way. That thought alone made my body tense and he knew it too.

His hands were off of me in an instant and he put a sizeable amount of space between us. “Jacks, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—“

I wanted to tell him he didn't do anything wrong. He didn't. It was purely my own doing. I couldn't form those words. My mouth was dry and I felt a

lump forming in my throat, stopping me from saying everything I needed. Nothing came out. No words strung together made a lick of sense in my head. Nothing made sense to me but the fact that I was too broken for someone as perfect as him.

He reached for his shirt, pulling it over his head quicker than he took it off. "I'm gonna go. Give you some space."

Before I could even process his words, he was heading for the door and I was left with my thoughts. The ones that ruined every good thing that happened between us.



## Austin

I was in a fucking mood tonight.

It wasn't like it was intentional, but I surely did nothing to steer it away from the dark woods. Practice didn't go well this week. My game was so rusty that it was questionable whether I'd be in the right shape to play in January. I couldn't play nearly half as well as I used to thanks to my shoulder injury. It was extremely tight and my flexibility was off, making my plays shit.

My Mother's consistent texts were another sore spot. Hell, they almost made my shoulder injury look laughable, even though she is the reason for it. Her begs and pleas for me to come to family Thanksgiving were embarrassing as hell. Not to mention, I was never going to step foot in that house ever again. Too much time had passed since I left and there was nothing left for me there. She was begging because I had a girlfriend and she knew that she lost all chances of being a part of my family in the future. She lost that chance a long time ago.

The worst part of my shit mood was fucking up things with Catalina. I knew I had to hold back when it came to her because of her trauma. I made her uncomfortable tonight and I owed her an apology for that. Even if she offered to massage my shoulder, it didn't give me the right to make a move on her.

She wasn't really my girlfriend. She was contracted to me. She didn't owe me anything. Hell, she didn't even owe me a fucking friendship. She agreed to this because my agent forced her to agree. We were caught and rumours spread. She didn't agree because she wanted to.

I felt like the world's biggest asshole. I had been flirting with her non-stop since I met her. Yeah, she reciprocated, but what if I made her so uncomfortable that she felt like she had to? Then again, if she was, I was sure she would have told me. She wouldn't have opened up about her trauma if I did. She wouldn't have agreed to come to Long Island with me next week if that were the case.

I chopped it all up to overthinking. Jacks was my friend and she had been through something that changed the way she saw everything. She wasn't going to move forward from it because of a few nice words. Just like I didn't get over my dad's abuse after high school, or when I moved in and stayed

with Lucas and his dad. Just like the accident that I was still working through. It took time and energy to move on from something that fucked you up. You couldn't sleep it off like a sickness or put a bandaid on it like a cut. It took a significant amount of mental energy to work through trauma.

I walked back into my apartment, tossing my keys on the counter before making my way to the bathroom. I was exhausted and a little down on myself. A combination I didn't favour. I knew I needed a hot shower and a good night's sleep in hopes that it would snap me out of this funk I was in.

I turned the water on hot before stripping out of my clothes. The small room quickly filled with steam, effectively covering the mirror so I wouldn't have to look at myself for a good while. I couldn't wait to be back in Long Island permanently so I would have consistent water pressure and the space to move around without the fear of knocking something over. I didn't want to be homesick anymore.

The hot water slipped over my sore muscles the second I stepped in. My shoulder was feeling particularly tight tonight and I knew it had to do with how much I overworked it. I knew I needed to get it looked at before it became a bigger issue.

My mind was going a mile a minute as I watched the water swirl around my feet. I had to get better in all aspects of my life, but especially in hockey. My career had already suffered so much this season and half of last because of this accident. Trying to heal from my injuries had been another obstacle. My life had been a series of obstacles and I had hurdled over all of them so far, but some of them I stumbled over, lucky to scrape by.

My parents? That was a scrape by. That was crawling on my knees, bleeding and broken until I made it over that hurdle. And here I was, letting them get to me again. I was better off without them and I knew that. I had proved that to myself. I had time and time again. My parents didn't have a spot in my life and they made sure of that. No amount of apologies was going to make up for years of abuse, neglect and trauma they put me through.

I knew they were the reason why I was the way I was. Why I never settled down fully with someone when I was in high school. Why I never brought anyone home with me. Why I worked so hard to get where I was and why I was so disappointed in myself for not being one hundred percent off the bat. I never wanted to be a failure. I never wanted to be a disappointment to anyone else again.

I couldn't stand being a disappointment in the league. I couldn't stand

being a disappointment as a partner and friend. Even if I had to suffer, at least I wasn't a disappointment. This was going to be great to talk about in therapy this week. My therapist was going to love all of this.

I shut the shower off, taking a step out of the porcelain frame and onto my microfibre towel. I wrapped another around my hips, letting it hang low enough that I could see the happy trail leading down beneath it.

*Stop thinking about your dick, Austin.*

I made my way over to the steam-covered mirror as I ran my fingers through my wet hair. I could feel the exhaustion creeping up on me. It was barely after nine o'clock and I was ready to turn in without hesitation. As much as I wanted to walk back into Catalina's apartment and figure out what the fuck is going on between us, I wasn't in the right state of mind to do so.

I hated to admit it, but this thing with my Mom was affecting me harder than it should have been. I hadn't had a therapy session this week thanks to my busy hockey schedule and I knew I needed one to work through all of this shit and why it was running me through the ringer. I should have been over their bullshit by now. It had been over ten years since I cut them out.

I couldn't shake the thoughts out of my mind tonight. If it wasn't them, it was the accident and that wasn't something I wanted to think about. I just wanted to turn my mind off for a while and not be in this constant cycle of anxiety. I hadn't felt like this in a long ass time.

I pulled on my favourite pair of boxers, leaving my sweats on the counter before going about my routine. Deodorant, brushing my teeth. The typical before bed tasks. I decided against a shirt tonight, not wanting to overheat with how fast my mind was going.

I took in a deep breath, trying to centre myself.

They aren't here, Austin. They are farther away than they normally are.

*Breathe out.*

*Deep breath.*

I don't have to associate with them. Nothing is forcing me to talk to them. I cut them off for a reason. That's acceptable.

*Breathe out.*

*Deep breath.*

I gave my mom a chance and she blew it. She damn near got me killed. I don't owe her anything. The accident wouldn't have happened if it weren't for her.

*Breathe out.*

*Breathe in.*

You're okay, Austin. It's just anxiety. It will pass. You're okay now. Everything is okay. Everything is going to be okay.

I flicked the bathroom light off and made my way over to my bed. My heart was beating faster than I would have liked. Being in this apartment — this empty apartment — I felt uneasy. The pale white walls reminded me more of the hospital than anything.

I reached over, turning off the lamp to darken the room completely. The sounds of the rain hitting the window filled my ears. Something I was going to use to calm my heart rate. I loved the sound of the rain. It reminded me of Halloween night when Jacks invited me to spend the night with her. That tropical storm seemed to last forever and in a way, I would have stayed in that moment with her forever if I could have.

A moment where we were both safe with each other. It was the first time I was safe with someone and I was almost certain it was the same for her. After all, there were a lot of tears on her part.

Right now, I was feeling like she was that night. Only I was too damn ashamed to go over there and admit I needed her.

What grown man needed someone?



I jolted awake with my heart pounding in my chest. It felt like it was a million degrees in my room as I kicked the comforter to the floor.

My room.

I wasn't in my room. Panic arose as I searched my surroundings, desperately trying to find something familiar to ground me. It was dark. Not a single ounce of light in the room. That had to be a good sign, right? Hospitals didn't turn their lights off and each room had a window into the well-lit hallway. No lights were good. No lights.

My hand reached to the right, searching for a table that I might have put my phone on. Sweat covered my body, making me feel like I was on fire. It was just a nightmare. I was safe. I was okay. It was all just a very bad dream and I had gotten past that point in my life.

I wasn't in the hospital anymore. I could walk on my own. Hell, I was

back on the ice. I was okay. Everything was okay. Only, it didn't feel like it was. My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. My hands were shaking profusely. Every time I shut my eyes, all I could see was the accident scene before me.

Deep breath.

In through my nose. Out through my mouth.

Repeat.

Deep breath.

*Breathe.*

I swallowed hard, reaching over to the side of my table, and flicking on the lamp once more. My eyes instantly went to the empty spot where my phone usually was. Where the fuck did I put my phone? Was it in my pocket and I forgot to take it out?

I slipped out of bed, making my way into the bathroom in search of my pants for my phone. My wallet was on the counter, but no sign of my phone. *Shit.*

I had my phone when I was in Catalina's apartment and I put it on the counter when I was cooking. I did not need to touch it when we were eating. It was still in her apartment. *Fuck me.*

My hair was everywhere when I finally looked up in the mirror. I had to run my hands through my hair at least two dozen times after the nightmare. I was a little sweaty looking, but I had been worse. I had been a lot worse.

It was a little after one in the morning when I looked at the clock on the nightstand. A couple of hours of sleep. That was it. I sauntered back into my room, pulling out a pair of sweatpants, and pulling them up my legs before heading to the kitchen. I needed to get my phone from Catalina's apartment. I had alarms set on there that she wasn't going to appreciate going off at the times they were set for. It wasn't even like I could text her that I was coming to get it. I hoped she was asleep and it was a quick in and out job.

I didn't bother putting a shirt on when I swiped my key to her apartment off the counter. The bright lights in the hall damn near blinded me as I made it the twelve steps from my door to hers. I slipped my key into the lock, twisting the knob quietly before stepping inside.

Panic rose in my chest when I realized her light was still on. My brows knit together when I saw her. She was sitting in the middle of her queen-sized bed with her laptop perched up on a pillow. Her auburn red hair was in a messy bun on top of her head and she was in her comfortable bedtime



clothes. She was typing away at that thing she hadn't even noticed I walked in.

I stopped dead in my tracks when I heard her snuffle. She was crying? What the —

“Jacks?” I gently cleared my throat. Her head flicked up and her eyes went wide. “Sorry. I left my phone here. Are you crying?”

She let out a laugh as she swiped her fingers beneath her eyes. “Not technically. I'm just emotional.”

“What does that even mean?” I cocked my head to the side as I took a step closer to her. I ignored the sense of calm that washed over me as I grew closer to my girl. Just the smell of her perfume was more calming than any of the breathing exercises I had done earlier.

She let out a shaky breath as her eyes met mine. “It means that what I was writing got to me. It's completely normal.”

I nodded my head, giving her a reassuring smile. I could listen to her talk for hours about anything she damn well wanted to talk about. “You want to tell me about it?”

She shook her head. “It's nothing definite yet. First draft in all.”

“So? I'd love to hear it, if you want to share,” I shrugged my shoulders before shoving my hands in the front pockets of my sweats. Shit. I should have put a shirt on.

“It's hard to explain when you don't exactly know the characters or the story,” she began, not daring to take her eyes off of her laptop screen. “The female main character left her hometown to stay with her dad for the summer. She needed a fresh start after losing her older brother. This boy in town, the male main character, has eyes for her. I just wrote a scene where she got in a fight with her dad and took off. Rhys, the main character drove past her and picked her up, but they had a moment before she got in the car. He doesn't know the reason why she's in town, which is part of the fight she had with her dad, and no one knows that her stepdad is abusive to her.”

Damn. I wanted to read this story. Felt a little like my life. “Is Rhys the knight in shining armour?” I asked her. “She needs a friend.”

“I think she's going to save herself. But Rhys is going to play a part in her success story,” she giggled, shutting her screen.

“It's a little late to be writing, isn't it?” I cocked my eyebrow.

“Creativity doesn't sleep, my friend. And it certainly comes at the most inopportune times,” she shared as she placed her laptop on her bedside table.

“Your phone is on the other table. It went off about an hour ago and I realized you left it. I plugged it in to charge. I didn’t want to risk waking you.”

She should have. Maybe then I wouldn’t have had a nightmare like that.

“You okay?” She asked me. “You look a little... rough.”

“Nightmare,” I breathed out. “About the accident. I get ‘em every once in a while.”

She frowned, looking up at me with her gorgeous green eyes. “Sucks, doesn’t it?” She half-smiled. “Makes you feel like you’re back there. Helpless again. Reliving it all.”

“Do you get them after —“

“I did,” she confessed. “For a long time. They become less and less with time and healing. I haven’t had one since I’ve been with you.”

“What do you mean?” I questioned as I took a seat at the bottom of her bed, partially facing her.

She sighed, placing her hands in her lap, avoiding looking at me. “It’s stupid,” she scoffed, shrugging her shoulders. Whatever it was wasn’t stupid. “It means I’ve convinced myself that no matter what, you’ll be there to protect me. I let myself believe that even if we have the worst fight in the world if I call you, you’d be there for me. Like I said, it’s stupid.”

It wasn’t stupid. Hearing her say that meant the fucking world to me and shattered me all in the same moment. She was right. I’d do anything to protect her. Even if we had the biggest blowout in the world, I’d drop anything if she needed me. I’d do anything for her. I just wished she knew that she could trust that feeling. Trust that I would be there for her.

“I would do anything to protect you,” I assured her with a soft smile. “I would no matter where I am, or what’s going on. You’re my Jacks. I’ve only got one of you and you’re one of a kind.”

She smiled, more to herself than toward me. “I’m sorry about earlier, Austin,” she breathed out, not daring to look up. “I got caught up in my thoughts and had a moment where they won and it’s not fair to you. You didn’t do anything wrong. If anything, I did.”

The sadness in her eyes damn near broke me. She had nothing to apologize for. She didn’t owe me anything, especially something physical like that. She wasn’t comfortable and I should have known that. It wasn’t part of our agreement, even if it was something I wanted.

I shook my head as I turned to face her more. “You did nothing wrong, Jacks,” I assured her with a sad smile, matching hers. “Why would you think

you did anything wrong?”

“—‘cause I feel like I was leading you on tonight and that isn’t fair to you,” she shrugged before her throat jumped. We were a foot apart, maybe more, and I could feel the warmth of her body. Something I needed but was too afraid to ask for.

I reached my hand out, laying it on the bed halfway between us, waiting to see if she was going to take it. She didn’t. “Jacks, you’re not leading me on,” I stated. “We’re in a fake relationship. Shit happens.” *Real smooth.*

Her shoulders tensed. “I know. It’s stupid.” She was shutting down. Brushing it off as if it didn’t matter when it did. She was upset about something and I wasn’t sure she was going to tell me what it was.

“What happens between us isn’t fake, Jacks. This conversation isn’t fake. Our friendship isn’t fake.” *The way I feel about you isn’t fake.* “Why would you think that you’re leading me on?”

She let out a sigh, almost as if she was admitting defeat. I turned my body more so I was facing her completely and not straining my shoulder so much. “Austin, you’re a guy. You have wants and needs and you’re not getting any of them with me because I’m broken,” she stated with a sadness I never wanted to hear in her tone. She felt like she wasn’t good enough for me. “You’ve been with countless women who have satisfied you in ways I’ll never be able to.”

I didn’t want to fully assume that she saw me that way, but it was hard not to think about her wanting me that way. Regardless, this wasn’t the place or time for that. Not when she was sharing openly about what was bothering her. That was something I worked hard for. I wanted her to feel comfortable talking to me about anything and everything.

“Jacks,” I shook my head, furrowing my brows. “Where is all this coming from?”

Her jaw tightened as her eyes flicked up to meet mine. “It’s been a thought on my mind for a while,” she confessed. “Longer than I’ve known you. It just kind of came up more now and after today, I got lost down that path.”

“Does this have anything to do with what you told me on the phone a while ago,” I questioned. “With guys changing the topic to sex with you?”

“Yeah, it does,” she nodded. “But your history is also a little intimidating and I didn’t realize it until today. On top of that, I was reminded that I’m twenty-seven and the only good experience I have is in books. And I’m

terrified of finding out how completely broken I am.”

I shifted myself closer to her before slipping my hand in hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “You’re not completely broken, Jacks,” I frowned as I fought the urge to cup her face with my other hand. “We’re all a little broken. That’s how we let the light in. You and I both know things aren’t always sunshine and rainbows. Rainy days and storms make their way through too. It doesn’t make us any less because of them.”

She let out a giggle. “Now who’s the writer?”

I rolled my eyes playfully. “Still you, sweetheart. I’m just your inspiration.” Her smile was back, even if it didn’t fully reach her eyes. “My past is intimidating and I get that. I’ve been with a lot of women. But none of those women compared to what I have with you. They wanted one thing and one thing only and that was a night with a famous hockey player to cross off their bucket list.”

“I know.”

She really didn’t know. “And for me, it was just sex. Nothing more,” I stated as my hand reached up, cupping her face, urging her to look at me. “I didn’t care if I saw them smile the way I search for yours. With you, I notice when something is off, even if it’s just the slightest thing. I know when you’ve had a good day at work and when you’ve had a bad day. I know when you haven’t had your first cup of tea because you’re extra grumpy and you give people this side eye as if to say ‘*Shut up you’re so annoying.*’ I know when you want a hug and when you want to be left alone. Most of all, I know that your heart is one of the biggest out there, and it’s been broken too many times.”

“Austin.”

“You may be contracted to be my girlfriend, but what isn’t contracted is how much I care about you,” I declared. “I wouldn’t be in your apartment right now, shirtless no less, if this between us was just a contract.”

Her lips curled upwards before her hand reached up to my wrist. “Why are you here, Austin?” She asked softly.

“Because I had a nightmare and the only place I wanted to be was here with you.” Boldest fucking statement I had ever made. Was I about to shit myself? Absolutely. Was I going to regret it? Most likely. But I could worry about these things later. Right now, I was right where I wanted to be. I could deal with the consequences later.

Her hand dropped but her smile didn’t. I let my hand slip, taking it back

in case I crossed the line. She shifted over, reaching her side table. She pulled out a bottle of lotion, giving me a half-smile. “You want to turn around so I can rub that shoulder of yours?”

“You sure?”

She nodded with a grin.

I wasn’t about to protest. I knew my shoulder needed some serious work and I would do anything to have her hands on me over anyone else. She poured some lotion on her hands before getting to work.

She started slow and gentle, almost as if she was afraid of hurting me if she dug in. Either way, it felt amazing. I felt the tension leaving my body with every soft stroke of her fingers. The lotion she was using had this floral scent to it mixed with something a little muskier. Something I didn’t mind in the slightest.

She was throughout, getting in deep to the spot I really needed it and I was sure she knew it. I didn’t even have it in me to be insecure about the scars that covered me from the accident. I didn’t feel that need to cover up around her like I did with everyone else. With her, I felt safe. I felt a sense of calm and warmth.

“My mom’s the reason I was in that accident,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “She called me that night after ten years of silence. I answered it, not knowing it was her. She was crying, telling me that my dad was drunk and had beaten the shit out of her. She told me her arm was broken, along with a couple of her ribs. She had a black eye and her head was bleeding.

“I told her to call 911. She told me she couldn’t because they would take her to the hospital he worked in,” I paused, swallowing the lump forming in my throat. “She begged me to come for her. In the middle of one of the worst snow storms of the year, she begged me to come help her.”

“And you did,” she breathed out.

“And I got in my car, barely able to see out of my windshield, ready to make a two-hour drive to her,” I revealed. “An hour in is when someone crashed into me. They were going full speed on a shitty road and drove straight into the driver’s side of my car.

“The car flipped three times before it settled in a field. Bits and pieces are a bit foggy, but I remember being upside down. I remember being in the worst pain I’ve ever felt. I remember the metal piece stuck in my shoulder,” I sighed, letting out another shaky breath as she worked her fingers deeper into

my shoulder, getting the spot that's been bothering me for weeks now. "And I remember thinking that I wasn't getting out of this. I was going to die in some field all alone."

Her movements stopped, bringing on a wave of anxiety that wasn't there before. Had I shared too much with her? Was it too much to hear? She didn't ask for any of this information after all.

Two arms wrapped around me from behind before warmth radiated over my back. My hands instantly came up, reaching for her in a sad attempt to keep her close. I wanted her close. I never wanted her to let me go.

"The accident fucked me up," I confessed. "More than anyone knows. But the worst part about it was finding out my mom had lied. My dad didn't touch her. She was fine. She only said it so I'd come so she'd look good to her friends that her son was an NHL star. She never came to visit me in the hospital. I found out from Lucas, who found out from his dad that she was fine."

She squeezed me tighter as her head pressed against the back of my neck. I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. This was something I had shared with my therapist, but it wasn't the same as telling someone I care about. Being held this way; being comforted, it was what I needed more than I wanted to admit. I wasn't alone anymore.

"You're insanely strong, you know that?" She whispered, giving me another squeeze. I felt a touch of wetness slide along my shoulder blade. "Austin, you have been through so much and you've come so far. You don't owe them anything."

I chuckled. "Funny you say that. She keeps texting me, asking me to come for Thanksgiving."

"You don't owe her anything," she stated. "You have your own family now. Your team. Your friends. Your pretend girlfriend. People who care about you, who wouldn't let you die alone. Those are the people who matter."

"I know."

She loosened her grip on me, shifting on the bed so she could see my face. I was sure I looked pathetic and tired on top of that. If she noticed, she surely didn't give it away. If anything, she looked at ease. Confidence washed over her as her hand came up to my stubble-covered cheek. "Why don't you stay here tonight? Just to keep the nightmares at bay."

"You sure?"

“Never been more sure of anything,” she nodded. Her eyes were soft and her smile matched. “Let me protect you too.”

*Let me protect you too.*

Five words that made me fall harder for this girl.

Five words that made me wonder how the hell I was going to tell her that I didn't want this to be pretend anymore.





## Catalina

I was nervous.

I hated to admit it, even to myself, but I was. Here I was, sitting on a plane a thousand feet in the air, heading to Long Island to spend the weekend with my pretend boyfriend. Not only was I doing that, but I had to pretend we were together in front of all of his friends and teammates while I was here.

Sure, this was going to be a great opportunity for Austin to hold up his end of our contract. I was going to get some really good material for my novel that I so desperately needed. Considering I was struggling with writer's block, I needed a push to continue.

Ever since that night Austin came into my apartment at one o'clock in the morning, I had this block. I had no idea why. If anything, his seeking comfort from me should have had my creative juices flowing, but they stopped completely. Every time I sat down and opened up my laptop, my mind went blank.

I had no idea why and I hated when I got like this. I hated feeling lost like this as if I wasn't truly a writer and just some pathetic excuse for one. I knew it was normal to get writer's block. Every writer got it at some point during whatever novel they were working on. I just felt defeated because it was my first one and it felt like *everything* was against me.

I felt like I was never going to get this novel done. Like I wasn't meant to quit my job at the cafe to be an author. Somedays it felt like I wasn't going anywhere but behind that counter to pour those coffees for people who made three times my wage.

Needless to say, I was a little down on myself for that.

I wasn't about to let it ruin my weekend though. This was my first getaway in a long time and it was to a place I've always wanted to go, but been too afraid to visit. Especially on my own. At least this time, I had Austin with me and all of his friends.

I was looking forward to seeing what his apartment was like. He talked about how much he saw it as his home when we talked on the phone. He brought up his comfy couch and his big kitchen. I wanted to see if it felt like him when I walked in. Just like he said my apartment felt like me when he was there.

All in all, I was excited to see what his life was like here in New York.

He had seen my world and the people in it. It was my turn to meet his friends and get to know his favourite places. Something he had promised me when he invited me this weekend.

He mentioned taking me out on a date this weekend, but I wasn't holding him to it. He was a busy guy when he was here. He had a lot of training hours to complete and his friends to hang out with. I didn't expect him to take some time out for me when he already spent so much of it in Stonebridge with me.

I brought my laptop, in hopes that I would get a bit of writing done when he was off doing his hockey stuff.

The flight landed and I managed to get through security with no issues. The bonus of only flying with a carry-on and not a big amount of baggage. I packed enough stuff for the weekend, and if I didn't, I'd steal something from Austin to wear in the meantime. It wasn't like I wanted to be out and about the entire time. I was a homebody and his apartment sounded like a dream.

I glanced around, looking for whoever Austin had set up to pick me up. There were signs with last names and initials. I searched for mine, not knowing exactly who I was looking for. My eyes caught a hand-drawn sign with Jacks scribbled across it, followed by a stick figure of a girl and a heart. There stood Austin and a slightly taller man with bleach-blonde hair slicked back and a smirk playing on his lips. If I had to guess, that was his best friend.

He looked damn good standing there. He had what looked to be workout pants with his team logo on them. He had on a hoodie, which I had never seen him in before. Considering the time, I was sure he just finished up some training. It was doing him some good. Even I had seen some more muscle definition on him, which I didn't think was possible given how he looked. He was in great shape without all the hockey training and conditioning.

"Cute sign," I giggled as I stepped in front of them. "Who's handy work is this?"

"Mine of course," the blonde said, holding his hand out. "I'm Lucas. You must be his beautiful girlfriend Catalina."

"That's me," I nodded hesitantly. "Nice to finally meet you."

He grinned. "Dude, she's so far out of your league."

"Shut up," Austin shoved him as he moved towards me, pulling me into him. "Hi, Jacks! How was your flight?"

"Good," I shrugged as I wrapped my arms around him, squeezing him. "I'm just happy to be here now."

Lucas gagged, capturing both of our attention. “You guys are so cute, it’s disgusting.”

“You’re welcome,” Austin chuckled. “C’mon, let’s get you to my place. I’ll even let you sit up front so you can ask all the questions you want.”

“Really?” I beamed.

“Really!”



On the way home, Lucas told me a few stories about Austin growing up. A couple were about hockey before they were drafted and I could see how passionate both Austin and Lucas were about the game. They grew up on that ice and strived for that dream together. For them to be drafted on the same team, they had to be incredible together.

He went on to share one off the ice, about a sleepover they had one night. Austin had to correct the misinformation Lucas was feeding me, which left us all in a ‘bout of laughter. Lucas was nicer than I expected him to be. Not like a lot of the hockey players I went to school with who made their entire personality hockey.

We pulled into a parking garage about twenty-five minutes later. Lucas typed in a code before the gate opened up and he made his way in. Anticipation filled my stomach. I was moments away from walking into Austin’s apartment and getting a moment alone with him. Something I haven’t had since the night in my apartment.

Lucas parked in his spot, hopping out almost instantly. Austin opened up my door for me. My bag was over his good shoulder as he held out his hand to help me out. I slipped my fingers with him, squeezing his hand. His lip curled upwards, making my heart flutter in my chest.

“I’m the apartment across from Austin’s so if you need anything and he’s not there,” Lucas began, giving me a warm smile as we headed over to the elevator. “I’m happy to help you. Any friend of his is a friend of mine.”

“Thanks, Lucas,” I smiled, feeling a sense of ease wash over me. I had never had anyone accept me so quickly, not even as a kid. Lucas was going off of Austin’s word and he welcomed me better than any of my friends had. I was worried about not fitting in here. I was worried that none of his friends

were going to like me and I'd be locked up in his apartment for the weekend, waiting for it to be over.

We stepped off the elevator, heading down a small hallway with two doors. How in the hell the two of them managed this was another mind-blowing thought. They were two peas in a pod, and I kind of hoped I got to know Lucas a little better this weekend so I could find out why exactly these two had been best friends for so long.

"See you later," Austin said to Lucas as stopped at the opposite door. He slipped his key in before opening it up, letting me step in first. I waved at Lucas, giving him a soft smile before stepping inside.

My jaw hit the floor instantly. I wasn't even a metre inside and I was taken back. His apartment was huge. No wonder he hated the one he had in Stonebridge. Nothing compared to this one. It was two stories judging by the staircase heading up at the other side. He had a balcony that looked like a small yard. His entire kitchen and living space had to be the size of my entire apartment. This was how hockey players lived? Holy shit.

"You live here?" I gasped, turning to face him. His hand came up to the back of his neck. His nervous tick. "Don't be nervous. I'm just in awe."

I headed further inside, taking it all in, step by step. His kitchen was gorgeous. A lot of space for two people to work comfortably. Not to mention, his cupboards were a beautiful chocolate brown, and the countertops were a warm beige that looked incredible. His stove was high-end, as was everything for that matter. He wasn't much of a cook so I was sure he wasn't the one who picked any of it out. I was in love with his kitchen, and couldn't wait to whip something up in it, just to say I did.

If I thought the kitchen was gorgeous, his living area was the same. He had a sectional couch similar to mine, only it was bigger and looked a whole lot more comfortable. The corner spot was big enough for two, and if we were together, it would have made a perfect cuddling spot.

Austin stood in silence, watching me take in his apartment with a soft smile playing on his lips. "This place is stunning, Austin."

"Make yourself at home," he nodded. "I didn't have a chance to get the guest room figured out so you can take my room. The couch is comfortable enough to sleep on."

I shook my head. "No way. You need your comfort. You're the athlete here. You take the bed. I'm happy with the couch."

He took a step closer to me, eyeing the couch before his hand slipped into

mine. He urged me to the stairs with him, taking us up to where I assumed his bedroom was. “Jacks, you’re not sleeping on the couch.”

“You’re not either,” I stated, crossing my arms over my chest. “You’ve got training and practices to work through. Your career depends on it.”

He let out a sigh, shaking his head. “I’m not going to win this one, am I?”

I giggled, trying to hide my knowing smile. “You know you aren’t. Remember who rubbed the knots out of your back.”

“Are you comfortable sharing with me?” He asked, cocking his eyebrow. “I know we have before, but this is a little different.”

The thought of sharing a bed with him made me nervous but in an excited kind of way. The other night was a little different, given that it wasn’t planned and it was more or less a comfort thing. It wasn’t because we wanted the other person there. This was because there was only one bed.

Oh god! How romance novel of us.

“I’m comfortable sharing a bed with you, Austin,” I replied softly. “Good thing too, ‘cause if not, I might have had to share with —“

“Don’t!” He stated, pointing his finger at me with a smile.

“Don’t what? I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I laughed, taking a step back from him. His arms engulfed my waist almost instantly, holding me to him so I couldn’t escape. Laughter filled the apartment as he moved the two of us toward the stairs.

He pointed out a couple of rooms on the way. The main bathroom. The laundry room and his home gym, along with the door to get outside. He released me as soon as we got to the stairs, motioning for me to head up them first. He raced back, grabbed my bag from the front door, and met me at the top.

“The door on the end is my room, that I will be sharing with you,” he teased, nudging me with his shoulder. “The door on the right is the spare room, that has nothing but a bed frame in there at the moment. On the left is my office, which you can use if you’d like. I’m not sure where you’re most comfortable writing, assuming that you brought your laptop. Feel free to make yourself at home.”

He stepped into his bedroom first, placing my bag down at the end of the bed. He had a chest there and a pile of neatly folded clothes on the right of it. His room felt like him from the second I stepped inside.

The curtains were opened, revealing a beautiful view of the city and the buildings close by. By his window, there was a seat to look out, making me

smile. Below it, he had shelves filled with books. His king-sized bed had a dark blue comforter on it with a white blanket folded at the end. He had throw pillows to decorate it, along with an adorable large stuffed turtle sitting in the middle of it.

The wall behind his bed was a dark grey, whereas the other walls were a softer, warmer grey, brightening up the room. I was certain he didn't pick this out himself and someone did it for him. It still felt like him. He made it his. Warm and welcoming.

"I'm assuming you want the right side?" He said as he opened the door on the left side of the room.

"Correct assumption," I nodded, following him over to the other room.

"This is the bathroom," he pointed out, motioning for me to step in first. The room was the size of my bedroom at home. It had a double sink, a huge tub, a step-in shower and what looked to be a towel warmer on the side. He had a rack filled with clean towels of all sizes in the corner. His apartment was gorgeous. I was in love. "Like I said, make yourself at home. I've got stuff for you in the cupboard on the left. If you need anything, let me know."

"Thanks," I nodded. "I'm going to freshen up if that's okay."

"Absolutely," he grinned. "I'll be downstairs in the meantime. Take your time." With that, he stepped out, leaving me to do whatever I needed to do in private.

I headed to my bag, grabbing my toiletries out of it to place in the bathroom. Curiosity got the better of me as I stepped in, closing the door tightly behind me. He said he had stuff in the cupboard for me, and that had me thinking about all the women he had in his apartment. What if it was all leftover stuff from when they came over and wanted to freshen up?

I had to know.

I opened up the cupboard, seeing a sticky note with my nickname on it resting on the bottom shelf. I glanced down, seeing two bottles of my shampoo and conditioner there. There was a box of the pads I used, along with some bubble bath, bath bombs and Epsom salts. I quickly realized that this was all for me. He had gone out of his way to make sure I felt at home in his home. My heart fluttered.

I had a love-hate relationship with moments like this. I loved that he paid enough attention to the details about me and that he made it known that he listened to me. It was something I had never experienced before with anyone. It was why I loved it. I felt seen when I was with him. I wasn't the last choice

or the only option. Austin made me feel cared about.

Which is why I hated it. This was only happening because our contract said so. None of what happened between us was natural. It was forced. My end of the contract specifically. He was helping inspire my novel by doing these things. It made me wonder if any of it was real. If any of it was because of him and what he wanted to do. I didn't want to get my hopes up and believe it was because he wanted to. I would be setting myself up for heartbreak.

I quickly unpacked my little bag, taking up a small section of his massive counter. Before stepping out, I made sure my bun still looked presentable and not like I had just arrived an hour ago. There were a few loose strands, but nothing significant that would require a redo.

Austin was in the kitchen when I finally joined him. He had two mugs on the counter and the kettle going. I don't know how he knew I needed tea, but I did. Then again, I always need one.

I made my way into his kitchen, hopping up on the counter opposite to him. He flashed me a warm grin, turning to face me. There was still some distance between us and if I was being honest with myself, I didn't want there to be. It didn't feel like there needed to be that four feet between us anymore.

"You get settled okay?" He asked as he took a step forward.

I nodded my head. "Yeah. I do appreciate the '*Jacks self-care pack*' you put together for me. Very sweet of you to pay so much attention to your fake girlfriend."

He chuckled, taking another step closer to me. "Speaking of that," he paused, placing a hand on either side of my body. "We're going to have to make this look like a relationship this weekend. There is a good chance we're going to be seen this weekend. Meaning we're going to have to kiss and shit to sell this."

I figured as much. I knew we couldn't get away with our easy banter behind closed doors. Certainly not in Long Island either. His teammates were here as were his friends and coaching staff. We were going to have to make it look like we were really into one another.

If you were to ask me a month ago, I don't think I would have been comfortable enough with this. But I knew Austin now. I knew the kind of person he was and how he treated me. He was kind and sweet. He was protective of me. That was something that needed to be built between us for this to work between us in the public eye. We had past that now.

“I kind of figured that,” I breathed out as I made eye contact with him. I could feel the warmth radiating off of him. He was so close yet so far and I wanted him closer. I wanted to feel that warmth and the sense of calm that washed over me every time he was near. I wanted to feel his hands on my body instead of next to me. All of these were things I shouldn’t have been feeling about my pretend boyfriend. “I think we can manage.”

He smirked, making my stomach flutter. “Me too,” he muttered. “But to be sure, I’m going to kiss you in a second and if you don’t want me to, you need to let me know right now.”

Every fibre of my being wanted him to kiss me. There wasn’t a hint of hesitation. A doubt in my mind. A single thought of what could go wrong. I wanted this more than anything. I wanted him more than anything. I knew he only asked because of my history, but he didn’t have to. Not him. Not *my Austin*.

Shit, he wasn’t *my Austin*.

Technically.

I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.

I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth as I maintained eye contact with him. How I managed to do that was beyond me. His pupils darkened, but his eyes softened. His hand came up, cupping my cheek before he leaned in, leaving an inch of space between us. I separated my legs, allowing him to move between them and he did.

I remember my first kiss clearly. It was in the sixth grade at recess. Our fort in the forest was nearing completion. We had all the money — bark from the trees — a fort could ask for. We were ready for the wedding. It’s funny that I couldn’t quite remember the exact surrounding details, but kissing my friend at that point was the only important point to remember. The awkward, unsure, which way your heads were supposed to turn to not smash your nose against them. As far as first kisses went, it was a good ten out of ten. Then again, what was I to compare it to?

Now, Austin was sure to have more experience and I valued that because it meant he was taking the lead on this one.

My hand reached for his waist as he closed the space between us, capturing my lips with his. His lips are soft with a hint of coffee on them, making my stomach flutter. I expected anxiety to course through me. The fear of that day in the stairwell, comparing every man to him as I had done since that day. Austin was different. He felt like home to me, and that’s



something I hadn't felt in an incredibly long time. He was the sun on the first day of spring. The snowflakes falling on Christmas morning. I desperately wanted to feel nothing, praying that this between us would remain a contract and nothing more. But I felt everything.

He ignited something in me I feared would happen. It wasn't just a physical attraction any more. It wasn't just a friendship that had formed over some chips and *Wizards of Waverly Place*. My original fear was coming true. I was falling in love with Austin Sawyer. *Falling hard*.

And the only thing I could do was exactly what I wanted to and that was melt into him with a sigh. His fingertips curled into my hairline as a groan came from the back of his throat as the kiss deepened. His tongue ran smoothly over mine as I instinctively drew him in closer to me.

I had never been kissed this fucking good. *Ever*.

Was this kiss affecting him the same way it was me? Did he feel his heart racing and his palms growing sweaty? Did he have this urge to bring me so close to him that there was virtually no space between us? Did he want to devour me the same way I wanted to devour him?

Was he falling for me?

He broke from my lips, pressing his forehead to mine. I was terrified to open my eyes in case he didn't look phased by this at all. Not to mention, I was sure I would give away just how much this kiss took my goddamn breath away. I wanted to live in my fantasy world for a moment longer before reality came crashing back.

"You all right there, Jacks?" He breathed out.

I nodded my head. "Next time, you don't have to ask if you can do that."

He chuckled, making my eyes open. He had a pink hue on his cheeks and the tips of his ears were red. His freckles stood out just a little bit more when I was this close-up. "Got it." My eyes softened before he inched forward, pressing his lips to mine once more in a brief, yet warm kiss. "Just to practice."

"Mmh," I giggled, wrapping my arms around him, and holding him in place. "Sure it was."

God, I hope it wasn't. With the way my heart was racing, I wasn't sure I was ever going to accept it as practice or as his fake girlfriend. That kiss was real to me.

"We're going to knock this pretend dating thing out of the park."



## Catalina

My mind was still reeling the same way my lips were still tingling. It had been over an hour since Austin kissed the living daylights out of me and now it was all I could think about. It was all I wanted to think about.

I was sitting in the corner of his sectional with my laptop next to me, staring off into space. Austin had to head out for an evening session with his coaches and a few of his linemates from what he said. He told me he wasn't going to be long, but not to wait up if I got tired from my day of travel.

He left me with the takeout menus and his credit card. I requested that whatever I decide to get, to order the starred items so he'd have something to eat later. I wasn't about to protest that one, especially with the prices of food and not knowing the place I was ordering from.

He had a good selection of menus stashed in one of his kitchen drawers. Probably from when he was recovering from his injury and not being able to cook anything. He had three different Chinese food places, a Thai, four pizza joints, burgers and fries, and some taco places. He had his bases covered, and I had no idea what I craved the most.

I slipped off of the couch, shoving my phone in the front pocket of my pajama pants. Austin had shelves surrounding his massive TV, filled with movies and books, which piqued my curiosity. I was in his space now. It was time to figure out the little things that made up my fake boyfriend.

His movie collection was extensive. From Disney to *Lord of the Rings*, *Fast and the Furious* to *The Proposal*, Austin had no distinct taste, which didn't surprise me. He binge-watched *Wizards* with me without complaint. I was sure if I asked to watch *Hannah Montana* or *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* with me, he would in a heartbeat.

I took this as my chance to look around his apartment a little more. Not that he would have cared. He gave me the okay to snoop if I felt like it. For the most part, I just wanted to get to know him a little better by his living space. It was a very clean apartment, then again, he was. He was very organized and liked to have everything in order. His cupboards and fridge only proved that.

I reached for my mug in the sink, giving it a good rinse. He had gone out of his way to buy the tea I liked the most in a massive quantity so I'd always have some to drink while I was here. He made sure there was enough milk to

add to it. I knew he prepared for me coming here this weekend and seeing all these things only proved that. He went out of his way to make sure I was comfortable in his home and that meant the world to me.

I added water to the kettle before flicking it on. It was just after seven and I was starting to get a little hungry. I wanted to wait a little longer to order some food, just so it wouldn't be as old when Austin got home. I was thinking about getting Chinese from the restaurant not too far from here.

As the kettle finished boiling, three loud taps on the door filled my ears. I furrowed my brows as I hesitantly made my way over to the tall, wooden door. I let out a shaky breath, unlocking the door before sliding it open. On the other side, I was met with the same, bleach blonde hair male I met earlier on today.

“Lucas,” I smiled. “Austin’s not here right now. He’s —“

“At practice,” he nodded. “I know. I came here to see if you wanted to hang out for a while.” I glanced down, seeing my pajama pants once more. He was in sweats himself, and he looked like he was dressed for comfort, not for going anywhere.

“Uhh, sure,” I breathed out, opening up the door a little more. I reached into my pocket, sending a quick text to Austin to let him know that Lucas was there. Three dots popped up seconds later.

**Him: He told me he was going to ask you to hang out.**

**Him: I'll be home by nine. Kick his ass in NHL for me.**

By the time I shut the door, Lucas was in the kitchen, grabbing a can of Coke from the fridge. I chuckled, resisting the urge to roll my eyes as I went over to finish making my cup of tea. “Austin told me to kick your ass in NHL.”

“Asshole!” He chuckled, shaking his head. “You want to play? I promise to go easy on you.”

“I’ll play,” I agreed. “But you’ll have to teach me. I’m more of a Mario, Ratchet and Clank kind of girl.”

“Of course, I can,” he assured me with a warm smile. “Then I’ll kick your ass in Mario Kart later.”

“You wish.”

Twenty minutes later, I was just getting the hang of the controller. Lucas was good, but he took a lot of penalties that I was sure could be avoided. The game was fun, but I didn’t exactly know all the rules and regulations when it

came to hockey, so I wasn't the best player either. Who knew throwing the puck down the ice was a bad thing? What the fuck did offside mean? I thought you were supposed to fight people in hockey.

I noticed that Lucas kept a good distance of space between us. Even when he was teaching me the controls, he didn't come close to me. I knew Austin wouldn't share anything about me with someone else. He wouldn't betray my trust like that, especially when he worked so hard to earn it.

The more I watched him, the more I got to thinking about it. He wasn't hesitant like Austin was. It was almost like he didn't want anyone touching him either. He kept a distance between us for both of our benefits. I liked that he respected that space, and didn't try to force an automatic close friendship with me just because I was fake dating his best friend.

But something was also a little off with him. He wasn't that same outgoing guy who was happy to pick me up from the airport. He was in his head, the same way Austin got when something was eating away at him. Video games were a distraction for him, and being here was reassurance that he wouldn't do something self-destructive.

We were more similar than I would have led on.

"You want to talk about what's bothering you?" I questioned as I finished off my tea. His jaw jumped as he continued his eye contact with the screen.

"How do you know something is bothering me?" He cocked his eyebrow almost playfully.

"You're quiet," I pointed out. "Looking for a distraction. Austin told me he has trouble shutting you up sometimes, and that's definitely not you right now. I know I'm a stranger to you, but I'm here to listen if you want to talk."

He pressed pause on the game before letting out a sigh. "I didn't think I was that obvious," he said with a dry chuckle. He placed the remote down on the coffee table before running a hand down his face. "It's a little pathetic that you, someone I just met, picked up on it."

"It's not pathetic," I assured him as I turned my body to face him.

"It is when it's over a girl," he revealed as he raked his hand through his hair. "A girl you want but under no circumstances can have."

"What do you mean?"

He let out a laugh. "She's my coach's daughter. His fucking daughter. Of all the fucking people in the world, and the only one I want and can't have is her. Her and her fucking blonde hair and her stupid smile, and the way her nose crinkles when she's trying to be cute. I'm-I'm fucked, Catalina."

I frowned, hearing the pain in his voice. The longing for someone he couldn't have. He was in love with this girl. It was obvious he was and he couldn't do a damn thing about it. "Do you know if she feels the same? Are things one-sided?"

"She has a boyfriend," he admitted as his throat jumped. "She's been with him for the last eight months. I wasn't in the right state of mind before they got together and I didn't want to tell her then. Austin had just gotten out of the hospital after the accident and he wasn't talking. Things just went from one thing to another and before I knew it, she was telling me she was talking to this guy who sounds a million times better than me."

"Do you guys still hang out at all?" I asked him.

"She's at the rink all the time," he shared with a sigh before turning slightly to face me. "She's one of the student medics. We talk all the time, but we also avoid talking about her relationship. Conversations are tense and awkward. I don't know what to say to her anymore."

I sympathized with him. It sucked not knowing how the other person felt. Assuming and wondering ruined everything, especially when overthinking took over. It always did. Lucas's feelings felt obvious though, at least to me. I was sure lingering stares and longing touches would have made it known to just about anyone. Then again, none of that mattered when I was in a fake relationship and couldn't pick up on what was real and what wasn't.

He leaned back on the couch, staring up at the ceiling. "What would happen if you told your coach that you were in love with his daughter? If things were to work out between the two of you. Like, say you told her and she wanted to be with you too."

"My balls would be cut off one by one and fed to me. Then he'd probably cut off my dick and either glue it to my forehead or shove it up my ass," he stated dramatically. "He made it clear when she started as the student medic that she was to be left alone. Not that it was much help. I've known her for a lot longer than that."

My eyes watered hearing his pain. I quickly blinked them away, not wanting to let my emotions get the better of me. Not during this conversation. "You can't help who you love, Luke," I reminded him. "Yeah, hockey is your career and you love it. But at the end of the day, you can't come home to it. You can't share your private moments and accomplishments with it. You deserve to have someone to come home to the same way I'm sure your coach does."

He let out a tense laugh. “It’s funny. I was giving this same pep talk to Austin a month ago,” he told me, pausing for a moment as his head rolled to face me. “His whole life, he has worked to play professional hockey. Then he got there and I don’t think that hard work mentality has ever stopped for him. At least until the accident.”

I leaned back on the couch, resting my head against the other side of it before bringing my knees close to my chest. “The accident took a lot out of him. I don’t think even he realized how much.”

“No,” he agreed, giving me a warm smile that had my brows knitting together. “But I’ve seen the biggest difference in him since he met you. Even if you guys have this whole contract between you or whatever bullshit it is; because if you ask me, *it is bullshit*. He cares about you, Catalina. Austin’s a good man. One of the best I know.”

I let Lucas’s words sink in. No one in this world knew Austin better than his best friend did. Someone who had been through hell and back with him. He wouldn’t be telling me these things if he didn’t have the evidence to back it up. I knew that Austin was a good guy. He treated me with kindness and respect. He was patient with me and never pushed me further than I was comfortable with.

I cleared my throat before letting out a nervous breath. “Why do you think the contract is bullshit?”

He got off the couch and made his way to the kitchen. I took this as a sign to follow him and I did, keeping the island as a barrier between us. My hands rested on the back of one of his chairs, keeping my eyes on the tall blonde. I was curious as hell as to what his answer was. I wanted to know what it was that went through his mind when he listened to Austin talk when he came home.

He opened up the fridge, grabbing a bottle of beer this time. I cocked my eyebrow at him as he turned back around. He sighed reluctantly. “Do I really have to explain this? You’re a freaking romance writer!”

“Yes, Lucas! Explain this!” I urged him on, shaking my head.

He rolled his eyes. “Catalina, you’re in his apartment in Long Island. You are miles away from your home, making yourself at home in his place. He invited you to come spend the weekend to celebrate my birthday. You’re sharing a damn bed with him. You spend hours with each other by choice. You know his childhood was shit and the details of an accident he hasn’t even told me about. You’re in his life just as much as I’m sure he’s in yours.

It may have started as a contract but you both know the contract has nothing to do with what developed between you.”

“We’re friends,” I said simply. “It was bound to —“

He cut me off as he twisted the cap off the beer bottle. “Bullshit. You two are not only friends.”

“We are just friends!” I argued, although I had a feeling it was pointless. I think I had finally met the Lucas Austin constantly told me about. The one who never shut up for longer than two minutes. The one who got his point across quickly and bluntly. The one who didn’t sugarcoat the truth. Even if I was on the receiving end of it right now, I didn’t mind the honesty in it.

“Catalina,” he tsked before he let out a chuckle. “The contract is bullshit because it’s clear the two of you want to fuck more than anything. No relationship contract is needed between you because it’s already there without it.” I love how he said fuck. Nothing about love, or even attraction. *Fuck*. Everything was *always* about sex.

What Lucas doesn’t understand is that none of this would have developed had there not been a contract in place. Austin would never gone for me had we not been pictured together that night. We would have gone our separate ways and everything would have been fine. That contract was our safety net; still was. We needed it. It brought me comfort the same way it ruined me. It meant he couldn’t give up on me and walk out without a second glance at me. It meant he was stuck with me until the end of it without throwing me away to find someone better.

But it also meant that everything that happened between us wasn’t real. It meant that kissing earlier was practiced so we could sell our relationship here. That’s why I was invited here. I wasn’t invited because he wanted me to be here with him. It was for show. To make this web of lies we created even stronger. Less doubtful. I was here for him to show me off as his girlfriend.

“You’re wrong,” I breathed out, shrugging my shoulders. “I’m here to help validate a lie. I’m here to hold up my end of the contract while he holds up his. This is a part of the agreement. We became friends because we spent so much time together which was needed for me to feel comfortable with him. That’s it.”

He brought the beer up to his lips, taking a good swing of it. I turned my back to him, heading back to my spot on the couch, trying to ignore the way my heart shattered as I turned.

I wanted to go home so damn bad. I wanted to take every moment



between him and me and erase it from my memory now that it had been tainted with reality. I was living in this fantasy land where I believed that Austin actually wanted me. The hugs, the late-night talks, the kiss; all of it was him holding up his end of the contract. He was teaching me what it was like to be in a good relationship and I was blinded by it, forgetting that this was a contract. This was an agreement that would come to a quick end in January.

Then I would be completely alone once more. And it felt like it was kinda how it is always meant to be.

The girl who no one loved. The one that faded into the background, was quickly forgotten about since she wasn't a part of the main portrait. The girl who was never someone's first choice. The one who watched everyone else get picked over her and sat there wondering what was wrong with her.

I just wanted someone to pick me; to want me. Everyday.

I wanted someone to love me for every piece of me, even the broken ones. The jaded pieces that sliced your finger when you tried to touch them. The soft curves were striped with faded white lines from growth. The sharp, cold pieces that filled with a bad attitude, a short temper and choice words. The scarred pieces that filled with fear, anxiety and resentment from past trauma.

There were also the warm ones that were capable of loving someone so deeply. The bright ones filled with laughter stomach cramps and sore cheeks. The luminous pieces that lit up the way home to me with waiting arms, ready to bring you in from the cold. The words that were stuck in me, waiting to be shared on a computer screen or in a paperback novel. The pieces that everyone seemed to pick and choose from. No one ever wanted the entire thing.

I was beginning to think that no one ever would.

I made a mistake coming here this weekend.

"Jacks," Lucas called out, capturing my attention once more. That was Austin's nickname for me. No one else's. "Sorry, that's what he refers to you as," he said sheepishly as he brushed his fingers through his hair. "Catalina. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said —"

"It's fine," I said with a dry laugh, throwing my hands up in defeat. "Like you said, I'm miles away from home so I'm going to turn in. It's been a long day. You can let yourself out."

I didn't give him the chance to argue. I made my way to the stairs, hoping

to hear that front door open and close by the time I reached the top. I desperately wanted to take that weighted blanket from his bed, along with my stuff to the couch. Better yet, I wanted to take the next flight home so I could feel comfortable. I wanted my safe space where I was alone and free to be me. No walls. No barriers. No worrying about someone walking in and reminding me that I'm out of place.

I stepped into the oversized bathroom, placing my hands on either side of the counter, and staring up at myself in the mirror. I wondered for a moment if Courtney would take a phone session right now. Clearly, I fucking needed it.

*He was going to break your heart, Catalina.*

I trusted him with my secrets and let him into my life. I let myself get close to him and he's going to break me. He's going to take that heart of mine and shatter it into a million tiny pieces, making it impossible to repair it.

I did the thing I said I wasn't going to do. I fell for the first guy who was nice to me.

*God, I'm a fucking idiot.*

"No you're not."

My head darted up, meeting with a tall figure standing in the doorway behind me with his arms crossed over his chest. Sad green eyes met mine. Austin. His hair was a mess and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. His jeans hung low on his hips from what I could tell.

I want to go home.



## *Austin*

Practice was fucking brutal.

My body ached in ways that I couldn't explain. Granted, my physical came back great. I passed with flying colours. Even my shoulder had improved. Ever since Catalina gave it a nice massage last week, it hadn't been bothering me. Not that I wouldn't mind another one from her. Anything to have her hands on me. Maybe I could return the favour? She worked on a few of the knots she was sure to have after working in that cafe.

I could still taste her on my tongue. It had been hours since I had her lips on mine and felt her body tense before it melted into me. Her soft sigh and the way her legs wrapped around me. Mmh, then fuck, I had to go. That sigh had my cock twitching when it sure as shit shouldn't have been.

But holy fuck. The way she responded to me. Her hands gripped my sides, bringing me into her. She wanted no space between us. She wanted me up close and personal with her and I took that as the ultimate compliment. A woman who wanted nothing to do with me, or anyone. Someone who kept the world at arm's length, for good reason, wanted me in her space. She trusted me in her space. That meant more to me than anything.

And god, did I want to fucking do it again. Instead of saying that, I stupidly called in practice for this stupid fucking fake relationship that I was done calling fake. Kissing her wasn't pretend, and it sure as shit wasn't practice. She deserved more than a shit excuse like that. I kissed her because I wanted to, and I needed to man up and admit that. Even if I was fucking terrified of losing the one person in the world I couldn't live without.

I was being a coward and she deserved better than that from me. She deserved to be kissed on my kitchen counter knowing full well that it's all I damn well want to do. She deserved to know she was desired in more ways than one.

I bolted from the arena as soon as I could. I checked my credit card to see if she had ordered anything. I wasn't surprised to see she hadn't. I figured she'd either be too tired to eat, or she was waiting for me. I decided to pick up some Chinese food on my way home, knowing she loved wantons and beef and broccoli, hoping she would curl up on the couch with me for a little while. I was going to kick Lucas out and spend the night with the one person I couldn't wait to have in my home.

*My home was home.* I finally had *her* home.

The rain had slowly turned into flakes of snow as soon as I arrived at the apartment building's entrance. I swiped my key to get in, making a beeline for the elevator. I was seconds away from seeing her, and I couldn't wait.

With each passing floor, the anticipation grew stronger. I couldn't wait to open up that door and see her smiling face. Her in her comfortable clothes and the soft braid she had her hair tied in most of the time. I wanted to see the glow on her cheeks from that kiss we shared earlier, and the warmth of her presence in my favourite space.

I finally arrived on my floor and got my key ready. The entire floor was quiet, not that I was all that surprised. You could barely hear the elevator arriving, let alone something happening in one of the three apartments on this floor. I slipped my key in, opening up the door, only to be filled with silence.

No tv. No video games. No laughter.

Lucas emerged from the living space with a sheepish look on his face, putting a halt to that anticipation I was feeling, replacing it with dread. I placed the bag of food on the counter, noting the bottle of beer on the opposite side. "What's going on?" I questioned, cocking my eyebrow. "Where's Jacks?"

"She went upstairs," he answered before shoving his hands in his pockets. "I fucked up."

My heart stopped. "What do you mean you fucked up?" My voice was calm, and it surprised me that it was. Lucas looked like he had kicked a puppy and that made me all the more worried. Did I push a friendship between the two of them too hard? Should I have waited to introduce them? Did he not like her? Did she not like him?

He let out a shaky breath before his throat jumped. "We were just talking and I commented on how your contract was bullshit. I think she took it the wrong way."

I swallowed hard. "Explain, please."

"She wanted to know what I mean by bullshit and I think I made her feel like she didn't belong when I said she was a long way from home."

"You said what?"

"And I might have brought up sex."

I took a deep breath, trying to centre myself instead of instinctively going off like I wanted to. I had spent two months, working my ass off to earn Catalina's trust. I had been nothing but patient with her, wanting nothing

more than to make her feel safe and comfortable with me. I had spent two months, getting to know her on a deeper level than I had known anyone, and none of it was because of a stupid fucking contract. And I had a feeling that one hour with Lucas just erased all of that progress I made.

