



**THE**

# RILEY

**EFFECT**

*by Nicole Marie*



Nicole Assimon

The Riley Effect- Nicole Marie

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*To the girls that helped this book get out of the group chat. I'm forever grateful you helped take an Instagram video and turn it into The Riley Effect. I hope you see a little of yourselves in this world you helped create.*

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# Content Note

*The Riley Effect* contains emotional references to the past death of parents and the grieving process that follows. Please use this information to help with your decision on whether to proceed with this story.

# Playlist

Let Me Love You

Mario

Keep Comin' Back

Blxst

Mamma Mia

Abba

We Belong Together

Mariah Carey

21 Questions

50 Cent

Summer Nights

Grease

Bedrock

Young Money

Like A Blade Of Grass

Jack Harlow

Empire State Of Mind

Jay-Z, Alicia Keys

Without Love

Hairspray



Family Affair

Mary J Blige

Lil Boo Thang

Paul Russell

White Air Forces

Pat

Knockout

Lil Wayne

Holy

Justin Bieber, Chance The Rapper

Good Things Fall Apart

Illenium , Jon Bellion

Breakfast

Kevin Gates

Nasty - Extended Version

Russell

King Of My Heart

Taylor Swift

# Prologue

Ivy

14 Years Ago...

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I hear my sister's wails before I can see her. My bedroom door flings open so suddenly it causes me to jump, and the candy I got trick-or-treating flies off my bed and covers my bedroom floor. Looking back toward the door, a hole now scars the wall below my One Direction poster. The handle must have punched through it.

My sister rushes through the threshold, quickly dialing three numbers into her phone before she settles onto my bed, pulling me to her side. I attempt to wiggle free to grab the peanut butter cup that had rolled under my nightstand. But my attempts fail as my sister pulls me back into her side.

"911, what's your emergency?" I barely hear the muffled question over her crying.

# 1

## Jalen



Well, I fucked up.

I'm unsure if I really grasped how bad until I reached the large door that houses the man controlling my fate. I take a deep breath and brace myself for whatever's about to come next.

Some would say that as a soon-to-be four-year starter and team captain, I should have known better than to start a fight during the party I was throwing at my off-campus house. I didn't want to break that asshole's nose, but you can't just walk around making women feel uncomfortable at my house and walk away scotch free.

The hockey house has always been *the* party house, and I take pride in knowing it's a place where people can come to let loose and know they're safe. So, I have no regrets about what happened on Saturday night.

I try to reassure myself that the punishment won't be too bad. How can it be? The semester only started two weeks ago. There's been no preseason lifts, not even a team meeting.

But I know nothing good comes from an impromptu meeting with the athletic director.

My knuckles graze the door leisurely in an effort to slow down my impending doom. I finally open the door in the Riley Center, Westvale University's athletic complex, to a pair of dark brown eyes glaring back at me.

Mr. Holloway, Westvale's Athletic Director, looks up from behind his oversized oak desk phone perched between his shoulder and ear. My feet take me backward. Maybe he forgot about our meeting. A guy can hope, right?

Wrong.

"Sorry, I have to go," he murmurs. "I know, I know. I'll call you back in twenty minutes. I have a meeting with a student," he hangs up and places his phone atop a large stack of papers.

"Hey, Uncle Matt, you wanted to see me?" I ask, my voice sounds overly cheery even to myself.

Yes, my school's athletic director is my uncle, my dad's younger brother. But I accepted my scholarship before he was offered the job here. Westvale was one of the first schools to offer me a hockey scholarship, and as the recruitment process went on, I realized we were a good fit. The school has a top-tier hockey program, is close to home, and has good academics.

My uncle played football at Westvale, so I grew up hearing how much he loved the school and how insane the parties were. I guess in some

roundabout way he did play a role in me becoming a Retriever.

Like most eighteen-year-olds, I craved the independence college was going to give me. I was going to be free. I could do what I wanted when I wanted, and my recruitment visit gave me a taste of that freedom. I'll just say it took me a week to recover.

If I'm being honest, I could have it worse than having Uncle Matt around all the time. He's only twelve years older than I am, and we grew up more like brothers than an uncle and nephew.

Coming into my first year at Westvale I was naive, thinking my uncle would let me party, play hockey, and coast through school until I was ready to enter the NHL Draft. I haven't been so lucky. If anything, he's been stricter on me than any of his other athletes. Something about not wanting to show bias or some shit.

There's no attempt to hide my annoyance with the current situation when I flop down onto a chair in front of my uncle's desk.

"I've been here for a week. There is no way I should be meeting with you already," I tell my uncle.

I decided on my walk over that it was best to pretend I hadn't skipped two classes, been late to three more, and gotten into my first fight of the year all in the span of a week. What my uncle doesn't know won't kill him. It really is the mature way to deal with the situation at hand.

"Do you live to make my job more difficult, Jalen?"

I try and fail to stifle a laugh. My uncle isn't asking that question sarcastically. He is clearly annoyed by the actions I'm trying to downplay.

"Okay, look, I'm sorry. I know I haven't been on my best behavior this last week, but I have one more year of freedom before I'm expected to be all stiff like you," I joke.

Eyes eerily similar to my Dad's stare back at me. A shiver runs down my spine because it's the same look my Dad possesses when he is disappointed in me.

I start tapping my fingers on the arm of the chair I'm sitting in, a shot of anxiety making itself at home in my chest.

"You think you'll be playing professional hockey next year if you lose that captain's patch on your chest?"

In my defense, Coach Stevens knew exactly who I was when he named me captain at the end of last season. I've always lived by my parents' cardinal rule—live as authentically as possible, it's the only way to be happy.

Is the gamble of not apologizing worth losing the chance at redemption? Last season ended in a devastating loss in the semifinals of the Frozen Four Tournament, something we have a chance at winning this season.

"Okay, I'll tone it down, but preseason practices haven't started yet. Let me have some fun before they start, at least," I plead, hoping to soften the harsh look in my uncle's eyes.

"One more incident, and I'll have to do something." He says sternly.

Contrary to what some people on this campus believe, my uncle has never taken it easy on me. I've spent just as much time in his office being lectured as I have in lecture halls.

My mind instantly starts trying to work out how to continue with the plans I've already made for the semester without breaking the promise I made to my uncle less than twenty seconds ago. We have some dope parties planned.

"I'm serious, Jalen. I can't turn a blind eye, and frankly, I don't want to."

He slams his hands on his desk, drawing my attention back to him. "It's time you grow up and take yourself and hockey seriously. Next year, you'll be playing against the best of the best. Your raw talent can only take you so far."

I roll my eyes. It's not like he hasn't given me some iteration of this speech twice a semester for the last three years. I will admit it coming a week into the start of the school year is a new record. One I'm honestly not too proud to have beaten.

"I know, Uncle Matt. I promise I'll behave."

"I hope so," he looks at me suspiciously as I shut his office door.

After meeting my uncle, I walk across campus to the athlete-only weight room, ready to run our captain-led lift.

My uncle may think I have coasted to my role as team captain, but I have earned the trust of my teammates and coaches, and I don't take that lightly. Over the last three years, I have helped the coaches develop workouts, ran player-led practices, mentored other forwards, and helped first-year students adapt to college. Not to

mention, I have a 3.8 GPA and will graduate with a finance degree in the spring.

I'm not shocked that the first person I see when I get to the gym is Byron, who looks like he needs a spotter on the bench press.

"Hey, you ready By?" I ask, checking the plates he's slid onto the barbell.

"Yeah, I have a meeting with my academic advisor in an hour, so I need to get this thing over with."

I've known Byron Andrews since elementary school. We met when we were invited to a hockey camp for underprivileged kids in New York City. Even though he's a year younger than me, we became instant friends.

I got a little excited at how quickly I picked up skating until I realized I didn't know how to stop. Luckily, a kid with shaggy blonde hair sticking out of his helmet was there to break my fall, and we have been best friends ever since.

He was also the first teammate to say something to some asshole kid who made a comment about me being one of the few biracial hockey players they've ever played against. He still curses people out who make comments about it.

We've both come a long way since that camp, earning spots on travel teams and college scholarships. I'm pretty sure if you told those kids wearing hand-me-down skates that we would one day be potential lottery picks in the NHL draft, they wouldn't believe you.

"Six, seven, eight, nine, ten," I count out as Byron finishes his set. The bar settles in its rest, and as we swap positions, I notice a familiar look



in his eyes. He's devising some kind of plan, and those never end well.

"What?" I ask, hoping for once that Byron's plan will be something wholesome, something that our moms would approve of.

"I invited the team over tonight and told them they were in charge of bringing new people. I need a change of scenery, you know what I mean. The old ones are becoming clingy."

I take a measured breath, annoyed that Byron went and planned this party without asking me what I thought first. He knows I had a meeting with my uncle today, and I don't think he thought about what it would look like for us to throw a party on the same day. I guess when you're not the one getting into trouble, you think with the head below the belt.

"Byron, I just promised my uncle I would be a perfect saint until the season starts."

"It'll be tame. Come on, man, we have a reputation to uphold. You want these freshmen to think we are soft?"

If there is one thing hockey players hate, it's being called soft. It doesn't matter if it concerns drinking, hockey or girls; we're anything but soft.

I push through the last couple of reps, not caring about the crashing sound of metal on metal the machine makes, when I hastily place it back in its home.

"Fuck you, Byron," I barely get out through my labored breaths.

He smirks. He knows he's got me. I can prove to my uncle that we can have a calm get-together like

civilized adults.

“Okay,” I respond reluctantly. “But I mean it. It needs to stay small. I can’t get in any more trouble before the season starts.”



This party is anything but small. The house is overflowing, the smell of weed lingers, and Byron is rubbing his dick against some girl on our couch.

I consider going to the library to get a head start on my work for the week, really not wanting to disappoint my uncle. The need for approval evaporates almost as quickly as it came when the hot blonde cheerleader I met last week grabs my hand and pulls me towards the stairs.

I follow the sway of her full hips as we make our way through a maze of beer-pong and sloppy dancing. I stop her at the bottom of the stairs that lead to my bedroom and walk her back until she is flat against the wall, caged in by my caramel-colored arms. I lean in and whisper what I plan to do to her once I get to my room. I’m about to tell her how good I can make her feel when I hear a deep voice screaming her name.

“What the fuck are you doing, Samantha?”

Before I know what’s happening, a fist closes in on me, and I see my roommates lunging toward the culprit. Byron, Marcus and Aaron grab him and force him out of our off-campus house.

Twelve hours.

It only took twelve hours to break my promise to my uncle.

2

Ivy



“Are we hungry?” I coo. Riley’s tail starts swaying, and his big brown eyes light up. The seventy-five-pound golden retriever loves to eat and I love any day I can earn his love by being the one to feed him.

I’m the starting shooting guard for the Westvale University basketball team and Riley is our school’s mascot. When I’m not at practice or a game, I take him to any home games on campus.

Westvale has an on-campus animal shelter that houses Riley and other animals that are looking for a home. It’s my happy place and has been since I was a kid. The shelter is one of the reasons I stayed in Westvale to attend college. That along with my family living here, the pre-vet program being one of the best in the country, and the full-ride

scholarship I was offered to play college basketball. Everything I wanted right at home.

Happy barks fill the shelter. The familiar sound eases the anxiety settling in my chest. I know it comes from spreading myself too thin, a bad habit my sister has been begging me to correct for years. That anxiety was what carved a hole in my heart that only the love of a puppy has ever been able to fill. My parents died when I was eight, and Ruby, my older sister, became my guardian at just twenty-one, the same age I am now. The sudden loss of half my family triggered panic attacks that always rear their head at the worst time. At some point, my sister decided it was best for me to talk to someone outside the family, so she brought me to a therapist who suggested I work with animals to help with my anxiety. That's where my love of animals was fostered. It is the one good thing that came from that horrific night.

“Hey, Ivy,” Jill, my supervisor at the shelter, says softly, knowing how easily I startle.

“Oh hey Jill, do you need something?” I ask quietly, trying to lower my heart rate, embarrassed at how I jumped even with her cautious approach.

“So I just got off the phone with the school's athletic director, Matt Holloway.” I look at her and let out a low laugh.

“Jill, I'm on the basketball team. I know who Mr. Holloway is.”

Jill nods, and I think she is slightly embarrassed because she just stands in front of me, completely silent.

“What did he want?”

“Do you know Jalen Holloway?” she asks, seemingly amused.

“I mean, who doesn’t? That pompous ass walks around campus like he is god’s gift to the world.”

“Oh, glad to hear you two are friends,” she says sarcastically. “Mr. Holloway has just informed me that Jalen will be volunteering with us for the rest of the year, and he asked for you specifically to be his supervisor.”

I stare at her silently, begging her not to add another thing to my already overflowing plate. “I have no say in this? I really don’t have time to add babysitting to my resume.”

“Sorry, Sweetie, Mr. Holloway thinks you’ll be a good influence. As an athlete with your reputation, I’m sure he hopes you’ll help turn Jalen’s attitude around.”

I sigh, knowing that Jill can’t change the circumstances, and even if she could, I’m too much of a people pleaser to say no.

“Make the best of it, Ivy. You never know what lies beneath the façade people put on for the rest of the world.”



After my shift at the shelter, I walk into my apartment and sink into the couch.

“What’s wrong?” Lola asks from our kitchen table, where she is buried under a stack of textbooks. Yeah, syllabus week is not really a thing for biology majors.

I've known Lola since we were paired as lab partners in a mandatory biology class. She was a freshman, and I was starting my sophomore year. We've been inseparable ever since.

Physically looking at us, we couldn't be more different. I'm nearly six feet tall with long golden brown hair and fair skin. Lola is five foot three with shoulder-length black hair and olive skin.

"Do you know who Jalen Halloway is?" I ask, curling into a ball in the corner of the couch before throwing a blanket over myself.

There's a lust in her eyes that has me rolling mine.

"Are you seriously asking that, Vee? I don't think there is a person on campus who hasn't seen his banner hanging in the dining hall?"

The life-sized banner features the hockey team's captains and schedule.

I can't help but laugh at the reminder of how differently this school treats the women's and men's teams.

"How could I forget that? He gets a banner, and we have to give away free pizza to get people to come to our games," I pause for dramatic effect, "and we won the National Championship last year. Anyway, I guess he got in trouble, and Mr. Halloway, the athletic director, is making him volunteer at the shelter. He thinks I'll be a good influence on his nephew."

"Well, he is hot, and you need to have some fun." Lola teases.

I've been known to put a lot of pressure on myself. I focus too much on school and basketball

and not enough on being a carefree college student.

I know she means well, but she understands why I focus on basketball and school. My sister's life turned upside down at twenty-one when she became my legal guardian. She dropped everything in her life so mine could stay as normal as possible after our parents died. She remained in this dead-end town, spending every day behind a desk working as a receptionist in a dental office.

So, at thirteen, I made a list of everything I could do to make my sister's life easier.

- 1) *Get good grades in high school*
- 2) *Stay out of trouble*
- 3) *Get a basketball scholarship*
- 4) *Get into vet school*
- 5) *Pay my sister back for the sacrifices she made for me*

There are only two more items to cross off that list. Now isn't the time for a distraction.

## Jalen



You would think I'm three years old by the way my uncle insists he walk me into the shelter. I side-eye him as we make our way through the parking lot, and he just laughs.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

He doesn't answer, just grins, and it pisses me off that he's enjoying this so much.

When I open the door to the animal shelter a bell chimes, my introduction to the weirdest punishment I've ever been given.

A lady who has to be in her fifties greets us with an over-friendly, almost fake smile. She walks out from the rear of the desk and extends her hand.

"You must be Matt and Jalen! I'm so happy you're here," she says, a little too cheerily, as she



shakes my uncle's hand. "We're so happy to have you working with us this year, Jalen."

"I'm excited," I lie, hoping I'll be able to charm my way out of this in a few weeks. It's not that I'm not an animal person. I have always wanted a dog. It's just that I should be focusing on preparing for the season and the NHL draft, not babysitting dogs.

"If you come this way, I'll introduce you to Ivy. She will be your supervisor while you're with us."

I follow Jill through the shelter, looking at the white walls and faded posters that cover the chipping paint. This place needs a facelift. It's depressing enough that these dogs don't have homes. The least we could do is give them a happier place to live. Jill guides us through the shelter until we reach the back. I stop in my tracks when I notice my supervisor is absolutely stunning. She has to be five-foot-ten with long legs that support an ass that would pour out of my grip.

"Jalen, this is Ivy. I'm sure you know her. She is on the basketball team."

Ivy turns and gives us a polite smile.

"I don't," I reply. I'm wondering where this girl has been hiding. The different sports teams at Westvale are almost like their own version of Greek life. We're all intertwined, so I have no idea how I haven't seen Ivy around campus. "Hi, Ivy. I'm Jalen."

She just gives me a little nod.

"Anything you need while you're here with us, Jalen, Ivy will help you with. I'll leave you two to

get acquainted.” She turns and leads my uncle out of the room.

I twist the bottom of my braids, waiting for Ivy to give me some kind of instruction. After an awkwardly long lull in conversation, I guess I’ll have to be the one to break the ice.

“So you play basketball? How come I’ve never seen you around before?”

“I’m not sure. I guess we must hang out with different crowds.” She says wryly as she fills the next dog’s food bowl.

I’m distracted when she bends down, and her sweatshirt rides up, exposing a thin layer of skin. I take a moment while she isn’t facing me to check her out without feeling like a creep.

She is absolutely gorgeous. Her caramel-colored hair is pulled in a ponytail, and even with it tied back, it stops in the middle of her back. Her long legs are folded under her as she scoops dog food into bowls she has spread out in front of her. Being six-foot-five, I love a girl with height, and maybe a basketball player is what I’ve been missing all this time.

A black lab struts towards me, and settles himself at my feet. I kneel to pet him.

“What’s this guy’s name?” I ask Ivy. For the first time since we’ve been left alone, she truly acknowledges my presence. She looks up at me with a smile. Okay, the smile is clearly for the dog.

“This is Elvis. He’s the sweetest boy. All he needs to be happy is treats and belly scratches.” He rolls over, and Ivy and I both reach down toward his belly at the same time. Our hands graze, and

Ivy pulls away like she's going to catch some kind of STD just by touching my hand.

“Should we make some kind of schedule? I know we both have seasons starting soon?” Ivy asks a little too professionally for my liking.

“Sounds good to me. Give me your phone, we should probably have each other's numbers.”

You would think I was Ted Bundy with how reluctant she is to give me her phone. After I save my number, I text myself, so I have hers, too. Still curious about why I haven't seen her, I rephrase the question I asked when I first got to the shelter.

“Did you transfer here? I haven't seen you around the Riley Center before.” Her glare doesn't soften, but this time she does answer my question.

“No, I didn't transfer here,” she says harshly. Her light brown ponytail sways as she turns towards me, nearly hitting her in the face. “I just don't waste my weekends getting drunk in unfinished basements.” I press my hands to my chest, pretending her words have wounded me.

“A few weeks with me, and I think we can change that.”

No response. Instead, she turns to continue feeding the dogs. I can't remember the last time a girl was so indifferent to me. I kind of like it.



I had to rush out of my meeting with Ivy to prepare for a team lift. We have a few weeks before official workouts start, but I've been holding captain-run activities since the semester started. Making sure

the freshmen are getting acclimated to college life and the upperclassmen followed the summer training program is extremely important to giving us the best shot at winning as a team. The team might find it overbearing, but I have one last shot at winning a championship.

I'm in a daze as I move toward my locker, still astonished that I hadn't met Ivy before this afternoon. Granted, the hockey and women's basketball teams don't normally run in the same circle.

I'm pulling my shirt over my head when I remember Marcus'— my roommate and teammate for the last three years—girlfriend is on the basketball team.

When I enter the athletic center lobby, Marcus is tying his thick black curls into a bun, waiting for the rest of the team before going into the weight room.

“Marcus, is that you?” I squint my eyes, pretending to be looking at a mirage in the distance. Marcus West has lived with Aaron, Byron and me since we moved into our house two years ago, but I don't think I've seen him in a week. He's spent every free moment he's had with his girlfriend trying to make up for the time they won't have once games start.

“Stop being an ass,” he practically screams at me over the music playing in the gym. “when you get yourself a girl, you'll appreciate having somewhere to stay that doesn't smell like weed and stale beer.”

“Yeah, okay.” I snark as I bend over to tie my shoes. Marcus heads down the hall to the student

athlete exclusive weight room.

“Hey, do you know Ivy Rhodes? She’s on Indy’s team, right?” I ask once I catch up with him.

“Yeah, they’re roommates too. Why?”

“My uncle is making me volunteer at the animal shelter. That psycho punching me last week was his last straw.” I tried to argue that I was punched and didn’t retaliate. I thought that should be rewarded, but he wouldn’t set that example for everyone else to learn from.

“Ivy is a pre-vet major. I think working there is part of their curriculum.”

We walk toward the row of treadmills to warm up before the rest of the team gets here.

“She’s pretty mellow,” he continues, “really focused on school and ball. You know she runs the program that brings Riley to games. How haven’t you noticed her before?”

I shrug, not really sure.

“She’s pretty hot, though,” I rarely talk about girls with my roommates, mainly because there is nothing to discuss. I keep them at arm’s length and end things before any *feelings* can rear their ugly head.

I turn to answer him as we set the pace on our treadmills, and that’s when I notice that we’re sharing the gym... with the women’s basketball team.

“What do you think about a party tomorrow night?” Marcus asks. “I think Indy said they don’t have practice this weekend.”

That earns Marcus a slap on the back because I really like the idea.

I know, I know, I just promised my uncle I'd calm things down a little, but how wild can a party with the women's basketball team be?

“Tell Indy to invite the whole team.”



Once Marcus and I shower, we wait for Indy outside her locker room.

Marcus and I are discussing our schedule for the upcoming season when the women's locker room door starts to open.

“Hey, Ind,” I greet her while Marcus leans in to kiss her. The door opens again, and the fluorescent light acts like a spotlight as Ivy joins us in the hallway.

I can't help but notice her natural beauty. Her wet hair is slicked back into a bun that rests at the nape of her neck. Unlike a few hours ago when I saw her at the shelter, her face is bare, and reveals freckles that flow over her nose and across her cheeks.

I give Ivy a head nod. “How was your lift?” I ask in Ivy's direction.

“Fine.”

Okay, so I guess we're still on a one-word response basis.

Marcus must catch the plea for help in my eyes and resurrects the conversation.

“So,” Marcus takes over, “we are having a party tomorrow, and we thought it would be fun if your team stopped by to celebrate your National Championship.”

As much as I hate that Marcus and Indy never waste a second to shove their relationship down your throat, his pride in speaking about Indy’s accomplishments makes me think it might be nice to have someone to share my life’s big moments with.

Last season, we were riding the bus to the airport after we lost in the playoffs, but you wouldn’t have known we lost if you looked at Marcus. I couldn’t grasp how he could be so happy after what was the most devastating loss of my career.

When Marcus last tried to have a party to celebrate Indy’s big win, we shot him down. I would have rather poured salt in an open wound than celebrate another team winning what I’ve worked for my entire life. But now I’m happy we didn’t because it’s the perfect excuse to have the girls over.

“Babe, are you serious?” Indy gushes. “I’ll talk to the girls, but I’m sure everyone will be there.”

“Are we going to be graced with your presence, Ivy?” I ask.

Indy looks toward her best friend, and they have an entire conversation without uttering a word. “She’ll be there. She promised me she would have some fun this year. Right, Vee?”

“I did.” She murmurs.

Alright, two words. We’re making progress.

## Jalen



“Give me twenty minutes, and dinner will be ready,” Byron yells from the kitchen as I untie my sneakers and set them by the door.

The smell of Sunday sauce wafts through the house, and that can only mean one thing, Byron’s making my mother’s sauce and meatball recipes. Growing up with an Italian mother from the South and a black father from New York City meant the Holloway household never lacked flavorful food. Personally, I never had much of an interest in cooking, but growing up, Byron spent more time at my house than his own. He was raised by his mom, who worked night shifts at the hospital, and my parents didn’t want him to spend so much time alone. So, when he was at my house, Mom taught him how to make meatballs and homemade pasta while Dad helped him perfect his fried chicken recipe.



“How was the shelter?” Aaron asks from the couch. We didn’t get a chance to talk during our training session because I like to split us into groups with different people each time. Then Aaron left with Byron while I waited for the girls with Marcus.

“Fine. Do y’all know anything about Ivy Rhodes?”

“Isn’t she on the basketball team?” Byron asks from behind the stove. “And she’s really hot, right?”

“She’s my supervisor at the shelter, and I haven’t really seen her around campus before.”

Aaron looks up from whatever he is watching on the television. “Yeah, she doesn’t go out much. She’s really into school.”

I laugh because we are all student athletes, but they pack our schedule with so many hockey obligations that it is nearly impossible for school to be our main priority. I often feel like an athlete who occasionally is able to go to class.

“We had a few classes together freshman year, and then it was like she disappeared, never really saw her again.” Aaron adds.

“Okay well, Marcus and I invited the women’s basketball team over to celebrate last year’s title win.” I pull out a chair from the kitchen table and decide to finish some homework before dinner.

Aaron and Byron slowly turn until they are facing me. Their grins tell me I’m about to get roasted. The boys weren’t happy when I enacted a temporary party ban at the house, and then they proceeded to bet on how long it would last. In all honesty, I knew it wasn’t going to last long, but

not even lasting a weekend is pretty sad. I guess I'll just take the repercussions as they come.

I start flipping through my finance textbook, with the few moments of silence I'm granted until Aaron pulls out the chair across from me.

"So what do you think the odds are that Ivy comes Saturday?"

A weird possessiveness comes over me, and I'm not really sure what to make of it. Ivy has made it clear she isn't too fond of me, but for some reason, I have this urge to protect her from Aaron's manwhore tendencies.

"Considering you have the same amount of charm as a brick, it doesn't matter what you say to her. You have no chance." Byron shoots back over a pot of boiling sauce.

"I, on the other hand, ooze charm."

My face grows hot at the thought of either of them with Ivy. Is this what jealousy feels like? If it is, I don't like it. I'm amazed we haven't been in this situation before. With all the hockey groupies on campus, I guess we've never needed to compete for hookups.

Curiosity gets the best of me and I start making a mental checklist to see if any of our hookups crossed paths. I tap my finger on the table running through three years of hazy college memories, only to realize I don't really care to remember anything about the girls from my past, my eyes are set on the future. And that future begins Saturday.

"Let the best man win," Aaron says. He smiles up at me, and I can feel my body tense. I rest my hands on our hand-me-down mahogany table and

stand to ensure they fully grasp what I'm about to say.

“Leave her alone. She doesn't need a bunch of horned-up hockey players trying to get in her pants the first time she comes to our house.” I force Aaron to meet my eyes because I'm serious about everyone feeling comfortable enough to come to a party at our house. If Ivy wanted that kind of attention, she would have been attending parties at our house for the last three years.

I watch as the wheels turn in Aaron Stallway's brain, and he slowly nods.

“I get it, boss.” I sit back in my chair more relaxed, but not totally confident I can trust the words of my roommate. If I have to spend the year with Ivy as my supervisor, I don't need my roommates complicating my relationship.

5

Ivy



Stand in front of my closet, foot tapping along with the pop music playing in Indy's room. How do girls decide what to wear to a party? Because I am struggling right now.

I strum through my closet until I land on a mid-length dress that is way too formal to wear to a party where our main source of alcohol is coming from a keg. I toss it to the reject pile—more like mountain—of clothes on my floor. The outfits there are slowly starting to outnumber what's left in my closet.

How do people do this every weekend? Is this what takes me out? I can see the headlines now: *Westvale Student Found Under Avalanche Of Clothes, Due to Indecisiveness And Lack of Party Experience.*

I stumble two steps backward, falling flat on my bed. I let out a cathartic groan that's been wanting

to be freed since the ax of outfit number two.

I've seen what my friends wear to parties, and I don't have anything in my closet that compares to their plunging tops and skin-tight skirts. Don't get me wrong, they look amazing, but that's just never been my style.

I prefer Jordans to heels. Jeans to dresses. I'm so out of my element right now. Who am I kidding? I've been out of it since I agreed to go to this party. I'm struggling to comprehend why I said yes when Indy asked if I'd come tonight. It's not like I've never been to a party. I went to my fair share in high school, but once I got to college, school and basketball became so intense that something had to go, and I chose to party less.

If I was lying to myself, I'd say I'm going tonight because, as team captain, I should be there. It's a sweet gesture by Marcus and his housemates to throw this party for us. But last night, while lying in bed alone, I found myself thinking about Jalen's blue eyes. I've never seen eyes so striking. They soften his masculine features. His square jawline, the veins that act like a roadmap between toned muscles and intricate tattoos. Tattoos that sprawl to places beyond the naked eye. If my focus wasn't on feeding the dogs, my ogling would have become embarrassingly obvious.

I'd never admit it if asked, but Jalen Holloway intrigues me. If you look past the fact that he's slept with half the girls at Westvale, you see how charming he is. How easily he captivates a room just by flashing one of his blinding smiles. His reputation precedes him and I will never be option number one for a man with a roster full of girls.

I've been in a couple of relationships, and they were fine, fun even. I still see my exes when they come home, and I need a little *stress relief*. It's probably a little selfish, but I realized long ago that with dreams as big as mine, I need to do what's best for me and not give a fuck about what others think I should do.

"Lola, why is it so hard to be a girl?" I moan, my eyes glued to the ceiling. The echo of heels click against the hardwood floor telling me she's already dressed and ready to go. Lola is going to Jasper's—our favorite hole-in-the-wall college bar—with a few of our friends from the pre-vet program. She'll meet Indy and me at the hockey house later tonight when it opens up to people other than those on the basketball and hockey teams.

She stops in my doorway and presses her hands against either side of the opening. Her eyes drag from the pile of clothes on the floor to me.

"What's wrong?" She asks through a muffled laugh.

"I have no idea what to wear tonight."

She starts rummaging through my closet, picking through endless pairs of mom jeans and NBA graphic tees. Lola's nearly through the options left hanging in my closet when she pauses and starts tapping her pointer finger to her chin. I don't think I've ever seen someone do that in real life. It makes her look like some kind of evil villain hatching a plan to take over the world. Or trying to get me laid.

Her eyes are drawn to the back of my closet, where the few dresses I own live. As she holds each

one in front of her, I veto it, and it gets tossed to the floor with the others. We repeat this process until all the dresses I own are on my bedroom floor.

“Arriving in your bra and underwear is bold,” she taunts me. “just going to dive head first into your partying era.”

I’m already out of my comfort zone going to this party, so if I’m going, I’m wearing something I feel confident in.

My phone pings, and I glance down to where it’s lying on my bed. It’s just an Instagram notification, so I ignore it because if I don’t find an outfit in the next twenty minutes, Indy is going to rip me a new one.

When I look back toward my closet, Lola has pulled out my favorite pair of camouflage cargo pants and pairs it with a low-cut bodysuit. I love the outfit, but I’m nervous it’s going to be too casual compared to the outfits my teammates sent in our group chat.

“Are you sure this is fine?”

“I want you to enjoy yourself tonight, and you won’t do that if you’re tugging on the hem of your dress all night. Plus, since when do you want to be like everyone else?”

I put up a good front, but I care what people think about me. Growing up, I was teased for being raised by my sister, and while their kids made jokes at my expense, the parents took pity on me. Making it known how hard they thought Ruby and my lives must have been. It’s better now, but sometimes my insecurities cause me to be anxious in social settings. I have panic attacks when I’m

stressed or overworked. During years of therapy, I've gained all the tools to try and nip them in the bud. Luckily, they work...most of the time.

Lola lays the outfit on my bed to free her arms. Her newly empty arms wrap around me, squeezing me tight. I can always trust my girls to remind me of who I am when I'm tempted to follow the crowd. Everyone deserves to have a Lola in their corner.

"I guess you have a point there," I place an exaggerated kiss on the top of my tiny friend's head.

Running my fingers over the Lola-approved outfit, a surge of confidence runs through me. It's quickly taken over by a voice in my head telling me I'm being selfish. That I should get a head start on next week's lab reports, but I push that thought back. Maybe everyone is right, and I should let myself have some fun.

I sit at my desk and pull out my makeup bag. When I glance back to my bedroom door, Lola is standing there with a goofy grin plastered on her face. I return it with a thankful one.

"Have fun tonight, Vee. You deserve to enjoy your senior year."



"Shots!"

What the fuck did I get myself into tonight? At the bottom of the stairs—tequila bottle in hand—is Indy with a sinister smile, making me think I might regret promising to have a couple drinks with her before we head to the hockey house.



Indy has all the fixings for a proper tequila shot lined up on our kitchen counter. I hold my empty shot glass to Indy. A waterfall of amber liquid flows into my glass, and my body warms with anticipation. I set down my shot to pour salt on the area between my thumb and forefinger, waiting for my roommates to do the same. Once they're ready, we lick the salt off our hands, down the shot, and suck the lime.

"I'll meet you at Marcus' after the party opens up," Lola reminds us with a puckered face.

"He said you could come with us if you want. Are you sure you want to wait?"

"It's fine. I promised some friends I'd meet them for drinks at Jasper's."

A small piece of me is jealous of Lola because the few times a semester I do go out, it's always to Jasper's. It's always filled with crowded booths and a packed dance floor. A place you can always count on for a good time. I'd rather have a few fun nights out with my friends that come with a satisfaction guarantee than stringing a bunch of mediocre weekends together.

"But don't worry, I'll be there. Do you really think I'd miss Ivy's first house party?" she jokes.

I shake my head. "It's not my first house party," I responded wryly. "I just have priorities that are bigger than partying."

The thought of my family sobers me up a little too much for my liking. Tonight's about me letting loose.

"Let's take another shot," I suggest. "I'm ready to have some fun this year."

6

## Ivy



Indy struts right through the front door, energy high and ready to drink.

“Party’s here!” she yells, always one to make her presence known.

Indy wanted to make sure she had some time with Marcus—they are so disgustingly in love, it’s sickening— before the rest of our teams showed up, so now we are the first two people at the party.

I’m a step behind Indy, a little hesitant now that we are at the boys’ house. She looks stunning in her skin-tight dress and heels that accentuate her already amazing ass. I look down at my cargo pants and Jordan 1s, wondering if I should have followed “*the college girl uniform*” that the rest of my team is going to show up in.

We're greeted by Marcus as soon as we walk through the door. His smile grows as his eyes wander down Indy's dress. I watch as his tongue runs over his bottom lip.

"She looks good tonight, doesn't she?" I ask Marcus. He pulls me into his side.

"You both do."

His words don't help my confidence because I could have come here wearing a paper bag, and Marcus would have told me I looked amazing. He is just that sweet of a guy.

"I know you're lying, but thank you." I lean into his hug for a second before letting him go so he can see his girlfriend.

"Who's here?" a deep voice asks.

"It's Indy and her roommate Ivy. I told them to come early so we could have a few drinks before the house becomes a zoo. That's Byron." Marcus' head bobs toward the smiling hockey player with shaggy blonde hair.

"Cool, I'll make some drinks. Anything in particular you guys want?"

Indy turns towards me, and I shrug. I'm not particularly picky when it comes to alcohol.

"Surprise us!"

Byron smirks before heading back to the makeshift bar. We follow him into the kitchen, where I'm introduced to Aaron, who helps Byron make the drinks. He has a bottle of tequila in hand, and cans of soda water are scattered on the counter. It looks like we'll be sticking with tequila tonight.

Aaron hands me my drink. Before he goes to make the next, he runs a hand through his auburn hair. He's handsome in a Kennedy kind of way. It's a little too put together for my taste.

I'm already halfway through my drink, and there's been no sign of Jalen. Indy and Lola have been harassing me about Jalen since he and Marcus told us about tonight. Apparently, Marcus said something about how Jalen has been asking his teammates about me.

Indy is convinced that Jalen is going to try something tonight. I told her the questions are probably because he's stuck with me as his supervisor at the shelter for the year.

Lola is convinced Jalen was flirting with me that first day he was in the shelter, and no matter how many times I deny it, Lola refuses to let it go. In my opinion, Jalen is the frontrunner for the biggest flirt on campus, so even if he was flirting with me, I'm not taking any of it too seriously. But I can't say I hate the possible flirting. Jalen is hot, and he knows it. He has an edge to him. His six-foot-five-inch frame serves as a canvas for stories that are told by his tattoos. I shake the dirty thoughts running through my mind. I'm not here to find a Jalen-sized distraction. I'm here for myself, to remind everyone I know how to have some fun.

I turn to talk to Indy, but I'm instantly drawn to a figure descending the stairs. He's wearing black fitted jeans and a button-up shirt, with what some might say is one too many buttons undone. I, on the other hand, can't stop staring at the mural permanently inked onto his chest. I imagine myself slowly unbuttoning the shirt to see the full picture.

I return to reality with a nudge by Indy before she whispers, “Stop gawking,” into my ear. Thanks to the highlighter that I decided to apply at the last minute, I don’t think she notices the rosy tint that I know is spreading over my cheeks.

“What’s on the menu tonight?” Jalen asks no one in particular.

“We started with tequila,” Byron answers before handing Jalen a shot.

“Are you going to make me drink alone?” At first, I think he is asking the group as a whole, but when nobody answers, I look in his direction, and his eyes are locked on mine. They darken nearly to navy, taunting me.

His intensity jolts a current of energy up my spine. I’m starting to wonder if everyone feels Jalen’s intensity like I do. Do they feel the same gravitational pull?

The intensity turns competitive as he waits for someone to answer him like it’s a dare. As a competitor, I can’t let him get away with this. You don’t make it to this level in our athletic careers without being a little ruthless.

I don’t take my eyes off Jalen when I tell him, “I think we are all ready for another.”

I just hope that it is not a mistake.

Indy shoots me a look that says, where has this bitch been the last three years. It pulls a giggle out of me.

“You’re the one that wanted me to have fun this year.”

“I hope I don’t regret that.” Indy laughs.

We're both handed a shot and another mixed drink.

## Jalen



After we take our shots I let the group know what I have planned for tonight. I figured with just our two teams being here for the start of the night, it would be fun to make tonight's event a little more high-stakes.

When I told Byron about my idea, he made fun of me, saying I was only planning this to impress Ivy. He's wrong. I am doing it because it ensures that Ivy will have to spend some time with me. And maybe in a competitive, light-hearted environment, she will speak more than two words at a time to me.

“Y'all want to hear what we're doing tonight?”

Five pairs of eyes turn toward me. Some curious, others are confused.

“Aren’t we just going to stand around and drink?” Marcus asks while pouring us another round of shots.

“No, I thought we would have a little more fun.” I pull the list of events I decided on from my pocket and unfold it for everyone to see.

“So I set up a party olympics. I thought with all of us being athletes, it would be fun to add a little competition to the night.” I step around the counter to head to the living room to set up the games I have planned. “Ivy, you wanna help me set up?”

Her eyes are blank, and for a moment, I’m nervous she is going to turn me down. She eventually nods. I let her step in front of me, and in a risky move, I guide her to the living room with my hand on the small of her back. To my surprise, she doesn’t pull away. I’m silently thanking the tequila gods because I feel those shots are mostly to thank.

The first place we stop is the back closet to get the folding table to set up a game of beer pong. It’s not until I turn to hand her the table that I notice what she is wearing. It is different from what most girls wear at our parties. I take in her sneakers with a nod of approval. You can never go wrong with the classics. My gaze drifts to her camouflage pants and stops when it reaches her low-cut top. The plunging neckline still leaves enough to the imagination. And my imagination is running wild.

There is something different about Ivy. She has this quiet confidence that I find incredibly sexy. I continue to take in her curves until I hear something humming in my ear. Ivy clears her throat. I pretend to rummage through the closet.



I'd normally make a big show of getting caught checking someone out, but Ivy has me second-guessing myself.

After taking a moment to gather myself, I turn back to Ivy and ask, "Would you want to make tonight's competition a little more interesting?"

Ivy's eyes narrow like she's trying to get a read on my intentions for this side bet. Then her head tilts to the side, intrigued to find out more.

I don't want to give her a chance to say no. My roommates already think she is way out of my league, but tell an athlete they can't do something, and it only makes them want it more.

I look into her coffee-colored eyes and propose my plan. "If the boys and I win, I get to take you out on a date, and if you and your team take the gold, I'll keep my head down and not bother you at the shelter for the rest of the year."

She's hesitant for a moment. I tuck my hands into my pockets. Something about putting the ball in her court is a little unnerving.

I'm surprised when she offers me a counterproposition, "I want to up the stakes a little. If you win, we'll go on that date, but if I win, you and Riley have to dress up in matching costumes for the football game that's on Halloween."

I look at her, stunned. But her eyes meet mine with a hint of confidence. This isn't the girl I met recently who only spoke to me in two-word sentences. There is something more to her. Someone I want to get to know.

"I'll take that bet baby, but remember, I don't lose."

“We’re the ones with a National Championship,” she says with a wink. “I think we are going to have some fun tonight.” She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip and my body stiffens. I think I’m about to be in for a long night.



Ivy and I finish setting up right as our teammates start making their way into my house. Unlike my housemates, the rest of my teammates are excited about the twist to a normal party. Anticipation pumps up my fellow athletes like we’re getting ready for a season-defining game.

I take the list I’ve been carrying to help set up the games and tape it to the wall. Ivy and Indy thought it would be best to do only one event at a time so we could all watch and cheer on our teammates. The list will act like a live scoreboard ready for the winners of each event to be added for everyone to see.

“The events tonight will go as follows,” I announce to a room full of tipsy athletes.

“Why are you speaking like you have a stick up your ass?” Eric Webb, our sophomore goalie, yells over his can of light beer.

I shoot him a nice long look of both of my middle fingers before I rattle off the “events” for tonight’s party olympics.

“Flip cup, stack cup, drunk twister, kings cup and strip beer pong are what we have planned for tonight.” I cup my hands around my lips to amplify my voice. “Each team can choose who they want for each event except for the last one,” I announce

the twist I've kept to myself. "Team captains will have to participate in the last event."

Ivy is standing next to the list tapped on the wall. I watch her eyes scan down the list until she reaches event number five. She runs a hand through her hair, and it breaks up the loose curls she put in it tonight. Her lips are pressed flat. Her expression is impossible to read.

"I thought it would be fun to have some friendly competition before we start our seasons. The first team to win three out of the five games wins."



We update the crinkled list after each event. Neither team has had a clear advantage, with the winners alternating after each game.

Flip Cup- Hockey

Stack Cup- BBall

Drunk Twister-Hockey (Told y'all we  
were flexible)

Kings Cup-BBall

Strip Beer Pong-

I can't say I'm disappointed that we have to play the last game or that we'll have to take our clothes off. Did I need to make this event strip pong? No, I didn't. Did I ensure it would be Ivy and Indy playing against Marcus and myself? Absolutely.

By the time we set up the table with the specialty cups in a pyramid of ten, Lola has arrived. She's standing with Ivy and Indy on the opposite

side of the table. I know Lola because she has come out with Indy a bunch of times since she and Marcus started dating.

I toss the ping-pong balls to the other side of the table. The orange balls take a few bounces before they get to the girls. I'm not nervous about them having the first shot. I'm weirdly good at beer pong, and the added motivation of wanting to keep my clothes on— or seeing Ivy out of hers— should sharpen my game.

Indy takes the inaugural shot. It bounces on our side of the table, and Marcus slaps the ball away before it can land in a cup. It's a little aggressive, but he knows that Indy won't let him live it down if she wins tonight and trust me she can be ruthless.

When it's Ivy's turn, she steps to the center of the table and bounces the ball on the edge before she catches it again. Her concentration is undeniable. Her tongue peeks out between her lips as she carefully decides which cup to aim for. She exudes confidence. But she overestimates her strength, and the ball flies through the air, never hitting the table. It only stops when it hits me in the chest.

"You don't have to try so hard to get me naked." I say with a wink.

