

SPLINTERED PROMISES DUET

BOOK ONE

# SPLINTERED

## Truths

M. GEORGE

# *Splintered Truths*



## *Splintered Promises Duet* *Part One*

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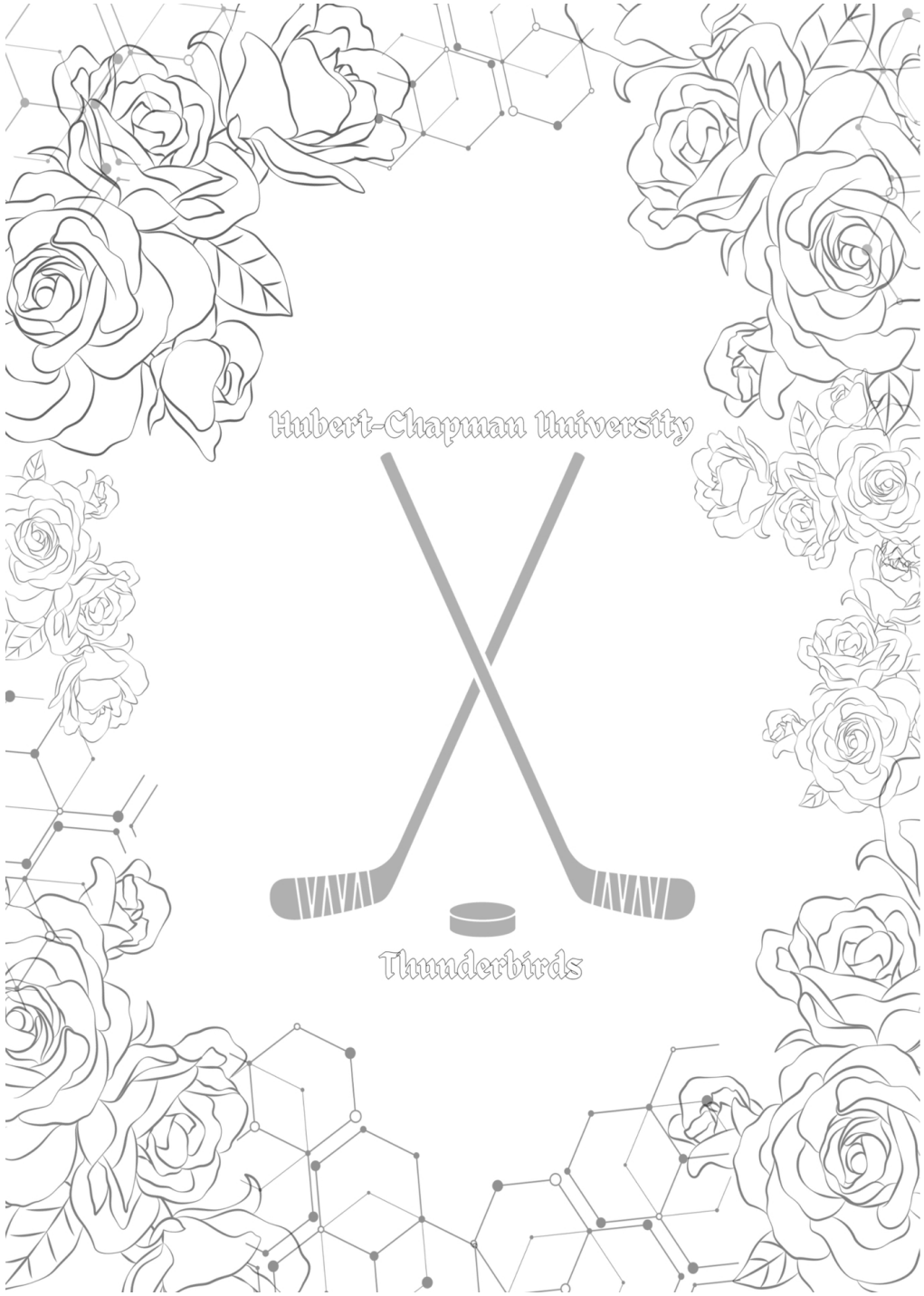
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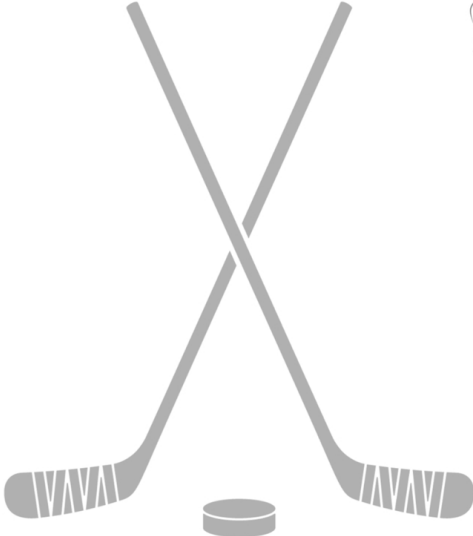
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Hubert-Chapman University



Thunderbirds



FOR MAYA. FOR  
JEFF. I WILL  
ALWAYS LOVE YOU,  
AND I WILL ALWAYS  
MISS YOU.

## **Dedication**



*For all the good girls shining bright in the darkness who just want their morally grey baddies on the cinnamon-roll side. May that hand necklace squeeze you just a little bit tighter and make you come like the good little girl you are.*



# *Important Note*



*This book contains content that is not suitable for all readers. Before proceeding, please be mindful of the fact that this book contains dark themes.*

*A full list of trigger warnings can be found on my Facebook Group at  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/656007759928663/permalink/712340360962069>*

*Please take note of potential content warnings, and be mindful of any personal triggers. Your mental health matters.*

*Thank you.*



# Official Playlist



*Blow- Ke\$ha*

*Vicious- Sabrina Carpenter*

*Doomsday- Nero*

*Face Down- Red Jumpsuit Apparatus*

*One Call Away- Charlie Puth*

*The Search- NF*

*Hate Me- Ellie Goulding, Juice WRLD*

*My Heart Has Teeth- deadmau5 (feat. Skylar Grey)*

*Demons- Imagine Dragons (Cover by Jasmine Thompson)*

*Animal I have Become- Three Days Grace*

*Vigilante Shit- Taylor Swift*

*Make Me Wanna Die- The Pretty Reckless*

*The Kill (Bury Me)- Thirty Seconds To Mars*

*Illuminated- VINTERSEA*

*Undisclosed Desires- Muse*

*Bodies- Drowning Pool*

*Morally Grey- April Jai*



# Chapter One



## *Danica*

**M**y body pulses in time with the music as the bass bumps loudly to the rhythm of a classic party song. Kesha's voice rings out, singing something about glitter on the floor while the drunken party-goers move together in a jumbled mass crowding the dance area. Trying to slide through the revelers without grinding into anyone, I note the group of girls to my left twerking with their drinks held high in the air, liquid splashing out with each swing of their arms, creating a sticky-slick mess on the ground.

Veering further to the right, I attempt to avoid their exuberant celebration while passing through the crowd. The frat house is so packed with jocks and other Greek row inhabitants that it will be a miracle if I can find Brad like we had originally planned. Squinting as I look around, I am relieved when I finally spot a familiar face, and adjust my direction slightly to head that way. Soon, I reach a small group clustered just beyond the back edge of the dancers, all heavily invested in what looks to be a game of beer pong.

"Finn! Bash!"

Pausing mid-throw Sebastian turns, eyes widening as he sees me pushing through the drunk mob. Quickly following where his eyes landed, his twin and my closest friend, Finnley, turns to find me coming upon their game, stepping forward to help me through the last of the crowd on the dance floor and pulling me into his side for a hug.

“Okay hotness, not that I don’t love seeing you but your brother is going to lose his shit when he finds you here, you know that right?” Bash speaks up as I step out of his brother’s embrace.

Hot and sticky from the sweaty dancers and the stench of stale beer in the air, I feel disheveled as I brush my bangs out of my eyes, rolling them as I gaze around the room. “Yeah well, I don’t see him here, do you?” Opening his mouth, I continue before he can respond, “I’m a big girl Bash, I can make my own choices.”

A throat clears behind me. “Want to try that again, Smarty?” Crossing my arms, I turn and glare at my older brother as he and a brooding figure walk towards us, each carrying several bottles of amber liquid. “What the hell are you doing here Danni? You’re way too young to be hanging out at a frat party. And what the fuck are you wearing? Seriously? Mom and Dad are going to kill you if they find out that you went out dressed like that, and then they are going to kill me for letting you come here in the first place.”

Glancing down at my pleated black mini skirt, tight midnight blue sequin tank and high tops, personally, I think I am underdressed compared to most of the girls in the crowd. Seriously, you would think we were at a nightclub and not some frat house celebrating the latest football win. Regardless, I have seen how his “dates” dress so he has no room to talk. I don’t owe him an explanation for how I choose to dress. Tossing my long auburn curls over my shoulder, I flip him the bird before responding.

“You act like I’m twelve, not almost eighteen. God, as if you weren’t sneaking out to party when you were my age!” Ugh. *Hypocritical much?* He just glares in response. Bash and Finn continue their game of beer pong off to my left, wisely choosing to stay out of it; and Hoodie Guy just stands there watching our verbal tennis match, all dark and forbidding. “Besides, I’m just looking for Brad. He wanted me to come to the game and then meet up with him here after to celebrate his big win.”

A scoff has me glancing from where I was speaking with my brother over to the brooding hoodie just behind him. Raising a brow, I attempt a disdainful glance though a shiver passes through me. Tall and broad shouldered, short dark hair to match his hoodie layered with a worn leather jacket, jeans, and biker boots, he easily seems out of place with all the preppy jocks and rich frat boys making up most of the horde celebrating after the game tonight.

“I’m sorry, who are you?” I ask in annoyance.

All steel, ice blue eyes meet mine with a matched brow cocked back at me, and slight smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth. Not even bothering to hide his amusement at my attempt to appear more confident, his unwavering gaze casts an unsettling sense of awareness across my skin.

“Don’t mind this jackass.” Throwing an arm over Hoodie Guy’s shoulder, Bash interrupts, causing the electric intensity of the moment to fizzle out as my eyes move between the two. “You would think he is just being grumpy because he was dragged along to party with his best friends, but frankly, his brooding manner comes naturally. And much to my dismay, it always seems to have all the girls fainting at his feet.”

Bash glances at his friend before directing his gaze to me, and it’s almost as if he can sense the pulsing energy passing between us. “Theo this is Danni, Caleb’s *little sister* who is undoubtedly ‘too young’ and ‘should not be at this party’.” Smirking, he squeezes his friend’s shoulder as he continues. “Hotness, this brooding jackass is my best friend and roommate Theodore Giovanni- Captain of the illustrious Hubert-Chapman University’s Thunderbirds. Play nice kitty cat.” With a wink in my direction, Bash removes his arm from his dark and moody friend and goes back to the beer pong table to resume his game with Finn.

Roommate, huh? If he lives with Bash that must mean that he is on the hockey team since Bash lives over at the designated Hockey house on Jock Row; though I’m not sure why I even care. With a mental shrug, I direct my attention back over to Bash.



“Come on, dude. How many times have we been over this? ‘Hotness’ is acceptable, but call me ‘kitty cat’ one more time, and I will show you my damn claws Sebastian. That is just an obnoxious nickname.” With an eye roll directed his way to show my annoyance, he just grins, sending a kiss my way before drinking the beer in the red solo cup that Finn’s ball just landed in. With a groan of annoyance at my brother’s teammate, he just smirks back at me, not even phased by my snippy retort. “God, you are so annoying.”

It’s easy to see that Caleb is getting frustrated with our playful banter, and I have to smile. As his younger sister, I consider it a personal achievement any time I can get under his skin. And with Bash by my side, it’s always an easy achievement.

“Dude! Stop fucking flirting with my sister! She’s off limits, you know that. Besides, she is way too young for you and your fuckboy ways.” With a glower, Caleb moves closer to punch Sebastian in the bicep before returning to grab my arm, annoyance radiating off him in waves. “And you,” he turns to glare at me, “are way too innocent to be in a den of filth like this. Come on, I’m taking you home.”

Disgusted with his overbearing protective older brother routine, I yank my arm from his grip as he tries to drag me away from the group. “Caleb! Get off me, geeze! I wasn’t even planning on drinking. I just want to find Brad, maybe hit up the dance floor for a few songs if I’m lucky, and then I’ll have him take me home. Between his football and my gym training we haven’t seen each other in weeks and you know how he gets when we can’t see each other.”

Hoodie guy’s mouth flattens as his eyes narrow at my words. “Besides, you know how it is with our schedules.” With a shrug, I take a step back from the group. “I’m going to go find my boyfriend now.” As I go to turn away from this lovely little gathering, I’m stopped in my tracks as a new voice interrupts.

“That’s a bad idea, kitty cat.” The low gravelly tone draws my attention back to where Theo has been watching this whole ridiculous interaction. Glaring back at him, I respond in kind, my own voice low and moody. “You don’t get to call me that. I don’t even let Bash call me that and I’ve known him for

years.” I jerk my chin to where the twins are still playing their game of beer pong.

“Trust me *la mia diavoletta*, you would be better off just going home. If we see your boy anywhere around here, we’ll tell him to go find you.” I prickle at his use of the word ‘boy.’ “Go home to your cozy warm bed with your pink fuzzy pillows where you can snuggle up safe and sound. This party isn’t the scene for you.”

“Excuse me?!” His pompous attitude fills me with rage, while he just coolly stares back, expression unchanging.

“You heard me. Go. Home.” A slight twitch of his raised eyebrow is the only indication of his annoyance with me, or the situation in general; I’m not sure which. Our strange standoff is interrupted as a drunken body bumps into me from the side of the dance floor, a clumsy apology on their lips as they resume their dancing. With a gasp, I stumble forward, catching myself on Theo’s hard chest as he reaches out, grabbing me gently by the arms. His gentle touch is an odd contrast to his harsh words and I flush, my pulse quickening as I try to regain my balance. I find I’m unable to look away from the obstinate man in front of me as Theo’s icy stare hardens into a scowl.

With a start, I realize I have been standing in his arms, just staring at him, and quickly move to back away. “You are such a jackass. Let me the fuck *go*.” Yanking my arm out of his grasp, I return Theo’s brooding glare with one of my own. Not giving either one a chance to continue, I turn, hastily pushing my way back into the crowd in search of my boyfriend.

Working my way to the back yard where the huge bonfire is in the hopes that I will have better luck there, the heat of the flames warms my face as I begin to scan the crowd. I wander through groups of people milling about drinking, as raucous laughter fills the air, and still there is no sign of Brad.

## Chapter Two



### Theo

“Aren’t you going to go get her?” I direct the question to Caleb who has resumed his drinking while he continues his earlier conversation with Finn and Seb.

“My sister? Dude, look. I’m pissed she’s here but she has made up her fucking mind and she isn’t going to leave until she is ready. I’ll give her a bit to get through her search and when she comes up empty, I’ll take her home.” Sipping from his beer, he continues “Danni is one of the most stubborn people I know. Even if I dragged her ass out of here, she’d just sneak out and find her way back.” Shaking his head, he mutters under his breath “Hard-headed brat” but I still manage to hear his annoyed comment. And for some goddamn reason, it pisses me off.

Scowling at my friend, I press the conversation further. “Why is she dating that fuckface Brad anyway?”

A look of incredulous disbelief passes over Caleb’s face, before quickly turning into a grimace. “Dude come on; he is star football material. Daddy’s little golden boy. All the chicks had a thing for him back at school.” His blasé attitude about Bradley *fucking* Oakley Jr. only serves to piss me off further and I can feel my scowl deepen.

“Doesn’t make him any less a fuckface. And damn well doesn’t make it okay he is with your sister. Does she even know about his ‘extracurriculars’?” At this, Caleb scowls in return. He knows *exactly* which extracurriculars I am talking about. And let’s just say they aren’t ones that affect his GPA.

“Listen, they started dating a few years back. I think it was around the end of her sophomore year maybe? He would have been a junior at the time. He made a big show with how he was all about her; charmed the whole damn school. Like, stereotypical golden-couple shit.”

My chest rumbles in a dissatisfied growl, the mental image pissing me off. Caleb continues, “They’ve had their issues in the past, but they seem to have come a long way since he graduated this last spring. And anyway, my parents love the guy and think he’s going places. Both our parents are hoping for a wedding in the future from what I’ve heard. Personally, I think he’s a prick but it’s a waste of breath trying to tell them that. As for Danni...” he hedges while searching for how to phrase his next thought.

“Come on, Brad is a total jackass that can’t keep his dick in his pants, and you know it. If you are so overprotective of your sister, that you don’t even want her at a party like this, then why haven’t you told her what a fucking man-whore her boyfriend is?” I inquire, quickly losing my cool.

A look I can’t quite place passes over Caleb’s face, but it’s gone before I can attempt to process it. He shrugs as he responds, “I’ve tried, but I told you she is hard-headed when her mind is made up. She wouldn’t listen unless I threw it in her face that her boyfriend of over two years is a fucking cheater. And while I hate the jerk, I don’t want to hurt my sister like that.” He gives me a shrewd once-over. “Why the fuck do you care anyway?” Glaring at me, I can see the suspicion written all over his face.

Finally pulling his attention from the game to glance over at his two bickering best friends, Finn interrupts. “Guys, chill.” Examining me as he throws his next shot, it lands without him even trying. Seb huffs before picking up the red solo cup.

Ignoring his sibling, Finn continues. “Theo, I’ve known Danni since Caleb and I were roomies as freshmen. Truthfully, I’m surprised you haven’t met her before now with how often she comes around to see Caleb. I swear, between my place and Caleb’s, the girl practically lives on campus. She’s here way more than she ever is at her own home. But anyway, that is

beside the point. Regardless, if you had met her before now you would know she absolutely will not listen once she has made up her mind.”

Chiming in where his brother left off, Seb interrupts. “Unless she sees it for herself, I don’t think our Kitty Cat will listen to reason.” Seb, glancing briefly back to the table as he takes aim, and huffs in annoyance when his shot misses.

Finn smirks as the shot goes wide. “Most of the guys here, especially those of you from HCU Thunderbirds and anyone else on campus who’s a fan really, know she is Caleb’s little sister and is wholly off limits. She should be safe enough to hang out for a bit and chill, even if she doesn’t find Brad.”

“And if she does?” There is a bite to my gravelly tone that even gives me the chills.

“And if she does, then she will either see what a tool that guy is and how shitty of a boyfriend he is, or she won’t and she will end up hooking up with him or whatever. I mean,” glancing between Caleb’s stony expression and my own stormy one Seb immediately backpedals as he continues speaking to the group, “not hook up or whatever. Your super-hot athletic almost-eighteen-year-old sister doesn’t ‘hook up’ with guys. She is still too young and innocent for any of that.”

The crowd of onlookers that have gathered around to watch the heated beer pong match between the twins groan loudly as Seb’s next shot misses once again, momentarily grabbing my attention. “Dude, I don’t understand how you can be such a god on the ice and have such terrible aim playing this game.” a voice from the audience taunts. Bash looks like he is about ready to throw down.

“Man, just stop while you’re ahead. If you’re not careful you’re going to wind up with Caleb’s fist in your face.” Finn mutters distractedly to the heckler as he takes aim, once more landing his shot.

Turning away from his losing streak with disgust, Seb interrupts the conversation before it can head further into dangerous territory. “Fine, I guess Theo is right. This scene isn’t the place for someone as young and hot looking as your



sister- sorry Caleb- no use denying her hotness here. I know she can handle her own and all, but even giving her time to search for Brad seems like a bad idea in this crowd. Plus, if you don't find her before she finds Brad, then you'll be the one picking up the pieces, because you know your parents sure as hell won't."

Sighing, Caleb takes a long drink from his bottle before placing it in the middle of the table. "I suppose you're both right. Besides, if she does end up finding him and falling apart it could throw off her game for her upcoming matches. With nationals on her mind, she would kill me herself if I let anything throw her off before her next competition."

Glancing first to Seb and Finn, before fixing his gaze on me, Caleb continues. "Alright here's what we're gonna do: she probably went looking for him out back by the bonfire so that is the direction I'll head to try and catch up with her; see if I can talk some sense into her and get her to head home. Seb, Finn, you guys stay here in case she doubles back, and Theo..."

Stony face pointed in his direction, I raise a brow in acknowledgement, refusing to give in to the anger seething within me "You head upstairs and see if you can find Brad while I try to do damage control with Danni. If you see him up there give him a heads up that Danni is here waiting for him so he can get his dick in his pants and meet us downstairs. Hopefully we can get through this disaster of a party without anyone losing their head."

With that, Caleb turns and heads out back in search of his sister. Without saying a word, I turn on my heel and head towards the back of the house, where another staircase that should be less crowded, also leads to the floors above. Not sure what Caleb is thinking sending me to go look for that fucking man-whore. If I find him, the only heads up he is going to get from me is my fucking fist in his face. A rage I don't quite understand fills me as I continue up the stairs.

I shake my head trying to clear it as I push my way forward. Not sure why I even care. Caleb's little sister is none of my business and needs to stay that way. So why can't I just drop

it? I should just bail, go back to my place and get out of my own fucking head. It's not like I wanted to be here tonight anyway, I only showed as a favor to Caleb and Seb since they know I won't drink and can offer them a ride.

What is it about the stubborn *diavoletta* that has me so twisted? She's Caleb's little sister. She's Bradley Oakey's high school sweetheart for Christ's sake. Absolutely everything about her spells trouble. But that fire in her clear green eyes? There were layers reflected in her gaze, blatant in her perusal as her toned form held firm against me in stand-off, a silent battle of wills.

I felt that electric shock roll through me from across the room like a bolt of lightning. Felt an infinite and tangible connection before she ever saw me; yet once she glanced my way with her luminous gaze, I noticed the chill on her arms. It seems I wasn't the only one affected here. Yep, trouble with a capital 'T.'

If it had not been for the fact that she is dating Bradley *fucking* Oakley I could just leave the whole mess alone. Let her live in her little fantasy world where Miss Preppy lives naively-ever-after with her sleazy prince charming, never suspecting what a total psychopath he is. At least that's what I tell myself. The reality of it however, knowing what I do, how could I not step in? It would be irresponsible of me not to. No, it has nothing to do with the incredible fire in those bright green eyes reflecting at me, and everything to do with the psycho behind closed doors.

Pushing further through the crowd I eventually wade my way over to the staircase and quietly make my way up the stairs. Not that I need to tread lightly with all the noise pulsing through every corner of this place, it's more a force of habit than anything at this point in my life. Years on the ice have led to a natural state of grace and quiet control that has brought great success in my professional life.



As I cross the second floor, I see it is just as packed as the first. With the hallway spilling over, some people are waiting in line for the bathroom while others try to talk to one another over the music; more still are clustered in small groups, waiting to make use of one of the many bedrooms currently occupied with loud noises emanating from within.

Glancing around, I don't see any noticeable sign of Bradley or Danica but I'm sure as hell not going to start poking my head in each of the rooms like some kind of voyeur. With a mental shrug I head upstairs to check the third floor. As I make my way up the final steps, however, I don't know whether to laugh or be pissed at the sight before me.

“Danica wait! Danica! This isn't what it looks like!”

A bare-assed Brad tripping over himself as he tries to pull on a pair of pants while behind him a naked blonde with messed up hair is wrapping a sheet around her body. Ignoring him, Danica is fuming as she walks down the hall towards me, grabbing a drink from some random chick as she passes by. Tossing it back in a single go, at the sound of her name being called she flips Bradley off without ever glancing back. Not noticing me, she tosses the cup on the ground and goes to grab another random drink out of some unsuspecting dude's hand.

“Whoa there *diavoletta*.” As she brushes past me, I go to grab her arm. “You don't know where that drink's been.” The thought of her drinking from an open cup, without knowing what's inside has my stomach tightening in knots. You can never be too careful at a crowded party like this. And clearly this chick is too naive to realize that.

With a growl, she shoves the stolen drink in my hand and pushes forward, continuing down the hall at a quick pace; desperate, it would seem, to get away from whatever scene she just walked in on. I match her shorter stride with my own long

one, following closely behind as she makes her way downstairs. I'm acting as a barrier between her and the jackass who is still scrambling to get his clothes on while trying to chase after her.

Not heeding my warning, she grabs another drink as she passes by a different group. After exiting the last set of stairs, she forces her way onto the dance floor. She is already wobbling, a bit unsteady on her feet after whatever shit she drank upstairs. I find myself unable to let her out of my sight as I continue along, pushing aside anyone who gets too close in the crowded space.

Brushing into her, I grab her arm to steady her once more as she stumbles slightly. Finally reaching the middle of the dance floor, Danica turns to me in a dazed whirlwind before throwing her arms around my neck. "Dance with me!" she yells in my ear, singing along as she starts swaying to the music, eyes glassy from whatever the hell she drank.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea. Your brother is still trying to find you." I raise my voice so she can hear me above the music as bodies press around us, forcing me to step closer. Wrapping my arms around her waist, I try to shield her from the grinding dancers surrounding us as the music plays. Turning her towards the back of the room, I begin awkwardly dancing our way through the crowd to where Seb and Finn are hanging at the beer pong table, but she resists, stepping closer trying to grind her hips into my thigh.

Danica's back is still facing the guys as I continue moving her in their direction, when abruptly she stops singing whatever song they are currently playing, body going rigid as her eyes focus over my shoulder. In that moment, I know she is gazing at him, and all sense of reason leaves my brain.

Leaning down, I pull her soft form tight against my hard body and speak into her ear so only she can hear. "Eyes on me, *passerotto*." Eyes widening, her gaze flickers back to me, clearing marginally from the shock of our closeness. I squeeze her hips slightly and raise a brow, making sure she is focused solely on me. My world narrows as I move my mouth from her ear grazing across her jaw before I take her mouth in my own.

An explosion of color, my world centers entirely on the beauty before me as I am lost in sensation. Gone are the pulsing music and crushing bodies that surround us. All I can see, hear and smell is Danica. A soft floral like lilac or maybe jasmine fills my senses as her fiery auburn hair encompasses the both of us. The feel of her lips, soft and full against mine. I hold her firm in my arms, raising one hand to tangle in her hair while the other presses her back, holding her soft form flush against my rigid muscles.

Briefly, I can sense her hesitation as the surprise of me claiming her mouth washes over her. Pressing closer, I gently pull on her hair, tugging her head to angle her better. "Open for me diavoletta." I whisper, nipping at her lush bottom lip. She sighs as her lips part for me, and I hungrily take what's mine. Our tongues intertwine in an intimate dance, and I pour my frustration and heat into that moment, letting her feel my desire as her arms slide up my shoulders to the back of my head. For a moment, time stands still as we are lost in each other, unbothered by the world around us.

Pulling back, her dazed eyes take a moment to focus on my face. Her throat clears before she once again glances over my shoulder. "I think he probably saw." The thundering in my ears matches the pounding in my heart as I lift my hand to tuck a loose curl behind her ear. Eyes glassy as they return to my face, I can tell that she is still out of it from whatever crap she drank. From all appearances, I would hazard a guess and say that it was probably spiked with GHB, especially since it hit so quickly. But then- I'm no expert when it comes to drugging unsuspected women.

Not even bothering to look at the fucker who was so careless with her heart, I grab her hand and pull her forward. "Come with me." Fingers entwined as I lead her through the crowd. With my other hand I pull out my phone before shooting off a quick text. After what feels like forever, we finally break through the mass of people as I lead her into the back yard and over to the side of the house. Darkness and a sense of quiet surrounds us and I relish the stillness of the night as the pulsing beat of the music inside fades in the background.

“Where are we going?” She’s still high on fucking life thanks to whatever fuckers were screwing around with tonight’s drink selections. There is no hesitation or worry about being led by a stranger into the night. A bubbly laugh escapes her throat as she stumbles and I firmly wrap my arm around her to make sure she doesn’t trip as I lead her forward.

Once cleared of the house, I continue down the street in silence. Frustration and the restless need to punch something fills every ounce of my body until I am vibrating with a silent fury. I should go back and punch that fucker in his goddamn face but Danica is in no condition to be left alone. A buzz vibrates in my pocket, followed by two more in quick succession. Ignoring the texts, I turn as Danica stumbles once again and I gently sweep her into my arms. Carrying her the rest of the way to my car will be more efficient with less chance of her injuring herself.



## Chapter Three



### *Danica*

A pounding fills my head as a wave of nausea sweeps over me. Burrowing my head as I groan, I reach for my fluffy throw pillow to block out the sliver of light but my hands come up empty. A subtle musk fills my nose as my face rubs into the soft flannel. Wait, flannel?! With a start, my head jerks back, slightly rising as I fight back the bile filling my throat.

I pry my eyes open further, glancing around the darkened space. Definitely not my room. Not my plush cerulean down comforter with my soft fuzzy throw pillows. Nor a trace of the matching soft blue walls with the crisp white trim. No sign of the frames filled with pictures of friends, nor the shelves that house my competition trophies. Not a single trace of anything I recognize. A sense of vague awareness fills me as confusion wars with nausea.

It seems like everything's a little fuzzy, coming through a mental fog that's weighing me down. My brain is refusing to connect the dots as I struggle to carefully register my surroundings and try to remember... well, anything really. I find myself squinting into a room shaded in dark tones; rich mahogany wood and sharp lines make up the matching furniture as a subtle fragrance fills my lungs once again. A masculine fragrance, vaguely familiar, like everything else in this room.

"If you're gonna puke, I'd rather you not rolf all over my bed. Bathroom's that way." Leaning against the doorframe, face shrouded in shadows, a man thumbs over his shoulder as he points down the hall. That gravelly voice though, I know I



recognize it too. God why can't I focus? I struggle to concentrate through the mental fog weighing me down, to carefully register my surroundings and try to remember... well, anything really.

"Wh-, who are you? What happened?" I start to shake my head and clear the cobwebs. Nope, instant regret fills me as knife-like pain cuts through the mental fog and another wave of nausea hits. Shakily, I struggle to pull myself up and hurry to the bathroom. Before my feet hit the ground, he is at my side, one hand on my elbow as the other grazes my back, helping steady my feet.

After a moment of assessment, he steps back, removing his firm touch and again nods toward the hall. "Bathroom's first door on your left." He stands behind me, hooded gaze not revealing the thoughts within, demeanor detached as he backs further away giving me space to move forward.

Another shaky step and I find my balance, moving forward, following his instructions, and making my way to the bathroom on the left. Flipping on the light switch, fluorescent bulbs flicker to life causing stabbing to sear my head as I move forward towards the sink and glare at myself in the mirror, squinting through the pain.

A splash of cold water does wonders at calming my rolling stomach, so I bend forward, carefully filling my hands with the icy liquid before splashing my face. I scoop another handful of water to run along the back of my neck. While I can't say I feel halfway human I have at least managed to fight back the nausea and the headache ebbs from a stabbing knife into a dull pounding. Using one hand, I scoop small amounts of water into my palm to take a tepid sip, unsure if it will settle in my roiling stomach.

Taking my time, I carefully try to sort through my muddled memories as I finish up in the restroom. I remember the game, Brad's winning touchdown. I know I went to the party... and I think I ran into my brother and his group of friends? After that everything sort of gets hazy. Okay, so I definitely went to the party and this undeniably is not Brad's dorm and that guy

waiting outside is clearly not my boyfriend. What the fuck happened last night?

Sucking in air, my breathing increases as the panic starts to register through the fog. *Oh shit. Oh shit. Okay think Danni! I went out to a party to hook up with my boyfriend and woke up in a strange place with a stranger. Fuckkkk! Oh god! What if something happened? What if I slept with him? Why can't I remember anything?*

A firm bump on the door interrupts my internal panic and I jump, startled by the intrusion.

“Hey, you okay in there? You didn't pass out or anything?”

“Uh, I'm fine. Just a minute!” Spinning around in a slow circle as I grab my hair, I try to think back and come up blank. Okay, alright. This isn't the end of the world. I will just call Caleb and he will come get me. It's totally fine, nothing to work yourself into a panic over. Reaching down to grab my phone, I realize I'm not wearing my usual jeans. Right, dressed to impress for the party so no pockets. Dammit why couldn't I have picked a skirt with pockets?! Ugh, fuck, think Danni! Okay my phone was in my clutch. Where is my clutch?

“If you're about done vomiting or freaking out in there or whatever, I need to take a piss.”

Spinning, I jerk open the door and look up... way up... into the chiseled face staring down at me with what I think might be amusement? Admittedly it is hard to tell as the only sign of possible amusement is the slight uptick on one side of his firm lips. Light scruff covers his jawline in a five o'clock shadow. With a quirked-up eyebrow, piercing blue eyes meet my gaze.

“You good there, kitty cat?”

“Oh! Hoodie guy!” The other eyebrow raises to match his first. It all comes flooding back to me. Tall, dark, and brooding, Hoodie Guy was a friend of my brother's... I think. I remember there was some verbal sparring before being annoyed and taking off to look for Brad. Okay then, maybe not all my memories are back yet. But this guy is friends with

Caleb, Finn, and Bash; that is one thing I am sure of. So, I didn't go home with a total stranger. At least there's that. And, if he is friends with the guys, he can't be all that bad, right?

"Theo." his head tilts down in a gesture of acknowledgement.  
"Name's Theo."

"Right! Theo!" I nervously pluck at my skirt, pleats now wrinkled with sleep. "Oh! Sorry! You needed the restroom!" Shuffling forward to move past him, he grabs my arm stopping me in my tracks.

"Not true, *Passerotto*. Just wanted to make sure you weren't thoroughly losing it in there. Waking up in some stranger's bed probably messed with your head a bit. Unless you do this sort of thing often?" he asks, giving me a pointed look. I shove past the feeling of utter shittiness from whatever god-forsaken hangover this is and work up a glare to return in his direction. *There's* the brooding asshole that I somewhat remember from last night.

"Not that it is any of your business, *buddy*, but no. I don't make a habit of amnesia-filled sleepovers with strangers, fuck you very much." A low whistle with a slight shake of his head has me crossing my arms defensively.

"The claws really are out this morning. Alright then, nice to see how you thank the guy who saved you. Kitchen's down the hall at the end there." With a thumb once again pointed over his shoulder, he continues, "Breakfast and coffee are ready. Maybe try to aim for some better manners when you meet my mom though, yeah?"

A derisive laugh escapes my mouth. As if his mom is actually here; or that he would truly want to introduce me. Doubtless, he doesn't even like me. Plus, from what I can remember, he is Sebastian's roommate, which means he lives over on Jock Row in the Hockey House along with several other members of their team. Although, looking around, from what I have seen so far it is surprising how neatly kept everything looks for a house filled with cocky jocks.

Oblivious to my internal speculations, Theo does not look back in my direction as he turns, making his way down the hall towards the kitchen. Unsure of myself after his last comment, my arms uncross as I hesitantly follow. Pausing in the doorway, I am stunned at the sight before me.

“Morning Ma.” Leaning down his tall frame, Theo bends over to kiss an older woman on the cheek before reaching around her to open the cupboard above her head, retrieving three coffee mugs in his giant hand. The woman is beautiful, but not in the classic sense. A little older, maybe in her late fifties, streaks of gray run through the sides of her beautiful dark hair pinned neatly in a simple updo. Her dress is well kept, though plain. When she turns, what catches my attention is those same striking ice-blue eyes with their gaze piercing into me, though laugh lines crinkle at the corners, softening the effect.

Pouring coffee into the three mugs, he hands one first to his mother before turning to me. “Creamer?” Unable to respond as I try to process everything I see before me (like the fact that he apparently *did* bring me home to meet his mom), he continues. “You definitely look like a creamer kind of girl.” Reaching into the fridge to grab the bottle before pouring a generous dollop into the second mug, he passes it my way, returning the bottle back to its place in the refrigerator. Clumsy hands grab at the mug before he lets go, our fingertips lightly brushing as he turns back to his own, taking a large gulp.

“You bring a girl into my home and don’t even introduce me to her?” With a light smack to his chest, his mother turns to face me as she chides her son. “I raised you better than that Theodore Eduardo Carmine Giovanni!” Moving forward, Theo’s mother grabs me gently by the upper arms. “Don’t mind my son and his rude manners. I am Elena, but you can call me Ma; all of Theodore’s young friends do.” With that, she lightly kisses each of my cheeks before stepping back.

“It’s not like that Ma.” Shaking his head, I cut in before he has the chance to continue. “Hello Mrs. Giovanni. I’m Danica.”

“Danica. Lovely name for a lovely girl. Now tell me, what sort of trouble brings you to us in the middle of the night? It’s not often that I get to see my boy during the week anymore so I will take whatever fortune led you our way. Though I will say you do look a bit young to be dating my Theo, dear.” She looks me over carefully.

“Ma. I told you, it’s not like that. Danica is Caleb’s baby sister, and she got herself into some trouble with an old friend of ours last night. Figured it’d be better to bring her here until she was feeling well enough to go home.” As he continues talking, his sure steps move forward, carrying with him two large plates filled with eggs, sausages, and toast. Placing the plates next to each other at the small table filling the space, he turns and grabs a third, also piled high with food, placing it at the head of the table before turning back to me.

“Speaking of, we have about fifteen minutes until we have to leave, so you better eat up.” With that, he sits down heavily, and starts shoveling food in his mouth. Hesitantly, I look between the arrogant man stuffing his face at the table, to his mother who leans against the kitchen counter, sipping her coffee with an amused expression on her face.

“Theodore, where are your manners? At least wait for the poor girl to join you at the table.” Turning to me, she gestures at the place setting next to her son’s. “Please, sit and eat dear. Don’t want this food to go to waste.” Moving forward, and after refilling her mug of coffee she takes my arm in hers as she leads me to sit down.

The smell of the food hits my nostrils and my stomach rolls in protest. Clenching my teeth, I ball my hands into fists tightly in my lap and glance down, taking short, shallow breaths through my mouth. Leaning over so his lips are almost brushing my ear, I feel the breath tickle the hairs on my neck as he whispers “Eat up, diavoletta. Trust me, the first few bites will be rough but the food will do your stomach a world of good. The worst kind of hangover is one on an empty stomach.” He nods his head at my plate.

Bracing myself, I grab the fork and slowly bring a small bite to my lips. And though my stomach does protest, I am surprised

to find that after the first several bites Theo is right. The food does act to help settle the turmoil in my abdomen. His plate empty long before I have finished mine, Theo leans back in his chair, watching me in silence.

I feel the blush creep up my cheeks, and I want desperately to ask about last night. What happened; how did I end up here, his mom's house of all places? But I can't bring myself to utter the words in front of his sweet mother, and so, I slowly nibble at my food, managing to get down a few more bites.

## Chapter Four



### *Danica*

“A lright diavoletta, time’s up.” I look over to see that Theo is glancing at a watch I hadn’t noticed he was wearing on his left wrist; he lowers his arm before standing. Walking over to his mother, he leans down, grabbing her empty dishes and taking them to the sink, before rinsing and placing them carefully in the dishwasher. Turning back to the table, I watch silently as he repeats the process with his own, and finally, my dishes as well. “I love you Ma. I should be back to check in sometime later this week, but call me if you need anything in the meantime, yeah?”

“I love you too sweet boy.” Rising from her chair, she walks to her son as he looms largely over her, and reaches up to pat him fondly on the cheek before he lowers his head so she can place a soft kiss where her hand just was. Turning back to me as I also rise from my seat, she clasps my hands in her own, giving them a firm squeeze. “It was so nice to meet you dear. I look forward to seeing you again.” Before either of us has a chance to respond, she leaves the room.

Shaking his head, Theo leads the way out of the kitchen from the opposite direction from where we entered. Following quietly, at a loss for words, I proceed towards the front of the house and out the main entrance. I’m unsure how to reconcile what I just saw, the sweet gestures and thoughtfulness towards both his mother and myself versus his brooding manner and general assholery from what I remember of our conversation last night and this morning outside the bathroom.

I stop short as I see the car parked in front of the sidewalk. Theo is standing in the sunlight, leaning lightly against the side of the most gorgeous '67 Chevy Corvette I have ever seen. Cobalt blue, it looks to be in pristine condition. Blinking, I make my way over to the passenger side. "This is your car?" "You got a problem with my car, *diavoletta*?" He glares at me over the hood of his car.

"What? No! It's gorgeous! I love old corvettes!" Smoothing my hand down the trim on the passenger side as I make this comment. His expression lightens as he takes in my new excitement.

"Good. Get in." He hops into the driver's side, leaning across with his long arm stretched out to open the passenger door before I can get to it. I slide smoothly onto the seat, the material cool against my skin as the smell of worn leather surrounds me. Goosebumps raise on my arms and I take a slow inhale. Correction, the smell of leather and Theo. *Yum.*

With a side glance over at me, he quirks a brow as if he notices my weirdness. Stretching over once again, he reaches around me, grabbing the seatbelt and buckling it. "Safety first, *il mio passerotto.*" The roar of the engine surrounds me as the car comes to life, and he carefully pulls away from the curb, making his way back towards the city.

Glancing through the windows, I notice the neighborhoods as we pass through. Though the homes are seemingly older and smaller than those in the part of town I live in, they are all well-kept and do not appear to be weathered with time. Several minutes in, I can no longer take the silence.

"So... um. I don't really, um. What happened last night? I remember meeting you when I was with the guys but after I wandered off to go find Brad it's all kind of a blur. Obviously the 'how' is you, but... why did you bring me to your mom's house? I thought you were sharing a place with Bash?" I sneak a quick glance in his direction. His features harden as I speak, jawline flexing as he works to control some thought or



emotion, hands clenching the steering wheel so tight his knuckles begin turning white.

“I brought you to Ma’s because I figured you would be more comfortable there. Waking up in a strange place is bad enough, but waking up in a house full of rowdy bachelors when you can’t remember a damn thing is a whole different story. Besides, the guys didn’t need to see you like that. You weren’t exactly in a good place last night.”

“I can’t... Um... I don’t exactly remember what happened. We didn’t... do anything, did we?”

A snort fills the silence that follows my question. “No. No *Passerotto*. We didn’t *do anything* last night. I don’t make a habit of messing with girls who have been drugged. Especially with girls that are jailbait.”

My eyebrows shoot up at his mention of my drink being drugged. I guess that would explain a lot about why my memory from last night is so fuzzy. I should probably be more alarmed, I know bad things happen to good girls who consume spiked drinks but for whatever reason, I trust Theo when he says we didn’t do anything.

I genuinely don’t think he would have let anything bad happen to me. Then my mind focuses on the first part of his statement and I look over at Theo while he drives, one arm resting casually along the windowsill, the other hand guiding the steering wheel. “*Passerotto*,’ you’ve called me that before. What does it mean?” I shoot him a quizzical glance.

“Nothing to worry your pretty little head over. Stick around and maybe one of these days you’ll find out.” Looking back over at me with the slightest hint of mischief, he throws a wink my way, so quickly I might have missed it had I not been looking over at that exact moment.

“Okay then. Well, good. We didn’t do anything. Jailbait comment aside, what did you mean by ‘girls who have been drugged? Did I take something that you saw? I just don’t understand, that isn’t like me. I’m not that kind of girl. I don’t ever drink and I categorically would not try drugs. Frankly, I don’t know why I would have.”

“Well, first of all, you told the guys that you weren’t there to drink, just to see that fuckface boy of yours, so I believe you when you say that hadn’t been your intention. But- I think your little plan fell to pieces sometime around when you stumbled into *Bradley* with his ass in the air getting fucking swallowed by some blonde chick on the third floor.” He says Bradley’s name with a sneer.

“Your brother and the guys were all trying to find you but I happened to run into that pleasant scene first right as you were flipping that fucker off and grabbing the first drink that passed your face. You managed to get through two drinks intended for others, and based on your reaction, it’s a safe bet that at least one of those drinks was spiked with something stronger than alcohol. You really should be more careful about where you get your drinks from *il mio passerotto*.”

A sharp inhale passes through my lips, and I clutch the windowsill as I process his words. A ripple runs through me and I’m not sure if it’s his use of “il mio passerotto” directed towards me in a more gentle tone than that of his earlier conversation, or if it is simply my body rejecting his statement about Brad cheating last night.

Choosing to ignore his “mio passerotto” comment, I skip straight to the heart of the matter. “No,” swallowing, I hear the shakiness in my voice and try again, “that can’t be right. Brad wouldn’t cheat on me, he loves me.” The words escape my lips as if on autopilot; having heard the same damn thing come from his own mouth more times than I can count. Never mind that Bradley had, in fact, cheated on me many times over our two years together. That was all in the past. Bradley loves me and I know he is sorry for what happened before. He’s promised me that he won’t do that to me again.

With a shake of his head, frustration evident in his tense profile, Theo abruptly reaches between us before silently passing over my clutch and phone, both of which I had long since forgotten. Pressing a trembling hand to the screen, I unlock my phone to find dozens of missed calls and text notifications. Quickly scrolling, I ignore the ones from my parents, passing over the group chat notifications from my

conversation with Caleb, Bash, and Finn, before finally landing on the text thread from Brad.

Fifteen new texts, seven missed calls from my *loving* boyfriend. Hesitating momentarily, I brace myself before opening the messages.

**8:57 P.M. BF: I'm Sorry!**

**9:03 P.M. BF: Baby, please...**

**9:22 P.M. BF: It wasn't what it looked like, I swear!**

**9:48 P.M. BF: Dammit Danica, answer your phone!**

**10:18 P.M. BF: Baby, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. Please just call me. Talk to me, let me explain...**

**10:45 P.M. BF: I love you, Princess. Please call me. We can fix this. Please.**

I don't bother looking further at the remaining texts, nor do I listen to the many voicemails that he's left. Shaken, I don't move at all as I try to comprehend the words in front of me. I don't understand. This can't be real. He's said he loves me. He's *promised* me that things were going to be better between us, that he wouldn't hurt me again. Brad has even gone so far as to bring up our future together in recent conversations, and the plans that he has for the two of us.

Exiting out of the message thread, I see a new notification pop up from one of my socials that I have apparently been tagged in. Mindlessly, I click the link, hoping for a distraction, and my stomach drops at the sight that appears on my screen. It's a picture of Brad, dancing with Stephanie Randall at the party last night. Stephanie, the former head cheerleader who graduated with Brad last spring. The one girl he *promised* me he wouldn't go back to. After everything we have been through together, everything he'd done. He *fucking promised!*

Before I can fully process what's happening, a sob escapes my lips, and I feel the tears start to stream down my face. Theo quickly pulls the car over, and parking, leans over to unbuckle my seatbelt. Pulling me into his side, his warm arm wrapping protectively around me, I can feel the dam break inside me as

the tears continue to fall unbidden like a tidal wave down my blotchy face. My quiet sobs fill the car and I am not sure if it is hurt or relief I feel at this moment. Bradley has taken everything from me, absolutely everything. In exchange, all I have ever asked is that he would not go back to his ex-girlfriend. For all the damage he has caused, this was the one fucking thing I asked. And now, I'm done.



## Chapter Five



### Theo

Nero's Doomsday fills my ears as I push through another set on the bench press. Sweat drips down my face, and I feel the burn of my aching muscles as I settle the bar back on the rack. Sitting up, I lean over to grab my water, breathing heavily before wiping myself down with the towel draped around my neck. The pounding bass matches the beat of my heart, yet does nothing to drown out my racing thoughts.

Rather than dropping her off at home, Danca had me take her over to Caleb's apartment which is a few blocks over from my place on Jock Row. According to her it would be better this way. If he could give her a ride, it would avoid any awkward questions from her parents. Since she didn't look at her phone beyond the texts sent to her by her shitty boyfriend, I guess she didn't realize that I had sent him a text the night before letting him know I had her, or that he covered for her by telling their parents she was crashing at his place after the game.

I know Caleb wasn't thrilled that I took her back to my mom's place, but there was no fucking way I was going to take her home when she was all messed up from whatever shit was in her drink. Not when that fucker kept texting and calling. For all I know, he probably showed up at her place to try and corner her. My fists clench just at the thought of her being alone and inebriated around him, and another jolt of rage races through me. *Not on my fucking watch.*

I doubt Caleb would have left the party early, just to come babysit his little sister when she was intoxicated, and I sure as hell wasn't going to bring her back to Jock Row and a house

full of my teammates. Assholes are a bunch of bigger gossips than the little old ladies at the community center Ma volunteers at, so no, I couldn't bring her to crash there and give them room to speculate over nothing.

After a breather, I lean back down across the bench to finish up my last rep. Pushing through the pain, I try to focus on my tired muscles as I complete my off-day workout routine, in a futile attempt to drown out all thoughts of *her*. Instead, old memories filter in, a stark contrast to the frustrating beauty that had filled my brain since meeting her last night. The memories still feel raw after all these years. With a heavy exhale, I rack the bar and go to wipe down the bench before hitting the showers.

# Chapter Six



## *Danica*

I race across the mat, pushing my legs as hard as they will go before pushing off into my front handspring. As my floor routine unfolds, I let the stress and frustration of the previous week melt away. Music plays loudly in the background as I work my way through each leap, aerial and roundoff.

Unsatisfied with my first run-through, I push through the entire routine another two times before pausing for a quick rest. Clapping intrudes on my concentration and I turn to see Coach Stephenson standing off to the side, silently observing while my teammates cheer me on. Catching my breath, I take a moment before making my way over to the group.

“Your floor routine is looking good, Ellis. If you keep it up with this level of drive, you should have a fairly straight shot to Nationals. You want to go beyond that and reach the World Artistic Championships though, and we may want to think about adjusting the routine to add even more complexity.”

Blowing the bangs out of my eyes, I nod in agreement while she continues. “I think if you tried incorporating a double back layout with a half twist towards the middle of your routine that could give you a lot of momentum to push you through to Worlds.”

Shock lines the face of my teammates as I stare at my coach in disbelief. “You want me to add in The Biles to my floor routine, this late into the season?”

Coach gives a simple nod, not one to give in to the theatrics of her tumblers. “I know you’re skeptical but it’s not unheard of. Your routine right now is good, you definitely have what it



takes to win, but I think you need to add in just a little more complexity to the routine to help you stand out from the competition. Many gymnasts are capable of it, but I think with the right focus and training we could undoubtedly get you there.”

Looking at me with her sharp gaze, I can feel the weight of her critical assessment. Coach Stephenson was an Olympic medalist back in her prime, and she is tough, but I trust her judgment. If she thinks I can do it, then I just have to try harder, and double-down on my training. Still catching my breath after my last run on the mats, I nod in acquiescence as she continues.

“We should have another meeting with Yuchenko and Straus though. I think if we really hone in on your strength training and fine tune your nutrition we can absolutely get you to that next level and you should be able to hit the mark on the added double back layout. Let’s go ahead and plan a meeting with them for early next week to see what changes need to be made and then we can come up with a game plan for adding that into your routine to make sure the transitions stay smooth.”

With that, Coach Stephenson turns and starts directing the other girls on our team in each of their sections. Still in a state of disbelief, I take a minute to really process her words. Coach may be unorthodox in her approach but that is part of what has made her one of the best Women’s Gymnastic Coaches in the country.

I’m not sure how I will be able to make this new addition work. The double back layout, named the Biles after one of the most celebrated Women’s Gymnasts of all-time, was one of her signature moves, and incredibly complex to execute successfully. But if coach thinks I can handle it, then I will just have to lean into the faith that she has in me and really buckle down to get it done.

Since my floor routine was the last part of my practice for the day, I settle onto the warm-up mats to stretch out before hitting the locker room. After showering and changing back into my standard post-practice gear (i.e. sweats, sports bra, and

lightweight zip jacket for optimal comfort) I head outside to wait for my ride.

Normally I would drive myself to and from practice, but I needed new tires and a transmission flush, so my car is out of commission until tomorrow when the shop is done with it. Having to Uber everywhere today has been annoying but hopefully by the time I am out of class tomorrow I can get my baby back. As I stand next to the curb, I pull out my phone to scroll mindlessly through my social feed while I wait for my rideshare, ignoring the several missed calls and texts from Brad.

“So, you *are* deliberately ignoring me.”

With a start, I jump slightly, shocked by the closeness of the voice behind me.

“That’s very naughty of you *princess*. You should know you can’t get rid of me that easily.” With a tsking noise, he shakes his head as he comes to stand before me, and all I can do is stare at the very person I have been dreading seeing since the disaster of a party last weekend.

“Brad, what are you doing here?”

“I came to pick you up baby. Just like old times.”

As his words start to register through the shock of him showing up outside my practice, the twitch in my eye that has been driving me insane for days kicks up again and a shiver rolls down my spine. He sidles up next to me, arm draping around my shoulder, and I fight the urge to cringe at his touch. As he kisses my cheek, I stiffen, anger finally breaking through the shock.

“Old times?! Baby?! Are you fucking kidding me right now?” Jerking out of his grasp, I turn instead to glare at the man who I had devoted the last two years of my life to. “There are no ‘just like old times’ Brad. You don’t get to fuck around with other girls and then come back acting like nothing happened!” *At least, not anymore.* Finally growing a spine that I have lacked for months, I turn my back on him and start to walk away, before being violently jerked back in place.

“Yeah *baby*. Just like old fucking times. You don’t get to turn your back and walk away from this. From *us*. I’m your goddamn boyfriend and you will not ignore me. You had your little tantrum and now you are going to be a good little girl, get in my damn car and I am going to take you home. Just. Like. Old. Times.” His sneering tone is masked underneath the beautiful face of the man that I once thought I had loved, but now all I can feel is nausea at his close presence.

“Brad, there is no ‘us’. Maybe my making out with another guy at a party or ignoring you for the last week wasn’t enough of a message to get through to you, but in case it wasn’t crystal-fucking-clear, let me spell it out for you. The minute I walked into that party and saw you with Stephanie *fucking* Randall’s mouth around your dick we were done. You aren’t my boyfriend. You don’t get to just show up at my gym after practice and act like nothing ever happened. We are over. Get it?”

With each passing sentence, his grip on my arm becomes more painful, the beautiful mask slipping as the ugly truth pushes through to the surface. The sad or ironic thing about this whole predicament is I don’t even remember making out with anyone else thanks to whatever shit I drank. From the sounds of Brad’s texts to me afterwards, however, you would think I was some kind of whore, throwing myself at every man who crossed my path. Not that it even matters. Brad can have sex with whomever the fuck he wants but if I so much as look in the wrong direction, I am totally at fault.

“Ow. Brad, let go. You’re hurting me.” I try to pull my arm free, but his grip only tightens further. Having a brawny 220 lb football player grip your arm full force is no joke.

A tear slips free as my anger is slowly replaced by a genuine sense of fear. Brad had been unkind in the past. There were times when he could be outright cruel, his words often cutting through me like a surgeon wielding a scalpel, precise in knowing where to cut, through to the bone. But for all the other unspeakable shit he had done to me and put me through over the past two years, he had never laid a hand on me prior to today. At least, not like this. Not publicly. Not without a

single care about who was around to see him do it. “Brad. Let go. Please.” Despite my best efforts to contain it, a whimper escapes me and his lips curl in a cruel sneer.

“Ow *Brad!* Let go *Brad!* Please Brad.” His elevated tone mocks me as he continues. “Where was your consideration when I asked you to listen, Danica? Huh?” He jerks me to his side, leaning close to my ear as he whispers, “We aren’t fucking done Danica. You don’t get to make that choice. Only I get to decide when I am done with you, and I am telling you right fucking now *princess* that I am not even close to being fucking done.” Turning his head, he takes a deep breath, inhaling the scent of my hair.

Before I can say anything else, my uber pulls up, the passenger window rolled down as the ride-share driver leans out.

“Everything okay here? You Danica?”

“Yes, that’s me, thanks!” With a shaky breath I respond at the same time Brad states “Everything’s fine here.”

I can see the driver narrow his eyes, but if I say anything I know there will be hell to pay later.

“Hey, aren’t you Bradley Oakley, the new wide receiver for the Thunderbirds?” Turning his attention to the driver, Brad employs his full megawatt smile. Brad has always been a glutton for compliments from his adoring fans.

“Sure am.” His response is sickly-sweet, and sends chills across my aching arm.