I asked Lucas for one thing and that was to not mention this contract to anyone, including her. I know his intentions were more than likely to help me get out of this contract, given how I felt about her. But it wasn't his place to do so. It was mine.

And now I had to clean up that mess.

"I'm sorry, man. I fucked up," he frowned, casting his head down. "I just — I wanted to see if your feelings were reciprocated. You know, the same kinda way you talked to Jade for me?"

I ran my hand down my face before scratching my jaw. I had to fix things with Jacks first. She was my top priority right now. "I get it," I nodded with a sigh. "You were trying to help. But you also don't know her yet, dude."

"I know."

"I'm going to go try and fix things with her," I told him, trying to keep my tone neutral and not give away how fucking terrified I was that the damage wasn't fixable. "Please apologize to her tomorrow when you see her, okay? It'll go a long way with her. Trust me."

"Already planning on it," he nodded, heading to the door. I let out a frustrated sigh. "Austin?"

"Yeah?"

"For the record, she's amazing," he stated with a sad smile. "But I don't think she's made for the life you live."

"Maybe so," I nodded. "But that's not a decision you or I can make for her. It's her decision to make."

How is it that in five minutes, everything did a complete one hundred and eighty? Five minutes ago, I was excited to walk in my door, hoping to see my girl in her comfies with her mug, waiting for me to come home. Five minutes ago, I was remembering the taste of her lips on mine, and the way her body melted into mine. I was confident that we were about to have an amazing weekend together.

My home in my home.

And in five minutes, that was slipping away.

I took the stairs two by two, needing to close the space between us as soon as fucking could. My heart was racing and my mind had slipped into

dangerous territory, going over the worst possible scenario. I had travelled down that dark road too many times before, it was almost like I knew what to expect going forward. That darkness would consume me, eating away at every happy moment I shared with her, replacing it with this intense pain that I couldn't bear. That was the hard part of getting close to someone. There was always the off chance that they were temporary. Only there to break your fucking heart.

Losing Jacks would break mine. Without a doubt. I wasn't willing to lose her. Not without a fight.

"I'm a fucking idiot."

Jacks stood in my bathroom with her hands gripping the edge of the counter. Her braid was over her shoulder and her chest heaving. She hadn't noticed me yet, and I was thankful. I was never the guy who said the right thing when it was needed. I wasn't a pep talk kind of guy. I typically said the wrong thing more often than not and made the situation worse. This wasn't one of those times I wanted to take that chance.

"No you're not."

Her body tensed before her eyes locked with mine through the mirror. I crossed my arms across my chest before leaning against the doorframe, taking her in. Something was bothering her and I could see it right away. She had that classic overthinking look on her face. A look she had been sporting for the past couple of weeks, now that I thought about it. It was about time we talked about it. It was bothering her. She was bottling it up and it was about to combust.

"What's wrong, Jacks?" I questioned, taking a step closer to her.

"I forgot my face wash at home," she revealed. I was sure it was a little lie, and I was going to let it go if she told me what was going on when we got downstairs. "I'm not used to this whole travelling thing."

"We can stop by Sephora tomorrow and get you some more," I assured her. I took another step closer until I was standing in front of her, glancing down into her gorgeous green eyes. "There's a huge store for you to explore."

Her smile appeared across her lips, but it wasn't the same one I was used to. She was tired and I certainly didn't blame her. She had a long day and travel wasn't something she was used to. Not to mention, she had to do it alone too. She was going to sleep in good style tonight.

"I picked up some Chinese on my way home," I revealed, taking a step into the bathroom. "Beef and broccoli for you, Jacks." Her smile appeared

once more, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "And extra wantons. I know you love them."

"You know me so well," she breathed out as she wrapped her arms around my waist. "Does that mean we get to watch the *Wizards of Waverly Place* movie tonight?"

I responded instantly, slipping my arms around her, and hugging her tightly to my larger frame. Her head pressed against my chest as her grip tightened around me. It was almost the welcome home I expected from her, only it was in my upstairs bathroom. "You bet it does."

"You treat me so good."

*It's about time someone did.*

I pressed my lips to the top of her head before giving her another squeeze. I was reluctant to release her, even if it was for a moment while we headed downstairs. She felt like home in my arms. It was somewhere she belonged. I was convinced that my arms were made to hold her and only her. She fit so perfectly in them. But I was starving and my girl needed to eat.

"C'mon, pretty girl. Our food awaits us."



Jacks sat in the corner of the couch with a blanket placed over her legs. I turned the fire on, hoping to take the November chill out of the air before we went to bed. She made herself comfortable while logging into her Disney+ account on my TV.

I set up a tray with our food. It was something I used often when I was recovering all those months ago and it made eating so much easier. Not to mention, it was a lot nicer looking to have everything neatly placed on a tray than to hand her everything and say *there ya go*.

She had the movie pulled up on my large TV, ready to press play by the time I walked over. Her eyes lit up when she saw the tray full of food and that's when I knew she was starving. "This looks incredible."

"Got it from the best place in town," I said proudly as I handed her her chopsticks. "It was the first place I ordered from when I moved here. Lucas and I ate it on the tile floor of the apartment we just signed together."

She let out a giggle and she snapped her chopsticks open. "The fact that



someone allowed the two of you to sign for an apartment back then is terrifying.”

“Tell me about it,” I chuckled as I took ahold of the Kung Pao chicken container. “We’d already been living together for eight months before then though so it wasn’t a big change. The biggest change was not having his dad and stepmom there.”

“Did you move out the second you turned eighteen?”

“Yes,” I nodded, swallowing hard. “But if you ask my parents, they said they kicked me out at eighteen because I was a problem child.”

“That I certainly don’t believe,” she shook her head before taking a bite out of her beef. “From what you told me, you were driven to get away from them. To get away from your dad specifically.”

“The ones who knew me knew the truth,” I assured her. “I knew I was entering the draft that year and it was only a matter of time until I was picked up by a team and whatnot. So I moved in with Lucas and his dad. He played a big part in us finding Joel as our agent. Not to mention, it was great to fit in with a family for a little while.”

“I’m happy you had that, Austin,” she said softly.

“Me too.”

She continued to eat her beef and broccoli while watching the movie unfold. The sadness that was once in her eyes was no longer there, but I could tell that something was bothering her. I wanted to let her eat before we tackled whatever was eating away at her mind. She seemed content. She seemed like she felt a little more at home.

She offered me some of her wantons, and not one, but two bites of her beef and broccoli. To that, I offered her some of my chicken, and she humbly accepted. God, I loved having her here. I loved coming home and having her here with me. She made my apartment feel more like a home. Something I hadn’t had in such a long time.

“Thank you for dinner,” she grinned as she closed up her now empty take-out container. “It didn’t feel right to eat without you. Not on the first night here.”

She usually waited for me when we were in Stonebridge. Even if my flight didn’t come in until late, she still waited so she could eat with me. It was little things like that that reminded me this wasn’t just some contract. This was a genuine connection. A genuine friendship is built from the ground up.

“I picked up some of your favourite snacks,” I revealed as I moved the tray to the other side of me. “Got dill pickle chips, dark chocolate, popcorn and cool ranch Doritos all tucked away for you.”

“You’re the best, you know that?”

Yes. But I love to hear it from her. She shifted on the couch, turning her body to face me instead of the TV. Was this the indication that she was ready to talk about things? Her head rested against the back of the couch while her knees came up to her chest. Her toes were tucked just beneath my thigh.

She had no makeup on whatsoever and she looked gorgeous. Not that she didn’t with it. When she went without it, she looked content. She was relaxed in a way she wasn’t anywhere else. I liked seeing her naturally rosy cheeks and the tiny scar on her chin. I liked *seeing* her.

“So Lucas told me that he upset you,” I brought up as I rested my head on the back cushion, looking at my girl. “You want to tell me about it?”

She shook her head. “He didn’t upset me, really,” she shrugged. “It was more or less a realization on my part that he so bluntly pointed out. I’m okay. I promise.”

“You looked a little upset when I came home, so I just want to make sure,” I told her, hoping to allow her to share if she wanted to. My top priority would always be her and her feelings. I got her in this mess with the contract. She came first. She had to.

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, not daring to make eye contact with me. Thankfully she didn’t. I think I would have combusted if she did. I would have taken her face in my hands and kissed the living daylights out of her. I’d do more but that was extremely inappropriate and would never happen without her consent. Hell, even then, I wasn’t sure I’d do it to her.

“I have a bit of an odd request,” she breathed out after about five minutes of silence. I turned my head once more, taking her in. “Can we maybe pretend the contract doesn’t exist this weekend? I know we have to sell this whole relationship thing while we’re here and this is asking the opposite, but... I just thought that maybe we could just be you and me?”

Out of all the words I expected to come out of her mouth, those were not them. She wanted to forget about the contract and quite frankly, I was more than happy to. If it meant that every moment that happened between us this weekend was real, I was going to fucking take it. I would take her wanting to hold my hand, and kissing her without the looming thought of a contract. Lucas said something about the contract being bullshit to her and I think this

was her way of seeing if it was bullshit or if it was the reason why I stuck around.

She needed to find out for herself if my intentions were pure with her. She needed to know if this was built on a solid foundation rather than one built on the quicksand that was a contract. A contract may have brought me to her, but she is what kept me close.

“Just be you and me? No contract? No pressure,” I cocked my head to the side with a smile. “I like the sounds of that, Jacks.”

“Yeah?” She beamed.

“Hell yeah,” I nodded, grinning widely.

I watched the tension roll out of her shoulders. Relief washed through her, like a weight had been lifted off of her chest and she could finally breathe again. I’d happily hold some of that weight, anytime and any day, if it meant she could breathe again.

Her gaze fell back on the screen in front of her, watching the movie unfold. Subconsciously, her legs straightened over my lap before she adjusted the blanket over us. I responded to her by scooting closer to her. Her hand reached over, slipping into mine, her fingers linking with mine before she squeezed me.

Jacks had come so far in the last month alone. She went from putting an insane amount of distance between us to reaching her hand into mine. I learned quickly that she was a very affectionate person if you were allowed in her space. She opened up her arms without a hint of hesitation and didn’t want to let go. She was warmer and more confident; sure of herself in a way she didn’t let others see. Whether it was out of fear or judgment, she didn’t let people see all of her. Only tiny pieces. Trial pieces if you will. Almost as if someone saw all of them together, they wouldn’t like the full picture.

It took a while for her to let me see a few of them together, and even now, I wasn’t sure I saw all of her. I had a feeling we were getting there though. Slowly but surely. She was letting me in her space the same way I was letting her in mine. Maybe by the end of it, we’d have a shared property together.

Whatever it was, I was going to ace this no-contract thing. I didn’t need a contract to keep me to her. She did that all on her own.



## Catalina

Normally, I was worried when I spent the night somewhere else. My bed was one of my all-time favourite places in the world. It was my safe place. It is the only place in the world where I was completely and one hundred percent whole. All my pieces mend together at the end of the day when I crawl beneath my sheets and rest my head on my memory foam pillow. I don't get that anywhere else.

Austin's bed was heavenly. It was the right balance of memory foam and softness, that I melted as soon as I slipped beneath the comforter. His sheets were a high thread count from what I could feel and more silky than I expected for a man. It threw me off that they were navy blue instead of my normal light whites and creams. Not to mention, it was spacious. I didn't have to worry about moving and accidentally bumping into him. He stayed on his side while I was comfortably on mine. Two ends of the bed.

And I slept like a goddamn baby. Completely uninterrupted. I went to sleep and woke the next morning, naturally might I add. No crazy alarms to wake up to on a Saturday morning. Just the bright sunlight on a November morning.

I glanced over at the other side of the bed, finding it empty and cold. I had no idea what time it was, but I knew Austin wasn't here with me. At least not in his bedroom anyways.

I tore the comforter back, getting out of bed with a big stretch. My stomach was growling and I desperately wanted my morning tea. I had no idea what it was like to have a Saturday off, let alone a Saturday morning. I wanted nothing more than to curl up on Austin's couch with my tea and *Scooby-Doo*. Just like when I was growing up.

I unplugged my phone from its charger before heading downstairs to start my morning. I had a message from Austin, sent at five-thirty this morning. He had a morning skate and he was leaving, in case I woke up wondering where he was. That was four hours ago. As I got to the last step of the stairs and met Austin, who had the biggest smile playing on his lips.

"Morning, sunshine," he chuckled, handing me my mug. It was different from the one I used the night before. This one reminded me a lot of my old one. The one I loved but broke a few months ago. This one felt the same, only it was pink with black polka dots on it. There was no way in hell he had

this one hidden in his cupboard. My heart started to race when I thought about him going out and picking a mug for me. My tea was already ready for me. “I was just about to come to check if you were alive.”

I giggled, bringing my tea up to my lips. “I was exhausted, apparently.” God, he made a damn good cup of tea. He was looking down at me with this soft, yet goofy grin that made my stomach feel funny. His hair was still a little wet from the shower he took at the arena, and he smelled of clean soap and men’s deodorant. “Your bed is very comfortable, by the way.”

“I know.”

“So the mug...did you—“

“Buy it for you?” He chuckled. “Yes. I saw it a few weeks back. I remember you breaking your favourite one and hoped that maybe this one would be a nice replacement.”

“You really know how to make a fake girlfriend feel at home,” I beamed. “Comfy sheets. Soft pillows. Memory foam mattress and now a mug. Austin Sawyer, I’m moving in.”

He grinned, casting his head down before his hand came up to the back of his neck. Why was he nervous?

“What? Do I snore?”

He shook his head.

“Drool?”

“No.”

“Then why are you —“

“You look beautiful when you just wake up, Jacks.”

My cheeks warmed at his unexpected words. I felt my heart flutter in my chest cavity when I locked eyes with him. He meant it. It had nothing to do with the contract that we agreed to put on the back burner this weekend. His compliment was genuine and he was nervous about that, which made me believe it even more. Even though I was sure I looked like I had been dragged through a hedge backwards, as my mother would say. I could feel the stray pieces of hair that had slipped out of my braid, and my face felt a little puffy.

But with the way he was looking at me, I felt like the most beautiful girl in the world.

“Thanks,” I half-smiled as my blush grew deeper. I hated that I was embarrassed when I accepted a compliment. It was like it was wrong to acknowledge you look good without being conceded, or self-absorbed. Why

did it still feel that way?

“So, Jacks,” he began as he led us towards the couch. “I know we’ve got a busy evening ahead of us with Lucas’s party. But I was wondering if maybe you wanted to go somewhere special with me?”

My lips curled upwards as I took what I claimed as my seat on the couch. “I’d love to,” I nodded. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a bit of a surprise,” he said sheepishly. “It’s kinda like the bookstore date you took me on. If you hate it, I promise we can leave.”

I shook my head. “No way. It’s your thing. Whatever it is, I promise I’ll keep my mind open about it.”

“Yeah?” He cocked his eyebrow.

“Yeah,” I grinned. “It’s not skydiving, is it?”



Austin had an Uber waiting for us outside of the building. Without mentioning anything to the driver, the car peeled away from the curb and headed in the direction of the destination.

I was a little nervous to find out where he was taking us, but I also trusted him. This was Austin, after all. He wouldn’t take me somewhere completely out of my comfort zone. A little, sure. Especially if it was a special place to him and he knew I’d be safe.

After about twenty minutes, the car stopped and we were outside of an arena. Austin was out of the Uber first, holding his hand out for me to take as he helped me out of the vehicle. He linked his fingers with mine shortly after before leading us towards the glass doors of the building.

Most of the lights were off as we entered, indicating that the place wasn’t open. At least not to the public anyway. The lights to the rink were on and the ice had been cleared. Austin led us through the halls with ease, which told me that this was where he spent the majority of his time when he was here. If I had to guess, this was their practice arena.

“What size shoe do you wear?” He asked me as we stopped at a turquoise-coloured closed door.

“Eight and a half,” I answered. He nodded his head before twisting the knob.

He motioned for me to enter the room first before he followed closely behind. It was an equipment room. There were tons of hockey sticks, pads, skates, skate blades. Anything you needed, it was in this room.

“Sawyer,” a female voice filled my ears, making me turn around embarrassingly quickly. In the doorway stood a gorgeous blonde. She was taller than me with a thinner build and a nice smile I was sure Austin had seen multiple times before. Was she someone he slept with before? God, I had no right to be a jealous girlfriend when I wasn’t even his girlfriend. “I’ve got everything set up for you. Her skates included. You’ve got half an hour until the kiddos get here for their game. Maybe forty-five minutes, if Timmy decides he wants to do his pregame ritual.”

Austin chuckled at that before he stood up straight, making his way over to me. “Thanks, Jade. I appreciate it.”

“No problem, Austin,” she smiled softly. She shoved her hands in the front pockets of her red zip-up sweater. “Now, aren’t you going to introduce me to your girlfriend?”

He rolled his eyes. Was she trying to make a statement? She had a history with him. How could she not? Austin wasn’t subtle when he said he got around. She was beautiful in every way that I wasn’t. I was sure she didn’t have stretch marks on her thighs and hips. She could probably walk in heels and her hair probably stayed curled for longer than five minutes.

“Jade, this is Catalina. The poor girl I spilled my coffee all over the first time I met her,” he said as he pointed at me with a warm smile. “Jacks, this is Jade. She’s a good friend. She also works here as a student medic. Her dad is one of my coaches.”

God, I’m a fucking idiot. This is the girl Lucas is in love with. The girl he wants but can’t have.

She stepped forward with a grin spread across her cheeks. “It’s great to finally meet you, Catalina,” she said as she pulled me into an embrace. “Austin hasn’t shut up about you. I hope we can become friends this weekend.”

“It’s really nice to meet you, Jade,” I replied. “I’d love that.”

“Well, I better let the two of you get to it. Ice time is precious,” she nodded with a smile before stepping out of the room.

Austin wrapped his arm around my shoulder, leading me out of the room to our next destination. Jade had everything set up in the men’s locker room, where Austin suspected it would be.



I got the first glance at his locker and it made me smile. It was insanely organized from the way his deodorant sat to the way his practice jersey hung on the hook. On the bench, there were two pairs of skates. One clearly for him, the other for me.

“You’ve been skating before right?” He asked me as he began lacing up his skates.

I nodded my head. “I haven’t been in probably ten years though. I’m not on your level though,” I assured him. I didn’t know how to stop if it wasn’t into the boards and skating backwards was out of the question. Even with those minor mishaps, I was insanely excited to skate with him.

He kneeled in front of me, taking one foot to finish tying up my skates for me. “Tight enough?” When I nodded, he proceeded to lace them up before doing the other skate. When he was done, he was back on his, holding his hand out for me.

He reached into his locker, grabbing a beanie from the top shelf before putting it over my head. “Just to keep you warm out there.” My heart began to race when I saw the way he was looking at me. It was more than just to keep me warm. It was more than a beanie. I was feeling something between us. There was a spark that wasn’t there before. A genuine spark that ignited something in me.

Austin was out on the fresh ice at top speed, gliding along there like he was born to do it. This was the first time I was seeing him in his element and didn’t even have a stick in hand. He looked more at home here than I had ever seen him. Even in his apartment, he didn’t look as free as he was when he soared over that ice.

“You coming or what, Jacks?” He chuckled as he stopped by the bench. I made my way to the door, hesitantly stepping foot onto the ice.

My legs were a little wobbly at first, as I expected them to be. Austin slowed down next to me, linking his fingers with mine, giving me that extra support in case I needed it. “Jade’s pretty,” I commented. “I can see why Lucas is into her.”

“He told you?” He practically gasped as he released my hand, skating in front of me instead.

“Last night,” I confirmed with a shrug. “It looked like something was bothering him, so I asked. He told me about her. The girl he wants but can’t have. He never told me her name, but when you explained who she was, I knew.”

“So I wasn’t seeing things when she first walked in,” he pointed out. “You were a little jealous there, Jacks. Weren’t ya?”

“No,” I protested. “I wasn’t jealous.”

“Tell that to the look you shot her way,” he chuckled as he continued to skate backwards. “You were jealous and it was kinda cute.”

I shook my head. “Whatever. How could I not be when she’s perfect? Statistically speaking, hockey players prefer blondes. Not to mention, you’ve been very open about one-night stands and for a second, I wondered if she was one of them. Until I knew who she was and realized she wasn’t.”

He stopped dead in front of me. “Austin, I *don’t* know how to stop!” I collided with his body, which felt more like a brick wall than anything. Maybe I should have turned and aimed for the boards, but I wasn’t quick enough or a skilled enough skater.

His arms wrapped around me, holding me to him. I wasn’t sure if it was a cute attempt at a hug or if he was genuinely holding me up. I wanted to believe it was a little bit of both.

“Hey, you were well within your right to think all of that. Jade is pretty and my best friend is in love with her. She’s like a little sister to me,” he stated, pulling away just slightly. “And you’re probably right with that statistic. Personally, I prefer redheads, if you must know. I prefer to beat statistics, and aim for above average.”

“Fair enough.”

“And lastly, yes. I’ve slept around, but I would never intentionally introduce you to someone I’ve been with. It’s the ones who haven’t slept with me that you should be scared of,” he shrugged his shoulders with a nonchalant smile.

“Oh so I don’t have to worry about anyone this weekend,” I teased as I pushed away from him. His jaw hit the ice, making me laugh even more than I already was. “I’m kidding!”

I took off down the ice, trying to skate as fast as I could to put a safe distance between us. Not that it meant anything. Austin was a fast skater, regardless. He caught up quicker than I anticipated, making my laughter erupt once more, filling the arena.

“I think it’s you I have to worry about this weekend,” he chuckled as his hands made their way to my waist.

“The one you haven’t slept with,” I muttered, swallowing hard as my eyes locked with his. “Seems fitting.”

I could feel myself locking up, unintentionally. The mere mention of sex, especially with him, had me closing the gates and securing the walls once more, wanting no one to enter once again. I could hear the faint sounds of the partygoers, *“Aww why? The party just started and we’re getting kicked out?”* I was tired of kicking them out all the time. I was tired of locking my gates and securing the walls. I trusted Austin of all people. Even though he wasn’t my boyfriend, he was still my friend and he was someone I should be able to talk to normally about things. Good and bad. Happy and traumatic.

He cleared his throat. “All right, let’s get back to our fun. No more thinking, sweetheart.” He nodded, giving me a knowing smile. “Why don’t we teach you how to stop and not use a human body, mmhkay?”

*I’m not closing these fucking gates.* “What if I like using your body?”

He let out a laugh as his arms slipped tightly around my waist, holding me firmly to his body. “You can absolutely use my body, Jacks. But I can think of a few better things to use it for.”

Warmth spread through my abdomen and I swore, I clenched around nothing at the thought of him. It was like I was peering around the corner, afraid at first, until Austin assured me that it was okay. I was never going to heal if I kept hiding from every little thing that scared me. I had to allow myself to jump regardless. It was the only way I would ever get over my past.

“Me too,” I nodded as my hand reached up to his face. His hand gripped tighter around the small of my back. I wanted to kiss him again. That was all I could think about as I stared up at his face. I wanted to feel his lips on mine and taste his tongue once more. But the last kiss we shared was practice for our fake relationship that we were simply putting on pause this weekend. We were friends this weekend and that’s where the line was drawn. Making out in a very public place was out of the question. Kissing in general wasn’t going to happen this weekend. No matter how much I wanted it to.

I asked for this for my own sanity. I didn’t want that confusion messing with my head. But it was moments like this where I wanted to kick myself for it. The moments when my body responded to him so intensely that it killed me not to be able to act on it. Not without admitting that to him and confessing my feelings for him were very much real. It wasn’t a risk I wanted to take.

“You keep looking at me like that, Jacks, and we won’t be on the ice for much longer,” he stated in a low, gruff voice. Wait, was this affecting him too? Was he thinking the same thing I was?

Maybe it was time to take a bit of a chance with this.

I let my hand slip from his face before patting his shoulder. “Well, we can’t have that now, can we?” His grip on me loosened enough for me to notice, allowing me to slip out completely and skate away from him. “C’mon, Austin!”

I was halfway down the ice when I decided to look back, only to see him adjusting his pants a little. Fortunately for him, he wore jeans so if he had an issue, he could hide it better in them than in sweatpants. We were on the same page, at least physically.

We continued to skate around the rink, sometimes together, other times he took off and did a lap before joining me again. He had a lot of energy for someone who was up at the crack of dawn and had already done a skate. I liked being here with him though. I liked being in this part of his life. Even with the tension building between me and the contract on pause, Austin consistently made me feel like I had a space in his life.

“You’re fast,” I smiled as I attempted to turn to face him, almost losing my balance in the process.

He shook his head. “I’m a lot slower than I was. I can feel it in practice.”

“I know there aren’t any rinks in town, but if you ever wanted to go somewhere to practice when you’re in Stonebridge, I could take you, or you can borrow my car,” I offered with a shrug of my shoulders. “I know you aren’t driving again, but in case you wanted to.”

“Maybe,” he nodded.

“Sawyer, you’ve got five minutes to be off the ice!” Jade’s voice filled the arena as she stood by the benches. “Kiddos want on here as soon as possible and we’ve got to clean the ice.”

“We’ll be off in a sec,” he called back as he held his hand out for me. I linked my hand with him, letting him drag me across the ice with a laugh. I couldn’t feel my toes anymore and I couldn’t wait to sit down with a cup of tea in my hand.

Austin pulled me forward before his hands reached for my hips. Before I even registered what was happening, I was off my feet and sitting on the ledge of the bench with Austin in front of me.

“You have fun?”

I nodded my head, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth without even thinking about it. That warm feeling filled me once more and it only intensified when he stepped closer. “It was fun. Thanks for bringing me here

and letting me be a tiny part of your world.”

He half-smiled as his eyes tore away from mine for a second. “You’re a big part of my world, Catalina. You have no idea how much.”

“A big part, huh?” I cocked my eyebrow, hoping he’d elaborate on that statement.

“Jacks, besides Luke, you’re my favourite person on the planet,” he chuckled as he slipped his arms around my waist and moved between my legs. “You are my world. And I don’t need a contract in place to feel that way.”

My heart stammered with his confession. My palms grew sweaty and my hands shaky. The sincerity in his eyes told me he wasn’t just saying it; he meant it. I felt my eyes start to tear up as his words sunk in. Every part of me wanted to believe him, to call this entire contract off and try this out for real. But there was this tiny part of me that was filled with doubt. And the more I paid attention to it, the bigger it got.

“I know you might not believe it just yet, and that’s okay,” he said with a confident smile. “Like your trust, it will take time for you to believe it. I know how you are. Words mean nothing unless there are actions to back it up.”

He was right. He knew me. Better yet, he paid attention to me to learn how I was. He had that communication with me too. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, pulling him in close for a hug.

“All right, Sawyer,” Jade interrupted with a sheepish grin playing on her lips. “Sorry to put an end to your fun, but I need your ass off of the ice.”

“On my way off,” he nodded but didn’t loosen his grip around my waist. “Are you coming out tonight? I’m sure Lucas would love to see you tonight.”

“I ... I don’t know,” she sighed, not daring to look at Austin directly.

He shook his head. “You can’t avoid him forever, Jadie”

“I’m not,” she protested. “It’s just awkward between us. He’s the one avoiding me.”

I swallowed hard. “I’ll be there,” I began, hoping that I could say the right thing to help both of them. “Austin’s not going to be able to spend all of his night with me and I don’t know anyone. I was really hoping you would be there.”

Austin squeezed my hip as Jade let out another sigh. “I’m not going to get out of this, am I?”

“Nope,” Austin and I said in sync.

“C’mon,” I pleaded. “I’d love to get to know you better.”

“And I would feel better knowing she has more than one friend here,” Austin added in. “Especially if we get separated. No one knows this city better than you do and I trust you, Jadie.”

“Fine!” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll go. Now off the ice.” She motioned to the bench. The Zamboni came through the garage, waiting for the boards to open up. “I’ll see you at nine.”

Austin helped me down before slipping his hand in mine. He led us back to the locker room, stopping when it required his key card.

He helped me out of my skates before removing his own and cleaning them off. He looked like he had a routine by the way he was moving around the room. I was admiring him as he moved with such ease. The man who called me his world.

“So we’ve gotta be ready by six,” Austin told me as he placed his skates in his locker. “Lucas has something planned before his big party tonight.”

“Are... are you sure I should be there?”

He chuckled. “Yes. In fact, I kind of need you there.”

“Where are we going?” I cocked my eyebrow.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”



## Catalina

When Austin invited me to come to Long Island for the weekend, I wasn't sure exactly what to pack. I knew we were celebrating his best friend's birthday, which meant we were going out. I brought my only black dress, hoping Austin wouldn't care about the outfit repeat.

I had my makeup done as he was finishing up in the shower. I decided to keep it light and easy. Sticking with straightening my hair for the first time in I couldn't remember how long. I had a nice two coats of mascara on my lashes and a bit of highlighter that I rarely did over my foundation. All in all, I looked good. I just needed the dress to tie this look together.

I pulled it out of my bag just as the bathroom door opened up. Austin stepped out with only a towel wrapped around his hips. His chest was wet from his shower and his hair was a mess from the quick towel dry. I couldn't stop myself from staring at him. It wasn't like this was the first time I had seen him without a shirt. It was the first time I had seen him wet without one and it had me clenching my thighs in an attempt to calm myself. He was gorgeous. From those muscles to his tattoos, to his scars. He was the hottest man I had seen since Jensen Ackles on *Supernatural*.

"Damn," I muttered under my breath.

"What's that?" He chuckled, bringing a blush to my cheeks. I thought I had been quiet enough that he wouldn't hear me. A smirk played on his lips, making me want to cover my own.

"Oh come on! You know you're hot," I protested, pointing at his body. "You can't walk out of the bathroom, still wet, and in a towel and not expect me to appreciate you. I'm sure it would be the same if I walked out in just a towel."

He shook his head. "You're right," he shrugged his shoulders. "But I'd have a hard time not touching you. You, on the other hand, have more self-restraint." If he called self-restraint my thighs clenched and heat fluttering my abdomen. Hell, my eyes had barely left the tattoo on his arm. Tracing the lines down his arm, locking on the shading on his bicep. "Jacks?"

"Mhh?"

"Did you hear me?" He cocked his eyebrow. *Shit. Self-restraint.*

"Self-restraint. Yep. Got it," I nodded confidently.

He let out a laugh, shaking his head. "After that, silly. You know, while



you were staring at me and I said we should probably warn Lucas about Jade.”

“Sure,” I nodded once more, swallowing hard.

“You weren’t listening.”

“I really wasn’t. I’m sorry,” I frowned slightly. “I’ve... I’ve never been comfortable with someone the way I am with you.”

He smiled softly as he ran his hand through his wet hair. “C’mere,” he motioned, as he stood by his closet door. I hesitantly moved closer to him, keeping a bit of distance between us. I tried my hardest to keep my eyes locked with his, instead of taking a closer look at him. “You can touch me, Jacks.”

“Are you sure?” I swallowed hard.

He smiled softly before nodding his head. “Fair warning, I’m only in a towel and it’s not going to hide much if and when my dick gets hard.”

That did nothing to help me. I clenched around nothing at the thought of getting him hard. Not that I’d be able to do anything about it just yet. Baby steps. Regardless of that, Austin allowed me to do this without a single ounce of judgment. He knew I was nervous about this kind of stuff and he was allowing me to learn to be comfortable with him.

I let out a shaky breath as I stepped closer, my hand reached up to his chest. Austin’s eyes were on me the entire time, watching as my fingertips traced over the scars from the accident. The accident he opened up to me about and only me.

*Trust.*

“I was fifteen,” I breathed out, almost unable to believe the confidence that filled me while I traced my fingers over his shoulder. I was done being scared. “That’s when I lost my virginity. To my boyfriend at the time. We had been together for almost six months. Everyone was doing it so I felt obligated to, you know?” My fingertips ghosted over the lines of his wing, highlighting each feather as a distraction. My heart was beating a mile a minute and I could feel my palms growing sweaty once more.

“Let me tell you, it sucked,” I chuckled. “It was nothing like I expected. I knew it wouldn’t be like the movies. Like when Reese Witherspoon and Ryan Phillippe have sex for the first time in *Cruel Intentions*, which I’m not gonna lie, I had a bit of hope for. It was awkward and weird and not what I expected.

“I was told it got better the more you did it and I wanted to believe that,”

I nodded as I dragged my fingers along his muscular back, feeling how tense they were beneath my touch. “Turns out the Monday after we did it, he told everyone in the boy’s locker room about it. About how he finally got laid after waiting for so long. I’m sure some of the guys do that in the locker room for you too.”

“Sometimes,” he nodded.

“I’m sure that they don’t take that information and use it to their advantage,” I said as I stepped in front of him once more, placing both hands on his chest. I could feel how fast his heart was beating. Hell, the pace almost matched mine. “Unlike one guy in the locker room. As soon as he found out during first-period gym, by fourth-period English, he took that information and thought he was entitled to the same. A girl who wasn’t a virgin anymore. It wasn’t like it mattered now.

“I needed to go to the library to grab a book for the assignment. He followed me and as soon as I was in the stairwell, he forced himself on me. He had me pinned against the wall of the stairwell, unable to move. Unable to get away. His grip was so tight, it left bruises,” I whispered, not daring to meet his eyes as I felt mine fill with tears. “He was much bigger and stronger and I didn’t stand a fucking chance, and believe me, I fought hard. I fought so fucking hard, Austin, and it did nothing. He felt nothing, not a single hit to his face, only what he wanted to feel. He said while he was doing it that I was asking for it by parading myself around for everyone to stare at. That if I was giving it out like a slut, then he was entitled to what he deserved. That I owed him that for showing off. That he was taking what was his and me struggling only made it better for him.”

“Jacks...”

“I was raped because some asshole thought he was entitled to my body,” I finished, letting my hands fall limp at my sides as two tears slipped down my cheeks, more than likely ruining my makeup. God, I hated saying those words out loud. I hated admitting that it happened like I somehow could have prevented it when I knew that wasn’t possible. Courtney had told me hundreds of times now that what happened to me wasn’t my fault. It was his. It was his choice and his decision. His doing and his alone. I didn’t ask for it. “And he has no idea how much he destroyed me because of it. How much of my life had been put on hold because I’m terrified of it happening again.”

His hand came up to my face, urging my chin up to look at him. His eyes watered and a sadness washed over his features. His throat jumped before his

jaw clenched. A million different emotions were processed through him at the moment between us. I felt like a weight had been lifted off of my chest now that I told him, but I was also filled with dread. That reminder of what happened and now another person knew the details of it.

He took my hand, bringing it up to his chest. His heart was beating a mile a minute. He swallowed hard once more. “Jacks, I...”

I shook my head as another tear slipped down my cheek. “I’m comfortable with you,” I breathed out, nodding my head. “I’m telling you this because you make me feel safe, Austin. I know I can touch you and you won’t force me to do something I’m not ready to do. You make me feel things I never thought I was capable of feeling after what I’ve been through; things that scare me and excite me. Things I’ve never felt with anyone before.”

He smiled softly as he brushed away the tear that fell. “I will never let anything happen to you, sweetheart,” he whispered as he leaned closer, pressing his lips to the top of my head. “There is no pressure here, okay? No pressure for anything. I’m patient, and you’re worth waiting for.”

I melted into him as his lips lingered on my forehead a little longer. My heart was still racing, only for a good reason this time. I felt a calm wash over me when I was in his embrace. A warmth filled me from my head to the tips of my toes.

“Thank you for opening up to me, Jacks,” he muttered. “Means a fuck-ton to me that you did.”

My heart fluttered as I pulled back to look up at him. “Thank you for being a safe place for me to open up,” I paused as I stood up on my tiptoes. In a moment of confidence, I turned my head and pressed a kiss to his stubbly cheek. “And for being open with me. For being patient with me.”

“You’re my safe place too, Jacks.”



Austin and I walked hand in hand down the busy downtown street. The temperature had dropped significantly since this morning, and flurries threatened the sky. Cars were honking at one another. Traffic was backed up. I forgot what it was like to be in a bigger city. Living in Stonebridge was

always so quiet. Hell, you could jaywalk and not worry about oncoming traffic. Here? I was sure someone would hit me given the chance.

My legs were a little cold as we made our way to the unknown destination. Austin was reluctant on that information, claiming it was a bit of a surprise. So I trusted him and hoped he wasn't taking us into some sketchy sex shop or back ally bar owned by a guy with one eye.

He stopped at a door, pulling it open before I could read where we were. The second I stepped foot into the heated building, I knew exactly where we were. A tattoo parlour. Not what I was expecting in the slightest.

"Austin, what are we..."

"Oh perfect!" Lucas's voice filled my ears, making my head turn. He was headed over in a pair of sweats and a black hoodie. From the looks of it, he had nothing underneath. "You're here."

"Happy birthday, man!" Austin greeted him before pulling him in for a hug.

"Thanks, bro," he nodded with a grin. "Head over there and see what I'm getting. I'd like to talk with Cat for a second."

Austin cocked his eyebrow but didn't question it, which made me a little nervous. As soon as Austin was out of earshot, Lucas turned to me, motioning for me to take a seat on the bench at the front.

"Happy birthday," I told him, giving him a warm smile.

"Thank you," he smiled sincerely. "Listen, I owe you an apology. What goes on between you and Austin isn't any of my business to comment on and I shouldn't have said what I said last night. It's clear I made you uncomfortable and I didn't intend to. I don't know when to shut up sometimes and I almost ruined something for my best friend because of it. That's not cool."

I was taken aback by his apology. I wasn't expecting one, or even prepared for one. I was used to people screwing up and blaming it entirely on me. I was never on the receiving end of an apology. Never. Until now.

I swallowed hard. "I appreciate the apology, Lucas. I know you didn't intend to make me uncomfortable. I'm just not used to any of this, you know?" I shared, giving him a soft smile as I turned to face him more. "I want to believe the contract is bullshit, but I can't be one hundred percent sure. I called it off for the weekend after you left to see if it is, 'cause I need to find out for me."

"Good for you," he beamed. "You make him happy, you know? You

really do. He's never had someone like you in his life. Someone who cares about him for him and not because he plays pro hockey, or because he's good-looking. You care about him and whether or not he's eating enough, or getting enough sleep. You listen to him, Catalina."

"I'm sensing a but coming," I added with a nervous laugh.

He shook his head. "But, is this really the life you want? Someone who is on the road for weeks on end. Evenings and weekends spent at the rink. Mornings you wake up alone because he's off at practice. Hockey is his first love, and it's a big part of his life," he told me. I knew he wasn't mentioning it to upset me. He reminded me of the bigger picture. Austin's life was hockey first. It was his job. It was his dream he had worked his entire life for.

"It's just something to think about," he added with a nudge of his shoulder.

"And talk to him about too," I replied. "It'll be something we have to talk about regardless of a contract or not. Even if our feelings don't match up entirely, I can't see our friendship coming to an end because of something as silly as distance."

"Distance doesn't bother you?" He cocked his eyebrow.

I shook my head. "No, it doesn't. We've been doing fine so far."

"Luke, you coming or what?" A man called from the back of the shop.

"You look beautiful tonight, Catalina," Lucas smiled as he got up, heading to the back of the shop. Leaving me with a smile playing on my lips.

I got up moments later, following Lucas to the back of the shop where I found Austin. My body gravitated towards him like a magnet. No matter where I was, I wanted to be near him. The smell of his cologne filled my nose, bringing me a sense of ease. He was flipping through a book of different tattoos. "You getting one?"

"Thinking about it," he said as his arm wrapped around my shoulder. "What about you, Jacks? You want a tattoo?"

"Right now?" I cocked my eyebrow, looking around the shop.

"No time like the present," he chuckled. "What do you say?"

"I don't even know what to get, Austin," I breathed out, looking up at him. "Or where to get it for that matter."

He chuckled. "You're telling me you've never thought about getting a tattoo or where you'd put it?"

"I mean, yeah! Of course, I have," I told him. "But at this exact moment, while standing in a tattoo shop, trying to decide while my mind is entirely

blank.”

“You trust me, right?” He cocked his perfectly shaped eyebrow. I nodded my head. “I trust you. So you pick something out for me, and I’ll pick something for you.”

“Are... are you serious?” I swallowed hard. “Austin.”

“Trust me, Jacks.”

I did trust him, but this was a big deal. What if I picked something he didn’t like? Or worse, what if he and I ended up hating one another at some point and each of us had a reminder of the other embedded into our skin forever?

I looked through the book, seeing if there was anything that even remotely reminded me of Austin. I wanted to pick something that represented who he was as a person, not just who he was to me. About thirty pages in, I was starting to give up hope until I came across it.

And it was perfect for him. I just hoped he was going to like it.

He smiled when he saw me come over with the tattoo of choice. I tried my best to keep it discreet from him, wanting him to be surprised by it when it was done. I showed the artist what I was thinking, pointing to part of another tattoo to integrate in there instead of what was originally there. He nodded with a smile before taking off to get things set up.

“Where would you like it?” I asked him.

“You pick. I don’t particularly care,” he assured me. “Wherever you think is best.”

“Even if it’s the most painful spot?”

“Even then, Jacks,” he chuckled. “Anywhere in particular you want yours?”

“Did you have somewhere in mind?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

He gave me a sheepish grin. “I was kind of thinking on the inside of your bicep.”

“That’s going to sting a bit, isn’t it?” My lips formed a line.

He shook his head. “It’s not terrible. I promise,” he stated. “But this is also your first tattoo.”

“You’ll be okay,” Lucas shouted over as the tattoo artist wiped away the excess ink on his shoulder. I had no idea what he was getting done, but he sat there as relaxed as ever. His hoodie was off his one shoulder, revealing a portion of his chest. “You’re tough, Cat.”

“Okay,” I nodded to Austin. “Yours is going on the outside of your

forearm. I like that spot on you.”

“Do you huh?” He let out a chuckle before taking a seat on the tattoo chair. “Guess we’re giving you something else to stare at, huh?”

“As if you need to give me something else to stare at,” I teased as I stepped around him. The tattoo artist placed the stencil down right where I wanted it. I was excited to see what this tattoo was going to look like on him. More than that, I couldn’t wait for his reaction. “No looking until both of us are done, okay?”

“You guys are the cutest,” Lucas gagged. “It’s truly disgusting.”

I let out a laugh. “I guess we forgot to mention we got Jade to come out tonight,” I chimed in, looking back over my shoulder at the blonde in the chair. “You’re welcome!”

“How the fuck did you manage that?”

Austin’s laugh filled the room. “Jacks convinced her to come.”

“Do me a favour and talk to her, okay?” I pointed at him. “Screw the whole coach’s daughter bullshit, okay? It’s your damn birthday. One conversation can’t hurt. If I have to hype you up, I will.”

“She’s a good wing-woman,” Austin added in. “It’s how I landed her.”

I giggled as I took a seat next to Austin as the artist got started on his tattoo. I reached my hand up, slipping it in his. He turned to me, giving me a soft smile before bringing my hand up and pressing his lips to my knuckles.

“Did she say anything about me?” Lucas asked almost pathetically. He was head over heels for this girl and he was hopeless about it. I only wished I had something good to tell him. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that it was the last place she wanted to be.

I let out a shaky breath, squeezing Austin’s hand. “You seriously need to talk to her, Luke. Don’t be weird or awkward about it. You guys were friends before she started dating this guy. Just ‘cause she’s dating someone, doesn’t mean you stop being friends with her,” I stated. “Does her boyfriend probably hate you? Yeah. You’re Lucas Collins, some fake blonde bimbo on some famous hockey team. It’s intimidating for a lot of men. Jade is gorgeous too. He’s bound to feel threatened by you. But she doesn’t know how you feel and right now, she’s probably thinking you don’t want to be her friend because she has another man in her life.”

“She doesn’t need me.”

I shook my head. “She does. Trust me, she does,” I breathed out, thinking back to the last night out I had with my so-called friends. “I have Austin. It

doesn't mean I won't need my friend Lucas too. It doesn't mean there won't ever be a time that Austin isn't around and something happens and you're there."

He sat in silence for a moment. The only sounds I could hear were the tattoo needles. I was sure I crossed a line that wasn't meant to be crossed. This was Austin's best friend. A wave of anxiety washed over me, filling my chest with dread. I made the worst first impression on this man and he was going to hate me. I was always going to be that girl he never approved of for his best friend because she didn't know when to keep her fucking mouth shut.

Austin cleared his throat. "You know she's right, Luke."

"Yeah," he admitted with a defeated sigh. "I know she is. I just ... I have no idea what to do to get her back. Too much time has gone by and I don't deserve to get her back for that reason alone."

Silence filled the room once more. The tattoo gun continued to buzz. Before I knew it, an hour and a half had passed by and Austin's tattoo was done. "Looks fucking amazing," the artist commented with a grin. "He might want to see it before I cover it up with the plastic."

I couldn't agree more. "Go ahead."

Austin shifted his arm, getting a glance at the long arrow now on his forearm. The artist had gone in and done the details in the middle of a compass, always pointing forward, which was what I wanted for him. The tattoo was gorgeous and the artist did an amazing job on it.

"Jacks," he smiled softly, looking down at his new tattoo. "It's beautiful. Why this?"

"An arrow represents struggling and making your way through it no matter what. An arrow is drawn back before it's let go. That's you. You were pulled back before you soared, making it through with your head held high. The compass represents a sense of direction. It means no matter where you are or where you go, you'll always find your way home," I explained to him. "I hope you like it."

"I love it, Jacks," he beamed as the artist began to bandage up the new ink. "You still want to go through with this?"

"Absolutely," I nodded before taking my seat in the chair. "Let's do this."

The artist cleaned up the area from Austin's tattoo and set up the new needles and ink. Austin showed him the design he was thinking of for me, and I saw the smile creeping up on his lips before he nodded.

"What are you getting on her?" Lucas called over. Austin walked over,



whispering the design in his ear. “You fucking —“

“Shut up, dick,” Austin cut him off instantly. My heart began to race. What if I picked something awful and I was going to have that on my body for the rest of time? *No*. He wouldn’t do that. He asked me to trust him, and I did. He wouldn’t do something that I hated. No way in hell. Not with how much he liked his tattoo.

He scoffed. “Fine. I’ll finish what I was saying after.”

“Trust me, Jacks,” Austin smiled, taking my hand once more.

I kept my eyes on him as the chair adjusted back and the artist placed the stencil on the inside of my bicep. Austin gave him a nod to proceed with the tattoo. “It’s going to be about an hour to do this,” he stated. “If you need any breaks, let me know.”

I was expecting pain when he started. Instead, I was met with a bit of an annoying buzzing sound and a mild stinging sensation. It wasn’t unbearable like some described it to be. If anything, I kind of enjoyed the feeling. A part of me was even tempted to look, but I knew I couldn’t.

“How’s it feeling?” Austin asked as he squeezed my hand.

“Good, actually,” I giggled. “You might have just started something.”

“Knew she’d take it like a champ,” Lucas called over. “Good luck with her, Austin. She scares me.”

“Good,” I shouted back.

The artist continued to draw what felt like lines along the inside of my arm. The lower he got, the more it started to sting. It was a little more sensitive where my bicep and tricep met. Even then, a few deep breaths helped me through the pain.

“What do I even say to her?” Lucas asked about twenty minutes later. “Everything I think of makes me sound like an idiot, and I am an idiot, but I don’t want that to ruin everything between us.”

“Jacks is a romance author,” Austin pointed out.

“Struggling romance author,” I corrected him.

“You’ve still read every romance book out there, and no one knows romance like you do,” Austin pleaded. “Not to mention, you’re a woman and we need a woman’s perspective on this.”

“Please romance queen, help a poor hopeless boy in need,” Lucas pouted like a little kid. “I will forever be in your debt if you do this for me.”

I looked to Austin, only to see him shrug with a smile playing on his perfect pink lips. “He’s good on his word.”

I shut my eyes, knowing what I was getting myself into. If it meant someone else's love life was going to work out, then who was I to deny them? I could live vicariously through them if things with Austin didn't work out. After all, what kind of romance author would I be if I didn't help out someone in need?

The tattoo artist let out a chuckle when he realized what was coming.

"All right," I breathed out. "Tonight, when you see her, don't be awkward because she has a boyfriend. Talk to her like you used to before she got together with this guy. Be her friend first. Some of the best relationships are built from a friendship. Thank her for coming out for your birthday," I began. I paused for a moment, taking a deep breath when I realized that he was no longer outlining and had begun shading. "I will sneak away with her at some point tonight and talk you up. You have to be patient though. Things aren't going to fix themselves with one conversation. Not when months have gone by and you haven't been an active part of her life. Women need to see effort."

"You should know I'm not a patient person, Jacks," Lucas stated. "Sorry, *Catalina*."

"You're going to have to learn to be, *Lukie*," I teased. "Hate to break it to you, but you fucked it up, and fixing it is going to take some time and patience."

Both the artist and Austin let out a laugh.

"Dude, you're so fucked."

"Shut up, asshole!"

I giggled as I made eye contact with Austin. "If she's worth it, then you won't mind being patient with her."

"She's worth it," Lucas declared.

"She absolutely is," Austin muttered to me before squeezing my hand.

Not even half an hour later, the artist finished up. All in all, it probably took a little over an hour and a half to finish my tattoo. I felt my back cracking as I sat up on the chair. My arm stung a bit, but it was bearable. All in all, the entire process wasn't bad at all. I couldn't wait to see what he picked.

"Can I look?" I looked to Austin who couldn't take his eyes off my tattoo.

He nodded his head.

I took a deep breath, preparing myself for what an hour and a half of tiny needles resulted in. I turned my head to the side, taking my first glance at my inked bicep. Tears threatened my eyes when I saw it.

*A feather.*

One that looked similar to the feathers on Austin's wing.

"It's a feather from the same bird on my arm," he began as his hand came up to the back of his neck, rubbing the soft, short hairs for a moment.

"Feathers represent freedom and courage, which is something I hope you continue to do. This feather is also a reminder to you, that you don't have to fly alone anymore."

A reminder that I'm not alone anymore.

A reminder that I had him.

"It's gorgeous. I love it!" Holy fuck, did I love it. It was perfect.

"You romantic son of a bitch!" Lucas called out.



## *Austin*

I knew I should expect the unexpected when it came to Lucas and his birthday. This one was no different. Not only did he sit through a three-hour tattoo session before his party, but he rented out an entire VIP section of the hottest bar in town. Anyone who was anyone picked this bar out of any in Long Island.

The place was packed with people and I mean packed. He invited people we hadn't seen in years to this party. Hell, I was damn sure I walked past our eleventh-grade gym teacher. Lucas always went that extra mile, and in tonight's case, I was happy about it. I didn't have to worry about random strangers bothering Jacks, especially when this wasn't exactly her scene.

Not to mention, she looked fucking insane tonight. That black dress hugged her curves in all the right places. Her ass looked out of this fucking world. Not to mention, her tits looked incredible. This girl was the hottest one here and she was all mine.

She and Lucas were at the bar together, going over the plan for when he saw Jade. I was holding out hope that she would show up, and if she did, he had a sliver of a chance at getting her back in his life. Jacks wasn't as convinced, but she also didn't know Jade like I did, not yet anyway. All in all, I think my best friend and my hope-to-be girlfriend got along pretty well.

"That her with Luke?" Beau pulled me from my thoughts. He walked up to me with a bottle of beer in his hand and a knowing smile playing on his lips. I nodded my head, turning my gaze back to her. "She's not at all what I was expecting."

"What were you expecting?" I dared to ask.

"Blonde. Fake tits," he shrugged. "Those fake lashes some chicks do. Oh and those duck lip injection things. She's stunning, Sawyer. Like the settling down, wife her up then knock her up, kind of stunning."

I hated to admit it, but Beau was right. She was the settle-down kind of stunning. She was the came home in the middle of the night and curled up next to her kind. The good morning kisses and the homemade meals kind. The girl to wear your jersey to the game and kiss the shit out of you whether you won or lost. Ending the night with her was a win regardless of the score.

"You're damn right," I stated with a half-smile.

Jacks was headed over to us with two drinks in her hand and Lucas right

behind her. She handed me a bottle of beer while she sipped away on what looked to be some sort of soda. She wasn't drinking tonight.

"You must be Catalina," Beau began, holding his hand out to her. "I'm Beau. One of the defensemen for Long Island. Austin hasn't shut up about you." I rolled my eyes.

She smiled at him. "Nice to meet you. Austin has told me a bit about you. He told me you're a good friend to have in your corner. He didn't tell me you were a giant though."

"He's not," I argued, looking at him. His dirty blonde hair was slicked back, looking neater than usual. He had a couple of inches on me, but not much.

She let out a laugh. "You do remember I'm five foot three, right?"

Beau was six foot four. He was a giant to her. Hell, all of us were compared to her.

She wrapped her arm securely around my waist before leaning in. I wasn't sure if she wanted something, or if she was just doing it to touch me. Either way, I was just happy to have her hands on me again.

Nothing compared to her touching me in my bedroom. The way her soft hands traced over my skin. Her eyes travelled with her. The way her teeth sunk into her bottom lip as she tried to hold herself back as if she was scared to do something I didn't like. I understood where her hesitation came from. Now that she had revealed a big part of her life to me.

If I ever came across the guy who did it to her, he was going to pay a hefty price for it. Something that equalled the amount of time she spent suffering because of his actions. Something that resembled the amount of pain she went through, and the amount of times she had looked at herself in the mirror and thought of herself as broken. Something significant was taken from her by him, and eleven years later, she was still recovering. She was never going to get those years of her life back, or the thoughts that constantly consumed her.

Her worries. Her insecurities. Her fears of not being enough. I looked down at her and saw pain still lingering in her eyes. The pain that had always been there, but I hadn't fully seen it before. I knew her on a deeper level and with that came a whole new stem of insecurities. More doubts. More worries. More fears.

From my experience growing up in an abusive household, it was hard to let people in. I looked at Beau and thought, he didn't know that my dad beat

the shit out of me growing up. He didn't know that my dad was a drunk. He had no idea what my life was like growing up. He knew Austin Sawyer, the hockey player. Austin Sawyer, the man-whore. Austin Sawyer, his friend. He would never know Austin Sawyer, the kid who was terrified to go home.

There was a whole other level of vulnerability that came with opening up to someone. She was looking at me with that fear in her eyes. The fear that was expecting me to run from her now that she had shared the darkest part of her. She was expecting me to walk out of her life without looking back. Little did she know, I was here to stay.

I was here to put her at ease. Continue to give her that safe space to be whole with me. She's never had something like that from what I've gathered. She's never had someone who genuinely accepts her for who she is.

I leaned down, pressing my lips to the top of her head as I reeled her in close. I found myself looking at her arm, hoping to catch a glimpse of her new tattoo. A tattoo I never thought she'd go through with, if I was being honest. Especially when it required her to put her full trust in me to pick out something for her that she'd like. I just wanted her to have that reminder that she wasn't alone and she had it in her to fly, even if she was scared.

I had no idea I had it this bad for her.

I may as well have branded her with my fucking jersey number.

"So Catalina," Beau continued as he leaned against the side of the booth opening. "You a hockey fan?"

She let out a giggle. "Sure," she shrugged. "If being a fan counts as knowing absolutely nothing about it."

"You've got plenty of time to learn," he assured her. "All your friends are pro hockey players."

She playfully rolled her eyes before taking a sip of her drink. She may have hidden it well from Lucas and Beau, but I could see the pink hue in her cheeks at Beau's words.

"Jade's here," she told Lucas, motioning over his shoulder. Her grip loosened on me. "I'm going to go over there."

I slipped my hand in hers, stopping her from leaving right away. She looked up at me with a puzzled smile. I leaned my head down, hoping to keep the next words out of my mouth on the quiet side. "If it gets to be too much, come over and squeeze my hand three times. If anyone is bothering you, come find me, Lucas or Beau."

"Got it," she smiled confidently. God, she was gorgeous.

I couldn't help myself. I shook my head with a grin before leaning down, and pecking her lips sweetly. She pulled back with that same smile before taking off towards Jade. Like the perv I was, I watched her ass sway in the fucking dress. That goddamn dress I desperately wanted to peel off of her body at some point in time and add it to my bedroom floor.

Beau cleared his throat as he took a seat in the booth. "You've got it bad for her."

"You see her tattoo?" Lucas asked as he made eye contact with me. "The feather that looks an awful lot like it's from Austin's wing."

"For what it's worth, Sawyer," he paused, taking a swing of his beer. "It's nice to see you happy again. I was getting close to putting you and Nate in a support group."