Marcus hits his first shot, and once Indy is done with the lukewarm beer, she flips the cup over and holds it towards Marcus so he can read aloud,

"Don't remove any clothing," he says enthusiastically, "Thank god, I don't think I realized everyone was going to potentially see my girl in her bra and panties." He says loud enough for only me to hear.

I can't help but laugh. We've all had a good amount to drink at this point in the night, and truths are rolling off everyone's lips.

When I take my shot, I can hear the swish of cheap beer when I sink the ball perfectly into the center of the cup at the point of the pyramid. Ivy flips it over after she finishes the beer. She has to remove one item of lower-body clothing. My dick twitches at just the thought of seeing her ass without the barrier of her pants. When she bends down, it's obvious she and I aren't sharing the same ideas for this cup.

She bends down slowly, sensually and with her Js lost before the game of Twister, she just has her socks to remove. Yeah, remember when I thought it was cool she wore sneakers to the party, not so much anymore.

"Hell no, you're not getting away with that, Angel," I protest. This girl might be a rule follower, but I have a feeling there is more to Ivy than this good girl persona she's been hiding behind all these years.

"It said one item of lower body clothing the last I checked. You can't get much lower than your feet," she barks.

"Fine, but we made both cups to get the balls back so we can shoot again." I remind her of the rules.

Marcus and I are superstitious like most athletes, so he shoots first, but this time it rims out. I sink mine, but Ivy doesn't tell us what the cup's bottom says. Instead, her brown eyes darken as she wiggles out of her pants. She doesn't even flinch. Her cheeks don't blush. I, on the other

hand, can feel my cheeks heat, and my pants tighten.

My blood boils as my teammates rotate their positions in the room so they can get a look at Ivy's ass. What the fuck is going on. I just wanted a date with Ivy to get to know her so maybe our time at the shelter isn't so awkward. But now that she is plantless in my living room with most of my teammates gawking over her. I'm starting to regret spicing up this game of beer pong.

As the game progresses, Marcus' wardrobe can only be described as no shirt, no shoes, no problem. While I'm currently standing in my boxers and button-up shirt.

Ivy takes her next shot, but it rims out. I thank whichever party god controls this game because Marcus and I are one cup away from winning.

Since we haven't hit a cup in a few rounds, Marcus nudges me to switch up the order we have been going in. I hold the ball to his lips, and he kisses it. I align my elbow with the end of the table before I let the ball go. I hold my follow through as the ball soars into the final cup.

"Nothing but net," I say in a relaxed tone. Like I wasn't worried I would lose this game and never hear the end of it from my teammates.

The house breaks into celebration so rambunctious you would have thought we won the Stanley Cup.

"How was my follow through?" I ask Ivy as I walk toward the opposite end of the table.

"It could use some work." She's pissed off that they've lost. And it's pretty damn sexy how competitive she is.

Once I reach the opposite end of the table and when everyone is fully clothed, I hug Indy and purposefully brush Ivy's shoulder with mine.

I successfully distract her from the conversation Aaron is trying to have with her. I think I heard him ask her something about exchanging numbers. Little does he know I am one step ahead of him.

"I'll text you tomorrow," I say, reminding Ivy of the bet she swore she wouldn't lose.

## Ivy



It's been a week since Indy and I were pantless in the boys' living room.

The Sunday after the party, I woke up with a groggy mind and instant regret. Putting a wager on the party olympics seemed fun in the moment. After the side effects of the alcohol and false confidence faded—once I'd sobered up—the anxiety crept back in. So now I am avoiding Jalen.

Like the coward I am, I've used every excuse I could think of to postpone our date. I have answered his texts sparingly, using school to justify canceling our shelter sessions and then pretending to be sick so my coworker would take Riley to this week's home games. My roommates have told me I need to stop acting like a child. So today's the day I put on my big girl pants to meet Jalen at the shelter.



I go down the row and clip a leash onto each of the dogs that will be going on the walk with Jalen and I today. When I get to Riley, I sit on the floor so he can curl up on my lap. I'm running my hand through his golden fur, using the familiarity of the situation to ease my anxiety. It's like Riley can feel how tense I am, so he jumps up out of my lap and drags his tongue from my chin all the way up to my forehead. I let out a laugh so full that you would have never known that I was shaking when I got to the shelter today.

It's only seconds before the anxiety rears its ugly head again. A deep, gravelly voice is greeting Jill at the front desk. I try to shoo away the butterflies that have taken flight in my chest. I won't say they're making themselves at home but they've been frequent visitors.

I was chalking these feelings up to being nervous to meet someone new, but now, with Jalen walking toward me, I'm questioning if it is something more. The party last Saturday was the most fun I've had since senior year started. I was able to let my guard down and live in the moment. A moment that's lived on all week in our team group chat. New pictures of Jalen in his boxers come in at least twice a day, and when they do I find myself getting a little territorial, which is insane considering I can't stand the guy.

When I turn to grab the next group of leashes, I'm startled, not expecting Jalen to be only a few feet behind me.

"Oh hey," my voice is shaky as I try to catch my breath.

Without a word, he takes the leashes and walks toward the far end of the room. When all the dogs

are rounded up, Jalen and I start toward the back door and the walkways that loop through campus.

The cool fall air is crisp, and I soak it all in. It won't be long before these paths are buried under a few feet of snow.

I've lived in Westvale my whole life, and every year, I'm still in awe when the town is lined with gold and red leaves.

I look over at the man walking next to me, and for the first time, I really allow myself to take in his features. His soft blue eyes juxtaposed with his sharp jawline. His shoulders are broad, and his built arms are home to black sketches that tell a story I want to learn more about.

Our feet crushing the newly fallen autumn leaves is the only thing keeping us from walking in complete silence. I can only take the awkwardness for so long. So when his arms flex as one of the dogs tries to stray from the pack, I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind.

“What are the stories behind all your tattoos?” I ask as we approach the track at the back of campus. It's the loop the dogs and I walk every Sunday.

“Well, some of them have absolutely no meaning.” There is no edge to his voice. It's like he is totally oblivious to the fact I've been ignoring him for the past week. He turns his inner arm toward me to point out a decorative lion portrait. “Some mean everything to me.” He moves all the leashes to his left hand and holds out his right wrist. I notice a date in Roman numerals. “This one means everything to me. It's my parents' anniversary. They're college sweethearts and had me at twenty, then got married when I was two.

They're my role models. To have a love that spans over decades like them is all I've ever wanted."

I look at the tattoo briefly, but there is some kind of gravitational pull for me to look into Jalen's eyes. I feel my lips tug at the sincerity that shines through them. I'm starting to get the feeling that there is so much more to Jalen than the party-loving, ladies' man everyone makes him out to be. He is supposed to be this shallow athlete biding his time until he enters the NHL draft. Has anyone else seen what's underneath that charming smile and inked skin, I think I want to get to know that person.

"How are you liking your time at the shelter?" I change the topic before he can ask me anything about my family.

"It's only my third shift, but it's definitely better when you're here."

I feel my cheeks heat, and I can't find the words to answer. Luckily, Jalen keeps the conversation alive. "So you want to be a veterinarian. Has that always been your plan?"

"I've never thought of doing anything else. Growing up, I had a dog there for me during some pretty hard times. He became sick when he was just a few years old, and he had an amazing vet who helped him through his recovery. I don't know where I would be without them both. I started volunteering in her practice and haven't thought about doing anything else."

"That's amazing. Growing up in the city, we didn't have space for a pet, but I always wanted a dog. I promised myself I would get a Bernese Mountain dog once I made it to the NHL."

A laugh bubbles out of me before I can suppress it. I fidget with the hair hanging loose around my shoulders.

Jalen is walking slightly in front of me, so he turns before asking. “What’s so funny?”

I pause as one of the dogs I’m walking spots a squirrel and pulls me in its direction. Once I gather myself, I continue, “I’ve always wanted a Bernese mountain dog. I already have a name for him.”

“Are you going to tell me what it is?” he asks when I don’t elaborate.

“Dexter.” I wait for his response. People either love or hate the name.

“Like the TV show,” he asks as we turn back and start our walk back to the shelter.

I roll my eyes as I do whenever someone asks me that question. “Real original question, and no, I have never seen the show. I just love it when pets have random human names.”

He looks at me with exacerbad eyes. “Well, we will have to change that.”

“I only promised you one date. I don’t think we’ll get through a whole TV show.” It’s like the words come out in slow motion with no way to get them back.

I’m mentally kicking myself for reminding him of the date he’s made no mention of.

“So you do remember our little bet. I was worried that’s why you were avoiding me.”

“You’re right. I was avoiding you.” I answer, a little too truthfully. I don’t have the energy to lie about something so obvious.

If he is taken aback by my honesty, his face shows no hint of it. “Well, I wasn’t going to forget. Especially after seeing your ass in the bodysuit.”

Right when I’m starting to have a tinge of remorse for thinking Jalen was just this shallow athlete, he makes a dumb comment like that.

He expects some sarcastic comments to fly out of my mouth, but I’m stunned into silence. Just the mention of that night changes the entire dynamic between us.

“We both start official practices this week, so I was thinking I could take you out next Saturday.” He says as he sets each dog by their beds and unclips their leashes.

The first week of practice is known as hell week. Coach Lee likes to see who took the offseason training plan seriously and who’s going to puke in the bathroom after the trial. Little basketball will be played; instead, it is spent running 17s and squatting during defensive drills. A night out after could be fun.

I tug my bottom lip between my teeth, unsure. But when I finally let myself meet Jalen’s eyes it’s his confidence that has me saying, “Saturday sounds good.”



Every free Sunday I’ve had since I started at Westvale, I have spent time at my sister’s house. I have dinner with Ruby and her two kids, Caleb, who is eight, and Stella, who just turned five. My sister’s husband tragically passed away a couple of years ago in a car accident, and knowing the pain

of losing a parent, I've always prioritized these dinners. Ruby has spent fourteen years worrying about me. While her friends were finishing college and getting drunk on random Wednesday nights, she was carting me to Girl Scouts and sleepovers. Never making me question her love for me. And when Darek came into her life, he accepted me as his own without any hesitation. He was one of the best men I've ever met. My sister and I have been through a lot, but she has shown me how to love someone unconditionally and how light can come out of some of the darkest times.

Besides Lola, Indy and Coach Lee, nobody knows what happened to my parents or why I threw myself feet first into my schoolwork when I got to Westvale. The sacrifices my sister made so I didn't get placed in some random foster home is something I'll never forget. I want to be successful so I can give her and the kids the comfortable life they deserve.

As I walk up her driveway, the aroma of fresh pizza fills the air. I follow it to the backyard where Ruby and her family built a pizza oven a few years ago. When I reach the backyard, I stop when I see my nephew, taking in his innocence as he eyes the toppings in various bowls, contemplating what he should add to the stack of pepperoni that currently decorates his pizza.

"Did you save any dough for me?" I clap my hands excitedly to get his attention.

"Aunt Ivy!" Both kids scream in unison. Stella stands so quickly her plastic lawn chair flips over.

"We are making your favorite because you start your practices next week." She tells me matter of factly. Her smile takes up her entire face when I

pick her up and squeeze her tight. “Owww, you’re hurting me,” escapes her mouth in an exaggerated scream.

I lower Stella and walk over to Caleb to kiss him on the top of his head. I laugh when he arranges the toppings into a smiley face.

“Hey, sis, how was your week?” I ask Ruby as she takes a pizza out of the oven. After placing the pizza on the table, she gives me a hug.

“It was good. I love having the kids back in school and in their activities. It gives me a chance to breathe.” She laughs, but I can see how tired she is. The dark circles under her eyes are a dead giveaway. She is the definition of a super mom and has been since she became the mom of an eight-year-old at twenty-one.

After dinner, I stand at the sink with my sister to dry the dishes as she washes them. This is my favorite part of the week because it’s the only time I am guaranteed one-on-one time with my sister. The kids go wash up for bed, so we normally aren’t interrupted.

“Anything new with you?” She asks like she does every week. Normally it’s the same old *nothing’s new*, but this week I need her advice.

I hesitate for a second, nervous to tell my sister about my date with Jalen next week. Ruby and I are opposites in a lot of ways. I refuel by curling up with a new book and spending time alone, and she refuels by going out with friends and drinking enough margaritas for the table. She is the life of every party, and I hate attending them.

When I tell her about my date, I know she’ll build it up into something it’s not. Jalen isn’t my

happily ever after, this is literally one dinner, and then he'll go on and do whatever it is that fuck boys do.

“What aren't you telling me?” She snaps her head so she is facing me. I swear she is some kind of mind reader. “You've never been good at keeping things from me. You might as well spit it out.” As badly as I want to dispute her accusations, I can't.

I place the plate I was drying on the counter and start the story from the beginning. How Jalen got in trouble, and now Mr. Holloway has him volunteering at the shelter. I tell her about the party he and Marcus had to celebrate our National Championship. The story ends with how strip beer pong led to our date next Saturday.

“I just want to make sure I have all the details. My straight-laced sister goes to a party, loses a game of beer pong with no pants on, and now has to go on a date with the hockey team's hot bad boy.”

I shrug at the simplified retelling of last week. It sounds so ridiculous.

“This is good for you,” she says in her motherly tone. She puts the dish back in the sink and guides us to the kitchen table. “I'm always telling you to have some fun. Going out twice a semester isn't having a normal college experience. Let yourself have some fun this last year. You deserve to be a normal twenty-one-year-old. You have the rest of your life to be an adult.”

I sit tucking my feet under myself so I'm sitting on my heels. My sister is right. I'm not sure I want to look back forty years from now and have no



stories to tell my children. Instead of telling them about the crazy parties I attended, I would have to tell them about my study group that met every Tuesday.

This isn't the life my sister wants me to live. She never enforced a curfew or told me I couldn't hang out with my friends or spend time with my high school boyfriends.

My sister's eyes meet mine, and I give her a slight nod. Silently telling her I agree.



I'm currently losing another one-on-one game with my closet. I scan where my pants hang for what feels like the hundredth time, hoping something new will appear. This time it's because Jalen won't tell me what we are doing tonight. And even though I'm not too keen on going on this date, it doesn't mean I don't want to look hot.

"What the fuck am I supposed to wear!" I scream into my closet. I hear Indy and Lola before I see them. I run my fingers through my hair, trying to figure out how I got myself into this situation again.

My roommates make it look effortless as they pick through my closet, mixing and matching pieces like they have some kind of roommate telepathy that I didn't get clued in on.

Now that we have started our respective seasons, Jalen only comes to the shelter once a week, and the conversations are always easy. If anyone asks, I'd deny it, but I am really starting to enjoy my time with him. He talks about his parents

often and his hopes to get drafted to New York so he can be close to them. I know Byron is his best friend from home, and they chose Westvale University to play three more years of hockey together. Even with the one-on-one time I've spent with Jalen, a part of me questions if it's all an act, so I'll give a good report back to his uncle.

“What are you guys doing tonight?” Lola asks me. She's now moved on from my closet and is digging through my dresser.

“My answer is no different than the other seventeen times you have asked that question this week. He won't tell me what he has planned.” I grip my bed sheets.

I'm trying to let loose and have fun like everyone wants me to, but my anxiety has me wanting to be in control. I hate surprises.

“Let's do something casual but not jeans and a tee casual.” It's Indy's turn now to examine my closet. She pulls out four different pairs of pants with different distinct patterns on them. We have dubbed these fun pants “party pants,” and my roommates and I share a collection.

From the pile, Lola picks out black boyfriend-fit pants that have silver stars on them. “These with your baby blue bodysuit would be beautiful.” She assures me with a smile so sincere I have to just believe her.

“Wear your Retro Silver Toe Jordans,” Indy chimes in. I love that they know that I'm going to want to wear a pair of sneakers tonight. I grab the outfit my roommates patiently picked out and head to our shared bathroom down the hall.

An hour later, freshly showered, I come into the living room with my hair straightened and makeup done. The outfit Lola and Indy picked is perfect. I feel confident in it, and half the battle of feeling good is looking good, and my girls made sure I did.

I head to the kitchen and pour us each a tequila shot. Indy smirks in my direction. “What? I need this, and I know y’all aren’t going to make me drink alone.”

“It’s not that,” Lola says earnestly, “You just look so beautiful.”

Lola is the emotional one of our little trio, even if she’ll never admit it. The girl takes every sentimental moment and tucks it away for when the time comes to relive the glory days. So I know when she says I look beautiful, she really wants to say that this is a moment that we are all going to want to remember.

I smile at my friends and lift my glass in the air.

“Take the shot. Jalen will be here any minute.”

The tequila hasn’t finished warming my throat when the doorbell rings. I take a deep breath and turn toward my roommates.

“Let’s get this over with.”

## Jalen



I've been waiting at Ivy's front door for what feels like forever. After standing on her front porch and knocking a couple of times, I text her that I'm here.

But a couple of minutes later, I'm still standing in the cool New York air, watching a beautiful sunset that mimics the changing leaves. As beautiful as it is, I can't really enjoy it because I'm nervous that I'm about to be stood up.

I start swaying back and forth, a nervous tendency I picked from my Mom. Ivy hasn't shown much interest in me or our date. She told Marcus that she only made that counterbet because she was drunk, and she tends to do regrettable things when she's had too much to drink. So now I have this sinking feeling that she has axed our date but forgot to tell me.

Watching Ivy at the shelter last week just reinforced all the amazing things I've heard about her. I've watched her care for each dog with such patience and grace. She knew which dogs needed snuggles before being brought to their beds and which ones needed time to decompress alone. She did it all with a smile so contagious that whenever I think about that day, I can't help but smile to myself.

The guilt of forcing this date on her has been eating away at me. The only reason I know how amazing this girl is, is that I wanted to prove to everyone I could get a date with the woman who never goes on them. Like it would add some kind of stamp to my man card. However, the more I get to know her, the more I want to peel all her layers away, get to know the real Ivy and let Ivy get to know the real me.

We've texted a little throughout the week, but I decided I wanted to get to know Ivy the old-school way, not through texts and Instagram stalking. I want to see how her face lights up when I ask her about the shelter or hear how she wheezes when she tries to catch her breath after laughing too hard. Some things are better in person, and talking with Ivy Rhodes is one of them.

I'm so lost in my own thoughts I don't notice when the door opens. "What the hell," I say under my breath when she taps me on the arm.

"Oh, I thought you were waiting in the car," she's less than amused to see me. "When you texted me here, I just assumed you hadn't gotten out."

I try to hide the smile tugging at my lips, thinking about how disappointed my Mom would

be if she heard that I didn't pick up my dates at the door. I might not go on many of them, but I was taught to date like a Southern gentleman.

I wanted tonight to be worth the time away from school and basketball for her, so I picked Indy's brain on everything to do with Ivy whenever she was at our house this week. Was Marcus happy about it? No, but now Indy realizes how serious I am about getting to know her best friend. That this isn't some kind of game to me.

"You clearly don't know my mom," I say sarcastically, considering we just met. "She would have kicked my ass if I ever waited for a date in the car." The corners of her mouth move slightly, forming something of a shy smile.

I place my hand on her back to guide her toward my car. I am happy to be a step behind her because even though I am the only one who knows it, I smile when I see she is wearing sneakers again. I love that she doesn't wear heels like every other girl on campus. For someone who seems so shy and desperate to fit in, she dresses unlike the girls I'm used to seeing around Jasper's, in clothes that leave little to the imagination. Don't get me wrong, I love that too, but something should be said about the quiet confidence it takes to have your own style. I find that incredibly sexy.

Before the door can close behind us, her roommates peek their heads through it. "Be irresponsible for once in your life!" Indy says in what I think is supposed to be some kind of sly whisper, but I've known Indy for over a year now, and nothing that comes out of that girl's mouth is remotely close to a whisper.

Ivy turns laughing wryly while shooting her roommates both middle fingers as the door closes.

“You look beautiful,” I say honestly. “I don’t think I’ve seen pants like that before. Is your closet just full of patterned pants? Didn’t you have camo pants on at the party?”

She seems a little taken aback at first. But relief washes over me when she lets out a giggle. “You remember what pants I wore that night?” she asks as her thumb runs over one of the silver stars patched onto her pants.

“You mean the pants I watched you wiggle your way out of when you lost that game of beer pong? I don’t know if you know this, but you have one of the best asses I’ve seen, and I’ve seen my fair share of asses.”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to start a first date talking about all the asses you’ve seen.” She tells me as she shoves my shoulder. When I go to open the passenger side door for her, she adds, “But with all the stories Indy’s told me, I’ll take the compliment.”

Once I settle into the driver seat, I hand Ivy the AUX cord and tell her to play whatever she wants. She looks skeptical, like I’m trying to test her, but I am not. I grew up listening to everything, so letting my passengers choose the music keeps them from complaining about my playlist that jumps from hip-hop to country.

As I turn to my right before pulling out of the apartment complex, Ivy’s fingers work quickly to find something she likes on the endless playlists I have saved to my phone. Honestly, I’d take some cheesy show tunes at this point, just so we don’t

have to sit here in silence anymore—and not because I secretly love musicals. I see her fingers slow when she finds a playlist titled *Game Day*.

“Is something wrong?” She asks when she notices I’m still sitting in the parking lot in front of her house.

“What...umm...No. Sorry, I was waiting to see what you picked.”

She lets out a low sigh loose, drawing attention to her full lips. Her eyes shoot back to my phone, and she rolls her lips and pushes them out as she takes her job of finding the perfect song seriously.

“If we’re being honest, I’m stressed right now. I’ve lost all my DJ privileges because half the group never likes the music I choose. I can’t blame them because my playlist jumps from A\$AP Ferg to Taylor Swift.” It’s one long run-on sentence like she is letting out a secret that’s been eating away at her for too long.

It feels like I just peeled away another layer. I try to keep a straight face, but when I can feel a smile creeping out, I take a moment to look out the driver’s side window and appreciate the beautiful sunset I get to witness with one of the most interesting people I’ve ever met.

Little does she know the playlist she’s chosen is littered with songs from John Mayer’s *Something About Olivia* to Eminem’s *Lose Yourself*.



The twenty-minute ride to the restaurant is easy. Easy conversation, easy silence, easy laughter. Ivy



is more relaxed after realizing I'm not going to throw her out of my car for her taste in music.

“I love this song!”

I'm shocked when Meek Mill's Dreams and Nightmares plays through the speakers. I look over to Ivy, and she's reciting the lyrics of the Philly-born rapper while bobbing her head.

I smile as she taps her hand to her leg in time with the music. She pulls her hair over one shoulder. I know she's getting ready for the beat to drop, and when it does, I join her. Her laugh is infectious as she lets loose.

We pull into the restaurant as the song finishes. I rotate in to face Ivy and ask her, “Have you ever been here?”

Her eyes brighten with the same competitive glow I saw during the party olympics.

“Have I been here,” she repeats my question with disbelief. “I love this place, it was the go-to hangout after Friday night games when I was in high school. I still come here with my niece and nephew.”

I chose the upscale sports bar because they have a room dedicated to arcade games. Ivy let her walls down the night of the party because she was focused on winning. It kills me that someone with such a vibrant personality feels the need to hide in the shadows, so I thought that she would feel more comfortable in a situation like this.

I'm about to open my car door when Ivy wraps her soft fingers around my forearm.

“I'm picking the terms of the bet this time,” she murmurs.

I shoot her a playful look when I ask, “What do you have in mind?”

“If I win, you have to rebound for me during a shooting workout after one of our shifts at the shelter. If you win, you have to teach me how to skate.”

I may be new to this whole dating thing, but I’m smart enough to know I can’t really come out on the losing side of this bet. Especially because her shit-talking does something to me that dirty talk never could.

Ivy opens the passenger side door before I can get around the hood of the car to open it. I shoot her a sad attempt at a stern face as I hold my hand out to help her out of the car.

“You know, my mom would be mad at me if she ever found out I didn’t reach your door in time to open it.”

Her eyes roll as she asks, “When did we time-travel back to the 1950s? It’s a nice gesture, but I can open the door myself.”

“I know you can,” I tell her, “but that doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to have someone do it for you. You deserve to have all the little things, Ivy.”

I decide to test my luck and lace my fingers through the hand that is already in mine.

As innocent as the gesture may seem, it feels like it’s a defining moment in whatever is going on between us. To my surprise her hand relaxes in mine. My skin heats at her touch. My clammy hands don’t seem to bother her because she takes the first step toward the bar, practically dragging me with her. The view of her swaying hips has me in no rush to make it to the restaurant’s door.

“What should we play first?” I ask after giving my name to the hostess.

Her eyes run over the room full of machines and neon glowing screens. There’s a kid banging against the side of the claw machine because the stuffed bunny she won is suspended by one foot but not falling into the space where she can grab it. Ivy’s eyes glide by her and light up when she notices the dartboard is free. I’ve never played a game of darts where we actually kept score, so Ivy gives me a quick rundown of how the scoring works before she hands me a set of darts.

“That doesn’t seem too hard,” I say confidently.

Have you ever said something you thought you could back up, and then you just ended up embarrassing yourself... Well, that’s what is currently happening. I can’t hit the dart board to save my life, and when I do, it is for points that I already have.

“I have never seen someone so bad at darts in my life,” Ivy says through a throaty laugh.

She ends the game with a bull’s eye. I grind my teeth because I hate losing. I know some guys would go on these kinds of dates and let the girl win, but I’m too competitive for that shit. And Ivy seems like the type of girl who would be upset if I handed her an easy victory.

“All right, Angel,” I say, brushing off her comment. “We’ve only played one game. We have a long way to go.”



By the time we sit for dinner, I've redeemed myself from that horrendous darts game. I'm up two to one, with wins in Pac-Man and Skee-Ball. We decided to save each of our favorite arcade games for after dinner. It shouldn't surprise me that her favorite game is Pop-A-Shot because mine is Air Hockey.

Ivy is unlike any girl I've been on a date with. I shouldn't be shocked when she orders a burger and fries and then asks if I thought the Rangers, my favorite hockey team, has a shot at winning the Stanley Cup this season. Now we're debating who's the best basketball player of all time. We've also talked about what it was like for her growing up in a small town compared to my childhood in the city. She gushed about her niece and nephew while I shared Byron's most embarrassing childhood stories. The conversation is so easy that I don't notice we are both done with our burgers.

"You understand that Micahel Jordan won every NBA Finals series he played in. That right there makes him the greatest of all time."

"Jalen," my name comes out in an annoyed tone. "You were barely walking when Jordan played professional basketball."

"That doesn't mean I can't appreciate his game. I mean, you've had to have seen *The Last Dance*."

"Of course," she says with a nod.

"If that was the only footage I saw of his career, I'd still say he was the best. I'm not saying I hate

LeBron, but his version of *Space Jam* sucked, and he should have known better than to touch a classic.”

I sip on my beer and watch her stew over my movie review. I discreetly pull my wallet out of my pocket not wanting to make a big show of it. When my eyes meet Ivy’s again, it looks like she wants to ask me something. She’s pulling the sleeves of her blue top into balls in her fist. It’s the first time since we sat down to eat that there’s any kind of awkward silence.

A little nervous, I push my leftover fries around my plate a little. “You clearly want to ask me something, Angel.”

Her eyes snap back to mine. “It’s not a question. I am just deciding if I can take your sports opinions seriously if you make them based on movies.” I get a quick look into her coffee-colored eyes before they retreat to her sleeves which are clenched deeper into her fists.

I know that’s not what she was deep in thought about. It wouldn’t have caused that sadness in her eyes. I normally would find this such a turn-off because I’m just here for a fun time. I don’t do emotions, but tonight I have this urge to push her for more. I don’t do that. Ivy seems like she is having fun tonight, and I don’t want her shutting down on me.

After a moment, she peeks up at me from under her lashes. I flash her a sincere smile and opt to change the subject and start a one-sided game of twenty questions to ease us back to the easy-flowing conversation that we’ve had all night. Ivy tries to grab the bill from the waitress before she can set it on the glossy high-top table. But I can hear my Dad now telling me that it doesn’t matter

what your date says. You should always be the one to pay for a first date. I pull out my credit card and hand it to the waitress before she even sets the bill on the table.

She lets out a small breath as her shoulders drop.

“Thank you for dinner, Jalen.”

“Of course, Ivy,” I say as I lean back in my seat. I want to soak in her beautiful mocha-colored eyes.

Once I get my credit card back, we head to the arcade to finish our competition. The Pop-A-Shot machine is currently taken, so I head towards the air hockey table and enter a dollar’s worth of quarters into the slots. The puck drops out on my side of the table. I run my hand over the small holes that pepper the table, waiting for the pressure to build and the air to blow.

I place the puck down when I notice that Ivy is distracted, trying to find something in her purse. I push the puck toward the goal at the opposite end of the table and score. Ivy tosses her chapstick back into her purse completely unaware that we started the game. I watch her eyes flash to the scoreboard.

“When did you score?” She pouts, putting her full lips on display.

“Gotta stay on your toes, Vee,” I tell her while waving my red and green paddle over the table. “Expect the unexpected.”

“Did you get that advice from a fortune cookie?” she mocks. But the same competitive glow that seeped through her during the beer pong game lights up her face.

While placing the puck on the table, she looks at me, “I’m not losing to you again, Jalen. The party was a one-time thing.”

I haven’t dated much, mostly just random hookups that last a few weeks before eventually fizzling out, but there is something different about dating another athlete. Especially because Ivy loves to shit talk, and we share the same competitive spirit. Since her intensity matches mine, I don’t feel like I have to tamper down how badly I hate losing when I’m with her.

Ivy wastes no time trying to even up the score after my surprise goal. We’re volleying the puck for a while before I miscalculate my timing, and the puck slips into the goal I’m defending. It took all of a minute for Ivy to even up the score.

“Just remember, big boy, this is the game you chose.” She winks, and I’m turned on by her trash talk. I mean, it helps that it’s coming from Ivy and not a two-hundred-and-ten-pound defenseman trying to beat me into the boards.

10

Ivy



This has to be the most intense Air Hockey game ever played. Did you know you can sweat just from pushing a puck back and forth on a table that blows out cold air? Because I didn't.

I refuse to back down from the icy blue eyes Jalen is trying to use to knock me off my game. The intense competitive glow is making me feel some type of way and I am not sure I'm hiding it well.

Jalen is a point away from taking the game and winning the bet. I appreciate that he isn't just handing me the victory, but I would never forgive myself if he secures another win tonight. I have too much pride to be a two-time loser.

I'll deny it to anyone who asks, but I'm having a really good time tonight. At the party, he was fun and easy-going and looked sexy as hell in fitted jeans and a button-up that unfortunately didn't



expose enough of his tattoos. Tonight, he possesses the kind of quiet confidence—in cargo pants and a Westvale hockey crewneck— that I could only dream of having.

He listened to every story I told about my family like I was explaining the plot of some Christopher Nolan film. What I really loved about dinner with Jalen was that when we started talking about sports, he didn't quiz me like I needed to prove to him I knew where Joe Burrow went to college—Geaux Tigers— but I did tell him I owned his number nine jersey.

On the night of the party, I made an alcohol-fueled bet, but there is no excuse for the bet I made tonight. I made it because I want to spend more time with Jalen. I couldn't have been more transparent if I had tried.

But my pride is still at play, and I refuse to let Jalen have another thing to hold over my head. Strip beer pong is enough.

“Have you ever skated before?” Jalen asks as he picks up his beer from the edge of the Air Hockey table.

“I haven't. I was nervous to when I was young because I'm a little clumsy.” I pinch my thumb and index finger together. My sister used to joke that I could rival any little boy in the number of trips we had to make to the hospital for stitches. I've been four times. “Then basketball became my life, and I was nervous I would injure myself and not be able to play.”

“Well, you better be ready to get that cute little butt of yours on the ice.”

Add his smug tone to the list of reasons I need to win this stupid arcade game. The cockiness he is displaying needs to be taken down a notch.

After Jalen puts his beer down, the puck is dropped, and it's do or die.

We're tied six to six. The next goal wins.

The orange disc moves effortlessly down the pint-sized rink. I make sure to prop my elbows on the edge of the table when I go to stop the puck. Jalen, like the simple-minded man he is, falls for the trick. His eyes go straight to my breasts that are pouring over the top of my bodysuit. I've noticed the subtle glances he has given them all night. He barely hits the puck, so I am easily able to stop it when it makes it down to my end of the table. I make a mental note to thank Lola for the outfit suggestion.

A low laugh comes from the opposite end of the table when I place the sign of the cross over my body and let the puck fly. I see the flashing lights before I hear the sound of victory- an annoyingly loud alarm- but it means I extend the series to game seven.

"Losers first," I say with a glowing smile. I push a chaste kiss to Jalen's cheek before I rise on my toes and whisper in his ear. "I'd wish you good luck, big boy, but I got this one in the bag."

"I liked it better when you ignored me," Jalen rolls his eyes and huffs out a harsh breath.

We decided to share a warm-up game. Jalen's first shot is smooth, and I'm starting to get a little nervous.

"Did you ever play basketball?" I ask before taking my last shot. "Your form is perfect."

“It’s almost like a right of passage to play hoops in my neighborhood,” he says as the buzzer goes off, signaling the end of our practice round. “My dad played basketball and had a ball in my hand by my third birthday. I played hockey and basketball for as long as I could, but eventually, I had to choose.”

When I turn and face the mini basketball hoop, Jalen tries to slap the ball out of my grip.

“Hellooo,” a deep voice has me meeting Jalen’s cerulean eyes. “Sorry, I honestly have no clue what you just asked me.”

“You definitely disappeared there for a minute. I asked if you were ready to get this thing going.”

I reply with a nod.

As the timer winds down, I realize there isn’t much that Jalen is bad at, and it’s fucking annoying. I thought I had Pop-A-Shot in the bag, but now I’m watching Jalen tic closer to the machine’s high score.

In a moment of weakness, I decide that just for today no winning tactic is too petty. This is a winner-takes-all scenario, after all. When time starts counting down from five, I reach around Jalen, and I run my fingers up and down his arm, just a ghosting touch. I notice the goosebumps that blanket his arms. When he lets out a low groan, I know that he is right where I want him.

“What are you doing?” he scolds, but his hooded eyes tell another story.

“All’s fair in love and basketball, right,” I say before I realize he might not get the reference from one of my favorite movies, *Love & Basketball*.

“Are you interested in recreating that strip one-on-one game?” he wiggles his eyebrows after making the reference to one of the most steamy scenes in the movie. I’m starting to think I should be concerned that so many of our conversations lead to games that include taking our clothes off.

“Thank god you know the movie. I was nervous you would think I was professing my love to you on our first date.” I tell him, laughing, trying to hide my nerves.

“It’s my Mom’s favorite movie. We should watch it. I haven’t seen it in a while.”

“Yeah, we should.”



Jalen hasn’t said much since we got in his car. If his white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel is any indication, he is not happy with the outcome of today’s seven-game series. Any hesitation I had when I found out he could shoot a basketball faded away after I hit my first ten shots. Jalen protested for a rematch, saying that I *distracted* him. The five seconds he had left on the clock would not have helped him make up the twenty points he needed to beat me, the new Pop-A-Shot record holder.

“Are you really going to sulk the whole way home? I didn’t cry in my underwear in front of your entire team when you beat me.”

“Well, that memory definitely has me feeling better,” he says as a mischievous smile spreads over his lips.

I lean over and push his shoulder playfully. “Don’t get ahead of yourself there, big boy.”

“Wouldn’t you love to know all about my big boy?”

“Oh my god, you did not just say that.” I can’t help but laugh.

“That was pretty bad, wasn’t it.” His laughter mixes with mine. And whatever anxiety I was feeling washes away.

I take a moment – as his eyes are focused on the road – to appreciate Jalen’s beauty. His angled jawline and how his shirt can barely retain his biceps. From a completely objective standpoint, I’d say that Jalen is one of the hottest men on campus, but he knows that. And that’s what makes me hesitant to really let him in.

His lips roll inward when he catches me staring at him like he’s trying to hold back a laugh. I can feel the red tint of embarrassment wash over my face.

“I...I was.” I try to spit something out before he can comment on my obvious ogling.

“I was thinking about how you haven’t told me much about your family.”

I want to draw my hands down my face and kick myself. What kind of segue was that?

“It was just my parents and I. My mom grew up in Nashville, so I love the country music she plays every Saturday when she cleans the apartment. My dad is from Brooklyn. Byron is the closest thing I have to a sibling. We met in elementary school and have been pretty inseparable since. His mom worked a lot of late nights at the hospital, so he spent a lot of time with my family.”

“What about yours?”

His question catches me off guard, but I know it shouldn't. I talked about my niece and nephew at dinner, but that was pretty surface-level stuff. I always try to avoid having to talk about my family's history in any kind of depth.

"It's been just me and my sister for most of my life. She's thirteen years older than me. She actually still lives in town."

"So you two must be pretty close?" He asks. The memories of my childhood flash through my mind so vividly it's like I'm watching a home movie. All the good times we had. The nights when my dad drank too much and became an unrecognizable version of himself. How mom would lay in bed with me when my anxiety was so bad I couldn't sleep.

"We are. I go to her house almost every Sunday for dinner. But if we're in season, I see her a lot more. She comes to all my home games. It's part of the reason I decided not to go away for college."

Luckily, the rest of the ride home is filled with laughs and trivial conversation. It's light-hearted and easy. Just the way I like it.

## Jalen



Ivy's apartment complex comes into view far too quickly.

I put the car in park and sneak a peek at Ivy. She is singing along, albeit poorly, to the country playlist I chose in the restaurant's parking lot. The braid she tied her hair in before our Air Hockey game is swaying, and her cheeks are flush.

Once the car is parked, I'm on a mission to open Ivy's door. As I round the car's hood, I see Ivy reaching for the handle. My long legs quicken their stride, but I'm half a stride too short, and my nose becomes a doorstop.

"Damn it, Ivy." I run my finger under my nose to make sure it's not bleeding.

"Oh..oh my god. Are you okay? I didn't see you there. You were just trying to be nice and open my

door, and I broke your nose.” I think she’s done, but I hold off speaking as I hear her whisper to herself, “This is why we can’t have nice things, Ivy.”

“I play hockey, Ivy. My nose has been through a lot worse.” I take Ivy’s hand and help her out of the car.

We start up the walkway to her ground-level apartment.

“Can I get you any ice for your nose?” she asks shyly when we reach the front porch.

I shake my head. In all honesty, this is nothing, but I’m enjoying seeing this softer, more nurturing side of Ivy. She runs her finger down my nose, and the simple contact sends chills throughout my body.

She must feel it, too, because her hand leaves my face in a quick jolt. My body reacts, and before I know what’s happening, our pinkies are interlocked, and I’m pulling her into me. Ivy’s chin rests on my chest, and when she looks up at me, I seize the moment by leaning in to place an innocent kiss on Ivy’s lips.

When I pull away, Ivy’s body sags in disappointment. The last thing I want is for her to leave this date, questioning my intentions. If she wants more, I can give her more.

I take her chin between my thumb and index finger and tilt my head so she is looking me in the eyes. Her coffee-colored eyes brighten when I bring my lips back to hers. Her lips part, a sigh escaping them and my tongue takes the invitation. We meet in a hot, wet seep. I’m completely lost in



the moment and don't notice Ivy's front door opening until she pulls away.

Indy stands at the door with her overnight bag in tow. I follow her eyes to where my hands are resting just above Ivy's ass.

I take a second to mourn the loss of a perfect moment.

"I had a lot of fun today, Ivy." I lean and press my lips to her forehead before returning to my car.

I turn back towards the porch before I open the door of my Ford Focus.

"And Ivy, you deserve all the nice things."



Have you ever driven home and you aren't sure how you got there without totaling your car? I'm currently expecting a ticket in the mail from one of the traffic cameras all over town. I'm unsure if I stopped at a single stop sign between Ivy's apartment and my house. That damn kiss was the only thing I could think about. If her lips were a drug, one hit would never be enough.

When I get to our front hallway, I take a second to send Ivy a text to let her know I'm home and that I had a lot of fun tonight.

I decide not to go out and meet my teammates, who are blowing up my phone with updates from Jaspers. Instead, I head to my room to get ready for bed. This was the last full week of practices before games start and I want to enjoy my bed as much as I can before I'm sleeping in hotels for half the week.

I'm not surprised when I turn the corner and see Byron's hands gripping some random girl's ass in our living room. Byron has been pulling this shit since we were in high school. I think he has some weird fetish with people watching him hook up.

He runs his tongue down the front of her throat, prompting moans from them both. Byron's hands move from her face, down her arms, and to her hips.

I almost make it to my room unnoticed. Until our trusty third step creaks in that way that only happens in an old house. Byron looks up, lipstick smeared across his lips.

"How was your date?" he asks as he takes a moment to catch his breath.

My chest tightens with a possessive feeling that's new to me like I want to keep these moments I've shared with Ivy between us. It took a fucking bet for Ivy to go out with me. I feel lucky that she opened up to me, and I don't want to jeopardize that because this random jersey chaser Byron has on our couch can't keep her mouth shut. I've been a permanent member of Westvale's rumor mill since I hooked up with the starting quarterback's girlfriend during my first week here freshman year. She didn't tell me she had a boyfriend.

Being gossiped about never bothered me, but I know it will push Ivy away. I don't want to push her away. I know I can be the reason she lights up a room. Call me selfish, but I want to see more of that.

Throughout our friendship, Byron and I have created our own language spoken with just simple

facial expressions. My eyebrows pinch up, and my lips straighten, signaling not now.

“Give me one second,” he says to the random girl, picking her up and placing her on the couch.

Byron is a step behind me when I walk into my room and strip out of my clothes so I can put on gym shorts and a Westvale Hockey hoodie. I’m hesitant to mention my feelings towards Ivy to Byron, but I also know I can’t lie to him. Mainly because I’m shit at lying to people that I care about. He rests his hip against the door frame, waiting for me to answer the question he asked downstairs.

“I don’t know, man,” I say before releasing a heavy sigh. “I really like her. She is surprisingly laidback, and conversation is easy, and I like that she is an athlete.”

I’ve tended to stay away from athletes when I have picked hookup buddies in the past. Their schedules are just as crazy as mine, and it complicates what’s supposed to be a casual relationship.

“She is just as competitive as me. When she won today, her eyes lit up like she won another National Championship.”

I slip past Byron and head to our shared bathroom down the hall. The room stays quiet. Byron follows me to the bathroom and sits on the closed lid of our toilet.

“You know you have a girl waiting downstairs to suck your dick.”

“I’m more interested in your girl,” he says, laughing. I can’t blame him for not wanting to wait for answers about tonight. As much as I wish Byron

would leave me alone, he is my oldest friend, and he's never heard me talk about a girl like this.

"There isn't much more to be said," I answer honestly.

"Nothing you want to share," he pauses, giving me a chance to answer. When I don't, he continues. "You know Indy is in Marcus' room right now, and the first thing she told us when she got here was how your hands were pretty close to her ass, and your tongue couldn't have been further down her throat."

When I finish in the bathroom, I walk back to my room, and I still haven't shaken Byron.

"You got it, bad kid. You must have gotten her number before the rest of us could for a reason because I've never heard you talk about a girl like this." He hums on his way back downstairs.

12

Ivy



One of my favorite parts of living with Indy and Lola is the recaps we have in bed after a night out. Most of the time, I'm the voice of reason, trying to decipher the truth in a basket full of drunk delusions, but right now, I'm in need of one of those talks. Except it isn't a night out I need advice about, it's a date. It's six in the morning, and I've been up for hours running through everything I could have said differently during my date with Jalen.

I roll over to take my phone off the charger and turn it back on.

I haven't spoken to either of my roommates since they helped me pick out my outfit before my date last night, so I'm expecting messages from both of them. I know there will be a few from Indy who texted me a few times last night wanting to

know all the details about what happened with Jalen. After she left to see Marcus, I turned my phone off. There was no way I could answer my friends' questions about last night when I have so many myself. When my phone powers up, the messages and missed calls come in.

One missed call from Indy.

Two missed FaceTimes from Lola, who I'm sure got all the details about my front porch hookup from Indy.

Twelve missed texts in our roomie group chat. Including- Are you still alive!?!

One text from Jalen

Jalen: Hey Ivy, I just got home. Thanks for a fun night. I can't wait for that one-on-one game. I'll see you at the shelter this week ☐

Little butterflies take flight in my belly as I reply.