“Hey man, I am a huge fan. After that last win, well that was just a hell of a play! Could I get your autograph?” Finally letting go of my arm, Brad pats down his chest while smiling, as if to show he was looking for a pen. Using the opportunity with him being distracted, I rush to open the back door, scrambling inside and locking it before Brad can turn back to grab me. “Sorry man, no pen on me. But definitely come check out the next game yeah?” With a charming smile and wink to the driver, Brad turns to face me, and realizing I have hidden myself within the back seat, goes to open the door.

“Oh no worries dude!” The driver holds up his phone, a feigned smile crossing his face. “I got your picture while you were grabbing this nice young lady!” With that, the driver quickly pulls away from the curb, as Brad’s attempt to open the door goes unsuccessful. “This isn’t fucking over baby! I know where you live. You can’t keep avoiding me!” His shouts fade as we pull further into traffic making our way down the road.

“You okay there lady? Things were looking pretty tense between you two.” The driver glances at me through the rearview and I don’t say anything, just nodding quietly. Another tear slips down my cheek as the pain starts to register in a sharp throb radiating up and down my arm. Not wanting to even look, I can just tell there are going to be bruises when I go to change later. I know the feeling well. A snuffle escapes my shaking lips as I desperately try to hold it together in front of this stranger.

“I’m sorry. He isn’t normally like this. I just...” Panic registers as I realize Brad knows my routine. He showed up at practice right as it was ending and knows that I usually head straight home after. “Actually listen. I know I put in the address already, but do you mind if I change it real quick? I don’t want to go where I was headed if he is gonna be there.”

Unease crosses the man’s face as he looks up at me through the rearview mirror once more. “Uh, sure. But if things are like that, do you need to, I don’t know, file a police report or something? I can drop you off at the local station.” Pulling up the app on my phone, I quickly added a stop to the route I had input without thinking first. “No, please, just... Can you take me here instead? I have family here that will be waiting for me.”

Glancing down at the updated info on his mapped route, the man nods. “Sure thing lady. You just sit back and rest for a few, yeah?”

The man starts to make idle chatter as I look out the window. I think he is just trying to comfort me, filling the awkward silence as I try unsuccessfully to hold back the tears that want to escape. After a long ten minutes across town, my driver

pulls up outside a large three-story townhome on the edge of HCU campus. Wiping the tears from my face, I quietly thank my driver for his help, pulling up the app once more to give a larger tip than usual before I exit the vehicle.

Looking around, the street is quiet as the sun fades low behind the matching row of old brownstones. Trees stand naked, their leaves long since fallen and the ground is slick with snow that has melted into a brown slush. With a deep breath, I make my way forward towards the nearest home. Rather than entering from the front, however, I edge along the narrow space between buildings until I come to the back of the property. Pulling the metal wire attached to the lever handle, I open the gate which leads to the back yard.

While not as big as the space from the frat party last week, this yard is still a good size, boasting a fire pit surrounded by chairs, and an older grill on the patio area. Heading past the grill, I make my way over to the back door, hoping it is unlocked. Holding my breath, I mentally cross my fingers and breathe a sigh of relief as the door silently slides open. I make my way into the quiet living room and glancing around, surprised to see it is not as messy as I would have expected.

# Chapter Seven



## Theo

Raucous laughter fills the air as they guys talk over one another. High off another win, normally we would celebrate with a big party. With it being mid-week however, we settled for several rounds of drinks at our favorite local bar before calling it and heading back to our place. A few of the guys have girls hanging off each arm, kissing on their necks or whispering about the dirty things they were going to do to keep the celebrations going.

Axton is currently recounting the tale of his winning goal for the fifth time, with each retelling becoming more exaggerated and fantastical as the night wears on; meanwhile Morrigan tips slightly, leaning against wall, totally wasted, without a care in the world. After getting the door unlocked, I reach over to help Morrigan into the house while the others follow noisily behind.

Abrams, Thompson and Marrow continue into the kitchen to gather another round of snacks while a few guys break off to different corners of the house to continue their party with the puck bunnies they picked up for the night's festivities. Seeing that Morrigan is headed towards the living room, most likely to pass out on the couch until morning, I toss my bag in the corner and turn to follow Marrow into the kitchen when I am suddenly startled by a loud yelp.

Looking over, I see that Morrigan has unknowingly thrown his drunk ass on the couch right on top of a large lump. A lump

that is now glaring up at us with angry eyes as she is yelling and shoving at Morrigan to get off her. Morrigan chuckles to himself, oblivious as he rolls over to the other side of the couch, unintentionally leaving only a small amount of room for her to try and escape. I see, however, that her legs are still pinned underneath his heavy frame. Shaking my head, I quickly make my way over to Danica, grabbing her arms to help pull her out from underneath his heavy ass.

With a sharp cry, Danica flinches, trying to jerk herself out of my hold. "I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to hurt you, just trying to help get you off the couch." I readjust my hold, wrapping my arms around her slight frame and lifting her fully off the couch before placing her gently down in front of me. "What are you doing here anyway?" With a closer look, I see that her hair is disheveled, eyes red rimmed and swollen, cheeks blotchy, as if she had been crying for a while. Wearing an oversize hoodie that is way too large on her small frame, I do a double-take when I realize it is one of Sebastians. "Are you okay?"

Her lips wobble, and the anger at being sat on by my burly teammate fades quickly as more tears start to fall. "I'm... sorry... I just- ... I ... I shouldn't be here. I'll go." Shuddering breaths wrack her small frame as she tries to speak through her repressed tears. With one glance, I can see she is barely keeping it together as she struggles to contain her emotions. Shaking my head, I go to grab her arm again to lead her to my room where we can talk in private. Again she flinches, this time with a small whimper. My eyes narrow as I move my hand away, glancing at her arm.

"Come with me, *passerotto*." Instead of taking her arm, I gently place my hand at the base of her spine as I guide her across the room, leading her up the stairs. I remain silent until we enter my room, locking the door behind me before turning to face her once more. I take my time looking her over before I step closer. Silently, I reach out and gently lift the hoodie over her head, dropping it at my feet.

Danica says nothing, biting her bottom lip as she tries to fight back the tears. My eyes roam from her tear-stained face down her body until it reaches her left side. Fresh, angry bruises are



blossoming over a wide area, covering a large portion of her upper arm. Bruises with the distinct appearance of a handprint. My vision narrows as my world tinges red, unable to tear my gaze away from the darkness marring this beautiful girl.

“I’m so sorry, I always seem to be crying when I’m around you. I didn’t mean to just barge in. Really, I wasn’t even here for you. I just- I couldn’t go home, and Caleb’s wasn’t an option either. But I remembered Bash usually leaves the back door open and I ... I just-” Her body turns in on itself, arms crossing over her chest, hand covering the bruise so it’s no longer on prominent display.

If this were any other day, under any other circumstance, I wouldn’t be able to help but notice the fact this beautiful mess of a girl was wearing nothing other than tight black yoga pants and a cute pink sports bra, showcasing her generous perky breasts. My gaze would be drawn to her smooth stomach, slim waist and tight ass that is highlighted so perfectly in her workout clothes. As it is, my mind barely seems to notice, cataloging the information to be stored in the back of my brain for a later time as a cold fury overtakes me, the high from our earlier win long forgotten.

“Tell me what happened. Then I’m going to fucking kill him.” My voice is low, tone serious. I don’t even bother to ask, I know who is responsible. All I need to know now is how it happened, so I can make sure to repay the gesture in kind when I find my *dear old friend* later.

“Please. Really, it’s nothing. I just- he surprised me after practice and he was angry I have been ignoring him for the last week. Normally he isn’t ... normally he doesn’t ...” Her voice trails off, glancing up into my stormy expression. “I don’t think he meant to hurt me. He was just really upset about my ignoring him.”

“Has he hurt you before?” Stepping closer into her space, ice fills my veins, my tone just as cold.

Her eyes bounce between both of mine and she takes a small step back. I can see the hint of fear in her eyes, but still, I press forward, not allowing her to create distance between us. She

tries to back away once more, but her legs bump into the side of my bed, allowing no room for escape. I lean into her, my hands gently pushing back a few stray curls that have escaped her ponytail before slowly caressing her cheek, and her gaze drops to her feet, unable to meet my gaze.

“Eyes on me, *la mia diavoletta*.” Deliberately softening my tone so as not to frighten her further, I continue. “You are safe with me. But I need you to tell me. Has he hurt you before?” I can see the hesitation in her face as she bites her bottom lip, worrying it.

“He hasn’t ... um... I mean... *not like this*.” The soft reluctance of her tone as she looks into my eyes tells me all I need to know. Her gaze drops to the floor, unable to maintain my gaze. Her shoulders droop, expression full of defeat and something else I can’t quite pinpoint.

“But he has hurt you.” It’s a statement, not a question.

Her lips tighten in a flat line as her expression closes off, body becoming rigid. Her silence speaks volumes. “Look, I’m really sorry for bothering you. I shouldn’t have come here; I just knew everyone would be gone with the game and it would be a safe space for me to wait until I could go home. I didn’t mean to fall asleep on your couch. I was going to leave before any of you got back ... Anyway, I really should be going.” She tries reaching down behind me to grab at Sebastian’s hoodie but my voice stops her in her tracks.

“Stay.” She pauses, looking up at me questioningly.

“I don’t want you going home with that fucker looking to harass you. You clearly didn’t feel safe going back where he could find you, so stay. At least for tonight.”

“I can’t just stay. My parents might not give a shit where I am most of the time but they will definitely notice if I just don’t come home at all. I have to go back.” I raise an eyebrow sardonically as she continues. “Look, just let me grab Bash’s hoodie so I can put it back and grab my lighter one from his room, then I’ll call an Uber and be on my way. Out of your hair in no time.” Forcing a cheerful smile, she pulls out her phone and unlocks it- presumably to call a ride- but I pull the

phone out of her hand and hold it above my head, well out of her reach.

“You’re staying, diavoletta. If your parents didn’t notice your absence when you crashed at my place last weekend, I doubt they will care much about this one. Sit your fine ass on that bed and don’t move.” I nod in the general direction of my bed behind her. My words are true, from what I gather from my conversations with Caleb during practice this week, his excuse to their parents went by without a hitch. Though what that says about her relationship with her parents, for their disinterest in the whereabouts and wellbeing of their daughter, speaks volumes.

I gently press on her shoulder with my other hand, urging her to step back once more until her legs bump into the bed and she plops ungracefully down on my mattress.

Turning, with her phone in my hand I head over to my dresser. Reaching inside, I grab one of my worn Seattle Sabretooth t-shirts and a pair of boxers and toss them to her over my shoulder. Without a word, I turn and leave the room, closing the door behind me. Pocketing her phone, I reach for my own in my pocket and dial a number I know by heart.

“Hey man, what’s up? A bit late to be hearing from you. I figured by now you would be balls-deep in some chick celebrating your big win.”

Cutting straight to the point, I don’t bother with my usual sarcastic response. “I need a favor.”

## Chapter Eight



### Theo

Returning to the room a short while later, I see that she has changed out of her clothes, which are now folded neatly and sitting in a small pile on my desk. Danica is sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed, fiddling with her hands nervously and I can see the angry bruise peeking out beneath the sleeve of my shirt. Glaring at it, I turn and grab my favorite hoodie before I round back to face her once more.

“Put this on.” I gently toss the hoodie onto her lap and she looks up at me, her face questioning. “If I have to see that bruise one more time, I’m not going to be able to stop myself from leaving right now to find that fucker and break his goddamn nose. So please, for the love of God, just put on the damn jacket.”

Hesitantly, she lifts the hoodie and pulls it over her head. After reaching down to pull the hoodie over her torso, she grabs the edge of the hood, pulling it to her nose and inhaling softly. “Mmm. It smells like you,” she mutters quietly to herself. She is entirely drowning in my jacket, her petite frame swallowed up in the material. But with her hair a mess and face bare of makeup from all her previous tears, numerous freckles on prominent display, she is a goddamn beautiful sight sitting in the middle of my bed. I swallow, trying to force down the thoughts that make my cock stand at attention. Caleb’s sister. She is my teammate’s little sister, and she is injured and scared. Not the fucking time dude.

As I continue to stare, she fidgets uncomfortably, pulling her legs up and pulling the hoodie over her knees before hugging

her legs tight to her chest. “You know, I could have just worn Bash’s hoodie, since I already raided his closet. You didn’t have to do all of this.” She nods down at her body.

Over my dead body will this beautiful woman wear another man’s clothes. I don’t care if he happens to be my best friend, or practically another brother to her. And there is no goddamn way in hell she is wearing any man’s clothes while sitting in my bed unless they are mine. It isn’t gonna fucking happen. Whether she realizes it or not, the moment this beautiful girl came into my life, into my home looking for safety, she became mine. And I *always* protect what is mine.

Rather than giving her a response, I simply turn to grab myself a pair of sweats from my dresser. Rounding once more to face her, I unlace my boots and remove them, neatly placing them in their spot at the foot of my desk, before slowly unbuttoning and removing my jeans. Her eyes widen as she watches me silently. I may not allow myself to touch her as she’s my friend’s younger sister (aka off limits by the bro-code standard- *at least for now*), but that doesn’t mean I can’t look. And I sure as hell don’t mind letting her look back at me, stoking the fire for what I know will one day become a blazing inferno.

I may not be as fucking carefree with my dick as a lot of the guys on the team who like to bounce around between puck bunnies, but that doesn’t mean I am unaware of my own looks. I know my muscled thighs and sculpted ass are a turn-on for all the ladies in the league, not just the ones who are fans of our team. I work my ass off, literally, to stay in great shape- especially during the season. It takes more than just talent to maintain my status as one of the top players in the country.

But the real moneymaker? Well, I’m curious to see how she will respond to that. Standing in front of her in boxers and t-shirt, I take my time pulling on my sweats, making sure she gets the full outline of my hard cock. Her wide, silent eyes don’t miss a thing as she observes me from her perch on my bed. As I go to remove my shirt her jaw drops, though I don’t think she even realizes it, and I can’t help but smirk.

## Chapter Nine



### *Danica*

Tattoos. Tattoos for days. Holy fucking shit! Most of his right torso, going up into his shoulder, is covered in an intricate design of a dragon, tail wrapped along his waistline as it climbs its way up across his chest, breathing fire across his shoulder. The flames bleed into a full sleeve covering his entire right arm from shoulder to wrist. A complex time piece shattered and melted under the fiery breath of the dragon. In the midst of it all is a skull shedding a single tear.

I am in awe of this beautiful piece of art. I have always been a huge fan of tattoos, and piercings for that matter, but unfortunately have never been able to get any myself. While my parents could care less about where I am at any given hour of the day, they would positively lose their shit if I ever gave in to temptation and tried to get a tattoo or piercing. God forbid I do anything that would impact my image for my family or my gymnastics competitions. It would “reflect badly” on them and “remember Danica, we have an image and certain standards to maintain.” I am, of course, just a reflection of them in all that I do, *or how I appear*.

Not that they care enough to actually attend any of my competitions. Oh, they put on a great show to everyone else, my trophies on display alongside my brother’s so they can brag to their colleagues whenever they host one of their numerous dinner parties that they put on throughout the year. You would think they were so proud of me for all my accomplishments.

The truth of the matter, however, is that they haven't bothered to attend any of my competitions in years. It has become an expectation that I excel in my studies and my sport, but as long as I maintain the status quo they don't have to put in the effort themselves. They just coast along, living in the glory of Caleb's and my own successes. If I let slip, however? If I *don't* medal in a competition? Well then, that is an entirely different issue altogether.

What good is having a daughter they didn't want in the first place if I can't at least help elevate their social standing? If I can't dress the way they want, attend a prestigious school and get perfect grades, date the guy they choose for me to date? If I can't stand out in the masses of women competing in professional level gymnastics to make *their* precious family name household conversation, then am I really worth the time and money spent on raising me?

I think that is what stings the most through all of this. Every step of the way, I have done whatever is expected of me. I get the grades they want, from the classes they choose for me. I wear the clothes they expect me to wear. Hell, I even made their sport of choice my passion, trying to impress them in what really has been an exhausting and futile journey. But two years ago, when my father made an underhanded business deal with Mr. Oakley, the expectation in exchange was that I was to be traded as a promise of goodwill.

Anyone who thinks arranged marriages are a thing of the past make me want to fucking laugh. I was told in no uncertain terms that Bradley Martin Oakley Jr. would be my boyfriend moving forward. He would help elevate my image as I work my way towards nationals and the Olympics, and in return, he would get a nationally recognized medalist to add to their family along with my parents' social connections.

I would be their shiny new trophy to display as long as we remained dating. Eventually, once married, Bradley would take over his father's company, and then I would become the model trophy wife. Killer body and glorified past full of trophies, with a nationally recognized name in the industry, I would make the perfect dinner partner all the while as I sink

quietly into the background of his life; organizing catered parties and popping out the standard 2.5 golden-blond children the average household is expected to have.

I tried to fight the arrangement at first, to push back. But every step of resistance on my part was met with increasing punishment. At first, it was just my parents' influence. I could live with the groundings, the silent treatment, taking away my "toys" that they thought I couldn't live without (i.e. my car and credit card). But then they started restricting access to my friends, to Caleb. I don't even think he knows but they deliberately started finding ways to keep us apart. And if there is one thing I could not live without in my shitty gilded cage, it was my brother. He was my only saving grace through all the misery, even though he had long since moved out of their house, having graduated three years earlier.

So eventually I just gave in to the demands and expectations. I went along with being Bradley's shiny new plaything, and as captain of the football team in high school, combined with having a high-level competitive gymnast for a girlfriend, we became the "golden couple." He tried to be kind at first. I think he may have even actually been interested in me at one point.

But once he had a chat with both of our fathers and the true nature of our relationship was explained to him, I think he finally realized he could do whatever the hell he wanted. Why put in the effort to make your girlfriend happy and stay faithful when you could have your cake and eat it too, while your girlfriend couldn't do a damn thing about it?

It started with a few unkind words, underhanded barbs. Over the remainder of our high school relationship, it morphed into him sleeping around with half of the cheerleading team, verbally abusing me anytime I tried to push back or got upset. He even got my parents involved a time or two when I really thought I was over the bullshit and tried to call things off. I didn't think it could get much worse.



His graduation night, though, he got wasted after his family's fancy dinner party and raped me. I never told anyone what happened, not even my brother. Why bother when everyone thought we were this perfect couple happily in love and sleeping together anyway? He took a piece of my soul that night, along with the several handfuls of hair he ripped out of my skull when he forcefully shoved his dick down my throat after pinning my hands behind my back and shoving me onto my knees in the rough gravel. I still have a small bald patch from the scar underneath my long layers where the hair refuses to grow back.

After that night I learned to just shut up about my relationship. My parents didn't care what he said or did to me as long as he gave me his precious last name when he graduated college. My friends didn't care because he was the golden star of our high school and now becoming well-known at the college level, even though it's only his freshman year. The only one who would truly care would be my brother and his friends, especially Finn, but I couldn't risk telling them for fear of what would happen to me if they tried to intervene. My parents would rip apart any access to communication I have with them, and they, along with my time at the gym, are my only true escape these days.

Instead, I choose to keep quiet. I come when I am bid, and lie to my parents frequently. They think I am often sleeping over with Bradley in his dorm (all the better to seal that sweet deal they set up) when in fact, I am usually seeking refuge with Caleb or at Finnley's. I have even crashed in Sebastian's room a time or two before he ended up moving to Jock Row with several of his hockey teammates at the start of this year.

The real irony of this whole goddamn situation however, is that the only reason I came to the game last week (and the disastrous party afterward) was because Bradley had made it known that as his "precious girlfriend" I was *expected* to be there. I fully believe he set it up so that I would go looking for him as he demanded, only to find him mouth fucking one of the former Varsity Cheerleaders from my school. He probably expected me to get emotional and upset about him putting his dick in his former girlfriend. He likes when I get upset, it gives

him an excuse to punish me. And God knows there is nothing he enjoys more than finding new ways to torture me with his sadistic forms of punishment.

The only thing he hadn't expected was for me to downright snap. True to history, he had expected me to simply roll over, take it for what it was, and maybe shed a few tears so that he could turn around and punish me *again* for getting upset about him doing whatever the fuck he wanted while I couldn't say a goddamn thing in response.

The fact that I had had enough, had finally grown a fucking backbone, and apparently stood up for myself by walking out on him, well, clearly that was the wrong move on my part. Because not only has he spent the last week harassing me, trying to catch me at home and school, forcing me to leave earlier each day to avoid him, but he finally caught up with me. And when he did, he let go of the leash he had tightly tethered his anger with and gave in to his true darkness in a public setting. I had never seen a look so crazed as his eyes were today when he was grabbing me, trying to force me to his car. Not even the first time he raped me, nor any of the times thereafter over the last six months.

I startle out of my thoughts as a shirtless Theo drops onto the bed next to me. Oblivious, I realize too late that the whole time I had been lost in memories I had been blatantly staring at his chest. I cringe, hoping I don't give off the idea that I am interested. I mean, God he is hot as sin and hell yes, I would gladly lick him from nipples to thighs if I could but I truly had not meant to stay here. Had not meant to be around by the time anyone got back.

I just knew that after a big game they would be out celebrating for hours and that meant it was a quiet place where I could go to hide. Knowing Brad would look for me at home, he also is not stupid and knows my refuge is Caleb's place when I feel like I need to escape. I figured though that he wouldn't even think to look for me in the middle of Jock Row, in a house full of randy hockey players.

Chances were good that if I could get here without being seen that I could avoid him while he looked in on my usual spots,

then I could sneak back home long after he had left and make a beeline for the gym before school so I wouldn't have to risk him catching up with me before he had his own classes to get to.

“... Il mio passerotto ...” Jerking to attention, I realized I was doing it again, getting lost in my own thoughts. I totally missed what Theo was saying, but his hand is gently caressing my face as he sits next to me on his bed, body turned slightly to face mine.

“I'm sorry, what?” A sheepish look crosses my face as I see his concerned expression.

“Don't worry about it. I was just trying to reassure you that I've got it handled. You are safe here for tonight so try and get some sleep, little sparrow.” Both of my eyebrows raise at his statement.

“You had asked me before what it meant, ‘il mio passerotto’ loosely translated as ‘my little sparrow.’ He shrugs before continuing, “I felt it fit you after our introduction last week. You know, petite, cute. Little song bird, dancing and singing along to the music.” One brow raised as his lips quirk up in a smirk, and he shrugs, “unless you are causing trouble, in which case, I feel your other nickname is more suitable. ‘La mia diavoletta’ - my little devil. You know, for your feisty trouble-making nature.” He winks at me before sliding down on the sheets, pulling back the comforter as he goes, and slipping inside. He leans over to the nightstand next to his side, tapping the screen on his phone and the overhead lights switch off. “Night.”

I stare at his back in disbelief. He actually expects me to sleep here, in his bed, in his clothes, with him sharing the same space? I barely even know the guy. Really, I should just drag my ass out of the bed and go crawl into Sebastian's instead. I know he wouldn't mind sharing like he has in the past, so long as he doesn't have a girl in there right now. Scratch that, he would probably love it to have two girls in his bed.

Even then, it would still probably be way less awkward to share a bed with a random puck bunny and with someone who

has been a close friend and adopted brother to me for the past several years, than it is to sleep *once again* in the bed of this almost complete stranger.

“Don’t even think about it, diavoletta.” A mumble facing the opposite direction, I don’t know how he even knew what I was thinking. I hadn’t even gone to stand up yet. “Lay your sexy ass down and get some sleep. I told you, you’re safe here.”

With a huff, I slide down the sheets, rolling over so I am facing the opposite wall. My back turned towards the stubborn man lying next to me, I lay as close to the edge as I can before grumbling “you know, a gentleman would sleep on the floor.”

With our backs facing each other, though I don’t understand the meaning, I hear him mutter “Gioia mia, ma chi ti ha detto che sono un gentiluomo?” By his tone, whatever he said certainly seems sarcastic, and I can’t help but roll my eyes as I hear his soft laughter. It doesn’t take long before I find myself falling into an exhausted, turbulent sleep, lulled by the sound of his chuckle rumbling through the shared bed.

# Chapter Ten



## *Danica*

I wake in a haze of grogginess. I am stuck somewhere between wakefulness and the hellish nightmare that filled my restless sleep. As I pry my swollen, tired eyes open I am greeted by a sight even more hellish. Four grown-ass men whisper yelling at each other while they take turns pointing and staring at me.

“Ahhh!” Startled into wakefulness, I flinch back on the bed as I sit upright, pulling the comforter closer to my chest. “Jesus! What the hell guys?” I snap at each of the men, now looking fully at me. Caleb looks pissed, while Finn and Bash have the grace to look sheepish for being total creeps hovering over me while I sleep. Looking between them, I glare, but my attention is drawn to Theo who pushes himself off the back wall, holding up a plate of food- and, God bless him, one of the largest coffees that Starbucks has to offer.

“Iced venti pumpkin-cream chai tea latte, oat milk, with one pump of vanilla and two pumps of brown sugar.” His expression is smug as he leans down to hand me the coffee and place the plate of food on my lap. A quick glance shows that it is reminiscent of the meal that I had shared with him and his mother last week, which leads me to wonder if his mother had prepared the food as I had assumed, or if he was the chef.

My mouth drops open, surprised. “How- how did you?” I am in shock, the rough night before and lack of caffeine not helping me with my poor brain function this morning. I shakily take the coffee from this blessed man and take a

tentative sip. Perfection. Perfection in a cup. But how did he know my order?

“Okay- so first of all, that is the most ridiculous, long-ass order I have ever heard of.” I changed my mind; he can go to the devil if he wants to make fun of this cup full of heaven.

“Secondly, how did you even come up with an order like that?” He smirks at me as I stick my tongue out at him.

“I’ll have you know; I saw it in a Tik Tok video, but it is absolutely divine so I am sticking with it. You can call me a basic bitch all you want but this pumpkiny-goodness speaks for itself.” I take another sip. “How the hell did you even know my order?”

“Oh, I just hacked into your phone, you know, pulled up your app to look at the order history. Had to make sure I got it right for my girlfriend and all. Gotta start this relationship out on a good note.” He winks and blows a kiss my way. *What. The. Hell.* I stare, dumbfounded.

“So here’s the deal,” Caleb glares between Theo and myself before continuing, “Theo here informed us about that fucker and what he did to you yesterday. The four of us will handle him, but in the meantime, you are under round-the-clock supervision. You don’t get to step a foot outside this place without Theo, Finn, Seb or myself.”

I open my mouth to protest but he continues before I can speak. “What this means is that you will have one of us taking you to and from school, and your gym practice each day. If you have to go home, I will be going with you, if you want to go get coffee or to the library, one of us will also come.” Caleb continues to glare, though I am not sure if he is pissed at me, or the situation in general. Or perhaps the fact that he found me sleeping in one of his best friend’s beds, wearing said man’s clothing.

Picking up where Caleb left off in the conversation, Theo interrupts. “Fuckers who prey on innocent girls don’t just back off once they choose to start abusing them. He views you as a possession, so I am going to make it crystal-fucking-clear that you are *mine*. If he so much as looks at you the wrong way, I

will fucking end him.” He gives me a pointed look, making sure he has my full attention. And how could he not with such a domineering statement like that?

“You may be off limits as Caleb’s little sister, but for all appearances sake, you *are* my girl. I will hold you, kiss you, cherish you the way that that fucker should have, and he is going to see what happens to his precious toys when he tries to break them.” Theo gives me a long look as he pauses, eyebrows raised in question to make sure I am processing what he is saying.

A little slow on the uptake, I am still mentally fumbling on him claiming me as his girl. At last, I am able to sort through my jumbled thoughts and get my feminist ass back into the twenty-first century. “Um ... wait just a goddamn minute.” I fumble momentarily before continuing. “First, I am nobody’s possession or plaything. You can’t just pass me back and forth like a ‘hot potato’ and claim dibs. This isn’t the eighteenth-hundreds. I am not a damn prize to be won or a piece of property that can be sold for the right price! I don’t belong to you, or any man.”

Ironic, coming from me, given that this is essentially what my father and Bradley’s are trying to do. Sell me off like a good little mail-order bride. But with each passing word I become more agitated, and rallying, I gather every last ounce of indignation I can muster as I carry on. “For that matter, you guys can’t just barge in here and tell me you are taking over my life. What about my volunteer work with the children’s gymnastic classes? My own practice? And school? There’s no way you guys can be with me every second of the day; you guys have your own classes, and hockey to think of. Besides, even if you could find a way to work around our clashing schedules, it’s not that simple. I told you last night Theo, things are complicated.”

Arms crossed, hard stare directed into my eyes, I am locked in a silent battle of wills with Theo, quickly becoming oblivious to everyone else in the room.

“Yes, we fucking can, Danni.” My gaze is pulled away by my brother’s irritated interruption. “He put his hands on you. He

scared you. He's gonna fucking pay, but until we can make that happen, we are gonna be right by your side. I know you don't like a lot of attention drawn to you, that's why, *against my better judgment*, we thought it would make more sense for Theo to be your 'new boyfriend' for the time being. Hanging out all the time with a new boyfriend will draw a lot less speculation from outsiders than suddenly being babysat by the three of us all the time." At this, he nods over to Finn and Bash.

Pushing aside the comforter in frustration, I set down my coffee on the nightstand, ignoring the plate of food that Theo also left there, which is probably now cold. I stand in a flurry of anxiety, pacing across the room, oblivious to how I must look like to the guys as I stomp around wearing Theo's boxers and hoodie.

"Besides," Caleb's voice interrupts my agitated pacing, "with the way the two of you made out at the party last week it's not as if a single person alive won't believe that you two are a thing." With this, he glares once more at Theo, and I would swear by his look that he wanted to punch him. Which is just silly, because outside of hockey, I have never seen my brother hurt anyone.

Hands raised placatingly, Theo tilts his head as he responds, "Hey man, she was the one who jumped all over me at the party. I am not typically into younger chicks, but what can I say? The lady demanded my full attention." Theo winks with a mocking smirk at me. Bash and Finn start laughing but quickly try to cover it with a cough as Caleb clenches his fists, stepping into Theo's space.

"Oh my god! You're the guy I made out with?!" My shriek pulls the attention of all four men in the room. "Fucking hell! Theo! You said nothing happened!" I glare accusingly at him, hands on my waist.

"Il mio passerotto, I said we didn't do anything as in 'I didn't sleep with you.' I told you, I don't fuck chicks that aren't sober. No matter how much they may want to climb me like a tree." Theo crosses his arms, staring hard in my direction. It takes me a moment to realize that with my hands on my hips,



it has pulled his hoodie tight and the outline of my naked breasts can clearly be seen through the thin fabric. Crossing my arms over my chest to hide my quickly tightening nipples, I huff before muttering under my breath, “God you are the worst.”

“I may be the worst, baby, but I will be the best fake boyfriend you have ever had.” He sauntered over to the side of the bed and stole a piece of cold bacon off my forgotten plate, chewing thoughtfully. “We finished here?” He looks between each of the guys.

Caleb comes over to my side, pulling me into a tight hug. Kissing the top of my head before pulling away, he responds. “Theo already got the ball rolling on this fake boyfriend business; He’ll fill you in later. I reached out to your coach to let her know you weren’t feeling well so you don’t have to worry about missing your gym practice this morning, and Mom and Dad think you crashed at my place after helping celebrate the win last night at my place. We have to get to class so Theo’s gonna take you to school.

Don’t go anywhere else and fucking call me if that cretin decides to show his face on campus. I’ll be there later to pick you up and take you to the gym.” He pulls me in for one last hug, and Finn and Bash follow suit before following him out of the room. Caleb pokes his head back in through the doorway, “Oh and I brought you some clothes from my place.” He nods to the duffle bag that I hadn’t noticed sitting on the floor by Theo’s desk before disappearing down the hall. And just like that, I guess I am once again left with a new fake boyfriend.

# Chapter Eleven



## Theo

God this fucking girl. How the hell did I get myself into this situation? The events of last night and this morning race through my mind. After her getting dressed, bruise covered by a long-sleeve top that shows way too much of her goddamn tits for my comfort, I led her out to my Chevy sitting on the side of the road in the cool dim morning fog.

Like usual, my playlist kicked in as my Bluetooth connected over the speakers from the custom sound system I installed, just as I was pulling away from the Hockey House. But when Bodies by Drowning Pool filled the car, this fucking girl had the nerve to bitch to me about my “poor taste in music.” Seriously, I’m sure *little miss sunshine and barbie dolls* over here would prefer I play some stupid top 20 or pop hit, Katy Perry or some bubbly-ass bullshit like that. After bickering for the next ten minutes, we finally settled on Deadmau5 and the silence felt heavy as the bass kicked up its beat. At least she has enough taste to like good progressive house music.

I don’t say a word to her as I turn the corner and drive towards the front of her preppy-looking high school. Students mill about, some casually hanging out front, while others reluctantly make their way inside. Unlike my old high school on the far end of town, these preppy students with their rich-ass parents don’t seem to care about timeliness, blatantly ignoring the first bell which had to have rung by now.

Danica looks over at me questioningly as I slow, pulling up alongside the curb. I’m sure she wonders how I know not only where she goes to school, but which entrance to pull up to that

will put her closest to her first class of the morning. What she will soon find out is that with the favor I called in last night, not only do I know her class and daily schedule, but I will soon have access to her whole world. Every email, every text, who her friends are, what her favorite foods are. And yes, even her favorite coffee order. Because I don't do things half-assed.

When I told her that I was gonna show that fucker she was mine, I meant it. And in order to possess someone you have to truly know them, understand what they like and how they operate. That was drilled into me from early childhood, and old habits die hard. So, I am gonna break down her whole fucking life, and by the time this all plays out I will know her better than the back of my hand. Of course, I don't tell her any of that. I'm sure she would think it was a vast breach of privacy and way overstepping the line but I don't give a damn. I protect what's mine, and this girl is fucking *mine* whether or not she realizes it yet.

Rather than telling her any of this, I simply park along the curb and shut off the engine. Quickly hopping out before she can say anything, I round the front to open her door. Helping her out of the car, I reach down to grab her bag, swinging it over my shoulder before I reach my arm around her, pulling her to my side.

With her body tucked close to me, I guide her up the steps to her school, acting the doting boyfriend, all the while keeping an eye on my periphery to make sure there is no sign of her sleazebag ex. At the top, I pull her close, sniffing her hair before positioning her for a chaste kiss on the lips.

I don't know how she manages to do it but even after sleeping in my bed all night this girl still smells like her light floral scent and it sends my pulse reeling. The urge to hold her tighter, kiss her deeper, show the whole fucking place that she belongs to me is overwhelming. I am slammed with thoughts of her tiny form curled into mine as she slept. Her sleep was disturbed, probably filled with nightmares, and she went from hugging the far edge of the bed like her life depended on it, to spooning tightly against my side, seeking comfort.

Of course, I didn't get a fucking minute of sleep, mind reeling with all the ways I wanted to destroy the stupid fucker for everything he's done, for hurting her, all the while fighting off the animalistic urges to claim her as her unaware body clung to me. Instead, I simply held her tight in my arms, as much for my sake, to keep me from doing something stupid and hunting down the asshole, as it was to give her whatever form of comfort I could.

Once the hour was reasonable, I gently pried her out of my arms to sneak out and grab her coffee order while I met up with Finn to go over the information he had found since last night. Never the wiser, she has no clue that he is my go-to man when I need information and help hacking into tech that I can't breach. Figuring out the passcode for her phone was simple enough; I mean really, her brother's birthday? Come on. But for the more complex information, digging into her emails and phone records, getting all the detailed background information, that was best left to Finn as he is the tech whiz of our group.

After reviewing the information that he was able to gather thus far, we met up with the other guys back at my place and I showed them the photo I had snuck of her bruised arm before going over what had happened and my plan moving forward. Caleb was damn near ready to go fuck shit up right then and there, and as much as I am in agreement with him, I also know that we have to be careful moving forward. I got the feeling that there was a lot left unsaid when I probed Danica last night. Until we find out the full truth of the matter, we can't know how to proceed with ruining this dude's life.

I see that we haven't gone unnoticed as I pull back from the kiss. Good, that was the plan. I made sure we were standing right in the middle of the walkway so everyone would have to walk around us. The fact that I chose to wear my jersey? Also, as a strategic move on my part. I want everybody to see us together, to see the number and my name on the back and know that this girl is fucking *mine*. After her precious relationship that was so publicly adored in this place, I figured it would be best to make myself known as loudly as possible.

When I finally take a step back to let her breathe, I scan her face, checking to see any sign of hesitation. She must be fully invested for this to work; if we are gonna make sure this new relationship is believable. “Look at me, passerotto.” Her unsure gaze meets my own.

“Remember, we may be a new couple but we are crazy about each other. Everyone should be talking about us by now so just go with it. How much or how little you say is up to you, but I am not ashamed to have you by my side, so own it. And if that ex of yours tries to show his face, you fucking call me, got it?” My words echo those of her brother from earlier this morning, but I want to be the one she calls, the one she turns to in a moment of need.

She bites her lip, hesitation and weariness showing in her expressive eyes. “I got it.”

“Good.” One more kiss pressed firmly to her forehead and I turned her to face the door, placing her bag on her shoulder and gently pressing her forward with a swat to her fine ass. Startled, she jumps before looking at me over her shoulder. Arms crossed, I just give her a wink and nod of my head as I watch her walk into the building.



## Chapter Twelve



### *Danica*

**M**y phone buzzes with a text as I step up to my locker, opening it.

**Hoodie Guy: One more thing, diavoletta. I took the liberty of adding myself to your contacts. Saved myself under your favorites and I am number two on your speed dial. Just in case.**

He follows up that text with a winky-face emoji. Seriously? He hacked my phone to get my coffee order and then added himself into my contacts... as 'Hoodie Guy.' *Ugh, smartass.*

## Chapter Thirteen



### *Danica*

The day is an absolute whirlwind and passes by in a blur. I cannot even begin to name how many people have come up to me, asking about Brad and what the hell is going on with the new guy. I have endured shameful slurs from the cheerleaders, all friends of Stephanie, my arch-nemesis, and the former head cheerleader whom I caught, well, giving Bradley head at that stupid frat party. It's hilarious considering I was the one who was cheated on. Not. I can only assume either she or Brad have spoken to their old friends, spinning some crap about how I was somehow at fault for the events of last weekend.

“Seriously Veronica? That line is beneath you. Slut-shaming *me* when I walked in on your best friend fucking my boyfriend? Not a good look on you, hun.” I shake my head and walk away from the group who were always more frenemies than actual friends, but whom I now guess are actually just my enemies, at least according to their Queen B.

Though I don't bother looking back, I assume that last line had to have shut her up. I know for a fact that she also slept with Brad last year, but maybe she was unaware of the fact that her so-called “best friend” also hooked up with him behind both of our backs. Mentally, I shrug. Whatever. They are the least of my concerns at the moment.

As the day presses on, I become more anxious, waiting for something, anything. My arm is throbbing with an annoying frequency that makes it hard to ignore underneath my irritating sweater I have been forced to wear. And I keep expecting Brad



to just show up, walk out from around the next corner to continue our “discussion.” Instead, radio silence. No sign of him in person, not a single goddamn call or text.

Nothing to indicate the rage that must be brewing beneath the surface, which is weird after the way he was blowing up my phone yesterday with calls and texts after I finally managed to get away. It is almost more intimidating when he gives me the silent treatment. At least when he’s in my face, I know what to expect and how to brace myself for the inevitable.

By lunch, half of the jocks around the school have joined in on the slut-shaming started by the cheerleaders. The other half who were polite enough to not join in on the rumor-spreading and slut-shaming have all come up to me in the halls between classes to try and get the dirt on the hockey player that they all idolize. Apparently, our little entrance this morning made more waves than I was expecting. But then, it certainly caught me off guard, so why wouldn’t they be surprised that one of the nation’s top college hockey players took interest in a girl so much less interesting than him. My intrusive thoughts are interrupted by a text.

**Hoodie Guy: Look up, il mio passerotto.**

I have been sitting off in the corner, trying to find a moment of peace from the sudden notoriety that my newfound “boyfriend” had brought into my life. I had technically been considered “popular” before, simply by being Brad’s girlfriend. But, let’s be real. He was always the star of the show, the center of attention at this school. The only reason people knew my name was because it was directly linked to his. And before him I was attached to my brother whose hockey skills are legendary at this school, even now- several years after his graduation. Outside of my performance in the professional gymnastics’ world, I have never actively craved or sought out the attention that has often been forced on me thanks to the men in my life.

After glancing at the text, I look up and see that my very own hoodie guy is here in the flesh. He has changed clothes since

this morning. Joggers and jersey exchanged for the standard jeans, hoodie, and leather jacket I am quickly becoming used to seeing. I take a moment to appreciate the view as he saunters closer, realizing that he has most likely already gone through his hockey practice for the day. His hair still looks damp, as if he recently stepped out of the shower.

As he walks closer to me, eyes hooded and expression intent, I can't help but ogle him. A hint of a smirk tugs the corners of his lips as he stands before me. Oh yeah, he knows exactly what he does to me. Fighting off this ridiculous attraction, I roll my eyes and try to calm my racing heart. "What are you doing here Theo?"

"A guy can't just show up to say hi to his woman on her lunch break?" He pulls me up and into his arms, face nuzzling into my hair. He says this so loudly that it can be clearly heard around the quad, and everyone within a ten-foot radius, at least those who weren't trying to unobtrusively stare at me before, are surely watching us now.

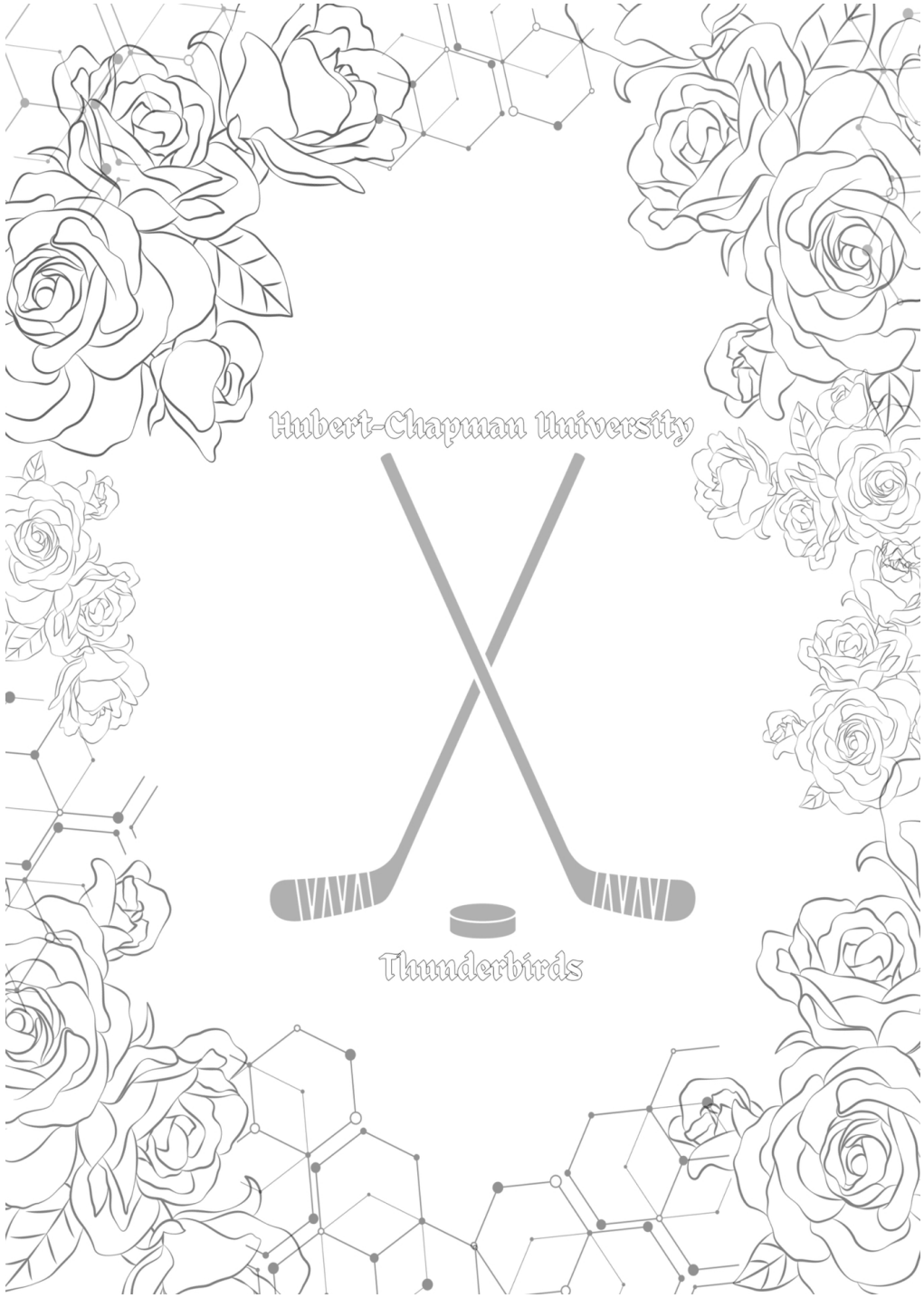
"Oh my god! People are staring! What are you doing?" Trying unsuccessfully to push myself out of his arms, he pulls me closer, face nuzzling the crook between neck and shoulder before slowly nipping his way up to the lobe of my ear. Whispering, so only I can hear, "That's the whole point, diavoletta. We want everyone staring, right? Now be a good girl, shut up and kiss me." With that, he grabs my face between both of his hands, gently forcing my face to look up into his.

I can't read his expression, but I am sure to all of the overly-curious onlookers, he must appear quite the infatuated boyfriend. A slight quirk of the brow is the only warning I get before he takes my mouth with his own, claiming it. Really there is no other way to describe the moment, other than a complete and utter public claiming of what is "his". An explosion of sensation courses through me as his mouth presses against mine, his lips teasing before he gently nips, urging me to open to him.

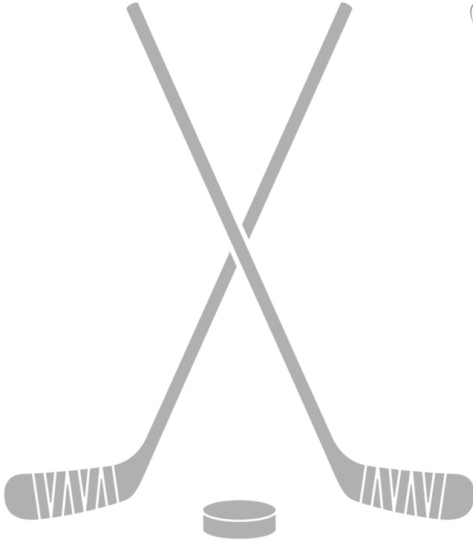
With almost no prompting needed, my mouth opens to welcome him, and his tongue slides into my mouth. As natural

as breathing, we connect in a slow, sensual dance, our tongues intertwining. His hands leave my face, one trailing up to tangle in my hair, which I had long since thrown into a messy bun, as the other travels down my back, pulling me tight to his body. In a state of blissful shock, my hands slide up his arms and rest lightly against his chest as I lean into his expert kiss. His movements, while carnal and impromptu to the outside onlooker, are quite deliberate, and in the back of my mind I register that he is careful to avoid brushing against my injured arm.

He pulls away, kissing me once more lightly on the lips, before turning without saying another word and walking out of the cafeteria. "That's it? No hello or goodbye? Just drive twenty minutes across town, kiss me and leave without a word? That's all I get?" I call to his back as he fades further into the crowd, my heart pounding in my ears. With my shouting, I become painfully aware of the myriad of students in the quad who have taken a keen interest in what just transpired. Oh my god! What is my life turning into? I sink back on to the step where I had been sitting, stunned, and mortified all at once.



Hubert-Chapman University



Thunderbirds

# Chapter Fourteen



## Theo

**M**y heart races as I force my feet to move forward, walking away from the large crowd that was staring. Glancing down at the notification on my watch, I nod slightly. Good, my ‘impromptu’ visit did the job, and Danica, along with the lunch crowd at large, was none-the-wiser to the inner workings of what just transpired.

After dropping her off at school this morning I remained close by, hanging out at a coffee shop where I had easy access to the school if the need arose. Finn met up with me not too long later, taking over “D-watch” while I headed back to campus for our morning practice. There was never a time where I was more thankful than today that Finn had chosen to go into the tech world, rather than following the rest of us into hockey. It allowed a lot more freedom in his schedule, while the rest of us were pretty tied down for the majority of the season.

Finn could do most of his school work remotely; though honestly, with the launching of his startup, none of us really understood why he is bothering with finishing his degree in the first place. His flexibility allowed him to keep a close eye on Danica when I couldn’t be there myself, though, which offered a small sense of comfort. So for today, more than any other time previously, I am thankful for the flexibility with his schedule. As for Caleb, Seb and I? Our morning was spent reviewing old tapes of game footage before hitting up the gym for our post-game routine work-out. At least it made the schedule a bit easier to manage whereas a typical practice day would have required hours spent on the ice.

We were just hitting the showers after finishing up our weight session when we received word from Finn that based on his tracking, Bradley was on the move and looked like he could be headed towards this end of town. Having already come up with a game plan with the guys before Danica woke up, we realized the idiot may try to harass her at school which is why we were taking turns keeping an eye on things in the first place.

To say we booked it out of that locker room was an understatement. Thankfully, I am much more familiar with the less affluent parts of this city and knew of several shortcuts that would help us make better time, even as the fucker got stuck in traffic. We arrived about five minutes before he was due to show. After a quick and silent glance between our group, it was decided that I would create a diversion, acting as a distraction not only for Danica herself, but her classmates as well.

No need for her to feel intimidated in a place where she had to spend a large portion of her day if it could be avoided. And no need to make a scene when this was a matter that needed a more delicate approach. Getting to show up unexpectedly and kiss the living daylights out of my teammate's hot younger sister? Well, that was just an added bonus.

The text notification I had received while walking out of the building confirmed that Caleb had successfully waylaid Bradley. We all figured he would appear to be less suspicious as a distraction than Seb, Finn or myself. If all went according to the plan we had set up earlier this morning, Caleb should have used some lame excuse about having to meet up with Danica to bring her the gym bag that was 'left at his place'. By doing so, this confirmed Danica was crashing with Caleb as a means of escape rather than hiding at home, which should theoretically create a safe window for her to go back to her house if she wants. And if not? Well then it looks like she will be hanging with me for a bit.

Though the excuse is certainly not one that I would have taken seriously, it appears that Bradley was dumb enough to take it at face value. After "running into" Danica's older brother

unexpectedly, Caleb was able to charm the fucker into joining in his “ongoing post-game celebrations filled with lots of booze and puck bunnies.” It was a convincing enough distraction with his tiny dick that he was willing to put off another confrontation with the supposed love of his life for a few more hours. And Caleb was able to join Bradley in his daddy’s Bentley for a ride back to campus for the frivolities. Fuck. Meanwhile, we doubled-back, using some of my earlier shortcuts that helped us make better time so we could get to the rendezvous point ahead of the sleazebag.

# Chapter Fifteen



## Theo

We appeared to have made good time, and Caleb's detour to stop and pick up more booze gave us the cushion we needed to make it back well before they did. I looked around the room that was set-up in a hurry. Being the party-house of a former teammate, it was neutral territory that shouldn't trigger suspicion when Bradley pulls up in his Bentley. And the favor I called in will be well worth what I owe the guy later.

The makeshift stage in the center of the room helps with the scene we are trying to set, and the single chair, center-stage gives off the impression that someone is getting lucky today. Flipping several switches on the wall, fluorescent bulbs shut off as the blacklights that line the floors and ceiling kick on. Seconds later, a loud beat kicks off from the sound system in the corner of the room.

As weird as it is being in this party space when it is completely empty, I gotta say, it appears to have been a good choice for today's activities. The house is just enough off the beaten path that we shouldn't have any unexpected visitors, and the music is suitably loud so that no one should overhear the little "chat" that we are about to have. Vibration on my wrist alerts me to the fact that they are almost here. Right now, we just sit back and wait.

Several minutes later, Bradley walks in carrying an armload of booze, chatting over his shoulder with Caleb. Completely oblivious to the fact that he just walked into a fucking mouse trap. Idiot. I wait patiently in a dark corner, Sebastian flanking the wall opposite me.



“Yeah man, we are a bit early but the party should be kicking up real soon. Place is gonna be swarming with puck bunnies, just you wait. Here, dude, you can dump the liquor on the counter and then why don’t you just chill, get comfortable in that chair over there and I will direct the show over to you.” Caleb’s voice speaks firmly, just a few feet from where I am leaning against the wall, face hidden in the shadows.

“Cool man. It’s real fucking sweet of you to invite me to this party. I’m sure Danica’s told you things have been a bit tense between us but you know how these chicks are.” Bradley shrugs noncommittally, continuing “Every little fucking thing is drama with these bitches. She surprises me by showing up to my afterparty after winning the game and then flips the fuck out on me before I can even talk to her about whatever she mistakenly thinks she saw. But you know her, she’ll calm down and we will all go back to our normal routine soon enough.”

Okay, I am getting real sick of listening to this asshole. Silently, I push off from the wall and walk around to stand at his back. Pausing for a moment, I cock my head to the side and wait to see if his intuition will kick in and alert him to the danger he has unwittingly walked into. Huh. I guess the genius hasn’t needed to develop that particularly saving skillset. Pity for him.

“Hey Bradley,” he pauses his conversation with Caleb, turning to see who had tapped him on the shoulder. Instantly my fist connects with his face and he drops hard on the ground.

Ugh. Asshole can’t even take a punch. “Help me drag his sorry ass over here guys.”

## Chapter Sixteen



### *Danica*

**M**y shoulders hunched forward as I tuck my head down, walking determinedly towards the exit. My long, tangled curls fall forward, blocking the view of my earbuds that are currently playing my favorite audiobook in a futile attempt to try to drown out the voices and stares. It curtains off my face and provides only a miniscule amount of privacy as I try to make my escape.

I spent all my afternoon classes with my headphones in, hiding behind my wild curls while trying to block out the world around me. For whatever pathetic amount of protection it's worth, I let my hair down not long after Theo walked out on me at lunch in a sad attempt to shelter myself from the stares and vicious whispers pointed in my direction.

I swear you could hear a pin drop on the marbled floor with how intently everyone was staring at us as he so casually strolled in like he owned the place. For all the hoodies and jackets this guy likes to wear, there is nothing that could hide him from prying eyes. His tall frame and brawny, muscled shoulders command attention in any crowd. Lack of subtlety notwithstanding, hockey is a huge sport in our area and he is well known.

Like, nationally. Theo is to hockey what a young LeBron James is to basketball. His ease on the ice and natural-born talent made his rise to stardom inevitable. Hell, I don't even

enjoy hockey, despite my brother being a player, and I even recognized his name when we were first introduced.

Theodore Giovanni's notoriety both on and off the ice is the last thing I need right now. I know that in his twisted head he thinks he is doing the right thing, trying to protect me from my crazy ex. They all do. Reality, however, is not as sweet as fairytales. Well, maybe Grimm's fairy tales possibly. Regardless, no matter how hard they may try to save me, there is no breaking free from this gilded cage. Brad was right when he cornered me. I had my tantrum over him cheating so blatantly but we both know I will go back to being his little plaything. I simply have no other choice.

Outside, the crisp, foggy morning has given way to an overcast and bitterly cold afternoon. The gloomy weather matches my mood as I proceed forward, headed towards the parking lot. After a moment, I pause- remembering that Theo drove me this morning, so I don't have my own transportation as a means of escape, and that Caleb was going to meet up with me to bring me to practice. Sighing, I turn back towards the building exit. As I go to reach for my phone to check on the status of my brother, a hand grabs my shoulder from behind and I scream, jumping slightly.

