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A hockey romance

Valencia Ice Mafia

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To My Readers Who Love The Ice

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author note

I grew up in a close knit Philadelphia, Pa neighborhood with a community ice skating rink behind our homes. It is where many fantasies of me becoming the brown version of Dorothy Hamill were born:.) And where I first watched boys with skates and hockey sticks take the ice with a vengeance. The Valencia Ice Mafia series is a love letter to all of those frozen dreams and icy memories.

- Lisa

introduction

This grumpy hockey star is determined to win it all... including the nerdy new girl on campus. Only problem? She's taken.

ALERT: This is not your usual hockey romance. If you're looking for cute skate lesson scenes at the rink and mugs of hot chocolate, then this isn't the book for you. It's better that you know that upfront. You've been warned.

University hockey god, Neo Major, is the undisputed king of the rink and head of the team's notorious Valencia ice mafia. He's the kind of guy who makes hearts flutter and panties drop with a single glance, but I'm determined to keep mine under lock and key.

Yet the moment he laid eyes on me behind a wall of shattered glass, I knew I was in trouble.

His pursuit of me is relentless, even though I'm taken.

My surrender to him is delicious, knowing it's a huge mistake.

Ours is a passionate journey, where possessive desires ignite us both, but painful secrets threaten to burn our fragile connection down to the ground.

NEO is a steamy standalone hockey romance with some dark themes and a heady mix of passion, drama, and heart. It features a grumpy alpha ice captain, a busy Vegas hockey house, some very steamy moments, and a happy ending. It is the first delectable book in the frosty-hot

**Valencia Ice Mafia series by USA Today Bestselling author
Lisa Lang Blakeney.**

prologue

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Valencia City University Valencia Suns Locker Room
Freshman Draft Class

Two Years Ago

Neo

“I WANT you to look to the left and the right of you. Each and every one of you was hand selected to become a Valencia Sun by the coaches on my staff, not because you were the top players from your high school, but because we saw something else in you.

There’s some very special people in this room.

The man next to you is your teammate, your brother. The expectations I have of you, that you should have of yourselves, are high.

“I expect grit.”

“I expect greatness.”

“I expect that every time you get out on the ice, you give everything you’ve got. More than you did in high school. More than you ever have before.”

“There should be zero distractions, and I think you know what I mean by distractions. Nothing should come between you and the ice. No partying. No girls. Nothing but ice.”

“If you do this, if you’re committed to the grind of becoming a VCU Sun, then we will win.”

“We will win a lot.”

“And winning is part of this hockey program’s DNA.”

“If you’re ready to win, I’ll see you on the ice tomorrow morning at 8am. If you’re not up for it, I will have Coach Mike help you with your university transfer paperwork.”

When Coach Dixon leaves the room, the room is eerily silent. While most of us have played hockey at a high level in high school, there’s something about the no nonsense way that Coach spoke just now that has most of us shook to our cores.

The man is a legend and commands respect from hockey players across the country. Once upon a time, VCU was a university that nobody ever heard of. Now it’s known for having one of the most successful ice hockey programs in the country.

I come from a family that lives, eats and breathes hockey. It’s in our blood. My older brother Jake and I learned to skate before we could even talk. Trained by our father, who was obsessed with the game.

Jake was the prodigy.

I was not.

But Coach Dixon saw something in me when he came to scout me in high school. Something all the other scouts didn’t see or care to see.

My drive.

He told me I’d have to work my ass off twice as hard to keep my place on his team and I will. I know that if I make my mark during my time here, I’ll have a variety of pro NHL offers to choose from, which is the dream of any player who loves the ice.

So I’ll do this for Jake and his dream deferred.

I’ll do it for Coach, the man who took a chance on me.

And more importantly, I’ll do it for myself. Because it’s all I’ve ever wanted.

And everything that I am.

violet

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Christmas Eve

THE SOFT BLUE glow of twinkling lights draped around our small but mighty Christmas tree illuminates the room. Large snowflakes dance in the chilly night air, gently touching the window panes, painting a perfect Christmas picture.

“Turn it up, Mom!” I shout, our laughter echoing in the small quaint living room of our old townhome. Mom likes to keep the heat obscenely low to save money, but that’s okay, because this Christmas Eve we’re dancing.

Mom smiles and turns the volume knob. The speakers come alive with the lively beats of holiday hip hop, modern renditions of classic Christmas songs with an energetic bass. I can’t help but laugh as my mother shakes her butt to the beat against the tree.

“This is how we used to dance back in the day, Violet. Back when boys and girls actually danced together and weren’t twelve feet apart.”

“Just so we’re clear,” I giggle. “You’re dancing to Run DMC with a Christmas tree.”

“But back in the day, this Christmas tree would have been a good-looking boy in a pair of Levis and Adidas sneakers.”

“A boy like my father?” The question slips out of my mouth before I can stop myself. My father is not a topic that the two of us discuss because he’s been out of the picture since

I was four-years-old. I know little about him. Just that he was my mom's college boyfriend and, for reasons unbeknownst to me, he chose not to be a part of my life.

“Yeah, sweetie, just like him.”

Maybe because it's Christmas and I'm feeling wistful or perhaps because I just watched an over-the-top Christmas movie, I clasp my mom's wrist and ask her a question I've always wanted to know but was always too afraid to ask.

“Ma, were you in love with my father?”

The look on my mother's face changes from jubilation to melancholy.

“Your father and I cared a lot about each other once upon a time.”

“But?”

“But we were freshmen in college, too young, and we definitely weren't in love.”

“And how do you know when you're in love?”

“Clearly, I'm no expert, but I believe true love is what you can lean on when everything in your life seems like it's gone to shit. It's nobody's fault, but me and your dad just didn't have that.”

“And other couples do?”

“The lucky ones.”

“I've never seen an example of one of those lucky ones.” I think about all the high school couples plus a few college ones I've seen come and go. And even though I have a guy I'm seeing right now, when I examine all the surrounding examples, it all seems like a lot of sex and heartache.

“Maybe it doesn't happen in our family, but there are definitely couples who make it. Like really make it.”

Mom then holds the star we always put on the top of the tree, taps it to my forehead, and closes her eyes as if she's conjuring something.

“And my Christmas wish is that you shall find genuine love one day, my child,” she says in her fake Egyptian Pharaoh voice.

“I see that someone’s been watching a rerun of The Ten Commandments again.”

She laughs and says another line from the movie in the same voice. “So let it be written, so let it be done.”

“Will you please?” I cackle. “And stop wishing silly stuff on our Christmas star. Why don’t you ask the star to help me pass my classes next semester instead?”

“You think my request is silly? Humph, you never know. I may have just broken a generational no-love curse with a ten dollar Christmas star blessing.”

A new song plays and the two of us dance around the room, grabbing ornaments from my Grandmom’s velvet-lined box, each with its own story from Christmases past. My mom’s salt and pepper colored “phony pony” as she calls it, swings along her back as she moves, contrasting with my deep brown natural curls that shine under the tree’s ambient light.

“Remember this one?” I hold up a porcelain angel. Her wings chipped at the edges.

My mom nods, a nostalgic glint in her eyes. “Your grandmother gave that to me when I was about your age. She said it was to watch over us—always.”

“Wow, these ornaments must be very powerful,” I jest as I place it at the very top of the tree, just below the star. “One will ensure I find true love and another works as a conduit of the dead.”

Mom chuckles.

“There,” I say, placing the angel on the strongest branch I can find. “Now Grandma’s watching over this Christmas, too.”

“She certainly is.”

Hours seem to fly by as I find myself in my happy place, cocooned in warmth and joy on another Christmas Eve with my mom. Presently, I’m a sophomore at a local state school

ten minutes from our home, but quickly realize that moments like this may become rare once I graduate college and move out on my own.

As the clock nears midnight, both of us yawning and stretching, we finish tidying up the living room. “Bedtime,” mom announces, the fatigue clear in her voice.

I nod in agreement, my eyelids heavy. “Best Christmas Eve ever, Mom. Night.”

Mom kisses my forehead like she has hundreds of times before. “Sweet dreams, hun’.”

The house settles into its nighttime rhythm, the gentle hum of the heater finally kicking on, punctuating the quiet of the night. Upstairs, my room is awash with the soft hues of the fairy lights I’ve had hung up with wall tacks since I was eleven years old.

“We’ll have breakfast at nine. No cheating before then.”

“Ma, I’m twenty-years-old. I will not sneak a peek at my presents.”

“Or smell them or shake them?”

“Agreed,” I giggle.

When mom motions to turn off my lights, I ask her to leave them on.

“It’s Christmas.”

“You don’t pay my electric bill.”

“Ma, please?”

“Fine, see you in the morning.”

“Merry Christmas, Mom.”

“Merry Christmas.”

It takes me a while to get settled. I’m still just as excited about Christmas morning as I was when I was ten-years-old. Some things, thankfully, never change.

Just as sleep pulls me under my warm comforter, I think I hear something—a soft creak, a whisper of movement. At first

I dismiss it, attributing it to our old house's tendency to groan and moan. But then, more distinctly, comes the sound of a heavy thump.

My heart races.

That definitely wasn't no damn Santa Claus.

Suddenly, all I can remember are awful news stories I've seen lately about local fires and increased home invasions in the area. Taking a deep breath, I slowly place a foot on the floor while simultaneously reaching for the phone on my nightstand.

I call 911 as I tip toe outside my door.

I don't see any movement, just the flicker of the tree lights downstairs.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"I think someone has broken into my house."

"What is the address of the emergency?"

"4320 Pilgrim Road."

"Is this a house or apartment?"

"House."

"What is your name?"

"Are you sending somebody?" I ask, frightened.

"I need your name, miss."

"Violet Tate."

"Violet, where are you in the house?"

"Upstairs."

"Do you see anyone moving inside the house?"

"No."

"Do you still hear movement?"

"No."

“Find a safe place to hide until the officers arrive. I’m dispatching someone now. Stay on the line with me, okay?”

“I need to get my mom.”

“I recommend you stay where you are.”

But I don’t listen.

If we have to fight an intruder off, we damn sure are going to do it together.

I creep slowly toward the shut door of my mother’s bedroom. She must be sound asleep and hasn’t heard a thing. I carefully open her door but clench my teeth when the hinges make a sound. “Mom?”

Then I go completely still and release a wail that comes from deep within my soul.

“Miss,” the emergency dispatcher urges. “Can you tell me what’s happening?”

I’m kneeling by the body of my mother as I carefully lay my ear down to her chest, but I already dread what I’m going to hear.

Absolutely nothing.

“Miss!” the dispatcher repeats louder.

“It’s Mama,” I tell the woman, not even recognizing the hollow sound of my own voice.

“What about your mother?”

“She’s gone.”

violet

. . .



One Year Later

“ARE YOU PACKED ALREADY? That was fast.”

“Yeah, because I’m not bringing that much with me,” I say with a great amount of trepidation.

“I know you’re probably nervous about going to a new school in a new state, but I promise that you’re going to love VCU.”

I’ve lost a year of my life to shock and sadness since my mother passed away from what doctors say was a ruptured brain aneurysm. Since that horrible Christmas Eve, I’ve taken a year off of college to grieve and then put our house on the market so I could sell it to settle my mother’s debts. To make things even more difficult, because I can’t financially support myself, I’ve been forced to uproot my entire life and move across the country to live with a total stranger.

My father...Steven.

My parents met when they were freshmen at Valencia City University, a small private liberal arts college in Valencia City, Nevada. When my mom became pregnant with me, she had no choice but to move back home to Pennsylvania to live with Grandma and raise me. My father, on the other hand, stayed in Nevada and has built his life here.

While in school, my father joined a fraternity and one of his frat brothers is the current president of the university. Now that President Harmon (who my dad simply calls Bob) has learned about my situation, the school has offered me a full-ride if I want to finish my degree. Even though I don't want to go to school there, I couldn't say no because I need the scholarship if I want to finish school. Although my mom never regretted giving birth to me, graduating from college was the one thing she wasn't able to accomplish, which explains why earning a college degree was my mom's biggest dream for me.

Your education is important, Violet. It will open so many doors for you, she said countless times.

"It's just that I was doing so well at my old school," I tell my father, foolishly holding on to some hope that he'll do the right thing and help me move back to Pennsylvania and finish college there. "They made accommodations for me there."

In high school, I was diagnosed with an executive functioning disorder which some people think is just double talk for "a disorganized mess". It's an actual issue though, that makes it difficult for me to study in a way that's productive and stay on top of my assignments.

"And you'll do great at VCU too. It's really one of the country's best-kept secrets. It's a baby Ivy League school without the high price tag."

I try not rolling my eyes at his repeated description of his beloved alma mater. It's all he can talk about since the school extended the scholarship to me, avoiding any discussion of my learning challenges.

"I just wish you would move into a dormitory. Your mom lived in Palm West. I was in East."

Which is exactly why I don't want to live there. Doesn't he get it? I'm already afraid that I'll feel her presence all over campus. Living off campus in an apartment with an old high school classmate from back home will at least give me some sense of separation.

“Kennedy needs a roommate, and she’s the only person who I’ll know when I start there. It will help me adjust,” I tell him.

“Well, it’s fantastic Bob was able to also give you a cash housing stipend to live where you want. In our day, we had to live in campus housing. There were no choices.”

Every time my father discusses all the things that President Harmon has done for me, he says it proudly, as if he’s the one actually footing the bill.

Actually, sir, you probably owe me eighteen years’ worth of damn child support.

I offer him a stunted smile in response, not really giving a damn about how things were in the day. Hell, back in his day, he was busy getting girls pregnant and leaving them to fend for themselves.

The awkward silence between us grows, and he fills it with more questions.

“What do you want to do about your things from the house?” he asks.

“I’ll keep them in storage if that’s okay with you?”

“Uh, sure,” he says with some hesitance, I assume because he doesn’t want to take on any extra financial responsibilities for me.

“Just until I graduate,” I assure him. “And then I’ll pay you back, of course.”

“It’s fine, Violet,” he says, but I’m uncertain if he’s really okay with it or if he’s just saying that because he feels like he should. And why would I know? I don’t know this man at all. “You don’t have to pay me for anything. I’m your father.”

Uh, not even close, dude.

“Okay, thanks.”

My father lives about thirty minutes from campus. Close enough that I could certainly commute to school if I wanted to, but the one thing we agreed on is that I need to live near

campus instead of at home with him. He claims it's so I can get the full VCU experience, but I know better. He doesn't need his new daughter living here and cramping his style, and I certainly don't want to be here either.

I was willing to take an Uber to my new apartment that I'll share with my friend, Kennedy, but he wouldn't hear of it and is driving me there instead.

"Will you come home for Christmas?" he asks after we've been driving silently on a long stretch of Nevada highway for fifteen minutes.

Home?

I have no home.

It died a year ago.

"Can we play it by ear? I don't want to leave Kennedy alone on Christmas if she doesn't have plans."

"Oh, right, sure." He sounds disappointed. "We can play it by ear."

I play with the strap of my handbag for five minutes before I ask him a question.

"Well, what do you usually do for Christmas?"

He turns his head to stare at me for a moment. I'm not sure what he's thinking.

"I cook dinner. Have some friends over. Although this year it will probably be a super small gathering."

"You cook?"

"Yeah, I don't have the time to cook every day, but I'm a pretty fair cook for holidays and special occasions."

"Oh."

Before the car becomes too loaded with our mutual silence, we arrive at Kennedy's apartment complex. Nevada is so different. The highways are freshly paved, with no potholes to be seen, unlike the streets of my hometown in Pennsylvania. The complex features several small apartment buildings

covered in tan stucco with terra cotta hued roofs, surrounded by sandy colored dirt and a few strategically planted cactus plants.

It's nothing like home.

And I start to long for my childhood bedroom, my refuge, more with each passing moment.

I ring Kennedy's doorbell while my father unpacks the trunk.

"Hi," she answers the door cordially in a pink halter top and cutoff jean shorts. "Welcome to Valencia City Village."

"Hi."

She and my father shake hands after he brings my suitcases into the living room, giving her apartment a quick once over. The furnishings are sparse but the apartment is clean, and it seems to satisfy his Johnny-come-lately sense of parental concern. I'm just glad it's not dripping in Christmas decorations. In fact, there's not one piece of nauseating yuletide joy to be found anywhere inside the apartment.

This should work fine.

"Well, I guess I'll leave you to it," he says to me as he stands at the front door.

"Thanks for driving me, Steven," I say, making sure to stand a few feet away in case he thinks I'm actually going to give him a hug goodbye. I'm not.

"No problem. Call me if you need anything."

"Yep."

After he leaves, Kennedy shows me to my bedroom. It's smaller than my room back home, but that's to be expected.

"You and your dad don't get along, huh?" she asks.

"We don't know each other well," I say, not wanting to get into a full-blown discussion about my fucked up family dynamics.

"That's why you call him by his first name?"

“It feels too weird calling him dad. We literally just met a few months ago.”

“Say no more. I bet you want a drink then.”

“Um, no, actually, I don’t really drink much.”

“Oh, is it a religious thing?”

Kennedy and I knew of each other in high school and we’d say hello to each other in the hallways, but we didn’t know each other well. Our friend crowds were like two ships passing in the night. She was part of the beautiful people clique, and I was a part of the nerds. And not the nerds who were smart and ran for student office but the kind who liked to remain under the radar, minding our business and earning our A’s (or in my case B’s and C’s). But our town is relatively small and word about my mom’s death spread fast, so when my neighbors learned I was going to move here to attend school, more than one person suggested (basically commanded) that I get in contact with Kennedy. I did, we chatted, and now we’re roommates—at least on a trial basis.

“No, I had two drinks at prom and accidentally told Keisha Holder that her boyfriend shoved his tongue down Ashley Reyes’s throat in gym class.”

“Oh, snap!” Kennedy chuckles. “I remember hearing about that.”

“And do you remember both Keisha and Ashley harassing me for two weeks straight afterwards?”

“I knew Ashley did but Keisha too?”

“She sure did,” I assure her. I was terrified and pledged to the universe or whoever was up there listening that I wouldn’t drink again if he or she would just get her to stop.

“But those two are still dating to this day.”

“Exactly, so I opened my big mouth for nothing.”

“Do you ever see anyone from high school?” Kennedy asks. “I haven’t been back home in a long time. I spend my holidays and summers here.”

“No, I haven’t lived in Pennsylvania in a year, since my mom died.”

“Oh, okay.”

“But there is someone I’m seeing back home.”

“Like a long distance kind of thing?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s that working out?” she asks skeptically.

“It’s been cool so far. Elijah was there for me when my mom passed and I wasn’t just going to dump him because I was moving here.”

“Um, that’s kind of a very good reason to break up with someone.”

“College is just a moment in time. When I finish, I’ll go back east, where I belong and Elijah and I can pick up where we left off.”

“Oh,” she says doubtfully.

“Is there any specific reason you never visit home?” I ask her.

“Not really,” she replies, but a look in her eyes tells me that there may be something that she’s holding back. Something that is probably none of my business, so I just leave it there.

“I guess I’ll unpack tonight and maybe order in tonight? Any good sandwich spots around here?”

“Uh, no, and there’ll be no unpacking tonight,” Kennedy says with firm resolution.

“Why?”

“It’s Santa Fest this weekend and we’re going.”

“Santa Fest?”

A ball forms in the pit of my stomach. I realize what time of year it is, but I don’t want to attend anything over-the-top Christmas-y. It all reminds me of last year and it’s just too painful. It’s part of the reason why I moved in with Kennedy

now instead of after the holidays. While the commercialism of the holiday makes it really difficult to ignore, I just want to pretend it isn't happening if at all possible.

“It's a Valencia City tradition. There will be local bands playing, lots of food, and, of course, there's the exhibition game.”

“What kind of game? I'm not really a big sports person.”

Kennedy stares a hole through my head like I don't have any brains in between my ears.

“A hockey game. You realize where you've transferred to, right? The VCU Suns are legendary. Everybody who's anybody will be at that game and so will we.”

“I sense that attendance for you is mission focused?”

Kennedy throws her head back in laughter and I shake my head in disbelief at how beautiful she still is even when she snorts through her nose.

“I remember you being smart in high school. Nothing's changed.”

“Who's the target?” I ask her.

“This guy named Ray.”

I can't imagine that there's a man on this planet who wouldn't take notice of Kennedy, so I wonder if there's any backstory to this.

“Any history with him?”

“We're circling each other a little, maybe trying to figure the other out before taking a leap. He's on the football team and has a real shot at the pros. I think he's being careful about all his decisions, but that's one of the things that I like about him.”

“I remember my mom telling me once that if a woman really wants to meet someone that she should go to that place alone so that it feels safe for the man to approach her. Maybe if you go to the game alone, it will be the perfect time for him to share a moment alone with you.”

“That’s a real delightful story, and a nice try, but I’m afraid that’s not an option. You’re rolling with me and that’s it. I don’t attend school activities alone because there’s safety in numbers and all of that good shit. You understand, right?”

I plop my butt on the floor of my new room and stare at my suitcase full of clothes. Suddenly, I wish I’d packed a little more thoughtfully instead of only throwing in whatever was clean.

“I guess I can unpack tomorrow.”

“That’s the spirit! Okay, we’re going to head out in an hour,” she announces, as if she’s a camp counselor in charge of an upcoming nature hike. “Oh, and Violet, be sure to dress in layers.”

“But it’s a hundred degrees outside.”

She sighs like I’m the most hopeless person she’s ever met.

“Not at the rink, girl. Not at the rink.”

violet

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I'M SHIVERING in a frigid hockey rink filled with a sea of rowdy spectators dressed in gold and black Valencia City University colors and contrasting red Santa hats. As members of the opposing hockey team hustle across the ice, VCU students are chanting some sort of anti-cheer at them, which grows louder with every iteration.

While it's unclear to me exactly what they're saying, it honestly doesn't matter. I'm only here because I agreed to attend the town's annual Santa Fest with Kennedy, which tradition evidently requires attending this game, although I never said I'd pay attention. Trust someone like Kennedy Bing to drag me into the chaotic frenzy of a hockey exhibition game when I've got reading to do.

I check my phone to see if Elijah has finally responded to my text from two hours ago, only to be disappointed to find that he hasn't, so I get back to my book.

"Are you actually reading while the Suns are playing?" Kennedy huffs beside me, her gorgeous almond eyes wide with disbelief.

"Absolutely," I say, not an ounce of regret in my voice. "You know the deal. I've got a scholarship and I can't fuck it up."

I have to stick to the plan.

While the school has been generous in offering me a full ride, the terms are that I complete my degree in four years with

at least a 3.0 grade point average every semester.

“It’s Christmas break, girl. We haven’t even started spring semester yet.”

“But I already know what classes I’m taking this semester. I literally have taken two of them before.”

Credits that VCU refuses to honor.

“So, you’re reading ahead?”

“Yep.”

“In classes you’ve already taken?”

“That’s right.”

“When you’re supposed to be, you know, getting acclimated to your new environment?” she asks in her careful voice. The kind of voice you use with a child or someone who you suspect of being mentally unstable.

“Yes, Kennedy,” I hiss out of the side of my mouth, annoyed with why she thinks watching dudes slide around the ice is a relaxing night for me.

“Why?” she asks in a voice that sounds perplexed.

“So I can focus on the classes that are actually going to be challenging for me. The ones that matter.”

Reading ahead has always helped me get a handle on my executive functioning disorder. The more time I give myself to learn a subject has always been productive for me.

“Uh-huh,” she says, looking confused by my line of reasoning. Probably just as confused as I am with her dragging me to this weird festival.

It’s called Santa Fest, yet it’s a million degrees outside as we sit in this ridiculously cold ice rink. How they keep it this cold is a mystery to me. And Kennedy said we’re watching an exhibition match to celebrate the festival and not a real hockey game but the way they’re playing, I can’t tell the difference.

“You do realize they have textbooks online, don’t you? You didn’t have to bring a whole ass hardback book to the

game. You could have just used your phone or something if you were even going to do it all.”

“Am I embarrassing you or something?” I ask in an uncomfortable voice, but my inquiry is cut short when two girls sitting behind us suddenly bump into my head as they rise to their feet to cheer.

“Woohoo!”

When they do, my head jerks forward, momentarily hyper extending my neck.

Ouch.

“Go, number seventeen!”

“Why don’t you cheer for somebody else? He’s mine.”

“You can’t call dibs on him like that!”

“Can I have your babies, Neo?”

“Damn, he’s fine.”

“And doing all the work for the team, as usual.”

“I’ve got some work he can do right between these thighs.” Then the two of them cackle with laughter like two horny witches.

“Um, excuse me, but you two just hit my friend in the head,” Kennedy pivots her head to say, but before either of them can respond a deafening roar erupts from the crowd, and two guys crash into the glass right in front of us, partially shattering it.

“Holy hell!” Kennedy exclaims.

Instinctively, I lean over to cover her, like a mother would shield her child when she suddenly pushes on the break of a car, until I feel pain. I lift my hand to my chin, feeling a sting where a small shard of glass has made contact.

“Give us a minute to check on everyone, Sun Nation,” the announcer says in an oddly pleasant voice over the rink’s loudspeaker, as if something catastrophic didn’t just happen.

“In the meantime, the refreshment stands are open, and DJ Kris is going to spin some tunes for your holiday enjoyment.”

One of the VCU players, who seems vaguely familiar to Kennedy, climbs over into the stands towards us immediately.

“Are you okay?” he asks us both, genuine concern etched in his face.

“I’m fine, thanks,” I mutter.

Kennedy and the player share a loaded silence, and for a moment I think something might explode between them, like one of their heads.

“Kennedy,” the player greets her by name, also giving her a brief head nod of acknowledgment.

She responds with a deafening silence, which seems to make the hockey guy grin even harder behind his clear face shield.

“It’s nice to see you too,” he says in response to her silence.

She defiantly places a hand on her hips, staring daggers at him. It’s obvious to anyone paying attention that these two have some sort of history. Sparks are definitely flying.

He emits a brief chuckle before turning his attention back to me. “So, um, were you reading a book just now?”

Every student in our section of the stands is now focused on the verbal exchange between the hockey player, Kennedy and me—the weirdo with the enormous book and bits of glass in her lap.

Great.

It only gets worse when another player skates over, his jersey bearing the **Number 17**. I quickly recognize the number. It’s because of him I’m going to need a hot compress on the back of my neck tonight.

This is the one they call Neo.

I glance at him and immediately feel uneasy.

He's massive, towering and wide. Bigger than the first guy.
An embodiment of physical intimidation.

Tufts of dirty blonde hair peeks from under his helmet, serving as a compliment to his cold blue eyes and crooked nose. He's absolutely not my type, but when I hear my heartbeat thud loudly in my ears, my inside voice whispers anxiously in the back of my mind as he approaches.

Don't be weird, Violet.

"Can we move this along, Shane?" he demands in a voice that's commanding and lacks any compassion. "We've got a game to win once they clean this up."

"Just checking on the bookworm here," the player called Shane replies with a grin, glancing towards me.

Neo surveys me like I'm a nuisance, an obstacle delaying the continuance of his oh-so-important game.

"It's tempered glass," he says with obvious disdain. "She's fine."

Hey, I didn't ask any of you to skate over here; I think to myself. What a jackass.

"Uh, no, she's not fine," Kennedy disputes, handing me a clean tissue out of her designer leather purse. "Here, your chin is bleeding."

"Yeah, man, she definitely took some glass to the face," the Shane guy says in defense of me.

Neo's eyes suddenly lock onto mine and I feel trapped. They're intense, like an approaching tropical storm. But it's not their intensity that unnerves me—it's the arrogance they ooze.

I curse silently at myself as he languidly rakes his eyes along my seated body, lingering at my breasts, and then finally landing at the book resting on my thighs—an examination which reeks of judgment.

My body has a visceral reaction to his study of me, quivering in some sort of unclear emotion—I guess fear. Then

the book accidentally slips off my lap and underneath the seat in front of me.

“Good to see you, Prez,” the blonde giant practically grunts at Kennedy while his bottomless blue eyes stay affixed on me.

“Same,” she offers without a smile of any kind. “But dude, this is an exhibition game, not a real one. Your midfielder almost took my girl’s eye out,” Kennedy scolds him, but why does he call her Prez?

An audible gasp comes from someone sitting around us. My guess is that there aren’t many people in this town who chastise members of the hockey team like this and apparently Kennedy has carte blanche to?

“Who’s this?” the giant asks her, clearly referring to me as if I’m not sitting right in front of his egotistic ass.

“This is Violet, my roommate, and she’s not looking for any new friends, Neo.”

Kennedy must not be reading the room. This guy definitely doesn’t want me as a friend and the feeling is absolutely mutual.

“You have a shitty holiday disposition,” Neo says to Kennedy, still closely watching me.

“What else is new?” Shane scoffs.

“Are we done here?” Kennedy says to them both. “Violet and I want to enjoy the rest of the festival.”

“Come to the kickback tonight and bring the bibliophile,” Shane says.

Why in the ever loving fuck is everyone talking about me like I’m not sitting right here?

Because you let them, Violet.

“Bibliophile?” Kennedy parrots back in a mocking tone. “Are we using our big words today, Shane?”

“Everything I use is big, Kee-Kee.” He grins and I swear I can feel Kennedy’s rage growing in the atmosphere. It’s

palpable.

“Don’t call me that,” she warns him as he dismisses her with a casual laugh.

“If you can tear yourself away from whatever that is,” Neo suddenly says to me in the deepest voice I’ve ever heard, pointing to the book in Kennedy’s hands with the end of his hockey stick. “You should come too.”

I hear someone mutter *who the fuck is she* under their breath and it’s possible Neo heard it too because his eyes flicker up and behind me with a hardness that’s frightening. Suddenly, everyone around us is quiet.

“Win the game and we’ll be there,” Kennedy challenges them both.

“You want us to win, huh? I thought you just said it’s just an exhibition game and to take it easy on them?” Shane counters playfully.

“I told you to win the game, not lacerate half the spectators.”

“So dramatic.” Shane rolls his eyes.

“Are they actually going to continue playing?” I blurt out loud, confused on why they would continue the game when part of the protective glass around the rink is compromised. “What if they run into the glass again?”

“They’ve never suspended a Santa Fest exhibition game in the history of it being played. It’ll be fine. The stadium staff will just move everyone in this section to different seats. I’ll make sure they give you good ones.” Shane smiles.

“Oh, okay,” I comment, not really knowing what else to say in response.

“Just win the damn thing,” Kennedy tells them again.

“Already done,” Neo says with conviction. “And then we’ll see you both tonight.”

“Good luck,” Kennedy responds, rolling her eyes.

“See you later, Violet,” Neo says, my name rolling effortlessly off his tongue as if we’ve known each other for a lifetime.

Then I finally exhale a breath I didn’t realize I was holding as the two of them skate away.

violet

. . .



“DO you know the entire hockey team?” I ask Kennedy as soon as they’re out of earshot.

“Put this thing in your bag please,” she ignores the question, handing me my book.

“Excuse me,” one of the girls who was sitting behind us says, tapping my shoulder.

“What now?” Kennedy whips around her head.

“We just wanted to apologize for accidentally bumping into you guys. We were clumsy. So sorry.”

It’s the oddest thing. Suddenly, their voices are so small and contrite, as if they’re afraid of one or both of us.

“It’s fine,” I say to them before Kennedy cuts me off with a few choice words of her own.

“You should have said that ten minutes ago,” she tells them.

As stadium staff continue to inspect the damaged glass, a man dressed in VCU colors and a reflective orange vest approaches us just like Shane said they would to offer us seats in a different section of the stadium.

“Ladies, we’re so sorry about the accident. Here are some new tickets courtesy of the Suns. Enjoy the rest of the game.”

When Kennedy reads the tickets, she snickers.

“What?” I ask her.

“Let’s go.” She stands up. “He’s trying way too hard.”

“Where are we going?”

“To our new seats.”

We arrive at the club section of the stadium. I haven’t been to many sports events or concerts in my lifetime but it’s pretty clear that this is where the people with big money sit. The seats are larger and covered in black leather with polished wood armrests instead of the hard plastic ones in the other sections.

In this area, we have access to our own dedicated bar and refreshment station, and everything is complimentary. Well, at least sodas and popcorn are.

“Welcome back, Valencia City,” the announcer says jubilantly over the sound system and the audience applauds. “Fortunately, there were no injuries and we’ll continue the game in a few moments.”

“Look how they lie, Violet. Of course, there were injuries. Look at your beautiful chin.”

“Kennedy.” I give her an accusatory glare.

“What?”

“Now that we’re settled into our new seats, you know I have questions.”

“What questions?”

“You have some sort of weird eye fuck battle with the Shane guy, then you yell at the big one, and then those two girls did a complete about face and started tripping all over themselves to apologize?”

Christmas in Hollis plays loudly through the arena’s speaker system as intermission continues and I try not to cry. Run DMC was one of my mom’s favorite artists and she used to play this song every Christmas Eve when we decorated the Christmas tree.

I can see her so clearly right now, testing last year’s Christmas lights while performing some of her old school

dances in our living room. The two of us laughing. And then me screaming in horror.

“Hey, are you all right?” Kennedy asks, sensing the sudden shift in my mood.

“I’m fine,” I lie. “Are you going to answer my question, because you’ve just agreed to attend some sort of party for the both of us if they win?”

“It’s a kickback, not a party.”

“Whatever, a kickback.”

“Okay.” She lets out a heavy sigh as if she’s about to reveal some sort of deep, dark secret. “I do know the hockey guys.”

“That’s obvious.”

“And they’re the most popular human beings on this campus, which is why those two idiot girls are staring at us from ten rows across right now.”

I look over near our previous seats and she’s right. They are staring.

“I still don’t get it.”

“Look around,” Kennedy leans in and lowers her voice. “What do you see?”

For the first time tonight, I actually pay attention to my surroundings, carefully glancing around us, and that’s when I see it. Ever since those two skated away, spectators seem to be giving us a lot of subtle (and not-so-subtle) glances.

“People are staring at us,” I whisper in confusion. I can feel the entire row of students to my left watching us.

“Yep.”

“I think people are talking about us too,” I murmur.