"Whatever," I rolled my eyes. "Where is Nate, anyway?"

"He told me he was going to be late," Lucas stated as he grabbed the darts off the board next to the booth. "He got held up at his brother's. Apparently, his daughter didn't want him to leave."

"So Nate is definitely not coming tonight," I chuckled as I took a sip of my beer. I was only going to have the one tonight before I switched to something non-alcoholic. I didn't want to risk anything happening to Jacks and not being prepared to fight back in whatever way was needed. My reflexes needed to be on point. "His little girl comes first and understandably. She's been through too much already."



## Catalina

The bar was more crowded than I expected it to be. Sure, Lucas was as well known as Austin was in terms of hockey, and yeah, Austin said he liked to party on his birthday. I was sure most of Long Island was in this bar. It was overwhelming, to say the least. It didn't help that I knew a total of four people. Two of which, I just met today.

My arm was stinging a bit as I made my way through the bar, trying to reach Jade before she met with anyone else. I felt a pit of anxiety forming in my stomach. Jade was this beautiful blonde, supermodel-type girl. She was from the city and knew all the hockey guys because of her dad and her job. She was the popular type. The kind of girl that would never want to be friends with someone like me. Someone who preferred to be at home with a book and a cup of tea.

What if she didn't like me enough to actually want to be my friend?

What if she was just being nice to me earlier because Austin was there?

What if she thought I didn't belong here?

What if she thought I only wanted Austin because he was a hockey player?

Oh my god! She was going to fucking hate me.

"Catalina!" A female voice called out. As I came back to reality, I was greeted with a warm smile and a flash of blonde. I mustered up the best smile I could, hoping it would pass for genuine and not *freaking out* internally.

"Hi Jade," I greeted her as I moved around one final person to get to her. "You made it."

She let out a sigh as she brushed a stray piece of hair away from her forehead. "I came for you more than I did him."

I let out a laugh, motioning to the empty booth close by. She nodded before taking a seat with her margarita placed perfectly in front of her. "He knows far too many people."

"No kidding," she agreed. "So what do you think of Long Island?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "It's a lot busier than my tiny town, but it's beautiful. I kind of like it here."

She nodded with what looked like a knowing smile. I nervously took a sip of my Sprite. "Good thing 'cause if Austin has any say in it, he'd have you here with him any chance he got."

I let out a laugh. “Probably. I definitely wouldn’t mind visiting more often.”

“I’m sure you will,” she nodded. “Especially with Austin needing to be here more often for practices and whatnot. I know my dad mentioned keeping him here. I heard him arguing the other day with my Uncle Chris about it.”

“Your Uncle is a bit of a dick,” I said sheepishly.

She laughed. “Oh, he’s horrible. The only reason he wants Austin is because he thinks Austin’s going to bring in money for their annual date auction. I mean, sure. Austin’s handsome as hell, and he’s got his whole reputation with women. It’s like a walking billboard for my Uncle. Advertise Austin for a date and people will pay and he won’t have to worry about money for a bit. He wasn’t banking on Austin having a girlfriend. Neither was I.”

*Shit.* I did not want to get caught in the lie of our relationship. No one was supposed to know about our contract. *Fuck.* I never should have called off the contract for the weekend. Nothing about our behaviour has been romantic. We’ve given no indications that we’re together. I needed to pull my shit together and convince her that Austin was it for me.

“He said he wasn’t much of the relationship type,” I pointed out with a soft smile. “He told me about his reputation pretty early on.”

She offered me an odd smile before bringing her drink up to her lips. Oh god, did she think I wasn’t good enough for him? Maybe she thought someone better would win the heart of her friend.

*Oh my god, Catalina, shut up! You’re going to have a panic attack if you keep this up!*

“I was relieved when I found out he was seeing someone,” she admitted. “The accident fucked him up. It took him two months to have an actual conversation with me and not one-word answers that drove me insane. I was scared he was never going to recover fully from this accident. My dad was even more worried about losing one of his top players. I think that’s part of the reason why he agreed to his brother’s plea for help.”

“I don’t blame you for being worried, or your dad for that matter. I think Austin was the most worried,” I told her with a sad smile, remembering that night in my apartment when Austin opened up about the night of the accident. “I know Lucas was too.”

She went quiet for a moment and I wanted to use that as my queue to bring up more about him. I just didn’t want to make her uncomfortable by

talking about him. “Austin mentioned that you guys are all pretty close with him. Lucas and I hung out last night while Austin was doing hockey stuff. I’ve never been around guys that are so considerate and welcoming as Austin and Lucas are.”

She smiled but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “They are some of the nicest guys I’ve met. I’ve been around hockey players my entire life and they are exceptional men.”

I couldn’t help but grin at that. “Lucas told me you two are pretty good friends,” I said, trying to be subtle. “I couldn’t help but pick up on some awkwardness at the rink this morning when Austin brought tonight up.”

She shook her head. “Yeah,” she paused, taking a deep breath. “Things have been kind of tense between Lucas and me for a little while now. Ever since I started dating my boyfriend, Oliver, we’ve grown apart. I don’t know if backed off because of my relationship or what, but it’s been awkward.”

Sounded pretty similar to the conversation I had with Lucas.

“Lucas was one of my best friends in the entire world and one day, he stopped answering my texts and we went three weeks without so much as acknowledging one another. Here we are, nearly eight months later and we’ve maybe exchanged twenty words in that time,” she stated before downing the rest of her drink. “I need another fucking drink.”

My throat tightened as soon as I saw her eyes watering. “I’m sorry, Jade.”

She shook her head. “It’s sucks. I’ve almost asked him why he stopped talking to me a million times, but I convince myself not to ‘cause he wants nothing to do with me. And not that I want anyone to know this, but I really miss him. My boyfriend is great, don’t get me wrong. But he wasn’t meant to be a replacement for Lucas. Hell, he doesn’t do any of the stupid things Lucas used to do with me. He’s reserved in all the ways that Lucas is wild. I miss my best friend.”

“The kind of person who brings out the best in you,” I breathed out, thinking of Austin instantly. “Those are the best kind of people. The ones who accept you for who you are and don’t try to change you.”

“Lucas was that person for me,” she swallowed hard, downing the rest of her drink. “I love my boyfriend. I do. But I find myself longing for the friendship I had with Lucas before all of this. I miss the 3 a.m drunken walk home during the off-season and the stupid questions he asked me on the way,” she told me. “Please don’t tell anyone this.”

“Promise!”

“And if you do end up telling Austin, swear him to secrecy. Tell him if he spills any of it to Lucas, you’ll withhold sex from him. Not even a BJ. He is definitely allowed to give you the Sawyer Special though.”

I went silent.

“Enough about me. I’m dying to know all about you!” She effectively changed the subject. I felt my cheeks warm. What was there to know about me? “You’re dating one of the hottest guys in the NHL. Between us girls, does his reputation proceed him?”

My mouth went dry and I tried my hardest to muster up a smile. What the fuck was the Sawyer Special? How the fuck was I going to answer this? It had to do with sex and that wasn’t something anyone needed to know. I knew she was trying to break the ice between us, and when girls talked, I knew that bedroom talk was generally brought up. But she didn’t know me, and I wasn’t about to tell her my trauma. I had a part to play. All she needed to know was that my relationship with Austin was real. I was playing a part. I was slipping into my favourite character from my favourite book and praying I was a good enough actress to pull this off.

“I don’t kiss and tell,” I winked.

Her eyes went wide and her lips formed into an O before she giggled. “Oh my god, it so is! No wonder he’s always on his phone before and after practice. You’re sending him dirty texts.”

“What can I say? I miss him when he’s gone,” I teased. Maybe I should forget the whole author career and switch to acting. I was killing it. She was eating up every word I was giving her.

“Ladies,” Lucas’s voice filled my ears. I glanced over, seeing Austin, Lucas and Beau standing by our table with some drinks and what looked like nachos. “We brought you some goods. A new margarita for you, Jadie. Another sprite for Jacks. A boyfriend to go with it.”

“Thanks, Lucas,” I smiled at him before turning my gaze back to Austin.

“You mind if I borrow my girlfriend?” He asked Jade as he held his hand out for me. I slipped my hand in his, letting him help me out of the booth and to my feet. As we walked away, a group of guys made their way over to the table, all ready to wish Lucas a happy birthday.

Austin led us passed the bathrooms and to a quieter part of the bar. It was more private back here than anywhere else. By the looks of it, I wanted to believe it was employees only. He stopped when the hallway stopped before pulling me into the corner with him.

“Hi Jacks,” he greeted me as his hands slipped around my waist, pulling me flush to him. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“It’s been half an hour. Forty-five minutes tops,” I chuckled.

He rolled his eyes playfully. “Forty-five minutes of Lucas freaking out about Jade. It’s so bad that Beau kicked his ass in darts and that has never happened before.”

I swallowed hard. “He’s going to be disappointed. I don’t think this is a conversation to have in a bar on his birthday.”

“Why?”

“He stopped talking to her, not the other way around,” I revealed. “She told me a bit more but I’ll tell you later. No chance of listening ears, and I have to swear you to secrecy. If not, you get no sex. Jade’s words, not mine.”

The words Sawyer Special whirled around in my head. I had no idea what they meant, or if I was even meant to know what they were. That was a part of Austin’s life that I didn’t want to know all the details of. I couldn’t blame him for being with multiple women when he was a pro hockey player who wasn’t ready for a relationship. He didn’t know me then either. It was moments like this that made it hard because I wasn’t his. And even if I was, this all happened before he met me. He wasn’t fucking random women anymore.

I was just terrified of being compared to them. Because I can’t compete with them. I would never be able to compete.

God, just when I get to a good place with him, something comes up and I’m taken back seven steps.

“No sex, huh?” He said as his grip tightened around me.

“Yep,” I breathed out. “And she mentioned something about the Sawyer Special.”

His face fell and his arms followed. He ran his fingers through his hair as his jaw clenched. He was nervous. Hell, he almost looked like he felt guilty. “Jacks, I’m…”

“This is probably a conversation to have in private at home,” I said quietly before I swallowed hard, trying to rid of the lump in my throat. He nodded his head. “But I need to know something; two things actually.”

“Anything.”

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to make eye contact with him. “Is this between us holding you back from what you want? Am I holding you back?”

He frowned instantly before his hands were back on my body. “Absolutely not, Jacks. This is not holding me back. This is moving me forward. This is making me happy. You make me happy.”

“Do I make you *happy* thought?” I asked him, hoping that he would understand what I meant.

He chuckled. “If you’re asking if I jerk off to the thought of you, then yes. You make me very happy,” he breathed out, leaning in closer. “Only you can make my dick so painfully hard and only the thought of you can get me off. It’s only your name I call out when I finish and only you every time my hand’s wrapped around my dick.”

“Austin.”

“And it’s enough for me, Catalina,” he stated as his hand cupped my cheek. “It’s enough for me to think of you when I do. It’s enough for me and will continue to be for as long as you decide.”

“The contract...”

“Is bullshit. The contract is bullshit and we’ve both known that for a long time now,” he declared as he leaned in. “I think both of us were just too scared to admit it.”

My heart began to race when I heard those words come out of his mouth. The words I wanted to hear for the longest time, but never thought I’d hear them. I propped myself up on my tiptoes before pressing my lips to his. My arms wrapped around him, holding him to me as he kissed me back, deepening the kiss almost immediately.

My back pressed against the wall as his tongue collided with mine, sending a flood of warmth between my legs. I could taste the beer on Austin’s tongue, along with the faintest taste of mint from the gum he was chewing before we arrived. It made me wonder if he planned on kissing me tonight, or if it was something he normally did. Not that I was concerned at the very moment when I had his body flush against my own and my leg around his hip.

I knew one thing for certain. I could see myself having sex with Austin in the future. The very near future. Especially with the way his leg is between mine and how fucking good it feels to have him pressed against me. I needed to get out of my head. I needed to be present and enjoy what I had in front of me ‘cause I had never had something like this before. Someone who wanted me back.

He pulled away slowly, leaving an inch of space between our lips — if

that. My eyes opened, meeting his now dark green orbs. I could see the faint smile by the lines around his eyes, making my heart soar. “We should probably join our friends before someone comes looking for us.”

I nodded in agreement.

“We’ll talk about this when we get home,” he muttered. “All of it. I just want you to know though. Nothing about our dynamic is going to change, Jacks. We’re still going to be you and me. Two best friends.”

“Promise?” I smiled softly at him.

“I promise,” he said, nodding his head. “Unfortunately for you, you’re stuck with me for a lot longer than the contract stated.”

Relief washed through me. He wanted me. He actually wanted me. “Oh really?”

“Yes, really,” he chuckled before pecking my lips softly. “There’s no way in hell I’m letting you go.”





## *Austin*

I kissed Jacks once more, tasting the slightest hint of her soda on my tongue before I pulled away. My hand reached for hers, giving it the softest squeeze. My heart was racing a mile a minute after what happened between us. That's how I knew it was right between her and me. She made me nervous in the best possible way, and it felt incredible to know that she saw me as more than the guy she got stuck with. She saw me as someone she could trust. Someone she could be herself with. I never wanted that to change.

She led the way this time around, tugging my hand along with hers. My friends were gathered around the same table while Lucas and Beau were shooting a round of pool. Jade's friend Katie joined, along with her brother Dean. Everyone on the team was here but Nate, which I was a little sad about given that I was looking forward to introducing him and Jacks. I had a feeling the two of them would get along well, given they were both introverts and had the same love for Disney movies.

"-'bout time the two of you joined us," Beau commented as Lucas sunk another ball on him. I rolled my eyes. "You two can't keep it in your pants for one night?"

Catalina chuckled. "I'm sorry! Have you seen how hot my boyfriend is?" She called out, making me smile. "If he was yours, you'd do the same thing."

I fucking loved this girl.

I pulled her into my chest, giving her cheek a sweet kiss before fully wrapping my arms around her. She melted into me, placing her hand lightly on my newly tattooed forearm. "To be fair, I've seen Austin in the change room. Man's impressive, even I have to admit that."

"I always knew you were looking at our dicks, Beau," Lucas shouted across the bar. "It's okay to compare yourself to us, man. Not all of us are blessed in that department. But don't worry. You can still use the little guy."

"Fuck you!" He shook his head, trying not to laugh. "If it wasn't your fucking birthday, you'd be a deadman for that."

"Yeah, but it is and let's not forget who admitted to seeing Austin's dick in the change room here," Lucas held up his beer to him before taking a swing.

Beau scoffed. "As if you two fuckers didn't compare dick sizes when you were bed buddies in high school."

“You comparing dicks again, Beau? Is there something you want to tell us?” A familiar voice filled my ears. I turned my head and smiled instantly. “Sorry, I’m late. I got held up at my brother’s with Zoey.”

“Everything okay?” I asked him as I held my hand out for a fist bump. He looked a little worn out, not that I could blame him. He had a four-year-old daughter who was a handful and a half. His hair was a mess and he looked like he threw something on before coming to the bar tonight.

Nate was typically a good-looking guy. He had that mysterious handsome look to him that had a stadium of girls wearing his *Jensen 30* jersey. He was a year older than Lucas and I, called up the year before us and taught us everything he learned his rookie year. He certainly made the transition into the NHL an easy one for us.

Now? He had dark circles around his eyes and it seemed like he needed about a year’s worth of sleep. He didn’t have that light to him anymore. Whatever light he had left in him went to his daughter. She needed it the most.

He shrugged his shoulders before bumping my fist. “We’ll talk later.”

I nodded my head, knowing it meant he needed a friend. “Jacks. This is Nate. One of my close friends and teammate. He’s a left winger on my line,” I told her. “Nate, this is my girl, Catalina.”

He held his hand out to her, giving her a warm smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Catalina,” he greeted her. “Austin has told me so much about you.”

“All good I hope,” she breathed out. “It’s really nice to meet you too, Nate.”

“I didn’t think you were going to show,” Lucas beamed as he pulled Nate into a hug.

He chuckled. “Yeah, and run the risk of you bitching about me missing it? Fuck that.”

Truth is, I didn’t tell Catalina much about Nate, even though he was a close friend. There were no words to describe him, especially at this point in his life. He was at the lowest point, and he was scrapping by, missing game after game because of his little girl, trying to get his life back on track. It wasn’t my place to tell her a lot of that stuff before she knew him. I also didn’t want to overwhelm my friend with the idea of my girlfriend knowing that about him.

“I’m going to go sit with Jade for a bit,” she muttered to me as she leaned back. I nodded my head, planting a kiss on her cheek before releasing her

from my arms.

I watched her walk over to the table where they were sitting, and slide in next to Jade who smiled widely when she saw her. My girl fit in, and I hope she felt that she did. It was a lot better than her friends back home, who didn't even notice when she left. I think everyone here would notice if she disappeared, especially without me.

"You love her, huh?" Nate nudged my arm, bringing me back into the conversation.

I swallowed hard. "Is it that obvious?"

"To me. Yeah," he let out a dry laugh as he ran his hand through his hair. "Don't wait forever to tell her, okay?"

"I don't plan on it," I said as I looked over to my girl, unable to keep my eyes off of her. "She deserves to know how I feel and I never want her to question it."

"He's in love all right," Lucas blurted out before bringing his beer up to his lips. "This motherfucker got one of the feathers off his wing tattooed on her not five hours ago."

I watched Nate's eyes go wide before a small smile appeared on his lips. "A feather is tame. Ella had my jersey number tattooed in a very private place."

I was in shock. It was the first time since that he even spoke her name. I didn't want to make a big deal out of it. He wasn't, so I wasn't going to.

"Now that's fucking hot," Lucas grinned widely. "Imagine sucking her clit and looking up to see your number right there. I'd bust a fucking nut right there."

I fought to roll my eyes, only because I knew it was true.

"As if you don't bust in less than two minutes anyway," Beau shot his way as he walked over with some drinks.

"I want a rematch on that game," Lucas all but demanded as he made his way over to the dart board. "You got lucky, Carter."

I motioned for Nate to take a seat at the booth close by, just in case the two idiots needed supervision. Lucas was on his fifth beer of the night and it wasn't even eleven yet. He hadn't even blown out his candles yet.

"What's going on, man?" I asked Nate as soon as we took a seat. His throat jumped before his head shook.

"I went to drop Zoey off at my brother's tonight," he began, letting out a shaky breath. "She started bawling as soon as I handed her backpack over to

him. And I mean bawling. I haven't seen her cry like this, Austin. I felt like the world's worst dad the second I got back in the car."

"You're not," I shook my head. "You're an amazing father, Nate. Zoey's at that age where you're everything to her. She wants to do everything with you."

He let out a sigh. "But I'm a professional hockey player. I'm a single dad with a four-year-old daughter," he pointed out as if I didn't already know that. "It's hard to do both."

I swallowed hard, seeing the defeat in his eyes. "We're all here for you, you know that right? We're all here to help take some of that weight off your shoulders. You're a single dad with a huge family behind you. You're not alone, man."

He nodded.

*Happy birthday to you.* I turned my head, seeing the candles lit on the cake in the centre of the room. Lucas's face lit up as soon as he saw the large cake with his jersey number in red and blue icing. Twenty-eight candles were placed evenly around the cake. Lucas made his way over to it, ready to blow the candles out. I didn't miss the way his eyes locked with Jade's before he blew them out. I knew full well his birthday wish had something to do with her.

My eyes met with Jacks, seeing the smile appear on her lips. I slipped around the crowd, making my way through groups of people to get to her. My girl. The one I couldn't wait to take home tonight.

The one I couldn't wait to make mine.



## Catalina

It was well past one when we finally walked through the threshold of Austin's beautiful apartment. His arm was wrapped securely around my shoulder while mine was snaked around his waist.

Lucas and Beau convinced him to have another drink with them, claiming it had been too long since they had all been to the bar like this. I could tell he was a little hesitant at first, but he eventually gave in around eleven. I stuck with my soda all night, happy with the fizziness and the lemon-lime flavour.

I liked getting to know Austin's friends the way I did tonight. Sure, they teased him about having a girlfriend now, and I heard the whispered comments about the man they were sure was never going to commit. They all supported him in a way I had never seen before, or at least experienced. That support went as far as to include me.

If Austin was busy shooting a round of pool with Lucas, Jade and Katie made it a group trip to go to the bathroom if I needed to go. If I wanted to get another Sprite, Beau was the first one to offer to come with me, just to make sure no one harassed me on the way. I genuinely felt like I was a part of their friend group. I wasn't the outsider who was only invited in because of Austin. His friends made it a point to get to know me a little better tonight. And it meant the fucking world to me.

Finally, I felt like I fit in somewhere for once.

"You have a good time tonight?" I asked him as I kicked my shoes off, feeling the relief of the cold tile against the soles of my feet.

A goofy smile played across his lips before he nodded. "I did. All my favourite people in one place for once, instead of the most important person missing."

"Most important?" I swallowed hard before looking at the tall hockey player.

He ran his hand through his hair before taking a step forward. "I like you, Catalina Jackson. I *like* like you so much that you are one of the most important people in my life," he paused, licking his lips as he gathered the courage to continue. "You know I don't date. You know I don't let too many people get close to me. I know you're the same way. Holding people at arm's length because you don't want to get hurt by them. But I've never been able to hold you at arm's length, Jacks. Not for a second, and believe me, I tried.

And it wasn't because I was scared you were going to hurt me. I was terrified I was going to hurt you and that's the last thing I ever want to do, even though I know it's inevitable, even if unintentional."

He took another step forward, stopping just before me with a nervous smile. My heart was racing a mile a minute as I listened to the words coming out of his mouth. Even if he was nervous, he was still so confident; and so put together, that made me think he had practiced this before saying it. "I don't want to play games with you, and I don't want to continue with this stupid contract when I know I don't need that safety net. I don't think I ever did. I don't need anything other than you. I don't want anyone other than you."

His hand came up and his palm rested against my cheek, urging me to keep eye contact with him. I swore when I looked up, I melted. His eyes were the softest I had seen them, and his smile was nervous, but still so sure. I could faintly make out the few freckles dusting over his nose, making my lips curl.

I could wake up to these eyes every day for the rest of my life.

I could count those freckles, dying to see if he gets more the older he gets.

Austin was my safe place and he had been for longer than I even knew. He wasn't the one to catch me before I fell because he fell with me. He wasn't the one to save me because he reminded me that I didn't need saving in the first place. He reminded me that it was okay to be a little broken because that's how the light got in. Maybe he was my light after all.

"You don't have to say anything. I know this is a lot to process..."

I shook my head. "Open communication, right?" I slipped my arms around his waist, keeping him close. I felt the warmth radiating off of him. His cologne filled my nose once more. "You're my favourite person in the entire world and I have the biggest crush on you. Like, write your name in hearts in my diary kind of crush. And the way my heart soars when you kiss me is insane. I trust you, Austin. I trust you more than I have ever trusted anyone. But, I'll admit, I'm a little scared."

He leaned down, placing a soft kiss on my lips before he smiled. I backed up a little, hopping up on the kitchen counter, and pulling him in once more. "What's got you scared, Jacks?"

"What if I'm not ready for this?" I asked him. "What if I'm not a good girlfriend? What if..."

"Jacks," he paused, taking my face in both of his hands. "There is no

rush. There's no time limit. We can take this at our own pace. One day at a time. You can be ready today. You can be ready tomorrow. And if you wake up on Friday three weeks from now and aren't ready that day, we'll slow it down. Neither of us is going to be perfect every day, just like we haven't been since we met. Now, I'm damn sure I can be a good boyfriend to you 'cause I've been your boyfriend this entire time. Nothing is going to change, Jacks. Not really. We just kiss more now."

"Always so confident," I smiled up at him, wishing I had the tiniest portion of the confidence he had. "Just kissing, huh?"

He shrugged before smirking. "I'm always open to more, and you know that. I'm trying not to pressure you, Jacks. I'm *really* trying."

I took a deep breath, unsure of whether I wanted the next words to come out of my mouth. I had to know. I wanted to know. Everyone else knew. "What's the Sawyer Special?"

His head dropped and he shook his head. "Jacks..."

"Please?"

He let out a defeated sigh before his jaw jumped. His hands slipped off of my body as he took a step back, running his knuckles along his jaw. My eyes were fixated on him, wondering what exactly was going through his mind.

He kneeled in front of me, making my heart speed up. His hand came up to my ankle, tracing along my skin as he inched forward. "Starts like this," he said quietly as our eyes locked. His fingertips ghosted around the hem of my dress. "Usually, you'd be standing up with your back pressed to the wall. Your pants either around your ankles, or your dress pushed up, bunched around your waist with my hand dangerously close to your panties."

*Holy shit.*

"And I'd ask you if you're wet for me before brushing my fingers over your pussy," he said lowly. *Yes. Holy fuck, yes.* I don't know what did it for me. The proximity of him to my core, or the words leaving his mouth, describing the things he'd be doing to me. One thing that struck me was that I wanted him to do this to me. I wanted to feel his fingers touching my pussy. I wanted him to ask me how wet I was for him and I wanted to tell him to feel for himself. Not a single part of me was nervous about it. Nothing brought me back to that day in the stairwell. He excited me. I ached for him.

"My lips would press against this soft spot," he breathed out, tracing his calloused fingertips softly along my inner thigh, stopping well before my center. "And for you, I'd ask you if it's okay to take your panties off because



I'm a gentleman and consent is fucking sexy.”

“Austin,” I breathed out.

“And if you said yes, it would be seconds before your panties hit the floor and my mouth pressed against your sweet pussy, tasting you like I've dreamed about for longer than I'd care to admit. And I wouldn't stop until you come undone, all over my fucking face.”

Fuck me. This man was going to be the death of me.

He pressed his lips to the side of my knee before standing up with the most innocent smile playing on his lips. “But, I am not going to do that to you,” he stated, keeping his smile in place. “You don't deserve to be lumped in the category of one-night stands, Jacks. Not for a second.”

Disappointment flooded me when I realized that he wasn't going to. He was only being respectful toward me, and it wasn't like I gave him the exact words that I wanted him. He was being his patient, kind self, and he was trying not to pressure me. But this heat in my core wasn't going to go away, and it wasn't like I had the privacy of my apartment to rub one out with the time and patience that took.

“I've never...” I shook my head, cutting myself off. I didn't intend to admit anything like that to him.

He furrowed his brows as his hands slipped around my waist. “Never what, Jacks?”

I sighed, casting my head down. “Been touched like that. Experienced that.”

He reached his hand up, pressing his thumb under my chin, urging me to look at him. “You will. Like I said, I dream of tasting you on my tongue.”

“I want you to.”

I had no idea I had the guts to say it, let alone in front of him. Judging by the look on his face, he didn't either. But I felt a sense of relief as soon as the words were out there. I wanted him to. I was ready to. It wasn't like this was full-on penetrative sex we were having. This was different. This was something I had never done before. Something that he gave me the courage for. Something that I had read in every single romance novel, over and over again and wanted from him. Only him.

“Are you sure?” He asked softly, running his hands down my bare arms. “Like really sure, Jacks?”

I nodded my head.

“I need words, Jacks.”

I took a deep breath, trying to ease my nerves. “Yes. I want you to feel how wet you make me,” I stated, mustering up every ounce of confidence I had. “I want you to taste me on your tongue, Austin.”

He took a step back, holding out his hand with a soft smile playing on his lips. My heart was racing and anticipation filled my stomach. I slipped my hand in his, letting him help me off the counter. He dragged me through the kitchen toward the stairs. I was really doing this. I was asking him to do this.

He motioned for me to walk up the stairs before him like the gentleman he was. As soon as I stepped foot in his bedroom, his hands were on me. My body pressed against the wall, his body caging me in as his lips collided with mine. My arms wrapped around him instantly, holding him tightly to my body. The tension that had been growing between us tonight finally coming to that release I think we both needed.

His hands traced over my body, gripping and tugging me wherever he wanted me. He had no idea where he wanted to touch and for how long. He just wanted to touch me and I was soaking up every second of the affection I had deprived myself of for the last eleven years. There was this buzzing feeling circulating through my body with every stroke of his tongue against mine and every grip of his hands, tugging me into him.

His hands reached beneath my ass, pulling me up before he pressed against me once more. My legs wrapped around his waist and my arms tightened around his shoulders as our lips moved in perfect sync with one another. I could feel the heat of him through his jeans. He was into this as much as I was into him.

He broke the kiss and pressed his forehead to mine before rubbing his nose against mine. “You’re safe with me, Jacks. You will always be safe with me.”

*I had never felt so safe in my life.*

He pulled back from the wall, carrying me with ease toward the bed. He gingerly placed me in the middle of the bed with his body coming down on top of mine. His lips pressed softly to mine before he backed away, kneeling on the mattress between my legs.

“You look breathtaking in this dress,” he said as his eyes travelled over my curvy body. “I’m sorry to say it’ll look better on my bedroom floor.”

I giggled at the excitement on his face. “You know as well as I do that I need help out of this dress. But first...” I sat up, reaching for the bottom of his shirt, shoving it up his long torso until he got the hint that I wanted it off

of him. He chuckled as he pulled it over his head, tossing it somewhere in the room without another thought.

“Oh, I’m getting naked now?” He laughed. “You want my pants off too?”

“Yes please!” I reached for his belt, fumbling a little as I undid it before undoing his button and zipper. There was a sizeable bulge in the front of his black boxers and it took everything in me not to touch him just yet. No wonder I felt him through his jeans. The man was packing some serious heat.

He shifted off the bed and pushed his jeans down his legs before stepping out of them. He smiled as soon as he saw me sitting up, ready to unzip this dress. I soon remembered that I was going to be left in just my bra and panties. He was going to see every curve, every stretch mark, every imperfection of my body that I hated. He was going to see more than he needed to and I was terrified he wasn’t going to be attracted to me anymore as soon as he saw me. I wouldn’t be.

His fingers pulled on the zipper, loosening the dress from my body before heading for the sleeves. I let out a shaky breath and he instantly noticed my hesitancy, something I was hoping he wouldn’t see either. “You all right, Jacks?”

I nodded my head, letting him proceed. He peeled the dress off me slowly, revealing inch after inch of skin until it bunched around my waist. He gave it one final tug around my hips before tossing it behind him. “God, you’re gorgeous.”

“That’s you, handsome,” I teased.

He shook his head with a chuckle. “No Jacks. I’m serious. You’re fucking beautiful, it’s insane.”

I swallowed hard. “I’m not—“

“You’re perfect, Jacks,” he protested as he kneeled between my legs once more.

His body hovered over mine before his lips collided with mine in a heated kiss. His hands traced down my body, urging my leg over his hip to bring us a little closer. He was in no rush to take this any further as if he was content just kissing the way we were, as if he was making up for lost time. In a way, I think we were considering I was sure he was going to kiss me that night on the beach.

He kissed along my jaw, taking his time trailing down the side of my neck. He stayed there for a moment, dragging his lips along my sensitive skin before doing the same with his tongue. Holy fuck, did it feel good. Hell, I

never wanted him to stop kissing my neck. Between the delicious scratch of his stubble against my skin and the way he softly groaned so close to me. My panties were slick with want and I needed something more. I needed to feel more of him.

“So responsive,” he breathed out as he made his way to my breasts.

“Austin, please!” I almost begged.

“You want me to touch you now, Jacks?” He asked between kisses down my navel. “Tell me, are you wet for me?”

“Yes.”

“How wet, sweetheart? How wet is that pussy for me?”

I let out a shaky breath. “So fucking wet, Austin. Touch me and find out how wet I am for you.”

He groans. “My girl has a bit of dirty mouth.”

Fuck, he can absolutely call me his girl. I was his girl. He could call me that forever and it wouldn't be long enough. His hands felt incredible sliding down my body, and his lips tracing over my skin ignited a fire in me I had never felt before.

“God, you're stunning, Jacks,” he breathed out as his fingers traced along my inner thigh. “Your curves drive me insane.”

“Even the stretch marks?”

He smiled. “Those were fucking earned and they're sexy. I love the way they feel beneath my fingertips.”

He kissed along my inner thighs, taking his time on each side. Surely, he knew it was going to drive me insane. I had no idea my body was so sensitive, especially to his touch, but it was. I don't think there had ever been a point in my life where I was this turned on. I could feel myself dripping, and that had never happened to this extent.

“God, you're soaked,” he cooed just before his hand came up to my core. My pussy clenched at the contact, needing more and more of it as soon as he was willing to give me it. “All for me.”

“Please Austin,” I breathed out.

“Can I take these off?” He asked as his fingers curled in the waistband of my boyshort panties.

I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth before nodding. “Yes. Fuck, please! I need you.”

He dragged my panties down my legs, adding them to the extensive pile of clothing on the floor. “What a pretty wet little pussy,” he muttered as his

finger ran through my slick folds. “Can I taste you, Jacks?”

“Please.”

He smirked before kneeling in front of the bed. His hands snaked around my waist, tugging me closer. “Be a good girl for me and sit still, sweetheart. I’m going to enjoy my meal.”

He didn’t even give me a second to register before his mouth was on me, tasting the hot mess he created between my thighs. I let out a moan as my back arched off of the mattress. Holy fuck, did it feel incredible. The warmth of his tongue pressed against my entrance had my toes curling instantly.

I didn’t know what exactly I was expecting. Maybe nerves. Maybe excitement? Maybe insecurity. But none of that was what I was feeling. If anything, my insecurities melted away with the enthusiasm Austin showed toward eating me out, like he wanted nothing more than to lick and suck me until I combust.

I felt safe like I could let go at any second and feel the pleasure soar through me, knowing full well Austin wanted that as much as I did.

I never thought him kissing my wet pussy would be so... intimate. I never thought I’d love it as much as I did, or that I’d let myself feel comfortable with someone down there. Here I was, his lips wrapped around my clit, gently sucking it into his mouth and I was panting like I had just run a marathon.

“*Fuck!*” I cried out as I bucked my hips against his face, needing him closer. I couldn’t get enough of him. The pressure in my abdomen was growing stronger and tighter. “Austin, I’m close!”

“What do you need?”

“More!” I replied, unsure of what I meant by it. I just knew I needed something more. “*Fuck, go left!*” Before he could even move, my hand reached into his hair, guiding him where I needed him more. “*Ohmygod! Right there!*”

He didn’t stop. Not for a second. He didn’t change a single thing about what he was doing. He continued to flick his tongue against my clit, over and over again. My stomach muscles clenched as I bucked my hips into him more, riding his face as the overwhelming sensation took over.

“That’s a good girl, Jacks. Come for me. Take what you need.”

Pleasure jolted through my body as I screamed out his name, over and over. A rush of wetness coursed through my clenching pussy, desperate to feel something buried deep inside me to clamp down on. My eyes were wired

shut, and my chest heaving, letting my orgasm run its course.

God, I've been missing out on that!

"You taste fucking delicious," he muttered as the bed dipped down and he hovered over me. "How was that? You okay?"

There was my sweet boy. Even with his hair a mess from my fingers tugging on him, and the redness in his cheeks from eating my pussy like it was his last fucking meal, he still looked so fucking perfect.

I covered my face with my hands before letting out a laugh. He followed moments later as he tried to peel my hands away from my face. "It was really fucking good, Austin. Like really *really* fucking good."

"I love watching you come undone," he chuckled. "Sexiest thing I have ever seen and heard, Jacks. You're sure you're okay though?"

I nodded my head. "Yeah. A bit overwhelmed, but good. You made me feel safe, Austin."

"Not scared at all?"

"No."

"No bad memories?" He asked as his hand came up to my face, his thumb brushing over my cheek. "No flashbacks?"

I shook my head. "Just happy you were my first for that. I am sorry that I grabbed your hair though."

"Don't ever apologize for guiding me where you need me," he stated. "There is nothing hotter than you telling me what to do, and showing me what you need."

My eyes cast down, seeing the straining bulge in the front of his tight-fit boxers. It had to be painful for him to be as hard as he was for so long without a release. "I— I could take care of you... if you want me to."

He kissed me softly as his finger ghosted over my forehead, brushing a few stray strands behind my ear. "As much as I would love that, Jacks, I don't expect you to. This was about you and making you feel good."

"I want to make you feel good," I muttered, not daring to break eye contact. "Please?"

"Are you sure?" He cocked his head slightly, continuing to run his hand over my head.

I nodded my head before offering him a soft smile. "I want to taste you, Austin." My hips shifted, moving him over until his back hit the mattress and I straddled his hips. He looked damn good on his back, beneath me. "So you can lay back, call me your good girl, and get your dick sucked because you

certainly deserve it.”

“Holy fuck, Jacks.”

Confidence washed through me when I saw his eyes darken as I leaned in. I pressed my lips to him, kissing him hard. His hands reached for my hips, holding me firmly to him. I could taste myself on his tongue, which was an oddly arousing taste if I did say so myself.

I made my way towards his neck, giving him the same treatment he gave me. My eyes traced over his scars before my lips did the same. I felt his breathing hitch as soon as my lips pressed to the sensitive area. A place I had wanted to kiss since the second he showed me his scars. The reminder that he was a fighter and he fought like hell to get where he is today. Without them, I never would have met him and I wouldn't be kissing his body.

This man changed my life and healed wounds I never thought would heal. His patience reminded me that he wasn't in this for anything other than me, not my body. His warmth created a safe place for me to curl into when I needed him the most. His kindness told me he wasn't like the rest of the guys I had interacted with. I was convinced he was made for me. Or at least, written by a woman anyway.

I pressed open wet kisses along his navel, stopping by the waistband of his tight-fitting black boxers. “Can I take these off of you?”

“Absolutely, sweetheart.”

My fingers curled in the waistband, tugging at the elastic to reveal more of his body. His cock sprang free, hitting his stomach with a slap. I yanked his boxers down the rest of the way before I took him in. All of him.

His cock was huge. Bigger than any I had seen before. It was long and thick, and as far as dicks went, his was sexy. The head was a deep red, aching for release. I adjusted myself on my knees before taking the weight of him in my hand.

I didn't have the most experience with this, but I had done it before. I didn't exactly enjoy it then but Austin was different. He wasn't begging me to deep-throat his cock like it was his last dying breath. There was no pressure, and this time, I wanted to suck him dry. I wanted to pleasure him the same way he pleased me.

“So big,” I muttered. Austin sat up, slipping his finger under my chin, urging me to look up at him.

“If it gets to be too much, you don't have to keep going, okay?”

I nodded my head before sticking my tongue out, licking the head of his

cock. His jaw clenched as he let out a sharp breath. He felt velvety smooth against my tongue and I tasted a hint of saltiness mixed with a bit of sweetness toward the end. It was a pleasant taste, actually. I took his reaction as a positive one, urging me to keep going.

I took him into my mouth, sliding my lips along his shaft as I took him deeper. My hand slipped along the base of him, helping me pleasure what I couldn't take in. He hit the back of my throat, making me gag around him before I pulled off. My cheeks heated in embarrassment.

"Hey, it's okay," he assured me. "It happens, Jacks. Take it slow."

I nodded my head.

"Good girl," he cooed. "You're such a good fucking girl. Taking my cock in your mouth. Sucking me off."

His words were the encouragement I needed to keep going. I took him in my mouth once more, sucking down around him as I bobbed my head up and down the length of him. I could feel my pussy dripping from this. Hearing the shallow breaths from Austin, and the tiny whimpers only encouraged me more.

"Fuck Jacks," he groaned. "Feels so fucking good."

I continued doing just that, stopping at the tip of his cock to swirl my tongue around a few times, just to taste a little more of him. He rewarded me with bead after bead of pre-come, making me want more and more of it.

He began panting and his eyes were screwed tight as my hand came up to his balls, gently massaging each one of them as I sucked him down once more. My confidence was through the roof, my pussy aching and I felt like I had a piece of myself back again. I wanted to keep doing this to him. I wanted to keep making him feel good like this.

"I—I'm gonna," he moaned out, fisting the sheets next to him. "Fucking shit, Jacks. Your mouth is fucking good. *Fucccckk*."

I took that as encouragement to keep doing what I was doing. I felt him grow heavy on my tongue and every so often, his cock would twitch. His balls tightened, and his breathing grew shallow. I knew he was about to explode at any second.

"Jacks, I'm about to come," he panted out a warning. I kept going, not wanting to stop him when he was about to hit his peak. Instead, I kept going, swirling my tongue around the tip, over and over again, stopping to flick the back of it every so often. His hot seed erupted on my tongue as he let out a strangled moan. He struggled not to buck his hips up, in case he choked me



with his length, which had to be hard enough for him to control.

Spasm after spasm, his orgasm finished out and I pulled off of him, letting his cock fall gently on his stomach. He was breathing hard as he looked at me, holding out his hand in front of my mouth. "You can spit it out if you want. I don't expect you to swallow, sweetheart."

I contemplated for a moment, trying to decide if I wanted to swallow the seed on my tongue or if I wanted to spit it out. I decided on the latter the more it sat there and spat in his hand. He let out a chuckle, shaking his head with a wide smile. "Even that was fucking sexy."

"You're welcome," I giggled as I got up off my knees, which were now red from the carpet. He got up off the bed, walking his very naked ass to the bathroom to wash up. He came back moments later with a little towel and a content smile playing on his lips. He motioned for me to get on the bed as he kneeled, cleaning me up so I wasn't drenched in my wetness all night. What a fucking gentleman.

"I should get up to pee," I said. "And I have to get washed up."

He nodded his head before placing a kiss on my cheek. "I'll go grab some water from downstairs and give you some privacy before the after-care."

"After-care?"

"Oh Jacks," he tsked playfully. "You haven't even experienced the best part of sex. The post orgasm cuddling."

"Sounds good to me."

"Good," he beamed. "Take any shirt of mine you want and don't you dare put pants on. We're doing this properly."

He got up off the bed, grabbing his boxers before heading towards the door. A wave of contentment washed over me. I finally took the next step, however small it may have been to someone else. It was significant for me and I loved every second of attention he gave me.

"Jacks?" He called out in the doorway of his bedroom.

"Mhh?"

He smiled, shaking his head. "Nothing. Just glad to have you here."

He had something else to say by the look on his face. But he wasn't ready to say it, or he didn't know how to say it. Either way, I was sure he was going to tell me in his own time and in his way. After all, he was Austin. He just needed time to figure it out before he shared.

And I was willing to wait as long as it took for him to be comfortable sharing.

*Austin*

I couldn't remember the last time I was this happy. I was sure it was when I was drafted at eighteen, ready to take on the NHL by storm, knowing I was finally getting away from my parents for good. It had to be then that I felt that warmth wash over me and genuine contentment fill me up.

That is, until Jacks.

Sure, when I met her on the street that day, I thought she was cute, but I never thought that she'd become this big part of my life and mean so much to me. I never thought that the contract would bring us as close as it did, or that it would create something so intense between us. I can't go longer than an hour without thinking about her. I constantly want to be near her. It's such a strong feeling that I don't think I'll ever get tired of it.

Now she was really mine. For real this time. No contracts in place and no end date in sight. Jacks was officially my girl. I was now her actual boyfriend. I was someone's boyfriend. Something I had never in my adult life been to someone. Truth be told, I was ready. I was ready to have someone to come home to and someone to call on the road. I was ready to let someone into every part of my life, and be open with them about everything. I was ready to be that person for someone else, whether I was here or not. I wanted to be that person for Jacks.

I checked over the locks, making sure each one was done up tight. I made my way into the kitchen, reading that it was just after two-thirty in the morning on the stove as I reached for two glasses. I didn't expect my night to end with my face buried in her pussy and hearing the cries of her moans as she came undone on my tongue, but I'm not fucking complaining. She took two big steps tonight, and I couldn't be more proud of her for doing so. Watching the confidence fill her up was incredible to watch. The badass

Jacks I know is in there made an appearance tonight, and she stayed out.

I've always seen the part of her that was confident, but reserved. The part of her that held back, and only presented what she thought people would like to see of her, not daring to show them the entire picture. And rightly so. It was clear that she had been pushed into the background for a lot of her life. She told me so on the rare occasion she did want to talk about it. But I could tell the topic was uncomfortable for her. Almost as if she talked about it, it would plant the idea of leaving her in my head.

I filled up two glasses, tossing a couple of ice cubes in there in hopes it kept it cooler for a bit longer. I headed back up to my room, ready to see my girl in whatever shirt she chose from my drawer and hopefully a pair of panties. I wasn't going to bother with anything more than boxers, now that she had seen me naked, it didn't really matter.

When I entered the room, she had turned on the two lamps on the side tables. She was sitting comfortably on the right side of the bed, scrolling through her phone. Her hair was now in a braid and her face was clear of all makeup, leaving her with a natural blush on her cheeks. She decided on one of my old hockey tees, and her legs hidden by my comforter could only mean they were bare beneath it. My heart fluttered at the sight of her.

This girl was mine.

"Anything interesting going on out there?" I asked her, capturing her attention. Her head perked up and a soft smile spread across her lips as I walked over, placing her glass on the coaster.

She shook her head. "Nothing really interesting. Not unless you count Lucas's birthday party picture as interesting."

"You don't?" I cocked my eyebrow, circling the bed to get to my side to put my glass down.

"I do," she paused. "But considering what went down in here... not nearly as interesting."

I let out a laugh as I made my way to the bathroom to brush my teeth. "Fair enough."

"There's three pictures of us going around," she called out. "Lucas shared one. So did Beau, and then Jade also shared one."

I placed some toothpaste on my brush and continued my routine. She was going to get the biggest kiss from me as soon as I was done. She was going to get all of my minty fresh kisses and then some. I had months of making up to do.

I flicked the bathroom light off, stepping into the bedroom with my eyes locked on her. She had the comforter opened up on my side, ready for me to climb in with. “So what’s this about Jade and Lucas?” I questioned as I slipped between the sheets.

“You have to swear you won’t tell him,” She stated as she flicked off the lamp next to her bed. “I am holding you to this. It’s girlfriend-boyfriend secrecy. You can’t break that.”

I leaned over, kissing her perfect pink lips. “I promise, I won’t say anything.”

She sighed. “She misses him, like really misses him.” She began. “It hasn’t been the same since she started dating Oliver. I can hear it in her voice that there is something there that she won’t tell me. She said she misses him and the friendship they had. Her boyfriend is reserved whereas Lucas is a wildcard. She misses the excitement. She misses him and I think it’s more than just a friendship kind of missing.”

“She’s been avoiding me a little too,” I shook my head, trying to process the information. “Maybe because I’m associated with Lucas. Might be because I’m with you. But she’s been distant. You think she’s got feelings for him?”

“I think there are some feelings there that she’s not quite ready to admit and that’s why she’s avoiding him and blaming it on the awkwardness,” she pointed out. “But I also don’t know her as well as you guys do.”

I took a deep breath. “Lucas has had his eyes on Jade since the moment we met her at training camp our rookie year. He fed her this line about the Calder Cup and said if he won it, he would dedicate it to her and all this shit. He’s always had feelings for her, but after she got with this guy, things just went from bad to worse.”

She shrugged. “They can’t figure anything out if they don’t talk to each other. They are like strangers now. I wanted to say that to her, but I didn’t want to make a bad first impression.”

“Jacks...”

She let out a dry laugh. “I was terrified going over to talk to her tonight, Austin. I was so scared she wasn’t going to like me, or worse, think that I was with you because of who you are. This whole weekend, I’ve been scared of feeling like I don’t belong, especially when I’ve always felt that way, no matter where I go.”

“Why?” I questioned, turning my body to face her completely. She said

comfortably, resting against the soft fabric backing of the bed with her pillow propped up and her knees curled into her chest.

She swallowed hard. "I've never belonged anywhere, Austin. Not for a second." She shrugged her shoulders, trying to play it off like it didn't matter like it was normal for her. Like it wasn't a big deal that she had felt like this for her entire life. "My entire life, I've faded into the background until I no longer existed. I've spent years, going through friend after friend because people grew tired of me because I was me. I didn't have the funniest jokes or the hottest gossip. I wasn't the prettiest and I didn't wear expensive designer clothes at fourteen or have the latest iPhone. I was just me and I was never enough to keep someone around. I was never enough to be invited to the party Friday night, or asked out by the cute boy in third-period biology. I was never enough to be considered someone's best friend. To be someone's first choice."

There weren't words I could say to her to make up for years and years of being left out like she was. I didn't know what it was like to be in the background like she did, but I knew what it was like to not be loved by people who were supposed to love you. She had spent the majority of her life trying to tend to the wounds created by other people.

I hated knowing that she thought she wasn't the prettiest because she was fucking stunning. She had curves that drove me fucking insane. She had a smile that made my heart skip a beat. Her eyes were a breathtaking green that told stories of the life she had lived before she met me. Her ass was out of this world and don't even get me started on her tits.

She also had the biggest heart of anyone I knew, and it had been cracked and chipped away at for longer than it should have. It was my turn to protect it and I knew she trusted me to.

My arm reached out to her, urging her to come closer to me. She hesitantly shifted until she understood where I wanted her. I was finally getting to hold her so I could cuddle the shit out of her for once.

She wrapped her arm around my waist before her head settled against my shoulder. The familiar scent of apple cinnamon filled my nose, bringing a wave of comfort to me. It was the smell of her.

"You belong, Jacks," I breathed out, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "I wish you had found it sooner, but sometimes things take a little more time. You belong here, especially curled up with me. I don't care what year your clothes are from or what store you bought them in, or what iPhone you have.

You don't need to have the funniest joke because you're already naturally funny and you make me laugh all the time. You will always be the first one invited out to the party on a Friday night, and you will always be the most beautiful girl in the room. But more importantly, you will always have a best friend who loves coming home to see you. Who thinks about you constantly, and who is going to be dating the most successful romance author in all of Long Island and Stonebridge, and everywhere else in the world.

"You have a place in this world, Jacks," I assured her. "And people who love you for you. I know some famous hockey player who would love to get even just a second of your attention."

"Mmmh," she giggled, tightening her hold on me. "Does he have a big dick?"

"God, I've ruined you!"

She let out a laugh that brought a smile to my face. She snuggled into me, trying to get as physically close to me as possible. My heart rate sped up, knowing she was comfortable enough with me to do this. "You kinda did."

"Hey," I chuckled. "You're just as guilty. If I remember correctly, your mouth did a number on me."

"I don't remember you complaining when you finished," she teased before pressing her lips against my bare chest.

"Neither were you," I shot back. "In fact, I remember you moaning out my name —"

"Yeah, yeah! You're good," she yawned, making herself more comfortable. "—'m glad you're my boyfriend now, Austin."

"Me too, Jacks."

"Feels good to go to bed with you," she whispered. I reached over, flicking my lamp off to let her go to sleep.

Her breathing evened out fairly quickly, leaving me to my thoughts as sleep overtook her. I placed another kiss on her forehead, letting it linger for a moment longer than I usually did.

She was finally mine.

I couldn't remember how many times I had dreamed of holding her close to me like this. All the nightmares I had. All the late nights, overthinking about the future. Every moment I felt lonely and missed her. Every time I slept in this bed after I met her. She just fit in so perfectly with me here. She belonged here. I just wished she believed it, especially when our relationship got more serious and we talked about moving in. Even asking her to move

here was a lot to ask right now, even if I was staying here full-time sooner rather than later. My career was about to get started again and she was stuck in Stonebridge in a cafe job she hated more than anything.

If she felt like she did belong here, then maybe she'd ask me to help her look for a place at least. I'm sure there was a place in this area within her budget so she could still have her space and come see me when she wanted and vice versa. I couldn't know for sure, but I think she'd be happy here. She had more friends here. She had me. She had Lucas. Hell, at some point, I was sure she'd have Jade too.

But her life was in Stonebridge. Her job. Her everything. Her apartment was her sanctuary. It was a space she called her own and made it so over the time she had been living there. She had her floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with all of her favourite books. She had her couch that she saved up a lot of money for and her open concept where she could see everything. Her apartment felt like her and asking her to move from that space from me felt like I was asking far too much.

Surely I could make it work if I visited Stonebridge more often. I was sure she and I could work out long distances. We were already working on it when I left to come here. It was going to suck sleeping in this bed without her, and not being there to give her a hug when she needed it. But it was also practice for the future when I was on the road for a few weeks on end. I knew she could handle that.

Lucas's voice lingered in my head though. What if she wasn't meant for this life? What if she didn't want this life? A life where she was associated with me and didn't have the privacy she once had. What if she didn't want that life? What would I do without her in my life the way she is? What would I do if she didn't want me anymore because I was a famous professional athlete? She had every right to walk away from me if this wasn't what she wanted, even if I didn't want to lose her.

"You're thinking too much," she muttered, squeezing me.

"Sorry," I whispered, instantly feeling guilty that she picked up on it.

She took in a deep breath. "Don't worry yourself too much, handsome. Whatever is on your mind can't be changed right this second, can it?"

"No."

She shifted slightly, not daring to open her eyes. "Take a deep breath for me." I did exactly that, feeling her close in. "You had a great night tonight. You and I took a contract and turned it into a relationship and made it official

by getting to know each other's bodies intimately. We're in your bed, cuddling together for the first time. You're safe here and nothing can get you. Not while we're in this bed together, kay? You're safe."

"I'm safe," I breathed out. "I'm safe here."

"Good," she praised. "Another deep breath, honey."

*Honey.* I liked it. I really fucking liked it. I did as she asked, taking in another deep breath, and continuing through the process until I felt myself settle down a little more. My heart wasn't beating as fast and my chest wasn't filled with the unease of anxious thoughts. Her words ran through my head, over and over again.

"You okay?" She asked moments later. Her head shifted slightly and my eyes met hers. I flashed her a soft, tired and quite frankly, weak smile before nodding my head. "It's okay to be scared. You know that, right?"

I swallowed hard. "I could say the same to you, Jacks."

She chuckled dryly. The sleepiness took over her body once more. "I'm tired of being scared."

"Me too," I admitted as I shut my eyes, taking a deep breath.

It didn't feel wrong admitting it to her like I thought it would. Jacks would never see me as weak like my father would have, or my mother for that matter. With her, I know if I need a shoulder to cry on, she'd be there to do just that. I think that scared me more. Knowing that it was okay to go to her when I needed her 'cause it was something I had never had. Jacks was comforting, whereas my mother couldn't stand being around me when I was sick growing up. She listened to me when I was used to people brushing me off for whatever soap opera was on TV or whatever drink was in hand. She wanted me and not just because I played hockey professionally. Hell, I was sure if I lived in a shoe box, Jacks wouldn't give a shit. She wanted me for me. For the guy who watched *Wizards of Waverly Place* with her, and held her hand wherever we went. She wanted the guy who helped her do the dishes after cooking and made her a cup of tea in the morning because it tasted better when it was made by me. She wanted the guy who was scared and had nightmares about the car accident and talked to a therapist once a week. She wanted what was underneath the muscle just as much as she wanted the muscle.

I just hoped she felt like I wanted her too. For all of her. But I had doubts in my mind that she knew and that was because of who she was. She had a hard time believing anyone wanted her, and now I knew why. I just had a



hard time believing it myself. Considering how big her heart was and how much she cared about people, it was no wonder why they left. Then again, I could see why they'd take advantage of her. Used and used until there was nothing left of her. She was tired of being scared of everyone walking out of her life and being left with nothing in the end.

I was about to start a new list.

The list of people that stayed.



## Catalina

I was starting to hate Long Island.

Between the view of the city from Austin's apartment. The breakfast he so kindly cooked for me and brought bed before I even woke up this morning. To the way a rare Sunday morning that I didn't have to be at work, and instead spent it making out in a king-sized bed with my new boyfriend. Long Island should have been called Fantasy Island 'cause that's what it was... a fantasy.

And I loved it here. I truly loved it here already, and it almost felt illegal for me to admit it, given that I had only been in the city for two days. There was a part of me that never wanted to return home to Stonebridge and the job I hated more than anything.

I wanted to think it had less to do with Austin than anything, but I knew he was a huge factor in my newfound love. Having his face buried between my legs last night was the healing I desperately needed. He was gentle, yet took exactly what he wanted while still being patient with me. Not to mention, I damn near died when he called me a good girl. Sure, I loved it in a romance novel, but nothing compared to being called a good girl while a six-foot-tall, broad-shouldered, sexy man had his gorgeous face between your thighs.

Yes, I had a praise kink. Thank you, Austin, for confirming that last night.

He spent the majority of our Sunday morning on the couch with me. I had my laptop on my lap, typing away at my novel while he watched two episodes of classic *Scooby-Doo* before changing it to the sports channel for hockey highlights.

Without asking, he refilled my tea for me about halfway through the morning while he made another coffee for himself. What was even more adorable was the kiss he pressed to my cheek as I typed away, not daring to bother me. The man knew how to read the room based on how fast I was typing.