Expecting to find Bradley as I turn to see who grabbed me, I am met instead by Finnley, of all people. I see he is trying to hide his amusement at my over-the-top reaction as I process for a moment that I am safe; for now, anyway. Taking a deep breath, I pull out one of my earbuds before smacking Finn on his arm. "Jesus Finn! Warn a girl next time! I thought you were Bradley." That wipes the amusement clean off his face. Concern fills his eyes as he gives me a once over.

"Sorry KC. Didn't mean to scare you. I tried calling your name several times but clearly, you didn't hear me." Where his twin brother has nicknamed me "Kitty Cat," Finn, being the computer nerd that I love so much, is always shortening his phrases into acronyms for "ease of use" (his phrasing, not mine). I guess "KC" is just easier than saying "Kitty Cat" all the time.

Whatever, it's the less annoying of the two options anyway. They are the only ones who could get away with calling me "Kitty Cat" and if anyone else were to attempt it, I am pretty sure they would knock that person down a few pegs for even trying.

"C got held up, so I am here to act as your chauffeur for the afternoon instead." He offers his arm with a flourish in an over-the-top gentlemanly gesture. Rolling my eyes, I loop my good arm through his and allow him to lead me away from this nightmare setting.

"Held up how?" Inquiring, I look towards his profile as we continue walking down the block towards Caleb's parked car. Well that's weird. "Why is Caleb's car here? You said he was busy?"

Not bothering to answer my questions, he simply opens the door for me, waiting until I am in the seat and buckled before closing it and rounding to the driver's side. As he pulls away from the curb, I try again.

"Finn. You're not telling me something. Where's Caleb? What's going on? You guys are all being really weird right now."

Finn glances quickly in my direction before bringing his eyes once more to the road. He shrugs. "What can I say, KC? It's not every day our little sis gets herself into a mess with her boyfriend that requires round-the-clock monitoring. C's caught up at the moment taking care of a few things with Seb and T. They rode together so it was just easier for me to take his car."

We ride in an uncomfortable silence, the minutes passing as he heads towards the busy downtown area where my sports center training facility is located. Even though we have only known each other for about three years, Finn knows me better than anyone. While his brother was always busy doing hockey things with my brother, Finn was always around any time I was trying to escape my home. Being Caleb's roommate freshman year, I ended up spending more time with him than anyone and now he is like another brother and my best friend all rolled into one. We tell each other everything... well,

almost everything, I guess. I never could bring myself to tell him what happened last June. I probably should have.

Able to read me like a book, Finn can probably tell that I am still trying to process everything that's happened. I can tell he is trying to give me time to try and work through my muddled thoughts, though from the way he keeps shooting side-glances over in my direction, I can tell there is more he wants to say.

Opening his mouth, he starts to speak, before pausing awkwardly. After another false start, the words finally come out, with gentle hesitation. "You can talk to me about it, that is, if you need someone to talk to. I'm always here if you need me, ya know? I love you. We all do." He looks pointedly in my direction before quickly glancing back at the road ahead.

Letting out a small sigh, I hug myself and shake my head. "I- I can't Finn. I just..." Unsure of how to word this without making things a thousand times worse, my voice trails off. "It's just not that simple."

"I get that, I really do. It must be hard to open up after everything that's happened over the last week. I know you love him, so this whole thing must be like a nightmare for you."

At his gentle tone, I feel myself start to shut down. He has no idea just how much of a nightmare my life has been and the guilt of not confiding in him starts to eat away at my gut. Some fucking nightmare. More like my own personal brand of hell. Ha. The fact that it hasn't *just* been this last week is entirely the problem. It has been almost two years of lies, gaslighting, cheating. And six months of so much worse. But between my own parents and Bradley's, this nightmare I'm living in is worse than the one on Elm Street.

There is no safe escape for me, no happy ending to my story. The guys just can't see it yet. And I can't bring myself to tell him.

We continue the rest of the drive silently. I can always count on Finnley to be there for me, without pushing. Don't get me wrong, I love Caleb and Bash unconditionally; but with Finn? I don't have to pretend to be anything I'm not. No need to

keep my snarky walls up that earned me my “kitty cat” nickname. Gone is the dedicated, straight-A student star athlete. I can just be the laid-back girl who loves to read silly romance novels with the altogether unrealistic happily ever after; the one who is a total foodie and loves to stay up on weekends bingeing shows or trying to kick his ass at video games. (It never happens, he will always be 1000% better than me at every video game but still, he lets me pretend that I stand a chance at winning, and to me that is everything).

Maybe it’s simply because he was always around more. While Caleb and Bash were away for long hours at a time with practice or games, though Finnley was focused on building his own tech start-up, he was just physically present. I would spend hours hiding away in Caleb and Finn’s dorm. Even on the days when he was lost in his own digital landscape, he was still here by my side whenever I needed him.

I’m not entirely sure that he knows there is more I’m not saying. Regardless, I can see that wondering is killing him inside. He just doesn’t understand *how much* is really left unsaid. Even now, he is most likely thinking back over the past six months, how I have spent increasingly more and more time hanging out at his place or Caleb’s. Always trying to escape my antipathetic parents and my sadistic “love”.

I know I should have said something. Any one of the times I was over there, I should have just pussy’d up and told him what was happening. And yes, I said “pussy’d up.” Dicks are the weaker organ, and you will never convince me otherwise; never mind the fact that since the end of last spring one has been used repeatedly to keep me on my knees, legs cut out from underneath me. When all is said and done though, how do you just own it and say “I’m stuck in an abusive relationship with a narcissistic rapist that my parents are going to force me to marry.”? I’ve never been good at asking for help, not that ‘help’ could truly be given in this situation.

We pull into the parking lot of the sports center and he gives me a half smile before opening his door. Following suit, I get out on my side and head towards the side entrance so I can cut directly to the locker room. Finn doesn’t say a word, following

quietly behind, only pausing once we reach the entrance of the women's locker room.

“You good?” I nod sharply, then head inside.

## Chapter Seventeen



### *Danica*

While I'm sure my teammates found it weird, I chose to change in one of the actual closed bathroom stalls, rather than the locker room itself. They probably found it equally weird for me to be wearing one of my long-sleeved leotards for a simple practice when typically my preferred work-out attire consists of athletic pants and a sports bra. If the side-glances they exchanged were any indicator, they had probably heard some of the rumors about the situation at the party last weekend along with Theo's appearance at my school today.

We don't all attend the same prestigious private school, but generally speaking, we are a tight-knit community within our team, and gossip travels fast. Regardless, they choose not to bring up my strange behavior, instead deliberately turning to talk around me about other local gossip while we hit the mats for our stretches.

Midway through our normal warm-up routine, I notice that Finnley has made himself comfortable off to the side of the mats, working intently on his laptop. He of course can't be bothered to watch as he has seen my routines dozens of times. And once he gets into his cyberpunk mode the rest of the world fades away, so it is not all that surprising that he isn't checking out the girls working out in their skin-tight shorts and sports bras. Well that, I guess, and the fact that he isn't a total creep.

Before I can start my normal routine, I catch up with Coach off to the side, apologizing for missing my weight training session this morning. Coach Stephenson is great at pushing us



to excel, and can sometimes come across as a hard-ass but she means well. Normally, missing any AM weight session or after school practice would be a big issue, so I am caught off-guard when she waves a hand dismissively in the air before telling me to get back to it. Unease settles deep in my chest as I wonder what the guys said to her that she would be so forgiving of missing practice with almost no notice.

It doesn't take me long before I get lost in the movements. Beam practice and uneven bars are both areas that require intense concentration. Lack of focus can lead to serious mistakes and career-ending injuries. I have seen it happen too many times to other athletes that have more talent and all my respect, so I double-down and focus on what's in front of me.

Several hours later, I am breathing hard and my limbs are literally shaking with exhaustion. I have pushed my skills to the limit today, intent on drowning out my own intrusive thoughts. Coach seems pleased with the intensity that I brought to today's session so hopefully that helps make up for a bit of the disappointment she must feel towards me from this morning.

I drop to the mats with a groan, wiping my face with the towel I have draped over my neck and taking a long gulp of water. I know I need to stretch out again, to help my body cool down safely but damn it all if I don't want to just collapse into a heap on the floor and lay there. Stephenson calls to the rest of the group to finish up. As they all make their way to join me on the mats, I force my aching limbs upright for my final stretches of the day.

Legs stretched out in a split as I stretch my inner quads, I feel a tingling sense of awareness, like someone is watching me. Goosebumps rise on my sweat-dampened flesh and I glance towards the end of the room where I had last seen Finn with his laptop. Rather than seeing my go-to guy diligently typing away, my search ends as it collides with the intense heat filling Theo's icy blue gaze. My cheeks flush as awareness races across my body, electricity filling the empty yards between us, and I'm unable to maintain eye contact.

Shrill whistling signals the end of practice and most of the group filters back towards the locker rooms to hit the showers. Normally, I would shower and change here before heading home but feeling exposed with the achy bruises hidden beneath my long sleeve, I simply drag my tired butt off the floor and head over to meet my fate. Stopping several feet away, I take a long look at the man who has filled so much of my head space today.

“Hey diavoletta,” refusing to settle with the space I had given, he closes the gap until he is almost toe-to-toe with me. “That looked pretty intense over there.” Nodding in the direction of the mats, I am unsure if he was referring to the cool-down or if he had been watching my final routine on the mats prior.

“What are you doing here? Where’s Finn?” Not bothering to comment on his remark, I simply press on with my questions. “Will you please explain to me what the hell is going on?” I gesture at him in frustration. Grabbing my hand, he presses into me, leaning down to kiss my heated cheek.

“Just came to watch my girl at practice. Sorry I couldn’t get here sooner; I got caught up in something with your brother and Seb.”

“So Finn said,” I raise my eyebrows pointedly, refusing to acknowledge the furious blush traveling down my cheeks into my neck. “That doesn’t explain what the hell is going on. First, you bombard me with a group intervention before I even had a chance to drink my coffee, then you bamboozle me at school and cause a huge scene and leave me to deal with the aftermath. Now you’re here. Why are you here?”

Try though I might, my resistance is waning beneath his heated gaze, and he tucks a stray curl back behind my ear. Damn curly hair never stays put in its stupid bun. The amount of product I have to use to get it to stay properly in its place for competitions is obscene and I refuse to put myself through that on a daily basis. I have long since given up on maintaining the perfectly coiffed look for day-to-day training.

“A guy can’t come see his girl practice? Come on now, il mia diavoletta. I gotta take advantage of what little down-time I

have admiring such a skilled gymnast. But there will be more time for that later. Hurry up, we gotta get going; we have plans for this evening; don't want to be late. Grab your stuff and you can shower at my place before we head out." He grabs my shoulders, turning me around and once again lightly pats my ass, encouraging me to head towards the locker room.

"Hey!" I glare at him over my shoulder before stepping forward. Realizing that we have garnered a crowd of onlookers as some of the gymnasts have paused to stare at Theo, my face floods once more with embarrassment. The girls who are all staring unabashedly probably have more to do with his absolutely divine form rather than his interactions with me specifically. But the observations coming from my male colleagues are most likely related to his notoriety in the Hockey field; at least, if the looks of shock and awe on all of their faces are any indication. Shaking my head in annoyance at once again being drawn to the center of attention, I quickly make my way into the locker room to grab my things so I can leave.



## Chapter Eighteen



### Theo

Speechless. I am utterly blown away, captivated by the graceful beauty before me. Though I was not able to be here for the start of practice for obvious reasons, I did arrive not long into the first hour. Finn stayed to hang out for a while before he had to get going and we both just watched in silent awe of the incredible talent in front of us. I can't say I have ever kept up with gymnastics as a sport. I am vaguely familiar with some of it, however, having caught sporadic intervals whenever the hockey teams didn't overlap for competitions during the winter Olympics.

I can't say I know the name of a single move performed, but each flip and jump looked so graceful, despite the clear power shown within her toned muscles. She got up on what I think is just called a beam and I was holding my breath through her whole routine, which ended with a complicated-looking jump/flip thing where she landed on the mat.

I knew from previous times when her brother mentioned her that she was highly skilled in her sport and well-known at even an international level, but I am utterly blown away by the raw power and grace I just saw on full display. Danica is so lost in what she is doing that I don't even think she realizes I have been standing here watching her this whole time. As their coach calls for the end of practice, my cock twitches at the sight of her stretched out on the mats, cooling down all her tired muscles. Damn if she isn't the most beautiful sight, and I have to fight the urge to walk over to where she is now

stretched out in a split, pull her up and kiss the living daylights out of her.

It's amusing to watch her startled expression when she realizes I have been watching her during practice. I can see the exact moment when she becomes aware of my presence. After she finishes, I make my way over to speak with her. I can't help but feel a sense of satisfaction in the fact that our conversation causes her face to flush in the prettiest blush, highlighting her numerous freckles. When she is embarrassed or turned on her blush travels down her neck and highlights all her sexy freckles in an alluring manner. I wonder just how far down her blush goes. Someday I am going to explore every inch of her toned body and take my time kissing every single freckle. With a sigh, I discreetly readjust my hard cock as I watch her enter the locker room.

After exiting the locker room, I grab her gym bag before casually draping my other arm over her shoulders. Danica throws me a questioning glance as I guide her out of the gym over to the parking lot where I have parked. From my periphery I notice that we still have a crowd so I tilt my head down and place a gentle kiss on the side of her head before stopping to open the passenger door. Tossing her bag into the back seat, I grab her hand and help her into the seat before gently closing the door and rounding to the driver's side.

The ride across town back to my place on Jock Row is made in silence. Not a single comment from her smart mouth about my choice in music the whole drive. Huh. That's a shame. I can't help the fact that I enjoy goading her and it seems car music is an easy way to do so most of the time. I will have to find some different songs to try on our drive to dinner.

Silently, she follows me into the house and I direct her upstairs to my room with its own private bathroom. Caleb had already swung by and left an outfit for her to change into after stopping at her house and raiding her closet. Though we both know that Bradley is not going to be an issue for her any time soon after our little "conversation." From what Caleb mentioned to me briefly, along with the few comments she has made, it seems like her home life is a very toxic environment.

It's probably best for her to avoid it as much as possible for the time being.

I hear the shower turn on and go to knock on the door. "You've got about forty-five minutes and then we have to hit the road." Turning abruptly, I walk out of the room. I can't just sit in here waiting, knowing that on the other side of that closed door she is wet and naked, slippery suds running down her lithe body. Fuck! Now I need a cold shower. Shaking my head, I proceed downstairs, trying to ignore the raging hard-on and flip the tv to some sports channel in an attempt to distract myself from my libidinous thoughts.

I've been unsuccessful in trying to distract myself from thoughts of her as I am totally zoned out to whatever is playing on the sports channel. The voices of the sports commentators all blur together as my thoughts continue to drift back to Danica. No matter how hard I try to think of other things, I can't keep this damn girl out of my head. Exactly forty-two minutes later she comes down the stairs to stand in front of me where I am sitting on the living room couch. My face is turned towards the screen but I am fully aware of her presence as she comes to stand before me. I am drawn to her like a magnet and I doubt there is a room on this earth she could be in where I wouldn't notice her presence. Out of my periphery I see an absolute vision and my breath catches.

Tugging on the sleeve of her navy dress, she fidgets, rocking on the balls of her feet. "So... do I look okay? This was the only outfit that Caleb left." She shrugs, then clasps her hands nervously together.

"You-" I have to clear my throat before trying again. "You look beautiful *il mio passerotto*." My voice comes out in a husky tone, attraction clearly evident in my voice but I can't do a damn thing about it. The dress is some sort of navy, lacey thing with sleeves that reach to about her elbow, and a hem that hits just below the knees.

Wearing gold flats and a dainty necklace to match, her face is framed in curls that have been tamed from the wild array in which they usually sit. Instead, they now fall gently in soft ringlets flowing down her back and shoulders. The navy with

gold accents compliments the fire reflected in her auburn curls, and the only sign of makeup I can see is a soft pink gloss lightly coating her lips, otherwise her numerous freckles are on proud display. I swallow down the urge to kiss her.



Loud, raucous laughter fills the air as I hold open the door to the bistro tucked away in the back corner of the popular downtown eatery district. A baby's cry filters in above the noise, and several young children run past- shrieking in laughter. "Careful," grabbing her arm, I pull her back slightly just as she passes the threshold and the children just narrowly escape crashing into her before continuing on with their game of chase. "Hey Marco! Benedict! Watch where you're going!" "Sorry Zio T!" One of the boys throws over his shoulder, not bothering to look back as he chases after his brother and cousins.

Danica points a questioning glance in my direction, "Zio T?" I go to step after the little hellions to make them come back and apologize, but pause when I see that they have already been caught. Looking down into Danica's wide eyes, I try to explain. "Well, yeah. Not technically their uncle, but their dad is my cousin and he is more like a brother than anything. I am their godfather, so they have just always known me as their uncle, or Zio, as it were."

As I am finishing up with my explanation, both boys who instigated the chaotic frivolities are marched up in front of us and forced to stand at attention. My mother has a boy by each ear as she directs them to apologize to Danica. Gazes downward, staring at the floor beneath their feet, each boy mumbles a half-hearted apology. "Really, Mrs. Giovanni, I'm okay." Danica glances over at me once, then to my surprise, crouches down so that she meets the boys at eye-level.



“Benedict? Marco?” Each boy slowly raises their eyes, looking into her sweet face. “My name is Danica. It’s very nice to meet you.” She holds out a hand to each of the twins, and they look at each other in wonder before reaching out their tiny ones to place in hers. Despite having such a large extended family, it is not often that adults, let alone outsiders, talk to the children at their level and I think it honestly surprised them. In fact, aside from their parents, I think I am the only other person who generally speaks to them in such a manner.

“That looked like a really fun game you were playing. I used to enjoy a good game of chase myself back when I was your age, too. In fact, I still like to play every once in a while.” I raise a sardonic eyebrow at her statement.

“Why don’t you both run along and go play quietly with the other kids? If you are careful not to accidentally bump into anyone else, maybe I can join you for a game of tag a little bit later?” Their small faces light up with delight before they happily nod their agreement. Rushing forward, they both throw their small arms around her neck in a tight hug, almost knocking her to the floor, before they quickly take off chasing one another once more. Well damn, unexpectedly I am forced to swallow down a knot of emotion that has clogged my throat. As if I couldn’t find this breathtaking woman any more attractive.

Gently grabbing her elbow, I help Danica to stand and see that her face looks flushed and eyes are luminous with the laughter she is trying valiantly to hold in. Turning, we both look back to my mother. Danica holds out her hand once more in greeting, but shaking her head, Ma simply pulls Danica into a warm hug. “I told you dear, you call me Elena or Ma. No need for formalities here.” She steps back slightly, hands resting on Danica’s shoulders as she gives her a thorough once-over. “It’s good to see you again. From the sounds of it, you two have had quite the week. Thank you so much for taking the time to join my sweet Theo for our little family dinner.”

“Little” may be a bit of a stretch to any outsiders looking in. With a quick glance around the room, I see it is filled with

extended family. Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, all gathered in clusters talking over each other in excitement as if this isn't a standing weekly dinner. The small restaurant is owned by one of my other cousins and with at least a good fifty people here by the looks of it, we are probably once again over capacity. As her husband is the Fire Chief for the district, however, I think the risk of being fined is minimal.

“Ma, let Danica be. I'm going to go show her around a bit and then find us a table.” Grabbing Danica's smaller hand in my own, I place it in the crook of my arm before leading her ahead.

## Chapter Nineteen



### *Danica*

With a smile plastered on my face, I grip Theo's arm tightly as he leads me around the room, introducing me to various family members whose names I have already forgotten by the time we meet the next group of people. In-between clusters, I lean closer into his shoulder, my hand on his arm shaking slightly. "You didn't tell me there were going to be so many people!" I hissed quietly in his ear.

"I told you on the way over that we were going to a small family dinner. Trust me, Danica. If you knew anything about my family, you would understand that this *is* just a small family dinner." He shoots me a cheeky-grin, before his eyes narrow and the smile slips off his face. "You okay?"

Breathing quick, shallow breaths through my nose, I try hard to tamp down the rising anxiety coursing through my veins. Am I okay? Ha. Do I look okay? "I can't- Theo, I shouldn't be here, this is a bad idea. If word gets out ..."

"Hey," He pauses, steps coming to a halt as he turns to face me. Unable to meet his gaze as the panic begins to rise in my chest, my gaze drops to the floor. "Look at me." Theo grips my chin, firmly directing my gaze upward. Still, through my anxiety-filled brain I cannot bring myself to focus and my eyes start darting around the room, much like the caged animal that I am. "Danica, I said look at me." His grip becomes even more firm as it slides from my chin, to cup the side of my face.

"Talk to me, passerotto. What's going on in that pretty little head of yours?"

Concerned eyes meet mine, his normal cocky assurance gone as he tries to read my expression. “Theo, I shouldn’t be here. We shouldn’t be doing this,” I gesture between the two of us, “whatever *this* is. If my parents find out. God, if Brad finds out.” My breathing becomes more agitated and I desperately try to suck in air, to bring oxygen to my panic-stricken brain.

Wrapping his arm around my shoulder, I barely register what is happening around me as Theo tucks me close into his side, pressing my head down into his chest before quickly guiding me away from the crowd. By this point, I know I am full-on hyperventilating and I fight desperately to hold the panicked tears at bay. Abruptly, I am pulled into a steady embrace. Warm, strong arms wrap tightly around me, and my face is pressed firmly against Theo’s chest.

“Shh. It’s okay. You’re safe. I’ve got you. I’m here.” Theo’s voice sounds so far away, a distant mantra being repeated quietly, and I fight to hold on to his words, to listen through the pounding of my heart and ringing in my ears. Unbidden, the tears that I had been fighting back fall in wet streaks down my face.

After what feels like eons, but truly had to have been mere minutes in passing, I can feel the tension start to ease as the steady beating of Theo’s heart soothes my frayed nerves. As my erratic breathing finally begins to even out, Theo’s hold on me loosens, as he pulls back to look at my tear-stained face. I focus on the base of his neck, where throat meets the clavicle; watch the thrumming of his pulse rather than meet his concerned gaze with my own watery one.

“Okay, wanna tell me what the hell just happened?” Removing one of the arms from behind my back, he reaches up and gently swipes away my tears.

Shakily, I breathe in. Hold it for a few drawn-out seconds then breathe out once more. *God, get a hold of yourself Danica!* I don’t have time for these stupid panic attacks. I never used to have this issue, but ever since last spring and Brad’s graduation, I seem to get them at the most random times. Over the last several months, they have become increasingly more problematic, both with their intensity and frequency. I try to

respond but choke on a shuddered breath. After a few more failed starts, I am finally able to get out the words that are raging through my mind.

“I don’t know what this is Theo. What are we even doing? You said so yourself I am off limits as your friend’s younger sister, and then you turn around and declare that you are going to protect me and be my pretend boyfriend to get my ex to leave me alone. Except he’s not my ex, he can’t be. And you never even gave me a choice, never included me in the discussion.

“I can’t do this. It isn’t safe. If my parents find out what we’re doing they will kill me. If whatever this illusion is doesn’t get Brad to back off then he will probably beat my parents to it. There is so much that you don’t understand. Oh god!” My breath quickens and I struggle to maintain control, to not give in to hyperventilating once more. Pushing down the deep-seeded fear, I continue.

“Am I mad at Brad for cheating on me? Absolutely. Am I terrified after he attacked me and left bruises on my arm? You bet. But there is so much more to this than you realize and I don’t have the luxury of playing pretend and living on wishful dreams that this will all magically get better. I can’t do it!

To make matters worse, you show up at my school and make a huge scene in front of everyone; intentionally trying to cause drama and walk back out the door without explaining anything to me, only to turn around and command me to go to a “small family dinner” with you. My god you are giving me whiplash and I can’t take it. I just can’t do it. I can’t-” My voice breaks off as my labored breaths once again become ragged at the start of a new panic attack forming in my chest.

“Calm down mio passerotto. It’s okay, I promise. I just need you to breathe for a minute. Focus on your breathing.” Just barely, I manage to push down the tightness in my chest. One deep breath later and I can’t help but snap.

“Calm down? Did you seriously just tell me to calm down? Do you live under a rock? You NEVER tell a woman to calm down if you want her to actually remain calm. Oh my god! What is wrong with you?” Frustration replaces the anxiety but

I just about lose it when I see he has started laughing. “Are you seriously laughing at me right now?” My words come out in a whispered shriek as I try to maintain some semblance of privacy, fully aware that we are ten feet away from a door leading to a room overflowing with fellow Giovanni’s.

What started as a low chuckle has turned into a deep belly laugh, and I can see the corners of his eyes crinkle with his joyful expression. “I’m sorry. It’s just, you should really see yourself right now. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to laugh.” Stunned by his unexpected show of emotions, I just stare at him, at a loss for words.

“Really. I mean, you’re just so damn cute when you get pissed off. You look like an angry kitten. I just can’t take you seriously when you are looking at me like that. And hey look,” he pauses, trying to catch his breath as he swallows down the laughter, “you aren’t hyperventilating anymore so I guess pissing you off made for a good distraction.” Shrugging as he looks at me with a sheepish expression, I open my mouth to respond before closing it abruptly again. Well damn, I didn’t realize but I guess he was right. I am no longer spiraling into the abyss of my own black hole filled with intrusive thoughts. Huh.

“Okay let’s try this again.” Pausing for a moment, he takes a deep breath, trying to contain the laughter only to replace it with his mask of cool disinterest. “Danica, I see that you have some valid concerns regarding my lack of communication and the events that have taken place over the last twenty-four hours, is that right?” I nod, unsure of how else to respond.

“Okay then, how about this? Clearly, I underestimated how overwhelming of an experience it would be for you meeting some of my family. Why don’t I introduce you to my uncle. Really, he is the main person I wanted you to see, other than my Ma who insisted I bring you by so she could see you again. We can sneak inside, make do with a quick introduction and take our food to go.

After that, I promise we can find a nice quiet place to sit and talk and I will try to explain things for you, okay?” Nodding once more, he seems satisfied with my acquiescence. “One

more thing, just so you can try to relax for a minute. I'm not going to get into all the details until later when we can have some privacy for our discussion, but just so you are aware, the 'Bradley situation' has been handled. You don't have to worry about what happens if he finds out about your being here. So just, take that for what it is, take a breather, and let's go back inside, yeah?"

Truly, I am at a loss for words. I was not expecting that admission to leave his mouth and now I am stumped. While I am unclear as to what he means by "handling the Bradley situation," I'm unsure if I should be relieved or even more afraid. At this moment, however, I think that I'll try to give myself a breather and try to relax, even if it's only for a minute. "Guess I'm just going with the flow now then." Shrugging, I take his outstretched hand as he grins once more and I follow his lead back into the boisterous gathering.

True to his word, Theo leads me directly to where his uncle is sitting in the middle of the crowded room. As we make our way forward, several people try to catch his attention, wanting to talk about his last game and the overall season, or to inquire about me. Determined to keep his word, he just politely nods and makes vague comments about how we must get going and he will catch up with everyone later, shaking their hands or clapping them on the back as we pass by.

Reaching the table at the center of the room, I see it is filled with a group of rough-looking men. Worldly men. It's not their clothes that give off this appearance, nor all the tattoos covering their arms under the rolled-up sleeves. Rather, it has something to do with their vibe. Something in their presence just has this authoritative, commanding aura and everyone in their gravitational pull seems to be giving them glances either of awed respect or hesitant wariness, despite everyone being related.

Really, I don't see anything in-between these two general sentiments. As for myself, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as a chill courses down my spine. I don't know how I know, but I am certain that these are dangerous men that you don't want to cross.

At the center of the group, one man in particular gives off very dangerous vibes. He must be a close relation, because I swear if he were twenty years younger, he would look *exactly* like Theo. Tall, dark, and dangerous must run in the family.

Theo leads me forward until we are standing directly in front of the group of men. As we pause before them, their conversation halts, and all eyes are directed towards us. Despite being uncomfortable with their piercing gazes, I try to push down the restless energy filling me and resist the urge to fidget as I meet their looks head-on.

A quiet word passes between Theo and the man who must be his uncle, but with their conversation being in Italian I am unsure of what is being said. Whatever it was prompts an unexpected reaction from the man before me. Standing boisterously, the chair screeches as it is pushed back in a hurried manner. The man walks around the table and comes to stand before me.

“Danica, this is my Uncle Dante. Zio, this is the woman I told you about.” Piercing eyes assess me, closely examining, though I am not sure what he is expecting to find. After a long moment of silence, Dante holds out his hand for me to take.

“Danica, a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I have heard much about you.” With my hand in his own grizzly-looking one, I am surprised when instead of shaking it, he brings my hand to his mouth for a kiss. “I look forward to seeing more of you in the future. Benvenuto nella nostra famiglia.” Pulling on my hand, he encircles me in a tight hug before finally stepping away and giving Theo a firm pat on the back. “Mi piace questa ragazza. Hai scelto bene.”

I look questioningly between Theo and his uncle, but Theo doesn't care to elaborate with a translation for me. The other men sitting at the table observe our interaction silently before they each, in turn, stand and walk over to give me a hug. I am overwhelmed with the amount of attention I have received in just the few short minutes we have been over here. In fact, I am certain that I have received more hugs from complete strangers tonight than I have had in the last year from my own family (Caleb and the guys notwithstanding).



As the last man takes his turn hugging me before going over to pat Theo on the back, I become aware that the entire room has fallen silent. Every single person in this room has stopped what they were doing to witness this interaction between Dante, his men and myself. There is a loaded heaviness to the air, thick silence as if everyone has been holding their breath in expectation. As the last man returns to his seat, that collective breath is released and everyone resumes their conversation, gazes deliberately avoiding our own.

Unsure of what the hell just happened; I have the distinct impression that Dante is a very powerful, very important man and my future relied solely on the value of his assessment. This moment feels as if there had been a pop quiz that I was unwittingly walking into, and though I am not entirely sure as to why or how, I somehow managed to scrape by with a passing score. Theo's mother comes over at that moment and pulls her son aside to have a quiet word. Straining my ears, I am unable to hear what passes between them, but in the next moment I feel a little hand tugging on the hem of my skirt.

"Hey Zio T's friend. Could you come play with us please?" Looking down, I see it was one of the little boys who had almost crashed into me at the start of this evening. After the heaviness of the last few minutes and the weariness that settled deep in my bones from struggling to survive through months of anxiety, I could use a pebble of light shining on my tired soul. In a split-second decision, I decided to take the small child up on his offer of fun.

Bending down so I can be at eye level with the cute troublemaker, I beckon him closer with my finger. As he moves forward, I lean next to his ear and whisper "You wanna play?" He nods once more and I quickly glance over my shoulder to see that Theo is talking with both his mother and Dante before turning back to give the boy a conspiratorial look. Gently tapping his shoulder, I whisper in his ear "Tag, you're it," before quickly popping up, giving a quick look at my surroundings to find a clear path and running away. With a squeal, the boy calls to his companions, and they all laughingly start to chase after me.

## Chapter Twenty



### *Danica*

It's amazing to me how the innocence of a child can lighten your soul. Their carefree laughter and bright smiles force aside the darkness within, and their hugs melt away the pain. I had always loved children. The insouciant way they view the world through their untarnished eyes always brought me reassurance of the good that still exists within the world, even if not directly in my own life. The exuberance with which they approached every new experience was a thing of pure joy to behold and I count myself fortunate for the limited opportunities where I can join in that sense of wonder with them.

By offering my almost non-existent free-time to the children's classes at my gym, I can share in their experiences through teaching the blossoming gymnasts. My work has always been a point of contention between my parents and I but volunteering with some of the younger gymnastics classes at my gym was one of the few things I had to look forward to these days and I absolutely refused to part with the only thing that brings true joy into my life anymore. Taking this time now to interact with Theo's nieces and nephews in a game of chase brought forth that same elusive feeling that I desperately search for with each of my classes at the sports center; not to mention a sense of relief after the pressure and anxiety I felt being thrown in the deep end with all of Theo's family.

I allowed the kids to all chase after me for probably a good ten minutes while many of the adults in the room, Theo, his mom, and uncle included, all looked on in amusement. At some

point in the process, I had kicked off my flats while the kids all chased after me in laughter, trying to get a better grip on the floor for my escape. Eventually, after I had herded the chaotic playtime away from the main eating area where most of the crowd was gathered, I finally let them all win by “catching me” and was promptly tackled to the ground in a dog pile.

It was at that moment when Theo walked over to our group, towering over the lot of us with a wide stance and arms crossed over his chest. Eyebrow raised with a sardonic expression as he cocked his head to the side and inquired “Having fun?”

From underneath a tangled pile of arms and legs, with laughter and squeals of joy, Theo reached out a hand to pull me up from where I lay with a genuine grin on my face, though the children made it difficult for him to actually do so. “Yep, your nieces and nephews are great, they sure know how to make a girl feel welcome.” Trying unsuccessfully to climb out from under the mess of limbs, Theo muttered quietly and the group quickly disassembled, jumping up and all rushing to give him a hug.

“Aww Zio! Do you have to leave?” “Please can you stay just a little bit longer?” “We want to keep playing with your friend!” Several voices all try to speak over each other as they plead with Theo for just a little more time. Meanwhile, Theo was still holding on tightly to my hand after pulling me up once the children had moved. Pulling me close to his side, with an arm wrapped around my waist, he shakes his head reluctantly.

“I’m sorry guys. Not today. I promised my girl I would get her home before it got too late. Besides, I don’t want you hellions wearing her out and scaring her off before she has the chance to really fall in love with me so she will stay forever.” He shoots me a wink and shit-eating grin as I slap his hand that is still resting on my waist, trying to step away. I get so flustered with his comments when he says things like that to me, even though I know it is just for show. “Alright, alright. Everybody give one last hug then we really have to go.”

A short time later, Theo is pulling into a dark parking spot at the back corner of a local park. The hour is late and the area is

deserted. Fallen leaves litter the pebble-covered pathways that I can just make out by the light of the dim lamps lining the walk. True to his word, after his conversation with Dante and my short interlude with the children, Theo led me out of his family-owned bistro with one arm loaded down with bags full of to-go containers as he used his other to guide me to his car. Now that we are at the park, we sit in comfortable silence as we consume his family's delicious homemade recipes.

Though I am sure it is well beyond what is allotted for my meal plan, I can't help but eat every last bite until I am literally too full. The uncomfortable sensation is one I am not well-acquainted with as my dietary routine is closely monitored on both ends, between my parents and my coach and nutritionist. Often, there is very little room in my diet for indulgences, though I do love to sneak the occasional Starbucks whenever possible.

Theo quietly observes me as I finish my last bite, moving the empty container back into the take-out bag. Having wolfed down his meal in five minutes flat, he spent the remainder of the time in silent consideration while I worked on my own meal. Self-conscious with his unwavering gaze, I clear my throat and wipe my hands down my thighs, smoothing down my unwrinkled dress.

"We took care of Bradley for you. He should no longer be a concern." His eyes are locked on my own, assessing my reaction to his startling statement, presumably.

My brow furrows in response. "What do you mean by you taking care of him? I don't understand."

Grabbing my nervous hand and intertwining our fingers, he stills their restless fidgeting as he continues, "I mean we took care of it. This morning, what happened between us? Well, the guys and I became aware of the fact that he was trying to corner you at school and probably would have made a scene. Instead, we beat him to the punch. He got there too late. I was already there with you, making it known that Bradley was no longer in the picture. That you have someone else watching your back. And while you and I provided a good distraction

for all his friends and your classmates, your brother got to Brad and convinced him to go for a ride.”

I swallow a sharp inhale at his words, stunned by the calculation that went into every step of our encounter. “What did you guys do?”

“Nothing the fucker didn’t have coming. We just had a little conversation, the guys, Bradley and I. Reminded him that if he thinks he is such a big man then he should be talking to us if he wants to use his fists. Only insecure assholes with little nubs for dicks feel the need to prey on the young and innocent. Needless to say, our conversation will have left a lasting impression on him, and I don’t think he is going to be in any position to be causing you trouble for a while. And he knows that if he tries, he will have to go through the four of us to get to you.”

Unsure what to say to this admission, I sit in stunned silence, trying to process his words. Could it really be that simple? Just a little show of intimidation to put him in his place, knock him down a size, and I could be free? Sighing, my shoulders drop in resignation as my momentary hope dims. I can’t be the one to say it though. Theo has already done way too much and it’s not his place to get involved any further. He has a bright future in the NHL, goals and a career just waiting a few months out.

I can’t risk him throwing all of that away by getting in the middle of my family drama; knowing that my parents aren’t just going to let this drop. My leash is too intricately tied to Bradley through our mutual parents. It’s one thing for Theo to scare him into being kinder, it’s an unrealistic hope to think that I could escape my fate altogether.

## Chapter Twenty-One



### *Danica*

The following week passed by in an uneventful blur. Theo, Caleb, and Seb had to be out of town for most of the week as they were playing several out of state games back-to-back. Per their direction, I was often accompanied by Finn anytime I had to leave the house. While we had always been close, I suspect that he was using some not-so-legal means of tracking where I was headed and when. I am not oblivious of the fact that Finn made most of his money for his start-up company through some pretty shady dealings on the dark web. I know he can navigate various forms of tracking like the back of his hand, which is why I wouldn't put it past him, despite my supplications, to keep a more extensive eye on me through morally grey means.

I hadn't seen or heard from Bradley at all since the night when he cornered me outside of my gymnastics practice either, which I thought odd. Even if he had been cornered by the guys and taught a physical lesson about putting his hands on me, I wouldn't put it past him to still try to stalk and harass me through other methods. Stranger still, my parents had been suspiciously quiet throughout the events that have led up to this point. While not overly caring or involved in my life for anything that does not directly impact them, I was suspicious of the fact that they had remained so silent regarding my and Bradley's breakup. There is no way that the news had not made it back to their social circles with how public our tiff had been.

For what little it was worth, I was taking the momentary lapse of chaos for the breath of fresh air that it was. I went to class, keeping my head down through all the pointed stares and whispers. Following that, I continued my normal routine, hitting the gym for weights and light cardio before school in the morning and the sports center after school had finished. On my rare day off in the middle, I kept up with back-to-back children's classes all afternoon. My favorite part of the day was when the toddlers came in for their class and open-gym time. It was so cute watching them interact with their parents as they toddled around exploring the various mats and practice beams.

Finn kept up with me whenever I was on the move. Meeting me in the early morning to give me a ride to my weight training, taking me to school thereafter and finishing up with escorting me throughout my gym sessions all afternoon into the evenings. I had no idea what he did all day while I bounced between my normal activities, other than the computer work that had something to do with his new business startup. Still, I am not sure how he wasn't absolutely bored out of his mind, hanging out with his best friend's younger teenage sister, but thankfully he kept his laptop with him so at least he could work remotely on whatever it was he had that kept him busy all the time.

At random intervals, I would receive texts from Theo about anything and everything. Random facts, small talk, little tidbits about his day.

**Hoodie Guy: Hey beautiful. How's your day going?**

**Hoodie Guy: Fun fact of the day- Did you know Wayne Gretzky retired at the ripe old age of 38? Right at the end of 1999 season.**

**Hoodie Guy: Il mio passerotto, you look so pretty, flying high on your beams.**

From the outside looking in, it would be an obvious assumption that he was a dotting boyfriend who had fallen head over skates for his girl and missed her every damn

second of the day that they were apart. My own point of view, however, was that he played the part well. So well, I almost couldn't tell that he was faking it. Gone was the aloof persona of the asshole that I met at the party. Who knew underneath that leather jacket and hoodie held the heart of a total cinnamon roll?

**Me: Stalker much? How do you even know what I look like right now? You are at least three states away.**

**Hoodie Guy: I have my ways ...**

**Me: God, could you be any more of a creep? Anyway, if you are going to stalk me while I am at practice the least you could do is learn the correct terminology. I was not, in fact, "flying high" on the beams. Today's focus was the uneven bars. You're welcome.**

**Hoodie Guy: Trust me, you don't want to know how creepy I can get. My apologies, I will have to brush up on my terminology. You looked beautiful flying on your uneven bars, my little sparrow ...**

**Hoodie Guy: We will be home in two days from our away games. Meet me for coffee.**

**Me: Are you asking or demanding?**

**Hoodie Guy: Well, I was asking but I have changed my mind. I don't think I like your tone and have decided I am not going to risk you saying 'no'. Meet me for coffee after we get back.**

**Me: ...**

**Hoodie Guy: Please.**

**Me: Well ... since you asked so nicely. Fine**

**Hoodie Guy: There she is.**

**Me: ?**

**Hoodie Guy: La mia diavoletta**

**Hoodie Guy: Send me a kiss for luck?**

**Me:**

**Hoodie Guy: Come on, you know you want to ...**

Today marks the last of HCU's away games for the Winter Tournament and they are playing one of their biggest rivals in the league. Last year, they wiped the floor with us and it took weeks for the guys to stop moping (though they would never



admit it). The thought of having to deal with all the melodrama makes me want to roll my eyes. Hmmm. I wonder how Theo handled the loss.

**Me: Just out of curiosity, what would you do if you lost the game?**

**Hoodie Guy: Well, it would definitely suck. We have been on a winning streak and everyone on the team has worked their asses off to get to the level we are playing at this season. But that is working under the assumption that you think we are gonna lose so...**

**Me: So what? I was the one who had to deal with the guys moping for weeks after the loss last year. Can you blame a girl for wondering how you handled it, and what your contingency is for this game?**

**Hoodie Guy: First of all diavoletta, your lack of faith in me is disappointing.**

**Hoodie Guy: I guess I will just have to show you how good we are in person.**

**Hoodie Guy: But first, I need my good luck kiss.**

**Me: I see how you slyly avoided my question there. Why is it so important that I give you a kiss?**

**Hoodie Guy: Aside from the fact that you are my girlfriend, you mean? Haven't you heard how superstitious hockey players are? We have very specific rituals that must be followed in order for us to win.**

**Me: Obviously I am aware of how ridiculous all of you hockey jocks are with your superstitions. Between Caleb and the guys, I have been subjected to your ridiculous ways for years. But I don't see how this involves me. You have been playing just fine without a pregame kiss from me all season, so why now?**

**Hoodie Guy: I have polled the fans and the verdict is in. You are my good luck charm. Ergo, I have deemed a pregame kiss from you essential to our success. My kiss please ...**

Sighing, I roll my eyes at the ridiculousness of it all.

**Me: Fine. Since you asked so nicely ...**

## Chapter Twenty-Two



### Theo

I am caught by surprise as a laugh escapes my lips. Shaking my head, I look closer at the picture that just came through on my phone. I had just been giving her crap but Danica rose to the challenge. This girl.

**Me: Okay, so you realize now I am going to expect a picture of a literal Hershey's kiss before every game. It is a requirement.**

**Little Sparrow: We'll see ...**

The roar of the crowd is deafening as I chase down the defender for the opposing team. With some fancy footwork and a quick trick of the hands, I am checking their player as I steal the puck and quickly push forward to the far end of the ice. As their team presses in on me, I make a quick pass to Morrow before breaking through and flanking his left. Preston and Axton follow close behind, moving to block as Morrow passes back to me. A hip check to the player closing in on me and I fake to the left before aiming and shooting the puck into the goal. Their goalie makes a dive but the puck grazes off his leg and flies up into the net.

Sirens blare with the announcement of the goal as I hear boos from the opposing team's fans mixed in with cheers from our own supporters. We are now 2-1 going into the third period and I make my way back towards the tunnel leading to our locker room. Coach spends a good portion of the intermission reviewing our next play and areas of weakness on the

opposing team. Throughout his speech, I am distracted with thoughts of Danica and her too-fucking cute Hershey's kiss she sent me before the game.

I shift on the bench next to my cubby, subtly pulling out my phone and see I have several notifications. Unlocking the phone, I can't help the shit-eating grin that takes over my face. The image displayed on my screen is just so captivating. With her face painted in red and gold, Danica looks adorable with HCU painted on one cheek and *my fucking number* on the other.

Even in the picture, it's clear to see that she is wearing an oversize jersey that clearly doesn't belong to her and I have to fight back the surprising jealousy I feel rear up in my chest at the sight of seeing her wearing another man's number. Must be either Caleb or Seb's, I can't really tell from the front. Doesn't really matter. My girl should be wearing my jersey, and only mine.

Several other notifications show me that I have been tagged in a new social media post. While not uncommon, I usually get tagged by our team's social media manager, or from random fans who repost, this one is a notification from Danica's private account. While there are several pictures, the first being the one that she texted to me, the next picture I see is of Danica with a group of her fellow gymnasts at what looks like a local sports bar.

She is cheering for my goal that was displayed on the large screen in the background. The third picture is one she must have taken when my face was on close-up after the goal, hands thrown up in celebration. The caption attached to the photo thread? *My man ...Let's f\*cking gooooo!* I know it's all for show, playing into the whole "fake boyfriend" thing but I can't help my response. My heart swells at the sight of her publicly claiming me, and I can't resist responding to her text.

**Me: You can't post pictures like that, it should be illegal**

**Little Sparrow: I don't know what you mean...**

**Me: You look goddamn sexy wearing my number. But it should be my name across your back. We're gonna have to fix that.**

**Little Sparrow: Shouldn't you be passing the puck or something? Why are you texting me?**

**Me: I saw your post, I know you know it's intermission after the second period.**

**Little Sparrow: And if your coach is anything like mine, I am sure they have a million things they are trying to tell you right now. Get your head in the game Giovanni.**

**Me: Another kiss for good luck?**

**Little Sparrow: \*image\* Here's your kiss, now get back to it.**

This time, instead of chocolate, she sends me something so much sweeter. A picture of her blowing a kiss into the camera. Several of my teammates are giving me looks at this point. I am usually the one completely focused on every word from coach, not allowing any possible distraction to become a hindrance. But my blatant texting with a huge grin on my face is something that is throwing off the vibes in the room. I force down my smile and send one final text before returning full focus to what's happening in the room.

**Me: There's my girl.**

**Me: Keep watching, la mia diavoletta. The next goal's for you.**

## Chapter Twenty-Three



### Theo

I sit quietly in the back corner of the busy coffee shop, sipping a peppermint mocha and check my watch for the third time. Danica should have been here by now. The nervous energy radiates out of me and I fight the urge to check my watch again. At last, I see her walk through the door, a goddamn vision in black yoga pants, a loose knit sweater and ankle boots. Scarf wrapped loosely around her neck and flowery headband pushing back her luscious locks to complete the look. After glancing around the crowded shop, she finally spies me in my hiding spot, excitedly waving as she makes her way closer to me.

I go to stand as she approaches my table, but before I can make a move, she leans down placing a chaste kiss to the corner of my mouth. Surprising the hell out of me, she walks around the corner and rather than sitting in the chair next to mine, she gracefully plops her fine ass into my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Theo! God, I have missed you so much! Being gone for a whole week is way too much for my nerves. I’m so glad you’re home!” Arms still wrapped around my neck, she snuggles closer in my lap, her ass rubbing teasingly against my now very hard cock. “Mmm, you smell so good. Like coffee and peppermint and Theo. My three favorite scents.” Leaning her head in close, she nuzzles the crook of my neck, inhaling softly, before slowly licking her way up to my ear.

I am paralyzed, transfixed by her shockingly blatant display of PDA. Unsure of what the hell is going on, my hands fall

lightly to her hips, before squeezing firmly. “Baby, I don’t know what you are doing but if you don’t want this getting completely out of hand you might want to stop rubbing your juicy ass on my cock right about now.” The only response is her kissing along my jaw, lightly nibbling my stubble as she trails along until she reaches my lips.

Tentatively, she presses her lips to mine, in a kiss that is achingly sweet before she pulls back slightly, looking deep into my eyes. “Theodore Eduardo Carmine Giovanni, you have changed my fucking life. You are the hottest piece of muscle I have ever seen, and you are all mine.” She leans in to kiss me once more, this time, a sense of urgency fills her as she nips at my bottom lip before running her tongue along the seam, encouraging me to open for her. As if I need any encouragement. This fucking girl!

Taking control of the moment, as I open myself to her fully, our tongues intertwining in a teasing game. I pull her more snugly into my lap. Moaning into our kiss, she twists, lifting one incredibly flexible leg up over my head and around to the other side of my shoulders until she is sitting astride, fully straddling me. Lost in the moment, I forget that we are in the middle of a busy coffee shop, albeit hiding in a secluded corner. If this girl wants to fucking ride me for the world to see, then who am I to say no? Hands running up and down my chest, they slide underneath the layers of my hoodie as she feels along my hard abs and up to my pecs before sliding slowly back down to the waistband of my jeans.

Breaking our kiss momentarily, I growl in her ear as I bite firmly before sucking that sweet spot on her pretty little neck, my voice low so as not to attract the attention of the other patrons. “Fuck diavoletta! You are so goddamn hot right now!” I get a hum of approval from deep in her chest as she leans into my love bites, her hand now rubbing deliberately over the top of my aching dick through my rough jeans. Rocking my hips into her hand, I continue to kiss and suck and bite along the graceful planes of her neck, determined to leave a mark that will show the world she is mine.

Pushing herself closer, as if that were even possible, her hands slide up into my hair, pulling my head lower to nibble along the tops of her breasts through her sweater as she rocks hard against me.

“God baby, if you keep moving like that, I’m going to fucking come in my pants like a goddamn fourteen-year-old.”

“Mmm but you would like that wouldn’t you? Making a mess of yourself as you make a mess of me. I am so wet I am practically dripping for you.” Grabbing one of my hands as she says this, she slides it down along the edge of her waist, across her abdomen before sliding it lower until I am rubbing her through her tight yoga pants, feeling her heat and dampness. The need and urgency I feel builds rapidly, raging inside like an inferno.

I can’t help but react to her sass with a little teasing of my own. With my hand that is not rubbing against her wet heat, I let my fingers gently caress her back as I make my way up, and I feel the shiver as it travels across her spine. Using the slightest of adjustments, I move my mouth to her ear while I reach around front, grabbing her throat and gently squeezing. Danica’s eyes widen and I can see the pupils dilate just as I feel her inhale with surprise.

Keeping my tone low, I gently nip at her ear before whispering “You like that, *la mia diavoletta*? I can practically feel your pussy dripping for me.” A soft moan escapes as she sticks out her tongue, licking her lower lips and I know she is just as turned on as I am. Squeezing her neck just a little bit tighter, I continue, “Now keep rocking against me and come like the good girl you are.”

Wanting her to feel the same need that I so desperately feel, I press my palm more firmly against the damp fabric. Rubbing my hand over her cunt, back and forth along the slit, the motion creating an intoxicating friction as it rubs against her clit. Her breathing hitches and she starts rocking in earnest, moaning loudly as she buries her face in my neck. This is so fucking hot, the hottest foreplay of my goddamn life. In the middle of the day in a crowded coffee shop she is racing

towards her climax, chasing that high that we both so desperately crave like the addicts we are.

Her hips rubbing into mine become more erratic as she desperately seeks her release and I ease my other hand down the back of her elastic waistline, reaching inside her panties to grab a firm hold on her fine ass and guide her motions while my other keeps its steady pace along her slit. Lowering my head, I inhale the scent that is uniquely Danica before I bring my face to her chest and bite her nipple through the fabric of her sweater. With a loud cry that cannot be contained, she comes hard all over my lap, her wetness seeping through both of our pants and I find my release alongside her.

“Fuucckkkk!”

With a jerk, I abruptly awaken to find myself alone in my dark hotel room. Heart racing, hand wrapped tightly around my throbbing dick with cum dripping down my stomach. Trying to catch my breath as I gather my bearings, my other hand runs over my bleary eyes and I groan. A fucking wet dream. I haven't come so hard from a fucking wet dream since I was a young scrawny teenager desperate for his first lay. Fucking hell that was intense.

With a shaky breath, I finish rubbing out my still hard-as-fuck cock and find that I am able to come once more. The intense pain burns alongside the pleasure as my head fills with my dream girl, the girl I can't really have. The fantasy I shouldn't want. Goddamn it. With a groan I throw back the remainder of the covers and make my way to the bathroom to shower off the residue of my darkest fantasies.



## Chapter Twenty-Four



### *Danica*

Theo is coming home today. After winning all three of their away games for the tournament, they are supposed to be headed back for a day of rest before they have to jump right back into prepping for their next home game. While he had been texting me relentlessly throughout the week, almost to the point of driving me mad, he has been strangely radio silent today. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. I know they had an early flight according to the call I had with Caleb last night. It's probably that he was just exhausted after all the travel and was using the time to catch up on sleep before we were supposed to meet later for coffee.

Going about my normal routine, the tension in my shoulders has finally started to ease up a bit. No word from Bradley in over two weeks now. Nor have I had to deal with seeing my parents, as I was up and on my way to weight training before they got going for the day and they were out at who-even-knows what shindig or fundraiser until ungodly hours of the night each evening. Either way, it has worked out for me, as I have been able to avoid being stuck in a room with them and being forced to converse.

There is a lightness to my step today as I proceed through each of my classes. Today is going to be a good day. I am now officially eighteen. I have crossed the legal threshold and come out alive on the other side! My brother is almost home. And the man I am quickly starting to care for is going to meet me for coffee after he gets home from his back-to-back away games later tonight. I can't think of a better way to spend my

birthday than with one of my new favorite people, out of the house and away from the weight of judgment and expectations that I can never seem to live up to for once.

As I am making my way to my locker at the end of fifth period, I get a text from Theo. I cannot contain the huge grin that crosses my face as I go to unlock my phone.

**Hoodie Guy: Hey diavoletta**

**Me: Hey HG. Your flight land safely?**

**Hoodie Guy: That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about ...**

**Hoodie Guy: ...**

A knot fills my stomach as I see the dots form and disappear several times on my screen. After what feels like forever, I finally receive his reply.

**Hoodie Guy: Our flight got delayed due to some inclement weather and we are held up for a while until the snow front passes. I'm sorry but I'm gonna have to take a rain check on that coffee date.**

Disappointment fills me with a heaviness that is all-too familiar.

**Me: Oh ...**

**Me: That's fine, I understand. Can't change the weather. We can meet up for coffee another time, no biggie.**

**Hoodie Guy: Well actually, I have been thinking. You haven't heard back from that creep of an ex recently, right?**

**Me: ... Nope.**

**Hoodie Guy: It might be a good time to end our charade then. Seems like our little routine did the trick and he is steering clear of you. We can just go back to being friendly acquaintances who know each other through your brother.**

**Me: . . .**

**Me: But... everyone thinks we're dating. So, what, this is like our "unofficial breakup" then? We play nice in public because we can't act like we weren't a thing since that was the impression you insisted we give everyone.**

**Hoodie Guy: Shit, no of course you're right. We can just be cool about it, polite to each other and everyone will think it was no big deal, just a short hook-up. I will, of course, always be here for you if you need me. You know that right? I mean, after everything over the last few weeks, we will at least stay friends?**

**Me:**

**Me: Right**

**Me: I guess I'll talk to ya later, *friend*. Have a good flight home.**

I try to contain my ragged breath as my world closes in around me. The last couple of weeks with Theo, brooding jackass one-minute, carefree clown the next, had been a real bright spot in my bleary world. Of course, it couldn't continue though. It wasn't a real relationship. He had made that very clear several times. It's not his fault that his teammate's younger sister was starting to develop an unhealthy crush on a guy who is way too old for her. No, he is right.

It is definitely better this way. Break off whatever this pretend thing is before it causes real pain. It served its purpose. Brad is no longer hanging around openly harassing me, and I have been able to go about my daily life without having to jump at every shadow. I should be grateful, really, that such an insanely hot, hotshot hockey player even noticed me long enough to want to play pretend to help his friend's younger sibling.

Slamming my locker closed, I make my way slowly towards my final class of the day. Welp, one more class then I can at least lose myself in gym practice for a bit. Not the best way to spend a birthday but certainly not the worst I have ever had either. It just sucks that I won't at least be able to see Caleb and Seb. The guys always celebrated a mini-birthday with me, it was a tradition of ours since my own home life was lacking.

A buzz in my pocket alerts me to a new text that has come through. Maybe Theo forgot something, or I guess it could be Caleb reaching out to tell me about the delayed flight himself. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I blanch as I read the text on the screen.