Me: Beating your ass last night was the highlight of my week ;) Sorry for the delayed reply. I turned my phone off when I got home. I didn't want to deal with Indy and the 500 questions she would inevitably ask.

Jalen: Lucky for you, I took the brunt of them. Marcus had to pick her up and carry her out of my doorway. But I didn't mind. I could talk about you all night.

Me: Aren't you, Mr. Smooth.

Jalen: Just wait, baby. You haven't seen anything yet.

Rolling my eyes, I place a pillow on my face and scream into it. I'm not sure if that really does anything, but it seems to help in the movies, and at

this point, I'll do anything to help me figure out my feelings for Jalen and the anxiety I feel about starting a new relationship.

I agreed to participate in the party olympics because I was tired of the people in my life telling me that I needed to *act my age*. Jalen seemed like the right person to help me with that. He's a known playboy, his house is always having parties, and he is an athlete. The perfect trifecta of man who would describe his relationships as no-strings-attached.

The Jalen I was with last night was much more than the hockey-playing ladies' man who asked me to come to a party. He was attentive and sweet, and when I woke up to a text this morning telling me how much fun he had last night and that he couldn't wait to cash in on the bet we made, I started having feelings I haven't felt in a really long time. I am confused. I don't have time for butterflies and overthinking text messages.

I shake my head like the simple motion will erase my confusion.



I'm pouring creamer into a much-needed cup of coffee when Lola walks into the kitchen.

"Headed to the shelter?" I ask, even though her volunteer shirt hints exactly where she is headed. Lola starts every Sunday at the shelter, no matter how bad her hangover is.

"Yeah..." she pauses, giving me a once over before taking her travel mug out of the cabinet and

pouring herself a cup from the pot I brewed. “You want to come?”

“Yes!” I answer a little too quickly. I’ll do anything to not have to sort through my feelings from last night. I was going to clean the house, but going to spend time with my favorite pups sounds so much better.

On the way to the shelter, I dominate the conversation, avoiding anything about Jalen or our date. I bring up the schoolwork Lola and I have due this week and share how the first week of practices went. Whenever Lola tries to bring Jalen’s name into the conversation, I whisk us away into a world where Jalen does not exist.

I set my phone on the counter and grab the container of dog food from the closet to prepare breakfast before taking the dogs on their morning walk. My phone buzzes as I set the food down for Riley, trying to ignore the urge to check it. If it’s Jalen, my entire plan of coming here to not think about him lasted about... twenty minutes.

When it buzzes for the third time in thirty seconds, I turn to grab it, nervous that it is my sister.

Before I can get to my phone, Lola walks in front of the desk with a chihuahua in one hand and uses the other to pick up my buzzing phone. She looks at the screen and then in my direction. I normally don’t care if my roommates look at my messages. I have nothing to hide. Now, having something I want to keep to myself, at least until I figure out what is going on with me and Jalen, I’m regretting all the times I had my friends read messages to me when I left my phone in the



kitchen and was too lazy to get off the couch to read them myself.

“We haven’t talked about last night yet. How was it?” she asks, her eyes still glued to my phone.

“It was better than I expected it to be. Jalen is pretty easy to talk to.”

“Have you heard from him yet?” she asks, but she already knows the answer.

If there is one thing I am worse at than lying, it’s talking about my feelings. So, the rest of this conversation should be a breeze.

“N-no.” I stutter. Before Lola can call me out on my bullshit. “Actually, I have. He texted me about an hour after I got home last night, letting me know he was home.”

“And...”

“And he told me he had a lot of fun.” I take a deep breath, bracing myself for Lola to ask me if there is a second date, the one I already agreed to, but I decide to rip off that band-aid myself. “And yes, there is a second date.”

“Really?” she asks, confused. Probably because I’ve never been on a date since we became friends, let alone a second one.

“Yeah, and you want to know what’s worse.” I take a deep breath. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“That’s not a bad thing, Vee. A second date doesn’t mean anything serious is going to happen.”

What if I don’t mind if things become serious?

13

## Jalen



It's Wednesday, which means it's a two-for-one pitcher night at our favorite dive bar on Main Street. It also means it has been four days since my date with Ivy.

My roommates have been up my ass all week with questions about our date. Not knowing what Ivy has told Indy, I haven't gone into much detail. Still, I wanted to tell them I'm hopeful for another date, especially with the night ending in a kiss like Saturday nights. I could have done without the audience though.

When I came downstairs for breakfast on Sunday - Byron was making breakfast sandwiches, and the New Yorker in me could not have been happier- Indy had already given the boys a play-by-play of the kiss she saw on her front porch. It would have been fine if it stayed between me and

my housemates, but Byron was talking to my parents on Monday and decided to tell them about my date. This has led to one too many questions from my Mom. I plan to kill Byron because now my mom keeps asking me when she will get to meet my girlfriend.

Ivy isn't my girlfriend, but she is beautiful, smart, athletic, and mysterious. She isn't at all the parties, and I think it would be good for me to have someone in my life I could spend a quiet weekend with just as friends. Most importantly, she has her own goals and aspirations. When I came to Westvale, I knew being on the hockey team would mean I'd have girls fawning all over me. I quickly learned those weren't the girls you take home to a judgemental Italian mother. So, I decided the casual hookup route was what college would be for me, which has worked out well.

Ivy and I have texted a little since Saturday, but I'm slowly realizing the little downtime I have is a luxury compared to Ivy's schedule. I consider myself lucky to get four responses over the course of a day. I hadn't overthought the texts until Aaron asked if I was sure she wasn't trying to politely ignore me.

"She's at practice," Marcus says when he notices me looking at my phone for the umpteenth time. I haven't heard anything from Ivy since we got out of practice at noon. I know she had to take Riley to a playoff field hockey game this morning, so maybe she's just been busy. Or lost her phone.

As I put my phone in my pocket, Aaron and Byron come back with our drinks, and a small group of girls that follows behind them join us in our booth.

If this happened two weeks ago, the pit in my stomach would be nonexistent. Evelyn, one of my hookups from last semester, snuggles in close to me and places her hand on my knee. I look around the table, pleading for help. My asshole friends do nothing to help me instead, they all have this sick look of amusement on their faces due to my discomfort.

My chest tightens, and paranoia creeps in.

*Damn, are my feelings for Ivy real?*

I scoot toward Marcus and Byron, hoping to avoid the busty redhead, whose hand keeps moving up my thigh.

Last semester if Evelyn's hand was close to my dick, it was a sign that she was ready to go. We had a nice routine down. We would find the other when we were ready to leave the bar. We would take some shots and then head back to my place.

For the first time, I'm just not feeling it.

I check my phone again and there aren't any new texts.

Thirty minutes later—when Evelyn is in the bathroom—Marcus gets a phone call from Indy saying she is done with practice and will be at our place in an hour after she eats and finishes some homework.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Marcus asks above the rim of his pint glass.

“How much do you love me?” I ask him. I let out an exaggerated sigh when he doesn't answer me. “I was hoping you would help me set up a double date. You and Indy, me and Ivy. Something really relaxed, like a movie date at our place.”

Marcus just stares at me for what feels like a lifetime, and now I'm questioning if double dates are just something that happens in movies. I wouldn't know because I just went on my first real date last weekend.

I would love it if Ivy would come hang out on a random Wednesday or thirsty Thursday, and as she gets to know the guys, I think she will. I have a hunch I'll get to know her personality better in a setting where she is comfortable with her surroundings. Indy and Marcus provide that.

The longer Marcus is silent, the more sweat rolls down my face.

Without saying a word, Marcus takes his phone out of his pocket and pulls me toward him so the two of us are shown in the screen's reflection. Indy answers the phone as she puts her robe on, and I scream.

"I'm so sorry, Indy. I didn't realize you'd be naked." It comes out so fast I'm not sure she understands what I'm saying.

She just motions her hand toward the screen, telling me she is perfectly okay that her boyfriend's best friend almost saw her naked. And it doesn't seem like Marcus really cares, either. Now I'm wondering what kind of freaky shit they are into.

"Hey, babe." Marcus starts before blowing Indy a kiss. "Jay was wondering if you think Ivy would want to come to our place this weekend and watch a movie. Kinda like a lowkey double date."

Indy lets out a squeal so loud that all the other conversations that were going on at our end of the

table stop, adding ten more sets of ears to our conversation.

“We will be there.”

“Shouldn’t you ask Ivy first?” I keep my voice low, hoping my new audience won’t hear.

14

Ivy



“I. Am. Not. Going.” I punch out each word, so maybe Indy gets the message.

She’s dragged Lola into the living room so now it’s officially two-on-one.

“Your scrimmage is Saturday. Friday night, you’d just be here hanging out watching movies anyways.” Lola reminds me. She’s sitting in the chair across from the couch. All she needs is a pen and clipboard and we are prepared for our therapy session.

“What if I have other plans?” I mutter.

Indy ignores my poor attempt at a joke. “We’ve had the same pregame routine since freshman year, Ivy.”

“Well, you said I need to live my life on the edge this year and I’ve been doing that. It doesn’t mean

I have to switch up my pre-game routines and it doesn't mean I suddenly have time to date."

"That ass-grabbing I saw on our front porch didn't scream casual to me." I want to reach across the couch and slap the smugness off Indy's face.

Deep down, I know she's right. That wasn't a drunken kiss from a date you hope never to hear from again. His lips were sure and dominant but also tender and sweet. Jalen's kiss was toe-curling, life-changing. And that's why it can't happen again.

I'm waiting for one of my roommates to say something as I roll the napkin I used with my dinner between my palms. Another thirty seconds pass in excruciating silence, and I can't take it anymore.

I throw my napkin onto my plate on our coffee table and take a deep breath.

"I'm nervous." The confession leaves my lips before I fully understand what I admit.

Lola joins us on the couch and snuggles into my side. She takes my hand and squeezes it. "Nerves are good. They mean you care. It's important to live your life Ivy. Not wait for it to come to you."

Indy adds, "I'm pretty sure it was you who told me we never get to where we are supposed to be by living in fear. It's one double date, and I promise that if at any point you want to leave, I'll be the one driving you home."

I take her hand and give it a light squeeze. How did I get so lucky to find these girls?

"Tell the boys I'll go only if we get to pick the movie."





The hockey team's Thursday night scrimmage gave me no choice but to see Jalen for the first time since our date on Saturday.

I wear my standard leggings, Westvale University shelter hoodie, and baseball hat. It's my usual uniform for when I have to take Riley to games.

I wish I had the same excited energy that the golden retriever has had since he realized we were headed to the Riley Center, instead I want to crawl under a rock to never be seen again.

I take the short walk from the shelter to the arena enjoying the cool fall evening. I soak in the sunset and the trees that are shedding their last leaves, knowing in a few weeks, snow will cover campus, and I won't see the sun until April.

Before I can enter the arena, I am bombarded by a gaggle of six-year-olds who ask if they can pet Riley. I bend down so I am at eye level with them and show them how Riley likes to sniff your hand before he lets you pet him. They bring the back of their hands to his nose and then give his back a good scratch. I stand as the last kid takes his spot along Riley's back. I let out a laugh at the grin on Riley's face and the row of kids putting it there.

There is a tap on my shoulder and Mr. Holloway is standing to my right.

"They're about to start the national anthem," he tells me with a soft smile. Then, turning to the kids, he continues, "Thanks for playing with Riley. The boy looks like he had some good lovin'."

I watch to make sure all the kids find their way back to their parents before I start walking into the hockey arena with Mr. Holloway.

“How’s Jalen doing at the shelter?” he asks me. “It’s been a few weeks since I’ve seen him.”

“He seems to be enjoying it. He said the other day it’s nice to have something to look forward to that isn’t hockey related.”

You can’t miss the smirk on Mr Holloway’s face as he holds the door open for me.

“I’m sure it has nothing to do with the fact he gets to spend time with you.”

I’m hoping he doesn’t notice the hitch in my step as I try to play it cool. Jalen and I have hung out once. It’s one thing for our friends to know about it but telling our families seems like a kind of big step.

“Wh..what do you mean?” I think I know what he means. And it’s a good thing I do because he gets pulled away before he has a chance to answer me.

“Hey Matt, do you have a second?” The question belongs to Coach Martin, Westvale’s Men’s Swimming and Diving coach. The urge to give this man a hug is overwhelming.

“I have to make my way to the ice.” The tension in my shoulders eases as I mentally note to never to complain about being unlucky again. I can barely talk about my emotions to my sister. Asking me to open up to my athletic director—and Jalen’s uncle— is my own personal death sentence.

Riley and I take the stairs so we are at ice level and take our spot on the carpet behind the petite

woman preparing to sing the national anthem.

A deep voice cuts through the sounds of a rowdy stadium and it's calling my name. The familiar voice wakes the butterflies that have been making themselves at home in my belly. I look in the opposite direction to a man skating my way. As always, I fail at playing coy and make eye contact with Jalen. He snags his spot for the national anthem, and that spot is right next to me.

"Hey," I say, unlike my run in with Jalen's uncle, I was fully prepared to see him today. "I saw your uncle walking in today," I tell him. The extra height his skates add to his six-foot-five frame has me hitching my head back, just so I can meet his eyes. "He asked me about how you're enjoying your time at the shelter."

His answer to his uncle's question comes without a second of hesitation. "I like it a lot more on days that you are there."

I can feel my face heat as he echoes his uncle's sentiment. I switch Riley's leash to my other hand so I can run my clammy hand down my leggings. Why am I so damn nervous around this man?

"But tomorrow," he starts, his voice hesitant so it takes me a second to realize he's talking to me. "So... umm, I think Marcus already talked to Indy, but we wanted to do a movie night tomorrow night."

I tamper the urge to make fun of the pink blotches taking over his caramel-colored cheeks, and when he looks down before meeting my eyes. It's weird to see a man who usually exudes so much confidence be so unsure of himself. I find it flattering that I can throw Jalen off his game.

“I’ll be there. What’s your favorite candy?” I ask because you can’t have a movie night without something sweet.

“When popcorn’s involved, there needs to be Bunch-A-Crunch. That shit goes right in with the popcorn,” he tells me before he skates to take his place for the puck drop.

I push my middle and forefinger to salute him as he skates. He laughs before turning to his right and saying something to Aaron. When his eyes are off me, I push my palm to my forehead and let out a sigh. Why the fuck am I dead set on always embarrassing myself when Jalen is around.

As Jalen settles into his spot at center ice before the start of the game, he flashes me one of his panty-dropping smiles. I sigh before offering him a smile of my own. I don’t know how much longer I can keep Jalen at arm’s length, but neither of us do relationships, and I don’t want to be just a girl in his rolodex of hookups.



The Retrievers won 6-2 yesterday. Jalen and the rest of the starters didn’t play much, but the time he did spend on the ice, I was memorized. Jalen moves with the grace of a ballerina and hits with the force of a linebacker. Watching him play in person, I can see why he’s one of the top players in the country. I’ve always loved basketball because it’s a contact sport, but the physicality of Hockey is, well, it’s hot. I now understand the attraction to hockey players. They have to take out that pent-up aggression on someone.

“Yo, Ivy,” Indy says as she snaps her fingers in my face. “Are you ready to go? I lost you there for a minute.”

I follow Indy to the boys’ front door, and as she struts right through, I stop to gather myself on their front porch. I guess I really am doing this. My anxiety is starting to creep in, and I remind myself that this means nothing. I’m here because I promised Indy I’d be more spontaneous this year. This is just a movie night with friends. Nothing is going to happen. Marcus and Indy will be here.

Since my parents’ accident, silence has become my worst enemy, the downfall of so many good days. People think I keep busy because I am an overachiever with big dreams, but if I’m being honest, a large part of it is because the more I have on my plate, the less time I have to think about my past... or my future.

I chant the mantra I’ve been saying to myself for the last few weeks one last time before I move toward the front door.

*I will not fall for Jalen’s charm.*

*I can control myself.*

“Can ya now?” I jump. My eyes shoot to the door and see a pair of bright blue eyes staring back at me.

I can feel my whole face heating, and the smirk Jalen is giving me tells me I’ve been caught. The floorboards of the boy’s dated front porch creak as I make my way to the door.

“I can!” The words come out so strained I don’t even believe myself.

Jalen stops me before I can sneak inside and joins me on the porch. He wraps me in a hug, and I relax into it. I take in his scent of cedar and pine.

He pulls away, leaning in for a kiss, but I am not expecting it. I gasp and drop my bag of very important snacks. Retrieving it quickly, I rise to my full height, Jalen's lips landing on my forehead. I take a step back. It's more like a stumble because I don't know how to stand in the presence of this man.

Jalen must have some of the same internal struggles because I am pretty sure I heard him mumble something that included the words fuck, idiot, and smooth. He opens the door and motions for me to go into the house, and it's not until I pass him in the doorway that I realize that the kiss was meant for my lips and not my forehead. Jalen is still mumbling when we get in the house and I can't help but poke fun at him.

“Is this the dirty talk I hear so much about? Because honestly, I think it needs some work.” I joke.

I step into the entryway and then turn and give Jalen a chaste kiss on his cheek. His eyes soften, and before I turn to walk down the hall, I give him a wink.

## Jalen



What the fuck was that! When did I become the rambling buffoon from an early 2000s rom-com? The one that's trying to land the girl that is clearly out of his league. I'm not sure why she keeps agreeing to spend time with me, especially when I can't talk in full sentences.

I'm still trying to decipher what happened on the front porch when I find Ivy admiring the pictures that line the hallway leading to our living room.

"When were these taken?" she asks with a giggle.

"Freshman year. We were at the mall, and JCPenny was having a sale on group photos, so we went and found the most ridiculous outfits we could find and got pictures taken. We passed them

out to our teammates and coaches and hung one in the locker room.”

I point to the one we took right before Halloween my freshman year, Byron’s even in it because he was up to visit for his official commitment to Westvale.

“Marcus, Aaron, and myself have lived together since freshman year. The first year, we took them right when all the costume shops popped up for Halloween, so we decided to dress like the cast of Austin Powers. I, of course, took the coveted role of Austin Powers. Marcus and Aaron were Dr. Evil and Mini-Me. We forced Byron to be Mr. Bigglesworth because it wasn’t a representation of the Austin Powers franchise without the hairless cat.”

As we make our way down the hall, we take a moment in front of each of the group shots. For our Sophomore year’s photo shoot, we decided to go all in on the JC Penny stereotype and dressed in the worst 90’s fashion we could find. Junior year, we really went for the shock factor and went with Victoria’s Secret Angels. That is the only one that isn’t hanging in the locker room. Coach Stevens says it was too risqué. I think it’s very tasteful. We stop at the last two pictures. “We just got these back” I smile sentimentally at the two photographs. “We had to do one last funny one, so we all dressed up as Coach.”

The first photo is us dressed like the sixty-year-old who gets paid to yell at us. We’re all donning different colored polo shirts tucked into nylon windbreaker pants and some form of dad sneakers. Stevens has quite the collection ranging from Nikes to New Balances.



But the last picture is my favorite. It is all of us in our Westvale jerseys. I run my finger over the frame of the second photo. It was my idea so we all would have something a little more serious to remember all the hard work we put into our four years at Westvale University.

When we finally make our way into the living room, the scent of fresh popcorn reminds me of the bag of candy Ivy brought. I hastily grab the bag from Ivy and pour it out onto the coffee table.

If the candy comes in the little boxes you get at the movie theater, it's on this table. I sort through the SweeTARTS and M&M's to find the dark blue box I hoped Ivy would buy.

"These are my favorite." I pass the box to Ivy. "Growing up, when I had a bad day at school or didn't play well, my dad would take me to the movie theater on our block. We'd get a large popcorn and then mix in the Bunch-A-Crunch." My smile grows as it always does when I talk about my parents.

My parents' love story isn't one you'll hear about in fairytales; it's raw and real, but they wake up and choose each other daily. My parents were in their early twenties when they had me. My mom chose to drop out of college to take a job as a receptionist so she could support us, while my dad finished school. When he graduated, he found a job back in the city as a middle school physical education teacher. Money was tight at times, but it didn't matter because I always came home to a house filled with love.

Before Ivy can get out whatever is on her mind, Indy comes storming in with two fresh bowls of popcorn.

“Jay, can you help Marcus in the kitchen?” she asks. “He’s finishing up the drinks.”

I nod and head toward the kitchen. The drinks aren’t quite ready, so I take the opportunity to watch the impromptu concert the girls are putting on. Ivy’s hips move to the beat of *Dancing Queen*. I can feel the corners of my lips lift as Ivy takes Indy’s hand and spins her. Ivy’s smile takes over the entire room. It’s like seeing the sun for the first time after winter’s long, dark days. I like seeing her like this, loose and living life freely.

“Are you just going to stare?” You can always count on Marcus to ruin a moment.

“What... what are you talking about?”

I take the drinks Marcus made for Ivy and me and move toward the living room.

“You’re fooling nobody!” He yells at my back.

By the time I return to the girls, Indy has claimed the loveseat for her and Marcus, leaving the more spacious sectional for Ivy and me. As I settle down on the cushion next to Ivy. She smells fresh, like citrus and mint. Ivy’s sweet and spicy perfume matches the fun and sarcastic personality I’m getting to know.

Once I’m situated with my back in the corner of the couch, I grab a handful of popcorn out of the bowl on Ivy’s lap. My hand stills in the popcorn bowl. Something warm and smooth covers my fingers.

“I hope it’s okay,” Ivy says shyly. “It sounded like a good combination, so I went ahead and mixed it myself.”

I place my finger on her nose, leaving a smudge of milk chocolate in its wake.

“It’s more than okay. It’s perfect, actually.”

“If y’all are done flirting, I will start the movie,” Indy states. Politely telling us to shut up.

I should have known the impromptu concert Indy and Ivy put on while Marcus and I were getting drinks was a sign because *Mama Mia* is now playing in the hockey house.

Marcus hates musicals, but I secretly love them, so I’m excited about the movie choice.

“I’m not watching this,” Marcus complains from under Indy.

“Yes, you are,” Indy scolds. “I already told you I’ll leave with the snacks if you change the movie on us.”

“I’m good with the movie choice,” I say before throwing a few pieces of popcorn into my mouth.

As we are taken to a small Greek island via our television, out of the corner of my eye, I see Ivy dancing to the opening credits. I don’t hide the smile it causes. If someone asked me when was the last time I’d seen Ivy this relaxed, my answer would be the night of my party, but tonight feels different, none of us are drinking, so there is no aid for any of us. The girls have their final exhibition game tomorrow, and there was no way I would be a drunk fool around a sober Ivy.

As the wedding guests make it to the island, I start inching closer to Ivy. She has her legs tucked to her side and is curled against the couch’s armrest. *Somehow*, my hand finds her thigh.

“You’re a really shitty singer,” I tell her while squeezing her thigh.

She flashes me a smile. “Do you compliment all your dates so generously?”

“No, just you,” I say with another squeeze.

After a second, with nothing but Ivy’s coffee-colored eyes piercing my soul, I decide to put all my cards on the table.

“I have never brought a girl back here to just watch movies, and I definitely have never hung out with a girl sober in my living room with my best friend and his girlfriend.”

Ivy nods. Fearing her response, I give my attention to the three middle-aged men singing on some small Greek Island.

It’s barely a whisper, but I hear Ivy say, “That’s good to know.”

My heart stops when I feel a soft hand resting on my thigh. She keeps it there, and I decide to intertwine our fingers. She doesn’t resist.



In the time Marcus and Indy have been dating, she has spent countless nights here hanging with just the boys, but this is the quickest I’ve seen her fall asleep. We are barely an hour into the movie when Marcus picks her up so they can go sleep in his room.

When they are halfway up the stairs with Indy resting across his arms, her eyes flutter open, and she winks. It’s a full-blown *you better thank me, wink*.

When I hear Marcus' bedroom door shut, I remove my hand from where it's resting on the couch and adjust myself so there is enough room for Ivy if she chooses to take it. I know she has taken the bait when I smell her floral shampoo.

"You're not as smooth as you think you are," she giggles. "You know she did that on purpose, right? She always thinks she can play coy, but she is as subtle as an elephant in a library." I can feel the rise and fall of her laughter against my chest.

"Are you mad we are alone?" I ask, wanting a genuine response.

"No. No, I'm not mad." Her answer is confident, and for the first time, I feel like Ivy may be feeling me as much as I am feeling her.

"Good, I'm not either."

When Ivy's attention returns to the movie, mine doesn't follow. I can't pry mine away from Ivy's lush, full lips. I can feel my body tense as I remember the kiss I placed on Ivy's forehead when she got here, and that's making the urge to pull those lush lips between mine so much greater.

I keep myself focused by playing with Ivy's hair. When I move to lightly massage the top of her scalp, she looks up at me with big doe eyes. The flash of innocence is a contrast to the lust that fills mine.

"Don't stop, it feels sooo good." Her voice turns husky as I deepen the massage. When I remove my fingers from the top of her head, I place a small peck on the sensitive spot below the back of her ear. I linger a second longer than necessary, taking in her warm scent.

"I'm really happy you came tonight," I tell her.

“I am, too. Thank you for being patient with me.”

“Of course, Ivy. It’s been worth the wait.”

Ivy adjusts her body to face me, and her dark eyes land on my lips. I don’t hesitate this time and kiss her the way I should have at my front door. It’s sweet at first. Slow-paced and innocent. We feel each other out, figuring out how our bodies fit together.

Normally, a kiss is just a preview of the main show. It typically doesn’t do much for me, but I could sit here fully clothed, kissing Ivy until tomorrow morning, and it wouldn’t be long enough. She’s a drug I can’t get enough of.

Ivy moves so her leg comes over my body, straddling me. A soft moan sneaks through my lips as she settles in my lap. Wanting more, I place my hand on the back of her head and guide her lips back to mine.

When her lips return to where I want them, my hands go on a trip down Ivy’s sexy frame. I take detours at the underside of her breasts before moving to her hips. I lie on the armrest and guide Ivy’s hips back without breaking the kiss. I pull her to me so her chest is flush with mine, and I can press gentle kisses down her neck. I’m nervous this is a dream I’ll wake up from too soon, and just on cue, I’m forced awake.

“Y’all are not going to believe what happened tonight!” Byron screams from the front door, thinking I’m here with Marcus and Aaron.

Ivy lets out a scream that sounds like a squealing cat right before she buries her face in my

chest. I wrap my arm around her as I place a soft kiss on the crown of her head.

It's clear Byron is piss-drunk, and I know from years of experience that yelling at him won't do anything but have him try to fight me, so I play along.

“What happened By?”

“So I decided to walk home from the bar,” his hands proceed to make sweeping motions to signal he is talking about himself. “Because ya know I'm too drunk to drive.”

It may not seem like it at this moment, but Byron has always been the moral compass of the group. Growing up as the only child of a single mom, he grew up quicker than most of us. He is an expert advice giver and the shoulder we all lean on, but he is still a 20-year-old college hockey player.... So he gets drunk... Often.

“I'm glad he has at least some self-awareness,” Ivy murmurs so softly into my chest. I'm positive I'm the only one who hears her embarrassed tone.

Not waiting for Ivy or me to address that, Byron continues, “So anyway, I was just enjoying some fresh air, taking in the warmth because, ya know, winter is coming soon.”

I nod, holding back my laugh at Byron and his drunken antics. I can't count the number of nights we've lost track of Byron. When we do, we can always count on him coming home with some crazy story. Once, he found himself in a chicken wing eating contest at the local fair. Another time, he played pick-up basketball with Carmelo Anthony at Rucker Park. My favorite story is when he ended up hooking up with his professor's

daughter and was forced to have breakfast with him the next morning.

“And....” I coax him.

“Please don’t get mad,” he says before he goes outside again. “But she looked cold, and I couldn’t let her just stay out there.”

He walks hesitantly back into the living room, holding the cutest puppy. He lets her down, and she runs right to Ivy. Still straddling my waist, Ivy scoops up the little tan and white fluff ball and places her on my chest. She looks to be on the small side, and her body is cold to the touch.

Ivy faces the puppy’s belly toward me.

“It’s definitely a girl.”

“Haven’t I.. we discussed th..this,” Byron slurs.

Not wanting to fight with my drunk best friend, I turn my attention to the girls in my lap.

“What breed do you think she is?” I ask Ivy because if anyone would know, it would be her.

She laughs as the puppy’s tongue laps over her face. “She’s probably a mutt, but there is definitely some husky in her.”

Ivy swings her legs so her back is against the couch, and her legs are draped over mine with the puppy in her lap.

“She has no collar, and it looks like she hasn’t been fed in a while. Can we keep her?” Byron asks from the kitchen. I’m sure he is looking for some kind of post-bar feast.

Ivy uses my chest to push herself to her feet, and I grunt as she scoops up the puppy and walks to the kitchen. Ivy opens different cabinets,



eventually finding what she is looking for. She takes the small bowl from the top shelf and fills it with water for the little fluff ball in her arms.

“Can we keep her?” Ivy repeats Byron’s question, sitting next to the water bowl and petting the puppy Byron is now holding. I’m not sure when I became the decision-maker of the house. I should probably wait until Byron is sober and we talk with Aaron and Marcus, but I don’t think I can say no to both pairs of hopeful eyes before me. At some point, my roommates will remind me that I made this decision for a girl who doesn’t live here, but in this moment, I don’t care.

“First, we need to put up fliers and see if anyone comes to claim her, but if nobody comes forward, we can keep her. What should we name her?” I ask.

The notes that make up *Mama Mia* fill the room as the closing credits start for the movie I forgot we were watching.

“Mia,” Ivy says. It’s a statement rather than a suggestion. I can’t think of a better name for the new lady of hockey house.



“We’ll have to get some specialty food too,” Ivy tells me. “I’m sure Jill will let us grab it from the shelter until we have time to buy some.”

The ride to Ivy’s apartment is like an infomercial on how to take care of a puppy.

“I’ll bring all the stuff you guys will need tomorrow. Just text me when you guys get home. Also, you need to make an appointment with a vet

so we can make sure all her vaccines are up to date.”

“I’m so sorry about Byron. I told him to text me when he was coming home, but obviously, he was not in any state of mind to remember that,” I tell Ivy as we pull into her apartment complex.

“It’s fine. I had a really great time tonight,” she tells me. “And don’t be too hard on Byron. I would have been so excited if I found that little pup.”

“I won’t be,” Just because I have Byron to thank for future visits from Ivy doesn’t mean I forgot what we were up to when he came home.

I pull into the parking space in front of Ivy’s apartment and open my door so I can venture over to the passenger side and open Ivy’s door. Ivy hesitates slightly when I offer my hand to help her out of the car, but when I lace my fingers with hers, she relaxes, acting like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

When we get to her front door, I tug her hand so she is facing me, and for the first time since we met, she leans in and gives me a light kiss at the corner of my lips.

“ Thank you for tonight. I’ll text you tomorrow when I have everything ready for Mia.”

I nod before deciding that her chaste kiss wasn’t how I want to end the night. My hand reaches toward the back of her arm, pulling her into me. I push my lips to her, and when she lets out a sigh, my tongue takes it as an invitation to enter, but only for a second. I pull away, and the corner of her lips turns up slightly. She unlocks the apartment door and gives me a small wave before she vanishes into her apartment.

16

Ivy



“Alright, ladies, I’m happy we started the season with a win, but we can’t get complacent. It’s a long season, and as reigning National Champions, we’ll have a target on our backs all year.”

After Coach Lee finishes her post-game speech, we move to our lockers to grab what we need to shower before our flight back to campus.

When I return to my locker, I pull out my phone, expecting to see a message from my sister and the kids. It’s become a tradition for them to send me a goofy video after my games to either celebrate a win or make a tough loss a little better. Competing at a high level comes with so many emotions, both good and bad, and these videos make the good times better and remind me during the rough ones what’s really important.

When I finally dig my phone out of my bag, it's Jalen's name that headlines the messages on my phone.

Jalen- Congrats on the win :) When you get home, come to Jasper's to celebrate.

It's foreign to me to have someone interested in following my games that isn't a family member. No boy from my past ever took the time to text me after a game. Looking back on it now, it was definitely a red flag, but they were both athletes, too, so I believed the lie that they just didn't have time. I now know you make time for what's important to you.

Jalen's the captain of one of the top hockey teams in the country who is getting ready for their first game of the season, one with high expectations, and he still made time to watch my game. He's not even my boyfriend. I don't even know if we are anything.

Jalen's been so patient with me. I know Indy has hinted to him why I'm so hesitant to start a relationship, and how my anxiety makes it hard to function some days. I'll have to talk about it with him soon but when I brought it up this week at the shelter all he said was that he'll be there to listen when I'm ready to talk. I think we chose which fork in the road we want to take. I'm happy moving at a snail's pace and thankful Jalen is willing to take it slow.

I read the message one more time before I answer, hoping Jalen sees the message before taking the ice for warm-ups.

Ivy- Thanks, I still can't believe it's my last first game. I already promised the girls I'd go with

them. Good luck tonight, and see you later.

“What has you smiling like that?” Indy asks as I place my phone back in my locker.

“It’s Jalen,” I say nonchalantly. I don’t want her to think it’s a bigger deal than it is since the whole Byron walking in on me straddling Jalen thing, she’s been planning a double wedding. “He asked me to meet him at Jasper’s when we get home.”

“Things seem to be heating up between you guys.”

There was a shift in our relationship after our shift at the shelter on Tuesday. I’ve been to the hockey house a couple of times this week to help with Mia. The boys shower that girl with love, but they have no idea how to train a puppy. My lips turn up, remembering how Mia peed on Marcus’ hockey bag. I thought he was going to kill Byron, blaming him for bringing Mia home.

I shrug. “I guess... We were already going to the bar. It’s not like I am going for him.”

“Vee, it’s okay to be excited about Jalen,” She sends a smile in my direction. “You deserve to be happy.” She looks at me earnestly and continues. “Behind the hockey playboy facade, Jalen is one of the best guys I know.”

“Yeah, he is pretty great.” My eyes close in frustration, knowing she somehow managed to get exactly what she wanted from me. “Don’t you dare say it?”

“Say what, that I knew you and Jay would be good together or that you having fun this year would lead to good things for me.”

I grab my stuff for the shower, and as I walk away, I flip her my middle finger.



After we landed back in New York, we had a couple of hours before we had to meet the rest of the team at the bar. Indy and I decided to go home to change and pick up Lola before we left for Jaspers to save a couple of booths.

“I can’t believe Mia peed on you.” Lola barely gets out between her wheezing laughter as we get out of my car—my sister gave me my Mom’s 1960 Mustang for my sixteenth birthday. I love that car.

Marcus texted Indy, asking if she could bring Mia out so she wouldn’t be in her crate until they got home from their game. You can say she was a little excited to see us.

But Indy is a good support and joins in with the laughter. “She literally couldn’t stop. My travel suit was drenched. Coach said she’d get me a new one, thank god.” She wipes away the tears from laughing so hard.

We send Lola to grab the large wrap-around booth at the back of the bar while we grab drinks.

“I still don’t understand why it took you so long to pick out an outfit, it’s not like you need to impress anyone.” Indy’s side-eye tells me she isn’t impressed with my snappy tone.

We got to the bar an hour later than I planned to because of her impromptu fashion show. I wanted to get to the bar early enough to have a few drinks before the guys got here. Now I’ll be lucky if I get one.

“Well, Marcus and I haven’t seen each other all week, and I’m hoping if I look hot enough, he’ll take me in the bathroom and have his way with me.”

Indy’s rebuttal makes me laugh but doesn’t shock me. Even though they’ve been dating for over a year, they still can’t keep their hands off each other.

“Good to know.” I grab the drinks and make my way back towards Lola. The boys must have walked right past Indy and me at the bar because they now take up most of the booth.

My breath hitches, and I nearly spill my drink when I realize Jalen has a gorgeous blonde draped all over him.

I must love torturing myself because I don’t look away as her hand begins to stroke Jalen’s thigh. I think Indy is trying to tell me something, but I can’t get myself to turn in her direction. I only hear white noise. My eyes glued to the man I was stupid enough to believe when he told me I wasn’t like the others.

“I’m sure it’s not what it looks like, Vee. You’re literally all he talks about,” Indy finally breaks through.

When my chest begins to tighten, I know I need to find a space where I can be alone. I look around, trying to find the quickest route to the bathroom. I can’t help but groan when I realize the only path is to pass by Jalen’s table. Not wanting to make a scene, I put my head down and swiftly make my way to a place where I can sort through everything alone. I follow the wood planks like lines on a treasure map, leading me to my escape.

Jalen must have finally peeled himself free of those dainty fingers because his tall frame is acting as my shadow.

“Ivy!” He yells after me.

“What the fuck Jalen,” Indy’s voice cuts through the music. I don’t hear the rest of their conversation, and I don’t need to because Indy is as loyal as they come. Marcus will be the first to tell you that you don’t want to be on the other end of Indy’s wrath.

The bathroom doesn’t provide the refuge I hoped it would. I can feel the base of the music pumping through the floors. The bright fluorescent lights take a minute to adjust to after being in the dimly lit bar, but at least no one can see the tears streaking down my cheeks.

A soft knock on the door reminds me I locked myself in the bar’s only women’s bathroom on a Saturday night. Who has a single-stalled bathroom in a bar?

“Ivy,” the familiar voice makes my body tense. “It’s not what it looked like out there.”

“Jalen, leave me alone.”

“Ivy, please let me explain. I promise I’d never do that to you. I mean, think about it, I knew you were coming, plus Marcus would rip my balls off if I did anything to hurt you.”

I shake my head before trying to hide a reluctant smile. Marcus and I have formed a close friendship of our own. He doesn’t know the origin of where my panic attacks come from, but he is one of the few people who has seen me have one outside of my sister and roommates. His little



sister also struggles with anxiety, so he always knows how to help me through it.

“Please just let me in,” Jalen pleads. “I can explain everything.”

“It’s the girl’s bathroom, Jalen. I can’t let you in.”

I didn’t need to hear Jalen’s humorless laugh to know that wasn’t going to deter him from trying to get in this bathroom.

After calming myself with the breathing techniques I learned in therapy after losing my parents, I fix my makeup in the mirror and unlock the door to Jalen’s apologetic eyes staring back at me. There is no anger or resentment, just a man wanting to explain his side of the story.

My attempt to tell Jalen I don’t want to talk fails when his hand brushes my hip, forcing me backward until his large frame takes up most of the space. He reaches over my shoulder and locks the door, giving me nowhere to hide.

“You really shouldn’t be in here,” I tell him. “We can just talk in the hallway.” I know I can control the conversation out in public, but it feels like anything is fair game with just the two of us in here.

“It’s too loud out there to have a real conversation, and I don’t want to brush this under the rug. I want you to know you can trust me.”

“Trust you,” I punch out the syllables. “You knew I was meeting you here tonight, and you still had some girl draped all over your lap. How the fuck does that send the message that Jalen Holloway deserves my trust?”

He looks at me hesitantly before moving to tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear. And then he has the audacity to ask, “Are you done?”

He pauses for a moment, and when I don't answer, he continues, “Her name is Claire, and we've been friends since Freshman year.”

“Just because your friends doesn't mean you didn't fuck. I'm sure you've slept with many of your *friends*.” I use air quotes around that last word.

Jalen lets out a low laugh, “Yeah, I have slept with my fair share of girls, and so has Claire.”

I watch the color drain from my face in the streaky bathroom mirror. For someone who had so much to say a minute ago, I'm speechless. How was I supposed to know that Claire likes girls? Ruby always says when you make an assumption, you make an ass out of you and me. And I definitely just made an ass out of myself.

Jalen closes the gap between us and engulfs me in a hug so tender I feel like I don't deserve it.

“Jalen, I feel...”

“Don't apologize, Ivy. I wasn't thinking about how others would perceive Claire and me. We have always had a flirty relationship, and I've never cared what anyone else thought about it until now.”

I hold on to him tighter because no words could show him how much that apology means to me. When my Dad drank too much, the night almost always ended in a fight between my parents. When they grew tired of screaming at each other, I know my mom went to bed without an apology. When we woke up the next morning, we all had to brush it

under the rug like it never happened— because if Dad didn't remember the fight, none of us could.

“I want you to know I haven't been with another girl since the night of the party.”

“Really?” I reply, stunned by his revelation.

Jalen's full lips move upward. His hand moves under my chin, using his thumb and forefinger to tilt it up so his eyes can meet mine. And in this disgusting dive-bar bathroom, he reminds me that I have the best friends in the world. “I promised Indy that if I pursued you, I wouldn't hurt you. I would never purposely hurt you, Ivy. I care about you. I want to know everything about you. Your hopes and dreams, what pisses you off, what makes you laugh.”

Before I can stop myself, my hands lock behind Jalen's neck but he guides his lips to mine. I'm fully happy to relinquish control to Jalen. After a few seconds, I pull away.

“Our friends are probably wondering where we are.” I bury myself into his chest, taking in his masculine scent.

“Are you ready to go back to them?”

I reach for Jalen's hand and interlock our fingers. “Only if you get me that drink you owe me.”

He unlocks the door, and we head to the booth that is now filled with our teammates, hand in hand.

Like some kind of sick cosmic joke, the only seat available is the one next to Claire. Jalen urges me to take the open seat. He squeezes my hand when I hesitate, and a sense of safety washes over me. It's

a new feeling for me to trust a man so fiercely, let alone one with a reputation like Jalen's. But, at this moment, he is my life preserver, and I feel like I can conquer any ocean with him by my side.

I slide across the sticky vinyl booth and settle in shoulder-to-shoulder with Claire. Luckily, Claire breaks the silence.

"Jalen couldn't stop talking about you," she tells me with a smile. "It's so nice to finally meet you." Then she pulls me into a hug and pushes me back out like she is desperate to rake her eyes over my body. "Jalen has been one of my closest friends since I got to Westvale, and I've never seen him so into a girl. He calls me like three times a day to ask me advice on the texts he sends you."

"Is that true?" I ask Jalen. It's hard to envision Jalen as anything other than the confident man who set up a game of strip beer pong to trick me into a date.

His eyes grow timid, and he gives himself away, but I still wait for him to tell me. "I told you I'm new to this whole thing. I just wanted to make sure I was doing it right."

I can't lie and say a large part of me isn't worried that he has never done this before, but the vulnerable look in his eyes tells me he really wants this. He wants me.

"You're doing a pretty good job," I tell him. I kneel on the booth's bench so I can place a kiss on Jalen's cheek, his scruff tickling me.

I stand from the booth and tuck myself into Jalen's side. I'm choosing to forget that I just fled into the bathroom instead of simply talking to Jalen. At this moment, he and I are beginning to

write chapter one of our story. And I'm going to start it by relaxing and enjoying the rest of the night.

## Jalen



Tonight went from a potential disaster to one of the best nights of the semester in the blink of an eye. I'm pretty sure we gave our friends whiplash when we came out of the bathroom holding hands.

I'm tapping my finger on the sticky bar top as I wait for the tequila and grapefruit juice I ordered for Indy. I promised to buy her a drink for the fake sleeping stunt she pulled last weekend. Scanning the room for her, I laugh when I see Byron trying to impress some gorgeous girl—who has tattoos scattered over her right arm—and falling short. She couldn't look more disinterested in whatever arm-wielding story he's telling.

“What's so funny?” Ivy asks. I can barely hear the faint screech of my barstool over the pop music the DJ at Jasper's is playing tonight. I slide backwards until there is enough space to pull Ivy

between my legs. She's facing the bar, and her back settles against my chest. I move her long hair away from her neck, allowing me to rest my chin on her shoulder.

"I'm just happy I know who's coming home with me tonight. Saves me a lot of work."

"What makes you so confident?" turning around, she places her hands on the sides of my face. I lean and kiss on her.

"I heard a rumor that the captain of the basketball team is really into me." I whisper against her lips.

Something changed in Ivy tonight. I think all she needed was the reassurance that whatever is going on between us is mutual. Now that she knows how I feel, she's more relaxed and confident just being herself. She's slowly pulling back the curtain she uses as a safety blanket.