“Yes, they probably are,” she says casually, reaching inside her crossbody purse for something.

“Why?” I ask incredulously.

“Because we are the anointed ones,” she says facetiously, as she applies a layer of a pinkish-brown lip gloss to her lips. “Members of the Valencia Ice Mafia actually spoke to us and during a game at that,” she scoffs. “We *must* be special.”

“The Valencia Ice Mafia?”

“Some random person in their infinite wisdom nicknamed them that, and it stuck. Now those nut jobs run with it. Some random business major even put the nickname on some merchandise and runs a side hustle selling the stuff on Etsy.”

“Just those two?”

“No, there’s more of them.”

“Dare I ask why that’s their nickname?”

“The VCU ice program used to suck until they brought in an NHL legend turned coach who completely turned the program upside down. In a shocking move, he got rid of all the old players and replaced them with a whole new squad. All freshmen. And they were the most lethal incoming freshman class to ever play in our conference. Now that they’re older, bigger and definitely cockier on the ice, they’re even more formidable. Hell, a few of them could easily go pro right now.”

“Then why don’t they?”

“They’ve made a pact to stay together until they win their coach the big championship. He suffered a major heart attack last year,” she says solemnly. “And he had to take a leave of absence from coaching.”

“Oh, no.” I say. Already shaken by the fragility of life, now that my mother has been abruptly taken from me. “Is he okay?”

“It was a pretty bad one. He’s had one surgery already, and I think he has to have another.”

“This may be a stupid question, but if the team is so good, why haven’t they won the championship already?”

An older couple sitting two rows in front of us turn their heads when I ask that.

“Lower your voice,” Kennedy hushes me. “Most of the people in this section donate big money to the hockey program and are wondering the same thing.”

“Oh,” I whisper. “Sorry.”

“To answer your question though, in my opinion the Suns are good, often even great, but they’re also dirty.”

“What do you mean?”

“They don’t call them the Ice Mafia for nothing. They get more penalties than any other team in our division. Other schools hate us. The refs hate us. We’re probably the most hated college hockey team in the states.”

“So the team fights a lot? I’ve seen that on the news before. I never understood why hockey is so violent and the referees allow it.”

“Fighting happens in the pro league, but that kind of behavior gets you disqualified in college hockey. They can’t do that...or let’s say, they shouldn’t, especially off the ice.”

“But they do?”

“I’ll put it like this. If anyone has the balls to start something with one of them, there will be carnage.”

Carnage?

Hell, that’s a huge red flag for me. While I understand human beings are flawed, I don’t understand why anyone purposely tries to hurt another human. It’s part of why I want to be a lawyer. So if these guys have a propensity for violence, I’m definitely not going to any house party or kickback where they’re going to be. Kennedy will just have to understand.

“Okay, here they go,” she claps excitedly. “Try paying attention this time. I promise you it’s a lot more fun if you watch and try understanding the rules. Keep your eye on those three.”

I take a sip of a Diet Coke our server brings to us and watch as Number seventeen moves with incredible speed and precision across the ice. It appears as if he’s the player setting the tempo of the game, although he never seems to get a

chance to make a goal. He tends to hit the puck over to Shane or the other guy Kennedy mentioned to watch.

“If that Neo guy is supposedly so good, then why doesn’t he ever try taking a shot?” I lean in, asking Kennedy. “He keeps giving it to the nice one, Shane, or that other guy.”

“Neo’s a center. It’s literally his job to set up his teammates to make goals, but he makes them too. He’s just taking it easy tonight. Remember, this is not a real game, it’s just an exhibition.”

My chin begs to differ.

“Gotcha.”

“And let me be clear before you get the wrong idea. There are no nice ones on the team.”

The crowd stands to their feet and watches with bated breath as Neo gently maneuvers the puck between his opponent’s legs, sliding it to Shane, who then hits the puck powerfully into the net.

GOAL!

The crowd erupts, and I stand as well, clapping my hands for their success, the energy infectious.

“The Valencia ice mafia triad strikes again!” the announcer says.

I watch closely as the three boys on the ice hug each other and then celebrate with the rest of their teammates. At the moment, they don’t seem like a group of bad boys at all. Right now all they seem to be are three thrilled, oversized kids who have apparently won the local Santa Fest exhibition game for the third year in a row.

But I have to remember.

Looks can be deceiving.

“Well, I guess we better get back to the apartment and change,” Kennedy says.

“Change for what?”

“I always honor my bets.”

“Have a good time at the kickback then; there’s a large suitcase full of clothes to unpack and a cup of English Breakfast tea waiting for me back at the apartment.”

“Then they’ll have to wait a little longer.”

“Kennedy—”

I don’t remember her being this bossy in high school. Then again, I have to remember that I didn’t know her very well.

“I told you, roomie. I honor my bets and I don’t go anywhere alone, so you’ve got to tag along, too.”

I’m trying to think of what else I can say to talk my way out of this when her phone receives an incoming text that makes her smirk.

“What?” I ask, curious about her reaction.

“Our ride just texted me to be ready by eight.”

neo

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I RARELY BOTHER TALKING TO

spectators at our games because I'm not here at VCU to make friends. I'm here to win hockey games and nothing else. If I had my way, I wouldn't be at this university at all. I would have gone straight to the NHL from high school and skipped the entire college experience. But a successful fast track like that is only for a talented few players like my brother Jake, not guys like me.

Already scouted by the time he was sixteen years old. My older brother Jake had a sweet NHL contract waiting for him while he finished high school. The plan was, once he graduated, he'd go straight to the New York Rangers, my dad's favorite team.

But I don't have it so sweet.

Players like me have to take the long road to success, especially if you're from the states, because there are so many international players who are light years ahead of us in skill and experience.

I have to stay in the gym longer, practice on the ice harder, and strategize differently than everyone else to prove that I'm worthy of a pro contract. Like my father has told me many times, "Nobody owes you anything, Neo. You're the type of player who will always have to prove his mettle in the league."

That's why I lead my team with an iron fist. I don't celebrate when we win. It's expected. We're not out there playing for penny bets, we're playing for keeps. Do we blow

off steam from time to time with a kickback at the ice house or a night out at the local bar? Hell, yeah. That's how you keep morale up. But spending too much energy on a class, a girl, or on anything other than hockey for more than twenty-four hours is not recommended.

In fact, it's career suicide.

The kiss of death.

Having said all of that, though, there's something about the girl sitting in the lower bowl section of the rink tonight that I can't ignore. I wish I could, but she's different. She's reading a fucking textbook during the game, which means she's really different.

Not in a good way, obviously, because what girl comes to one of our games and doesn't cheer loudly, or flash her tits, or ask for my number, or at the bare minimum pay fucking attention?

Yeah, so you see, it's pretty obvious why I definitely noticed her immediately.

It's almost as if coming to the game was an afterthought and not the highlight of her night like it is for most VCU students, especially the women.

I mean even if she didn't have the big book on her lap, she still sticks out like a sore thumb, because she isn't dressed appropriately for a hockey game at all, wearing a short black denim jacket that skims over her breasts, stops at her waist, and doesn't seem warm at all. Whether we're located in the hot ass state of Nevada or not, doesn't she understand that it's cold in an ice rink?

Admittedly, it's not just her peculiar reading habits or choice of outerwear that caught my attention. The girl is gorgeous in a very effortless kind of way, and at first glance, it feels as if she's totally oblivious to it.

She's wearing a black wool beanie which is struggling to contain a wild mass of dark coils which touches just past her shoulders, and she has a heart-shaped face with dark brown

soulful eyes that seem like they've lived through five lifetimes.

Gorgeous.

I'm waiting for her to stand up to see what else she's working with besides a beautiful face, but am not fortunate enough to get a glimpse of the rest of her, which only piques my curiosity even further. I love a well proportioned, squeezable ass, and something tells me she's sitting on one of those.

But beyond the face, the body, and the book, the thing I find most alluring is her focus.

Her intensity.

Her desire to ignore everything else around her and just read whatever was in that book. Hell, it kind of reminds me of me when I lace up my skates and hit the ice.

When flirty ass Shane checks on whether she was injured from the hard check at the glass, I get the oddest feeling in my gut. Almost as if something was very wrong with him doing that. It makes zero sense because I don't know this girl, don't give a shit about this girl, and Shane is my best friend—so I chalk it up to my usual game day twitchiness. Which is why I was about to skate away and let the stadium staff do their jobs so we can finish the game, that is until she raised those lush brown eyes to meet mine.

Then I became fucking stuck.

“Who's this?” I ask Kennedy, unable to help myself from asking the question.

I want to know.

A part of me needs to know.

Then maybe this curious pain in the ass part of my personality will be satisfied and move on to more important things.

“This is Violet, my roommate, and she's not looking for any new friends, Neo.”

The unmistakable tone of warning in Kennedy's voice is understandable. Based on her past knowledge of me, she believes I run through women on campus like I'm eating a bag of Skittles, enjoying every flavor in the bag. But what most people don't understand except those closest to me is just because a girl throws her pussy at me, doesn't mean I always take it...or even want it.

But once Kennedy introduces the book nerd as Violet, something in my brain clicks. I recognize the name. She's more than just an acquaintance of Kennedy's. She's the new transfer student Shane told me about over chicken sandwiches one night. The mysterious friend from Kennedy's high school who is suddenly now her new roommate. I remember being confused about it when Shane told me because we all know that Kennedy keeps a super tight friend circle and particularly likes her privacy.

Now all of a sudden she has a roommate?

And why this girl?

I doubt they have much in common.

I shake my head like something is rattling loose inside of it. It's ridiculous that I'm even giving something like this any airtime. I have goals. I have a pro career that I'm in hot pursuit of. I don't have time for curious distractions, especially soft, nerdy ones that are completely clueless to the effect she has on the guys around her. It's hard to miss how the corny dude in the ugly Christmas sweater has been eye fucking her for the last ten minutes. I'd love to swat him like a fly with my hockey stick if I didn't think it would get me thrown out of the game.

I keep my eyes trained on Violet but listen as Kennedy and Shane volley sexually charged words at each other. It would be better for everyone if they'd finally fuck each other and get it out of their systems, but I know that's not ever going to happen. Kennedy will never let him get that close.

Just when I'm about to skate away in hopes that the stadium staff will get this night back on track, I do a double take once I hear Kennedy throw down the challenge for us to

win. If we win, there's a possibility I could see Violet later tonight. I shouldn't give one hot damn whether I do or not, but I can't help myself. For some reason, I do give a damn.

"Already done," I tell them both, assuring a win. "And then we'll see you both tonight."

"Good luck," Kennedy says sarcastically, rolling her eyes for good measure, but I don't care about any of that. She's Shane's problem.

"See you later, Violet," I say and watch closely as her eyes lower to her lap, her hands fidgeting.

I can tell she wants to say something, maybe to tell me to fuck off. I'm not sure, but she holds back her words and tightens her lips. It's disappointing, but perhaps I can get her to talk a little more freely once she's over at the house. I'm hoping a fruity drink and fifteen minutes is all I need to figure this one out and move on to more important things.

The upcoming season.

neo

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“**THAT HAD** to be the first game in a long time, where you weren’t constantly in the penalty box,” Bass chuckles as he works on tapping the keg.

“It wasn’t a real game.”

“Yeah, but you had the rest of us out there playing hard like it was a real one,” Bass retorts.

“What are you trying to say?” I raise an eyebrow, wondering if my friend is questioning my leadership. I’m touchy about that shit.

“I was just making an observation, asshole, relax.”

Bass hands me a cup of beer, and I take a sip of the cool amber liquid, savoring the taste. I only allow myself one cup of celebratory anything, so I need to make it last half the night. After that, it’s Gatorade for me. I learned my lesson back when I was a fat head freshman and celebrated a little too hard during training camp. Coach showed me no mercy that week. I puked for three days straight.

“We know you play every game, exhibition or not, like it’s your last. I’m just glad you’re actually going to party with us tonight instead of being a grumpy old man and staying up in your room.”

Tonight, the entire team, minus the coaching staff, are getting together in the ice house, which basically serves as a frat house for members of the team. We’re so revered by VCU alumni that a group of boosters bought the adobe-styled house

for us to live in. Not all of us live here, though. The younger guys on the team live in one of the university's athletic dorms, but they party here with us on the weekends and holidays. As their captain and head of the house, it's my job to stay clear-headed and make sure nothing gets out of hand, so most of the time I'm in my room watching game tape.

"I'm not grumpy," I grunt. "I just have stuff to take care of most weekends."

"Just remember to take care of yourself too, Cap," he says, using my team nickname.

"Where's Shane?" I ask, changing the subject. Sometimes Bass tries to give guys on the team life coaching (particularly me) when nobody asked him for it and a change of topic is the only way to handle him.

"I think I saw him talking outside with Kennedy. You know how he is, probably driving that girl completely crazy with his passive-aggressive teasing."

A part of me that lurks somewhere down deep lights up like a Christmas bulb.

"Kennedy's here?"

"Yeah?" Bass responds suspiciously.

"Who's she here with?"

"I don't know," he says disinterested. "Some new girl."

I take another swallow of my beer and walk away from Bass. It pisses my friends off when I decide to end a conversation by simply walking out of a room, but they should be used to it by now.

It doesn't take me long to walk through from the back of the house to the front, and immediately see Shane's large limbs around the shoulders of two small women, Kennedy and Violet. Their backs are to me and my eyes hone in immediately on Violet's ass.

It's perfect, just like I thought it would be.

Fuck.

The last thing I need is to actually be attracted to this girl. This is supposed to be an information gathering mission only.

“Hey, Neo.” A random girl that I may or may not have slept with at some point last year is sitting on top of a wood cabinet in a skirt so short I can see the color of her red panties. “You were great tonight,” she slurs, definitely drunk or high on something.

“Thanks.”

“How come you never call me?”

“Hockey,” I say, offering my usual answer when the truth is I don’t do second dates. First dates are fun. Second ones are irksome.

A few other guests of the house rush over, wanting to talk to me about the game or have some sort of other random conversation, and it gets the attention of Shane and the girls.

“Oh, the Cap is here!” Shane shouts as I make my approach and more heads turn.

Every guy on the team gets their share of attention from students on a regular basis, but they especially love to rub my nose in it because they know it’s not something I particularly care for. I don’t play the game to be the big man on campus, it just happens to be a side effect of being the captain of the most popular team at VCU.

“I see you made it,” I ignore Shane’s smart ass greeting and speak directly to Violet, who again is dressed differently than every other thirsty girl in the house tonight. Her conservative black crew neck tee and dark washed jeans are deceptively sexy as the outfit hugs all of her curves but nothing about it screams, *look at me*. I wonder if she has any idea just how attractive she looks in it.

“Um, yes.”

She has that same look on her face. The one she had at the rink when it appeared as if she rather be anywhere else but there. It makes me wonder if Kennedy had to bribe her to come tonight.

“But you rather be reading?” I ask, half joking.

Her eyes blink a few times before she answers me.

“Is that going to be your go to line for the rest of the semester?”

My go to line?

I hold back a laugh.

“Sounds like you plan on reading at all my games this season,” I reply, offering a small, teasing grin. I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t help myself. She’s getting more interesting by the minute.

“I brought homework to a hockey game. So what? I’m sure I’m not the first person to do it. I bet half of the people in there were on their cell phones ordering last minute Christmas gifts and not paying you all any attention.”

I take a step closer to her. Close enough that I can see she’s wearing clear gloss on her lips as well as a thin layer of eyeshadow with flecks of gold glitter that illuminate the bronze skin of her eyelids. It’s not a lot of makeup, but just enough to accentuate what she already has.

“They’re always paying attention,” I tell her with a confidence that isn’t meant to sound cocky. It’s just facts.

“I hope this hockey thing works out for you,” she says in a patronizing tone that no one else on this planet would ever use with me and my dick gets hard.

“It already has,” I tell her and when she laughs in response, I don’t.

I can’t.

I’m too busy appreciating how spectacularly she glows in the soft light of the house.

Kennedy interrupts us just as it was getting good. “I told you that Violet isn’t here to make new friends, Neo. Just point us to the real drinks and not this watery beer crap and we’ll be on our way.”

“I’ll walk you to the drinks.” And I have no idea why my voice drops three octaves and my chest puffs up when I’m around this girl, but it does. Suddenly, I don’t want her walking through the house without an escort. I know these guys in here. She’s new, she’s gorgeous, and she’s available. That’s the only green light these fuckers need.

“Fine,” Kennedy huffs.

“Where are you going?” Shane asks, turning away from another conversation he was having as he watches us walk away.

“I’ve got ‘em,” I tell him, understanding the meaning behind the question. If he can’t have Kennedy, he damn sure doesn’t want anyone else in this room to have her, either.

My back stiffens as I walk through the room with the girls on either side of me, because while I know some of the stares are to acknowledge my presence, the others are directed at Kennedy and Violet...especially Violet.

Two of the team’s favorite puck bunnies, Gia and Rain, super fans of the team who happen to fuck some of us too, are manning the mixed drink bar. We have the usual bottles of gin, vodka and tequila and mixers available, but they’re also in charge of serving a holiday themed drink that’s made with peppermint schnapps.

“Do you two want the candy cane?” I ask them.

“I’ll take anything at this point,” Kennedy fusses.

Violet is still staring around the room, and I’m not sure what she’s thinking. My assumption, or maybe my hope, is that she admires the house because it’s not common for a university team or club to have the kind of house we do.

“Do you like the house?” I ask her, wondering if there’s something I can use to impress this girl if it isn’t hockey.

“It’s nice,” she says plainly, then turns her back to me. “Excuse me, but may I get a coke instead?” she asks Gia.

“That’s all you want?” Gia questions, giving Violet a hard once over, something I think all the puck bunnies do to new

girls who visit the house.

“Yeah, is that okay?”

I give Gia a cursory warning glare, reminding her to act accordingly. I get that she’s possessive, but just because she sucked a few of us off over the last few years doesn’t mean she gets to be a bitch to guests of the house.

“Of course it’s okay,” she says with a saccharin smile. “I was just making sure that’s all she wanted, Neo,” she adds.

Kennedy rolls her eyes at Gia as she silently mixes her drink with the candy cane stick used as a garnish. The two have a history because of Shane. Actually, half of the house has history with Gia.

“This is a pretty fancy drink for an ice house kickback,” Kennedy says, giving me the side eye as she takes a sip.

“I go all out for Christmas.”

“I didn’t realize your grumpy ass had a favorite holiday,” she quips, tipping the glass in Mia’s direction to see if she wants a sip, but Violet shakes her head no.

“Who doesn’t like Christmas?” I say, remembering all the great Christmas mornings that my brother and I shared when we were young.

Violet wipes the top of the coke can with the edge of her t-shirt to clean it, pops the can open, then says, “I don’t.”

Just when I’m getting ready with a line of questioning to discover why this little book nerd is also a Christmas Grinch, Shane walks toward us with purpose, worry etched on his face.

“What?” I question him. Shane is rarely worried about much.

“I’m going to walk the girls over to the snacks,” he tells me.

“Why?” Wondering why he’s suddenly cock blocking me.

“It’s Bender.”

neo

. . .



I DON'T HAVE many weaknesses, but Bender Price is one of them. Bender is a forward from the Vegas Chiefs, a rival college team, who has been overheard talking shit about me and my brother more than once. I wouldn't give a shit if it was just about me. People talk about me all the time. It's the fact that he always has my brother's name in his mouth too.

He talks about Jake's career, his character, and his death as if he knew him personally. He didn't. I think part of his problem is that he's jealous of my success and using Jake to get inside of my head. Getting inside a man's head during a game is pretty simple, but being calculated about it and getting into it beforehand is diabolical.

“What about Bender?” My hand twitches.

“He's here.”

“He actually had the balls to step inside this house?”

My house?

Shane somehow convinces Kennedy and Violet to head over to the taco table while I figure out what I'm going to say once I approach this interloper. I haven't seen him in months since we rarely play their team during the regular season, but one thing the two of us aren't is friendly. If he's here, he must want an ass whipping. I might just oblige him.

“Who the fuck invited you?” I approach, not mincing words.

“Neo, old friend.”

“Who let you in, Bender?”

“You should put a lock on your little house here if you want to regulate who comes and goes.”

Shane and Bass make their way over to us, flanking both my left and right sides.

“You should leave, dude,” Shane tells Bender.

“This is a Suns only event,” Bass adds.

“Ah, the little ice mafia sidekicks. What are you two, the Robins to his Batman?”

“You jealous?” I smirk. “You need a friend or something?”

“Oh, I’ve got a friend all right,” he says while grabbing his dick. “And her name is Vikki Dixon.”

I laugh to myself.

Bender tosses Vikki’s name around as if it’s supposed to mean something to me when it holds no gravity at all. Vikki is someone who is probably the closest thing I’ve got to an ex-girlfriend. She caught me freshman year when everything about campus was exciting and new and I wanted a beautiful girl on my arm to amplify my importance as a new member of the team. Plus, there was the added bonus that she was Coach Dixon’s daughter. A daughter who had influence with her father which therefore put me on his radar. But relationships are not my forte and even though one with her was beneficial for me, I couldn’t stomach it, so I stopped calling. A long time ago.

“If you’re here to flaunt your new girlfriend or something, I’m afraid you’ve wasted your time. I couldn’t give one shit.”

Bender’s smile sours a second too late to hide his disappointment. “Is that right? Not even a hot little number like Vikki? She did mention your emotional intelligence was about as tiny as your very small... well, you know.”

“You take a great interest in my dick,” I shoot back, leaning against the living room archway with nonchalance I

was far from feeling. Shane and Bass chuckle for effect. “I didn’t know you cared that much about how much I’m packing.”

The atmosphere in the room shifts, and I can feel the coarse undercurrent of tension skirting beneath the jovial surface of the gathering. When you talk about a man’s dick, things can get nasty.

I catch sight of Violet, watching us from the taco table. Her eyes are wide, an indication she’s more aware of the situation than she lets on. But she holds her silence, her eyes flitting between me and Bender with an unsettling intensity.

“The fuck you say?” Bender replies, not liking that his hetero masculinity is being challenged in front of company.

“Maybe you can talk about other people’s dicks all you want where you come from,” I dig in, pushing off the wall and stalking toward him. “But when you’re in my house...” The words hang in the air as an ultimatum, and Bender meets my gaze unflinchingly.

“Well, if it’s your house,” he says with a nasty grin, “then why don’t you make me leave?”

As Bender’s words echo in my mind, and my left hand clenches, the wheels began turning in my head. He’s here for a reason, and it isn’t to flaunt Vikki around. Bender is smarter than that; he knows how to play people, how to get inside their heads and needle them until they snap.

“Maybe I will.” I return his grin with one of my own. But unlike his, which holds a gleam of malice, mine is cold and calculated. Bender’s smirk twitches slightly at my response before he turns away dismissively, leaving a trail of unease in his wake.

“Enjoy your party, Neo,” he calls over his shoulder, striding towards the taco table where Violet stands like a beacon in the crowd. My lips press into a thin line as I watch him approach her, his cocksure gait stirring a wave of distaste within me. But I remain rooted to my spot, determined not to let Bender’s calculated moves dictate my actions.

As Shane and Bass rejoin me, their faces a mirror of my own frustrations, the room fills with an uneasy silence. The laughter and chatter from before feel like distant memories, swallowed by the thick tension that now hangs in the air.

“Let’s just fuck him up,” Shane says.

“Please!” Bass chimes in. “The freshmen are itching for a fight. Let’s give it to them.”

I shake my head slowly. “Not right now. Not here.”

“You’re just gonna let him get away with this disrespect?” Bass continues incredulously.

I draw in a deep breath, unable to tear my gaze away from Violet, who is looking back at me when Bender says something to her. It could be a coincidence, but he’s targeted the one person in this room that will get a reaction out of me.

Dammit, I promised the higher-ups of VCU’s athletic department that we’d have no problems at this kickback, which has been planned for at least a month. The school doesn’t mind a little bad press as the bad boys of the college hockey world, but not too much of it. Yet now that I see the worry etched on Violet’s face, I’m afraid I’m going to have to break it.

What the fuck is he saying to her?

“I changed my mind,” I tell Shane and Bass. “But since he’s here alone, he’s mine.”

“Fine,” Shane agrees. “But if he as much even says *excuse me* to Kennedy, I’m jumping in.”

And before Bass can chime in, I’m across the room, with my hand around Bender’s throat, his face down on the table dripping in pico de gallo.

It’s a glorious feeling.

My brother taught me my famous choke hold move, so it’s only fitting that I use it on the guy that likes to bring Jake’s name up whenever it suits him. The move is designed to disable my opponent until he taps out in surrender. Of course, that’s in a fair fight. There’s nothing fair about this one.

It takes four VCU Suns to pull me off of Bender and kick him out of the house. Once he's gone, my breathing calms and the weight of what I've just done starts to settle.

Shane is like a hottie whisperer and is always able to make women feel at ease, even in the most stressful situations. He brings Kennedy and Violet back over to where Bass and I are standing, but it's obvious that Shane's wrangling is not enough to comfort Violet.

She's staring at me as if I'm a monster, which may be a fair assessment, not to mention that she's going to think that I attacked Bender because I was jealous of him and Vikki when it was not that at all. Dude had that ass kicking coming to him for a long time, not to mention that I snapped when I saw him trying to chat up Violet. I don't even want him looking at Violet, much less speaking to her.

Why? I don't know.

She's not mine, and it makes little sense why I'm so completely territorial over a girl I don't even know yet or, sadly, at this point, will ever get to know. She's probably terrified of me.

"He was an asshole, man," Bass says out loud, probably for the benefit of whoever is listening around us. "He deserved that. Been a long time coming."

Shane checks his phone, then leans in and whispers something in Kennedy's ear, and her face frowns instantly.

"Violet, something's come up, and I'm actually going to need to leave," Kennedy suddenly tells her.

"Are you okay?" Violet's face etched with concern.

"I just need to book a flight and get home. Do you want to stay here for a while or come back to the apartment with me?"

"Oh, that's easy," Violet replies, dumping her coke in the trash. "Home with you."

"But you just got here," I blurt out carelessly.

"This isn't exactly my type of party," Violet responds tersely, clearly referring to the scene I've just made tonight.

My eyes lower to the ground. I don't have an appropriate response to that comment, so I say nothing, and after they leave, I shouldn't be pissed with Shane, but I am.

"What the fuck did you say to Prez to make them want to leave?" I ask him in my "team captain" voice. The one I use when I'm giving an order or expect an answer.

"It's family shit," he says, ignoring the boom in my voice.

"Why can't you give that girl one night of peace?" I growl, pissed that his obsession with her often has a domino effect on the rest of us...okay, well, maybe just me.

"Since when do you care about what goes on between me and Kennedy?"

"I don't." I quickly check myself.

"It's obvious you're attracted to the bookworm."

"She's cool," I try saying casually, knowing that my dick is laughing hysterically at my attempt at being cavalier.

Literally laughing.

"You didn't want us to handle Price until he dared to say two words to her. You like her."

Sometimes it's a pain in the ass the way Shane and Bass can read me so easily.

"She's cool," I repeat, although I don't say it as casually as I said it before.

"I'm pretty sure I heard that she has a man back home," Shane reveals and a pang of disappointment hits my belly. "On top of the fact that she couldn't give two flying fucks about you."

My face tightens. "And your point is, Shane?"

"That bothers the hell out of you, doesn't it?"

"Probably less than it does for you when Kennedy has a dude over on a Friday night."

"Watch your mouth, asshole. Honestly, you should be thanking me for tonight," Shane continues, and I cock my

head to the side out of confusion, my loosely balled fist itching to hit him dead in his perfect ass jaw.

“Explain yourself quickly, pretty boy,” I warn.

While Shane, Bass and I are known as the Ice Mafia Triad for how well we work in tandem on the ice, we all have personal nicknames for each other and out of the three of us, Shane is definitely the prettiest. We always joke that when the three of us go pro, he’ll be the one with the most endorsements because of that face of his.

“What I just told Kennedy is making her get on a plane and fly back to the East Coast for Christmas.”

“So?”

“So, the new girl will be in Valencia City all Christmas break alone.”

Shane’s eyebrows wiggle, and when the revelation of what he’s just said hits me like a ton of bricks, he gives me a light tap on the back.

“Merry Christmas, Cap.”

violet

. . .



IT'S BEEN several days since Kennedy left hastily for the airport, muttering under her breath something about someone's "whore of a mother". Although we're roommates, and had a gym class together once in high school, I don't know her well enough yet to dig into her personal business. If and when she's ready to tell me what's going on and what Shane has to do with it, she will.

Elijah and I spoke earlier in the week, but the conversation felt very stilted. It almost felt as if he wanted to tell me something but was holding back. Since then, I've been holed up in the apartment catching up on my Econ reading but need a break. I've avoided as much Christmas fanfare as I can by staying inside, but I need to see other human life before I go completely bonkers.

I decide a good thing for me to do is to visit campus and use the time to learn my way around while there aren't as many people in town. Walking across the picturesque campus, I take particular notice of the Mediterranean-styled buildings and the name on each one. Most of them seem to be named after people I've never heard of—probably alumni since I know very little about this school.

"You lost?"

The small hairs on the back of my neck rise. I'd recognize that sexy, self-important voice anywhere. What are the chances that I'd run into him today?

“Just exploring campus,” I say, hesitantly raising my eyes to meet his.

“I’ve never seen someone so eager to rush getting back to school,” he says with a serious face that’s totally unreadable.

“You guys have a shorter break than most schools on the East Coast and the semester is creeping up on me.”

“Most schools on the East Coast? Careful, that almost sounds very elitist of you.”

“I think you’re projecting your own insecurities.”

Two girls, a few feet away from us, walk by and are gawking at the two of us. Once Neo notices them, he rubs the back of his neck with his hand as if he’s suddenly uncomfortable.

When one girl raises an arm and waves at him, Neo doesn’t respond right away, so the two girls decide to approach us.

“Hey, Neo.”

“Vikki.”

“Oh, so you *can* see me?” she mocks. “I wasn’t sure you knew it was me since you didn’t return my wave.”

Suddenly, I remember that name. The girl he was fighting over at the kickback.

Vikki and her friend now focus their attention toward me. “Hi, I’m Vikki and you are?”

“Let me speak to you for a minute,” Neo cuts her quickly off, pulling her to the side.

“Why?” Her tone suddenly shifts and I wonder if she’s just embarrassed or totally frightened. “I’m just trying to get to know your new friend. Is she a freshman?”

Vikki’s friend sucks her teeth as she stares me down in a very *Mean Girls* movie sidekick kind of way. I re-adjust my handbag over my shoulder to get ready to go. I want no parts of whatever this drama is particularly because the last time

that girl's name came up, he almost killed a guy in front of a house full of people.

"You, don't move," Neo asserts the moment I try to take a step forward.

I look at Vikki's friend and she stares back at me skeptically, as we both try to figure out which one of us he's actually talking to.

"I'm talking to you, Violet."

Both Vikki and the mean girl whip their heads around to give me another hard stare as if they've just caught me committing some sort of crime, which works because I actually feel guilty.

I can't walk away fast enough.

"Hey," he calls after me.

"Let her go," I hear Vikki say behind me and a small part of me feels a sense of relief. If Neo has a girlfriend, especially one he's willing to fight for, then that's a good thing.

It means he's off limits.

I spend the next hour in the university's commons building, exploring each floor, and committing certain rooms to memory. I notice that there are very few places where you can go on campus where you don't see large black and gold posters promoting the hockey team and most of them feature the big three: Neo, Shane and Bass. I'm starting to truly understand just how important the hockey program is to this school. It seems to be all they care about.

After a ten-minute walk east of the commons, I coincidentally find myself at the ice rink and I'm drawn to the open entrance of it like a moth to a flame. Neo's probably still somewhere with his girlfriend, so I think a small peek inside won't hurt. He isn't here.

There's a cool bite in the rink's air and it has a distinct chemical smell I remember from the last time I was inside the rink. From a distance, I watch members of the hockey team,

all dressed in their black practice jerseys and protective gear, work on drills across the ice.

At first glance, in all of their clunky apparatus they seem to awkwardly move across the ice at breakneck speed, but the more I watch, the more I realize there really is an art to stay upright and hit a small piece of rubber into a net with pinpoint accuracy. They are in total control of their bodies and their movements. It's impressive.

My goal is to remain hidden from view but I find that I don't do a very good job of it once the tallest man out there skates gracefully toward me with that arrogant, stiff jaw of his, wisps of blond hair peeking from beneath his helmet.

"This is a surprise," Neo says as he pulls off his helmet.

My breath catches.

Under the lights and the ice, this man practically glows.

"Looking good, seventeen!" I hear from above me and she's one hundred percent right.

He raises his arm to greet whichever girl said it, but I can tell by the sincere tone of the person's compliment that it wasn't either of the girls from earlier. Instead, she just must be another one of his many fans who constantly showers him with all of this adoration.

"I was finishing my campus self tour and thought I'd just pop my head in," I explain, albeit rather badly.

"Hoping to find me?"

His cocky response takes me by surprise considering who he was just with an hour or so ago.

"I wasn't hoping for anything." My eyes dart away. "It was just a walk. In fact, I didn't think you'd even be here."

"Have you been staying alone inside your place since the kickback?"

I try casually staring at the other players practice while we talk so I don't have to look directly at Neo's face, probably

because I'm afraid he'll see exactly what he does when every other girl on this campus looks at him.

"I don't mind having a little alone time."

"Yeah, I bet living with Prez has got to be challenging."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

"Are you always like this?"

"Like what?"

"In a mood."

"Is that some passive aggressive way of saying I'm unlikable?"

This conversation is going sideways. I try to course correct.

"Are you always here...at the rink?"

"Hockey never stops."

"So where's Shane?"

"Why are you looking for him?" he asks, his body significantly stiffer than it was a few moments ago.

"It's hockey practice, right?" I shrug my shoulders. "Shouldn't he be here too?"

I'm only curious about Shane's whereabouts because I'm almost 99% sure it has something to do with the reason why Kennedy isn't in town, either.

"He's out of town," he answers flatly.

Bingo!