**Father: Dinner at seven. Your presence is required.**

Never one to mince words, that father of mine. Guess I thought too soon about how it could always be worse. Well shoot. A frustrated growl leaves my mouth as I turn around, heading for the exit instead of my last class.

Unable to focus on the work before me after the back-to-back disappointments that came through on my phone, I end up heading to the sports center early. At least that way I have a chance to give coach a heads up that I'm going to have to leave practice earlier than normal. My showing up an hour early should help alleviate some of her annoyance at me cutting a practice short.

My intrusive thoughts are absolutely deafening as I pound the mat, in round after round of mind-numbing exercises. No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to focus and get my head in the game. If I'm not careful, I'm probably going to injure myself. Distraction is your own worst enemy as a gymnast, with the slightest slip you could wind up with a career ending injury. My heart and my head just aren't in it tonight though, and it's noticeable even to Coach. With a frustrated growl, I called it as she once again shouted instructions at me from across the mat. "I'm done Coach. I have to head out soon anyway, I'm gonna hit the showers."

Coach Stephenson gives me a sharp nod while calling out to me something about getting my head on straight and doing better tomorrow but I am not even listening as I make my way forward to the locker rooms.

My bruises have mostly healed now, at least to the point where it is not obvious at first sight that they had been a large man's handprint. I wore my normal workout gear today and chose to

shower as I typically would before my routine got flipped upside down. After I was finished cleaning up, making my way over to my locker, I remove my towel and pull out a simple cream dress out of the locker. With my parents and their demanding expectations, I thankfully always keep a good dress, nylons, and heels in the locker ready and waiting for any short-notice demands for social gatherings.

Though it's technically my birthday, the expectation for the dinner would no doubt be that I was dressing as a representation of their appearance. In all likelihood, the dinner was probably a larger social function with high end snobs that wanted to win over my father's influence and my mother's deep family pockets. I would wager my entire life savings that they didn't even remember it was my birthday today.

## Chapter Twenty-Five



### *Danica*

It was the birthday dinner from hell. I was correct in my assumptions that they would completely forget that it is my eighteenth birthday today. Wrongfully, however, I had the careless expectation that it would be a high-society shindig where I would have to paste a smile and mingle with polite conversation. No. As I made my way gracefully into our grand formal dining area with a smile plastered on my plastic face, I'm instead surprised to find that the room appears to be empty. Until I hear a soft voice at my back. I feel the burning ice of a knife stab me in the gut and chills run down my spine at the voice that speaking softly into my ear from behind.

"Danica, my love," the hand slithering over my back is as repugnant as the man himself, placing a cold kiss on my frozen cheek. Unbidden, a shiver passes through me as my pasted smile falters. Turning, I stare into the cold face of my greatest nightmare.

"Bradley. What are you doing here?" Fading bruises ring his hollow eyes, with a split lip and slightly crooked nose he definitely looks like the guys beat the shit out of him. *Too bad I hadn't been able to watch the fun.*

"Oh darling! How silly of you to even ask. You know it's your birthday, right?" I turn to stare at my mother, who is now sitting at the table, next to Bradley's mother, having apparently entered from the door at the far side of the room. I can tell they are already several sheets to the wind and finally notice the empty wine bottles scattered along the formal place settings; our mothers having apparently pre-gamed before I arrived.

Um. Really? As if I was unaware of what today was. Knowing it's better to simply smile and nod, I do just that, rather than opening a can of worms that will only result in my prolonged misery. "Sit down, sit!"

At my mother's urging, I go to sit in my normal spot. "No, not over there. You need to sit on the other side. There is a place setting next to Bradley's" She gestures across the table in a motion that is slightly clumsy and exaggerated. Biting back the urge to comment, I quietly make my way to the far side of the table. Bradley is right there next to me, pulling out my chair and as I go to take my seat, he slips his hand beneath my hair, gripping tightly while smiling politely over to our mothers.

Swallowing down my gasp at the sharp pinching along the back of my neck, I try valiantly to maintain my nonchalant air with my fake smile. Only a moment later, the catering staff start making their way into the room, one after another, placing covered plates down at each of our settings and leaning over to fill our glasses with both wine and water. Looking questioningly at my mother, I let my careful mask slip as I am caught off guard by the wine being poured liberally into my glass.

Despite being underage, it is customary within my parents' elite social circles for even the children to celebrate a toast with wine or champagne on special occasions. In the past, I have been allowed the occasional sip for appearances sake, but the generous portion now filling my glass seems exorbitant. Never mind the fact that the day of my birth has never garnered any cause for celebration in this house.

Barely deigning to acknowledge my questioning glance, my mother waves a drunken hand in the air as Bradley settles into his seat beside me, leaving one hand resting on my neck in a power move to show his control over me. "Never mind the questions. We will wait for both of your fathers to arrive. They are just finishing up some business but should be along shortly... Ah look! Here they are now. Welcome home husband." Mother blows a sloppy air kiss in his direction, and I can see it is difficult for my father to wipe the disgusted

sneer off his face as he sits at the head of the table, while Bradley's father takes up a seat at the opposite end.

"Oh good. You are here on time for once." Casting me an annoyed glance, as if I am ever actually late to an event where my attendance is required, my father soon looks away as he glances around the table. "I can see we are all set for the celebration. Have you already discussed the good news with the children?" He looks between Bradley's mother and my own.

"No dear, we wouldn't want to spoil your fun. This is your moment, so we thought it best that you be the one to share the details." Bradley's mother responds on my mother's behalf, as she is now currently drowning herself in another upturned glass, rather than waiting for whatever news my father wants to toast. A sense of unease washes through me, dread weighing down my stomach as if I had swallowed a boulder. Whatever news is coming, I just know it can't be anything good.

"Well children," my father glances appreciatively over at Bradley before pinning me with a hard stare, "as you are aware, today is Danica's birthday. She is now eighteen." He pauses, as if that is supposed to bring some great revelation in which we all connect the dots floating around in his thick skull. I stare blankly up at him.

"As per the law in our fine state of Maryland, at the age of seventeen a minor is technically allowed to marry if granted consent by both parents. After a lot of discussion, however, we felt that for appearance's sake it made more sense to wait until you turned eighteen. Now that you're officially eighteen, there is no reason the public should question our decision to move forward with the nuptials. As for all the little business details? Well, both parties have finally come to a mutually beneficial agreement after months of discussion, so we can now say that you two are officially engaged. Cheers!" Holding his glass in the air, I sit in stunned silence as the bottom drops out of my stomach. Everyone else has raised their glass in celebration and I cannot move. I can't even think right now.



My breath hitches as I try to swallow down my panic. Always so kind as to bring me down to reality, a sharp pinch along the back of my neck from Bradley's firm grip as he hisses in my ear to "Smile, future wife," has me crashing out of the daze I had slipped into and back down to this hellish dinner. With a shaking hand, I raise my glass as the group stares at me in expectation and a round of cheers erupts around the table while drinks from their celebratory toast are clinked together.

"Please excuse me, I just..." Unable to finish my sentence, uncaring if my abrupt departure will later earn me a punishment, I hastily set down my full glass of wine and it tips precariously before overturning to spill on my place setting; my chair scraping noisily against the floor as I hastily push it back and rush towards the nearest restroom.

After my stomach is thoroughly emptied of what little contents it had and the dry heaves finally stop wracking my body, I drag myself off the floor and over to the sink. Liberally dousing my face in ice-cold water, I try to wash away the horror of my new engagement. Rinsing my mouth once more, I look at my reflection and stare detachedly at the hollow, sad shell of a girl reflected in the mirror.

I thought I had more time. I thought I could have at least another year as I finish out high school. Maybe convince my family that going to college and continuing with professional gymnastics would be good for their image, buy me a short amount of time of additional freedom. Now I realize how foolish it was to allow myself even that small amount of wishful thinking. The flicker of hope only made the cut of the knife that much sharper as it sank deep inside my hollow chest.



## Chapter Twenty-Six



### *Danica*

Returning to the formal dining room, I quietly take my place at Bradley's side, the silent and dutiful fiancé that I am expected to be. The others didn't bother waiting for me and have all dug into their meals. I see they must have instructed the caterers to go ahead and remove the cover off my plate as well, after clearing the mess I had made with the spilled libations, and now my food has gone cold. Lovely. There is nothing more enjoyable than cold, soggy fish to celebrate the beginning of one's demise, and on my birthday, no less. And make no mistake, this engagement is truly a death sentence. One way or another, I know deep in my bones I am not coming out on the other side alive.

Half-heartedly nibbling at my food, I settle for pushing it around my plate to make it look as though some was eaten while I tune out the animated voices around me. Business terms are being thrown around casually about the merger between Bradley's family and my own. Essentially, that is all this marriage is. I was an inconvenience to my parents, a burden they never wanted, as they both so frequently remind me. The least I can do is make myself useful as a bartering tool to help elevate their social and financial status.

It appears my disinterest has unfortunately caught the attention of Bradley. Having resumed my spot at the table, he promptly replaced his hand, only this time laying it casually on my thigh beneath the linen of the table. Now he is using that hand for the weapon it is and has started to sharply pinch my inner thigh, bringing out a yelp as I jump in my seat. Silence fills the

air as all eyes move to me. With a hard look as if to silently chastise my outburst, my father resumes his conversation with Bradley's father, Mr. Bradley Oakley Sr.

"Danica, isn't it just delightful that you two lovebirds can finally tie the knot?" Mrs. Oakley leans closer so we can speak more effectively across the table. Rather than allowing me to continue (as if she even truly cared about my response) she continues, "Such a lovely bride you will make. Of course, we will have to wait at least until Summer so you can finish out this term of school. Normally a wedding with people of our social stature takes at minimum one year to plan, preferably two to three to get the right venue, but Bradley has informed us that you two are just so in love he simply cannot wait.

It will be quite a squeeze, and we will have to utilize many of our social connections of course, but I don't think it entirely unreasonable to assume that we can make this wedding happen by August. Thankfully, I had the foresight to anticipate a shorter engagement window and placed your names under reservation at several exclusive wedding venues right after the two of you first started dating."

"If we grease the right pockets, I am sure it won't be too much trouble to move around a few other wedding dates so we can get the most anticipated slot. Let's see here ... hmmm ... Six months should at least give us enough time to have your custom wedding dress made. These things take time, but again, I already had them begin the work months ago so really all we need is to verify your measurements that I gave them. Provided you haven't gained any more weight, that is." With a critical eye, she glances up and down as if assessing just how much work it will be to squeeze me into whatever designer atrocity she has in mind.

"Wait a minute. Excuse me. I'm sorry, I don't mean to interrupt." She shoots me a look of reproof for barging in on her critical assessment of my person. "I'm sorry but if I get married this summer what will happen with my education, with gymnastics? The expectation was that I would be gearing up for Nationals this spring, and a chance at the Olympics. Not to mention college in the fall." With a wary glance in my

father's direction, I press on. "I know it was very important to all of you to have an Olympic Medalist in the family. If I marry over the summer, how will I be able to maintain my workload between school and training?"

"Oh dear!" She waves her hand at me as if I am just some silly little thing, "You don't need to worry yourself with school. Or with your athletics. By pulling many strings, we have arranged for you to have private coaching with one of the top gymnastics coaches in the world. Truly, it is a miracle we were even able to secure him. He had commitments and contracts that we had to buy out, but we made it happen." Pausing to look at me expectantly, as if I would fall over with undying gratitude, her smile falters as I just stare back at her blankly. Instead, she simply reaches out across the table to pat my hand with a placating smile after my lack of a response.

The deliberate oversight in not mentioning anything about my college plans for the fall does not go unnoticed as I continue to listen to her speech. "You will be able to maintain private gymnastic lessons all from the comfort of your own home that Bradley's father and I will be providing for the two of you. No need to worry about divided attention with those other little gymnasts. No need to waste any more of your precious time sharing a space with several other competing gymnasts or having to put up with those silly children's classes that you teach."

With this, she waves her hand in the air as if to shoo away an annoying fly. "By doing so, this will allow you to find balance between closing out that chapter of your life while you begin your training with your mother and myself in how to become a dutiful housewife. There is a lot more to it than meets the eye, you know. Certain standards and expectations that need to be met by families of our stature. But never fear, we will guide you in the right direction. Then after you have placed with your gold medal in the Olympics, you can retire on top; bringing more beneficial connections and honor to our mutual families with the acclaims you will have gained. Hopefully soon after you will settle into the new role of motherhood yourself."

They have it all planned out. Every miniscule detail of my life is going to be micromanaged and controlled. It seems any semblance of freedom I had hoped to have will be completely non-existent. My stomach churns as my thoughts begin to spiral, desperately searching for any possible means of delaying the inevitable but I come up blank. Mr. Oakley Sr. and my father both stand at the same time, signaling for their wives to do the same. “Ladies, our children’s pending nuptials are cause for celebration, I think.” He nods to his son before turning his head over to my father. “We should leave these two lovebirds alone so they can celebrate privately for a bit. I am sure they have much to discuss.”

A look passes between the three men in the room and my mind seizes, frozen in abject horror. “Wait, you’re leaving me alone with him?”

“Only for a short time.” He stares hard at his son, though what he is trying to communicate is entirely lost on me as I scramble desperately searching for some excuse to not be left alone with him again. My mother, completely drunk at this point, stumbles her way over to me before condescendingly patting my cheek in what she presumably meant as a sign of compassion.

“Now dear,” hiccupping as she continues, words slurring slightly. “You know how this plays out. You screwed up, and now you need to make things right with your fiancé.”

My father takes her by the arm and steers her out of the room, not even bothering to look at me in passing. The Oakley’s follow suit and suddenly, I am alone in a room with my sadistic future husband.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven



### *Danica*

Bradley remains quiet as he sits in his spot next to mine. Several minutes pass in silence as he quietly sips his wine. Nerves tingling with awareness, I am filled with a sense of danger and move subtly to grab the knife from my place setting, covering it with my linen napkin and slowly, ever so carefully sliding it under the side of my dinner plate. Staring at the wall facing him, Bradley either doesn't notice or chooses not to react as he continues to slowly finish his first glass.

Once emptied, he reaches out and pours another. Tipping his head back, he drains this one in several large gulps before slamming the glass down so hard that the fragile crystal shatters in his hand. One of the fragments slice open a thin layer of skin, and I watch as he tilts his head slightly, observing the slow drops of blood slide smoothly onto the white table linen with a sense of detachment that is unnerving. "Here, you cut yourself. Let me... I should go get something to clean that for you." Starting to rise from my seat, hoping at a chance to escape whatever is to come, I am frozen in my tracks as he interrupts.

Clutching the broken stem tightly in his fist, he tsks, shaking his head. "Such a shame, isn't it?" I jump at the cold detachment of his voice breaking through the silence. "That something so beautiful, so fragile, can be so easily broken." Turning in his seat, he faces me, eyes devoid of emotion. Using his other hand to run softly over my hair, I sit frozen inside as I try and fail to hide the flinching of my features. Without provocation, that hand suddenly fists into a ball,

yanking my head back tightly and pressing the jagged glass stem to my throat just above my thrumming pulse. I choke down my gasp, my rapidly beating heart the only true sign of the rising panic within me.

“It’s tragic really, that something so poetically exquisite, so delicate, can be such a good-for-nothing whore!” With sudden violence, he slams my head down into the table, face connecting with the cold china place setting and sodden food that went untouched. Jumping from his seat, he towers over me, before leaning down, pressing his chest into my back, pushing my face more firmly into the plate as he drags the rough edge of the makeshift weapon down the side of my throat. Though I can’t see it, by the sharp sting of the cold glass against my skin I can tell he has drawn blood, and I feel the warmth begin to trickle down my neck.

Pushing one hand into the table, I desperately try to draw air in my panicking lungs as my other hand reaches back frantically attempting to get him to loosen his hold on my hair, the knife hidden in my lap forgotten. “Listen up, you worthless raging cunt. I know you were trying to screw me over with your silly little games, fucking that hockey thug like the sleazy hussy that you are. But I am telling you right fucking now, it stops here.” With significant force, he lifts my head before slamming back into the table, causing me to cry out in pain, fragile china cracking under the force of my face slamming into it.

Removing his other hand from the line of blood now seeping down my neck onto the table, he reaches behind me, unbuckling his pants. “Please! I’m sorry!” I cry out as he roughly lifts my skirt, forcing it above my hips and ripping my underwear in his haste to try to remove them. “Oh, I don’t think you are yet, *Danica*” he sneers. “But you fucking will be when I am through with you. I will not let you humiliate me by parading your loose cock-sucking pussy around to every asshole that steps in your line of sight. You are *my* fucking future wife!”

Emphasizing roughly, he shoves his cock into my ass and I am blinded by searing white pain as tearing sensations rip through



me, my vision spotting. “And I will not let you make me look like the bad guy when you are such a slut!” He slams into me repeatedly as he brutally rips at the hair on the back of my head. I cry out in pain as I desperately try to find leverage to push away but he punches the side of my head, effectively silencing me.

As stars erupt around my eyes in a dizzying outburst, I desperately try to clear my head. Scrambling for purchase along the table, my hand connects with the linen covering the forgotten knife that had been hidden under my plate. Turned on by my pathetic attempts to resist the brutal invasion, Brad reaches down using his other hand to tightly grip my throat.

As my vision blurs, my numb fingers successfully latch on to the handle of the knife and I swing up in a wide arc, not caring what I hit, just hoping to get some slack to try and escape his clutches. Slicing through his arm like butter, I hear a yelp of pain as he jerks back, cock ripping out of me as his grip on my neck and hair loosen.

A desolate noise somewhere between a cry of relief and gasp leaves my throat as I frantically shove away from the edge of the table. Shakily, I rush out of the dining room towards the entryway. If I can just make it to the front door, if I can get outside then I will be okay. He won't hurt me in public, not when my cry could carry to where one of the neighbors could hear; Wouldn't want to cause a scene.

“You fucking bitch!” With an almost otherworldly roar, he comes tearing after me. Easily having a good foot on me, his strides quickly overtaking my own and I find myself being slammed against a wall before being brutally thrown to the ground. “You. Fucking. Psychotic. Bitch! You. Cut. Me!” With each word uttered, savage blows land on my torso and legs with the full force of a hefty linebacker, and I find myself gasping for air as I curl in a ball in a sad attempt to make the smallest target possible.

After a few more kicks to the stomach, his rage has died down to a simmer and I am forced onto my stomach while he takes me from behind, finishing the savage claim that went unfinished in the other room. At this point, unable to stop the

pain, unable to stop the beast, I feel myself shut down. I don't fight back. I no longer resist. I don't even cry. Lying limp like the worthless whore he says I am as he pulls out and comes in a hot stream across my ass and thighs.

He says something to me as he is tucking himself back into his slacks, but I don't hear a word that is said. In a sadistic twist, he leans down and tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear, before kissing my cheek and gently patting my naked ass. Then he is gone. The silence is broken only by my ragged breathing as I lay there broken, half-naked on the floor of my parents' entryway. Where my parents abandoned me to my cruel fate, knowing full-well who it was they were selling me off to. An empty shell of the happy eighteen-year-old I woke up as only this morning, now too broken to even cry.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight



### Theo

I nternally I sigh as I stare blankly at my phone. Shit, that conversation did not go at all how I had meant for it to go. After that intense dream, I just couldn't get my damn head on straight, and people were starting to notice. During our game last night, the guys repeatedly had to pick up the slack after missing what should have been two very easy goals and letting the opposing team slip through our defense.

Thoughts of our kisses, her playing with my nieces and nephews, eating leftovers in the car together as we sat in the quiet; my head was spinning, and I came to the unfortunate conclusion that Danica Ellis was a distraction I could not afford to keep in my life. Not if I want any real shot of claiming my spot in the pros. I had risked too much, given up an enormous part of myself to make this dream a reality and I couldn't let a fake relationship derail everything I had worked so hard to achieve.

Knowing that the Bradley situation was handled was the only reason I was able to push through my reluctance to send those god-awful texts. I knew sending the whole "let's just be friends" texts would hurt but fuck, the truth of the matter is I *can't* just be her friend. This girl has wormed her way inside my head, and I can't get her out.

I had every intention of keeping things going the way they had been, every intention of meeting her up for coffee today when we got back ... but that dream. That fantasy is one that I will relive over and over probably until I drop dead. In that moment, it was so real to me, and waking up from something

so exquisite was a living nightmare. After that dream I knew I had to back off before things got out of hand. There is just too much wrong, too much at stake.

Never mind the fact that she is my friend and teammate's younger sister, or the fact that she is so much younger than me she is literal jailbait, it is just a dream that I can't ever make a reality and it is killing me. The second I typed the words; it was like I took a knife to my own chest. Knowing that I am going to have to see her around at our games, when she hangs out with her brother, but never wearing my name, never truly mine ... I don't know how I am going to get through it.

Nursing my only beer of the night, I have my hood up under my leather jacket. No need to invite unwanted conversation. After we got home, I went along with the guys when they tried to drag me out to celebrate our wins from all three away games. Winning three away games in a row is a big fucking deal and I should be in a much more celebratory mood. The victory feels hollow without Danica here to help celebrate it. Instead, I glower down at my beer as I tune out the loud noises of the crowded bar.

Jagger and Kalen sit on either side of me, each with a puck bunny sitting in their laps as they recount tales of each of our victories. A few of the other guys from our team have hit up the dance floor, surrounded by a large group of bunnies hoping they will get lucky tonight. Finn and Seb sit across from me on the opposite side of our large booth and watch the game currently displayed on the overhead television above the bar while each enjoys their drinks. Normally, I would join them in something a little stronger, maybe hitting up a quick, no-commitments hook-up to take the edge off the victory high but tonight I am just really not in the fucking mood.

Exiting the back hall to walk up to the table, hand-in-hand with a blonde that looks like she just had a really good time, Caleb narrows his eyes as he sees me.

“Hey man, when'd you get here?”

I shrug noncommittally, not bothering to answer.

“Oh, he got here probably twenty minutes ago or so but you were pretty... busy elsewhere.” Seb throws in while wagging his eyebrows in Caleb’s direction. To her credit, the blonde doesn’t comment as she blushes and leans more closely into Caleb’s side.

“Weren’t you meeting up with Danica tonight? I thought you guys were going out to hang for coffee or some shit?” Once again, he stares pointedly in my direction and once again, I choose to ignore him, focused on watching the glistening condensation glide slowly down the side of my beer bottle.

After a loaded pause, it becomes apparent that he isn’t going to let this go. Not bothering to look up, I responded. “Danica and I decided it was time to call it off. Her stupid ex hasn’t bothered her at all since we had our little chat, and our connection was becoming a distraction for both of us. Seemed like a good enough time to call it.” Shrugging once more, I look up briefly before scowling back down at my glass, choosing to not elaborate further on the details of our conversation.

“Well shit!” Glancing at the smartwatch on his wrist before looking over at me, he continues, “Sandy, baby, I had fun, but I have to go.” He leans over to place a quick kiss on the blonde’s cheek.

Pulling back, she glares at him as she huffs, “It’s Sarah, you jerk,” but Caleb’s back is facing our group as he hastily pushes through the crowd to leave the bar, not slowing down long enough to hear her response. Flipping her hair over her shoulder, Sandy or Sarah or whatever her name is gives our group a saccharin smile in flirtatious invitation before Finn dismisses her with a wave of his hand.

“Not interested, thanks.” He throws me an accusatory look as he shoves Seb, trying to push his way out of the booth. My mask falls momentarily as I look in bewilderment between the brothers’ at their odd sudden change in demeanor. In response, they both just glare at me. “Dude! What the actual fuck?”

My face is stony, defenses raised. I’m being attacked by two of my best friends and I don’t even know what the fuck for.

“You seriously broke up with her? On her birthday? You are such a jackass!” Seb shakes his head at me as Finn puts his phone to his ear, presumably trying to reach the birthday girl. Well fuck.



## Chapter Twenty-Nine



### *Caleb*

Ugh that goddamn idiot, breaking up with her on her birthday. I should break his face for being such a jackass. I knew this whole plan with them fake dating was stupid. I could see how they were both getting attached to one another. Shit.

Had I known he was going to be acting like such a jackass I wouldn't have canceled my long-standing plans on how I normally celebrate her birthday with her each year. God knows our parents won't actually give a shit to acknowledge the day, though I have never really understood why there is such a huge divide in how they treat the two of us.

Pushing my way out of the bar, I pull out my phone and call Danica to figure out where she is so we can meet up, when I see a missed call from our father. Great. Clearing all my notifications, I try calling her twice with no answer. Pulling up my thread, I go to text Danica that I am coming to pick her up so we can celebrate her birthday together when I see that I also have an unread message from the bastard himself. Great, any communication from him is always a sign of something bad coming my way.

**Bastard: Since you couldn't be bothered to come to our celebratory dinner, I thought you would want to know that congratulations are in order. Your sister is engaged. We will be making the official announcement at the beginning of next week.**



Oh shit.

The bottom drops from my stomach as I break into an all-out run to my car. I press repeatedly on her programmed speed-dial, trying desperately to reach her to make sure everything is okay as I unlock my car and quickly pull out of the lot, but there is no answer. Dammit! I have to get to Danica. She would never just agree to a plan like this without a fight. On top of that, Danni never ignores my calls when I am actively trying to reach her. Shit! Something is wrong...

## Chapter Thirty



### *Danica*

**B**linking up at the dark ceiling from my cold bathroom floor, I try to groan from the pain but all that comes out is a faint wheeze as I gasp for breath instead. I try to slow my unsteady breaths and force back the spots that are clouding my vision. I just woke up, and I can't tell from the lighting how long I was unconscious. Minutes or hours could have passed, and I would be oblivious either way.

After lying half-naked, broken and in shock on the floor of the entryway for an unknown amount of time my parents finally came home. I was so out of it that the situation didn't fully register at first, and I was in so much pain that I couldn't be bothered to feel embarrassed with how they found me. Father didn't even bother to acknowledge me or look in my direction as he stepped around me walking down the hall towards his study. I vaguely recall hearing a mumbled "You need to deal with it," thrown to my mother in passing.

After a few more minutes of silence, I heard the click-clacking of my mother's heels on the cold tile floor. The clicking stopped just before me, and with a momentous amount of effort I painfully pried open one of my throbbing, swollen eyes to look up into the emotionless face of my mother.

Throwing a small kitchen towel, it lands next to my face where it is resting on the floor. "Clean yourself up, you're a mess."

A whimper escapes my lips as they try to form the word, "Mom..."

She had already turned away from me and was starting to make her way up the stairs. With her foot midair, hand on the rail, she pauses not bothering to look in my direction as she sighs before whispering “You will learn soon enough. This is the game we are forced to play, a role we have been born into. It’s best for you to learn it early ... Your father won’t want to see you lying there when he comes out. Go clean yourself up.” Without a single glance back at me she disappears up the stairs and down the left towards her half of the large house.

For all her aloofness, her quiet disdain, she is right about one thing. Father won’t want to see me like this again. God forbid I taint the painted image of the perfect house and perfect family that he tries to project at all times. Whatever else, I know I don’t want to be on the receiving end of his *disappointment* if he did see me again. With a groan, I roll over and painstakingly drag myself across the floor to the stairway.

Managing to crawl in one torturously slow step at a time, after what feels like hours I finally collapse at the top of the stairs. Tears stream down my face as I bite back the cry of pain that has a chokehold on me. As I lay panting, desperately seeking some measure of control to lock down my emotions and agony, I hear footsteps followed by the sound of the front door closing. A short time later, lights flash, illuminating the glass windows lining the entryway as my father’s car turns down the winding drive.

A small cry escapes my lips and the steady stream of tears leaking out my eyes are a dam threatening to burst and drown me in the overflow but I fight down the emotion. I just need to get to my room, get to my phone. I can call for help if I can just get myself over there. Biting down another groan I roll over once more and continue in an almost army crawl, elbow over elbow as I inch my way towards my room at the far end of the house.

Eventually, I make it to my bedroom, my own makeshift prison in this hell house I call home. After reaching for my phone, I go to dial the first number that comes to mind. *Hoodie Guy*. His name lights up my screen as my shaking

hands open my contacts but through the pain-filled fog my mind clears just long enough to process that he is done with me. Theo played the hero and helped me through a momentary battle not knowing the bomb that would be set off in its wake.

I can't call him, can't reach out for help. He has already done too much. Not that it would even matter. He isn't here, their flight was delayed by the snowstorm and he couldn't help even if he wanted to. That means Caleb and Seb are still gone too. I could call Finn; I should call him. But I don't want him to see me like this. Out of everyone, he is my closest friend. My person. I can't let him see me like this.

Tears fall in earnest down my swollen and bruised cheeks, and I force myself to move forward, into the bathroom. Once fully enclosed within my small private bathroom I finally let go. With a painful whimper, the tears fall freely as sobs wrack my body until the blackness that has been hovering at the edges clouds my vision and I let myself sink into oblivion.

# Chapter Thirty-One



## *Danica*

**M**y head is pounding as my mind swims somewhere in the great abyss where unconsciousness and reality collide. Persistent buzzing like that of a mosquito ring in my ears and I raise a heavy hand to try and swat away the annoyance. Unable to raise my leaden arm or remove the source of the vibrations, I feel myself slip back into the inky black nothingness.

## Chapter Thirty-Two



### *Danica*

“Oh god! Danni! Danica! Come on Smarty, wake up! Oh god! Oh god!”

A voice filters in through the darkness, and I struggle to focus. With painstaking effort, I pry one eye open with just a sliver. There is groaning in the distance, beyond the worried voice floating above me and it takes several seconds before it registers that the pain-filled noises are coming from me.

“Danni? Oh, thank god!” Choking back a sob, my brother drops the phone he was holding to his ear as he leans closer to my face. “Thank God you are awake! It’s okay Smarty. I’ve got you. I’m gonna get you help, just hold on!”

I moan, shaking my head. Shit, nope. That was a bad idea. Everything starts to spin. Through a split lip I think I mumble something about no hospitals but I’m uncertain if the words actually left my mouth or if they just stayed floating somewhere inside my addled brain. Trying with great effort to focus, I pry my other eye open and see my brother once more has the phone to his ear, held up by his shoulder as he searches for someplace to hold on to me that isn’t broken. Good luck with that. From the feel of it, everything is broken. Nothing will ever be the same. The room swirls on its axis in a tilt-a-whirl as inky blackness sucks me down once more.

Dim lighting comes blindingly into view as my crusty, aching eyes open. Unfocused, I blink against the light as the soft sounds of beeping and quiet whirring of machines fill the room. Trying slowly to raise my head, everything is a blur as

pain explodes around me. Wincing sharply, I groan as my head rests once more on a soft surface.

“Smarty? You’re awake?” A hand squeezes the only part of my arm not currently aching and I hear a loud beep before the voice continues “Nurse! Please come quick! I think she is waking up! Danni! Sweetheart, can you hear me?”

“Mmmm. I can hear you. Stop yelling.” I croak out the words, my throat is dry and scratchy, and they barely come out as a whisper. I’m not sure if the floating voice even heard me.

“Oh, thank god! You’re awake!” A wet kiss is placed on my aching cheek, and I try slowly to open my eyes. They feel heavy and tight, as though they have crusted over. Through numb, swollen lips I try once more to speak, mouthing the word “water.”

A loud, cheerful voice grates against my aching nerves as it interrupts. “I know honey. You are probably so thirsty. We can’t do anything about that quite yet until the doc takes a good look at you, but here, this should help in the meantime.” Loud crinkling, like some sort of plastic sounds next to my head as a drawer closes, then a soft, spongy material that is slightly damp is placed against my lips.

The dampness runs along the seams, helping to loosen the cracked and swollen mounds. I stick my tongue out gently, licking at the dampness. “Here honey, I’ve got ya.” Once more the sponge is placed to my mouth, this time gently against my tongue and I greedily suck the small amount of moisture that the soft material holds.

“I’m Elsie, your nurse. Do you know where you are?” Trying to shake my head, I realize halfheartedly that I am unable to do so, everything feels weighed down, as if I am trying to wade through the ocean while wearing heavy snow gear. Elsie the nurse moves in a quiet and gentle manner around the room as she starts fiddling with things. My eyes refuse to open all the way, so I can’t clearly make out what she is doing, but it sounds as if she is messing around with different pieces of equipment. I feel a soft but firm touch inside my wrist for a moment before there is a gentle brush across my forehead.

“On a scale of one to ten, can you tell me how you feel? One being like a walk on the beach while on a tropical vacation, ten being the worst pain of your life.”

I vaguely feel myself mumble something about a nine before I slip back into blissful unconsciousness.

When I awake next, it is with a modicum more alertness. My eyes are able to open more freely, though they, along with every other part of my body ache with various forms of pain. It is a dichotomy of sensation, dull throbs clash with sharp stabbing against the background of general achiness all over in an overwhelming symphony that threatens to take my breath away. My vision swims and I slowly blink back the haze. Though I am unable to turn my head fully, my bleary eyes take in the dim lighting of the room. The soft beeping is broken only by a soft chorus of snores.

Looking down, I see Caleb asleep, hand gently holding my arm as his head rests against the side of my bed. Over his shoulder, I glimpse Sebastian and Finnley, each asleep in an uncomfortable-looking chair, arms crossed over their chests and legs stretched out in front of them. My eyes shift as I look over towards the opposite end of the room, and a shocking electrical sense of awareness registers through the achiness that has overtaken my body as crystal-blue eyes meets my gaze with a look of intensity.

“You came.” I choke out the whisper, my irritated throat hoarse with dryness.



# Chapter Thirty-Three



## Theo

*48 hours earlier*

“**Y**ou seriously broke up with her? On her birthday? You are such a jackass!” Seb shakes his head at me as Finn puts his phone to his ear, presumably trying to reach the birthday girl. Well. Fuck. Me.

I groan as I run my hands down my face, then through my hair in frustration. The hood of my jacket falls back as I do so, and from my periphery I see that several girls have taken notice and are trying to capture my attention. It isn't going to happen though. The only girl whose attention I crave is the one girl I just pushed away, and on her fucking birthday no less. Damn. Why wouldn't she tell me it's her birthday when we originally made plans?

Finn and Seb are both still glaring at me and I realize belatedly that I had voiced my question out loud.

Finn shakes his head frustratedly before pulling the phone away from his ear.

“She isn't answering. Dude, you really fucked up big time. Danica hates her birthday. Her norm is to hunker down and pretend it doesn't exist until Caleb ends up dragging her sorry ass out for some brother/sister bonding shit and usually involves at least one melt-down. It's like trying to move a stubborn bull that has dug its hooves in before it goes on a rampage. The fact that she willingly chose to spend the evening with you, and then you not only blow her off but call

off whatever this fake-relationship-thing is ...” Seb whistles low as Finn continues ... “Man, you screwed up big this time.”

“Should we try to meet up with her?” Seb inquires to his brother, blatantly excluding me from the conversation.

Finn lets out a frustrated sound as he taps one hand agitatedly against his thigh. “I don’t think so. She isn’t answering her phone. You know how she gets. Probably better let Caleb sort this out with her and then we can meet up later.”

I can’t help but stare at the two of them, my eyes darting back and forth as I take in their mutual agitation that seems disproportionate to the situation.

“Okay, I know I screwed up and clearly I need to have a conversation with her and apologize but what the hell is wrong with the two of you?”

As I am saying this, Finn once again has the phone to his ear, this time, it seems, he is leaving a message for Caleb.

“Hey C, we couldn’t get a hold of Danni. She wasn’t answering for us either. Shoot me a text once you get in touch with her, yeah? Let me know she’s doing okay.”



Something’s wrong. Caleb totally bailed on weight training and practice today which is completely out of character for him and Seb has been acting really weird. His game has been totally off, he wasn’t even trying during any of our defensive drills and it was easy to see that he was upset about something. If that weren’t enough, Finn has been hovering in the background all throughout our practice, constantly texting on his phone while periodically glancing up to shoot Seb a loaded look.

We hit the showers after practice and Seb tries to make a beeline out of the locker room after he stopped into Coach's office for a private word. Something is definitely up. Seb is not one to ever go out of his way to have a one-on-one chat with Coach, especially not on a day when his game was so clearly off. I am several yards behind as he exits the building and makes his way over to Finn's car. With a quick glance around the parking lot, I sprint the rest of the way and reach the car just as he is opening the door to get in.

Quickly, I reach over and slam it closed, leaning against the frame to block his path. Crossing my arms, I raise an eyebrow and give the brothers a pointed look. "Talk."

Giving each other a look, one shrugs while the other gives a slight shake of his head. "Now."

"Look, dude. Now's really not a good time, we're in a bit of a hurry. We can talk to you later but we have to go." The words come from Finn's mouth. I flatten my own into a displeased line. Unease fills my gut, something is definitely off. I turn, addressing Seb, knowing I am more likely to get a response out of my teammate than his brother.

"As your captain, I need to know if something is going on. Caleb totally blew off practice today and I don't know what the hell is your problem but there is clearly something on your mind distracting you, so talk."

His face shuts down in a stony mask as Seb looks between his twin and myself.

"I could always make you talk ..." My words are quiet but the threat is clear in my tone. I could put him through tortuous drills or harass him until he gave in. Though physical violence is always an option, it isn't one I was keen to use on someone I consider to be a brother, but I will let the weight of the threat carry through my fallacious statement as if it were true.

With a gesture towards the car, Seb shakes his head before he responds. "We really don't have time for this. Get in, we'll explain on the way."

Not one to usually allow others to drive me around as I generally prefer to be always in control of myself, I make an exception as I push off the car and settle my large frame in the small backseat. Both of my friends quickly join me, hopping into either front seat and then we are off, headed towards a destination that I still don't know.

“Now are you going to explain yourselves?”

Glancing at me through the rearview mirror, I can see Finn is tense, his knuckles are white as they tightly clutch the steering wheel. “... It's Danni...”

With just those two simple words, I feel the bottom crash out of my stomach as my vision narrows. “What happened?”



We arrive at the hospital about thirty minutes later and I fight to contain my fear and anger as I push through the doors to the lobby and hastily glance around, trying to orient to my surroundings. The guys are close behind me and Seb nudges my shoulder before nodding in the direction of the elevators. A short time later, we arrive on the eighth floor, where they have informed me that Danica has been admitted.

Room 804 is just down the hall to the right. My long strides bring me to the door in no time, and just as I am reaching towards the handle, the door opens and I am face to face with two older individuals who must be Danica's parents. The man looks to be in his mid-fifties, with graying hair and hard features that are not softened by his sharp business suit. His general outline is similar to that of his son, although the years have not been kind to him. The woman standing to the right and slightly behind him has the same auburn hair as Danica but that is where their similarities end.

Where Danica is sunshine, with smiling green eyes and freckles that she comes by naturally, the woman in front of me can only be described as plastic. I am not typically one to judge, to each their own and all that or whatever but her face almost looks like a science project gone wrong. It is evident that she has had numerous rounds of Botox and injections that have frozen her features in an unnatural state for someone desperately holding on to the dredges of youthfulness. Auburn hair full of product and colors to try and brighten it and makeup covering any indication of freckles, if she has any at all.

Both individuals pause at the sight of three hulking bodies hovering outside the door. They are tense and both look as if they have been pinched, or maybe it's just that they both have a stick up their ass. Either way, not what I was expecting them to look like.

With an uptake of her doctored nose, the woman sniffs before eyeing each of us in turn. Her husband narrows his eyes before grabbing the woman tightly by the arm and literally dragging her out of the doorway. They don't bother saying a word and the man deliberately bumps into me, pushing against a solid wall of muscle as he passes. If we were on the ice, and he were twenty years younger, I would say he was asking for a body check but obviously this is not the time or place. And shoving my girl's dad into the boards even if we were on the ice is probably something that is frowned upon.

Choosing to be the bigger person, I don't give them a second glance as I brush past them, entering the room, and see Caleb sitting at my girl's bedside. Holding on to her arm, his eyes are red like he had been crying at one point but his body language is all wrong. He looks pissed. Momentary hesitation aside, I deliberately enter the room, just loud enough that my presence is made known without being too intrusive. Before sitting, I pause at the foot of the bed and take in my beautiful girl.

What a fucking sight. She is a wreck. Both eyes swollen completely shut, with stitches along her forehead close to the hairline and a split lip that has more than doubled in size. A blanket is covering most of her torso but she has a cast on one

arm, IV attached to the other with several different tubes and wires sticking out. A series of beeping machines give off statistics that I can't read but from what I can see just by looking at her, she is a patchwork of black and blue, various cuts and bruises, gashes stitched back together marring her beautiful tan skin.

"Danica ..."

The word comes out as a strangled whisper, my voice choked with emotion.

Looking up at me, and presumably Finn and Seb who are also in a state of shock as they take in the sight before us, Caleb swallows thickly. Shaking his head, it's clear to see he is fighting back tears as he tries to clear his throat.

"She hasn't woken up. She was barely conscious when I found her but by the time the ambulance arrived she had passed out. I-" Choking on a shuddered breath, Caleb pauses, swallowing once more. Adam's apple bobbing repeatedly, a tear falls down his face, landing unnoticed on his sister's arm.

"Caleb, what happened?" From behind me, Seb asks the question. On the way over, they gave me just a glossed over version of events. Basically, after leaving us at the bar last night, when everyone was trying to get in touch with Danica, he went home and found her like this. No details as to how she ended up in such a state, but I can give one fucking guess as to who is at fault.

Shaking his head, Caleb stumbles emotionally through his recounting of events that ended with them being here in the hospital, his bedside vigil as their parents couldn't even be bothered to show up until after the police had shown up. The detectives had already been by to take Caleb's statement, but with Danica not having regained consciousness, it was a very brief conversation.

"You don't need to be here T." Caleb addresses me in a quiet and calm manner, seemingly drained after the emotional roller coaster he has been on over the last 24 hours. "I know you and Danni weren't really a thing, it was just for show. Since you called it off, you don't owe us anything, you don't need to stay."

“Just try to fucking keep me away.” My voice comes out in a low growl, and I have to bite back my anger. Caleb is not the one it needs to be directed at; he’s been through enough. But when I get my fucking hands on the son of a bitch who hurt her there is not a place on God’s green earth where that piece of shit can hide. There is going to be absolute hell to pay. I may be going to hell for staking my claim on this beautiful soul, but I will drag that sorry asshole down with me if it’s the last thing I do. “She may not be my girlfriend by rights but she is still mine. My fucking girl. Just try to keep me away.”

“Whoa. Down boy.” Finn pats me on the shoulder, and I realize belatedly that my fists are clenched tightly. God, I want to punch something right now.

With a scowl, I grumble under my breath before taking a seat in the chair opposite Caleb on Danica’s other side. Looking over her pulverized body, I tentatively reach out for the hand that is attached to all the wires and IVs. She looks so fragile, but I know deep down she is a warrior, *la mia diavoletta*. She will pull through this. She has to.

# Chapter Thirty-Four



## Theo

*Present Day*

I nod off as my bleary thoughts start to run together. We have been here for over twenty-four hours, remaining at Danica's bedside unwavering. In an unprecedented move, Coach Williamson called off today's practice. Word got out that there was an accident involving a close family member of one of the team, so out of respect Coach decided to call it for today and tomorrow. After that time, we will have to resume our normal schedule, there is no way around it unfortunately unless we are going to forfeit our next match.

Honestly, if word got out about what really happened there is not a single doubt in my mind that the vote would be unanimous. Most of the team knows Danica, they all care for her on some level as an honorary little sister. For the few who haven't met her (much like myself up until a few weeks ago) they would all make the same call. She is one of our own, and we take care of our own.

Danica still hasn't recovered enough to regain consciousness. She had a few brief moments in the middle of the night where we were all hopeful that she might be waking up, but she slipped back into her comatose state within moments of the nurse coming in to check on her. The doctor who showed up shortly thereafter said it was a good sign though. She suffered a severe concussion and mild brain swelling, along with a broken wrist, several cracked ribs, bruised spleen and various other cuts and bruises (some of which required stitches).



Her doctor, who introduced himself as Dr. Martinez, informed our little assemblage keeping vigil that the broken bones and all the cuts and bruises were less of a concern than the brain injury. With a concussion like the one she had, complicated by the swelling on her brain, there were concerns regarding long-term complications and her ability to wake up. The fact that she opened her eyes and seemed to recognize her brother was a reassurance. It didn't feel that way to us.

Nothing about the situation we were currently in was reassuring. But for all the concern we have collectively between the four of us, we are a useless lot as we have been repeatedly told that all we can do is sit and wait. To their credit, Seb and Finn have been right here by her side just as much as Caleb and me. We are her only family, her only real family. After that brief display of support, Danica's parents couldn't be bothered to show up to check on their only daughter again.

They made it clear through numerous texts and phone calls that Caleb has refused to answer that they feel this whole situation is a nuisance and he never should have called the paramedics at all. Makes me wonder if they thought she would be better off dead. The way these people are acting, they feel inconvenienced by the fact that they now have to deal with doctors and police questioning the events that led up to their child ending up in the hospital in critical condition.

That's the other thing. When Danica was first brought in, she was critical. Internal bleeding required surgery and they triaged the rest until they could get her stabilized. I guess she spent most of the first night in the ICU before she was finally considered critical but stable enough to be admitted to a different floor. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with these people that Caleb and Danica are unfortunate enough to call parents. How could anyone in their right mind look at this beautiful woman and feel anything but devastation and rage at what she has been through?

Danica sighs in her sleep, shifting slightly and I jerk, alert once more. Was that just the lightest squeeze of her fingers in my hand, or did I imagine it? I sit up straighter in my chair.

The guys are all asleep, passed out from exhausting hours of sitting next to her bed or pacing aimlessly, hoping for any kind of response. A small, almost inaudible breathy sound passes from her swollen lips and my gaze locks on her face, anxious to see her beautiful green eyes. I know I screwed up. None of this would have happened if I hadn't been such chicken-shit and bailed on her for our coffee date. This is all my fucking fault and I swear I will make this right even if it kills me trying. I just need to see her, need her to see me. She has to be okay.

Another soft moan whispers out of her throat and her head turns slightly away from me. No, dammit. Look at me baby. I'm right here, look at me. See me. One eye painstakingly cracks open followed by the other, and I see the pain and the fear in her gorgeous eyes. I give her less injured hand a very slight, gentle squeeze, letting her know without words that I am here for her and a moment later, her head is slowly turning towards me. There's my girl. My chest tightens, filled with emotions I can't name as relief washes over me.

"You came." Her voice is low and scratchy, probably feeling dry and painful after having the intubation tube to help her breathe when she was in surgery.

"Let them try to keep me away." There is a ferocity filling my low response, a thousand unspoken words that I desperately need to tell her. Words that I can't say but damn my heart is breaking with the need I have for her. A small tear escapes the corner of one eye, and I lean forward to gently kiss it away, while reaching over to press the call button for the nurse.

Though I kept my voice quiet, Caleb, Finnley and Sebastian all jerk awake at the sound, their bodies on high alert for any signs of change.

"Smarty! Oh God! You're awake! It's okay Smarty, I'm right here." Caleb is crying as he gently touches one of the few unbruised places on Danica's other arm before leaning in to gently kiss her head. "I'm right here. We're all here. You're safe now. We've got you." With his words, more tears slip out through her battered eyes.



The next several days pass by in a blur filled with various physicians and other hospital staff, each coming and going as they perform various exams on the state of Danica's overall wellbeing. Danica's parents made a brief appearance once more for show, but with their arrival, my little sparrow quickly became agitated to the point where the nurse on shift ended up having to administer more medicine for pain and something to calm her down. From her state of distress, they were worried she would only injure herself further. Her parents left shortly thereafter without a word to any of us.

It wrecked me to leave her side, but our time came, and I had no choice but return to campus once our reprieve had ended; we were being called back to the ice. Not wanting to leave her alone for even a second, Finnley took up the bedside vigil to watch over her and provide companionship while the rest of us were back to the grind. The ice had always been my haven, an escape from whatever chaos was thrown into my life. Cool air filled my lungs. The smooth glide of my skates on the fresh ice brought me no sense of relief as I pushed myself harder with each drill, lost in my thoughts and unable to focus on the puck in front of me.

I had made a mistake, I realized. The biggest mistake of my life. I thought the feelings and undeniable pull I felt towards Danica would be a hindrance, a risk that would keep me away from achieving my dreams but after seeing her lying in that hospital bed, so small and fragile, I realize how close I had come to losing the most precious thing that ever came into my life. Danica wasn't a distraction or a hindrance, but my anchor in the storm. Though I may not be able to have her now completely, she was fucking *mine* and I wasn't going to let anyone take her away from me.

After an absolutely brutal practice, I am exhausted. Coach pushed us to the limits today, running drills that I could

normally do in my sleep, but my head wasn't on the ice. It was back in that bleak hospital room with my girl. It took all of my effort to drag my sorry ass back to the locker room to shower and change before I once again found myself piled in the backseat with Sebastian and Caleb as we made our way back to the hospital.

Our phones were on silent all throughout practice and I reached into my pocket now to pull it out and check my notifications. I see several missed calls and texts from Finn. Immediately, my phone is pressed to my ear as I am redialing. "What happened?"

His voice is grim on the other end of the line, and I can tell without him having to say it that whatever the news was, it was bad. "You're not gonna like it ..."

Putting the phone on speaker so the other guys could be looped in, Caleb calls Finn from over his shoulder as he presses harder on the gas pedal. "Is Danni okay? What's going on?"

"It's your parents, dude."

"What did they do this time?" He bites off the question, voice full of frustration.

"I take it you haven't been on any social media pages yet today?"

With a terse shake of my head, I belatedly realize that of course Finn can't see my response so I clip out my short reply. "Of course we haven't. We've been running drills all day. Just tell us what the hell happened?"

I can hear Finnley let out a breath and his pause only causes my hackles to rise further.

"Dude, just spit it out." This coming from his brother in response to the delayed answer.

"There has been a formal announcement in the society pages, announcing the engagement of Danica and Brad. It was picked up by a local news media station and is being run alongside a story about how your sister was involved in an accident though the details are being kept quiet. The story has gone

viral. With your sister being a nationally acclaimed gymnast and his family being the wealthy snobs that they are, the story of her ‘accident’ and engagement have made national news. It’s being played on every major news station and has already been reposted on social media in hundreds of thousands of posts. Somehow there was a photo of Danica with all her injuries here in the hospital that was leaked, and that photo has spread too.”

“The fuck!” In unison, all three of us exclaim our astonishment and anger.

“Anyone wanna take a guess as to who leaked that picture?” Seb’s sardonic tone echoes each of our thoughts as a grim look passes between us.

“We’re on our way. Be there soon.”

Another twenty minutes pass in tense silence as we make our way through downtown traffic before arriving at the busy hospital. Upon our arrival, we are greeted by an absolute media circus. News vans crowd the busy parking lot and reporters and camera crew stand around, filming various reports presumably about Danica. Shaking my head in disgust, it takes several minutes before we are able to find parking and we duck our heads as we push through the crowd. Reporters catch sight and recognize each of us in turn, quickly making the connection that we have to Danica and they surge forward, begging for a chance to interview.

At the door, we are greeted by security personnel who allow us to pass before blocking off the entrance once more. Eager to see my girl, nervous tension fills me as I head to her room. She has still been pretty out of it the last few days, only waking for brief intervals before falling back into a restless sleep. The police came to interview her before I left for the evening yesterday and she hadn’t been able to answer. With the severity of her concussion and the swelling on her brain, her memory of the events leading up to Caleb finding her have been hazy at best, and it is clear to anyone watching that simply trying to remember the events wears down what little energy she has.

I'm greeted by the glorious sight of her bright green eyes as they trail me when I enter her room. Elevated slightly in her bed, she is the most heartbreakingly beautiful mess I have ever seen.

"Il mio passerotto..." I bend down to kiss her gently on the cheek, wishing it could be so much more. "How are you feeling today, beautiful?"

"Hey Smarty" Caleb is right behind me, stepping over to her bedside and placing a kiss on the top of her head. Seb follows suit, and then we all hover, trying to hide our collective anxious energy as we glance over her, making sure she is okay.

"Guys, I'm fine. Really. You don't have to keep showing up and wasting what little free time you have babysitting me." The bruises are in various stages of healing, some still dark as others have faded to a more sickening greenish/brown; swelling has lessened around her eyes and they are able to open more fully as she takes each of us in.

"You are not fine, Smarty. Don't even start that shit with me." Caleb's frustration is evident in his eyes, and though it is not directed at her, Danica flinches in response.

"Hey, eyes on me passerotto." Looking over in my direction once more, I reach out to gently take her hand, careful not to disturb the IV and wires from the various instruments that she is attached to. "It's okay. I've got you."

"We've got you." Seb interrupts, stepping closer to the foot of the bed, his tall frame towers over Danica and she looks small in her hospital bed. Bracing myself against the surge of jealousy that passes through me, I am careful to make sure that my emotions are not reflected in my face. Danica's situation has left her feeling vulnerable and her perception to those around her has been heightened during her time in this hospital room.

"Danni," I can see that Caleb is working overtime to try and hold back the emotions we are all feeling, "are you aware of what is happening right now?"

Confusion clouds those bright green orbs as she looks first to Finn before turning back to Caleb. With a slight shake of her head, she winces before laying back against the pillows.

“Here.” Reaching out, I carefully lower the frame of her bed slightly with the push of a button and then gently readjust her pillow, my eyes never leaving her face as I critically examine her features, searching for any signs of discomfort. A soft sigh escapes her cracked lips as she settles more comfortably into the pillow.

“Our parents leaked a picture of you in here. They are spinning some crap about you being in an unfortunate accident and announcing to the world that you are engaged to that asshole Brad.”

“Oh-” So soft, the sound almost imperceptible but still, I caught it. There is no shock on her face, no surprise in her tone. Her shoulders drop and a look of defeat and resignation passes across her features before she carefully puts up her walls once more.

“Oh? That’s all you have to say?” Caleb’s voice is incredulous, and I shoot him a scathing look over the top of her head, a silent warning to back off.

Dismissing his statement with the slight shrug of her shoulders, she sighs and closes her eyes before responding. “I honestly can’t say I’m surprised. We both know what they are capable of. Pulling a stunt like this is nothing. Besides, you’re not dumb enough to think they weren’t absolutely pissed that you had me brought to the hospital.” Her voice is small, dejected and it breaks my fucking heart.

“I can’t believe they’re going through with the engagement announcement. It’s insane. We all know who is responsible for your being here. The guy is a fucking monster. He belongs in jail for the shit he pulled. It’s not gonna happen. Over my dead body will I allow that jackass anywhere near you.” Caleb’s voice is rising quickly, his heightened emotions making him lose sight of the fact that it is causing more anxiety for his sibling.

A tear slips down her cheek, and I can't help myself as I sit down carefully on the edge of her bed and gently pull her into my side. "Caleb." My voice is sharp, and I cut him a look, using my most stern "captain of the hockey team" authoritative tone. Looking between the two of us, he bites back his response as he stares stonily back at me.

Using my free hand that is not currently holding her gently, I reach out and brush away her tears. "It's going to be okay, il mio passerotto. We've got your back. You rest. We'll figure it out." *I'll fucking figure it out. I owe the fucker that much.*



# Chapter Thirty-Five



## *Danica*

Days pass by in a blur of restless naps and quiet conversations. Finn has been tasked with keeping me company while the rest of the guys have to resume their normal lives. Every day they leave for practice and class, but they always make sure to check in through texts and calls. Details are still fuzzy in my mind about what happened the night of my birthday, but it is slowly coming back to me in bits and pieces. I was unfortunate enough to remember most of what happened during the brutal rape and those memories haunt my dreams.

Exhaustion battles against the pain of my slowly mending body, and my sleep is often restless. In fact, the only time I am truly able to relax is when Theo walks through the door. Something about his quiet presence soothes my weary soul. My parents have been noticeably absent for most of my stay, and the only glimpse I have seen of my fiancé is from his interviews on television regarding the state of my health. Funny how none of the reporters have cared to note that he hasn't actually been to see me in the hospital even once.