Ivy deepens the kiss. My arms wrap around her back so I can pull her into me. You would have no clue that Ivy started tonight furious with me because her hands have been glued to me since we left the bathroom. It's like she's staking her claim.

"Can you fucking believe it?" a familiar voice asks me.

"What happened, Bryon?" I ask after resting my forehead on Ivy's. He's always one to ruin a moment.

"It sucks here tonight," that's code for no girls in here want to sleep with him. "I need a shot. You guys want one?"

I look at Ivy, leaving the decision to her since we've had a good amount to drink tonight. I don't

want to influence her to drink more than she is comfortable with.

“One more then I’m done for the night.”

“Okay, By, we’ll both take one.”

Byron bellies up to the bar. He isn’t there for more than thirty seconds when a busty redhead comes to take his order. Not long after that, she secures the three shots Byron asked for.

When each of us has a shot in hand, Byron makes a toast. “May you have better luck than I did.”

He holds his glass out, and Ivy and I tip ours in his direction before we take the shot. I gag on the unexpectedly sweet liquid.

“Is this a lemon drop shot?” Ivy asks through puckered lips.

“Don’t let the tattoos fool you. Byron’s drinks of choice have been fruity and full of sugar since we were in high school.”

“And I’m not apologizing. That shit tastes good.”

I’ve always admired that the person Byron puts out to the world is the most authentic version of himself. He could put on this big, aggressive hockey player facade. He’s led the team in hits since he was named a starter in his sophomore season, but he leaves that aggression on the ice and is really just a blue-eyed tattooed teddy bear.

I have never felt that freedom to show the world who I truly am. I was almost always the only black kid on my hockey teams growing up, and at times, being biracial made me feel like I didn’t fully have a landing spot. Whenever that feeling came up,



guilt washed over me. I came from a home where both my parents were there for me every day and they always supported me wholeheartedly in whatever I did. But sometimes, the narratives we make up in our heads become the truth we see in our everyday lives.

Ivy must have poked some kind of bear in Byron when she confirmed the kind of shot she took because he goes into a rant defending his manhood that nobody questioned. He stops mid-rant when a hip-hop throwback starts to fill the bar. He tries to leave without an explanation but I can't give up a chance to make fun of the sudden change in his mood.

"Where are you going By?" I have to yell to be heard over the music.

"If I have any chance of taking a girl home tonight, it's going to start with this song." Byron has struck out with every girl he's talked to tonight, the unwarranted confidence makes Ivy laugh as she turns to face me.

"Your friend confuses me, but he does have a point."

"And what point is that?"

"That this is a good song, and we should dance."

"I'm warning you now that my dancing skills come from the Italian side of the gene pool and their rhythm is severely lacking."

"You're too graceful on the ice to be *that* bad of a dancer." The way her eyes grow with hope makes it impossible for me to say no.

I lean into Ivy so I can whisper in her ear. “If I go out there and dance with you, my entire team will know how I feel about you.” I never dance, and when they see me dancing with the girl I went to console in the bathroom, they’ll know for sure there is more going on with Ivy and me than her just being my supervisor at the shelter.

“You already walked out of the girl’s bathroom with me on your arm tonight. I think everybody already knows you’re obsessed with me.” She flips her hair and I can’t help but to laugh.

I guess we did make it blatantly obvious how we feel about each other tonight and not just to our friends but to each other too. If hearing Ivy say she wants me feels this good I’ll have her remind me everyday. I have enjoyed every minute I’ve spent with her over the last few weeks. Before this year, Ivy mainly kept to herself, focusing on school and basketball, but I want to show everyone the girl that I’ve gotten to know over the last few months. The girl who spends extra time at the shelter with the older dogs who are overlooked for adoption. The girl that’s sarcastic and not scared to put me in my place. The girl who understands the demands of a Division I athlete and isn’t mad if we don’t hang out for a few days. The girl that if she lets you in, you’ll never want to let her go.

I lean forward because even in this crowded bar this feels like an intimate moment. “You’re right. I am obsessed with you.”

“Then dance with me.”

I get up from the barstool I’ve been perched on for the last hour and take Ivy’s hand so I can guide us to the darkest corner of the dance floor. My six-foot-five frame is hard to hide, and it’s not that I

want to hide Ivy, I just like when it's the two of us without the prying eyes of our friends.

When we reach our alcove, the beat changes. It's sexy. It's dirty. It has Ivy pressing her ass against me. She takes my hands and guides them slowly down her body until they rest on her hips. She takes full control, moving sensually.

"I'll give you whatever you want, Ivy." I groan into her neck. "I'm following your lead, baby."

That encourages Ivy to move harder against me, causing my breath to quicken. Her hands move up until they are gripping my neck, and there is no space left between us. I move my hand until it's resting against the front of her thigh. She moans as I tease closer to her center.

I lower my head so my lips rest against the shell of Ivy's ear. "Are you finally ready to give in to this attraction, Angel?"

I want to stay here in this moment where the pressure of the hockey season is nonexistent. The pending NHL Draft is the furthest thing from my mind. Here, in this moment, I'm just a kid in college dancing with the girl he can't get off his mind.

The song ends, our movements slow, and I'm blinded when the fluorescent lights start to glow over the bar, signaling final call.

I turn to Ivy, and for the first time tonight, I can clearly see her beautiful mocha eyes. "Come back to my place. We're having after hours." I'm panting, my heart rate still raised from having her pulled so tight to me. "I'm not ready to say goodnight."

"Okay," her voice is raspy. "Let's go."

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Ivy



The sexual tension in this taxi is overwhelming, well, not for Indy and Marcus, who have no problem releasing theirs. Luckily, I'm more focused on Jalen who hasn't so much as mumbled in my direction since we left the bar. He seems tense, looking toward the front windshield like it's a crystal ball that holds the answers to all his problems. Mine being trying to figure out why he invited me back to his place.

“What's wrong?”

His question does nothing to break up the couple I'm sharing the backseat with. Having picked up Indy and Marcus from the bar plenty of times, I know when alcohol is involved, there isn't much that will stop them from keeping their hands off of each other.

I try to keep my tone neutral-because having one anxiety attack today over Westvale's most notorious playboy is enough for me- before lying to Jalen about what's really bothering me. "I'm just realizing how grateful I am to normally be driving these two home instead of being inches away from being roped into a threesome."

If I was being honest about my feelings, I would have told him, I know you are new to this whole actually pursuing a girl thing, but to be all over me at the bar and ask me over for after hours and then not to talk to me once we get in the cab is really fucking confusing.

Jalen's laugh cuts through tension, making the atmosphere in the car lighter.

Once he catches his breath, he turns in his seat, and his deep blue eyes lock on mine. "They really will just make out anywhere. Do you think they'll always be like this?"

"I hope not," he says sarcastically. "If they are, their kids will always have a listening ear in me to complain about their parent's inappropriate PDA." We continue to share Indy and Marcus' PDA stories like they aren't in the car with us.

"It's nice that they are still so into each other. My parents have been together for over twenty years, and I still catch them stealing kisses. I used to think it was embarrassing to have parents who were always holding hands, but now I realize how lucky I am to know what unconditional love looks like."

Unconditional love, what a beautiful concept. I think in another lifetime, I could believe in something so selfless, but when selfish acts scar

your childhood, unconditional love is a fleeting concept.

“I guess you’re right. Aren’t you just full of surprises tonight, Mr. Holloway?”

I promised my sister that I wouldn’t let the past control my future, this year and tonight has shown me how far I have come. Despite a few hiccups, my time with Jalen has been the highlight of my semester. But I can’t get rid of this nagging need to remind myself that this needs to stay casual. Vet school and ball need to be my top priorities.

I’m deep in thought when I feel a rush of autumn air wrap around me. It takes looking out the front windshield to realize that we are back at Jalen’s place. I grab my purse that I tucked into the pocket behind the passenger seat, and when I turn to get out of the car, I’m greeted with Jalen’s signature smile. The one I’m drawn to as much as I am the stars in this small town’s sky.

“Are you ready to go inside? It sounds like Aaron and Byron started the party without us.”

The beat of the song being played inside the house catches my attention, and so do two really hot guys, who I assume are some of Jalen’s teammates.

Jalen wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me in so I’m the only one who can hear him when he says, “If I ever catch you looking at one of my teammates like that again...”

I pinch his side before he can finish that nonsensical sentence.

“Oww, I was just kidding.” He rubs his hip dramatically, trying to alleviate some of the sting.

My sneakers crunch on the light frost that is covering the driveway but I make sure I stay tucked into Jalen's side. Liking this jealous version of him much more than the straight faced, silent Jalen I got during the majority of the car ride home.

"What should we do about these two," I ask, pointing to Marcus and Indy. The couple has no clue that we are sitting in the boys' driveway.

"Don't worry, Dave and I have it taken care of."

"Who's Da..."

Our cab driver lays on the horn.

The plan works like a charm. Indy finally pulls herself away from Marcus. It takes a second, but when she realizes where we are, she takes Marcus's hand and drags him out of the car. Her eyes are fixed on Jalen while Marcus gathers himself. He's still very drunk and is now very confused. While Marcus tries to pay for the already paid for car ride, Indy storms off without muttering a single word.

"We won't see them again tonight," I tell Jalen as we watch Indy drag Marcus by his shirt to the front door.

"No, but that was worth it." He hands the cab driver an extra tip. "Thanks Dave, that was worth every penny." This lighthearted man is so far from the aggressive forward I see on the ice. He intrigues me, and that is dangerous.



The next time I look at my phone, I'm in disbelief. It's four in the morning, and after hours is just

starting to wind down. I decide to clean up a little before calling a cab to take me home. Jalen is trying to force the stragglers out when I trip over a loose gaming controller and bump into the coffee table. All the half-empty glasses shift forward, spilling their remnants all over Aaron and the girl he brought home from the bar.

“I..I...I’m so sorry. I would say I’m not normally this clumsy, but that’s a lie.”

I hand the roll of paper towels I’m holding to the beautiful brunette. I hear a huff escape Aaron’s lips as he gets up from the couch, guiding the girl to the bathroom.

“Don’t worry about it. He won’t remember this in the morning.” The lack of concern in Jalen’s voice should be comforting, but my anxiety is telling me that Aaron is going to hate me forever.

Jalen wraps his arms around me, and I rest my chin on his chest so I can look him in the eyes.

“I’ve really just made a fool of myself all night, haven’t I?” I quickly realize I don’t want to talk about my feelings, so I change the subject. “I’m going to call a cab, but I’ll come back in the morning to clean up if you need the help.”

“You are not getting in a cab alone at four in the morning, and I can’t drive you home, considering how much I’ve had to drink.”

“Well, I can’t stay here. You saw what Aaron was doing on that couch.” I point to it for emphasis.

“Sleep in my bed. I don’t mind taking the couch.”



“Are you sure? I’ll need something to sleep in.”  
Like that is going to change his mind

“I think we can find something that will work,”  
he smirks.

Jalen wraps my hand in his much larger one and guides me to his bedroom. I sit on his bed as he goes through his drawers, looking for something I can wear.

“Shorts or pants?” he has one in each hand as asks me the question.

“Shorts would be amazing.” I’m not short by any means, but I’d be absolutely swimming in any pair of Jalen’s sweatpants I put on.

He hands me the clothes before telling me, “Indy has a bunch of stuff in the bathroom downstairs if you want to go use any of it.”

Thank god my best friend is dating Jalen’s roommate. Looking like a clown with mascara running down my face in the morning wouldn’t be ideal.

The downstairs bathroom is every drunk girl’s paradise, with everything you need to get ready for bed quickly. Indy has makeup wipes, facewash, and a new toothbrush organized in a basket under the sink.

When I finish brushing my teeth, I make a mental note to thank Indy for ensuring my face doesn’t end up all over Jalen’s pillows and promise her I’ll refill the basket.

One more look in the mirror shows the face of a girl who is nervous. Those nerves turn into embarrassment, remembering that Jalen had to come into the girl’s bathroom to console me. I

audibly tell her, “Don’t overthink tonight. Just enjoy the rest of the night.” I’ve enjoyed almost every second I’ve spent with Jalen since that first date. He has been so patient with me, and once I realized I had read the situation with Claire completely wrong, he didn’t allow me to dwell on it. The rest of the night, he was glued to my side when he could have been with his friends. By placing a hand on my hip. Pulling me into his side. Sliding his hand into mine. Everyone at that bar knew I was the girl he wanted to be with.

The confidence I tricked myself into believing I possessed in the bathroom is gone when I reach Jalen’s doorway. Even with his back turned to me, I can tell the man in front of me was sculpted by the gods. I take in his broad shoulders and how his gray sweatpants sit loosely on his hips. After taking a moment to gather myself, I walk into the room and set my neatly folded clothes on the desk against the same wall as his door.

“Thanks for the clothes,” I say softly, unsure if he knows I’m back in the room.

“It’s no big deal. I’m just happy you agreed to stay.” His sincere words have me blushing.

He moves toward his bed, grabbing a blanket and pillow to bring downstairs. When he turns, I realize that for the first time, I’m getting to see the full exhibit of artwork permanently etched on his chest. The piece covers his entire upper body, flowing over both shoulders and down his forearms. His collection of tattoos is far more expansive than I realized. I’ve always loved tattoos because they give you a glimpse into people’s stories, telling you bits and pieces you might not know otherwise.

“I feel bad kicking you out of your room.” I start picking at a loose string on Jalen’s shorts.

Jalen runs his calloused hands down my forearms until I look up at him. “I pushed you to stay, so the least I can do is give you somewhere comfortable to sleep.”

“I normally don’t fall asleep right away. Do you want to watch a movie up here with me?” I don’t know who gave the question permission to leave my lips, but there is no taking them back now.

“Yeah, I’d love that,” Jalen says, not needing any time to think it over.

Jalen may not have hesitated when I asked him to stay, but he is now sitting on the far end of the bed against the wall, leaving plenty of space between us.

“Anything you’re in the mood to watch?” A still shirtless Jalen asks, scrolling through the streaming catalog.

It takes a minute, but when it flashes on the screen, I know what we’re going to watch. “Can we watch Grease?”

“You really like musicals,” he states matter-of-factly.

“My sister and I have watched them together for as long as I can remember. We still try to have a movie night once a month,” I tell him as I pull the blanket he was going to take downstairs up my body. “I love it because now her kids watch them with us.” I smile, thinking about Caleb singing along to the one we watched last week.

Jalen settles into his corner of the bed, and he slides underneath his navy blue comforter, the

bedspread of college-aged guys everywhere, and makes himself comfortable. It's a little weird that he couldn't keep his hands off me at the bar, and now we are sitting on his bed under two different layers of blankets.

It's not until I look at my phone that I realize we are twenty minutes into the movie, and I haven't watched a single second. Instead, I am hyperfocused on the man bopping his head along to every song.

"Have you seen this before?" I ask as Rydell High's annual prep rally starts.

He shakes his head but keeps his eyes on the screen. As this six-foot-five future NHL lottery pick watches this movie with virgin eyes, I feel bad for all the other girls he's been with who never saw this side of him. The sweet and caring side that followed me into the girl's bathroom. The one that ever judged me for not asking him if there was anything going on between him and Claire before I reacted. I'm not sure what's going on between us, but I do know at this moment, there is nowhere else I want to be.

I adjust the pillow behind me, giving me an excuse to move closer to Jalen. Taking the bait, he lays his arm around me, giving me the perfect nook to relax into. If he cares that I impeded his personal space, he draws no attention to it. I turn my body into him to rest my head on his shoulder and snuggle into his side, enjoying one of my comfort movies in Jalen's arms.

Halfway through the movie, Jalen's fingers start ghosting my arm, I watch the goosebumps form in his wake. I'm so relaxed it takes me a minute to realize that the sighing that fills the

room is coming from me. I look up at him, wondering if I'll see the same need I'm feeling in his eyes.

"Everything okay?" he pauses the movie, giving me his undivided attention.

"I'm just really happy I decided to stay here tonight."

"Yeah?" A knowing smile is plastered to his face. "Why is that?"

"This bed is really comfy, and I get to see Mia in the morning. Who doesn't love puppy kisses first thing in the morning..." All intelligent thoughts escape me when Jalen places his hands on both sides of my head, stopping my rambling.

I lose my train of thought, watching the gold chains he always wears sway against his sculpted chest.

"I don't remember what I was saying."

"I think you were about to tell me how much you enjoy ending your nights in my bed." His raspy voice is full of sleep. The air in the room is so thick my breathing becomes staggered. Before I can catch my breath, he lowers his lips to hover over mine.

"Don't flatter yourself, Jalen." The words would be a lot more forceful if I didn't have to catch my breath between each one.

"Be honest with me. What's the real reason you asked me to stay and watch a movie with you?"

My breath hitches. I've always struggled showing my emotions. I love the mantra, actions speak louder than words. So I let my actions show Jalen why I asked him to stay up here with me

tonight. I reach for the thick gold chain that's still swaying and tug on it. Getting the hint, Jalen lowers his lips until they meet mine. The kiss is soft at first like he wants to make sure I'm okay with it.

His lips part when I tug on his chain again, wanting more. Needing more.

Jalen settles himself between my legs and rests his forehead against mine. "Are you sure this is what you want, Ivy?" he peppers kisses all over my face before continuing. "Because I really want this Ivy. I've wanted it for so damn long"

I do what I always do when I'm not sure how to respond to a question, I make an ill-timed joke. "Well, all you had to do was ask."

"I'm serious. Tell me this is what you want."

He looks at me earnestly. This man has taken the time to get to know me, the real me. He's chipped away at the ice that's guarded my heart for so long. Never taking too much, always listening to what I need.

"Yes, Jalen, I've wanted this for a long time too."

He wastes no time, gripping the back of my knees and wrapping my legs around his waist. He rubs his hard length against my wet core.

"Jalen, please." I moan.

There is nothing soft about the way his lips take mine. It's possessive and intense, like he is releasing the sexual tension that has been building since the night of his party.

Jalen releases my lips and brings his hands to the hem of his shirt that's covering my body.

“As much as I love seeing you in my shirt, I think it’s time we get rid of this.” I hold my hands out so Jalen can pull it off of me. Before the shirt even lands on his bedroom floor, Jalen’s lips are nipping at the top of my breasts. He brushes his fingers over the underwire of my bra. It forces the bottom of my bra up so my breasts pour out of the top. He sucks and nips on the over-pouring cleavage hard enough that I know I’ll wake up marked.

“This is the same bra you wore when you had to strip in my living room.”

How does he remember that? It’s been weeks since that night. He must see my confusion because he adds, “I couldn’t believe that a girl I hadn’t seen at a single party in my three years at Westvale had no problem throwing herself into my crazy games. So, of course, I remembered what you were wearing.”

He presses kisses down my neck. “I hate losing, but that party has led to some good surprises.”

The smile that spreads across Jalen’s face doesn’t match the look of need in his eyes. He pulls me up until I am straddling him. He unhooks my bra and slides it off my arms, dropping it to meet the same fate as the shirt I was wearing. If my nipples weren’t already hard, they would be when Jalen’s fingers lightly dance over them. He continues moving his hands down my body learning every inch. When he meets the waistband of my shorts, he pulls them off, leaving me in just my thong. But soon, it’s gone too.

He trails the tips of his fingers down my inner thigh, running his fingers through my slit. My hips

buck up when he cups my pussy, trying to get more friction as he grinds the heel of his hand to my clit.

“Oh, Jalen, yes.”

He trails kisses down my body, stopping to suck each nipple, giving them a little extra attention. When he is satisfied with his work, he settles himself between my legs. He pushes the tip of his finger inside me, inching in slowly, widening me.

“You’re so wet,” He whispers as he pulls out of me.

Just when I think he is about to add a second finger, he rubs his forefingers together as they hover over my face. He went from sweet and soft to dark and mysterious, and I am shocked by how much it turns me on.

“Is this what I do to you, Angel? You walk around all sweet and innocent, but I always knew you were soaking wet for me.”

He takes his forefinger into his mouth, sucking it off and then pulls it out with a pop.

“You taste so sweet.” He holds his thumb over my mouth. “You want a taste.” He wastes no time pushing his finger inside my mouth, making sure I leave no trace of how wet Jalen makes me.

Jalen moves to place a deep kiss on my center. I push myself up into him, telling him exactly what I want. His tongue slides down the length of me before he confesses.

“I’ve been fucking my hand to the memory of you standing in my living room for weeks,” He looks up at me, “but the real thing is so much better.” I’m a little taken back by his confession, but Jalen doesn’t seem to care.



“Yo...you..what?” Long controlled strokes have me forgetting what I wanted to ask. Jalen’s confidence is all-consuming. He doesn’t second guess what he is going to say or what he wants. He just takes it. And right now, I’m happy it’s me.

He groans, going to town tasting every inch of me.

He works a finger in and gives me no time to adjust before he adds suction to my clit. The hand not working me to bliss grips me in place as he adds a second finger.

“I’m so c..cclose” I get out through labored breaths.

“Don’t worry about being quiet, baby. They won’t remember hearing us in the morning.”

For some reason, the thought of Jalen’s roommates and Indy hearing us pushes me over the edge. With one more thrust of Jalen’s fingers, I’m coming. My body shakes as Jalen continues to work his fingers in me as I come down from the high.

His hooded eyes meet mine as he licks my juices off his fingers. “You taste so good, Vee. I needed a second taste.” After he cleans his finger, he looks in my eyes. “You were worth the wait.”

When he sits up, he places a chaste kiss on my forehead before leaning over me to open the drawer of his bedside table.

Condom in hand, he tells me, “We don’t have to if you don’t want to. My night’s been perfect with you just being here.”

Right when I thought this man couldn’t be any more perfect, he one-ups himself. He’s not perfect

because he just gave me the best orgasm of my life. It's because he always makes sure I'm comfortable, and I know if I tell him no, he will listen. He respects that sometimes I get anxious but encourages me to push through it. He listens to me, and he makes me feel safe. He's chipping away at a lifetime of pain.

I pull him down and capture his lips with mine. "I need an answer, Ivy," he says with his lips still pressed to mine.

"Yes," I began to stroke the large bulge pressing against his sweatpants. "I'm sure."

That's all the encouragement he needs. I work his pants down his legs, but it must be too slow for Jalen because when I tug his sweatpants off, he doesn't wait for me to bring my hands back to his boxers.

"Well, that's one way to set a mood," I joke before reaching out for Jalen's cock. I stroke the smooth skin a couple of times, making sure to trace the long vein that runs down it before running my tongue across the tip and licking up the salty bead of precum that drips from the tip.

"As much as I love those soft lips wrapped around my dick, I'm not coming in your mouth tonight."

I force my legs together, trying to ease the throbbing. He rips the condom open and rolls it on himself. He instructs me to lift my hips as he grabs the pillow he was using while watching the movie and places it under them.

I notice how big he really is when he rises to his knees. I've always known Jalen is big, I mean, there aren't many six-foot-five men strolling around

campus, but damn, this man is impressive. It's not often that I feel small, but I feel protected underneath Jalen's muscular frame.

Our eyes lock as I eagerly take in his length. Slowly, he pushes his thick cock into me, inch by inch. I moan as he fills me up. He gives me little time to adjust before he quickens his movements. My hips snap to meet his movements, pulling me closer and closer towards another high. We work together, moving me closer to my second orgasm.

"You feel so fucking good, Ivy. Your pussy was made for me. Look how good you take me."

I look at the place where we're connected, mesmerized by how good he feels thrusting into me. I tug him back, forcing his lips to mine. He kisses me like a man possessed, and I can't get enough. I tug at his bottom lip. When he moans, I slip my tongue in to meet his.

"I'm not going to last much longer," his voice is strained. He takes his hand that's resting on my hip and slips it between us to rub my clit, adding another dimension to my high.

"Come on, baby, come for me one more time." His words set me on fire. He cries my name as his body pulses around me. Jalen loses any composure he has left. His thrusts become sloppy until his body shakes, and he empties himself. I scream his name as I come for the second time.

His body collapses on top of mine. We lay chest to chest as Jalen takes a second to catch his breath before pressing a quick kiss to my lips.

*You're the one that I want (you are the one I want)*

*Ooh-ooh-ooh, honey*

I snort a laugh as he leans forward until his forehead rests against mine. “I’m so sorry Ivy. My foot just hit the remote. I had no idea it was going to start the movie,” he laughs, “but just in case it wasn’t clear, you are the one I want”

I give him a playful push. He uses the momentum to pull out before getting up to clean himself off and throw away the condom. When he settles back onto the bed, he pulls my body into his. I can feel the rise and fall of Jalen’s chest as his breathing evens out. He falls asleep first, but I fall asleep wrapped in his arms. It’s been a long time since I’ve fallen asleep in a bed that’s not my own. It’s one thing to have a little fun, but it’s another to let myself get distracted, and I’ve worked too hard to get distracted now.

## Jalen



“Ivy, give me a minute to wake up.” I swat at her hand that’s clawing at my chest. I hear giggling coming from the other side of the bed. I keep my eyes closed desperate for ten more minutes of sleep.

“If you really think I’m the one licking your face right now, you’re truly delusional.”

When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is the furry little fluff ball responsible for waking me up. A small part of me is kind of disappointed I wasn’t woken up by Ivy’s tongue.

“When did you get in here, little girl?” I coo as Mia makes her way onto my chest. Ivy moves over, so we’re sharing a pillow, fighting over who gets to hold Mia.

“How did she get in here?” I ask before giving Ivy a quick peck.

She rests her head on my shoulder before playing with the end of my braids. I don't usually have girls stay over, and on the rare occasion I do, I never stay in bed long enough to talk or, even worse, cuddle. This feels good, though.

I have no idea what's happening with us. One day, it feels like Ivy and I are on the same page, and the next, we aren't even reading the same book. It's clear that Ivy has major trust issues, I think last night was proof of that. Most of my teammates would wash their hands of a girl who was that distraught from me talking with another girl in a bar, but I can see there is more to this than someone just pissed that I'm not giving her attention. There has to be a story behind Ivy's lack of trust, one I hope she'll tell me when she's ready. A few weeks ago, Ivy lived in the shadows. All I know is that she brings so much more light to my life and her waking up in my bed is better than any sunrise.

“Someone opened the door, and she ran in. I have no clue who it was.”

“She loves to come here in the morning and snuggle with me. It drives Byron crazy because she loves me more than him,” I state matter of factly. “Isn't that right, little girl? I'm your favorite, isn't that right.” I snuggle Mia into the crook of my neck.

“Now that she has all her shots, you should bring her to the shelter. The other dogs would love a new buddy to play with.”

I watch as Ivy arches her back before sitting up against my headboard. For the first time, I notice the tattoo that wraps around her side. The delicate script must have been hidden under her bra strap the night of the party, and for last night, I have no clue how I missed it. I'll blame it on being too in the moment.

"What does it say?" I ask as my fingers run across it. She places her hand on mine. The movement is tender like she is making sure she can trust me with whatever she is about to share.

"It says, Be Brave, Be You. My mom would always say it to me," she pauses to take a deep breath, "She died when I was eight, and I didn't understand what it meant then, but my sister reminded me of the mantra during high school at a time when I was struggling, and it made me feel closer to Mom. So, I got this on my eighteenth birthday, so I'd always have a piece of her with me."

Ivy looks down to where my fingers are still. I place the fingers of the opposite hand under her chin and tilt her head until her eyes meet mine.

"Thank you for sharing that with me," I kiss her before continuing, "I'll be here whenever you want to tell me more about her. I want to hear all about the woman you loved so much."

She stays silent, and a sinking feeling settles in my stomach. Did I say the wrong thing? I don't want to push her, but maybe that's what she wanted. She did say she's been working on opening up to people. Fuck, I don't know what I'm doing. I've never liked a girl enough to talk about her family, and I've definitely never second-guessed myself this much.

“Jalennn,” the screeching sound comes from downstairs and in an instant I’m jolted back to reality. I quickly pull on a pair of sweatpants and make my way to the kitchen, where an angry Indy waits for me.

“Jalen,” she punches out, “Which girl in your rotation did you let go in the bathroom, use my stuff, and then leave the bathroom a mess?” Her hands are flying around, it’s not until Marcus wraps his arms around her that she calms down.

Does she really not remember coming home last night? She and Marcus were going at it pretty hard in the back seat, but that’s nothing new, and neither of them had to be drunk to partake in an aggressive post-bar makeout session.

I decide to make a game out of Indy trying to figure out who I was with last night. I can’t wait to see how many random girls she guesses until she lands on her best friend.

“You seriously don’t remember riding home together?”

Game ruined.

Ivy comes downstairs in my shorts and shirt, not trying to conceal the fact that we slept together last night.

Indy’s eyes slowly scan from Ivy’s to mine, then back to her best friend’s. “Why are you here?”

I always forget how well Indy can hold her liquor. There was no indication that she was blacked out last night. She met Marcus at a frat party where she outdrank the football team’s offensive line. If you ask Marcus, he’ll tell you it was love at first sight.



“I hung out with you for two hours after we got home last night,” Ivy reminds her roommate. “You really don’t remember any of that?”

“Nope, but if you’re going to stay here, you can replenish anything you use the last of.”

Ivy moves towards her best friend and gives her a hug.

“Good morning to you too, Sunshine.” The girls walk over to the couch laughing.

“She seems comfortable here. Are you going to make this a regular thing?” Marcus asks.

“I don’t think it’s up to me.”

It makes me more upset than I’ll ever admit but I honestly have no clue if this will be more than a one-time thing, but I’d be hurt if Ivy decides to pull away again.

I go to the kitchen, where Aaron is making coffee. I grab two mugs, and he hands me the coffee.

“You want to join us for breakfast?” I ask him.

“Nah, I don’t really feel like fifth wheeling. How was the end of your night?”

“It was good.” I can’t keep my smile at bay.

“That’s all you’re going to give me. Jalen, we have lived together for four years, and you have never made a girl breakfast.”

“I really like her,” I say with a shrug. I’d never admit this to anyone, but that terrifies me.

20

Ivy



I've been coming to the Riley Center for the season opening basketball games for as long as I can remember. Well before I ever picked up a basketball. The double header is one of those small-town events that'll have you bumping into your elementary school principal and the person who caused your first heartbreak all before the end of the first quarter.

One of my favorite pictures of Ruby and me was taken at this event, it's from the year she gained custody of me. She always tells me that she thinks that was the day I fell in love with the game of basketball.

Now I'm about to play in my last home opener. I look around the arena and commit this moment to memory. I take in the sounds of the fans, the smell of popcorn that wafts through the arena, the

bouncing of basketballs against the old hardwood floors and the sense of pride I've had putting on the Westvale University jersey for the last three years. I'm not taking any moment for granted this season.

The crowd is extra rowdy tonight because it's our first home game since we won the national title last March, and tonight, the school is celebrating by hanging a banner to commemorate that accomplishment. This banner will ensure that anyone who watches a game in the Riley Center will know what we accomplished last season.

One thing I'm not sure I have memorized is the speech I have to give after the banner is revealed. Indy and Lola have been good sports about listening to every tweak I've made to it, but I know I've been driving them crazy. I hate public speaking, and knowing I have only one shot at giving this speech makes it even worse.

A buzzer signals the end of warm-ups, and it's time to line up for the national anthem. My teammates and I line up along the foul line beside our bench. I scan the seats across from the scorers' table, looking for my sister and her kids. A pit forms in my stomach when I don't spot them in their normal seats. I know they are probably just late. Ruby warned me that this might happen because it's meet the teacher night, but my mind always drifts to the worst possible scenario.

A rare moment of silence in the gym draws attention to the sound of a door slamming and has everybody looking toward the arena's entryway. I smile when I see my sister and the kids rushing to their seats. I give them a wave and blow Caleb and Stella a kiss.

Mr. Holloway invites us to join him at center court when the national anthem is over. He says a few words about our team, and as the banner moves towards its new home in the rafters, I hear someone calling my name, but I can't put my finger on who the deep voice belongs to. Not until I notice Jalen standing behind our bench with Marcus, and I have to say he looks so damn fine. I don't know what it is about backward-facing baseball caps, but Jalen pulls it off better than the best of them.

"How's the shelter been lately?" Mr. Holloway asks me while Coach Lee addresses the crowd. "I haven't seen Jalen in a few weeks."

My throat goes dry. What does he mean by that? Has Jalen told his uncle about us? There isn't even an us to talk about. We hooked up once. So what.

"Yeah, he's starting to form relationships with the dogs at the shelter," I tell him, wanting to keep the conversation as professional as possible.

"That's good."

Surely I'm just paranoid, but I feel like he knows more about what is happening with Jalen and me than I do. I have no more time to stew over whatever Jalen may or may not have told his uncle because Coach Lee hands me the microphone.

The panic of having to talk to a sold-out arena, mixed with anxiety that Mr. Holloway knows I slept with his nephew is just what I needed tonight. When I make it to center court, all that anxiety eases because I notice Stella in the stands giving me two thumbs up. I make sure my eyes stay locked on hers so I can pretend I'm having a one-on-one conversation with my niece.

“I know I speak for the entire team when I thank you for coming out on a Tuesday to celebrate last year’s team. Being from Westvale has made this National Championship so much more special for me. I promise we will do everything possible to bring you guys another win home.” Short and to the point, just like Coach asked for it to be. Mr. Holloway comes to get the microphone from me and he lets us soak in the standing ovation from the fans.

When the crowd settles down, the starting five take our spots on the bench, preparing for the starting lineups to be announced.

“Why didn’t you tell me Jalen was coming with Marcus?” I hiss at Indy, who is a two-year starter.

“How was I supposed to know? I thought they had practice during our game,” she retorts before bending down to retie her sneakers.

She’s been making it really hard for me to believe her lately. She has been in Jalen’s corner ever since this whole thing began, making sure Jalen has all the tools to win me over. Which makes me believe she orchestrated this whole thing, but I have no time to ask more questions because my name is the next to be called.

When I meet the other starters at halfcourt, I take a moment to look at the crowd, and that is when I spot a pair of blue eyes staring into my soul. He gives me a look that tells me he understands how much this moment means to me. As much as I don’t want to admit it, I like that he understands me and knows that this season is filled with lasts. I force myself to look away from Jalen because I can’t afford to lose sight of what matters and that

is winning the conference and ensuring ourselves a one-seed in the postseason tournament.

Once Indy's name is called, our starting five is finally complete and we're ready to take the court. Izzy Smith, our sophomore center, wins the tip. Indy secures the ball, and we set up in our half-court offense. Indy gets the ball to Imani, who swings it to me. When I notice I'm open, I take the baseline three. It feels good as it leaves my hand, and when it goes in smoothly—not even touching the net—I know this is going to be a fun night.

Turning to make my way back down the court, I don't even register what defense Coach Lee is trying to tell us to run because Jalen is on his feet behind her, screaming my name. I flash him a smile. Yeah, this is going to be a good night.



I'm feeling good as I leave the locker room after the game. We've won our first two games of the season, and the team's chemistry hasn't lost a beat since last season.

"Aunt Ivy!" Stella yells. Her little legs are working overtime to get her across the Riley Center's lobby. She launches herself into my arms and I spin her around making her laugh. "You played so well. I can't believe you made five threes." I can't believe it either, but the early season success shows the work I put in this summer is already paying off.

"It's all because of you and your brother's help this summer," I tell her before I give her a kiss on her forehead. Stella and Caleb rebounded for me all summer. They thought it was so cool that they

could be in the gym with me when school wasn't in session.

I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn and Indy is giving Caleb a high five.

“Hey, Ind, is something wrong?”

She leans forward and whispers, “Jalen wants to know if he can come over and say hi. He made me ask because your family is here. I don't think he's ever met a girl's family before. It's kind of cute how nervous he is.”

“Who's Jalen, Aunt Ivy?” Stella asks. I can't blame my best friend for not knowing that anything you say in front of a five-year-old won't stay a secret for long.

“He's a new friend of mine. Do you want to meet him? He plays hockey,” I say calmly, making it seem like I'm in control of the situation when I'm clearly not. How can I say no when Jalen was thoughtful enough not to intrude on my family time.

I take Stella's hand, and my heart melts when I see Jalen squatting in front of Caleb, who is hanging onto his every word.

“Have Caleb and Jalen met before?” Indy asks as we walk toward the rest of my family.

“I don't think so,” I say with a shrug.

Jalen hugs me, and when his hand lands a little too low on my back. I abruptly pull away before I introduce Jalen to my family.

“I see you already met Caleb, and this is Stella.” I take the little hand of the girl hiding behind me and tuck her into my side. Stella and I both are on the shy side and prefer to be around small groups

of people, where Caleb and Ruby thrive as the center of attention.

“I want you to meet my friends Marcus and Jalen. They play hockey.”

I watch Caleb’s face as he takes in these two Division I athletes. There was a time when I looked at Westvale’s student-athletes with the same awe. I remember thinking you had to be so mature to be in college, but here I am at twenty-one, having no idea what I’m doing.

“Does Aunt Ivy braid your hair, too?” Caleb innocently asks Jalen.

I hear Indy snort, and it takes all my energy to not swing my arm into her stomach to shut her up.

Jalen squats down so he is eye to eye with my nephew and speaks to him sincerely, “No, she doesn’t, but yours look so good. Do you think you can convince her to do mine?”

“You can come to my house the next time she does mine, and she can do yours too.”

Jalen puts out his hand as an offering to Caleb. “Sounds like a deal, kid.” It tugs at my heartstrings watching the way Jalen interacts with my nephew.

We hear the horn that indicates the men’s basketball game is about to start, and I have to meet the rest of my team in the gym.

“We better get going. The kids have to get to bed,” Ruby offers us a smile while she helps the kids into their coats. I wish they could stay for the next game, but I know it’s a school night.

Once the season starts, I don’t get to spend as much time as I’d like with my family, making all these little moments so much more meaningful. I



soak in the hugs I get from my sister and Stella. When it's Caleb's turn, he jumps into my arms and whispers, "I think it's really cool that Jalen has braids like me."

I try to keep myself from crying but can't help the few tears that sneak through. Caleb had even less time with his dad than I did with my parents, and he comes from a small town where there aren't many people who look like him and his sister. So the fact that he can see himself in someone like Jalen, who is not only a great athlete but—more importantly—an incredible man means everything to me. I hope it shows Caleb that he can accomplish anything he sets his mind to.

I squeeze Caleb, and before letting him go, I tell him, "I love you so much, little man." Then I turn to make sure Jalen can hear, "And your hair looks so much better than Jalen's. Maybe we should let him come next time we have a hair day."

"You tell me when, and I'll be there," Jalen tells us. I was expecting a sarcastic response because that man takes a lot of pride in his appearance. I'd bet anything that he has gotten his hair done by the same person his entire life.

"Okay!" Caleb yells, not being able to control his voice.

He kisses me, and then his mom grabs his hand dragging him toward the door so they can head home.

Jalen and Marcus come with Indy and me to grab some food before we take our seats for the game. I laugh when Jalen edges Indy out so he can take the seat next to me in the stands.

“Real smooth,” Indy jokes with Jalen before she pats him on the leg.

“Thanks for being so great with my nephew,” I hesitate before continuing, “His dad passed away a few years ago, and I think he thought it was really cool to meet someone who looks like him and plays a sport at his favorite college.”

“He seems like a cool kid, and just so you know, next time I need my hair done, I am calling you.”

A smile masks my nerves. All this talk about the future makes me anxious. Even with these raw emotions, I know that there isn't a universe where watching the way Jalen interacted with my nephew doesn't make the thought of the future a little less frightening.

21

## Jalen



I haven't been to the shelter since the hockey season started and Uncle Matt has reminded me that I still need to put in my time there to stay eligible for my upcoming games. He not so subtly hinted that I was expected to be there today.

I texted Ivy when I woke up this morning to see if she was coming in, but she hasn't responded. Marcus said she has a big biology exam next week, and it's normal for her to go MIA when she has to study.

Jill is at the front desk when I get to the shelter with an abnormally large grin covering her face.

"Hey Jill, sorry I haven't been here in a while. Since the season started, I haven't had any free time."

I take in the warm smile she flashes, “I knew you would be busy with hockey. We go through the same thing every year when Ivy starts her basketball season. Don’t worry about it.”

I can’t help but notice that her smile has turned from friendly to knowing. She must see the confusion in my eyes because she continues, “Last time Ivy was here, she mentioned that you two have been hanging out outside of your time at the shelter.”

I lean against the front desk, wanting to know what Ivy has told her. If I have learned anything about Ivy in the last few weeks, it’s that she’s a private person and I don’t want to divulge more than she is comfortable with. Especially now that she has finally begun to open up.

“Her roommate and mine are dating, so she sometimes comes and hangs out when Indy is at our place.” It’s not even believable to my ears.

So it’s no surprise when Jill doesn’t buy my bullshit, but she looks oddly pleased with my answer.

“Ivy is guarded for a reason. She’s been through a lot, so if you ever stop feeling the way you clearly do about her, let her know before you break her heart.” Her eyes are soft like she is hopeful that Ivy and I have something real going on, but she stands in front of me with arms crossed and her stance rigid. So it also kind of feels a little like a threat.

I’m unsure where Jill gets her information from, but Ivy clearly doesn’t feel as strongly about me as she is hinting at. She left my house Sunday morning after having breakfast with me...and the rest of my house. There was no kiss. If I’m being

honest, I feel lucky to have gotten a hug out of her after her game on Tuesday.

“I will.” I keep the response simple. “I’m going to head back and see what dogs need water before I get them ready for a walk.”

“Sounds good, Jalen. Thanks for coming in today.”

I’m getting the last dog’s harness on when the bell on top of the front door rings.

“Ivy, I didn’t think you were coming in today.” Jill pretty much yells from the front desk.

“Why are you being so weird?”

I don’t hear the rest of their conversation, but Ivy’s boot-clad footsteps get louder with each step she takes.

When Ivy makes her way to the back of the shelter, she drops the water bottle she was holding and her mouth hangs open, but nothing comes out.

“Oh, that’s why she’s acting like that,” Her response is neither shocked nor sad, but rather soft and happy.

Deciding it best to leave that topic of conversation alone, I hold up all the dog’s leashes, and ask Ivy, “Want to join us? I’m headed to the baseball field to play fetch.”

There is a smile trying to tug at Ivy’s lips, but she suppresses it the moment it threatens to show. “I’m almost done with getting the dogs ready. Why don’t you head outside and I’ll meet you there.”

Ivy’s sitting on the bench behind the shelter when I finally get all the dogs prepped for their afternoon walk but she isn’t sitting there scrolling

on her phone, she is taking in the mountains that surround campus. I see her shoulders are pinching up before they relax in a rhythm that seems very soothing. I take a moment and follow the rhythm of her shoulders with my own. Our peaceful moment in the mountains ends abruptly when Sabastian, a five-pound chihuahua, lets out a yip that is ear-piercing enough to wake the dead.

We walk in silence to the baseball field. I watch the sway of her round hips whilst trying to enjoy the cool fall breeze because, in a few weeks, I wouldn't be shocked if these fields were covered in snow.

I am shocked at how being in Ivy's presence makes me nervous. She's beautiful—not like an Instagram model beautiful— but she has a natural beauty that is mesmerizing. I love spending time with her, but everyone keeps acting like she is some delicate flower that freezes during the first frost of the year. I guess I saw a little of it at the bar last weekend, but I thought it was an alcohol-fueled moment at the time. The only Ivy I've seen has been assertive and sure of herself. It's one of the reasons I wanted to see where things could go with us. I'm used to girls fawning all over me. There has never really been a chase, but I'm learning things are a lot better if you have to put in the effort to earn them.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

I decide it's time one of us tries to have this conversation.

“I know we've both been swamped the past couple of days, but I think we should talk about last weekend.”

This is usually part of the “relationship” where I tell the girl I’m too busy and then move on to the next casual hookup.

I open the gate by the home dugout and bend down to let the dogs off their leashes. I love watching the dogs from the shelter enjoy their freedom. The leaves fly up like smoke would in a cartoon, showing how happy they are to have free space to roam. It’s like giving them a little bit of freedom completely changes their personalities.

“Yeah, we probably should.”