Something is definitely up with those two.

"I guess you like them pretty, huh?" Neo sneers.

I notice a small group of female students standing close to the glass, blatantly fawning over the players, including Neo. No wonder this so-called ice mafia is full of themselves. This

must be a daily occurrence for them. Don't these girls have better things to do?

Neo snaps his fingers in front of my face in an attempt to gain my attention, irritation clouding his pupils.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" I respond.

"I said I guess you like your men pretty," he repeats. "Am I boring you?"

"You think I'm interested in Shane because I asked you a question about him?"

"You asked where he is. That sounds like a question expressing particular interest in someone."

"A question is just a question."

One of his teammates skates towards us to ask Neo something. I recognize him from the posters, so this must be Bass. "Hey, Cap, we're about to head out. You cool?"

"Yep."

"Hey," the guy casually says hello. "Nice to meet you. I'm Bass."

"Hi." I smile. "I'm Violet."

Neo quietly observes me the entire time the other guy is speaking and continues to after his friend leaves. It makes me feel gloriously uncomfortable in all the places it shouldn't.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I ask, my stomach fluttering.

He doesn't respond, and I can't read his facial expressions for shit. I don't know what he's thinking. Good thing he can't read minds, either, because I'm embarrassed about what's on mine.

"Let's eat," he suddenly suggests.

"Eat?" I echo the word as if I don't know what it means.

"Eat lunch."

"With you?"

He can't mean with him.

"Yeah, with me."

"Why?"

He leans his massive body into his hockey stick, which is planted into the ice.

"Because that's what people do at lunchtime. They eat lunch. And I'm hungry."

I take a long breath and remind myself that I can only blame myself for being in this position. I had zero business coming into the hockey rink, especially after bumping into him on campus. All I was supposed to do today was listen to my advisor's recommendation and identify buildings, learn pathways, figure out where the cafeteria was and then go back home, but no, I had to step inside of the goddamn ice rink.

"Um, so, I really need to head back to the apartment."

"To do what? Read?"

He says the word read like it's some sort of crime and I can't lie — I'm actually tired of studying Econ and wish I could just relax and read one of my shifter novels. Sometimes the key to retaining new information is to know when to walk away and allow it to marinate.

"I guess I could eat as long as it isn't at some restaurant littered with Christmas decorations."

Wait, what are you saying, idiot?

"That might be hard," he says, offering me a rare crooked grin. "Christmas is in a week."

"Then maybe I should—"

"Wait, Grinch," he interrupts swiftly. "You've been on campus all day and I can't have you going home hungry. I know just the spot. It's Santa Claus free."

"Will Vikki be okay with this?"

There, I've said it.

“I didn’t invite Vikki,” he says plainly, but I see some sort of playful light in his eyes as if he’s actually happy I asked about her.

“While this would be a perfectly innocent lunch between acquaintances, I just don’t want her getting the wrong idea.”

“I promise that there’s nothing innocent about me asking you to lunch. I’m asking you for all the wrong reasons.”

His cerulean blue eyes dance playfully as if this is all a game for him, almost as if he’s wishing for some sort of reaction from me. I try not to give him one. In fact, I don’t say anything in response at all because I’m trying to think of a polite way to get out of this.

“Subtlety is not one of my strengths,” he explains, reading my uncomfortable expression like an open book. “And there’s no one in my life that would have the right to have a problem with us eating a meal together.”

Neo’s explanation is obscure and isn’t exactly a firm no on whether Vikki would try to slit my throat if she discovers the two of us had lunch, but a girl’s got to eat, right?

Fifteen minutes later I find myself back in a familiar place, back at the freaking ice house where the kickback was the other night.

I cut my eyes at Neo like he’s grown two heads.

“You can’t be serious.”

violet

. . .



“YOU ASKED FOR SANTA FREE, so here we are.”

“Um, I’m not having lunch with the entire hockey team.”

“You’re only having lunch with me.”

“Where? How?”

“We can eat outside by the pool.”

“You have a pool?”

“It’s Vegas. Everyone has a pool,” he says casually. “But yeah, we have an amazing outdoor space.”

“And you have all of this because you play hockey?” I say snidely.

I didn’t mean to say it like that, but the words just flew out of my mouth. While I’m grateful to have the academic scholarship given to me, it comes with so many strings attached, including the scrutiny of my father. These guys, on the other hand, have everything handed to them on a silver platter. A phenomenal house with a pool in undergrad and all they have to do is play a game that they’d probably play for free? It’s borderline ridiculous.

“Because we win hockey games,” he corrects me. “There’s a difference.”

Neo walks through the unlocked ornate wood door of the house and I follow him inside. It looks a lot different than it did when I was here for the party. In the light of day, I see that

it looks like any other neatly kept home in the area. Each room is tastefully furnished, smells faintly of lemon polish, and there are awards and team pictures neatly framed on the walls.

A middle-aged woman with a round stomach and cheeks to match greets us in the living room as she wipes her damp hands on a tea towel affixed to the apron around her waist.

“¡Buenas!”

“Hola, Lucia.” Neo greets her in a respectful tone I’ve never heard him use before. “This is my friend Violet. We thought we’d have a little lunch outside today.”

“Es perfecto, cariño. Os prepararé pollo y verduras a la parrilla.”

“Gracias, that would be great.”

“What did she say?” I whisper as she walks back into the kitchen.

“She’s going to grill some chicken and vegetables for us. It’ll be the fastest thing. Plus, I eat clean during the season.”

“You speak Spanish?”

“I understand most of it, but can’t really answer back. I have to answer in English.”

“How did you learn?”

“The maternal side of my mom’s family is from Puerto Rico and most of them refused to speak to us kids in English, so I was forced to figure out what they were saying.”

“Oh, wow, that’s cool.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so at the time, but now I realize it was the best thing they could have done.”

“And is Lucia always here?”

“She doesn’t live here, but since she’s our house manager, she’s here a lot. She makes sure the lights stay on and we don’t wreck the place. VCU alumni spent a lot of money on this house, so employing her was part of the deal.”

“I bet she sees a lot,” I say.

“Not sure what you mean,” he deadpans, and suddenly I’m unsure of what I meant as a joke.

“I just mean...I’m sure things get wild around here sometimes.”

“Are you talking about the other night?”

“Well,” I look anxiously down at my hands. “That was kind of wild. For a minute there, it didn’t look like Bender was going to get out of there alive.”

“How do you know his name?” Neo’s forehead crinkles.

“He introduced himself before everything went south.”

“He introduced himself to you.” Neo echoes what I said, his voice lowering an octave.

“Yes.”

“Well, the thing that happened between me and him was not a normal occurrence. This is not a frat house. This is the ice house.”

“And?”

“And there’s a difference.”

Uh, okay, I think to myself. Remembering that Kennedy told me the exact opposite thing about them. They’re not called the ice mafia because they’re nice boys who help old ladies across the street.

Neo dumps his gear on the floor and pulls his hoodie over his head to reveal a plain black tank top underneath. I notice the edges of a significantly large tattoo, which appears to be the mane of a male lion in the middle of his well-defined chest and I only snap out of staring at it once he asks me a question.

“So what do you think of Valencia City?”

Before I can answer, we walk out onto the most beautiful patio area I think I’ve ever seen. There’s lots of expensive-looking dark brown rattan seating with plush cream-colored cushions, a complete outdoor kitchen with stovetop, sink, dark granite countertops and huge potted cacti plants to anchor the

space. But the best part of being out here is the view of the Nevada mountains.

Something about it is so peaceful and serene that suddenly I think about my mom. She'd love this view. Traveling to new places with beautiful scenery was always something she pasted on her annual vision board, yet she was never able to find the time or, more likely, the money to make her goals happen.

"I haven't seen much of the city yet, and it's hotter than I'm used to, but so far I like Nevada."

"Do you miss the snow? You're from Philadelphia, right?"

"I haven't lived here long enough to miss anything, but no, I don't think I'll miss the snow."

He takes a seat at the end of the couch and I follow his lead, sitting at the other end.

"You live with your dad, right?"

"Not exactly, but how do you know about my father?"

"I don't remember," he says, which I find improbable. Neo seems like the type who remembers everything and everyone. "Maybe Prez mentioned that he lives here."

"Are you and Kennedy close?"

"I'd call us friends, and that's saying something because I don't have many of those and neither does she."

"I find you not having many friends hard to believe on this campus. People talk to you all the time and there are posters of you everywhere. I've never seen anything like it."

"Real friends and fans of the game are not the same thing."

I watch as his hand flexes, the one resting on his thigh, and remember him doing the same thing when I asked him about Shane.

"Are you going home to Philly or to your Dad's for Christmas?" he asks, moving the subject back to me.

"I doubt it."

He adjusts his rather colossal frame on the couch before he asks another question. “Do you have someone special back home? Someone you’re seeing?”

I consider the question. The truth of the matter is, my fading relationship with Elijah doesn’t seem that special at all, especially because of the distance between us, both geographically and emotionally. It hurts to even think it, but I’m not sure Elijah would even care that I was here alone with Neo toady. He’d probably just ask me was the food good.

But I don’t say any of that.

“Yes.”

“Is it serious?”

“As serious as it can be with someone who lives across the country.”

“Can I ask you something else?”

“You’ve been asking me questions since I got here,” I reply. “Why stop now?”

That makes him chuckle, which is super sexy to watch. Neo has a panty melting smile when he dares to reveal it.

“Why don’t you like Christmas?”

“I never said I didn’t like it.”

“You have a visceral reaction to it,” he says.

“What do you mean, I have a visceral reaction? We’ve known each other for all of two minutes. How could you assume to know that about me?”

“I’m an athlete who pays close attention to body language. I don’t need to know you intimately to notice that your nose flares and your body tenses when someone mentions it. It’s like Santa Claus did you dirty one year and you’re holding it against him.”

I emit a small laugh because Neo is funny, and I’m not even sure he’s trying to be.

“It used to be my favorite holiday.”

“Who ruined it? Some dude I gotta beat up later?”

“No,” my voice softens. I take a deep breath and just say the words. “My mother died suddenly last year on Christmas Eve.”

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry,” he offers what feels like a sincere apology.

“It’s fine. You couldn’t have known.”

“Is that why you transferred here to VCU?”

“I had to come live with my father, who lives about thirty minutes away from campus.”

“But you’re a legal adult, right?”

“Of course, but like most students, I have zero financial independence.”

“I see. Well, maybe one day you’ll like it again.”

“Like it?”

“Christmas.”

“Maybe,” I reply, but I seriously doubt it. Christmas will always remind me of the most painful time in my life. A time when my vibrant, colorful life permanent shifted to gray. There’s nothing that can change that unless someone invents a time traveling machine and I can get my mother to a hospital in time.

Lucia ends up cooking us a delicious southwestern seasoned lunch of grilled chicken and veggies along with some of her famous virgin prickly pear virgin margaritas, and it’s the best thing I’ve eaten since I moved to this damn desert.

“I hope Lucia gets paid well,” I tell Neo because I highly doubt that the woman gets paid a fair wage. These privileged-ass hockey boys have it so good.

“That sounds like an accusation instead of an actual question.” His face tightens. “You think the big, bad hockey boys are taking advantage of our sweet, five foot tall house manager?”

“This is America.” I shrug my shoulders. “And do I believe that it’s very possible this big, bad *university* is underpaying a domestic worker? You bet I do.”

“Huh.” He studies me for a lengthy period as he deliberately chews a fork full of food. “Very interesting.”

And in this moment, I’m not too sure if Neo wants to fight me or fuck me, although the latter might be wishful thinking on my part.

violet

. . .



“YOU’RE A JUDGY THING, aren’t you?” he says, breaking the awkward silence between us.

“Was that being judgy?”

“You’ve made it abundantly clear that you think we’re some group of pampered assholes paying Lucia pennies, but I’m not sure why you think we’d do that,” he says after swallowing his last bite.

“I don’t know.” I shrug my shoulders. “Because you can?”

“You’re an interesting one, Grinch.”

“Hey, I just confided in you why I don’t care for all the Christmas hoopla and you call me a grinch?”

“It doesn’t matter much why you’re a grinch, it just matters that you are.” A slippery grin spreads across Neo’s stern jaw. “You want to go for a swim? It’s hot as balls out here.”

I still haven’t found a decent hair salon that knows how to work with my hair texture, and I’m not trying to ruin my blow out which took me over an hour and Kennedy’s very expensive Dyson blow dryer, so my answer is an emphatic, “No, you shouldn’t swim right after eating.”

“Okay, then, do you want to watch me swim?” he asks with another one of those smirks that sends a jolt of something surprising straight to my core.

“I can.”

He stands and I swallow thickly as I try my best not to ogle the well defined six pack that ripples underneath his tank top. I'm sure he gets enough of that from students on campus.

"Just come sit by the edge of the pool and put your feet in," he tells me.

"Fine," I mutter to myself, knowing full well this is turning into something more than just lunch.

I'm already sitting at the edge of the saltwater pool with my drink in hand when Neo unceremoniously flings off his tank, then pulls his gray sweatpants *and* black boxer briefs down. He is splendidly butt ass naked and I almost choke on my mocktail.

"What the hell are you doing?" I protest, quickly lowering my eyes as he dives perfectly into the water, causing only a momentary ripple of the water. When his disappearing body reemerges right between my dangling legs, I'm startled.

"I'm swimming."

"Naked?" I swivel my head around to see if anyone else in the house is witnessing this spectacle.

"It's the only way I like to swim."

"You're so inappropriate."

"People all over the planet swim in the buff all the time."

"And you're making stuff up. That's not true."

I find myself completely mesmerized by how the sun bounces off his slicked back, water soaked hair.

It's disturbing.

I love Henry Cavil and that guy who starred in The Kissing Booth. I don't even like blondes.

"I promise you I'm not making it up."

"This is definitely not what most people in other countries do. They make bathing suits and swimming trunks for a reason. It's a billion dollar industry."

Neo chuckles at me as he pushes off with his feet onto his back in a floating position. I do my best to keep my eyes on his face and not on any other obvious part of him, but it's difficult when it's right there in my line of vision.

Don't let him see you watching, idiot.

"I've never met anyone like you, Violet."

"The feeling is mutual."

"Are you going to keep staring at the mountains and not at me while we talk?" he mocks.

"Are you going to keep purposely trying to embarrass me?"

"Fine," he huffs. "That's not what I was doing, but I'll keep everything waist down below the water if it will make you feel better."

"It will."

"I bet you don't act like this when you stare at Greek statues in a museum."

"The last time I did that I was eleven-years-old, on a class trip, and you best believe I giggled the entire time."

Neo proceeds to swim a few laps along the other side of the pool, first freestyle, then butterfly, then the breast stroke. Watching him swim is like watching a work of art glide through the water, except nothing about what I'm seeing makes me want to giggle.

I'm not eleven-years-old anymore.

He finishes by swimming back over to me and treading water between my legs.

"You're beautiful under this light," he says to me, the sun slowly setting behind us.

"Just in this light?" I jest, my stomach fluttering.

"Ahhh," he smirks. "I knew you were funny, too. I wonder what else you're good at?"

"Keep wondering, Cap."

His smirk turns into a full-blown smile I can feel straight in my chest. I shouldn't have used his nickname like that. I'm blatantly flirting with him. Anyone with half a brain can see that.

I shouldn't even be here.

What I should be doing is sitting at the dining room table inside the apartment, taking advantage of the fact that Kennedy isn't here to drag me to every Christmas event in the city, and studying. My executive functioning issues are no excuse for failure. If I blow my scholarship, I'll probably have to leave school, and my father will probably never forgive me, not that I really care what he thinks.

"Can you hand me a towel, Violet?"

God, why must he say my name like that? V-I-O-L-E-T, like he just bit into a juicy Florida orange and the juice is dribbling down his chin all sweet and sticky.

"Where is it?"

"There's a stack of them in that cabinet over there." He points to an outside armoire made of heavy grade almond colored plastic. I grab him one of the thick black bath towels with the words The Suns embroidered in metallic gold at the corner.

"Wow, you even have custom towels at casa de la Valencia Suns."

"Eh, we'll have to work on your Spanish," he teases. "Now you can turn your head or you can watch."

"I bet you'd like that."

"I would very much fucking like that."

I almost choke on my own saliva.

"I'll just, um, give you your privacy."

I turn my head as he steps out of the pool while he wraps the towel around his waist. But thanks to my peripheral vision, I can't help but notice one of his muscular calves, so I shut my eyes to avoid any more accidental glances.

“You can turn back around now.”

But him wearing a towel doesn't matter much. In fact, it might just be making things worse. Just looking at his perfectly sculpted body dripping in pool water is enough for a dull ache to build between my legs.

I'm not a virgin, but it's been quite a while since a guy has touched me. Elijah was the last one and that's been well over a year.

Since my mom's death, I've been in a dark place and haven't felt sexual. But right now, my vagina is paying for all of that antisocial behavior. It feels like it's in starvation mode and fighting for her life. She's looking to be fed, or more like stuffed, especially if the meal is from this statuesque hockey god.

Perhaps because of a timer set to sunset, the pool lights suddenly turn on, creating a warm and romantic illumination of the yard that only petrifies me. And when I'm afraid, I run.

“I think I should head back to my place now. Give Lucia my thanks for the delicious meal.”

“It's getting dark.”

“Exactly my point. Shouldn't some of your teammates be home soon?”

“They are home.”

Oh my god! “They are?”

“What are you so worried about? Lucia probably told them that I have company, so they wouldn't bother us.”

“So they think that I'm what...one of your puck bunnies or something?”

“Does it matter what they think, or are you more worried about what they'll tell Shane?”

I notice how Neo's left hand flexes again when he asks the question. When he walks toward me, I take a careful step back, recognizing that any proximity to him is unnerving for

me and my vagina, but my backward movement seems to annoy him further.

“Are you afraid of me, Violet?” he asks, perhaps concerned about what my response will be.

“No, what I was trying to say is that this is a men’s hockey house and I’m a new transfer student with a reputation to think of,” I tell him.

“A reputation? This isn’t 1955, Violet,” he says straight-faced. “We’ve got girls in and out of here all the time and nobody is on campus calling them whores or pinning them with scarlet letters.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not one of your hockey bunnies or whatever they’re called, and I have no interest in becoming one. I don’t know what you want from me, but I’m at this school to get my degree and then get the hell out of Nevada with zero drama.”

“No drama here.” His face softens a bit, and he throws his hands up in a motion of surrender. “This was just lunch and all I want is to be friends.”

Just lunch.

Just friends.

Of course, that’s all this is.

Seriously, what was I thinking? I’m a bit embarrassed, implying that this impromptu lunch might have been more than what it was...just lunch. Neo is just a flirt. I think he may even still be with Vikki and even if he isn’t, he can have any woman he wants on this campus. In fact, I’m beginning to think that the only reason why he invited me here is because Kennedy told him to stay away from me.

“Good, so I’m free to leave?” I ask, feeling a little stupid about the last ninety minutes I’ve spent over this house.

“Absolutely, but I’ll walk you home.”

My first reaction is to protest the escort back to my place. I’m already mortified that I was even having some of “those” thoughts, but I have a feeling that Neo would never go for it,

so I simply agree to get this evening over faster. Then I'll never have to see him again, at least not on purpose.

Our walk to my apartment is mostly quiet, and it leaves me feeling more uncomfortable than I was fifteen minutes ago. It's a complete 180-degree turn from how he was acting earlier—friendly. Have I made a complete fool of myself tonight?

When I can't stand the silence anymore, I decide to fill it with words because that's what I do sometimes when I'm nervous.

“Are you going home for Christmas?” I ask, realizing that I don't even know where home is for him.

“I don't go back to Ohio much.”

“You're from Ohio?”

His head tilts to the side and his mouth forms a half smile. “I keep forgetting you're new around here. Yeah, I'm from the Columbus area.”

“Why don't you want to go back and see your family?”

He stops walking for a moment and so I stop too.

“A drunk driver killed my brother when I was in high school. I don't like to go home much.”

His revelation shocks me, and instantly I feel horrible for asking him about home at all. I know the pain of losing someone close to me and how I don't like to talk about it... ever. Neo clearly doesn't like to talk about it either.

“I'm so sorry for your loss,” I say, because what else do you say to something like that?

We start walking again and I decide that it's probably best that we walk the rest of the way in silence. Once we arrive at my building, Neo leans against the stucco wall near the main entrance, one leg bent with his foot flat against the wall as I dig inside my handbag for the key.

“They really should put a keypad lock on that door,” he says.

“I found it,” I say excitedly, pulling it out and raising it in the air, but he doesn’t lift his head. “So, thank you again for the food—”

“I thought about something on the way here,” he cuts me off.

“What’s that?”

“You lost your mom during Christmas and I lost my brother. What are the odds of a coincidence like that?”

“Your brother’s accident was during Christmas time?”

“The day after Christmas.”

“And you still celebrate?” I ask, somewhat outraged, but then quickly catch myself. “I’m sorry. Occasional verbal diarrhea is an affliction of mine. That was insensitive of me to ask.”

“Christmas reminds me of all the good times we shared, not the pain. It was Jake’s favorite holiday, so when I celebrate it, I feel as if he’s still with me. I’m not going to let what happened ruin those memories. It was just fucked up timing.”

“I hear you,” I respond, remembering that Christmas was my mom’s favorite time of year, too. “I guess I’m just not there yet.”

The walk to campus from my place is relatively short, but the distance from Neo’s house to mine is further than I thought it would be as I look up at the darkening sky. Hockey bad ass or not, I don’t feel right about him walking home by himself. If it wasn’t for me dropping by his practice unannounced, he wouldn’t even be here, so I offer to call him an Uber, even though my credit card may laugh hysterically when they try to charge it for the ride.

“Let me call you a ride,” I offer. “The walk back home is entirely too far at this time of night.”

“Thanks, but I’m not going to just let you call me a car. I offered to walk you home. I knew the distance here. It’s fine.”

“But—”

“Plus, I don’t do Ubers in Vegas. Half of these drivers are tweaking on meth or fentanyl. I don’t trust them and you shouldn’t either.”

“Can one of your teammates pick you up?”

One of those pampered princes must have a car.

“I could call someone, but knowing them, they’re already a few beers in at this time of day.”

His reluctance makes sense now that I know a drunk driver killed his brother. He’s probably super sensitive to people driving under the influence and rightly so. I would be too. I’ve never understood why someone would get behind the wheel after drinking. If they don’t have the capacity to care about the safety of other people, they should at least care about whether they harm themselves.

I have an inner debate with myself. Should I just let Neo walk home? Yes, I should. It’s not that late out and he’s a big boy. He can take care of himself. But there’s another option that my damp panties are in full agreement with, which I know is a bad idea, but I voice it anyway.

“Then why don’t you stay and leave in the morning,” I suggest, stunned at myself for making the offer, knowing full well the risk it poses for my growing attraction towards him.

Neo pushes off the wall, walking toward me. His icy blue eyes hold me in place with a look so fierce that it sends a volt of electricity straight to my weeping pussy, kick starting the fucker like the sputtering engine of a car that’s been sitting unused in the garage too long.

“Offer accepted, Grinch.”

violet

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THIS WAS NOT the smartest idea I've ever had.

Spending the night in a small apartment with the hottest guy on campus is going to be sexual torture.

The only thing keeping me in check is that I'm pretty sure this is exactly how I was conceived, and it serves as a sober reminder of what not to do.

I suck in my stomach a few inches as Neo walks the perimeter of the living room, picking up the few figurines and photos that Kennedy has on display.

I'm wound up tighter than a drum and am not sure how I'm going to get through the rest of this evening if he keeps looking like... this.

"Can I get you anything?" I ask.

"I'm actually hungry again."

"Yeah?"

"I eat a lot during the season. Hockey is a very physically demanding sport."

Why does that perfectly normal explanation sound so extremely dirty coming out of his mouth?

I check the kitchen cabinets to see what we have.

"I didn't get a chance to grab any groceries since moving in, so I'm not sure I have much unless you want a cheese omelet."

“Maybe we order something,” he suggests. “Whatever you want from a delivery service?”

“I’m not really that hungry, so it doesn’t matter to me. What’s good to order out here?”

“You can’t get any bad Mexican food but never order a cheesesteak out here. You’ll be highly disappointed.”

“I’m not a big Mexican food eater, but get whatever you want.”

“You don’t like tacos?”

“I can take them or leave them.”

“Burritos?” he asks incredulously.

“Same.”

“Wings it is then.”

Neo takes a seat on our small dark gray tufted couch, which takes up the majority of the space in our living room, and I sit on the floor with my back against it. We decide to scour Netflix for a movie we can both enjoy and find that it’s harder than we thought.

“There’s a ton of crappy ass Christmas movies on here,” he says. “But I say we watch one. It doesn’t look like we have much of a choice.”

“They wouldn’t even show us those movies if they didn’t think your algorithm wanted them.”

“You think I watch corny Christmas movies in my spare time?”

“The algorithm doesn’t lie,” I laugh.

“Fine, you want to switch to your account?”

“I don’t have one.”

“You don’t watch television?” he asks with a hint of disbelief.

“I rather read.”

“But you know all about the mysterious algorithm?”

“Again, I read. Artificial intelligence is in the news almost every day.”

“Are you a business major, or maybe tech?”

“Economics.”

“I hated that class in high school. What will you do with that degree?”

“Law school.”

“That makes sense.” He doesn’t seem to be too impressed. “But why do you want to be a lawyer?”

Oddly enough, nobody has ever asked me that, not even my academic counselor. Whenever I tell anyone my career goals, they simply look as if they’re impressed and congratulate me. It’s the polite thing to do, but I think we’ve already established that Neo isn’t worried about being polite.

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted to be.”

“But why?”

“For truth and justice,” I say in a clipped tone, annoyed by all his questions that are making me uncomfortable. “Why do you want to play hockey for a living?”

“Because it’s a good living.”

“And that’s it?”

“Ten million dollars is a good reason to do anything.”

“But that’s your why? That’s why you get up every single day and train, eat clean, consume no alcohol, and go to bed by eleven?” I challenge.

“How do you know what time I go to bed?” He grins sinfully. “Have you been asking around about me?”

“Absolutely not. It was a lucky guess,” I say, but that’s kind of a lie. I haven’t asked anyone about him, but it only takes a few seconds to conduct an internet search on one Neo Major and see his entire life encapsulated on a web page.

“You sure?” He teases, licking the right-hand corner of his mouth.

“I’m sure.” My eyes dart away.

“I play hockey because I love it, but my determination to be the best is fueled by something bigger.”

I return my eyes back to his.

“Exactly...your why.”

“Yes, my why, as you describe it is my brother.”

“You want to succeed in honor of him?”

“My brother was going into the NHL right after he graduated high school. He was a big fucking deal in the hockey world. A prodigy really.”

Hmm, I think I was a little lazy with my research. I’m going back on the computer as soon as he leaves tomorrow. Obviously, I missed a huge section about Neo’s personal life. Suddenly, a lot of things are starting to make sense about who he is and what drives him. He’s not just some brooding, beautiful thing to stare at. There are layers to him.

“I’m so sorry about your brother,” I tell him again. “It always infuriates me that people get behind the wheel when they’ve been drinking or getting high. It’s so selfish.”

“Yeah,” he replies, his eyes fiercely trained on me, and I feel butterflies in all the wrong places. “Thanks for saying that.”

“Why don’t we just search for something old and familiar and watch that,” I suggest nervously.

“Yeah, because in a minute I’m putting on a hockey game.”

“And I’m ready to pull out a book,” I laugh.

“Okay, there’s no need for such drastic measures. Maybe instead of TV, why don’t we play a game while we wait for the wings?”

“You don’t really seem like the game type,” I say while walking into my bedroom to change into the baggiest sweats I can find without being too hot inside my own house.

“What are you talking about?” he scoffs. “I play a game called hockey every day.”

“Not that kind of game. I mean a social one,” I say loud enough so he can hear me from the other room.

“I can be social. Let’s exchange numbers,” he demands, and I catch myself smiling at the request.

This is bad, Violet.

Don’t do it.

“Okay,” is my answer as I stare with disappointment at myself in the mirror.

After locking his phone number in, I ask him, “So what kind of game do you want to play? I’m down for Scrabble.”

“No scrabble. Let’s play a *get to know you* game.”

“We’ve been getting to know each other all day.”

“You didn’t even know I was from Ohio, so it’s safe to say that you don’t know much about me. Most people know where I’m from, Grinch.”

“Hey, I didn’t give you permission to call me that. I’m not a grinch. I’m just grieving.”

“Giving out nicknames is my super power and it’s my prerogative to call you by whatever name I want. I don’t need your permission.”

“That’s not actually how that works. If that’s the case, maybe I’ll just call you jackass?”

“Damn, is that what people call me behind my back?” he says, and I can hear his raucous laughter all the way from here. I just wish the sound didn’t warm my chest the way it does.

“To be fair, I know nothing about you because we’ve just met,” I say. “And more importantly, I’m not one of your hockey groupies.”

“Groupies are girls who follow the band, Violet. Puck bunnies is the term to use when you’re talking about hockey whores.”

“In the name of every feminist who came before me, you shouldn’t call them that,” I say as I return to the living room in my oversized blush pink sweats and my bare feet.

“I didn’t invent the term.” He contends as he rakes his piercing blue eyes down my body.

Why have I done everything I can to cover myself in fabric yet in front of him I still feel totally exposed?

“But you’re perpetuating it.”

“I could think of worse names to call them,” he mutters. “Some of them do very indecent things, quite regularly, with several members of the team.”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to slut shame anyone.”

“Have you been asking about me, Violet?” he taunts. “Nice sweats, by the way.”

“I didn’t have to ask anyone about what I already know, and even if you are a man whore, that’s your business. All I’m saying is you’re not in any position to call anyone names.”

“Prez calls them puck bunnies too,” he counters, raising his arms up for emphasis.

“I never heard her say it, but by the way, what’s the deal with you three?”

“What three are you referring to?”

It’s pretty clear he’s pretending to not know who or what I’m talking about, but I’ll play his game.

“Kennedy obviously loves hockey, and may enjoy watching the team play, but the few times I’ve seen her around you and Shane, it feels as if she doesn’t like either of you guys that much at all. You three have a weird energy.”

“Fucking Shane again,” he protests, then immediately checks his phone after it dings. “The driver is approaching with our order.”

I grab some plates and extra napkins for us from the counter. Although I’m not particularly hungry, but that’s forever been my damn weakness. I can always eat a few

wings, another slice of pizza or a handful of gummy bears no matter what I've already eaten.

“Just how well do you know Prez?” Neo asks, watching me move through the kitchen, because unfortunately even in baggy sweatpants my butt still jiggles.

“We went to high school together.”

“Were you two close?”

“We didn't know each other well. Why do you ask?”

“Prez doesn't get along with most people, especially girls. I was surprised to hear that she was letting someone move in here. If you weren't friends, how did she even know that you were transferring to VCU or that you needed a place to stay?”

Suddenly I feel like I'm the one on the hot seat.

“I'm from a tight-knit neighborhood and people talk. Everyone knew about my mom's passing, which means everyone knew that I was forced into moving out here.”

“Forced?” His lips press tightly together.

“My mom lived check to check like most folks, and I couldn't afford to stay in our house, pay bills and go to school on my own. That's why I came out here to live with my father.”

“But you didn't want to?”

“My parents were never together and I don't really know him. He was never in my life. It's just hard, you know?”

“So he made you move out here?”

“I think he could have helped me keep the house and maybe stay in the college I already started at back home, but I suppose that would have required too much work and financial assistance on his part.”

“So you didn't really have a choice.”

“Exactly,” I say somberly. “You never answered my question about you and Kennedy.”

“I didn't realize there was a question.”

“Why does she give you guys such shit?”

“She gives it to Shane, not me.”

“Why?”

His eyes narrow. “Have you asked her?”

“I thought I did, but I don’t know that she really gave me a straight answer.”

“So you’re trying to get the information out of me after plying me with hot wings?”

“How am I plying you with wings that you bought?” I postulate. “The bottom line is I don’t like secrets.”

“That’s obvious, but there’s no big secret being kept from you. Shane and Kennedy just have a complicated history.”

“What’s so complicated about it? Did they used to date or something?”

The food definitely looks edible as I plate the wings, then place them on the coffee table along with the included sauces and celery sticks.

“That’s not really my business to tell.” He grabs a wing and the way he inhales it is almost pornographic. “Talk to Prez.”

“Fine,” I huff. “Well, can you at least tell me why you call her Prez, or is that a secret, too?”

“It’s a joke. It means that she’s president of the Ice Mafia fan club. Queen of the puck bunnies.”

“An honor that I imagine makes her skin crawl.”

“The joke only works because Kennedy is the antithesis of a puck bunny.”

“Right,” I agree.

“Although there’s nothing wrong with a woman wanting a hockey player between her thighs,” he says in a husky voice. “Nothing wrong with that shit at all.”

violet

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I **AVERT** my attention away from the insinuation hanging between us and place my focus on the television as well as the chicken wing in my hand. Neo ends up putting the Game Show Channel on as background noise and as the night continues on, I grow a lot more comfortable talking with him.

His grumpy disposition and good looks seem a lot less imposing now that his lips and fingers are smeared with buffalo sauce and we actually find ourselves frequently laughing as we play along with the contestants on Family Feud.

“You’re a mess,” I say, handing him a napkin during a commercial break. “Wipe your mouth.”

”And you’re sexy as fuck.” He suddenly moves within inches of me and says, “Let me wipe yours.”

He takes the napkin and gingerly wipes the side of my mouth, and something about the tenderness of the gesture makes me shut my eyes. I don’t open them again until his mouth finds mine.

His lips are soft, yet firm as they meet mine with a fiery intensity. My body responds immediately, my nipples hardening as Neo’s hand slides down my back, pulling me closer to him. The taste of hot sauce lingers on his tongue as it dances with mine. I moan softly, unable to resist the want coursing through me.

As we break from the kiss, Neo looks at me with a hunger that sends shivers down my spine and renders me defenseless. I'm doing so many things I shouldn't.