Every time I see his face, I feel my body start to shut down and my mind floods with panicking thoughts. It has gotten to the point where Finn actually took away my phone so I couldn't lurk on social media and he is now refusing to turn on the television. Instead, he brought me one of his spare laptops and we have been playing a lot of *Boulder's Gate 3* to pass the time. I can only imagine how annoying it must be for him though, as I frequently fall asleep mid-playthrough. At the rate

we are going, it is going to take us years to complete the main storyline.

It takes several more blurry days before the hospital staff is all in agreement that I am stable enough to be discharged. Police and hospital security had to block a path so that I could be safely wheeled out to the car by my brother, as Seb, Finn and Theo all form a protective circle around me, blocking the prying eyes of the journalists. From what I have been told, they are also camped out at my parent's home as well as Calebs.

The guys had discussed possibly setting me up in a hotel somewhere before that idea was dismissed. They are all being suspiciously tight-lipped about where I will be staying in the meantime, though I do notice we aren't headed in the direction of campus or any of their homes. Just getting to the car and remaining upright for any length of time is still exhausting and without meaning to, my eyes drift closed as I lean into Theo's comforting embrace.

When I awake, it is to the gentle sway of a confident walk and strong arms carrying me, holding me close. "Close your eyes *la mia diavoletta*, I've got you." I drift off once more, allowing my body to relax into the safe embrace.

My mind is hazy, finally having given in to a more restful slumber. As I slowly start to drift into consciousness, I am surrounded by soft sheets and soothing smells. Rubbing my face against the soft fabric, I open my eyes and am accosted by an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu*. While the room is draped in shadows of the setting sun, with the curtains cracked I feel a sense of familiarity with surroundings which are vaguely recognizable. It takes me a minute to process before I realize I am once again lying in Theo's bed, in his room at home.

Turning my head, I see the man himself snoring softly in a chair that is sitting close by. He brought me back home. Once again, my knight in shining armor is protecting me, keeping me in his safe space. I lay there quietly watching him sleep, unsure of how long, the time seeming to pass slowly. Theo has been a constant rock for me through this whole ordeal. Never pressing me to talk about what happened, acting as a buffer

whenever needed, whether it was with my own brother, the hospital staff or police. I don't know what I would have done without him.

Seeming to sense the eyes on him, Theo lets out a yawn and stretches, his shirt riding up to show his delicious abs. "Theo, why am I here?" My words are quiet, and he takes so long to answer that I am not sure if he even heard me at first.

"Evening Danica. How are you feeling?" Standing, he moves over to the bed, his limbs lithe and graceful for such a brute of a hockey player.

Choosing not to respond, I see. Well two can play at that game. I just stare back at him with solemn eyes. I *need* to know why I am here. I don't understand why he has even been around at all. Pretend boyfriend or not, we had bonded and were growing close to one another. I could feel it in every late-night phone call, every text, every time he showed up at my school or practice. His departure was abrupt and dismissive and caught me completely off-guard. While I don't fault him for not realizing it was my birthday when he chose to end things, it still hurt. Everything that happened thereafter... well, I certainly didn't anticipate that he would instill himself as a fixture by my hospital bedside throughout my recovery.

"Theo. Please. Just tell me the truth."

Tension fills the air, the silence almost deafening. I'm afraid he won't respond at all, he really is terrible about opening up and explaining things. After a moment, I can see the deliberation in his mind before he finally chooses to respond.

"I can't lose you." His voice is low and gruff, and at first, I thought I completely misheard what was said.

"I almost lost you. I was scared and an idiot. I said some things that I never should have said, and I almost lost you. But you're mine *il mio passerotto*. You're mine and I'm never fucking letting go, consequences be damned." His gaze is intense, it feels as though he is looking into my soul, and I am breathless with the passion of his words. "There are a million reasons why this shouldn't work. You're the sister of my friend and teammate, you're still in high school and I leave in

a few months for Seattle to play professionally for my dream team. Hell, you're fucking engaged to the person I hate most in this world, but I can't let you go. You. Are. *Mine*."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he leans over and presses his forehead to my own and we just breathe each other in. Content to be next to each other, sharing the same space, the quiet moment. I have no words, my mind is spinning in circles, fragmented memories of my living nightmare fighting against the hope his words spring in my chest. My heart is racing, and with my hand that is not in a cast, I tentatively reach out to touch his cheek. He leans into the caress with a low hum, as if the contact brings him comfort too. Turning his head, he kisses my palm and then leans closer. My breath catches, and I could swear he is going to kiss me. Not for show, not on display for my classmates or fiancé or even his family. In this moment, it is just him and I-

A soft knock on the door has him quickly jumping back, his face once again a mask of cool indifference as his mother enters the room. Looking between the two of us with knowing eyes, she raises an eyebrow at her son, but her words are addressed to me.

"Oh good! You are awake, Danica dear! How are you feeling?" Theo steps back from the bed, making room to allow his mother to pass through. She comes over to me, the back of her hand resting against my forehead before she gently runs her hand over my hair in a comforting gesture, then leaning forward to straighten my pillows and sheets.

"Hello, Mrs-" The look on her face has me quickly correcting myself "Elena." With a satisfied smile, she nods and allows me to continue. "I'm pretty sore but doing better than I have been, thank you."

With a click of her tongue, she tsks me while shaking her head. "You poor thing. You have really been through it, haven't you? Well, no matter. You're here now and we are going to take good care of you. I bet you must be starving. I have whipped up several different options, I wasn't sure what you would be up to eating. Theo-" her tone is sharp as she addresses her son without looking in his direction. "Help your

lady get comfortable and I will go get you both something to eat.” Turning with a flourish, she is out of the room before I could even blink. I look over to see the sheepish expression on Theo’s face.

“Don’t mind Ma. She loves getting to play nurse. Here, let me help.” Futilely, I was attempting to sit myself up but the pain in my cracked ribs has me biting back a groan. Stepping forward once more, Theo wraps his strong arms around me and gently helps me to sit up, before readjusting the pillows to support my back in this inclined position. Straightening out my blankets, he rocks back on the balls of his feet, shoving his hands in his hoodie. I’ve never seen him look like this before, almost nervous. Most of the time he has this air of cool indifference or cocky arrogance. It’s unnatural to see him looking so unsure of himself, and belatedly, I realize I never responded after his little speech a few moments ago.

Mrs. Giovanni enters the room once more, loaded down with a tray carrying an assortment of delicious smelling Italian cuisine. Manners kicking in on autopilot, Theo hurries over to his mother and takes the tray from her, kissing her on the cheek and thanking her for the food. Walking over to my side, she grabs some pills and a glass of water off of the nightstand and hands them to me. With watchful eyes, she nods once I have swallowed the last of the medication before taking my glass and returning it to the table. She bends down and kisses me on the top of my head before turning and walking out of the room without another word.

## Chapter Thirty-Six



### *Danica*

Two weeks have gone by, and I have fallen into a comfortable routine. While I have remained at Theo's home, his mother has been great company. She helped me get by the first several days while Theo had to be away for class or practice. Once the sharp stabbing pain settled into more of a dull throb, I found I was slowly gaining back some energy and was able to get around more. For longer periods of time, I found myself just sitting at the dining table, talking with Mrs. Giovanni while she worked on different tasks or resting with her in the family room in comfortable silence.

Mrs. Giovanni loved sharing tales about the antics that Theo got into as a boy while he was growing up, her face lit with pride any time she mentioned his name. She told me about his relationship with his uncle and how he was introduced to hockey; shared tales of his escapades on the ice before getting his full-ride scholarship to HCU and his signing with his NHL dream team, the Seattle Sabretooths. There was never any mention of his father in all of her recollections, and through my time spent moving around the house I saw photos of the man were noticeably absent. It made me wonder what the story was there.

**Hoodie Guy: Got a kiss for me?**

The notification pops up on my phone and I roll my eyes. It's game day again and he is insistent that my sending that meme

of the Hershey's kiss is an essential part of his pre-game routine that he can't play without.

**Me:** I'm sorry but kisses are reserved for fake boyfriends, so...

**Me:** You're SOL dude \*shrugs\*

**Hoodie Guy:** \*Growly voice\* Don't make me leave this locker room.

**Me:** You're all the way across town, whatcha gonna do about it? \*eyebrows raised\*

**Hoodie Guy:** Ohhh mia diavoletta, you have no idea...

**Hoodie Guy:** \*image\*

He sent me a full-length mirror selfie. All geared up, he is giving the camera puppy dog eyes and has an adorable pout to his lips. I laugh-snort, completely caught off guard by his ridiculousness.

**Me:** I literally just LOL'd. And it hurt like a bitch, so thanks for that.

**Hoodie Guy:** It's okay baby, I'll kiss it better for you when I get home... but I am gonna need my kiss first \*eyebrows raised imploringly\*

**Me:** You do know we are not actually dating right? Like, I know we never finished our conversation before but YOU told ME that I was a distraction that you couldn't afford and that we didn't need to pretend to date anymore.

**Me:** So this is me, not being a distraction by choosing to not send my no-longer-fake-boyfriend a pre-game ritual kiss

**Hoodie Guy:** \*growls in frustration\*

**Hoodie Guy:** Diavoletta... .

**Me:** Who? Me? \*smiley devil emoji\* \*angel with halo emoji\*

**Hoodie Guy:** . . .

**Me:** Fine... \*sighs\*

**Me:** \*pic of Hershey's kiss\*

**Hoodie Guy:** There's my girl.

**Hoodie Guy:** \*selfie with a huge grin on his face\*

**Hoodie Guy:** Thanks baby. Now put on my jersey, go lay down in my bed and make sure you are watching the game. I'm gonna win this one for you.

**Me: I am rolling my eyes so hard at you right now, you know that? You are such a weirdo.**

**Hoodie Guy: Yeah beautiful, but I'm forever your weirdo.  
\*kiss emoji\***

My heart flutters at his flirtatious texts. I won't admit that I am already in his bed, wearing his jersey which, of course, smells like him and watching the pregame commentary on ESPN. Whatever *this* is, it's not real. I know he probably feels guilty after what happened to me. He only broke up from our fake relationship because he thought the Brad situation was handled and that the guys had scared him into leaving me alone. Obviously, that had been a gross underestimate of Bradley's psychotic nature and anger issues.

But I am under no illusion that whatever is happening right now with Theo could be a real thing, regardless of however this all plays out with Brad and my parents. Although I am still finishing high school, and he is several years older, in just a few short months he will be headed across the country to fulfill his NHL contract and live out his wildest dreams. My family drama and whatever future I have as a gymnast doesn't play into his dreams, it can't.

My eyes are glued to the screen as I watch the team skate onto the ice. Seb and my brother are the first to enter the rink. As the rest of the team emerges, they each do a lap around the ice, throwing their hands in the air, their antics wild as they encourage the cheering of the decked-out fans crowding the stands. And then, there he is, *my man*.

I could never own that statement out loud, but whether or not I am forced to go through with this stupid engagement that my parents have announced to the world, Theo will always hold a special place in my heart. Bradley can break my body, he can rape me, verbally tear me down and try to destroy my spirit. But he can't touch my heart, that is the one part of me he will never possess because I already gave it away.

Theo is captivating as he makes his way around the rink. Joining in the revelry, he encourages loud cheers from the crowd and then glides to a stop directly in front of one of the



cameras filming the game. He points to the camera while mouthing something that looks suspiciously like 'il mio passerotto' then with a wink he blows a kiss to the camera before skating off to go warm up with the rest of the team. My jaw drops as I watch, and the screaming of the women in the stands is deafening, even I can tell from my vantage point watching it on television.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven



### Theo

The energy on the ice is electrifying as the crowd goes nuts. We are halfway through the second period and I have managed to get two assists and one goal as we pull ahead 3-2. This game was supposed to be a relatively easy one, but it seems the other team has stepped up their game and they are trying their best to give us a run for our money. They may be playing well in this game, but we are better.

I am checked into the boards by one of the opposing defensemen as he crashes into me. “Come on, Antonov. Is that all you’ve got?” Laughing, I shake it off as I push him back and slip through an opening, chasing down the puck. Antonov races after me, but I am the better skater, and my light footwork quickly allows me to pull ahead. At the blueline, another of their defensemen checks me and with a flick of the wrist I pass the puck to Seb on my left. He aims a slapshot, but it goes wide and just barely misses the goal, the puck rounding the back of the net.

Several members of the opposing team beat our guys to the puck and make quick work of passing it down the ice as we chase after them. Just as I am about to meet their center, another player on their team crashes into Caleb. “Dude! What the fuck?” There are groans and angry shouts from the crowd. Ripping off my gloves and throwing them to the ground, I yank their defensemen off Caleb and throw all my weight into my fist as it connects with his face. With a loud crunch, I feel his nose give as blood spurts everywhere, dripping onto the ice.

In a futile attempt, he punches into my side, but I turn to the left before he can make contact, his fist grazing off me and we both go down on the ice. Fists are flying as I land a blow into his side and another to his jaw. Trying to push me off, he throws a careless fist which connects with my face and I feel blood drip down into my eye. Refs are blowing their whistles and several teammates pull me off him. As I make my way over to the sin bin, unconcerned about taking my five minutes in the box, I wipe the blood from my brow and catch my breath. Nobody messes with our goalie.

I rejoined the team at the start of the third period. My time in the penalty box gave the opposing team an advantage that they pressed and now we were tied 3-3. Throwing a look over to Seb, he takes my cue and we execute a tricky maneuver that we have been practicing for weeks. Antonov takes the bait, and the distraction allows our center to push through, taking control of the puck and driving it down the ice. Donovan's shot is blocked by their goalie and the game continues in a tight battle for control of the puck.

Counting down to the final minutes of the game, we are still tied 3-3 and their center has control of the puck. With a slapshot, he takes aim for the net. Caleb makes a quick dive, blocking the shot with an outstretched hand. "Yeah! That's my fucking goalie!" Cheers throughout the crowd give us a revitalizing boost of energy as Caleb sends the puck in my direction. Skating backwards, I take control and drive it down the ice, passing to Seb who passes to Donovan.

Their path is blocked and Morrigan crashes into their left forward, clearing a path for me. I gain control of the puck once more and press forward, taking aim and shooting towards the goal. Their goalie makes a dive, but it grazes off the tip of his glove and goes flying into the top left corner of the net, securing our win as the final seconds count down before the buzzer sounds.

With a victorious shout, my teammates swarm me, cheers, and hugs all around. Turning quickly, I point to the camera nearest me, signaling to Danica that just as I said I was going to, I won the game for her. Our team makes a victory lap around the ice,

waving our hands in the air and goofing off in celebration with the cheering fans. After one final wave, I make my way back to the locker room, eager to get cleaned up so I can head home to my girl.

# Chapter Thirty-Eight



## Danica

I watch as Theo slaps his stick and shoots the puck towards the net. Holding my breath, I watch in eager anticipation as their goalie dives towards the puck, but it bounces off his hand and flies upward into the back corner of the net. The buzzer sounds, signaling the end of the game and the shouting of the fans makes it hard to hear the commentary of the game as I watch the guys crowd into each other, celebrating their win.

In that moment, the camera pans to Theo, as the commentators discuss his stats from the game and his winning goal, and he points into the camera and I know he did that for me.

I reach down for my phone to text the guys and congratulate them in our group chat and see several unread messages. Huh. I guess I was so consumed by the game I didn't even notice my phone go off.

**Unknown Number: You told the police? You fucking Bitch!**

**Unknown Number: You think the police are going to save you? Think you can block my number and that I will just quietly go away?**

**Unknown Number: I own you, you fucking worthless whore. You are mine.**

**Unknown Number: Danica!**

**Unknown Number: You do not get to ignore me! You are my goddamn future wife and you do as I fucking tell you to!**

**Unknown Number: You are such a worthless whore. You are probably out fucking that skating bastard that you threw yourself all over at the party.**

**Unknown Number: I am gonna show you just how worthless you are, you cow.**

Reading through the texts, there are easily thirty more that follow along the same line and my face pales with each threatening message, and I flinch as I finish reading the last one. He has called me names for the entirety of our relationship. Bitch, whore, slut, worthless. While his creativity is lacking, he really has run the gambit with his use of slurs over our two years together. Most of the time, I try desperately to brush them aside and ignore them. I know they aren't true, that I have never been unfaithful despite his inability to keep his dick in his pants. When he calls me 'cow' though, that one stings; playing off deep-seated insecurities that my parents have instilled in me from a young age.

Jumping as my phone rings in my hand, the unmarked number is displayed on my screen. I hit ignore and a text comes through almost immediately after.

**Unknown Number: Answer your goddamn phone you bitch!**

**Unknown Number: When I find you, I am gonna show you just who you belong to, no cop or judge can keep you from me. You. Are. Mine!**

My phone rings again, and in a moment of courage or stupidity (I'm honestly not sure which) I answer, not bothering to look at the screen.

"Why won't you just leave me alone? You got what you want from me, just leave me alone!"

Silence fills the phone after my anxious outburst.

"I'll be there in five, mio passerotto."

The call ends abruptly. Shit. Why didn't I look at the caller ID? I try calling Theo back and he answers immediately.

"Don't answer if he calls. I am on my way. Just be a good girl for me and stay in my room, yeah? I need to know you are safe

until I get there.” He hangs up the phone once more, before I can even get a word in.

With a huff, I toss my phone down in my lap and lean back against the pillows that I have propped against the wall to help me sit up more comfortably. I would try calling again to reassure him that I am fine, he doesn’t need to rush over here but I doubt he would listen. Today was supposed to be a good day. He won his game after stressing over me for the last several weeks. Theo should be out celebrating with the guys, not stuck in his room playing babysitter to me.

I should go home, let him move on with his life, but I break out in a cold sweat and my stomach tightens into anxious knots at the thought of stepping foot in that house again. It had never been an overly warm and welcoming environment for me, but now it has turned into the backdrop of my recurrent nightmares. Even just the thought of my parents’ home makes me feel physically ill. Hypothetically, I could go to Caleb’s or to Finn’s, but Brad would know to look for me at either of their places.

Pushing aside the anxiety that has become a permanent fixture in my gut, I think through my list of contacts. I don’t have many friends at my school. The people I hung out with there were all Bradley’s friends and would offer no safe harbor from his wrath. I do have a few friends that I have made over the years from my time at the sports center, mostly on my gymnastics team, but I am not overly close to any of them and I don’t know how I would be able to describe my situation in a way that they would understand. And while I like my coach, I am not oblivious to the fact that my parents pay her, and it is likely that she would take their side in whatever messed-up story they would spin on the situation.

I guess I had never given it much thought, but now that I look back over the last several years of my life, it is almost amazing to see how Bradley wove his way throughout every aspect of my life, slowly isolating me from the friends I had previously been close to. Of the few that I had in the days B.B. (before Brad), over time he somehow managed to pull me away from them.

We drifted apart and were simply living our separate lives, or so I thought, but the reality of the situation when I look at it dead on is that he simply pulled me away. Never wanting to hang out with my friends because they were “too immature”, we hung out with his group of friends that were “on a more sophisticated level”. People that our parents would approve of. People whose parents were in his dad’s pockets, which meant they could be manipulated and controlled.

After Brad left me behind when he went off to college, I never really gave it a second thought, simply sticking to our former group out of habit. I have always been quiet by nature, more reserved after having grown up under my parents’ critical scrutiny. Bradley was always the more charismatic and charming one, easily making friends who were drawn to his winning smile and family’s wealth.

I guess a part of me just gave in to what was easier, sitting on the sidelines of my own life, letting others be the center of attention while I quietly observed. In this way, I was able to do what was expected of me, practicing for the day when I would have to play “good little housewife” without a mind of my own. Truthfully though, I think I lost myself a long time ago and never cared to look for her or acknowledge her absence until Theo brought it to glaring attention.

“Don’t even think about it.” Interrupting my thoughts, Theo bursts into the room with a startling flurry of chaotic energy.

Looking up at him in confusion, I tilt my head inquiringly.

“You were thinking of leaving. Don’t even try it. I don’t want those thoughts floating around in that beautiful head of yours.”

My mouth drops open in shock. “How did you- how?” I can’t even form the words.

In a deliberate manner, Theo takes a calming breath and slowly walks to the side of the bed, before sitting on the edge and raising a hand to cup my cheek. Involuntarily, I flinch at his raised hand, and he pauses without touching me, fingers hovering just next to my face. His eyes hold a look I can’t quite describe as he intentionally meets my gaze, letting me see the truth in their depths. His words are spoken softly as if



trying not to startle a skittish animal when they leave his mouth, and I guess for all intents and purposes that is what I am these days. I have been reduced to a shell of my former self; an animal so skittish that even as I long for the comfort of a loving touch, I shy away instinctually out of fear born from months spent under a cruel hand, ever ready and raised against me.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know that, I just-” blowing out a shaky breath, I steady myself before leaning in, removing the small distance that separates us, allowing his hand to connect with my face. In my head, I know that he isn’t Brad. Theo would never hurt me. I know that. Since being in the hospital, logic and reason are easily overruled as my body reacts involuntarily to the slightest movements or inflection of tone. Theo has been the only person I have been able to be around without practically jumping out of my skin.

Even Finn, Seb and Caleb cause me to flinch and shrink away in fear when they have come to visit and tried to hug me or hold my hand. I know, deep down, that these are my people, that I am safe with them. But it seems Brad broke more than just my body when he assaulted me this last time. Some days, between the skittishness during the hours I am awake and the nightmares that plague my sleep, I wonder if I will ever be normal again. A knowing look passes through Theo’s eyes, though he doesn’t comment on my jumpy behavior or the fact that I had to mentally gird my loins, so to speak, to allow him to hold my face.

“I know you, il mio passerotto. You don’t get to just run away when the going gets tough. No need to even think about it. You are here with me, where I can keep you safe. Where you belong.”

With a sharp intake of breath, tears fill my eyes at his words.

“Theo-”

“I told you Danica, you are mine. Mine to protect. Mine to hold. Mine to keep. Don’t leave me. Please.”

Determination fills his fierce tone, but there is an uncertain vulnerability in his eyes. I drop my gaze, unable to maintain eye contact when he is showing so much of himself with me. Always my Hoodie Guy, with emotions on lockdown, I don't know what to do with this sudden display of heart. The tears spill over now, running down my face. Catching them with his hand, he gently rubs his thumb back and forth, brushing away the tears as they fall.

"I don't know what to do." I choke out the words on a sob, body shaking as I struggle to contain the overwhelming emotions raging within me.

"Don't think. Just stay."

## *Chapter Thirty-Nine*



### *Theo*

**W**e stayed like that for an eternity trapped in the silence of a few quiet moments. Danica's tears fell freely as she allowed me to continue holding her precious face. I could see the hesitation and fear clouding her beautiful green eyes, at war with this inexplicable pull we have towards one another. Though she still won't talk about it, whatever that fucker did to her that has caused the light to dim in her beautiful soul.

Fear, true fear has touched her, and now it has a vice grip that won't allow others any physical contact without that same trepidation and uncertainty casting a dark shadow on her light. She has been trying to fight through the pain, but it has not gone unnoticed by Seb, Finn, Caleb or myself that her automatic response to anyone near her is to shy away from human contact. I know better than anyone the truth behind that trauma response; but my gorgeous girl is a fighter, a true survivor. I know that whatever demons she has to fight back won't keep her down for long.

Like all precious things, our rare moment of quiet companionship ended -as all things do- and she cried herself to sleep while I stood watch over her. Laying against my flannel sheets, wearing my jersey, she is the most goddamn breathtaking sight my sore eyes have ever seen. Her beauty couldn't be marred by the fading bruises and cuts that are slowly healing, nor by the cast covering her left arm. Looking at this exquisite gem of a girl, with her hair a chaotic mess of silky curls, and shadows under her eyes that are at odds with

the cheerful freckles peppered liberally over her alabaster skin, I can't help but catch my breath.

I've barely known this girl for a few short months, mere weeks, honestly. It's really astonishing when I think hard about it, that I somehow managed to miss her over the last three years. Three freaking years I have known Caleb, been his friend, teammate, and now captain. How the hell was I so unfortunate as to be one of the few people on the team to never meet her? I mean, sure, hockey was always my focus. And I know I am not the most social person on our team; parties and drinking were never really my thing. But still, how the fuck did I almost miss meeting someone who is quickly becoming the most important person in my life?

Ever since that night at the party, I haven't been able to get this damn girl out of my head. Her fucking hot body has nothing on her "don't give a damn" attitude and her witty comebacks. This girl is an incredible athlete in her own right; one that can't be bothered by the fact that her innermost circle happens to be the three hottest guys in the hockey league, and Finn, of course. Growing up in a wealthy family, with athletic talent, hot-as-sin looks and a famous hockey player for a brother, you would think she would be the most obnoxious, needy diva around, but she has completely obliterated every assumption and initial impression that crossed my mind.

And I almost fucking lost her. Worse than that, like the goddamn idiot that I am, I almost pushed her away. *Then* I almost lost her *again*. Which reminds me, the whole reason I rushed home like the devil himself was biting my ass... Leaning down over her as she sleeps, I assess her with deliberate calculation- watching her chest rise and fall with each gentle breath and mentally planning the best maneuver for removing the phone without touching or waking her.

After her initial round of tears slowly abated, I tried to get her to open up about her shocking answer to my earlier phone call. I just know that fucker was harassing her. There is no other reason she would have answered with such panic in her tone. But when I tried to ask her about it, she flat out refused to discuss the issue. Upon my insistence that she give me her

phone so I could deal with it myself, she promptly shoved the damn thing down the front of my jersey that she is currently sleeping in, nestled between her fucking perfect breasts, as if that would *actually* be a deterrent for me.

Mentally, I scoff at the thought, as if I would be afraid to reach in and “risk” touching her gorgeous boobs to get the damn phone. I mean, I don’t want to scare her with my touch, but I *really* need her phone so I can see what happened with fuckface since she is refusing to talk about it, so I will just have to be extra careful not to wake her.

Never mind the fact that all I want to do is bury my face in her chest and suck those delectable tits in my mouth. Damn, I am getting hard just thinking about it. Shifting uncomfortably, I pause as I think how I can go about this without waking her. Readjusting my hard cock, I tell it to calm the fuck down as I think through this current problem, and thankfully my aching need for her lessens as I focus on my rage at her ex.

Initially, as I reached for the device when she was first trying to shove it down my jersey, she actually flinched away from me on the bed, and I could see the stark fear in her eyes. Clearly that was a trigger, and one that we *would* be discussing at a later time. Can’t have my little sparrow being afraid of my touch; one day she will learn to trust me enough to know that I won’t ever hurt her, but that is a problem for another day.

But first, back to the problem at hand: how to get Danica’s phone out of my jersey? ... Hmmm. Dammit, I really don’t want her freaking out at my touch. And if she wakes up with me pawing at her tits, I can only imagine the trauma that would cause after the ordeal she has just been through. God-fucking-dammit.

Reaching carefully over, I rest one hand gently on Danica’s head. Moaning softly, she turns her head, intuitively leaning into my touch, seeking comfort. With a soft caress, I reassure my sleeping beauty that she is safe in my hands, and I slowly, *painstakingly slowly*, inch my other hand down the gaping opening at the top of my alternate uniform. Thankfully, there is such a size difference between the two of us that Danica is positively swallowed up by my clothes, and with the position

she is laying in there is a generous opening at the neckline. A generous opening that reveals a tantalizing hint of my future. But refusing to allow any distractions, I bite my tongue until I taste the copper, a quick distraction from my lascivious thoughts.

As my fingertips brush against the metal now warm from its time nestled against her soft skin, Danica stirs slightly and her eyelids flutter. I hold still, not daring to breathe, and she groans, as if flinching from a nightmare. Shushing her softly, and offering a reassuring touch to her head, her eyes thankfully remain closed as I carefully slide the phone out of her makeshift “pocket”. Quietly releasing my breath, I am unable to resist the urge any longer and bending down, I gently place a soft kiss to the top of her head before stealthily backing away until I can sit at my desk across the room.

Phone successfully retrieved, my problem now is figuring out how I am going to handle the jackass who thought he could lay a hand on my girl and make him wish he never set eyes on her; since he is clearly a slow learner and did not take the first fucking hint from the ass-whooping we gave him the last time.

I go to unlock Danica’s phone, having long since memorized her pin, along with all her other passwords to her various logins, and pull up her recent contact history. As my mind registers the words filling her screen, tension builds within me as the boiling hate rages into a blazing inferno of ice-cold fury, and my veins freeze over like the rink I skate on each day.

**Unknown number: You fucking worthless whore.**

**Unknown number: I am going to fucking kill you, you bitch.**

**Unknown number: Answer me right fucking now.**

Missed call.

Missed call.

Missed call.

**Unknown number: You have an obligation to fulfill. You are mine Danica. Don’t you fucking forget who you belong to.**

**Unknown number: You can run to that dipshit brother of yours and his fucktard friends but at the end of the day**

**they are just a bunch of puck-slinging man-whores who only give a damn about themselves.**

**Unknown number: You think they actually give a damn about you? You're no better than the goddamn puck bunnies who throw themselves at the hockey team like the trash they are.**

**Unknown number: The only reason they even bother to pretend to care about you is because you are a nuisance like a damn mosquito always hovering around. Give it a few months and they are all going to go live their lives far away from here and forget you ever existed.**

**Unknown number: Then where will you be baby? That's goddamn right. You will be married to me, under my full control and there is not a damn person alive who will be able to save you from me.**

**Unknown number: You think you can hide from me? You think they will protect you? Grow up! I fucking own your ass.**

**Unknown number: Just like I fucking owned your ass when I ripped it in half like the worthless whore you are.**

**Unknown number: Rest up baby, because when I find you, your fat ass is mine, and this time, you won't have a pretty little toy knife to throw around like a little bitch.**

**Unknown number: You've been a bad fucking whore, Danica... And you know how I like to play with my whores...**

Correction, my problem is the fucking dead man walking, and figuring out how exactly I am going to put him six feet under.

# Chapter Forty



## *Danica*

I wake in a cold sweat, choking as I claw at my throat, desperate for air and a bone-chilling scream pierces the air.

“Shit! Danica!” A looming presence in the shadows grabs at my thrashing arms in a futile attempt to hold me down, and I thrash harder, desperate to escape.

“No! Let me go! Stop! Let me go! Please!” I am gasping for air, sobbing, and fighting desperately for my life.

Suddenly, a bright light illuminates the demons in the shadows, temporarily blinding me and I am momentarily stunned.

“Danica! Honey, you’re okay. Shh, you’re safe. It’s alright.” The soothing dulcet tone and cool hand of a woman’s gentle touch registers through the fog of panic and I blink back against the harsh light. Tangled in a mess of sheets and a too-large shirt, I greedily gulp in a great lungful of air as I take in the four large, worried eyes staring back at me.

With chagrin, I realize that the piercing shriek came from my own lips, and I am not, in fact, being brutally raped and beaten by the monster lurking in the shadows. It was just a nightmare. Scratch that, it was a fucked-up memory; Time after time that Bradley raped me over the better part of this last six months playing on a torturous loop to the sound of his demeaning words and feel of his brutal strength always trying to crush me and make me feel small, burned into my brain.

And like the fucking masochist that I am, my brain has apparently decided that I can’t just suffer through the



memories during my waking hours, no I have to go and relive every painful, exhausting second on replay in my dreams as well. Lost in my own personal hell, it takes a moment to process the fact that Theo is still anxiously hovering, his grip tight on my upper arms while his mother lingers near my head, quietly muttering soothing words in a language I can't understand. They are beautiful and calming though, and I feel the security they are meant to convey.

Shakily, I breathe in. "I'm- I'm so sorry. I-" I flinch back, as the touch registers through the panic-induced-haze, trying to pull my arms back. "I'm okay, Theo. I'm sorry, Mrs. G."

Tsking in a low tone, (probably at my unintentional use of the moniker she seems to dislike so much), Theo's mom shakes her head while muttering under her breath in quick Italian as she goes about straightening the disarray of bedding; gently untangling me and tucking me back in, before stepping into the hall. I watch her walk away, too ashamed to meet the hurt I know is in Theo's gaze as he silently watches me, while being careful not to touch me in my delicate frame of mind. Still uttering a string of unintelligible Italian, Theo's mother reenters the room a few short moments later, carrying a glass of water and a cool cloth which she tenderly places against my furrowed brow.

I close my eyes momentarily and manage to catch the soft utterance, "Vedrai che andrà tutto bene" as she brushes her hand gently through my hair while placing a soft kiss to the top of my head. A moment later I hear the soft tread of her footsteps as she leaves the room once more, gently closing the door behind her.

My eyes remain closed as I focus, trying to calm my breathing and still my racing heart. I feel weak and my limbs, initially numb from the fear, come alive with an agonizing sensation. Belatedly, I realize I must have been swinging around my arm that is still healing from its break. The sharp ache beneath my hand cast is a painful reminder of everything I have been through whereas other physical signs have started to fade.

"Danica."

I breathe in. Hold it, *don't look*.

“Danni.”

Breathe out on a shaky exhale, heart pounding in my ears.

“La mia diavoletta.” With that, my eyes pop open, and my startled gaze meets Theo’s own determined expression. Ashamed of myself for letting my fear show, for screaming down the house and sending everyone out of bed, for being the broken worthless mess that I am, I quickly drop my eyes once more. “Eyes on me, il mio passerotto.”

Hesitantly, I raise my gaze once more, lips trembling softly, afraid of what I will see when I look into his eyes. Disgust. Revulsion. Hate. I am a nasty, needy piece of shit who has done nothing but take up his time and crowd his space. Giving nothing in return for his generosity and kindness, I can’t even bring myself to let him touch me. And I fucking NEED him to touch me, dammit!

Unbidden tears fall from my lashes as my overwhelming fear and self-loathing drown out the world around me. I can’t even see Theo’s disappointment through the tears clouding my vision.

“Danica... shit.” Theo abruptly sits down on the side of his bed, startling me. Before I have the chance to react, he is pulling me into his arms, gently rocking me and muttering quiet words of comfort in my ear. “Tesoro mio, shhh, it’s alright. Don’t cry. I’m right here. Danica, please let me hold you. Shhh. I’ve got you. You’re safe. I’m right here.” Reaching an arm down, he wraps it under my legs and pulls me fully into his lap, blankets and all. Continuing to rock me back and forth, repeating his words in low, soothing tones, a dam bursts inside my heart and I sob loudly, crying big fat ugly tears. Letting the ugliness that fills my soul leak out in a steady stream down my blotchy cheeks in a pathetic attempt to wash away the pain.

The sobs wrack my body, gut-wrenching anguish piercing my chest like a million tiny daggers chiseling away at my battered soul in a wound only I can see, and I gasp desperately for air. In a futile attempt, Theo reaches up with one hand to try and

brush the tears from my face but the steady stream has a mind of its own, and refuses to be quelled by his painfully soothing touch. Giving up the effort, Theo has now started muttering fully in Italian and the words are lost on me in my haze of grief and self-loathing as he starts to kiss anywhere he can reach.

My cheeks, each red-rimmed leaking eye, my forehead, behind my ear, my neck. Kisses pepper every exposed inch within reach as he continues to rock me back and forth and whisper soothing words that I will never understand. I push against his chest, anxiety caused by his loving touch at war with the soothing way he is caring for me. “Baby, you’re breaking my fucking heart right now. Please just let me hold you. I’m not going to hurt you. You’re okay. I promise, I’m not going to hurt you.”

# Chapter Forty-One



## Theo

**D**rowning in my own rage and self-loathing for the situation I allowed Danica to fall into, albeit unintentionally, I didn't notice when she must have first started thrashing about from her nightmares. Instead, my thoughts spiraled down a dark and twisted path, plotting the various ways in which I was going to torture and subsequently dismember the piece of shit who hurt my girl. I was abruptly torn from my intrusive thoughts and schemes with the heart-wrenching scream that ripped through the dark room. Jumping up, I quickly rushed to Danica's side and desperately tried to wake her from her nightmares, but she was in an isolated prison within her head that I couldn't pull her out of.

“Ma! Hurry! I need your help!” Shouting into the night, I knew my mother would hear my plea. Over the last several weeks while I had been reluctantly attending classes and hockey practice, she had been Danica's ever-present companion, and was always nearby and ready to help. This wasn't the first night terror to plague Danica since her release from the hospital, but it sure as hell seemed to be the worst one yet. I don't know, I thought the nightmares fueled by fear and her pain meds was bad enough, but these fucking texts that Bradley messaged her must really have sent her spiraling, because not even my shouting next to her ear woke her from her internal prison, and I am becoming genuinely concerned that she is going to reinjure herself with all the flailing.

In a desperate attempt to prevent more harm, I reach out to grab her by her upper arms, trying to stop the chaotic

movements as I speak in a futile attempt to wake her. Though it feels like forever, it was probably only a minute or two before Ma entered the room. Pausing in the doorway, I can see her knowing eyes register the situation as she takes in the scene before her.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Shhh. You’re okay. Tesoro mio, stai tranquilla, sono qui.” Repeating the soft murmurs of reassurance as I continue to hold her in my arms, my heart is ripped to shreds as the tears continue to fall and sobs cause her petite frame to shake under the force of her torment. Slipping unconsciously into Italian, I continue to murmur soft nothings and kiss away the tears that keep coming.

With the soft touch of my lips to her tear-stained cheek, Danica tenses as if ready to bolt, but I just hug her more tightly to my chest, continuing to rock her back and forth, desperately trying to kiss away all the hurt we have both endured over the last several weeks. Slowly, painstakingly slowly, I feel her body relax into the comfort of my embrace and the tears lessen from a continuous stream to a few sporadic stragglers. The shaking sobs turn to hiccups and sniffles, and she rubs her face into my chest, wiping away the evidence of her heartache.

Pulling back slightly, I anxiously examine her as best I can from such close proximity; hoping that when I look there is no fear reflected in her eyes. Though it is nothing less than what I deserve, it kills me a little bit every time she pulls away from me. All I want to do is hold her, make her pain go away. And if I could beat the shit out of myself, I would. This is all my damn fault. If I hadn’t left her alone, if I hadn’t called things off, she never would have been put in that situation to begin with. Maybe I should have the guys just do it for me. God knows Caleb is probably more than willing, and he has every right to want to punch my face in after everything that has happened.

Rather than fear or bitterness or even resentment, her red-rimmed gaze meets mine, unwavering for the first time in weeks, and a timid smile pulls at the corner of her pouty lips.

Sniffing softly, Danica shakes her head slightly. “I’m sorry Theo, I got your shirt all dirty.” Her gaze drifts down to the wet stain on my gray tee and lingers there, embarrassment clouding her features as her shoulders droop.

I don’t even bother glancing down to where she has just wiped away her tears and runny nose. Instead, I lift her chin, gently so as to not completely scare her off. Meeting her gaze head-on, I fall back into old habits as I raise a brow sardonically.

“You can make a mess of me any day, il mio passerotto. If you think a few tears are going to scare me away, you’ve still got a lot to learn about me.”

A shaky laugh escapes her beautiful mouth, and my gaze is drawn to her lips. Even with all the turmoil that has plagued us over the last several weeks, my body has constantly battled my mind with thoughts of holding her, kissing her, making her mine. Every night she sleeps in my bed, in my clothes and as I lay on the floor, close by in case she needs me, my mind drifts back to my hot-as-fuck fantasies and I have to fight the urge to jerk off to the sound of her sweet breathing, with her soft floral scent surrounding me.

Rock hard at the thought of her naked under my jersey, Danica shifts on my lap, unintentionally rubbing against my cock and I bite back a groan of pain and pleasure. Damn I want her so fucking much. Eyes widening with shock, a pretty blush blossoms across her freckled face as recognition of my uncomfortable state of arousal registers across her features.

“Diavoletta, are you okay now?” I silently curse my horny dick that seems to have a mind of its own, telling it to sit the fuck back down. The last thing I need is to freak her out after finally calming her tears for the second time tonight. Gently, I shift her off my lap and settle her once more against the pillows, not waiting for her response to my question. With one smooth motion, I grab the blankets, pulling them up to her chin to try and hide my biggest temptation and then turn towards the door to make an escape for the bathroom. This situation is becoming painful very quickly and I am gonna have to do something about it before I embarrass myself.

“Wait.”

I pause, one foot out the door, looking over my shoulder. If I turn fully around, I won't be able to hide the evidence of my erection now tenting my sweats. Raising my brows inquiringly, I remain silent as I allow her to gather her thoughts, despite my need becoming painfully more urgent.

“Stay. Please.”

Biting back a groan of frustration, I reach across the wall and flip off the light switch, once again casting us in shadows in a sad attempt at hiding my desperate attraction. Turning fully towards this beautiful temptress, I resign myself to a painfully long night spent on the floor and go to lay down on my makeshift bed, where I have spent every night for the last two weeks. My back hates me for it, but this self-inflicted abuse is the least I had coming for my own stupidity.

Bending over to pull back the covers of my makeshift bed, a tentative hand reaches out to brush my arm, and I hesitate.

“... Theo...”

“What is it, *la mia diavoletta*?” There is an unintentionally sharp edge to my question, and I feel her hesitation hanging in the air.

“I'm sorry, never mind.” I grimace at the hesitancy of her tone, forcing down my frustration at my own inability to control my desire when I am around her. It's not Danica's fault that I have a raging hard-on every time I am around her, or that I can't do a damn thing about it right now.

“Talk to me, *diavoletta*.”

With a sigh, her words come out in a soft whisper, and I strain to hear her.

“Could you- I mean... would you please hold me?”

In shock, I look up to find her chewing on her bottom lip, anxiousness and exhaustion lining her features.

“Are you sure? I mean, I don't want to make you uncomfortable.”

She nods, continuing “I know... I – I’m sorry, I know I have been difficult to be around. It’s not that I am scared of you. I trust you, really I do. I just... Every time I close my eyes I see him, feel his hands on me. I know it’s not him when you touch me, I just-” her words drift off along with her gaze, lost in I can’t even imagine what kind of thoughts.

“Look at me, Danica.” The command of my words is at odds with my gentle tone. “Are you sure?”

Her face pales, and she bites her lip so hard I am worried she is going to split it back open, after it has only just healed. Reaching out, I gently pry her bottom lip from between her teeth, running my thumb softly over the sore spot where she left marks. I can see her flinch against my touch, but she takes in a shaky breath, holding for a moment before slowly releasing it. With quiet deliberation, she tentatively leans her head into my hand. “Please Theo ... I need to do this.”

Well okay then. This was ... unexpected. I move at a snail’s-pace, making sure her watchful gaze doesn’t leave me; the last thing I need is for her to look away then be brought back with startling awareness to my close proximity. I carefully pull back the covers, allowing on the briefest of glances at her beautiful creamy skin sticking out from under the edge of my jersey before I slip into the bed next to her.

Carefully, I lay at her side, determined not to touch her, and make her more uncomfortable. I remain as still as a statue, back rigid against the mattress; breathing her scent in as it drifts around me through the darkness. I can hear the hitch in her breathing before it rapidly increases. We lay like that, deliberately not touching each other as we each adjust through our own discomfort, and I am unaware of the passing time, simply trying to appreciate the gift of this moment.

After an eternity of forced stillness, Danica tentatively rolls over, turning against my side. I freeze, afraid to breathe, afraid to make any movement that would set off another round of panic. Breathing in, with slow controlled movements, Danica tentatively lifts her injured arm and rests it across my abs. As she goes to rest her head against my shoulder, I slowly raise



my arm, and she snuggles closer, laying her beautiful messy curls on my chest and breathes out a long, shaky breath.

I can feel the tension in her body, even as she lies against me, and my arm remains awkwardly in the air. Unsure whether to lay it behind my head or to try touching her, I just leave it hanging in the air like the world's biggest dork who has never been touched by a girl.

“Hold me Theo.” Her soft command is at odds with the stiffness of her posture, and I hesitate only for a moment before carefully lowering my arm around her back, gently holding her against me. I can feel her hold her breath. One long minute later, her body gradually relaxes and she blows out a breath, closing her weary eyes. As she finally drifts off to sleep, I desperately run through every nasty, awkward thought I can think of in a pathetic attempt to keep my needy dick at bay.

*Fixing the transmission on my Corvette, nope. Seattle Sabretooths losing the Stanley cup. Still no, shit! Uh... Nana Isabella telling me to rub lotion on her old wrinkly feet. Ew. Fuck.* Yep, that did the trick. Breathing out a sigh of relief, my dick deflates at the nasty mental image as I fight back a shudder. But at least now I won't have to fight the hard-on all damn night as I hold this precious girl close to my side. Aw fuck, the damn thing is up again. *Shit. This is going to be a long fucking night.*



## Chapter Forty-Two



### *Danica*

**M**y mind is hazy as I slowly drift into awareness. I can feel the soft sunlight warming my face as it peeks through the cracks of the curtains. My body is cushioned comfortably and for the first time in weeks I feel rested. Taking a moment to process how I feel, I realize with a start that I slept. Like, for real slept. With no dreams. I have been plagued for weeks with exhausting nightmares, reliving painful memories over and over again and despite all desperate attempts, I have not been able to get a true night of restful sleep, in...I can't even remember how long.

I feel a rumble against my face, and a loud snore startles me out of my quiet contemplation. Abruptly opening my eyes, I realize that I am being held in Theo's arms. We are in his bed, and I fell asleep with him holding me. Oh my god! He is holding me, and I didn't pull away, and I actually slept! Holy shit! Laying still, listening to his snores as his chest rumbles against my cheek, I smile, a genuine smile and close my eyes once more.

## Chapter Forty-Three



### Theo

“Dude, what the hell is the matter with you?” A sharp nudge jerks me awake, and I realize Sebastian has elbowed me hard in the ribs. The dim lighting of the office space where we review gameplay footage from our opposing teams lulled me into a trance-like state as the droning of our Assistant Coach Edwards reviewed different moves to watch out for by some of our upcoming competitors.

On Sebastian’s other side, I look over to find Caleb eyeing me through narrowed eyes. As the team captain, I am usually the one who has to rope the others in and force them to focus when they are zoned out but today, I just couldn’t help myself. I spent hours last night with Danica tucked close to my side. Finally resting peacefully for once and like the jackass that I am, my mind just would not shut off. Thoughts of her naked in my bed, writhing in my sheets as she moaned in pleasure played on an endless loop and I bounced between fantasies.

God damn, she is the sexiest fucking creature I have ever laid eyes on, and it is some sick joke the universe is playing on me that she is sleeping my bed, wearing my fucking clothes and I can’t do a damn thing that I want to with her. I bounce between just wanting to hold her close, kiss her and never let go, and wanting to fuck her into oblivion. Thoughts of my hard cock sliding between those luscious lips as she swallows me down, or my head buried between her thighs as she explodes all over my face. Fuck!

Swallowing hard, I choke down a groan of painful need and try to subtly readjust my hard dick. That’s all I need dammit,

to get a fucking boner thinking about all the ways I want to fuck my girl while her brother sits right fucking next to me. Ugh!

“T! What the hell man!” Caleb is glaring at me now and throws a pencil at my face. Ow. Fucking thing almost hit me in the eye. I glare back at him while Seb, gaze bouncing between the two of us, slaps first myself, and then Caleb on the side of the head.

“Fucking focus dude!” Shit. Yep, I deserved that. Resigned, I turn back to face the screen recapping another play on the ice and attempt to focus my wayward thoughts.



Long after practice has ended, and all our classes are done for the day, I regroup with the guys back at my place on Jock Row. It feels really weird being back in my room, having spent the better part of the last two weeks at Ma’s place whenever I don’t have to be on campus for practice or class. Really, I have only swung by here a few times to pick up clothes as needed, and a few miscellaneous things I forgot to grab before Danica was discharged from the hospital.

Finn has joined Seb, Caleb and myself, as I called this war council upon requesting everyone’s help. Now they lounge casually around my room, Finn situated at my desk, his laptop and assorted computer equipment items strewn chaotically around my once neat desk, completely taking over the space; while his brother lounges across my bed like the asshole he is, messing up my tidy sheets, and Caleb chills in a chair across the room.

“We have a fucking problem” Not bothering with pleasantries, I cut straight to the chase.

“Yeah dude, we know. His name is *fucking Bradley Oakley*.” Seb throws out sarcastically.

I almost get sidetracked as I notice that the dickhead is wearing his fucking dirty tennis shoes while he lays there, all casually. Crossing my arms, I glare at him. “Dude, get your nasty-ass shoes off my bed.”

Seb smirks before kicking off his sneakers, arms crossed behind his head as he lounges around acting like he owns the damn place.

Finn, quiet in the background as he madly types away, pauses for a moment. Turning around to face the group, he hits a button on his phone and images are cast from his screen to my tv so everyone can see what he has pulled up. Images taken directly from Danica’s phone without her knowledge. After everything that happened last night, with that piece of shit scaring my girl, I knew I had to get the guys involved so we could figure out a more... permanent... solution to our Bradley problem.

I spent what had to be one of the longest nights of my life, holding my girl while she finally slept, my mind on an endless loop, bouncing between fantasies of her and brainstorming all the ways I was going to rip Bradley-fucking-Oakley limb from limb. While I had wanted to reach out to the group right away, making sure my girl was safe and comfortable and finally able to rest was more important, so I bided my time. Once she was up for the day, however, I was able to reach out to Finn while she was in the shower and have him hack into her phone to get copies of the incriminating texts that fucker had sent. The same texts, which are now on prominent display on my television.

It takes a minute for the words to register, but I can see the exact moment when Caleb and Seb come to the same realization as I did, that Bradley Oakley must die.

“I don’t own a shovel, but I’ll go to the goddamn hardware store and buy one. Tell me when and where and that fucker is gone.” Seb’s demeanor, which had been full of confident arrogance as he gave me a hard time only moments ago has now gone rigid, his tone ice-cold.

“I’m gonna fucking kill him!” There is a raging fury in Caleb’s hard face, body tense as he finishes reading through the texts.

“Yeah well, you’re gonna have to get in line. The son-of-a-bitch has had it coming for a long time, and he is *mine*. I just need to know if you’ve got my back?” Looking at each of the guys in turn, I find a grim resoluteness lining each of their features as they each give a terse nod in my direction.

“Are you sure you wanna go there, man? This could absolutely destroy your career. Any chance of a future with the NHL; they could end up pulling your draft contract. You’ve already had a lot of speculation going around after what happened back in high school. Are you sure you wanna risk dredging all of that up again after it’s finally died down?” Caleb looks to Seb, then back over to me, confusion temporarily clouding the turbulent anger in his eyes as he tries to process Sebastian’s statement.

Seb has been one of my best friends for years. He and Finn grew up on the wrong side of the tracks, just like I did. And while we didn’t go to the same school, we have been playing hockey together since middle school. Both guys are intimately familiar with my gray past and how I almost ended up in jail instead of being granted a full-ride hockey scholarship which led to my NHL draft signing.

Caleb, however, was relatively new to our group. Growing up in a more affluent area, he was raised with the privilege of attending fancy private schools and playing hockey in a more cushioned environment. We never crossed paths during our adolescent journeys through school and hockey leagues; it wasn’t until our freshman year when we were thrown into each other’s lives.

Finn was assigned to room with Caleb in the dorms, whereas I had ended up rooming with his twin. Between this, and our time on the ice, the four of us quickly became a tight-knit group and have been damn near inseparable ever since. No matter the crime, we do the time together. Whatever shit one of us starts, the rest are almost always right behind to back him up.

Despite our close friendship that had developed over the last three years, Caleb was not privy to my darkest moments. He was aware that some shit went down my sophomore year of high school and I'm sure by now he has heard the rumors, as they occasionally pop back up. All they have served to do in the years since their creation, however, has been to give me a badass reputation. I am ice-cold and not one for much talk.

The ladies have always said it makes me seem dark and mysterious, though why they find it to be such a turn-on I will never understand. Really, it just comes down to the fact that I can't talk about that shit. It's honestly a miracle that I ended up where I am, instead of state prison. If it hadn't been for Coach noticing me at the local rink one weekend and taking me in to mentor me, honestly that is probably where I would have ended up.

Looking over at Finn for confirmation before turning my gaze to Sebastian and Caleb, I uncross my arms and gesture to the texts on the screen.

"C-man, I know how this all started; that you were uncomfortable with my stepping in to help with Danica. I get it. You know my history with the ladies. I've never been one to commit, I take what I need and get out because they have never been the end goal for me. Hockey is my life, and you know as well as I do how important it is to not let anything get in the way of that dream." I pause, taking a moment to gather my thoughts, then look Caleb dead in the eye, my face solemn and eyes resolute. I want to make sure he sees me and really gets what I am saying here.

"Danica is different, man. I get that she's your sister but this girl? She is fucking *everything*." Danica truly is the whole package. Sure, she is a total smoke show. And yes, she has quite a mouth on her; but it's so much more than that. Initially I didn't want to care. I mean, she is way too young for me and totally not my usual type. But she has gotten under my skin, wormed her way into my fucking head and I can't get her out. Danica is it for me. She's end game. And if I have to give up my future with the NHL to fix this and keep her safe, then that is what I'm going to do.



# Chapter Forty-Four



## Theo

*Three Years Earlier*

I stand at the edge of the doorway, frozen in shock, my brain trying desperately to process what I'm seeing in front of me. A muffled scream and desperate plea to stop jerked me abruptly back to reality and I quickly run into the room without thought, desperate to get to her.

Throwing all my weight into it, I duck my head with a roar, tackling my best friend to the ground. Blind with rage, I throw punch after punch, and don't stop until I am forcefully being pulled away.

Breathing hard, I wipe the blood away from my split lip, a minor casualty from a stray fist thrown up in defense against my forceful attack. Making a dive to start once again pummeling the guy I thought I knew, *my best fucking friend*, a strong arm holds me back tightly, as a command is barked in my ear. "Theodore, enough!"

Shaking with rage, I jerk free of the old man's grasp, spitting at his feet before I turn to my right. Hovering near the edge of the desk, clothes torn and disheveled, hair in disarray, my mother hides, whimpering in the corner.

My heart is pounding in my ears and the rage burns within my chest, but I force myself to take in a shaky breath, trying to calm the fuck down. I walk over to Ma and reach down a hand to help her stand. Tears stream steadily down her face; her lip is split and bleeding and I can see a bruise beginning to form around her left eye.

“It’s okay, Ma. I’m here.”

# Chapter Forty-Five



## Theo

*Present Day*

My thoughts are pulled away from the past as Caleb interjects. “Danica has been through enough. If you fuck around and screw this up, I will kill you myself.”

“I meant what I said Caleb.” My use of his full name rather than our standard abbreviation adds gravity to my words, and I see Caleb’s expression shift to one of consideration as he looks back at me. “Danica is different. I know there is a lot to figure out. I get that I am leaving soon and who knows where she will end up for school and her gymnastics, but I really care about her.” Swallowing down the emotion in my chest, I force myself to maintain eye contact with Caleb.

Not one for talking, typically I prefer to remain the silent “broody and mysterious” type that the bunnies seem to dig so much. It has certainly brought no end of cheap hookups whenever the mood suited me. Opening up and talking about my feelings? Especially with the guys, leaves me feeling all different kinds of uncomfortable. But that’s the thing. Danica is worth it. If I have to open myself up to the possibility of ridicule from my three closest friends for Caleb to understand how serious I am right now, well then, that is a small price to pay.

Rising from his spot across the room, Caleb makes his way over to me while looking me over and I can’t help but feel like I’m some sort of lamb for the slaughter. Stopping just in front of me, my body tenses as he shoves his finger into my chest,

and I have to physically restrain myself from reacting to his aggressive posturing.

“Don’t screw with her emotions. I mean it Theo. You are just as bad as the rest of us when it comes to throwing your dick around. And after the shit you pulled with her a few weeks back, I should punch your goddamn face in for how you hurt her. But Danica has chosen to move past it, so for now I will let it slide. I mean it though, if you hurt her again, I will fuck you up, friend or not. Ya feel me?”

I keep my mouth shut, biting back the response I would like to give. Instead, I jerk my head in a terse nod, and am caught by surprise when Caleb offers me his hand to shake in a gesture of goodwill.