And holy fuck, was I typing.

Last night alone was the most inspiration I had since Dean Winchester talked about sex in season 9 of *Supernatural*. I think last night topped that. I wasn't even sure that it was the physically intimate aspect of last night, albeit,

the kissing was top-tier. I wasn't sure there was ever a time in my life when I felt like someone wanted to kiss me so badly. Austin wanted to do it all the time.

I turned off my word count before I started, wanting to take the insane pressure of a number blinking at me. Since then, I felt so much lighter. I continued along with my love story, even though I had to go back a bit to do a few edits before continuing along. It was pacing out, given that there was the topic of abuse in there. It was his first relationship that didn't start in a one-night stand, and her first one in forever.

She was spending the summer in a small town where her dad resided. Three months prior, she lost her older brother to suicide and she was the one who found him. She hadn't been the same since and her mother and step-dad didn't seem to care all that much. Not about him, and not about her. She needed out, but she carried a dark cloud with her.

She wasn't ready to open up to anyone and not her dad, who didn't give a fuck about her since the split. Staying with him was the only option she had 'cause there was no way she was staying in a shitty town where everyone looked at her with pity in their eyes. The only one who didn't was Rhys. The man who entered the diner and asked her on a date... only to be rejected.

Austin was my Rhys. Down to a fucking T.

Their personalities matched like no other. His softness towards me translated on the pages in front of me in the way Rhys was with Avery. The kindness. The patience. All of that was on those pages and it was why I loved writing Rhys so much. I had the real thing sitting on the couch next to me. His brushed-back brown hair and his soft dimples when he smiled. The stubble covering his cheeks and the soft lips I loved kissing.

"I can feel you staring at me, Jacks," he chuckled as he continued to watch the TV in front of him. A smile crept up on his lips shortly after.

"It's called admiring," I corrected him, looking from my computer screen to the man in front of me. "And you love the attention."

He shrugged, nodding his head. "How's the writing going?"

"Good. Good, actually. I finally feel like I'm getting somewhere."

"So the writer's block is over?" He cocked his eyebrow.

"Dormant," I muttered. "It never fully goes away. It always comes back at the worst possible time."

He turned his head to look at me with the softest smile playing on his lips. "Hopefully it stays dormant for a little while longer. At least until you finish

this one.”

“Fingers crossed.”

I continued to type away at the keyboard, writing out an important scene between the two main characters. It was a big turning point for them in the story, and in a way, it was a lot to work through. The character’s trauma ran so deep from her brother’s death, and no one seemed to understand the full effect it had on her. Rhys is patient, of course. But he was concerned about the girl he was non-exclusively seeing. He knew something was wrong and was unsure of how to make it better for her.

Like Austin was with me and my trauma. Patient as hell, but he wanted to know.

There was nothing like a good ol’ thunderstorm to knock out the power to force some proximity to make some shit happen between two characters. Not to mention, a little bed sharing anyone? Yes fucking, please.

“Hey Jacks,” Austin called out about twenty minutes later. He stood in the kitchen, all dressed and ready to head out for his dryland, as he calls it. I glanced up from the screen, seeing the hat on my boyfriend’s head, covering his hair sides for the few pieces sticking out the sides. “Jade texted me and she’s asking if you want to hang out this afternoon. You want to?”

The idea of hanging out with her was appealing. Hell, it was nice of her to reach out through Austin. “Tell her yes. It might be good for me to get to know her a little better, right?”

“Could be fun,” he nodded. “She’s good people, Jacks. I promise. I think the two of you would be good friends.”

I half-smiled. “Send her my number and tell her that I’m getting ready now.”

“Will do,” he agreed. “But first, get your ass over here and kiss me goodbye.”

I sighed playfully, rolling my eyes. “So needy.”

“Have you looked at yourself? You’re gorgeous! Of course, I’m fucking needy,” he teased, slipping his hands around my waist before his lips were on mine, kissing me sweetly. I wrapped my hands around his neck, dragging him in a little closer as I deepened the kiss, sliding my tongue along his. Kissing him goodbye was a bad idea, but oh so good.

“Have fun lifting weights and stuff” I smiled as I pulled away. “I wouldn’t be opposed to a sweaty selfie. Just so you know.”

He nodded, licking his bottom lip. “Enjoy your time with Jade. I’ll see

you later, Jacks.”

“Bye, handsome.”

The smile that played on his lips as he walked out the door was enough to send flutters through my chest. I was head over heels for this man and I was only falling deeper each time.



Jade suggested we head to the mall as soon as she showed up at Austin’s door. She told me I needed to experience the mall in Garden City, so that’s where she took us. Living in Stonebridge meant we had one mall thirty minutes away, and you only really went if you needed something. I couldn’t remember the last time I simply walked around the mall, let alone with another female.

“Do you have a dress for the auction yet?” Jade asked me, giving me a nudge.

I shook my head. “I was probably going to wear something I already had.”

“You’re not much of a shopper, huh?” She let out a laugh. “C’mon, one of my favourite stores is on the floor below and they have some of the nicest dresses for a decent price.”

We took the escalator down and ended up in some store I had never heard of before. It was a lot bigger than I anticipated. One section of the store was floor-to-ceiling, filled with shoes of all kinds. The dresses were near the back of the store, in all colours and designs from what I could make out. The last dress I tried on was the black one I wore last night.

I flipped through a few options. Most of them were a little too puffy or a bit too short for my liking. Not to mention, I wouldn’t look good in hot pink. Jade was on the other side, flipping through darker dresses with a little more length to them. I wanted something with a little more length to it. Especially if it was near mid-December.

“Some of these dresses are horrible,” Jade commented as she pulled out a frilly mermaid green dress. “I wouldn’t be caught dead in this.”

I let out a laugh, shaking my head as I continued to flip through. “I’m hoping I can find something decent to wear. The chances of me finding

something here are higher than in Stonebridge.”

“Small town girl,” she giggled, pulling out a champagne-coloured floor-length dress that would look phenomenal on her.

“You need to try that on,” I stated.

“Yeah?” She furrowed her perfectly shaped brows toward the dress. She had a thin build, and she was a bit taller than I was. This dress would hug her curves flawlessly and show the perfect amount of cleavage. “We’re here to get you a dress, not me. I’m not the one with the hot date with her equally hot boyfriend.”

“He is hot,” I giggled as I turned my head, finding a new section to look through. “And extremely sweet.”

She nodded in agreement as she grabbed another dress that would look good on her. “He’s always been a sweetheart. Ever since I met him. He was always the guy to call out shitty behaviour and make sure everyone felt comfortable when they were with him and his friends.”

“You’ve known him since he was signed though, right?”

“Yeah,” she breathed out. “I was just starting in college and I spent a lot of time in the arena because of my dad. He was the assistant coach then. He, Lucas and a few of the other guys would hang out with me and my friends when they celebrated home games. The friendship formed over the years.”

I hated to admit it, but I was a little jealous. Jade had this great group of friends, and they all hung out together. Everyone was always included. I never had that. I was never included in the conversation. No one cared to know what I was up to, or even who I was dating. It was all about everyone else’s lives, and what was going on with them. Not a single one of them asked how I was even doing. I was so tired of shitty friends.

“I don’t know when you’ll be in town next, but you should come out with us,” she suggested. “We don’t usually go bar hopping like we did in our early twenties. Lately, we’ve taken to dinner. Last week, we went mini golfing. You should join us next time.”

I smiled to myself at the invite. It meant more to me than anything. “I’m not sure when I’ll be back in town. I know I’ll be here for Austin’s first game back. We haven’t talked about further ahead thanks to my shitty job. Getting time off is hard.”

“We can plan something for that week,” she beamed with excitement.

“It’ll be so much fun, I promise!”

“I don’t doubt it,” I nodded. “Thank you for inviting me out today. I don’t

have many girlfriends, or friends in general so it means a lot.”

She made her way over to me, wrapping her arm around my shoulder, and pulling me in for a side hug. “Me either, Jacks. But I’m hoping that we can become good friends.”

“Me too.”

She reached for one of the dresses in front of me, tossing it to me. It’s a long, deep red dress with a helpful amount of cleavage. “You need to try this one on. Trust me,” she winked.

I grabbed it, rolling my eyes before heading to the change room.

I stood in front of the floor-length mirror, pressing the fabric against my body. It was nice, I’ll give Jade credit for that, but I wasn’t sold. It was going to be a little tight to my curves and I worried about my boobs would look with the cut being as low as it was. It was almost entirely open back. There was a slit in the one side of the leg, adding a bit of style to the dress. When I checked the price tag, I was surprised to see it was under a hundred bucks.

I slipped the dress on with my back to the mirror. Not wanting to see the way it looked right away. It wouldn’t be proper anyways, I reminded myself. My bra would be visible and I wasn’t wearing the right underwear to not be seen under the material. It was soft though, and I liked the way it felt against my skin. I finished slipping the straps up my arm before smoothing out the material. I was nervous to look at myself, in case I hated myself in it. I wasn’t prepared for that disappointment.

I let out a shaky breath before turning on my heel, taking myself in.

Holy shit!

The dress hugged every curve in the best ways possible, especially my ass. The deep cut in the front would look amazing with the right bra or even some pasties and a bit of boob tape. I looked incredible in it. A million times better than I had anticipated. Austin would love this dress. Hell, he’d love it even more on the bedroom floor.

“Lemme see!” Jade called out from the other side of the curtain.

I nervously peeled it back, my eyes meeting with her in the champagne gold dress that looked insane on her. Her eyes raked over my body, sparking my anxiety in case she thought I didn’t look good in it. This was why I hated shopping. “Oh my god, Jacks! You look gorgeous! I told you that dress was it!”

“Just like I told you that dress was it for you!” I pointed out. “You look stunning!”



She shrugged her shoulders before bringing out her phone. She opened up her camera app, motioning for me to come closer. We stood in the full-length mirror together, looking pretty damn good in our dresses as she snapped a couple of photos.

When she was satisfied, she flipped the camera to selfie mode, taking a couple of us together. For the first time, I think my smile was genuine in a photo. I didn't have to fake it. I didn't overthink the way my face looked, or how stupid my smile was.

"You're buying that dress right?" She asked me as soon as her phone was back in her purse.

I let out a laugh. "Only if you're buying that one!"

"Done."

As soon as our dresses were purchased, she suggested stopping for some lunch at the food court. Quite honestly, I was hungry myself. She settled on a burger and fries while I decided on a sandwich with some fries on the side. Although, I had trouble deciding which one, I settled on the one with bacon a bit more, even after the bacon Austin brought me this morning.

Jade gave me a bite of her burger for a bite of my sandwich, which I thought was nice of her. I enjoyed how bold she was and how she went after what she wanted without hesitation. She was the kind of confident I wished I was. I kind of hoped hanging out with her would make me feel more confident too. She wasn't the kind of girl who brought others down either. She was genuinely a kind person, and I hoped that she and I would continue to build our friendship after today.

"I hate that you're leaving tomorrow," she admitted as she threw a fry in her mouth. "Why can't you stay longer? Like forever maybe?"

I laughed, shaking my head. "—'cause my life is in Stonebridge. My job."

"Real convincing Kitty Cat," she tsked. "But your family is here now. Your hot hockey boyfriend and your new best friend!"

I tried my hardest to hide my smile at her words. She liked me. She wanted to be my friend. She genuinely wanted to be my friend. I knew I was overreacting internally, but it meant the fucking world to be accepted by someone here. It felt like I had finally done something right for once. Someone wanted me. Someone wanted me to be a part of their life. God, I hated how much I was over the moon about this. It shouldn't have been a big deal to make a friend, but it was. It was a really big fucking deal.

“Tell me you’ll at least be living here someday,” she wiggled her eyebrows. “Preferably with one Austin Sawyer.”

“Maybe,” I shrugged. “I mean, we haven’t been together that long. I wouldn’t want to rush things. Moving in together is a big deal.”

She hummed in agreement. “Fair enough. I understand wanting to take things slow. It’ll be harder when he’s playing fully again. Between the roadies and the long distance, it’s good to take things slow. Once his season’s over, then he’ll be all over you.”

She knew how this life worked. I didn’t know much about hockey, the game or the lifestyle. I knew Austin had practice, training and skates all the time. Even this weekend, he was spending at least half of it training in some sort of way. That was only going to get more intense the better he felt.

‘I’m counting on it,’ I beamed. “I’m happy to take things slow, to be honest. Gives us a chance to have lives separate from one another too. He’s got his career and it gives me a chance to hopefully continue mine. We’re not like one of those couples who are dependent on having their partner every second of every day.”

“I like that, actually,” she grinned. “I should be taking relationship advice from you instead of my other friends.”

I shook my head. “Absolutely not. I am not good with relationships. I just read a shit ton of romance novels,” I protested before finishing my last bite. “This wouldn’t happen to do with a certain tall, blonde-haired, idiot who had a birthday last night, would it? Not so much a boyfriend you already have.”

She let out a sigh before it all came out.

She was head over heels for him at one point in her life. As in out of her mind in love with Lucas and had been since he introduced himself to her that first day at the rink. She thought he was the hottest guy she had ever seen and he flashed her this sexy smile that had her weak in the knees. But with her dad being the assistant coach turned head coach and the rules he set in place, there was no way in hell either could make a move.

They spent the last nine years as friends. Best friends. They hung out, had sleepovers, and told each other secrets. At a point, her feelings got to be too much and he got around with a lot of other women. She knew he never wanted her that way. He had never looked at her and given her any indication that he wanted more, let alone thought she was pretty. Which is why she put herself on every dating app there was and swiped right until she found Oliver. Ever since Lucas backed off to the point where he would see her in a room he

just entered and left instantly. It was like all those years of friendship meant nothing to him.

She missed him terribly, but she had waited for him and he wasn't worth it anymore. He wasn't worth her pain and suffering. He wasn't worth wasting her breath on, since she wasn't worth a simple text back, or even a conversation at the rink if it wasn't forced. He made his choice and he didn't want her. So she had to move on. She just wasn't ready to. She wasn't ready to find someone after having her heart broken. Nine years of loving someone was a long time. It was going to take more than a few months to get over him and the effect he had on her heart. Oliver was helping, but it was still there. She was sure it always would be. What Jade had with Lucas was special. It was deep and real and he threw it all away.

I understood where she was coming from and didn't blame her one bit. The pain in her voice and the tears in her eyes as she spoke about them told me how much she loved him. It told me how much she longed for him and dreamed of him. Only to have it all shatter to the ground.

“Alright, enough of the sad shit,” she wiped beneath her eyes. “Let's go buy you some sexy lingerie for Austin to come home to!”

Oh god, what did I get myself into with this girl and why did I love it so much?



## Austin

Dryland wasn't nearly as brutal today as I was anticipating. I think Coach was going easier on us given that he knew we were all out late last night for Lucas's birthday celebration. And it was all of us. Nate walked in this morning with Zoey's hand in his because she threw a fit at his brother's house and demanded that Daddy come and pick her up. While he conditioned, Zoey hung out with one of our coordinator's kids on the mats with a few soft dodgeballs they kept just in case.

Lucas was hungover and walked in with a coffee from McDonalds, along with a greasy breakfast sandwich and three hashbrowns. No one even batted an eye at him this time. At any other time, he would have been training until he puked. I've seen that one happen one too many times.

I could feel my body getting stronger and stronger with each day. My leg was back to its original strength and my shoulder was getting there. There were a few tweaks here and there that needed adjusting, but all in all, I had made a full recovery and couldn't wait to step on the ice for my first game come January.

I just finished my last set of goblet squats, feeling the sweat drip down my back as I placed the weight back in its spot. I was exhausted from last night but every fucking second was worth it. I was going to shower and head home, hoping that Jacks wouldn't be back just yet from hanging out with Jade. I was hoping to head out to grab a few things to make her my chicken tacos again. Seeing the look on her face when I brought her breakfast in bed this morning was one I'll never forget.

"You look fucking happy today," Lucas panted out as he slicked his hair back in his hand once more. "It's a good look on you, man."

I shrugged my shoulders before wiping my face with the front of my shirt. "What can I say? I woke up with my girlfriend cuddled into my side. Of course, I'm fucking happy."

"You two — are you..."

"Yeah," I nodded, clearing my throat. "It's done."

"Thank fucking god."

I chuckled. "How's the tattoo? Lifting must've been fun."

"Fuck off," he growled.

"What idiot gets a partial sleeve done in the middle of the fucking

season?” I teased, earning a shove. At least it looks fucking cool, but still. Wouldn’t be me. I got my wing done well before hockey started up again. The tattoo I got yesterday was barely noticeable. Well, until the plastic comes off when I shower in a few and it becomes itchy as fuck.

Lucas cleared his throat before stripping his shirt off, wiping away most of the sweat from his face and neck. “Your girl say anything about Jade?”

*Shit.*

I knew this was coming, but I wasn’t prepared for it. I wasn’t ready to lie to my best friend’s face about the girl he wanted. But I also owed it to my girlfriend to keep it a secret, because she was keeping it a secret for her. Not to mention, Jacks was with her at the moment. I was going to feel awful about it, but at the same time, he fucked up with her. He wouldn’t be in this mess if wasn’t such a baby about her getting a boyfriend. And let’s not forget what he said to upset Jacks the other day.

I shook my head. “No. She didn’t say anything.”

“Bullshit.”

I rolled my eyes. “Jade wanted to know more about her. She was getting to know her, Luke.”

“She’s still supposed to be my in with Jade.”

I fought the urge to dig into him. Jacks wasn’t just his ‘in with Jade’. She was also supposed to be his friend too. “Hey, after the way you fucked up with her, give her a fucking break. She’s nervous as it is being here.”

“Sawyer!” Coach’s voice filled my ears, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. This couldn’t be good. He never called on me and had good news to share. It was always something shitty. Did I not squat enough weight today? Were my sprints too slow? Did I take off on the wrong foot? Breathe wrong?

I made my way over to him, dread following me. He motioned for me to follow him toward the office for more privacy, which only meant he was about to tear into me for something and I sure as shit wasn’t ready to hear it.

The door shut and I took a seat in front of his desk. A wave of anxiety filled my chest and unsettled my stomach. My Coach Carter took a seat at the desk and pulled the chair in. He had a stoic look on his face, making me even more nervous. I had a dull ache on the left side of my head beginning, meaning I was in for a shitty evening if I didn’t nip it in the bud.

“What’s going on Coach?” I asked, breaking the silence that filled the room.

He chuckled, brushing his knuckles along his jaw before his dark eyes met mine. “I’ve seen some impressive improvements in you, Sawyer. This last month, I’ve watched you transform from stiff to the free-bird you’ve been since you were a kid.”

“I’m sensing a but coming,” I breathed out, not ready to take the full compliment from him just yet. His eyebrows shot up as he chuckled. I felt there was something off with him in the way he sat. He wasn’t in his usual authoritative stance. It was more like he was stressed; unsure.

He cleared his throat. “But, I need you here full-time. To get you back to your level before the car accident, I need you here, training with the guys, practicing with the guys, skating with the guys; every single time,” he stated, making my heart drop. *Jacks*. She was going to suffer because I was gone. She wouldn’t get to see me... I wouldn’t get to see her. I knew we would be doing long distance at some point in our relationship. It was a given thanks to my career. I never expected it to be the day after we agreed to make this a real thing. *Fuck!*

“I know you’re still helping out Chris with his part of the company,” Carter added in. “I’ve let him know that you’re legally obligated to be here. Things are still going forward with the auction. You and your girlfriend are still set to attend as planned per the contract you both signed when you arrived. You are also still obligated to see a therapist.”

I nodded my head before swallowing hard. I was right. None of this was good news. If you would have asked me a few months ago, I would have been ecstatic to come back to Long Island. I wanted to be home more than anything back then. But I didn’t know *Jacks* back then. I didn’t know what it was like to have someone want you because of who you were inside and not for your jersey number. Which reminded me. I needed to get a jersey for my girl so she could wear it to the game. I’d do that before I left the arena.

“I’m happy to have you back, Sawyer.”

“I’m happy to be back,” I breathed out. “But I need you to make sure that your brother doesn’t try any shit with me being back. I mean it. I know he’s going to try something because he’s pissed off. I need you to have my back on this one.”

He stood up, holding his hand out. “You have my word, Sawyer. I have your back on this one. Don’t worry about him. I got you in this mess, and I will clean it up.”

“Thank you,” I nodded, shaking his hand.

With that, I was out of the office, heading to the showers without another word. Not even to Lucas who looked concerned as I passed him on my way into the shower stall. I wasn't ready to tell Jacks about this news. I didn't want to tell her I was going to be her long-distance boyfriend.

God, my head hurt like a mother fucker. I knew I should have popped a Tylenol before now.



My headache only got worse on the ride back home. I could feel Lucas looking over at me every so often. My head felt like it had a fucking heartbeat. I was starting to feel nauseous. Lucas's cologne wasn't helping, and neither were the bumps on the road or my overthinking about what the fuck I was going to do about my girlfriend being eight hours away from me and vice versa.

"You okay, man?"

"Migraine," I muttered, shutting my left eye, hoping it would ease the pain.

I heard him mumble something under his breath. "We're almost home. Just don't puke in my car okay?"

"I make no promises."

Lucas pulled into the garage moments later, helping me out of the passenger side. My stomach was turning. My head was pounding. I felt like an absolute ass and all I wanted to do was curl up in bed in a pitch-black room. It had been forever since I had a migraine come on that quickly and that harshly. They only really came on when I was experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety. Sure, being back full-time was a little stressful on my relationship, but not enough for it to warrant this.

Lucas held most of my weight as we made our way to the apartments. I wasn't expecting him to help me into mine, let alone up to my bedroom. Although, I was forever grateful for it. He shut all of the blinds and curtains, making sure the room was as dark as possible before pulling out my bottle of Tylenol and placing it beside the bed.

I tore my clothes off of my body, letting them fly over the room. I practically melted into the bed as soon as I was beneath the comforter. The



throbbing side of my head rested gently against the pillow before my eyes were shut. Finally, I was able to relax.

“I’m going to grab you some water before heading out, okay?” Lucas said softly.

“Mhh.”

I settled in, pulling the comforter in close. At that exact moment, another stronger wave of nausea washed over me. I barely made it out of bed to the bathroom before the contents in my stomach made an appearance. The process of vomiting only hurt my head more, making me more nauseous; a horrible vicious cycle that made me want to die.

My head pressed against the porcelain bowl as I tried to take deep breaths. I needed the nausea to go away so I could settle in bed and sleep this off. I hadn’t had a migraine like this in what felt like years. It came on so fucking quickly too. My entire body felt off. I could feel my heartbeat in my ears, and my body felt like it was beating along with it.

“You all right, Aus?” Lucas asked from the entrance of the bathroom.

“Mhh.” It was all I managed to get out.

His hand reached for my shoulder, giving it a gentle rub. “You want me to call Jacks?”

“No,” I mouthed. “Don’t want her to see me like this.”

“Something tells me she’d still find you charming as hell,” he assured me. It went in one ear and out the other. The last thing I wanted was for my girlfriend to see me in this state. “Your anxiety has been okay?”

“Mhh.”

“These non-answers you’re giving me are saying more than you think, man,” he pointed out as he continued to rub between my shoulders. “You forget I lived with you for seven years. I know you, Aus. I know you better than you think.”

“—‘m fine,” I lied. Second lie I told my best friend today.

He chuckled. “Bullshit.”

“Fuck you.”

“Do me a favour and don’t push her away like you’re doing to me,” he said lowly. “Don’t hurt her like that because you’re scared of someone seeing the not-so-perfect parts of you.”

I heard his footsteps shortly after, indicating that he left. A new wave of anxiety filled my stomach before the nausea had its chance. Lucas was right and I knew he was. I had spent the better part of the last year pushing him

away after the accident. Truth be told, I wasn't even sure why I still kept him at arm's length. At first, it was to protect him. He was a mess when I was in the hospital and he had no idea that I knew. He broke down in my hospital room, claiming if I left him, he'd be nothing. He'd be lost and he wouldn't be able to play hockey because it was our thing we had done together. On the days we got up at 4 a.m. to skate in his backyard to get as much practice in as possible. Our fantasy teams and which ones we would die if were drafted to. If he lost me, he lost all of that.

At first, it was because I didn't want him to know what happened and how close he came to losing me. I didn't want him to know that it was my mom's fault or that my dad told me he was glad he wasn't the surgeon. I didn't want him to think about me being alone in that car, waiting for the pain to take over before I faded away with no one there. The guilt would have eaten him alive, even though he couldn't have done anything to prevent it had he been in the car. Because that's what would have happened. He would have gotten in the passenger seat and drove in that storm with me and I would have lost him. That much I knew for certain.

I had been in therapy since March and I still hadn't worked out why I couldn't tell my best friend about it, but could tell my girlfriend about it. It didn't make sense to me. I don't think it ever would.

I reached up, flushing the toilet before shakily getting up off the cold bathroom tile. I stumbled getting back into the bedroom, keeping my left eye shut as I slipped back beneath the comforter. My chest was filled with anxiety, weighing it down so much that it felt like I was drowning.

I needed rest. Then I could deal with my anxiety. Right? Where was the weighted blanket I bought for Jacks? Thank god, she kept it at the end of the bed. Maybe I bought it for myself too.

Migraine first.

Anxiety later.

Deep breath.

Breathe, Austin.

Deep breath.

It's okay.

You're okay.

I'm okay.

Fuck.

I was not *fucking* okay.



## *Catalina*

“This was fun,” I smiled to Jade as we climbed onto the elevator. I found out she lived in this same building, only a few floors down from the boys. Turns out Austin helped her snag the apartment pretty quickly when her lease was up on her last one. She even got a major discount on the place for knowing Lucas and Austin, which made me smile. It was nice to know she lived so close by. At least if I wanted to visit her, she was a few floors down.

“It was,” she beamed. “You’ll have to let me know how good that lingerie works! Austin isn’t going to know what hit him.”

“I will. I promise,” I nodded, pulling her into a hug as the elevator stopped on her floor. “Thank you for today. It was nice to have a friend that isn’t Austin.”

“Anytime! I hope you come back to Long Island soon! Garden City already misses you.”

She waved goodbye, swinging her shopping bags. The elevator doors closed up once more, taking me to Austin and Lucas’s floor, not before making me punch in the code.

The doors opened once more, only to reveal a tall, blonde-haired man with a newly done tattoo on his shoulder. “Hi, Lucas!”

“Hey,” he said gruffly. I moved to the side of the elevator, giving him enough room to climb on if he wanted to. He wasn’t. The doors shut quick enough and he turned to face me. His eyes filled with worry as his throat jumped and his jaw clenched. “Austin’s in there.”

“I figured that when I saw you,” I nodded, trying to keep things light.

He shook his head. “He’s not good in there, Jacks,” he breathed out, making my heart drop. Did something happen during his training? Did he get hurt again? Did he agitate his injury? “He’s got a bad migraine. I mean really bad. When I left, he was puking in the bathroom.”

“Shit,” I breathed out. “I had no idea he got migraines.”

“He doesn’t often, but when he does, they take him out,” he shared with me. “Jacks, don’t let him push you away, okay? He’s going to be stubborn in there, and chances are, he might be a bit of a dick. Don’t take it, okay?”

I nodded. “I won’t.”

“Good.” He turned on his heel, heading back to his door. He was pissed and a little upset. If I had to guess, Austin didn’t say much to him when he

was in there.

“Lucas?” I called out, taking a deep breath. “He’s not trying to push you away or replace you with me. He’s not trying to do that. I think it’s just hard for him to talk to you about some things because you’re his best friend. What he went through, you also went through differently. I think he’s just trying to find the right words to say to you so that he doesn’t make it worse for you. He didn’t know me then. I wasn’t in his life. I didn’t go through what you did when he was in that accident. I don’t carry the raw pain of almost losing your best friend like you do. Give him time and I promise, he will tell you.”

He swallowed hard, nodding his head. He turned his back, heading into his apartment without another word. Not to say I was surprised. After all, he was a guy and I was still a stranger to him. He wasn’t going to open up his feelings to me.

I twisted the knob, quietly stepping inside Austin’s beautiful apartment with my shopping bags in hand. Although, they seemed a little redundant at the moment, given he was upstairs with a killer migraine. I left them by the kitchen counter, not wanting to disturb him with excess noise.

I tiptoed my way upstairs, hoping to be quiet enough to change out of my jeans and into something more comfortable. There was no way I was continuing to wear a regular bra for the rest of the day either.

The bedroom was pitch black when I stepped inside. The blinds were shut and the curtains drawn tight, letting no light in. That told me everything I needed to know. Migraines were a common thing for him, he just never mentioned it. He was lying in bed with the comforter over his body and the weighted blanket brought up, covering him. Was he anxious too? Did something happen with his mom to trigger his overthinking? Was this a continuation of last night?

I carefully pulled out my comfortable pajama pants, along with my bralette and one of his oversized hockey shirts. I didn’t even bother changing in the bathroom. It wasn’t like he was awake, or would even see much of me if he was. Even if he did, it wasn’t like he didn’t see most of me naked last night.

When I was done, I headed into the bathroom, searching my toiletries bag for three things. Strong ibuprofen, anti-nausea and peppermint oil. Two things I needed most when I had a migraine. I never went anywhere without it, not even the grocery store.

I hated seeing him curled up in bed like this, especially knowing he was

in pain and there was very little I could do to take it away from him. Lucas had Tylenol and a glass of water on the side table, at least, I'm guessing it was him. It didn't look like it had been touched by him just yet.

I made my way over to the bed, trying to decide the best way to approach this without overwhelming him. I decided to crawl on the bed from my side, hoping it would be okay to get close to him. His eyes were shut, but I could see the pain on his face.

I reached my hand over, brushing the stray pieces of hair away from his forehead. He was a little sweaty, and from what I could tell, a little pale as well. He wasn't feeling good and I hated seeing him like this. My strong, protective Austin was taken out by a migraine.

He stirred slowly, screwing his eyes shut with a wince. "Shhh, it's me," I said softly as I gingerly brushed my fingers through his hair. "You get migraines, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"Jus' need some rest," he slurred.

I smiled to myself. "I've got something that helps me when I get them if you want to try?"

"Try anything, Jacks."

I twisted the cap on the peppermint oil bottle, waiting for a few drops to come out. I carefully rubbed my middle finger along his temple, making my way to the other side. I needed two more drops before reaching the other side where I was sure he was hurting the most. I made sure to get all the little spaces, hoping that it would be the most effective way to make him feel better.

"I like that," he breathed out as a small smile appeared on his lips. "Feels cool."

"Helps with the pain," I assured him. "I've got stronger ibuprofen here for you too. I'm guessing you've already taken Tylenol so you gotta wait a couple of hours until you can have this. I also have some anti-nausea medicine too."

"Lucas?"

I let out a little laugh. "He mentioned something. I'm glad he did so I know how to take care of you. I don't like it when you don't feel good." I continued to run my fingers through his hair, hoping the soft sensation would help ease him a little more. He seemed to like it that night he snuck into my

apartment after his nightmare so I wanted to continue it here.

“—‘m sorry I ruined your last day here,” he swallowed hard.

I furrowed my brows. “You didn’t ruin anything, honey. You can’t help it when you don’t feel good. A bit of rest and you’ll be good as new.”

He shut his eyes once more before his throat jumped. I could tell there was something more going on with him than he was letting on, but I was afraid to ask. I didn’t want to push him to talk to me if he wasn’t ready to share what was going on. Comforting him was the next best thing I could do. I wanted him to feel as safe as possible, just like how he made me feel when I was with him.

“Can you — can you crawl in with me?” He muttered with a shaky breath.

I wasted no time, throwing the comforter back before tucking myself in next to him. The minty scent filled my nose as soon as he snuggled closer to me, resting his head on my shoulder. His arms slipped around me, cuddling my body to his. I wrapped my arms around him the best I could, trying to find the right position so I could continue to run my fingers through his hair.

“I have to stay here, Jacks,” he breathed out. “Coach told me today that I gotta stay full-time. I’m sorry.”

I pressed my lips to the top of his head. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry about, honey. We’ll make this work. Practice for the future, right? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” I giggled. “Now get some rest, handsome.”



Austin fell asleep not long after the last words were spoken. His heart rate slowed significantly and his breathing evened out. He was having a bit of an off day, and I couldn’t blame him. We just officially got together last night and he found out today that he’s not coming back to Stonebridge.

It wasn’t lost on me that Austin didn’t do relationships because of his lifestyle. I was sure long distance scared him more than he wanted to admit. Not to mention, his parent’s marriage took a toll on him, and it made him nervous about any relationship he was bound to get into because he was

essentially a part-time boyfriend and a full-time hockey player. It only really moved up the timeline because this was bound to happen eventually. He was better now and I should have expected it.

I slipped out of bed about an hour after he fell asleep, wanting to leave him to get some much-needed rest. I snuck down to the kitchen, hoping to whip him up something to eat to help his stomach and his head. It was after six and I was starving. I was just overwhelmed with the size of his kitchen and not knowing where everything was yet to decide on what to make.

After about twenty minutes of snooping through Austin's kitchen, I decided to make spaghetti. Austin had all the materials in the fridge and I came across some noodles in the cupboard that I could use to make it. I was even going to attempt garlic bread, which was going to be toast with garlic butter. Pathetic, but at least it was something.

I had the noodles boiling and the sauce simmering. The meatballs were nearly cooked when Austin emerged from the bedroom in a pair of sweatpants hanging low on his hips. He looked a million times better than he did curled up in bed. His hair was an adorable mess and there was evidence of sleep in his eyes, but he looked better.

"Hi handsome," I greeted him from the kitchen, stirring away at the sauce.

"Mmmh, smells incredible," he tiredly grinned. "I fucking love spaghetti."

"How are you feeling?"

He let out a sigh before yawning. "Better. There is still a dull ache but it's not nearly as bad as it was. I read the pill bottle you gave me and took one of those PMS ibuprofens before rubbing that peppermint on my head again."

"Those will help," I assured him. "You still anxious?"

His jaw jumped before his eyes tore away from me, avoiding any sort of eye contact with me. "A bit. I'll be fine."

"You don't have to hide it from me, you know?" I brought up, turning my back to him to hopefully ease his nerves. "I don't want you to feel like you have to have it together all the time to fit some macho hockey stereotype. You're allowed to have anxiety, Austin. Even if I hate that you do because I know firsthand that it fucking sucks. If you want to talk to me about it, just know you can."

Two arms wrapped around me, pulling me in as a head rested against mine. "Thanks, Jacks. It's not so much anxiety as it is just overthinking. I got



overworked last night and today about us, and what the future holds with you in Stonebridge and me here. Part of me feels like it's selfish to expect long distance and another part of me feels like an asshole for even thinking about asking you to move here because your life is there and I know you're happy. Your apartment is yours, and if your home."

I turned my head, giving him a soft smile. "Expect long distance, Austin. We're already making it work now. We can continue to make it work until we're ready for that next step. Planes and FaceTime are two very valuable things we can take advantage of."

"All right," he said, squeezing me. "Long distance it is on one condition."

I turned in his hold, wanting to face him for this. His confident smile was back and larger than ever as he leaned down, pecking my lips. "Go on."

"Well," he paused, pulling me tighter to his muscular body. "Since I play here, there will be weeks that I am here, but physically have to be here. I'd like to set up an account for you to use to come and see me whenever you can and want, without worrying about money, Jacks."

"Austin..."

He shook his head. "No no. I'm not letting you fight me on this one, okay?"

"It doesn't feel right," I protested. "I'm not with you for your money."

"I know that," he agreed with a soft smile before his hand came up, cupping my cheek. "I would have used the money for the same thing, only to come and see you. You'll just be coming to see me. That's my only condition, Jacks."

"I'll pay you back," I argued, trying to put my foot down on this one. The last thing I wanted him to think was that I was taking advantage of him because he had money. I hated the idea of him paying for my flights to see him. The worst part about it was how inconsistent my work schedule was. Getting this weekend off to come visit was almost impossible. What were my odds of getting time to fly to Long Island to see him?

He cupped my face in both of his hands, holding me in place as he kissed me once more. "You'll do no such thing. This is non-negotiable, Jacks. I want to make this work between us. I want us to work out, okay?"

"I know. Me too."

"I haven't felt this way about anyone," he breathed out, brushing his thumb over my cheek. "Not a single person has made me feel the way you do and I don't want to lose that. I don't want to lose you."

His words struck a cord in me. My heart was fluttering and my body was aching for him. He said the words I didn't know I needed him to say. He was scared to lose me. Someone was scared to lose me. For once, I was picked first. I was wanted as a partner. I was needed. I wasn't the trash thrown on the side of the road. I wasn't the last option. Austin chose me. He wanted me.

My eyes welled up and I couldn't look away with Austin's hold on my face. "I don't want to lose you either."

He leaned down, giving me another kiss, only deepening it this time. His tongue swept over my bottom lip, silently asking for access to mine. My arms wrapped tightly around his back, needing no space between us. He took the lead, dominating the kiss passionately, making my knees weak and my heart race. I felt so wanted by him and there wasn't space for any doubts.

I let out a sigh, breaking the kiss with a frown. "We'll continue this later. I have to finish up with this."

He smiled at me, releasing me from his hold. "What do you need me to do?"

I gave him the instructions. I needed him to drain the pasta and set the table and he did just that. Austin was very helpful around the kitchen, especially when I knew he wasn't the most comfortable. He tried and that was all that mattered to me. He asked his questions and wondered why I was doing certain things and what it meant when I added an ingredient at that time and not at the beginning. He was willing to learn and that meant more to me than making it myself with him sitting at the counter waiting. It reminded me a lot of my parent's marriage. My dad was always helping my mom with something. Making dinner was always a team effort, not an individual one.

He dished out the pasta onto the plates for me, not before asking how much I wanted. I came over with the sauce, pouring a helpful amount onto each mound of pasta. Austin had the tongs ready, placing two big meatballs on my plate before adding four to his own. I could get used to nights like this.

We sat at the other side of the counter where he had four stools set up. As I set the plates down, he grabbed the parmesan cheese from the fridge, along with some water. With his migraine still lingering, it was probably best for him to stick with water, and maybe some tea later.

Dinner was filled with conversation. Austin told me more about his migraines and most importantly, what triggers them. He gets the odd one here and there but ones like the one he had today were unusual. He thought it had something to do with the news he got about staying in Long Island and the

effects it was going to have on the days leading up to the auction. He was also worried that I was going to be hurt by it since we only officially became an item last night.

I couldn't help but feel grateful that he trusted me enough to open up to me about it, even if it wasn't a particularly nice conversation to have. He asked me if I got migraines often and I shrugged because it was a hit and a miss. It depended on the weather and the time of year. He was curious about the ibuprofen he took and I laughed a little before telling him they were for period cramps. Even that made him laugh a little.

After dinner, we ended up on the couch with his head in my lap so I could continue to play with his hair. It was something he admitted to loving because it made him feel calm and cared for. Something he never got when he was growing up. As selfish as he felt for it, he admitted he liked being taken care of today. I made a mental note to try and care for him a little more, even when he wasn't sick. Little things went a long way.

"Here you go, beautiful," he said, handing me my mug filled with orange pekoe tea. He settled back down in my lap, ready for some more pets. "Now tell me, how was your day with Jade?"

I smiled, looking over at my bags by the counter. "It was great. We went shopping. I enjoyed getting to know her."

He cocked his eyebrow. "You guys went shopping? What did you get?"

"Nosy," I teased. "If you must know, I got a dress for the auction and maybe a little something for after the auction."

"Jacks, did you buy lingerie for me?" He smirked.

I shook my head. "Not for you. For me. Your dick is too big to fit in a thong."

He let out a laugh, "You're not wrong."

"—sides, if I'm nice, maybe I'll wear it for you," I wiggled my eyebrows.

His hand came up to my face, brushing back a stray piece of hair from my face. He had a soft smile playing on his lips. "It's incredibly sexy to see how confident you are. You might not see it, but I do. You've healed so much since I met you, so fucking much, Jacks."

He was right. I had healed. Not fully. I wasn't sure I would ever truly heal from what I went through. The scars were always going to be there. But before I met him, I was still going to therapy talking about how terrifying it would be to try and move forward in a relationship with someone. Not to mention, having the trauma I did wasn't something everyone could handle.

Not everyone was like Austin, who had no problems being patient with me. I was growing confident because he gave me the space and encouragement to grow into it.

“It helps to have someone patient and kind. You respect my boundaries and you don’t pressure me to change them,” I shared as I dragged my nails gently along his scalp. “Not to mention, you are extremely sexy so it’s kind of hard resisting you.”

“Is that so?” He smirked before sitting up. “Is this an invitation to continue our kitchen make-out session?”

I shifted on my seat, placing my tea on the table. Austin sat back on the couch, watching my every move. I threw my leg over his thigh, settling down on his lap. His hands wrapped around the small of my back, holding me to him. “It is definitely an invitation to continue,” I whispered, leaning in closer to him. “A very exclusive invitation that I’m hoping you accept.”

He inched closer, his lips millimetres away from mine. His hot breath mingled with mine as anticipation filled my stomach. “I accept,” he breathed out. “But I don’t like to show up empty-handed.”

“Mhh.”

He leaned in a little more as his hands tightened on my waist, dragging me forward. I could feel him through his sweatpants. My pajama pants were thinner than his, and I could feel everything. He wasn’t even fully hard yet. “Have you ever come with your pants still on, Jacks?”

“No,” I shook my head, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth.

“Would you like to?” he asked, brushing his nose against mine.

I nodded my head, licking my lips.

“Words, Jacks. Tell me,” he urged.

I swallowed hard. “I want you to make me come with my pants on, Austin. Please make me come.”

“Good girl,” he mouthed. I was already breathing heavily in anticipation. “I’m going to make you feel so good, pretty girl. So fucking good.”

His lips were on mine, finally putting me out of my misery. He dominated my mouth once more, taking complete control, and leading the way and I followed every step of the way. My arms wrapped around his shoulders, steadying myself as I shifted closer to his lap, feeling the hard warmth of him beneath my center.

His hands cupped my ass cheeks, dragging me against the growing bulge in his pants. A wave of pleasure jolted through me. I could feel my panties

growing damp with every glide against him. His cock was hard and my pussy was aching for him. Grinding against him felt so fucking good. It was similar to when I used to get myself off, only this felt better. The friction between our bodies ignited something in me that was very dormant until he touched me.

“Austin,” I panted as I brushed my cloth-covered pussy along the covered shaft of his cock. His breathing wasn’t much better. “Feels so fucking good.”

He growled, digging his fingers into my flesh, and dragging me over his lap. “That’s a good girl. Grinding that pretty little pussy on my cock,” he cooed, rubbing his nose over mine. “You gonna come, Jacks?”

“Mmh, fuck!” I cried out.

Austin shifted beneath me, making it easier for him to move with me. That little change made all the difference. I felt more of him, giving me more to grind on. My lips collided with his as I kept my pace. Slowly dragging my center against him, over and over in the same rhythm. I felt my peak growing closer and closer. The coil grew tighter and tighter in my core.

“Come for me, Jacks.”

A few more glides later, my body was overtaken with pleasure and I cried out. My hands gripped into his back, tugging him to me as I rode out my high. Austin followed shortly after, grunting out when finished inside his sweats. I felt like a teenager, or at least, how I was supposed to feel, given that over-the-clothes stimulation was meant for your parent’s basement when they weren’t home. I never experienced it, and if I was honest, I was happy I got to experience it with Austin.

“I love it when you call me good girl,” I confessed, pecking his lips.

He chuckled. “Well, you are my good girl. And you look fucking gorgeous when you come undone.”

I climbed off of his lap with shaky legs. He was up right after, sporting a fairly large wet spot in the front of his sweats. He slipped his hand in mine, leading me upstairs so I could clean up and change my panties. His back was covered in scratches, making me smile just a little, knowing that there was no way he was hiding those from his teammates when he was changing. I was damn proud of that.

He dropped his pants by his closet, not bothering to hide himself now that I had seen him. That level of comfortability was there for him. He cleaned himself up before grabbing a fresh pair of black boxers. I opened up my bag, grabbing a clean pair of panties and a new pair of pajama pants. Since I had

his shirt on, my ass was covered as I slipped my pants and panties off. I just needed to clean myself first.

I confidently walked to the bathroom with my new clothes in hand. I was quick, going to the bathroom before cleaning myself up. Austin was waiting for me on the other side of the door with a goofy smile playing on his lips.

“Big spoon or little spoon?”

“Big spoon,” I nodded. “You’re having the off day so you get to be cuddled today.”

We curled back up on the couch with Austin leaning against me. My hand continued to play with his hair as we watched *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*. It wasn’t until Ben got punched in the face that Austin spoke up once more, catching me off guard.

“Would you ever consider moving in with me?”

“Austin, we’ve been together for a day,” I let out a laugh.

He scoffed playfully. “Technically we’ve been together since September,” he pointed out as he linked his fingers with mine. “I’m just wondering if moving here would be something you’d like. ‘Cause if it’s not, I get it. This isn’t Stonebridge at all. This isn’t what you consider home.”

I let his words sink in, along with the softness of them. There was no pressure from him. There was no absolute to them. He was asking me a genuine question. Something told me that if I said no, he’d move to Stonebridge when he wasn’t playing hockey just to be where I was. But the truth was, my home was becoming wherever he was. Whether it was Garden City or Stonebridge.

“I think I could like it here,” I admitted, knowing full well I was already in love with the city. He didn’t need to know that. “But it’s still too soon to think about moving in together.”

“How about we have this conversation again in April?” He suggested. “Maybe May or June. Once the hockey season and the Playoffs are over.”

“Sure.”

I sure as hell hoped he couldn’t feel how fast my heart was beating ‘cause it was damn near about to beat out of my chest.

Best twenty-four hours of my life by far.



## *Catalina*

“It’s been a little while since I’ve seen you,” Courtney smiled at me as she entered her office. She had a tray of two paper cups in her hand and her clipboard beneath her armpit. Her hair was shorter than it was three weeks ago, which was when I last saw her. She had on a new outfit by the looks of it, and her ring had a beautiful shine to it, even in this dull late November afternoon.

I let out a shaky breath. I had no idea why I was so nervous for this session. It wasn’t like I was on the verge of a mental breakdown, or something had triggered my fight or flight senses. I was here on my scheduled therapy day, ready to share the latest updates in my life and maybe get a bit of advice from her on how to move forward healthily.

“Uh oh,” she frowned, clicking her tongue. “Silence. That can’t be good. Is my outfit that bad?”

I let out a laugh, watching the serious expression on her face contort into a warm one. She handed me one of the cups, the little string from the teabag swinging in the air before I tucked it in the sleeve. Misery Business Cafe. At least I knew it was good tea, but why of all places, did she have to go there?

“What’s new, Ms Catalina?” She asked as she took her seat, bringing her cup up to her lips. I continued to play with the string from the tea, tucking it in and out of the sleeve. Where was I to start? What was more important to talk about? I only had an hour — and fifty-eight minutes, to talk to her about everything that happened in the last three weeks. That wasn’t enough time to even brush over one topic, let alone three weeks’ worth of topics. “Catalina? Is everything okay?”

“Mhh,” I nodded, continuing to fidget.

She smiled, shaking her head. “Maybe I need to start with a different question.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “You’ve got nothing to apologize for,” she assured me as she placed her notepad on the table next to her. “On a scale of one to ten, what would you rate your anxiety at this very moment?”

“Five? Maybe six?”

She nodded her head, taking in my answer. I could feel it bubbling inside of me as soon as I answered. That five turned into a seven, which was quickly



turning into a nine. She was thinking of the next question to ask me, trying to figure out where the hell I was.

“Austin’s my boyfriend now,” I blurted out, feeling the weight release from my chest. The balloon had lost its air. “For real.”

“Catalina, that’s amazing,” she said as her smile reached her eyes. “This is a huge step for you.”

I shook my head, adjusting the sleeves on my shirt, covering my hands with them, as if to try and hide myself a little more. I don’t know why I felt so awkward talking about this with her. She was my fucking therapist. She knew all of my trauma. I would have thought it would have been nice to tell her some good news. “We also fooled around. Not like... sex. But we — mouths were used.”

“What made you decide to take this step?” She questioned. I swore the grin on her face was permanent. It hadn’t fallen since I told her, and I had a feeling it wasn’t going to either.

I shrugged my shoulders, letting out a breath. “I don’t know. He told me he’s never felt the way he feels about me with anyone else. That he didn’t need the contract as a safety net. The entire weekend I was with him, he made me feel so included and so wanted. I finally felt like I belonged somewhere for the first time in my life. I finally felt chosen,” I shared, bringing my tea up to my lips. “And the more I thought about it, the more it became apparent that Austin had chosen me, over and over, from the start. He took the time to make me feel comfortable with him. He was patient with me and made the time to earn my trust.”

Oh god. How was I so fucking blind? This was never a contract for him. That’s why it was so easy for him. He wanted to know me. Whether it was as friends or more, Austin put himself in my life by choice. Those nights in my apartment didn’t have to happen with the contract in place. He was there for me.

This fucking man.

“I told him I was raped,” I confessed, watching her smile disappear. “While we were in his apartment in Long Island. I told him exactly what happened. All of it. Every detail of what happened and he stood there, letting my hands roam over his body, listening to every word I had to say. And when I was done, he promised me he’d never let anything happen to me again.”

“Catalina,” she shook her head, her smile spreading across her cheeks once more. “This is huge. How did you feel after you told him?”

I swallowed hard. “Relief.” I nodded my head, letting out a shaky breath. “I felt relief. Like I could breathe again. It was the first time I could breathe. In a way,” I paused, trying to compose my thoughts. I wasn’t sure how much I wanted to voice out loud. Of how much I wanted to admit out in the open in the fear that it would all be taken away. “I felt like I could move forward. Like I could finally let go of it all, knowing that someone else has my back now.”

“It sounds like you’ve had some serious healing since I last saw you, Ms. Jackson,” she beamed.



I hated being here in Stonebridge knowing that Austin was in Long Island. It had been over two weeks since I last laid eyes on his physical being. Sure, we had FaceTime calls and we texted throughout the day, but it wasn’t the same as actually having him close by. I couldn’t hear his laugh the same way I would if I were next to him. I couldn’t kiss him, or play with his hair when we were separated by distance.

As I walked down the same sidewalk on Main Street, the cold late November wind wiped through my hair. The same way it had for the last three Novembers I had lived here. Only this time, the walk no longer filled me with the same comfort it once did.

Stonebridge was my leap of independence after college. It was about spreading my wings and seeing if I could fly on my own. It was about finding my place in this world on my terms and conditions. I chose to flee Chicago. I chose to live in this tiny town with a small population to plant my roots in hopes I would grow here. I loved this town for giving me that opportunity. I loved this town for being safe for me and I loved it for being the fresh start I so desperately needed. I loved so much about it... but it felt like I was holding myself back here. It felt like I was glued to safety, with no place to grow anymore.

One weekend in Long Island made me realize how stuck in a rut I was. I did more writing there than I had done in months here.

I reached into my bag, looking for my phone as I slowed down my steps. I opened it up, searching for a specific contact that I hoped would help me.

The photo we took in the dress shop caught my eyes first, making me smile before clicking her contact, bringing my phone up to my ear.

It rang three times before I heard shuffling in the background. “Hey Jacks.” Her greeting was warm and welcoming, like every conversation I had with her. She had even taken a liking to Austin’s nickname for me, and in all honesty, I liked it when his friends called me that. It was always filled with affection. Not like Cat, which I had gotten my entire life. “What’s going on?”

“I feel lost,” I admitted without intending to. I didn’t want to seem pathetic with my confession or have her think less of me, but it was how I was feeling. Lost. I couldn’t help but tell my friend that. “I haven’t seen Austin in almost two weeks, which is the longest we’ve gone since we met. Everything here feels duller and colder. I just feel so lost.”

I took a seat on one of the benches on Main Street, tugging my jacket closer to me to shelter me a little from the brittle cold wind. “Aww, Jacks,” she said. I could hear the frown in her voice, followed by the slapping of a stick in the background. She was at work. I disturbed her at work.

“I’m sorry to bother you while you’re working,” I said, feeling an insane amount of guilt for dumping my issues on her when she didn’t ask for it.

“No, no!” She protested. “I’m glad you called me. I was going to call you later actually. I’m just at work and to be honest, I needed a break. The kids are in today and one of them reminds me of Lucas and it’s just hard.”

“Fuck, we’re both messes,” I breathed out, trying to ease the guilt I felt.

She lets out a laugh. “I would kill to have you here. Sounds like we need a girl’s night with multiple bottles of wine and copious amounts of junk food. Oh and probably *Clueless* and maybe *Legally Blonde*. Two of my favourites.”

Now I felt lost here. I wanted to be there. “As long as we can watch *10 Things I Hate About You* and *She’s All That* somewhere in there.”

“Duh!” She went quiet for a moment. “Have you talked to Austin about this?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t want to add stress onto his shoulders,” I told her. “I don’t want to be that girlfriend that can’t handle long distance. I don’t want to be that girl who can’t have a life separate from her boyfriend, even though I don’t think it’s fully the case.”

“I’m listening.”

“I miss him. I really do,” I confessed, swallowing hard. “And I miss him because I always had someone to talk to. I had someone to look forward to seeing. I found comfort in knowing that I could see him walk through

whatever door separated us at any minute. Without him, I have no one here. The girls I once called my friends aren't my friends and haven't been this entire time."

"I'm sensing a but coming," she urged me to continue.

I let out a shaky breath. "I don't want to prove Lucas right when he told me that I wasn't meant for this life. For Austin's life."

The line went completely silent before I heard a click. "He fucking said that?" She shouted. "He fucking said that to you? Are you kidding me, Jacks?"

"I don't think he had any ill intentions when he said that," I tried to tell her, but I was sure I had already set her off. As if she needed another reason to hate the man. I owed Lucas for this one, that was for sure.

"Doesn't fucking matter," she spat. "He doesn't have the right to say that to you. Not to mention, you and Austin aren't separated right now because he's on a roadie. You are separated because you're stuck there and he's stuck here. There is a big difference here. Austin doesn't get to come home to you the same way after being on the road."

I felt a wave of anxiety fill my chest as the words poured off my tongue. "Would it be crazy if I just packed up my life and moved there?"

"Absolutely not, Jacks," she stated instantly. "Not when the people who love you are here. Not when you're miserable there like I know you are."

I felt tears pricking at my eyes, letting out a pathetic laugh. "Know of any affordable places?"

"My neighbour is moving out at the end of December," she revealed. "But these apartments are small. Nothing like what the boys have."

"Want to put a good word in for me?"

"Already done," she declared. "You should talk to Austin, Jacks. Tell him what's going on. He might make things a little easier for you."

"Promise."

We talked for a few more minutes before I had to make my way to work. She hung up, leaving me with encouraging words, giving me the slightest upturn in my mood before it was damped once more with the smell of coffee, and Olivia's disgusting perfume mixed with her cigarette smoke.

As I reached the cafe, I felt my phone vibrate in my hand as soon as I opened the door. Austin's name was next to the little green icon, making me smile. I loved it when I got a message from him or anything from him.

**Austin: hey pretty girl. Coming home to you tonight. Weekend free from practice so I am all yours.**

I answered immediately.

**Me: I can't wait to see you. This is the best news I've heard all day.**

And it was. My heart was leaping for joy, knowing in a few hours, I would finally be wrapped in his arms. He was here to spend the weekend with me and I couldn't be happier knowing we probably weren't going to make it further than the threshold of my apartment door. I was keeping him close the entire time, soaking up every ounce of Austin time I could get before he took off for a few more weeks. Chances were, I wasn't going to see him again until the night of the auction.

I slipped behind the front counter, making a beeline for the back of the cafe to put my stuff in my designated locker. I grabbed my apron in hand, tying it around my waist. I had no idea what I was doing today, and quite frankly, it didn't matter. I was seeing Austin tonight. The smile was permanently etched onto my lips.

I grabbed my favourite pen, tucking it safely away in the pouch of my apron, ready to get this shift started. The front counter was quiet, and our usual regulars hadn't made their appearance just yet. Then again, it was Thanksgiving weekend if I wasn't mistaken. It wasn't going to be a busy day. It never was, even though we kept the store open on all holidays, for maybe a total of six people. Maybe?

I could smell the cigarette smoke before the bodies followed. Olivia and Sabrina stumbled in the back door, laughter erupting between them like they were the best of friends. Tracey followed suit shortly after, grinning widely at me as she closed the space between us.