The request comes out confident but her body tells a different story. She tucks her hands into the front pockets of her jeans and looks at her right boot, which she is using to push the infield dirt around. She takes a deep breath before looking up at me through her dark eyelashes.

“I think... I mean I have had a lot of fun these past few weeks, but I think we should keep things going the way they are. I don’t really have time for more,” She pauses to take a deep breath before she continues. “You’re free to hook up with whoever you want. I know I had a little freak out last weekend, but that happens sometimes when I drink.”

That wasn’t what I was expecting or what I want. This is the first time a woman has ever said she wants to keep the relationship casual when I want something more.

Then I remember my conversations with Indy and Jill. I realize that last weekend was a big step for Ivy, and maybe taking it slow is how I show I’m serious about wanting more with her. I know

pushing her into something is really just pushing her away.

“That’s fine, but Ivy, I still want to spend time with you. You’re not going to push me into another girl’s arms and get rid of me,” I make sure she looks me in the eyes before I continue. “This conversation isn’t a relationship ending. It’s the start of one because you’re worth waiting for Ivy. I really like spending time with you, and I know you like spending time with me. Whenever you’re ready to make this official, I’ll be here waiting for you.”

Her body relaxes and she tries to hide her smile, but I’m happy when she can’t hold it at bay any longer. I match it.

I laid it all out. She knows exactly how I feel. Now it’s time to be patient because slow and steady wins the race.



When I get home, the boys are in the living room huddled around some video game. I want to tell them about the conversation that I had with Ivy today and ask their opinions on if I went about it the right way. I take my usual spot in the corner of the sectional and try to figure out how to have this conversation around the game of Madden NFL that Marcus and Aaron are playing on the Xbox.

“Hey, guys, can I ask you a question?”

The only response I get is a bunch of unintelligible grunts.

“I need some advice on something Ivy said to me today.” That has Aaron pausing the game and



facing me. Byron gets up from the kitchen table, where he is working on something for his marketing class, and makes his way to the armchair we have placed next to the couch.

“So when I got to the shelter today, I didn’t think Ivy was going to be there, but I guess she needed a break from her school work and showed up to work at the shelter,” I run my clammy hands down my pants before I continue. “When we were out walking the dogs, she brought up whatever has been going on between us over the last few weeks, and she said she wants to keep hanging out, but I am free to hook up with other girls. She doesn’t really want me to hook up with other girls, right?”

There is a moment of silence before my teammates start laughing, and I instantly regret asking the question.

“No girl actually means shit like that when they say it. Trust me, I’ve fallen for that trick before.” Aaron tells me.

“Then you can’t..” I try to interject to save some self-preservation.

“When I was seventeen,” he adds.

Behind the glare, I’m shooting in Aaron’s direction. I am secretly happy I asked. I don’t want to be with anyone else, but I’ve never really paid attention when my friends have vented about their girlfriends in the past. It’s like the women want to assign us a quick test to make sure we aren’t going to break their hearts. I’ve always been good at taking tests, but when it comes to Ivy I want to make sure I ace it.

22

Ivy



Maybe I should just be a Zombie for Halloween because that's how I feel trying to find something to wear tonight. I probably should have put more effort into my costume considering this is the first year I'll be out with my friends since I've been in college. Midterms are coming up, and if I wanted to go out tonight, I had to get some school work done first, so now—like I have had to for most of the semester—I need to figure out something to wear from what's already in my closet because I don't have time to run to the costume store in the mall before tonight.

There's a hockey game this afternoon, and promised Caleb I'd take him to the game with me and Riley. Luckily, my sister and Stella are coming too, so I won't have to entertain the kid the whole time. I love him, but I don't think I can handle his eight-year-old energy today.

“Lolaaa!” I scream to get her attention because I’m hoping she has something I can borrow for tonight.

When she gets to my room, she is panting. “What the fuck Vee? I thought you were seriously hurt up here.” She has her hands on her thighs trying to catch her breath.

“Do you have something I can wear to Jasper’s tonight?”

“I told you not to wait until the last minute to find a costume.” She glares at me the way a disappointed mom would look at a child who didn’t clean their room when she asked.

“Okay, I should have made time to do that, but I didn’t, and I need your help.” I bat my eyelashes because I know she can’t resist my puppy dog eyes.

“I have one thing that might work. Give me a minute to find it.” She spends the next fifteen minutes in her room, but when she comes back, I’m so thankful for the dress she is carrying. The silver dress is covered in large disc-like sequins that scream disco queen.

She throws the dress in my direction. I snatch it and hold it out in front of me and watch how light bounces off the discs when they’re hit at the right angles. I have to try it on to make sure that it will work with the seven inches I have on Lola.

The dress is a little short, but I will make it work. I pull out my silver platform heels and slide them on. Not bad for a last-minute look.

I hear a whistle coming from the bedroom door, and I’m startled yet flattered to see Marcus standing at my door with Indy by his side. “I know

someone who will be happy to see you in *that* tonight.”

I feel my face flush. I pick up a pillow and throw it in Marcus’ direction to take the attention off myself. A satisfied smile springs on my face when it hits Marcus square in the head.

I’m still uncomfortable talking about Jalen with everyone, and now that he is free to hook up with whoever he wants, maybe the thought of us being together will lose its appeal. It’s not like I have time to add another responsibility to my list and to be honest, Jalen deserves to be with someone who can give him all of them, and the sooner he realizes that, the better.



When I take my seat behind the home bench after the national anthem, my sister and the kids are already sitting in their seats. I walk up and give Caleb and Stella hugs and make sure I make a big show of it because Caleb is now at the age where he is too cool to show any affection. After placing an overly dramatic kiss on the top of his head, I take the open seat next to my sister.

“What are the kids doing for Halloween?” I ask. Back when I lived with my sister full-time, Halloween was my favorite holiday to spend with the kids. We still go to those pop-up costume stores, and let the kids try on a hundred different costumes until they find the perfect one. Before this year, I’d alternate between Caleb and Stella, trying to match one of their themes.

“Just the normal, trick-or-treating with the neighborhood crew, then while the kids sort

through their candy, the parents will be enjoying some wine.” I can tell my sister is in need of a wine night. She is the best mother to these kids, but I hope she starts finding time to do things for herself. She deserves it.

“That’s good. What’s the latest neighborhood gossip? Are the Wilsons and Andersons still fighting over who broke the garden gnome?” Small-town drama is the best. It’s so trivial, but the whole town gets involved, and it makes for must-see TV.

My sister laughs, but before she can answer, banging on the glass draws both of our attention to the ice. Jalen is waving way too enthusiastically for someone who is in head-to-toe hockey pads. His smile takes up his entire face. I turn to Caleb, who is talking to his sister, and show him who is at the glass. Caleb jumps up on his seat like somehow standing on the seat will make Jalen hear him better.

“Jalen! What’s up? I’m so excited to watch you play! I’ve been watching hockey videos on YouTube to learn all the rules.” It’s true that ever since they met after my game, Caleb has been taking in anything that has to do with hockey. Jalen has everything to do with his new interest in the sport.

Jalen looks genuinely happy to hear about my nephew’s newfound love for hockey. “Any time you want to take the ice, let me know. I coach kids at home, so I already have a bunch of drills.”

I think the air conditioning broke in here because the thought of Jalen teaching kids how to play hockey has me wanting to strip out of my coat.

Jalen spins toward the center line where the captains are lining up and tilts his head in our direction.

“I’m serious, Caleb. Anytime you want to play, let your aunt know. She has my number. And I’ll see you tonight, Ivy.” Then he winks at me. A dramatic I can’t wait to bang you again, wink.

Of course, this is the moment my sister decides to join the conversation. While Jalen skates away, my sister asks me, “What are your plans for tonight, Ivy?”

I don’t even attempt to lie to my sister. She’s always been able to see through my bullshit.

“Me and some of my teammates are meeting Jalen and some of his friends at the baseball house for a Halloween party before going to the bar. Nothing crazy.”

“You seem to be going out a lot this semester,” Ruby says. To most, this sounds like a concerned sister, but she is proud of me for getting out there more. “And it seems like Jalen has a lot to do with that.”

“I mean, he is Marcus’ roommate, so I guess we’ve been hanging out a lot.”

I love my sister and owe everything I’ve accomplished to her and her sacrifices, but I know she would be devastated if she knew the real reason I’ve always kept boys at arm’s length. Meaning my love life is the one part of my life I’ve always kept from her.

The puck is about to drop when someone sits in the empty seat to my left. It takes a second to register it’s Mr. Holloway, who is dressed casually in street clothes.

“Hey, Mr. Holloway, What’s up? This is my sister Ruby and her kids, Caleb and Stella.” Mr. Holloway reaches across my body to shake my sister’s hand.

“Please call me Matt. I’m here to be a supportive uncle, not as Westvale’s Athletic Director.”

“Ohh, your nephew is on the team. Which one is he.” That has me rolling my eyes. I mean, how hard can it be to tell which player is Mr.Holloway’s nephew?

“Number fifty-three, Jalen.”

If Mr. Holloway notices the *this could get interesting* look in my sister’s eyes, he doesn’t show it. My sister doesn’t have time to tell whatever embarrassing story I know she is desperate to tell because the sound of a horn fills the arena, and the puck is dropped for the opening face-off. I run my hands down Riley’s back as bodies start hitting the boards.

When you grow up in Westvale, Hockey is a way of life. Even being a basketball junkie, I learned to enjoy hockey, but watching your friends play makes the game so much more stressful. Westvale is playing against St. John’s University. I know this one means more to Jalen than any other game on his schedule. The Queens-based college passed him over during his recruitment process, and Jalen told me he would have loved to play for his hometown team. By the way, Jalen is playing tonight, St. John’s shouldn’t want to play against the man holding no to a four-year grudge. Jalen is playing aggressively and putting someone into the boards every chance he gets, but he is still in control. Making it all look effortless.

When I get back from taking Riley outside for his walk during the first intermission, Jalen is throwing a punch at a St. John's defenseman. I hurry back to my seat, eyes glued on the ice as Jalen takes a punch to the face. One whose imprint will be showing for days to come.

I pick up my pace when Byron gets involved, and the fight takes a nasty turn. My legs start to go numb. I need to sit, but my seat is no longer open. Mr. Holloway has slid over a spot and is leaning in to hear something my sister is saying. Whatever it is, he laughs and puts his hand on her knee.

It's not until Riley barks that either of them notices I'm back. "Hey, take your seat back. I just couldn't hear your sister, so I..." I hold my hand out telling him he is fine to stay where he is.

"What happened to Jalen out there? That fight looked a little intense," my voice sounds strained.

"It was just a normal fight, Vee. Why are you so concerned?" I want to slap the knowing grin off my sister's face. If that's not bad enough, Stella now has a confused look on her face, which I know will lead to a hundred questions. And Mr. Holloway has a suspicious gleam in his eyes. I shrug off the question, instead giving Riley a good pat on the back. He's never given me any trouble.



23

Ivy



I play with the zipper on my purse but my eyes focus on the cracked concrete trying not to trip in these obscenely high heels. During our walk to the baseball house I've been lost in my own little world thinking about how horrible tonight is going to be. This dress is too short, these heels are too high, and everyone is too drunk. I hate holidays everyone celebrates by drinking until they can't see straight and the anxiety is always a little worse on October 31st.

We lose Lola the moment we step into the house. "Where is she going? I feel like she's been MIA the last few weeks."

Indy shrugs before pulling me towards the bar. Got to love a girl with a one-track mind. On our way, I take in the foreign sights and smells of a college party. Other than the one the Hockey boys

threw for my team—which had a very controlled guest list—I haven’t been to a house party this year. My newfound enjoyment of going out has mostly involved nights at Jasper’s.

The lingering scent of weed and its smoke adds to my anxiety making the room as hazy as my thoughts. When Indy and I finally push our way back to the bar, I pull the large bottle of tequila off the shelf and take a satisfying swing.

“That’s not ours,” Indy reminds me.

“It is now,” I answer without any shame.

Gold liquor in hand, I notice some of my teammates are talking by the front door. I turn too quickly in the five-inch heels that I’m not used to wearing and stumble into a strong pair of arms. Luckily, my numbing potion is still in hand.

My eyes slowly rake up the man holding me upright, and some of my embarrassment eases when my eyes land on a familiar tattooed chest. I grip along the side of the five buttons he decided didn’t need to meet their partners, and when I finally get myself upright, I’m nearly eye-to-eye with Jalen.

Without thinking, my hand runs along his bruised eye. “Did this happen in the game today?”

He grabs my wrist, but my finger lingers on the discolored skin. “Yeah. My uncle told me how concerned you were about me.”

I roll my eyes. “I would have been concerned for anyone who got hit so hard that his helmet flew off.” Jalen pulls me closer, and I take another pull from my stolen bottle of tequila. His smile cuts through the smoke-filled room. And I hate how my stomach turns every time I see it.

He leans forward, ensuring I'm the only one who can hear him, "Keep telling yourself that, Angel."

"Why did you punch that guy?" I know Mr. Holloway didn't think anything about the fight, but I saw the look in Jalen's eyes. They were ready to kill.

Jalen wraps his arms around my waist and settles us into a corner away from the chaos and costumes. He leans down and presses a kiss to my lips. I pull away when he tries to deepen it. If I can't run away from my emotions, neither can he.

"Jalen," I cup his face so he can't take his eyes away from mine. "Please talk to me. I didn't recognize the man behind those eyes today."

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath before playing with the ends of my hair.

"He just kept making stupid comments." He tries to look down at his shoes, but I steady his eyes on mine. He turns his head and presses a kiss to the center of my palm. I feel like it gives him the strength to continue. "About how I shouldn't be playing hockey because I'm half black." I don't realize he braided my hair until he lets it fall against my chest. "He just made one too many comments."

I pull Jalen's face closer to mine so he doesn't miss a word I'm about to tell him. "Fuck him. You were pretty amazing out there, and I know a little guy who thought it was pretty cool to see someone out there who looked like him. You're an inspiration to a lot of kids. You should be proud of that."

“Thanks, Angel. I really needed to hear that.” His shy tone breaks my heart. This man normally oozes confidence, but an old wound can only be picked at so many times until it bleeds over.

He takes my bottle of tequila and drinks a good amount before handing it back to me, giving me a look that doesn't do a thing to ease the anxiety that buzzes through my body.



We've been at the party for a few hours when I grab Indy's hand and drag her to the bathroom.

“I need to go home.” The distraction of the party hasn't eased my anxiety one bit. And the memories of that night are starting to creep in. I need to get out of here.

“Are you okay, Vee? You've seemed on edge all night.”

That's because I am. This is the night I lost my parents. When I got to Westvale, I decided it would be best to keep that fact to myself. Everyone loves Halloween, and when they learn the circumstances around my parents' deaths, they only want to coddle me. I can't handle the pity.

“I just don't feel great. I'm gonna go call a cab and head home.”

“I'll go with you. Just let me tell Marcus.” Indy can tell I'm about to protest, so she holds up her hand as a signal that I won't be going home alone. “You've had a lot to drink tonight. There is no way I'm letting you get in a car with a stranger.”

I pick up the bottle of tequila I've been carrying around all night, and for the first time, I notice there's only a quarter of the amber liquid left.

"You're right. I probably shouldn't go home alone."

I use my hand as a fan because, all of a sudden, this bathroom feels like a sauna. I open the door to get some air and so Indy can tell her boyfriend we are going home.

We find Marcus sitting on the living room couch. When the room starts to spin, I try to steady myself enough to take the open seat next to Marcus. Before I can find the balance to do so, Jalen wraps his hand around my waist and pulls onto his lap. I plop down so ungracefully that my dress rides up, and I nearly flash the entire party. Jalen grazes his fingers up my thighs until he reaches the hem of my dress and shimmies the sparkly skirt back down my thighs.

"I didn't get to tell you before," he runs his hand down my leg until it's on the strap that hugs my ankle. "I wish you wore heels more often because these shoes make your legs look so damn good."

He needs to stop complimenting me on what's always been my biggest insecurity. He's starting to become too damn perfect. I normally don't wear heels because the boost they add to my five-foot-ten frame makes me taller than almost every guy on campus. I love that Jalen isn't intimidated by the extra inches.

He wraps his masculine hands around my ankle and gently moves his thumb back and forth under the strap of my heel.

“The cab’s almost here,” Indy tells me before she turns to finish her conversation with her boyfriend.

“You’re leaving already?” Jalen asks. He looks sad.

I nearly fall off this lap as I lean over the arm of the couch where my bottle of tequila sits. When Jalen sees how little liquor is left in the bottle, he smiles.

“Someone decided to let loose tonight,” I swear his playful smile does more to me than any amount of alcohol could.

“Will you come home with me?” Entirely embarrassed by my forwardness, I quickly add, “So Indy can stay with Marcus. She hasn’t really been able to see him this week.”

“That liquor sure makes ya bold, Angel, but I’d love to bring you home.” Jalen leans over and whispers something to Marcus, who whispers something to Indy, who then gives me two thumbs up.

Dear lord, what did I just get myself into?

“Your cab is here,” Indy tells Jalen and me. “Text me when you get home.”

I’m guided through the party with Jalen’s hand resting on my lower back. I try to ignore the obvious stares from furious girls and curious guys at Jalen’s intimate touch. The moment the cab pulls away from the baseball house’s driveway, the repercussions of drinking nearly half a bottle of tequila hit.

“Jalen, I think I’m going to be sick.” I’m always so measured, always in control, but with Jalen

sitting next to me, I'm spiraling. I would normally be embarrassed to admit I lost control and drank too much, but to admit it to *this man*, who I'm sure thought he was going to get lucky tonight, makes it even more embarrassing.

His tattooed forearm lays across my thighs as he rolls down my window. I inhale the clean, small-town air and gaze at the stars as I begin calming myself down. Four in. Seven hold. Eight out. I repeat a couple of times until I feel my stomach ease.

I place my hand on top of Jalen's, still resting on my thigh and squeeze it tight. "Thank you. I already feel better."

The intense look in Jalen's eyes makes me nervous. Does he regret coming back with me? To be fair, I didn't realize how drunk I was until I got in the car.

Jalen tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. He kisses my forehead before he says, "I'll always be here to help you, Ivy."

He must feel my body tense because he removes the arm resting on my thigh. I wish Jalen was honest. He won't always be there for me. Every man who said he would be there for me has left. This is just supposed to be fun, and he knows that.

Jalen gets out first when we get back to my apartment. He takes my hand so he can guide me across the seat and out of the car. I grab his wallet after he digs it out of his back pocket. "I can't let you pay. You would still be at the party if it wasn't for me."

He carefully tugs his wallet out of my hand, and the same gentle look from when I told him we

should just keep things light appears in his blue eyes. “Ivy, I got it.” The words are simple but tug at my heartstrings. Jalen makes the smallest efforts feel like the grandest gestures.

Jalen interlocks our fingers as we make our way to the front door. I slam my bag into his chest. “The key is somewhere in there.”

His low laugh draws a similar laugh from me, “Do you think I’d be able to work a lock right now? I’ve embarrassed myself enough tonight.”

He places his hand on my bare shoulder and turns me until I face him. “Don’t ever worry about embarrassing yourself with me.”

I throw my heels on the mudroom floor the second we enter the apartment. I’m heading for my bedroom when Jalen stops me. “Where are your glasses? I will get us some water while you get ready for bed.”

“They are in the cupboard next to the sink,” I slur.

One glance at my bed, and I know I just need to lay down for a little while, then I’ll take off my makeup and change. I must have passed out the second my head hit the pillow because the next thing I know, there are fingers running over the bottom of my foot.

“What do you want?” I groan without opening my eyes, burying myself deeper into my pillow.

“I have your water. I really think you should drink some. And you probably should change out of that dress. Where do you keep your pajamas?”

Without opening my eyes, I point to the dresser that sits across from my bed. I hear Jalen place the



glasses of water on my nightstand before he goes and grabs the oversized Westvale basketball shirt I sleep in.

“Thanks,” I say appreciatively to Jalen when he hands me my shirt. “Do you mind unzipping me?”

When Jalen nods, I get up and turn my back to him. He takes his time unzipping the dress, making sure his knuckles brush against each vertebra that lines my back.

Jalen helps me out of my dress and then helps me into my t-shirt.

Before I get into bed, I move to give Jalen a hug. “Thanks for getting me home safely. Please text me when you get home.”

“I’m not leaving you here alone, Ivy. I’m staying until one of your roommates gets home.”

“You really don’t have to,” I tell him, but I immediately get lightheaded and stumble backward until I land on my bed.

“Yeah, I’m definitely not leaving. Throw me a pillow.” He must see the confusion in my eyes because he continues. “So I can lay down on the floor.”

I may have tried to usher him out of my house, but I can’t let him sleep on my bedroom floor.

“You’re not sleeping on the floor.” I slide under my comforter and hold it up until Jalen gets the message. When he notices his shorts and t-shirt are clean on my desk, he strips down to his boxers before putting on the clothes I wore the last time we were in the same bed.

The last thing I remember before passing out is Jalen wrapping his arm around my waist and

hoping this keeps the nightmare I have every Halloween far away.

As I fall asleep, I'm transported to the day my dad lost his job at the steel factory where he was the Vice President Of Operations.



My dad takes me outside to work on some basketball drills while Mom is getting dinner ready. He loves that I'm showing interest in the sport that he loves so much and never says no when I ask him to practice with me.

On the second day of this dream, when I get home from school, Dad is in the living room with a beer in his hand and five empty cans on the side table next to his chair. I run up to him and try to sit in his lap, hoping we can watch an episode of my favorite cartoon before I have to start my homework. For the first time in my life, I'm disappointed by a man who is supposed to love me. After he places my feet back on the stained carpeted floor he stands and walks back to the fridge with his shoulders slumped and releasing a deep sigh. He grabs another beer, but instead of returning to the living room, he takes his defeated posture up the stairs to my parent's bedroom. He slams the door causing the house to shake.

Moments of the next year loop throughout the night. The time Dad yelled at Mom for cooking his steak rare instead of medium rare. The time he told me he didn't have time to play basketball with me because he needed to look for a job, but when I came inside after I practiced, he was sitting in front of the TV watching the same lame reruns.

The final scene of this nightmare is from that Halloween night fourteen years ago. When I get off the school bus I notice a yellow piece of paper is taped to the door. It looks important, so I rip it off the door and hand it to my mom. Her face turns a ghostly shade of white before she tells me to finish my homework so I can go trick-or-treating later.

Ruby and I have the perfect night with our friends from the neighborhood. The smiles that have been permanently glued to our faces fall when we get home. Mom yells at us to go upstairs. I'll never forget the panic in her eyes. We never see Dad. I faintly hear her yelling stop, but the first floor is silent by the time I get to my room and dump my candy on my bedroom floor. The house goes silent like it always does after my parents have a big fight. Only this time, there is one more screeching stop that comes from my mom before a loud bang shakes the house.

That night has haunted me ever since.

## Jalen



“Stop. Stop. No, please, Dad, what are you doing?”

Ivy’s body is shaking against mine. She keeps telling her dad that he needs to stop. I wrap her tight in my arms. “Ivy, I think you’re having a nightmare. Come on, babe, wake up.”

I don’t want to scare her so I hold her until she stirs herself awake. Her eyes slowly flutter open and she is a little disoriented when she finally wakes up.

“I think you were having a nightmare. You kept telling your dad that he should stop, and then you started shaking. Are you okay?” I rub my hand over her back, trying to help her calm down.

Ivy takes a deep breath and then sits up so her back is against her headboard. She starts to roll the sheets between her fingers. I place my hand over

hers to stop her anxious movements. “Ivy, you don’t have to tell me anything. We can put on a movie or go back to bed. It doesn’t matter to me.”

A pair of beautiful brown eyes meet mine with a tenderness that only comes from living through tragedy. I lay my hand in the dead space of bed between us, palm up. Ivy laces her fingers through mine. She holds on for dear life, like we are about to ascend to the top of a roller coaster.

“Only my roommates and Coach Lee know the majority of the story of what happened to my parents but they still don’t know when it happened.” She closes her eyes before taking a deep breath. Bracing herself for the drop from the apex. “My parents died on Halloween when I was eight. I had just gone home from trick-or-treating with the neighborhood kids and my sister. She always made sure she’d be home to take me.” The smile she flashes me doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“When I got home, I went upstairs to take off my costume and organize my candy. All of a sudden, my parents were screaming at each other. They always found something to fight about when my dad drank too much.” I can’t take the look of desperation in her eyes, so I pull her closer and she places her head on my shoulder. “That night, the fighting was really bad, and I still have no clue what it was about. All of a sudden, I heard my mom yelling at my dad to stop and asking him what he was doing, and those were the last words I heard my mom speak.” She takes a deep breath,

“Then my dad shot my mom and then killed himself. To this day, we have no clue what happened while we were out. My parents fought a lot for sure, but there was never any physical

violence. The next day, my sister dropped out of college and started the process to become my legal guardian. My trauma therapist suggested she get me an emotional support dog, and that's where my love of animals came from." She casually shrugs, like she hasn't just shared the most heart-wrenching story I'll ever hear.

I watch as a tear falls down her cheek and use my thumb to catch it.

"When I was a junior in high school, I asked my sister to tell me the full story of what made my dad change so much," Ivy takes a deep breath before continuing. "My dad had a gambling problem that my mom didn't know about. He was trying to steal from the steel mill to cover the expenses he had at home. Eventually, his bosses figured out what he was doing, and he was fired. That led to a year-long spiral of drinking instead of looking for a new job." She readjusts her pillow so she is lying on her back, looking at the ceiling before she continues. "I was the one who found the eviction notice on the door on Halloween. I gave it to my mom, and she must have confronted my dad about it when we went out."

"I'm so sorry, Ivy." It doesn't feel like enough, but I don't know what else to say.

"Thank you, Jalen. I have seen a lot of good in my life, too. The Westvale community came together and raised enough money for Ruby to buy us a new house and have the mortgage fully paid off. I focus on the seven amazing years I had with my dad instead of the single awful one. I know he did some bad things, but I swear he wasn't an awful person."

I use my thumb to wipe away the tears she tried so hard to keep from breaking free and kiss the top of her head.

“Ivy, I had no idea. I’m so sorry,” I say while trying to hold back my own tears. I already thought Ivy was incredible, but knowing she accomplished all this while living through this unimaginable tragedy is inspiring.

“That’s why I was never out before this year. My sister stopped her whole life at twenty-one to raise me. So, I got good grades and was lucky enough to be able to earn a basketball scholarship to the college in our hometown. Then, when my sister lost her husband in a car accident, I knew I had to do whatever I could to be there for her and the kids. Like she was for me. So I did that by getting good grades so I can hopefully get into vet school, but this year, Ruby, Indy and Lola sat me down and told me I needed to enjoy my last year of college. So that’s why I went to your party.”

When she sinks further into my grip, I make sure to hold on to her tight. “Thank you for sharing that with me. I know that wasn’t easy.” I kiss her before saying, “I’m happy you didn’t push me away last night. As long as you let me, I’ll be there for you.”

She thanks me before she falls back to sleep. I don’t sleep for the rest of the night. I can’t take my eyes off the strongest person I’ve ever met.



I’m looking at my phone when Ivy wakes up. I won’t force her to talk about last night if she’s not ready to.

“Hey,” I pull her into my side, and she rests against my chest. “How did you sleep?”

“Um, I slept okay. Jalen...” she says hesitantly.

I stop her because she doesn't have to explain anything to me. I was happy to be here when she needed someone to talk to. “We don't need to talk about what happened last night if you don't want to.”

“No, I'm okay. I just wanted you to know that you being here last night really helped. I am normally alone on the anniversary when my panic attacks happen. I can never sleep and if I do I wake up anxious.” She takes a deep breath. “But last night, I was able to fall back asleep, and it helped me feel okay this morning. I don't like talking about it because it's just so heavy. I think telling someone the full story really helped,” Her voice cracks.

My heart breaks at the fact that she feels like she has to hold all this in. Nobody should have to go through life like that. “Well, if you ever need to talk about it, I'm here for you.” She looks up, and her eyes tell me she doesn't fully believe me. “I'm serious Ivy. Please call me whenever you need to talk. I don't care if it's three in the morning.”

“Jalen, why are you putting all this effort into whatever this is?” she points between us.

“Ivy, you are the most interesting woman I've ever met,” I say, kissing the top of her head. She angles her head so that she is looking at the floor. “Hey, can you please look at me?” I ask her. She does, reluctantly. “Ivy, you are one the easiest people to talk to. You work harder than anyone I know, and you wear Jordans to parties.” That last



part earns me a little laugh, and I give myself a mental fist pump for putting that beautiful smile back on her face. “Whatever you need from me, I’m here for you. I can be your friend, a listening ear, but if you want more, Ivy, I want that too.”

I mean that. If Ivy ever wanted something more from me, I’d drop everything to be with her.

Ivy runs her thumb over the bruise under my eye. “I was so nervous during that fight last night.” She hikes one leg over mine so we see each other eye to eye. “Your uncle was sitting with my family and me at the game and made fun of me for being so nervous about you. He just laughed, but I hated seeing your helmet fly off like that.”

She’s staring at my lips as her finger comes back to circle my dark skin. I can’t take it anymore. I pull her hand from under my eye, and I lean in and kiss her. My kiss is returned passionately, and when she nibbles on my bottom lip, I moan. I pull away not because I want to stop—trust me, I don’t— but Ivy’s emotions are still high, and I don’t want her to do anything she might regret.

“We still have a lot to talk about. I have a team breakfast I have to be at in thirty minutes, but we can talk tomorrow. Maybe we can get dinner?” I can’t remember the last time I asked someone out on a proper date. No bet involved. No friends’ assistance needed

“Okay, text me later.” She reaches up and kisses me. “And Jalen, thanks again for everything last night.”

25

Ivy



I run through my sister's front door like I'm being chased by a bear trying to outrun a hurricane in the middle of a forest fire.

"I need advice!" I blurt.

Ruby looks up from the salad she's making with a quizzical look.

"I'm doing great, Vee. Thanks for asking. How are you?"

"I don't have time for your jokes, Ruby. I'm having an existential crisis!"

I hate how dramatic I sound, but I think for the first time in my life, I've let myself catch feelings for someone. I don't know what to do.

I had a couple of boyfriends throughout high school, but they were never that serious. This thing with Jalen was supposed to be fun and easy, but

last night it became real. He stayed with me when he could have run. He'd have no problem finding a girl with a lot less baggage. Instead, we are going to get dinner tomorrow and talk.

“Can you please just sit for a minute?” I pat the stool next to me at Ruby’s kitchen island.

Ruby must hear the desperation in my voice because she puts her knife in the sink and takes my hand before taking the seat next to me.

I tell my sister everything that’s happened between Jalen and me—albeit as PG as possible since the kids are playing in the room next to the kitchen— from the party at his house to my panic attack last night and everything in between. It feels good to talk through what I’ve been feeling for Jalen. I love Indy, but she spends a lot of time at the boy’s house, and she is so pro-Jalen I was scared she would tell him something before I was ready to.

When I finally exhale, I feel so much lighter, like the weight of an entire lifetime filled with anxiety has left my body. I look up from the napkin that’s been occupying my fingers and see Ruby grinning from ear to ear.

“I knew it!” she says. She jumps out of her seat and starts doing a happy dance. I’m not kidding you she is literally doing the running man in the middle of her kitchen. “Ivy, stop looking at me like that. It’s obvious something has been happening between you two since we saw him after your game. I’m happy you’re actually trusting your feelings.”

I hate the smug look on her face. I throw the napkin I’ve been using to calm my anxiety at her.

“Stop being so arrogant,” I tell her through a laugh. I get up and make my way behind Ruby and wrap my hands around her. “Thanks for listening. I love you, Ruby.”

“I love you too, Vee. You know I’m always here for you.”

I guess I’m learning there are a lot more people in my life who are willing to listen if I give them the chance.



An hour later, when we are all seated at the dinner table, my phone starts to vibrate in my pocket. I pull it out, ensuring it’s not Coach Lee wanting to talk something over before next week’s games. I feel my body tense when I see it’s a FaceTime from Jalen. Why the hell is he FaceTiming me? I look like shit. I threw on a gray hoodie and gray sweatpants that don’t even match. My hair is in a messy knot on top of my head, and I have no makeup on.

“Who’s that Aunt Vee?” Caleb asks me while he stabs some peas on his fork.

“Umm... uhh..” I can’t lie to the kid. “It’s Jalen.” I’m not the one who decides if I answer Jalen’s call because Caleb gets up and rips the phone from my hand. I chase him around the living room, desperately trying to get my phone back. “Give me my phone back, you little shit.”

“Hey!” Ruby yells from her seat, but the laughter in her eyes tells me she knows it was warranted.

I finally think I have him pinned when he sits on the couch, but before I can get my phone back, I

hear, “Hey Ivy, so I was thinking about our...” he must finally look at the screen because he doesn’t finish that thought.

“Hey buddy!” he greets Caleb. “How are you?”

“I’m good. What are you and Aunt Ivy doing?” I cringe at his question, but I am also curious to hear how Jalen will answer it.

“Your aunt is finally letting me take her on a second date.” I’m happy Jalen can’t see me right now because I know my cheeks are flushed.

“Oh, that’s cool.” I hear Jalen laugh at Caleb’s lack of interest. “Can you teach me how to skate?” Caleb’s obsession with hockey has only grown since he met Jalen. All he does is watch highlights on YouTube and play street hockey with his friends.

“Of course, kid. Tell Ivy to give my number to your mom, and we’ll set it up.” There is no hesitation in his answer, and if that doesn’t cause tingles to dance down my spine and settle between my legs, I don’t know what will.

I shouldn’t be shocked that he is good with kids. I can’t wait until I find the thing he is bad at because right now, he seems damn near perfect.

“Caleb, why don’t you give me the phone and go finish dinner. I’ll be there in a second.” When Caleb hands me my phone, I lean down and kiss him on the top of his head.

When I look at Jalen, a mischievous smile pulls at his lips. “I feel like that look should make me nervous. What are you thinking?”

“I’m making you come skate with Caleb.”

“Absolutely not!” I protest. “I’m in the middle of my season, and there is no way I’m risking breaking my ankle.” There’s no way I’m putting my senior season at risk.

“Stop being a baby. You’ll be fine,” he jokes. When I don’t answer, he concedes. “Fine, I won’t make you skate, but you at least have to come and hang out with us.”

Part of me wants to protest just to keep up with the game we’ve been playing, but my heart wants me to stop resisting.

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything. I have to get back to dinner.”

“Okay, I thought we could go to dinner and see a movie tomorrow. We have an early morning practice, so I am free anytime.”

“That sounds good. We have practice at noon but a home game on Tuesday, so I don’t want to be out too late. If that’s okay.”

“Ivy, I get it. We are traveling to Michigan, so I’ll make sure it’s an early night”

“Okay, sounds good. Just text what time I should be ready.” Silence blankets the room for a moment. Neither of us is really sure how to sign off from this FaceTime. “I’m looking forward to tomorrow, Jalen.” And I can say that honestly.

A large smile covers Jalen’s face. “Me too, Ivy. Sorry, I interrupted your dinner. See you tomorrow.”

“You’re fine. And see you tomorrow.” I reluctantly end the call. A pit instantly forms in my stomach. I know I’m in trouble when I’d rather

stay on the phone and talk with Jalen than return to the dinner I look forward to every week.

I ignore the smug look on my sister's face when I get back to my seat and put my phone face down on the kitchen table.

“What did Jalen want?”

“Just to set up a plan for tomorrow, and your son has a hockey lesson sometime next week.”

She just nods, and neither of us says another word as we finish dinner. But we don't sit in silence because Caleb talks about how excited he is for Jalen to teach him how to skate.



Ruby and I start the dishes when the kids go upstairs to get ready for bed.

“Now that we can talk in private, I want to make sure that you're really okay. I know you've been embarrassed by your sleep terrors in the past.”

It was just the two of us for a long time, but Jalen makes me feel like maybe I can rely on other people and take some of that stress away from Ruby.

“I meant what I said earlier. There is something different about Jalen. He took the time to get to know me. When I had that panic attack in the bar, he came into the women's bathroom and made sure I was okay. Last night, he tried to sleep on my bedroom floor when I drank too much. Then held me until I fell back asleep after a nightmare about Mom and Dad.”

When I look over to Ruby, the smirk that normally appears when talking about Jalen is replaced by a sad, soft smile.

“I don’t know Ruby, he’s not the person I thought he was. He makes me feel safe, and I think I can really trust him.” My sister nods understandingly. If anyone knows how much trust and safety mean to me, it’s her.

“I’m proud of you, Vee.” She looks me in the eyes. “It’s important that you live your life. We both know how short life can be.”

I wipe away the few tears running down my cheeks because, sadly, we do know.

Ruby puts the dish she was washing back in the sink before turning to wrap me in one of her famous bear hugs.

“I love you, Ruby,” I say before squeezing her tighter.

“I love you too.”



Lola and Indy are sitting on my bed as I finish getting ready for my dinner with Jalen tonight. I’m swiping on the last bit of lip gloss when Lola sighs.

“Is something wrong?” Indy asks her.

“So, I, um... did something today.” Her dramatic pause causes me to become worried.

“So I decided to change majors. I just don’t think I can do another three years of school. I have enough credits from random high school courses, that if I change now, I’ll still graduate on time.”



Indy and I give her a second to continue, mostly because I think we are too stunned to say anything. Lola's parents are both very well-respected doctors who didn't like the idea of their daughter becoming a veterinarian. So, I can only imagine how they feel about this change.

The silence lasts for a beat too long. I ask the question I'm sure Indy has too, "What are you going to change it to?"

"I'm going to do business entrepreneurship and then culinary school. I found a program that I can complete in six months."

I jump up from my vanity and smother Lola in a hug. "I'm going to miss seeing you in all my classes next semester, but you'll be an amazing chef." She really is, and if she wasn't working with animals, the only other thing I can see her pursuing is cooking.

"Is this why we haven't seen that much of you lately?" Indy asks.

"Uhh, yeah," Lola answers.

Running my hands down my shirt, I turn to my roommates— like always—needing their reassurance on my outfit for tonight. I love my Charles Leclerc cropped graphic tee— who doesn't love the Monegasque Formula 1 driver— but a little confidence boost never killed anybody.

"This is a good dinner and movie outfit, right?" I ask. I need an answer extremely quickly because Jalen should be here any minute to pick me up.

"You look good Vee. You don't want to try too hard for a movie date." Indy informs me. Which is rich coming from a girl that pisses rainbows and butterflies.

“I’m just nervous,” I pull my bottom lip between my teeth. “What if he decides he doesn’t want to deal with my baggage after all?”

“Have you ever noticed how Jalen looks at you?” Lola asks from where she is perched on my bed, scrolling through her phone. I honestly didn’t think she was paying attention anymore.

I take a moment to think about it, and Indy must see my hesitancy because she interjects after a couple of seconds. “I’ve been around Jalen a lot over the last year and a half. I’ve been at the house when he’s brought random girls home.” I wince, hating the idea of Jalen being with other girls. “Don’t do that, Vee. You knew exactly who he was when you started this thing with him.”

“Fine, you’re right,” I concede.

“But he’s never looked at one of those girls the way he looks at you. When you walk into the room, Jalen’s face lights up, it’s like you added a new light to his life.”

I am about to tell Indy that she’s batshit crazy when the doorbell rings.

“I’ll get it!” Indy hops off my bed and makes a mad dash for the front door before I even have a chance to protest. I sometimes think she and Marcus are more invested in where Jalen’s and my relationship is heading than we are.

“Indy isn’t wrong,” Lola contributes. “Trust him, you’ve told him everything, and there are no more secrets. Now you can focus on whatever kind of relationship you want without any barriers.”

I pounce on my bed and wrap Lola in my arms. “I know there is something you’re still not telling

us, but I'll be here when you're ready to talk about it."

I don't want Lola to feel pressured to answer, so I get off my bed, grab my boots and head downstairs to meet Jalen.

When I make it to the mudroom, I'm confused to see it empty. I take a second to pull on my boots, and that's when I hear laughing coming in through our open front door. I'm pulling on my beanie when I find Indy gripping Jalen's arm to hold herself up.

It's an unusually cold fall day in Western New York. I'm happy I decided to grab my fleece instead of the light jacket that's hanging in the hallway closet. It takes Jalen and Indy a moment to notice that I've joined them outside. I wrap my arm around Jalen's waist and place his arm over my shoulder so I can tuck myself into his side.

"What's so funny?"

When Jalen's eyes meet mine, I notice the intensity that Lola is so confident she sees. I'm so lost in Jalen's gaze that I don't realize we've walked off the front porch and are nearly to his car.

I think I hear Jalen say goodbye to Indy before he places his hand on my lower back and guides me the rest of the way to the car.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Jalen places his hand on my thigh. I watch his thumb slowly move over the light-wash denim.

"I'm just happy that we were able to do this tonight. We're both so busy during the week that I feel like I never get to see you." I pretend to tie my boot to hide the pink that is starting to flush my cheeks.

When I pull myself back upright, I'm happy to see that he went with the casual movie outfit, too. He makes the white t-shirt, black jeans, and backward Yankee cap look far better than should be legally possible.

“Do guys know how sexy we think a backward baseball hat is?”

He lets out a low chuckle, “I didn't. Does that mean you think I am sexy?”

I reach over the center console and nudge his shoulder. “I think you know how sexy you are. Who am I to disagree with the masses.”

Jalen lets out a low laugh, I haven't heard him use it with anyone else.

I take Jalen's hand that's resting between us and lace our fingers, taking a moment to appreciate how natural this feels and how nerve-wracking that is.

We sit in silence as Jalen drives us to the pizza shop on the other side of town. I can't believe how comfortable I am in this silence. There is no impulse to talk, just to fill it. I squeeze his hand, a quiet expression of my comfort in this moment.

We walk into the restaurant hand in hand. Once we are seated and I down half of the tequila soda I ordered, I decide to rip off the bandaid, needing to get this conversation over with.

“So, I know I said I'd be okay with us seeing other people.” He looks up from the menu. Eyebrows raised. Eyes latched to mine. “I don't want that anymore.”

He nods, without adding anything.

“If that’s what you want,” I add nervously. “You were just so great with my nephew. I talked to my sister, and she told me I needed to overcome my fears. People have been taken from me my whole life, my parents and my brother-in-law. I just don’t want to be hurt again. After you called last night, my sister reminded me that life is meant to be shared, and I really enjoy our time together.”

Jalen reaches across the red and white clothed table and places his hands over mine to settle my fingers that are toying with my napkin. His blue eyes show an understanding I wish replaced the pity I was shown growing up.

“You’ll always be able to trust me, Ivy.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Jalen throws forty dollars on the table—far more than our drinks cost—grabs my hand, and pulls me out the door. If my legs were any shorter, he’d be dragging me out of the restaurant.

“Where are we going?” I giggle as I try to keep up with his long strides.

“I am taking you home.”

## Jalen



I gently nudge Ivy into my car before briskly walking to the driver's side. I thank my lucky stars that I am easily able to take the left-hand turn to get back to the house.

“Jalen, slow down!” Ivy grabs my forearm and shakes me out of whatever lust-fueled haze I'm in. “Nothing will happen if we don't make it home in one piece,” she tells me through a strained giggle.

I relax knowing I don't have to savor every moment we have together like it could be our last anymore.

“I'm sorry, Angel. I've just hoped you'd change your mind and trust me enough to give us a real shot.”

“Jay, are you sure it's not just because you want to have sex?” I look over, and Ivy's playfully

wiggling her eyebrows.

“I mean, that’s just a perk of this whole relationship thing, right.”

“I’m already regretting this.” She playfully pats my hand and leaves it resting on top of mine. I flip my hand over and she starts tracing aimless designs on my palm.

“What’s going on in that pretty head of yours?”

“I feel like, for the first time in my life, everything is going exactly how it is supposed to.”

We sit hand in hand for the rest of the car ride home. When I see that our driveway has an overflow of cars, I know I fucked up. I completely forgot that Byron was making dinner for some of the team, and then they were going to watch Monday Night Football.