With a clap of his hands, Sebastian looks over at us with a cocky grin, eyebrow raised and the moment between Caleb and myself is broken. “Good, now that’s settled, let’s get back to how we’re gonna deal with this fucker ...”

“So, we’ve got two main fronts that we’re gonna have to tackle this situation from.” Caleb nods at the screen a short while later as he fills the group in on what he has been able to find out. “Danni hasn’t wanted to open up much about what happened but from what I have been able to gather, our parents made some sort of shady-ass deal with his and they are using her as a bartering tool.” At the incredulous looks we give him, Caleb scoffs in disgust as he continues, “yeah, believe me, I know. Can’t say I am exactly thrilled to call them my parents at this point either.”

Looking first at the brothers, Caleb soon turns to face me, a look of resolute determination on his face. “In our world, as idiotic as it seems, bartering tools are worth more than money. Connections and favors are what give these assholes their power. I don’t know what sort of hold the Oakley’s have over my dad that he would stoop to this level but I am going to fucking find out. In the meantime, they have made some very public promises about Danni and Brad’s engagement as well as the new business partnerships for their company.” He says this to me as if I don’t fucking know. I mean, I *do* know much more than they probably realize about the inner-workings of

their “blue-blood” lifestyles. But even if I didn’t have a familiar intimacy with it, the situation with Danica would make it pretty damn obvious.

Pausing, Caleb forces down a look of frustration with the shake of his head and nods once more at the screen. Displayed now are news articles about Danica and Brad’s public history, alongside social media posts discussing their surprising engagement. The way the media has it portrayed, you would think they were fucking Cinderella and Prince Charming.

I don’t get why people even give a shit. I mean, yeah they both come from important, wealthy families; and sure they have a lot of friends in high-up places. But it’s not like they’re fucking royalty. Just because their companies are known internationally and they throw glitzy parties throughout the year that always seem to make it into the trashy magazines’ gossip section with various celebrities in attendance, why should people fucking care about two young people getting married that they don’t even know?

He continues, “And clearly, Oakley Sr. has thrown his weight and money around because there hasn’t even been a whisper of his shithead son in the media after being taken in for questioning and the restraining order we had placed for Danni. As far as the world is concerned, they are happily in love, albeit young, wanting to get married. I will work on this angle to see what I can find out so we can destroy it from the inside out.”

Nodding over to Finn, Caleb has my best tech guy pull up several different recent news articles to be displayed on the screen. International news reports about the business dealings between their two companies now sit juxtaposed with the social sites raving about the “dream engagement”. A real-life fucking “fairy tale” several of the sites rhapsodize. Ha! Maybe if it were one of Grimm’s fucking fairy tales. Sure as shit feels more like one of those horror stories wrapped up with a pretty bow at this point.

“The other point on this blade, of course, is Bradley himself. Now, we thought that by ganging up on him and giving him a good beating that would be a simple enough deterrent to get

that ass-face to back the fuck off but clearly, we were wrong.” Caleb’s face pales, his expression grim as he swallows thickly. “You guys weren’t there after it happened. The way I found her ...”

I can see the hesitation on his face as he pauses briefly before continuing, his next words chosen carefully, as if treading on thin ice. “She was so messed up. After we got to the hospital, they couldn’t reach my parents. Danni was unconscious, in serious condition and I was the only family there. I gave the okay for them to run a rape kit ... I didn’t even have to be in the room with her when she heard the results, or when she gave her statement to the police. It was obvious from how I found her what happened-” His voice breaks off, thick with emotion and I can see he is fighting back tears.

Glancing over from Caleb to Finn and Seb, I can see the nausea they are both fighting off, which is quickly replaced by cold anger in their eyes. Danica is like a sister to both of them; she has been for years. They would be justifiably upset regardless of who this happened to, but the fact that it’s Danica? Their chosen family? Well, that is completely unforgivable.

“Brad was taken into custody for questioning, but the charges didn’t stick.” Finn interrupts our internal musings, filling us in with information that I truly didn’t want to hear. “His dad has connections, like BIG connections. I did what I could on my end, hacking the system to make sure the restraining order was pushed through, but obviously that only seemed to piss him off more.”

Seb scoffs, interrupting his brother “As if a goddamn piece of paper was going to stop that fucker after all the shit he has pulled. What are the cops going to do? Absolutely nothing. His dad has the fucking Governor in his back pocket, not to mention the Chief of Police and the damn DA. Even if Danni felt safe enough to come forward and testify against him, I’m sure “daddy dearest” would make the whole fucking thing just disappear. The charges are never going to stick against someone like him.” Seb’s jaded point of view similarly

matches that of my own, which isn't all that surprising given his own fucked-up history.

"I know, I get it." Finn continues, "It's not about her coming forward to press charges. At this point, I am building as much documentation as possible to use in our favor. Caleb said that connections and favors are what give these assholes their power. But they always underestimate guys like me, the quiet ones sitting behind the computer. *Our* fucking power comes from information. It's funny, really, to see how easy it is to get that information. When assholes like Brad and his dad think they are above the law; they get careless."

The look on Finn's face is diabolical. I don't know what he is planning, and from past experience, I know he won't share with the group until he has gathered all of his facts. Whatever it is, though, is going to rock Bradley-fucking-Oakley's world. And I am here for it.

"Okay then. What's the plan?"

## Chapter Forty-Six



### *Danica*

Theo was gone when I got out of the shower this morning. I had unintentionally drifted back to sleep for a short time, lulled by the beat of his heart as my head rested comfortably against his chest. I feel like my body is still trying to catch up after weeks of restless slumber and endless nightmares haunting me in the shadows. Waking once more as Theo shifted beneath me, trying to quietly slip out of the bed, I just laid there watching him move about the room as he got ready, still in awe of the fact that I had finally been able to sleep.

More so, I was completely blown away by the fact that he held me; he held me all night and my skin wasn't crawling with a sick need to peel away all the dirty layers of my filth and shame. For one small moment in time, I almost felt whole again; well, as much as I ever was anyway. Unfortunately for me, the beauty of such a priceless moment in time was ripped away once more under the harsh light of day.

Sitting alone on the couch, in one of Theo's oversized hoodies and a comfortable pair of his sweats, I blow softly on the steaming mug of tea. My gaze directed blankly towards whatever happens to be on tv, its volume turned low as I listen to the soft melody of the rain pitter-pattering on the windows in the background. Since *the incident* I have found myself more often than not just drifting, my mind lost to its own musings as I tune out the world around me. Grey, rainy days like today just make the perfect backdrop to my melancholy. I can't even recall the number of times Elena or Theo have



walked in to find me just staring blankly into space. I honestly wonder why they even put up with me at this point.

Between my weird blank episodes and my late-night screams acting as a rude wake-up call every time I have another nightmare (which has been at least two to three times a night up until last night), I can't imagine why Mrs. G would allow her son to bring me into her home. Even if I truly was Theo's girlfriend, I honestly can't say I am any mother's ideal for her son these days. Maybe Bradley really is a good fit for me with how fucked up in the head I am. Maybe we are a mismatch made in hell. I shudder at the thought.

A firm knock at the door has me jumping out of my skin as I am startled out of my mind's endless rambling. Elena isn't home, she had a shift at the community center today and unlike the last few times when she brought me with her, I didn't have the mental capacity to try peopling today. With Theo still on campus, that leaves me all alone in this house that is now too quiet. Another firm knock has me tensing. My breathing hitches as a familiar panic slithers back in the broken crevices of my soul. *Oh god, what if he found me?*

The phone which had been tossed carelessly onto the coffee table when I first sat down now starts to ring, and I breathe out a sigh of relief, tears welling in my eyes as I see *Hoodie Guy* appear on my screen; the selfie he had sent me from his game, all geared up and pouty lips on prominent display as my backdrop. *Huh, I didn't put that picture there.* . . my eyes widen as I realize Theo must have gone into my phone to change the background at some point while I was asleep or in the shower this morning.

"Theo?" I quickly swipe to answer, my voice breathless.

"Il mio passerotto. How's my girl today?"

"I- I'm okay, it's just..."

"Talk to me, diavoletta. What's going on?"

"Oh, there was a knock at the door right before you called and it just startled me, is all. But I'm fine, really. Whomever it was must have left, the knocking has stopped."

“That’s actually part of the reason why I was calling. I want you to go to the door. There should be someone waiting out front for you.”

“... You sent someone to babysit me?” There is a bitter edge to my voice that I can’t quite contain. I don’t mean to come across as bitchy, but the sharp bite to my tone slips through anyway. It is now almost three weeks since I left the hospital and I have not been out of this house except for a follow-up with my doctors and meeting with police to give my statement.

I don’t know what Caleb said to my parents, but for whatever reason they have totally backed off and left me to my own devices after being discharged from the hospital. They generally don’t care what the hell I do anyway, unless there is a specific public event that they need me at to project this perfect family image; But even then, three weeks of just... not hearing from them at all is odd. I’m not complaining though. Just thinking about them or going back to their house after that night from hell makes my skin crawl and almost always sets off a panic attack.

Aside from whatever deal Caleb made with my parents, Finn and Caleb also arranged with the school for me to finish my class work remotely while I recover (and with my current mental state, God knows how long that is going to take). Finn got me all set up with a whole new fancy computer system, carefully arranged on Theo’s desk for all my virtual class needs while I stay here (completely unnecessary, but he wouldn’t listen to my protests about letting me just use my ancient laptop). And Caleb somehow managed to sweet-talk the staff at my school into agreeing to all of it. He always did have a way with the administration there. I guess not much has changed.

Also, as I was too injured to practice at the Sports Center, I have been limited to video calls with my coaches, team nutritionist and physical therapist. No practice or volunteer work for me for a while. Though, if all goes well, in another week or so I can begin working in the weight room as I start rehab to work on rebuilding my strength and flexibility while I continue to heal. I won’t be able to do any real work until this

damn cast comes off though, and that is still another month away at least, from what the doctors told me.

All this to say, I have been quite cooped up, confined in this house. Not that I'm not grateful, because I absolutely am. And up until recently, I was totally content to hunker down in Theo's room which smells deliciously like him, or visit with his mom whenever she is home. But aside from the two times when I have ventured out with Elena to help at the community center where she volunteers (the two times when Theo was available to come along and act as my personal buffer and bodyguard), I have been housebound. And three weeks is a long time for anyone to be holed up.

"Diavoletta, he isn't there to babysit you, just to make sure you are safe. Just trust me, please. Now, just be a good girl for me, and go to the door."

My eyebrows raise at his statement. "Okay ...?" Uncrossing my legs, I drag myself off the couch, phone still held to my ear as I walk to the front of the house. "Alright, Hoodie Guy. I'm here. Now what?" I try my best to bite back the sarcasm in my tone.

"Good girl." His voice growls in a low murmur, causing my heart to skip a beat. My tone may have been only slightly sarcastic, but I can fully hear the smile in his voice as he continues with his reply. "Now, go ahead and open up."

Scowling at his cryptic reply, I huff but open the door anyway... and I am completely blown away at the sight before me. Theo, standing in front of me on the covered patio, in one of his best game day suits, holding a box and a rose. My mouth drops open, and I almost drop my phone, I am so shocked by this absolutely perfect man standing before me. God, he is mouthwatering. The slightly wet custom-fit navy-blue suit and tie that shows just a hint of the defined muscles underneath. The gray shirt really serve to bring out the ice in his blue gaze.

Holding out the rose to me, raindrops glistening on the petals, Theo leans in for a soft kiss at the corner of my mouth, before looking closely into my eyes. "For you, il mio passerotto."

Raising a shaky hand, my fingers graze where his lips had just been. A smirk pulls at the corner of his gorgeous mouth, and I can see the humor reflected in his eyes. “I picked up a little something for you.” Reaching out, he pulls my trembling hand from my lips and gently sets the box in my open hand, as the one in the cast is currently busy clutching the beautiful rose for dear life. Unlike what one would normally expect from an admirer, where you would typically expect red or pink for a gift of roses, this flower was the most stunning shade of blue I had ever seen. A blue that matched the complex shading of his suit.

Raising the rose to my nose, I close my eyes and inhale the delicate floral scent, before opening once more to raise an inquiring brow at Theo. “A blue rose?”

The smirk on his face spreads into a full and glorious smile that has me catching my breath. Wow.

“I read somewhere once that blue roses signify mystery and the unattainable, which seems to be the theme for us doesn’t it?” He nods to the box in my hand, and I glance down at it. “And the theme for tonight. Go get dressed, *la mia diavoletta*. I’ll be waiting.”

It takes me a moment to process his words, and as I stare blankly back at him, he lifts his wrist, casually glancing at his watch. “The clock is ticking, little sparrow. Hurry up.”

With a mental shake of my head, I turn on autopilot and head towards the hall at the back end of the house which will lead me to his room. The box is rather large, and a bit awkward to hold with one hand, but I don’t want to risk crushing the beautiful flower he gave me. Upon entering his room, I carefully place the box on his bed, before turning and placing the rose on the nightstand. Now that my hands are as free as they can be, given one of them is still wrapped in its bulky cast, I gingerly open the lid of the box and gasp at the stunning sight before me.

The first thing I notice are shoes, beautiful Loubiton heels with their customary red soles. Having been to more fancy dinner parties and charity events than I could ever count, I am not

altogether unaccustomed to high-end designer wear, but I am an absolute sucker for heels and these shoes are stunning. Lifting each one gingerly from the box, I gently place them to the side and see a pile of silky fabric underneath. As I pull out the material, my eyes begin to water as I see a gorgeous floor-length silk dress with delicately matching lace panties and strapless bra set underneath.

A shaky laugh escapes my lips as a single tear escapes my lashes. Oh, my goodness, this man. Shaking my head when I see that he actually got the correct sizes for everything, bra included, I close the door and begin to strip out of his hoodie and sweats.

## Chapter Forty-Seven



### *Theo*

I stand in the entryway, restlessly pacing back and forth while periodically checking my watch. What feels like hours has probably only been about thirty minutes. I am not worried about the timing though. I knew to give Danica a lot of cushion for getting ready; I'm just anxious to see her. Watching the surprise on her face when she saw me at the front door morph into pure joy at the sight of the blue rose was worth every second of painstaking detail I put into tonight's plans, and worth every single favor I called in to make it happen.

Glancing up as I hear her soft tread on the carpet, I am absolutely stunned at the breathtaking beauty in front of me. Blue satin gown with contrasting silver heels, curls smoothed down with some kind of product and pulled back behind her ear on one side, this girl is an absolute stunner, the kind of vision I have only seen in my fantasies. Stopping a few feet away from me, she turns in a slow circle, arms out to showcase the silhouette of the dress.

"Well, what do you think? I know the cast kinda detracts from the overall look but not too shabby for an impromptu date, huh?"

Swallowing back the emotion, I realize I have actual tears in my eyes. This girl. This goddamn gorgeous girl. With a shake of my head, I take two large steps to close the distance between us, and gently reach out to grab her hips. I see her freeze, the hesitation on her face and I pause before actually touching her. With a questioning look, she lets out a breath and

then nods in silent permission. I slowly grab her by the waist and bring her against my chest.

Reaching up with one hand while the other still rests on her hip, I lift her chin with my finger, and look into her eyes as I whisper “You are the most stunning woman I have ever seen. Whether you are wearing my sweats, or in an expensive dress, you always look beautiful to me. Your cast doesn’t detract from your beauty, nothing could.” With that, I lower my head and gently kiss her on the lips.

Eyes watering, she brushes away the moisture before the tears can fall. Taking her hand in mine, I walk her to the door, pausing first to grab an umbrella and remove my jacket, placing it carefully over her shoulders. She glances up at me with a questioning look even as she snuggles into the warmth of my coat. “The only jacket I want to see you in is my own, *la mia diavoletta*. Besides, we don’t want to get that cast of yours wet.” I flash her a grin as I wink, opening the door and giving her my arm.

After opening the umbrella to block out the steady rainfall, I escort her carefully off the porch and down into my waiting car. Leaning in, I inhale her soft floral scent as I reach across to buckle her seatbelt. I know she doesn’t need the help anymore now that she is on the mend but it’s more for myself at this point; I am desperate and will use any excuse to be closer to her- to touch her.

Closing her door, I quickly go around to my side, hopping into the driver’s seat and starting the engine. As it purrs to life, I reach into my slacks and grab out my phone, unlocking it and pulling up the correct app. Once connected, I hand the phone to Danica to play some music as I pull out on the street.

It’s quiet coming from the passenger side as she looks over my phone, and I can’t help sneaking a glance when I hear her sharp intake of breath.

“Theo, what is this?”

Fighting back my smile, I turn my eyes once more to the road, choosing not to answer.

“You made me a playlist?”

On my phone over the last several weeks, I have worked diligently to put together a custom playlist for Danica. I know she isn't a huge fan of my music, and while I enjoy the banter of our bickering over music every time I drive her around, doing this was just one small way that I could show her how much she means to me. As she scrolls through the playlist, I continue to sneak glances her way, amused at her widening eyes.

From Taylor Swift and Katy Perry, to Ed Sheeran and Britney Spears- there are hundreds of songs on the playlist; songs that I have seen her sing along to on the radio, songs that made me think of her when I heard them in passing, even ones that she has discussed liking when she was growing up. Not a single trace of Slipknot, Rammstein or System of a Down to be found.

Settling on one of Taylor Swift's newest hits, the car is filled with the upbeat melody and I can feel Danica's eyes on me, observing. Turning the volume up loudly, a smirk pulls at my lips as I start singing along to the tune. Danica gapes at me, I can see from the corner of my eye that her mouth has actually dropped open.

“Oh my god! I can't believe you are actually singing along to Taylor Swift!” There is laughter in her voice, and I look over to see the sparkle in her eyes as delight brightens her face.

“Hey now, just because I prefer darker music most of the time doesn't mean I can't appreciate the Queen. She truly is a mastermind and poet in her own right.” The sincerity in my voice causes Danica to start laughing for real now.

“I seriously can't believe it! You are a secret Swiftie!”

“Well now...” I start uncomfortably.

“No. No, no, buddy. Don't even try it. There is no denying it. You are a closet Swiftie, but I will bring you out into the light of day, just you wait!” With a big grin on her face, she reaches over and hugs my arm and now I am the one who is shocked.



This is the first time in weeks that Danica has initiated any sort of human contact, outside of her asking me to hold her when she was overwhelmed with dark emotions last night. Maybe we are beginning to make some real progress here. I keep my hands on the steering wheel and eyes on the road, careful, as I don't want to do anything to disturb this moment and her happiness. Danica keeps her hold on my arm, though she pulls back slightly from the hug.

“Okay Hoodie Guy. What's the plan?”

## Chapter Forty-Eight



### *Theo*

I do not, in fact, tell her the plan. Wanting to keep with the theme of the evening, mysterious like the blue rose I gave her, I choose instead to turn the volume up again and keep singing along to bop after bop that she pulled from her playlist, both for her entertainment and distraction. After about two more songs of just watching me in stunned amusement, Danica finally breaks down to start singing along as well. I knew she wouldn't be able to resist.

My little songbird has a love for music; I have known it from the first night when she dragged me onto the dance floor and started singing while her hips swayed to the beat, and just like then, I still can't resist the magnetism of this girl. Her voice is entrancing but it doesn't hold a candle to the shining brightness of her soul when she is happy.

After almost an hour of driving the rain finally cleared up. While we rock out to the music in our fashionable clothes, I turn down the lane of a remote country road and drive towards the fading light of the cloudy sunset. The countryside is beautiful out here. Even with the gloom of fading winter grays, the landscape of rolling hills and naked trees makes for a stunning sight.

Eventually, we round the bend and a beautiful rustic building, styled in country chic aesthetics, lights up our path in contrast to the dim lighting of the fading sun. Parking in front of the building, I quickly round the hood of my Chevy and go to open Dancia's door for her. As she unbuckles, I grasp her hand, helping her out and then readjusting my jacket more

snugly around her shoulders. With night setting in, and winter not quite over, the temperature drops quickly once the sun has set and I don't want her to get cold.

Danica, bundled in my suit coat, reaches over and hugs my offered arm and I lead her into the welcoming light of the building. Once inside, we are greeted by the host who leads us through a beautiful but empty dining room, over to a table situated in the back. With floor to ceiling windows on one side, and a warm fireplace nestled nearby, the ambiance and view could not be more perfect. Pulling out her chair, I gently remove my coat from Danica's shoulders and help her get situated in her seat. My hand gently brushes across her shoulders as I push her chair in and she tenses momentarily, before turning her head to look at me.

"Thank you," her quiet murmur is a contrast from the stiffness of her posture mere seconds before, but I know that this is just one more reason I have for ending Bradley Oakley when the time comes. He hurt my girl, and she can barely stand to be touched because of what he did. No one should have to live with that weight on their shoulders, especially not my beautiful songbird. Brad is a fucking dead man walking; but I mentally shake my head. Tonight is not about him. Tonight is for Danica, and I need to focus.

After the waiter comes over to bring us water and our menus, Danica glances around at the room and down at her menu before looking at me. I get the sense that she is uncomfortable, and I am not sure what exactly I did to make her feel that way.

"Dani--"

"Theo--"

Laughing, at the fact we both started to speak at the same time, I shake my head, gesturing for her to go first. "No, it's okay, you go first." She responds in kind.

"I was just going to say, I'm sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable. I didn't mean for my touch to bother you, I just ... God, I need you so badly it hurts. But I shouldn't have touched you like that, not even to readjust your chair, I'm sorry."

With a small smile that doesn't reach her eyes, Danica reaches across the table and hesitates momentarily before placing her hand gently on top of mine.

“No, Theo I'm sorry. It's not that I don't trust you, I really do. It's just- I don't know.” She pauses, searching for the words. “Bradley broke something in me, some part of me that I didn't even know was there, and now I don't know how to get back to that girl. To who I was.”

With a bitter laugh, she continues. “I didn't even like that girl. The girl I was before last month was already broken; a battered shell tossed around in the turbulent waves of the life my parents forced me into. Truthfully, between my parents and Brad, I have had years of being broken down and molded into what they want, and I don't even know who I am outside of that life. Being with you, in your home, it's shown me more; a life I didn't know was out there. And I want to lean into it, I want to live that life and be that girl for you, but I don't know how. I don't know if I will ever know how after everything that has happened.”

Turning my palm up, I firmly grasp her hand in mine, resting on the table. Going to speak, I am interrupted as the waiter approaches, asking for our order. Gritting my teeth in frustration as Danica pulls her hand from mine and rests it in her lap, I wait until she has ordered before reciting my own request and passing the menus back in a quiet dismissal. Taking my queue, the man backs away with a nod of his head and leaves us once again in silence.

Danica has turned her body slightly, her eyes glancing out the window in a faraway look. Her gaze may be looking over the shadowed landscape, but her thoughts may as well be a million miles away. I watch her, watching the world, and don't know how to resume.

“What is this, Theo?”

Brows furrowed in confusion; she turns once more to look over at me.

“I don't understand what this is. What we are. I mean, we hated each other at the party and the next thing I know, we

were fake dating. And then we weren't anymore, but you wanted to be friends. I ended up in the hospital and suddenly you were back and glued to my side. Now I am living in your mom's home, you've become everything to me, and I still don't know what we are. And now we're here," She gestures around the beautifully silent and empty room, "Doing this. Whatever this is." Shaking her head slightly, I can see the pain, confusion, and frustration written in her features.

"Danica-"

My voice is shaky and my words falter. Clearing my throat, I try again. "Il mio passerotto... La mia diavoletta. You mean so much to me. This started out with me just trying to help the little sister of one of my best friends. And if I was able to stick it to a guy I hated in the process? Even better. But through our texts, our late-night phone calls, I realized you were actually a really cool person. I watched you perform at the Sports Center and saw an incredible athlete with a talent and dedication to her sport that matches my own, and I was in awe of you. Seeing you interact with my nieces and nephews, I saw a gentle, playful side of you that you don't show the world."

I pause momentarily, trying to find the words that would truly fit the emotions I feel now, and there are none that come close, but I press on anyway.

"I started to care for you, like a lot. And I'm not that guy, Danica. I've never been that guy. But for you, against my own will, I was starting to break my own rules. You got inside my head. I was thinking about you all the time, at practice, during games. I needed to hear from you or I couldn't focus; and honestly, that freaked me out."

Looking across the table at my girl, I see her solemn eyes as she takes in my words. Her hands are still in her lap, and I desperately want to hold her, to hold on to her so she doesn't leave. I'm ashamed as my next words come out and I pray to God she will stay and just listen. I mean, I know I drove us here, but really there is nothing stopping her from leaving the table, getting up and just walking away from this conversation that needs to happen.

“I’m ashamed to say this but I’m not a nice guy, la mia diavoletta. I’m not the guy you take home to meet your parents. I’ve always put the game first, at the cost of everyone and everything around me. I’ve never really had a girlfriend before. I mean, I’ve hooked up with people, but I couldn’t let anyone or anything get in the way of my career. That has always been my endgame. There was only one time where I pushed my dreams to the side, and I almost ended up in jail because of it. Since then, when I almost lost everything, I haven’t looked back. I haven’t let a single person get in my way. Until you.”

Her eyes widen at my words. *Yeah baby, I’m not a nice guy. You need to realize that but dammit if I don’t wish I could shield you from my past.* In a surprising gesture, she lifts her hand and reaches across the table to gently grab my arm once more. Choosing not to acknowledge it, I don’t want to scare her off again, I continue with my confession while hoping for the best.

“You are different Danica. You worked your way under my skin and yeah, it freaked me out at first, so I pushed you away. And God, I wish I could take it back. I am so sorry I did that to you, that I hurt you. That I allowed you to be hurt. God, if I had just been there! It fucking kills me, I know it’s my fault you were put in that situation, and I know I can’t take back what I said or what happened to you, but il mio passerotto, I am begging you to let me try.”

Lips parted in surprise; my words clearly are not what she was expecting to hear. I take the fact that she hasn’t up and left the table yet as a good sign though, so I press my luck and continue.

“Baby, I almost lost you. It fucking kills me. God, I don’t know what I would have done if I had lost you. But I knew as soon as I sent that text that I royally fucked everything up. I am an ass, I know it. And I know that you know it. But I am hoping you can look past it and learn to trust me again. I know I broke your trust when I called it off, whatever it was that we were doing; but dammit Danica. I still can’t get you out of my fucking head and I don’t want to anymore. I realized I don’t

have to choose between you and my career; I know we could figure out how to make it work regardless, but what I am saying is that if I had to? I would choose you every fucking time. Screw hockey. Screw your family. You are it for me, Danica. You are my end game.”

I watch as a tear slides down her cheek, and I reach across the table to gently brush it away, unable to resist touching her any longer.

“I know you aren’t ready for anything right now. We are in a real fucking mess of a situation with your ex, but I am going to be here to work through it with you. And when you are ready, I am still going to be here for you. So, this is me, starting over.” I reach out, gesturing to the suspiciously quiet and empty room. Really, the waiter should have been back by now with our food. I wonder if my emotional monologue scared the poor guy off.

“This is what our first date should have been, Danica. I should have wined and dined you. Should have taken you out for a romantic evening and treated you like the fucking queen you are. So, this is me doing it right this time. This is our first *official* date, and I am asking you; no, telling you, I’m your goddamn boyfriend and I am not going anywhere. No more faking it. No more playing for show, for your psychotic ex, for your family. This is just me; just a guy dressed up in a fancy suit, trying to win over his dream girl. Say yes.”

I swallow, vulnerability almost choking me as the last words escape my mouth. I have never opened up like this, never been so brutally honest. God, I couldn’t even bring myself to ask her. I fucking demanded a yes because I can’t fathom a world in which she says no; when she realizes she is too damn good for me and leaves. She sits, silently staring at me, and my anxiety rises. She isn’t saying anything; why the fuck isn’t she saying anything? I valiantly try to fight the panic that is rapidly building in my chest. Another tear slips down her face and genuine fear creeps in at the thought of her saying no.

“... Okay.”

“... O-... Okay? Like for real, ‘yes,’ okay?” Shaky at first, my voice only falters for a moment as hope and excitement spread through me like a wildfire.

“Okay like, ‘you completely took my breath away and now I don’t know what to say’, okay.” Danica looks me dead in the eye as she says this, and I can see that ember of attraction in her fiery gaze as her words come out with conviction.

Unable to contain the joy spilling out of me, I can’t help but jump out of my chair to pick up Danica and give her a panty-melting kiss. Flinching at the surprise of my embrace, she tenses only for a moment before melting into me. A lithe, graceful arm that is not encumbered in a silver cast wraps tightly around my neck. Her fingers run through the hair at the base of my skull, while Danica rests her injured arm against my chest and clutches at my dress shirt.

I begin nipping gently at her bottom lip before slipping my tongue out to run along the seam of her mouth, encouraging her to open for me. Her response is hesitant at first, cautious. Soon though, her restraint is pushed aside by her growing passion. Groaning in agonizing pleasure as she tentatively reaches out her tongue, I try my best to restrain myself as she cautiously explores my mouth, our tongues intertwining in a delicate and teasing dance.

Holding her close to my chest with my arm around her waist, my other hand which had been tangled in her beautiful curls slowly travels down the side of her face. Fingers grazing her jaw before trailing lightly down her neck, my mouth pulls away from hers as I begin to place soft passionate kisses along the path my fingertips just traveled. Nibbling lightly at the soft spot between her neck and shoulder, my hand continues downward, encouraged by the soft moans of pleasure escaping her luscious lips.

Brushing lightly, my fingers graze over her breast, hard nipples showing through the layers of satiny material. As I go to playfully touch one nipple, softly pinching, Danica gasps and pulls away, startled by movements. Pulling back slightly, I maintain my grip on her waist while still allowing her room to breathe.



“Too much?”

She nods, breathing heavily, lips swollen from our passionate encounter. Nodding in response, I place one last kiss gently on her lips and help her into her seat once more.

As I am settling back into my own chair, I hear the sound of a discreet throat clearing behind me. Our waiter has returned, having surreptitiously waited to appear with our food until the moment was right. It took a lot of favors being called in, with promises of season tickets and special photo ops, to get this swanky country club to shut down for our private dinner tonight; but from that kiss alone? From her fucking agreeing to be my girl, it was worth every aggravating moment of planning.

As the waiter leans over, setting down our steaming dishes, a beautiful rose blush blossoms over Danica’s beautiful face, highlighting her freckles as it trails down her neck. Following the path it leads, my gaze lingers on her breasts a moment longer than it should, and her blush deepens. I can’t help but smirk at my girl in response.



## Chapter Forty-Nine



### *Danica*

The next several weeks have passed by in a blur of heaven and hell colliding. Painfully long nights interrupted with soul-crushing nightmares have slowly eased over the passing time spent in Theo's arms. After that most incredible, romantic evening where Theo gifted me himself, laying his heart on his sleeve, he has been right by my side, my shining knight fighting back my demons in the shadows. Each night, he lay in his makeshift bed on the floor, only to be rudely awakened by my blood-curdling screams; and each morning I woke up safe, held firmly in his strong arms.

After several nights of attempted chivalry, we both finally gave up the pretense and now I can't sleep unless I am being held in his arms. I still have my nightmares, though their intensity and frequency have lessened over the passing weeks. Every time I awake in a cold sweat, Theo is right there, his voice calm and soothing as he lulls me to sleep with stories from his hockey escapades, tales about growing up with his mother, sometimes just sweet nothings whispered softly in Italian until I fall back into a more peaceful slumber.

It has not escaped my notice that in all of his recollections there has not been a single mention of his father. The one time I attempted to broach the subject, however, Theo shut down. His closed-off manner was off-putting after he had opened himself to me in our time spent together so I didn't push further. In return, Theo has been patient with me, allowing me to open my heart to him in my own time. In the still, quiet moments, sometimes I am able to talk about everything that

has happened, while other times he simply holds me, wiping away my tears from the memories that haunt me, lost in my own mental prison.

The verbal and emotional abuse I endured growing up, the forced relationship with Bradley, the first time he raped me after his high school graduation. When I tried to speak about that awful night, the first of many that would follow, (though clearly not the worst), Theo sat patiently by my side, attuned to my rigid body and my need for personal space as I brokenly recited the incidents from that introduction to my personal hell. And when I showed him my scar hidden beneath layers of hair, the bald spot that refuses to fully heal, he gently kissed the area and told me I was perfect and beautiful; words I never felt before him.



*9 Months Earlier*

“Oh my god! Baby, you did it! Congrats!” My happy squeal travels across the room as I run to Bradley, jumping in his arms. His unzipped graduation robes billow around both of us as he catches me in his arms, placing a bruising kiss on my lips that leaves me breathless. Cap sitting askew on his head, I playfully tweak the tassel before standing on tiptoes to place a happy kiss on his cheek as he grins back at me.

Bradley’s parents walk over to us at a more sedate pace, trailing several yards behind me. God forbid they show any indication that they are proud of their son in their stony features.

“Bradley! You look like a mess. For God’s sake, fix your robes. There are *photographers* here.” Brad’s mother hisses, a frozen smile plastered on her plastic face. Bradley quickly straightens, zipping his robes once more, and I reach over to help adjust his cap. His hand whips out, clutching mine in an iron-like grasp to the point where it is bruising, and I bite back a small gasp of pain as the smile drops from his features.

“Dammit Danica, look what you did! You made a mess of me.” He snaps as if I was the one who had unzipped his robes prior to his parents’ arrival. “And fix your damn hair, it’s all screwed up from your running over here.” His words lash out at me like a whip, striking true at my most vulnerable insecurities.

“I’m sorry, Bradley. Mr. and Mrs. Oakley.” With my contrite apology, I desperately run my fingers through my hair in a pathetic attempt to straighten out my wild curls, while still maintaining some level of discretion in the hopes that the photographers don’t look our way.

My mother and father, who have also joined our little group, both eye me with disdain. I know they don’t approve of my outfit for today’s ceremony but honestly, it’s not like it is my own graduation that I am having to pose in pictures for; and dammit, it’s hot outside. My knee-length flowy floral skirt, pink tank top with matching cardigan, and flats make up an outfit that I thought to be both cute and comfortable in the humid heat of the June air. Regardless of the Maryland weather, my parents’ high standards regarding fashion would not be deterred; and my outfit, though cute, is apparently not “high-end” enough to meet the critical scrutiny of their elitist opinions.

Once all straightened out, I notice that Bradley’s parents make a subtle gesture, and as if out of nowhere, no less than three journalists appeared to take “candid” photos of the happy graduate with his family. Owning a multi-million-dollar corporation and maintaining deep-rooted social ties to some of the country’s most elite power players has ensured that Bradley’s face will undoubtedly end up in the society section of several major media outlets and many social media pages as well.

Forcing down a sigh, it’s honestly hard not to cringe at the “fakeness” of it all. Sometimes I wonder if I was born into the wrong family. Mother and Father are the epitome of “high class, old money” society wealth, using their social standing to build connections while bulldozing anyone who gets in their way. They have always been proud of Caleb, loudly boasting

of his achievements, though they only ever seem to tolerate his love of hockey; Caleb taking over the “family business” is Father’s end goal.

With me, though? I can never seem to do anything right. I am held to the same expectations but can never reach their lofty standards. No matter how good my grades, how perfect my clothing choice or makeup, nor how many trophies I win at national-level gymnastics competitions. I always seem to fall short of the mark; always end up being an afterthought in conversation. The only time when they feel it necessary to comment at all is to “critique” areas that “need improvement”, often fixating on things I cannot change, like the riot of freckles I was graced with or my less-than picturesque stature. Clearly, I did not take after either of my parents, my contrasting features must have come from somewhere further down in the gene pool. And that, in itself, is apparently a failure worth noting.

Several hours later, after our mutual families had wine and dined in an elaborate celebration hosting no less than four celebrity athletes, two supermodels and five actors that I can easily recognize, Brad and I finally make our escape after being dismissed so that I could drive him back to campus for his grad night celebration. We had planned ahead of time to ride together so that I could drive the car back home after he was dropped off.

Instead, after getting to the car, Bradley opens the passenger door, impatiently gesturing for me to get in. Hesitating, I glance at his face and notice the ruddy color and glassiness of his eyes. I know he’s had too much to drink in celebration tonight, but I am hesitant to say anything. Knowing how he gets though, it’s probably better for me to risk being in an accident than deal with his temper. Quickly, so as not to irritate him further, I slide into the passenger seat, and not bothering to wait, he rounds to the driver’s side, leaving me to close the door.

After pulling out of the long driveway, Bradley starts making his way into the heart of town. Rather than heading straight down the busy lane, however, Bradley turns on a side exit that

I'm unfamiliar with. Several long minutes pass in tense silence-filled air as Bradley maneuvers, taking turn after turn, until we end up in a remote part of town that I'm unable to recognize.

Bradley has barely spoken a word to me since this afternoon at his graduation ceremony, and I am not sure what I did, but I must have done something that put him in a bad mood. As the night progressed, and we were forced to mingle with the rich and famous, I could feel his grip on my arm get tighter, in a painfully bruising manner, though his smile never once wavered. He also started drinking more heavily as it got closer to time for us to leave. And his temper is always worse when he's been drinking.

Pulling into a large, empty parking lot, the car settles, idling as Brad turns to face me. Flinching slightly at his cold features, I am all-too aware of the bruises that usually accompany such a look from him. His face smooths out, and I start to question whether I had really seen such a cold look in his eyes, or if I was now projecting my own insecurities onto this quiet moment.

Reaching over, Bradley softly raises a hand to my hair, running it over my more subdued curls. After the verbal lashing earlier in the day, I took great care before dinner to ensure there was not a hair out of place, not a single possible imperfection to be remarked upon in my appearance. "You look beautiful, princess." Smiling at me, he reaches across the console and pulls me closer for a tender kiss.

Brad calls me his princess when he is happy with me, those are the good days, the times when I know I've done well. He must be happy with the effort I put into making the best version of myself so he could look good at his party. Everyone always tells me that as his girlfriend, I am a direct reflection of him and I need to act accordingly. Tonight, I must have done something right. His smile broadens before he deepens the kiss, hand gripping my hair more tightly, pulling my head back as his tongue enters my mouth.

Bradley has always been passionate in his displays of affection when he throws them my way. We have had our issues during

the course of our relationship. I know there have been other girls, but I have learned not to comment on it. In return, he has granted me the favor of promising that he wouldn't sleep with the one person I can't stand, his ex-girlfriend and our head cheerleader, Stephanie Randall. It had upset me at first, but I learned the hard way that it was better to bite my tongue. If I shut up and looked pretty, played my part as was expected of me, then we could be happy together. It's what everyone wanted. Some days I almost believe that I want it too.

Roaming hands run down my chest, forcing me back to present as he presses down the top of my fancy evening dress and my breasts pop out of their bra. Gasping into his mouth at the sudden shock of the cool air on my skin, he leans down, taking one nipple in my mouth and sucking hard, while still pulling tightly on my hair. "Ah, gentle!" My words come out in a cry of pain. I am quickly rewarded for my outburst with a sharp bite to my nipple that chastises my plea for relief against his gruff embrace, and I know that he drew blood as I try my best not to flinch.

Biting hard on my lip, I struggle to force down the cry of pain once more and he finally relents, licking away my punishing marks. Reaching his long arm across my torso as he leans over the console to kiss me, I am startled by the sudden change in position as he presses the lever, dropping my seat back. With an awkward shift, he climbs fully over the console, now hovering above me, his weight pressing me further into the seat as his bruising kisses claim my mouth once more.

Gasping for breath as I turn my head to the side, I struggle to get out the words through his forceful show of affection. "Brad- what- what are we doing? Don't we have to be back at school soon?"

"Yeah baby, but first, I'm gonna celebrate with my princess. I'm a fucking college student now. A football star on the rise and a force to be reckoned with. Doesn't that make you hot?" His hands reach under my dress as his words drip over me like oil. Lowering his face once more, he takes my other breast into his mouth, biting sharply as he shoves his hand down inside my tights before pushing my panties roughly to the side,



callous fingers forcefully breaching my barrier and causing me to gasp once more.

“Be quiet, princess!” His words are growled against my skin as his fingers brutishly pump in and out of me. My eyes fill with tears at the chafing discomfort and the forceful way in which he is grinding into my leg. It wasn’t like this before. We have never gone all the way, but there have been a few times recently, when he was happy, where he would tease me with playful caresses and tender kisses. This time, all I feel is his impatience and urgency, ripping painfully through me with each gruff motion.

“Brad. Wait, please.” I try to kiss the top of his head, but he reaches one hand up, yanking my hair back once more. “Baby, please wait. I need time, I’m not ready.”

“Dammit Danica, I’m sick of fucking waiting. You’re such a goddamn fucking tease, you whore. I see how the other guys look at you. Do you think I don’t notice how they all want you? But they can’t have what’s mine. And make no mistake, you are fucking *mine, princess.*”

Letting go of my hair, he slaps me hard across the face, and the tears which had pooled in my eyes now flow freely down my cheeks, smudging my carefully applied smokey makeup. Shocked from the abrupt gesture, my hand reaches out to touch the stinging skin, and Bradley opens the car door. I breathe a sigh of relief. Maybe he is giving up. I pissed him off with my words, and we still aren’t ready to have sex, but it’s ok. He will go have his fun celebration and come back in a better mood, then we can start over. Like the way it was before.

I am ripped abruptly from my internal musings as Bradley forcefully yanks me out of the car. Crying out in pain as I stumble to the ground, I skin my knee, ripping my tights on the uneven gravel. With a fistful of hair, he yanks me up, forcefully bending me over until my top half is lying across the passenger seat. “Brad! Wait! What are you doing?” My cries go unanswered and I hear the distinct sound of tearing as a hole is ripped through my tights and dress is thrown up across my back. A ripping sensation tears through me before I

have the chance to push myself up from the seat. “Wait! No! Brad, please!” My pleading only seems to spur him on, I can feel him getting harder inside me with each uttered word. He laughs when he sees the tears, leaning over my back and licking across my cheek.

“Your tears are fucking, mine Princess. I fucking own you. Be a good girl, shut up, and take this dick like the good little whore you are.” Slapping my ass as he straightens, he begins pumping harder, and I whimper as the tears stream steadily across my face and into my hair. In a moment of clarity, I force down the panic long enough to shove hard against the seat, pushing myself away from the car. And caught by surprise, Bradley stumbles back, his hard dick angry in the fading light.

“Oh, you wanna fucking play games with me? Alright Princess, let’s play.”

In his momentary surprise, I had been able to push myself completely off the seat, but my shakiness from my panic slowed me down by precious seconds and Bradley was quick to lash out, gripping my arm once more in a painfully bruising grasp.

“Get on your fucking knees, Danica. Now!”

“No!” I shove against his chest, crying as I desperately try to get away from my crazed boyfriend. A fist whips out, and the side of my head explodes with pain, allowing him the moment he needs to force me to my knees. I can feel the jagged rocks cutting into my legs, adding to my sensory-overloaded panic.

“Alright baby. You wanna play games with me? Think you can tell *me* no? Who the fuck do you think you are? You’re not going anywhere. With that, one hand forcefully grasps my chin, forcing my mouth open as the other pulls at my hair, ripping strands out. I am choked seconds later by his angry dick being shoved to the back of my throat and I gag.

Laughing at my discomfort, Bradley continues to hold my head in place, his grip on my chin so tight that I can’t even bite down and chomp his dick off like I want to at this moment. He pumps forcefully in and out of me, my mouth and throat raw, and gags causing my chest to heave. With one last forceful

pump, he pulls out of me, yanking so hard I can feel a chunk of my hair rip out as streams of cum coat my face. Sobbing uncontrollably at the brutal assault, he just laughs as he tells me to clean myself up and “get back in the fucking car.”



The rest of the night was a blur. I honestly think that for a long time I had blocked out the memories in an attempt to shield myself from the trauma. Not that it worked. Not that it ever works for me. I vaguely remember getting back in the car, in a state of shock. Somehow, we ended up about a block from the school and he got out, leaving me sobbing in the passenger seat.

Looking back now, it's easy to see that he parked away from the school so no one would see what a mess I was. I'm not sure how long I sat there crying. In a daze, I think I ended up climbing out of the car and walking back home, unable to stand the smell of him permeating the fine leather seats. That part of the night is still a bit of a blur. Eventually I managed to make my way back home; my parents were still out socializing at Bradley's party, so I had the house to myself as I dragged my aching body up the stairs and into my bathroom. That was the first time I tried to scrub away my shame while I sat sobbing on the floor of my shower.

# Chapter Fifty



## *Danica*

*Present Day*

A full month has passed since that wonderful night when Theo took me on our “first” date. I am still in awe at the fact that it has been almost two months since the “incident.” Two blissful months of radio silence from my parents and their deluded expectations, and almost as long since I have had any contact from Brad. I asked the guys about it one night when they were all over for dinner but they adamantly refused having anything to do with it. Maybe it’s too much to hope, but a part of me wants to believe that he finally took to heart the restraining order.

Wrapped in a fluffy white towel, I wipe away the steam fogging the bathroom mirror and look at my reflection. Damp hair draped in curly tangles around my shoulders, freckles spotting across my face and neck, down my shoulders. My eyes are bright and clear with excitement. Today is the day. After waiting for weeks, I finally get my cast off. It is also the day that I get to officially attend a hockey game in person, as Theo’s girlfriend.

Theo has spent weeks juggling classes and hockey, in-between taking care of me. He has barely set foot in his place next to campus. I am honestly surprised at how well he has balanced everything. I can’t imagine the toll my nightly interruptions from broken nightmares have taken on his body, but he has been so patient with me.

It’s laughable, really, to see the man that Theo is when I compare him with the image I had in my head of my “Hoodie

Guy” after we first met. This dark and brooding stranger turned out to be my own personal cinnamon roll with a hint of spice. And God, the spice this man has! A luscious combination of cedarwood, leather, and something that is just simply *Theo*. While we haven’t been able to progress as far as I want to physically with our relationship, Theo has been patient with me every step of the way. And I have definitely made progress. Where at first I couldn’t even be touched without flinching away, I am now at a point where he can reach out for me, he can hold me and kiss me and even run his fingers through my hair without me spiraling into a panic.

It helps that he knows more of my history. He is cautious with how he holds me; he never forcefully pulls my hair but he still exudes raw masculine power as he takes command of our more intimate moments. I know it is slowly killing him, just like it is killing me. I don’t even have to guess at how many times he has jacked off to thoughts of me, because he has now taken to telling me about it in explicit detail with a recounting of each of his fantasies as he holds me at night. And damn if that isn’t the hottest fucking thing. I need him so badly it hurts, and I know he feels the same. Tonight, I am going to show him. I WILL work through my shit because I need this, I need him, and I can’t wait any longer.

A short time later, I am casually dressed in jeans and a tee with my high tops that I wore that first night at the party where I met my Hoodie Guy. A series of chimes draws my attention to my phone. As I reach for it, I see several new notifications in my group chat.

**Finn: I’m here, KC.**

**Bash: Oh shit! Today’s the day! Get it girl! You get that cast off! Then make sure to send us a pic of your sexy-ass self all naked Kitty Cat!**

**Hoodie Guy: What the fuck dude! The only one she will be sending anything “naked” to is me.**

**Caleb: Guys, can we please NOT talk about my sister like this. Gross.**

**Bash: Sorry C-man, no can do. Kitty Cat is hot AF, and sister or not, you damn well know it. And T- you know I was referring to her bare-naked arm, cast free.**

**Don't rain on my parade as I lavish her with compliments.**

**Me: Haha oh my god! You guys are so weird.**

**Hoodie Guy: Always your weirdo, diavoletta. \*Heart emoji\***

**Me: Better watch it Bash, or the claws might come out at you \*winky face\***

**Me: And don't worry Hoodie Guy, you are the only one getting to see me bare... \*kiss emoji\* \*winky face\***

**Caleb: OH MY GOD! STOP!**

**Hoodie Guy: Damn fucking right! You are MINE, la mia diavoletta. For my eyes only.**

**Finn: ... Still waiting, KC!**

**Me: Shit! Sorry Finn, be right there.**

**Me: Bye guys, wish me luck! \*Kiss emoji\***

**Bash: See ya soon, hotness!**

**Caleb: Good luck Smarty. See ya soon.**

**Hoodie Guy: Wish I could be there with you but I'll talk to you in a bit, il mio passerotto. Don't forget my good luck charm before the game...**

Shoving my phone into the back pocket of my jeans, I grab my favorite hoodie that I stole from Theo and my wallet before I rush outside to meet up with Finn. With tonight being a game night, the guys were all locked into their "game-day rituals" and weren't able to join me for the fun time of seeing my cast come off. Not that it's all that exciting in itself. But with the cast off that means I can officially get back to training. God I have missed the Sports Center and my routine. More than anything, I have missed the young kids in the youth gymnastics classes that I volunteer at.

I know I won't be able to jump right back in at full capacity, but I have been keeping up with my rehab routine that Coach Stephenson and my PT set up, so I should be ready to start rebuilding that arm strength once I am officially cleared to hit the mats again. Aside from this, however, I am even more excited for the surprise I have in store for my Hoodie Guy later tonight. All my other injuries have long since healed; the broken ribs, the bruised spleen, various cuts and bruises and even my nasty concussion are all just a blip on the map of my

previous injuries. The only thing left was this damn cast. But now it is coming off and I can finally show off the way that I want to for my guy.

Hopping into the passenger seat, I look over at Finn with a huge grin spreading across my face as he drops a large plastic bag in my lap.

“You got it? Sweet! I love you, I love you, I love you!” Leaning across the console, I grab Finn with my good hand and smack a sloppy kiss on his cheek. Turning red with embarrassment, Finn looks at the road while he shrugs his shoulders.

“No big deal. Glad I could help.” I sit back and buckle myself in as he pulls away from the curb.

Several hours later, cast-free, I am all decked out for this night’s festivities as I sit next to Finn in the bleachers. The guys arranged for us to have great seats, right next to the barrier blocking off the ice in a special section dedicated to WAGS. Leaning into Finn’s warmth, I hug his arm while he takes a selfie of us on my phone. His arms are longer than mine, so I suckered him into playing camera-man for me.

“Alright! No more pictures!”

I pout my lips at him before laughing and hugging his arm a little tighter.

“Thanks Finn, you really are the best, you know that?”

He rolls his eyes while shaking his head at me. “Yeah, yeah. So you tell me.” Passing the phone back to me, he reaches over and tweaks the jersey I’m wearing.

“So, this is it, huh? Going big and officially claiming your place as T’s girl? You know this is going to cause a lot of backlash with your parents and Bradley, right?”

I sigh in resignation as his words settle in my chest.

“I know, but dammit I’m tired of playing the timid pawn that they want me to be. I’m tired of hiding, not being able to step out in public out of fear that Brad will find me. He is not a demon in the shadows, he is one fucked up man. His dad may

have had everything swept under the rug with what he did to me, *again*, but he won't be able to keep covering this up. And if I finally go public in a big way with Theo, if I know Bradley at all, this is finally going to break that loose screw in his head, and he is going to mess up. Publicly. All I have to do is play my part, keep to public areas and let him tie his own noose."

Finn looks over at me with a sardonic expression on his face. One hand tapping his thigh rapidly, I can tell he is agitated. He always taps things when he is upset, it's one of his stims, but one of the things I love about him.

"Look, we have all been over this. Am I absolutely terrified about what Bradley is going to try to do? Of course, I am, I'm not stupid. But this was what we came up with as a group based on the information that *you* were able to find. Well, you and Caleb, that is. I know we all hate it, but I think you were right when you said this is the only way to draw him out so that I can finally go back to living my life."

Over the last several weeks, Finn has been diligently working on discreet surveillance of Bradley and Oakley Sr. as well as my father. For all the wealth they throw into their companies' security systems, Finn is a much better hacker and has been able to find some very interesting... very incriminating evidence to use against them. He has been watching their every move, both physically and financially and finally found a weak point in their system.

My father, it seems, has been squandering the old family fortune. With a taste for gambling but not enough skills to back it up, he has made an absolute mess out of the family and business finances. Caleb has helped in gathering this information, leaning into the role father wants him to play and taking on an internship role, conditional to him being allowed to finish his hockey season. While we know Caleb obviously isn't going to do our father's bidding and actually step into the company in any real capacity, playing the part has allowed him access to father's office and other key areas within the building so he could plant the tools Finn needed in place to ensure better access to his surveillance.



As for the Oakley's? While they have more money than they know what to do with, it seems Mr. Oakley Sr. has a taste for young women and a tendency to take away other people's toys. From what we have been able to find out between their exchanges, my father was planning on giving me away for a much-needed financial boost while Oakley Sr. had the benefit of marrying me off to his son, who was fully in his pocket. Based on what we could see from his internet history that he thinks was deleted, Oakley Sr would have fully controlled my marriage to Brad, and in turn, gained full access and control over me for whatever his sick pleasures were at the time. It is absolutely revolting, but we have clear and hard evidence of him doing just that with the young wives of some of his business associates.

The only thing we don't have at this point is hard proof of Bradley's abuse of me. With his dad sweeping the charges under the rug, magically ensuring all the evidence disappeared, there is nothing stopping him from harassing me other than a small piece of paper that Finn ensured was pushed through in the system. But even that was kept under wraps, as Mr. Oakley seems to have the major media outlets in his pocket as well. This leaves only one choice; we have to catfish Brad and use me as the bait.

Theo just about lost his shit when I put the idea out there. But looking over the information Finn and Caleb had gathered, we had all come to a similar conclusion. No one wanted to say it though, to throw me under the bus. So, one night while we brainstormed and strategized for hours I finally jumped in with both feet and threw it out there. Theo's explosive outburst was met with a similar level of shock and rage from the rest of my guys but in the end, we all know that I don't have a choice.

Brad is going to come for me either way. When he does, I don't think he plans on letting me survive it this time. Not after what I'd done, my perceived betrayal. So, if we can't stop it from happening in the first place, why not use it to our advantage? He knows he's coming for me, and we know it too. But if we can get ahead of the game, push him off balance when he does, then we can beat him at his own game and get clear evidence of the asshole that he is so that he will finally

have to leave me alone for good. Tonight's public show of my relationship with Theo is just the first step in laying that trap.

# Chapter Fifty-One



## Theo

Our game is in the final minutes, and we are ahead 2-1. Donovan has the puck and is pushing towards the goal when he is roughly checked into the boards. With a tight maneuver and a flick of his wrist he passes the puck to me before it is stolen by the opposing left wing. I press hard towards the goal when I am quickly flanked by two of our opponents. They are both skilled players and I can see they are trying to maneuver me into one of their classic plays, forcing me into a tight spot so their third can sneak up and steal the puck.

I make a quick decision and turn sharply, surprising their players as I head back in the opposite direction with the puck. They quickly followed suit, chasing after me, and using their bulk and speed against them I made another sudden turn, pushing hard to make a breakaway. Trying desperately to catch me, they are seconds too late as I swing, and my shot hits the back of the net. The buzzer sounds loudly, signaling our win as the final seconds of the game play out. With a victorious shout, I am swarmed by the guys on my team, each slapping each other on the back in congratulations.

Looking over their heads, I turn to face the crowd and I see her. Right there, wearing *my fucking jersey* and I can't help the shit-eating grin that takes over my face. Skating quickly towards the edge of the rink, I gesture for her to meet me where a door opens onto the ice. As soon as she is there, I am pulling her through the door and grabbing her, slamming my lips against hers as she wraps her legs around my waist.

Pulling back with a victorious shout, I do a victory lap around the rink with my girl in my arms, to the wild cheers of the crowd.

Danica is holding on for dear life, as if I would ever fucking let her go, and her green eyes are the brightest emeralds shining back at me, so naturally, I can't help but kiss her again. With one hand gently gripping the base of her neck, my other is firmly holding her ass, hugging her close to me. Danica moans as she leans into the kiss, pulling back abruptly as Caleb and Seb skate over to us and slap me upside the head.

"Dude! Come on!" Seb shouts while Caleb's "What the fuck, man?" Almost drowns him out.

I laugh, shaking my head at them as I skate back over to the door, setting her down once more on firm ground. With a light kiss on her nose, I throw a wink her way before skating off in the opposite direction, towards the locker rooms to change.