"I'm leaving," Sabrina called out, throwing the strap of her bag over her shoulder. The cafe had only been open for a few hours. How was she already going home? How could she afford to leave? I really should have been counting my blessings. It meant a full shift without her nagging.

God, it was going to be one of those days.

Haley's shift started two hours after mine. It was close to the two-hour mark when she stumbled in with her oversized sunglasses and her blond hair a mess. I just finished rolling out my dough for the pastries I was about to

make when our eyes met, and shy smiles were shared between us. It was moments later, she brought two milk crates, placing them next to the table with her drink.

Her hair was thrown up in a ponytail, hidden under her hat. She leaned her elbow on the tabletop, letting out a yawn. “I haven’t gone to bed yet,” she declared before bringing her cup up to her lips. “We all went out to the bar last night for Montana’s birthday, and these guys were buying us shots to celebrate. One of them was all over her and I’m almost certain she went home with him.”

“Sounds like you had a fun night,” I responded as I twisted the pastries into formation.

She hummed in response. “So much fun. I don’t think I’ve ever been that drunk before,” she confessed, rubbing her temple almost as if to emphasize her pain. “Anyway, what’s new with you?”

“Austin is coming this weekend,” I said with a smile. “I also got more of my book written, which is —“

Before I could even finish my sentence, her hand slammed down on the table, stopping me from continuing. I couldn’t say I was all that surprised. It was how it went with her. Anything that was going on with me, whether it was good or bad, was shoved into the box of I don’t give a fuck in her brain, because it had nothing to do with her. “I forgot that Nikki was hoping I would introduce her to Austin. She’s got a thing for hockey players and she flipped when she found out you know him.”

“You mean that I’m in a relationship with him?” I corrected her. “In case you forgot, Austin’s my boyfriend.”

“Well duh,” she scoffed, rolling her eyes. Why was that something to get snippy about? “You guys should come out to Jonsies with us tonight. You and Austin.”

“So I can watch Nikki flirt with my boyfriend? To make him uncomfortable with someone flirting with him in front of his girlfriend?” I cocked my eyebrow, halting everything I was doing. “Sure, that sounds like a lot of fun for both of us.”

“Come on, Cat! He’s a professional hockey player. He’s used to women throwing themselves at him,” she argued. “He’s a notorious womanizer. You can’t possibly believe the two of you are going to have a happily ever after. No offence.”

“And why is that, Hails?” I crossed my arms over my chest, calling her

the name she hated. “Tell me, why aren’t we going to have a happily ever after?”

She rolled her eyes once more as her attitude sunk in. “—‘cause you’re kind of plain. And I’m not saying that’s a bad thing. It’s not. You’re just very... laid back. A homebody. He’s the opposite of you. He’s a social butterfly with a wicked slap shot and I’ve heard rumours about him being huge.” Well, that part is true. Austin’s dick is big. Not the point of thought. “I’m not trying to hurt your feelings. As your friend, I would never hurt your feelings. It’s just the reality of the situation. I’m trying to look out for you.”

I scoffed this time. “None of what you’re saying is looking out for me. You’re trying to set your best friend up with my boyfriend. You’re doing the opposite of that. If anything, you’re not being much of a friend to me.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” she stated, getting up off the milk crate stack, and giving me a nasty once over. “But I’m only looking out for your best interests. Don’t come crying to me when he cheats on you with someone better suited for him.”



I could feel it building. The overwhelming sensation that was threatening to take over. My heart was thumping against my ribs, going a mile a minute, maybe more. I could taste the unpleasant venom on my tongue; the lump that had been forming in the back of my throat for the better part of the day. One that refused to dispute, no matter how hard I tried to swallow it down.

It felt like someone was blowing up a balloon in my chest cavity, trying to disperse all of the air from my lungs so I couldn’t breathe any longer. It was like I was no longer in full control of my body, the way I was bouncing off the walls, trying to get back to my apartment. Trying to fly to safety.

I was so disorientated that it took six tries for me to slip the proper key into the lock, pushing the door open. I don’t remember dropping my bag to the floor. I don’t remember walking over to my couch. And I don’t remember when the tears started. All I knew was that my cheeks were wet and my body was shaking and I couldn’t breathe.

No matter how hard I tried to take that breath, I couldn’t. I couldn’t remember how to breathe. I didn’t know how to *fucking* breathe. How was I

going to survive if I couldn't get air in my lungs? Was this it for me? Was I never going to see Austin again? Was he going to find my body here, lifeless? Not a single sign of life in me. Typical. Right when I was starting to be happy.

My knees were up to my chest as tears stained my cheeks, one after the other, after the other. My bottom lip was quivering, my chest aching, my body shivering. I was having a panic attack. A really bad panic attack. And I really needed him. I really fucking needed his arms around me.

Because it was only a matter of time until he brushed me to the side, just like everyone else did. I was no one's favourite person. No one really needed me. Not forever anyway. I was temporary. A fix that was hit until there's nothing left. Convenient until something better was found; someone better. I was never going to be someone's first choice. Not forever.

Focus. I had to breathe. I had to fucking *breathe*. My life depended on it. I had no choice. I needed to breathe.

You need to breathe, Catalina.

My eyes shut tight, two tears slipping down my cheek in the process before I let out a sob, taking in a huge gasp of air. I choked it out seconds later, repeating the same process over again. My chest heaved up and down, shaking with each weak breath that barely made it to my lungs. That balloon was about to explode in my chest, and I feared it was about to take me out.

I could smell that distinct smell of tears mixed with the stuffy nose that was associated with it. My cheeks were soaked and my face felt tight because of them. I was so weak, frail even, that it was pathetic. No wonder I wasn't anyone's first choice. I wouldn't like me either.

Through my tears, I didn't register the apartment door opening. The couch dipped in front of me and a hand reached for my knee. "Jacks? Sweetheart, what's wrong?" His voice was so sweet and sincere, making the tears start all over again 'cause I didn't deserve it. I didn't deserve him.

His arms wrapped around me, tugging me into him as sobs filled the room once more. He was holding me tight to him, and for a moment, it felt like he was the only thing holding me back from slipping away. I thought I had cried myself out, but I didn't. I didn't think I had that many tears in my body.

"Jacks," he breathed out. "It's okay. Let it all out. I've got you."

I shook my head, nuzzling myself in closer to him. "I'm sorry," I choked out.



“Nope. You’ve got nothing to be sorry about, Jacks,” he stated. “Who do I have to hurt?”

I pulled back slightly, wiping my nose on the back of my sleeve, seeing a massive wet spot when I pulled it away. “What?”

“Who am I hurting, Jacks? No one fucks with my girl and gets away with it.”

I let out a pathetic, shaky breath, swallowing hard. “I’m just having a bad day. A bad couple of days, actually.”

He leaned forward, pressing his lips to the top of my head, letting them linger for a moment. His hold on my body shifted, making sure I was comfortable over his lap. “I’m listening. What do you need, my love?”

“I don’t belong here anymore, Austin,” I swallowed hard. “I don’t belong in this town, and it’s not because you’re in Long Island. I have no one here and it took you coming to town for me to realize that the people I called my friends couldn’t give a shit about me. I can’t work in that cafe anymore and endure more belittling, tormenting and immaturity. I’m done working for someone who can’t even pay me right for everything I fucking do. I’m just done. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t.”

He squeezed me tightly. “I know. I know. Are you one hundred percent sure about moving?”

I nodded. “I’m tired of being alone, Austin,” I confessed, licking my bottom lip. “I’m tired of walking into that cafe, knowing full well that they’re all going to talk shit about me, no matter what I do. I hate the high school energy and knowing that no matter what, I’m always going to be a topic of conversation. I’m tired of feeling like I’m invisible, begging to be accepted into the story, instead of as a background character, only needed when I have a fucking purpose. I’m tired of feeling like I have to beg for love and friendship. Of begging for someone to be proud of me, or tell me I’m doing a good job when it’s something that should be said without having to ask for it. I’m tired of being treated as less than what I deserve.”

“You don’t need to beg people for that, Jacks,” he said softly. “It’s not right to beg for the bare minimum. Sorry to be blunt, but it’s the truth. You shouldn’t be begging for that, sweetheart. The only thing you should be begging for is my touch when I’m teasing you. That is the only time it’s acceptable for you to beg. When it’s consensual.”

He was right.

“Trust me,” he paused, drawing me in closer. “I begged for my parents to

love me for a long time before I realized you're not supposed to do that. I begged for most of my life for them to love me. For them to even look at me and be proud of me, but they never were. It's a freeing feeling to let go of. The right people stick around, Jacks. The right people are still there through the bullshit and the not-so-happy times. They are the ones you keep. They don't give up on you."

"I hate that you had to go through that," I admitted, playing with his fingers in my lap.

He shook his head. "I hate that you're feeling this way right now, Jacks." His hand came up, brushing a stray piece of hair from my face. "You of all people deserve to feel every ounce of love you put out into the world. Not this shit. Not doubting your place in the world because others made it that way. "

I shrugged my shoulders, swallowing hard. "Nothing new, Austin." I reached my hands up, wiping my tears with the sides of my index fingers, seeing the mascara on them as I pulled away. I mustered up the best smile I could. "Anyway, I should probably shower so I don't smell like coffee."

"The fuck?" He chuckled. "You were crying two minutes ago and now it's like normal. How in the hell —"

"Sometimes all you need is a good cry to feel better."

I slipped out of his hold, trying to steady my legs as I got up, moving around him. My eyes darted to my purse at the front door, knowing full well all of my stuff was still in there. Two hands wrapped around my hips, tugging me in close. I smiled for the first time since I heard he was coming home to me.

He followed me into my tiny bathroom, keeping his hands on my body the entire time. We stopped in front of the mirror, looking at one another. My eyes looked a little raccoon-like, and my makeup was blotchy. My hair was even more of a mess than it was this morning. Hell, I was a mess.

"You're the most beautiful girl I've laid eyes on, Catalina Jackson," he breathed out before pressing a kiss to my cheek. He tugged me in closer. The heat of his body radiated against my back, spreading warmth through me. This was exactly what I wanted. To be in his arms. "I'm proud of you. *My girl.*"

"I like being your girl."

"I like you being my girl," he whispered. "Does my *good girl* want company in her shower?" His lips trailed along my neck, igniting a spark in

my belly. His touch was so soft and sweet, I wouldn't have thought much if his words were anything but soft.

I wanted him in the shower with me. "Yes. I do. Preferably a tall, sexy hockey player with gorgeous green eyes and a huge cock."

His eyes widened as soon as the words left my lips. Oh, I sparked his attention. I slipped out of his hold, turning to face him with a smirk playing on my lips. Confidence radiated through my veins purely from the way he looked at me. The softness laced with desire.

I took the hem of my shirt, and pulled it over my head, letting it drop to the floor. The button on my jeans was next and before I had the chance to shove them down my legs, Austin bent down, curling his thick fingers in the waistband, dragging them down my legs, stopping when they pooled at my ankles.

I stepped out of them, making my way over to the shower to turn the water on. Behind me, Austin stripped off his shirt, revealing a new set of deep purple bruises that had to be from practice. Something that made my heart drop to my stomach. It was something I was going to have to get used to with him. He was a hockey player. They got hurt sometimes. It didn't mean I had to like it.

I reached for the front of my sports bra, unzipping the front of it before popping it open. He hadn't seen this part of me yet, and I hated to admit it, but I was scared he wasn't going to like what he saw. I didn't have 'porn star' boobs. I was average and because they were bigger, they weren't as perky as I wished they were. I had to take this step, not for him; but for me. It had to be my choice.

As soon as my bra was on the floor, my nipples hardened, partially from how turned on I was. The bathroom was also one of the coldest places in my apartment. I heard a gasp as my panties hit the floor, leaving me completely naked in front of him for the first time. When I stood up straight, Austin had kicked his boxers off, his cock half-hard as he stepped closer.

"You're a goddamn dream," he swallowed hard, eyeing me up and down. "Holy fuck, you're hot as fuck."

I let out a giggle before stepping into the shower, soon realizing that this wasn't ideal for two people. Especially not someone with Austin's build. Knowing us, we were going to make it work. All I could think was how thankful it was a glass door shower and not a stand-in tub one.

He joined me seconds later, slipping his hands over my stomach once

more. I could feel his hard length pressed against my ass. The water was aimed against me, soaking me before it could even get to him. “Can I touch you, Jacks?” He muttered in my ear. His thumb stroked over my hip and all my attention was drawn to that singular action. I was so in tune with him that it was insane. He affected me so strongly, that I never thought it was possible to be so in sync with someone. I was already soaked for him and he was about to find out just how much he affected me.

“Hmm,” I nodded.

He chuckled, kissing along my neck. “Tell me, is that pretty little pussy wet for me, Jacks?”

“Touch me and find out,” I breathed out, letting my head fall back against his shoulder. His hand slipped lower, his middle finger parting my folds, circling my entrance. A shiver shot through me and I let out a tiny gasp. Fuck, it felt good when he touched me.

“You’re soaked,” he cooed before tearing his hold away, turning me so I was facing him. He smirked, backing me into the shower wall before he stepped closer, getting the spray from the shower head. His cock was fully hard, bobbing with each step, the tip a deep red. “You’ve got perfect tits, holy fuck. I just want to devour you. God, these nipples.”

My entire body was in fire and he had barely touched me yet. A part of me figured it was from being so inexperienced, but Austin drove me insane. I wanted him to touch me all the fucking time. I needed it like I needed air.

“Spread your legs for me,” he demanded, reaching between them. “*Good girl.*”

My chest was heaving as I kept my eyes on him, watching in anticipation for what he was going to do next. His fingers slipped through my folds, gathering my slick before circling my bundle of nerves. My legs were already shaky before this, with him between them, it was worse. It felt like I was going to buckle at any given moment. “Austin.”

“Such a perfect little pussy,” he muttered, leaning in to brush his lips against mine. “Should I slip my finger in your pussy, sweetheart? Rub that sweet spot until you come all over my fingers?”

I swallowed hard, the words slipping out before I could even think about holding back. “I — I can’t come that way.”

That soft smile appeared on his lips once more before he leaned in, kissing me sweetly. His other hand urged my chin up, our eyes locked. “I would still like to make you feel good,” he assured me. “Not everyone can

come from that. ‘Sides, I’d like to tease you a little. One day, when you’re ready. My fingers will be replaced with my cock.’

“Fuck.”

“What do you need, Jacks?”

“F-fingers,” I pleaded. “Fingers in my pussy, Austin.”

His hand slipped between our bodies, cupping my pussy before his middle finger slipped inside me. His palm pressed against my clit. I let out a moan against his lips. His fingers were thicker than mine, giving me more than I was used to.

My hand reached down, taking his cock in my palm. I stroked him to the same rhythm his finger curled into my pussy. I ground my hips against his hand, stimulating my clit at the same time. The pressure in my core building quickly, growing stronger and stronger with every brush of his hand.

His forehead pressed against mine, his chest heaving as I continued to jerk his cock. My hand slipped along him with ease, my thumb running over the tip, brushing over the parts he reacted well to the last time. I loved doing this with the same person. Learning everything that drove him crazy, making him feel good with my touch. I loved knowing what drove him closer to the edge, just like he was learning what I liked, ‘cause he cared to know.

“Good girl,” he praised. “Come for me, pretty girl. Let me feel you squeeze around me.”

That was all it took. My stupid praise kink threw me over the edge, my orgasm coursing through me, wiring my eyes shut as I cried out. The stimulation to my clit along with the teasing of his fingers was enough to make my toes curl and my knees weak. My heart was stammering in my chest, and my breathing was uneven. I had never experienced an orgasm as strong as this one, not even on my own.

“So beautiful when you come,” he panted, urging me to continue my hand on his thick cock. I could feel him twitching every so often, meaning he was close. I stepped up on my tiptoes, pressing my lips to his before deepening it. My tongue battled against his before I was pressed firmly against the tile wall. God, I loved it when he did this. With Austin, I was safe when he did this. I knew I was one hundred percent safe with him.

“You gonna come for me, Austin?” I breathed out, nudging his nose with mine. “Cover me in your come, and mark me as yours. Pretend you’re buried deep in my tight little pussy, filling me up —“

“Fuck,” he groaned, twitching once more.

Hot white ropes covered my stomach, leaving his mark where I was hoping he would. His hand pressed against the wall above my head, trying to hold himself in place as he rode his high. He was so pretty when he came undone like that. I loved watching him lose control like that. It wasn't something that happened very often. Not with Austin. He was always so disciplined. Seeing him lose himself to pleasure like that was incredibly sexy.

"You've got a dirty mouth," he let out a chuckle before pecking my lips. "Holy fuck."

"What can I say, I'm a romance writer," I shrugged my shoulders. "I know a thing or two."

"Damn fucking right you do."

The rest of the shower was spent cleaning up. What I didn't expect was for him to watch and condition my hair for me, let alone my body. It was an incredible intimate moment that I wasn't sure I was ever going to experience, but grateful I could. I returned the favour, taking my time to give him the very same treatment. Something I knew he had never experienced either.

Austin had sexual experience, but he was just as new to this relationship thing as I was. It took me a moment to realize that. He wasn't used to the affection I showed him, the same way I wasn't used to it. It was nice to be able to go through it together, without putting too much pressure on one another.

When we stepped out of the shower and he wrapped me in a towel first, I didn't miss the way he looked at me. That same softness was there, and so was something else. He looked at me with this sweetness that I had only ever seen him give me. It made me feel warm inside when he looked at me like that. Like coming home after being away for so long. That's what he was to me.

I felt at home whenever he was here.



## *Austin*

Something I noticed about Jacks was her excitement for Christmas. I walked into her apartment last week, seeing the place almost completely decked out in Christmas lights and decorations. Her tree in the corner of her tiny living room pulled the room together. It was welcoming in a way that I didn't know I needed.

I spent Christmas with Lucas's family last year. His dad had us over for the few days we had off for the holiday before we were needed for our three games before the New Year. His step-mom wanted a nice family dinner with all of us. It was nice to still be considered family after all these years. She went all out for it. A massive tree in the family room, stockings hung from the fireplace with each of our names on them, lights all over the house. It felt like a true family Christmas. I think even Lucas's younger step-sister, Claire, even enjoyed it. For a moody fifteen-year-old, that was a big deal.

The year before that, I was sick with a nasty head cold that I was damn sure was going to take me out. To this day, I haven't been that sick before. Jade was running around Garden City, trying to find me every medication she could while Lucas stayed in my apartment for four days, in case something happened and I died. Needless to say, hot toddies and Christmas specials were on the menu for that year.

Christmas was never a big deal for me. Not when my family didn't give a shit about it. Hell, I found out when I was seven that there was no Santa Claus 'cause my parents didn't want to put the effort into it anymore. Granted, they played a long a little longer when Matt came along, but I never had that luxury. I didn't get the special wrapped presents under the tree, or the fancy dinner that Lucas's stepmom slaved over. We were lucky if we even got Chinese food for dinner that night. Dessert was out of the question. The night ended with a bottle in my dad's hand and my mom crying about something. Not exactly anything to write home about.

I guess when I saw her apartment, I kind of froze. It was equally as beautiful as it was terrifying. It was another thing I wasn't adequate at and she didn't deserve that. She never mentioned anything about her decorations, or even about her apartment. It was more or less the bigger picture of Stonebridge and her place here.

I was all for her moving to Long Island, even if she got her own



apartment. We certainly weren't at the moving-in stage. We were nowhere near there yet. I just saw her fully naked the other day, and that was a big step for her. She's still not comfortable peeing in the apartment when I'm over, and she blushes when her stomach growls. She still gets nervous when I compliment her when she doesn't have any makeup on. We were still learning to be comfortable from a relationship standpoint. It was clear our relationship was still in its early stages, despite being together since September.

Jade was working on getting her the place across the hall from her. The old couple was moving out, and the price range was in Catalina's budget. Even if it wasn't, I was hoping she'd let me help her out until she got herself on her feet. I wanted her close by. A few floors down was better than a thousand miles away like she was now. Not to mention, I hated walking in on her crying the other day, feeling like she didn't have a place in her home anymore.

I wanted her to feel at home here. A place where she had more potential to live out her life. She had Jade, who she had become very quick and close friends with on the weekend she was here, which was something I hoped would happen. She had Lucas, despite the two of them butting heads a little. There was a friendship forming between them. She hadn't even met any of Jade's friends or a lot of my other teammates, who were also dying to meet the girl who tied me down, as they put it.

I just got the feeling that she belonged here, and it wasn't only because I was here. I saw so much light in her that was dimmed down in Stonebridge. She was held back, stuck in this fortress she locked herself in because she felt safer there than in the outside world.

I took a shot on the net, watching Martin, our goalie block it with ease. Great on him. Shit on me. I hadn't managed to slip one in the entire practice. Then again, none of us had. Martin was on fire tonight, blocking shots, covering pucks, you name it and he did it with ease. While the rest of us were panting, sweat dripping down our backs and exhausted from the extensive practice Coach put us through.

I hated when he went over drills after a loss.

I was exhausted by the time I walked off the ice. My body ached from deep within, my shoulder being the main cause of discomfort. I was still a little tight, even though I had been working on it more and more during dryland. I was still in top peak performance according to the assistant coach

and our on-site trainers. I was just stiff. I needed to loosen up. It was something that would happen when I was back playing. Once I knew I could still play at the level I was playing last year.

I stripped off my practice jersey before taking a seat on the bench. Lucas sat down across from me, giving me a look I wasn't too sure of. Beau came barreling in with a skip in his step, getting all the rookies worked up. "What's your issue, Carter?" Lucas snorted as he unlaced his skates. "You finally getting that stick removed from your ass?"

"Fuck you, Collins," he spat back. "You're just pissed you're not getting your dick sucked as much as I am."

I scoffed. "Hope you scheduled a test. You've taken home a random girl every night since Luke's birthday."

"Tonight is no different," he smirked, stripping off his jersey with ease. His equipment joined seconds later. "I've got a pretty little blonde waiting in the lobby for me to take her home and make good on my promise."

"Oh yeah? What's that promise?" Lucas chuckled. "Disappointment when she realizes your dick is small or that you don't eat pussy?"

"What the fuck is your problem, Collins?" Beau raised his voice, sending the change room into complete silence. "No really. You've been acting like a fucking dick all week and I'm sick of your shit."

Lucas jumped up on his feet, pointing directly at Beau. "What the fuck are you going to do about it, huh?"

Oh fuck. This was not good. Lucas rarely participated in arguments like this. If he had an issue, he took it out on the ice. It was rare that he did it in the change room. That's not to say it hasn't happened before this.

"You're not as tough as you think you are," Beau stated, throwing his towel to the ground. Oh, this was happening. If he said one more thing, it was going to send Luke off the deep end and there was no coming back from that. Not when he was already pissed off enough. If it went any further, I needed to step in. "You're all talk and when it comes to doing something about it, you chicken out, like a little bitch—"

"Enough!" I called out.

"You would defend him. He's the one fucking your ass every damn night."

"Shut the fuck up, Beau," I raised my voice, pointing his way. "You're being as much an asshole as he is which is fucking ridiculous given that you're about to get laid yet again. Grow the fuck up, mind your own business

and focus on your life instead of whatever is going on in his.”

“Easy for you to say, asshole. You’re hiding behind this good guy image, but everyone in this room knows it’s only a matter of time before you fuck things up with your girl. In fact, we’ve got bets going on around here, don’t we boys,” he chuckled, opening his arms up. “Who knows if you’re going to cheat on her or if one of us is going to fuck her first.”

I saw red.

I knew they were just empty words, but Beau put them out there for the entire team to hear. That wasn’t what bothered me. It was the disrespect he showed toward Catalina, yet again. That’s what got to me. I didn’t give a fuck what he wanted to say about me. He could say the worst things and I wouldn’t have cared. But when he brought her into it and spoke about her like that? I didn’t stand for that shit. Maybe I was a bit too protective of her. Maybe I cared a little too much. Regardless, she didn’t deserve anyone disrespecting her like that.

Within seconds, I was in his face, trying my hardest to control my anger. “Talk about her like that again and it’ll be the last thing you do,” I stated. “Lucas might be all talk, but you know as well as I do that I am not. She’s done absolutely nothing but be kind towards you and she doesn’t deserve you being an absolute scum to her. Now act your fucking age, and have some respect. I won’t be telling you again.”

“Real fucking tough, Sawyer.”

I scoffed, taking a step back.

“Cool off, Beau,” Nate called out. “No one likes it when you’re an asshole to everyone.”

Needless to say, the change room went quiet after that.



After showering and packing up my shit, I noticed Beau had fled the locker room quickly, not bothering to get any last words in. Lucas was quiet, as were the rest of the guys. It wasn’t often that there was an argument between teammates, but when there was, things went quiet for a few days after. We were all here for one thing, and that was to play professional hockey. No one wanted the drama. They wanted to play.

Lucas pulled out his keys, motioning for me to follow him. I was a little embarrassed with myself for not getting back behind the wheel after my accident. The worst part about it was that I didn't even have the desire to drive again. It wasn't like I was when I was sixteen and desperate to get away from my parents. I needed to drive back then. Now? I had Lucas who drove me to and from practice when I needed it. Catalina drove whenever we went somewhere that wasn't within driving distance. But I knew I couldn't do this forever. I needed to drive again. I just needed the courage to drive again.

I threw my bag in the trunk before hopping in the passenger's seat. Lucas joined me a moment later, slipping the key in the ignition. His shoulders sagged before his forehead hit the steering wheel. Today was a lot for him, and it was evident in his features.

"You wanna talk about it?" I asked him as I pulled out my phone, checking to see if I missed any messages.

He shook his head. "You feel like doing something tonight?"

I let out a chuckle. "Lead the way."

He cranked the music up, giving me a warm smile before peeling out of his parking spot and making a right turn out of the lot. My fingers ghosted over the message Jacks sent to me, reading her words over and over again.

**Jacks: Hi handsome! When you get a chance, can you call me? I wanna ask you something.**

"What's wrong?" Lucas questioned, tearing his eyes away for one second to give me a look.

"Jacks texted me, asking me to call her at some point. She wants to ask me something," I revealed, feeling my heart rate increase. "That can't be good, can it?"

He laughed, shaking his head. "You're asking me? The one who fucked things up so bad that the girl won't even look at me anymore?"

"Good point," I nodded, knowing just how bad the situation was thanks to my girl.

He cleared his throat. "You know," he paused, stopping at a red light before turning to look at me. "The way you stuck up for her in that change room today was very honourable of you. Seriously, man. She's brought out this side of you that I haven't seen since you were a kid. I can see she makes you happy. Everyone can. Watching you get all protective over her like that,

when she wasn't even in the room, says a lot about your relationship with her."

"She deserves to be defended," I shrugged my shoulders, reading over her message once more. "You mind if I call her?"

"By all means."

I clicked on her contact, hearing the ring in my right ear. Once, then twice before her soft voice filled my ears. "Hi, handsome."

"Hey, beautiful," I greeted her, trying to keep the smile off my face, but failed miserably.

"How was practice?" She asked as I heard her shifting in the background. I missed her. I really fucking missed her.

I scoffed. "Not great, but not horrible," I shared with her. "How was work?"

"Not great, but also not horrible," she answered with a little giggle that made my heart feel weird in my chest. "Are you in the car right now?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "Lucas and I are going somewhere. Where I'm not sure just yet. I'm sure it's not going to get me in too much trouble."

"Hi, Jacks!" Lucas called out, earning a laugh from my girl.

"Tell Lucas I said hi back," she said and I relayed the message.

"What did you want to ask me, sweetheart?" I asked a little quieter, hoping to keep Lucas focused on driving instead of on my conversation with Jacks.

She went quiet for a moment, making my heart drop slightly. Was this not a conversation for the car? Did I call her at the wrong time for this? God, what if she was going to ask me something really personal? What if it was sex related? I didn't mind Lucas knowing things, but I didn't need him knowing anything about her.

I heard her let out a shaky breath, making me swallow hard. "I... uh. I was wondering if maybe you *wanted to come home with me for Christmas?*" She blurted out quickly. I almost didn't catch what she was saying. When I finally registered what it was, my heart rate picked up and my palms grew sweaty. "I know we've been fooling people since September and we've only officially been us for a few weeks, so I understand it if it's too much, or if you don't want to. Especially when you'd be meeting my parents for the first time, and we'd kind of have to alter the truth a little about our relationship and that's asking a lot. But I just thought I'd ask you 'cause I don't know what you're doing or if you even celebrate it given what your life was like growing up. And now

I'm rambling like an idiot. I'm sorry! Please don't feel obligated to say yes. I understand completely if you don't want to and I won't be mad if you don't want to. I just wanted to ask you because I would like you to come."

I couldn't help but smile listening to her nervous ramble. It wasn't often that she was this nervous, especially when it came to me. This was also a big deal. This was meeting her parents and on a huge holiday. This wasn't like the Halloween date I set up in her apartment or Lucas's birthday party. This was a step in our relationship that meant a lot, especially if I were to have a future with her; which was the plan. I just wasn't sure if I was ready to put myself through it, and not have them like me. My parents didn't like me, so why the hell would hers?

But she wanted me there. She made sure I knew that. She didn't bring anyone home to meet them. She made that very fucking clear when I first met her and offered to be her date home for a family event, thinking she'd take that as compensation for being tied to my ass. She didn't want just anyone meeting them. This was important to her. I was important to her.

"Austin?" She breathed out. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have sprung this on you like this. I wanted to wait but —"

"I want to," I stated. "I'd love to."

"Really?"

"Really," I nodded, smiling to myself. "They aren't going to hate me, are they?"

She let out a laugh. "Absolutely not. My mom is the sweetest person in the world and she is going to adore you. My dad is already there 'cause he's a major hockey fan. He knew who you were before I did."

I chuckled at that. Her parents weren't my parents. They didn't expect her to follow some family legacy, or to take a path she didn't want to be on. From what she had told me, they are good people. I was just nervous 'cause she meant the world to me, and I didn't want them to hate me and not want her with me. I didn't want them to see through my confidence to the scared little boy who only wanted affection from his parents.

"It's going to go great, I promise," she breathed out. "It means a lot to me that you want to go with me. Anyway, go have fun with Lucas. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay, pretty girl," I assured her. "If it's not late, I'll call you later."

"Sounds good, handsome."

I hung up the phone, shoving it back in the front pocket of my jeans. She

invited me to Christmas with her family. If that didn't confirm how she felt about me, I don't know what did. Not that I was having doubts or anything. It just told me where she stood with me and that meant a lot to me. It meant we were on the same page.

"You're in love with her," Lucas breathed out, clearing his throat. It wasn't a question. It was a statement. Like he knew for certainty, without a hint of doubt. I smirked at that confidence.

"—'course I am," I said nonchalantly.

He shook his head. "Does she know?"

"No. She doesn't."

He made a right turn, pulling into a familiar parking lot. The sounds of wheels filled my ears, making me shake my head. Only Lucas, I thought to myself. Only he would get me back behind the wheel of a vehicle by go-karting. Two grown-ass men, spending their Wednesday night go-karting like a couple of teenage boys.

He cut the ignition but didn't unbuckle his seatbelt like I did. "Don't wait forever to tell her, okay?"

"I won't."

"I'm serious, Sawyer. Don't fuck up like I did," he stated, guilt riddled in his voice. He undid his seatbelt, kicking the car door open.

This had to be why his mood was so fucking sour today. It had something to do with Jade. I had a feeling I would get it out of him before the night ended. If I didn't, then I had a whole other issue on my hand.

We managed to get through pretty quickly. Not without the employees noticing who we were and asking for photos with us. It had been a little while since I had that happen to me and I kind of forgot what it was like. I forgot what it was like to have people know who I was. I had been in this safe bubble with Catalina. With Lucas, I wasn't surprised. He was one of the best players on the team and he was well known after the last game with the hat trick against Toronto. Embarrassing as hell for them if you ask me.

I was strapped in first, waiting for Lucas to settle himself in, along with his helmet. This was nothing like driving a car, but I appreciated his attempt to get me behind the wheel. It was a good first step.

As soon as he strapped himself in, I took off, leaving him behind me, yelling a stream of curse words that would offend a lot of people had they heard him. I didn't care. He took forever so he deserved to be left behind.

It felt incredible to be behind the wheel of the go-cart. Not only had it

been years since I had done this, but it felt great to take some of the stress out and just feel the track. The turns, the curves, the speed. It was great to feel it all again.

Before I knew it, I had done countless laps and an hour had passed by. Lucas stopped his cart next to mine with a knowing smile playing on his lips. He knew I needed this night out. We both needed this night out.

“Want to tell what sparked that exchange in the locker room today?” I asked him as I climbed out of my cart, removing my helmet before fixing my hair.

“He made a comment about fucking Jade,” he revealed as he removed his helmet, tucking it under his arm. “On the ice earlier. He told me he was going to shoot his shot with her. And it’s not like anyone knows that —“

“Johnson would kill him if he knew,” I raised my eyebrows. “Hell, even if he found out about some of the stuff you and Jade have done as friends. I mean, let’s not forget New Year’s in Vegas three years ago. As far as he knows, we all look out for the girl. Nothing more.”

“I can’t keep doing it, man. I can’t,” he shook his head, taking a seat on the edge of the track. “I have to do something about it. It’s killing me. And it’s worse because you’ve got Catalina and you’re happy. She fucking invited you to meet her parents for Christmas, Sawyer. I want that. As painful as that might be, Jade is the one. I know she is.”

“What can I do to help?” I asked, slapping him on the back.





## *Austin*

The last twenty-four hours had been a fucking nightmare.

I received a call from Joel two days ago, stating that he got a call from Chris. Chris was pissed about a lot of things, as he usually was, but he was even more pissed about the fact that his brother was more involved. After the conversation I had with Coach Johnson, I was expecting Chris to be pissed.

When Coach Johnson said he was going to take care of everything so I didn't have to worry about his idiot brother, he meant it. I was sure he had reached out to other parties in the company, and not only was I one of the special guests, but he somehow got the entire team on board, willing to spend their Saturday nights at a date auction. That seemed to calm Chris down when he realized how many people would attend an event with the entire Long Island hockey team in his presence.

I don't know how the hell he managed to do it, on such short notice, but he did. And if I was being honest with myself, it felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I didn't have to worry about the drama that came with being at an event like this without security. I didn't have to worry about Chris trying something with his brother in attendance. I also had my best friends attending with me, so I didn't have to do this on my own. I could enjoy my night with my beautiful girl in my arms.

Which brought me to my biggest worry. I had to make sure Jacks could get here on time. With her work schedule, she caught a late flight as soon as her shift finished at ten, and she arrived late in the night. I sent a car out to pick her up from the airport, making sure she got in the safest way possible. I could see the anxiety written all over her face the second I opened up the door. She was insanely overwhelmed with her day, and exhausted from the stress of it all.

Even exhausted, she was the most beautiful girl I had ever laid eyes on. I was incredibly lucky to call her mine.

I grabbed her bags and urged her up to my room. She wanted to take a shower so she didn't feel disgusting, as she put it. I hoped it made her feel better physically and mentally. It was going to be a long day, given the event was fifteen hours away, and neither of us had slept yet. We were going to need all the energy we could get. I just wish my coach gave me a bit more heads up on this so I could prepare her.

As soon as she was in the shower, I headed to the kitchen, preparing her a cup of the tea she loved so much. Even with the caffeine in it, she would be out like a light. I had convinced myself she built up a tolerance to the stuff with how much she drank it, and that was why it didn't keep her up late at night. But it sure as hell got her going in the morning.

I poured the milk into her mug, settling the carton down on the counter as I took in a deep breath. It was a lot for me in the last couple of days. Between practice and the press starting to pester me for interviews about coming back, and worrying about making sure Catalina was okay with this event, it was just so much to take in. It felt like everyone was expecting me to be perfect like I was before the accident, and I wasn't that guy anymore.

I wasn't sure I ever really was that guy.

I was going to get questioned at this event over and over again about coming back to hockey and fighting the odds. I was going to have to endure every question about what happened, how I recovered and how I was doing. Every look I got tonight was going to be a double take. That was the problem with Long Island. Everyone knew me here. They knew my name, my stats, and about the car accident that almost ended my hockey career. At least in Stonebridge, the town was small enough that they didn't give a shit about hockey. I could walk freely without someone stopping me for a picture. I felt for Catalina when everyone caught wind of her tonight. She was already noticed when I shared pictures of us on my stories and tagged her. It was going to be worse tonight.

I could only hope she'd let me post one of us together tonight. One that would stay there forever. I just wanted her to know I was serious about keeping her. I wasn't letting her go, no matter what.

Two arms wrapped around my waist before something buried between my shoulder blades. Her familiar body wash filled my nose, bringing a wave of ease over me. "You smell incredible."

"Thanks," she whispered, pressing her lips between my shoulders. "I call it taking a shower."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Okay, smart ass."

"Are you making me tea?" She questioned and I could tell she did it with a smile playing on her lips.

"Yes, my love," I answered affectionately, bringing her hand up to my lips "You holding up okay? You've had a really long day."

She nodded against me, giving me a tight squeeze. "It was a long day. It's

all worth it to sleep next to you.”

I wanted to say it. The three little words were on the tip of my tongue, ready to come out. I wanted her to hear them, and know that there was someone in this world that loved her more than anything. But as soon as I opened my mouth, nothing came out. Anxiety jolted through me like a flicker of lightning across the sky. What if she didn't feel the same way about me? What if it was too soon? God, it was too soon. We had been together for like three weeks. What kind of idiot would I be to say those significant three words at this point? The biggest one. She would go running for the hills. Or worse, never want to see me again. It was way too soon. Even if I did love her. It wasn't the right time to tell her I did.

One day. Just not today.

“We've got a good twenty-four hours ahead of us,” I breathed out.

She giggled. “Let's hope they are smooth sailing. I don't think I can take any more drama.”

“Me either,” I nodded. “C'mon, let's get you to bed so I can cuddle the shit out of you.”

“Such a softy.”

For her? Absolutely.



I finished putting on my suit jacket, adjusting it on my shoulders before fixing my hair in the mirror once more. Jacks had taken over the bathroom to do her hair and makeup, leaving me in the bedroom to change privately. I had been looking forward to seeing her dress since she told me she picked it out. If it was anything like the black one she wore to Lucas's birthday, then I was a goner. Jacks was fucking gorgeous and she had no idea.

If she was up for it, she was going to have my face buried between those silky smooth legs of hers and I was going to use her soft thighs as ear warmers. Then I was going to give her my own personal hattrick. I was determined to make her finish with my fingers and not just my tongue.

She emerged from the bathroom, instantly grasping my attention. My jaw dropped to the floor.

She was wearing this gorgeous dark red dress that hugged all of her

curves beautifully. The dress was low enough that it gave me a perfect view of her tits, making my pants a fuck-ton tighter than they needed to be. There was a slit in the side of her dress, showing off a part of her calf, leaving me desiring her more and more by the minute.

Her hair usual auburn hair looked a little darker against the material of the dress. She waved it or something, giving it a bounce I wasn't used to. It wasn't often Jacks wore her hair down, so it was always special to see it like that. Her makeup was a little darker, matching her look. She was flawless. Absolutely fucking breathtaking. I was speechless.

"Holy shit," I breathed out after a moment of staring at her for too long. "Jacks. You look insanely beautiful. Fuck, we'll be lucky to leave this apartment with the hard-on I've got from looking at you."

She rolled her eyes, giving herself a once-over in the mirror. I couldn't help myself. I closed the space between us, taking her in my arms, and pressing my boner against her ass. "Austin."

"Told you. You make my dick so fucking hard, Jacks," I chuckled. "It's going to be painful to be stuck at this event tonight with you looking like a fucking queen."

"Says the one in the suit that makes his ass look insane," she commented, giving me a smirk through the mirror.

I shook my head, smiling as I turned her in my hold, looking in her gorgeous green eyes that I had fallen so in love with these last few months. Eyes that lit up when she saw me. My heart raced every time I looked into them, seeing the person who pieced me back together without even having to try. She was the one I wanted to wake up to every morning and hold tight to every night before I went to sleep. She was my favourite person in the entire world, and I knew by looking at her right at this very second, that I couldn't survive without her. I didn't want to.

"We should have our signal tonight," she said, wrapping her arms around my neck. "You know? In case things get to be too much. I'm preparing for it to be overwhelming."

She was fucking adorable. "Sure. The hand squeezes?"

She paused, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth as she looked up at me. "The hand squeezes."

"Sounds like a plan," I nodded, slipping my hands around her waist, and pulling her into me. I leaned down, brushing my lips over hers in a sweet, soft kiss. I didn't want to ruin her lipstick by deepening it, even though I

wanted nothing more than to swipe my tongue across hers and make good of our last few minutes in the apartment.

Something had changed in her. I noticed it when she arrived early this morning, and when she woke up after her much-needed night of rest. Even now, with her in my arms, I noticed it. She was at ease. She was home. My home was home. I felt it as soon as she walked in that door. That warmth. I had felt it every damn day I was with her since the day I met her. *Fuck it.* I'm going to tell her.

Three loud bangs filled my ears, followed by the sound of my cock-blocking best friend's voice. "Are you two ready or are we just going to sit in here all night?"

Catalina let out a laugh. "He sure knows how to ruin a moment."

"Doesn't even surprise me," I shook my head. She pulled away, releasing me from her hold before stepping away. I reached for her hand, tugging her back as a thought filled my mind. "If we get separated tonight, find Lucas or Jade. Or even Nate. Don't go near Beau."

She furrowed her brows. "I thought Beau—"

"Not right now." My jaw clenched as I shook my head. "He's being a bit of an asshole right now. It's just best if you stay away from him, especially if I'm not there."

She nodded her head, squeezing my hand. "Then I'll stick with Jade or Nate. Lucas is usually not too far from you so chances are I won't be able to find him."

"Fair point," I nodded. "I don't know what order they are auctioning us off —"

"I'll buy you. Don't worry," she beamed, propping herself up on her tiptoes.

"I swear to fucking god, I will come up there in two seconds if you two don't get your ass down here," Lucas shouted up.

She rolled her eyes, settling back down on her flat feet. That wasn't happening. I quickly swooped in, pecking my lips to hers once more before we headed on our way down. In true Catalina fashion, she carried her shoes right to the front door, not daring to put them on until the last possible moment. I had a feeling I'd be carrying her home with them in her hands, and there wasn't a single part of me that wanted to protest that. I'd carry her wherever if it meant she was comfortable.

"You look stunning, Catalina," Lucas said to her, eyeing her up and

down. If I didn't know he was already in love with Jade, I would have hit him for checking her out like that. My girl looked gorgeous, and she deserved to be told that by everyone who saw her tonight.

I helped her slip on her long coat, covering most of her up to keep her a little warmer. It was on the cooler side tonight, and I worried about her being cold. Lucas led us out of the apartment, and to the elevator, where he let Catalina enter first like the gentleman I knew he could be when he wanted to. I stepped in next to her, slipping my hand into hers before smiling at her.

"Do you know what Jade's wearing tonight?" He asked her, cocking his eyebrow at her. I fought hard to roll my eyes. I loved the dynamic the two of them had. Catalina didn't give in to his bullshit, and she was immune to his charm, especially when he was being a dick. She stood her ground with him and didn't let him get away with treating her as less than what she deserved.

Lucas on the other hand, was kind to her. He treated her the same way he treated his younger step-sister, whom I knew he adored. He was sweet to Catalina, but he also didn't sugarcoat things with her. That filter that stopped him from being an asshole wasn't there with her, and sometimes he could be blunt. But he could also be open with her, and he felt comfortable talking about girls with her, which I think he needed more than he needed a guy's opinion.

Catalina let out a laugh, unable to hide her smile. "I do. And she looks beautiful."

"That's it? That's all you're going to tell me?"

"Yep," she grinned widely. "Look, if you really want her, and I mean want her, you need to make an effort to talk to her. I know her dad is going to be there tonight so that makes it difficult for you two. But you guys are just talking. Starting that friendship up again. She's also not someone who deserves to be hidden and treated poorly because you're scared of what he might think. She's not a little girl, and she can make her own decisions."

"I know."

She nodded. "Which brings me to my next point. Don't be a fucking dick to her, especially if Oliver is there. And don't be awkward. If you want her so bad, you need to suck it up."

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath.

God, her confidence was sexy as hell.

"You know she's right, man," I added in, shrugging my shoulders.

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, I fucking know. That's the worst part," he shook

his head. “Hey, you think if I come up with a whole elaborate scheme to make her my fake girlfriend and have her fall in love with me that way, that it would work?”

Catalina looked at me and her face clearly said that Lucas was a fucking idiot. I had to try not to laugh at the sight of her because it was true.

“No,” she and I said in unison.

“C’mon, it worked for you guys.”

“I didn’t know Jacks back then,” I argued as the elevator doors opened up. “And she sure as hell didn’t know me. Not to mention, she has a fucking boyfriend, you dick. You’re shit out of luck, man.”

The car was waiting for us at the front of the building. The top was covered in a thin white layer of snow. My hand left Catalina’s and shifted to the small of her back, guiding her to the car with ease. She allowed me to help her in, thanking me with that sweet smile of hers before I joined her.

Lucas continued on his little rant the entire ride to the event center, giving me a tension headache. Catalina continued to argue with him the entire ride, stating all of the facts that she could without fully giving away the reason why Jade was done with him. I admired her loyalty to her friend, and in a way, I thought Lucas deserved it for treating Jade like that, even if I knew he had a good reason. None of us knew what that was.

As we pulled up to the hotel, my eyes were met with flashes from cameras. It was something I knew would happen but didn’t expect at the same time. Not only were they going to take pictures of me, but they were also going to get pictures of her too. This was our first big event and everyone who didn’t know I was in a relationship was now going to know.

It was a packed place, which sparked a bit of anxiety in me. What if tonight went incredibly wrong? What if things went south, or someone found out about the contract and it was going to be aired out tonight? There were so many possible ways the night could go wrong, and that wasn’t fair to Jacks. It wasn’t fair of me to even be thinking about it, but I was. I had someone else to think about now, not just myself. I had a girl to protect. The girl I loved.

“Holy shit,” she breathed out. “There’s so many people here.”

“Great turnout for charity,” Lucas muttered as the door opened for him.

The second he got out of the car, cameras started flashing. He was always much better for the press than I was. I hated pre-game and post-game interviews more than anything. I knew they were supposed to be a fun part of it, especially when it was typically about a win or goal I scored, more than it



was a loss. But it was the way I was treated sometimes. Some of the reporters forgot we were humans too. We weren't just professional hockey players. We felt losses more than the fans did. We felt injuries and fights more than fans did. To be pestered about them directly after a game was played was humiliating sometimes.

"Ready?" I turned to my girl. She flashed me an unsure smile, ready to follow me anyway.

I was out of the car first and instantly, the media turned and all attention was on me. My stomach was in knots as I turned back, offering my hand to the only person in the world who would be able to get me through this. She gave me a warmer smile, taking my hand as she eased herself out of the car, settling on the snowy ground. Her hand never left mine. She only interlocked our fingers before running her thumb over mine soothingly. "Everyone is going to know about us after this," she mumbled to me.

"Good," I stated, leaning over to kiss her cheek. "Everyone deserves to know that the most beautiful woman in the world is taken."

"Austin," she frowned softly, clearly touched by what I just said to her. "Are you sure?"

I knew what she was asking, and I hated that she was asking it. But she needed to know for her own sake. She had been led on, left out, forgotten about more times than she could count. She was asking me if I was sure about her. In not so many words, she was asking me if she was my choice. I also knew that the second my words left my mouth, she was it for me and she'd know it too.

"Absolutely sure," I assured her, squeezing her hand. "C'mon, let me go show the world the girl I love."

*Shit. Shit. Shit!*

This was not how I wanted to tell her, but it was out there and I didn't regret it for a second. I leaned over, giving her a sweet kiss before leading the way. Her hand held onto mine tightly and she kept herself close as cameras captured us walking toward the entrance. Photographers yelled my name, desperate for pictures of the two of us together. One of the security guards came up behind us, blocking a few of them as we made our way to the front doors.

She handed over her jacket to the coach check, revealing her dress to me once more. She looked like a queen, and quite honestly, I couldn't wait to get it on my bedroom floor and have her use my face as a throne. I wished I had

kept her at home and skipped all of this just to have the night alone with her. But tonight was important for us. Not only was this night what brought us together in the first place, but it was also about showing off just how in love with her I was. This time, it was entirely believable and one hundred percent true. There was no contract needed for me to show everyone at this event that she was my girl.

“There’s a huge turnout tonight,” she said, linking her arm through mine. Ahead of us was Nate with his date. His hand engulfed her tiny one, as she led him into the main room. Zoey. Not even five years old and she was commanding a room like she owned it. She had on an adorable blue dress that reminded me a lot like Elsa’s from Frozen. Her chocolate brown hair was tied back in a ponytail, which happened to be the only hairstyle that Nate knew how to do for his daughter. “Is that…”

“Zoey, his daughter,” I told her.

“She looks like a mini Nate,” she smiled, unable to take her eyes off of them.

We managed to find our table fairly easily. Catalina’s name was written in cursive on the card next to mine. Next to her was Jade’s name card along with Lucas’s. Nate and Zoey were next to me. Across from us was Zayn Lapenski, a rookie, I had yet to play a game with. From what I heard, he was a good player. Lucas said he played on the World Juniors team last year and scored the winning goal for Canada. He brought along a date. A tall blonde who was clearly smitten with him. Good for him.

Jade joined the table moments later, dateless might I add, rolling her eyes when she saw she was seated next to Lucas. Not that I was surprised about that one. Her chair would be turned toward Catalina for the entire night. Having Lucas on the other side was the small price she had to pay.

Lucas on the other hand, was practically drooling over the sight of her in the gold dress she picked out. Her blonde hair had curl to it and her makeup was more done up than what I normally saw. I saw Lucas’s eyes drag over her body, taking her in like he hadn’t seen her before. If our coach had seen this, he’d be slapped in the back of the knee with a hockey stick and told to skate until he couldn’t anymore. Which was something that happened a few years back with a rookie. Coach Johnson was not having any of that shit. He’d lose it if he knew Lucas had a thing for his daughter.

“Austin,” Jade smiled. “You mind if I steal your girlfriend for a minute?”

I nodded my head, watching the two of them get up and walk arm and

arm toward the ladies' room. Lucas gawked over her as she walked away while I couldn't take my eyes off my girlfriend's ass. That dress was fucking lethal. My dick was half-hard in my tightest boxers, praying that they contained it until we got home.

"Uncle Lucas, I think you're drooling," Zoey called out from the other side of the table. I couldn't contain my laughter, even if I tried.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," Lucas said, wiping his mouth for the extra effect. "Jade looks beautiful tonight. Not as beautiful as you."

"I'm Elsa," she stated as a matter of fact.

The grin that spread across his cheeks was priceless. "Elsa is my favourite of all the princesses."

"She's a queen."

"Yeah, man. She's a queen," I added.

He shook his head before giving me a look that said he was about to metaphorically kick me in the nuts. "You know, the girl sitting next to Uncle Austin is his girlfriend, and he kisses her on the lips. All. The. Time."

"Dude," Nate shook his head, giving him a warning.

"Are you going to marry her, Uncle Austin?" Zoey asked me, looking over at me with her gorgeous blue eyes. Ones filled with a million different questions, and hope that I remember having at that age.

"Yeah!" Lucas chimed in. "Are you going to marry her?"

"Someday," I answered her. "If she says yes."



## *Catalina*

Jade linked her arm with mine as soon as we got up from our table, leaving the boys behind. The place was packed and I mean packed. When I first heard of this event, I was thinking it was this small gathering in a rental hall. Not this huge event with his entire hockey team, most of Long Island and Stonebridge employees, and whoever else was at this. The only good part was the amount of money that was about to be raised for charity.

Quite frankly, I was getting a little overwhelmed with the amount of people here. The only thing that kept me from leaving was the people at my table. I knew they were my friends and they weren't about to get up and walk away without telling me they were leaving. Hell, I had a feeling Jade wasn't going to leave my side all night.

We slipped into the women's bathroom, finally able to hear one another without the blaring of music. Jade stood in front of the mirror, fixing her under-eye makeup before her eyes met mine. "You look gorgeous tonight, Catalina," she smiled, turning to face me. "Austin certainly agrees. He can't take his eyes off of you."

I swallowed hard, unsure whether or not I should share what was on my mind in the bathroom of a crowded event, especially when it came to something personal. I decided against it, instead, trying to swallow it down with the lump that had been forming in my throat since I stepped out of the car.

The worst part was I didn't know why I was reacting the way I was. Austin said I was the girl he loved. Was that his way of telling me he loved me? Did he have to tell me before an event like this? Did he even mean to tell me or did it just slip out? I had so many questions and no way to even ask for an answer while in a place like this. I had to wait until the night was over and that was hours away.

"Think there is anywhere private here?" She asked me, giving me a sheepish look.

"We can always go look," I suggested as I fixed my hair in the mirror. Jade brought her phone out, pointing it toward the mirror to get a picture of the two of us. I loved that she took pictures of the two of us together. It just felt like she appreciated our friendship to have pictures of us together. Maybe it was because none of my other friends did the same, or because I was left

out of them. With Jade, there was no competition for who was prettier or who looked better tonight. It felt like she wanted the picture to remember the night.

“Look at us,” she beamed.

“Can you send me that? I’d love to share it later.”

She sent it right away. “Do you mind if I share it on my Instagram and tag you in it?”

“Go ahead,” I nodded. “After tonight, my relationship with Austin is going to be very public.”

She shook her head. “It will blow over quickly. At least with the media coverage, and you’ll only get that because Austin was in that accident and he isn’t officially back on the ice yet,” she assured me, bringing a sense of ease over me. “It’s the female fans that are the worst. I would keep your social media private ‘cause they are vicious when any of the players are in a relationship. Austin is no exception, given that he’s never been the type. Stay off of any hockey groups, or anything to do with it. You’ll save yourself a lot of tears in the long run.”

She linked her arm with mine, leading us out of the bathroom and down the opposite side of the hall from the event and towards the lobby. “You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

She let out a dry laugh. “You have no idea.” She sat down in one of the corner chairs, away from the rest of the group entering the hotel for the event. I took a seat across from her, smoothing out my dress before I sat down. “When I first started hanging out with the guys, it took maybe a month before my name was spread around gossip sites. There were some very nasty and untrue things said, and I went down a rabbit hole. For a long time, I avoided going out with the guys, or even being seen with one of them in case someone saw me. I hated them using my name to fuel their hatred for other girls who wanted to be me. They assume everything about your life and eventually, it kind of consumes you. It makes you believe the bullshit they are saying about you and it’s a shitty way of living your life.”

“How did you get over that?” I dared to ask.

Tears filled Jade’s eyes. “Lucas and Austin were a big help. When I figure it out, I’ll let you know.”

I smiled softly, feeling a lump forming in my throat once more. Maybe this was what Lucas meant when he said I wasn’t made for this life. I know it takes a lot to be in the eyes of the public, but I had no idea how intense it

would get being with one of the most well-known hockey players in the league. Regardless of that, it was too late to back out now. Not when I had fallen head over heels for this man and couldn't picture my life without him in it.

"That brings me to my next thing," she breathed out, giving me a sheepish grin. "Has Lucas said anything about me?"

"Why do you ask?"

She let out a sigh, swallowing hard. "I know I'm still livid with him. I am," she paused, leaning forward a little. "But it has been like nine months since we've had a meaningful conversation, and he keeps looking at me like a lost puppy. I'm just wondering if he's said anything."

"He may have mentioned something?" I furrowed my brows. I didn't want to say too much and betray Lucas's trust. "Maybe you guys should talk, Jade. He was your best friend and you miss him."

"But what if he doesn't miss me?" she frowned, looking rather worried. "What if he wants closure? What if he wants to call me a bitch or something worse? What if he tells me our friendship meant nothing to him?"

"What if he tells you he misses you?" I questioned, hoping that maybe this would spark the right conversation and that maybe she would consider that possibility. I knew Lucas, and I knew he would never say something to disrespect her.

"Would he though?" she shrugged her shoulders. "It's been *nine months*. If he missed me, I'm sure he would have said something by now."

I swallowed hard, trying to ease her mind without saying too much. "He's a guy. It takes a while for them to pull their heads out of their asses. He is definitely one of those guys."

"Yeah."

"I think you should talk to him, Jade," I breathed out. "You miss him. He's ready to talk. Maybe you two will get a part of that friendship back."