He effortlessly pulls me onto his lap, as if I don't weigh a thing, and I allow it. When his hands roam the curves of my body as he kisses my neck, I don't stop him. And when his teeth graze my skin, leaving a trail of heat in their wake, I inadvertently gasp in delicious delight.

"I want you so fucking bad," he whispers huskily in my ear, making my sex starved vagina clench with desire. "And I can tell that you want me too, but I can wait until you're sure. Tonight, I just want to give you something think about. Make you feel good. So you've got a choice, Violet. My fingers or my tongue?"

No man has ever talked to me like this. It's unnerving. My body responds to every word he says, craving everything he's offering, but my brain is flashing huge yellow caution signs.

Alert! Use Caution.

"Let me offer you some encouragement while you decide," he says in a playful voice, probably sensing the inner battle I'm dealing with.

Neo's hands travel under and up my shirt, cupping my breasts as he kneads them gently. I'm not wearing a bra, which may or may not have been a wise decision. I guess it's all how you look at it. It feels entirely too good, so I arch my back, giving him better access and now his mouth finds one of my nipples.

"Tongue?" He growls the question as he sucks and tenderly nibbles on it, sending waves of pleasure straight to my core. "Or fingers?"

I'm lost in the moment, my body burning on fire as Neo slides one of his massive hands down my sweats and inside the crotch of my panties.

"Fuck, you're wet," he sighs into my ear, and a tuft of his blond hair brushes softly against my face.

My hips writhe as Neo's skilled touch between my folds sends me higher and higher, my brain foggy with want. It's been so long that I quickly almost reach climax when my common sense finally kicks in. I have a boyfriend and I almost let a hockey player finger fuck me.

I grab his wrist to stop him.

"Wait—"

All movement immediately stops.

And my poor vagina weeps.

It's heartbreaking, but necessary.

There's a reason why Kennedy warned him away from me. *She doesn't need any new friends, Neo.* She was probably protecting me from the big bad ice wolf and I need to remember that.

"I guess you've decided on an alternate option," he says, his voice sounding disheartened as he pulls his hand from between my legs and lowers my top.

"Enjoy the couch," I tell him.

"Good night, Violet."

I haven't had a great night's sleep in almost a year and last night was no different. Well, there was one difference.

For months I've been replaying last year over and over in my dreams. In some iterations of the dream, I'm chastising my mother for not being forthcoming with me. I think it's because after her death, I discovered that she may not have had some sort of random aneurism at all. Mom had a myriad of health problems that she was keeping from me, some of which I'm sure contributed to her outcome.

But last night I had variations of the same dream all starring one Neo Major. In one of the ridiculous dreams I had, he finger fucked me in the middle of an Econ class while

people stared at us. Some with envy. Others in disgust. It was a *wackadoodle* dream, and I was the star.

After tossing and turning half the night, I overslept and wake up the next morning to find a simple one word text from Neo implying that he's left.

Neo: thanks

I lay still, thinking about our evening together and what almost happened between us. If I hadn't come to my senses, there's a strong chance I would have slept with him.

Who the hell am I right now?

I don't just sleep around with random guys I don't know. That isn't me. The last time I had sex, it was with Elijah and that was only after we'd been seeing for close to six months because that's who I am.

I have rules.

Standards.

I get to know the guy and maybe even some of his friends as well. I check his social media. I check the dating sites to make sure he isn't on them actively looking for a hookup. I ask for STD results.

Usually, I do all the things.

Not this time.

This time, I came dangerously close to breaking all my rules.

I can still feel the delicious traces of Neo's calloused fingertips along the skin of my inner thighs, but now that my head is no longer clouded from his presence (and from lust), I understand now more than ever that it would be in my best interest to forget what almost happened. Not that I'm interested in the possibility, but there could never be anything romantic between Neo and me.

I'm Violet, the scholarship student and book nerd. He's Neo the hockey god, university treasure. If there was even a

chance of something happening between us, it would inevitably be short-lived and only end badly for me.

I'm a realist.

And I know his kind.

His big, beautiful kind.

They're absolute trouble.

And I'm not going to make the same mistake that my mother did. I refuse to repeat history.

As I head to the kitchen for breakfast, I almost trip over a surprise sitting right outside my bedroom door. There's a small Christmas tree plugged into the outlet near my door with gold lights and ornaments twinkling merrily, and there's a small note attached.

*"You're going to get there, Grinch,
and this tree is the first step. Merry
Christmas." - Neo*

kennedy

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I TRUDGE INTO THE WARM, festive living room, the smell of pine and cinnamon greeting me, almost like nothing's changed. I grew up in a house where my parents took the holidays very seriously, wanting to make it magical for me, their golden child. My parents were always the older couple at back-to-school nights, a result of my mother having three miscarriages and a battle with infertility before giving birth to me.

It hadn't even been six weeks after high school graduation when they both sat me down to a dinner of my mom's homemade soup dumplings to have a "talk". I immediately started crying, believing they were about to tell me that one of them had cancer. Their mortality had always been a worry of mine since I was a little girl.

It wasn't cancer.

It was worse.

It was divorce.

After that every thing happened so quickly. My dad bought out my mom for her half of the house, and she moved to a condo forty minutes away. It's weird coming home now. Nothing is the way it was. Nothing makes sense. Especially when I walk inside and see a stranger taking up space where my mother used to stand.

"There's my baby girl," my father spreads his arms, waiting for me to run into his embrace like I did when I was a

little girl. But I won't, because standing next to him is Shane's mother, her boney hand entwined with his.

"Hi, Kennedy, it's great to see you," she says in an annoying wispy voice that is the complete opposite of my mother's strong one.

In fact, Shane's mom is the complete opposite of mine in every way and I wonder what the hell my father sees in her. My mother has a slight figure, creamy tan complexion, and beautiful onyx colored hair compliments of her Japanese heritage. She is gorgeous and I count myself blessed that I share half of her genetic code.

Shane's mother is just okay looking. She's a pear-shaped, pale redhead, the same height as my father at five foot nine. She's polite and soft-spoken and gets on every last one of my nerves simply because she exists.

But here's the kicker...

The two of them met at accepted students' day at VCU and simply because of our ill-fated connection, I haven't been able to shake her cocky son Shane ever since.

"Hi," is my simply return greeting.

My dad beams at me, unaware of the storm brewing inside my chest since Shane already told me what I'm walking into.

"Are you hungry, Kee-Kee?" he asks, using my childhood nickname that Shane has now weaponized against me.

"I ate on the plane," I tell him.

"You want to go put your bags upstairs, then come back down?"

"Down for what?"

His expression flattens. "To spend some time with me. I haven't seen you in months."

"Uh, sure."

"Shane is coming by too," Shane's mother says, as if I don't already know that. "He just wanted to drop his things at our house first."

“We were on the same flight,” I deadpan.

“Right, of course.” Her cheeks redden.

When Shane told me at the kickback that our parents were planning on celebrating Christmas together at my house, I knew that meant things had suddenly turned serious. When a couple decides to spend the holiday together, that is pretty significant.

I’m not exactly sure how much time flies by as I sit in my room staring at a pair of old, white ice skates which hang on a hat rack stand in the corner of my room. I used to love ice skating as a kid and would skate regularly at my neighborhood rink until the city shut it down due to budget cuts. I would fantasize that one day I’d be the first biracial girl to skate professionally in the US and in the olympics for Japan, but of course that was just a pipe dream. For one, I’m not a dual citizen of both countries and second, truth-be-told, I was never that great of a skater.

“Hey.”

I didn’t even hear Shane come in the house, much less upstairs, but he’s standing in my doorway looking like he actually feels sorry for me.

“Don’t give me that pity stare.”

“One thing I’d never feel is pity for you,” he replies, and the cool gaze in his eyes confirms that. Okay, he’s still the same ass I’ve grown to detest.

“Good, then why are you standing in my doorway?”

“I’m here to escort you downstairs. Dinner’s ready.”

“I already told them I wasn’t hungry. I ate on the plane and now that I think about it, so did you.”

“I’m a growing boy. I need more than one meal and you could stand to eat something else, too.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I cock my head to the side. “Are you calling me skinny?”

In a world full of Instagram bodies with tiny waists and huge asses, my slender, teacup-boobed body doesn't fit in with today's standards of "hot".

It used to bother me a lot when I was just starting high school but with maturity I learned to accept the fact that no matter what I eat, I'm just not going to gain as much weight as another person who eats the same thing and that's okay. I'm beautiful, just as I am. But something about Shane's comment, or maybe the fact that he's the one saying it, irks me tremendously.

"I'm just saying that snack on the plane they served was only about three hundred calories. What else have you eaten today?"

"What are you, my personal trainer?"

"Just come," he commands, finally annoyed with my resistance.

Shane is typically an easy-going, even-tempered guy, but I love it when I can get to him. His nice guy routine doesn't fool me. I know him in a way others don't. Behind the wholesome guy next door act is a cocky, arrogant jerk who takes great delight in pissing me off.

"Why should I?"

"Just because you want to continue living in some sort of immature delusion that your parents are going to get back together doesn't mean I'm going to allow you to disrespect my mother. She cooked a meal for us and you're going to eat it."

I stand and get right up in his face.

Who the hell does he think he's talking to?

"And who's going to make me?"

He steps even closer, his large body almost engulfing my small one. He smells like a mixture of spring fresh body wash and mint, and I wonder if he found the time to shower when he dropped his bags off at his house.

I still smell like airport.

“Kee-Kee, I will take every single green bean that my mom prepared with her sweet bare hands and shove them down your throat one by one if I have to, but you will eat.”

“Is that a threat?”

“I don’t threaten women.”

“It sounded like a threat.”

“It’s simply a promise you know I’ll make good on.”

Our sudden stare off is silent and feels deadly.

Like, I could literally kill this kid.

He’s clearly getting some sick enjoyment out of this whole cluster fuck going on between our parents, and it baffles me why. He doesn’t even know my father. Why would he blindly trust that my dad will be good to his mother? Hell, he basically blindsided my own mom with the divorce. Doesn’t he get that the same thing will happen to his mother? That she’ll get hurt?

“I so wish your teammates could see this side of you,” I practically hiss. “Do they even know how cruel you are behind closed doors?”

“Oh, they know, Kee-Kee,” he responds, while a wicked grin spreads across his face.

“Whatever,” I mutter and I forcibly push him out of my way and head to whatever fresh hell I’m in store for downstairs.

kennedy

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SHANE'S MOM cooks us a very basic meal of roast beef, green beans, and roasted potatoes. It's pretty standard American fare and in no way competes with my mom's cooking skills. Another big difference between them both.

The food doesn't sit well in my stomach, mainly because Shane seems to be scrutinizing every bite I take. His eyes narrow at one point during the meal, when it's obvious he wants me to pretend that it's the most delicious food I've ever eaten.

"Do you like the roast beef, hun'?" His mother asks my father. I can't believe she's using terms of endearment for him publicly already.

"It's delicious, Kate. Reminds me of my grandmother's and that's a serious compliment."

"Was she a good cook?"

"The best."

Oh, good Lord, Daddy. Don't bring Great-Grandma into this.

"Yeah, Ma, it's really good," Shane adds, looking at me with a side eye.

"Uh, I don't usually eat beef," I say, and Shane kicks me softly under the table. "But it's tasty."

A few more minutes of mindless pleasantries continue over the dinner table. Shane drones on about hockey. My

father asks me about business school. And then the bomb drops.

“Baby girl, I have some great news,” my father says, dropping his fork down with a clank.

“What is it?”

“I’m not going to beat around the bush. I’ve asked Kate to marry me, and she said yes!”

Kate stands out of her seat and offers me a smile of self-restraint, her engagement ring sparkling under the white lights of the chandelier. I didn’t notice it earlier because I don’t make it a habit of inspecting what Kate is wearing, but now it shines in my eyes like a beacon of futile hope.

“We wanted to wait until you got home to tell you.”

I feel my stomach drop.

“You’re marrying her?” I turn my head to glare at Shane. “Did you know about this?”

Shane’s head is down, but he slowly lifts it and enunciates slowly, “I had some idea.”

“Kee-Kee,” my father interrupts as Shane’s mother sits back down.

“Do you even know what this means?” I say to my dad.

My dad’s smile falters. “Kennedy, I thought you’d be happy for us.”

“And why would you think that?” I ask in disbelief, standing for dramatic effect.

“Maybe because I thought my happiness mattered to you.”

“How can I be happy? You just met her and now she’s in my mother’s house, cooking in my mother’s kitchen, and her son is the most arrogant person at my school making my life a living hell.”

“Excuse you,” Shane interrupts with laughter in his voice. “Me, arrogant?”

I slam my hand on the table, glaring at him, my fists clenched.

“Don’t you dare make a joke out of this! You’ve made my life miserable at school, and now I have to deal with you at home?”

“Does Shane bother you at school?” his mother asks in confusion, looking between us. “I thought you two were friends.”

Shane raises an eyebrow. “We seem to only be friends when she comes to my games or to my parties. You know, when it’s convenient for her.”

“What does that mean?” I snap. “There’s always some sarcastic undercurrent to everything you say. I go to the school’s hockey games, not just yours.”

“And the parties?”

“You made me go!”

“You forced her to go to a party, Shane?” His mother asks in disbelief.

“I can’t imagine that I could force Kennedy to do anything she didn’t want to do.” He responds. “We made a bet on a game and she lost. That’s why she came to the last party. You’d have to ask her why she came to all the others.”

I despise him.

“That’s only half the story!” I protest. “The truth is that we are not friends and we never will be. You’re like a pesky tick that is leeching onto me and invading my family, sucking the blood out of us!”

“Kennedy!” my father protests.

“You definitely should be in the theater department and not the business school.” Shane crosses his arms, a hint of annoyance flickering in his eyes. “I’m not invading anything. Our parents are getting married, not us. Get over it.”

“Shane Sullivan, watch your tone. And I told you to look out for Kennedy and get to know her, not harass her.”

“Look out for me?” I scoff. “Do you really think I want to go on campus every day and chat it up with the one person who is a constant reminder of bullshit going on in here?”

“Sit down, Kennedy,” my father orders in a voice I haven’t heard him use with me since I was nine-years-old so I take my seat. “What’s going on in here is that two people have made an adult decision to share our lives together,” he continues. “I understand you don’t care much for change, and I knew this would be difficult for you to hear, but I never imagined you’d be this emotional about it.”

“Dad—”

He raises a hand to quiet me.

“It is Christmas. Kate is a guest in this house, and she will soon be a member of this family. Our family. So I warn you, please don’t say anything else tonight that you’ll regret because I promise that it won’t play out the way that you expect.”

My father’s harsh words slice at my heart like shards of glass. He just made it clear, in front of everyone, that if he has to make a choice, it will be Shane’s mother.

If I sit at this table any longer, I’m afraid that I’m going to cry and embarrass myself more than I already have, but if I leave, I may enrage my father even more than he already is. Thankfully, I get a pardon.

“You may be excused,” he tells me. “I think you need some time to reflect on your attitude.”

There are tears in Shane’s mother’s eyes, practically mirroring what my own must look like, and the weight of how I’ve reacted tonight is becoming much clearer. Maybe I’m not as mature as I like to think I am but dammit, this all really hurts.

I close the door to my room and think about calling my mom because she’s the only voice I want to hear, but that would be selfish. Why should I ruin her holiday by telling her about this? While I understand my parents’ divorce was

“amicable,” I’m pretty sure that it would still hurt my mom to know how my father has moved on with his life.

Suddenly, there’s a heavy knock at my door. I’d know the sound of those Fred-Flinstone-sized knuckles anywhere.

“What, Shane?” I say through the door.

“Open up.”

“I don’t want to talk right now.”

Of course, he opens the door anyway, and once he sees my tear-stained face, his expression softens slightly. “Look, Kennedy, I get it. We haven’t exactly been best friends, but maybe, for our parents’ sake, can we at least try to make this work?”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm the storm inside me. This whole situation feels like a nightmare. Like somebody else’s life. Yet the realization I have zero control over the choices that my father has been made abundantly clear to me tonight. I have to make some sort of peace with it, even if that means that Shane is now a fixture in my life.

Shane waits for my response, his usual arrogance replaced by something resembling genuine concern.

Reluctantly, I nod. “Fine. For our parents.”

My shoulders relax slightly, but the tension between us remains as he advances towards me carefully, like he’s walking on eggshells. The closer he gets, the more I have to tilt my head to watch his approach.

Shane is tall.

Ridiculously tall.

He stands in between my legs as I sit on the edge of my bed and uses his thumb and pointer finger to tilt my chin up higher to face him.

The unexplainable part is I let him.

He bends down slowly, probably anticipating that I’ll stop him at any moment, but I don’t. I know what he’s about to do. I’m almost daring him to do it. To get it over with. This

explosive energy between us has been building for months. We both know it. I've just been too afraid of it to do anything about it.

It's not the brutal clash of lips and teeth that I expected between us. Actually, it's a soft, tentative, careful kiss that feels different from any kiss I've ever had before.

Shockingly, my body enjoys this.

My nipples pebble and I feel that all too familiar squirm in between my legs when I'm turned on. And when the kiss ends, I almost feel bereft.

"I'm glad that's settled," he says with a smile I have grown to ignore because it can't be trusted.

What in the actual fuck am I doing?

"Get out," I tell him, my voice cracking.

"I'm going. I'm sure you have a lot to process. You just kissed your stepbrother. That's got to be a Christmas mind fuck for your ass."

"I hate you!"

"Your brain might hate me, but your pussy definitely doesn't. I can smell how much she likes me from here."

"Get! Out! Shane!"

"See you at the next game," he laughs as he closes the door behind him.

I fall back on my bed, turn over, and scream into the pillow. There's got to be a way I can reverse *Parent Trap*, this smug fucker and his mother out of my life.

I just have to figure it out.

violet

. . .



THE PROBLEM with being touched by a hockey god is that now I'm cursed with memories of the experience and how much better it could have felt if I had allowed it to progress where Neo was hoping to take it.

His tongue or his fingers?

My nipples harden just thinking about his wicked proposition. It's all I can think about some days.

To avoid getting any further worked up about someone who I need to take completely off my radar, I try reading a chapter in my Econ textbook on Solow's growth model. Yet all I seem to keep thinking about is the look Neo gave me as his fingers flicked my clit. His lustful gaze is practically seared into my consciousness now. Two seconds more and I would have orgasmed so hard for him it would have been embarrassing.

I was smart to stop it when I did. I truly believe that you give a little piece of your soul away when a man can make you come like that.

I decide to call Kennedy not only to check up on her but because I feel guilty as hell about what almost happened last night and I kind of miss her.

"How's Philly?" I ask her.

"As good as it's ever been," she replies sarcastically.

"And how are you?"

“I’ve been better.”

“Are you ever going to tell me why you had to leave so suddenly like that?”

“Just some family shit. Nothing that warrants a full blow conversation right now. There are little birdies listening.”

“Understood.”

“What have you been doing while I’ve been gone? Anything exciting going on in Valencia City?”

Spying on Neo’s hockey practice.

Drooling while he swam in the buff.

Letting him suck on my nipples.

Relishing the feel of his fingers in my panties.

“Just reading and stuff.”

“Of course,” she laughs. “That’s all you ever do. Have you talked to your man at all?”

“Elijah?” I say, almost forgetting about him.

“Is there another one?”

“Right,” I chuckle nervously. “Yeah, of course, I’ve talked to him. I miss him so much,” I lie.

“Aww, that’s cute.”

“Are you staying home through the whole winter break?” I ask her.

“Hell, no. It’s a shit show here,” she sighs. “My goal is to fly back the day before New Year’s Eve. There’s a party I want us to go to and I want us to get new dresses for it.”

“A dress?”

“Yeah, like a total fuck ‘em dress. We need to look super hot. I’m going hunting.”

“Hunting for what?”

“Dick hunting, girl.”

“Uh, okay,” I chuckle. “Is that Ray kid going to be at this party?”

“That’s the word on the street,” she replies. “Hey, are you going to go over your Dad’s on Christmas?”

“Probably not.”

“Aww, I know he’s not your favorite person, but I don’t want you to be alone on Christmas. That sucks.”

“It’s fine. It’s just another day of the year.”

“Now we know that’s not exactly true. It’s only been a year and I know you must miss your mom something fierce.”

“Yeah, I do,” I admit. “But that’s why I’m going to stay in bed and read a novel I’ve been wanting to get to. I just want to get through the day and move on.”

“That sounds super sad.”

“I’m fine, Kennedy,” I huff, annoyed with her commentary on how I’m choosing to spend my holiday.

“Okay, girl, if you like it, then I love it.”

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Is Shane from our neighborhood in Philly?”

There’s a loaded silence between us which sort of reminds me whenever I bring up Shane’s name in front of Neo. Neither he nor Kennedy ever want to talk about this guy. What is he, a serial killer or something?

“He’s definitely not a Philly boy. He’s from New Jersey.”

“South Jersey?”

“Yep.”

So near Philadelphia.

“Did you know him before coming to VCU?”

“Why all these questions about him? What do you care?”

“Why are you getting so defensive?”

“I’m not being bloody defensive.”

“Why did you suddenly speak in a British accent?” I try holding back a laugh.

“I just finished my holiday ritual of watching a few classic James Bond movies in a row.”

“Roger Moore or Sean Connery?”

“Sean Connery, of course.”

Of course.

“So what’s going on, Kennedy?” I return to the topic at hand. “Why does nobody want me to ask about Shane? He seemed nice enough at the rink the other day. Nicer than the other one.”

I pretend not to even remember Neo’s name.

What a joke.

Kennedy sighs heavily, clearly not wanting to discuss it, but my curiosity has been getting the better of me since the festival. I need to know.

“If you must know, and I don’t care who hears me, I don’t like talking about him because Shane’s bitch of a mother is dating my father.”

Well, damn, that’s not where I thought this conversation was going.

“Um, and?”

“And I don’t like it, Violet!”

“Is it serious between them?”

“As a heart attack. They brought me and Shane home to tell us that not only are they serious but they’re engaged. Can you believe that? She is marrying my father and moving into my mother’s house.”

Oh, damn.

“So you and Shane—”

“Will be step siblings if I don’t figure out a way to stop this colossal midlife crisis of my dad’s. He’s making a huge mistake, and he’s so pussy whipped he doesn’t even realize it.”

“How long have they been dating?”

“That’s not the question you should be asking.”

“Okay...what’s the right question?”

“How soon did they start officially dating after my parents’ divorce?”

“That sounds like a trick question.”

“The answer is exactly three weeks and four days after the papers were finalized.”

“Yeah, that’s not long at all.”

“Exactly, which means they must have been seeing each other well before my father strolled inside our kitchen and told my mother on a random summer night that he wanted a divorce. It means that his mother *is* the reason for the divorce.”

“I can see now why you’re angry.”

“Oh, I’m not just mad, I’m livid.”

“And how does Shane feel about it?”

“What does he care?”

“Well, it’s his mother in the middle of this, too. I’m sure he has strong feelings about who his mother marries.”

“I don’t know if Shane has a strong feeling about anything other than himself, Violet. I’m not sure he’s even capable of feeling anything outside of what happens on that ice and in his boxer shorts.”

“Ah, okay.”

No need to argue with her about a topic that she is probably way more knowledgeable about than me. She’s been at VCU longer and knows those guys better.

I can hear her angry breathing over the phone and decide to distract her with a random piece of information she might find amusing.

“We got a Christmas tree,” I blurt out.

“What?”

“A Christmas tree.”

“I thought you couldn’t stomach the whole idea of decorations because of, well, you know.”

“It’s not a huge tree or anything. It’s a small thing covered in one string of lights and a few random gold Christmas balls.”

I stare at Neo’s little gift, which I’ve since placed on the island counter of our kitchen, and find myself smirking. How the heck did that guy get a decorated Christmas tree, leave it for me, and leave the apartment without me hearing a thing? Talk about James Bond.

“Facetime me. I want to see it.”

We hang up our cell phones and I call Kennedy right back. Her eyes are slightly sunken in, like she has had little sleep. This thing between her dad and Shane’s mom must be really taking a toll on her.

“See.”

“Aww, it’s kind of cute in a very Charlie Brown Christmas kind of way. I’m so proud of you. Where’d you buy it?”

“Well, that’s the thing.”

“What?”

“I didn’t buy it.”

“Explain yourself, love,” she says in a faux British accent again.

For a moment, I consider telling Kennedy that it was Neo who left the tree but then I’d have to explain how that came to be, and I’m not too sure she’d be happy to hear that I had lunch over at the ice house and then ended up here where I let him spend the night. It goes against every one of her “we don’t go anywhere solo” safety rules.

And she’d be one hundred percent right.

Out of sheer curiosity, I violated the girl code.

So I decide to keep my mouth shut.

“I found it.”

“So it’s like a little abandoned tree that you rescued? How sweet.”

“Yeah,” I look away guiltily from her face. “Something like that.”

“Go. Away.” Kennedy says to whoever has just entered the room, and she turns her phone face down so I can’t see who it is, not that it matters. I already know that it’s Shane.

Suddenly there’s a physical scuffle, and what sounds like laughter. Then Shane is on camera.

“Hey, book worm,” he smiles, much of his ginger-colored hair sticking straight up in the air.

“Uh, hi, Shane. What are you doing?”

“Just—”

A bed pillow unexpectedly flies into camera view, knocking the phone out of Shane’s hand, and another scuffle ensues.

“You’re going to pay for that, Kee-Kee,” I hear him growl.

“Violet!” Kennedy hollers. “I’ll call you back!”

violet

. . .



I'M REALLY TRYING to act like Christmas is just another day of the year, but the reality is that it isn't and probably never will be, at least for me. Between the relentless push of Christmas music, television programming and VCU's obvious commitment to an obscene amount of holiday lights, it's pretty hard to escape.

My father called me last night to double check if I wanted to come to his house for Christmas dinner with him and his new "friend" Charlotte. I'd already said no two other times, but lately he's been persistent about building a relationship with me, as if he could ever make up for the twenty years of my life that he's missed. Needless to say, I politely passed on the invitation and gave him an excuse about coming down with a cold.

"I don't really do a huge turkey thing on Christmas, but I make a mean Cornish hen," he said. "I'd love for you to come home and have a quiet Christmas dinner with me and Charlotte. I think you'll like her."

My first inclination is to remind my father that my actual home had always been back on the east coast in a warm tiny townhouse with my mom. Not with him. Never with him. But it's not really my personality to disrespect my elders, even knowing that this elder is only in my life because he has to be and not because he chose to be. But of course, I don't say any of that.

“I’m not really feeling too good,” I said, selling my story with a few fake coughs.

“Do you have a temperature? Have you taken a covid test?” He started battering off a million questions and I rolled my eyes to myself. Really? He chose now to be concerned about my health? Where was he when I had the chicken pox in the fourth grade and my mom had to take off three days of work that she couldn’t afford to take care of me?

“I think it’s just a cold. I’m pretty sure I just need some rest.”

“Have you been prepping a little too hard for the upcoming semester?”

“Maybe, but I just want to make sure I don’t blow the full ride you managed to get for me.”

The one I don’t actually deserve.

The poor girl pity scholarship.

“You won’t blow it. I’ve seen your high school transcripts. You’re an excellent student, Violet, and you work hard. Don’t stress yourself so much.”

I became stuck on his second comment, not really hearing anything after that.

“I’m sorry, but how have you seen my transcripts? Don’t you need my permission? I’m over the age of eighteen.”

“It never dawned on me that I’d need permission. I’m your father, so I just asked, and the school gave me online access.”

“Why?” I blurt out, offended that he’s taking liberties that he hasn’t earned. How dare he interject himself in my life like this at the eleventh hour? “Why would you do that?”

“Because I care, Violet.” His response is said softly, as if my question hurt his feelings.

Imagine that.

Today I've been in my pajamas for hours, played with some new skin care in the bathroom mirror, cracked open a brand new wolf shifter romance (which I love) and have read eleven chapters already. Elijah also finally called again, and we had the lamest conversation, practically confirming my decision to end whatever this is we're doing before the new year begins.

"Hey, Vi."

"Hi, Elijah. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas."

silence

"Are you getting ready to go to your grandma's house?" I asked him.

"Yeah."

more silence

"You good?" he asked.

"Uh, huh."

torturous silence

"You want to call me tomorrow when you have more time to talk?" I asked, not really knowing what else to say.

"Yeah, that would be good. My mom is waiting for me and my sister."

"Right, okay. Tell everyone I said hello."

"Will do. Holla at you later."

"K."

When we hung up, I felt disappointed in the quality of our non-conversation, but I also felt relieved when it was over. The only thing left for me to do now is fix myself dinner and watch a very corny Christmas movie, the kind that my mom would have had playing in the background all day while she prepared Christmas dinner.

So, Merry Christmas to me.

But maybe Kennedy was right. I'm not sure this was the healthiest way for me to spend the holiday. Being by myself, and losing myself in werewolves, hasn't stopped me from thinking about the last time I saw my mother.

Last year.

Christmas Eve.

I can visualize her so clearly, sprawled out on the floor next to her bed. Her head next to a pair of black slippers with smiley faces on them. She was wearing an oversized throwback t-shirt with the MTV logo on it and a pair of pajama bottoms with snowflakes on them. Her eyes were slightly open, but her eyeballs were rolled back. It's a haunting image. One that I will probably carry for the rest of my life like a scar in the center of my chest.

I'm sniffing with sadness as I open the refrigerator to search for whatever ingredients I can find to make myself a makeshift Christmas dinner. I consider boiling bowtie pasta but there's no sauce. We used the last of that two weeks ago and I hate just eating butter and noodles. I contemplate making mashed potatoes. Those would be delicious, but we're out of milk. It's so like my unorganized ass to not have thought this whole thing through. I should have stocked the fridge yesterday.

I sit on the living room couch in a defeated posture when a knock on the door startles me.

"Who is it?" I ask, looking through the peephole of the front door which seems to be obscured by the back of someone's head. Someone's blonde head. My chest tightens from the mere possibility that it's him.

"Who is it?" I repeat.

"It's me," he replies and then turns his head so that I have a clear view of his face.

His unforgettable face.

I hesitantly open the door, unclear as to why he's at my front door on Christmas Day.

“You didn’t call to say you were coming,” I say, unable to stop myself from smiling. “Shouldn’t you be somewhere... else?”

“And a merry Christmas to you too, Grinch.”

He makes himself comfortable, walking right in and straight to the kitchen with two full reusable grocery bags and starts unloading them.

“What is all of that?” I ask.

“Dinner.”

“You want to have dinner here?”

He stops what he’s doing and looks at me with compassion.

“I realize this is probably a very shitty day for you and I have off of practice for obvious reasons, so I thought since I was making dinner anyway, why not make dinner for two?”

My eyes immediately water.

“Don’t you dare cry, Violet,” he warns. “This is what friends do for each other.”

“Thank you.”

“Now go wash your hands so you can help me.”

Wash my hands?

It just dawns on me, I probably look a complete mess.

I do a fast walk to my bedroom and take a look at myself in the mirror that hangs above my dresser. Sleep bonnet on my head. Eyes puffy. Disheveled pajamas. The only thing going for me is that I don’t stink having taken a long shower late last night to help me calm down after the call with my father.

I change quickly into the only actual matching leisure sweats I own, a fluffy cream-colored sweat top with matching sleep shorts. Then I take my hair down, shake out the curls, then swoop all my dense strands up in a messy ponytail that sits on top of my head. Finally, I check my breath by blowing against my hand, decide that I’m good and finish up by

spreading a bit of the strawberry scented lip mask Kennedy gifted me on my lips.

“Violet!” He calls impatiently for me.

“Coming.”

I return to the kitchen feeling much better than I did when I left.

“What can I do?”

He studies me briefly and I notice he clenches then releases his left hand. I wonder if he hurt it during hockey practice. It seems to bother him a lot.

“You’re going to cook in all white?” he asks me.

“It’s the only thing I had clean,” I fib.

“What was wrong with the pajamas you had on?”

“I had them on all day,” I say, trying to blow the question off. “Give me my assignment, please.”

“You can start chopping the onions and celery.”

“What are we making?”

“Roasted chicken, stuffing, spinach salad, and macaroni and cheese.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” I say excitedly.

“Are you impressed?”

“Kind of.”

“Don’t be. Most athletes know how to cook because we eat a lot and don’t live at home with our momma’s anymore.”

“Will your mom miss you today?”

“Of course, but she’s in Puerto Rico visiting family. She has a touch of the Christmas *Grinch-itis*, too.”

“Oh, because of your brother.”

“Yep.”

“And what about your dad?”

“He’s probably in front of the TV watching football with a drink and a bowl of beer nuts.”

“He didn’t want to go to Puerto Rico with your mom?”

I try chopping the celery as finely as humanly possible with the only dull knife we own.

“My parents aren’t together. They fell apart after Jake’s death. I guess my parents’ marriage couldn’t survive it.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that. Honestly, it’s amazing to me that your parents were married as long as they were. I wouldn’t even know anything about that. Raised by a single mom over here.”

“Um, have you ever cut celery before?” He asks curiously.

“Am I doing it wrong?”

“It’s just that it’s turning into mush,” he chuckles. “Let me show you.”

The kitchen is small and not really meant for two people, or at least a person of his size, and someone else to cook at the same time, which is why I guess he turns and stands behind me. I take a quick inhalation as he grabs my hands with his and shows me how to “correctly” chop the celery.

“The knife is definitely dull, but you can still get it done. Just hold it at an angle like this.”

“Okay,” is all I manage to utter, his body dangerously close to mine.

“You got it now?”

“Yep.”

He releases my hands and goes back to prepping the chicken. Carefully seasoning it with what looks like spices he brought from home.

Once we’ve finished stuffing the chicken and placing it in the oven, he orders me to take a seat and play some music while he preps the macaroni and cheese.

“Why can’t I help with that?”

“You can’t have too many cooks in the macaroni and cheese. It won’t come out right.”

“Uh, I grew up on it. I think I know my way around a pan of macaroni.”

“Do you make a cheese sauce or cut up the cheese in chunks?”

“Sauce.”

“Bonk!” He makes the sound of an annoying game show buzzer. “You cut up the cheese.”