A few hours later, the party is in full swing as we walk hand-in-hand into my place on Jock Row. The team decided to throw a party here after our big win and I couldn't resist bringing *my girl* home to celebrate with me. Our phones have been blowing up for hours. After she sent me my pre-game ritual chocolate kiss, Danica posted several photos to every social account she owned, tagging me in all of them. Pics of me hugging my girl, of us holding hands, and her wearing my jersey are now floating throughout the internet alongside her words about how "unfortunately" things had ended between her and Bradley several months prior to her "accident" and that she was in a happy relationship with me.

Her statement to the public also stated boldly not to believe the rumors that had been floating around about a possible engagement between her and that fuckface (my words, not hers). It's laughable, really, considering the "rumors" about the engagement were started by her own fucking parents and Bradley himself. While she took a very polite and diplomatic approach with her statement, it blew up on news feeds along with video footage of our kiss after tonight's game.

There will not be a doubt in anyone's mind that this beautiful girl is fucking *mine*. And, needless to say, our phones were blowing up all night at the shocking declaration. I finally made her turn off her phone as I did the same, so we could have some peace while we had a quick dinner with the guys before all heading over to the party.

Danica thinks that all this publicity is part of the foundation we are laying for our trap to get Brad to come out of hiding and force his hand in showing the world what a dickwad he is. As if I would ever let Danica act as bait in a trap set for that psychotic asshole. No, our public declaration of our relationship status is just that; me shouting to the world that she is *mine*.

Me and the boys have different plans in place for that fucker, ones that Danica is not privy to. No need to weigh her down with worry about what could go wrong if shit hits the fan. But she wanted to help put an end to this, so while we made our own plans, we patiently waded through the repetitive information with Danica, so she had some sense of fulfillment in dealing with her ex.

Nothing can be done about it tonight though. While the media covers the revealing news of our relationship, we are just going to let things settle for a night or two, giving good ol' Bradley time to simmer. Works to my advantage, anyway. This just means I have the rest of tonight to party with my girl.

"This is so crazy!" Shouting over the noise, Danica leaned closer into my side to avoid the crush of a crowd touching her as much as possible.

My hand rests along the small of her back as I guide her towards a less crowded area off to one side, aware that even though she has grown more comfortable with me and the guys, a room full of strangers in her personal space might be pushing it. "What's crazy, *diavoletta*?"

"Do you realize, we met at a party just like this all those months ago and I couldn't stand you. Now look at us, a few months later and you have become the most important person in my whole world." She laughs, her carefree mirth lighting up

her whole face. What a goddamn beautiful sight. With all the darkness dragging her down, the moments when she has truly been able to let go and enjoy herself were few and far between at first. Now, I appreciate each moment for the priceless gem that it is.

Before I can respond, several of my teammates saunter up, interrupting our conversation. Damn. Maybe I should have suggested skipping the party so I could keep her all to myself. But then I remember how much Danica needs this; while I get out every day to go to campus she has largely been holed up at Ma's house in hiding, doing her virtual classwork to keep up with her grades, and is probably bored out of her damn mind the rest of the time. Still, I have made more of an intentional effort to get her out in the evenings when I am home- even if it is just to go for a midnight ride in the Corvette- just so she can get out in the real world for a bit.

With a resigned sigh, I turn to introduce her to the group, before belatedly remembering she probably has met most of them already through Caleb. Still, they all nod and shake hands, smiling as they flirt with my girl. Donovan Abrams, who has always been a little too friendly, goes in for a hug and I can see the subtle shift in demeanor as Danica stiffens reflexively. Putting a hand out to block him before he can touch her, he pauses in surprise. "Hey man, hands off my girl." I growl at my teammate, eyes darkening with my threatening tone.

"Whoa Cap! You know me, I didn't mean anything by it." Hands raised in a placating manner, he steps back with a sheepish grin, giving Danica some much needed breathing room. I give him a terse nod in return.

With a soft smile pulling at one corner of her mouth, Danica responds before I can comment. "It's okay Donovan. I know you didn't mean anything by it. I'm just... a little sensitive about being touched is all."

"Gotcha." With a wink, he throws his best panty-melting grin her way and I tense; but Danica just laughs, the sound coming out in a soft melody, as she brushes aside his playful flirting.

Sliding my hand up from the small of her back until it rests in a reassuring manner on the back of her neck, I lean in close to her ear, speaking so only she can hear me. “Do you want anything to drink?”

Sensing her hesitation, I can tell she is remembering the last party we were at, when she unwittingly dosed herself with date-rape drugs by stealing several open cups from other people. She had been upset after her run-in with Brad and whatever chick he had been fucking behind her back.

“It’s okay, *la mia diavoletta*. You’re safe with me.”

Relief floods her face, and her brilliant emerald eyes sparkle back at me. Nodding her head, I guide her away from my teammates and we make our way over to the kitchen.

“Beer?” A look of disgust passes over her face, and I have to laugh. “Not a fan, I take it?”

“Beer is disgusting. Could be that I just haven’t been exposed to it enough, but it seriously smells like piss. Usually, I have wine when my parents drag me along to their functions. Sometimes champagne. I have been known to enjoy a good cider from time to time though.”

“I’ve got ya, Danica.” With a knowing look thrown in her direction, I turn- ignoring the wide variety of containers on the counter and reach into the tallest shelf of the cupboard next to the fridge. I’m not much for drinking myself, only indulging on rare occasions, but I do keep the good stuff hidden so the guys can’t just blow through it.

Turning around, I produce the bottle with a flourish in an over-the-top gesture. “Only the best for my lady.”

Laughing, she takes the bottle from my hand and inspects the label.

“Blackberry cider?”

I shrug, feigning indifference as I respond. “I’m not much of a drinker myself, but on the rare occasion when I do want something, I lean more towards ciders.” I don’t mention the fact that the acrid scent of cheap beer is burned into my

memories; reminders of days that I had long since buried six feet under.

Popping the top, she takes a tentative sip of the tart drink before passing it back to me. Shaking my head at the offer, I lean back against the counter, arms crossed as I casually observe my girl while we sit in comfortable silence. The music is blaring and there are a myriad of conversations floating around us as people float through the kitchen to the backyard or in the opposite direction towards the living room. A game of beer pong has started, and of course, Seb and Finn have joined in the revelry while Caleb and one of my other teammates is pitted against them.

Everywhere around us there is a sense of chaotic enthusiasm as people indulge more heavily in their vices, celebrating tonight's win. But all I can focus on is my girl, my need to be alone with her. I guess all this time spent with her alone has made me appreciate the quiet. While I used to be amused watching the disjointed festivities as I hung back and waited for a girl to find me for the night, now all I can think about is the one standing in front of me, quietly sipping her drink as she observes me in turn.

“Can we go somewhere quieter?” Her abrupt question startles me out of my own internal dialogue. Shrugging with nonchalance, I grab her hand after taking the almost empty bottle and placing it in the sink. Turning, I go to lead her out to the back yard, but she stops me with a shake of her head. Pulling on my hand, I quirk a questioning eyebrow at her but allow her to pull me in the opposite direction.

Like a lost puppy, she guides me through the crowd, careful to avoid people bumping into her as she goes along. After a few moments, it's obvious that she is leading me upstairs and I am only a little surprised when she stops in front of my locked bedroom door.

“I could use some quiet. I'm not used to all this socializing anymore.” Her statement is matter of fact, but I can't gauge by her tone how she is feeling. I know on the best of days she deals with social anxiety and being thrown into a scenario like this, after everything that has happened, it's not surprising to



me that she wanted to step away for a short breather. Reaching into my pocket, I grab out my keys and unlock the door, gesturing for her to enter ahead of me. Walking into the middle of the room she pauses, and I turn, shutting the door as I flip on the lights.

Turning back to face her, I am stopped dead in my tracks.  
Holy. Fucking. Shit.

## Chapter Fifty-Two



### *Danica*

Standing in a puddle of clothes, I nervously finger the edge of Theo's jersey that covers my otherwise naked torso. I have thought about this long and hard for weeks and finally decided tonight was going to be the night. I want this man, and I know he wants me. We have skirted around our charged emotions and the electricity between us for weeks; Theo holding me in bed every night, kissing me and rubbing me. Helping me to feel good and realize that I don't have to be afraid of the touches of all men. Well, not this man anyway.

The staring and flirting and innuendos of strangers makes my skin crawl, and Bradley even looking my way makes me want to claw my own eyes out. But Theo? I burn for him, my skin flushing with even the briefest of glances in my direction; he makes me come alive, a raging fire blazing in my soul when I see the desire reflected in his eyes. He has been so patient with me for weeks, giving me what I need even when I didn't know it was what my body craved. His kisses, and the firm caress of his hands have made my body come alive long after I thought it had died in the hollow ashes that had been my relationship with Bradley.

Taking the plunge, I set tonight up in advance, mentally hyping myself up for something my body wants to fight me on, even as I know how badly I want it. Finn helped me earlier. Since I haven't been able to leave on my own, and my clothing options were limited, having not returned to my parents' hell house, I ended up ordering a special outfit online. Finn, bless his awkward soul, went to the lingerie store and

picked up my order for me before he came to get me for my appointment. Things have been awkward given everything that has happened with me, but he is still my best friend, and I leaned heavily on his support for this; opening up about my fears and my desires to be able to just let go for once.

As my hype-man, even though he was uncomfortable with the situation, Finn offered himself up for the task of being my runner and getting the supplies I needed. He even helped me research the best ways to move forward on progressing things physically in a relationship after having been through physical and sexual assault, giving me the best tips from what research he was able to find. Along with the sexy lace lingerie, of his own accord, Finn supplied a lubricant and a few toys he said were “top of the line”. Though I was blushing like crazy on the drive to the doctor’s office, his matter-of-fact tone as he explained that sometimes women needed help after that sort of trauma helped level me out and I felt a sense of calm resolution about tonight.

So here I am, having led my newish “not-fake” boyfriend up to his room under the false pretense of needing a quiet space to decompress. While he was distracted with making sure the door was shut and lights were on, I quickly dropped my pants, and now stand before him, my soul as bare to him as my legs underneath his backup jersey that I stole. I see his eyes widen as his jaw drops and I can’t help the nervous hint of a smile that plays at my lips, though my eyes drop as I fidget with the hem of the large top.

“Whoa-” Theo’s throat is hoarse and he has to stop to clear his throat. “Danica, what is this?”

Instead of answering, I hesitate only a moment before I step closer to him, running my hands up his chest and wrapping them around his neck, pulling his head down so I can speak in his ear. “This is just me. Just a girl in a simple jersey, telling her dream guy that she is in love with him, hoping that he loves her too.” My words are an echo, a reflection of his confession to me at that dinner when he laid his heart on his sleeve. It is only fair that I do the same; I can be no less honest about my feelings at this moment. If I am going to take this

step, to trust him with my body, then I know I have to trust him with my heart too.

I can see him swallow, the emotion causing his eyes to mist over as he grabs me and pulls me close. “Tesoro mio,” with a shaky breath he continues, “I love you so fucking much.” Not waiting for a reply, he lowers his head and kisses me. And holy fuck, what a kiss! A gentle press of his lips against mine is quickly overcome with the mutual desire burning between us. His mouth opens, tongue running along my seam, and I open myself willingly, no hint of fear or doubt clouding my decision.

His groan fills my ears as his tongue invades my mouth, claiming me. Tangled in passion, our mouths move in an intricate dance that is as natural as breathing. We have kissed before, so many times, but everything feels different now. I am overwhelmed with emotion, my senses on overload as they try to process every detail of what is happening in the heat of the moment. He bites my lip, eliciting a groan from my own mouth before he makes his way down, kissing behind my ear, along my jaw and down my neck with light nibbles.

As his kisses trail back and forth, his hands also begin to cautiously roam over me, running first over my back before making a slow trail across my hips to my waist, up my ribs and lightly grazing over my breasts. Pulling back slightly, my eyes are glazed over, and it takes a moment to focus enough to see that he is looking at me inquiringly, as if asking permission to continue. I give a slight nod of consent and he kisses me firmly, growling against my lips.

“Not good enough, tesoro mio. Tell me what you need, and I’ll give it to you.” Another firm kiss against my lips as his fingers tease my nipples has me groaning with desire of my own.

“Theo, please. I need you.” My words come out on a soft moan.

Theo just looks at me, a cold fire blazing in the depths of his icy-blue eyes “What do you need, Danica? Use your words.”

Biting my lip as the blush travels further down my body, my words come out in a soft plea. “I need you to touch me.”

With a salacious grin, he slowly grabs the bottom of the jersey, lifting it up over my head and tossing it without a care across the room. Pulling back slightly, his breath catches as he takes a languid look over my body. Dressed in delicate black lace panties and matching bra, each with a red bow in the center to match the colors on his jersey, I know the contrast of black lace stands out against my flaming hair and freckles, and suddenly I am self-conscious. Maybe this outfit was the wrong choice. Maybe I was too forward. Brad certainly wouldn't have appreciated my boldness in a moment like this. He would have called me a whore for my efforts.

“You are so goddamn perfect, il mio passerotto.”

His words are all the reassurance I need, like a balm soothing a burn wound, as if he just knew where my thoughts were headed. Without giving me another chance to overthink, I am suddenly lifted into his strong arms, muscles highlighting the tattoos poking out from under his shirtsleeves as he gently lays me back against the pillows on his bed. Looking me over once more, a cocky smirk pulls at his lips as he slowly lifts his shirt over his head. Hot damn, how do guys always make it look so sexy when they do that?

I feel like such an awkward nerd when I even think about trying but his moves are graceful and elegant as he rips the shirt off in one fluid motion. Another quick movement has his pants off and holy shit. Theo *fucking* Giovanni in all his glory. I thought his abs and tattooed muscled arms were delicious, but the sight of his dick, rock hard and jutting upward has my core aching with need. I can feel myself growing wetter just looking at him.

Coming back down to the bed, he leans in over me slowly, his movements deliberate as he watches my eyes, I'm sure searching for any signs of hesitancy. But my eyes are filled only with passion and determination, for once; as all thoughts of my past trauma are lost in this moment that is consumed fully by Theo. Arms framing my head, his kiss this time is more slow, tender. He takes his time, nipping at my lips before running his tongue down my neck and back up to my ear, gently biting it.

“Are you sure this is what you want, Danica?”

A quick nod of my head as my breath comes out shaky, goosebumps covering my skin. I’m not cold, but I am shivering from my need and the intense emotions this man is making me feel. When he holds me, when he is kissing me like this, I feel like the most precious gem, delicate and treasured and loved. Tears fill my eyes and I blink them back quickly. “I’m sure Theo. Please. I just want you.”

He groans into my neck, kissing that sweet spot as he whispers something in Italian. “God, you fucking kill me in the best damn way.”

Moving lower this time, he makes his way down to my collar bone, trailing soft kisses as his hands slowly caress my breasts, before pulling down the cups of the bra, using the fabric to push my breasts out further. “Danica, you are so fucking perfect.” With that, he takes one nipple in his mouth, and I gasp at the startling sensation. His tongue lavishes the nipple, sucking and licking one side as his fingers playfully tug at the other, making it hard and needy.

“Theo!” His name comes out in a gasp, a reverent prayer on my lips as he worships my body with his hands and mouth.

Looking up at me briefly, he checks to make sure I am still okay at this moment, that I wasn’t pleading for him to stop. “Just say the word, and I will stop. If it gets to be too much, you let me know, yeah?” With an ungraceful jerk of my head, he smirks into my skin as he begins making his way lower once more. My body is aching, full of need, and I can feel the wetness gathering in a pool at my core. I have never felt like this before. Even the times before everything went bad between me and Bradley, he never made me feel this way.

My body feels like a live wire, electrical currents coursing through my veins with every precise touch of his fingers and lavishing kiss that worships my skin. I am lost in the moment and my hands reach down, desperately searching for something to hold onto as they find his hair. Looking up from the waistline of my lace panties, I see the twinkle of mirth

mixed with the hunger in his eyes as he gently nips at my hip before slowly lowering the material down my legs.

Reaching down with his long arms, he pulls the fabric off, tossing it across the room and I am suddenly naked down there, completely bare to him. Leaning back on his knees, Theo looks me over slowly, and I feel the blush spread from my cheeks down my neck, my whole body heating in embarrassment. He leans down once more, kissing my knee and inner thigh before making his way up to my core and I tense.

“Wait!” A nervous cry escapes my lips, and I don’t even know why I said it. *I want this, dammit!*

Immediately freezing, his body tense with barely restrained desire, Theo raises his head to look me in the eyes. “What’s wrong? Do you need to stop?”

“I- I just-” Nerves causing my whole body to shiver, I stutter the words, unsure of how to say what I need him to know. “I’ve never- I mean...”

A look of understanding comes over his face before a slow smile spreads across his handsome features. “Do you want me to continue, Danica?”

“I- I don’t...”

“Baby, trust me. There is nothing in this whole fucking world that I want more right now than my head between your legs, tasting your fucking glorious pussy. I know you haven’t been treated right in the past, and I don’t know what that fuckface might have said to you before, but you are so fucking perfect Danica. Here, bare to me, you are so gorgeous, and I just know you are going to be the best damn thing that I have ever tasted. So, tell me, do you want me to stop?”

My breath catches at his words, eyes wide in shock of his statement, and I shake my head no.

“I need your words, diavoletta. Tell me that you want this as much as I do. I’m not going to touch you unless you tell me to.”

“I- I don’t know how.”

“Do you want me to stop?” Repeating the question, he raises an inquiring brow, a knowing look in his eyes.

“No.” My response is so soft I can barely hear it as it escapes my lips. Clearing my throat, I shake my head as I try again. “No, I want this. I want you, Theo. Please.”

A smile breaks out as relief spreads across his face. “Do you trust me?” I nod. Reaching up, he takes my hand in his own and brings it down, gently grazing it across my breast, over my stomach and down to my tight core. Intertwining his fingers with my own, he reaches both of our hands, spreading me open and finding my clit. Guiding my fingers, he firmly begins rubbing our fingers over my clit, eliciting a soft moan from my mouth and my eyes drift shut from the intense pleasure of the sensation.

“Keep rubbing, right there. Good girl. Just like that.”

With one hand still guiding my movements, he lowers his head once more and I jolt in shock from the unfamiliar sensation of his tongue running along my core. Giving me a moment to adjust to the sensation, he pauses, tongue still inside me, with his eyes on mine creating an intense sense of intimacy between us; our fingers still connected as they continue to rub my sensitive nub. As my body starts to relax and loosen, he resumes his exploration, groaning into me as his mouth and tongue devour my center, his scruff against my satin skin eliciting a fresh wave of goosebumps as a delighted shiver courses through me.

I can feel myself building in a strange new sensation, and I know this is what it is, to be building towards a climax. I have read about it in my books; hell, I have tried to get there myself. With everything I have experienced, it has always been hard to get my head in the game and it always escapes me before I can lose myself in the waves of sensation. As the feeling builds within me, my embarrassment and shock fall away, replaced by an intense need, and my free hand drifts lower to grip tightly in Theo’s hair. A soft moan escapes my lips and I feel myself getting wetter around his face, but in this moment, I just don’t give a damn.



My moans of pleasure build and seem to spur Theo on, his hand that is not entangled with mine running softly along my thigh before his tongue is joined by one of those fingers, rubbing at my center in quick movements. A cold, tingling wave passes through me and I feel my body explode in sensation as my muscles tighten around him, legs clenched tightly against Theo's head. Not stopping for a second, Theo's tongue is joined by another thick finger, continuing to move in the most intoxicating way as he rides out the waves of my pleasure, lapping up my wetness until I am left a quivering, gasping mess.

"What the fuck was that?" I manage to get out the breathless question, my body still coming down from its high.

Theo looks up at me then, his eyes now darker than their normal ice, more of an ocean-deep hue as he responds. "This is me showing you just how fucking addicted to you I am." One calloused hand still rubbing my sensitive core, he brings his body back up my torso, licking and kissing with passionate nips along the way, until our mouths join, and I can taste my desire on his tongue. I moan at the sensation, desperate for him; needing more but not sure how to put it into words.

"You still doing okay?" Covered in perspiration, his body tense and shaky with unreleased need, all I can do is nod in response, completely overcome with the moment and the intense feelings that are all so new to me.

"I need your words, baby." Nipping my ear, he growls the words quietly, his tone commanding. Trailing heated kisses down the column of my neck as he waits for my response, he elicits a soft moan from deep within me as his delicious tongue finds refuge in that special place where my neck meets my shoulder, and I melt.

"I'm good." I manage to get out in a shaky breath, my heart pounding in my ears. All I can see and hear and smell is Theo; and it is so intense and incredible, like nothing I have ever experienced before. I didn't know it could feel like this. I mean, I have read stories obviously, and heard from the more gossipy girls at my school, but I always thought it was an oversimplification of the act. Now I know how incredibly

wrong I was, and I have never been more grateful to be wrong about something in my life.

Theo nods tersely in response before kissing me once more. Taking my mouth in his own, our tongues intertwine and I feel something hard pressing against me at my center. This is always the part that hurts the most. My natural inclination is to tense up, but with Theo, at this moment, all I feel is safe. Safe and relaxed. Taking a deep breath, I open my legs wider, allowing him better access as he presses into me. Continuing to kiss me, one hand running gently through my hair as he brushes it away from my eyes, his other hand reaches down, once more rubbing at my clit while he pushes further in.

With my sharp inhale, he freezes, giving me a moment to adjust to the sensation of his large size filling me, and once I tentatively kiss him back, he begins to move in earnest. Fingers rubbing in firm circles, he slowly pumps in and out of me, and I feel myself becoming wetter with his steady movements, if that were even possible.

Completely overcome in this moment, I lose myself to a world of exploding sensations. A tingling awareness begins to build once more at my center as his body continues to move in tandem with my own, and I realize belatedly that I have begun moving, meeting my hips with his in each thrust, his movements becoming harder and more intense. I feel him deeply inside of me, a fullness that is almost indescribable as he stretches me, his fingers continuing to play with my clit.

The sensations are overwhelming but still something is not quite there, and as if he can sense my need without me even saying it, Theo lowers his head, taking one of my nipples in his mouth, sucking and biting gently, and then he pinches down on my nub and my body shatters beneath his touch.



# *Chapter Fifty-Three*



*Theo*

**H**oly. Shit.

# Chapter Fifty-Four



## Theo

**I**t took me a long damn time to come down from the high that I found between Danica's thighs. She is the sweetest damn thing I have ever tasted, and like taking that first hit, her body has become my new addiction. I could spend hours getting lost between her legs, tasting her, feeling her body clench tightly around me. And her cry of release when she had that first orgasm? Music to my tired ears.

Catching my breath as we both float back down from the clouds, it takes me a minute to realize that Danica is crying, and immediately after seeing the tears stain her beautiful, flushed cheeks my stomach drops.

"Danica. Baby! Talk to me. Are you okay? Did I hurt you?" The words rush out of me as I reach to wrap her tightly in my arms, kissing away each tear as it falls.

A shaky laugh escapes her full lips and I pull my head back slightly so I can see her face more clearly.

"Am I okay? Ha! I have never been more okay in my entire life. Oh my god Theo, that was incredible. You were incredible!" I stare incredulously at this beautiful crazy girl, laughing through her tears as she smiles back at me, her face beaming.

"I was so afraid, after everything that I've been through, that I wouldn't ever be able to get to this point. That I wouldn't be able to be touched without feeling shame or disgust or fear. I was afraid that in the moment, I wouldn't be able to go through with it, that I would panic or that I wouldn't be able to

relax into it. But you changed that for me Theo, you changed everything.”

Seeing the incredulous relief and joy in her gaze, my body relaxes once more, and I settle more comfortably into the bed, turning to lay on my back and pulling her down gently to lay on my chest. We lay there, in the stillness, listening to each other breathe, my hand lightly gliding up and down her back in a gentle caress and I silently revel in the fact that she no longer cringes away in fear of my touch. As she snuggles closer into me, I can feel her breathing even out into a gentler rhythm and I feel my eyes get heavy as we both fall into a content sleep in each other’s arms.

I wake abruptly sometime later to a loud thud and cry of pain and jolt upright. Danica, tangled in sheets and hair in wild disarray, appears to be in the middle of another nightmare and has somehow managed to dislodge herself from my side, rolling off the narrow mattress onto the floor. Quickly hopping out of bed, unaffected by my naked state, I run quickly to the other side where Danica is now thrashing around, wildly.

“No! Let me go! No!” Her scream is piercing, and I am thankful that the party seems to still be in full swing. The loud music blaring through the halls and voices can be heard through the walls, floating upstairs, as a riotous cacophony that will hopefully drown out her cries while she fights the demon haunting her night terrors.

While I had hoped we could get through our intimate connection without any triggers when the time came, I am not entirely surprised by the fact that she is having issues tonight. I know our experience together is nothing like what that fucker did to her, but any man touching her is bound to wreak havoc on her subconscious.

Having been through this routine more times than I can count over the last several months, I crouch down beside her. Heedless of the fact that she could easily hit or kick me in the balls, I am completely unprotected in my naked state as I wrap my arms firmly around her flailing limbs, hugging her tightly. Once I have her secured, I sit my bare-ass on the floor and pull

her fully into my lap, arms holding her in place as I whisper soothing words in her ears.

It takes several minutes, but her body finally relaxes into a more restful pose, and I stand, carrying her back into the bed and lying with her in my arms once more. Through the whole ordeal, Danica never woke once, which is not altogether unusual, but it breaks my fucking heart when I see her trapped in the prison her mind has created. I know firsthand though, that waking her forcefully rather than letting her gradually come back to awareness on her own can be more traumatizing. I continue to hold her tightly and sing a soft lullaby, one that my mother sang to me on my darkest of nights when my demons wouldn't rest, until we both settle back into a peaceful slumber.

The next morning, as light filters into my room I wake with a start as I crack my eyes open to see Danica sitting upright, staring at me.

“Oh shit!” I jump slightly, and I see faint amusement pulling at the corners of her mouth.

“Sorry, HG. Didn't mean to scare you.”

“Why are you just sitting there, staring?” I'm sure the look I gave her was comical, my incredulous confusion, both with her calling me “HG” and her staring, unable to be masked while I am still half asleep.

“Tell me last night was real. That I didn't just dream that it happened.” Her soft words show a vulnerability that breaks my heart, and now I get it; her calling me “HG” rather than by my name is an attempt at distancing. She must be worried about last night, possibly even regretting it. Sitting up with a sigh, I run a hand over my face to try to clear the mental cobwebs as the thin sheet covering my torso falls down to my waist, barely containing my desire for her beneath the tenting of the fabric.

“Last night was real. Come here, *il mio passerotto*.” Grabbing her hand, I pull her close, and reach up to run my other hand softly over her jaw. “Last night was the best fucking night of my life, right here, with you. It was the most real I have been

with anyone, ever.” The uncertainty which had been clouding her eyes starts to clear and I see hope shining in them now. “I meant every word I said. I love you Danica Lynae Ellis. You are the best fucking thing that has ever happened to me, and I am never letting you go.” I pull her face to mine and kiss her. Unlike last night, this kiss is languid and unhurried, a sensual exploration between lovers.

She pulls back from me, breathless, cheeks flushed and hair fanning around her face forming a beautiful red halo with the backdrop of the sunrise behind the curtains. She takes my fucking breath away.

“Promise me something, Theo?”

“For you, diavoletta? Anything. Name it.”

“Don’t do anything stupid. Please.”

My brows furrow at her request, and for a moment, I wonder if she somehow found out about the plans that the guys and I came up with.

“I mean it, Theo. Bradley and his parents are dangerous. Please don’t do anything to provoke them. I couldn’t live with myself if anything happened to you, if you put yourself in harm’s way trying to defend me.”

Kissing the top of her head gently, I give a silent nod, unable to say the words aloud. I am not one to break promises, and she has asked me the one thing that I cannot promise her; because I made another promise to Bradley Oakley Jr. years ago, and the time has come to collect on that promise.



## Chapter Fifty-Five



### *Danica*

The rest of the day passed with me floating along in a daydream. Theo and I stayed in bed for almost the entire day; only getting up once when he went to head downstairs and make us some food. The remainder of our time was spent lounging around in bed, talking and watching shows and with Theo kissing away my past hurts, one at a time. He made love to me several more times, and we both discovered new triggers that I didn't realize that I had.

With each involuntary reaction, he patiently backed off and we found ways to work through it together. It's frustrating and sweet at the same time. I want to be able to do so much more with him, and I feel so limited by my body's inability to just let go and be in the moment. Honestly, I was surprised at Theo's capacity to be patient with me, and with the way his capable hands could put me at ease and work me through any tension set off by my unexpected reactions.

Unfortunately, the day waned, and reality started to creep back into our secluded paradise. With it being Sunday, Theo had to jump right back into his normal routine with practice and classes the following day. I wanted desperately to just remain hidden in this room with him and block out the rest of the world, but that wasn't an option. Theo didn't feel comfortable leaving me so close to campus when Bradley had to be around, especially in a house where so many people came and went on a regular basis, even if he trusted his teammates implicitly.

Eventually, he convinced me that the best option would either be to go back to his mother's house or to stay with Caleb or

Finn, and we both knew that the latter wasn't an option at all. At least by staying at his Ma's that left me with the promise of him coming home to me each night. The other factor that had to be accounted for was the fact my cast was off now; I was set to resume physical therapy and some level of practice at the Sports Center starting tomorrow.

Theo felt relatively comfortable with me being left in that setting, surrounded by my coaches, staff and teammates but Finn agreed to hang out with me anyways as a precautionary measure. Damn if it wasn't chafing being in a position where I was under constant supervision, even if I knew the guys all had my best interests at heart. Still, I couldn't wait for the day in which Brad would step into our trap and I could be done with this whole ridiculous mess.

After a quiet, leisurely evening spent together in his room on Jock Row, it was finally time to head back home. Getting into his Corvette once more, Theo passed me his phone as I settled into the comfortable leather seat, and I pulled up my special playlist. Rather than heading straight home, however, Theo took a very off-the-beaten-path route, winding through quiet side streets and headed further east, towards the outskirts of the city. Shooting him a questioning glance, he simply smiles back at me, taking my hand in his and raising it to his mouth for a kiss. And I can't help but remember a different drive, months ago with Brad veering off course and the disastrous results, yet here, with this man all I feel is peace and contentment.

"I just wanted a little more time with you *la mia diavoletta*." I can't help the smile that breaks out across my face.



The next morning, I drift slowly in and out of consciousness as my mind and body try to connect in a state of wakefulness. Realizing there is an emptiness in the spot where Theo had

lain, I groan and roll into his spot, the delicious smell of him lingering with the last traces of warmth from his body.

“No.”

“Shhh, go back to sleep diavoletta, I’m just headed to practice.” I feel the soft kiss placed against my temple and with a contented sigh, let my body relax as it drifts once more into a peaceful slumber.

Hours later, the bright sunlight glaring through the crack in the dark curtains shines brightly in my eyes, and I reluctantly pry them open. Reaching across the bed, I grab my phone off the nightstand, checking the time.

“Shit!” Throwing the covers back in a rush, I make a mad dash around the room, gathering together my gym bag with my practice clothes, hairbrush, and other necessities. I completely overslept, somehow managing to have silenced my alarm on my phone without realizing and if I don’t hurry, I am going to be late for Finn picking me up. I’m in such a rush that the overall tender soreness leftover from Theo’s lovemaking barely register as I frantically run about the room trying to get ready.

Five minutes later, I am breathless as I stand at the curb, anxiety coursing through me as I try to calm my racing heart. Somehow, I managed to make it out the door with minutes to spare. I stare expectantly down the road in the direction that I know Finn always comes from and am caught completely off-guard as I hear a blunt crack before the pain registers behind my eyes and my world goes dark.

# Chapter Fifty-Six



## Theo

I push myself almost to the point of exhaustion as we run our 2 v. 2 drills on the ice. I know these drills like the back of my hand. I could easily do them in my sleep, but I press myself as hard as I can, needing the distraction from the guilt that is eating away at me. I fucking hate lying to Danica. We have grown so close over the past few months and this weekend was like I was living in a dream, a dream world with my dream girl. Now I have to play the villain in the story as I lie to her about the plans we have in store for her ex; one that we have set in motion and will be proceeding with tomorrow.

Danica thinks that we will be headed out for another away game tomorrow. I worked my ass off and pulled a lot of strings in my position as captain, but I managed to get the whole team on board, backing me up. I even went so far as to arrange for a scrimmage match out of town with our team pitted against a neighboring city's rival team, at the risk of pissing off the coaches on both of our teams for pulling a stunt like this, in-between games and mid-season. But with my notorious image, and my being one of the top college players in the country, I have earned a lot of respect and a lot of pull over the years. And I also have a lot of dirt on the guys in our league.

Despite playing for different teams, I have made many connections and friendships along the way, as a lot of the other players were in the same leagues as I was growing up. Everyone will be at the scrimmage game to participate, with the exception of Seb, Caleb and myself. So that aspect of having an away game technically isn't a lie. We just won't be

there to participate in the game with the rest of our friends. Even with the technicality, the deception weighs heavily on my heart and the guilt is starting to eat away at me.

Breathing hard as I push myself through the next set of evasive passing drills, I am stopped abruptly as Seb crashes hard into my side, causing us both to almost go crashing down on the ice as his gaze looks off in the distance. It's only years of dedicated practice and skill that helps me right my balance at the last minute.

“Dude! What the fuck was that?”

Dropping his stick, puck lying next to it on the ice, he starts skating quickly over to the edge of the rink without a word to me. Glancing over in the direction he was headed, I glance up to the stands and see Finn anxiously waving for our attention. Confusion fills me for a second before all-out panic hits me in the gut like an opposing winger checking me into the boards. Finn is here but where the fuck is Danica? They were supposed to be at her own practice by now, and I know Finn wouldn't have left her alone for any reason. I race quickly to the edge of the rink, my own equipment forgotten on the ice, and I arrive at the same time as Caleb, who glances over at me with anxiety written all over his face.

In the background, I hear a shrill whistle and Coach Williamson barking at us in the background before Seb yells a quick reply. “Sorry Coach, family emergency, we have to go!”

Not bothering to look back, not caring if I get fucking benched for the rest of the season, I jump over the boards and rush towards Finn.

“What's wrong?” Seb and Caleb both blurt out at the same time, my words only seconds behind their own.

“What happened?” My words come out a harsh bark, anxiety shattering my calm filter that I normally wear.

“She's gone.”

And just like that, my vision narrows as my world collapses in on itself and I have to fight the sensation of blacking out, my exhaustion from my hard practice colliding with a sensory

overload that my body is struggling to process. Seb places a steadying hand on my shoulder, gripping painfully tight, and I am thankful for the biting sting as it gives me something to focus on.

“Gone? What do you mean gone?” Caleb shouts, anger and panic filtering into his voice.

“I don’t know man, like, she’s just fucking gone. I went to get her for practice, and she wasn’t there. Her bag and phone were dropped on the ground by the curb and there was blood on the sidewalk. I double-checked the house, and she wasn’t there. Obviously, I can’t call her without a phone, and I couldn’t reach you since you guys don’t carry your phones while you’re on the ice, so I rushed right over.”

“When I find Bradley, I’m gonna kill that fucker!” I’m seeing red right now, my vision has literally edged in red with the fury cascading through me, my body vibrating with rage.

Finn shakes his head, cutting off any further comment from me. “It’s not Brad, man. He didn’t take her. I already checked our camera feeds that we set up around his usual haunts. He’s been in class all morning, with at least fifty witnesses. He could have arranged for someone else to do it, but he wasn’t the one who actually grabbed her.”

“Then where the fuck is she? We have to find her before that fucker does something to her.” There is a desperation to my words, and I am speaking over my shoulder as I rush towards the locker room, making quick work of yanking off my gear and throwing on street clothes so we can go find my girl.

A short time later, we are sitting outside of the Poli-Sci building waiting anxiously for any sign of Brad. We can’t just storm into the building and take him out of his class, as much as we’d all fucking like to. But that would raise way too many questions that we just don’t have the time to fucking answer.

Instead, we wait quietly in the car, Finn’s tablet resting on the dashboard for our viewing pleasure as we sit staring at Brad in his class through the video feed that we planted inside his classroom several weeks ago. We knew with Danica coming out of the hospital that we couldn’t risk Brad finding her, and

we simply didn't have the manpower to follow him around at all hours of the day.

Instead, our brilliant tech genius Finn came up with the solution of breaking into each of the buildings where Brad frequents between home and classes to plant cameras and put a tracker on his car. We have tried our best to keep a set of eyes on him as much as humanly possible (which is part of why my days on campus have been so long though Danica just assumed it was for class and hockey). I even went so far as to ask my Zio Dante for a favor, enlisting the help of some of his men when we had to be out of town for away games and Finn was unavailable. But having the cameras and tracker added another layer of reassurance as we worked on a plan for how we were going to deal with him in the meantime.

Thick tension fills the car as the minutes slowly drag by. The silence would be deafening if it weren't for the sound of Finn, using his phone as a hotspot for wifi, hurriedly typing away on his laptop; the clacking of the keys was becoming an almost soothing melody, a subtle reassurance that even as we were forced to sit still, *someone* was doing *something* to try to get some answers while we were stuck waiting in limbo.

"Fuck!" Finn's shout echoes in the silence, causing all of us to damn near jump out of our seats. Finn never curses. Ever.

With a weary glance in his direction, we all look to see him glaring at his screen.

As if the cursing wasn't indication enough of how serious the situation is, the frustrated shake of his head, and the grim set of his mouth damn near causes my heart to skip a beat. Finn has spent the better part of the last hour, sitting in front of this damn building while we wait for Brad, typing away at his computer, trying to find any cameras around my neighborhood to hack into. Apparently, the ones we have at Ma's had been disabled prior to Danica's disappearance and Finn hadn't been aware since he was driving. The fuckers timed it perfectly. I'm afraid to even ask what he's found out. Caleb is the only one brave enough to choke out the words.

"Just tell us."

Instead, he turns the laptop to face in our direction, and clicks a few buttons. The angle of the image on the screen is not a clear shot. A house across the road and slightly diagonal to Ma's has security cameras and there is a grainy image of Danica that appears before us. Standing along the curb, fidgeting anxiously with her phone in one hand and gym bag slung over her shoulder, she appears to be glancing off in the direction where Finn would have come from.

Focused intently in that direction, she doesn't notice the man sneaking up behind her, pulling out a gun. I inhale sharply at the glint on the screen, and my instinct is to cry out to signal to her to run; instead, I can only stare in abject horror as the man expertly flips the handle and cracks the butt of the gun sharply to the back of the head. Even from a distance I can see that she appears dazed but doesn't go down. A second sharp blow, this one to the side of her head sends blood dripping to the pavement as she drops like a stone sinking underwater. She never even had a chance to fight back.

Seconds later, a dark SUV quickly drives up and another man hops out of the back, and they both lift her before tossing her unconscious body roughly into the back. I wince as I watch. If she doesn't come out of this with another concussion and several nastier bruises I would be surprised. But then, at this point, that seems to be the least of our worries. *God, she better fucking come through this! I don't know what I would do- no, nope not even going to go there.* The car flips around, speeding off down the road and cutting down a narrow side road that doesn't have street cams. Assholes did their homework.

A sharp elbow to my ribs forces my attention from the screen and I look up to see a mass exodus as students swarm out of the building, several classes having ended at the same time. Without having to say a word, I exit the vehicle along with Caleb and Seb and we walk through the crowd until we flank the door. Leaning casually on either side of the frame, Bradley is completely oblivious to our presence as he rushes out of the building. Mentally, I shake my head at his lack of situational awareness. He really should work on his survival instincts. I



guess this is one of those moments that Darwin talked about; survival of the fittest. And I'm the fucking kingpin.

Shoving off the wall as I uncross my legs, I casually saunter up behind him in a decidedly unhurried manner, belying the turmoil roiling within me like a plague of locusts. I step up next to him, grabbing the base of his neck tightly, and Seb flanks his other side, throwing an arm around his neck. To any outsider looking in, it would appear that we are just a group of buddies messing around. In reality, we have boxed the bastard in, in our vice-like grips, so there is no running away. Caleb steps in front of our group, and we forcefully steer Bradley in the direction of our idling getaway car.

“Hey *buddy*. Long time, no see. I think we need to have a little chat.” My words come out in a pleasant tone, though it takes an incredible amount of effort to feign my nonchalance. By this point, Bradley has finally sensed the danger he is in, *dumbass*. But it is too late for him to try and run; and sure, he could call out for help, but who would stand a chance against three hulking hockey players? For that matter, we are some of the most popular guys on campus, practically revered as gods on the ice. I doubt anyone would believe him if he tried to say that he was in danger. Ha.

We make it over to the car without anyone noticing, and though Brad is tense, he hasn't made an effort to really fight us or get away. Pausing on the passenger side, I open the back door (ever the gentleman- as Ma would say) and gesture for him to get in. He hesitates, and I can see the shrewd calculation in his eyes, but Caleb cut him off at the pass, circling around to the other side and hopping in, blocking his only perceived means of escape.

“Get in the fucking car, Bradley.” My low tone is deep and menacing. I am in no fucking mood to play his games.

Still holding him by the nape of his neck, I squeeze tighter, eliciting a hiss from him and I shove hard, forcing him to bend down and climb in. Seb hops in next, blocking his other side and I close the door before moving to the front driver seat and pulling away, into the fading evening.

# Chapter Fifty-Seven



## Theo

*Ten Years Ago*

**B**lood pours from my crooked nose and the gash on my brow bleeds into my eye causing my vision to blur. My ribs ache from the brutal kicks of a steel-toed boot, and I curl into a ball as I gasp for air, trying to make the smallest target possible.

“Get your ass up, boy! And fight me like a man!” The gruff words of my drunken dictator barely register through the fog of pain, and all I can do is whimper.

“Eduardo! Please, stop! Leave him alone! Please!” My mother’s desperate cries are cut off abruptly as he brutally backhands her, sending her sprawling to the floor mere feet away from my aching body.

“Mama.” I cough, spitting out the blood filling my mouth as I try not to gag on the coppery taste. “Don’t.”

“Listen to your son, bitch!”

Heedless of his threatening tone, Ma crawls over to me, trying to cover me with her body and my father’s brutal kick lands on her soft side, eliciting a cry of pain.

“I told you to stay out of the way!” The drunken fury coursing through his body makes his face look like that of a demon, and I guess to me that is what he is. My very own demon, haunting me in this place that has become my hell. Reaching down, my father grabs at my mother, dragging her away from me by the roots of her hair as her screams fill the air.

A sharp blow to the head and my world fades to black.



*Present Day*

An involuntary shudder passes through me as I pull around the dark drive, parking behind the dilapidated building. Years of neglect have only added to the menacing air, as I glance up at the darkened windows. Most have been boarded up to cover broken glass, likely left behind by drifters. Shutters hang crookedly off a few windows while others are missing altogether. The porch is sagging on one side, and the roof is covered in a thick layer of moss. Glancing in the rearview mirror, I see Bradley's eyes widen in shocked recognition as he looks about the deserted property.

Without saying a word, I get out of the car and walk around to the back. Seb has climbed out, dragging a struggling Bradley behind him and I watch in amusement at his wasted efforts. Seb has an easy fifty pounds of solid muscle on Brad's lean form, not to mention an added six inches. Sucker doesn't stand a chance as he fights against Seb's controlled movements.

Forcefully, he is shoved to the ground, and Caleb- who came to stand next to me, watches on with cold detachment before squatting down and pinning Bradley's legs with his knees. As the guys hold him still, I step in, grabbing his wrists and zip-tie them together to the point where it is starting to cut off circulation. The more he struggles, the tighter the restraint pulls against him. I do the same to his ankles, ensuring he can't try to run when we "help" him up before standing back to observe my handiwork.

Brad has started struggling in earnest, but it will do no good. His desperate cries for help will go unanswered in this abandoned hellhole from my past. Caleb and Seb each stand, grabbing an arm to drag Bradley across the gravel and up the rotting steps, with Finn moving silently behind our group,

carrying several large duffle bags he had removed from the trunk.

Taking out a long-neglected key, I first unlock the newer padlock that had been installed at the top of the frame a few weeks back before following suit with the rusty deadbolt. The door groans on its hinges as I ease open the rotting wood. Leading the way inside, my steps echo against the old hardwood floor and specks of dust float in the air. Old pictures of forgotten memories hang abandoned on the walls, staring eerily back at us as we make our way down the hall. Not bothering to try the light switch, I reach the door at the far end of space. This door is clearly new, having installed the reinforced steel frame and electronic pad myself only weeks ago. It stands out in this dilapidated mausoleum of hellish memories but was a necessity that we had planned for well in advance.

Placing my hand to the pad, it lights up, scanning my palm. By the state of the house, you would think the power wouldn't work, but we had turned it back on for this specific purpose when Finn set up the security system. With a soft click, the door unlocks its thick bolt, sliding back to allow me to open the heavy barrier and grant us entrance to the dark pit below.

## Chapter Fifty-Eight



### *Danica*

A groan breaks through the darkness, someone moaning as if they were hurt. Trying to lift my head to peer through the inky blackness, a sharp burst of pain explodes behind my eyes, and I realize the groaning was coming from my own lips. I squint, as I try to carefully turn my gaze in a manner that won't cause intense, blinding pain. As I try to see anything around me, I realize that there is some sort of fabric covering my head. Moving my arms, I try to reach up to remove the cover and realize with a belated sense of panic that my hands are restrained, bound tightly behind my back.

The overwhelming urge to panic sets in and I desperately fight to control my breathing. Now is not the time to lose my shit. I don't know what the hell is going on, but clearly, this is not a moment where I can afford to let go. With determined effort I force my breathing into a slow pace, one that Theo had used to work me through my worst night terrors and panic attacks. In... hold for three... out... hold for three, and repeat.

I am not sure how long I continue with the repetitive practice but after a while I finally regain a mediocre sense of control with my overwhelmed body. Once I know I am not going to lose it, I slowly lean backward, trying to reach my bound hands to feel my surroundings. From what I can tell, I am lying on a cold, hard surface. Based on the feel of it, I would hazard a guess that it is some sort of concrete floor. I can't really smell anything through the fabric covering my face, and with my racing heart and jagged breathing it makes hearing anything in my periphery a challenge.

With the timing of my abduction, I would assume that this was Brad's doing, though I never would have pegged him as the traditional "bind her up and take her" kind of kidnapper. More than likely, I figured he would pull a stunt like the last time where he cornered me in a semi-public place and tried to forcefully make me go along with whatever he had planned. But for something like this? To genuinely kidnap me? Honestly, I would have doubted that he would have the patience or emotional control to pull a stunt of this magnitude. But then, there are a lot of things he has done over the last year that I wouldn't have believed him capable of doing until he went and proved me wrong.

I need to come up with a plan, to think this through and figure out how to get myself out of this mess. The blinding pain behind my eyes has turned into a dizzying jackhammer, making it hard to focus. Based on past experience, I know that I must have another concussion. God, at the rate I'm going this year, I will be lucky to have any brain cells left with the number of times I have taken blunt trauma to my skull. My head hurts more just thinking about the past injuries.

Biting back the urge to groan aloud, I twist my arms awkwardly, leaning hard into the cool floor as I brace against the surface and try to push myself upright, relying heavily on core muscles that were built through years of intense training. The last two months of neglect have definitely had a noticeable effect on my overall strength, but muscle memory is a beautiful thing and suddenly I am thankful for every tooth-clenching core workout my team of coaches made me suffer through over the years. After a few false starts, I finally get the momentum needed and with a heavy shove, I tighten my abs and throw my weight into the opposite direction, pulling my reluctant body upright.

Breathing heavily from exertion, I can feel the beads of perspiration that have collected on my brow and wild strands of hair tickling my face and I desperately wish I could wipe it all away. Sitting upright in the silent room, I take a minute to let my body adjust to the new sensations, taking note of every aching muscle, every sore spot that I know must be forming into fresh bruises. While not as bad as the last time when I

ended up in the hospital, there is not a doubt in my mind that the lingering aches are a clear indication that I am going to have several more weeks of wearing long-sleeved clothing to cover up these new marks.

Breaking through my internal musings, I hear what I think could be footsteps walking towards me, but the fabric surrounding me muffles the sound and I can't be sure of the direction that it's coming from. As the sound moves closer, I hear muffled voices, as if someone is talking in a whisper. Straining hard, I listen in a desperate attempt to hear what is being said, to no avail. Blowing out a frustrated breath, a wisp of hair tickles my nose, and with no way to relieve the sensation, I sneeze.

The talking stops abruptly, and the slow methodical movement resumes walking in my direction. I tense as the footsteps abruptly halt in front of me.

“Well, look what we have here.” A tsking sound follows the muffled words. “What a mess you have made, little girl. How very disappointing.”

I can't place the voice, but there is no way that can be Bradley. First of all, he has never referred to me as “little girl”. Secondly, the tone of the voice is way too deep. A sharp kick to my side has me gasping for air as the wind is knocked out of me. The attack caught me completely unawares. As I continue to struggle to catch my breath through the rough fabric, a second voice chimes in.

“What are we going to do about this situation? It needs to be handled, and clearly, we can't go along with the original plan and just force her into marriage?”

“There is no ‘we.’ She is your problem, and you need to fucking handle it.” The first voice rises in anger with this response to the second person's question. The voices, though muffled, sound vaguely familiar though my addled brain is having a difficult time connecting the dots. I strain to hear more clearly but the voices have begun to fade as if they have turned and begun to walk away.

Gasping for air and head spinning on a dangerous tilt-a-whirl, I feel myself sinking into the familiar inky blackness and let myself fall.

I awake sometime later as the fabric is roughly ripped off my head, taking a good handful of hair with it, and I fight the urge to cry out in pain. Crying has only ever made things worse for me. Squinting against the bright light, it takes me several minutes for my eyes to focus as I blink back the floating spots clouding my vision and fight off the sharp pain piercing my skull.

When my vision clears enough for me to take a good look at my surroundings, I see that I am, in fact, sitting on a concrete floor in a dimly lit room. It looks like it could be some sort of warehouse or basement. The room is long and narrow, with high beamed ceilings and only one flickering light above me. The room is cold, but I gratefully fill my lungs with the sharp bite of fresh air. Whatever covering they had used on my head had been stiflingly hot and stuffy, though I'm sure they could care less about my overall comfort, and really it appears I have bigger issues to worry about at the moment.

For all the emptiness surrounding me, I can't see a person, no sign of the one who must have ripped away my covering. But I can feel them. Much like the times when Bradley would sit silently watching, a predator stalking his prey before he strikes, I feel the same energy in the room and know I am being observed.

“Hello?”

Futilely, I call out, as if expecting someone to answer in response. Silence.

“Why am I here? What do you want from me? Hello!” My voice rises, words coming out scratchy from my overly dry throat after who-knows-how-long of sitting in the darkness.

“I know you're not Brad. For all his faults, *this* really isn't his style. So, whoever you are, if you would just come out and talk to me, I'm sure we could figure this out together. I'm not sure what I've done or what it is that you want, but there really is no need for this level of theatrics.” I try my best to affect a



neutral tone, and I'm not sure I quite manage, as there is a slight shakiness at the end of my words.

A slow clap sounds from behind me, and I jump. I *knew* someone was watching me. Why aren't they saying anything? I can feel their eyes burning into my back and I cringe under the intense scrutiny.

"Please. Just let me go. I promise, I won't say anything. I don't even know who you are. Just let me go." My tone is pleading, and I feel nothing but self-loathing and disgust. I am really getting sick of these damn words coming out of my mouth. Sick of always being the helpless victim; always having to beg for salvation that never comes. It feels like this will be the end of it though. Maybe whoever the fucker is will finally put me out of my goddamn misery and just end this charade of a life I have been 'living'.

The slow echo of footsteps are ominous in their languid approach. Unhurried, as if they are enjoying this moment and have all the time in the world as they observe me. Finally, the approach slows as they round my side and come into my range of view. Stepping into the flickering light, I gasp as outraged disbelief courses through my veins. No. There's no way! I must have hit my head harder than I originally thought.

"You?!" I can't help the shocked outrage as the word escapes my gaping mouth.

I am met only by a bitter, maniacal laugh.

## Chapter Fifty-Nine



### Theo

My knuckles are raw and bloody, and I breathe heavily as I take a step back from the bloodied face of my former best friend. But that was in another life, eons ago. Now all that I can see before me is the pathetic waste of a man who woke up each day and chose violence. The man who had attempted to rape my mother. The man who had brutally beaten and raped my girl more times than I ever want to know about.

“Where is she Brad?” Caleb’s voice is cold as he interrogates his intended brother-in-law.

Brad, now tied up from the wrists and dangling from the beam running across the ceiling of the reinforced basement, just shakes his head, spitting out a mouthful of blood. *Oh look, I knocked out another tooth. Huh. His face isn’t going to be so pretty now.*

“Why would I ever fucking tell you?”

Caleb shakes his head with calm resignation, letting out a soft sigh.

“Bradley, I don’t think you get it. You are here, all alone, with no one around to save you. We are going to get this information out of you one way or another, and you are the only one who determines how much pain you are going to be in before we get there.”

A deranged laugh escapes his lips, even as the blood continues to drip down his face.

“You think I’m fucking scared of you? What are you going to do, kill me? You guys grabbed me on campus, there were fucking witnesses everywhere. If I disappear, who do you think is the first person they are going to come to? And make no mistake, there *will* be people looking for me.”

Standing behind him, Seb roughly grabs Bradley by the head and jerks him to the side, forcing him to look into the corner that is lit up by an endless row of monitors. When we had first come back here to start prep work for this eventual meeting, Finn had taken great care not only with installing a top-of-the-line security system but also an intense-looking series of computer monitors and other fancy-looking equipment. I’m not sure what all it is used for, but Finn assured us that this was the same set-up he had been using with his start-up company that he had formed the previous year and that it would be *useful* with our little visitor. He sits there now, dozens of images pulled up on the various monitors while he types away at a rapid speed, the click-clacking of keys in the background playing like a soft melody to our more blunt ministrations.

“Oh, don’t you worry your pretty little head Bradley,” Finn calls from over his shoulder as he keeps typing away. “You really don’t give us as much credit as you should. You aren’t going to disappear.”

A flicker of relief passes across Brad’s bloodied face at Finn’s words, until I cut in.

“No, *Bradley*, you aren’t going to disappear. We’re going to make sure everyone knows exactly where you are and what happened to you.” Taking a serrated blade off a table, I circle slowly around his back, the knife gently grazing his skin before I come to stand before him once more. With a quick motion, I swing my arm in a downward arc, and slice his shirt straight down the center, grazing his skin enough to leave a fine trail of blood behind but not enough to do any real damage.

“Now, we’re wasting time. Let’s try this again- where’s Danica?”

A loud beep interrupts before Brad can utter a word, and I turn my head slightly with an inquiring glance at Finn. He nods once, before I hear a click and the bolt sliding open once more before a figure appears at the top of the stairs. The door, which opened soundlessly on its hinges, closes firmly once more and the bolt slides back into place, locking our little group in.

Seb and Finn tense, their bodies at attention, and Caleb stands a little taller as the figure walks slowly down the stairs. Seb and Finn have had several previous interactions and as such, they are wise in their caution with the man who has entered the room. Caleb, while not having any direct experience previously, has been clued in on the important details prior to our arrival in this hellhole. Stepping slowly to the side, I hold out my arm, knife in my hand outstretched in silent offering.

The man steps forward, his large, calloused hand taking the offered weapon as his rings glint in the dim lighting.

Bradley's eyes widen in shocked recognition and are quickly replaced by terror, genuine fear at the monster who came to play in the shadows.

“Bradley, you remember my Zio Dante? Zio, you remember Bradley? The friend who betrayed our trust and tried to hurt Ma before becoming my girl's personal nightmare?”

Dante steps out of the shadow, the light casting an eerie glow across his face as a wicked grin pulls at the scars lining his weathered features.