She went quiet for a moment. Her throat jumped before she shook her head.

"I can't help but notice you don't have a date tonight," I breathed out. "Where's Oliver?"

She let out a shaky breath before mustering up a smile. "He's working late. Again. He sends his best. In all honesty, I don't think this is his scene. Plus, I think he feels a little threatened by so many hockey players in one place." She shook her head. "Your date can't keep his eyes off of you. Jacks,

he's so in love with you, it's insane. I don't know what you did to that boy, but I have never seen him so happy."

"I haven't done anything, social. Just given him a safe space to be himself," I pointed out with a shrug. I checked my phone, seeing the time before getting off the chair. "C'mon, let's go join the boys. The auction will be starting shortly."



I was contemplating telling Jade about Austin and the love word. I really was. Especially after she opened up about wanting Lucas. I just couldn't bring myself to. She wouldn't get it the way I needed her to, and that was on me. I didn't want to tell her that we hadn't had sex yet because I was scared thanks to my past trauma. I wasn't ready to have that conversation with her. It was enough that Austin knew. At the end of the day, this was a conversation that Austin and I needed to have.

I arrived back at the table first. While I was gone, he grabbed me a beer from the bar, keeping it close to him until I got back. I took my seat next to him, leaning over to give him a quick kiss. His hand reached over, slipping his fingers between mine.

"You were gone awhile," he said as he leaned over, pecking my cheek with his soft lips. "Everything okay?"

I nodded my head before turning and kissing his lips once more. "Yeah. We'll talk when we get a private moment."

He smiled, pecking my lips once more. I squeezed his large hand before placing it safely in my lap. He moved his chair closer to mine, keeping him close by. Jade made her way back to the table a moment later, placing a drink on the table for herself and to my surprise, she brought a drink back for Lucas. Something I knew was going to make his night. It was a step in the right direction.

An older gentleman in a black, form-fitting suit, stood on the other side of the table. A man I soon found out was Jade's dad... and Austin's head coach. Austin released my hand, getting up from his seat instantly. What I didn't expect was for him to hold out his hand for me, helping me out of my seat.

"We're about ready for you to present," the man said to my boyfriend



with a smile.

He nodded. “Coach, this is Catalina. My girlfriend,” he smiled as he introduced me. “Jacks, this is my head coach, Carter Johnson.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet the girl keeping this one in line,” he grinned as he held out his hand to me, giving it a good shake. “Even though you could do much better than this knucklehead, I’m glad he’s got a good one to lean on.”

I smiled, trying to keep my composure. “It’s really nice to meet you as well. Austin has told me great things about you.” I completely understood why Lucas was scared shitless of this man. Coach Johnson came across as a tough guy. Not much of a rule breaker and more about discipline than anything. He was intimidating as hell, and it wasn’t just his tall, broad frame that made me nervous. It was his resting bitch face and the way his jaw jumped when he looked at you. He was meant to be an authoritative figure of some sort. There is no way a man like him sat back and watched the world go up in flames.

“I expect to see a lot more of you,” he smiled genuinely, even if it terrified me. He turned his gaze to Austin, motioning to the stage, effectively putting an end to the conversation.

Austin gave me one last kiss before following his coach to the main stage. I took my seat once more, watching the man I loved take centre stage.

He looked damn fine in that tux. It fits snugly to his broad shoulders, giving me something to draw my eyes over. His hair was perfectly styled tonight, compared to his usual a little messy, but slightly put-together look he sported around the apartment. His black dress pants hugged his perky ass perfectly, making me want to tear them off of him to see what was underneath the fabric.

My boyfriend was damn fine, and he was all mine.

The first part of the auction was items donated throughout Long Island. From what Lucas told me, it had more to do with the office located here. This office was bigger, better, and all-around more successful than the one in Boston, Chicago and of course, Stonebridge. It made sense as to why the event was being held here. Not to mention, hockey players were sure to bring in the crowd.

Austin was a natural at presenting. He had the crowd going without so much as an ounce of effort. People naturally drew to him every time, no matter where we went. There was a part of me that was a little jealous that he

fit everywhere, especially when I didn't possess that same skill. It was also beautiful to see the person you loved getting the attention and recognition they deserved. It was nice to see people love the person you loved.

It was roughly forty-five minutes later that the item auction was done, and the meal was served. Typically at these events, the food was known to be terrible and this one was no exception. The bread was hard, and the butter was a brick. The vegetables were overcooked to the point where they were soggy. For a room filled with hockey players, this wasn't nearly enough to feed them. Not even close.

I leaned over to him, trying to get as close to his ear as I could so no one else would hear me. "Can we please pick something up on the way home?"

He chuckled. "Absolutely. Just as long as I get to eat your pussy for dessert."

A fire ignited in my lower belly. He simply smiled at me, as if he didn't just say he wanted to eat me for dessert. The man didn't think twice about it and said it as if it were the most casual thing in the world. To him, it kind of was. I would never get used to how open he was about it, but I certainly enjoyed it.

My eyes scanned the room, taking in the people at this event for the first time all night. I recognized a few of them from Austin's team, and a few came into the cafe on their way to the office. Not that I knew any of them by name. What grasped my attention was the girl taking centre stage. A short blonde woman. Lyndsey made an appearance when I prayed she wouldn't. Even if Lyndsey worked for Posyen, she took any opportunity to come between Austin and me, no matter where we went.

Austin cleared his throat, earning the eyes of the whole table. He turned his head to Lucas, motioning to the stage, seeing exactly what I was seeing. I reached over, slipping my hand into Austin's, squeezing it. He released it, giving his head a nod for us to take off from the table.

He led the way out of the event hall and towards the empty hallway. I trailed a little behind him, unable to walk in the heels I chose. He turned his head, smiling when he saw me behind him before he slowed his steps.

"What's going on?"

"Lyndsey on stage isn't a good sign," Austin stated, his jaw jumping. "It's not my place to tell you the details, but I will say that Lyndsey and Lucas have a history."

"History?" I furrowed my brows. "Like exes?"

He shook his head as he ran his knuckles over his jaw. “History kinda like yours.”

My heart dropped. I knew for a damn fact that it wasn’t Lyndsey who had been in a similar situation. It was Lucas. He had my history. He had been... *shit*. This was an auction and he was set as one of the men up for auction. “Does Jade know this history?”

Austin shook his head. “I’m the only one who knows, Jacks.”

“Can I tell Jade to buy him?”

“Do you think she will? After everything that happened between the two of them? Even if she has a boyfriend?”

I gave him a sheepish frown, shrugging my shoulders. “I’m not sure. But it’s worth a shot, isn’t it?”

He nodded his head before slipping his hands around my waist, tugging me into his body. I collided with him as he backed us into a private corner of the hallway. His lips collided with mine as he gripped the small of my back, holding me flush to him. His tongue ran swiftly across my bottom lip, asking for access to my mouth to deepen the kiss. How I ever went without his touch was beyond me. I could never go without it again. Long distance was killing me.

“Can’t you stay one more day?” He muttered against my lips before he pulled back a little, leaving very little space between us. “Call in sick and stay one more day with me.”

I swallowed hard, shaking my head before my eyes tore away from his. “I can’t. I wish I could. But pictures will make their way around, and then words will. Not to mention, the guilt will eat me alive. I want to stay with you. I do... *so damn bad*. But it won’t be long until I’m here full-time, and we have Christmas coming up — if you’re still up for that. You can change your mind at any time if you don’t want to...”

I was cut off with his lips on mine once more, effectively shutting me up in the politest way possible. “I’m not changing my mind, Jacks. I’m coming to family Christmas.”

“I was hoping you were going to say that,” I smirked before pecking his lips.

“You two seriously need to get a room,” Lucas’s deep voice filled my ears. I peeked past Austin’s shoulder, seeing Lucas walking over to us with his hand shoved in the front pockets of his black dress pants.

“You seriously need to stop walking in every moment I have alone with

my girlfriend,” Austin scolded his friend. “This is the first moment alone and your ass still walks in on it.”

“Not my fault you pick the worst times to get handsy with her,” he shrugged. I could tell that he was off. His usual confident stance wasn’t present, and his jaw was more tense than normal. He couldn’t stand in one place for long.

I reached into my bag, searching for my phone as Austin turned to his best friend. My thumbs had never moved so fast to type out a message. Not when it was this important. Jade was going to know exactly where I stood on the whole Lucas matter.

**Me: I need you to buy Lucas at the auction. Please, Jade! I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.**

**Jade: I have \$25 on me... have you seen him, Jacks? He’s worth \$2500 minimum.**

**Me: Lucas will pay for himself. I’ll talk to him, I promise. You just need to buy him so the blonde on stage right now doesn’t.**

**Jade: Fuck me.**

“Jade said she’s going to buy you,” I blurted out, putting an end to their conversation. “She’s only got twenty-five bucks —“

“Not a problem,” Lucas stated, pulling me into his arms, and squeezing me tightly. “Thank you. Thank you! Thank you! I owe you big time.”

“Stop cockblocking me and we’ll call it even,” I stated, earning a chuckle from Austin behind me. “Be nice to her, Luke. Be the good guy I know you are and fix things with her while you have the chance.”

“Promise,” he said as he pulled back, holding his hand up. “You can kick my ass if I don’t.”

“I will. You know I will,” I declared, pointing at him.

Austin wrapped his arms around me from behind, pulling me to his warm chest. I melted into his embrace, watching the smile creep up on Lucas’s features when he saw us. The smell of his cologne filled my nose, bringing a wave of comfort over me. I missed this, I thought to myself. I missed being safe in his arms, knowing he was always there to protect me. My life was so

fucking different to what it was a year ago.

“Can you do me a favour?” I asked Lucas, holding out my phone to him. “Take a picture of us together. I’d like to share one later.”

Austin’s grip tightened around me before his lips were on my cheek. I couldn’t contain my smile as I leaned back, soaking him.



The date auction began just after nine. It was only the ladies and Nate left at the table. Somehow, he managed to get out of it while everyone else wasn’t as lucky. You either had to be married or widowed like him to be considered off the market. Chris’s request, not anyone else’s. I had my paddle ready to bid on my boyfriend like we had been planning the entire time.

Jade had hers ready in her hand. My palms were sweating. There were so many ways that this could go wrong and not enough where they could go right. I needed to make sure I got Austin and she got Lucas. That was all that mattered.

A shorter man took the stage. A man who looked similar to Coach Johnson was only on the heavier side, and you could see it in his face. His suit was stretching against his abdomen. He had a dirty moustache and a comb-over that made him look ten years older than I’m sure he was. He cleared his throat, announcing himself as Chris Johnson. The man who threatened Austin only a few months ago. That was the man Olivia had the affair with? He looked completely different from last year. He let himself go.

The auction started moments after his mildly inappropriate introduction. The anxiety was building in my chest, knowing how much this moment meant to both of us. I wouldn’t be here with him if it wasn’t for this moment. Our relationship never would have started. Our friendship never would have blossomed into something real. I wouldn’t have begun healing from my trauma, and I never would have found someone I trusted with my entire being. I never would have fallen in love. I never would have found my best friend. My life had changed for the better because of it.

The first player was a rookie from what Austin said. He was one of the guys sitting at our table with a girl who looked to be his age. Surprisingly, he went for fifteen hundred thanks to his girlfriend who bought out everyone.

Lucas was up next and I could see the panic written all over Jade's face. This was a big moment for her and a big moment for whatever they had going on. Hopefully, her win resulted in the two of them moving forward with whatever they figured out. They needed this chance to talk. They needed this forced reunion to figure out whatever shit was going on that neither of them wanted to mention to Austin and I

"Our next bachelor is one of the star centres for Long Island," Coach Johnson began, reading over whatever card was in his hand. "He's also a major pain in my ass." The room erupted with laughter as many of the ladies in front of us got their paddles ready to bid. "Lucas Collins, ladies and gentlemen. We'll start the bidding at fifty dollars."

"One fifty."

"Five hundred!"

"One thousand!"

Within seconds, the bid was already up to two thousand dollars. My heart was racing, watching him take centre stage with his hands in his pockets. His usual outgoing, cocky, asshole self was reserved. Awkward even. He didn't want to be up on that stage and I didn't blame him one bit.

"Seven thousand," Lyndsey yelled out, holding up her 763 paddle with a smirk playing on her lips.

I turned to Jade, urging her to make her bid on the man. She was frozen in shock. "You have to make your bid, Jade. Say like twelve thousand, bid out everyone else. It's his money!"

"Seven thousand, going once! Seven thousand going twice..."

"Fifteen thousand," Jade shouted, holding up her paddle. Oh god, she put her foot down for that one. Lucas wasn't going to be happy about this one. But it was better than the alternative with Lyndsey.

"Sold for fifteen thousand dollars!" Coach Johnson grinned. "Our new highest amount. Remember folks, this money is going to charity, to help kids in schools have access to full lunches and resources they need to help them learn. With every winning bid, the full amount goes to the charity fund and will be shared as early as next week. Bid for the children!"

"Lucas is going to kill you, Jade," I giggled, shaking my head.

"Call it karma," she shrugged with a smile before getting up, ready to meet Lucas so he could pay at the front counter. "Good luck!"

"Our next bachelor is a man you haven't seen on the ice in a little while. This right-winger has been through it this year and bounced back even better

than he was before. Not only is he agile, and quick on his feet. He's a killer with the ladies," Coach Johnson chuckled. "Ladies and gentlemen, Austin Sawyer!"

Austin walked on stage with a smile playing on his perfect pink lips. His hair was slicked back a bit from running his hand through it and his hand was in his suit pocket. The room cheered him on as he waved, greeting them with a reserved warmth. He didn't want to be on that stage, but he was, and I was ready to buy him and call him mine.

The bids took off before Coach Johnson could even begin. It was already up to four thousand by the time he caught up and called numbers out. My heart was beating a mile a minute, listening to the room of horny single women call out a price to have my boyfriend for the night. No wonder Austin didn't want this. He wasn't some prize to be won. He wasn't just a body to use. He was a person who had rights.

I glanced over, seeing Chris leaning against the wall, talking to Olivia, who I wasn't all that surprised to see before Lyndsey called out a higher price than what she did for Lucas. I had a feeling that the conversation wasn't a friendly one, especially when Olivia was the one who leaked the pictures of Austin and me the first time. Not to mention, the history between them.

"Twenty thousand dollars," I called out, holding my paddle, praying that it was enough to win me my man. Austin stood tall, glancing in my direction with a smile playing softly on his lips.

"Twenty thousand!" Coach Johnson called out. "Anyone care to top that? Twenty thousand dollars going once."

Silence filled the room.

"Twenty thousand going twice!" He announced, glancing around the room. "Sold for twenty thousand dollars. A new record!"

Austin grinned widely, waving at the crowd once more as he headed to exit the stage. I got up from my seat, ready to meet him by the entrance so I could pay off my debt. When I finally met him, his eyes softened and his arm instantly reached for me. My body gravitated towards him, needing to be near him like my lungs needed air.

"Twenty thousand dollars," he chuckled, shaking his head.

"I swear, I will pay you back," I said sheepishly. "Twenty thousand dollars is a lot of money."

He let out a laugh. "Jacks, have you seen my hockey contract?"

"It's still a lot," I protested, giving him a little nudge.

He stopped in his tracks, dragging me into him before my eyes met with his. “Tell you what,” he began, placing a kiss on my cheek. “Give me twenty thousand kisses in twenty thousand days.”

“Twenty thousand days is a lot of days, Austin,” I reminded him with an unsure smile. There is no way in hell he would stay with me for that many days.

He brought his phone out, looking up how many years it worked out to be. “Fifty-four years. Almost fifty-five. Looks like you’re stuck with me until you’re eighty, sweetheart,” he winked.

My heart fluttered in my chest, unable to take my eyes off of the man in front of me. A part of me knew that he was just saying that to get out of my paying him back for the money I just spent on his behalf. There was this tiny part of me that hoped he meant it. That he wanted me until we were in our eighties. That he wanted to spend his life with me and grow old with me. “Doesn’t sound so bad to me. Should I sign a contract?”

He chuckled. “If by contract, you mean marriage certificate? I think that comes a little later, Jacks.”

This fucking man. I rolled my eyes at him, shaking my head as I shifted away from him. “Smart ass.”

The payment table was a quick process. And just like that, Austin was out twenty thousand dollars. The most important part of our evening was over and the man was officially mine. He brought my hand up to his lips, pressing a kiss to my knuckles before dragging me back into the event. They were wrapping up the auction with a few kind words and thanks for the money raised for the children’s foundation. As soon as Coach Johnson wished the room a good night, music filled the room.

“Would you care to dance?” Austin asked, holding his hand out to me.

I placed my hand in his, letting him lead me out onto the dance floor. His hands slipped around my waist as mine snaked around his shoulders. The music slowed down to MAX’s Light’s Down Low, making me smile. Austin’s grip tightened around me before his lips pressed to my forehead.

My heart was racing, but I felt calm. It felt like he and I were the only two people in the room, moving together as one. I was with my person. The one person in the world who knew me for me. The only person who took the time to get to know all the layers beneath the surface. He was the one who let me in, letting me get to know the pieces of him that he didn’t let anyone else see. He let me see past all the bullshit. He let me into his heart, the same way I let



him into mine. He was my best friend.

My favourite person in the entire world.

The person I loved more than anything.

I propped myself up on my tiptoes, reaching his ear as my grip tightened around his shoulders. My chest pressed firmly against his, and his hands reached a little lower, holding me to him. "I want you. All of you."

He pulled back, giving me an unsure glance as he tried to read my face. "As in..."

I nodded my head with a confident smile. "As in take me to bed with you," I said softly, leaning in a bit closer. "And show me how much better you are to every book boyfriend I've had."

"Are you sure?" He asked, reaching one hand up to cup my cheek. The sincerity in his features only made me more sure.

"I've never been more sure," I assured him. "It's you. It's always been you."



## Catalina

I expected the car ride back to the apartment to be a little awkward. When Nate announced that he was heading out as it was past Zoey's bedtime, and the little girl was falling asleep in her daddy's arms. Austin and I jumped on the opportunity to head out too. I was dying to get him home, and even more to get his tux off of his body and his hands on mine. Lucas and Jade stated they were ready to head out too. Needless to say, we all took the same car home.

Here I was, my thigh pressed against Austin's, heat pooling in my belly with every touch. My panties were soaked and my pussy practically ached. Something I had never felt before in the presence of another person. Austin placed his hand on my thigh, dying to get closer to my centre. I had never hated wearing a long dress so much in my life.

Thankfully, he didn't have a skirt-like bottom on. My hand slipped in his before moving to his lap, right where the sizeable bulge sat between his thighs. He was half-hard at least, making me smile. My entire focus was on him. I had no idea what Jade and Nate were talking about, or was it Lucas? I was completely consumed by the man next to me, desperate to get his hands on my body. Longing for the feel of his weight on top of me. Craving his taste.

He shifted in his seat, making me look at him before he leaned in. "I cannot wait for this dress to be on my bedroom floor."

I giggled, rolling my eyes playfully.

"Tell me. Is that sweet little pussy wet for me, Jacks?" He muttered into my ear, making me shift slightly in my seat. "Tell me, 'cause I can't touch your pussy myself."

"Maybe," I teased, pressing an innocent kiss to his stubbly cheek.

He groaned, leaning in even closer. "Be a good girl, and tell me, Jacks," he declared. "Or else I might have to bend you over my lap and spank your ass."

"Shit," I practically whimpered, making him pull back with a surprised look on his face. His eyebrows furrowed and a small smile appeared across his lips.

"Would you like that?" I asked genuinely. "Would you like me to slap your perfect ass while I fuck you from behind too? Filling your tight little

pussy, over and over with my big hard cock.”

I squeezed his hand tightly before facing him. This man had no fucking idea what he was doing to me. I had no idea what he was doing to me. Sure, some sex scenes in books got to me and I needed to rub one out or I took a cold shower to get over it. This was more than that. This was leading to something very very real. My pussy was throbbing, *aching* to be filled up with him. I had no idea where that desperation came from, or why I needed him instead of my fingers or toys.

“I’m so fucking wet for you, ” I mouthed before sitting back in the seat, pretending that my core wasn’t begging for him.

Nate was dropped off at his house first. A gated community for his safety and the safety of his daughter. Even the driveway to his house was gated, and needed his code to unlock it. He carefully climbed out of the car, holding his daughter tightly to him before wishing us goodnight.

“He’s doing a million times better,” Lucas pointed out as soon as the car started driving again. “I think I even saw him smile tonight.”

“He’s doing the best he can,” Jade said before she swallowed hard. “He’s been through hell. He’s never going to be one hundred percent.”

“Do you think he’ll ever put himself out there again?” Lucas asked before the car went silent, voicing the answer we were all thinking.

Austin shook his head, giving my hand another squeeze. “I don’t think there is any coming back from what he went through. I know for a damn fact I’d be a wreck for a long time if anything happened to Jacks, and I’ve only known her a few months. He was with his wife for a long time. You don’t just get over losing your person.”

I would be devastated if I lost Austin. These few months had been everything to me. Hell, they had turned my life around for the better. Before him, I accepted my so-called friend’s shitty behaviour because they were all I had. I had spent night after night, curled up in my apartment, wondering if this was what my life was going to be like. I believed that no one would want me because of my past trauma. I was afraid of opening up and trusting someone. Now, here I was, four months later, head over heels in love with my best friend. Here I was, four months later, about to have sex with him for the first time.

The car pulled up in front of the apartment building. Lucas was the first one out, holding his hand out for Jade, who accepted it but didn’t acknowledge him afterwards. She was giving him the cold shoulder, which

made me wonder how the night was going to end for the two of them.

Austin was out next, holding his hand out for me with that soft smile playing on his lips the second his eyes met mine. I stepped out of the car, grateful to have his support with the pile of snow forming on the sidewalk. Like the gentleman he was, he didn't let go and made sure I made it to the front doors of the apartment with ease.

And like the lady I am, I kicked my heels off the second I stepped foot inside the building. Just like that, I was four inches shorter once again.

"You guys coming up?" Austin called out to Lucas and Jade.

"In a bit," Lucas nodded with a serious expression on his features. He was about to talk to Jade. Jade was finally going to talk to him. They were finally going to have that long-awaited conversation and put all of us out of our misery! I was sure I'd hear about it in the morning. I had my own man to take upstairs and have my way with.

"All right," Austin nodded toward Lucas. "Only contact me if it's an emergency. Jacks is only here for one night and I plan to spend every waking second with her. Don't ruin it."

"Go get laid," Jade rolled her eyes playfully. "Jacks, full details in the morning before you leave!"

The elevator doors opened and I stepped inside first, settling on the right side before Austin joined me. He pressed his floor number and the doors closed moments later. "Does she know we haven't..."

"No," I shook my head with a soft smile. "No one knows what goes on between us but us. 'Sides, I don't think it would go over well that we haven't slept together but been us for four months in her eyes."

"Jacks," he swallowed hard before pulling me in, engulfing me in his arms. "There is nothing to be ashamed of. We all go at our own pace. And I have no issues whatsoever with the pace we are going. Even if you change your mind about tonight, I am more than happy to drop your dress to the floor and put you in one of my hockey shirts. There is no pressure here."

"But you want to," I pointed out as I buried my head in the center of his chest.

"Damn right I do," a chuckle roared in his chest. "You know I want you, Jacks. But this isn't just sex and we both know that. This has never been about sex."

His grip tightened around me as the elevator doors opened up to his floor. My heart was racing and my stomach felt funny. Like I had just gotten off a

rollercoaster and was still trying to get used to my feet on the ground. Austin wrapped his arm around my shoulder, leading me towards his door with that same confident swagger in his step.

He unlocked the front door with ease, allowing me to step inside before he joined me. I tossed my shoes to the floor, making my way into the kitchen. I was starving thanks to the crappy meal the event provided. Austin promised me whatever food I'd like, and I had a craving for Chinese food, come to think of it. I also knew I was stalling, trying not to let myself go down that road with Austin, even though I desperately wanted to. I was just scared.

Scared that he wasn't going to enjoy it.

Scared that he wasn't going to be mine in the morning.

Scared that he wasn't going to love me afterwards.

Scared that I wasn't going to be enough for him.

And the worst part of it was that I knew he loved me, even if he hadn't said it fully yet. I knew he was going to be there in the morning when I woke up. I knew he'd be upset if he knew I thought I wasn't enough. We had that conversation before. I was scared of losing my person. That it would ignite into flames just as I finally let myself go there. It was all or nothing. This wasn't going to change if I decided to wait until another day. My body longed for him, but my mind held me back. My heart ached for him, and yet my mind convinced me otherwise.

Two strong hands wrapped around me, tugging me into a strong chest before a chin dropped down to my shoulder. My body responded to him, desperate for more of him. My mind had nothing to do with this. My mind had no place in this. My heart did.

"I want to," I breathed out.

He placed a kiss on my cheek. "Give me five minutes," he muttered. "Pick a place to order from afterwards 'cause, by the time I'm done with you, you'll be starving."

He released me, making a beeline for the stairs, taking them by twos before he reached the top. I rolled my eyes knowingly as a soft smile appeared on my lips. I pulled out the Chinese food menu we ordered from the first time I was here. He marked down next to the items I liked the last time, making sure he knew when we ordered again. By the time I finished looking at the menu, he emerged from upstairs with his suit jacket off and his hands in the front pockets of his dress pants.

"Hi handsome," I greeted him with a smile. He made his way over to me,

reaching my thighs before lifting me onto the countertop.

He placed a soft, sweet kiss on my lips, smiling against them before he pulled back. “I want to make one thing extremely clear,” he paused, cupping my cheeks in his palms. “If at any point, you are not comfortable or you want to stop or you just don’t want to go any further — please tell me, Jacks. If something doesn’t feel right. If you need me to do something different. If you need...”

“I need one thing,” I breathed out, pressing my hand over his heart.

“Anything,” he stated. His expression was stern and serious. “Name it and it’s yours, sweetheart.”

I shut my eyes tight, feeling the tears threaten my eyes. *Fuck*, this is not supposed to be happening. Why am I getting emotional over this? I took a deep breath, trying to center myself once more. “I need you to tell me that nothing is going to change between us. That you’re not going to —“

He cut me off with his lips, pressing them to mine in a rough kiss. My face was still cradled in his palms. I reached for him, throwing my arms around his back, practically hugging him to me. “Jacks, the way I feel about you isn’t going to change after this,” he stated, his face an inch away from mine. “The way you feel about me might, but in a good way. But we’re not changing. I’m yours, Jacks. I’m all *yours*. I have been since the moment I saw you.”

I wasted no time, pressing my lips to his like my life depended on it. He responded instantly, gripping me as if I were to fade away if he didn’t hold on tight enough. His hands slipped down to my ass, pulling me against the bulge between his legs, providing a delicious amount of pressure to my core. He dragged me off of the counter, holding me up against his solid body as he moved around the kitchen with ease.

“You are not carrying me up those stairs, Austin,” I stated between kisses.

He chuckled, shaking his head before my back pressed to the wall next to them. “Is that a request or a demand, Jacks?”

“Both,” I whispered with a laugh.

He smirked, releasing me from his hold. “Your wish is my command,” he said softly. “And so you know, it’s only because I don’t want to ruin that dress of yours.”

“It’s not because you want to watch me walk up them?” I teased, turning on my heel to take the first step. I felt a firm smack to my right ass cheek, followed by another smirk from Austin when I turned back. My heart

fluttered.

I made it to the top of the stairs, making the sharp turn to his bedroom as quickly as I could. Austin caught up instantly with his long legs and his big build. I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw what he came up here to do.

There was a trail of red rose petals leading towards the bed, along with a few on his darker comforter. On his side tables, he lit a few candles, providing enough light to the room that we could see each other. It was incredibly romantic, even for him. It meant the world to me that he went this far for me.

“Austin,” I breathed out.

“I wanted you to have a redo,” he cleared his throat. “No pressure. No expectations. I wanted you to be treated like you should have been you first time. It might not be on the Resse Witherspoon and Ryan Phillippe level, but —“

“You did all of this for me?” I whispered, turning back to face him, completely dumbfounded that he had gone as far as this.

He shrugged his shoulders with a sheepish smile. “—‘course I did. You’re my girl. You deserve the best.”

His hands were on me once more, circling my body to hold me to him. My back pressed against the wall before his lips were on mine. This time, my fingers were searching for the buttons on his dress shirt, desperate to get him out of it.

His fingers grasped the zipper on the side of my dress, pulling it down with ease before it loosened on my frame. I shoved my fingers beneath the material, urging over his shoulders to reveal his undershirt. The man was wearing far too many layers for my liking. I needed skin on skin. I needed to feel all of him.

“Austin,” I whimpered as I rolled my hips against his, desperate for pressure between my legs to relieve the ache I was feeling. “Please.”

“Please what, sweetheart?” He cocked his head to the side so innocently. “Use your words.”

I pushed myself off the wall, taking a step forward. The straps of my dress came down my arms before the material pooled around my ankles, leaving me in my bra and panties. “Clothes off,” I said as I reached for his belt. I made quick work of it, tugging it through the buckle before it loosened, giving me access to the front button on his dress pants. He was hard, pressing against the front of his tight black boxers.



“You have no idea what you do to me, Jacks,” he breathed out before pressing his body against mine, holding me against the wall. “How fucking sexy you are.” His arms reached down, lifting me before my ankles locked around the bottom of his spine. His length pressed against my aching core, providing me with the warmth I needed.

He had no idea what he did to me either. Here, he had me pinned against the wall with his strong body holding me up, his hands enclosed around me, and I was at ease. I was in the hold of someone who would give me the world if I asked him to. I was in the arms of someone who had done everything he could to protect me and make me feel safe. I was with the only person in the world who was patient enough to help me heal from the wounds created before he was a part of my life.

I was ready and there wasn't a doubt in my mind that I was.

“Where'd you go? Where's your head?” He whispered, pulling back slightly to brush his nose over mine.

My head was right where it should have been. With him, my patient, kind boyfriend who I was safe with. My best friend whose name I was about to scream out when we furthered this along. Austin, the man I was so in love with, it was insane.

Instead of words, I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, pulling myself closer to hug him. “With you.”

Tightening his grip, he stepped away from the wall and made his way toward the king-sized bed. The second my back hit the mattress, his body was on top of mine before his lips were. His hand caressed my cheek as his tongue collided with mine. I could feel the weight of him pressed against my center, shifting every so often to invoke a sound out of me. I wanted to feel him. All of him. I needed it.

“You're the most beautiful girl I've ever laid eyes on, Catalina Jackson,” he breathed out, rubbing his thumb over my cheek. My heart fluttered as I met with his breathtaking green eyes. “Can I touch you?”

I nodded my head. “Y-yes.”

His fingertips ghosted along my skin, giving me goosebumps. I could see the gears turning in his head as he formulated how exactly he wanted to do this. Austin wanted this to be perfect for me. Little did he know, it was already perfect because I was doing this with him. That was all that mattered to me.

“Are you nervous?” I asked him, making his head pop up from his gaze

on my breasts.

He chuckled before that smile appeared on his lips, bringing him back to me. “A little; yeah. You?”

“A little,” I admitted, shrugging my shoulders. “But not for the reasons you think.”

“What’s the reason?” He cocked his head to the side. Reaching his hands around my back, he unclasped my bra, dragging the material away to reveal my breasts to him.

“Your dick is huge. Is it even going to fit?”

He let out a laugh, in turn, making me laugh along with him. “Trust me, Jacks. It’ll fit. You were made for me.” He laughed once more, shaking his head. “You’re perfect, you know that?”

He didn’t give me a chance to respond. Instead, his lips were back on mine. My hands traced along his spine as I experimentally rolled my hips against him, feeling the heat of him against me. He let out a groan in response, earning a smile from me.

Soon enough, his lips left mine and travelled along my neck, leaving open wet kisses in his wake before he found the spot I loved the most. My fingers carded through his hair as I responded to him, feeling that fluttering sensation inside me. This was right. This felt right.

He took my left nipple between his lips, running his tongue over it before doing the same to the right. I arched my back into him, aching for more of his touch, the more I got of it. I never wanted him to stop. I wanted him to touch me everywhere, all the time.

He traced lower, placing kisses along my navel as his eyes locked with mine. “You’re soaking through your panties. This all for me, Jacks?”

“All you.”

“May I?”

“Please, Austin.”

His fingers hooked in the waistband of my thong, dragging the thin material down my legs before tossing them to the floor. I felt his hand come up, cupping my sex, feeling just how turned on I was thanks to him. “This pussy is so fucking wet, Jacks,” he cooed. His finger slipped inside me with ease, brushing along that sweet spot before pulling away. He sucked his finger in his mouth, tasting me like he had done many times before.

Then he did it again, only he added another finger inside me this time and his palm brushed over my clit. He leaned down, capturing my lips once more.

Grinding myself on his hand, I trailed my hand down his abdomen, palming his large bulge in my hand. I needed to feel him inside me.

“Austin,” I breathed out.

“Feel good?”

I nodded my head as my eyes fluttered shut, letting myself succumb to his touch. I had never come from fingering alone, although, something told me Austin might be the one to change that. His finger strokes were consistent with the way I was grinding on his palm. I felt myself growing hotter and wetter. I wanted more. I needed more.

“Austin, please,” I all but begged.

“What do you need, Jacks?” He asked softly, pecking my lips.

“You.” I reached my hand into his boxers, gripping the base of him in my hand. He was hard as a rock, and twitching in my hold. Something told me he wanted me to.

He moved between my legs once more and his lips were back on mine, kissing me like it was the first time. I curled up, using my feet to help me shove his boxers down his legs, revealing his big, hard cock to me once more. He pulled back and chuckled. The tip was glistening with his want.

“Are you sure, Jacks?” He asked, tilting his head to the side.

“I’m sure,” I nodded. “I want this. I want to do this with you.”

He reached over to his nightstand, opening up the side drawer to pull out the little foil package. He ripped it open with his teeth, pulling out the rubber before carefully placing it on his dick, giving it a few good strokes.

He leaned forward, caging my head between his forearms to help prop him up. I was surrounded by him entirely, and I had never felt safer. He was everywhere. From the feel of him to the scent of his cologne that drove me wild, to the taste on my tongue. He was there, keeping me as his.

His cock was resting on my belly, eager to be inside me. He brushed his nose against mine, then pecked my lips. “At any time, you can say stop and I will stop. If you change your mind. If you don’t want to do this anymore. If something doesn’t feel right, tell me. I want this to be good for you, Jacks.”

I nodded my head, feeling wetness threatening my eyes at his sweetness toward me. He must have seen it because he smiled a moment later, pecking my lips. “I’m ready.”

He reached down between us, taking his cock in his hand. He ran the tip between my folds, gathering up my slick before lining himself up. He slipped in slowly, inch by inch, as his lips met with mine. He was holding back for

me, and I knew it. I appreciated it. I took in a sharp breath against him as he slid in the rest of the way. I felt an intense sensation between my legs as he stopped, deepening the kiss. I was so fucking full and I had never felt this way before.

“You okay, Jacks?” He pulled back, checking in as his eyes met mine.

I nodded my head. I felt incredible. Overwhelmed, sure. But so full.  
“Yeah.”

“Told you I would fit,” he smirked, making me giggle, taking away some of the tension. “You were made for me.”

“More like you were made for me,” I teased, rolling my hips against him. His eyes shut as he groaned.

Austin steadied himself before he slowly began to move his body against mine. The intense sensation quickly disappeared and transformed into a warm pleasure I had never felt before. He was taking this slow for me, allowing me to get used to the feeling of him. His lips never left mine, even though it was getting harder to breathe between movements.

In a moment of confidence, I rolled my hips along with him, allowing myself to be completely consumed in what we were doing together. His body pressed against mine, filling me up entirely with him. This felt right.

“You feel incredible, Jacks,” he panted in a low growl against my neck.

My fingers curled into the strong muscle of his back, dragging him closer in response. I was desperate to have him closer. Fuck Ryan Phillippe and Reese Witherspoon. Sex with Austin was a million times better.

“More,” I begged.

“More as in...”

I didn’t know what exactly I needed. I just needed more of him. More of his dick. More movement. More something! “As in fuck me! Please fuck me!”

“Good girl,” he smirked against my neck. “Asking for what she needs.”

He drew back a little more before pushing himself back in, his hips meeting with mine as he went that much deeper. I cried out, throwing my head back. “Yes! Fuck, just like that!” He continued to sink into me at that pace. The sound of his skin slapping against mine filled the room, followed by the sounds escaping past both of our lips. His were low and strained, almost as if he was holding back, but they were sexy. Like really sexy. I loved hearing them slip out of his mouth, knowing that I was the reason for them. There was nothing sexier than hearing your boyfriend moan.

The pressure between my legs was growing stronger like it did when I did this on my own. It was spreading through my pussy and I need more. I wanted more.

“Jacks,” he let out a stranded groan. His lips attached to the side of my neck, paying attention to that sweet spot that drove me absolutely wild. It was all too much, yet not enough. I don’t think I could ever get enough of Austin Sawyer.

Everything felt so incredible that it was almost overwhelming. I could feel my pleasure building and I was on the brink of letting go. I couldn’t hold back my moans any longer. “Fuck, there! Right there!”

And he kept it going. He didn’t change a single thing about what he was doing. His pelvic bone rubbed deliciously against my clit with every thrust, driving me higher and higher. His hand slipped down my body, urging my right leg up over his hip, allowing him to sink in at a deeper angle. I was seeing fucking stars. “Right there?”

I let out another moan, throwing my head back against the pillow. He moved my other leg up, giving me the hint to cling onto him like it was my saving grace. My ankles hooked around him, resting at the base of his spine before he picked up his pace. I felt his lips against my neck once more, throwing me over the edge. “Oh my god! Austin!”

“That’s it,” he breathed out. “Come for me, Jacks.”

With another thrust, my legs began to quake as pleasure took over my body. My eyes screwed shut when I felt the heat jolt through my body, taking me higher than I had ever been. Austin covered my mouth with his, swallowing my moans as my fingers dug into the flesh of his back, desperate to ground myself. Another deep thrust sent me reeling into a new territory of ecstasy I had never been to.

My entire body was shaking beneath him and I was loving every second of it. “Austin,” I cried out. “Fuck, Austin!”

He broke the kiss, pressing his forehead to mine. My eyes fluttered open, meeting his once more. His arm wrapped around me, clinging onto me as his thrusts grew sloppy. He bucked against me, burying his face in the crook of my neck with a groan as he hugged me tightly to him, feeling his release.

My chest was heaving and my body felt sticky and sweaty. The weight of him on top of me was a comfort I didn’t know I needed. He grounded me, keeping me close to him so I wouldn’t drift away.

He pulled his head back, looking at me with a tired, but happy smile.

“You okay, Jacks?”

I nodded my head, giving him a reassuring grin.

“I didn’t hurt you?”

I shook my head.

“You can’t talk, can you?” He chuckled, leaning down to peck my lips.

I swallowed hard, looking into his gorgeous eyes. “Was that okay? Was I —“

“You were perfect,” he stated, not daring to let me finish what I was going to say. “That was — that was intense and hot, and hands down, the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“Now I know you’re lying,” I laughed, shaking my head. Austin cupped my cheek, urging me to look at him.

“I’m not lying to you,” he said calmly, but his tone was serious. “I’ve felt like I was missing something for a long time, especially when I was recovering, and that feeling finally went away when I met you, Jacks.” He paused. His finger reached up, brushing a stray piece of hair away from my forehead, tucking it behind my ear. “Sex has always been just that. Sex. But with you, it was more. It will always be more. You will always be more to me.”

The sincerity in his eyes made my heart flutter.

“You’re okay though, right?” He asked, stroking my hair softly. “I didn’t hurt you or anything?”

I shook my head. “No, you didn’t. Promise,” I assured him, reaching my hand up to his cheek. “It was overwhelming, but in a good way. You made me feel safe with you.”

He melted into my touch. “Good, ‘cause you are safe with me. You always will be.”

“So are you,” I assured him. “Thank you for being so patient with me.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that,” he shook his head. “But you absolutely can for giving you the best orgasm you’ve ever had.”

“So cocky,” I rolled my eyes. “It was the best orgasm I’ve ever had. And you were right, you do fit perfectly.”

“Damn right,” he smirked, pressing a kiss to my lips. “You think you can move?”

I giggled. “You are aware you are still buried inside me, and on top of me?”

He rolled his eyes this time. He shifted off of me, holding the base of his

soft cock as he withdrew from me. He stumbled his way to the bathroom to remove the condom. I moved to sit up, feeling my muscles ache a little in protest. Austin emerged from the bathroom moments later with a washcloth in his hand, ready to clean me up.

Such a gentleman.

“I’ll be back in a sec,” he announced. “I’m going to grab dinner and some water for you. Then we can spend the rest of the night with some post-sex cuddles that I know you love so much.”

It was him I loved so much.





## *Austin*

“Are you sure you can’t stay?” I asked against Catalina’s lips as my hands circled her very naked waist again. “Call in sick to work and spend another day in bed with me.”

She let out a giggle, pulling away from me, and rolling to her side of the bed. The sheet barely covered her tits, giving me the best view of her. Thanks to me, her hair was a mess, and the purple marks on her collarbones were a great reminder of what we did last night...twice. Not that she didn’t leave her marks on me. My back was still stinging deliciously from her nails. I need more of her. I needed her naked in this bed with me for at least a week to make up for all her lost time.

I was incredibly proud of my girl and I think she was proud of herself too. She took her body back last night and claimed it as her own. She decided when she was ready. She decided when it was right. She stood by that, and I backed her up. And man, was it fucking incredible to watch her let go. Her body tensed, and her pussy tightened around my cock. The way I fit perfectly inside her like I was fucking made for her. I hated to admit it, even to myself, but I was being clingy, not wanting to let her get on that plane to Stonebridge.

I think a small part of me feared her overthinking last night. Especially when she was a little quiet when we stepped into the apartment. I was certain she was going to change her mind and tell me that she wasn’t ready after all. And I would have accepted it nonetheless. I was with her for more than just her body. I didn’t need sex with her to be with her. It was one of the many bonuses of being with her.

“You know I can’t,” she shook her head, turning her head against her pillow, facing me. I turned my body, propping myself up on my elbow before reaching for her. “I want to. I really do. But I need as much money saved up as possible so I can move here comfortably.”

I cleared my throat, giving her a soft smile. “What if I pay the first couple of months’ rent for you?” I asked her, playing with the sheet covering her chest. “Will you stay then?”

“You’re not paying my rent, Austin,” she protested, shaking her head. I didn’t think she’d go for that anyway. I still wanted to offer in case it meant she would stay. “I should probably get ready to go.”

“Is there anything I can do to make you stay another night?” I dared to

ask, giving her my best puppy dog eyes. “Anything at all?”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, honey. I really wish I could stay here with you.”

She shifted from her spot on the bed, ready to get up. She reached for my white tee, turning her naked back to me before she threw it over her head. She gave me a small smile before heading towards the bathroom. I turned my body, my eyes not daring to leave her body as she walked.

“Stop looking at me with your sex eyes, Sawyer,” she pointed at me, narrowing her eyes in my direction.

“I can’t help it when you’re walking to the bathroom in my white shirt and nothing else,” I said in my defence. My dick stirred in my boxers as soon as my eyes fell on the curve of her ass. The tiny part my shirt couldn’t quite cover. “You’re irresistible, Jacks. I can’t get enough of you.”

“Austin,” she rolled her eyes playfully. I was taking my shot, and I had a feeling I wouldn’t have much convincing to do to get her.

I smirked. “Come sit on my face, sweetheart. I could really go for some breakfast.”

“You’re a menace!” She called out as she made her way over to me.

I let out a laugh as she threw her leg over my lap. My dick hardened instantly. The site of her thick thighs made me want her all the more. “Yeah,” I agreed. “But I’m your menace.”

I urged her forward, wanting nothing more than to have her sexy ass on my face. I knew she was skeptical, but I could take her. No doubt about that. I wanted to hear those moans I heard last night. I wanted her to let go and make her feel like the fucking queen she was, sitting on her throne.

She could only protest so much before it happened. She knew it too.

She shifted forward, bunching up the shirt she was wearing, revealing her pretty little pussy to me once more. Fucking heaven. She could suffocate me and I’d be fucking happy about it. As long as I got to taste her and make her feel as good as she makes me feel.

I gripped onto her ass, dragging her to my mouth where I went to fucking town. She was already wet and waiting, which was hotter than anything. I loved eating her pussy more than anything. She was so damn sensitive and responsive. After all the shit she had been through, it was nice to see her finally let go and allow someone else to take control for a little while. Even if it was for only a few minutes.

I held her down tight, licking and sucking at her clit to get her going. It

took no time at all before her body began to shake and her thighs clamped down around my head. I rush of wetness coated my tongue, giving me the reward I was dying to taste. I could eat her out all damn day.

“*Austin*,” she cried out, grinding her pussy along my tongue to keep her orgasm going. I kept my hands on her ass, helping her move on my tongue, but stopping her from relieving the pressure. I wanted her to feel it in every part of her body.

My cock was so hard by the time she climbed off my face, allowing me to breathe again. I wanted to be inside her again. I wanted to be buried so deep inside that pretty little pussy of hers that she felt it in her stomach. I was addicted to her, and it had nothing to do with how long it had been since I had gotten laid. It was all on her. Her pussy was an addiction I didn’t want to give up.

She leaned down, capturing my lips with hers in an unexpected, but incredibly hot kiss. “How do you want me to take care of this?” She asked as her hand wrapped around my cock. She pecked my lips once more, short-circuiting my brain. “My mouth, or inside me?”

“Fuck,” I breathed out. “Inside. I need to be buried in you.”

By the time I came back to reality, she was sliding a condom over my dick. My eyes met with her, watching her remove the shirt from her body to reveal her perfect tits once more. I was ready to flip her onto her back and have my way with her. She threw her leg over me once more, taking my cock in her hand, and lining me up with her entrance before sinking down.

This girl was going to be the death of me and if this was how I went, I’d be a happy fucking man.



I carried Catalina’s bag to the front doors of the building, a little sad I couldn’t take her to the airport myself. She turned to face me with a sadness in her eyes that fucking gutted me to see. She wanted to stay as much as I wanted her to. I kept telling myself that it wasn’t long until she lived in this building and all I had to do was walk her down a couple of hallways to walk her home. Soon enough, she’d be here with me. I had to let her go this time.

“Call me when you get home so I know you’re safe, okay?” I said as I wrapped my hands around her waist, pulling her in close before placing a kiss

on her lips.

She smiled against me before nodding her head. “I will. Promise,” she assured me. “Two weeks. That’s how long we’ll be apart.”

“It’ll be the longest two weeks of my life,” I breathed out. “I’m going to miss you immensely.”

She grinned widely, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. “I think I’m going to miss you more. Two weeks, then I’m all yours.”

Mmmh, I *loved* the sound of that. Even though I was preparing to start back, I wanted to spend as much of my free time with her as I could. I wanted to plan a nice date with her and take her out for the night. I wanted to make her feel special and taken care of. I wanted her to know I was putting in the effort for her because she deserved it.

I kissed her lips once more. “Have a safe flight, Jacks.”

“I will,” she nodded, pecking my lips before she shifted out of my arms. “Thanks for an incredible night... and morning.”

“I should be thanking you, sweetheart.”

She gave me one final kiss before she reached down for her bag, throwing it over her shoulder and heading towards the door. In true Jacks fashion, I could see the tears threatening her eyes as she turned away. There was the emotional girl that I loved. And the next time I saw her, I was going to tell her just that.

Last night wasn’t the night to talk about my feelings for her. I didn’t want to overwhelm her and I sure as hell didn’t want her thinking I was saying those three words because we were about to fuck. I didn’t want the night to be too much for her. She needed to be in charge of the night and she was. I was happy with that. But she also deserved to know that I loved her and that she was forever my first choice. She was it for me. There was no one else in this world that I wanted more than I wanted her.

I headed back up, shoving my hands in my sweatpants as the elevator headed to my floor. I needed to get my morning workout in, even though I worked some of my muscles when I fucked Catalina’s tight pussy this morning from beneath her. I needed to get my weight training in before our skate this morning. The guys played New Jersey tonight at home, and Coach Johnson decided to hold the morning skate at noon, giving us a break thanks to the event last night.

I stepped into my home gym with my plan in mind. I wasn’t lifting heavy today. It was more bodyweight exercises that I had in mind. Nothing a HIIT

wouldn't do nicely. Then, when I was done, I was going to send Jacks a sweaty, shirtless picture of myself to keep her from missing me too much. Or maybe give her something to think about when she touches herself. I wasn't picky.

It was roughly an hour later that the sweat was dripping off my body. My skin had a shine to it once again, and I couldn't wait to hop in and have a nice cold shower to clean up. I stood by the mirror, ripping my shirt off my body before pulling out my phone. On the screen, I had fourteen missed calls from Joel. Sixteen from Lucas and a shit ton of text messages. I barely read the first one before Joel's face appeared on my screen.

"Why the fuck aren't you answering your goddamn phone?" He shouted instantly. "Never mind. I'm outside of your apartment. You need to let me in now if you know what's good for you."

I didn't get a single word in before he hung up. My heart dropped as I glanced at my phone, not daring to look at the rest of the messages. I needed to get to the front door to let Joel in. So much for a nice cold shower. He better be quick. I had the skate to get to in less than half an hour.

I unlocked the door and saw Joel standing outside the door with Lucas standing next to them. Joel looked pissed whereas Lucas looked concerned. My heart dropped. *What the hell was going on?* Joel barged his way in, not bothering to say a word as he made a beeline for the kitchen. Lucas patted my shoulder as he walked in.

"Where the hell have you been?" Joel shouted, shaking his head.

"Working out," I shrugged my shoulders. Was that not obvious? "What the hell is going on, Joel?"

He scoffed. "What, you haven't been online this morning?"

I shook my head, only to find Lucas smirking. "I think the scratches on his back prove he wasn't."

*Shit.*

"Chris leaked information about you to the press last night. Everything he threatened in his office, he made public. Including the drug addiction accusation," Joel revealed before his jaw jumped. "The organization is demanding a drug test, Sawyer. It's part of regulation and with something as big as this is, they want to take the proper precautions."

"I understand," I nodded. "I'll happily comply to one. I've got nothing to hide."

He smiled for the first time since he walked in here. That smile quickly

faded and he was back to his serious agent look. "It gets worse."

"Worse?" I let out a dry laugh. "How much worse can it get?"

"Lyndsey spoke out like he threatened. She said that you forced yourself on her when you were in Stonebridge on Halloween night," Lucas added, looking down at his feet.

"I was with Catalina Halloween night," I stated, thinking back to that night in her apartment. It was one of the defining moments I knew she was more than just a contract. She and I had a date night that night. In her apartment. "I have pictures to prove it. And I'm almost certain I posted that night on my Instagram story because I was proud of my setup for her."

"You did," Lucas nodded, confirming my thoughts. "I remember it. You watched Hocus Pocus during that big storm that hit Stonebridge."

Three loud bangs filled my ears, drawing my attention to my apartment door. The door swung open and in came Hurricane Jade, searching around the apartment frantically. "Where's Jacks?"

"Airport," I told her, furrowing my brows at her. "She left about an hour and a half ago for her one o'clock flight home."

"Fuck," she frowned, aggressively running her fingers through her blonde hair. "Have you seen what's being said about her online?"

My heart collapsed. I never even thought about how this would affect her. She was all alone in a crowded airport as this was hitting the fan. I quickly opened my phone, seeing all of the rumours that were circling thanks to Chris. What was worse was that Catalina was dragged into this and not by choice. If it weren't for me, she would have been left alone and she wouldn't be in this mess.

They were saying horrible things about her. And I mean absolutely horrible things about her. They were body-shaming her for her curves. They were saying she was only with me for money. That she wasn't good enough for me. All of those things Catalina had thought about herself at one point or another. I knew she had. My heart fucking sank. I quickly opened up my phone, pressing her contact before bringing it up to my ear.

It rang, once, twice, three times, then went to voicemail. A part of me prayed she didn't know what was going on. I had a feeling she would soon find out when Lyndsey or Olivia said something to her. I didn't give a fuck what was said about me. I didn't. It was what was said about her that really bothered me.

"She answering?" Jade asked. "She hasn't answered any of my

messages.”

I shook my head, shoving my phone in the front pocket of my sweatpants. Every muscle in my body was tense. My heart was beating a mile a minute and I could feel the anger bubbling in my chest. Of fucking course this had to happen. Of course, Chris had to open his big *fucking* mouth because things didn't go his way at this event. He just had to take the opportunity for his five minutes of fame, in hopes it would make him a couple of dollars.

“Right now, we have to worry more about you and your career,” Joel stated, making my blood boil.

I shook my head as my jaw clenched. “No. We have to make sure my girlfriend is okay. Her safety is more important than my career. I know I'm clean. She has nothing and no one with her when she should. Everyone that loves her is in this room. So if you have any brilliant ideas, I'm all ears.”

“She's not even your girlfriend,” Joel declared in front of everyone. “Last I checked, the contract stated that she would be in the spotlight like this. It's nothing she didn't already sign up for, Austin. Take a chill pill.”

“What?” Jade furrowed her brows, swallowing hard. “Hold on!” Jade raised her voice, crossing her arms over her chest. She was pissed. “You and Jacks aren't actually together? This was— this wasn't real? This was all a contract to you? Are you really that big of a fucking asshole that you'd play her along like this when she is head over heels for you? Are you really this big of a fucking dick, Sawyer?”

If Joel thought I wasn't going to fight back, he was severely mistaken. “She is my girlfriend, dickbag. I swore I'd protect her and I'm not about to break that promise. So make some calls, do whatever it is that I pay you and your guys to do and protect her too. This has already gone on long enough. Do your fucking job and I'll do mine.”

“You want to go get her?” Lucas offered, cocking his eyebrow at me. “I'll drive.”

“No need,” a soft voice filled my ears as the apartment door swung open. The sight of red hair and a sweet smile made my heart skip a beat. “I uh — I couldn't get on the plane after I heard about what was being said about you.”

I closed the space between us, pulling her into the safety of my arms before squeezing her tightly. “I'm sorry, Jacks,” I muttered into her hair. “I'm so fucking sorry.”

“You've got nothing to apologize for,” she assured me as she squeezed me a little tighter. “Nothing at all. We'll get through this together.”

“Yeah?”

She giggled, eyeing me up. “You were going to come pick me up without putting on a shirt, babe. I think we both know we’re better together than apart.”

I wanted to say it. I wanted to say it so fucking bad. But I didn’t want this moment to be about me and my needs. I didn’t want her to remember the first time I told her I loved her, for real, because my name was on every news site. I wanted her to remember it being a beautiful moment we can tell our kids about someday. Instead, I sucked it up and kissed her softly, happy to have her back in my arms.

“Damn right.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Joel clears his throat. “The sooner we get you drug tested, the easier it will be to start taking care of this.”

I released my girl, nodding my head. I knew he meant right now. At least, if I got this over with, I could come home to Jacks and we’d figure out what to do next. “You want to stay here with Jade?”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” She asked as she placed her hand on my arm, providing me with the slightest bit of comfort I didn’t know I needed.

“No offence,” Joel butted in once more. “But it’s best if she stays home until we have this situation under control.”

“Jacks,” I turned to her.

“I’ll stay,” she smiled softly. “Go do what you need to do.”



I had lost count of how many drug tests I’d done in my life. This was no different than any other test I’ve done. I knew for a damn fact I was clean which made me worry even less about it. I never touched the shit that was out there. The worst thing I had done was smoke a joint when I was fifteen in Lucas’s backyard and that came to a quick halt when his dad caught us. He damn near ripped us a new one because we were supposed to be athletes. I never touched it after that. Not to mention, I hated the feeling of coming down from a high. It made me feel like I was sick.

Surprise surprise. My drug test was clean.



Joel escorted me to the rink afterwards so I could join in on the skate. My mind was elsewhere today, and I didn't think I had it in me to skate, but I was going to anyway. I wasn't going to let Chris and the media control my life. I needed to show up and I needed to be there for my team. It was Joel's job to clean up the mess. It was his job to protect me and protect Catalina. It was his responsibility.

"All good, man?" Lucas asked as he caught up with me.

"Clean as suspected," I stated with a shrug of my shoulders.

"I knew you would be," he chuckled. "But speaking of not so clean. Your fucking back is shredded. You and Jacks have some hot, celebratory sex last night?"

"Better question is," I laughed, pausing for a moment to make sure no one else was listening. "Did you and Jade talk last night?"