“Whatever,” I smile.

“And how many cheeses do you use?”

I remember how my mom and my grandmother used to make it. Simple and southern style.

“Three cheeses!”

“Bonk!” He makes the sound again. “You’re not doing it right if you don’t have five.”

“Five? Ew, that’s overkill.”

“Just wait until you eat it.”

My body is humming with excitement and I’m too restless to sit, so I put on an old curated playlist of dance hits and tidy up the living room while Neo continues to cut his various cheeses.

I nervously fold up Kennedy’s favorite mud cloth throw blanket about four different times as I watch Neo from across the room. He’s so different when it’s just the two of us. He’s not the person people see on the Suns’ posters, standing in the forefront with a mean screw face, head of the notorious Ice Mafia.

In our shared solitude, his usual icy demeanor melts away, revealing a warmth that is as inviting as the enveloping aroma of our Christmas dinner. He moves about the kitchen with a grace that contradicts the strength you’d associate with his role on the ice; his bulky form maneuvering with a dexterity that I find oddly enthralling.

I go back to focusing on the blanket.

“Dancing alone?” His deep voice startles me. I hadn’t realized he was watching. He looks at me with a teasing eyebrow raised and a gleam in his eyes.

“No,” I say, feeling my cheeks warm up as I realize he’s caught me unguarded. “Just…” I trail off, laughing at myself.

“I’ll dance with you.” He wipes his hands on a dishtowel and steps towards me, extending a hand. I look at him in surprise, then laugh again, shaking my head as I take his hand.

“You dance?”

“To this song I do.”

I gently place the neatly folded blanket on the sofa, my gaze still locked on him. He wraps his arms around my waist, towering over my frame, and moves his hips in a delicious rhythm, syncing with the beat of *Despacito* playing in the background. He sings along under his breath, horribly out of tune, but it only makes me smile wider. Our laughter fills the house now, echoing against the walls and resonating within me.

Our eyes lock as the song ends and when he leans in for a kiss, I’m anxiously expecting it. I want it. As soon as he feels my response to his advance, the kiss grows stronger.

His hand lifts from my waist to cradle the back of my head, fingers threading through a few loose strands that have fallen from my bun. The world seems to blur around us. The only thing in focus is the feel of his lips moving passionately against mine.

His kiss is an intoxicating mixture of passion and gentleness that leaves me momentarily breathless. His hold on me tightens, pulling me against the hard planes of his body as his other hand moves up to cup my cheek. Our shared warmth ignites something within me, a longing that’s been dormant for far too long.

Hesitantly, I break the kiss to draw a much-needed breath, but Neo takes it as an invitation to trail kisses down my neck. My hands instinctively move up his chest, tangling in the

fabric of his shirt, as I tilt my head back to give him more access. He responds with a low growl that reverberates through his chest and shoots a thrill straight down my spine.

“Neo...” His name escapes my lips as a breathy whisper, making him pause momentarily before resuming his exploration with renewed fervor. His teeth graze my skin lightly before he soothes over the slight sting with another fervent kiss.

A delicious shiver runs down my spine as his expert hands trail lower, skirting around my waist and slipping beneath the edge of my sweatshirt. His touch is electrifying; hot, yet gentle, it raises goosebumps over every inch of skin it grazes.

I gasp when he pulls away rather abruptly, leaving me disoriented and breathless. He looks at me with smoldering eyes filled with desire, making things really wet and wild down below.

“Fingers or tongue?” he asks in a bass-heavy voice, reminding me of the erotic offer he made the last time he was over here.

“Well, since you’re making our Christmas dinner with those fingers—” I grin.

“Then tongue it is.”

violet

. . .



THE WORDS LEAVE his lips in a husky whisper, sending a wave of anticipation rippling through me. He walks me over to the sofa and gently guides me to sit. He begins to slowly sink down, while spreading my knees far apart, the passion in his eyes never waning. Seeing him positioned between my legs, looking up at me with such intense desire, it does things to me that I've never felt before.

Neo's hands slide to my hips, fingers digging into the soft flesh there. His lips follow his hands, pressing hot kisses against my abdomen through the thin fabric of my shirt. Then his warm breath teases my exposed skin, causing me to clench around nothing.

With his hands, he lifts my wide hips off the cushion easily, grabbing the waistband of my sleep shorts and panties and pulling them both down my legs, then tossing them to the ground. He keeps his palms underneath my ass cheeks and lifts my pussy to greet his ravenous mouth.

"Neo..." I moan out his name, arching my back off the sofa even higher as his mouth finds its destination. The sensation is overwhelming; a tsunami of pleasure that causes stars to burst behind my eyelids. My fingers thread through his hair, pulling lightly as he explores and tastes.

"Violet," He murmurs hungrily against my skin, causing an all-too-pleasing vibration, "Look at me, baby."

I open my eyes, meeting his smoldering gaze. There's something incredibly intimate about holding eye contact in the

midst of such ecstasy. His tongue resumes its slow exploration and I can't suppress the moan that slips past my lips. "This is—"

"So fucking good," he finishes my sentence.

His hands grip onto my ass tighter and I can feel his smirk against me when another moan tumbles out from my throat. He's taking great satisfaction in the fact that I am losing my mind, but I can't think about that right now. Hell, he should take satisfaction in what he's doing because he's doing that shit very well.

The pressure builds within me like a raging storm. I am lost in him; in the warmth of his touch and the taste of his lips. I wish this feeling could go on forever, numbing me to the reality of the day, making me forget about all the struggles that lay ahead. I definitely don't want this to end.

And then it crashes over me, a wave of pleasure so intense it leaves me trembling and gasping for breath. Neo draws back slightly and I watch him, heavy-lidded eyes drinking in the sight of his handiwork. His fingers brush against the inside of my thigh as he begins to rise, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

"Violet," he whispers, sliding back up to align himself with me. His eyes burn with an intensity that makes my heart thunder in my chest. I clasp my hands around his neck, fingers lost in the tangle of his hair as I pull him closer for another kiss, a languid meeting of lips that thrums with the afterglow of our intimacy.

His arms encircle me, pulling me flush against him as he lifts me clear off the sofa and onto his lap as he takes the seat in my place. I straddle him, adjusting my body until I find a comfortable position atop his, a place where his rock hard length presses against my aching clit. There's a rawness in his gaze that leaves me breathless all over again, and I can't help but run my fingers over his muscular chest.

"I want to be inside of you," he confesses, his effervescent blue eyes continually holding mine in place.

“This is a big step for friends,” I say, flirting hard, not even recognizing my own raspy voice.

“Fuck being friends. You’re mine now, Grinch. And you better let the loser back home know that things have changed.”

“That’s not a very romantic confession,” I tease, scooting myself back a little so that I can unbuckle his belt.

“I never said I was the romantic type,” he growls.

He lifts himself with me still on top of him to assist me in my quest, opening his fly and pulling down his jeans. It’s not an easy task, no matter how easy movies make it look, so I decide to take matters into my own hands.

I dismount and bend down on my knees in between his massive thighs, slowing pulling his jeans down to his ankles. I keep my eyes on his, as I pull each leg down and over his ankles. When his jeans are off, there are only his boxer shorts and a very large bulge sitting right in the center. I smile, lick my lips, and ready myself to take his massive dick inside of my mouth.

Hey, it’s only fair.

“Violet, what the fuck—”

I pull his dick out of the fly of his boxers and lower my mouth onto the tip. I’ve never given head to a man this big, so I pray that I can get my oddly small jaw open wide enough to accommodate his size. I guess the universe doesn’t give you more than you can handle because by a miracle I’m able to almost deep throat him.

His right hand grips the edge of the sofa cushions as his left one slides itself into the roots of my hair, freeing it from its messy bun bondage.

“Yes, Violet,” he murmurs my name like a prayer. “Fuck, yes.”

I hold the base of his dick with my hands and give a slight twist as I continue to work his length with my mouth. It doesn’t take long to bring him to the edge.

“Violet, I’m going to come. Where do you want it?”

A surprisingly submissive part of me wants him to come wherever he wants to.

Down my throat.

On my breasts.

Along my back.

Across my ass.

I don't give a shit.

But he doesn't ask me again and soon releases with a satisfied grunt completely down my throat.

"Swallow every fucking drop," he commands thickly, and I do as I'm told.

I'm on my knees, staring up at him, pleased that I was able to make him feel good, as he stares down at what feels like awe of me.

"You are so beautiful in this light, Violet," he approves, wiping the corner of my mouth with his thumb. "Let me see the rest of you. Let me see what's mine."

Without hesitation, I pull my sweatshirt off, revealing my bare, heavy breasts, and my dark nipples quickly pebble from being exposed to the cool air of the room.

"Stand," he orders in a clipped manner, which only makes me more excited.

I'm standing totally nude, with my flaws and all, in front of this man, but he makes me feel like the most beautiful woman he's ever seen with just a look.

"Turn around."

I stand facing the door, my backside to him.

"Beautiful," he offers.

By the time he tells me to turn around again, Neo has completely disrobed, his lion tattoo on full display, and is opening a condom packet. While I've already seen his entire body because of his antics by the pool, there's something

different about seeing him now. Maybe it's because I know I'm about to experience it and not just watch.

His dick is standing straight to attention when he tells me to, "Come and sit back on my lap and spread your legs wide for me. I'm going to want to get deep inside of that sweet pussy."

I can feel the desire practically pooling between my legs, I want this man so badly.

"Hold your tits for me. Hold them up high."

I cup my heavy breasts and hold them up as he wraps his lips around the nipple of one of them.

My head falls back in pleasure.

With his hands, he grips my hips and slowly guides me down the massive girth of his penis.

Oh. My. God.

The fit is tight, so tight that I don't know if it can physically happen.

"Rock back and forth, baby. Just a little bit. That'll help me get in."

I try moving my hips, but I'm so out of my depth that I'm not sure I know what I'm doing. I never did this position with Elijah. It doesn't seem to be working.

Without warning, Neo bites my left nipple, and I let out a groan of blissful pain that surprisingly gives my vagina more slip. He flattens his tongue to soothe where he just bit as I work my hips further down, then does the same thing to the other breast.

"Ahh!" I cry out, a bit confused as to why I'm loving the dual sensations.

"That's it, Violet," he groans. "I'm almost balls deep."

When I'm finally down, that's when the really good part starts.

“I’ll do all the work. Just wrap your arms around my neck,” he tells me.

I hold on tight as Neo rams his hips in an upward motion, filling me to the hilt, making me gasp with each and very delicious stroke.

“I’ve been thinking about this pussy for a fucking long time,” he tells me in my ear.

His filthy words only make me want him more and I grind my hips against his thrusts, wanting nothing more than for him to fill every part of me. Devour me.

I’m riding him!

I’m actually riding him and he isn’t doing all the work.

I feel like a goddess and so sexually powerful.

“Lean back a little, baby,” he whispers through sweaty breaths. “I’ve got you. I just want to get to your clit.”

I lean back as he holds me at the base of my spine with one hand, and uses the thumb of the other to rub my sensitive clit.

“Neo!” I cry.

Between being full of him and his fingers on my clit, an orgasm of titan proportions is building inside of me and is about to release like a tsunami.

“Whose pussy is this, Violet?” He demands to know through a clenched jaw.

“Um,”

He completely stops moving.

“Is this my pussy?” he repeats the question.

“Yes,” I answer harshly, but of course I would probably say anything to get him to finish. “Can we finish?” I beg.

“Now that we’ve cleared that up,” he laughs wickedly. “Let me make you see stars.”

In a flash, he lifts me up, turns me around, and guides me carefully back down on top of him in the reversed position. It’s

much easier this time because I'm sopping wet and my vagina's already had a nice yoga stretch.

We start moving again, but it feels different in this position, almost as if there's "more" of him inside me. When he wraps his arms around me, using one hand to fondle my breast and the other to stroke my clit, my knees naturally fall open even wider.

"That's it right there, baby," he praises. "Give me all of this."

The release is shattering.

I feel as if I'm falling down into a sweet abyss as I surrender my body to this man.

His body shudders quietly into its own release and afterwards I fall back into his embrace, sweaty, satisfied and totally spent.

He continues playing with my breasts as I take deep labored breaths, still coming down from the best orgasm I've ever had in my life. I could sit here in his arms forever if it wasn't for the sizzle noise we both hear from the oven.

"I think you need to baste your chicken," I tell Neo.

"I think I just did."

"Would you stop playing?" I giggle, happier than I've been since... forever. "I'm still waiting to taste this infamous five cheese macaroni."

"Okay, let me go clean up and then I'll feed you."

I kiss him on the cheek. "Yay, I can't wait."

"And after dinner...desert." His eyebrows wiggle, knowing exactly what we'll be doing after dinner.

"I can't wait for both."

neo

• • •



A MONTH AGO, I would have never even thought this was possible, but the past week I've just spent with Violet have probably been some of the best in my life. There are very few incredible moments in life.

There's a win on the ice your first time.

Your first goal.

Disney World when you're seven.

And being inside of Violet.

And not necessarily in that particular order.

It doesn't even bother me that she hasn't told Kennedy what's up between us yet. The connection the two of us are sharing right now is special. Once in a lifetime, special. And if she wants to keep that just between us for now, I'm fine with it.

"I brought you a gift," I tell her as I stroll inside her apartment like I own the place.

She's curled in the corner of her sofa, reading one of her Econ books like she often does, but perks up once she sees the bag in my hand.

"What is it?" She grins.

"Open the bag."

She opens the reused paper grocery bag to find one of my hockey jerseys. Well, not just any jersey, the one custom made

for us when our program was added to Division I hockey last year.

“Ooh, this is nice.”

I know she doesn't understand the importance of it but that doesn't really matter. What matters is when she wears it, everyone else will know what it means, which is precisely the point.

“You never dress right for the rink. I want you to put on a hoodie and then wear this jersey on top of it. You'll be hockey warm and ready.”

“Yay! When's your next game?”

“Not until the fifth. They were able to juggle our schedule since we play in the exhibition game every year. Normally, we'd be back to it right after Christmas.”

“You know that Kennedy comes back tonight?”

“You've told me a thousand times, so yeah, I'm aware.”

“I just—”

“You don't want her to come home to find me walking around the house, dick swinging.”

“I wouldn't have put it exactly like that, but yeah.”

An expression of concern I'm beginning to become all too familiar with crosses Violet's beautiful face.

“What is it?” I ask her. “You have your worry face on.”

“Have you told Shane or Bass about...*this*?”

“You do realize that it irritates the fuck out of me, that you always bring up Shane's name, right?”

“Which is irrational.”

“I never said I was rational, babe.”

I lean in and kiss her firmly on the lips. I should have greeted her this way ten minutes ago. It's my favorite way to say hello to her.

“I’m just saying, haven’t the guys in the ice house been wondering where you’ve been for the past few days?”

“Not really, Violet.”

“So you spend a lot of nights out, then?” Her mouth forms into a jealous pout. So fucking cute.

“I’m the captain of the house. No one questions what I’m doing or who I’m doing it with. That’s the perks of the job.”

“Uh-huh,” she responds suspiciously.

“Can you put the book down for a little while?”

“Why?”

“Well, we’ve been in your apartment for the past few nights and I thought we’d go out for a few hours before your roomie gets back.”

“Like on a date?” Her bedroom eyes twinkle.

“Definitely a date.”

“What should I wear?” She hops up out of her seat.

“You look good in anything, baby. Wear what you want.”

She hugs me, settling the side of her face into my chest, where I’m hoping that she’ll stay for a really long time.

“You’re adorable, Cap,” she playfully calls me. “But I need to know if I should dress up or down.”

“Dress down. Jeans are fine.”

Twenty minutes later, one of the starters on the team, Keith, drops Violet and I off on the strip. I give him a little side money to get something to eat with the promise of no alcohol. That way, he’ll be able to drive us back when we’re ready to go. I assure Violet that Keith doesn’t live in the house and so our privacy will remain safe.

“We’ll walk from here, Keith. I’ll text you when we’re ready.”

“Okay, Cap.”

“Do you know how to drive?” Violet innocently asks as we walk down the Vegas strip, taking in all the lights and the throngs of people.

I cringe inside, knowing that this question was coming sooner or later.

“Yes, I have my license.”

“Oh,” is her response, and I know she’s already come up with a theory as to why I don’t drive. Unfortunately, she’d be only partly right and I don’t have the balls to tell her everything.

When we arrive at our destination, I decide that will be a conversation for another night. I don’t want to talk about that or ask her about things that she might not be ready to talk about either. Tonight, I just want it to be light and airy between us.

“A Karaoke bar?” Her smile grows broader, and I feel relieved about my choice for a first date. She seems to approve.

“Are you ready to sing for me?”

“I was born to sing. The question after our little Christmas dance is, are you ready to sing for me?”

“Are you saying I’m tone deaf?”

“Your words, not mine.” She chuckles.

I love it when Violet laughs. Her chest expands and her smile could light up the sky. God, she’s gorgeous.

I booked us a private room with my credit card and when we arrive, the trays of sushi and other assorted appetizers I preordered are brought to the room fifteen minutes later. As I survey our private room, I realize it’s just the perfect blend of tacky and cozy. Neon lights outside the window, casting a glow on the half-eaten sushi rolls. I’m feeling a bit out of my element, wanting desperately to impress this girl.

“You know, I’ve never done karaoke before,” I admit, reaching for another piece of sushi. “I’m more of a shower singer.”

Violet's eyes widen in mock horror. "You mean I'm on a date with a karaoke virgin? This is monumental!"

I chuckle, feeling the nerves settle. "Yeah, well, prepare to be amazed. Or horrified. Probably both."

She picks up a microphone, twirling it in her hand. "You know the rules, right? You have to sing with all your heart, no matter how off-key."

I nod. "I think I can manage that. But what's your go-to karaoke song? Something tells me you're a pro at this."

Violet grins, a mischievous sparkle in her eye. "Oh, I have a few surprises up my sleeve. But first, I want to hear you. Consider it... initiation."

"Fine, I'm good at everything I do, as you can attest to, so this shouldn't be any different. Let's see..." I browse through the song list, trying to find something that won't completely embarrass me. My finger stops at a classic rock song. It was one of Jake's favorites.

"How about some Bon Jovi?"

"Living on a Prayer?" Violet guesses, her eyes lighting up.

"Exactly. If I'm going down, I'm going down in flames."

As I stand, microphone in hand, I feel a rush of adrenaline. The first notes play, and I start singing, off-key and all. Violet is clapping and laughing, her eyes crinkling in delight. I can't help but get into it, belting out the chorus with more enthusiasm than skill.

When the song ends, Violet is on her feet, applauding. "That was... something," she says, laughing.

"I told you. Amazing and horrifying." I'm sure Jake is somewhere laughing his head off.

She steps closer, her hand reaching for mine, and my dick instantly grows hard. If I wasn't trying so hard to be a gentleman, I'd fuck her right now on this damn table.

"Your turn to pick a song for me," she says in a flirty voice. "Choose wisely."

I scroll through the list, a plan forming in my mind. “How about a duet?”

Her eyebrows raise. “A duet, huh? Which one?”

I select a song and show her the screen. Her face lights up with excitement. “Perfect choice.”

As the music starts, we stand side by side, singing into our microphones. Our voices blend together, surprisingly in tune. Does it even surprise me that when Violet sings with me, I sound two-hundred-percent better?

We’re laughing, occasionally missing a lyric, but it doesn’t matter. At this moment, it’s just me and Violet, singing our hearts out in a karaoke bar in Vegas.

The song ends, and we’re both breathless, grinning from ear to ear. “That was amazing,” she says, her eyes shining.

“Yeah, it was,” I agree, feeling a warmth in my chest that has nothing to do with the singing.

I know the intensity of this new relationship has hit us both like a thunderbolt, or at least it’s hit me like one, but now I understand why I ran from girls before. It wasn’t because they were distractions or a threat to my goals, it’s simply because I didn’t meet the right one. Violet could never be a threat to my success.

She would only ever be an asset.

violet

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KENNEDY RETURNS from Pennsylvania still reeling from what happened at home. I don't know all the details yet but it sounds like she met Shane because of their parents' romantic relationship which I imagine must be quite awkward for both of them and is also why I still agree to go out with her tomorrow night when I rather be bringing the new year in with Neo.

I hate how I basically danced around what we were planning for tomorrow, casually telling him that I was spending it with Kennedy, but not giving him the full details of *what* we're doing.

While our friends-with-benefits while exclusively fucking each other relationship is brand new, and we haven't put any titles on it, I know if I told him I was going to some random party with Kennedy he would be pissed and an angry Neo is not my favorite person.

"I don't really have money for this." I tell her, staring at myself in a silver iridescent bodycon dress that stops right above my knees.

"It's very 90s, fits your body like a glove, and compliments your skin tone. The perfect trifecta for a fuck 'em dress. You've got to get it. I wish I had your ass."

"Kennedy, it's fifty bucks. I could feed five homeless people with fifty dollars."

“I’ll buy the groceries this month,” she says, sounding annoyed. “Just get it. Your hunt will go so well if you wear it.”

I fidget with the waistline of the dress, not sure that I like how it accentuates my pooch.

“Seriously, this isn’t the most practical use of my money.”

“If everything we did was practical, the world would be a very boring place, Violet.”

“How profound of you,” I said deadpan.

Turning to the side, I stare at my profile in the floor-length mirror of the dressing room. God, there are lumps and bumps everywhere. That’s one of the crappy things about grief. It tricks you into believing that everything will be better if you just have that last bag of chips or one more cupcake. I’ve probably gained about twelve pounds over the last year and regardless of what well-meaning people say, and how Neo looks at me like he wants to gobble me up whole, I don’t like what I see.

I don’t feel pretty.

Well, that is, unless I’m riding him.

“I can tell that you’re trying to talk yourself out of going, but it’s no use, roomie. I’m not going to a whole ass New Year’s Eve party alone. You know the rules.”

“I’m not sure why I’m forced to make decisions based on a series of rules you created.”

“I didn’t create the rules,” she bites back. “It’s girl code! Stop trying to make it complicated.”

“Whatever, Kennedy, just let me look around the store for a little bit. I might find something else cheaper.”

“Fifty dollars is a deal for a dress of this quality, and this is the most inexpensive boutique near campus. If you want more of a selection, we’d have to drive to the strip and I can’t imagine that you’ll find anything cheaper than fifty dollars at Crystals.”

“Fine,” I huff. “Let’s check out.”

We grab some veggie burgers from a local plant-based restaurant that mostly VCU students patronize and eat them in the back of our Uber on the way home.

“Do you ever feel nervous about taking an Uber out here?” I whisper as I stare at the back of the head of the driver, thinking about my conversation with Neo.

“What?” She looks confused. “No, I take them all the time. This is Vegas. You’re basically forced to take a car everywhere. That’s why I want to bring my little Toyota here, but I have to convince my father to ship it to me, because there’s no way I’m driving it across the country.”

“Understood, it’s just that Neo doesn’t seem to ever take them and I was wondering if there—”

“How do you know Neo doesn’t take Ubers?” she asks suspiciously.

I take a bite of my burger, buying me some time to think of a response other than, “Oh, because I’m fucking him now and he told me.”

“I’ve seen him around a few times while you were gone and he’s always got one of the players driving him around,” I reply, suddenly wishing I hadn’t brought up this topic at all.

Kennedy laughs. “Oh yeah, that’s basically them hazing the freshmen. They think they’re so much better than everyone because they bring in so much money to the university, but they’re really just like every other organization on campus, making those boys do their bidding. Crazy, right?”

I stare guiltily outside the window as we pass the outskirts of campus. “Yep, real crazy.”

New Year’s Eve

“So, where exactly are we going tonight?”

Kennedy turns on the television to watch people gather at Times Square in New York as she starts applying makeup

primer to her face.

“Gamma Sigma Gamma,” she answers.

My stomach churns.

“Wait, we’re going to a frat party?”

“Yeah,” she says like she already told me.

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“We’re in Valencia City. Where else would be going? The clubs in Vegas are going to be packed with drunk tourists and they’re probably going to be checking ID. We have to stay local.”

Crap.

“And you know, Ray is a Gamma,” she adds. “He pledged his freshman year during football season. Impressive, right?”

“I guess.”

“Can you believe that they get started lining up this early?” Kennedy points to the screen. “I mean, it’s only five o’clock there. What are they going to do all day?”

“Hell, if I know.”

“Have you ever been to Times Square?” she asks, staring at the screen in awe.

“Once, but it was in the middle of the day after a matinee of *The Lion King*.” I fondly remember. “My mom took me to this restaurant where the waiters sing to you and stuff.”

“Oh, that’s cool.”

“What about you?”

“No, I’ve never been to New York. It’s a miracle that my parents even let me go to Nevada for college, but honestly, I think getting me out of their hair while they hashed out the details of their divorce may have been the reason.”

Kennedy’s phone rings, and she emits a heavy sigh when she sees who it is.

“Your mom or your dad?” I ask her, assuming it’s one or the other.

“Neither — give me a second?”

“Sure thing.”

I step inside my bedroom to give Kennedy some privacy but the reality is that our place is small and the walls are made of cheap dry wall. You can’t hammer a nail that will stay put and you can hear every damn thing someone says when they’re speaking at normal volume.

“What!?” she roars when she answers the call. “It’s none of your business where I’m going tonight and it’s not your job to keep an eye on me. I’m a big girl.”

There’s silence for a few more moments.

“Nope,” is her one word response.

More silence.

“Why don’t you call Gia with this nonsense? I have somewhere to be.”

An hour later, I’m dressed, and practically creep back into the living room, worried that I might find Kennedy in a very bad mood after her earlier conversation with whoever that was. What I find instead is a girl clearly bent on us going on a New Years Eve mission, dressed in a tight gold dress complete with a sparkly New Year’s Eve themed headband and four-inch heels.

“Damn,” I say, as she twirls around. “You look amazing.”

“I know,” she says with a sly grin. “And you look hot as fuck.”

I’m wearing a silver cocktail dress that cinches at the waist and accentuates my curves. It has spaghetti straps, falls just above my knees, and I’ve paired it with black open-toe heels.

“Thanks,” I smile, feeling a bit more confident. “I should take you shopping with me more often. I would have never picked this.”

“And it looks good, eh?”

“Yeah,” I admit. “I definitely like it.”

“Okay, quick pre-game shot before we head out?” Kennedy suggests enthusiastically.

“Uh, no thanks,” I decline. “Remember, I don’t really drink.”

“Oh, damn, Violet, okay. But if you decide to drink *anything* at the party, make sure to drink the bottled beer, okay? Nothing else.”

“Got it,” I say to appease her, knowing full well that I won’t have any alcohol tonight. It’s just not my thing.

In the car ride to the party, Kennedy excitedly talks about all the different people we might meet there and how much fun we’re going to have ringing in the new year.

“You seem determined to get Ray’s attention tonight,” I point out, wondering if Kennedy is reacting to something else that may have happened back home, something other than her father’s relationship status.

“New year, new me,” she simply replies.

Meanwhile, my mind starts to wander as I think about what Neo might be doing right now. If Kennedy wasn’t sitting right next to me, I’d text him again, but I’ll just have to be satisfied with the audio text he sent me earlier.

“Have an amazing night, Grinch, and I’ll taste you soon in the new year.”

Damn that hockey god.

The party is in full swing when we arrive at the Gamma house. I’m surprised so many students are still on campus, but Kennedy explains that upperclassmen tend to stay in town during breaks if they live a plane ride away and only freshmen go home. I take a deep breath as we exit the car and try psyching myself up.

You’re not doing anything wrong.

It’s just a college party, Violet.

Enjoy yourself.

He's probably having a blast wherever he is.

“Ready to go fuck ‘em, girl?” Kennedy smiles, grabbing my hand as we walk through the front door and I smile.

“Yep, let’s do this.”

violet

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IT'S the last night of the year and I'm barely standing upright as I listen to a guy I met only twenty-five minutes ago explain to me the systemic problems with the college exam system.

"What's your name again?" I ask, my thoughts slowly becoming muddled. I should be home in bed because I'm clearly exhausted, but I promised Kennedy I'd hang.

"Blake," he replies with an aloof smile. "I'm a new pledgee of the house."

"Right, Blake."

While he seems nice and I appreciate his attempt at a cerebral conversation with me tonight, I wish we weren't having it in the middle of a frat house during New Year's Eve. There are way too many competing sounds and sights in here for me to follow this conversation effectively. We should be dancing instead. Yeah, I feel like dancing.

"You want to dance?" I ask him.

"Sure," he smiles broadly, leading me eagerly to the middle of the floor where everyone's celebrating that the ball has dropped and we're already in a new year.

Blake's hands are around my waist as I swing my hips to the bass heavy beat of the song that's on. I see a blurry silver reflection of me in my dress in a mirror across the room and instantly I laugh. I look like a freaking gorgeous disco ball.

I'm hot!

“Do you want me to top off your drink?” he asks, taking a few steps closer to me, noticing that my cup is only half full.

“No, she doesn't,” a dark voice with dangerous intent interrupts. “And take your fucking hands off of her.”

Neo approaches in all his bad ass splendor, his right hand holding a small bottle of Gatorade and his left one clenched in a loose fist. He's dressed in dark jeans that fit him like a glove, a graphic tee with the Valencia Suns logo on it, and a black leather jacket. Out of all the places he could be on this night, in this city, I cannot believe that he's in this one.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, unable to stop myself from blinking, happy to see him.

Blake straightens his spine clearly in an attempt to make his five foot whatever inch frame taller than Neo's obvious six foot four one, but it doesn't matter. Even if Neo was only my height of five foot four inches, there's an energy he possesses which makes him always appear larger than everyone in the room. It's that big dick energy of his that works to his advantage when he plays hockey, intimidating his opponents just by being...larger than life.

The beautiful asshole doesn't even bother to respond to my very appropriate question, but instead simply hands me his Gatorade.

“Drink it,” he orders.

I press my hand on his, pushing his offer away, but the skin to skin contact ignites something fiery in my core. A reminder of the need he's able to create in me just by a single touch.

“I don't want to drink that,” I say in a sharp tone that's uncharacteristically rude for me.

Neo drags his eyes completely down my body, examining every inch of my dress with a look of either appreciation or disgust. I'm never sure with him. Then his judgmental gaze returns to my eyes, holding my unsteady sea legs in place.

“I don’t care what you want, Violet. Drink it before I pour it down your throat.”

There’s nothing playful about his tone. He’s pissed at whatever someone like him seems to always be pissed at and I don’t want to make a scene, so I take a sip of the orange-flavored water and paint on a sarcastic smile. “Happy now?”

Then I take an exaggerated bow.

“Very.”

Neo looks at Blake. “Why the fuck are you still here?”

Blake takes a careful step back. “My bad, man. She didn’t mention that she had a boyfriend. By the way, nice to meet you, Neo. I’m a big fan. Really love what you do on the ice.”

“Stop dick riding and disappear.”

Blake’s face drops as if he’s just been crushed by one of his heroes and he slinks away. My plan is to give Neo a tongue lashing for being so rude, but that’ll have to wait.

Because I’m so sleepy.

“Grinch, wake up.”

Neo snaps his fingers in front of my face.

“I’m awake!” I protest.

But barely awake.

It’s the oddest thing.

I shut my eyes back again, primarily so the room will stop spinning. I believe I’m even giggling.

Neo grows closer to my face. I can sense him, and when I pop my eyes back open, I’m face to face with a very angry one.

“Who’s the grinch now?” I say, laughing.

“I thought you didn’t drink?” he asks through gritted teeth.

“I don’t.”

“But you’re clearly inebriated.”

“I can’t be. I just told you. I don’t drink.”

His eyes narrow. “What did that motherfucker give you to drink, Violet?”

The ridiculous amount of twinkling white lights strung around the frat house is making it difficult for me to process information but I manage to answer him or at least I think I do.

“Punch.”

Everything that happens next occurs so quickly that it momentarily sobers me up like a hard slap in the face. The one I imagine a baby born in 1955 felt when they entered the world and the doctor who delivered them wanted to clear their airway and make them cry.

A jarring one.

Neo’s long legs take several large strides toward the opposite side of the room. Blurry eyed, I do my best to quickly move through the crowd to keep up. I follow him only to find Blake on the ground, his pale face partially underneath the legs of a chair, turning a shade of beet red because Neo’s hand is wrapped around his throat, choking the life out of him.

Watching Blake try to fight for oxygen is terrifying, but what’s even more frightening is that no one around us, even his so-called frat brothers, are attempting to help him. They either have their phones out and are recording the assault or their hands are covering their mouths in imaginary shock.

“Neo, stop!” I plead, scanning the crowd for Kennedy. I haven’t seen her in about forty minutes, but she’s got to be somewhere around here. I need her help. “You’re killing him.”

The tension in the room is palpable, like a thick, heavy blanket pressing down on everyone’s shoulders. My heart pounds against my ribcage, and my palms are sweaty as I desperately try to reach Neo and stop him.

But he doesn’t budge, his attention laser focused on cutting this poor kid’s life short. As I watch the fight drain from him, all I can see are flashbacks of my mother lying lifeless on the floor of her bedroom. These are two totally different situations, but possibly with the same outcome.

My heart thuds in my chest as I watch the scene unfold before me. My hands are clammy and my body shakes with adrenaline. I resist the urge to vomit from the intensity of the situation. He won't listen to me, and I can't stomach it anymore, so I run.

My hands shake as I try to push through the gawking room of spectators, my heart racing with each step. I can feel the heat of the room and the adrenaline coursing through my body.

I manage to spot a door to either the front or the backyard.

It doesn't matter which one.

I just need to get out.

I'm almost there when my body thumps into someone and stops me dead in my tracks.

"Violet, what the hell is wrong?"

Her voice sounds like it's underwater but it's Kennedy.

"Neo," I say, out of breath.

She grabs me firmly by the shoulders. "Neo, what? Use your words."

"Choking."

"What do you mean by choking? Is he choking, or did the jackass choke you?" She uses her hands to check for marks on my neck, then looks me squarely in the face. "I don't understand. Tell me again. What's wrong? Your eyes are bloodshot. Were you drinking?"