*Three Years Earlier*

*“It's okay, Ma. I'm here.”*

Reaching up a shaky hand, she grabs onto me with a desperation that I have only seen a few times before, when dealing with my father. I gently pull her up, wrapping her in my arms as the tears fall freely.

Glaring over the top of her head, even as I rub gentle circles over her back, Bradley shrinks back from my menacing expression.

“Ma, go to the car and wait for me. I’ll be right there.”

Shaking her head adamantly, the blood from her split lip drips down her chin, mixing with the salty stream of tears running in silent streams down her face.

“No, Theodore. Leave him. Please just take me home.”

Stepping back from my arms, she reaches to grab my cold and bloody fist in both of her hands, and I force my gaze away from Bradley, back to Ma.

“Mio figlio, please.”

With a jerky nod of my head, I turn my mother towards the door, directing her with a hand placed gently behind her shoulders. As we reach the doorway, I turn back to face Bradley and his father, Mr. Oakley Sr. The man had been more of a father figure to me in recent months than my own had been, and Bradley was like a brother to me, but no more.

“If you ever come near my family again, if you ever try to harm someone I love, I will destroy you.”

My tone is cold, devoid of emotion as I utter words I never would have imagined saying, and in the small recess of my mind it registers briefly that in this moment, I truly am my father’s son. Blood always tells and, in this moment, the truth is clear as day. I am Theodore Eduardo Carmine Giovanni, son of Eduardo Giovanni and heir to the notorious Giovanni Mafia family.



*Present Day*

Bradley is breathing heavily, blood dripping in rivulets down his body as cuts mar his arms and torso. Three fingers have

been stripped of their nails and now both hands hang limp in their bindings, a bloody, gory pulp where the nail bed usually protected. While this moment has been a long time in the making, an old debt that needed to be settled, I get no satisfaction in the moment as I assist my uncle in methodically torturing my former best friend. Zio Dante, though? Why I can see the immense satisfaction he is taking in his deliberate movements, each step and word calculated and directed where it will hurt the most.

The only person more upset about what had happened to my mother all those years ago was Dante. After Bradley had attacked her, we had been forced to turn to Dante for help. If my father had seen her in such a state, had found another man had touched her, Ma would have been the one to be punished. His ties to the Oakley's ran too deep for him to dare risking that alliance over something he valued so little as his marriage.

Dante, though, was my father's second in command at the time and had been in love with my mother for years. In another life, they probably would have married and lived a much happier existence. As it was, they were both bound by the ties of the mafia that ran deep in our blood. Dante was raised to be my father's second, for all the good and bad that entailed, and my mother was raised to be an offering, a marriage of convenience that offered an alliance too important to pass up. Never mind the fact that she was in love with another. Duty always came first. And that cost her everything.

Just as she did with me, Ma pleaded for Dante to not get involved with the Oakley's as punishment for Bradley's crimes. My mother had worked for several years as Mr. Oakley's senior administrative assistant, her only reprieve from the hell that was her home life. The ties connecting our two families had provided a means of escape from being stuck at home, waiting around for my father in whatever mood he happened to be in.

My father, having stepped into the role of Don when he was only twenty, had lived a hard life and he was determined to build me up in the image of what he perceived to be strength. His beatings were always a lesson meant to strengthen my

character, my fortitude and resilience. After all, if I could withstand the devil himself then whatever was thrown my way when I took over my father's role would be child's play. Against my mother's protests, I was taken out of school routinely to observe "the business." Witness to torture sessions, debt collections, product distributions, if it weren't for Ma, I probably would have ended up a complete psychopath from the example my father was determined to set. But Ma would step in whenever she could, to the detriment of her own health, to try and shield my innocence from a life of depravity.

The problem was, my father had become a raging alcoholic over the years, and where once his beatings were a calculated measure to teach me discipline, over time they became simply an outlet for his alcohol-induced rage. By the time I was a teenager, his methods had become sloppy and Zio Dante was essentially running the family business. He was the one who taught me to fight, to shoot, to interrogate. And he was the one I turned to in my darkest moments, like that of the night when I found my mother trapped with Bradley. Or the night shortly thereafter when my world was turned upside down.

"Bradley, Bradley, Bradley. What *are* we going to do with you?" There is a lilt, an edge of amusement to my uncle's words.

"Let me go, please. I haven't done anything. I swear. It wasn't me."

Tsking, Dante shakes his head as he stands before Brad; Seb and I flanking his side. Bradley's head starts to droop from exhaustion, and Caleb, standing behind Brad, roughly yanks his head back up by the hair. Brad winces in pain at the rough handling. *Good, I hope the fucker loses a good handful or several like Danica did at his handling. You know what? No. I will make sure he fucking does.*

Before I can let my intrusive thoughts take over and step forward to begin forcefully ripping out handfuls of Brad's hair from his skull, there is a buzzing behind me on the table. Not bothering to look back, I wait for Finn, and he soon responds.

“Brad’s phone. Looks like he got a text. Here.” Standing up from his workstation, he walks over to our little group and holds the phone up by Brad’s face.

“Huh. Looks like his face is unrecognizable. You guys did such a good job on him that his own phone doesn’t recognize him.” Finn’s tone comes across in a “*huh, that’s interesting*” sort of manner that makes me want to laugh. Not the right moment for it, but amusing, nonetheless.

“Can’t you just hack into it?” This coming from his brother, Seb.

Rolling his eyes in response, Finn sighs before continuing.

“Well, I *could*. But that would take an unnecessary amount of extra time that we don’t need to waste. I’m sure you guys can get him to give you the pin.”

Dante’s eyes light up at the thought and he reaches up to grab one of Bradley’s fingers and starts bending it back until Bradley is screaming and the digit sits at an unnatural angle.

“Shit. Stop, stop! I’ll tell you. Just stop!”

“Aw. Come on now, you’re no fun.” Dante mutters in response under his breath.

Bradley, near hysterical from the pain mixed with fear, continues on, not hearing Dante’s words. “My- mm-my pin is 0727.”

Finn chokes back a laugh, before giving a disgusted sigh and shake of his head. “Of course it is. So unoriginal.”

I turn my head, looking between Finn and Bradley. “What am I missing?”

“His pin is his birthday... And he’s a Leo.” Not sure what one has to do with the other, but with Finn, who knows? He finds the smallest details and fixates on them. It is part of what makes him who he is, and part of what makes him so brilliant at what he does. The inner workings of his brain absolutely amaze me, even if I don’t always understand it.

Unlocking the phone, Finn quickly pulls up the correct app and scrolls to the most recent notification. A relieved grin



breaks out across his face.

“We’ve got her.”

# Chapter Sixty



## *Danica*

The bitter, maniacal laughter ends abruptly as rage consumes my father's face.

"Father? I- I don't understand. What's happening? Why are you doing this?"

"Don't call me that, you fucking bitch!"

My head jerks back as if he slapped me. But then, he always has known how to wield his words in a way more vicious and viscerally painful than a physical blow ever could be.

"I don't understand why you're doing this. What did I do wrong?" Tears that I have been fighting back finally break through the shock and fear.

"Why do you think, you stupid little brat? I worked my ass off for this deal and you've ruined everything!" His words end in a shrill shriek, spit flying with each word.

I cringe back at the sight. I have never seen him lose his temper like this. Always cool and detached, his words weaponized against me in a deliberate manner, he has never been violent with me physically, and he has never cared enough about me to actually lose his cool like he has now. He looks positively deranged.

"What- what deal?" I fight to keep the shakiness out of my voice, needing to ask the question, desperate to understand how I could have ended up in a situation like this.

With a deep breath, my father forces down his emotions, straightening back his greased hair that had flown in disarray

with his outburst, and smoothing down his suit and tie. Once his composure was back to a semblance of normal, he finally looked me in the eyes, and I saw nothing but blank detachment.

“You are the problem. You ruined everything, never should have been around to begin with.” To my confusion, he continues, “I told your mother after she found out she was pregnant to get rid of you but the stupid whore couldn’t be bothered. Not that she wanted you either. No, she just wanted to keep you around as a constant reminder of my mistakes, to try to undermine my authority.”

My tears had slipped past my lashes and left a salty trail across my burning cheeks. Still bound with my hands behind my back and feet tied together, I have no way of dealing with it, of hiding the fact that this man has once again made me cry. And I cringe, knowing how much he hates the sight of my tears.

“You’re just as much of a fucking whore as your mother, you stupid little girl.” With that, he spits, saliva hitting my face in a sticky dripping mess, and I fight back the urge to gag. Turning without a glance in my direction, my father starts pacing, his movements jerky and agitated as he runs his hands repeatedly through his formerly styled locks.

“Your goddamn mother couldn’t just do what she was fucking told. After I gave her to Morrows to pay off my debts the stupid fucking bitch couldn’t just use birth control like she should have. Then, she fucking kept you when she got pregnant with his fucking seed, the goddamn whore! She couldn’t just do as she was fucking told and get rid of you. No, she had to keep you so I would have to live everyday with the constant reminder of his child being thrown in my face as repayment for my debts.”

He laughs once more, and I am seriously starting to question his sanity as he becomes more erratic with his movements.

“All you have ever done is just use my goddamn money. Use *my* resources. I have kept a roof over your head. I fed you and clothed you and put you in the best school and gymnastics program that money can buy when I should have just dumped

you off at a fire station as an infant. And all I wanted? All I have ever asked in return? You couldn't just do what you were fucking *told* and marry Bradley Oakley, making yourself useful for *once* in your fucking life. No, you had to go and ruin that too by announcing to the world that you were dating that fucking hockey player instead of being engaged to Oakley Jr. Now, I can't pay my fucking debt to Oakley, we are all screwed. And it's all your fault!"

Whipping around with such abruptness that I am caught off guard, he rushes over and slaps me hard across my face, the taste of copper filling my mouth. I don't even know how to process the bomb that he just threw in my face. Father used my mother to pay off one of his debts, and I was the result? That means, all this time, I have been walking around calling this monster my father when someone else should hold the title. I don't even know who Morrows is, if he is less of an evil man or just as bad?

My entire life has been a lie, the truth that was carefully constructed to build my world splintering into shards of broken glass around my heart. I know it's wrong and definitely not an appropriate time but all I feel is a sense of relief as the broken pieces fall slowly into place. My more sturdy build, solid muscle to my parents' tall and lanky frames. My red hair, alabaster skin and freckles to their darker hair and complexions. My social anxiety to their outgoing social natures.

So many places where I felt like I didn't belong in my own home, in my own world and it's because I didn't. I'm different from my parents because, at least with my father, I *am* different. Blood always tells the truth. No lie could ever hold it in completely. My father's aloofness, his resentment and detached manner make so much more sense. Caleb was always the favorite because Caleb is *his*. Caleb could be his younger twin. I was always the imposter.

A calm acceptance fills me as I process his words. It all makes sense. He never cared about how I was treated by Bradley because I never should have existed. I wasn't his problem to worry about. If Bradley screwed up and went too far, well then

that would just be a different way of handling a complication that never should have been under his roof in the first place.

“What happens now?” I am surprised by the calm manner that I was able to affect as I addressed the only father I had ever known.

“Ha! Now? What happens now is we find a different fucking way to make you useful. If I can’t use you to seal the deal with Oakley by marrying you off to his son, the least I can do is give you up as collateral for my debt. He doesn’t want money. Bastard is filthy fucking rich. But he might be willing to take you as payment, if we can keep it quiet so it doesn’t get back to the press.”

My eyes widen at his words. *Give me to Mr. Oakley as collateral?* Like he did with my mother all those years ago? My father’s phone rings, saving me from having to come up with a response. He answers, stepping away, further into the shadows and muttering quietly. A few minutes later, he walks back to me, shaking his head with a grim smile.

“Looks like you lucked out again little girl. Fate must be on your side. Mr. Oakley Sr. has decided we will proceed as planned with the original agreement. He has someone on the payroll that can overlook your *reluctance* at being married to Bradley Oakley Jr. should be making his way here shortly and then you, lucky little bride-to-be are going to be married off and no longer my responsibility. My debt will be paid in full, and I will never have to see you again. Bradley is going to take you away from here and handle you so that I don’t have to. Looks like fortune is favoring us both today.” Stepping close to my side, he forcefully grabs my hair, ripping my head back to look up at him and I choke down the fear, fighting off the memories that want to overwhelm me at this moment.

“Make sure to smile pretty for the cameras. Wouldn’t want anyone questioning this wedding after the stunt you tried to pull.”

I cry out painfully as he shoves me down forcefully, my unbalanced body unable to catch itself as I fall to the ground,

once more smacking my head into the concrete. I blink back stars, dazed as he walks away without a backward glance.

# Chapter Sixty-One



## *Danica*

I'm not sure how much time passes as I sit there in the flickering light, my thoughts whirling in a tumultuous cycle that competes with the pounding of my unmistakable concussion. My father has left me alone to sit and stew, overwhelmed by the confessions of a crazed man. I guess I shouldn't even call him father. He's the man who raised me, if you want to get technical, but the man has never been much of a fatherly figure to me. I don't even know how I feel about that. Relieved. I definitely think I feel relief, but it is hard to tell with the anxiety and fear that is trying to drown me.

I don't know how I am going to get out of this. I have tried repeatedly to break free of my bindings but all I am doing is creating more bleeding sores. The blood running down from my wrist into my hands is making them slippery and I can smell the sting of copper in the cool air. They are bringing Bradley here, going to force me into marriage. If I can't get away, if I am forced to go with him, there is no way I am going to survive. I know he will kill me this time after publicly humiliating him with my statement about the engagement rumors being false and that I am dating a different popular athlete. How the fuck am I going to get out of this alive?

By now, Finn has to know that something happened to me. I don't know how long I have been gone, but he would have figured out pretty quickly that something was wrong. Which means that Theo, Caleb, Bash and Finn will all be looking for me. Not that it will do much good. I don't have my phone for them to track and I doubt they will have been able to get to

Bradley. With everything going on that shitty asshole probably retreated back to the safety of his parents' gated mansion and armed bodyguards. No, the likeliest possibility is that I am on my own unless I can find a way to buy some time and get a signal out to them... somehow.

A door slams in the distance and I hear several sets of footsteps coming my way. I tense, frozen in silence as I strain to hear their voices. Oh god. Brad's here already? It can't be time. I'm not ready. I haven't had a chance to come up with a plan. My breath hitches as the panic I have struggled to fight down breaks through, overwhelming me.

I am grabbed in a bruising hold as I am yanked to my feet by my upper arms. Yelping at the pinching pain in my arms, I kick my legs in the air, thrashing around as I struggle against the strong hold. Desperate to escape in one last ditch effort, I kick my legs up once more, throwing all my weight backward in the hopes that I will throw my captor off-balance and send him stumbling back.

Unfortunately, he is prepared for my pathetic attempts and seems to brace himself by widening his stance behind me as someone else comes up from the side, punching me in the face and I feel my nose give under the force. Feeling the crunch and a warm gush, it takes a second before the pain registers. Fucker just broke my nose. My eyes well with tears and I can't stop them from streaming down my face when I feel a sharp pinch and glance down, stunned as I blink back tears to see a needle sticking out of my arm.

"There now, see, no need for violence my dear. If you just calm yourself, we should all get along just fine." The soothing words are at odds with the scenario as I futilely struggle against my tight hold. I'm losing energy quickly, and I blink, trying to force my eyes to stay open. Struggling to see through the blurry haze, I vaguely make out a form that I think is Mr. Oakley Sr., walking up to stand next to my father as the edges of my vision go dark.

"Now, now dear. No need to fight it. Just rest and when you wake up it will all be over."



Through the heavy fog now clouding my brain, I vaguely register the thought that these bastards have drugged me. They aren't even planning on me being conscious for my own damn wedding, which means I have absolutely no chance of fighting back or escaping. And with that, my world goes dark once more.

## Chapter Sixty-Two



### Theo

“Good, now I’ve signed off as a witness. Bradley should be here soon to finalize the arrangement. I’ve other important matters to attend to. I’m assuming you can at least handle marrying off your unconscious daughter?” The words are dripping with disdain and sarcasm as I see Mr. Oakley address Danica’s father from where I stand, hidden in the shadows.

Not bothering to wait for a response, Mr. Oakley turns on his heel and walks off in the opposite direction, exiting through a different door at the far end of the warehouse. There are two men who remain standing on either side of Danica’s unconscious body, lying on the floor in a pool of blood. A red haze clouds my vision and I fight back the urge to storm into the room and take those fuckers down, almost choking on my rage. A strong hand grips my arm, both reassuring and restraining and I look over to see Dante standing at my side.

We left Bradley with several of my uncle’s men, while his top, most trusted made-men have tagged along in case we need back up. No fucking backup is going to be needed as I rip those fuckers’ limb from limb. They took what didn’t belong to them and hurt someone that is precious to me. I am going to make them pay with my bare fucking hands and I am going to make it hurt. Glancing to my left, I see that my other side is flanked by Caleb and Seb. Caleb wears an expression of disbelief and outrage at the sight of his father looming over Danica. He is going to have a lot to process once this is through and we have killed his father. Any man who has ever

hurt Danica is a dead man walking, and it is my honor and pleasure to ensure their sentence is carried out.

Glancing down impatiently at his watch, Danica's father taps his foot in an agitated manner. "I don't know what is taking Bradley so long. He should be here. We need to get this fucking shitshow over with." He sighs before turning away from his daughter to begin pacing back and forth.

"Oakley Sr. just cleared the scene. I've got a tracker on him." Finn's voice chirps from the small earpiece I am wearing. Not usually one for physical confrontation, Finn is holding down the fort from our surveillance setup that we have in my uncle's van outside. "Two guards on the south and east exits have been taken out and replaced with Dante's men. Should just be whomever is left with you inside. From the infrared on the drone, I am counting three bodies aside from yours and Danica's. You should be good to go."

With the all-clear that we have been waiting for, I waste no more time as I stealthily make my way into the room. Caleb cuts across from me, headed to handle his father, while Seb and Dante each take one of the guards. As much as I want to handle the fuckers, my first priority is ensuring Danica's safety. And there is way too much blood on the ground for my comfort right now. Rushing over, I drop to her side, ignoring the shouts and fighting surrounding me from all directions as I kneel uncaring in a pool of Danica's blood. She's lying limp and I can see her hands covered in blood, wrists raw from her attempts to break free of the too-tight zip ties.

Pulling a knife from my boot, I make quick work of slicing through the plastic attached to her wrists and ankles before gently turning her on her back. Her chest doesn't seem to be moving and she is too pale. *Oh god. Please let her be breathing!* Feeling for a pulse at her neck as I lean my head next to her mouth I feel a faint pulse as a shallow breath brushes lightly against my cheek. With a sigh of relief, I gently run my hands over her body. She has a gaping wound from the side of her head that is definitely going to need stitches and her nose has clearly been broken. Blood drenched hair lies in

tangled clumps in the pool which has formed from the wounds to her head and nose.

Running my bloodied hand gently over her hair, my heart lurches as I look at the contrast of red against her deathly pale skin.

“Danica, baby wake up. Please wake up. Oh god. Please be okay!”

Without moving her and risking further injury, I can't tell if she has sustained any more damage, but she definitely needs a hospital. I look up anxiously, searching for Dante.

“We need to get her help. She has lost a lot of blood.”

Dante just nods, unfazed by the urgency in my tone as he remains calmly standing over the prone form of the man he has disarmed and then killed. Seb stands close-by, huffing as he tries to catch his breath, a cut over one eye as his guard lies unconscious but breathing on the floor.

“No need to fret, nephew. Head injuries always bleed a lot. Your girl will be fine.” Addressing Finn in his earpiece, and I tune him out as he arranges for medical care for Danica, and for his men to come deal with the bodies. Afraid to pick up unconscious beauty, careful of her head injuries, I reach for her hand instead, holding it close to my chest as I sit in a pool of her blood. The whir of a gunshot pierces through the air and Seb and I both jump as my uncle stands there, unfazed after just killing the man Seb had disarmed.

“We don't show weakness and we don't leave witnesses.” Dante then turns around, looking at Caleb who was still fighting with his father. Amusement passes over Dantes face as he crosses his arms, just sitting back watching the scene unfold. I look over to them, and see Caleb land a heavy blow to his father's jaw. Blood is running down his face from a broken nose and Mr. Ellis is wheezing like Caleb may have broken a few of his father's ribs.

For his part, Caleb remains largely unfazed. His years on the ice, being checked into the boards and having to throw down against opposing teams, has given him an advantage over his

impuissant blue-blooded father. “How the fuck could you do something like this? To your own fucking daughter!” Caleb roars in outrage as his fists continue to land blow after blow.

Whimpering in pain, his father has curled into a ball, completely resigned to the fact that his son is beating the shit out of him after he just arranged for his own daughter to be kidnapped and beaten before selling her off to her abuser.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Chest heaving from exertion, Caleb gives up on his fists as he starts kicking his father in the side. “You are the shittiest fucking scum of the earth. At least Bradley could take his hits like a fucking man instead of curled on the ground like the coward you are!”

“Enough.” Dante’s voice is quiet but full of command as he interrupts Caleb’s furious onslaught. “I said enough.” Seb quickly moves to Caleb’s side, a hand on his shoulder bringing Caleb back to the present and helping to still his movements.

“If you keep that up, boy, there won’t be anything left of the man. And while I despise low-lives like him, I doubt you could handle having your father’s death on your hands.”

Looking down at the man, bleeding and barely conscious on the floor, Caleb lets out a huff of disgust before shaking off Seb’s hand then turning to face me, where I am still sitting next to Danica on the floor. His face quickly drops as he sees her limp body and he swallows heavily.

“Is she- I mean-”

“She’s alive.” My words are quiet, though not at all reassuring. I can’t say she is fine because she fucking isn’t. It took months for her to work through the trauma of her previous abuse and rape that went on for months before she ended up in the hospital. Now she has been kidnapped and beaten by her own father, God only knows what kind of psychological trauma this is going to cause.

“My medical team is here.” Dante interrupts as several more men walk into the room, carrying a variety of medical equipment and a stretcher. I stand and watch helplessly as they

carefully place Danica on the stretcher, my heart racing at the thought of letting her out of my sight for even a minute.

“Theodore, Sebastian, go with my men and see to Danica. Caleb will remain here with me.” His words are a dismissal, I don’t even question him as I fall back into years of routine that have been ingrained in my blood. When the Don makes a command, you obey, no questions asked. It doesn’t matter that I chose to remove myself from that life with my uncle’s permission. He is still the head of the family and there is no room for questioning an order when it comes from his mouth.

Seb hesitates only for a moment as he looks back to Caleb. Caleb, standing resolutely with a grim look on his face, simply nods in silent agreement. “Go, look after her for me guys.” His words are spoken softly and I hear what isn’t said. Take care of his sister so he can take care of their father. Grabbing Danica’s hand, I hold tightly to *il mio passerotto* as Dante’s medical team wheels her out of the warehouse.

## *Chapter Sixty-Three*



### *Theo*

Danica spent several days under close medical supervision, this time at Ma's house. Dante arranged for in-home care with a doctor that he trusts coming to check on her several times a day and a nurse staying on-site until she was well enough to get up on her own. After several more cracked ribs and numerous bruises, the worst of her injuries was a nasty concussion and an open wound on her head that required stitches. She is still pretty self-conscious about the spot that they had to shave to clear the area for the stitching, but I keep telling her how goddamn beautiful she is, even with a new bald spot, which always earns me the bird or a pillow being thrown at my head. Totally worth it to get her smiling though, or at the very least, not fixated on something else that went wrong in her life.

Seb, Finn and I took turns sitting with her round the clock until she was fully on the mend. I'm not entirely sure what happened with Caleb, other than the obscure text that he sent checking on Danica and letting us know he was going to be gone for several days while he had to "take care of some things."

Finn is with Danica now so I can take care of a few things myself. Taking a deep breath, I brace against the wave of painful memories as I once again pull up the drive of my old childhood home. Where once it had been abandoned, there now sit several heavily armored, dark SUVs belonging to my uncle. Dante has had his fun, taking his pound of flesh in revenge for Ma, but now it's time for me to finish this.

Parking next to Zio's Ducati that sits at the end of the row of SUVs, I let myself in through the locked back door, and head down the hall filled with bitter memories hanging from the wall before scanning my hand on the high-tech lock pad and letting myself into the heavily fortified basement. Screams pierce the air, raising the hair on my arms as I walk slowly down the dark stairs. No matter how many times I was exposed to this life while growing up, no matter how deserving the asshole, I will never get used to the sounds of a person being tortured.

Brad still hangs from the ceiling, a bloodied mess, as he cries out in pain. Cuts litter his once pristine body, and he is missing several teeth and fingernails as blood drips down his chin and wrists. What better punishment for someone who puts so much value into appearances than to be given a body littered with scars? I would say it would almost be fitting to leave him like this, to suffer with his outward scars as his victims are left to do the same with the internal scars that only they can see. But then, that would be getting off a little too easily. After all, beauty is only skin deep, but the pain suffered internally from abuse and rape leaves scars that last a lifetime.

"I see you've become well reacquainted with my Zio Dante, old friend." Taking a deep breath, I try to mentally prepare myself for what needs to happen as I step back into the role I was born for. Proceeding into his line of vision, Brad's eyes are clouded with pain as he slowly lifts his head to look at me.

"Fuck you, Giovanni." Brad's words spit out with a mouthful of blood, splattering to the ground.

"No thanks, I think you've done enough fucking to last a lifetime Bradley; and you're really not my type. In fact, between Ma and my girl, I would say you have had more than your share of fucking people that aren't your type, and we really should balance the scales, don't you think?"

His eyes widen at my statement, unable to contain the fear and surprise after days of being tortured.

"You really should have left well-enough alone. As if what you tried to do to Ma in your dad's office back when we were



in high school wasn't enough. Tell me, *Bradley*, does it make you feel like a man, when you pick on someone smaller than you? When you force someone to the ground and take away their power? Do you feel like the big man on campus when you hit innocent women and force them to have sex with you?"

A burst of laughter, bordering on insanity escapes from Brad's lips, making me pause.

"Innocent? *Innocent!* If that is what *princess* made you believe, then she really has you by the balls dude. That girl is no fucking innocent. She was bred to be a whore like her mother before her. Like your mother was for your father. A whore given in payment for her man's debts; meant to be used and tossed to the side. That girl doesn't have a single fucking innocent bone in her body." Another burst of crazed laughter escapes his lips just as my fist connects with his face. How fucking *dare* he.

"She is not your *princess*, you motherfucking psycho. Danica is so much better than you will ever be. So much *stronger*. And you want to know what? You are going to die down here, alone, and the world is going to forget about you because you are nothing. Your life means nothing. And Danica? She is going to go on to live her fucking life to the fullest. She is going to smile and laugh again and forget you ever fucking existed. Every night she is going to fall asleep with my goddamn cock buried deep inside of her, with my name on her lips as I erase every last fucking trace of you from her beautiful soul."

Any momentary hesitation I felt for my former friend disappeared with his calling my girl a whore. Now all I can feel is a cold rage settling deep in my soul. Not a blazing red inferno, but an ice filling my veins until they are as hard as the stone that he turned my heart into; Frozen like the ice I skate on. My uncle and his men made a good start on making this fucker suffer over the last few days in my absence but there is a promise I have yet to keep.

Circling around behind Bradley, his laughter cuts off abruptly into screams as I rest one hand on his shoulder to brace myself

while the other grabs a large fistful of hair at the base of his skull. An eye for an eye, and all that. I clench tightly as I use the full force of my toned muscles to rip out a fistful of his hair to the music of his screams.

“Lorenzo, do me a solid?”

At this, my uncle’s second in command steps over, raising an inquiring eyebrow in my direction, arms crossed and his face passive.

“I believe that when this fucker decided to mark my beautiful sparrow in such a manner, he also had something shoved down her throat at the time. Would you mind?” With a nod of my head, I indicate behind Lorenzo.

Without a word, he turns on his heel, walks over to the wall and grabs the item I had been indicating. Returning back to our little group, two more men step forward, on each side of Bradley and hold his sides steady, while I reach around from behind and force his jaw open. Leaning close, I whisper my next words so only he can hear.

“You know, I considered using a dildo for this next part. But honestly? I don’t think you are man enough to handle it. Probably too big for you, anyway.” With my casually stated words, Bradley seems to find a renewed source of energy, and he starts flailing violently in a futile attempt to defer the inevitable. I flick my gaze upward, signaling to my uncle’s second.

With one quick brutal shove, Lorenzo shoves the ratcheting wrench that had been resting on the workbench into Bradley’s mouth and down his throat until the sound of his choking gags fill the air. Satisfied that he won’t be able to get the tool out, I let go of his jaw, letting Lorenzo hold it in place while I go back to painstakingly ripping out another handful of his hair. Muffled screams mixed with choke-filled gags are music to my ears.

I give a short nod, and Lorenzo mercilessly rips the tool out, causing immeasurable internal damage. Once the wrench has been forcefully removed, Lorenzo pulls out a syringe from inside his coat pocket and jams the sharp end into Bradley’s

arm, injecting the chemicals with brutal precision before stepping back once more.

“Now, you see, Bradley? It’s not nice to shove shit down peoples’ throats and pull on their hair until it comes out. It doesn’t feel very good, does it?” My tone is mocking as I glare daggers at the asshole who is gasping for breath and wheezing. In his panic, and overwhelming pain, I don’t think it’s even registered in Brad’s tiny little brain that Lorenzo just injected him with drugs.

Dropping another fistful of broken hair strands on the floor carelessly, I walk with slow deliberation until I am once again facing Bradley. Tears streak down his pale face and make a ghastly contrast against the gore of his blood. I feel no satisfaction at seeing a man so beaten, but I also feel zero remorse for balancing the scales with the man who inflicted so much pain on the person who is my most treasured prize.

“You really shouldn’t dish it if you simply cannot take it. It’s an age-old adage but something I would have thought you would learn growing up under your father’s tutelage. Apparently, he didn’t teach you well enough.” A flicker crosses over his face, and though it was gone in a flash, I could have sworn it was bitterness and possible resentment. Huh. Too bad we did so much damage that he can’t respond anymore. Oh well.

“Now you see, Bradley, here’s the thing. You were raised to take over your father’s kingdom and I was raised to take over mine. You and I were friends once upon a time. You knew who my father was and what his dealings were with your own father, and still you chose to fuck over my family and try to hurt my mother. That, in itself, is unforgivable. Clearly, I had other issues that took precedence at the time and had to let matters lie. But then, you tried to break something that belonged to me. Long after you knew she was mine; you tried to break her spirit and steal her away from me, and that ... well, that signed your death notice. And as much as I feel you deserve to have your pain drawn out, to rot in the shit of a bed that you made, I have my girl waiting at home for me.”

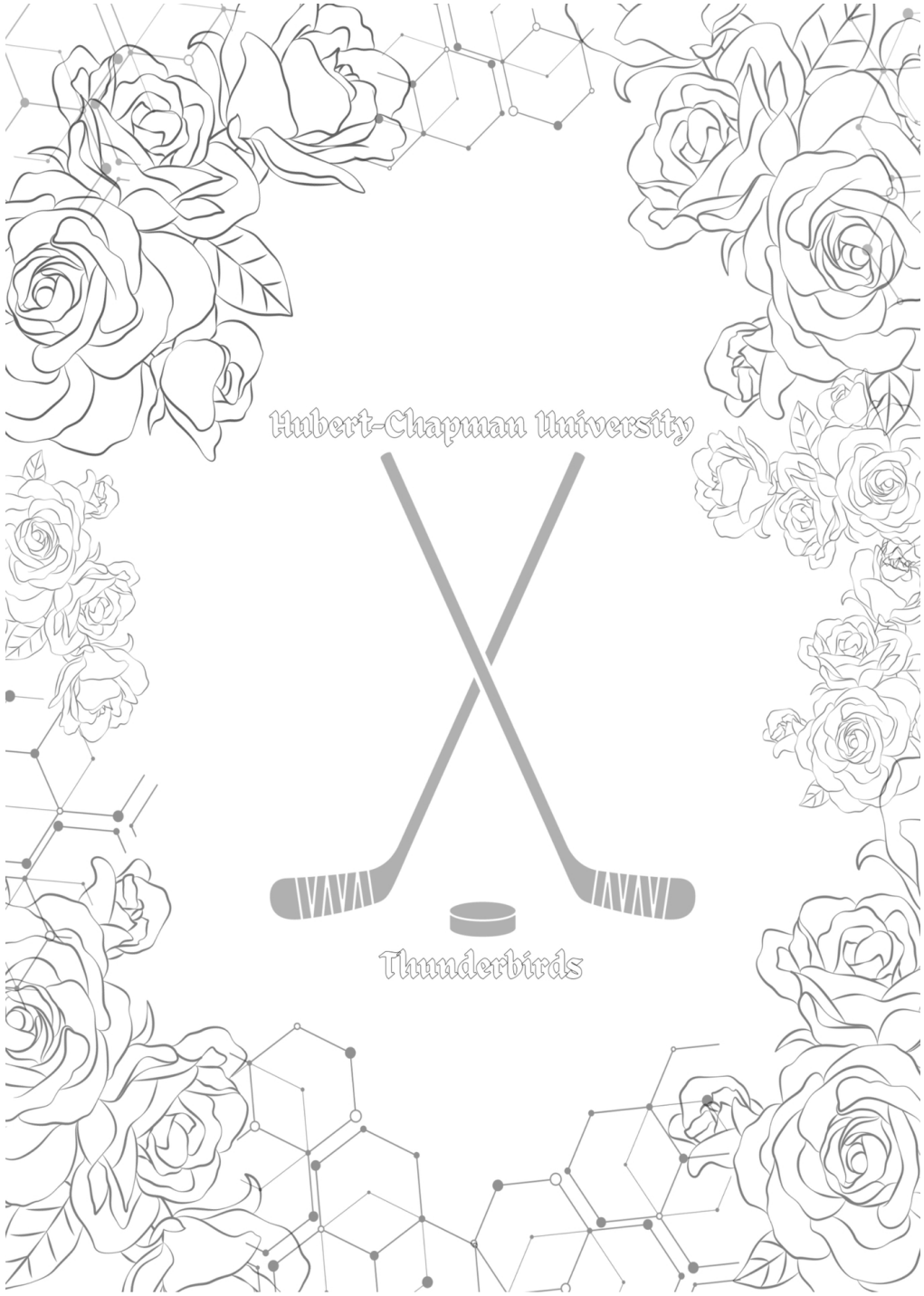
I pause, noting that he is barely hanging on to consciousness. I need him to hear me though, to register the last words that will ever be spoken to him. Stepping closer, I grab him by the jaw and force his head up, waiting for the haze to clear from his eyes. Once I see that he is focused on me, his breathing heavy, I look him dead in the eye for the last time.

“You know, one lesson my father always taught me growing up? Our bodies are just a shell, and when they die, the only thing that carries us on is the memories of those that loved us. But you, Bradley Oakley Jr.? Nobody fucking loves the monster that you have become. And nobody is going to miss you when you are gone. Your body is going to rot in the ground and there won’t be a soul alive who will mourn your passing.”

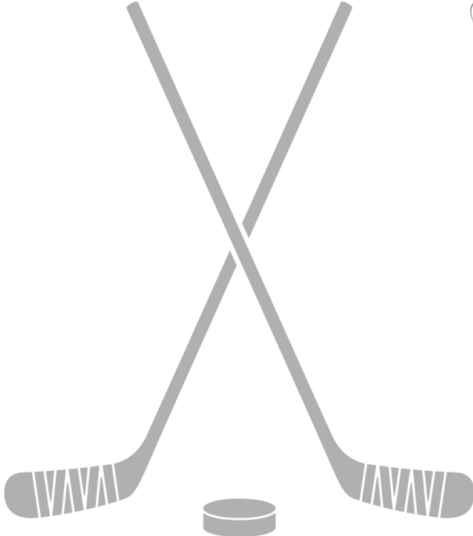
Breathing raggedly, I can see the struggle as Bradley tries to force the words out of his mouth, but the injuries are too extensive, and they come out in the barest whisper.

“Go... to... hell.”

I tsk, shaking my head. “I may be going to hell, old friend, but I am taking you with me.” With that, I whip out both arms and grab him by the head, turning it sharply to the side and snapping his neck as I had been taught long ago by my father. A skill I had hoped I would never use. Stepping back, I observe the lifeless body dangling limp from his restraints. Not a word is spoken as I turn away and walk out of the room, leaving Dante’s men to finish what we started.



Hubert-Chapman University



Thunderbirds

## Chapter Sixty-Four



### Theo

“Oh my god!” Danica’s shout from the living room sends me running down the hall.

“What is it? Are you okay? Baby, what’s wrong?”

Danica’s face is a mixture of shock and disbelief, a remote hanging limply from her hand as she stares at the television. It has been over a week since I ended Bradley, and my time has been spent holding Danica in my arms whenever I am not forced to go to class or hockey. Glancing at the screen, I see she has paused the news station which is currently covering the tragic accident leading to Bradley Oakley Jr.’s untimely demise. Leaning over, I grab the remote from her hand and resume the news report.

“We are standing here at the base of Calgary Crevice, at the end of the dangerous three-mile pass surrounded by jagged cliffs. As you can see, from reports sent in to first responders, a car went over the barrier before plummeting twenty feet below into the jagged rocks below. Initial reports show the car quickly burst into flames, leaving little for our first responders to reclaim.”

The news reporter pauses as she looks into the camera, most likely for dramatic effect, before continuing. “Initial reports have come back from the autopsy showing that Bradley Oakley Jr., rising football star for HCU and heir to the Oakley family fortune had drugs in his system at the time of his unfortunate accident and the remains were too badly damaged to gain further insight, other than it appears he had likely

already passed prior to impact. It is believed that the drugs in his system most likely stopped his heart, leading to loss of control of the vehicle which then careened past the barriers and over the cliffs. Oakley Jr. is survived by his mother and father who have asked the public to respect their privacy in their time of grieving and have chosen not to give a statement at this time.”

Ah, looks like the reports have come back accurately then. Dante, being the good Don that he is, has people on his payroll everywhere from the police and news station, all the way to the medical examiner who was in charge of his autopsy. They didn't get the facts wrong though. Bradley did, in fact, have drugs in his system. We made sure there was enough of it in his system before he died that it would be sure to show up on any reports if there was anything left of him to run. And he was, in fact, dead prior to the collision in which his car went over the barrier before colliding in a fiery crash at the bottom of the cliff. The only details that they got wrong were the pesky little truths regarding *how* exactly Bradley died in the first place. But that is no one's business but my own.

Not bothering to look at the screen, I instead watch my little sparrow's face anxiously as she takes in this shocking information. I didn't tell her that I dealt with Bradley. In the aftermath of her kidnapping, her doctors suggested that the best thing for her was not to cause any further stress, and I figured the news that I had kidnapped and tortured her ex in retaliation, with the intent to end his sorry existence, might be just a tad stressful for her recovering self.

“Il mio passerotto, talk to me. Are you okay?”

Her face, still frozen in shock, doesn't even acknowledge my question.

“La mia diavoletta, eyes on me.” My firm tone finally breaks through the haze, and she pulls her eyes away from the screen to look up at me. “Are you okay, Danica?”

“I-” there is hesitation in her voice, and for a second, I think that maybe I screwed up. Maybe I shouldn't have killed him. But no. The jackass definitely had it coming.

“I- I mean. I don’t know. Is it real? Is he really gone?”

I fight against the smile pulling at the corner of my lips. Now is not the fucking time to smile like the goddamn lunatic that I am.

“Yeah, baby. He’s gone. It’s over. Caleb is dealing with your dad, and Bradley is gone. He can never hurt you again.”

A shudder ripples through her, and a tear slips down her face. Quickly, I jump over the back of the couch and pull her into my lap.

“It’s over. Shh. You’re okay. He’s gone. He can’t hurt you anymore. You’re okay. Shh.” I rock her in my arms, holding her tightly and her sobs fill the quiet of my mother’s living room.

“I’m free.”

“Yeah, baby. You’re free.”

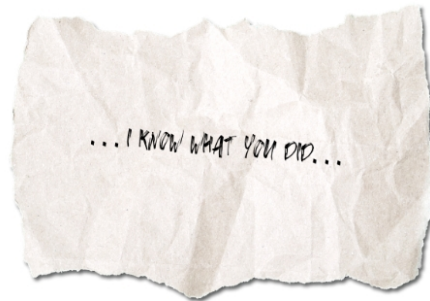
Kissing the top of her head in reassurance, I fight back the memory of Bradley’s brutal death and his last words to me. I will go to fucking hell if that is what it takes to set my sweet songbird free. I would die a thousand times over if it meant she didn’t have to experience the kind of pain she has been through over the last year ever again.



# Chapter Sixty-Five



## Theo



Crumpling the paper that I had found in my locker at the ice rink, I slam the door closed as I shoulder my bag and head to exit the building. I have received several similar notes over the last month and it's getting really fucking old. I mean, I have done some shit in my life. The least they could do is be a little more specific, so I know what I was up against. With a resigned sigh, I make my way to my car, throwing my gear in the trunk before I go to sit in the driver's seat.

Danica had moved into Caleb's new place for appearances sake. No longer under her parents' thumb or the threat of an abusive ex haunting her every move, she had no excuse to remain in hiding at my Ma's house. With Danica not wanting to go back to that nightmare of a home she grew up in, Caleb found a new two-bedroom apartment a bit further off campus, so she had a comfortable place to live. At least until Caleb figures out what's going to happen with their family company, that is.

Caleb, for his part, has refused to talk about what happened with his father. The only word on the street is that his father is facing some serious embezzlement charges which has left his company on shaky ground.

Supposedly, he has taken off to “parts unknown” to try to escape trial and Caleb is expected to step into his father’s former role as the hockey season is coming to a close. Truthfully though, there is more to it than Caleb is willing to admit. Either way, their dad is gone and their mother, unable to face the shame and ridicule of her peers has retreated to a private property without even attempting to make contact with her children.

With a sigh, I go to start my Corvette and notice the corner of what looks like a manila envelope sticking out slightly between my seat and the gear shift. Unease fills me as I reach for it and pull out the contents. Pictures, numerous gruesome pictures fall out. Pictures of my father’s brutal death, surrounded by crime scene tape, pictures of the police reports that were filed after. Pictures of the more recent death and autopsy reports for Bradley, and finally pictures of Danica. Danica walking into the sports center; holding hands with me after the game last week when we won the Frozen Four. Pictures of her alone inside her brother’s place.

My stomach tightens into knots as I sort through dozens of images, their threatening intent perfectly clear. At the very back, a folded-up piece of paper sits in between the last two photos.

Hands shaking, I pull out the last photo that was behind the paper, and it’s a picture of Danica, sharp-shooter target locked on her head. Whomever must have taken the picture had to have done so from far away, based on the angle. It was taken weeks ago, the last time I took her out for a coffee date after practice, her bright red curls glistening in the early spring sun, my leather jacket sitting loosely on her shoulders and a bright smile lighting up her face. For the first time in my life, I feel a real sense of panic as my whole world is ripped out from under me and I fight to catch my breath.

Opening the paper that had been nestled against this terrifying photo, the words blur on the page as my eyes fill with tears and I feel my heart shatter like splintered pieces of ice under my skates...

... AN EYE FOR AN EYE. YOU TOOK WHAT BELONGS TO ME AND NOW IT'S TIME TO PAY THE PIPER. IF YOU WANT YOUR LITTLE BIRDIE TO LIVE, YOU WILL CUT ALL TIES WITH HER. OTHERWISE, THE TRUTH HAS A WAY OF COMING OUT, AND I PROMISE YOU WON'T LIKE THE RESULTS... BUT I'M SURE ROTTING IN PRISON FOR THE MURDER OF YOUR FATHER AND HER EX-BOYFRIEND WILL HAVE ITS OWN WAY OF DESTROYING YOUR RELATIONSHIP BEFORE I HAVE THE PLEASURE OF TAKING HER, ANYWAY. GIVE ME WHAT I'M OWED. LOSE THE GIRL AND SHE LIVES... JUST NOT WITH YOU. OR, LEAVE ME NO CHOICE BUT TO TAKE WHAT IS RIGHTFULLY MINE BY FORCE, AND YOU WILL ROT IN PRISON WHILE SHE DIES, ALONE, FACE THE LIES THAT YOU TOLD. YOU WON'T EVEN GET TO SAY GOODBYE...



# Italian Phrases



*mio passerotto*

*La mia diavoletta*

*Tesoro mio (talking directly to the person)*

*Mio tesoro (talking about/in reference to the person)*

*Tesoro mio, stai tranquilla, sono qui (physically)*

*Stai tranquilla, sono qui con te tesoro mio (emotionally)*

*Vedrai che andrà tutto bene*

*Benvenuto nella nostra famiglia*

*Mi piace questa ragazza. Hai scelto bene, figlio mio*

*Gioia mia, ma chi ti ha detto che sono un gentiluomo?*

*my little sparrow*

*my little devil*

*My sweetheart/treasure*

*My sweetheart/treasure*

*Don't worry sweetheart, I'm here*

*You'll see that everything will be fine*

*Welcome to the family*

*I like this girl, you chose well, my son*

*My joy, but who told you I'm a gentleman?*



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*... Coming soon...*

## **UNBROKEN PROMISES**



### ***SPLINTERED PROMISES DUET***

#### ***BOOK TWO***

*SEVEN YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE TRAUMATIC EVENTS THAT LED TO THE DEATH OF HER ABUSIVE FIANCÉ AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF HER FATHER, BUT FOR DANICA THE WORLD IS DARKER THAN EVER. WITH A STALKER LINGERING IN THE SHADOWS, SHE WONDERS IF SHE WILL EVER BREAK FREE FROM HER NIGHTMARES?*

*TORN BETWEEN FAMILY LOYALTIES AND THE DREAMS HE REFUSES TO LET GO OF, NHL SEATTLE SABRETOOTH'S STAR, THEO "SLICK" GIOVANNI LIVES HIS LIFE IN SHADES OF GRAY AS HE STRUGGLES TO FIND BALANCE IN A WORLD THAT HAS GONE DARK.*

*BUT WITH A BLACKMAILER COME BACK FROM THE SHADOWS, THEO IS FORCED TO CONFRONT HIS GRUESOME PAST TO SAVE THE WOMAN OF HIS DREAMS; EVEN IF SHE CAN'T STAND THE SIGHT OF HIM.*

*WILL THEY OVERCOME THE ODDS TO MOVE TOGETHER INTO THE LIGHT? OR WILL THEIR SECRETS FROM THE PAST FINALLY RIP EACH OTHER APART?*

# *A Note of Thanks*



THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE THAT HELPED SUPPORT ME ON THIS JOURNEY AND I CAN HONESTLY SAY THAT I NEVER WOULD HAVE GOTTEN THIS FAR WITHOUT THEIR HELP. FIRST, TO EVERY SINGLE READER WHO TOOK TIME OUT OF THEIR BUSY LIVES TO JUMP INTO THE WORLD OF MY CHARACTERS, THANK YOU! IT'S CRAZY FOR ME TO THINK THAT ANYONE WOULD WANT TO TAKE THE TIME TO READ MY WRITING. YOUR SUPPORT HAS MADE THIS INDIE AUTHOR'S DREAMS COME TRUE, AND IT IS ALL THANKS TO EVERY SINGLE ONE OF YOU!

TO ELLE. THANK YOU FOR BEING MY PERSON. YOU ARE THE BEST HYPE-WOMAN, SOUNDING BOARD AND ALPHA READER A GIRL COULD ASK FOR. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR BEING ONE OF MY CLOSEST FRIENDS, AND GIVING ME ENCOURAGEMENT EVERY TIME I THOUGHT MY IDEAS WERE DUMB OR THAT I SHOULD JUST GIVE UP.

TO KAT, THANK YOU FOR BEING SUCH A GOOD FRIEND, HELPING ME WHENEVER I GET STUCK ON A TECHNICAL ASPECT OF MY WRITING, AND OFFERING A GREAT OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE ON THE STORY.

TO MY OTHER WONDERFUL ALPHA READERS, KT AND SHANNON. I AM SO THANKFUL TO HAVE FOUND BOTH OF YOU. IT HAS BEEN AN HONOUR SHARING THIS JOURNEY WITH YOU BOTH AS WE EACH WORK TOWARDS PUBLISHING OUR STORIES. YOUR COMMENTARY LITERALLY HAD ME CRYING FROM LAUGHING SO HARD, AND I APPRECIATE YOUR CRITICAL EYES AS YOU CRITIQUED MY MESSY WRITING.

TO LIRIEL, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR HELPING ME WITH ALL OF MY ITALIAN TRANSLATIONS, MAKING SURE THEY WERE AUTHENTIC TO HOW THEY WOULD BE TRULY SPOKEN BY NATIVE SPEAKERS, NOT JUST A CUT-AND-PASTE GOOGLE TRANSLATION. AND ALSO FOR ENSURING THERE WAS NO MAJOR GUFFAW IN MISTRANSLATING SOMETHING INTO AN UNINTENTIONALLY INAPPROPRIATE PHRASING.

TO MY WONDERFUL EDITOR, ALEX. THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO WORK WITH ME THROUGHOUT THIS STORY, MAKING SURE EVERYTHING MAKES SENSE AND FLOWS WELL. I REALLY APPRECIATE YOUR THOUGHTFUL PERSPECTIVE, ENSURING THAT NOT ONLY THE GRAMMAR AND PROSE WAS WELL-WRITTEN, BUT THAT IT ALSO WAS WRITTEN IN A MANNER THAT KEPT PERSPECTIVE OF POTENTIALLY SENSITIVE TOPICS FOR MY READERS.



TO MY INCREDIBLE BETA READERS, AND EVERYONE IN MY WONDERFUL WRITING SUPPORT GROUPS ONLINE (BOTH THROUGH FACEBOOK AND REDDIT), THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR SUPPORT AND HELPING ME FIND RESOURCES WHEREVER NEEDED THROUGHOUT THIS JOURNEY. YOU HAVE ALL BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN MAKING THIS BOOK A REALITY.

TO MY AMAZING GRANDPARENTS AND MOM, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR SUPPORTING ME ALONG THIS JOURNEY. IF NOT FOR YOUR SUPPORT, AND HELP WATCH MY BUSY KIDDOS I NEVER WOULD HAVE FOUND THE TIME OR ENERGY TO BRING THIS STORY TO LIFE.

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# *About the Author*



M. GEORGE IS AN INDIE AUTHOR WHO LIVES IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST WITH HER SPOUSE, THREE YOUNG CHILDREN AND FUR BABY GOLDENDOODLE. SHE HAS ALWAYS BEEN PASSIONATE ABOUT READING AND WRITING. IMAGINING HER FAVORITE STORIES COME TO LIFE IN A WAY WHERE THE CHARACTERS CONTINUE TO LIVE LONG AFTER THEIR STORIES ENDED ON PAGE, AND CREATING WORLDS OF HER OWN WHERE HER CHARACTERS LIVE RENT-FREE IN HER MIND. WHEN SHE IS NOT LOST IN A BOOK OR HER WRITING, SHE ENJOYS SPENDING HER FREE TIME WITH HER CHILDREN, SUPPORTING THEM IN THEIR EXTRACURRICULARS AND PLAYING VIDEO GAMES OR WATCHING SHOWS WITH HER SPOUSE. HER FAVORITE SHOWS LIE WITHIN THE REALM OF FANTASY AND THE PARANORMAL, AND HER FAVORITE CHARACTERS ARE OF THE MORALLY GRAY VARIETY. THE DARKER THE BETTER...

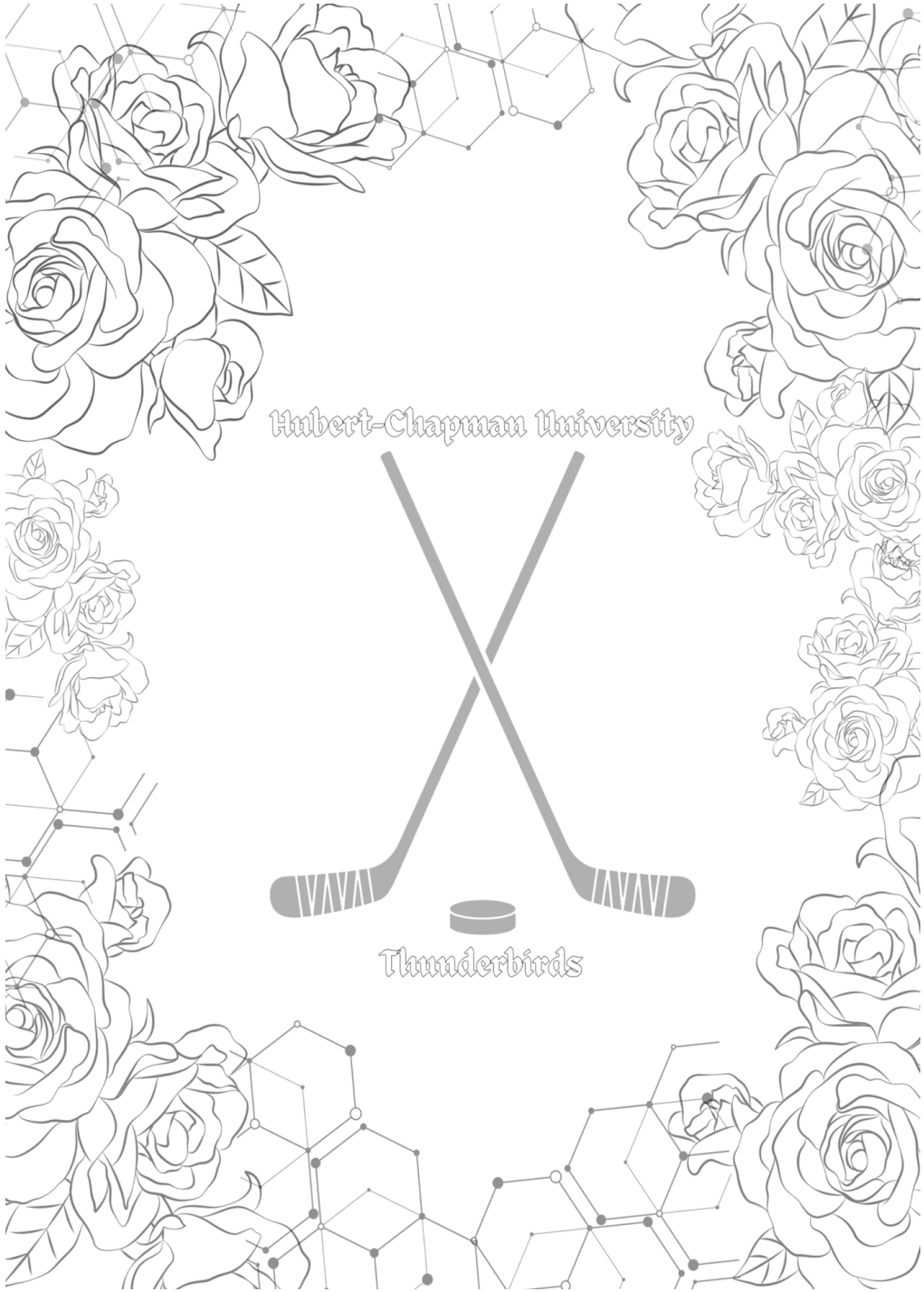
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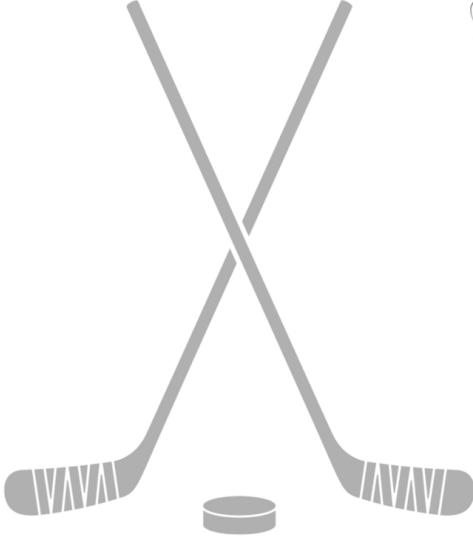
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