I stop Ivy when we make it to the front door. “I don’t want you to be blindsided, but I totally forgot that some of my teammates were coming over to watch the NFL game tonight. But it’s not going to stop me from taking you upstairs.”

There is no way to hide what’s going to happen when I drag Ivy to my bedroom. I’m about to get dogged.

Once Ivy and I are both in the house, I close the door and take her hand. I tell her to put her head down and ignore whatever is about to come out of my teammates’ mouths.

“Did Ivy finally figure out she’d be better off without you?” Byron jokes from the kitchen making something that smells absolutely delicious. When he turns and sees that Ivy is with me, he sends a very unsubtle wink our way.

My plan is to sneak upstairs while the rest of the guys are focused on the game. I know Ivy is shy and I don't want her to ever feel uncomfortable in this house.

"Try and be quiet. I think we can make it upstairs without drawing too much attention to ourselves," I whisper to her.

We move as stealthily as we can and any noise we make is drowned out by some incredible touchdown pass that was just made. Everyone is too in awe to notice us. Until Ivy trips up the stairs. Not having much room to adjust, I join her laid out on the hardwood. From a couple steps down I bury my head in her stomach. If the loud thump of our bodies doesn't grab their attention, our uncontrollable laughter will.

"Where are you two going?" The southern drawl belongs to Eric, our goalie.

"Just have some homework we have to finish." The excuse is unbelievable, but it's the first one that comes to mind. I scoop Ivy off the step above me and throw her over my shoulder to carry her into my room.

She pinches my butt a couple of times, so I do it back. We play the game until we reach the threshold of my room.

"Well, I'm glad nobody knows what we're up to," She jokes when her feet are planted on my bedroom floor.

I wrap Ivy in my grip and look into her beautiful mocha eyes. "I just want to make sure this is what you want, Ivy."

"Jalen, when you brought me home on Halloween and tried to sleep on my bedroom floor,



I started to wonder how no other woman had scooped you up. When Caleb answered your FaceTime yesterday, and you were so kind to him, I knew I'd regret it if I never gave us a shot." She takes a deep breath before she finishes, "Just be patient with me. I come with a lot of baggage."

"I'll always be here to help you carry it."

Ivy wraps her arms around my neck and pulls my lips to hers. It's deep, passionate and means so much more now that she's mine. Ivy pulls away from me, and her fingers begin undoing my belt. She unbuttons my jeans, and before I have time to process what's going on, Ivy is on her knees, pulling my boxers down with her. She runs her finger over the sensitive tip.

"Baby, I need you to take off that shirt," I murmur. "I can't have another man looking me in the eyes while your lips are on my cock."

"You're absolutely ridiculous," She laughs, and we say goodbye to Charles Leclerc for the rest of the night.

Ivy's kneeling on my floor in a black lacy bra. Her slender fingers wrap around me and guide me to her mouth. She takes as much of me as she can until I hit the back of her throat.

"Fuck yes, Angel, just like that." My fingers move to guide her head, eyes up to mine. The stimulation when her hand wraps around my base and starts moving in time with her mouth is almost too much.

"As good as this feels, baby, this isn't how I want to come tonight."

Ivy sits back on her heels, and I watch intently as her hands move to the back of her bra. Once it

hits the floor, I scoop her up and throw her on my bed.

I throw off my shirt before I reach down and unbutton her pants. "It's only fair that we take these off, don't you think?" She lifts her hips to make it easy for me to slide her jeans off. "These too." I pull back the side of her lacy thong and let it go so it snaps against her thigh.

I kiss my way up her body, focusing on the curve of her hips all the way up to her taut nipples. She moans as my tongue rolls over one while the other is pinched between my fingers. I switch to the other nipple and give it the same attention.

Ivy's hands grip the side of my head, "Kiss me, please." The desperation in her voice has me growing harder. My tongue prods the seam of her lips until our tongues meet in a beautiful dance.

"Jalen," Ivy pants as her fingers dig into my shoulders. "I think I might die if you don't get inside me right now."

I rest my forehead against hers. "I don't think that's how this thing works, Angel." I plant a quick kiss on the side of her lips before reaching into my nightstand drawer. When I have the condom rolled on, I flip us over so she is on top. "I want you to ride me tonight, baby."

Ivy slides down my length. When she is fully seated, I let out a moan. Ivy takes it as an encouragement to pick up her pace leaning forward to make sure her clit is rubbing against my pelvic bone with every movement. I momentarily memorize the way her tits swing. I reach up and roll both her nipples between my pointer finger and thumb. "Oh my god, Jalen, I'm coming." I lean

back and watch as she milks my cock. I hold her up and ram into her a few times, then spill myself into her.

“Wow, that was amazing.” Ivy lays down on my chest.

“Yeah, it was, baby girl.” I move the hair matted from her forehead to lay a kiss there.

“Hey, do you think we could shower and watch the football game downstairs?” I mean, could this girl be any more perfect? Volunteering to watch Monday Night Football with my friends. Ivy is a keeper, but I’ve known that since the first day at the shelter.

The football game is halfway through the second quarter by the time we make it downstairs. Ivy’s in my sweatpants—that she had to roll over at the waist a few times— that paired with her wet hair leaves nothing to the imagination about what just happened. Byron moves over to give us the corner of the sectional. I sit back against the curved leather and pull Ivy so she is seated across my lap. Byron looks like he is about to make some kind of comment, but before he can get anything out, I shoot him a look.

“Where’s Mia?” Ivy asks Byron.

“She’s in her crate in my room. She was tired from the dog park today.”

“Bummer, I think I’m gonna go now. I was only really here to see Mia.” I pinch her sides, and she starts to giggle. “Okay, I’m just joking, but she has my heart.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty damn cute.” Byron beams with pride.

Ivy puts her hand on my thigh and gives it a squeeze. “So I was thinking that you could pay up for the loss you took on our first date before your hockey lesson with Caleb this week.”

“I want you to know, just in case you want to think it over, that I’m good at basketball and will have no problem kicking your ass.” I give her ass a little pinch for emphasis.

“You’re delusional,” she tells me before she kisses the side of my lips.

I pull her back tighter to my chest. I don’t want to let her go. I never knew I could be so happy committing to one girl. A girl who is okay sitting on the couch in a room full of my teammates watching Monday Night Football.

“Come on, if that’s not a holding call, I don’t know what is,” Ivy yells at the TV.

Yeah, this girl is perfect.

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Ivy



For as long as I can remember, the gym has been my happy place. A place I come to when I need a moment of solitude or when my anxiety becomes uncontrollable. It's a weird feeling to be excited to share my happy place with my boyfriend. I still can't believe Jalen is my boyfriend. This was the last thing I expected to happen this year.

I finish lacing up my basketball sneakers before making my way to the ball rack that I had to ask the men's assistant coach to get for me. Jalen thinks he's going to gain some kind of advantage by playing with a men's regulation-sized basketball, but I'm not concerned.

I'm working through my warm-up routine when Jalen strolls through the gym's doors. I thought the butterflies would have died down by now. I have seen him almost every day this week,

even if it was only a couple of hours at the shelter or Jalen coming to my house to do homework, but they've only gotten stronger.

Spending more time with Jalen has made me realize that opening up to him was the best thing I've done for my own happiness. For the first time, I'm free. Free to live life like a normal college student, free to make mistakes, free to be myself. Jalen brings out a part of me I haven't seen since that life-changing Halloween all those years ago.

I jump into his arms and wrap my legs around his waist.

"Hey," I say after a kiss.

"Hey, Vee," he laughs and puts me down. "You miss me?"

"It's a little conceited to think I've missed you, when I saw you twelve hours ago." Jalen lets me down and when I turn to pick up my ball, Jalen pinches my butt. And it's not a playful pinch.

"Ow, what was that for?"

"Lying," he tells me.

"Okay, so I'm a little happy to see you. I'm just really excited to watch you and Caleb skate today. He called me this morning and all he wanted to talk about was you."

I pick up the ball I discarded when Jalen got to the gym and step behind the three-point arc. I tuck my shooting arm into my side and let the ball free. Jalen jogs to the baseline and grabs my ball as soon as it falls through the net. He continues to rebound for me as I make my way around the arc.

"Did you play any other sports growing up?" Jalen asks as he's running down a missed basket.

“I started playing organized basketball when I was five. It was my Dad’s favorite sport, so he had me practicing on one of those Little Tikes basketball hoops as soon as I could walk. I played volleyball and lacrosse in middle school, but once I got to high school, I wanted to focus on basketball.”

I take a deep breath, readying myself to give a little more of my story to Jalen. “Basketball always made me feel close to my dad. He was my best friend, and I know what he did was horrible. But he was still my dad, you know. He had just one bad year.” I take the hem of my t-shirt and use it to dab away my tears. “I know he loved me.” There is no way to control my tears, so I just let them flow freely.

Jalen pulls me close and allows me to process all my emotions, something I’m still learning to do. I take the hem of his shirt now to clean my dripping mascara.

“You should feel special. I only cry in front of people I’m comfortable around.”

“You cried at the bar the night you thought I was hooking up with Claire,” he reminds me.

I let out a low laugh. “That doesn’t count alcohol was involved.”

Jalen joins in on the laughter but quickly grows serious. “Just because your dad did something awful doesn’t make him an awful person, Ivy. I think it’s amazing that you have basketball to connect you to him.”

I wrap myself tighter around Jalen, but I can’t make myself look into his eyes. I know if I do I’ll start crying again. While I’m still buried in his

chest I try to find the motivation to start this basketball game.

“Okay, enough with the sappy shit.” Since I met Jalen, I’ve talked about my emotions enough to last me a lifetime.

I pull myself away from him to pick up the basketball. When he’s not looking I throw it at him. “You owe me a one-on-one game, and Caleb will be here in forty-five minutes.”

“Ladies first, Ivy,” he says, offering me the first possession.

“Are you sure?” I don’t need the chivalry, I am the one who plays college basketball.

He nods.

So, let the games begin.

I take two hard dribbles to my left, and when Jalen cuts me off, I crossover and start moving to my right. Jalen is caught off guard, and I’m able to make it to the hoop for an easy basket.

“I thought you said your dad taught you how to play basketball?” I tease him. “Maybe you’re spending a little too much time on skates.”

My teasing ignites some kind of spark in Jalen’s competitive nature. He licks his lips before aggressively offering me the ball.

“We’re playing make-it-take-it?” Normally, in a game of one-on-one, if you make a basket, it is customary to get possession until you miss and the other player gets a rebound. You can also play where your opponent gets the ball after a make like they would in a regulation basketball game



Jalen stays silent instead getting in his defensive stance before he passes me the ball. This time, I take the lane he leaves open and move toward the hoop. I stop when his large frame cuts me off and dribble in place looking for my next move. Before I can do that he grabs my wrist and spins me into him.

“Jalen, what are you doing?” I ask, thoroughly confused, what kind of game is this going to turn into.

“What? I just thought you needed a hug.”

When I try to pull away, he pulls me back. It’s like we’re playing tug-of-war, just without the rope. Realizing he’s never going to let go of me, I free my right hand and toss the ball behind me. Trying to give it enough arc so it has a shot of going in.

Jalen turns us so we can watch the ball. It looks like it’s going in, so I straighten my back, ready to rub it in Jalen’s face, but then it takes a little dance around the inside of the rim, and Jalen’s body straightens as mine sags. After what feels like the longest three seconds of my life, the ball falls into the hoop.

Jalen leaves me to grab the ball, and when he has it secured in between both hands, he tells me very sternly, “That’s absolute bull shit.”

“Hate the player, not the game,” I say before dramatically hitting the sides of the ball and grabbing it out of his hands.

He gets very serious for a second during a very unserious basketball game.

“I could never hate you, Ivy.”

I'm stunned to silence, and Jalen carries on like nothing happened. Just a nice little throwaway comment.

I miss my next shot, and Jalen secures the ball easily. He tries to use his big body to back me down so he can have an easy look at the basket. With his back to my front, I jump on his back, and he carries me around like a chimpanzee carries around her baby. To my disappointment, he makes the basket easily.

"I'd say my basketball skills are treating me well," he taunts.

He tucks his arms under my legs and gives me a piggyback around the gym before dropping me to the hardwood.

"Bring it on, big boy. I'm not scared of some sappy hockey player."

Jalen's eyes brighten like they did the night of his party olympics and again on our first date. He's ready to win by any means necessary. I love that Jalen has the same competitive nature as me. He understands my *need* to win and the pressure I put on myself to do so. I think Jalen and I could make crossing the street into some kind of competition, and we would have as much fun as we are right now.

Jalen and I trade baskets until the score is eighteen to twenty. I'm one point away from endless bragging rights.

When Jalen hands me the ball, I take it, latch it to my hip and snuggle into his chest. I flash him my lust-filled eyes. When I raise my toes—he takes the bait—and leans into a kiss. I throw the ball behind his back. Jalen is too stunned to figure out

what's happening, so I chase the ball down and lay it in the basket.

I secure it as it's deposited out of the net. At the same time, something falls hard against the hardwood, and I turn to find Jalen sulking. I walk over to him and straddle him so we're face to face.

"Don't worry, baby. I think there are many more games in our future." I say, rubbing his stubbled cheeks.

"Yeah, whatever." He grabs the back of my neck and rubs his thumb up and down the side. I swear my heart rate is higher now than it was at any point during the game we just played.

"What can I do to make this better?"

"I have an idea." Jalen leans in and kisses me. This isn't a quick kiss. He kisses me like he wants this memory to block out the loss I just handed him.

His tongue runs along the seam, my lips open, and his tongue meets mine, deepening the kiss.

"Hem," the sound of someone clearing their throat reluctantly pulls me away from Jalen's soft lips.

"Hey, Aunt Ivy." A cheery voice echoes through the fanless arena. Ruby's standing in the doorway with Caleb, a 'I told you so' look plastered on her face.

"Hey, guys." I greet my family before hopping off Jalen. I look at his face to hide my embarrassment, but when my eyes meet Jalen's, his cheeks are just as flushed as mine.

"Mr. Calm, cool and collected, can get embarrassed. Good to know."

“This is not the time to tease. I can’t believe this is how I’m seeing your family for the first time as your boyfriend.”

“Don’t worry about it. Ruby has begged me to find a boyfriend for years. She’s loving it.”

“You ready to go get some skates,” I ask Caleb.

He nods his head aggressively. His enthusiasm is written all over his face.



I’m sitting on the home team’s bench, watching a clumsy Caleb get his bearings on the ice. Caleb and Jalen were upset when I vetoed putting on a pair of skates myself. I would have loved nothing more than to be on the ice with my two favorite guys, but Coach Lee would kill me if I sprained an ankle.

Caleb slaps the ice in frustration. The kid is definitely starting to get the hang of it, though. Jalen’s patience is unmatched. If he didn’t have a future in the NHL, he would make an amazing coach. Every time Caleb falls, Jalen makes him get back up and continue with the lesson, no matter how many times Caleb gets frustrated and says he’s quitting. Jalen’s constantly reminding him of the basics that he learned today making sure that Caleb won’t forget if he wants to practice on his own.

No matter how hard I try, I can’t stop thinking about what a fantastic father Jalen would make. How he *would* be there to teach them how to ride a bike, be the loudest voice cheering at their games and walk them down the aisle at their wedding. All the things I’ll never get to do with my dad.

Jalen's encouragement has me wiping away tears. When I see Caleb skating over to Jalen and giving him a hug, I lose it all over again. I try to get myself together as they skate toward the bench.

"What's wrong, Aunt Ivy?" Caleb asks. His lips pucker, and I can see his little mind at work trying to figure out why I'm crying.

"I'm just so proud of you. Trying something new isn't easy." I tug my coat around myself. Using it as a shield to hide all my emotions.

"Jalen said he would help me practice again. He says after I learn to skate, he'll teach me how to play hockey."

"You're lucky. I think Jalen is the best coach out there." I look at Jalen, an appreciative smile plastered on my face.

"Nah." Jalen brushes off the compliment, "Caleb is just an amazing student.

Caleb looks up at him like he just got a compliment from the Pope himself.

"We better get your stuff together; your Mom will be here any minute to pick you up."

Caleb turns to Jalen and wraps his little arms around Jalen's much larger frame. "Thank you, Jalen. I had a lot of fun today." I don't know if I've ever seen Caleb this happy.

"Any time, buddy. I'll have Ivy set up a time with your mom to get you back out here again. You'll have a stick in your hand before you know it."

Once Caleb gets his skates off and is back with his mom, Jalen and I decided to get something in the athlete-only dining hall attached to the Riley

Center. He takes my hand from across the table. This is the first time we've been in public since making this relationship official. I push away the anxiety that creeps in at the public display of affection.

“Is something wrong?”

I can feel my body deflate. I'm convinced that no matter how secure I feel in this relationship, the anxiety it draws out of me will always prevail.

I pull my gaze up to meet his blue eyes and furrowed brow. “I'm just not used to this whole PDA thing, and I'm annoyed that something as elementary as holding hands embarrasses me.”

Jalen squeezes my hand. The smile that tugs on his lips isn't the one of pity that people try to hide when they learn about my past. Instead, it is one of understanding. “If you are ever uncomfortable with anything, Ivy, all you have to do is tell me. I don't care if it's as small as you don't like the placement of my hand on your back. You'll always be safe around me.”

Jalen lifts my hand from the table and presses it to his lips.

After my brief moment of emotional weakness—which, thanks to Jalen, has been happening a lot more lately—I put my armor back on to keep those pesky little feelings away.

“You have a game the day after Thanksgiving, right?”

With a mouth full of pasta, Jalen tells me, “Yup, bummed I can't go home, but I know the deal.”

The holidays are a time when I don't regret leaving Westvale for college. As long as we aren't

on the road, I get to spend every holiday with my sister and the kids. It's a luxury I don't take for granted.

"My sister always cooks the world's largest Thanksgiving meal, and when she and Caleb were looking at your schedule the other day, they noticed the Black Friday game." I clear the nervous lump in my throat before continuing, "We all wanted to know if you'd maybe want to spend Thanksgiving with us."

Jalen's blue eyes brighten, and I already know I'm going to regret this before he utters a single word.

"Are you asking me to spend a holiday with your family?" His joking demeanor has me ready to kick him in the groin. "That's a pretty big step for someone who just said they were uncomfortable with holding my hand in public."

"I've held your hand in public before." I retort.

"Not sober."

Jalen has a way of taking my anxiety-inducing fears and showing me how insignificant they really are. I feel like I can give all the skeletons in my closet an eviction notice.

"You've already met my family, but I'd love for you to get to spend some real time with Ruby and Stella."

"I'd love to come. I want nothing more than to get to know the people who molded you into this beautiful, strong woman sitting in front of me."

This man's ability to make me blush is eerie. I shouldn't be shocked, though, Jalen's woken-up

emotions that haven't seen the light of day in a very long time.



## Jalen



I'd consider myself to be a pretty spontaneous person. If once in a lifetime experience presents itself, I have no problem grabbing the bull by the horns and doing it. As long as it's not the day before a game.

My two-day pregame routine starts with a morning lift with the team, then breakfast with the guys. We have practice and finish the day with a film session. On game days, I'm locked in until warmups. Starting the day with stretching, mobility drills, and strategy meetings before we take the ice for pre-game warmups. I've followed this routine for nearly eight years, and today is the first time I'm breaking it.

Coach scheduled an early morning practice, so we are done at nine. By ten o'clock, I'm on my way to meet Ivy at the shelter. She wants to give Riley a

haircut before our home game tomorrow. Jill started doing the haircuts at the shelter when she took it over twenty years ago. Ivy, being the overachiever she is, had Jill teach her how to do it freshman year so she could help ease Jill's responsibilities.

Frost covers the grass leading to the shelter. The first chilly fall morning has always been one of my favorites. It's the time of year when I can finally walk around the city and not come home drenched in sweat, but more importantly, it means hockey season is in full swing.

Ivy's laughter replaces the bell that normally rings when you walk through the shelter's doors. I take my time moving through the halls, enjoying this carefree version of Ivy. I take my phone and hit record, saving this video for when Ivy needs a reminder of the beautiful life she is building for herself.

Using Ivy's laugh to guide me, I find a freshly bathed Riley shaking off the reminiscence of his bath onto Ivy.

Once she sees me at the door, she tries to work up some anger by yelling, "You're late!" in my direction. The words are unconvincing. Sounding too happy spitting through her laughter.

I jog to the back, where Ivy is trying to start Riley's haircut. She sets the clippers down and turns to face me with no anger in her eyes.

"Sorry, Coach kept us late today. He wanted to make sure we are all ready for tomorrow." It's a rivalry game and one that will be important for tournament seeding at the end of the season.

She goes up on her toes and places a soft kiss on my lips. “I figured that’s what happened, but I get you for the rest of the day, right?”

I wrap my arms around her waist, using her body to warm myself up. “Yes, the rest of the day, I’m yours.”

She pulls back so she isn’t speaking directly into my chest. “Caleb thinks you’re only coming tonight because you miss him.”

“Oh, he’s not wrong.” She pushes me away, laughing. Ivy runs her hands down my forearms and laces her fingers through mine.

“He is pretty amazing. Just help me finish up here, and we can go home and get ready for tonight.”



I grab my keys from the hook we have next to our front door at the same time my teammates come downstairs to leave for Coach’s. Marcus takes his time inspecting my outfit before he barks into a fit of laughter. My khakis and a button-down shirt are a little more formal than the guys’ Westvale-issued gear.

“What’s so funny?” I ask. “I wear this out all the time.”

“It’s not the outfit. It’s the five gifts you have in your arms.” Okay, so I might have gone a little overboard. It started with a bottle of wine and a bouquet of flowers. Then I thought, why not give Ivy a jersey to wear to our game tomorrow? The next thing I knew, Caleb was coming with her to the game, so I felt weird not bringing him one, and

I couldn't leave Stella out. So that's how I ended up walking out this door with flowers, a bottle of wine and three hockey sweaters.

My only response is a shrug.

"I was already late to the shelter this morning. I don't want to be late again. Have fun at Coaches!" I yell back at my teammates as I'm already halfway out of the door.



I'd never admit it to Ivy, but I'm more nervous to spend Thanksgiving with her family than I was for our Frozen Four game last season. During a hockey game, I know what to expect, the smell of the stadium, who my linemates are, that when our coach is pissed, the vein in his forehead pops out, making him look like a jock version of Harry Potter.

Tonight, I'm in a world of unknowns. I've never spent a holiday with a girl's family, and my relationship with Ivy is still new. I'm nervous I will say something that will fuck this all up. I know how much Ivy's family means to her. That her biggest aspiration is to repay her sister for all her sacrifices, so if she doesn't like me... I don't even want to think about that.

I text Ivy as I get out of the car because with all these bags in my hands, I won't be able to ring the doorbell. I'm quickly distracted by the clicking of heels on asphalt. "Hey, Angel, want to help me with these." I hold out the four bags and bouquet.

"You know it's Thanksgiving and not Christmas, right?" she asks me with a twinkle in

her eyes.

I shrug, bags in hand. “I can keep yours until Christmas. Let me put it back in the car.” I turn and place the bag containing her sweater on the back seat.

“Oh wait, that’s for me?” she asks. “I’ll just take that one in with me.”

I try but fail to hold in a deep laugh. Ivy laughs as she slips her hand through my arm as we walk to the front door.

“Is everything okay? You seem really tense.”

“It’s just that I’ve never spent the holiday with a girl’s family. Hence, the twenty-seven bags.”

“You know how Caleb feels about you. Stella asked if she could take a picture with you when I told her you were eating with us today, and Ruby likes to talk a big game, but in reality, she is a big softy.” She squeezes my forearm. “I think you would have been fine without the gifts, but a little bribery never hurt.” We walk slowly to make sure we don’t slip on the iced-over driveway.

Ivy opens the front door after her pep talk in the front yard, and I follow her in. When she goes to hang up our coats I finally get to see what she is wearing, an olive green dress with ruffled sleeves. I’ve never seen Ivy dressed like this before. Her hair is pulled up, giving me all the access I need to step behind her and kiss her exposed neck. She reaches behind her and holds my head there for a second.

“You look beautiful today. This dress is a little unexpected.” She steps out of my arms and turns to face me.

“Yeah, it’s a little different than what I normally wear, but I like it to keep everyone guessing.” She runs her hands over the front of my shirt. “It’s a shame a few more buttons aren’t undone right now, but I guess we will save that for later. Can I ask you a question before we head into the kitchen?” I nod, and she continues. “So we have a fostering event at the shelter every year right before Christmas break to see if we can get some of the animals placed in homes during the holidays. My team always helps out, and Jill was hoping you and some of your teammates might want to join us this year.”

“Let’s do it.” All I need is a cheesy grin and two thumbs, and I could be a star in a black-and-white comedy movie, but I think it will be good to have the guys do something to give back, and I could never say no to Ivy.

“Thanks Jay, I’ll text Jill right now.”

She pulls out her phone and quickly sends the message before we make our way to the kitchen.

The aroma of freshly baked pies is the first thing I notice. It is only interrupted by the loud thud of something falling over.

“I thought I told you to stop jumping on the living room furniture. If you want to act like maniacs, go into the basement.” I assume it’s Ruby’s voice that carries throughout the house.

“I told you, you have nothing to worry about. This house is always in a state of pure chaos,” Ivy jokes.

When we make it to the kitchen, Ruby puts the final touches on the table settings, and the kids are

about to go downstairs. “Before you guys go downstairs, Jalen has something for you.”

The kids run over—Caleb nearly faceplants after tripping over a side table—and I hand them their bags.

“You should open yours now,” I tell them. Caleb picks through his bag first and holds up the sweater in awe.

“This is cool!” He puts it on over his shirt.

Stella seems less impressed, but she still gives me a hug and says thank you. She is a lot like her aunt, a little shy, but Ivy says she’ll probably open up by the end of the day.

“Let me guess, I got one of those too.” Her lackluster tone doesn’t fool me. Ivy’s eyes tell me she is excited about the gift. “I’ve never had a girl to give my jersey to, and since you and Caleb are coming to my game tomorrow, I thought you both could wear it.”

Her eyes glow, and she leans in to whisper, “How can I say no to being your first?” I laugh and pull her into a kiss.

“If you guys are going to make out in my dining room, the least you can do is give me that bottle of wine first.”

“Shut up, Ruby, you’re loving this,” Ivy says without removing her lips from mine.

Ruby doesn’t give her sister a response, instead she grabs the bottle, struts to the dining room and pours herself a glass. By the time Ivy and I join her, she has two wine glasses waiting for us.

“I know everyone has to wake up and be athletes tomorrow, but you have to have at least

one glass of the wine you brought.”

I look at Ivy so I can follow her lead. When she picks up her glass, I grab the one left on the island and hold it up and offer an impromptu toast. “To the Rhodes, thanks for saving me from dinner with twenty disgusting hockey players.” We all clink our glasses together and then help Ruby carry the rest of the dishes to the dining room table.



If Ivy can cook half as well as her sister, I’m never letting her go.

“Those mashed potatoes were the best thing I’ve ever eaten.”

“I helped Mom make them,” Stella tells me. Just as I suspected, the cute little girl to my right opened up to me while we played with her Barbies.

“I’ll pack some up for you. I know you’re busy this week, and we have plenty of leftovers,” Ruby says, carrying our dirty dinner plates to the sink. “Jalen, actually do you mind helping me carry the leftovers into the kitchen? Then we can pack some up for you.”

“Okay.” I pick up the green beans and gravy while thinking about how happy I am that I won’t have to cook for the rest of the week. When I’m a couple of steps behind Ruby, she takes the dishes and doesn’t waste any time.

“Look, I really like you. I was skeptical at first because Ivy didn’t hold back when it came to your reputation.” When I try to defend myself, Ruby holds her hand up to stop me. “But I now get what she sees in you. You didn’t have to teach Caleb how



to skate or come spend time with us when you could have been with your friends. More importantly, I see the way you look at my sister.”

“I do really care about her.” I make sure I’m looking directly into Ruby’s eyes.

“I can tell. She has been through a lot, so if, at any point, you don’t want to be in this relationship anymore, you have to be honest with her. She doesn’t deserve to be dragged along, just so you have someone to hang out with.”

I freeze. I have no idea what to say. I’ve never had this talk with someone’s parents, but it feels like it has so much more importance coming from Ivy’s sister.

“I don’t have any intentions of hurting Ivy, but I promise I’ll always keep her feelings at the forefront of every decision I make.” I’m handed a pie and a nod from Ruby, and we head back to the table.



Ivy and I get back in my car with enough leftovers to feed my entire team for a week. Now that I’ve seen a glimpse of Ivy with her family, I get why spending time with them was more important to her than running around with drunk college boys. Her niece and nephew adore her. They were fighting for her attention all night.

“What did you and my sister talk about in the kitchen?” Ivy asks, looking out the car window taking in the last bit of fall.

“She warned me that you snore like a drunk truck driver.”

Ivy's eyes shoot at me like daggers. "I haven't snored like that since I was a kid. She's so annoying." The immature tone in Ivy's voice is a nice reminder that she isn't always the mature one in this relationship.

I can't hold in my laughter. "That's not what we talked about. She just gave me the *"if you hurt my sister, I'll kill you"* speech. I can't believe you used to snore."

"Yes, I *used* to snore," She really emphasizes the past tense use of the verb. "And my sister is all bark and no bite, so just ignore whatever she said to you." She bends down and pretends to clean some dirt off her immaculately clean boots.

"You have to remember she was more of a mom than a sister to me for most of my life, so she's a little overprotective."

"Hey, look at me," I pause, not saying another word until her eyes are on mine. "I love that your family has always been there for you, but I want you to know that I'm not going anywhere. I want you to know you can always trust me."

"You've been nothing but amazing to me, Jalen. I know that I can trust you," she says without a beat of hesitation.

"I'll take you home. I know you have practice in the morning, and I have an early morning skate. The team and I are going out after my game. Let's meet up after."

"I'll talk to the girls, but I'll be there." I walk her to her door and pull her into a hug. "My family loved you, by the way."

"I'm glad I could bribe them with wine and hockey jerseys."

“You’re right. I’m sure it had nothing to do with that charming personality of yours.”

She uses my neck to pull my lips to hers. “You think I’m charming?”

She pushes off my chest before I can kiss her. Her eyes make a full rotation before meeting mine. “See you after your game tomorrow.”

“See ya, Angel,” I say over my shoulder.

29

Ivy



Caleb, Stella, and I arrive at the Riley Center in our matching jerseys with Jalen's number stitched in blue on the back. While we are in line waiting to get our tickets scanned a lady, who looks to be in her eighties, asks us if we were Jalen's family. Right as I was about to tell her we are just fans—don't need to be the talk of the small-town rumor mill—Caleb jumps in to tell her that I am dating Jalen, and he gifted us his jersey yesterday during Thanksgiving dinner.

It's still weird to tell people— even random strangers who I hope don't care— that I'm in a relationship. It's not that Jalen and I want to hide our relationship, we're both so busy with our teams and demanding class schedules that the little alone time we have we like to spend just the two of us. Today, I'm here in this jersey. My niece

and nephew are in his jersey, so it's only a matter of time before the whole town knows about us.

There is a selfish part of me that wants to run to my locker in the Riley Center and change my top because I want to live in the delusion that if I keep my relationship the way it is, we'll be able to live in this happy, protected bubble forever. One nobody can take it away from me.

I know we can't protect ourselves from the inevitable. So when break ends and campus is flooded with students too busy cramming for finals to go out and party, the hottest gossip floating around will be how the shy basketball player landed the hockey player nobody thought would settle down. He's stuck with me because now that I know what it's like in Jalen's arms, I don't think I'll ever feel safe anywhere else.

As we pass the concession stand a little hand tugs on my sleeve.

"Aunt Ivy, can I get some popcorn?" Stella's sweet voice asks.

"Of course, Stella. Caleb, what do you want?"

"Can I have Skittles?" I know my sister told him no sugar today because he ate half an apple pie by himself yesterday, but the fun part about being an aunt is I can *forget* what my sister told me and give him back before he crashes from his sugar high.

"Sure, buddy." I ruffle his hair before getting in line.

Once our food is secured, we make our way to the amazing seats Jalen got us right next to the home bench. When I told Jill I was taking the kids to the game, she insisted on me bringing Riley

even though we don't normally bring him to games when students are gone.

So now I'm here getting ready to watch Jalen with my favorite kiddos and my best furry buddy. I wait until we get to our seats to give the kids their food because Caleb is a little asshole, and there is no doubt in my mind that he would have hit the bucket of popcorn out of his sister's hands if he was given the opportunity.

I nearly spill the popcorn when someone starts banging on the glass. I'm prepared to ring out some fan for scaring the shit out of me, but instead, I'm greeted by Jalen's beautiful smile.

"Just wanted to come say hi before the game starts."

"Are you sure it isn't because you wanted to see us in your gifts?" I mean, it was a joke, but Jalen's eyes darken.

"I've been waiting to see you in my jersey." The words are harmless, but the tone of his voice makes me wish we weren't in a stadium with twenty thousand people. "Do a little twirl for me, Angel."

I don't get a chance to twirl for Jalen.

"We'll see you after the game, right?" Caleb asks, reminding me that I'm, in fact, at a hockey game and not in Jalen's bedroom.

"Of course, buddy." A horn vibrates through the stadium, and Jalen waves before heading back to the bench.

For having grown up in a hockey town, I still don't know much about the sport. Jalen's been helping me, but I don't need to be a hockey

historian to know that the Retrievers need to get their shit together. It's been a sloppy game, with turnovers committed by both teams. They're tied 2-2 with a minute and a half left in the game.

Eric, who just stopped the puck, is holding on to it until the whistle blows. When the official has the puck, Byron lines up to the left of the goal for the faceoff. My body tenses. They need to get the puck to the other end and fast. I trace the stitching outlining Jalen's number, waiting for the puck to drop. When it does, the entire stadium is on their feet. It's defining. Electric. It must be addictive playing to a sold out crowd. We get a good crowd at our games, but for how successful we've been, you'd think we'd have more seats filled. Women's athletics have come a long way but still have a long way to go.

Byron tips the puck, and Marcus gains control of it, moving it up the ice. He sees an opening, but his shot is blocked, and my body deflates. I don't think I can make it through an overtime period.

Jalen controls the rebound with seven seconds left on the clock, enough time for one shot. He gains control, and his shot slides between the goalie's legs.

"We won!" Caleb jumps on his seat, cupping his hands around his mouth, he continues. "Yeahhhh Jalen!"

Riley is barking uncontrollably.

Even Stella, who I had to bribe to come with us today, is on her feet, jumping up and down.

It's pretty damn sexy to see your man score a game-winning goal.



Unfortunately, we couldn't see Jalen after the game. He got swept into a press conference, and I had to get the kids home before my film session with the team.

So when the girls and I pull into Jasper's parking lot, I'm ready to see Jalen for a lowkey night out.

I take my time walking into the bar, knowing that tonight it won't be so crowded since only athletes are left on campus for the holiday break. I order my usual tequila soda, before scanning the bar. My eyes are drawn to Jalen and the boys, who are in their normal corner booth. Hands are flying, postures are defensive, and I'm curious to see what's going on.

My leggings make it easy to slide across the faux leather booth and into the open seat next to Jalen.

"What's going on over here? I could hear you guys yelling from the bar."

Eight pairs of glossed-over eyes snap in my direction. I peer around the booth over the lip of my drink, waiting for someone to answer.

"How much have you had to drink?" I ask Jalen.

"Just two beers," His words run together.

"Don't forget about the shots!" Byron yells from the other side of the table.

"Oh yeah, and I've had four shots." His smile is meant to be innocent, but it makes me want to do things that are anything but.



“You deserve them, babe,” I truly mean it. I still can’t believe how exciting the end of that game was. “That goal was incredible.”

I use his thigh to prop myself up and give him a kiss. When I got to settle back down, I feel his pocket vibrating.

“Jalen, I think someone is calling you.” He’s looking at the caller ID when his lips pull into the most genuine smile.

“It’s my mom.” He shows me his phone with a child-like giddiness.

“Hey, Mom, I’m just at the bar with the guys and Ivy. Oh, you’ve never met Ivy. Come say hi, babe.”

I’m now regretting my sweatshirt and the bun piled on the top of my head.

“Hi, Mrs. Holloway. It’s so good to finally meet you.” I can see where Jalen gets his beautiful blue eyes from. The woman in front of me is absolutely gorgeous.

“Please call me Mae. Have you asked her yet?” Her eyes jump from her sons to mine.

“No, Mom, I haven’t, but I guess I should do that now.”

Jalen turns and pulls me on his lap. He acts as sober as a person who has had six drinks can be.

“My mom and I were talking on the phone when I got home from your sister’s house yesterday, and we noticed we have the same days off for Christmas break, and we thought it would be cool if you came back to New York with me.”

I blink a few times, making sure I heard that right. “You want me to spend Christmas with your family?” I just need confirmation that I heard that right.

“I would love that. I want to take you on a tour of our future home.”

Well, when he puts it like that. Plus, New York at Christmas sounds like a dream.

“I’d love to spend Christmas with your family.”

“She said yes!” Jalen says into the phone.

The table breaks into cheers, and I just laugh. I guess I’m going to New York.



A couple of weeks after Thanksgiving, the shelter hosts the annual fostering event. I mentioned the event when I was out with Jalen and the guys the Friday after Thanksgiving, and they all eagerly asked how they could help. Jill is still in disbelief that just adding their names to the flier has doubled our RSVPS from last year and helped three dogs find their forever homes earlier this week. The teammates of Jalen’s that couldn’t come because they had to study for finals secured some pretty amazing donations that will put the shelter in a great financial position to start off the new year.

“Hey Vee, where do you want this poster?” Byron asks, holding up a life-size poster of Riley at a Football game this past season.

“You need to find Lola, she has the easels that are big enough to hold those.” Byron nods and

then is on his way to find my best friend.

I take a lap around the inside of the shelter, trying to find Jalen so we can give Jill the spa package we got her for Christmas. The last place I have to look is the back of the shelter that all the dogs call home. On the way back, I'm stopped by a few of Jalen's teammates who have questions about which dogs are available for adoption. I'm pointing out a couple when Jill overhears us and offers to introduce them to the dogs.

As I watch them head over to see Rufus, a one-year-old chocolate lab, I notice that Marcus and Indy have been spending a lot of time with Daisy, a miniature poodle that arrived at the shelter last week. I try not to get my hopes up too high about them adopting her.

"Hey, babe," The unexpected sound of Jalen's voice startles me.

"Jalen, you can't sneak up on me like that," I tell him with my hands clutched over my heart.

"Sorry." He looks concerned that he could have just killed me. "I just wanted to give Jill her gift before it gets too crazy in here."

"You guys didn't have to get me anything," Jill says, coming out of the storage room closet.

"Why didn't she nearly give you a heart attack?" Jalen asks, exasperated.

"Her voice is more gentle than yours," I shrug.

I hand Jill the small bag that holds the voucher to the spa in Westvale. Jill's face lights up when she notices the day-long package we gifted her.

"We overheard you say how much your back's been bothering you, so we thought some time in

the hot tub and a massage might help,” Jalen tells Jill.

Jill pulls Jalen and me in for a hug before looking at us with misty eyes. “The fifteen thousand dollars you guys raised was enough of a Christmas present. This is just so thoughtful. Thank you guys.”

“You deserve it Jill, thank you for everything you’ve done for me.” I hug Jill one more time before she shoos us away to get ready for the event to start. I’m really going to miss this place next year, but I feel a lot better knowing that our teams helped set the shelter up for long-term success.

30

Ivy



Jalen hangs over my shoulder, a bottle of champagne in hand.

“Just hit submit, Ivy. It’s perfect.”

It’s just so hard to send off an application I have worked on perfecting all semester. Countless hours deciding what schools to apply to, getting my transcripts and letters of recommendation, all for this moment. Closing my eyes, I hit submit. My vet-school application is now in the hands of the acceptance committees.

I already feel lighter knowing that I’ve done all I can to put myself in the best position to get into my dream school.

Jalen places the bottle of champagne on the table so he can drape his arms over my shoulders. His arms are so long his hands land on my

stomach. He taps his fingers aimlessly over today's graphic tee.

“We have a lot to celebrate, Vee.” He kisses the top of my head before unwrapping himself from my body to open the champagne. There's a loud pop followed by a flying cork, and I'm hoping there is no overflowing champagne because we don't have time to change before we are supposed to leave for New York City.

We do have a lot to celebrate. Both of our teams have only one loss this season. I just applied to vet-school, and for the first time in a long time I'm truly content.

Jalen joins me at the kitchen table. “No time for glasses. We need to be on the road in twenty minutes.”

I swipe the bottle from him and take a long pull. I'm not driving today!

“You know, next year, when you're a professional, you'll need to start using glasses.”

In the few weeks Jalen and I have been dating, one of the odd habits of his I've picked up on is that he never uses a glass. If you look into the fridge at the hockey house, you'll see six different beverages with Jalen's name tapped on the outside. I'm the only one who will share a carton of milk with him.

Jalen brushes off the comment with an eye roll and starts putting on his Timberland boots.

“I'm going to put our bags in the car and turn on the heat.”

He's been on auto-pilot all day. He's done laundry, cleaned out the kitchen and got his car ready for the drive home. The only time he sat still

was when I told him I was sending my application in.

It's adorable how excited he is for me to go home with him for Christmas. For the past three weeks, every conversation has led back to New York and what we will do while we are there. Who wants to meet me, and what traditions he can't wait to share.

Deciding I should be helpful, I go upstairs and grab our bags. I wince at the size difference in our luggage for the five-day trip. I'm able to take Jalen's duffel and backpack to the door without a change in my cadence. My full-sized suitcase is going to be another story. I asked Jalen what kind of outfits I should bring with me, and he responded, "You look great in anything, babe." While it was charming, it was completely unhelpful. On top of all that it's winter so the clothes are bulkier making me look like some primadonna who doesn't know how to pack and a forty-pound suitcase and a steep set of stairs.

My heart is beating like I just completed a shuttle run. By the time I make it to the front door—with only a few dings to the floorboards—I am completely out of breath. I stop in the kitchen to fill our water bottles and grab the snacks we got for the road.

"Thanks for getting the bags, Vee," Jalen's voice carries from the front door. "Damn, babe, your suitcase is heavy." A muffled laugh escapes me, if he only told me what to pack.

When everything is in the trunk, I grab my coat and scarf, but I know better than to put them on for our four-hour car ride, instead I lay them on the back seat.

“Are we all set?” I ask Jalen as he finishes maneuvering my suitcase into the trunk of his car.

“We’re ready to go, I just need to lock the front door.”

Jalen’s roommates, except for Byron, left earlier this morning. Byron said he had to do something on campus and would just take the train home. Jalen thought it was a little suspicious because the semester’s over, and Christmas is the only time the campus completely shuts down for the year.

Jalen skips back to the car. I’m not kidding. The six-foot-five hockey player is skipping to his car, giddy with the excitement of a little kid on Christmas morning.

“You really are excited to show me what you love about New York, aren’t you?”

“I’m excited to show you what we’ll be doing in New York next year.”

Long before I met Jalen, my dream was to attend Cornell University Medical College in Manhattan, and long before Jalen met me, he hoped to be drafted by his hometown team, The New York Rangers. So, in a perfect world, we would be in the same city next year.

I tense at the talk of the future. It’s not that I don’t see myself with Jalen. He’s been the picture-perfect boyfriend, but perfect doesn’t mean forever. Any relationship that should have been my example of everlasting love has ended in tragedy. It’s only a matter of time before the Rhodes family curse strikes me.

I put any thoughts of the future to bed, as it only causes my brain to run free with all the what-ifs that will never be answered. Instead I remind



myself how excited I am about spending the next few days in the city with someone I really care about.

“What is an appropriate amount of time in the car before we stop? The first thru-way stop has a Shake Shack, and I could use a burger right now,” Jalen asks, completely serious.

A deep laugh that originates deep in my belly tunes out whatever song Jalen put on. “It’s never too early for a burger.”