"You're talking too fast," I tell her as I pull her by the arm into the main room of the frat house, then point. "There!"

Blake is still on the floor, turned on his side, practically coughing up a lung, and Neo is now fighting three frat house guys. The way his body swings, landing each blow with calculated precision, is not surprising, but it's the look on his face when he does it.

He's enjoying this.

Frankly, it's disconcerting.

“Neo, stop playing with them and end this!” Kennedy shouts.

Suddenly, Neo knees one guy in the balls, chops another in the throat with the side of his hand, and finally the other guy sees the forest for the trees and backs away with his hands up in surrender.

“If I ever see him or any of you even look in her direction, I’ll be back, and then this ends in a very different fucking way,” he tells the room, his nose flaring in anger.

The music has stopped, and no one says a word as Neo approaches Kennedy and me and shuffles us promptly out of the frat house.

“Let’s go.”

Once we’re out, Kennedy and I follow Neo as he walks angrily ahead of us. Neither of us says a word to him or each other until about five minutes into our walk.

“What the fuck was that?” Kennedy breaks the silence, raising her arms up for emphasis.

Neo stops moving and finally turns around. The fresh air is helping to wake me up and I notice that Neo didn’t get out of the brawl unscathed, although I shouldn’t feel any sympathy for the maniac. He brutally attacked Blake for no good damn reason.

“Where were you?” he asks her, and it sounds more like an accusation than a question.

“Why? Because you’re reporting my whereabouts back to Shane?”

“No, because while you were doing whatever the fuck you were doing, your friend here was being drugged.”

Kennedy studies me carefully now.

“Drugged?”

“I had the punch,” I explain. “But I smelled it and there was no alcohol in it. I don’t think I was drugged.”

Neo steps thunderously toward me, making me almost dizzy.

“Have you never been to a college party before in your life? When have you ever seen a frat house serve straight up Hawaiian fucking punch?”

“Well, I—” I stutter, but he doesn’t let me finish my sentence.

“This frat is known for lacing their drinks. It’s called Gamma Twilight punch for a reason and this one,” he points to Kennedy. ”Should have known that.”

“The dude you pummeled gave her Gamma punch?” Kennedy asks with dread.

“He’s new to the frat so those dickheads probably told him what to do and then watched him do it for shits and giggles. I’m two seconds away from killing them all. Why would you come here, especially on a night like this?”

“I told you to only drink the beer,” Kennedy fusses at me as she steps a few feet away from us to take a call privately. “One second, y’all.”

“But I don’t drink!” I exclaim, raising up my arms for emphasis. “Why would I drink the damn beer? I just can’t believe Blake purposely did this. He was talking about college testing and all his ideas for fixing the system. He seemed like a nice guy.”

Neo stalks closer to me until I can feel his warm, minty breath against my face.

“Don’t you ever say that rapist’s name out loud again.”

“He didn’t rape me.” I remind him, rolling my eyes.

“He was about to, Violet!” Neo runs a hand through his hair in frustration with me, as if I’m some sort of reckless child. “He had his hands all over you! What if I hadn’t been here?”

As I slowly come down off of whatever may have been added to the punch, the reality of Neo’s question floods my senses and I become emotional.

“Don’t you dare cry,” he orders angrily, his lips very close to my quivering ones.

“I’m not,” I lie.

“Crying won’t change anything.” His bruised hand gently palms the side of my face and inadvertently I lean into it. “Fuck, Violet.”

“Thank you for defending me,” I tell him.

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“But you can’t ever hurt someone like that again,” I say. “I could have reported him instead and let the university deal with it.”

“Just don’t do some silly shit like that again and I won’t have to hurt anyone. You should have been with me tonight.”

Our eyes lock on each other.

What was meant as one of his “tough guy” orders sounds more like a plea, and while I should run for the hills from someone who seems to repeatedly commit this type of violence and feel zero remorse, there’s something about what he did that’s sexy as fuck.

Or is it just the gamma punch making my panties wet like this?

His gaze bores into mine, intense, fiery, revealing depths of emotions he’s never allowed anyone to see. His hand remains on my cheek, his fingers edging into my hair. There’s a strange comfort in that touch, a sense of security.

“Neo...” His name rolls quietly off my tongue and I see him close his eyes momentarily, as if my voice is a soothing balm for his volatile energy.

“Yes, Violet?” There’s a softness in his voice that wasn’t there before.

“I just want to say...” My words trail off as fear gutters in my belly. I’m not sure why I’m afraid; afraid of him or afraid for him - but it lurks there, like a shadowy beast in the corners of my mind.

“What is it?” He whispers, his breath tickling my earlobe.

“Whatever is going on between us can’t continue,” I say, taking an uncertain step back. The physical separation feels like a chasm opening up between us.

“But it already is, baby,” he begins, but I shake my head, cutting him off.

“I’m scared.”

His face scrunches up in hurt confusion. “Is this about the dude back home?”

“No.”

“Then how exactly have I completely scared you away?”

“Neo...you have to understand,” I plead with him. “I’m not scared of you because you beat him up. I’m scared because I’m not scared.”

His brows furrow at my confession and he takes a step towards me, bringing us closer together again.

“You’re afraid...because you’re not afraid?” He looks utterly lost at this seeming contradiction.

“Yes.” It sounds ridiculous, I know. “I should be terrified of you right now...but instead...I feel safe.”

Safe with a man who just assaulted another man...again.

“What’s wrong with that? I’m not some monster, Violet,” he mutters bitterly, his voice laced with an edge of raw hurt that tugs at my heartstrings. “Neither Bender nor the frat boy are nice guys. They deserve exactly what they got, and it could have been a lot worse.”

“I’m going to be a lawyer, Neo.”

“What the hell does that matter?”

“Justice matters to me, even for the not-so-nice guys.”

“Listen, Violet,” he starts, his voice gravely and vulnerable as he slides an arm around my waist.

“What?”

Our lips brush against each other as he speaks gentle words against my mouth.

“I always get what I want and what I want without question is you. Now, what do I need to change to make that happen? Because I’ll fucking do it.”

Before I can respond, without warning, our private moment of vulnerability with each other is cut short.

We’ve been caught.

And I’m going to have a hell of a time explaining this to her.

“What in the ever loving fuck is going on here?”

violet

. . .



WHEN WE RETURN HOME, it's late and I'm exhausted. I immediately kick off my shoes and run to the bathroom because I have to pee something fierce. Whatever was in that Gamma punch is wreaking havoc with my digestive system. When I'm washing my hands, Kennedy raps lightly on the door.

"You okay?"

"Yep, I'm almost done if you need to get in here."

I open the door after drying my hands and Kennedy's on the other side, already in a sleep t-shirt, using a makeup wipe to clean her face.

"So are we going to talk about what I saw tonight?"

I was able to dodge any explanation about what Kennedy thinks she saw between Neo and me, convincing her to just drop it for now, so I could go to bed and sleep off the drugs, but I knew she wasn't going to just drop it.

So here we are.

At two am in the morning.

"That was nothing," I try gaslighting her. "Do you have another one of those makeup remover wipes?"

Kennedy goes back to her bedroom and grabs her pack of wipes. But not only does she return with them, she also has a piece of paper in her other hand.

"Really? Then what's this, bitch?"

I shut my eyes, disappointed with myself. It's the note that Neo left with the Christmas tree. I remember mixing it up with a pile of mail on the counter and said to myself about five different times that I would grab it and put it in a safe place, but I just never got around to it.

"I realize what this looks like."

Kennedy's face contorts like mine does when I'm having period cramps.

"What this looks like is I flew home for a week and when I returned, the entire world turned upside down. *You're going to get there, Grinch, and this tree is the first step. Merry Christmas?*" She reads the note with dramatic effect.

"Yeah, um, so I was going to tell you."

"Neo Major gave you a...Christmas tree?"

"Gave *us* a Christmas tree," I correct her.

"And when did he give this to *us*?"

"Yeah, so, I stopped by the ice house for a second when you were gone—"

"The ice house!" she exclaims. "By yourself?"

"It was just lunch, Kennedy."

"I thought we both agreed that you didn't need any new friends, especially one's living in that house."

"You're the one who brought me there first!"

"I didn't think you'd go back on your own to visit the last person on earth you should be talking to. Now he's gifting you Christmas trees and shit?" She tosses a used wipe in the air. "What the hell, Violet?"

"He felt sorry for me and we had lunch. That's it."

"How did the tree get here? Did you bring it home from the ice house? Was it theirs?"

"Lunch was late. By the time he walked me home the sun was down and I didn't think I should let him walk home by himself."

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, I’m not kidding,” I say, getting a bit irritated by this grand inquisition. I know Kennedy has strong feelings about the Suns, but I don’t owe her an explanation about my choices.

“Neo is a grown ass man. He punches people in the mouth for fun. He can definitely walk back to the house on his own.”

“Well, he seemed a little skittish about getting in an Uber so—.”

“And you fell for that?”

“I didn’t fall for anything because nothing happened. He spent the night on our couch and when I woke up, he’d left the tree outside my *closed* bedroom door.”

“Wait, he slept over?” Her eyes widen.

“Would you relax?”

“Think about this, Violet. Neo is the captain of the hockey team. The leader. The head fucker in charge. Any one of those guys at the house could have driven you home or picked him up.”

“I thought about that, but—”

“I leave you alone for a few days and the world has gone to complete shit.”

“Hey, I get that you’re going through some things at home with your father and Shane, but please try not to project all of that onto this situation—if you can even call this a situation.”

“Oh, trust me, it’s definitely a damn situation.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“Are you still high off of that punch? He almost killed someone at the frat house tonight, and now I understand why—it’s because of you. Girl, you’re marked. Nobody with a ten-foot pole is going to touch you, much less talk to you now. He made that very clear in front of everyone. You belong to him.”

“What those Gammas did to me and probably countless other girls is a criminal act. I can understand why Neo reacted

like that. He was appalled, and I appreciated somebody having my back tonight.”

“You’re not understanding. Neo doesn’t just walk around town with spare Christmas trees in between his balls, which means he called someone, probably a puck bunny, to buy that tree and bring it to our house.”

“A puck bunny?” The thought nauseates me.

“You’re marked, but not exclusively marked. You’re not... special to him.”

“That’s kind of mean to say, Kennedy.”

“I’m sorry, but he’s slept with almost all of those girls. It’s probably a rite of passage for them. The girls serving us the drinks at the kickback the other night are longtime puck bunnies. They take pride in the fact that they’ve slept with all of the upperclassmen on the team, especially if they can bag one or more of the triad.”

“The triad?” I find myself whispering.

“Neo, Shane and Bass.” She emphasizes their names. “And let me be clear, Violet, leaving you that tree was strange as fuck, even for him. But Neo Major never does anything without a well thought out, strategic reason, which is usually to his benefit. I don’t know what he wants with you, but it can’t be good.”

“Aren’t you two friends?” I ask. “Why do you think so poorly of him? Why are you saying these things?”

This conversation has really upset me considering the fact that I’ve already slept with Neo...repeatedly.

“This is not personal. You’re my roommate and now someone I would consider my friend. I’m a hockey fan who happened to have gotten to know a few of the players my freshman year because of Shane’s connection to my father’s inability to keep it in his pants. I’ve seen these boys in action and I’m warning you to stay clear of Neo. It won’t end well for you. I’ve had a front-row seat to the effect he can have on a love-struck girl. Just ask Vikki Dixon. She’ll tell you.”

“I’m not love-struck,” I say rolling my eyes. “I barely know the guy.”

“The games are one thing but I should have never taken you over the ice house. That’s my fault. Just promise me you’ll stay away from him now that you know.”

“He’s not some dangerous warlord.” I say in a weak voice. “He won’t kill me.”

“Wait.” Kennedy studies me quietly at me for a moment. “Please tell me you didn’t sleep with him?”

My eyes water and I don’t give her a response, but that’s all the confirmation that she needs.”

“Okay,” she takes a deep breath. “We all make mistakes but listen to me, the boy has baggage, Violet. People don’t really talk about it, but did you know that he killed his own brother?”

“That’s not true!” I protest, tears streaming down my face. “A drunk driver killed his brother.”

“Girl, that’s the half-truth his parents told the media to save his hockey career, but the gossip is that Neo was driving the car, not Jake. My guess is that he was the one who made some sort of driving error that night. Ran them both right into a guardrail and they spun out. I’ve often wondered if that’s why he doesn’t drink. Maybe he was drunk that night and—”

“Stop.”

“Violet.”

“Just stop, Kennedy.” I raise my hand in a stop motion. “I don’t want to hear any more of your theories about Neo and his brother or your stories about the team. I have a headache and I just want to go to bed and pretend that I didn’t have the shittiest New Year’s Eve of my life.”

Kennedy’s face drops.

“And just so we’re clear,” I tell her. “I don’t need you giving me anymore unsolicited advice about who I choose to spend my time with. I had a mother, and she’s gone. I’m sorry if I gave you the idea that it was now your job.”

When I slide into bed underneath the freshly washed sheets I put on before we left for the party, completely spent from the night's rollercoaster of emotions, I decide to do the one thing I can control and text Elijah.

Me: Let's breakup

neo

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I SIT in interim Head Coach Mike’s office, the familiar scent of leather and recent victories hanging in the air. The walls are a testament to the recent glories of our team, adorned with framed jerseys and team photos. I’m here, feeling a mix of anticipation and anxiety, as Coach Mike leans back in his chair, his expression serious yet sympathetic.

“Neo, I’ve been in talks with your father and some scouts from the NHL. They’re impressed with you, really impressed,” Coach Mike begins, his gaze fixed on me.

My heart pounds in my chest. This is the moment I’ve dreamed about, but now that it’s here, it feels overwhelming, almost surreal.

“Who’s interested?” I ask with bated breath.

“The Golden Knights, The Devils and The Maple Leafs,” he says proudly. “All impressive teams looking for the next great center. All solid offers.”

“My dad didn’t mention any of this. I spoke to him on Christmas.”

“It was important to me and Coach Dixon that we fielded your offers and told you about them first. We know how well-meaning parents can be, and I’m not saying your father would get in the way, but we just want to make sure that you examine all your options on your own before talking it over with your family.”

I feel the pressure of my father's expectations like a physical weight on my shoulders, pressing down on me as I sit in the chair opposite Coach. My fingers trace the grooves in the wood of the armrest, worn smooth from years of use.

“Who offered the best deal?”

“The Knights came strong. They definitely are big in supporting local players and they'd prefer a college Vegas star to stay in Vegas,” he continues. “They want you now and the deal would close at about 12 million.”

Coach's words hit me like a tidal wave.

A chance to go pro early?

Twelve million dollars?

“And the other offers?”

“A little under ten million, but still substantial money. I really like the coach up in Toronto too. I've worked with him before, when we were both in Seattle.

But as much as I want this, a part of me recoils. “I... I don't know if I'm ready to leave,” I find myself saying.

I fiddle with the band of my practice jersey and it feels soft and worn under my fingertips, a symbol of the brotherhood we've formed since freshman year. There's the team and the championship we've been striving for. We made a pact.

And then there's Violet.

Coach Mike nods, understanding the conflict inside me. “I get it. It's a big decision. Your father, of course, is all for you going pro early, thinks it's a golden opportunity.”

My father, always the driving force, always pushing for more. The pressure to live up to his expectations has always been a constant in my life. He's never said it out loud, but in some ways I believe my father thinks I owe him this career. He blames me for everything I've taken from him and holds me responsible for what happened to Jake. It's a terrible burden to bear and maybe I do owe my family something, but now there's Violet to consider, the girl who unexpectedly stormed into my heart, changing everything.

“What’s weighing on your heart, son?” Coach asks.

“There are other things to consider than just money,” I admit, the words heavy with emotion. “There are people here at school who I don’t just want to leave behind.”

Coach Mike’s expression softens. “I understand, Neo. This isn’t just about hockey. It’s about your life, your future, but I don’t think you need to worry too much about your teammates, especially Shane and Bass. Based on their stats lately, they’re going to get their opportunities too. You’re not leaving them behind if you decide to go pro now...just a little early.”

The NHL has been my dream since I was a kid and I look down at my hands, feeling torn. Coach thinks I’m struggling with leaving the guys behind, and while that is part of it, there is someone else who I believe may mean just as much to me as they do, and with time, probably much more.

“There’s someone else I’m thinking about as well.”

“Someone else?”

“A girl.” If this was Coach Dixon for obvious reasons I wouldn’t feel comfortable talking about this, but I can definitely confide in Coach Mike. “Her name is Violet.”

“And you don’t want to leave her behind either?”

“Exactly.”

“I didn’t know you had a girlfriend.”

“It’s very new, but I’d say it’s serious.”

My bum hand twitches with nervous energy, my palms sweaty as I tell someone out loud how I feel about Violet for the first time.

“How’s that hand feeling?” Coach asks, noticing the spasms I can usually hide from most.

“It’s coming along,” I bullshit. “I think the physical therapy is helping.”

“There will be a physical exam required by any team you sign with. You aren’t going to be able to hide what’s going on

forever. The Suns are happy to have you here, twitchy hand and all, but for millions of dollars the NHL is going to want guarantees.”

“I know.”

“It’s time you think long and hard about the surgery before it isn’t even an option anymore.”

I give a heavy sigh because Coach knows full well that I don’t want to go under the knife.

“If it’s meant to heal, it will heal.”

Coach’s mouth flattens into a thin line. “No disrespect, son, but that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. You’re not destined for healing. You’ve got to go seek it.”

“Yes, Coach.”

“Now I know it’s a big decision, Neo,” Coach says gently. “But whatever you choose, know that I’m behind you. You’ve got to do what’s right for you. It’s simply my job to let you know the offers are there.”

He pulls a file folder containing several papers, each pile representative of the teams’ offers, and hands it to me.

“Here are the official offers. There’s no rush. Read them over. Talk to your parents. I can even arrange for you to have conversations with the head coaches from each team. Honestly, I advise talking to them more than once and visiting the teams at their home stadiums. Go to a practice. Get a feel for the culture of the locker room. That’s how you’ll really know where you belong.”

I stand up, feeling a sense of gratitude for Coach Mike. He’s always been a straight shooter with me.

“Thanks, Coach,” I say. “I’ll need some time to think.”

“Take all the time you need,” he replies, standing up with me. “And remember, whatever path you choose, make sure it’s the one that makes you happy. You can’t live your life for anybody else.”

We shake hands, and as I leave the office; the decision weighs heavily on me. The future I've always dreamed of is right there for the taking. The choice isn't going to be easy, but it's mine to make.

“Oh, and Neo, I put another copy of the surgical referral in there, too. At the very least, you can get a consultation. It won't affect any of your offers. All they'll see is a young man serious about his health and game readiness.”

“Okay.”

During my walk back to the ice house, I think hard about everything Coach has said today. The house is bustling with energy as my teammates get ready for a long practice today. We're gearing up for our next game with the Chiefs.

Shane pulls me to the side while he makes a turkey sandwich. “What did Coach want?” He asks. “Was it serious?”

He spreads entirely too much mayonnaise on the roll he's using.

“Not especially.” I don't want to discuss the offers right now, even with Shane. I want to keep them to myself until I've decided.

“What did I miss on New Year's? Everyone's talking about the kid you mopped the floor with.”

“Slice those tomatoes thinner,” I tell him. “You make a horrible sandwich.”

“Fuck the sandwich, bro', what happened at the Gamma house?”

Bass walks in and sits at the counter right in between the two of us, grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

“Violet happened.”

neo

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I HAVE BEEN TOTALLY DISTRACTED

by the bomb that Coach Mike dropped on me. Three NHL pro contract offers worth over ten million dollars a piece? Mine for the taking if I declare myself pro and drop out of college right now? The pressure to make the right decision is overwhelming and I've been ignoring calls from my father for the last week, making it obvious that Coach informed him that he's already talked to me about the offers.

All of that stress falls away though when I'm inside of Violet though. Her pussy is my therapy and I could happily self-medicate myself on this forever if she'd let me. The two of us are super in sync tonight. I need to feel control over at least one thing in my life and she needs to feel a total release of control.

This is her first time fucking me in my room, a choice we didn't really have tonight, because Kennedy is home and she doesn't want to upset her by having me over, whatever that means.

I sense that she's nervous. There are hockey players in and out of the house, but it's my job to make her feel so good that she'll forget about all of that and not want to be anywhere else but here.

She's wearing one of my gold jerseys with nothing else underneath, and I love how the color plays against her skin. I pull at the edge of it, bringing her toward my hungry face. I'm

sitting on the floor, my back against the bed, and my head is in the perfect position — right at the apex of her thighs.

“Give me what’s mine, Grinch,” I growl.

She lifts the jersey a bit higher, so it sits right at her waist and I use my hands to palm her bare juicy ass and position her right where I want her.

“That’s nice,” I tell her. “Now twist the jersey in a knot, so it stays put.”

She does.

“Good girl. Now use your hands to spread your pussy apart for me and keep it that way. I shouldn’t have to do all the work.”

My playful words make her legs wobbly, and I give one of her ass cheeks a smack.

“Stand up tall.”

She locks in her knees.

“Now spread that pussy.”

She uses her fingers and gently pulls the lips of her pussy apart and I give her clit a gentle kiss.

“That’s it,” I coax her. “That’s exactly what I want.”

I rub gentle strokes along the backs of her thighs with my hands as I simultaneously tease her clit with my tongue. The goal for me is to see how fast I can make her come. It’s kind of what I live for these days.

She lets out a blissful squeal, almost falling into me as she rests her hands in my hair.

I smack her other cheek.

“Stand up, baby, or I’ll stop.”

“Don’t stop,” she pleads.

I chuckle at her begging, but the sound is muffled by the inviting warmth between her thighs. My tongue finds her sensitive spots easily, and her taste fills my senses, throwing me into a state of primal desire. The gentle breeze coming

from the open window of my room makes her shiver against me.

“Then act right,” I remind her, fingers digging into the soft flesh of her ass to keep her steady. Despite my dominating words and gestures, I can’t help but let the affection for her seep into them. Every movement is measured, every touch imbued with a kindness that I hope she recognizes.

She whimpers out an obedient ‘yes’, thighs quivering as she tries to hold herself upright. I run my hands soothingly along her legs, quieting her, shaking with firm but gentle strokes as I continue to lap at her. She writhes against me, trying to get more contact, and I oblige; pressing deeper, licking harder.

“Neo... Neo...” she whispers my name like a mantra and the sound sends shivers down my spine. It’s definitely my kryptonite when I hear her vocalize in this way, especially when it’s my name falling from her lips.

The little devil on my shoulder sometimes makes me question whether she’s said anyone else’s name like this. I want to hurt them if she has.

I stop eating her out for a moment and ask her what I’ve wanted to ask for the longest. “Have you broken up with him, Violet?”

“What?” she asks breathlessly.

“You heard me.”

I know his name but I don’t use it. A quick google search on her old Instagram posts told me everything I needed to know about him. I will not say it. She knows exactly who I’m talking about.

“Yes, we broke up.”

I smile. “And this pussy only belongs to me now?”

“It has always been waiting for you,” she says with sincerity and I almost come on myself.

I return to what I was doing with a vengeance.

Devouring her pussy with purpose.

Finally, she cries out, head thrown back in ecstasy as she comes undone at my ministrations. Her hands clench tight in my hair, but I don't mind it—it's as intense for me as it is for her.

As the aftershocks of pleasure ripple through her body, I pull back and wipe my mouth on the back of my hand before pulling Violet down onto my lap. She's panting heavily, face flushed and dewy in the muted light of my room. Her hair is tousled attractively around her face, mused from how she kept tugging on it as she lost herself to the pleasure. I draw her close, hands roaming freely along her body as we bask in the afterglow.

“You okay, Grinch?” I ask softly, biting back a smirk at her dazed expression.

“All your fault... too good...” she breathlessly mutters, half rested against my chest.

“That's what I aim for,” I reply with a self-satisfying grin. “But I'm not done.”

“You're not?” she asks, an eagerness all over her face.

“No, baby.” I say, stroking myself beneath her. “Not by a long shot.”

She stares hungrily at my dick and I know my girl she wants to give me head in the worst way, but tonight is about my control and her surrender.

“Climb over me and onto the bed. All fours. Ass facing this direction.”

She does as directed and I stare for a moment at the sight before me.

So fucking beautiful.

I get on the bed and rest on my knees directly in front of her face.

“Eyes on my hands,” I tell her.

I open a condom packet and place the piece of rubber on the tip of my dick, but stop there.

“Roll the rest of it on me with your mouth, Violet.”

The feeling is exquisite as she figures out the best way to put on the condom without the use of her hands while also without hurting me.

“Take your time. Ahhh,” I hiss. “You’re doing so good, baby.”

After she’s finished, I make sure to tighten up her handiwork so we don’t have any unwanted babies and then I tell her to, “Turn around.”

Her arms are outstretched on the bed, head down, and her ass is up.

I slide my middle finger gently through her folds, appreciating just how wet she is for me. Hell, she’s going to need to be. This position is always a lot for her to handle. I’m a big boy.

I tap her pussy once with a loose open palm to let her know I’m about to start and she wiggles her ass in anticipation.

With one swift thrust, I enter her from behind and she cries out from the welcome intrusion.

“Yesss, Neo!”

I pound her from behind with hard, punishing strokes not to ever hurt her but because she loves it this way, and I’m all about giving Violet whatever she needs whenever she needs it.

“What do you say when I give it to you like this?” I ask in a deep, commanding voice.

“Thank you, Neo,” she mews and her words of gratitude make my dick feel ten times larger than it is.

“That’s right.”

“Neo-”

“Yes, baby?” I ask playfully, feeling her orgasm bear down on her and me, trying to stave off my own.

“I’m coming.”

“Then play with your pussy and come hard for me,” I say gutturally.

The two of us come almost simultaneously.

“*Fuckkkkkk.*”

Like always, it’s fantastic.

After collapsing into the comforter of my bed, I scoop Violet up and hold her in my arms. Her fingers trace idle patterns on my bare chest as we sit there in silence. The world outside my bedroom door doesn’t exist right now—it’s just me and Violet; two bodies entwined in passion and shared affection.

“I know this all seems fast, Violet, but I love you,” I say softly into her ear, worried that my confession might be too much too soon.

“It’s definitely fast.” Her eyes are glassy as she stares back at me. “But I think I’m in love with you, too.”

I hold her closer.

It’s peaceful moments like this that make me forget about the overwhelming pressure of pro contracts, intrusive calls from my father, and plain old “adulthood”.

But reality intrudes sooner than I want when the ring tone of my phone breaks the silence. I groan, reaching over to grab it off the bed, glancing at the caller ID. It’s dad. Again.

Violet pulls away slightly to look at me, her brown eyes questioning.

“It’s my dad.” I sigh, holding up the phone for her to see.

“Maybe you should take it....” She suggests hesitantly.

I frown at the screen before shaking my head. “Not right now...”

I toss it back on the bed, turning my attention back to Violet who looks at me sympathetically.

“Is something going on at home?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“You sure?”

I give her a long kiss, reminding her that she can always trust me.

“Positive,” I reassure her. “He can wait. Now get under these covers.”

neo

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“WHAT DO you want me to do, Cap?”

“Just keep an eye on her.”

“Um, well, how should I pull that off since I’m always with the team?”

“When you’re not on the ice, you watch her.”

“No disrespect, but that sounds kind of like a stalking charge and my mama ain’t–.”

“You think I give a fuck about that?”

There’s a hierarchy in the Valencia Suns, and all freshmen are at the bottom of it. We call them grunts. They have to do their thing on their ice and they have to prove their mettle as part of the team as well.

Most of the starters are upperclassmen and we all adopt one newbie as our personal errand boys. According to the university bylaws that might be classified as hazing, but we like to call it team building.

While I used Keith to drive me and Violet around on our first date, my actual personal grunt is Deuce. He’s a good kid from Colorado Springs who shits, eats and breathes hockey and is eager to please, so I have him keeping an eye on Violet for me. Now that people know that we’re together, and especially after what happened at the Gamma house, I feel more protective of her than ever.

“So, is it okay if she knows I’m there, like if she sees me?” Deuce asks nervously.

“No, it’s not okay,” I tell him, as if it’s the stupidest question he’s ever asked. “Keep your distance, grunt.”

“What I think Neo’s trying to say, Deuce, is that he doesn’t need you to follow her around like some kind of deviant. Just ask around about her. She’s new to the school and doesn’t know many people,” Bass tells him. “Cap just wants to make sure no one, you know, fucks with her.”

Bass is unofficially in charge of all the new players on the team. Nobody assigned him the job, he just enjoys it and the grunts believe he’s their ally because he comes off nicer than me...until he isn’t.

“This is where she’ll be.”

I text him the address of Kennedy’s apartment.

“Okay.”

It’s obvious that Deuce is uncomfortable with his assignment. No doubt he has a conscience or some such shit, but what he’ll soon learn is that I don’t share that same burden of having a moral compass. I pretty much do what I want on this campus without impunity and I don’t care that I can.

Now that I’ve touched her, tasted her, and Violet is officially mine — there’s an inexplicable pull that I feel toward her - a pull that’s as strong as the gravitational force between the earth and the sun.

Some might even call it obsessive.

She’s all I think about.

It’s scary though, because she makes me feel things that are out of my character. I feel the need to spill my guts. Share all my secrets. Talk about emotions. Even talk about Jake. She may be one of the few people on this campus to see a part of me I rarely share with the world. And if that ain’t some scary shit, I don’t know what is.

A few weeks ago, my only purpose in life was winning hockey games. I am living the life Jake was supposed to have.

We're so close to a championship, I can see it. And I'm so close to a pro offer I can taste it.

But now Violet has completely turned all of that upside down. And I can't fuck that up, which is why I'm going to protect what the two of us call our own little private "love bubble" at all costs.

"Wear this," I tell Deuce, handing him a black baseball cap, free of VCU branding. "You see anyone unusual approach her, you let me know, especially those Gamma dicks or Bender."

Deuce nods solemnly, the wrinkles on his forehead deepening. He's struggling to hold my gaze, his eyes constantly darting around the locker room. It's a typical reaction from someone who's been given a task that doesn't quite align with their established worldview. Again, I ignore.

Bass gives me one of his cautionary looks. The kind that tells me I'm walking a fine line between being captain of this team and a straight up psychopath, so I try softening my approach.

"It's just surveillance," I reassure Deuce, although I'm not entirely sure I'm telling the truth myself. "She won't even know you're there."

Deuce takes the hat, swallowing hard. "You're sure this is alright, guys? I don't want to get kicked out of the program."

Before Bass can answer that, I raise an eyebrow at Deuce and shrug. "Do you trust me?"

He hesitates for a moment before nodding, the tension in his jaw loosening slightly. "Yeah, Cap, I do."

"Then do what you're told and all will be well."

As he walks out, pulling the cap low over his eyes, I can't help but question my sanity at this point, and so does Bass.

"You know I'm always down for having a grunt prove loyalty to the team, but this is a wild ask, even for you, bro'. Deuce is nobody's private detective."

"Are you questioning my ask of a grunt?"

“Uh, fuck yeah. They’re *my* grunts and I know you about as well as I know anyone. Keeping tabs on some girl is not what you do. You spend more energy dodging them than protecting them. I know you like Violet a lot, but is there something else going on, or does she really have your head this spun around?”

“Violet is not just some girl, Bass. She’s *my* girl, so watch your mouth.”

“Well, damn, I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Welcome to a new world order, motherfucker.”

“And I guess surveillance is part of every new world order,” Bass laughs at me.

“You’ll see when you meet the girl who turns your head and splits it wide open. I can’t wait.”

“Yikes, that shit sounds painful.”

“Yeah, but in the best way possible.” I grin.

After Bass leaves, I sit alone in the rink; the silence echoing off the cold ice and empty seats. I think about my meeting with Coach again and all that is at stake. I finally took one of my father’s calls and let him say his piece. The conversation went just about as well as I thought it would... badly.

I grit my teeth when the door to the rink creaks opens and the last person I feel like seeing walks inside.

While Vikki is very attractive, she’s dressed in one of those curve hugging, crop top and legging sets. The kind of tacky outfit that doesn’t leave much to the imagination. The kind of outfit that once upon a time was the only way a girl could dress to get my attention.

It’s funny how things change.

Violet wore the biggest sweatsuit she could find when I first went over to her place and all I could think about were creative ways I could try talking her pretty ass out of it.

“Hey, Neo.”

“What are you doing here, Vikki?”

“My dad has already spoken to Coach Mike, but he wants an update from his number one player.”

Shit.

“How’s your dad doing?” I ask her.

I miss Coach Dixon. He was tough when I first arrived at VCU but he had a strong belief in what I could bring to the hockey program. Without Coach Dixon’s tutelage, I’m not confident that I would be captain of the Suns or scouted for the NHL.

“He’s still doing rehab every day and cutting out his beloved cigars. It’s an uphill battle, but he’ll get there. He misses all of you.”

“He’s a legend. If anyone can get back on his feet, it’s him.”

“So...Dad would love to see you. Maybe talk about these pro offers you supposedly have been getting? You should come visit with me one day next week.”

I hate she knows about my business when there are so many people closer to me who don’t, but there are a lot of things that Vikki gets to overhear by being so close with her father.

“Vikki—”

“What?” She feigns innocence.

“We’re not together, so let’s not pretend that we are.”

“There’s no need to be a dick about it. I know we’re not together. We could never be a couple because you’re incapable of real human emotion. I just wanted you to visit the man you claim is your inspiration for wanting the collegiate championship this year.”

“My affection for your father is not up for debate. I will visit Coach with the rest of my teammates when he’s up for it.”

“Why can’t you go with me?”

“That wouldn’t be a good idea. Plus, last I heard, you’re fucking Bender Price.”

“Oh, is that it?” Her face brightens. “You’re jealous?”

“Not even a little bit. I’m just pointing out that you’re in a new relationship, just like I am. We should respect our new partners and keep our distance.”

“A relationship?” She scoffs. “You?”

“Did I stutter?”

“Are you trying to wife up one of the puck bunnies now?” She laughs mockingly. “You can’t make a hoe into a housewife, Neo. Everyone knows that.”