"Don't change the subject."

I scoffed. "Out of respect for my girlfriend, I will only confirm we fucked last night, and it was definitely, the best sex I've ever had. The rest of the details are between us. Now spill before I have to ask Catalina for the details she is definitely getting out of Jade."

He shook his head with a sad smile. "She called me a dick, along with a few other choice words before slamming the door in my face," he shared. "Safe to say, Jade is probably done with me."

"Have you tried apologizing to her?" I questioned as I picked up my pace.

"Oh no! I never thought of that," he threw his hands up. "Of fucking course I have. She asked me what I'm sorry for I never answered it correctly. I don't know what to say to make it right."

"Sawyer, my office!" Coach Johnson shouted from the bench. "The rest of you, head home and rest up! We've got a game to win."

I headed off the ice first, making my way to the locker room to take off my skates. Anxiety was creeping in the more I thought about this conversation with Johnson. He looked pretty pissed and when he was like this, it never went well for any of us. Lucas gave me a nod as soon as I was done, knowing full well he was wishing me good luck.

I headed down the dreadful hallway, making my way to the end office where Johnson practically lived. I tapped twice on the door before I heard a muffled come in.

I stepped inside and saw him sitting at his desk with his glasses sitting at the end of his nose. He took them off, placing them on the stack of papers he

had in front of him. “Your drug test came back clean, Sawyer. Not that I’m all that surprised. Your girlfriend doesn’t seem like much of a partier.”

“She’s not,” I chuckled.

“I know you’re innocent, kid,” he stated as his jaw ticked and his throat jumped. “I know the kind of man you are. I’m sorry I let you down this year, Sawyer. I got you into this mess, thinking it would be good for you to get out of the city for a little while and get your head in the right place before coming back to the game. I thought it would be good for you to take a few months to heal up and clearly I was wrong about it. You never should have gone there and met with Chris. Never.”

I cleared my throat. I didn’t regret any of it for a second. I’d do it all over again if I had the choice. “I met the girl of my dreams because you sent me there, Coach. I did get my head on straight when I was there. And if I could go back, knowing this was all going to blow up, I’d do it the same way,” I declared. “Eventually, hockey will come to an end for me. I’m closing in on 30, and before I know it, I’ll be retired and god knows what else. I know all of that. What won’t change is the girl I come home to after every game and curl up next to. I can live my life without hockey, but I can’t live my life without her.”

“You’re a good man, Sawyer,” he nodded. “She’s a damn lucky girl.”

“I’m the lucky one here.”

Lucas waited in the parking lot for me, taking off as soon as I was strapped into his jeep. Taylor Swift blared through the speakers as he muttered along with the song the entire ride back to the apartment. I kept my eyes glancing out the window to not laugh at him. He was the worst singer I had ever met.

Twenty minutes later, we pulled into the parking garage and I was more than ready to walk into my apartment and hold my girl in my arms for a little while. That was the only thing I had been thinking about since I left.

When I stepped foot in the door, the smell of something incredible filled my nose. I found Jacks in the kitchen. On the island counter, she had a tray of cookies that looked to be cooling. Jade sat at the counter with her books open, going over something while Jacks did her thing. “Holy fuck, you’re beautiful.”

She turned her head, giving me a warm smile as she wiped her hand on the apron she had on. My apron that said kiss the chef. She had changed back into her comfortable pyjama pants, and one of my sweaters similar to the one

I gave her back in Stonebridge. Her hair was in a messy bun on the top of her head, and she had no makeup on. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever laid eyes on.

“Hi,” she greeted me. “How did it go?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Clean as suspected,” I stated as I walked over to her, placing a soft kiss on her lips. “Smells incredible in here.”

“Figured I’d bake some cookies while you were doing your thing,” she said. She had a hint of flour on her eyebrow, making my smile grow even wider. She was fucking adorable. “Did Joel mention anything on what to do next?”

I shook my head with a sheepish smile. “I think we should just hang tight for the night. I know he’s working on some shit. It’s his job to take care of all of this. So it looks like we’ve got an extra night together.”

“Movie night?” She beamed.

Anything she wanted, she was getting. Movie night? Fuck yes! “Damn right!”

“Okay, I’m going to head out before the two of you start dirty talking and fucking on the countertops,” Jade said as she packed up her things. “Austin, we’ll be having a conversation later about all of this.”

I knew she wasn’t going to let me away with it.

“I was thinking,” Jacks started. “Since you’ve had a shitty day today, why don’t I cuddle you and play with your hair tonight?”

I shook my head before hopping up on the counter. I swallowed hard as I looked into those green eyes I had fallen hard for. “Jacks, you’ve also had a shitty day. This isn’t just happening to me, it’s happening to you too. The internet is a terrible fucking place sometimes,” I told her. Her eyes tore away from mine and she moved over to begin to tray her cookies on the cooling rack. A telltale sign she knew exactly what I was talking about. She was hurt by it, and I *fucking* hated that she saw any of it. None of it was true. I just didn’t want her downplaying her hurt to provide for me. “None of what was said about you was true, Jacks. Just like the stuff about me wasn’t true.”

She placed the spatula down next to her, not daring to look at me. “It sucks when the things they are saying are things you’ve said to yourself. It took me a long time to get over feeling like I wasn’t good enough for you. And I now get what Lucas meant about me being equipped for this life because this is a horrible feeling. It sucks feeling like the whole world has a say in a relationship that is only meant for two people.”

I hated that she didn't see herself the way that I saw her. Seeing the heartbroken look on her face made my stomach turn. I just wish she saw the way her smile lit up the room or the way her embrace calmed me down like nothing ever had. I wish she saw herself when she was totally immersed in something and the way her face changed as she wrote. I wish she saw the way she changed me and taught me to be more open with myself and the people around me. I wanted her to see herself as good enough the way she was. All her curves and edges. All her stray hairs and eye crinkles. She was perfect to me. Why couldn't she see that?

"Sweetheart, I know it feels like everything is like that now, but it's going to fade out," I assured her. "Soon enough, we'll be old news and no one is going to care about us or our relationship. But it is okay to feel upset about all of this. You're entitled to feel that way. You're not, however, allowed to tell yourself that you're not good enough for me, 'cause you are good enough."

"I guess I'm just a little in my head," she shrugged. "I don't mean to be like this. It just brings up some not-so-nice thoughts."

I nodded my head, giving her a sad smile. I motioned for her to come in for a hug, only to have her turn her back. Okay, something was really bothering her for her to deny affection. Physical touch was her *fucking* love language. I had no idea what to do in this situation. I had never been in this situation, let alone with someone else involved. I was sure I said something wrong here because she closed up.

"Jacks."

"It's fine," she nodded, keeping her back to me.

"What can I say to make this better?" I asked her, swallowing hard. She never even flinched. I slipped off of the counter, taking a few hesitant steps towards her. "Jacks."

"I said I'm fine," she stated. Her tone was sharp and cold. I took a step back.

Without even thinking, I scoffed. "Yeah. Totally fine."

"What do you want me to say, Austin?" She turned, facing me with a defeated look on her face. "I told you what was wrong. I told you exactly what was going on in my head and whether or not you tell me if I'm allowed, doesn't mean it's not going to happen anyways. I can't just turn it off because you told me to. It doesn't work like that and it doesn't help when you say not to. It makes it worse because I feel even dumber for thinking it. I'm not like you."

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I raised my voice.

She shook her head. “It means I can’t just let things roll off my back like you can. I’m not like that and I will never be like that,” she argued, throwing her hands up as she did. “You don’t get it because you’ve always been accepted for who you are, no matter where you go or what you do. You are accepted whereas I have never fit in. I have never had a place meant for me. I have never had a place where I felt perfect. You have. You fit in this world and I don’t. So forgive me for not being able to adapt to your world and your way of things. I’m sorry for constantly feeling like I’m not good enough. But I can’t change that. I’ll never be able to change that.”

My heart shattered at the sight of her. Tears fell down her cheeks before she shook her head. She turned away, putting on the oven mitt before pulling the batch of cookies out of the oven. She reached to turn it off before she made a beeline for the stairs, not daring to look back.

I stood there dumbfounded for a moment. We never argued. We never fought. Here I was, standing in my kitchen, unable to even begin to process what just happened between us. All I knew was that she was more upset than I thought she was and I was an even bigger asshole for not realizing how much my words affected her. What was worse was that I didn’t realize just how serious she was when she first told me she never felt like she fit in. This was really big for her, and Lucas’s words were still ringing in her head after almost a month of him saying it.

I was going to give her a bit of space, just to calm down. I was sure if I headed up there right now, she’d chew my head off and bake it in her next batch of cookies. I also needed to figure out the right thing to say to her to assure her she does have a place in this world, ‘cause she did and it was with me. I just had to make sure she never doubted it again.



## *Catalina*

I felt this suffocating sensation in my chest the second my eyes met with Austin's. We had never gotten into a fight before. Not even a mild argument. We had always gotten along damn near perfectly since we started getting to know one another. I didn't like this feeling of being so far away from him, even if I was the one who put the distance between us. I had to in order to save myself from saying something I didn't mean and I would have regretted.

He just didn't get it. He had never been friendless, or been left out. He was never invisible and never a background character. He didn't live the same life I did. He didn't know the first thing about it. He chose this life. He wanted this life, playing hockey professionally. I didn't choose to be in the spotlight. I didn't want my face plastered all over the internet like he was. I didn't want every person in the world to know my personal business. Now that I thought about it, Lucas was right. I wasn't meant for Austin's life. If he couldn't understand where I was coming from after all this time together, he never would.

I shut his bedroom door, trying to keep my breathing under control as I searched the room for my bag. I was running away like a coward, but I also needed some space. I needed the distance between us so I could figure out where I wanted to go from here. I came back because I was worried about how this would affect Austin, especially with the severity of the allegations. I wanted to be there for him like he had been there for me. But it was like he swept it under the rug as if it was nothing to worry about. He was going about as if this were a normal day for him.

Meanwhile, I deleted my Instagram, Twitter and Facebook this morning, praying that it would be enough to hide away from the internet and its cruelty. I had no idea how I was going to go about publishing my book now. Everyone was going to know me as the girl who crawled into bed with Austin Sawyer. Even with a pen name, it wouldn't be hard to figure it out with the way hockey fans were. And say I do publish it under a name, what were the odds someone would leave a shitty review just because?

I couldn't hold back my tears any longer. They came cascading down my cheeks rapidly, dripping down to the nearest surface it could find. I felt so fucking defeated like I couldn't do anything right. No matter how hard I tried, I was never going to be a published author. I was never going to be hidden

when Austin was my boyfriend. I was never going to be normal again.

I took a seat at the end of the bed, trying to calm myself down. My heart ached at the thought of ending things with Austin. It would mean I lost my best friend. It would mean I would have to start all over again, by myself, without any guidance or reassurance. I would be giving up the only person who has ever seen me for me. All because I was scared and I didn't want to admit it.

The soft sensation of the weight blanket soothed my sweaty palms. I could feel myself taking in the room as if it were the last time I would see it, without so much as thinking about it like that. Subconsciously, I was preparing for the worst, just like I always did. A routine I was all too familiar with. At some point, it had to stop. It had to get better. The cycle had to break.

His light gray walls balanced out his dark comforter, and the dark wood of his furniture. Letting out a shaky breath, I swallowed the lump forming in my throat. I shifted off of the bed, circling the room for all its perfection. Austin was a bit of a neat freak after all. He liked things to be organized to his liking, and minimalistic at that. But still, he had photos on his bedside table now. One of the two of us he had taken back in October at the beach. He had two condoms next to it. A gentle reminder of how far I had come that we now needed those in our relationship. Better yet, we had used three already.

I threaded my fingers through my hair before I sunk down to the carpeted floor. I was pushing away the one person I should have held close. I was shoving him away from me like it was the only thing I knew how to do because I was scared he'd finally realized what everyone else already had. I wasn't special. I wasn't beautiful or interesting. I wasn't a size zero. I had stretch marks and love handles. My boobs were too big. I could never shave my vagina perfectly.

I was so damn tired of giving up everything because I was scared.

I brought the sleeve of Austin's sweater up to my face, wiping my cheeks dry as I took in a deep breath. I wasn't solving anything by sitting on his floor, crying about how I was never picked first for the team. I had to pull myself together and stop mopping around, waiting for everything to fix itself and go and fix it myself.

I pushed myself up, trying to gather every ounce of confidence I had before stepping out of his bedroom. If I didn't do it now, I wasn't going to at



all. Tugging the sleeves down, I hesitantly made my way down the stairs. My eyes instantly darted to the kitchen, seeing everything had been cleaned up and the cookies were placed on a plate on the island. Austin had cleaned everything up. Tears pricked at my eyes once more. No matter what I did, I was going to be really fucking vulnerable during this conversation and I really didn't want to be.

My bare feet touched the cold tile floor, tiptoeing around the corner into the living room area. I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw him. He was standing in the corner of the room, trying to put together a fake pre-lit Christmas tree by himself.

"Hi," I breathed out, standing with my feet together and my fingers nervously playing with each other.

"Hi," he smiled softly before his throat jumped. "Want to help me decorate our Christmas tree?"

He said *our*. I felt my throat close up and tears threatened my eyes once again. God, why was I so fucking emotional over this? Why was I reacting this way?

I slowly made my way over to the tree, praying that Austin didn't look at me and see the tears, or my puffy eyes. He was just placing the last part of the tree in its slot. I made myself useful, separating the branches to make it easier to hang stuff up. It was a bit bigger than the one in my apartment and fit the room perfectly. I didn't think Austin was the Christmas type. He never mentioned anything when he saw my setup, so I thought that he wasn't all that into the holiday. Some people weren't after all.

The tension in the air was so thick, I wasn't even sure a professional butcher's knife could cut through it. I had anxiety building in my chest, slowly growing deeper with each passing second. I didn't want to look at him, in case I broke down. I didn't want him to feel guilty if I did. I also couldn't stand on the other side of the tree, avoiding him as we decorated.

He plugged in the lights and instantly, they were multicoloured, lighting up the room perfectly. My heart warmed for a moment. I took a step back, taking in the brightly lit, yet naked tree. Austin did the same, glancing over the lights from the other side of the couch, keeping the distance between us. The distance I had put between us. It was like we were strangers again.

"I've never had my own Christmas tree before," Austin breathed out as he adjusted one of the branches near the top. "Never really had much need for one."

“Why now?”

“—‘cause the girl I love is a big fan of Christmas,” he shrugged his shoulders with a soft smile. I swore my heart skipped a beat when he said the word love for the second time in twenty-four hours. “I haven’t been doing a very good job at making you feel like you have your own special place in my world. I’ve been stupid, thinking that things will work out in time, without effort or assistance. I’ve been selfish in expecting you to just adapt to the way my life is without properly preparing you for what it’s really like. Worst of all, I haven’t even attempted to adapt to yours. I’ve been fooling myself, thinking that this relationship stuff is easy, when it’s not.”

“Austin,” I shook my head.

He turned to face me, keeping the couch as a barrier between us. “You’re right. I don’t get it. I don’t know what it’s like to be left out, and forgotten about. I really hate that you do. And I hate it even more that you feel like it’s a reflection of yourself when it’s not, Jacks,” he stated as he placed his hands on the back of the couch. “I see you and I know you. I know you better than anyone out there, which is how I know you’re good enough. You’re more than good enough. You exceed the expectations by a landslide. You don’t see yourself the way I see you.”

A single tear slipped down my cheek, falling to his blue sweater.

He threw his leg over the back of the couch, maneuvering over it with ease before he stood tall in front of me. His hand came up, his index finger brushed away the trail of wetness left behind. My heart was racing and a large lump the size of one of the Christmas balls formed in my throat. “I’m sorry for being an insensitive dick, Jacks.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry for being too sensitive about everything.”

“No,” he smiled softly. “Don’t apologize for that, sweetheart. You were trying to talk to me and I wasn’t listening to what you were saying. You don’t have to apologize for being who you are. You’re sensitive and it’s one of the many things I love about you.”

There it was again. *Love*.

“I love you, Catalina Jackson,” he breathed out as he cupped my cheek in his warm palm. My heart fluttered profusely. More tears filled my eyes at his confession. His eyes were locked with mine and that confident man I knew was shining through. There wasn’t a hint of doubt in his eyes. He was going for it, no matter what response he’d be given. “I have since the moment you asked me to go to the bookstore with you and my heart felt all warm and

fuzzy inside. I've been falling hard ever since." He paused, giving me a smile. "You're my person, Jacks. You're my better half. The part of me that I can't live without. You're my best friend. You're the one I want to come home to. The one I want to spend the next twenty thousand days with, and even then, I don't think it would be long enough."

My bottom lip quivered as I stared up into his gorgeous green eyes. I reached for his waist, drawing him in closer until our bodies met. "I love you too," I whispered, not daring to trust my voice this time around. I watched the smile spread across his lips before he leaned down, brushing them against mine in a soft, sweet kiss that melted me from the inside out.

"I'm really sorry I made you cry," he muttered as he pulled away, pressing his forehead against mine. "You don't deserve that."

"I was frustrated and I took it out on you," I admitted. "And I'm sorry I did that. You didn't deserve that. You have done nothing but make me feel like I fit in with you and your world. I got overwhelmed and said things that were true at one point but didn't feel as prominent as they used to. You didn't deserve the blame for any of it. I really don't like fighting with you."

He shook his head. "Me either."

"It was really sweet of you to go out and buy a Christmas tree for me, though," I beamed, hugging him tighter. He tucked me safely under his chin, squeezing me back just as hard. "It's about time you got in the Christmas spirit, Mr. Grinch."

"Whatever," he scoffed, releasing me from his hold. "At least I won't be mistaken for an elf. With your height, I would worry."

*Game on.* "You weren't complaining about my height this morning when I was riding your dick," I shot back. "In fact, I think you said I was the *perfect* height."

"*Fuck.*"

"Not so much to say now, huh?" I teased, moving towards the Christmas tree. "I guess I've rendered you speechless once again."

He smirked, shaking his head as his eyes narrowed at me. "One more word out of you and I'll shut you up with my cock down your throat."

As if I wouldn't like that, I thought to myself. Maybe if I was lucky, he'd spank me too. "And here I thought Santa only came once a year," I grinned widely. "Don't worry, I've been a *good girl* this year."

"Jacks," he shook his head, trying to hide his laughter but failed miserably. "Those romance novels have rotted your mind."

I scoffed, rolling my eyes. “As if you wouldn’t love it if I sunk to my knees in front of you.” I took a step closer to him, watching his throat jump. I decided to take matters into my own hands this time. Taking another step forward, I dropped to my knees in front of him, reaching my hand up his left thigh. “Tell me,” I paused, smirking up at him. “Is your cock getting hard for me, Austin? Is that big, thick cock getting hard, thinking about sliding into my dirty little mouth?”

“*Holy fuck, Jacks,*” he breathed out, licking his bottom lip before biting down on it. My hand trailed up to his cock, feeling the swell of him through his gray sweatpants. “Christmas brings out the naughty side of you.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s you that does that,” I teased before leaning my face in closer, pressing my lips against him. “Now tell me.”

His chest rose and he swallowed hard. “My cock wants that pretty little mouth of yours,” he confessed. His hand came down to my head, cupping my cheek. “You going to be a good girl and let me fuck that mouth of yours?”

“Please,” I nodded, leaning back on my calves before opening my mouth, and sticking my tongue out. I reached for the waistband of his sweatpants, curling my fingers in before tugging them down his hips. He went forward, slipping his boxers down with them, his hard cock bouncing free in front of my face.

I leaned forward, taking his cock in my palm. My eyes met with his as I opened my mouth once more, flicking my tongue over the tip. His eyes were locked with mine, watching my every move, trying to anticipate what was coming next.

I sucked the tip between my lips, tasting the salty sweetness on my tongue. Gathering the spit in my mouth, I used it to slick him up, making it easier to take more of him when I was ready to, which he was surely expecting later. I took him deeper in my mouth, the tip hitting the back of my throat and I tried my hardest to repress my gag reflex. He said he wanted to fuck my pretty mouth, so I was going to let him.

Bobbing my head back and forth, trying to take as much of him as I could with each dip. Tears pricked my eyes, this time for a good reason. His hands made their way into my hair, partially holding it away from my face, and a little for something to hold onto. “Fuck. Such a good fucking girl. Taking my dick in your fucking throat. So fucking pretty, Jacks.”

I released him for a moment, taking a deep breath. “I can take it.”

“You sure, sweetheart?”

“Yeah,” I nodded, wiping away at my mouth before taking in a deep breath. “Fuck my face.”

He swallowed hard, nodding his head with anticipation. “Tap my thigh three times if it’s too much. I’ll be gentle.”

“I will.”

“Good girl,” he smirked. “Now open your fucking mouth and take this cock, Jacks.”

I did as I was told, letting him slide his cock along my tongue and deep into my mouth, hitting the back once more. He carded his fingers through my hair as he drew back, sliding back in once more. He started off slow, letting me get used to the feeling of him being in control. My eyes met with his, keeping them locked as I took his cock, over and over.

He eventually picked up the pace, hitting the back of my throat. It was messier than I expected it to be with spit spilling out of my mouth. My panties were fucking soaked I was so turned on by this. Letting him take control of me, and pleasuring him the way he wanted it. It was so fucking hot.

“Just like that, sweetheart,” he grunted, fucking deep into my throat that I gagged around him. “Swallow my cock like a good fucking girl. Are you my good girl, Jacks?”

I nodded with his cock still buried in my throat. I couldn’t take it anymore. I reached my hand down, slipping it beneath my pyjama pants and into my panties. My middle finger circled around my clit, scratching the need for touch.

“Look at you,” he grinned, pulling himself back. “Touching your fucking pussy. Are you wet for me?”

“So fucking wet, Austin,” I panted out as soon as I released him, watching the spit drip down from his cock. I leaned forward, licking from his shaft to the tip, cleaning up the mess as my fingers worked my clit.

He let out a moan that was like music to my ears. It was the praise I needed to hear from him. I took him in my hand, continuing to jerk him off until he told me otherwise. He was slick and heavy, and I wanted more than anything, to feel him inside me again.

“Bottoms off, Jacks,” he demanded with a gentle smile. “Want to see that dripping pussy for myself.”

I did exactly as he asked, pushing both my pants and boy shorts down my legs, and tossing them to the side. He urged me up before bending me over

the back of the couch. His fingers reached between my legs to feel my core, sliding through my folds with ease. One hand came down, colliding with my left ass cheek.

“Fuck,” I breathed out.

“Fucking love this pussy,” he muttered. “Can I fuck you, Jacks?”

“Condom?” He pulled away, reaching into the pocket of his sweatpants, retrieving a little foil package. “Please.”

I heard the sounds of the package opening, followed by the movement behind me. He rubbed the head of his cock through my folds, coating his length in my slick. “You sure?”

“Yes,” I nodded, wiggling my hips in search of him.

He placed his hand on the small of my back before his cock sunk into me, filling me up perfectly. I let out a tiny moan, clamping around him as I adjusted to him once more. He felt much bigger from behind and already, he hit all the right places with minimal effort. “So fucking tight.”

“Please!” I begged, needing him to move as if my life depended on it.

And man, did he fucking move. He quickly started in a fast rhythm that had my legs shaking. I could feel the wetness dripping down my thighs.

It wasn't long until I hit my peak and Austin followed moments later, clenching onto me as if I were going to drift away. Sweat coated my body and my heart was racing a mile a minute. I still wasn't used to having sex, especially when I went so long without it, and never experienced it like I did with him. It has never been as intense as it was with him.

He pulled out of me and suggested that I go take a shower to clean myself up. In all honesty, I couldn't have agreed more. I felt wet and sticky, and the sweat made me feel ten degrees hotter than normal. He discarded the condom into the trash before tucking himself back in his boxers.

For quickness, he let me shower first, letting me do whatever it was I needed to do before he took his turn. I washed my hair and body thoroughly, making sure I felt nice and clean before stepping out. Austin had to lend me a pair of boxers since I didn't have any clean underwear in his apartment. Mine would have to go in the wash before I headed back home tomorrow night.

When all was said and done, I crawled in between Austin's legs on the couch, settling down against him as his arms engulfed me. The tree decorating could be finished tomorrow. Instead, he had ordered us some dinner and had the Long Island game on the TV. His fingers made their way through my damp hair, trying to comfort me as we watched the game.

“I can’t wait to see you out there,” I breathed out, nuzzling against him. He chuckled. “My first goal will be dedicated to you, Jacks. And every goal after that.”

“Such a romantic,” I teased, falling silent for a moment before speaking again. “What’s it going to be like for us?”

He cleared his throat, going quiet for a moment. “It’s going to be a lot of late-night phone calls from whatever state or country I’m in. A lot of phone sex, and texting. It’s a lot of nights at the hockey rink with Jade, in my jersey. It’s going to be delayed holidays, birthdays, and moments I’m going to miss by a few days because I’m away. It’s celebratory parties and stressful nights. It’s happy victories and a lot of bruises and sore muscles. But it’s also not worrying financially, and a good off-season where I get to spend as much time with you as possible.”

I nodded my head.

“You’re my family, Jacks,” he stated. “You are my priority. I am going to try my hardest to make this as easy as I can for you. If there is anything you are concerned about, or have questions about, ask me, okay?”

“Thank you,” I smiled softly, placing a kiss on his cheek.

“You okay?” He asked softly. “It’s been a hard day for you.”

I gave him a reassuring nod. “Yeah. Nothing a good night’s sleep curled up with you won’t fix,” I said. “And maybe some pizza.”

“Already on the way,” he winked.

“This is why I love you,” I beamed.

“If you think you love me now,” he chuckled, shaking his head, “Wait until you see what else I ordered.”

His phone buzzed on the couch next to us, making me furrow my brows. Austin reached over. “It’s Joel,” he revealed, sliding his thumb over the screen. “Please tell me you have good news for me.” He pulled the phone away, putting it on speakerphone so I could listen in.

He chuckled, making my heart drop. I didn’t like Joel one bit. He was a dick. Not to mention, he looked like the Dollar Store version of AJ from the Backstreet Boys, but before he got clean. “Like hell I do,” he paused. “Lyndsey came clean as soon as the word lawyers were involved, and a statement has been issued, along with the evidence of your date night with your girlfriend that night to back it up.”

“Thank god,” I breathed out.

“Chris has been fired,” he revealed. “He’s under criminal investigation

for money laundering. Turns out those fundraisers have been linked directly to his bank account. From what I hear, your hot assistant is taking over the Stonebridge location.”

“And the posts on the internet?”

“The team is working on taking them down,” he confirmed. “Even the ones about your girlfriend.”

“Thank you.”

“If I were you, I’d lay low for a little while,” he suggested. “Let people see you when you’re back on the ice, doing what you do best. This will blow over eventually. I don’t want you to worry too much about it.”

They continued to go over a few more things. Mostly things I had no idea about. I was happy that he had done his job and protected Austin. It didn’t mean I liked him though. I don’t think I would ever like him.

“Hot assistant, huh?” I teased as soon as he hung up the phone.

He shook his head. “She plays for the other team, my love.”

“Oh my god! Was she the one kissing the blonde girl last night?” I turned to face him with a wide smile on my face. “Your assistant was tall, darker skin tone, pretty hair?”

“Yeah?”

“She was so kissing a blonde girl last night!” I told him. “While we were dancing! I saw!”

“It’s about time she told her best friend,” he chuckled. “She’s only been pining over her for years!”

“Sounds like two other people we know,” I wiggled my eyebrows. “Think Lucas and Jade are ever going to get over their issues?”

“Fuck no.”





## Austin

Catalina was curled up next to me, her head on my shoulder and her arm wrapped securely around my waist. We had the fireplace going, and after the game, she asked me if I could put on a Christmas movie. Her breathing had evened out not long ago, and I knew she had fallen asleep purely from how close she got to me. She was a cuddler, and I couldn't blame her. She had gone eleven years without it, and physical touch was one of her many love languages.

I was convinced all of them were her love languages. The woman was a romance author. Love was in her DNA the same way hockey was in mine. Slowly but surely, I knew that she was rubbing off on me. Not to say I was going to write a romance novel anytime soon or anything. I just had this new appreciation for showing my love to her ever since I told her two weeks ago that I did. But I wasn't good with words like she was. I had always been better with my actions.

We were heading to her parent's place tomorrow to celebrate the holidays with them, and I couldn't have been more nervous and excited at the same time. I was meeting the people responsible for raising my girl to be the incredible woman she was. At the same time, I didn't want them to see me the way my parents saw me. I didn't want them to not like me, or worse, not want me with their daughter. If I had a daughter, I sure as hell wouldn't want her dating someone like me. Not with my reputation. God, my daughter wouldn't be allowed out of the house until she was thirty.

This whole Christmas thing was a big reminder of the things I never had growing up. My childhood wasn't filled with the love Jacks had. She asked me to pick my favourite Christmas movie... and I hadn't seen half of the ones she listed as her favourites. I just told her to pick and she picked *Elf*, just for laughs. I never had that tradition of watching movies or going for a walk through the park to see the lights. Jacks believed in Santa until she was ten. She put out milk and cookies every Christmas Eve, and couldn't sleep because she was so excited. Her favourite Christmas movie was *The Polar Express*, and she had a big soft spot for Rudolph. I couldn't give her the same information about me.

It was the first time in our relationship that I felt like I wasn't enough for her, and fuck was it a shitty feeling. I went down this spiral after that

realization, only to know that she felt this way constantly when she was with me. It felt like she could do so much better than someone who didn't hold the same values as her. Someone who saw things the way she saw them. I wanted to love Christmas as much as she did, but I didn't. I don't think I ever would.

It was hard to shake that feeling after I realized it. Much like her, it ate away at me, trying to convince me that I didn't deserve her when I knew I did. She chose me. She trusted me and opened her heart for me. She took the time and got to know who I was, without once, bringing hockey into it as if it was some prize at the end. Respectfully, Jacks didn't know shit about hockey.

"You're thinking too much," she said softly before letting out a groan. I felt her body stretch next to me before her grip tightened around my waist. She nuzzled in closer, giving me a whiff of her apple shampoo that I loved. "What's on your mind?"

My first instinct was to lie to her. I didn't want to worry her with something as stupid as this. I was a guy. I was a fucking hockey player, for crying out loud. I shouldn't have been worrying about something like this shit. I should have had Beau's mentality in that I can always fuck someone better if things don't work out. But this was Jacks. My person. I refuse to lie to the person I love. The ones that love me, won't judge me for stupid things like this. I know I'd be pissed if Jacks lied to me about it. I wanted her to be able to talk to me about anything. I owed her the same.

"I don't have a favourite Christmas movie," I confessed as I reached for her hand. She shifted slightly, giving herself enough room to look up at me.

"That's okay. I know it's hard to pick —"

I shook my head, cutting off her words. "I never had Christmas like this, Jacks. Not the way you do. Not the way your entire face lights up at anything you see that is even remotely Christmas-related. Christmas at my house was always alcohol and arguing. Nothing special about that, now is there?"

She frowned before throwing her body at me in a hug. Her leg was now between mine and her head pressed into my chest. She squeezed me as hard as she could, making me chuckle at her efforts. When she pulled back, the frown was still etched in her features. "Do you not want to come with me anymore? Is that why you're overthinking? Did I pressure you to come?"

*Shit.* Did it really sound like I didn't want to go?

I grabbed her face, pulling her into me for a kiss. "Of course, I want to go with you. I'm looking forward to going with you," I stated with a smile. "I bought a Christmas tree for you, Jacks, because you love Christmas so much.

I wanted you to feel at home here. I have never put one up before this. I don't go all out. I don't watch movies or listen to music to get in the spirit like you do. I wish I did. I wish Christmas was good memories for me, but it's not."

She let out a shaky breath. "Do you feel pressured at all? Am I making you feel like you have to celebrate it? Even slightly?"

I shook my head. "No, sweetheart. You know I don't do anything I don't want to do," I reminded her. "I just wish I felt like you did. I wish I had that excitement you do."

"I can't help but feel like I pressured you," she swallowed hard. "This brings up so many bad memories for you, and the last thing I want to do is remind you of them."

My heart swelled. "The only thing I want to do is replace the bad memories with good ones with you," I admitted as I reached my hand up to her soft cheek. "I've already got some good ones started."

"Really?" She furrowed her brows.

I nodded my head, brushing my thumb over her cheek. "Yeah! I told my girlfriend that I love her for the first in front of our Christmas tree," I reminded her. "Then, she sucked my dick like a fucking candy cane before I fucked her from behind like the good girl she is."

"Those are some pretty satisfying memories you've made so far," she giggled before leaning in, and pecking my lips. "If there is anything I can do to make this a little easier for you, please let me know. I don't want you to feel pressured, or like you don't fit in. I know your parents sucked, but I can promise you, my parents will love you like their own. My dad has loved you for longer than I have even known you. And my mom is going to love you when she meets you. I've already told both of them all about you and how sweet you are with me."

I smiled. Her parents were very sweet people from what I gathered in the passing conversations she had while I was there. Her parents had been married for over thirty years. They had kids, a house, even a family dog. Her parents still loved one another. From what she told me, her dad still brings home flowers on Valentine's Day, Mother's Day and their anniversary, just to show he was thinking of her. I wanted to be like that. I didn't want to repeat my parent's marriage. I didn't want Catalina to experience my parent's marriage.

"Does this mean we get to have sex in your bed?" I cocked my eyebrow at her, keeping my tone light in hopes she'd know I wasn't entirely serious

about it. I wouldn't deny her if she wanted to. I was a gentleman after all.

"You want to have sex when my parents will be in the house?" She shook her head. "You're loud."

"You're louder," I protested, making her laugh.

"It's not my fault your dick hits all the right places," she shrugged her shoulders, pulling away from me to get comfortable once more. Fuck! I loved this girl. I loved her so fucking much I don't think I could breathe without her.

I dragged her in a little closer before resting my head against hers. She responded by tightening her grip around my waist, trying to get impossibly closer to me. "Jacks?"

"Mmh?"

"You're my favourite person in the entire world."



Catalina's parents were incredible.

Here I was, standing in the middle of their kitchen on Christmas Eve, attempting to assist Catalina and her mom with their baking. I learned quickly that she wasn't joking when she said her mom taught her everything. She knew her way around a kitchen better than I knew my own arena. She was insanely skilled in the kitchen and confident too.

"Have you always been this good at baking?" I asked her mom as I stirred the wet ingredients into the dry as she asked me to.

She nodded her head. "My mother always told me the way to a man's heart was through his stomach," she said as her eyes watched over my every move. "I taught Catalina here the same thing."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "She had me with that chicken stir fry."

"I know I did," she beamed, pointing her spatula at me before she winked. "You devoured it, and two days' worth of leftovers in one sitting."

"Compliments to the chef, my love," I grinned.

"Austin makes incredible chicken tacos, Mom," she revealed with a soft smile, making my heart flutter in my chest. "He made them for me one date night, and like the gentleman he is, made two kinds in case I wasn't a fan of spicy buffalo."

I watched the smile spread across her mom's face. I tried my hardest not to convince myself that it was more than kindness. I really wanted her parents to love me. Not only as a person but as their daughter's partner too. I knew Catalina was just telling them things about me so they could get to know me, but I really hoped it made them like me more for her too.

"You've found a keeper," she muttered over to Jacks as if I wouldn't hear her. I placed my bowl on the counter, proud of the work I had just done, and ready for her mom to make sure it was up to standard. I had no idea what we were even making, I just knew I wanted to help them out. I wanted to do whatever it was that helped me fit into their family.

"He is a keeper," Jacks breathed out as she walked over my way. Her gorgeous green eyes were locked with mine, making my knees feel weak. I swore I fell more and more in love with her every day I saw her. She was turning me into a romantic. Who I was last year would have been buried balls deep inside whatever woman hit on me at the bar, and I wouldn't have so much as even asked for her name.

I was proud of the man I had become, especially for Jacks.

"So Austin," her mom began as she started scooping out a ball of dough onto a baking sheet. "What is your favourite Christmas tradition?"

Shit. First thing that came to mind. "Decorating the tree... and mistletoe," I shared. God, I hope it wasn't too obvious that I was new to this whole Christmas thing. I didn't want her mom thinking that I didn't appreciate the holiday, or them inviting me to join their family for it.

I felt a hand press between my shoulder blades and I turned to see my girl next to me, bringing me back to reality. I flashed her a warm smile, receiving one back from her. Her head rested against my shoulder, keeping little distance between us, even with her mom there. "Mistletoe, huh?" She giggled.

I rolled my eyes, trying to fight my grin as I looked at her. "Any excuse to kiss you, of course."

"As if you need an excuse," she teased.

"You're in luck," her mom said. "There are a few new ornaments missing from the tree. Why don't you two go add the finishing touches?"

"I'd love to," I nodded before slipping my arm around Jacks shoulder.

Decorating the tree at her parent's house was a little different than it was at my place. I got a really good look at all of the ornaments they had hung, telling me stories throughout the years. There were a lot of Disney ones,

which I expected for Jacks. A lot of cute little Hallmark Christmas ones that made me smile, including the Frosty one. A Christmas special I kind of forgot about until now. Maybe that was my favourite special and I just didn't know it?

I stopped when I came across a few homemade ones. They were what you expected... horribly decorated, messy and filled with authenticity that only a six-year-old had. Seeing Catalina's name spread across the red ball made my heart feel funny. I had one just like this, only it didn't make it to the tree the year I made it. The year I found out Santa wasn't real.

I felt Jacks slip her arm around my waist, pulling me from whatever trance I let myself slip into. "You're spacing out a little more today," she pointed out, giving me a squeeze. "You okay?"

"Just..." A pause. "Feeling like I missed out on a lot."

She slipped around me, standing in front of me with a sad smile. "I hate that you feel like that," she stated with her brows furrowed together. "I hate that your parents were so shitty to you, and took away everything that's good about your childhood." Her throat jumped and her grip tightened around my waist. My stomach felt uneasy. I felt like I was ruining her favourite time of year with my bullshit. "This is a fresh start for you, my love. This is a chance for you to dip your toes in the water and indulge in it. It's a chance for you to start your own traditions, like fucking me from behind on the couch after you've assembled our Christmas tree."

I couldn't help but chuckle. She was right. I knew she was. She was a lot kinder than she should have been. Especially when I was kinda dragging myself about the whole thing, bringing her down in the process. She deserved to have the happy me. The one that let things roll off the shoulder. There was nothing I could do to change my shitty past. But there was a fuck-ton I could do to change my future, starting with this Christmas she so kindly invited me to. She wanted me here, and she deserved to have me here. The me she loved.

I pulled her into my arms, tugging her in as close as I could. "I'm sorry I'm being a grump," I said softly. "You're right. This is a fresh start, and I'm happy to be here with you."

She shook her head before her head tilted back, meeting my eyes. "I wish I could take away all the shit you went through when you were growing up," she confessed. My eyes met with hers, seeing the soft yet seriousness in her eyes. My heart swelled as I took her in. "I can only make good memories with you in hopes they make the bad ones seem distant. Like you did with

me.”

I leaned down, brushing my lips against hers in a sweet, chaste kiss. Her arms slipped up the length of my back, reaching my neck to draw me in closer to her. I was able to wrap my arms securely around her waist, holding her flush to my chest as I smiled against her lips.

“Get a room, you two,” I deep voice filled my ears. I jumped back immediately, putting some distance between Jacks and me. He turned his head, looking at Catalina. “Chickadee, you mind if I interrogate your boyfriend for a few minutes?”

“Dad,” she warned, shaking her head. He winked at her, and that seemed to convince her enough to leave me alone with him.

Her dad was a little shorter than I was expecting. Then again, I was over six feet. She looked like her dad. He had the same eyes and the same facial features that made me smile. He wasn’t a built guy like I was expecting. If anything, he looked like a dad. A good dad who cared about his kids.

My palms began to sweat and my heart rate picked up. I was nervous. Of course, I was nervous. She said her dad was a huge hockey fan, and I was hoping that was going to give me a little elbow room to grease him up a little, in hopes he’d like me after that.

I took a seat on the couch, trying to ease my nervousness. My hands were knitted together and I was fighting the urge to fidget. He sat down on the chair across from me, a soft smile playing on his mouth when I finally looked up at him.

“Austin Sawyer is sitting in my living room,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “I remember your rookie year, kid. You were incredible. I was devastated when I heard you were out indefinitely after that accident. How are you doing now?”

He was starting off with hockey. That was something I could handle, especially with someone who knew the game. I loved Jacks and all, but that girl knew close to nothing about the game I played and that was okay. It was going to be nice to talk to her dad about it.

“I’m doing a lot better, sir,” I nodded.

“Austin,” he interrupted. “You can call me Liam.”

“Apologies, Liam,” I breathed out, trying to rid the lump growing in my throat. “I am doing much better. I’m back on the ice next week to play our Toronto game.”

“Nervous?”



“For the game or this conversation?” I half-joked, feeling the sweat trickle down my back.

Her dad laughed, shaking his head. “The game, son. You don’t have to be nervous about our conversation. This isn’t one of those conversations where I intimidate you and threaten your life if you hurt my daughter.”

“Then what is it?”

He got up from the chair, moving to take a seat next to me on the couch. His hand clapped my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. He had done more for me at the last minute than my father had in twenty-nine years. “When I found out Catalina was dating you, I was happy, don’t get me wrong. But I was nervous. You’re a professional hockey player on the road for weeks on end. Now, yes. Long Island doesn’t travel as much as some other teams, but distance is still hard in a relationship, especially when one of you is in the public eye a majority of the time.”

“I understand.”

“You’re also the first man she has brought home since she was fifteen,” he added with a sad smile. “And the way she looks at you —with such love — she’s never looked at anyone that way.” He said it with such sadness, it ripped something apart inside me. He was there after Jacks was hurt. He was there to witness how much it destroyed her. “You look at her like she’s your world, son. You look at her and you see her. You see all of her, not just the surface-level pieces she lets people see. You see the happy side of her. The nerdy side of her. The vulnerable side. I have seen the two of you here, and the way your face softened as soon as you looked at her screamed that you’re in love with her.”

“I am.”

“Does she know?”

I nodded my head. “Told her a couple of weeks ago. When everything blew up about me on social media.”

“It can’t be easy for you to be in the spotlight like that,” he shook his head. “Your personal life shouldn’t be up for discussion.”

“I’m more worried about her,” I admitted, looking at her dad with sadness. “She doesn’t deserve her life being talked about when she didn’t sign up for it. Falling for me doesn’t automatically give the public the right to her life too. I’m trying to protect her, but things get out of control sometimes.”

“The important thing is that you are trying to protect her,” he said with a

smile. “It’s our job as men to look out for our women, even if they don’t exactly like it, or even agree.” He was right about that one. I would do anything I could to protect Jacks, even if she didn’t like it. “She says you’re not close with your parents.”

“I’m not. No. We’re not on speaking terms,” I stated firmly. “I didn’t exactly follow my family legacy.”

He scoffed and I thought I had said something wrong. “What legacy is that?”

“My dad expected me to be a surgeon like him. Like my grandfather. My mother is a nurse at the same hospital.”

He shook his head. “It’s their loss, son,” he stated with another pat on the back. “You’re a good man. My daughter wouldn’t love you if you weren’t. She wouldn’t have brought you here if you weren’t. You are always welcome here.”

His words meant the fucking world to me. It was more than my dad had ever said to me. He welcomed me into his house with open arms. Both of her parents did. “Thank you, Liam.”

“But, if you hurt my daughter, she is the one who is going to threaten your life,” he reminded me.

“Your damn right,” Jacks voice filled my ears. In her hand, she had two mugs and a soft smile playing on her lips. She walked over in her Christmas pajama pants and her ugly Christmas sweater, handing me a mug filled with something topped with whipped cream. “Spiked hot chocolate,” she beamed. “And yes, I am trying to get you drunk.”

I took it from her with a smile. “You look adorable.”

“You think so?”

“I know so,” I chuckled. “Very festive.”

“I’m glad you think so ‘cause there’s a matching one for you upstairs.”



It was closing in on 10 pm. I had Jacks resting her back against my chest. Her head rested close to mine. My arms were wrapped tightly around her. She wasn’t kidding about the matching Christmas outfits, and quite honestly, I kind of loved them. We had the same Christmas sweater, but different pajama

pants. Hers was a soft material from the lingerie store she loved to shop in. She got mine when she was online shopping, unsure if I would even wear them. I'd do anything for her if it made her happy.

The look on her face when she saw me clearly stated she was.

Her parents were curled up on the chair together, much like we were. We had a Christmas movie on. One Jacks picked and claimed as her favourite a few nights ago. *The Polar Express*. In all honesty, it was a good movie thus far, and I loved the way her body reacted to it.

She was also slightly intoxicated thanks to the special hot chocolate and the three beers we had throughout the evening. Her body was buzzing in a way I had never seen, let alone felt. She was safe and comfortable. She was with her family. She knew nothing was going to happen to her.

She shifted in my arms, moving to lay next to me, curling herself into my side. Her soft body fit perfectly against my harder one. Her head rested safely on my chest, and her arm securely around my waist. I dropped my lips down to the top of her head, letting them linger for a moment longer before drawing my attention back to the movie.

"I think this one might be my favourite," I confessed quietly.

She beamed up at me with her drunk smile. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Oh god. "Sure."

"I love you." Even though I already knew she did, it didn't stop my heart from feeling fuzzy and my muscles from relaxing. Hearing those words leave her lips were never going to grow tired. "You're my favourite person in the whole wide world. And you're so comfortable to cuddle with."

I tightened my arm around her, pressing my lips to the top of her head. "I love you too."

"Mmh. Merry Christmas, Austin."

And for the first time in I don't know how long, those words left my lips. "Merry Christmas, Jacks."



## *Catalina*

“So fucking hot, Jacks,” Austin muttered in my ear. His hips collided with mine as his cock pushed inside my aching core. It was the first time we decided against using a condom, now that the pill had a chance to kick into full strength. I felt closer to him than ever, not just because there was no barrier keeping us apart.

His firm naked body hovered over mine. My hands traced over his skin, feeling the ridges of his muscles and the dips between them. I threw my leg over his hip, dragging him closer, drawing him deeper into my wanting pussy. His lips collided with mine as he began to move, filling me up over and over again.

“Austin,” I cried out, throwing my head back against the pillow.

“Look at you,” he breathed out between kisses. “Taking my dick like a good fucking girl.”

He felt incredible and he looked it too. His muscles flexed as he moved with precision. He knew exactly how to move and how I liked him to move. His big cock sliding along all the right places. One of his hands traced down my body. His calloused fingertips left a delicious scratch in their wake. I rolled my hips along him, meeting him thrust for thrust.

“Can I try something?” He asked softly. His hand came up to my cheek, tilting my head up to him. “I want to make you feel good.”

I nodded my head. “Yes.”

His hands slipped around my body, tearing me away from the mattress with ease and his cock was still buried deep inside of me. I wrapped my arms around his shoulder, holding myself to him as he shifted our position.

He sat down on the bed, settling me in his lap. How he hadn't slipped out of me was beyond me. He felt deeper at this angle. I felt fuller and closer to him than ever before. We were face to face, breathing in each other's air as our eyes met. “You okay, Jacks?”

I shifted slightly, and whatever I did, felt incredible. “Fuck!” I cried out. “Yes! Yes, I'm okay. Please do something.”

His hands trailed down, grabbing the globes of my ass, dragging me forward. My eyes fluttered shut, feeling him push impossibly deeper into me. “This will help you come 'cause I can stimulate your clit with my pelvic bone, like that night on the couch, only naked,” he said with a softness to his

breathy voice. “And I get the best view of your perfect tits pushing against my chest.”

His fingertips curled into my ass, urging me to start moving. And I did. My arms tightened around his shoulders, keeping me grounded as I began to move. The angle was phenomenal, as was the stimulation to my clit that he promised me.

It took no time at all before I was a whimpering mess in his lap. My legs were quaking. The pressure was building in my core. I was close. I was so fucking close. “Austin. I can’t —“

“Yes you can, Jacks,” he groaned, ready to lose control of himself. “Let me make you feel so good, sweetheart. Let me make that pussy squeeze my cock. Fill you up with my come.”

This man and his fucking dirty mouth. “*Please! Please! Please!*” He took that as the go-ahead to help me move along with him. His cock pushed deeper with each grind of my hips. “Fuck me. Come inside me, please. Fill me up, please. Please. Fuck.”

“So sexy when you beg me,” he gritted as his eyes screwed shut. He wrapped his arms tightly around me as I worked myself on him, chasing my slow-building orgasm. The pressure was almost too much and I needed the release. I needed to come so bad. “You’re doing so good, Jacks. Come for me, sweetheart. Come around my big cock.”

That did it for me. My body was shaking as my walls clenched around his hard cock. I leaned forward, burying my face in the crook of his neck as my fingers tried to grip something to hold me here.

His release came moments after with a loud grunt and a buck of his hips into mine. Sweat covered both of our bodies, making things rather sticky and uncomfortable as soon as our highs wore off.

“You’re incredible,” he muttered, pecking my lips before he collapsed against the mattress. “I don’t think I’ll be able to think of anything but this today.”

I shook my head with a giggle. “That’s too bad, considering you have your first game tonight,” I reminded him as I traced the tattoo on his ribcage. “That was good luck sex. You haven’t even gotten your birthday sex yet.”

“Shit,” he muttered. “I forgot that was today.”

“The game?”

“My birthday,” he swallowed hard, turning his head to the side. I lifted myself off of him, instantly feeling the mixture of wetness running down my

legs. That was something new, I thought to myself, still not used to the whole having sex regularly thing. “I’ve been preparing for this game, I kind of forgot my birthday today.”

I smiled proudly. “Well, I didn’t. Happy Birthday, Austin!” I kissed his lips sweetly. I made my way to the bathroom, needing to clean myself up more than anything. More importantly, I needed to use the bathroom. As I sat down, Austin walked in, still very much naked, standing in front of the mirror. I expected to feel a little nervous, but I didn’t. It felt like the most casual thing in the world. It felt... normal? Were we already at that stage where we were comfortable enough using the bathroom with each other in there?

I finished up using the bathroom and reached into the shower. Austin was in and out, grabbing things here and there. I really needed to feel clean and not sticky and covered in sweat. Just as I was about to step in the shower, Austin walked back in with my phone, handing it to me. “Someone named Hank is calling you.”

The landlord for the lower apartments.

I quickly grabbed it, answering it as quickly as I could in hopes it wouldn’t go to voicemail. “Hello.”

“Hello. Is this Catalina?”

“Speaking.”

“Hi Catalina. It’s Hank. Apologies for calling you so early, but I didn’t want to wait,” he began. His tone was warm, giving me hope for the next words that were hopefully about to leave his mouth. “Unfortunately, someone put in a significantly higher amount down on the apartment as they need it quicker. I’m sorry to do this to you. I know it’s a big inconvenience. I hope you’re able to find something else.”

With that, he hung up.

He gave the apartment to someone else.

The apartment I was supposed to get at the end of this month.

The one I was supposed to sign for tomorrow.

He gave it to someone else.

“Jacks,” Austin’s voice pulled me from my thoughts, bringing my eyes forward. “Everything okay?”

I nodded my head, giving him the worst fake smile I could muster up before it fell, and I shook my head. “Hank is the landlord for the lower apartments. He was just calling to let me know that he’s giving the apartment

to someone who put down more money on it than I offered. Significantly more,” I frowned with another shake of my head. “So it looks like my move here is a little more delayed than we hoped.”

I turned on my heel, getting in the shower without another word.

A feeling of dread washed over me. I didn’t know this city well enough to figure out where to look next. Sure, I could ask Austin or even Jade, but that wasn’t the point. The point was to live in the same building so I didn’t have the added worry of the extra distance between him and me. Not to mention, I didn’t have the biggest budget in the world. I wasn’t going to have a job when I moved here, and it was going to be difficult navigating all of this mostly on my own.

Maybe this was a sign telling me to stay in Stonebridge a little while longer. Maybe it was a sign telling me to wait and see if things were going to work out between Austin and me, and in the meantime, I visit when I can. Maybe, just maybe, it was a sign telling me to slow it down between us. We were great together, but we also had to be great apart. We had to see if it would work between us with distance involved.

But I wasn’t going to tell him this.

Not on his birthday of all days.

Not on the day of his first game in over a year.



Turns out professional hockey players have insane pregame rituals. I had never seen Austin so... particular about something in my life. After my shower, he hopped in to clean himself. After that, he had to head out for his morning skate, leaving me to finish the last little details of his birthday party that Lucas and I were planning for him at his place.

Not to mention, I still hadn’t given him his birthday presents yet. One he was getting tonight underneath the jersey he gave me. The other was an actual gift I had planned for a little while now. He would get both of them when we got home after the party.

When he got home from his skate, he asked me if I wanted to make some lunch with him. Of course, I agreed. He was making some sort of pasta, knowing he needed a good meal to prepare for the game tonight. Pasta was



his go-to, but sometimes he made power bowls, or whatever Lucas was eating. All he wanted was to eat.

As soon as he finished his meal, he cleaned up, gave me a kiss and headed up to bed for a nap. He had a routine. A superstitious ritual he couldn't break. I respected that and I didn't want to do anything to ruin it, even if I wanted to curl up next to him. He would definitely consider me a distraction then, and I didn't want that.

Instead, I took the time to bring out my laptop and used the quiet time to curl up on the couch and write. I had a novel to finish and a dream to pursue. It wasn't going to write itself, unfortunately. Not to mention, Austin had given me a lot of motivation these last couple of weeks. It was time to turn it into something someone would read one day.

Soon enough, I was writing paragraph after paragraph. The words were cooperating for the first time in a long time. I was also at the point in my novel that I was excited to write. The love scene. The first love scene. The slow burn was sweet, creating the perfect moment for them to finally get together intimately.

Much like my first time with Austin, it was sweet as hell. It was easy to recollect the moment we spent together. The way his hand slipped along every inch of my skin. The feeling of his lips tracing along my jaw, travelling down my body much like his hands did. His gentle caress of my cheek as he kissed me deeply. God, I loved him. I only hoped that I could translate that on the page.

My fingers typed for what seemed like hours. The word count increased significantly with each glance I allowed myself. Before I knew it, the couch dipped down in front of me, pulling me away from the document in front of me. I glanced up, seeing my favourite smile from my birthday boy. He was dressed in a black suit and a black tie to match. His hair was brushed back and he smelled incredible. I could get used to being a hockey girlfriend if it meant seeing my boyfriend dressed like that.

"Hi handsome birthday boy," I beamed, shutting the laptop, and placing it on the table next to me. "Have a good nap?"

"Mhh," he smiled, leaning over to peck my lips. "I did. You get some writing done?"

"Lots of it," I said proudly.

"Any chance I get to read that for my birthday?" He asked, giving me his best pouty lip that almost made me cave right there and then.

I shook my head. "It's not done yet, my love. I promise once it's done."  
He smiled, pecking my lips once more. "I gotta head to the rink now. Get my shit taped up and whatever."

"You nervous?"

He chuckled. I expected a cocky answer for him but it wasn't what I got. "Little bit," he breathed out. "It's been over a year since I've played an NHL game. I think I'd be insane if I wasn't a little nervous."

"I love your honesty," I said, squeezing his hand in mine.

"Well I finally have someone to be honest with," he winked, giving me another kiss. "I love you, Catalina Jackson."

"I love you, Austin Eugene Sawyer," I muttered between kisses. "Score a touchdown for me."

"Jacks..."

"A home run," I teased, laughing at myself and the look on his face. "A goal! Score me a goal!"

"Damn right," he rolled his eyes. "Jade's taking you to the game right?"

I nodded my head. "She's coming to get me just before six."

"Good." He shifted off the couch, smoothing out his suit. "One more kiss for good luck."

I stood up from my seat, climbing on the couch without a second thought to give me more leverage on him. I reached his lips a whole lot easier from this height, giving me the opportunity to deepen it just enough to be borderline inappropriate. "Good luck, handsome. You're going to kick ass tonight."

He planted one more kiss on my lips before heading to the door, stepping out to get ready to play his first game of the season. Of the year. And he was going to kill it tonight. I saw it on his face yesterday. He was ready to be back on that ice. He was ready to kick his career to a start once more.



"The stadium is packed," Jade said, glancing around at the seats around us, taking in the full house. Her number seventeen jersey with Collins on the back of it made me smile. She wasn't kidding. I don't think I had been to something this busy since the Fall Out Boy reunion tour back in twenty

thirteen. This was probably more packed than that. I don't think there was a single seat left in the building, let alone some standing room.