Jalen places his hand over mine, which is resting on my lap, and gives it a tight squeeze. ‘I knew there was a reason I liked you.’”



Forty minutes and two bacon cheeseburgers later, we are back in the car and a couple of hours away from New York. I’ve heard people say that you really get to know your partner when you travel with them, and so far halfway through this drive, I’m loving traveling with Jalen. To fill the silence, he has the perfect playlist of random genres—including songs from our favorite musicals. He packed snacks and insisted on playing a road trip game.

To my dismay, we decided on never have I ever. I was no saint in high school, but I am sure my life in recent years doesn’t carry the same skeletons that Jalen’s has.

“We need to wager on this game,” Jalen informs me. “I’ve been thinking about it since you equaled the series with that Pop-A-Shot win,” he scoffs.

“I didn’t realize you were keeping track.”

“I don’t care if you’re my girlfriend. I hate losing.” He’s so serious that I can’t help but laugh at him.

“Then why would you want to play Never Have I Ever? You’re almost guaranteeing yourself a loss.”

Something clicks, and he runs his hands down his face. He tries to change the game, but I cut him off. “We’re playing this game.” I may not want to play it, but I also can’t let him change the game, so he has a better chance at winning.

“Fine, but I am not happy about this.” He stares me down his bright blues turning navy.

“You start.”

“Fine,” Jalen punches out. “Never have I ever taken a biology class.” My five fingers turn to four as Jalen uses my lackluster social life against me.

I decide I’m going to use this game to figure out what rumors about Jalen are true. Nobody adds fuel to the rumor mill like Westvale University’s Men’s Hockey Team.

“Never have I ever hooked up with a girl and her cousin on the same night.” His face goes ghostly white. His hands go rigid around the steering wheel. Jalen’s eyes hold every little hope when they meet mine.

“Oh my god! It’s true,” I say with humorous shock. He eases when he realizes I’m not mad at the confession.

I squeeze Jalen’s forearm that’s resting on the center console. “I’m never going to get mad at you for things that happened before we got together.

Neither of us can change our pasts. All I care about is what you do while we're together."

"Ivy, when I met you, I realized why I've never been in a relationship. It's because nobody has ever made me feel the way you do."

I'm speechless.

After a few seconds of silence, I lean over and kiss his cheek.

"I trust you, Jalen."

Trust is something I don't give out freely and Jalen knows that. It's earned. At every turn of our relationship Jalen has shown me why he deserves my trust.



I'm woken up an hour later by honking horns and police sirens. When the sounds of New York City fade, I hear Jalen mumbling to himself about the loss he took in Never Have I Ever. It was closer than I initially thought it would be, but it happens to be that most of the rumors about Jalen that run around campus are true. I meant what I said. I don't hold anything that happened before us against him. It wouldn't be fair.

"Welcome to my city, Babe," Jalen drawls when he notices I'm up. "Do you mind if we make a stop? My mom's favorite bakery is around the corner."

I stretch out my arms and hum out that little sound that happens when you arch your back. "If it gets your mom to like me, I'll buy her the whole bakery."

That earns me a chuckle. "She's going to love you, I promise."



The trip to the bakery added twenty minutes to our travel time, but if the cookies taste as good as the bakery smelled, it will definitely be worth the stop.

Jalen's childhood home is in a five-story walk-up in Brooklyn. He won't let me carry my suitcase because "his mother raised a gentleman." So I am carrying a box of Italian cookies while Jalen is lugging our bags up five flights of stairs to his front door.

"Mom left the door open, apartment 5D," He reminds me through staggered breaths.

The nerves I've been harboring for the past few hours disappear when I see a familiar shade of blue eyes.

"You guys are here!" she squeals with pure joy spread across her face.

"It's so nice to meet you, Mrs. Holloway."

She scoffs at the formal greeting, "Please, call me Mae. Andre should be home in a couple of hours. He couldn't take today off work."

A thud comes from just beyond the doorway, stopping our conversation. "What did you pack in these damn bags, Ivy?" Jalen flops on the floor in a dramatic display of exhaustion.

"You didn't tell me what we were doing, so I didn't know what to pack."

"I'm sorry I didn't raise him better," Mae's sweet southern drawl makes the joke seem like words of endearment.

“If he is going to carry my bags, he can complain all he wants.” Mae’s warm laugh takes any remaining nerves I have and throws them out the window.

“Why do I feel I’m going to regret introducing you guys,” Jalen murmurs.

While I laugh at Jalen’s disdain for my new alliance with his Mom, she has some choice words for her son. “It’s been you and your father ganging up on me for the last fifteen years. Excuse me if I have no sympathy for you.” Jalen’s mouth drops. A grin plasters mine. I think Mae is going to be my new best friend.



Jalen’s dad comes home an hour later, freshly baked Italian bread in hand. It only takes a passing look at Andre for me to realize it’ll be perfectly okay if Jalen looks half as good as his dad in twenty years.

He greets me just as warmly as his wife with a smile that looks like the one I often see on his son’s face. I’ve only been here a few hours, but I feel like I’m at Sunday dinner at home with my sister and her kids.

After eating enough food to fuel a month-long hibernation and helping Mae with the dishes, Jalen gives me a tour of the apartment he grew up in. The cozy apartment’s walls are lined with pictures timelining the Holloway Family’s history. It starts with his dad in his college basketball uniform and his parents the first year they met. It also includes all of Jalen’s school and hockey photos, including his time at Westvale.

“Your parents have always really loved each other,” I point out to Jalen with a tinge of jealousy. Jalen wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me back into his chest.

“You know they’re already obsessed with you,” he sighs before continuing. “I know it’s not the same, but my Mom is a great listener if you ever need to talk to someone.”

I run my fingers over the hands holding me. “I’m really happy your Mom invited me here. I can already tell your parents are all I’ve ever wished for.”

The last thing I want is for the next few days to be heavy. The holidays are always tough

“Why did Byron learn to cook, and you still burn toast,” I ask as he turns me so we are face to face. “A man that can cook is really fucking hot.”

“It was one time! I know how to cook,” he scoffs. “Byron loves it more, so I let him do the work.”

“Whatever you say, Jalen.” He takes my hand and shows me the rest of the apartment until we reach his bedroom. I’m not sure what I expected, maybe some Playboy posters, but I love that it still looks like his *childhood* bedroom. There are posters of Derek Jeter and the New York Rangers. Old Knicks tickets are taped to the wall. MVP trophies from all the youth hockey tournaments he’s won. It’s a look into his past.

I’m taking in Jalen’s achievements when I’m thrown on his bed. He slowly crawls up my body until his lips meet mine. He forces a whimper out of me when our tongues tangle. He reaches for the hem of my shirt, and I place my hands on his.

“Your parents are in the room next to us.”

“They know what’s going to happen if we’re staying in the same room.”

“But I just met them. Maybe give them twenty-four hours before we give them an opportunity to hear us having sex.”

“Fine,” He whines like a child.

I should be turned off by the fact that he is behaving like a little kid who’s just been told he can’t have ice cream, but I can’t say that I don’t love the fact that he can’t keep his hands off me.

“I was thinking we could go on a walk,” Jalen drawls. “I had planned to show you around the block before you rejected me.”

“Oh my god, stop being a baby.” I push him off of me. I put on my boots and face Jalen. “Let’s go!”

## Jalen



The faint smell of my mom's famous caramelized bacon wafts through my room. Without opening my eyes I roll over ready to pull Ivy's body into mine. Instead of finding the soft curves of my girlfriend, I pull in a pillow that does nothing to help the morning wood I'm sporting.

I pull on a pair of sweatpants and set off on the dubious task of finding my girlfriend in the two-bedroom apartment I grew up in. The old hardwood floors creak, shocking me out of my haziness. There was a point in time when I could tell Byron which floorboards to avoid so we didn't wake up my parents as we snuck out.

I hear Ivy before I see her. Leaning against the wall that separates the kitchen from the living room I take in the sight of my mom doubled over in laughter.



“It smells so good in here,” I tell the women in my life. “Is that bacon?”

“It is!” Ivy informs me while wrapping her arms around my torso. I place a kiss on the top of her head before pulling her into my lap as I take a seat at the table.

“Ahh, young love,” Mom almost sings as she flips the bacon in the skillet.

Ivy’s body stiffens in my lap. Tragedy and love are synonymous to Ivy, and it’s hard for her to imagine a world where she gets to live out her life with the man she chooses to love. That’s what this week is about for us. I plan to show her that I’m the type of man that will always be there for her. I know I will because I’m falling for her. I think part of me knew I would when she reluctantly accepted the invitation to the party olympics.

She is kind, smart, and loyal. My whole life, I have aspired to find love like my parents. I’ve enjoyed all the perks that being a Division I college athlete has to offer, thinking that one day, years down the line, I’d find the girl I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. When Ivy came into my life, she brightened a world I didn’t realize was dull.

“What are your plans for today?” My Mom asks from behind the stove.

I shift Ivy in my lap. A grin tugs at her lips when she realizes I’m using her to hide my hard-on. “I told Coach Hale that I’d come to the rink today. He has the eight-year-olds there this afternoon.”

“It’s hard to believe that’s the age when you started playing. I can still remember you begging me to quit after your first practice.”

“You never told me this story,” Ivy says, her voice laced with curiosity.

“Most kids start learning to skate well before they turn eight, so when I realized how clumsy I was on skates compared to everyone else, I decided I was done. I wasn’t used to being the worst athlete on the team.”

“Andre wouldn’t let him,” My Mom cuts in. “Told him that he signed up to be part of a team, which meant sticking to his commitment. He told Jalen if he didn’t want to play the next year, that would be perfectly okay.”

“The best thing my dad ever did for me was to push me to continue that season.”

We’re interrupted by a generic ringtone coming from the other room.

“I have to go get that. Can you guys keep an eye on breakfast?” Mom asks us. We nod in unison.

“Your parents are amazing.” The sadness in Ivy’s eyes kills me. Nothing I say will ease the longing she has in her heart for the family she wishes she had. Pulling her closer, I wrap her in my arms. Ivy needs to know that I’ll always be her safe space.

I let her go so we can finish cooking the bacon and start on the pancakes. Playing house in the apartment I grew up in.



There is something magical about introducing the person you’re dating to the neighborhood you grew up in. The best thing about growing up in

Brooklyn is that the block doesn't change much. The same family runs the pizza shop across from the building I grew up in. The bodega still has the best bacon, egg and cheeses you'll find in the burrow, but the one place that I can't wait to show Ivy is the unassuming building two blocks down from my apartment.

"Hey, Jalen," the burly man behind the desk greets us as we walk in. "You helping out with..." His eyes shoot to Ivy, piquing his curiosity.

"Ivy, this is Coach Hale. Coach, this is my girlfriend, Ivy."

She holds out her hand, trying to make the best first impression on the man who introduced me to the sport that changed my life.

The grin on my former coach's face has me holding my breath. Coach Hale is an old-school kind of guy, the kind who says the first thing that comes to his mind and deals with the consequences later.

"What size skates do you wear, Ivy?"

"I don't," she tells him. "I play basketball at Westvale, and my coach would kill me if I hurt myself this close to the postseason."

"I just wanted to bring her along to show her the place where I spent the majority of my childhood," I explain.

"If you go to Westvale, you probably know Byron, right?"

"I do. I've heard the two of them raised hell back in the day," Ivy says, patting my shoulder.

Coach proceeds to tell Ivy about the time Byron and I snuck into a rival team's rink and let loose a

bunch of frogs in the lobby.

I look over my shoulder as Coach and I walk to the locker room to suit up for practice. Ivy's wrapped up like a burrito in her big down coat, beanie, and scarf, sitting on the bleachers across from the home team's bench.

"She seems like a good one," Coach says, sitting on the bench in the locker room sliding on his skates.

"She's the best."

All it took this time was listening to a few stories from my childhood for Ivy to receive another stamp of approval.



"That's it!" I scream through my hands from the other side of the ice as a kid on my team scores the game-winning goal. Ivy jumps to her feet from the home bench. She's been sitting with the substitute players on the team Coach Hale assigned me. Scrimmaging has always been my favorite part of practice. It's when you can put everything you worked on throughout the day to the test, and there is no better feeling than when you see it all come together. I started coaching once I figured out that there is one thing that rivals perfecting a new skill of your own, and that is watching a kid struggle with a skill, and then one day, it just clicks. In this case, it's for a game-winning goal. It's a feeling I'll never get over.

"Yes, Jack!" I pump my fist in the air before skating over to him. "I told you'd get it down."

“I’ve been practicing,” His grin is missing his two front teeth. “I’ve been working really hard to show you when you came back from college.”

The second grader’s confession has me pulling him into a hug. I was lucky to have both my parents in my life growing up, but the male role models I met through this youth hockey program have been some of the most influential people in my life. Being on the other end of it now, I’ve known some of these kids since they first started the program, and it kills me that I can’t be here more often. I feel like they grow so much—both physically and in the game— while I’m away at school. I know it’s only going to get worse when I’m in the NHL next season.

“You did amazing, buddy!” I squat down so we are at eye level. “I’ll be here for a few more days if you want to get some work in, have your mom call me.”

Jack throws his arms around my neck and pulls me into a hug. “Thanks, Jalen!”

The sweetest laugh fills the air, and I know who it belongs to before I spot her. When I finally find Ivy, she is on the ice in her boots, helping a kid—who can’t be older than five— onto the ice. My mind jumps to a time in the future, bringing our kids to the rink for early Saturday morning games, afternoons walking through Central Park, and nights on the couch watching movies. I’m falling for this woman, and I don’t care who knows.



“I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist me.”

Ivy looks up at me right as her big brown eyes begin to roll. “Your parents are at a Christmas party. There was no way I was going to sleep with you in a two-bedroom apartment if they were here.”

The conviction in her voice is cute, but let’s be honest, she wouldn’t be able to resist all this.

“Are you hungry?” I ask, my hands tangling in her caramel-colored hair.

“Starving.”

“Let’s go see what we have.” I throw her one of my clean t-shirts, and she heads to the kitchen while I make a pitstop in the bathroom. When I finally reach the kitchen, I find Ivy with a row full of buttered bread and a pan heating on the stove.

“I wasn’t sure what was for tomorrow’s dinner, so I thought grilled cheese was a safe bet.”

I let Ivy do her thing while I pour us some wine.

“What about some music?” I ask with my face in my phone, ready to select the playlist I’ve been working on since our first date when she was too self-conscious to play her music in my car.

Song after song plays, and Ivy dubs them all as her favorite.

“What’s this playlist?” Ivy asks as we finish the last of our dinner. “I love every song on it.”

I slide my phone to her and watch as confusion lines settle on her forehead. *Ivy’s Favorites*. “Did you make this?”

I rub the back of my neck. “You were just so against playing music in my car that first time that I thought if I had a playlist with all your favorites,

you'd realize I don't care what we listen to as long as I'm listening to it with you."

Ivy rises from her seat across from me and makes herself at home in my lap. "I can't believe how seen you make me feel, Jalen. Thank you."

The kiss she presses to my lips and the way she sneaks her tongue past them should be a lesson to all men that sometimes a simple gesture can do more than the most expensive piece of jewelry.

She pulls away from me as Elvis Presley's *Can't Help Falling In Love* starts playing through the Bluetooth speakers.

"Dance with me?" She asks as if I could ever say no to her. I place her on her feet and take her hand in mine, and we spend the rest of the night dancing in my childhood kitchen.



Christmas Eve is the best day of the year, better than my birthday, better than the season opener and better than the Fourth Of July.

When I was younger, we would go visit my Mom's family down south or before my Dad's family left the city, we'd spend it with them. At some point, my hockey career had to take precedence, so it meant a quiet Christmas' with just the three of us before some kind of hockey showcase. It always felt right. We'd go to afternoon mass before heading home, where Mom would make The Feast of The Seven Fishes, an Italian Christmas tradition.

Holidays like these helped shape the close-knit relationship we have. Bringing Ivy home this

weekend was more than a simple meeting with the boyfriend's parents. It was integrating her into my family's traditions.

Ivy has survived the first Holloway Christmas Eve tradition with afternoon mass. She handled all the old ladies who watched me grow up with grace. They couldn't stop dotting all over her and telling her all the embarrassing stories from my childhood that only they could get away with telling.

This morning, when I went to shower, I left two tickets to Madison Square Garden on Ivy's pillow for the Knicks game tonight. I wanted to bring Ivy here because as this season goes on, there is more speculation that the New York Rangers will take me as their lottery pick in the upcoming draft, so The Garden could soon be my home, too.

Ivy hasn't stopped smiling since I gifted her these tickets this morning. She squeezes my hands as we step on the steep escalator that will bring us up to the arena's entryway. The walls are lined with past and present superstars who had career-defining moments in this arena.

I watch Ivy as she takes in the history of the sports that have provided us with so much throughout our lives.

"Was it always hockey for you?" Ivy asks as we stop in front of a display paying homage to the 1994 Stanley Cup winners.

"Yeah, it was," I tell her as memories of my childhood run through my mind. "I remember thinking my dad was going to be mad at me, but he came up to me one day and told me that it was okay



if I liked it more. He told me he and Mom would support me no matter what I wanted to do.”

When I look back at Ivy, she has a single tear running down her cheek. I wipe it away with my thumb. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“After spending time with your family, I’m realizing everything that I have missed out on with mine. Thank you for sharing yours with me. I really loved the ladies from church.”

“Of course, you did,” I mumble—remembering the embarrassing stories she took too much joy in listening to—before pulling her in. Her coffee-colored eyes hold secrets I know she wants to share.

“I know you didn’t have the time you wanted with your parents, and the holidays are hard for you, but my family is yours. We want to make memories with you for as long as you’ll have us. One day, when we have a family of our own, they will be able to listen to a treasure trove of memories that we have made over the years.”

Ivy’s eyes are locked on a map of the arena as we try to find the section our seats are in. Anxiety starts creeping up the longer the silence goes on. When her gaze takes hold of mine, I notice the red tint in her cheeks. “That’s the first time you’ve spoken about having a family with me. Is that really what you want?” Her nose crinkles and her eyes squint as she bashfully looks at me.

“Ivy, I wouldn’t have brought you here to spend time with my favorite people during my favorite time of the year if I didn’t want my future to have you in it.”

Ivy takes a moment, trying to decide if my words are sincere. She takes my hand and starts down the hall after pressing her lips to the top of it.

“Come on, babe, let’s go enjoy the game.”

And that’s exactly what we do.

We end the trip with the dinner my Mom made for Christmas Eve and the cup of coffee we got to share with my parents before we had to head back to campus to prepare for the last leg of our regular season.

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Ivy



The time between Christmas and the start of the new semester is always quiet around Westvale. The only people on campus are the winter sports athletes. The last three years have consisted of practices, games, and when basketball's over for the day, chill nights spent at Jasper's with the men's basketball team. This year is pretty much the same, except Jalen has been tagging along. He came—more gifts in hand—to celebrate a late Christmas with me and my family. We've watched movies with Indy and Marcus. It's been the perfect few days, but now it's time to get focused. We have our biggest game of the season against the number-one-ranked University of Connecticut Huskies. The winner takes over the top spot in the conference.

“Can you believe the guys are going to be in the same city as us for New Year's?” Indy asks as I get

ready to shower post-practice.

“Jalen hasn’t stopped talking about how excited he is that we will be in the same city for our first New Year’s Eve.”

“Yeah, that’s nice,” Indy hides her head in her locker, refusing to make eye contact with me.

“What are you hiding?” I try to demand an answer out of her.

One of the reasons Indy and I clicked so quickly is that she is as loyal as they come, a girl’s girl through and through, but right now, she is acting really weird.

She grabs her towel, drops her head, and still refuses to look me in the eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says before disappearing behind a shower divider.

I have no clue what’s going on, so I take my shower caddy and get ready for our bus to Connecticut.

Jalen’s team left this morning. I’ll see him when we get to the hotel. He and Marcus promised to take us to dinner, so I know that can’t be what Indy was trying to hide from me. I push down the anxious feeling I get when something is out of my control. When life throws you as many curveballs as mine has, you hold on tight to the parts of life where you get to choose your own destiny.



I’m picking up my bag from the undercarriage of the bus while Izzy is telling me about how her nephew used his new kitten’s litter box as his own

personal toilet. I get this nagging feeling that someone is watching me as I catch my breath. Through the tinted bus window, I notice Jalen's big blue eyes and a goofy smile plastered on his face. The sight might calm most girls—seeing that their boyfriend is so enamored with them—but I can't help thinking about how storms happen after the sunniest days.



“This may be the best ice cream I ever had,” The words mush together as Indy tries to save the ice cream, threatening to run down her hand. Ice cream in December sounds odd, but The University of Connecticut has its own dairy farm on campus and makes some of the best ice cream you'll ever have.

“This is my favorite part of coming here,” Izzy says through slurping noises.

This casual conversation is killing me. I've been begging Indy to tell me what the hell Jalen has planned for tonight, and she just won't tell me. I'm really starting to wonder where her loyalties lie. Best friend, my ass.

“Can you please just tell me what Jalen has planned tonight?” I ask my roommate.

“Nope.”

“Yes.”

“Nope”

“You're insufferable.”

“I'll just say that we are switching roommates for the night.”

You want to guess who Jalen's roommate is for away games this year. If you guessed Marcus West, ding ding ding, you're a winner.

"We have the biggest game of the season tomorrow. I'm not switching roommates with your boyfriend."

"Ehmm," Indy shrugs her shoulders. Izzy looks beyond confused, and my anxiety has just etched itself into a new home. I think Jalen may be the death of me.



Indy has just turned on the TV so we can watch the pre-ball drop festivities. We have our face masks on, and still no mention of whatever Jalen has planned for tonight. Which I now believe is nothing, and I'm happy about that.

I reluctantly peel myself off my bed so I can remove the cracked clay from my face and brush my teeth. I settle in the bathroom, toothbrush halfway to my mouth, when Indy forces her way in, my phone in her hand.

"Guess who finally texted you. Guess who finally texted you?" She sings.

One thing I love about being in a relationship with another athlete is that they understand the importance of getting in the headspace to compete. Jalen and I talk every day when one of us is on the road, but we both understand that it may take some time for us to get back to each other.

I grab my phone from Indy's hand. Before I can enter my passcode, Indy interjects, "What did he say?"

“Well, if you give me a minute to actually read it, I’ll be able to tell you.”

Jalen: Hey Angel, I miss you. Can I see you tonight?

Me: Idk we both have pretty big games tomorrow.

Jalen: Come on, all you have to do is ride the elevator up two floors. Pleaseeeee \*praying hands emoji\*

Damnit, how can you say no to a man begging to see you?

It’s hard to think that this year started with a simple promise to my sister and friends that I’d be more social. Somewhere along the way, it morphed into me wanting to trust new people and believing that not everyone has ulterior motives. Tonight, I’m making the conscious choice to remember that.

Me:

Fine. See you in twenty minutes.

Jalen:

Cool, I’ll tell Marcus to head to your room then.

Me:

Why does Marcus have to leave?

Jalen:

\*three smirking emojis\*



Twenty minutes later, Indy forces me out the door with a guarantee I’m about to have the time of my life. The sound of a low-pitched bell draws my eyes away from my phone to Marcus, who is holding the

elevator door open. A goofy smile spreads across his face when he notices me waiting for him to exit so I can jump on.

“Why are you smiling like that?”

Marcus rests a hand on my shoulder and stops me before I get on the elevator, giving me two pats. “I’ve never seen Jay commit to anything like this before.”

I’m stunned speechless, before the elevator doors close Marcus turns over his shoulder. “Don’t be too loud tonight, my teammates need to get some rest,” and winks.

I swear time slows as the elevator moves between floors. Picking at my manicure, I watch the loose flakes float to the floor and try not to overthink what is about to happen.

One knock, and Jalen is at the door. I’m so surprised that I almost don’t notice the bouquet of wildflowers he has in his hand.

“These are my favorite,” I tell him. “How did you know?”

“I asked your sister,” His voice is sheepish. “She texted me with hockey questions for Caleb. She got my number from my uncle.”

“Well, they are beautiful,” I wrap my hands around his neck and pull his lips to mine. Jalen grabs me by my waist and pulls me into his room. He bites my bottom lip, turning a sweet thank-you kiss into something more passionate. Without removing his lips from mine, Jalen locks the door and pushes me against it.

“I’ve been waiting for this all day,” He says between the open-mouth kisses he’s placing down



my neck. He stops abruptly, and I freeze.

“I was supposed to wait until you saw the rest of the surprise.”

Whatever story I was telling myself about not being enough for Jalen ends the moment I see what he’s done with his hotel room. The room is lit by candles, making the generic hotel room into something from one of my favorite romance novels.

Then I notice the basket in the center of one of the beds.

I take a seat next to it. The wicker basket is filled with all my favorite things. Popcorn and Bunch-A-Crunch—a nod to that movie date at his house—there are two books I’ve been telling him I want to read and three cases of my favorite chapstick.

“Why did you do all this?”

“Well, we didn’t really get to have that romantic getaway being shackled up with my roommates last week, so I wanted to make our first New Year’s Eve special.”

“You’ve set the bar pretty high, Mr. Holloway.” I get off the bed and stalk toward him like a lioness to its prey. “I think we should make up for the lost time.”

I barely make it two steps before his hands are under my ass and hoisting me up. I wrap my legs around his waist, and he lowers to the couch behind me, and I settle into his lap. Jalen’s calloused fingers slip under my shirt. His touch is assertive.

I love this side of Jalen.

He cups my face, his fingers running over my jaw. His eyes dance down my body, making me feel like the oversized t-shirt and biker shorts I'm wearing are the sexiest things he's ever seen.

"I love you, Ivy," He continues before I can tell him how I feel about him.

"I love the way you fall asleep during every movie we watch, I love how passionate you are about your work at the shelter, and I love that you took a chance on me."

His face turns from someone who wants to rip my clothes off to someone who can't believe what they just said.

"You don't have to say it back. I know it takes a lot..." I put my hand over his mouth, it's the only way I can stop his rambling.

"I love you too, Jalen."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I've never felt so safe in my life. Thank you for being so patient with me."

He presses his lips to mine, and I fling my arms over his shoulders, pulling him closer to me. His tongue glides over my lips, demanding that they open for him. When his tongue slips into my mouth, I let a whimper loose. Jalen moves with me wrapped around his body and gently lays me on the bed.

"I'm going to show you just how much I love you."

"I don't want sweet and gentle, fuck me like you hate me." There is a week of pent-up aggression that needs to be fucked out of my body.

Jalen's eyes turn dark as his masculine hands run down my body until they meet the waistband of my spandex shorts. Before I know what's happening, I'm lying on the bed in nothing but my matching bra and panties I packed just in case something like this happened.

He stalks over me, and I flatten my palm against him through the fabric of his sweatpants. The simple touch pulls a deep groan from him.

“Don't tease me, Angel. You're playing with the devil.”

Jalen kneels between my legs and rubs his cock over the part of me that is in desperate need of his touch.

“As bad as I want to go deep inside your tight pussy, I need a taste first.”

His finger peels the panties away from the skin, and his fingers run through my wet folds. I take the initiative and unhook my bra, throwing it across the room, and it lands on the second bed. I moan as his finger grazes my clit, circling it in smooth, easy strokes.

His knees settle on the floor before he pulls me forward. My hips fall off the edge of the bed, only supported by Jalen's strong grip.

“Stay just like that, angel.”

He takes his time slowly placing kisses up my thigh before he takes my legs and drapes them over his shoulders.

I lean up on my elbows so I can look into Jalen's navy eyes.

“Jalen, enough teasing.”

And with those words, he completely unravels.

## Jalen



“Is all this for me, baby? You’re so damn wet.”

I pump a finger in and out, setting a leisurely pace that I know is going to make her feisty.

I add a second finger and slowly kiss all my favorite parts of her body. Her sexy hips. Her toned tummy. The curve of her perfect ass. Her taut nipples.

“God, do you know how amazing these tits are?”

Before she can answer, I sink a third finger into her tight pussy, stretching just enough for me to enter.

“Damn baby, I’ll never get sick of this.”

I tug on each nipple and am rewarded with a moan. I make sure to give each one a hard tug, so Ivy gets the kind of love she begged for.

She only lasts a couple more pumps of my fingers, and once my mouth lands back on her clit, she pulls my hair as she comes, igniting my primal instincts.

I pull off her and reach for my wallet beside the table. Ivy's hand is on mine.

"I'm on birth control."

"Are you sure?"

She nods confidently, still trying to catch her breath.

"Can you turn over for me, Angel?"

Ivy on all fours is a view that rivals any sight I've seen. I fist my hand around my cock and give it a couple of pumps.

"God, baby," I place a kiss on her perfect ass.

"Your ass in the air like this is so damn sexy." I slap her ass—hard. Ivy moans. "You like that, Angel?"

"Yes!" She reaches and wraps her hand around my pulsing cock.

"Please, Jalen," she begs.

"Since you asked so nicely."

I line myself up and push into her in one swift motion, giving her no time to adjust.

"God, Jalen," she cries.

My fingers curl into her hips, meeting mine every time she rocks back.

"You have to be quiet, baby. We don't need my teammates hearing us. The thrill of being caught makes it so much sexier. Doesn't it?"

Her round ass bounces whenever I enter her, and I use it to anchor myself to her. I bend over, my chest flush with her back.

“Is this what you wanted? Am I fucking you hard enough?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she whimpers.

And, the sound makes me lose control. I flip her over and sink right back into her. The pace is chaotic, and I’m doing everything I can to not come before I can give her another orgasm.

Ivy’s body arches.

“Yes, Jalen, right there, baby.”

She reaches and grabs my chain, using it to help her climb her way back up my body. We are a mixture of whimpers and incoherent words as we both reach our moment of ecstasy. As Ivy arches her back, she pulls on the gold chain. It snaps.

Ivy’s body slams back onto the bed, and we both fall into a fit of laughter.

“I can’t believe that happened. I’m so sorry, Jalen.”

“It’s okay, Angel,” I tell her sincerely.

“I can always get it fixed, but I only get to tell my girl I love her for the first time once.”

Ivy wraps herself into my side. I lean down to place a kiss on her cheek.

“Are you going to stay up here tonight?”

“Yeah,” she responds through hazy eyes.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” I reach over the side of the bed, making sure my body never leaves Ivy’s side, and grab my laptop. Our next musical is

all queued up to watch– Hairspray–while the ball drop plays on TV.

“I can’t believe I was so anxious about this. I thought something bad was going to happen today when Indy said you had a surprise for me.”

In true Ivy fashion, she makes it through the opening credits before she passes out. I don’t get the chance to ask her what she meant.



My teammates and I take over the first two rows behind Westvale’s bench. My mind is still reeling from how last night ended. Ivy and I didn’t get a chance to talk this morning, she had to leave first thing to prepare for her shoot-around.

*I can’t believe I was anxious about this.*

I haven’t stopped thinking about that statement since Ivy muttered those words in her sleepy haze. I know Ivy has trust issues, especially regarding relationships with men. That’s why I’ve worked so hard to show her I’m a man she can trust.

A gentle tap on my shoulder pulls me back into reality, and I find a look of concern spread across Aaron’s face.

“You okay, man? You were in some other universe for a moment there.”

“Do you think I’m trustworthy?”

You’d think I asked him to help me bury a body. The question stuns him, and I’m left with nothing but the sounds of balls bouncing against hardwood.

“What do you mean?”



“Ivy said something last night that makes me think she doesn’t fully trust me.”

“I assume it’s because of your past,” He pauses for a moment. “Dating history.” I nod.

“I mean, think it’s understandable. She hasn’t dated much, and every time we go out, some girl from your past comes up to us in total disregard for your relationship.”

I guess I haven’t thought about how that would make her feel. I just shrug them off without a second thought. Now, if I think about it, I can see how that could make Ivy feel insecure in this relationship.

“Damn, Aaron, you’re right. I didn’t realize you were so observant.”

He shrugs, “I think you learn more from watching than talking.” I don’t know where all this wisdom came from, but I’m thankful for it.

I decided that it was not worth overanalyzing some words muttered after the best sex I’ve ever had. Ivy struggles with showing her emotions, and last night, she told me she was in love with me. Those are the words I’m choosing to remember from our first New Year’s Eve together.

I look down at the bleachers, and it’s just another reminder of how lucky I am. My entire team came out to support Ivy and Indy. After my party at the start of the season, our two teams have become close— pre-games, nights at Jasper’s, going to each other’s games— and now we are supporting the girls during their biggest game of their season.

It’s been a nail-biter from the opening jump, with no team leading by more than five points.

Westvale fans are outnumbered four to one, but we are a very passionate minority, contributing to the gym's rowdy atmosphere. As time ticks down during the fourth quarter, this game could go either way.

Indy's drive to the basket pulled the game within two. Forty seconds show on the clock when UCONN's coach calls a timeout. We need one stop just to have a chance at tying the game. When the timeout breaks, Westvale is ready to go. They're locked in on defense, and with twenty seconds left in the game, they hold the ball, leaving enough time for one shot. Indy takes two hard dribbles and stops at the foul line when she notices Ivy is open. Ivy has her feet set beyond the three-point line—she's going for the win. I have a good feeling about the shot as it leaves her hands. I hold my breath, watching as the ball rotates once around the rim before falling through the net.

Before I know what's happening, I'm on my feet.

“That's my girl!” I scream, and somehow, through all the cheers, in a sea of her teammates, Ivy's eyes lock on mine. I give her a wink. This girl can really do it all.



The start of the second semester is always a whirlwind. We are approaching the end of the season, and by the time everyone else makes it back to campus, we've already been here for nearly a month. The combination of spending too much time with the boys and playoffs looming—during which drinking and partying come to a stop—we

birthed the tradition of the hockey formal. It might sound like some fancy party, but in reality, it's just a bunch of college kids using it as an excuse to dress up for a pregame before going to the bars.

That's tonight, but first, I have one of my last scheduled shifts at the shelter. I don't think I'll stop coming to this place, though. My uncle was right. I needed some grounding, some responsibility. More importantly, it gave me Ivy.

It's hard to believe I went three years without noticing her, and now I can't imagine my life without her. Before Ivy, I thought random hookups and crazy parties were what the college experience was supposed to be. People that settled down were missing out on the true college experience. I don't think that anymore.

It's a mild January day, so I decide to get some of the dogs ready for a walk around campus. By the time Ivy arrives at the shelter, I have Riley, along with a few others, ready to go.

I'm giving Riley some belly scratches, his feet are dancing through the air, when I hear the bell hanging over the door ring.

"Oh, I think Ivy is here," I coo, "Want to go show her what we have planned for today."

And he's off, the twenty minutes I just spent loving on him, meaning absolutely nothing.

I grab the leashes of the dogs that will be joining us and stuff a couple of tennis balls in my coat pocket, knowing that snow and a game of fetch will be something these dogs love.

When I get to the front door—four dogs in hand—I find Ivy giving Riley the same attention I was,

but his tail is wagging a little bit more. I can't blame him. She makes my tail wag, too.

We make it to the football field and let the dogs roam. I hand her the second tennis ball. We hurl them down the field at the same time.

"Ha, mine went farther," I gloat.

"Best three out of five," she demands hastily.

"Whatever you want, Angel."

"Are you excited about the formal?" I ask as we wait for the dogs to dig the balls out of the snow that covers the campus.

"Indy told me these things get kind of crazy. I'm not sure I want to get too crazy so close to the postseason."

"Oh, come on, it'll be fun. All you have this week is practice. Your next game is..."

"Saturday," She reminds me.

"You'll be fine. That's a week away. I'm not saying you need to get hammered but have fun."

"That's what I've been doing all year," she snaps.

Her eyes grow big, we're both shocked by her anger. "I'm sorry. I just can't believe that this season is my last. I've been playing since I was eight."

I wrap my hand around the zipper of Ivy's coat and pull her to me. She rests her cheek on my chest.

"Are you okay, Vee?"

I stroke her hair, giving her all the time she needs to process whatever emotions she needs to.

“It’s just that,” her brown eyes are sad when they peer up and meet mine. “I’ve never been good with change, and everything is about to be different. The end of basketball, moving out of Westvale and leaving my family behind.” She uses the sleeve of her jacket to wipe away her rogue tears. “And let’s not fool ourselves, Jalen. The probability of us being in the same city next season is minuscule.”

“Baby,” I take her face between my hands, “Ivy, it’s all but certain that the Rangers are going to take me, and you’re going to get into your dream school. We will be in the same city next season.”

“There is no guarantee of that,” she murmurs.

“No, there is no guarantee of anything in this life, Ivy. And if for some reason we aren’t in the same city next year, we will make it work because I love you, Ivy Rhodes, and I’ll do anything I can to make you happy.”

The wind picks up, and her hair flies forward, covering her face. I tuck the rogue hair behind her ears.

“You’re my family now, Ivy, and I am yours. I’ll be here for you on the good and the bad days. It doesn’t matter how far apart we are. You can count on me.”

A shy smile tugs on her lips. I think she believes me. I hope she believes because even though I truly believe Ivy loves me, I don’t know if she trusts me.

## Ivy



“Are you ready for tonight?” Indy asks from the training table at the opposite end of the room.

We had our last full-throttled practice before the team leaves for our first-round game in Nashville next Saturday. So until then, it’s dips in the cold plunge and walk through practices until we get to the arena on Friday.

“Yeah, I have to go home. I’m borrowing a dress from Ruby. I’m not sure I’ll be enough of a human to go there for dinner tomorrow, judging by how hard Jalen is planning on going tonight.”

Indy’s eyes hold mischief and amusement as they glance between me and some far-off memory.

“What are you reminiscing about over there?”

“Let’s just say last year ended with a bang.”

I take the stories she tells me with a grain of salt knowing her habit to over-exaggerate a story from a night out. The thing is, I've heard similar stories from everyone I spoke with about the party this week. So my plan is to have fun tonight, and tomorrow, we start our quest to be back-to-back National Champions.



I'm not even through the front door when I hear the soothing sounds of chaos pouring out of my sister's house. What I don't expect is Mr. Holloway to be in my sister's kitchen.

"Aunt Ivyyyyyy!" The screeches of my name from my niece and nephew draw attention to my arrival from the adults in the room.

My sister's eyes widen when she sees me, completely forgetting I'm picking up a dress for tonight.

"Ivy... ahh... hi."

With my suspicions being confirmed, I want to do a little happy dance but decide against making a big deal of it in front of the kids.

"I'm picking up that dress," Ruby's eyes are blank. "For the hockey formal tonight."

"Yeah, I definitely forgot."

One thing I've always loved about my sister is if she's caught doing something, she doesn't try to talk her way out of it. She knows we're smart enough to see through her bull shit.

"Let's go grab that dress, Vee."

It takes everything in me to wait until we get to my sister's room to ask her every question that is running through my mind. The second she closes the door, I ask the first and most important one, "Are you dating Mr. Holloway?"

"I am."

What kind of answer is that, it has no details... unacceptable.

"For how long?"

"Since we met at Jalen's game. This is actually the first time he is meeting the kids as my boyfriend."

Part of me feels a little bad that I'm ruining this night, which I can tell means a lot to my sister. I should have reminded her I was coming today, but we talk almost every day, and she didn't mention anything to me either. I guess she wanted to make sure the relationship was serious before telling me that she was dating my boyfriend's uncle. I'm sure some people might find it weird that we are keeping our relationships in the family, so to say, but my sister seemed happy when I walked in here today. It's hard to date in a small town, and my sister hasn't dated much since Darek passed away. All I want is for her to be happy, and if that means being one big happy family, then so be it.

"You seemed really happy when you didn't know I was behind you," I can't help but laugh. "But you both looked absolutely mortified when you realized I was home."

"I just wanted to make sure he was sticking around before I told you. If things went well with the kids tonight, I was going to tell you when your season ended."



I walk over to Ruby and wrap her in a tight hug. “You deserve this, sis. I love you. And the Holloways are good people.”

I grab the dress I’m planning on wearing tonight and a couple of others just to be safe.

We head downstairs—my sister’s face plastered with the sweetest smile— and go to the kitchen so I can say goodbye to the gang that’s hanging out there.

Caleb is telling some elaborate story—hand motions included—about what happened during recess yesterday. They don’t notice me when I enter the room, so I take that time to watch how the kids are talking to their mom’s new boyfriend, and I’m not shocked to see him fully immersed in the crazy story of an eight-year-old. I’m also not surprised to see the kids talking to him so easily.

“Hey guys, I have to leave,” I drape my arms over Caleb’s shoulders and pull him into a hug. “But did you know Mr. Holloway...”

“Matt, you can call me Matt, Ivy.”

“Did you know Matt is Jalen’s Uncle?”

“No way!” Stella screams, followed by Caleb’s. “Jalen is teaching me how to play hockey!”

“Is he?” Matt says with an amused smile.

“You’ve been good for him, Ivy. I finally think he’s grown up a little.”

Little does he know how good Jalen has been for me.

“Thanks. You have a pretty amazing family, Matt.” The room goes quiet.

“Well, I better get going. I promised Jalen I’d help him with his hair before the party tonight.” I head out the door, dresses in hand, hoping my boyfriend’s uncle hits it off with my sister’s kids.



I’m sitting on Jalen’s bed with his back to me as he sits on the floor. My fingers work one over the other to get his hair ready for the guests that will be here in an hour. His fingertips skim over my bare legs, slowly moving closer to the apex of my thighs. I swat his hand away.

“There is no time for that, Jalen. I still need to do my makeup, and people will be here in an hour.”

Jalen turns so he is facing me—completely destroying the braid I was working on— and presses his face into my lower belly.

“Please, babe, I’m not going to see you for like three weeks after we both make it to the championship game,” His words are muffled into my t-shirt.

I grab the sides of his face and guide it until his eyes are on mine.

“I love how optimistic you are about this postseason.” I lean forward to press my lips to his, “We can have really hot drunk sex tonight, I promise.”

“Fine,” He huffs.

“Let me finish your hair so I can get ready.”



Somehow, I manage to finish getting ready before the first guest arrives. It's Indy. So, my rushing was for nothing.

"You were supposed to text me when you were on your way."

"Oops, I forgot," She shrugs before heading to the makeshift bar the boys made in the living room."

"Are we drinking tequila tonight?" I roll my eyes. I don't know if there has been a night out this year where tequila wasn't our poison of choice.

When Indy pours out two shots for each of us, that's when I know we are in for one hell of a night.

The shots hit us quickly, so we take a minute to sit on the couch and gather ourselves. I glance around the room taking in all the random girls hanging on the arms of some of Westvale's most elite athletes. They are almost doing too much, whether it be a dress that is a little too skimpy, coming into the party a little too drunk or smothering the guy they came with to the point that they are visibly disinterested.

"Doesn't it feel good to be secure in our relationships?" I ask Indy.

"Yeah, it shouldn't, but it still shocks me how desperate these girls are."

We hide our laughs behind our second Vodka soda of the night. The boys got shit tequila, and I'm leaving that for all the body shots happening right now.

The mood changes when T-Pain starts playing, and I grab Indy's hand.

"Let's go dance."

I take my best friend's hand and head to the center of the room, where others have made a makeshift dance floor.

We feel the rhythm. I take Indy's hand in mine and spin her around, laughing as we enjoy the song that we blast in our apartment before every game.

Mid-belt and in my tipsy haze, I find Jalen, his goofy grin not lining up with the heat in his eyes.

"Do you mind if I steal a dance?" He asks Indy.

"She is all yours," she replies with a sultry look in her eyes. "I should probably go find my boyfriend."

"He's hammered," Jalen informs her like we haven't spent the better part of the night taking shots together.

"He keeps calling it our last night of freedom."

"That's true until we're back here celebrating a couple of National Championships," He tells her while I reach for his hand.

He acts like it's so easy. It's hard to win one, let alone going back-to-back. It'd be pretty amazing to add two more banners to the Riley Center's rafters.

When the song ends, Jalen collects his roommates. We line up along the bar to take what they are dubbing a "roomie shot." I make sure to pull Indy along with us because we both spend enough time here to be included.

When we each have a shot in front of us, a slur of words leaves Byron's mouth—who surprisingly came solo tonight—the only ones I could make out were, win, fucking and pussies.