I keep a stone face. “I would appreciate it if you would respect me and my girl and stop popping up everywhere. You’re not invited.”

“Popping up? This is the school hockey rink where my father is the coach. I always belong here.”

“Your father isn’t here right now and last time I checked, you aren’t on the team.”

“Wait, you’re serious?”

“Very.”

She paces for a moment, then faces me once she thinks she’s figured it out.

“Is it the freshman?” she asks in horror.

“Who it is doesn’t matter.”

“You are throwing me aside for a fucking freshman?”

“How can I throw you aside when we were never together to begin with, Vikki?”

“Oh, that’s how you’re playing it now? Pretending like we didn’t have a relationship?”

“We were occasionally fucking each other.”

“Exclusively!”

I was sleeping with Vikki exclusively, not because she was my girlfriend, but because I don't slide my dick into every random girl that bats her eyes at me. That's how you get a damn STD or a baby before you even make it to pro.

"Well, now I'm exclusively with someone else. End of conversation."

I stand.

She peers up at me with what I believe is a phony wounded expression, but for a brief moment I feel guilty, especially because it was so obvious to everyone but her why I even bothered past date one with her in the first place.

Vikki staggers back, her dark eyes shimmering with tears and her lip quivering. She wraps her arms around herself as though she's hugging the heartbreak that's ripping through her.

"That's it? Just like that?"

"Just like that." My cold reply hangs in the air, a heavy finality that severs the invisible thread between us.

Her tears spill over, leaving faint trails on her cheeks. It was harsh, but this conversation needed to be had. She sent Bender to my party to send a message, an obvious attempt to make me jealous, but this is my response.

I should feel something, remorse, pity... anything. But I feel nothing other than an overwhelming urge to get away from her.

I turn to leave when she throws one last accusation my way. "You used me! You used me and my father to get ahead in your career and now that he's not coaching this year, you're just tossing me aside."

I stop at her words, my hand freezing on the doorknob to the locker room. I have stepped on some folks on my way to the top and there may be some truth to what she's said, but I keep my voice steely as I reply without turning back, "You knew what this was from the start, Vikki."

With those words hanging in the air between us, I walk out of the rink and toward the locker room area, shutting the door

behind me. It closes with a quiet click, but inside me it feels like a loud bang.

As I walk down the hallway, I hear a blood-curdling scream of anger, and the guilt inside me stirs once again. I'm not proud of what I said or what I've done, but I push those unproductive feelings down and remind myself that this was necessary. Fucking my way to team captain was never my goal or end game. It was just a coincidental by-product of sleeping with the coach's daughter, but now it's time to move completely on from Vikki and all that she represents.

I'm not who I am because of the people I know, but by what I can do on the ice. And it's time that I stand completely in the power of who I am and what I bring to the table with or without her and Coach Dixon as my allies.

I'm Neo fucking Major.

Ice Mafia king.

Puck magician.

The future of this sport.

neo

. . .



MY FATHER FLEW ALL the way from Ohio and didn't tell me he was coming until he landed. We had one phone conversation about the pro offers on the table and now I've been avoiding him ever since. That's why he's here.

He's standing opposite me, in the patio area of the ice house, the air around us thick with tension. He's got that look in his eyes, the one that means he's about to lie down the law.

"Neo, you need to choose one of those NHL offers now," he starts, his voice firm, brooking no argument. "Opportunities like this don't come around often. You know that. Now if you ask me, the one with the Maple Leafs is the one you should take. It ain't the Rangers, but it's a good city, a great offer, and you can wear that jersey with pride."

I clench my fists, trying to keep my voice steady. "Pop, I want to finish my degree. The team needs me."

My father scoffs, pacing the room. "The team? This isn't about some college team. This is about your future. Your career. Do you have any idea how many kids dream of this chance? Do you realize the sacrifice your mother and I made paying for hockey, getting you to your practices, your games, and all the other shit?"

I feel a surge of frustration. "It's not just about hockey. There's more to my life than that."

He stops, turns to me, his expression hard. "More to your life? Like what? That girl Violet I've heard about? You're

going to throw away your future for a college romance?”

“It’s not just about Violet,” I counter. “I made a commitment to my team, to my education. Waiting a year won’t hurt my chances of playing in the NHL, but it could mean everything to my teammates.”

To her.

My father shakes his head, his disappointment palpable. “You’re being naïve, Neo. This is your chance to secure your future, to make something of yourself. Don’t let sentimentality cloud your judgment.”

I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of his expectations bearing down on me. “It’s my life, Dad. My choice. I want to do this my way.”

He pauses, then his tone changes, a note of warning creeping in. “And what about the truth, Neo? About the accident? There are people on the internet looking for a story all the time and if they dig hard enough, they’ll find it. If you stay here, the truth might come out while you’re in college and then there’s no NHL offers after that. You’ll be back home working at the local supermarket with Ken’s son.”

I flinch. The memory of the accident is like a physical blow. “I know what happened, Dad. I live with it every day.”

“And if it comes out that you were the driver and not Jake? It could ruin everything,” he presses. “Your mother and I lied to the state police. We lied! We lost one son and weren’t going to lose the other, but I’m pretty sure what we did was a crime. Going pro now, it could be your chance to leave it all behind. Start fresh.”

I shake my head, a mix of anger and guilt churning inside me. “I never asked you and mom to lie for me. I didn’t want you to. Your cover up has been eating up me inside for years!”

He looks at me, his expression softening slightly. “I know you loved your brother. I’m just trying to protect you, Neo. To give you the best chance at life. Don’t let Jake’s death be for nothing.”

There it is.

No matter how he sugarcoats it or tries to reframe it, my father blames me for his favorite son's death and he will continue to make me pay for it until the end of time. The thing is, maybe I should be paying for it? If I had told the truth back, then there's a very good chance I would have gone to a juvenile detention center. That's a hell of a lot worse than appeasing my parents by going pro now.

Lucia interrupts the tense mood when she walks out and offers my father some refreshments. I think she may have done it on purpose to give me a break from him. She's amazing like that.

“¿Os traigo algo de comer o beber, cariño?”

Lucia is pleasantly surprised when my father answers back, “May I have a Coke or Pepsi please?”

“Enseguida. Llevaré dos.”

She gives me a knowing look as she walks away to grab the sodas, a look that my mother would probably give me, telling me without saying out loud to stay strong.

“I understand everything you're saying, Dad. I made a mistake five years ago that I will regret for the rest of my life, but I don't think you and mom should have to suffer the consequences of the decision Jake and I both made that night.”

“The decision you both made?” He echoes.

I've told him the story a million times, but I just don't think he was far enough removed from grief to ever hear it, so I tell it again.

“Jake and I had been to a house party at Mika's house. We were all drinking, but Jake had way more than me. He couldn't see straight, much less drive. I'd had two mixed drinks and hadn't been driving long, if you remember. I didn't want to get behind the wheel, but Jake made me. It was either that or we call one of you to come get us, and neither one of us wanted to do that. You would have known what we had been up to and there would have been hell to pay.”

My father takes a seat on one of the rattan couches, almost as if he needs to steady himself to hear the rest of the story.

“It was raining that night and I couldn’t see for shit. I barely knew how to work the wipers or the fog lights, and Jake fell asleep as soon as we got in the car. When we spun out, I saw my life flash before my eyes, Dad. I really thought we were about to die and there was this tiny part of me that was glad that at least neither one of us would die alone. When we hit the guardrail, tipped on our side, I panicked and called the first person that came to mind—Mom.”

He finishes the story for me.

“And when we met you at the scene, your mother and I had already decided what the story was going to be if our worst nightmare had come true. If Jake was gone, we knew we had to protect you at all costs.”

“I know that things would be different if we called you that night,” I continue. “We would have been on punishment for a week, but Jake would still be alive and playing for the Rangers. I get that. But I loved my brother. I worshipped him. I did whatever he told me to do and I probably would foolishly do it again. I just wish you wouldn’t hate me for it.”

“I could never hate you, Neo,” my father murmurs. “But I’m scared. I can’t lose both of you. Your mother and I will never survive losing the only son we have left.”

Lucia walks out again, apologizing for her disruption but setting the drinks on the table along with a tray of freshly fried corn chips and guacamole.

My father and I sit in a long and loaded silence, considering all that we’ve shared with each other today. I think we both heard each other in a way we may never have before and suddenly my decision is made.

I know what I need to do.

I’m just not sure if I can live with it.

violet

...



TONIGHT, I'm sitting in the best seats in the house of the rink wearing my special edition Valencia Suns jersey with the number seventeen on the back and the name Major above it.

The way the girls are staring at me tonight has been a bit unnerving, but I'm starting to get used to it. It's just par for the course if I'm going to be with Neo.

Over the past few weeks, I've learned that standing up to Kennedy about Neo was what needed to happen. She's not mad about it or avoiding me. In fact, we've been getting along great, as if nothing's happened. She was the one who asked me about abusing my new status as "the marked one" to get us great seats at the game, and I was all too willing to oblige.

I've noticed that things between Shane and Kennedy are not as playful as they used to be. I would say they acted very much like competitive siblings, but not any longer. Now things are very weird. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that Ray from the football team is sitting behind us with his hands all over Kennedy's shoulders.

"If I can get you good seats to our game next weekend, will you come?" he asks Kennedy.

"Both of us?" Kennedy smiles.

"Of course, I know you don't do anything without Miss Violet over here."

“Violet?” she asks, not assuming anymore that my answer will be a definite yes like it used to be.

“Let me check and see if I have plans with the captain over there and if I don’t, I’d love to go, Ray.”

“Perfect,” he smiles. “The tickets will be at will call and if you can’t use them, then maybe you can transfer them to someone who can.”

“Sounds good,” I say, and Kennedy just smirks, happy that things seem to be moving in the right direction with Ray. Maybe a little too happy for Shane. He’s been giving us the evil eye all night.

The game against the Chiefs is a tough one, and the tension in the air is palpable. I can feel the electricity buzzing through the crowd, a mix of excitement and anxiety. I’m nervous for Neo, but I can’t help feeling a surge of pride seeing him out there on the ice, a true leader in every sense.

Kennedy leans in, shouting over the roar of the crowd. “This is the Neo I was talking about, Violet. He’s on fire tonight!”

I nod, my eyes glued to the game. “He’s amazing.”

The first period is intense, with both teams playing aggressively. Neo’s on top form, dodging and weaving with a grace that’s almost balletic. But when the Chiefs score the first goal, a collective groan rises from the Valencia supporters.

“Come on, Suns! You can do this!” Kennedy yells, her enthusiasm undiminished.

I join in, cheering and clapping, feeling every check and shot as if they were my own. Halfway through the second period, Neo steals the puck and races down the ice, his focus absolute.

He shoots—and scores!

The crowd erupts, and I jump to my feet, screaming at the top of my lungs.

“Yes, Neo!” I yell, more out of reflex than anything.

“The boys are on fire tonight,” Kennedy laughs and high-fives me. “And Neo is a machine! Did you see that shot?”

The game continues, a nail-biting back and forth. The Chiefs are tough, but Valencia is tougher. In the final period, with the score tied, the tension is almost unbearable. Neo’s playing like a man possessed, his determination clear in every move.

With just minutes left on the clock, Neo gets the puck again. He skates past the defenders, a blur of speed and skill. This time he passes the puck to Bass, who shoots—and scores the winning goal! The crowd goes wild, and I’m screaming and jumping, hugging Kennedy in a burst of joy.

“We did it!” I shout, my heart racing.

Kennedy grins, her eyes shining. “You guys are going to celebrate hard tonight!”

“You’re not coming?”

“I’m going to pass on this one. Ray and I are going to grab some dinner, plus Shane wouldn’t want me there.”

“Okay,” I say, still wondering what in the world happened between those two.

As the team lines up to shake hands, I can’t take my eyes off Neo. He looks up, finds me in the crowd, and gives me a smile that sends my heart into overdrive. I blush, feeling a flutter in my stomach.

The game ends, and the crowd starts to disperse, still buzzing with the excitement of the win. Kennedy and I make our way out, talking and laughing, the thrill of the game still coursing through us.

“Um, I would wait with you,” Kennedy starts. “But I just don’t really want a scene with Shane.”

“Would there be a scene?”

“Maybe. I know I don’t usually do the whole by yourself thing, but would it be okay if Ray and I left? If you stand at that doorway right there in about fifteen minutes, Neo will find you as he exits. Just text him.”

“No worries. I’ll be fine. You go ahead and have a good time.”

“Thanks, Violet.”

As I wait by the South entrance for Neo to change and finish celebrating their win in the locker room, I can feel someone staring at me.

It’s Vikki.

I pretend to not notice and start playing with my cell phone, but it doesn’t matter. She approaches me anyway.

“Look at you in your jersey,” she taunts, as she pops a few Peanut M&M’s in her mouth, one at a time.

“Hey, Vikki.”

“I have to give it to you. You work *so* fast.”

“What are you talking about?” I sigh with indifference.

“A freshman locking down Neo Major? The only other girl able to pull that off was me.”

“Oh, right, I heard he had a little something with the coach’s daughter?”

Her faux smile falters.

“I wouldn’t be so smug if I were you. I can’t wait to see you cry when he goes pro and leaves your ass for a singer or an actress. They all do it.”

“I guess one day we’ll see.” I shrug my shoulders as if I couldn’t care less.

She cocks her head to the side. “Oh, you don’t know, do you?”

“Just go away, Vikki.” Not trying to take the whole *I’ve got a secret bait*. “I don’t want to argue with you over a guy. We’re both better than that.”

“This is hysterical. You really don’t know that your hockey fuck buddy is about to shit on the college program that put his second-rate ass on the map. He’s going pro, girl. Like now. He’s leaving the school. My dad plucked him out of some

backwater town in Ohio and made him who he is today and this is how he betrays him?

“And he’s betraying you too, by the way. By the look on your face, I can see you had no idea that he was leaving, did you? But that’s who Neo is. Lots of secrets and zero self control. Did you see how he beat up my new boyfriend at the ice house kickback because he was jealous? That’s the scary shit I’m talking about. I couldn’t take the drama anymore. Honestly, it’s probably a good thing he’s leaving. Safer for the whole campus.”

I stand with my mouth agape as Vikki unceremoniously walks away, probably feeling quite smug about the shadow of doubt she’s cast over the tiny love bubble I found myself living in with Neo.

Neo exits the doorway, covered in Gatorade or whatever it is hockey players pour on themselves after a win, looking completely incandescent. He’s so utterly and completely happy that he doesn’t even notice the sheer terror I’m feeling. Fear that what we have has ended almost as quickly as it began.

He wraps an arm around my neck and pulls me closely into his massive body. “Did you see me out there, baby?”

“You were amazing,” I tell him flatly, unable to feign genuine joy.

“Hey, Violet!” Bass, Shane and the others greet me cheerfully, treating me like I’m a part of the team. I wonder if they know Neo is leaving? Would they be this excited if they knew he was? Maybe Vikki was fucking with me to get under my skin. Perhaps I’m ridiculously gullible.

Because Neo would tell me something as important and life changing as him accepting a pro offer and leaving school.

Wouldn’t he?

violet

. . .



WHILE A CELEBRATION RAGES on
below us on the first floor of the ice house, Neo and I are tucked away in his bedroom, intertwined in each other.

He is spooning me from the back, scissored between my legs, fucking me sideways as he grips my breasts for leverage.

“You have to be quiet,” he teases as I moan a little too loudly. “What happened to the girl who didn’t even want to be caught dead in here? Now they can all hear how I make you come.”

“No, they can’t!” I pant.

“They’re about to.”

Neo fucks me deeper as his mouth settles into the side of my neck, sucking the skin softly.

My orgasm is winding slowly and my moans are growing louder, so he places a gentle hand over my mouth as he continues to work me into orgasmic submission.

My release hits me hard and I arch my back as every muscle in my body contracts with pleasure.

“That’s my sweet pussy,” he purrs into my ear as he massages my clit, giving me aftershocks that make me shudder.

“I love you,” I tell him, basking in the afterglow of our lovemaking.

“I love you too, Grinch.”

He casually smacks my ass as he rises from the bed.

“I have to make an appearance downstairs. This was a big win and I have to make sure they don’t burn down the place. I’m going to go and when you’re ready, you can follow me down there, okay?”

“Sure,” I smile.

“Take your time.” He gives me a kiss on the lips. “Maybe later I’ll eat your pussy in the shower.”

“Okay,” I laugh.

I have a unique opportunity at this moment. I’m alone in Neo’s room, which rarely happens, so it would be the perfect time to snoop. I’ve never done this before. I’m not that girl who steals her boyfriend’s social media passwords or follows him after a party. There were girls in high school who made that damn near a full-time job. I was never in a relationship serious enough to warrant that.

But now you are, Violet.

After cleaning myself up and putting my clothes back on, I stall for time, tidying up the room and making the bed. Finally, when there isn’t one more thing I can fold or put away, I start the search. The obvious first place to start is his desk. If there was anything important lying around, I’m sure it would be in one of these drawers.

I’m relieved as I search methodically through each drawer to find nothing much but school supplies, hockey stuff and a box of condoms. At this point, I’m feeling super guilty for violating Neo’s privacy when I spot his backpack in the room’s corner. The bag is stuffed to the brim with notebooks, a laptop, a t-shirt and a very official-looking folder. I take a deep breath as I pull the folder out of the bag, opening it to reveal its contents. I’m still processing everything I’ve read when Neo enters the room.

“You’ve got to see what’s going on downstairs, babe.” He freezes when he sees what I’m holding. “Violet?”

The world around me blurs into a watercolor of heartache as I stand to face him, holding the various letters that have just

detonated our love like a grenade. Neo, with his tousled hair the color of a sunrise and eyes like a stormy sea, stands across from me in the cramped confines of his room, a chasm of unspoken words yawning between us.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me,” I whisper, my voice trembling like a leaf in a tempest. “You’re leaving VCU?”

He runs a hand through his hair. “Violet, I—”

“You’re leaving school for the NHL?” My voice rises, a crescendo of disbelief and hurt. “And I had to find out from some letters hidden in your bag?”

Neo looks at me, and there’s a storm brewing in his eyes, a tempest of regret and something unspoken.

“I was going to tell you,” he says, his voice a low rumble, like distant thunder. “But it’s complicated.”

“When were you going to tell me? After you packed your bags?” I scoff, the sound bitter in my ears. “And look, you have so many choices.”

He takes a step closer, his presence overwhelming, like a wave about to crash. “I haven’t made any decisions about where yet.”

“And what about us?” The question hangs in the air, fragile and fraught with unshed tears. “Is fucking me just a pastime until you figure out where you’re going next?”

“Of course not.” His denial comes quick, but it lacks conviction. “You mean everything to me.”

I laugh, but it’s void of humor, a hollow sound echoing off the walls. “Everything? Yet, here we are, with you ready to skate off into your shiny new life, leaving me behind, exactly how Kennedy predicted.”

Neo’s jaw clenches, and he looks away, the muscles in his neck tensing. There’s something more he wants to say to me, but he won’t and it’s only making me angrier. If now is the time to come clean, this is it.

“And what’s this about?” I ask him, showing him another piece of paper. This one is from an orthopedic surgeon.

“It’s nothing. Coach wants me to get my hand checked out.”

“That hand?” I point to the hand that he always clenches. The one that always seems to bother him, especially when he’s stressed.

“Yes, Violet.”

“How did you injure it?” I ask, replaying every conversation I’ve ever had or anything I’ve ever heard about Neo since the moment I stepped foot on campus.

“What?” His face becomes as white as a sheet.

“How did you hurt yourself, Neo? Because I know it’s not from hockey. According to everything I’ve read, you’ve never had a major hockey injury.”

“I was in a car accident,” he finally admits, his voice a mere whisper, a breeze trying to soothe the raging fire within me.

“*The* car accident?” I ask without pity.

He doesn’t respond.

“You told me that your brother was hit by a drunk driver. Were you in the car with him when your brother died?”

A feeling of dread seems to settle in his bones. “How do you know that, Violet?”

The pain this discussion is causing Neo hurts me to my heart, but I need him to be honest with me...for once. I just need to know exactly who I’ve been sleeping with. Who I’ve fallen in love with.

“I just know.”

“Yes, I was in the car.”

“You never mentioned that before.”

“It’s hard to talk about, Violet.”

“But we’ve shared so many other things. I’ve damn near bared my soul to you. You know everything about my mother’s death.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t kill her!” he roars.

There it is.

“So you were driving the car?” I whisper, just like Kennedy suspected.

“Yes, I was driving, but everyone thinks that Jake was. It’s just a matter of time before it comes out, Violet. And I need to go pro before it all vanishes,” he explains desperately, dropping to his knees in front of me.

The utter hell Neo must have been going through all these years is unimaginable. I’ve felt some sort of survivor’s guilt for not getting my mom to the hospital, which I know was unrealistic and wouldn’t have saved her life, anyway. But his guilt must be excruciating.

“I hate this for you, but I just wish you could have told me,” I say regretfully. “You know I hate secrets and now I don’t trust you.”

“Going into the NHL won’t change anything for us, baby. In fact, it just means we can be together more. We can travel. I will give you the world.”

“Did you ever consider what I would want?” The realization of his complete selfishness is like a bucket of ice water, dousing my last embers of hope.

“Violet, please...” He reaches for my thighs, but I step back, an instinctive retreat.

“Don’t,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “Don’t make this harder than it already is.”

There’s a silence then, a void where once there was laughter and love. I can see the struggle in Neo’s eyes, the war between his dream and our reality.

“I thought we were in this together,” I continue, each word laced with a bitterness I never knew I possessed. “But you made your choice, and you did it alone.”

Neo’s shoulders slump, a warrior conceding defeat. “I’m sorry, Violet. I truly am. But there are other people I have to consider.”

I nod, a mechanical motion, my heart feeling like it's been shattered into a million irreparable pieces. "I get it. Hockey is your dream. I'm just a blip on your radar."

"Don't say that! You know that isn't true. I can still have that dream and have you in it. Nothing has to change."

"I'm afraid that's where you're wrong." I lay the folder on his desk and head to the door. "Everything's changed."

"Violet, don't you walk out the door!" He commands.

"We're outside of the love bubble, Neo. We're not in bed. You don't get to tell me what to do. You don't get to say shit to me ever again unless I allow it."

His eyes widen. "What are you saying?"

"This is over."

"Because of this?" His fist lands hard on the tabletop, making a loud sound, and the papers inside the folder fly.

"Because of who we are. We're just too different."

"That's what makes us work."

"It doesn't matter, anyway. You're leaving and I'm not. I came here with my own dreams, Neo. I'm going to finish my degree in the very place where my mom didn't get a chance to. I'm going to get into law school. I'm going to have a fantastic career as a litigator somewhere and in that life, there's no room for me to be the girlfriend of a professional hockey player. Think about it."

"I won't let you go," he unclenches the same fist and uses it to cradle the side of my face. "I love you, Violet. Please don't hurt me like this."

Hurt him?

He just doesn't get it.

I turn my head and kiss the inside of his palm. "There are the way that I want things and then there's the way that things are. Good bye, Neo."

I walk out of his bedroom door and try fighting back the tears as he recklessly calls after me.

“You’re pissing me off, Violet. This shit ain’t funny. Come back here.”

There’s a lot of people in the main room of the house, including Shane, Bass, and Lucia. They watch the both of us with cautious glances, but I don’t respond to Neo at all.

“I’m speaking to you!” He yells wildly. “Shane, don’t let her leave.”

Shane looks at me with pleading eyes, but I ignore them. Neo runs down the stairs, grabbing me by the arm.

“Stop ignoring me.”

The entire team watches Neo lose his shit. I hate how this is probably coming off to everyone. Their captain, their ice hero, looks like a crazy lovesick boy, running after the cold-hearted girl who broke his heart.

“Let go of me,” I say coolly.

“Violet,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Let me go.”

He releases my arm but then points to every player in the room.

“If any one of you lets her leave this house, I will fuck you up.”

“Cariño, ¿qué haces?” Lucia says to him and I don’t know the translation of what she asked, but the intent is pretty clear. She wants him to relax.

“Cap, you need to calm down,” Bass says, like he’s staring down the barrel of a loaded gun. “If Violet wants to go home, then that’s her prerogative. She’s a guest here.”

“Are you okay?” Shane asks, approaching me slowly.

“This is a personal disagreement between the two of us. I just need a chance to explain some things to her,” Neo tells the room. “Everything’s fine.”

“Are you willing to stay a bit longer, Violet?” Shane asks me.

I shake my head no.

Silent tears rolling down my face.

“She doesn’t want to stay, Neo,” Shane tells him. “Why don’t the both of you sleep on it and revisit things in the morning?”

“Please, Violet.” Neo says, pain etched in his voice.

My resolve is slipping.

I have to get out before I change my mind.

So I run.

Right out the front door and down the road toward campus.

Thankfully, no one listened to him and tried to stop me.

But when I turn my head back to look, I can see Shane and Bass forcibly restraining a wildly irate Neo from chasing after me. He’s mouthing the words *I love her*.

And it breaks my heart.

neo

• • •



THE SHARP, metallic tang of blood fills my mouth, a bitter reminder of the fight I just instigated on the ice. My knuckles sting, throbbing in time with the erratic beat of my heart. In the locker room, the air is thick with tension, the usual camaraderie replaced by a palpable sense of unease.

I'm a mess, a far cry from the focused athlete I once was. My reflection in the mirror is a stranger—bloodshot eyes, a bruised cheek, a spirit broken. I used to find solace in the rhythm of the game, the ice a canvas where I painted my future. Now, it's just a frozen wasteland, void of the passion that once fueled me.

“You need to get your head in the game, man,” Jack, one of my teammates, says. His voice is laced with disappointment, a mirror of my own self-loathing.

I try to laugh it off, a hollow sound that echoes off the walls. “Even at my worst, my stats will still obliterate yours.”

“Excuse him, Jack,” Bass interjects, shaking his head. “He's not himself ever since...”

He doesn't need to finish the sentence. We both know what he's referring to; ever since Violet walked out of the house and out of my life. The unspoken name hangs in the air like a ghost, a reminder of what I've lost.

The worst part is she's gone.

Like, actually gone.

The winter break is nearly over, she's still not back, and Kennedy won't tell me where she's gone. She's either at her father's house or back in Philadelphia. Or maybe she went to visit her ex, Elijah. Just the thought is making me sick to my fucking stomach. I pray that's not where she is.

I made a spectacle of myself at the house in front of everyone when she left and I wanted to apologize, but I can't find her. She hasn't posted anything on social media and she won't pick up the phone when I call. Instead of worrying, which I was doing at first, now I'm pissed.

This is just mean and Violet's not usually a mean person.

I turn away, unable to meet Bass's gaze. "I'm fine," I lie, the words tasting like ash in my mouth.

But I'm not fine.

Far from it.

Every night, it's the same routine – a glass of something strong, a futile attempt to drown the memories that haunt me. Violet's laughter, her smile, the way her eyes lit up when she looked at me. It's all gone, replaced by a void that I can't seem to fill.

I thought I could do it. I thought I could protect my parents, chase my dream, and still have her. But what's a dream without her? A hollow victory.

Coach walks in, his expression grave. "Neo, a word?"

I follow him into his office, and he gets right to the point. He doesn't mince words. "Your performance is slipping. You're suddenly drinking now and you're fighting everyone who dares to call you on it... it's not acceptable. This is not the behavior of a captain."

"Maybe I shouldn't be captain."

"Is that what you want?" Coach challenges. "Because I can make that happen."

"Maybe you should."

Coach is right. I've become a liability, a shadow of the player I once was.

"You need to sort yourself out," he continues. "Whether or not you take those pro offers, you can't keep going down this path. You will self destruct and have nothing."

I want to scream, to tell him it's not that simple. That every time I close my eyes, I see her. That every beat of my heart is a reminder of the love I sabotaged with my silence. But I say nothing, the words trapped in my throat like prisoners.

Walking back to the locker room, the weight of my failures feels smothering. I sit down, staring at my hands, the hands that used to hold hers. I barely even notice when Shane approaches.

"Did I ever tell you happened at Christmas?" he casually asks as he sits down on the bench next to me.

"No."

"My mom got engaged."

"Oh, right, I think I heard that."

"You know why I'm not angry about it?"

"Because you love your mom and you want her to be happy?"

"No, man, because it means that I'll be forever connected to Kennedy. I'm free to terrorize her for the rest of our days." He laughs.

"Terrorize?" I scoff. "I think you mean fuck."

"Whoa, man, you need to chill out."

"I mean it, Shane. Both of us have to stop all of this passive aggressive shit or we're going to be alone for the rest of our lives. You're not some ten-year-old boy who wants to terrorize his new baby sister. You are a grown ass man who is bat shit crazy for that girl. Just tell her."

"You asshole. I'm not taking relationship advice from you. You've pushed away your teammates, alienated Coach, but most importantly, you've lost the one person who actually

seemed to love your ass. What could you possibly have to teach me?"

His words hold a cruel sting as he leaves the locker room, the sound of his footsteps fading into silence. I'm alone with my thoughts, a dangerous place to be these days. The echoes of my past mistakes bounce off the walls, taunting me.

The next few practices are just as grueling as the last. I get in a few scuffles with some of my teammates and sulk most of the time. Later, Coach Mike approaches me with a serious look on his face. I'm sure he's about to tell me that he's stripping me of captain and giving it to Shane.

"You still haven't straightened yourself out, I see."

"I just have a lot on my mind, Coach."

"Which is why I hate to bring this up, but President Harmon wants a meeting with you today."

I've had very little interactions with the university's charismatic president since I've been a student here. He tends to only show up to hockey games where there's a press opportunity. The fact that he wants to see me, though, can only mean one thing. He wants to give his pitch for me staying at VCU and finishing my degree, which would also mean helping the team win a championship that he so desperately wants.

Championships mean more dollars to the university. Winning attracts money. It's that simple. And I understand all of that, but I don't want to get into it with him. I've already made my decision. A decision that cost me the one person I care about the most in this world. I'm leaving and there's nothing he can say to change my mind. It would be a waste of time for the both of us.

"Do I have to go?" I ask Coach, already dreading the answer.

“It would be in your best interest to take the meeting, hear what he has to say, and then tell him what he wants to hear. Tell him you’ll give what he said some serious thought,” he advises.

“Right.”

“And then come to your own decision, like we discussed.”

“I can do that,” I say, knowing full well that the decision has been made.

“Let me know how it goes, son.”

neo

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AFTER A HOT SHOWER and my post workout smoothie, I stride into President Harmon’s office, my heart pounding a fierce rhythm against my ribcage. The room is posh, lined with mahogany bookshelves and adorned with prestigious awards. President Harmon, a stocky man with a stern face, sits behind his oversized desk, his eyes meeting mine with an unnerving intensity.

“Neo, have a seat,” he says, gesturing to the chair across from him.

I sit down, my mind racing. This meeting, out of the blue, has me on edge. He steeple his fingers, eyeing me like a chess player contemplating his next move.

“Just came from practice?” he asks, eyeing the state of my wet hair.

“Yes, sir. Getting ready for the big game.”

I see a moment of perplexity cross the president’s face; he does not know just how important this next game is for us.

“It’s with the Hawks,” I explain. “They are a tough Division 1 team with an enormous fan base. If we beat them, then the conversation changes about our chances in the finals.”

“Ah, yes, I’ll be tuning into that one. I can’t come because it’s my weekend with the kids.” His tone changes to a serious one. “So what I wanted to talk to you today about is your future. Neo, you’re aware of how important you are to our university, don’t you?”

I nod. “Yes, sir, I understand my role on the team.”

He leans forward, his gaze sharp. “Good. Then you’ll also understand why your decision to stay or go pro is of significant concern to me and the board of trustees of the university. We care about your future and want you to succeed.”

The air in the room thickens, and I can already sense he wants me to declare that I’m staying another year at VCU.

“Thank you for the concern, sir, but I have discussed the offers with my parents and I’m still weighing my options,” I reply cautiously.

President Harmon’s expression hardens. “Let me be frank, Neo. We recruited you when a lot of schools wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole. You were an average player then, but you’ve become a dominant player here at VCU. We need you here. You staying could be the key to us winning the national championship. And we could change a lot more kids’ lives if we win. Think of the number of hockey scholarships we could give if we had more incoming dollars to the program.”

I feel a surge of pride that he desperately wants me to stay but also a flicker of resistance because of how he framed it—as if he’s done me a favor and now I owe them one.

“I appreciate that, sir, but my future—”

He cuts me off, his voice colder. “Your future, Neo, is not just about you. It’s about this university, the team, and perhaps other people you haven’t considered.”

My brow furrows. “I’m not sure I follow.”

He leans back, a knowing look crossing his face. “Violet, the girl you’ve been seeing. She’s been through a lot, hasn’t she? I’m not sure if you kids even talk about things like this, but did you know she has a full ride to this university? Her scholarship is quite generous, funded by alumni donors who have... expectations.”

A chill runs down my spine.

“What are you saying?”

“If you choose to leave early for the NHL,” he continues, his tone laced with unspoken threats, “it might be... difficult to justify continuing her scholarship, given the circumstances.”

Anger flares within me. “You’re threatening to take away Violet’s scholarship because of my career decision?”

“Hey, it’s not something I want to do.” He rolls back in his chair, resting clasped hands on his rotund stomach. “I knew Violet’s parents when they were students at this university. Her mother had a promising future before she quit school. I don’t want that to happen to Violet. So this is not a threat, Neo. It’s reality. Decisions have consequences. Yours could have significant ones for Violet.”

I clench my fists, struggling to keep my composure. “That’s not fair to her. She’s earned that scholarship.”

President Harmon shrugs, an air of indifference surrounding him. “I wouldn’t say she earned it. The semester’s just about to start, so it’s too soon to say whether or not she deserves the money, but life isn’t always about what’s fair and who deserves what, is it?”

Why is this fucker talking so cryptically?

“I don’t understand what you’re implying. Just say what you mean, President Harmon.”

“I gave Violet that scholarship because of who she knows, but as quickly as it was given, it can be taken away. If I’m going to be completely honest, there are other students who deserve the scholarship more than her.”