Jade had insisted on grabbing us popcorn and beers, stating we couldn't watch a hockey game without it. I argued with her, stating that sour patch kids were also a staple at any sporting event. She laughed and agreed.

Our seats were pretty damn good. A lot better than I had expected. We were maybe five rows from the ice on the home bench side. It was going to give us the best view of the ice and more importantly, Austin.

The players were on the ice, skating around and shooting pucks into the net. A few of them were doing stretches, reminding me a lot of the position Austin was in this morning between my legs. I scanned the ice for number thirty-six, hoping to finally see him in all his gear. I couldn't wait to see him play tonight.

My eyes quickly spotted him maneuvering the puck on his stick with speed and ease. He was born to be where he is today. He was born to wear those skates.

"So, Lucas's jersey, huh?" I teased, nudging her shoulder a little. I watched her cheeks turn pink as her eyes moved forward. Was she looking for him too? "You two finally talk it out?"

"Not exactly," she shook her head. "I've actually been avoiding him."

"Why?"

"Because we kinda-sorta-maybe-possibly-had a huge fight New Year's Eve," she confessed. The colour in her cheeks only darkened. Even under her blush, I could see it. "And I told him he was never my best friend."

"Jade!"

"I know," she shook her head. "I had a few drinks. He had a few drinks. He was pretending like he hadn't ignored me for the entire year. I was angry. He said some things. I said some things. We had a screaming match, I said he was never my best friend and we went our separate ways."

Shit. "Jade," I asked quietly, trying to hide my frown.

"I know, Jacks," she breathed out. Somehow, her frown only deepened. "I've never regretted something more in my life. Things could have gotten better, but now they are worse and I feel like shit."

I was sad for her. I was rooting for Jade and Lucas. I wanted that friendship back for them. I wanted that awkwardness to go away. I felt worse for Lucas. He had to be devastated over it. "You can't avoid him forever, especially not when you're wearing his jersey. Not to mention, he's going to

be at the party tonight. The party at his place, that he and I are throwing. The one you are attending. Please talk to him.”

She swallowed hard. “I’m going to talk to him tonight. I have to.”

“He cares about you Jade,” I told her, hoping it would ease her anxiety. She scoffed. “He does, Jade. He told me he cares about you. Even though you guys aren’t talking, he still cares about you. He always will. Despite what you said to him, you two were best friends. There is far too much history for it to be thrown away because of one argument.”

“But what if this was the breaking point?” She sniffled, making my heart drop. “We need to drop this conversation for now. I really don’t want to spend this game crying.”

“Consider it on pause,” I assured her, giving her a weak smile. I reached for her hand, giving it a squeeze before offering her some popcorn. She let out a weak laugh, trying to snap herself out of it.

The lights turned down moments later, and the game was ready to begin. They played the Canadian national anthem before the American one. Before I knew it, the puck dropped and the game began. Austin was on the ice shortly after. I remember him explaining shifts to me when we watched a few games together in the apartment. He was always second shift after puck drop, putting him on the ice now.

Watching him skate was insane. Sure, we had our skating date and he was face then. Seeing him on the ice, doing what he did best was a whole other sight. The only thing I was not a fan of was the hits. One of the Toronto guys hit him into the boards while in battle for the puck. It was something I was going to have to get used to. I was fine when he did it to other people. In fact, it was kind of hot to watch him check someone into the boards.

He was made for this and I could see that he loved it. He was flying out there like he never left.

I was sure I fell in love with him all over again watching him do what he loved.



## *Austin*

It's felt fucking incredible to be back in the game.

I was gliding along the ice like I never left. My body felt great. I was focused on the game at hand, more so knowing that my girl was out there, watching me with pride. The puck was constantly on my stick, tossing between Nate and Luke. It certainly helped that Toronto was a shit team and barely brought their A-game when they were here. I thought they'd put up more of a fight than this.

We were well into the third period, and the score was up two thanks to Beau and Nate for their nasty shots on goal. Their goalie didn't stand a fucking chance. I was just finishing up my time on the bench, ready for my line to head back out on the ice for another shift. I felt the sweat dripping down my back thanks to my hair.

Before I knew it, I was back on the ice, skating to the offensive zone, ready to play my part. The puck landed on my stick as Smith, one of the Toronto defensemen, came at me from my left. I shot the puck towards Luke before shifting away so I didn't take a hit.

I skirted past their other defensemen right as Luke passed the puck my way. I had an opening and I was going to fucking take it. As soon as the puck was on my stick, I took the shot, aiming for the top shelf. The buzzer went off moments later, confirming my shot went in.

I spread my wings and took off.

My teammates gathered around me, congratulating me on the goal that felt more than fucking incredible. My first game back too. That was my push. That was my confirmation that I was back and ready to kick ass again. No car accident was going to keep me from playing the game I was meant to play.

The cheers from the fans in the stands only lifted me up more.

"Great shot, Sawyer," Coach Johnson called out as I skated past the bench, bumping my teammate's gloves along the way.

With five minutes left in the period, Toronto managed to get on the board with one shot from their captain. Shortly after, Beau took a penalty for boarding, leaving us short a man for the final few minutes of the game. I was back on the ice for the final minute of the penalty kill, hoping to keep the score three to one while in the defensive zone.

They were working hard to set themselves up like I'm sure they had done

at least a million times in practice. It was easy to see they were struggling. They didn't play like we did. They didn't have the same dynamic between their players as we did. I could read Nate and Luke with so much as a shoulder shrug and that was something I hadn't forgotten. Not for a fucking second.

As their wingers tossed the puck between each other like this was some sort of playground game, I felt myself growing more frustrated. They were wasting time on this, hoping to let the period come to a close with a shitty score instead of taking the shot like they should have. No shot was a bad shot, but clearly, they didn't understand that concept. Hell, I would be surprised if they even understood how to play fucking hockey.

Colton, their left winger, made a move to pass to Matthew, their centre. A dumb fucking mistake. I dug the edge of my blade into the ice, taking off towards him, checking him into the boards before taking the puck. It was like taking candy from a baby.

Soon enough, I took off down the ice on a breakaway, almost smiling when I realized they were too fucking slow to catch up to me. I swerved right, throwing off the goalie before tossing it in the back of the net.

That's two, baby!

The period ended seconds after that. My teammates skated over to me, pulling me in for a celebratory huddle before the rest of them from the bench joined. It felt fucking incredible to win my first game back. Even more so to have two on the board. It was like I never fucking left.



I was still buzzing long after my shower, taking this as a big win.

I stood in the change room in my Long Island t-shirt and boxers, the reporters made their way in. Post-game interviews were about to begin, and I knew I was getting one, regardless of my star status in the game. Joel had prepped me for this one, reminding me not to say anything stupid. He was asking a lot, in my opinion.

Before I knew it, I was surrounded by reporters and journalists, ready to question me for the first time this season.

“Austin. How does it feel to be back?”

I chuckled. “Phenomenal. Feels like I never left. I’m happy to be back.”

“Two goals and one assist is a great start to your season. Are you optimistic about the playoffs?”

“That’s still a long way off,” I shook my head. “As always, I like to focus one game at a time, like the rest of these guys in here. It’s important to keep focused on the steps to get there, not the main goal.”

“Is there anything you can tell us about the rumours going around about you?”

My heart dropped. I was waiting for this to come up, and Joel told me it would. I just wasn’t prepared to answer it so quickly. I was sure I would answer a few more about the game before jumping to that. “I’m here, aren’t I?” I let out a dry laugh. “Honestly, being taken out of the game I love to play, not knowing if I was ever going to play again is terrifying. I’m still pretty young and I still have a lot of games left in me. This past year of recovery has been nothing but getting back to this point and making sure I was still a vital part of this team.”

“Is it true you were driving drunk the night of your accident?”

That was a question I was not expecting.

“No, I was not,” I stated firmly, my tone sharpening towards the young reporter asking. “Any other questions about hockey, and hockey only?”

“What has been your biggest motivator to get back on the ice?”

I shook my head, trying to fight my smile. “My girlfriend has a thing for me in hockey gear. What can I say?” I shook my head, earning a chuckle from a couple of the reporters. “Really though, I’m meant to be on the ice, playing the game have loved my entire life. Thank you for your time, guys.”

They made their way over to Lucas for his interview. At least he was able to put his pants on before his interview. One of the ones from mine was lingering. The one who asked me if I was drunk that night on the road.

“I apologize for asking that question, Austin. My boss said he would fire me if I didn’t,” he said. The kid couldn’t have been older than eighteen. I clapped him on the shoulder, giving him a smile.

“It’s all right, kid,” I nodded. “No hard feelings.”

I finished getting dressed, knowing full well I was going to be overdressed for whatever party Jacks and Luke had planned as a surprise. I loved my girlfriend, I did. But man, the girl had a shit poker face and she sure as shit couldn’t hide a thing from me. I knew her tells better than anyone. Just like I was damn sure she knew all of mine.



I slung my bag over my shoulder, finally able to pull my phone out and check it for the first time. I had a few messages from Catalina, which was a given. What really made me smile was the two I got from her dad. A good luck one, and a congratulatory good game, happy birthday message. The relationship I developed with him over Christmas was one I valued immensely. I may not have had a good father figure growing up, but I have one now.

I stepped out of the change room, leading towards the hallway to get out of this building privately. Most of the crowd was out of here by now, save for a few hoping to grab autographs. I was searching for a certain redhead, wanting a celebratory kiss from her more than anything.

“Great game, superstar,” a familiar voice called out. My number thirty-six jersey caught my eye, followed by the warm smile growing closer to me. I opened my arms up, waiting for her body to collide with mine. The smell of her warm, apple cinnamon perfume filled my nose, bringing a wave of comfort to me. This night was perfect. Hell, this entire day was perfect.

“Of course it was,” I grinned. “I had my lucky charm cheering me on.”

“Two goals tonight,” she beamed, squeezing me tightly. “You were on fire.”

“Did you enjoy the game?” I asked her as one of my hands reached her cheek, urging her to meet my eyes so I could give her a kiss.

“It was amazing. You were amazing,” she giggled, pecking her lips to mine before I could. “Watching you play is mesmerizing, Austin. Truly. I love seeing you do what you love.”

“Austin,” a female voice filled my ears. I turned my head, glancing behind me. My heart dropped and all the blood drained from my face. Jacks must have noticed how my body tensed ‘cause her grip on my body tightened, grounding me.

*My mother.*

Time hadn’t done her any good. Her hair was graying and wrinkles decorated her eyes. She was frail, almost as if she had let herself go. What the fuck was she doing here? Better yet, how the fuck did she get passed security to get to this area? Jacks had a special pass to get here. My mother shouldn’t have been given shit.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked coldly. I pulled Jacks in a little closer, wanting to protect her more than anything.

“Happy birthday, kiddo,” she breathed out, taking a step forward. I took

that as my cue to take a step back. “Can’t your mom say happy birthday to you?”

“No actually, you can’t,” I stated, shaking my head. “You’ve got some fucking nerve showing up here.”

“Austin,” she pleaded, taking another step forward. Jacks shifted in my hold, putting herself between my mother and me.

“Don’t,” her strong, confident voice ripped through the hallway. “You had your chance to make things right. Years to make things right.” Jacks shook her head, slipping her hand in mine, giving it a squeeze. “It’s too little too late to repair the relationship you destroyed with your selfishness and your neglect. It’s too late for you to be a part of his life when you did everything you could to put it on the line last year, and you didn’t even have it in you to visit him when he was in the hospital after you lied about your asshole husband beating you to get him there. He deserves better than you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, bitch,” she scoffed, making her disgusted face. It was my turn to squeeze her hand. “You’re just another slut in his bed.”

“Don’t you dare talk to her like that,” I warned her, taking a step towards the estranged woman. Jacks did not deserve to be spoken to like that. Not by her of all people. “For your information, she’s my girlfriend. One I was terrified to have in case I was unlucky enough to end up with someone like you. But she’s not. She’s the opposite of the woman you are. She’s sweet, and kind. She’s strong and independent. She’s fucking perfect. You want to call her a slut in my bed, fine. But just know that it’s her I’m going to watch walk down the aisle someday. It’s her I’m going to say I do to. It’s her I’m going to start my family with. And you know what, Mom? I’m not worried about ending up like you and Dad, ‘cause I knew to get as far away from you as I possibly could the second I could, and I never looked back. I will never look back.”

“Austin, please.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you and him are dead to me,” I shook my head. “You’ll never know my girl or our kids. You’ll never be a grandparent to any of them. You’ll never get a part of me again. You lost that a long time ago and you put the nail in the coffin last year after what you did.”

“Better get a prenup on that one,” she called out. “She’ll bleed you dry.”

“Last time I believed something you said, I almost died,” I declared, trying to keep myself as calm as humanly possible. “Now, you’ve got five

seconds to walk away before I call security. I never want to see your face here, or any other arena ever again. I'm done."

She lingered for a moment. For a second, I thought she was testing to see if I would really do it. Jacks gave my hand a squeeze, motioning her head to the end of the hallway. Lucas, Nate and a couple of other guys from the team were glancing down our direction.

*Fuck.*

This was the last thing I wanted anyone to know about me. Especially my teammates. They didn't need to know how my relationship with my parents was. Now they knew more than I ever wanted. It was all it took for my mother to walk away.

What the hell was she thinking showing up here? What gave her the fucking right to show up almost a year to the date after the accident? She sure as fuck wasn't checking up on me. She wasn't doing anything but reminding me that she existed. That she was playing this innocent card when she was just as bad as my dad. She might not have raised her hand to me, but she sure as shit didn't do anything to stop him. She didn't do anything but buy the bottle for him to consume after his long shift. She enabled him just as much as he laid his hands on me. This was on both of them and she had to be on fucking crack if she thought I was ever going to give her a chance to be a part of my life. That ship sailed twenty years ago.

"We'll be out in a second," Catalina called out to the guys, urging them out the private door. Her hands reached for my cheeks, turning my focus to her. "Where can we go for a private moment?"

She was dragging me down the hall, looking for a place to take a moment. I couldn't form words and I couldn't for the life of me, figure out why I couldn't say anything. Why I couldn't communicate with her where to go? Nothing was coming out. Somewhere along the way, my vision blurred. Before I knew it, I was sitting down on something soft and Jacks was kneeling down in front of me. Her hands caressed my cheeks once more.

"It's okay, superstar," she breathed out. "You're safe. You're having a panic attack, my love." I was? Her hands continued to gently run over my face, slowly calming down my rapid heartbeat. "You're okay, Austin. I've got you."

I reached my arms around her, tugging her into me for a hug. I needed her close. I needed her embrace more than anything. She of all people knew that. She knew me better than anyone. She was my person. "Thank you."

“You don’t have to thank me,” she muttered as her fingers carded through my damp hair. “No offence, but your mom’s a bitch.”

I let out a chuckle, drawing her in closer. “Told ya.”

“She is,” she giggled. “You okay? Is there anything I can do for you, my love?”

God, I loved it when she called me her love. It was so soft when it rolled off her tongue. “I just needed this moment alone with you.”

“Happy to oblige,” she beamed.

“I might need another one later tonight,” I said. “Maybe we can sneak away from the party to make out somewhere.”

“Who the fuck told you about the party?” She asked out of shock. I drew her in for a soft kiss.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re the worst liar in the world, Jacks,” I told her. “Not to mention, you had me answer a text the other day and I accidentally saw the conversation between you and Lucas and the two of you were mid-conversation about decorations.”

“Shit,” she breathed out. “Please act surprised!”

“For you? I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?” She pulled back with a mischievous look on her lips.

I shook my head, trying to fight my smile. “Yes! Anything, you dirty birdie you.”

“You think I’m a dirty birdie now,” she leaned in, whispering in my ear. “Just you wait to see what I have on underneath this jersey, birthday boy.”



Jacks went out of her way for my birthday. And I mean, she really went out. When we walked into Lucas’s apartment after making a quick stop at mine to change, the place was decorated to the nines with all sorts of balloons and shit. There was a decent-sized cake on his kitchen counter and a ton of food to feed all of us after playing a sixty-minute game.

What I wasn’t expecting was for them to light candles and have me blow them out. Not that I wanted to admit it, but I kind of loved that they did that. After the shit that just went down with my mother, I needed that reminder that I had people who genuinely did love me.

I had a girl who loved me and stood by my side.

A girl who put on the sexiest lingerie for me, telling me that she was the present I got to unwrap. And man did I unravel her. Her black, lace, practically sheer lingerie was sexy, sure. But seeing her like this? The confidence that filled her. The way she let herself go for me. My dick was instantly rock hard.

I took my time with her tonight and she let me too. Whatever I wanted, as she said to me. I just wanted her. To hear her whimper my name, beg me for more and more. I was learning exactly how to pleasure her body the way she liked, just as she was learning what exactly she liked. For her, she loved my face between her legs.

Which is why I made her come three times from that alone tonight.

“Please,” she begged. Her hips searching for something — anything — to give her that friction she craved.

“Please what, Jacks? Tell me what you need,” I pleaded as my lips wrapped around her left nipple. My hands traced along her waist, dragging along her soft skin. God, her body was insane. She was breathtaking. Every dip and curve of her, the ridges and freckles. I knew she didn’t see her body the way I did and man, that was a shame. Just the sight of her was enough to make my cock twitch in response. “Tell me, sweetheart.”

“Need you inside me,” she whispered as her chest arched into my touch. “Please, fuck me! Fill me up with that big cock of yours, superstar.”

Superstar sounded adorable coming from her lips.

“Want to feel all of you,” she added as her hand trailed down my body, reaching for my cock. “Please, make me yours.”

I shifted myself on top of her, settling between her legs. I reached for the extra pillow, lifting up her hips to slide it under, hoping this would help her with my angle. I took my cock in my hand, tapping the tip against her entrance, gathering up her slick. Her hips wiggled and her hands reached for her tits, pinching her nipples between her fingers. God, I was a lucky man. A lucky fucking man.

I pushed the tip inside her, my body falling forward, my lips ghosting over hers. “I love you, Jacks.” Without giving her the chance to respond, I pushed the rest of me into her tight pussy, feeling the warm wetness of her consume me. She let out a tiny moan and it went straight to my dick. “You okay, my love?”

She nodded her head. I felt her arms slip around me, drawing me in close

to her. "I love you too, birthday boy."

I closed the space between us, pressing my lips to hers in a soft kiss. "You're it for me, Catalina Jackson. There is no one else in the world I could picture spending my life next to."

Her eyes glossed over and I knew that my words struck something in her to get at kind of response. My lips met with hers as I began moving, keeping my thrusts almost painfully slow, desperate to feel as much of her as I could while I could.

She moaned into my mouth when I hit a particular spot, encouraging me to keep going. My hand slipped down her body, encouraging her leg to move over my hip so I could get closer to her. She rolled her hips in sync with mine like we had done this dance a million times before. I could do this a million times with her and it still wouldn't be enough.

"Austin," she cried out, throwing her head back. "More."

Who was I to deny her what she needed?

Before I knew it, her walls squeezed around my twitching cock. Her orgasm shook through her body, only this time, she pulled me in for a kiss, keeping me there as she rode out her high and my pleasure peaked. With every wave of her, I filled her up with my seed. Fuck, I loved that she was comfortable enough to let me do that.

"You alright, Jacks?" I breathed out, brushing a stray piece of hair away from her forehead, and tucking it behind her ear.

She nodded her head with a soft smile, tears pricking her eyes. "Yeah."

Something was off with her. I had known it for most of the night. She was a little distant. Not from me, just in general. I had a feeling it had to do with her losing out on the apartment. She didn't want to talk about it this morning, and I knew that much when she turned and stepped in the shower. Maybe she was ready to talk about it now. Even if she wasn't, I wanted to remind her that I was there to help her figure it out.

I lifted myself off of her, withdrawing myself from her core before leaning back down, and lifting her up. She wrapped her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist, letting me carry her to the bathroom with ease. I placed her down on the bathroom counter, grabbing a washcloth to clean the mess between her legs.

"Austin," she breathed out, capturing my attention. A single tear slipped down her cheek. "Something's bothering me."

"I know, sweetheart," I nodded, giving her a weak smile as I brought the

warm cloth between her legs. “You want to talk about it now?” I leaned forward, kissing her cheek.

She nodded her head once more. I finished cleaning her up, tossing the cloth to the laundry hamper before handing her the toothbrush with her toothpaste on it. I knew her nightly routine like the back of my hand now. She brushed her teeth before going through her face routine.

Tonight was no different, only she was naked this time. She was fucking beautiful, standing there in front of the mirror. She included me in her routine tonight. Whatever she washed her face with, she shared with me. Her creams were on my face, and god knows what else. Regardless, I just liked the quiet moment between us. It was comfortable.

I tossed her one of my T-shirts as she was about to go to the bathroom one last time. She emerged moments later in one of my old Long Island hockey shirts. She was nervous by the looks of it. Her steps were hesitant when she climbed into bed. I reached out for her, slipping my arm around her waist. “What’s on your mind?”

“I didn’t get the apartment, Austin,” she breathed out. Her throat jumped as her eyes met mine. “And I think maybe it was a sign.”

My brows furrowed.

“Maybe I’m not meant to make the move here yet,” she continued, keeping her eyes locked with mine. “The one downstairs was convenient for us. It was in my budget and all around great. I’m bummed I didn’t get it. I think it was a sign for me to stay in Stonebridge for a little while longer.”

My heart dropped. This had been on her mind all day? I knew how she felt about Stonebridge. She hated it there now. She didn’t have the same things there that she had here. Friends. Family. People that loved her for her.

“I also think it’s a chance for us to really see if we can handle long distance,” she said as she reached for my hand. “It’s a chance for us to see if we can make this work with any circumstances that are thrown our way. I know we can, in my heart, I know we can. I just need to be one hundred percent certain that I am capable of this.”

“You don’t want to find another place here?” I asked her, squeezing her hand, trying to understand where her head was.

She shook her head. “It’s already going to be a lot to move here. At least if I was living in the same building, knowing eventually I’d be moving in with you, it was only a few flights of stairs to move things. I don’t want the next year of my life to be living out of boxes, knowing I am just going to

move again. I need a home; a safe place, before I move in with my safest place.”

I let out a breath when it settled in that she wasn't breaking up with me. It was the opposite of that. She was doing what she needed to do to make sure we did work out. She needed to take the cards in her hand and play at her pace. After all, this change was big for her. She was still working through her trauma. I needed to let her be the independent girl I fell in love with.

“Do you hate me?” She asked as her eyes welled up once more.

I shook my head. “Of course not, Jacks. I meant what I said. You're it for me,” I reminded her. I shifted out of bed, making my way over to the dresser where I kept the envelope I had been waiting to give to her. “You're right. We do need to see if this can work between us long distance. Not with the convenience of you downstairs. We need to see if we can handle this, and I can't keep asking you to sacrifice yourself for me. Not like this. So you know what? We'll make this work.” I handed her the envelope that came in the mail with a smile.

“What's this?”

I smiled. “This is making it work, Jacks.” She opened it up, revealing the card with her name on it. “This is yours to use to fly here whenever you want to. I won't have as much of a chance to come to you now that I'm playing again. Whatever money I would have spent to come see you is here. I'd like you to come see me one weekend a month.”

“Are you sure?” She mouthed, her eyes not leaving the black card in her hand.

“You are my girl and I love you,” I said with a shrug of my shoulders. “I want you any chance I can have you, no matter the cost.”

“I can do that,” she nodded with a soft smile that damn near melted my heart. “Until we move in together.”

Before I could even think about what I was saying, the words effortlessly left my lips. “In the meantime, I'll get this place ready for you,” I sat down in front of her, reaching for her hand once more. “Make it our place. I'll build you that library you're dreaming of, and a desk for you to write your books. The same desk I will happily fuck you on when you're frustrated. I'll make sure the spare bedroom is put together for your parents to come see us. It'll be a home for us to host family Christmas, and build our family in. That sound like a plan?”

Two tears slipped down her cheeks as she nodded. She threw her arms



around my shoulders, tugging me into her. “Thank you,” she whispered, squeezing me even tighter.

I meant every word of it. Catalina was my future. She was the one I wanted to spend my life with. I wanted her and no one else. I would go to the ends of the earth for her. I would give her the world if she asked me to. All she was asking for was for me to love her from a distance. A distance that meant she could work through whatever she needed to on her terms. A distance that meant finishing her novel and pursuing her dreams of being an author. Something that meant securing our future together.

“We’re going to make this work, Jacks. I promise you that,” I assured her, kissing her softly. I believed those words. I really did. There wasn’t a single doubt in my mind that Jacks and I wouldn’t get there. We would. I knew for a damn fact we would.

“Good,” she said as she pulled back from my neck. “But just to make sure, I may have taken an extra week off of work just to make sure. Called this morning to let them know.”

Those words lit something inside me. I leaned over, kissing her hard, tasting the slightest amount of saltiness against her minty lips. “I love you.”

“And I love you, superstar.”

## EPILOGUE - A FEW MONTHS LATER...

*Catalina*

I wiped down the counter for what felt like the hundredth time that hour. I was getting antsy. Austin had a huge game tonight and in Caroline of all places. It was game seven, a big game that could make or break if they made it to the final round. I was still learning exactly how hockey worked, but even I knew this one held a lot of weight for him and the rest of the team.

My mind had been racing all day, trying to keep myself busy until three o'clock. Jade was picking me up outside of the cafe, and driving my car straight to Raleigh. She had my bag packed in the back, ready for me to change out of this shitty, smelling uniform and into something more presentable for my boyfriend's important game.

The cafe was dead. Our regular customers had not dropped by for their morning coffees and baked goods. Not Roy and Dave to grab their teas. No Leon and his scratch tickets were at the table by the window. The ladies were nowhere to be seen. It was dangerously quiet. Unfortunately for me, my manager wasn't letting me leave early, in case it picked up later on.

Here we were, after eleven and we hadn't served a single customer in close to an hour. I had wiped down every surface in the front of the house at least three times. I had brewed coffee and cleaned the machine down. I deep-cleaned the pots and even soaked the filter baskets in heavy-duty cleaning. There was no way I was going to keep myself busy until three. It was impossible.

"Boss is here," Tracey muttered as she skirted by, holding a pink cloth in her hand to head out to the dining area. Smart girl. I should have taken off somewhere the boss wouldn't have seen me.

I snuck into the back, deciding to help Kayley out with some of her

dishes. She was a little behind and I had nothing better to do. Anything to keep me busy.

I filled the sink with the detergent, ensuring all the trays were soaking in the bubbly sink. Doing the dishes here wasn't nearly as fun as doing them at home with Austin. He had to be thinking about tonight's game. He wasn't like me though. He wasn't worrying about the outcome as much as he was worrying about how he was going to play.

Throughout the playoffs, he had taken a few nasty hits. When I saw him last night, he was covered in bruises all over his body. I spent a good half hour rubbing his back and getting the knots out of his shoulders. He was hurting, even if he didn't want to admit it to me. I saw it in the way he slowly got up from the bed, and when he was in the shower. His muscles screamed at him every time he so much as moved. That was normal for him, he assured me. It was nothing to worry about.

It didn't mean that I didn't worry, especially going into tonight's game. I was more scared he was going to take another hit and have it take him out of the game. It was hot when he checked someone into the boards, but when it happened to him, my heart stopped.

I didn't want to admit it, and not to Jade of all people, but I was also worried about Lucas. In the last two games, he had been angry. It wasn't the normal Lucas anger that wore off after the final buzzer. He was short with me when we were out to dinner last night. Austin had to step in and put an end to it before Lucas apologized. He hadn't mentioned if anything was bothering him, then again, he wasn't going to. He was focusing all of his energy on these playoffs. When hockey came to an end, we might be lucky to find out what's going on with him. Might.

"Cat, Sophie wants to see you in the office," Sabrina called out as she walked passed me with her pack of cigarettes in one hand, and her phone in the other. I tossed the cloth into the soapy water and grabbed some paper towels to dry my hands as I made my way over to the office. I was stopped dead in my tracks when she came out to find me.

"Hey. How are you?" She asked me, rubbing my back.

"Fine," I answered vaguely, trying not to come across as rude.

She nodded her head. "Olivia called in for tonight so we need you to cover for her until nine."

"Sorry, I can't." I wasn't missing Austin's game for this place. No fucking way.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid there are no other options. You have to."

I scoffed. "Sorry, but it's not happening. Someone else can cover for her. I'm not available to."

She crossed her arms over her chest before leaning in. My heart was racing a mile a minute, knowing full well I was about to get yelled at for not complying with her request. No matter how many times I had stood up for myself with her, it never sunk in that I had a life outside of this cafe. She expected me to be flexible for her cafe, then come raise time, I find out I get a few cents when others get dollars more for less work. I was tired of it.

She shook her head. "Catalina, your work ethic hasn't been the greatest these last few months. I would have thought you would be willing to do whatever it takes to make that up. I need you to step up and do your fucking job."

"Excuse me?" I furrowed my brows.

"You heard me," she cocked her head to the side, narrowing her eyes at me as if I was stupid and didn't comprehend her. "You need to step it up, stop being lazy and focus on your job. Other employees here have families to go home to. You don't," she pointed out. I swallowed hard, not wanting to say something I would regret. "Hard work will get you further in life. I didn't get my mansion and this successful cafe by taking every other weekend off. You could learn a thing or two from me and my success."

"Oh, could I?" I was getting angry. "And what would that be? Teaching me how to belittle employees to make them feel worthless every time they step foot in this cafe for their shift? Or maybe you want to teach me how little to pay employees for their hard work and ignore when they go out of their way to do something?" I shook my head, unable to hold back. I was done. "Or maybe you want to teach me how to be a huge bitch. Then again, I think you've taken the crown on that one."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me," I smiled at her, shaking my head once more. "I've spent countless hours here, covering shifts, working late hours, fifteen-hour days without breaks, only to be told I'm lazy and don't focus on my job. I've come in with a fever of a hundred and three because I was made to feel like shit for letting my co-workers down if I wasn't here to pull my weight. I've been forced to come here during horrible snowstorms, and hurricanes, and never once, have you or the manager here, stepped in to help any of us. You call that successful? You call it successful knowing your employees go home to

their families and cry about how shitty you made them feel, just so you can feel like a queen bee? I'm sorry, but I graduated high school years ago, and I'm done working for someone who has a superiority complex and uses it to berate and belittle employees just to make themselves feel good."

"I —"

"I'm done," I stated, untying my apron from my waist, and pulling it over my head to drop to the floor. "Find someone else to do the job. Better yet, get the manager to do the job instead. I quit."

With that, I turned on my heel and headed to my locker. I grabbed my bag, jacket and phone, ready to leave this place behind me.

This chapter of my life was done.

The Stonebridge book of my life was now complete.

It was time to go home to Long Island.

To Austin.

After he won though. He had to win first.

# GAME 7 - EASTERN CONFERENCE

## *Austin*

Game Seven of the Eastern Conference Final and here we were playing against Carolina in Carolina. I joked to Jacks back in April about how funny it would be if we played against Carolina at some point during the playoffs. Now, here we were, not only playing them in the playoffs. We were playing them for the final spot in the Stanley Cup final.

Our first chance to even play with the hopes of holding up that cup. We had one final game to get through. One game.

My body was hurting and if my body was hurting, my teammates have to be feeling worse. I played half a season at most. They have played every game. Every night. They showed up and put us in this position. I didn't. I was a tiny portion of their efforts. I could only hope to bring them to the Stanley Cup final in hopes of making it up to them for missing the beginning of the season.

My shoulder was really fucking feeling it. It didn't help that I was checked into the boards two nights ago. I was battered, bruised and aching in ways that only said I played professional hockey.

I sent off my I love you text to Jacks before putting my phone in my bag until later. I needed to focus on my game tonight. I needed to push through the pain and play the best game I could.

We stepped out onto the ice for a pre-game skate. I needed to move my legs before I got more antsy than I already was. Lucas skated next to me. His face was a little bruised from a fight that he got into with one of the players the other night. Lucas was more of a fighter than I was and spent a lot more time in the sin bin than I did. He had no issues dropping his gloves the other night after a dirty hit from Calvari, a player who had beef with Lucas since our junior days.

Needless to say, Lucas wasn't having it. It didn't mean he didn't take a few hits in the process. He was already on edge from that fight, which in all honesty, wasn't really Lucas's style. He had been more angry lately than not, and whenever I asked, he brushed it off as stress from the playoffs. Understandable considering we had gone to game seven with each team we played in the Eastern Conference. First, with Montreal, we almost lost when it went into overtime.

Boston was no better. Considering they won the Stanley Cup last year,

they were out for fucking blood. Beau was out on concussion protocol after a hit that had his head colliding with the boards. It was shit for my line, but we made it work with the rookie who had stepped up his game significantly since the playoffs had begun.

Carolina was the worst by far. It was how on edge Lucas was, or us missing Beau. Nate was getting agitated with every game we played and his normal passive nature was turning aggressive. He checked one of their defensemen into our bench last game and damn near started a riot.

We all wanted this win so fucking bad. We wanted to hold up that trophy at the end of tonight and know we did something right this season. Most of all, I didn't want to see Carolina win. I was grateful for the place because it brought me my girl, but the team sure as shit didn't deserve that win.

"You all right, man?" I asked him, giving him a little nudge.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Just trying to clear my head before the game tonight. If I don't, I'll be kicked."

I swallowed hard. "Talk to me. Is it Calvari?"

He shook his head, shrugging his shoulders. "No, not that. I'll be fine."

"Promise?"

He chuckled. "Sawyer, you know I don't make promises I can't keep."

"Luke..."

"We'll talk after the game."



The game was going to shit.

We were down two goals and they were playing dirty. The refs were clearly Carolina fans with the shit they were getting away with. Nate had been elbowed. Calvari charged at Lucas, setting him off and he got a penalty for roughing. I had been tripped twice and nothing. But god forbid I check someone into the boards and get an interference call. I was pissed off, to say the least.

We all were.

During the intermission after the second period, Coach Johnson just about ripped us all a new one. I was sure I saw steam coming from his ears he snapped at all of us. I couldn't blame him. None of us could. If anything, his



anger only motivated me more to get this done. And because our captain wasn't saying shit, I was going to. Someone needed to spark this team.

"C'mon guys," I breathed out, clearing my throat. Every eye in the room was on me, making my stomach plummet. Shit, I didn't think this one through. "We've come so far this season. You've had to work your asses off to make up for missing players the entire season, and I apologize for that, personally." I paused, watching heads nod. "I know we're angry. Hell, we're fucking pissed and we should be. But let's not give them a win to celebrate on top of this. They are playing dirty and the refs are making shitty calls. We're two behind going into the third. I know you fucking assholes can win this. I know we can put ourselves back in this game and take back what is clearly ours. Now let's fucking go and kick some ass 'cause I'm not going home tonight with my tail between my legs and I sure as shit do not want to see the sad look on my girlfriend's face at the loss. I'm sure you don't want the same from your wives and kids. Let's win this thing, boys!"

Cheers filled the room as some of the guys got up, ready to head back out to play the last period. A few of them tapped the top of my helmet on the way. I only hoped it was enough to motivate them to win this game. Three goals to take it home.

"Sawyer," Coach Johnson called out, leaving me standing in place. "The guys needed that. I think they needed it from you of all people. Go out there and kick some ass."

"You got it, coach."

Within the first minute of the third, Nate drove one to the top shelf, slipping past their goalie without him even realizing it. The goal only motivated the team more. We were one step closer to tying this one up. One more to even throw this into OT with a chance to keep this going. Not that I wanted OT. That pressure would surely kill me.

The equalizer came with eight and a half minutes left on the clock thanks to the rookie getting it in the fifth hole. One more in eight minutes was doable. It was one hundred percent doable, but Carolina has just as much a chance.

My line took the ice once more, replacing the third down in the offensive zone. Not that it stayed there long. We lost the face-off and the frozen biscuit was sent down to the defensive zone. I took off as quickly as I could, trying to make it there before anything drastic happened without our defensemen there. I checked someone into the boards, snaking the puck away from him,

and sliding it along the boards to Lucas.

He took off on the breakaway as soon as the puck landed on his stick. His ability to move through just about anyone at top speed was the shit they'd talk about on ESPN highlights tonight. He took his shot, only for the goalie to block it at the last minute, covering it instantly so we couldn't get the rebound. He was fucking scared and we all knew it. Carolina knew we were in this to win.

"Give it up, Sawyer," Spears called out next to me. "Go home to that slut you've got in your bed."

*Don't let it get to you. You've got too much to lose in the next five minutes. Don't do it.*

When I looked up, my eyes caught Lucas with his head turned to Calvari. His shoulders were tense. I don't know what it was, but I had a really bad feeling when it came to those two. He wasn't entirely in the game tonight, but he was trying. He had to push through for five fucking minutes.

The puck dropped in the face-off, going in my direction instantly. I passed it over to Nate once again, knowing he could get us set up to take this one home. We were so damn close. We could fucking do this. I watched the Carolina defensemen line up in front of the net. I moved behind the net, ready to send it to Lucas when the whistle went, stopping the play.

Calvari's gloves had dropped before Lucas joined them on the ice. "C'mon daddy's boy. You gonna hit me or what?"

"Fuck you!" Lucas spat.

"Your daddy will be in his grave before you take the fucking shot," he chuckled. Wait what? What the fuck was going on here?

I moved closer, hesitantly trying to get between them.

"Why don't you take a look at your fucking stats and worry about your own fucking game, ya fucking pigeon"

He scoffed and I knew the second the sound left his lips that it was going to set Lucas off even more. "Why don't I fuck your girl after this game. Whether she wants it or not, she's going to take my cock down her fucking \_\_\_"

Whatever restraint he had left was gone. His fist collided with Calvari's nose before anyone registered what was happening. The ref whistle kept going but it didn't stop the two of them from going at it. I had never seen Lucas so pissed in my entire life.

As soon as I turned around, I was met with Spears who decided to take a

swing at me, colliding with my face. A cheap shot that had me doubled over for a moment. A perfect moment to take him out by the neck and slam him down to the ice.

It wasn't long until one of the refs pulled me off of him, separating half of us down the ice. Lucas was holding his face as the medics made their way onto the ice. I wasn't keeping my distance for this. Not with my teammate hurt. He was bleeding pretty badly by the looks of it. He had a towel up to his face before the medics got him up and moved him off the ice.

Even with him injured, he was kicked from the game. Thankfully, so was Calvari.

I was given a two-minute minor for roughing after the whistle was called, leaving me with a little over a minute left on the clock to get the puck in the net. I didn't care how or by whom, it just needed to happen. After all of this, I was not fucking losing to Carolina.

With Lucas booted for the game, the rookie took his place. I was going to have to make this work. Lucas and I were joined at the hip in our lineup. That silent conversation was gone and I hadn't bonded with the rookie the same way I had a lot of guys. I didn't have the chance with half a season under my belt.

I had the puck in my possession, waiting for the rookie to get in place before the play would begin. If we were lucky, this would work out and we'd be heading to the final round. I shot the puck over to him and I knew instantly it was a mistake. He didn't pick up on it and Carolina scooped it up, taking it down to the defensive zone. No matter how fast I was, I didn't have the start the other guy did on his breakaway.

And just like that, we lost.



I had to get looked at by the team medic as soon as I stepped off the ice. It was protocol after being in any kind of scuffle on the ice. Given my shoulder injury from the accident and the hit to the face, I should have been looked at as soon as the fight was done. They also knew I would have fought to stay on the ice until the final buzzer called the game.

I needed a bandage over my eyebrow to cover the nasty cut I received

thanks to his fist. The weight of the loss was hitting me hard. We were so fucking close. We were so devastatingly close to the final round. From taking the Eastern Conference win. These guys worked so fucking hard for it. Seeing how heartbroken they were in that locker room was the worst part about this. No one understood a loss the way we did. And to make matters worse, the press was in right after for their post-game interviews. It should be against the rules to interview the losing team during game seven of the playoffs, no matter what round. It's always going to feel fucking shitty.

I just wanted to get out of here and take Jacks in my arms and hold her close to me for a long ass time. In a few day's time, I could spend all my time with her, whether it was in Long Island or in Stonebridge. As long as I had her, it didn't fucking matter where.

After a brutal hour of post-game interviews, I was on the bus back to the hotel we were staying at. Jacks told me she was going to meet me there instead of waiting until I was done and I couldn't blame her. The ride was silent. Lucas looked worse for wear, with a bandage on his nose, a dirty shiner and a split lip. He hadn't looked this roughed up since high school. He hadn't fought like that since high school. As soon as we were back, I was going to ask him what the hell was going on.

I was one of the last ones off the bus. Most of the guys headed to the hotel with their heads hung low. Defeat washed over all of them, and honestly, I felt it the most.

"Sawyer," Coach Johnson called out. I glanced up at him, seeing the sadness etched in his features too. Guilt filled me up. He wanted this just as bad as we did. He worked just as hard for this. "You played a hell of a game, son. We'll get them next season."

All I could do was nod my head. I knew I could have done so much fucking better.

I felt like shit for it.

I slipped the key into the card slot, hearing the beep. I opened the door to a dimly lit room and the smell of lavender. On the bed was Jacks, still clad in my Long Island jersey and a frown playing on her lips. Her arms opened up, and like the pathetic loser I was, my head ducked down in shame as I made my way over to her.

"You played a damn good game, my love." Her voice was so soft as her hand reached for my tie, loosening it as her eyes locked with mine. She carefully shoved my suit jacket down my arms before unbuttoning my dress

shirt. My heart began to race as soon as she reached for the belt on my pants. “What can I do to make you feel better?”

My throat jumped.

“Move in with me, Jacks,” I breathed out as my throat jumped. Her eyes glossed over as a smile appeared on her lips. “I don’t want to spend another second away from you. I’m ready. We’re ready. Fuck, the apartment is ready. It just needs you.”

She shook her head. “You are my home. My home is where you are. We could live in a shoe box on the streets and I’d be okay with it as long as I have you.”

She meant it too.

“Glad we’re on the same page.”

“Oh honey,” she giggled, pecking my lips “Half my stuff is already in your apartment. I quit my job this morning.” I couldn’t say I was all that surprised to hear it. I had been waiting for it for some time now. It was fucking incredible to hear though. “We both thought you were going further, so it was originally going to be a surprise. You’ve had a rough day.”

“Tell me about it,” I chuckled, resting my head on her shoulder for a moment. “The day isn’t nearly as bad now that I’m with you. You make the bad days a little better, Jacks.”

# EXTENDED EPILOGUE

## *Catalina*

One of the things I absolutely loved about living in Long Island was the taco stand just down the street from our apartment. I had been on a taco kick for the last week, which was becoming a slight problem thanks to the convenience of walking down the street. What made it worse was that Austin was on a roadie, leaving me with less self-control than I would have if he were home.

Jade was no better.

Since I didn't have Austin, she had been over four of the seven nights, claiming it as an impromptu girls' night. One with wine and cheese. Another was with Chinese food. Tonight, we were doing tacos. Lots of tacos.

Here we were, walking down the street of Garden City in our pajamas and Ugg boots, in the middle of November. It was so cold we could see our breath. She had brought over three bottles of sangria for our Friday night.

I had six tacos in my bag, while she had eight. Both of us were a little tipsy after the first bottle. We could barely contain our giggles as we made our way back up to the apartment. God, I loved girls' night in.

I collapsed down on the couch once more, heat filling my cheeks now that I had warmed up. "I can't wait for Austin to come home," I admitted as I reached into my brown bag. "I hate roadies."

Jade chuckled. "As if you aren't enjoying phone sex with him."

"Well, yeah. That's great and all. He does have some pretty filthy fingers and the nude photos he sends me are extremely sexy," I paused, swallowing hard. "I just miss having him here. I miss him sneaking into bed after coming home late and curling himself around me. I miss the way he gets up ten minutes earlier, just so he can cuddle me before he goes to practice. I was so spoiled this summer with him and I guess I still haven't gotten used to the hockey life yet."

"It doesn't help when your boyfriend is so in love with you and isn't afraid to show it," she pointed out. "He's obsessed with you. It's depressing for the rest of us."

"As if you don't miss Oliver," I teased, hoping to get a reaction from her. She had been dating Oliver for close to two years now. He was a respectable pediatric doctor from Manhattan and was the definition of husband material, according to her anyway. After deciding she was done with Lucas and his hot

and cold attitude towards her.

I was finally introduced to him when I moved to Long Island in May. It was a lot easier to get to know people in the area when I wasn't under a huge time constraint. Austin had made it a point to help me get to know the city he loved, and the people in his life that had been for a long time. That's when I was introduced to Oliver.

Needless to say, I was still team Lucas.

Oliver was great, sure. He had great credentials. He owned his own house and paid off his student loans within the first three years of graduating. That was all there was to him though. His job. He didn't have the same outgoing personality that Lucas had. Not to mention, I hadn't seen Jade laugh once when we went out to dinner with him on a double date.

Austin and I both agreed, she didn't have the same passion in her eyes. He was the opposite of Lucas. Oliver had the patience of a saint. He didn't get angry often and typically didn't care for sports, even if Jade was in the sports medicine field herself. Hell, he had no idea who the Long Island Manatees were when he met her father, the head coach. He was quiet, almost to the point of being shy. He was easygoing, smart and apparently great in bed.

"I do miss him," she smiled, nodding her head. "I'll see him tomorrow though. He has a date planned for me on Sunday."

"Cute," I beamed. "You guys are getting pretty serious, huh?"

She nodded her head softly. "What exactly are you implying, Jacks?"

"You guys do spend every weekend, all weekend together," I smiled, taking a bite out of one of my tacos. "You've been together for a while. You have to be thinking about taking that next step."

"Are you talking about moving in?" she furrowed her brows with a knowing smile. I nodded my head. "I mean, the top has come up, but it's quickly brushed off. I mean, I stay over at his place almost every weekend. Not to mention, he is good in bed. Jacks, his dick is so good that I have no problems finishing within minutes."

I shook my head with a smile.

"And he's so gentle," she said before downing the rest of her sangria.

"Gentle can be good," I nodded in agreement. "But sometimes being pinned against the wall with a hand on your throat is needed. Sometimes getting your ass spanked until it's red raw while he fucks you deep from behind is needed."



Austin can get pretty rough when he wants to be. Or more when I want him to be. Sometimes he leaves me begging for him to fuck me before he actually does something about it. The man knows exactly how to drive me insane before giving me the sweet release I desperately need.

“Oliver’s not like that,” she let out a giggle. “He’s very reserved. Missionary is the most I get from him.”

“But he still goes down on you, right?” My brows furrowed. She took a bite of her veggie taco, not daring to meet my eyes. “Jade! Are you fucking kidding me? He won’t eat you out?”

“He doesn’t like the way it tastes,” she shrugged. “It’s fine. It’s not a big deal.”

“Please tell me you don’t go down on him then.”

She shook her head. “Of course I do. Jacks, I’m not going to deny him what makes him feel good.”

I could punch her in the fucking face. How the hell was she settling for that? How did she still go down on him when he wouldn’t do the same for her? I understood not liking something, but denying them entirely new experiences was a red flag. No wonder there was no passion in her eyes. She deserved to have mind-blowing sex. It made me wonder if she was trying to convince me it was good when it really wasn’t.

“It’s not like you expect Austin to go down on you every time. It’s something you can live without,” she said, almost as if she was trying to convince herself that it was all right.

I shook my head hesitantly, downing my entire glass of sangria before pouring myself another glass. “It’s rare if Austin doesn’t go down on me. He likes to make sure I come at least twice before we have sex or before I go down on him. But that’s him and what he likes. And it’s also what I like too. Everyone is different.”

The rest of our tacos were eaten in silence. I genuinely felt bad for making her feel bad about it, even if I was honest. She was settling and I fucking knew it. I knew she was the one to look for Lucas after he was kicked from the Eastern Conference. There was something there that none of us knew about.

Lucas was a lot of things; a lot of not-so-nice things, but Jade was his soft spot. He would always have that for her. He would always be longing for her. I was convinced she was the same. She was in love with him just as much as he was in love with her. They were too stupid to act on it.

“Does Lucas ever mention me?” She asked, breaking the silence.

I nodded my head. “You know he does, babe.”

“Jacks, my love!” A deep voice filled my ears, making my smile grow wide. “I’m home!”

Austin walked into view with a large box in his arms, his hockey bag hanging off his shoulders and a bouquet of flowers. I sprung off the couch, heading in his direction when I caught a glimpse of Lucas standing at the front door with a tray of drinks. He brought me home a tea as well.

What the hell did I do to deserve this man?

He placed the box on the counter, along with the flowers. “Hi superstar,” I beamed before wrapping my arms around his shoulders and pulling him in for a kiss. “I missed you.”

“I score a fucking hat trick and you get superstar?” Lucas scoffed. “Un-fucking-believable!”

I turned my head towards him. “You kicked ass, Luke,” I stated. “A hat trick, two assists and only one penalty. You’re making me proud.”

“Thank you,” he said proudly before making his way into the apartment after kicking off his shoes. “Smells like tacos in here.” He stopped dead in his tracks when his eyes met with Jade on the couch. I didn’t miss the *shit* that left his lips when he realized she was here.

“These are for you,” Austin said, holding out a beautiful bouquet of salmon-coloured roses. “And so is the tea that Lucas has in his hand.”

I pecked his lips once more. “Thank you.”

“This box came for you too. It was really heavy when I tried to carry it in,” he informed me before he released me, moving to put his hockey bag at the front door. I furrowed my brows. I had no idea what it was, let alone that there was something for me. Jade and I just came back to the apartment, and I wasn’t notified about any deliveries.

I placed the flowers down on the countertop before trying to pry off the tape on the box. It said my name on it and the correct apartment. It didn’t say who it was from from what I could tell. I was also mildly drunk and my senses were a little off. I managed to rip the tape across the box, opening up the flaps, only for my heart to stop at what was inside.

“*Holy shit!*”

“What is it?” Lucas furrowed his brows, taking a step closer.

I reached in, grabbing the first one off of the top as tears filled my eyes. *My novel*. My author copies were in the box. It was fucking stunning. From

the front cover that I spent months trying to put together, to the binding, to the back. It was gorgeous. I was holding my novel in my hands.

“Are those...” Austin started as he made his way over to me.

“My book,” I mouthed, handing him the novel.

I did it.

I finally did it.

I was a published author. Seeing it in my hands only made it more of a reality.

“It’s perfect,” Austin smiled, engulfing me in his arms once more. “I’m so proud of you, Jacks. So fucking proud of you.”

I couldn’t have done it without him. I had him to thank for this.

I pulled back, reaching for the book once more, opening it up to the author’s dedication before handing it to Austin. He had read my novel when I finished the first draft. He had read over it multiple times for me, making sure everything was perfect.

*To those of you who are convinced you don’t deserve anything good because of your past. This one is for you. You will heal. You have to be willing to.*

*And to Him. This is my love letter to you.*

“Jacks...”

A single tear slipped down my cheek. “It’s my love letter to you, Austin Sawyer. To the man who found a broken girl on the streets of Stonebridge and decided to spill his coffee on her. You found me when I was broken, at a standstill in my life, unable to move forward from the trauma I had been through. I have spent the majority of my adult life afraid of what’s out there. Then I met you, and your patience provided me with the safe space I needed to know that not everyone was out to hurt me. You healed parts of me that I was sure would never recover. And throughout that, I wrote this novel, knowing full well I was falling in love with you. This book is for you, superstar.”

His eyes glossed over with unshed tears as his head cocked to the side. He clenched the book to his chest and his throat jumped. “Jacks,” he breathed out, shaking his head. “It’s perfect. But there is one thing I would change.”

I furrowed my brows. He turned the book, pointing at the front cover.

“Your last name,” he stated with a shrug of his shoulders. “Sawyer has a much better ring to it, don’t you think?”

“Austin.”

He placed the book down on the counter before reaching into his back pocket. Then, just like in the movies, he got down on one knee and opened up the black, velvet box. Inside sat the most beautiful diamond ring I had ever seen. Tears filled my eyes once more as my heart began to race. Was this really happening right now?

“I love you,” he said, giving me that handsome smile that won over my heart. “I’m not nearly as good with words as you are, so forgive me if this isn’t some romantic book-worthy speech. You’re my person, Catalina Jackson. You’re my home, and quite honestly, you have been for a very long time. You are the smile I need when I’ve had a shitty day. You’re the laugh I need after a devastating loss. You are my favourite person on the entire planet. It has only ever been you for me. You are my only choice. Twenty thousand days isn’t enough for me. I want you forever.” Two tears slipped down my cheeks, remembering his comment back from the night of the event. “So, Jacks... what do you say? Will you marry me?”

I kneeled down in front of him, cupping his cheeks in my hands before my lips pressed firmly to his. “Yes. Twenty thousand times, yes!”

His arms wrapped around me, holding me tightly to him in the warmest embrace I had been given since he left. “I love you so much, Jacks,” he whispered, kissing me hard. He pulled away, taking the gorgeous ring from the box, slipping it on my finger with ease.

My heart skipped the second I looked at it. It was two bands in one with a diamond in the centre. It was beyond gorgeous. When I daydreamed of the day I would finally meet someone and get to this point, I always pictured a simple ring worth a few hundred dollars at the most. I would have been happy with a ring pop from Austin. All that mattered was that he wanted to be with me. The rest of it was material items. Austin was one of a kind; irreplaceable. He was my best friend. My person. My only choice.

“That was the smoothest way to propose,” I beamed, shaking my head. “You might not be as good with words, but your actions speak volumes for you.”

“He learned from the best,” Lucas grinned widely as he clapped Austin on the shoulder. “Congratulations to the two of you. I couldn’t be any happier for you.”

Jade stood up, making her way over to us, keeping her distance from Lucas. “Congratulations! I couldn’t be happier to see two of my favourite people taking this step.”

“Thanks, Jadie,” Austin beamed before turning to me. “You better have left me a taco.”

“Why don’t we go grab some more tacos and give the happy couple a moment,” Lucas suggested to Jade. Her cheeks heated up before she reluctantly agreed. *Good.* Maybe he could finally talk to her and make her realize that Oliver isn’t the one for her. Just him asking her to go with him was more of a reaction than anything she gave me earlier.

As soon as they were out the door, Austin’s lips were on mine, kissing me hard and fast. Soon enough, my ass was on the kitchen counter and he was between my legs, dragging me into him. I reached down for the belt on his dress pants, making quick work of getting them undone and down his ass, enough for his hardening length to come out.

“Fuck, I love you,” I breathed out against his lips. “Get inside me now.”

He shook his head, breaking from the kiss. “Jacks, you’ve been drinking. Are you sober enough for this right now?”

I swallowed hard, shaking my head. I wasn’t sober enough for it, even if I wanted it. I had almost two bottles of sangria. He was completely sober. “I’m not. Not yet,” I frowned, taking my hand away from his pants. “I’m sorry.”

He leaned forward, pressing his forehead to mine. “It’s okay, sweetheart. I’ll fuck my fiancé in the morning.”

“Fiancé,” I giggled. “It has a really nice ring to it.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” he smiled, giving me a sweet kiss. “As pissed as I was at being sent to Stonebridge to help my coach’s shitty brother, I knew when I bumped into you that morning that you were meant to be in my life. I can’t live without you, Jacks.”

“Lucky for you, you won’t have to.” I wrapped my arms around his back, pulling him into me. “Thank you for choosing me.”

“There was no competition, Jacks. It has always been you. It will always be you,” he breathed out as he rubbed his nose against mine. “And once you’re sober, I’ll give you a sneak preview of what our future will look like.”

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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From a young age, I've always found solace in writing. When I think back to my teenage years, I spent a lot of time behind a laptop, typing away at whatever story brought me comfort that week. My life has always been about the words on a page, whether they were someone else's or my own.

Here I am, years later, writing the acknowledgements for my first novel. To say I'm emotional is an understatement.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jen Rowan is a Canadian author with a profound love for contemporary romance. She has spent the majority of her life creating stories and worlds to escape to when reality becomes too much. She is best known for her fan fiction works on Tumblr. She has recently taken a step toward her love for hockey romance and happy endings by creating her own stories and fictional characters to fall in love with.

When Jen isn't writing, she spends her time either working her full-time job or curled up with a good book and one of her four cats, while sipping on tea.

Instagram: [jenrowanauthor](#)

Twitter: [@\\_jenwrites\\_](#)

Facebook: [facebook.com/JenRowanAuthor](#)

Tiktok: [jenrowanauthor](#)

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