When all the shot glasses are empty, I take Indy's hand and pull her toward the stairs that lead to the boy's bedrooms.

"I'm going to use the bathroom upstairs," I whisper to Aaron.

I feel my body sag and let out a groan when I realize the boys used their dining room chairs to block the stairs leading to the bathroom that I desperately need. Somehow, two girls drunk on vodka win the game of Tetris against the roadblock.

"Do you want to go hang out in Jalen's room for a minute?" I ask when we are both done. "I need a minute away from.." Before I can finish my sentence, something falls downstairs, causing the entire house to shake. "...that."

When we get to Jalen's room, we both take our shoes off and lay on the bed.

"Can you believe this is it?" Indy asks.

"What do you mean?"

"It's the last of everything. The last hockey formal, our last year of being roommates and the last basketball games we'll ever play."

I nod as she rattles off all the difficult parts that come with big life changes, but I don't dwell on those because what I learned this year is that living in the moment makes for a much more fulfilling life.

“I guess it is sad, but haven’t you been pushing me all year to live in the moment,” I let out a sigh. “This year has been the most fulfilling of my life. Let’s just live in the now and enjoy every second we have left of our senior year.”

Indy pops up from her side of Jalen’s bed, “Alright, that means it’s time for another shot!”

She hops over me, puts her heels on in record time and is halfway out the door before I can even process what happened.

By the time I catch up with Indy, she has her finger in Jalen’s chest, and he looks like a man who has been caught in a position he wishes he was never in.

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Ivy



“What the fuck are you telling this random chick about my best friend?” Her finger is pointed at the middle of Jalen’s chest, unhappiness is painted on her face.

“It’s not what you think,” That expression makes my heart sink. That’s always what you say when it is just how it looks.

I hurry over to them before they draw more attention to each other and drag them to the mudroom so we can at least have some kind of privacy to figure this thing out.

Indy’s eyes are glued to Jalen. Jalen’s eyes are set on the floor and mine are moving between the two, trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

“Anybody want to tell me what happened back there?” I ask forcefully, trying really hard not to raise my voice.

Indy lets out a huff before she rips into Jalen, “What, Jalen, you have no problem talking about your girlfriend to some random chick but aren’t man enough to talk to her about it now?”

Jalen’s body tenses at her curt words. When he finally decides to look me in the eyes, they aren’t the same ones I saw before I left to go upstairs. The drunken haziness is replaced by sadness.

“It’s not...not what you think.”

“What, you weren’t talking about your relationship problems with my best friend to Evelyn, who I know you used to hook up with?”

My heart sinks. Did the whole party hear whatever Jalen confessed to Evelyn?

Life after my parents’ death flashes before my eyes. The life of pity and people not knowing what to say to you. You have to comfort the people who are supposed to comfort you.

Even with a sober look in his eyes, Jalen’s words are a drunken slur.

“She asked me how we were...” Jalen’s words just end.

“Since he doesn’t have the balls to tell you, I will.”

“He told her he didn’t know if he could handle all your doubts about your relationship. That he’s given you everything, and you still don’t know how to let yourself be with someone.”



I don't know what doubts he is talking about, I've told him that I love him, that I have a hard time trusting people, but I opened my heart to him. This is why I kept to myself. It was safer. People had no reason to go around and talk about what I was doing. I happily flew under the radar.

All the feelings I had as an eight-year-old, having to decide who I could trust and who was going to blame me for my Dad's rash decisions, are making their way to the forefront of my mind.

My chest tightens and it's getting harder to breathe. I can't take my eyes away from the person who promised me that I could always trust him.

"We need to go," I say through labored breaths. I need to leave before everyone in this house watches me have a full-blown panic attack.

"Ivy, wait," Jalen finally forces himself to look at me. I'm so furious with him, but somehow, my heart still breaks when I see the tears streaking down his cheeks. "Let's go upstairs and talk."

Something about seeing a six-foot-five man in tears must soften Indy's heart, too, because she places her hand on Jalen's chest. "Now's not the time. You guys should talk tomorrow when you both have sobered up and are clear-headed."

He nods and walks towards the stairs, leaving the rest of the party behind. I walk out the door, wondering how I was so foolish to trust anybody but myself.

I'm not sure how we made it home. It could have been a rideshare. Lola could have picked us up. Maybe we even hitchhiked. I'm just happy to be in my own bed, surrounded by my best friends.

“It’s going to be okay, Ivy,” Lola ensures me. Her hand runs down my back, calming the anxiety I apparently should be embarrassed about having.

“This is why I was better off keeping to myself,” I tuck my head further into my pillow, hiding my embarrassment from my two closest friends.

“Ivy, don’t say that. I’ve seen you grow and have so much fun this year. I’m sure Jalen had a good reason.”

“I saw the look in his eyes,” Indy adds. “I was the one who called him out, and I think he may have realized his drunken mistake.”

“But why did it have to be her? He knows how I feel about her, and now she knows I’m a fucking mess of a human.”

“Ivy, give yourself some grace. You lived through something traumatic. You never let it hinder anything with your school work, basketball or your family. And this year, you pushed so hard to work through that final barrier of letting new people in,” Lola reminds me.

“You’re an amazing human, Ivy,” Indy chimes in. “But to push Jalen away forever before hearing him out is silly. Just talk to him whenever you’re ready. People deserve second chances.”

I know alcohol and emotions are a lethal duo. I know my friends are right and that I need to hear Jalen out. I’m not going to make any promises on when that will be. I need to let my heart sort out these emotions before I can truly trust what my gut is telling me to do. If I can trust that Jalen will be honest with me even if the conversations are difficult to have.

I pull myself out from the deep recesses of my pillows. “I am so lucky to have you guys.” I reach out and pull them into a hug. Whatever happens with me and Jalen, I know I’ll have these girls by my side forever. I’ll always be in debt to Westvale University for that.

“I’m going to go to bed. I’ll see you guys in the morning.”

Indy and Lola turn off my bedroom light and leave me alone with my thoughts for the rest of the night. I don’t know how I let myself get here, but I have solace in knowing I can survive these feelings because I’ve survived so much worse.



Indy must have turned my phone off last night because I woke up to calls and texts not only from Jalen but from Marcus and Byron, too.

The last text is from Marcus. He tells me that Indy let him know we got home safe. He also says Jalen is distraught over what happened. Marcus swears it was a drunken mistake. I understand why it’s easy for him to chalk it up to a night of booze. The difference is Jalen knew my insecurities and knew that I didn’t trust Evelyn. He *knew* that being blindsided is my worst fear.

A drunk thought is a sober truth.

I text Marcus and Byron, thanking them for checking on me. I leave Jalen’s messages unread. I’m just not ready to hear whatever explanation he’s come up with to excuse what he did.



After a trip to the gym—to sweat out whatever alcohol was still in my system this morning— I decide to go to my sister’s early for Sunday dinner.

“Hey, guys! I hope you don’t mind. I’m here a little early.”

I find my sister in the living room looking at something on her iPad. I park myself in front of her, not sure what I want to say about last night. Ruby looks up from whatever she is reading and it only takes a split second for her to realize that something is wrong.

“Ivy, are you okay?”

“No,” I break down again and snuggle myself into her side.

“What happened, Vee?”

I tell her about the formal and how I was excited for a night out before I had to turn all my focus to basketball and the teammates I’ve battled so hard with this season. I remove the blue and green decorative pillow from behind my back and place it on my sister’s lap so I can lay my head on it.

I don’t leave out any details because I need honest advice from my sister and not just the words I want to hear. So I tell her parts of our relationship that I’ve kept to myself since we started seeing each other this fall. How I never trusted other girls’ motives with Jalen and that there was always this little tinge of jealousy about the girls that were with him before me. I thought that maybe I wasn’t good enough for him.

“That’s where I’m stopping you,” She grabs my shoulders and pulls me till I’m upright. Her eyes are serious, and I know that she’s entered “mom mode”. She jumps between sister and parenting mode with ease.

“I’m not going to sit here and listen to why it’s your fault that Jalen broke your trust because it’s not. You’ve always been amazing, Ivy. You’re an honor roll student and a great basketball player, but more importantly, you’ve always had a big heart that had room for everyone. I mean, really, what college student comes home to have dinner every Sunday with their family.”

Ruby only pauses so she can press the soft pads of her thumbs under my eyes so she can wipe away the tears that don’t seem to want to stop.

“I don’t think I’ve told you this, but I am so proud of how you pushed yourself to grow outside of your comfort zone. You have made beautiful new friendships, tried new things and found love. I know he made a mistake Ivy and that your trust is hard to earn, but we can’t push away the people we love because they do something we don’t like.”

My fingers start playing with the hem of my t-shirt as I try to take in the wisdom my older sister is preaching.

“I know it’s hard not to assume that everyone we trust is going to do something catastrophic to blow up our relationships after what happened with Dad. Jalen’s nothing like Dad. I see how he looks at you. He isn’t going anywhere.”

“How does he look at me?” I ask with hope I’ll believe the answer.

“He looks at you like his world doesn’t exist if you are not the star at the center, Ivy. I’ve been lucky enough to be loved wholeheartedly in this lifetime.”

My heart breaks as I listen to my sister talk about her and Darek’s relationship. “We are lucky if we get to experience those kinds of relationships in our lives, the ones where we go to bed just because we are excited to wake up and have a new day with them. I cherished every day I had with my husband because it was one more day to watch him love on our kids and make memories as a family.”

Now we are both crying, but it doesn’t stop Ruby from telling me what’s on her mind. “We both know that life is too short. Don’t waste time being mad. Hear him out and see what he has to say. It’s okay if you need a little time to figure out what’s best for you after you talk, but don’t take too long to have that initial conversation.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket and take an extra long look at the picture I set as my lock screen. It’s a picture of us after the Christmas Eve service under a decorated Christmas tree that Jalen’s mom took. It was one of the first times I realized that I was falling for Jalen.

“Jalen left me a voicemail I haven’t listened to yet. I’m going to go up to my room and listen to it now.”

My sister pulls me into a hug. “I’m so proud of you, Vee.”

I swallow the smile that is trying to pull loose when I remember I have no idea what Jalen said on his voicemail. After the disappearing act, I pulled last night, he could be done with me. Knowing I

need to listen to it to end the misery I've been feeling all day, I pull myself away from my sister's grip and head to my childhood bedroom.

I make myself at home amongst the stuffed animals that comforted me on my worst days, pull out my phone, and head to my voicemails. I select the one from Jalen, press play and put my phone to my ear, giving myself no time to chicken out.

My heart breaks when I hear the devastated tone in his voice.

“Hi, Angel. I just want to make sure you got home okay. I know I messed up. I know I shouldn't have gone to Evelyn for advice, but I was drunk, and I felt so helpless that I couldn't help you with your anxiety. I was devastated when you told me you were so anxious the whole day leading up to my surprise on New Year's Eve. I knew I was going to tell you I loved that night. It made me feel like you didn't trust me. I guess I proved that you shouldn't. I've always been nervous that I wasn't good enough for you. I know I should have come to you with all this and not let a drunken moment get the best of me because you deserve so much more than that Ivy. You are the most amazing woman I've ever met, and I will do everything in my power to show you just how amazing you are, even when I know you are trying to dim your glow. I'll never let you put out that light, Ivy, because your light fuels me. Without it, I'm nothing. I love you, Ivy. Please just let me know you're okay. I need to know if you're okay. I love you.”

My heart is beating out of my chest. I don't even know what to say to that voicemail. That was the most vulnerable I've ever heard Jalen.

I pick up my phone and pull up Jalen's name. I take a minute to make sure I won't break down the moment he answers the phone. When I'm sure that my mind is in the right place, I press the green call button. It only rings twice before Jalen's voice comes through on the other end.

"Hey, baby."

The voice that greets me isn't the one of the confident man I fell in love with. It's the voice of a man who is clearly distraught.

"Hi, Jalen."

"I'm so happy to hear your voice. Marcus told me you girls made it home okay last night, but it makes me feel so much better to hear it for myself."

I take a deep breath because I know what I'm about to say is going to be a part of one of the most difficult conversations I've ever had.

"I got your voicemail, and I really appreciated it."

"I meant every word. I'm so sorry."

I can hear him trying to choke back the tears.

"I know you did. I've been doing some thinking, and I think we should just put this on pause until we get back from our tournaments. I really just want to focus on my last games with my teammates. I don't get any more games after this, you know?"

I can hear that the dams have broken, and the sound of Jalen crying hurts my heart.

"This isn't what I want, but it's for the best. I need to put my team first."



“I’ll wait for you Ivy. I’m your biggest cheerleader.”

“I know you are,” I take a deep breath.

“Good luck, Jalen, I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I hang up, knowing that I can’t stay on the phone any longer if I want to do what’s best for me.

## Jalen



The last three days have been a whirlwind in the most soul-crushing way. The lead-up to the postseason is a time when I thrive. knowing that we have a shot at that title creates a one-track mind where hockey is the only thing that I care about. These last three days, I've only been able to think about Ivy.

I wish I could blame it on the alcohol—and a small part of it might have been—but I was insecure. I felt like I had done everything in my power to make Ivy feel wanted. I gave her time to grow into the relationship even though I would have told her I loved her when my Mom asked her to spend Christmas with us.

I went to a person I knew Ivy didn't trust for advice just because she made me feel seen. And that is what Evelyn wanted. She wanted to torch

my relationship with Ivy. Why... because she thought that it would bring me back to her. I was honest with her, and she knows I never saw her as more than what we were. But she won because I was the idiot who fell for her tricks, and now I'm not sure if I'll ever have the only girl I've ever loved back in my arms.

I move through the motions of a travel day, hoping to get to game day so I can go out and just hit some people. I go through my bag, making sure that I have everything I'll need for the four-week tournament. I'm putting my last roll of tape in my bag when a firm hand lands on my shoulder.

"Hey, Jay," I can hear the worried tone in my childhood best friend's voice.

"Yeah, what's up?"

"I was hoping we could stop to get something to eat at that new cafe in town before we have to get on the bus to the airport."

I knew this conversation was coming. Byron was only going to let me mope around for so long before he demanded answers about what happened on Saturday at the party.

"Just let me throw my bag on the bus, and I'll meet you at my car."

When Byron leaves the locker room, I take a moment alone to attend my one-man pity party because I know that this is the last moment I have to be selfish. My team is going to need their captain if we want to end this season as champions.

On the drive to lunch, Byron tries to keep the conversation normal. He asks me a question about a PlayStation game we got last week, acting like I

haven't been one pathetic asshole these last few days.

On the other hand, I am acting like that pathetic asshole answering only in mhmms and words that possess a single syllable.

Byron tells the hostess we are under a little bit of a time constraint, and she is able to bring us to a table right away and assures us a waitress will be over any second.

I enjoy the silence Byron gives me as we look over the menu.

A pretty redhead, who looks like she's a student at Westvale, comes and takes our orders. I'm grateful that she seems to be interested in Byron because I don't need another reminder of how badly I hurt Ivy. After she takes our orders Byron breaks the silence.

"Look, Jay, I need you to be honest with me. Are you okay?"

"How did I practice today?" I ask because I know I played well. If I'm going to be playing professional hockey, I know life is going to happen, and like any other profession, I need to be able to separate work from what's happening in my personal life.

"I know I can trust you on the ice. I'm not worried about how you'll play. You just haven't been yourself this week."

The concern he has for me is portrayed in his eyes. Byron has always made sure that we talk through what's going on in our lives. He wants to make sure that his friends know they can rely on him. I've never been more thankful for that than I am right now.

“I have never felt like this before. I feel helpless, like I might not be able to fix this.”

“I know you are used to being in control, but she’ll come back to you when she is ready.”

“This is the first time I’ve been heartbroken, and why? Because I was just a drunk idiot who couldn’t keep his mouth shut and lost the love of his life.”

“I know it feels that way now, Jay, but Ivy said that she’ll talk when she’s ready. You have to remember this is her last shot to leave it all out there with her teammates, too. She kept to herself before this year because she wanted to make sure that her priorities were on school, her family and the team. If you love her, give her the space she is asking for. We don’t all get the chance to play at the next level. Let her enjoy the game one last time.”

A low masculine laugh escapes from Byron. We are two men from New York City, and neither of us has dated seriously since we got to Westvale, and now here we are, trying to keep my broken heart at bay.

I know that he’s right, and I hate that he’s right. If I smother Ivy and push her to come to talk to me before she is ready, she will just be anxious, and the conversation will just end with her asking for more time to get her thoughts together. I’ll give her that time because I love her. I’d rather give her all of the time she needs now and be hopeful that we find a way through this and end our last year at Westvale together.

After we finish our therapy session, the waitress comes back to ask if we need anything, and when

Byron and I both tell her no, we are all set. She moves on to go to her next table. Byron stops mid-bite.

“Can you believe we are eating lunch and discussing your love life?” I let him finish chewing.

“No, I’d honestly never thought I’d be this sad sap talking to his best friend about the girl that got away.”

For the first time in the last three days, I let out a genuine laugh. I’m so damn lucky to have these people in my life, and I’m never going to let them go. If this thing with Ivy has taught me anything, it’s to appreciate the time people give you to be a part of their lives because they don’t have to give you any time at all.



The universe is playing some cruel jokes on me today because, for some reason, I’m the only one who’s able to be home when Lola comes to pick up Mia. After lunch, Byron had to run some last-minute errands before the bus leaves. And since he never came home last night, I’m now I’m scrambling to get her stuff together.

I’m placing the last scoop of Mia’s food into a container when I hear a knock at the door. The sound startles Mia, and before I can pick her up, she’s zooming around the living room. I start chasing her because I want to get her in her travel bag so I can get her out the door before I have to have any real kind of conversation with Lola.

“Come in!” I yell toward the door as I lunge for the dog. It’s taking too long to grab her, and I don’t

want Lola standing in the cold.

Mia barely slips through my hands, but I don't let it deter me because I'd rather cut off my left hand than talk about how I fucked up again.

I finally get her trapped in a corner, and when I lunge to pick her up, she fakes left, darting between my legs right into Lola's arms, like they are old friends reuniting after years apart. I find that odd because I can't remember her ever being here, but if it gets Mia out the door, then....  
WELCOME LOLA.

"Hey, what's... uh... going on here?" She asks me. She looks like she's upside down, standing on the ceiling, as I look at her between my legs.

I right myself and pick a couple of toys to throw into Mia's bag. Once her favorite ball and chew toy are settled, I go down the mental checklist to make sure that Mia will have everything for the— hopefully— four weeks we'll be gone at this tournament.

I shove Mia's travel bag into Lola's arms, knowing that Mia has everything she needs. Wanting to give her adequate time to get used to her temporary home, I rush out my next words. "Here is the list that Byron left for you."

For the first time since she looked like she was standing on the ceiling, I'm forced to look at Lola in her eyes.

Looking at her, I don't see the hate and disappointment I've seen from our friends over the last few days. I see someone wanting to make sure I'm okay even though I know I don't deserve it.

"How are you doing, Jalen?" She asks sincerely.

“I’m okay. Just wondering why the fuck I was so stupid.”

“Ivy will come around,” She assures me.

“I don’t know if she will. She’s not answering any of my calls or texts.”

“Just give her time. She needs to focus on basketball. It’s what she’s dedicated her whole life to,” She looks me in my eyes. “She’s lost so many people that she has loved in her life, and I think the night of the formal, she thought she lost you too.” She throws Mia’s duffel bag over her shoulder and takes a deep breath.

“You were good for her, Jalen and deep down, I know she knows that too. You guys will find a way to work this out. There isn’t a person that you two have spent time with that doesn’t think you two are meant to be together.”

It almost feels like a pep talk coach would give us in the locker room. I’m refocused and fired up. I’m going to go get that trophy, then come home and get my girl.

“Thanks, Lola, I really needed that,” I wrap her up in a bear hug and only jump away when Mia lets out a high-pitched bark.

“Oh my gosh.” I take her from Lola’s hands, flip her so she is lying horizontally in my arms and rock her like a baby. When she finally calms down, I place a kiss on her head and hand her back to Lola. “Thanks again for taking care of her.”

“Anytime, I’m happy I have someone to share the apartment with.”

I help bring Mia’s things to the car, and once they pull out of the driveway, I walk back to the



house with a newfound bounce in my stride.

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Ivy



We're scheduled to leave a few days after the guys, and it honestly feels good to know that I can't run into Jalen or any of the other guys on campus. I've spent most of it in the library trying to get ahead of the classes I'm going to miss while we are on the road.

Now I'm as caught up as my professors will let me be without actually attending classes, and since sitting in my room and crying has lost its appeal over the last few days, I decide to head to the shelter.

The sound of barking comforts me, and I'm as thankful as ever to have this place to come to.

I know it's silly because I'll be able to visit whenever I come home, but I'm going to miss this place next year. So, I am going to enjoy every last one of these regular visits.

Jill is feverishly typing at the computer when I walk past the front desk.

“Hey, sweetie, how are you?”

She doesn't look up at me as she asks the question, and I'm thankful that she can't see the tears that have betrayed me. It's the fact that I can't force myself to answer her question that has her looking up from what she was working on.

“Ivy, what's wrong?”

“Nothing, I'm fine.”

I round the desk with my eyes fixated on each step forward. I'm fooled into thinking I'll be able to break free. I'm a step away from entering the dogs' housing quarters when a soft hand lands on my elbow. She pulls me back, and then I'm face to face with her for the first time since I decided to take this break with Jalen.

I sag into her hug and just let myself feel the emotions that have been trapped inside me. It's not just what's going on with Jalen and me, but it's leaving home and starting another four years of school, not knowing where that's going to be. This hug also feels motherly, and now, more than any other time since her passing, I need it.

“I'm just really missing my Mom. I could use her right now.”

“I know I'll never come close to replacing your Mom, but I'm a good listener,” She links her arm through mine. “Let's go to my office.”

Once we're settled into her office, I tell her what happened with Jalen and how upset I am with myself for trusting someone new when I was perfectly happy with the trajectory of my life pre-

Jalen. That going back to the status quo isn't possible because my sister is dating Jalen's uncle, and even if I wanted to be mad at her for complicating all of this, I can't. She is the happiest she has been in a long time, and she hasn't brought anyone around the kids since Darek passed. If anyone deserves to be happy, it's her. I end my emotional dumping by telling Jill how much I'm going to miss her.

“Well, you're not getting rid of me that easily.”

Jill moves from behind her desk and smothers me in another motherly hug.

This is why it's going to be so hard to move out of Westvale because people like Jill, the people who adopted me into their families, made sure I had a ride to practice when my sister had to work. They always made sure the Rhodes girls knew that they were loved.

When she releases me, her eyes have a soft glow to them.

“Why don't you come feed the dogs with me? You leave tomorrow?”

I nod and follow her back to where we keep the dog food before walking down opposite sides of the dogs' living space until we meet at Riley's bowl. If you've ever had a dog, you know they possess some kind of secret power to sense your foul mood and completely flip it.

I sit next to him, run my hand down his back and watch him enjoy his lunch. Riley waits until the bowl is licked clean to place his big ol' booty on my crossed legs. For the first time since Saturday, a genuine smile slides across my face, all thanks to this seventy-five-pound lap dog.

“Isn’t it crazy the effect these animals have on your life?”

I look at her knowing she’s aware of the impact dogs had on my life after my parents’ deaths.

“Teddy was the biggest blessing I had growing up.”

I smile, fondly remembering my childhood dog.

It’s at that moment I realize how the golden retriever, making itself at home in my lap, has shaped these last four years. My heart cracks a little because I remember that he also brought Jalen to me.



The National Championship tournament is one of the best sporting spectacles if you ask me. Sixty-eight teams widdle themselves down to one national champion. Every year, a Cinderella story wins over the heart of America, and I just hope they aren’t on our side of the bracket. We’ve earned the one seed and now we have a shot of being back-to-back national champions.

Another reason I’m excited for this tournament to start is that it takes me away from all the reminders of Jalen that keep popping up everywhere I turn.



We were lucky to have made it out of the first round of the tournament. I played like shit. I had six points and accumulated five fouls with eight

minutes left in the game and was forced to sit on the bench for the rest of it.

Coach makes sure that we get the hint that if we don't want to go home without a title, we need to pick it up. The guilt crushes me. I can feel my chest tighten, and my hands begin to shake. The familiar signs of a panic attack. I pretend to rummage through my temporary locker as my teammates file into the bathroom to shower so we can catch a little of the game currently being played since we play the winner of it.

I take a quick look around, and when I realize I'm the only one left in the locker room, I start the breathing exercises I've been dependent on since elementary school.

Inhale for four seconds,

Hold for seven seconds

Exhale for eight.

I repeat the pattern four more times before I make my way to the showers.

The game is already in the second quarter by the time I catch up with my team. There is an open seat next to Indy, and I slid in, trying to fly under the radar.

"Hey," Indy greets as the crowd breaks into a cheer, brought on by a three-point shot made late in the shot clock.

Guilt rushes through me when I look down the row at my teammates. The dread of letting people down and knowing that I played like shit hits me. In the first half, I was guarded closely, not giving me much room to shoot the ball, but I made up for it with a few good assists and lockdown defense. In

the second half, nothing came together. I just had no rhythm.

“Hey, how’s the game been?” I ask, praying we can keep the conversation away from anything that has to do with me.

“Syracuse looks good. I wouldn’t be surprised if they start pulling away going into halftime.”

“I think that would be a good match-up for us.” I keep my eyes on the game playing out in front of us.

“Did the boys win?” I can’t help it. I need to know.

“There are five minutes left in the third period, and they are up five to two. I think they’ll pull this one out.”

“That’s good.”



A few hours later, Indy and I are getting into bed. We have to be up at seven because we have a nine o’clock practice. When we both are settled, I run my fingers up and down the base of the lamp. Nervous of what the silence of the night will do to my thoughts.

The lights are only off for a few moments before the shield around my heart lowers. I run my fingers along the bedspread a few times while mustering up the courage to ask my best friend some questions I might not want to know the answers to.

“Indy, do you think I made a mistake ending things with Jalen?”

I hear the rustling of the sheets, and with the moonlight shining through the back of the curtains, I can see Indy has turned on her side, so she is facing me.

“I think you made a rash decision.”

I know she is right, and it completely destroys me.

When I don't answer her, Indy gets out of her bed and comes to lie next to me.

“Ivy, you have been through more in your life than most people live through in their entire lifetime. This year, I've watched you grow. You came out of your shell and made friends beyond Lola and the team. You let loose and realized you could balance it all,” Her pause is followed by a quiet laugh. “And you're really funny when you're drunk.”

I push her shoulder, and she nearly falls off the bed. Pulling her back on the bed I scoot over so she has more of it to sit on.

“Do you think Jalen misses me?”

“He'd be crazy not to,” Indy pulls me into a hug. “But we don't have time to talk to him. We have a title to win.”



The talk with Indy after our first game lit something in me, and I played some of the best basketball of my career over the last three games. Now we're in Austin, Texas, getting ready to play in my third Final Four.



Ten minutes before opening tip coach gives a pump speech for the ages, and she's now passed the torch to me.

“Girls, this is what we've worked towards all season. Making it to Austin isn't where this ends. Win this one, and we'll give ourselves an opportunity to win it all. Bring it in, guys.”

My teammates cheer as we form a huddle in the center of the locker room with our arms raised in the middle of our antsy bodies.

“Team on me, team on three.”

I count to three, and in unison, we punch out “team”.

I run to my locker. Ruby was supposed to text me when she got here with the kids. When I pick up my phone, a picture of my family lights up the screen. They are in their seats, snacks in hand. The smile only lasts a split second. I lock and unlock my phone three times, and tap the notification aggressively like somehow that is going to change what I'm looking at.

A voicemail from Jalen.

One, who leaves voicemails anymore?

Two, why didn't I wait to check my phone until after the game?

My body tenses, but I remember the talk I had with Indy in our hotel room after our first-round game. This is about me and my team and everything we've sacrificed to get here.

Indy jumps on my back, and I throw my phone in my locker so I can grab her legs.

“Are you ready for this?” she asks me way too loudly for someone who is three inches away from my ear.

I let go of her legs so she can jump back to the floor.

“Let’s go get this win.”

This game has been a nail-biter all the way through. Notre Dame has been alongside us in the top ten all season. Neither team has been up more than six the entire game.

There are eight seconds left in the game when coach calls a timeout to draw up one last play. We need a three-point shot to force overtime. We are able to get the ball in play quickly, but after that, Notre Dame’s defense becomes smothering.

Indy gets the ball with five seconds left on the clock. I cut down to the block and pop back up behind the three-point line, and Indy is able to get me the ball.

The clock runs down...

Three... two... with one second left on the clock, I let the ball free.

It feels good when it leaves my hand. It’s on line. It drops in the center of the basket. At the last second, it clips the back of the rim and falls outside the hoop.

We lost.

I collapse. How did I miss that shot? I’ve made it a thousand times before, and during the biggest game of my life, I couldn’t get it down.

My teammates pull me up to my feet, guiding me to the locker room. We disband for the showers

right away. None of us want to stay in the arena longer than necessary.

I grab my travel suit that I have to wear back to the hotel, and when I throw the towel over my shoulder, something falls and hits my foot. I bend over and pick up my phone. As my thumb scrolls over my lock screen—I ignore all the apology texts about our loss – and pull up my voicemails. I might as well listen to the message Jalen left me while I’m already numb.

The voicemail is only twenty seconds long.

“Hey, angel. I know we haven’t talked much in these last few weeks, but I know I’d always regret it if I didn’t wish you good luck before your game. I hope you get this before your game. I love you, Ivy. I’m sorry I have given you a reason to doubt me. If I’m lucky enough to get a second chance, I’ll never give you a reason to second guess that you’re my first choice. Go kick ass tonight, and we’ll talk when we get back to school.”

I listen to Jalen’s words three more times before I find Indy.

“Why are you smiling like that? You look like a murderous clown.”

“How do you feel about Raleigh?”

It takes her a second.

“Raleigh, as in Raleigh, North Carolina, where the hockey team is playing for a National Championship tomorrow?”

“Yes, that Raleigh, let’s go support our men!”

## Jalen



My shoulders sag as I check my phone to see if I have a message from Ivy. It is just like the other seventy-four times I checked. There is nothing.

I don't have time to dwell on it because I have a team to lead. Westvale will be National Champions at the end of these three periods. I finish tying my skates when Byron takes the seat next to mine.

"I can't believe that this could be the last time we take the ice as teammates."

It's weird to think that I won't be playing with Byron next year. The only time we didn't suit up together was during my freshman year at Westvale when Byron was finishing his last year of high school.

"There is always a chance we get drafted by the same team."

“Could you imagine two kids from New York City who learned to play hockey because of a youth program in Brooklyn playing on their home team in the NHL?”

“Crazier things have happened.”

I look at my lifelong friend and say something men don't say to each other nearly enough.

“I love you, man. Let's go kick ass one more time.”

We are a little too bulky in all of our pads to hug each other. We settle for a fist bump and make our way to the ice.

We win the face-off and quickly move the puck to The University Of Minnesota's side of the ice. Byron sees that he has me ahead of him, and I think I have a clear shot at the goal. Until Minnesota's defenseman gets a cheap shot at me, and everything I have withheld since Ivy broke up with me pours out. I get a couple of good shots in before the ref pulls us apart, and I'm ushered two minutes in the penalty box.

Unfortunately for me, the intensity of this sport, paired with the emotions of knowing this is my last game at Westvale, plus not knowing if Ivy will ever forgive me, has me spending more minutes than I have all season sitting my ass in the penalty box.

At the second intermission, Aaron pulls me aside.

“Dude. Get your shit together.”

He pushes me in the chest in between each word.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I think everything has just been piling on, and the first hit just lit it all on fire.” Aaron’s eyes stay locked on me.

“I think I just kind of needed that release,” I shrug.

“I get it, man.”

His gloved hand lands on my shoulder.

“But get your shit together. We got one more period, that’s it.”

Twenty more minutes of playing for the Retrievers.

“Let’s go get this trophy.”

We’re lucky to start the third period tied at one. The guys have done an amazing job making up for my mistakes, but now it’s time to act like the team captain they voted for.

We make it through the first fifteen minutes of the period tied. We are a man up and attacking the goal as we start the last five minutes of regulation. Aaron sends me a beautiful pass. I get around the Minnesota defenseman and take my shot. It feels like it’s in the air forever before it slides past the goalie’s glove, and when I see that red light flash, I drop my stick and embrace my teammates.

Two minutes. We just have to hold off Minnesota for two minutes, and then I’ll finally be a National Champion. We play perfect team hockey for the last two minutes, working together to secure this win. I watch the clock tick down, and even as I watch it hit zero, I don’t process what we just accomplished. It’s not until I’m stuck underneath a pile of my teammates that it registers that we won! When I finally get back to

standing upright, I see my parents banging on the glass. I wish Ivy was with them.

We stay on the ice as we're presented with the awards for the tournament. I'm named the tournament's Most Valuable Player, and I'm not going to lie, it feels good to be rewarded for all of the hard work that I have put in over the years.

"That's my baby!" I know that voice. I know those words.

I look up and see Ivy standing with my parents, repeating the same possessive words I yelled when she hit that game-winning shot on New Year's Day.

I hurry off the ice and beeline it for my family. I pull Ivy into a hug and hold on tight because I'd be crazy to let this girl go again.

"I think maybe you should hug your parents too." Her face is buried so deep into my chest the words bounce off my chest protector.

I place a quick kiss on her head so I can take in the familiar scent of her floral shampoo. I reluctantly let her go to give my parents a hug.

"It's pretty amazing that Ivy flew here after her loss to be with you."

I was so happy to see Ivy, that I completely forgot that the only way she could be here was if she lost.

Mom must sense that Ivy and I need a moment alone because she intertwines her fingers with my Dad's. "We should go find Byron. We haven't seen him yet tonight."

As my parents leave, I pull Ivy back into another hug.

“You’re here.”

“I’m here,” she sighs. “I’m sorry about everything.”

“It’s okay,” I get why she was upset even though there was nothing was going on between Evelyn and I. I can see how Ivy would have perceived the situation differently.

“Can you just let me get this out? I’ve had a three-hour plane ride to figure out what I wanted to say to you.”

I laugh and hold my arm out. “The floor is yours.”

“This has been the best year of my life. Before I met you, I told myself my life would start when I finished school. That to be happy, I had to get into the top vet school, have the best grades, and be the perfect role model for Caleb and Stella. You tricked my entire team into believing you threw a party for us, but it was really so you could spend time with me.”

I feel my cheeks heat.

“Yeah, I know about that, but since that party, you’ve shown that I need to live life in the moment. Why save for the future what you can do now. I might miss it completely if I don’t.”

Ivy takes a deep breath and makes sure she is looking me in the eyes for this next part. She pulls a long red box out of her purse and hands it to me.

“I meant to give this to you before the formal, but we were rushing, and then obviously, it didn’t really end how we wanted, but I want to make sure you have it.”



I open the velvet box and see a chain identical to the one she broke on New Year's Eve.

"I love you, Jalen. I'm sorry I let my insecurities get the best of me, but trust me, you led me down a path that I would have never seen for myself. One where my life is balanced. You make me feel seen, and I know I still have to work through some things, but if you want, I'd love to have my biggest cheerleader by my side."

I pick her up, and her legs instinctively wrap around my waist. I kiss her like a man starved for the woman that he loves. She lets my tongue snake to find hers, but only for a second until she pulls away.

"Save it for later. Your parents are here."

"I love you, Ivy Rhodes."

"I love you, Jalen Holloway."

"Can you believe this all started when your uncle made you volunteer at the shelter and help me with Riley?"

"It's funny how one moment can alter your life."

"I guess we have the Riley effect to thank for bringing us together."

I stand in awe of Ivy as her laugh cuts through the chaos of the arena. When I first met her outside of the Riley Center, she was guarded and wanted to stay to herself. Depriving the world of seeing who she was. As long as she'll have me, I'll never let her hide within herself. This world deserves to see who she is with her biggest supporter at her side.

I take Ivy's hand, and we go to find my family. Westvale University gave me a lot, but I'll never

love any of it more than I love my Angel.

# Epilogue

Ivy

Morning Of NHL Draft, New York, New York

I wake up to the sensation of Jalen's lips moving up and down my neck.

“Save it for when we have a room to ourselves.”

I swat back, pulling away so I can sit up against the headboard.

We're back in his childhood bedroom because tonight is the NHL draft at Madison Square Garden. Jalen insisted on staying closer to the venue tonight so we didn't have to worry about a ride home. He reserved a table at some new club in Manhattan for us and our friends to go to on the same block as the hotel.

Not only is it the biggest day of Jalen's career, but it is for mine as well. I'll be hearing back from all the veterinary programs I applied to today.

It's been a whirlwind since I got in from Westvale last night. I haven't seen Jalen in a few weeks because he has been working out for different NHL teams since we graduated in May. I decided to spend time at home because I'm not sure where I'll end up next year, and I wanted to soak in every minute I have with my family.

They're actually all here today so Matt can introduce Ruby and the kids to his family.

I rub the sleep out of my eyes before grabbing one of Jalen's Westvale Hockey shirts I stole when we first started dating.

"What time is it?" I ask as Jalen tries to pull the hem of the shirt. "Everyone will be here soon for brunch, and I promised your Mom I would help her."

I swat away his hands and go to my suitcase to get my toothbrush so he doesn't talk me into staying in bed.

Jalen is in the family room playing Madden with Byron when I come out to help his Mom in the kitchen. I put an apron over the sweater and leggings I put on after my shower.

"Can you believe we're finally going to find out where Jalen will be playing next season?" I ask Mae as I pour more pancake mix onto the griddle.

"It's been a whirlwind of an off-season. I think we are all excited to see where his home base is going to be. How are you feeling about today?"

Mae and Andre have made sure I haven't gotten lost in the shadows of Jalen's success.

"I'm excited but nervous."

"It's all going to work out just the way it's supposed to."

She pulls me into a hug before leaving me to man the kitchen while she sets the table.

I sneak a piece of bacon out of the frying pan and drop it on the floor for Riley to find. Jill and the athletic department decided it was time to let Riley

retire from his game day duties and enjoy the rest of the years he has. I've heard rumors that they already have a new Riley lined up and I can't wait to meet him when I get home.

I didn't even need to ask Jalen what he thought about adopting the former mascot. He came over to my apartment a few days before graduation, the application already filled out just waiting for my signature. Jill was waiting for us at the front door later that day with Riley in hand. With misty eyes, she told us that there was no better home for Riley than with Jalen and I. She made us promise to bring him by whenever we are home.

Thirty minutes later, the Holloway's tiny apartment is filled with family and friends. We reminisce on the last year and hear stories from all the different stages of Jalen's hockey career. Laughing away the nerves, I know we are all feeling this morning.



Jalen is getting pictures taken in our hotel suite for the draft issue of his favorite sports news website. He insisted I get my hair and makeup done for tonight. I finish in the makeup chair right as Jalen is walking the photographer out.

When it's just the two of us left in the room, I get to take in Jalen's custom-made suit.

"I'm happy you went with the plaid," I tell him while I run my hands down his crisp white button-up. I requested that he forego the tie and leave a few buttons undone. He agreed only because he knows how I feel about his tattoos that peak out.

“I don’t think you’ll regret going with a more timeless pattern.”

“Well, I do have a little surprise.”

He opens up his jacket, and the inside is lined with pictures. There are some from all the different hockey teams he played on, some with his family and the biggest one in the center of the right side of his jacket is of him, me and Riley on campus during one of our walks.

“I love this.”

I run my hand down the picture and push up on my toes to kiss him, but before I can find his lips, a *ding* comes from my phone.

I freeze.

Jalen freezes.

“Do you think that’s it?”

There is no need to specify. I’m only waiting to hear from one more school.

“Do you want me to check?” he asks.

I nod.

“It’s the email you’ve been waiting for.”

I grab my phone and then back away, deciding I need to put my heels on before I can read an email. Then I have to wash my hands, no need to have smudged fingertips on my screen.

“Ivy, do you want me to open it for you?”

I run my hands down my olive green ankle-length dress before I shake my head.

“No, this is something I need to do for myself.”

Jalen hands me the phone, and I hold it to my face to unlock the screen.

I read it out loud.

“Ivy Rhodes. It is with great enthusiasm that we write to congratulate you on your acceptance to Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.”

I throw my phone on the couch and jump into Jalen’s arms. He catches me with ease before he wraps my legs around his waist and kisses me.

“I’m going to be in New York!” I say as my lips hover over his.

There is a loud knock at the door that breaks up our little moment.

Jalen’s Dad’s voice cuts through the locked hotel door.

“It’s time to go! Our car is downstairs.”

Jalen places me back on the ground and I grab my phone and purse off the couch. Before he unlocks the door to meet his parents, he places a kiss on my cheek and then tells me, “I’m so proud of you, Angel.”

I place my hand in his. One future down. One to go.



Madison Square Garden is all glitzed out. I walk the red carpet with Jalen and smile for far more pictures than I ever have. When we make it to the table, Jalen’s parents are already seated with Matt, Ruby and Byron. There was an extra seat at our table. Marcus and Aaron pushed Byron to take it since they had been friends for so long. The other

guys are with Indy and Lola watching the draft at some sports bar. They'll meet us at the club later.

The arena goes quiet when the commissioner comes on stage and introduces the draft class. Jalen keeps his hand in mine for the first five picks.

When the commissioner comes back out with the gold envelope, the sixth pick tucked inside, Jalen squeezes my hand.

The New York Rangers have the sixth pick in this year's NHL draft.

The room moves in slow motion as the envelope is opened.

"With the sixth pick in this year's NHL draft, the New York Rangers select."

Of course there is a pause for *dramatic effect*.

"Jalen Holloway, Westvale University."

I jump right out of my seat, but it takes Jalen a moment to join me. He has his head in his hands like he can't believe he has been drafted to his hometown team. I give him some time with his parents before I lean in to get a quick hug, and then he has to go on stage.

"I'm so proud of you! We are going to be in the same city," I squeal.

"I can't wait, baby," He kisses the top of my head and leaves to go live out his lifelong dream.

I grab my phone off the table before we head backstage to meet everyone else when Jalen is done with his interviews.

It's about thirty minutes before Jalen rejoins the group, smiling so big it could light the darkest room.



I sneak my way into his side. I want to soak in everything. Commit as much of this day to memory as I can because one day, our kids—grandkids—will ask us about this day.

“You guys better get a place big enough for me to come stay with you,” Ruby says as we walk toward the back exit.

“Only if Caleb comes too,” Jalen and Caleb are still BFFs. I sometimes wonder if spending time with Caleb is the real reason Jalen stays in this relationship.

“That’s fine. You can babysit while Ivy and I go out.”



My phone buzzes in my purse when we get to the club. I pull it out, expecting a message from Marcus letting us know where the table is.

Before I can read the message, Jalen puts his hand on the small of my back and leads me to where our friends are enjoying a round of shots.

“Let’s take a picture while we all can see straight,” Indy suggests.

We huddle in the booth as I take my phone to give it to Ruby.

There’s a text at the top of my lock screen. I read it. And then read it again before I look at the contact name.

Lola- Cooking Class: I think we should tell everyone about us tonight. It’s too much to keep sneaking around.

“Has anyone seen my phone?” Byron is patting himself down like a TSA agent trying to find it.

“Is this it?” I ask, holding up the device in question.

“Yeah, thanks Ivy.”

I watch him read the message as all the color drains from his face.

“Is Lola from cooking class, my Lola?”

He nods.

She puts her face in her hands.

And my very mature boyfriend, who was the sixth pick in the NHL draft tonight, yells loud enough to cut through the base of the dance music.

“Busted.”

# About The Author

Born and raised in Central New York, Nicole is the oldest of four children. Growing up in a college town, sports became a passion of hers at a young age. Any given day, you'll find her watching basketball, football, Formula 1, or a history documentary.

Nicole loves to travel, and when she has downtime from working at a nonprofit for individuals with developmental disabilities, she can be seen reading a good book, spending time with her large extended family, or working on her next project.