“Can you even do that?”

“It’s a presidential scholarship. It’s at my discretion to whom it’s given and how it’s applied.”

“This is some bullshit,” I say, angry at the threat he’s made to Violet’s future, but he doesn’t falter.

“Think about the team, the university, and about Violet. We’re all part of a bigger picture, Neo. Your decision affects more than just your career. If you stay, she stays. Don’t be selfish, son.”

“I’m not your son.” I stand up, my body tense with anger and conflict. “I’ll make my decision based on what’s best for me and for those I care about, not because of any threats you make.”

President Harmon watches me, unflinching. “I hope you make the right choice, Neo. For everyone’s sake.”

I walk out of President Harmon’s office, my mind spinning with anger and confusion. How dare he use Violet’s future as leverage to manipulate me into staying at this university? But fuck, if he actually calls my bluff and pulls her money, this could destroy her.

I head straight to the ice house and see some of my teammates getting ready to eat and play some video games. They all look up as I enter, sensing my rage. Bass walks over to me with a questioning look on his face.

“Everything all right, Cap?”

“I just had a chat with President Harmon.”

“What the hell for?”

“I’ve been keeping some things from y’all,” I say loud enough for everyone’s benefit. “I got three offers to leave school and go pro with Vegas, Jersey and Toronto.”

“Oh, shit!” a voice says.

“That’s what’s up,” someone else chimes in.

“But Harmon threatened to take away Violet’s scholarship if I do it,” I seethe.

“Violet?” Someone rumbles. “Why is he fucking with her?”

“That’s not right!” Jack protests.

“I can’t believe he would use her like that,” Bass says bitterly. “Does Violet know?”

“He just threatened me. She doesn’t know.”

And she’ll never know.

Violet already doubts herself so much because of her learning challenges. I'm afraid she'd just use what he said to confirm the doubts she already has about herself.

"Then why was she so pissed the other night at the house?"

"She found the offer letters in my room before I could tell her about them."

"Oh." A few of them mutter. "Yeah, my girl would be pissed too."

"She thinks I was just going to up and leave her," I say. "Can you believe that?"

"And were you?" Shane interjects, as he descends from the second floor.

"My father was pushing me to take an offer. Now the president is pushing me to do something else. I just needed some room to figure things out."

"And Violet just wanted you to let her in, so now you've got all the room in the world you want," Shane quips.

"Where is she, Shane?" I point accusingly at him. "I know you know."

"Tell him, Shane," some others urge. "Stop gate keeping, man."

"Seriously, I don't know," Shane responds earnestly. "Kennedy and I are barely speaking."

"I know." Deuce steps forward, raising his hand tentatively.

"Tell me!" I plead.

"She'll be back in town Thursday."

"How do you know for sure?" Bass asks him.

"I checked the trash outside, and she happened to print her travel itinerary."

"Good work, grunt!" I applaud Deuce.

“Todos os vais al inferno,” Lucia says, eavesdropping as she walks upstairs.

“What did she say?” Bass looks at me.

“That we’re all going to hell.”

violet

. . .



“I SEASONED some wings and threw them in the air fryer if you’re hungry. They should be ready soon. How was your time at Steven’s?” Kennedy asks sounding nicer than usual. She must have missed me.

“It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. In fact, if I had to describe the visit in one word, I would say it was helpful.”

“Helpful? Well, that sounds promising. How so?”

“My father had this old photo album and inside were all these pictures of my mom from the 90s. Tons of pictures that I’d never seen before. I even recognized some of the backgrounds of the photos as locations on campus like at her dorm. He said that he’d taken most of them.”

“Wow, that doesn’t sound like your mom was just some random girl he met on campus and got pregnant then.”

“I know, right? I think my father cared about her a lot more than I realized, which was nice to learn. And the pictures were just so cool. Instead of the mom I remember, it showed me that she used to be this younger version of that woman. The happiness in her eyes that I saw, I don’t know, it gave me some peace. It reminded me that she wasn’t always just a mom.”

“I love that.”

“Yeah, so I guess I’m saying the photo book was helpful because it gave me more of a connection to her and started a conversation between us about their time here at VCU, their relationship, and getting pregnant with me.”

“Did he talk about why he basically disappeared from her life?”

“He admitted he was immature and scared when she told him she was pregnant, and when she gave him an out, he took it.”

“Well, at least he was honest.”

“His truth doesn’t make me feel any better about it, but at least we’re having the conversations and not pretending that he’s super dad.”

“Would he be willing to make you copies of the pictures so you can replicate the book for yourself?”

“That’s the thing. He gave me the book. He said it was only right that I should have it, but I’ve left it at his house for safekeeping...I mean, our house.”

“Nice.”

“And how were things here?” I ask, bringing up the elephant in the room.

“Let me grab the wings and I’ll catch you up on things.”

Kennedy and I are sprawled on the couch in our apartment, with greasy chicken fingers, and the TV tuned to a local sports channel.

“There’s a news conference you need to watch,” she tells me.

“About what?”

“Neo is at the center of it.”

My heart races with a mix of excitement and anxiety. I haven’t seen Neo in weeks since I walked out on him, and I miss him so much it hurts, but do I really want to listen to him announce to the world that he’s going pro? The very thing that broke us apart.

“Here it comes,” Kennedy says, her eyes glued to the screen. “This is huge, Violet. Pay attention.”

Neo looks calm and composed as he steps up to the microphone.

“He looks good,” I whisper to myself, part of me secretly hoping that he’s lost sleep just like I have since we’ve been apart, but he looks just as perfect as always.

There’s a confident smile on his face, but I can see the nerves in his eyes. He clears his throat and begins.

“I want to thank everyone for being here today. After careful reflection and discussions with my family, I’ve made a decision about my future in the sport I love. I am pleased to announce that I’ve committed to playing professional hockey with the New Jersey Devils.”

“Yay!” Kennedy gives a quick hurray. “It isn’t the Flyers, but it’s damn close.”

My breath catches in my throat.

It’s done.

He’s going to play for the New Jersey Devils.

He’s leaving.

“But,” he continues, and I lean in closer, “I’ve decided to stay at Valencia City University for another year, to complete my degree and play another season with my team. We have a championship to win for the school, our fans, and for Coach Mike and Coach Dixon. Go Suns!”

“Woo hoo!” Kennedy cheers loudly at the screen this time. “Okay, Cap!”

I gasp, my eyes widening. I don’t understand. He’s staying another year. He’s actually staying. But how?

“How can he play for The Devils and stay in school?” I ask Kennedy. “I’m confused.”

“The Devils will hold his place on the team while he finishes college, kind of like when you commit to an early decision for a university.”

“Oh, okay.”

“It’s a really sweet deal, Violet. The Devils must really want him.”

“I wonder why he picked New Jersey? He had other offers, you know.”

“I have my theories.”

“Like what? Is Jersey a good team?”

Kennedy turns to me, her expression serious. “Violet, there’s something you should know.”

I tear my eyes away from the screen. “What?”

“I may have misjudged our hockey captain a little.”

“What makes you say that?”

“His best friend basically ripped me a new asshole, and I had to accept that perhaps I’ve made some incorrect assumptions.”

Shane.

“So, what did you learn?”

“His brother’s death was a tragic accident that Neo’s parents made him lie about. The shit is pretty twisted.”

“I already know about that, Kennedy,” I say, not wanting to discuss the sensitive details about Jake’s death.

“Right, but did you know that his father has been pressuring him to take a pro deal and using the details around Jake’s death to justify it?”

“I don’t follow.”

“Neo’s jerk of a dad blames him for the accident, even though I read the police report and know the truth. It’s right there in black and white. The cops tested the blood of both brothers. Jake was legally impaired, and Neo’s blood alcohol was well below the legal limit. He wasn’t drunk. It was bad weather, and the car hydroplaned on a dark highway. He didn’t have to lie. He could have just told the truth and then his father wouldn’t have this toxic hold on him.”

“Holy crap, I didn’t know any of this.”

“Can you imagine the pressure he was under, having a parent blame him for the death of his brother and using it to basically run his life?”

God, no, I can't.

“And there's more.” She hesitates, then says, “Just when Neo was ready to take a deal to protect the big lie the university called. President Harmon threatened to revoke your scholarship if he didn't stay and play for another year.”

“Wait, what did you say?” I feel like I've been punched in the gut. “Are you saying that he just made that announcement because President Harmon blackmailed him?”

Kennedy reaches out, squeezing my hand. “What I think is that Neo found a way to protect everyone he loves, including you.”

Anger and admiration war within me. I had no idea how much pressure Neo's been under this entire time. I've always assumed he walked this easy path and all he had to worry about was goals and assists, but I was wrong. And now I find out that my father's so-called friend is using me as leverage for some damn championship?

I turn back to the TV, where Neo is answering questions with his usual charm and grace. “I can't believe him.”

Kennedy nods, her voice firm. “He's a hockey god with a heart and he loves you, Violet. More than anything. He'd do anything for you. I see that now and I hope you do, too.”

Tears sting my eyes as I watch him, my heart swelling with love and adoration. Neo, my grumpy, fiercely protective hockey star, putting everyone he loves (including me) first.

“He's amazing,” I whisper, more to myself than to Kennedy.

She wraps an arm around my shoulders. “He really is. And he's all yours if you still want him.”

As the news conference ends and the screen fades to black, I'm left with a whirlwind of emotions. Pride, love, anger,

gratitude. Neo has made his choice, a choice that speaks volumes about who he is and what he values.

I stand up, determined. “I need to see him. I need to tell him... that I was wrong.”

“I’ll call the Uber, girl.” Kennedy nods. “The press conference was in the athletic building, so he’s either on his way to the rink or the house.”

I grab my tote bag and head for the door, my steps quick and purposeful. Neo has shown me, in the most profound way, how deep his love runs for everyone he cares about.

And now, it’s my turn.

As I rush to the ice house, my heart is pounding, every beat a mix of love, gratitude, and determination. There are a few players inside, but I don’t really know any of these guys by name. A tall guy with brown skin and jet black hair I’ve definitely seen before approaches me once he notices me looking around the main room like a lost puppy.

“Violet?”

“Yes, hi.”

“What’s up, I’m Deuce.”

“Nice to meet you. I was wondering if Neo was back yet?”

“You saw him on television?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Then he’s probably at the rink.”

“Is the team practicing today?” I ask him.

“Not today,” he tells me. “Everyone’s too excited about our boy going pro, but I guarantee you that he’ll be there.”

“Okay, thanks.” I study him a little closer. “Have we met before?”

“Probably here at the house,” he answers sheepishly. “ I don’t live here, but I’m always dropping by to hang out with the guys.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Um, do you need a ride to the rink or anything?”

“No, I could use the walk. Thanks though.”

It’s still bright out and the rink is close enough for me to walk from the house, so I head on foot in that direction.

Neo is on the ice, practicing alone, the sound of his skates cutting through the silence. He hasn’t seen me yet, and for a moment, I just stand there, watching him. He’s so focused, so in his element, and so utterly beautiful to me.

“Cap!” I call out, my voice echoing in the empty arena.

He stops, turning toward me, surprise etched on his face. Slowly, he skates over to where I’m standing by the barrier.

“Violet? What are you doing here?” he asks, a hint of worry in his eyes. “It’s Wednesday.”

“What do you have against Wednesdays?” I say playfully.

“You’re supposed to be coming home tomorrow.”

“And why would you think that?” I ask, wondering if Kennedy told him the wrong day of my return to respect my wishes of my whereabouts not being shared.

“I guess I got the wrong intel,” he admits. “I’ve had eyes on you since we broke up. Just because you hate me doesn’t mean I’ve stopped loving you, Violet.”

“You know I could never hate you, Neo.” I take a deep breath, gathering my courage. “Just like I know that you’re not the self centered secret keeper that I thought you were.”

“Violet, I should of–”

“Quiet,” I shush him. “I know, Neo. I know about President Harmon’s threats to take my scholarship away. Kennedy told me everything.”

His expression changes, guilt and concern mingling together. “Violet, I... I didn’t want you to find out like this.”

I lean over the barrier, closing the distance between us. “I’m sorry you had to deal with all of this alone. Tell me what happened.”

“When Coach first told me about the NHL offers, I was pumped. It was everything I had been working towards, but then I thought about you. About us. We were just getting started, and I never felt like this before. I wasn’t ready to drop a bomb on it all. But then there’s my dad and everything that happened with Jake. I had to protect my parents because of all they did to protect me. That’s why I procrastinated telling you.” He looks down, his hands gripping the hockey stick tightly. “But when the president came for me, damn near threatening me to stay, I couldn’t let them take your scholarship away. Not because of me. All they want is another year from me and I could give them that. I could give them anything if it meant not hurting you. Luckily, the Devils were able to give me the best of both worlds.”

I reach out, touching his cheek, making him look at me. “Neo, you are the most selfless, caring, incredible person I’ve ever met, and I... I love you. I love you more than I thought possible. But guess what? I don’t even want their stinky ass scholarship anymore. I’ll figure out another way to pay for school. That’s what student loans are for.”

His eyes meet mine, raw and open. “I’ve missed you, Grinch. This was some really mean shit you did, locking me out like this.”

He pulls me into his arms, and I climb over the barrier, my feet landing on the cold ice. His embrace is warm and strong, a safe haven in the midst of chaos.

“I should have stayed and talked things through. I’m sorry. I’ll never do it again. ”

“You better not.”

I nod, resting my head against his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart.

“With everyone pulling you in ten different directions, has anyone bothered to ask you what you want, Neo? Because whatever it is, I’m behind you a hundred percent.”

“That was part of my problem, I was just too worried about everyone else’s opinions. But what I know for sure is that I love hockey and I love you, so I made the decision on my own to take the deal with the Devils because they were the only ones willing to wait for me. Plus, the home stadium is close to Philly in case you want to go to law school back home.”

“You’re making plans that factor me in? We were barely speaking to each other a day ago.”

“I’ve figured out a way to get everything I ever wanted and you’re part of that, baby. Any decisions I make from this moment forward will always take your happiness into consideration. More than hockey, more than anything, you’re my heart, and I promise, Violet, from now on, we’ll face everything together. No more secrets, no more sacrifices in the dark. Just you and me, against the world. I knew you’d come back to me. I just had to wait.”

As we stand there, holding each other on the ice, I know that this is just the beginning. I raise my arms and wrap them around Neo’s neck to pull him closer. The kiss is tentative and tender, like the kind you have on a first date. He drops his hockey stick on the ice and lifts me up by my thighs, wrapping them around his waist.

“Let’s skate together,” Neo says, his voice soft.

With my body wrapped around his, we glide across the ice, the world fading away until it’s just us, our love, and the promise of a future filled with endless possibilities.

It’s magical.

violet

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WE DRIVE through the quiet streets of Neo’s Ohio hometown, remnants of Christmas past still on people’s lawns and front doors. Neo’s hand is warm in mine, his grip tight, as if he’s drawing strength from our connection. I can sense his mixed emotions: excitement, nostalgia, and a hint of sadness.

“There’s my old high school, Madison High,” he points out, a small smile playing on his lips. “And that’s the diner where I worked one summer. Worst job ever because I suck at customer service, but am great at milkshakes.”

“Really, you? Sucking at customer service?” I tease, squeezing his hand and smiling at his trip down memory lane. “It’s beautiful here, Neo. There are parts of it that remind me of home.”

He nods, his eyes distant for a moment. “Yeah, it’s a good place to grow up. Just... a lot of memories, you know?”

We pull up to a cozy-looking brick house with a well-tended greenery. I can imagine that in the spring and summer months, it’s probably even prettier when everything is in bloom. A statuesque woman with fair coloring and a sleek brown ponytail, who must be Neo’s mother, is waiting on the enclosed porch, her face lighting up as we approach.

“Neo!” she exclaims, her arms open wide. He rushes into her embrace, and I can see the tension leaving his body. He’s a mama’s boy. I should have known.

“Mami,” he says, his voice full of warmth.

She turns to me; her smile was just as welcoming. “And you must be Violet. I’ve heard so much about you.” She pulls me into a hug, and I feel instantly at home.

“I hope all good things.”

“What’s not good about a young woman studying to be a lawyer to save the world?”

Inside, the house is filled with the mouthwatering aroma of garlic, onion and adobe seasoning. Neo pulls me to his side, whispering. “Ooh, she’s pulling out the big guns to impress you. Mom doesn’t really cook like this anymore.”

“Shh,” I quiet him. “You’re making me nervous.”

Neo’s mom busies herself in the kitchen, and I offer to help, but she waves me off with a laugh. “You’re a guest, Violet. Sit, relax. Dinner will be ready soon.”

Neo takes me on a quick tour of the house, showing me pictures and sharing memories. There’s a warmth here, a sense of love and family, that makes me feel even closer to him. I’m moved by the picture of Jake on the wall by the staircase. He’s wearing a cap and gown and looks so much like Neo it’s eerie. Same crooked smile. Same full head of hair, albeit darker than his. And same blue eyes.

“He took these pictures the summer after junior year and never even got the chance to actually wear this cap and gown,” Neo explains as I solemnly listen.

Dinner is a feast of arroz con gandules, pernil, and plátanos. One of Neo’s favorites. It turns out to be one of the best meals I’ve ever had in my life and I look forward to the day when his mom and I are close enough that she can show me how to cook it.

We eat and talk, and Ms. Major’s stories about Neo’s childhood make me laugh until my sides hurt. After dinner, Neo grows quiet, and I know it’s time to make our planned visit to Jake’s grave. Neo’s mom drives us to a well-maintained cemetery, which is about twenty minutes away at sunset in silence, each lost in our thoughts.

“I’m going to go speak to him first,” Neo tells us both and so the two of us hang back.

“I see he still refuses to drive,” his mom says to me.

“He doesn’t trust Uber drivers either. He won’t get in a car unless he knows the person and is sure they haven’t been drinking.”

“He can’t avoid driving forever.” I see a worried expression cross her face. “He hasn’t been behind the wheel since Jake died. It’s not healthy.”

“I agree, Ms. Major, but we need to give him more time. He’s been through something so traumatic. It must be scary to think about getting behind the wheel again.”

“Violet,” her head looks down. “You know that what happened with the boys was an accident, right?”

“Yes, ma’m, I know.”

“You must think I’m a horrible mother. What I did.”

“No, ma’m, not at all. You were protecting your child.”

“Neo tells me that he might have to have surgery on his hand?”

“Yes, to correct some nerve damage.”

“I’m hoping he’ll come home for it. He can rest here.”

“I’m sure the athletic department’s medical team will want to keep a close eye on him. That might be hard from Valencia City.”

“I guess that’s a good point.”

We stand in an awkward silence and watch as Neo approaches us.

“You ready to meet, Jake?” He reaches his hand out for mine.

“I’m ready.”

“Ma?”

“Let’s introduce them,” she concurs, her lips slightly quivering.

At the grave, Neo kneels, placing the colorful bouquet of roses and snapdragons his mother brought gently on the well-tended plot. “Hey, Jake,” he whispers. “I want you to meet Violet. She’s amazing. You would have made her laugh so hard with your snarky one-liners, and then I would of had to punch you in the mouth.”

Tears prick my eyes as I watch him talk to his brother, sharing news and memories of his escapades on the ice. It’s a side of Neo I’ve never seen, raw and vulnerable. When he’s finished, it’s our turn to step away so that Neo’s mom can have her private time with Jake.

“Does your father visit here too?” I ask. He’s the last piece of Neo’s family puzzle. The man I’ve seen pictures of on social media but never in person. It would be interesting to meet the man who wields so much dominance over this family.

“He doesn’t believe in visiting graves. If it were up to him, Jake would have been cremated and his ashes spread over the Scioto River. But even though we weren’t raised to be hugely religious, my mom is Catholic, and wanted him to have a proper burial. So here he is. I don’t mind it. I like that I have somewhere to visit and hope that he can hear me.”

I slide my arm around Neo’s.

“I’m sure he can.”

“And what about you, baby? How are you coping?”

“I’m still processing things. I’m not ready for gravesite visits.”

Neo nods his head in understanding. “Remember what I told you. You’ll get there, Grinch.”

When we return to the house and settle in the kitchen for dessert, Ms. Major takes Neo’s hands in hers, her eyes full of emotion. “I’m so glad you came home to visit and I’m super proud of the hard decisions you’ve made lately. You’re going to do big things in this world, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Mami.”

“Violet, Jake would have loved you,” she says softly. “Thank you for being a soft place for my boy to land. I can see it in your eyes and his, in the way you are together. You two are going to make it.”

Neo looks at me, his eyes filled with emotion. “I know, Mami. I know.”

That night, as we lie in bed in the guest room, Neo pulls me close. “Thank you for being here, for being part of this,” he whispers.

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” I reply, my heart full. “But you know you can’t stay in here, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

“We are in your childhood home. You have a bedroom right down that hall.”

“And you think I’m going to sleep in it when your sweet, luscious ass is twelve feet away?”

He rubs my butt with the palm of his hand, attempting to slide a few of his fingers underneath the waistband of my jeans.

“Your mother is here!” I protest, pushing him away.

“Should I tell you about the time my mom caught me with the girl down the street when I was sixteen?”

“No, you shouldn’t.” I roll my eyes.

“She knows I have sex, Violet.” He laughs hysterically.

“Not with me she doesn’t.”

“I just want to hold you, baby,” he says in a voice as if he’s actually in pain.

“Oh, stop it.” I mock. “I’m not doing anything in here, including snuggling with you behind a closed door.”

“Damn, Grinch, you’re getting on my nerves with this whole prude act.”

“Am I? Then I’m doing my job well.”

“Okay, I give in. Let’s go to the family room, cuddle on the sofa and find something to watch on Netflix. Can we at least do that?”

I think about it for a moment and figure that should be safe enough. “Sure, I’m fine with that.”

“Put on your sleep sweats so you can get comfortable.”

“Neo,” I warn.

“No funny business. I swear. I just want you to relax. I’ve never seen you this uptight. It’s cute how you want to impress my mom.”

“Fine,” I push him out the door. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

After an hour of us watching a movie I couldn’t remember the name of if you paid me, we fall asleep on the couch in each other’s arms, the events of the day weaving us even closer together.

It was more than just a visit; it’s a sharing of souls, a merging of past and present. And when my mother visits me for the first time since she died with a peaceful smile in my dreams, I know with absolute certainty that this is where I’m supposed to be.

epilogue

. . .



One Year Later

T-Mobile Arena

Violet

THE LARGE LAS VEGAS arena roars to life as I watch Neo skate onto the ice, now a star in the NHL, living out the dream he's always chased. The energy is electric, and here I am in the VIP box, his number one fan, draped in one of his red and black Devils jerseys, which still carries his intoxicating scent.

“Cap is amazing!” Kennedy, my ever-enthusiastic roomy, yells over the crowd's roar. Her eyes are alight with excitement. “Look at him go! I swear he's faster than he was in the Suns' championship win last year.”

Pride swells in my chest as I watch Neo, graceful and powerful on the ice. “He's been in the weight room religiously,” I say, a wide grin plastered on my face, as he weaves through the opposition and scores with an effortless flick. “He calls me from there sometimes and makes me watch him work out.”

“Oh brother,” Kennedy pretends to stick a finger down her throat. “You don't need to share everything with me.”

The crowd erupts as the puck hits the net, and I'm on my feet, clapping and cheering. Neo looks up, finds me in the crowd, and offers me a smile that makes my heart flutter.

After the first period ends, the kiss cam lands on us. I blush as the crowd erupts in cheers, and before I know what's happening, Neo is clambering over the boards and jogging towards me. He reaches our box, pulls me into his arms, and plants a kiss that's so movie-star perfect the crowd goes wild.

"You're such a show-off," I whisper when he pulls back, his eyes gleaming with that playful charm.

"I have to give the fans what they want, Grinch," he says, and then he's off, back to the locker room with the rest of the team.

"He marked you in college and now he's marked you on national television. Nothing's changed, I see," Kennedy chuckles. "He seems happy, though."

"He does, right?"

"Imagine how he'll act once you graduate and join him out east."

"That's in almost two and a half years, though."

"Which is your ridiculous choice. Neo makes an obscene amount of money, which he could literally use to buy you a degree or, at the very least, pay for you to transfer and go to school out there. I heard Villanova has a great pre law program that feeds right into their law school."

"You sound a lot like him. Are you trying to kick me out of your place?"

"Never!" She playfully bumps into my shoulder. "It's just that you glow whenever you are in the hockey god's presence and it's my job as your roommate and your friend to do everything in my power to help you keep it. The glow looks good on you, girl."

"You know I never thanked you for opening up your home to me when I needed a place to stay, and pulling me kicking and screaming into the rink that first night. My head was jumbled up into a million pieces and you help me put myself together again."

“Ugh, stop getting so sentimental. We’re at a freakin’ hockey game.”

“I know you hate it, but I couldn’t let any more time go by without me finally saying thank you.”

“Well, you’re very welcome.”

Uncomfortable with the direction of this conversation, Kennedy distracts herself by applying a fresh coat of lip gloss, so I think it’s best to lighten the mood.

“It’s a shame your stepbrother couldn’t join us tonight.”

She whips her head to the right angrily, facing me.

“That’s not funny, Violet.”

“I’m just saying,” I shrug, trying my best not to snort when I laugh. “Neo and the Devils come to Vegas to play the local team and Shane couldn’t make it?”

“You know full well that Shane and Bass have their own game to get ready for.”

“Aren’t the wedding plans in full swing? Are you and Shane standing up for the bride and groom?”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“You’ve been saying that for a year and they’re still engaged, Kennedy.”

“Hey, I don’t want to talk about it. All you should be focused on is hooking me up with one of Neo’s teammates. What about that number twelve? You think he likes tiny girls like me?”

I just shake my head at that, knowing full well that Neo would never let that go down, not while Shane is still breathing.

“Ooh, second period’s starting.” I clap. “Pay attention, Kennedy,” I laugh, throwing back the words she’s often said to me.

The game ends with a Devils’ victory, and we make our way down to the players’ area, greeted with cheers and

congratulations. Neo's teammates have become like a new family to him, embracing him as one of their own. It's a relief to see that he was able to move from his super close VCU family to another and still find his footing. I've met some of the players on the team, but Neo introduces me again to some of his teammates.

"Eddie, Vlad, this is my girlfriend Violet and her friend Kennedy."

"Hi ladies! Love to meet new Devils fans."

"Hello to you too," Kennedy flirts.

"Nice to meet you," I say.

As the arena empties, Neo takes my hand, leading me out into the night air and we walk. Kennedy says her goodbyes and ends up taking an Uber to meet someone for pizza. I think Ray.

"Did you enjoy the game?" He smiles.

"You know I did. How's your hand feeling?"

"It's good, baby."

"Are you still going to have the surgery during the off season?"

"Well, I wanted to talk to you about that."

"Neo Major, I promised your mother that I wouldn't let you chicken out again over this surgery."

"I have my reasons for waiting longer. Mami will understand."

"I can't imagine what they are."

He looks at me, his eyes full of love and something else, something deeper. "Let me explain," he says.

I'm surprised when we arrive at the parking lot the players use and Neo pulls out a key fob, pressing the button on it to unlock a nearby smokey gray Mercedes Benz truck.

"What the hell, Neo? You bought a Benz?"

“Not only that,” he beams. “But I’m going to drive us to our hotel.”

“Now just wait a ding dang minute. You’ve been driving *and* you bought a car? What part of I don’t like secrets don’t you understand?”

“But these are positive secrets.”

He’s right.

But I still just can’t shake the feeling that when someone keeps something from me, the bottom is going to drop out from under me soon.

Neo’s car is plush, and it drives like a dream down the Vegas strip. I’m impressed with how Neo handles the truck, not sensing any nervousness on his part at all. In fact, he looks sexy as hell.

When we arrive at the massive five-star hotel where the team is staying, Neo pulls directly up in front so that the valet service can take over from there.

“Welcome back, Mr. Major,” the attendant greets him. “Congratulations on the win.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you leaving again, or should I park it for the night?”

“Hold it up front. We may decide to go out in a few hours. I’m not sure.”

Neo gives the man a hefty tip and we head inside. A hotel bellhop approaches with a cart and offers to take Neo’s gear and the small overnight tote I packed up to the room. Neo goes to the front desk and has a brief conversation with a woman who hands Neo several key cards.

“Ready?” he asks, his smile widening.

“For what?” I ask suspiciously. “Do you have another surprise up your sleeve?”

“Maybe.” He winks.

We head to the second floor instead of the fifteenth where he said our room was and as soon as the elevator doors open, I'm bombarded by the sudden sounds of soft romantic music in a lounge covered with bouquets of flowers.

"Dance with me," he says, extending his hand.

It feels like it's been forever since I've been in Neo's arms like this. We knew his hockey schedule would be brutal once he went pro, but I didn't realize just how much of a difference it would mean to our relationship.

We slowly dance together, our movements in perfect sync. It's magical, the kind of moment you read about in fairy tales. As the song nears its end, Neo stops, his gaze intensifying. He reaches into his pocket and, to my utter shock (again), gets down on one knee, right there in the middle of the room.

"Violet," he starts, his voice steady but full of emotion. "From the moment I first saw you, I knew you were the most fascinating and kindest soul I'd ever meet. I know we are still young and life is unpredictable, but I can't imagine living one more day without you. Will you marry me?"

Tears blur my vision as I nod, overwhelmed by love and joy. This was the last thing I was expecting, but the best secret he could have kept from me ever.

"Yes, Neo," I cry. "There is no place I would rather be than with you for the rest of my life."

He slips the clearest princess cut diamond ring onto my finger, stands, and we embrace, the world fading away until it's just us, our love, and the promise of a future together. It's more than just a proposal; it's the beginning of our forever

Neo wraps his arms underneath my butt, lifting me off the ground, his laughter mixing with mine. "I love you, Violet," he says, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

"And I love you," I reply, feeling a surge of happiness so intense it's almost overwhelming.

As we finally break our embrace, Neo sends a quick text on his phone and suddenly staff members dressed in all black

with white aprons enter the space, bringing various hot foods and placing them on a buffet table.

“What’s going on?” I ask, wiping the wetness from my cheeks.

“We’re going to have dinner with a few of our friends to celebrate,” he grins. “If you don’t mind.”

Without warning, Kennedy and the entire Valencia Suns hockey team walk into the room, their congratulations and hugs adding to the warmth of the moment. The quiet hotel lounge transforms into a spontaneous celebration, with everyone sharing in our happiness.

“We’re getting married this summer!” Neo announces jovially during a toast. “Clear your calendars!”

After a few hours of good food and laughter, Neo and I find ourselves alone in our room upstairs. The lights are dim, casting a soft glow over us. He takes my hand and pulls me slowly onto the bed, straddling him.

“You know, I had this entire speech planned for when I proposed,” he confesses with a sheepish grin. “But when I saw you, and when I held you, all the words just disappeared.”

I run my hands playfully through his hair, loving how my new diamond sparkles in between the golden strands. “You did just fine. It was perfect.”

“This is just the beginning, Violet. There’s so much more ahead for us. I want to give you the world.”

“I can’t wait for every moment, Neo,” I say, feeling a profound sense of contentment.

Our bodies press together, feeling the rise and fall of each other’s chests as we breathe. As our hands roam over each other’s skin, reveling in the warmth and softness, our lips meet, and I feel the softness of Neo’s skin against mine, his hand gently caressing my cheek as we deepen the kiss. His hand cups the back of my neck, his thumb gently caressing my skin. I run my fingers along the nape of his neck, feeling the soft hair against my fingertips.

He pulls the hockey jersey I'm wearing up and over my head, and proceeds to peel off all the rest of my layers of clothes. He turns and lays me gently on the bed, unzipping my jeans and pulling them down, kissing every inch of my inner thighs along the way.

His seduction of me isn't rushed or ravenous like it can often be between us, but reverent. He handles my body as if it's a fragile work of art, worshiping every single inch of my hills and valleys.

I mirror back the same devoted treatment of his incredible body. Caressing every defined hill and hard angle of all that his hard work in the gym has created. I love watching him groan in pleasure as I gently trace the intricate mane of his beastly lion tattoo with my tongue.

We end up in one of my favorite positions when we're making love, reverse cowgirl, especially now that I'm on birth control and I can feel him completely inside of me without a barrier of latex between us.

He makes me watch ourselves in the long mirror affixed on the wall opposite our bed as we lose ourselves in the bliss of our union.

What I see reflected is not just sexy, but special.

It's love.

And in the words of my mother, I know for sure that we're going to be: *one of the lucky ones.*

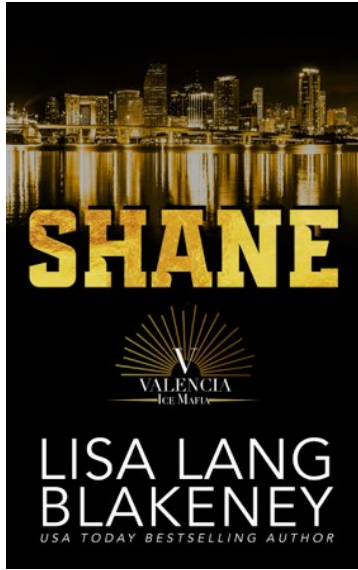


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acknowledgments



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about the author



Lisa Lang Blakeney is a USA Today Bestselling author of contemporary romance sold in more than 28 countries. Worried that her fellow PTO moms might disapprove, she wrote and published her steamy debut novel [Masterson](#) under a different title and pen name in August of 2015.

Thanks to strong reader support of her alpha male character, Roman Masterson, she was encouraged to continue with the series and published the entire Masterson Trilogy the following year. She hasn't looked back since and continues to write novels featuring strong alpha men and the smart women they seek to claim.

A romance junkie for sure, you can find Lisa watching a romantic comedy, reading a romance novel, or writing one of her own most days of the week. If she's not doing that, she's outside in the garden tending to her roses.

Lisa is the wife of one alpha (whom she met in college), mother to four girls, and two labradoodles. Get news on releases, sales and giveaways when you become one of Lisa's VIP readers at : <http://LisaLangBlakeney.com/VIP>

