

THE THINGS WE DESERVE

LOVE



M. J. COLTER

the things we deserve

BEYOND THE BOARDS - BOOK 1

M. J. COLTER

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Each person has their own triggers, please take care of your own mental health while reading. If you are struggling please contact someone, you are not alone.

a note from the author

Hello beautiful readers,

Thank you for giving my silly little book a chance, I have spent a very long time working on it and it's an honour just to have it out there for the world to see.

This is my first book ever published, I have both written and edited it by myself (with a little help of those who read it on wattpad first). There are probably going to be things that I missed, between grammar, spelling, plot holes... but I tried my best. I have fallen in love with these characters. I have cried, laughed, and grown as an author since originally posting this on Wattpad. They are perfectly imperfect, and that's the way I wanted them to be. They make mistakes, do stupid shit, and annoy the ever living fuck out of me, but they're mine.

With all that being said, I hope you learn to love this book like I do. I promise it's not all sad.

P.S. for all my readers from the Wattpad days... all those little things you learned about the boys in their letters, they're still true, but it'll be our little secret.

playlist



Lonesome & Mad — Under The Rug, Ariel Posen

Family Line — Conan Gray

Waiting On the World to Change — John Mayer

How Do I Tell You — Lily Moore

Strange — Celeste

Everywhere, Everything — Noah Kahan

People Watching — Conan Gray

Lose Control — Teddy Swims

Love Me Back — Bebe Stockwell

Wash. — Bon Iver

Black Out Days — Phantogram

Mess It Up — Gracie Abrams

Fall in Love with You — Montell Fish

An Ego Thing — Lizzy McAlpine

Home — Catie Turner

I Remember Everything (ft. Kacey Musgraves) — Zach Bryan

Everything — Michael Buble

You're Gonna Go Far — Noah Kahan

sheluvme — Tai Verdes

Just A Little While — The 502s

All your 'n — Tyler Childers

Breathing — Henrik

Anatomy — Kenzie

Work Song — Hozier

*For the little girl that lives inside me,
The one who grew up too fast because life hardened her...
They finally hear us.*

one

CLAIRE

“You’re going to be *fine* Angel, I promise” Chris says through the phone. “Tony wouldn’t let you anywhere close to them if he thought you wouldn’t be okay.”

I groan in response, “that doesn’t mean I’m excited about it.”

Tony asked me a couple weeks ago if I would help coach his hockey team, and of course I said yes. That man is like a father to me, he was there when my own family wasn’t. Besides, I owe him for letting me live with him these past years.

He’s a big part of the reason why I had the chance to leave Vancouver in the first place, he got me out of that fucking house, I owe him everything. He offered me his home when I told him I got into the school he coaches at, without hesitation I might add.

I think both of us knew it would be a fight, my parents kept me under their thumb, and with me in another country it would be pretty hard to have complete control over my life.

We had a plan, my grades were good enough and I got a full-ride scholarship, and I had a place to live. Even if they told me they wouldn’t fund it, I could still go.

I wanted so badly to get away from my parents, but I mostly wanted to be closer to my brother and my not-father.

The whole not-father thing started a couple years before Chris left to attend Livler, the same school I attend now, and it’s stuck ever since.

Chris graduated college, and got drafted into the pros, he’s one of the top players and currently plays for Dallas. Even though he travels a lot for work, he’s closer than he has been for a really long time.

Tony was his coach growing up, and when he found out his favourite coach —and mentor— was moving to the United States to coach university level hockey... he moved right with him.

There is about a five year difference between my brother and I, and even though we grew up two completely different ways, we're as close as can be. Although, sometimes guilt eats away at me, gnawing at the raw secrets I keep to myself.

“He thinks you'll be a good influence on them, and this way he has eyes and ears to make sure they stay out of trouble” Chris laughs, “Tony sees you as nothing but a sweet little girl, but I know that you can be a devious little shit sometimes, so maybe you won't be as forthcoming with that information as he thinks.”

I can't help but chuckle at his dig, “I'll try to make the best of it.” We both go silent for a second while I put my car in park, staring at the three cars sitting in the driveway in front of me, “I guess I'll call you later then, maybe show you the new place?”

“Sounds good to me. Oh and also, are you still planning on coming to the game tomorrow? I sent the tickets to Tony, you should've gotten them by now.”

“I'll be there” I confirm, placing my phone between my ear and shoulder so I can grab the boxes from my back seat, “I gotta go though.”

“Alrighty Angel, if any of them give you a hard time, you let me know. I'll be there to kick their ass's faster than you can blink.” I roll my eyes, he's a scary guy but I've only ever seen him get into fights on the ice... he's harmless. “Love you.”

“Love you too.” The line disconnects and I drop my phone into the box I'm holding before finally taking that first step towards the unfamiliar front door. I tap a couple times against the wood with my foot before waiting anxiously for someone to come greet me.

How bad can this be? Sure they're a bunch of dudes who are probably gonna be a little pissed that some random girl is

coming in and shaking everything up, but they're gonna be nice.

Right?

The door swings open and I'm greeted by the one person I'm the most nervous about meeting, Lucas St. James. I've seen him on campus a couple times, or flashing a smile to some camera at a party that inevitably gets plastered all over social media, but nothing compares to seeing him in person. He's so much... prettier than the photos.

Standing at a whopping six-foot-three, he stares down at me with dark brown eyes. His dirty blonde hair is damp, like he's taken a shower recently, and it's messy in the best way possible. I'm really trying not to picture him shirtless with water dripping down his abs right now... but fuck it's hard when he's looking at me like I'm his next fucking meal. That smirk on his face makes me want to melt into a puddle and disappear.

"Uh hi, I'm Claire" I manage to choke out, heat crawling up my neck.

He cocks an eyebrow, "*Okay... and what are you doing here Claire?*"

I stay silent, not quite sure what to say and wondering if Tony told them what was happening.

I swear to god if this is some sick joke I'm going to kill him.

"St. James, who's at the door?" someone shouts, followed by footsteps heading our way.

Nicholas Blair suddenly appears in front of me, pushing his friend aside to see what's going on. He's easily just as attractive as Lucas, with similar heights and award winning smiles, but that's where their similarities end. His hair is jet black, and his eyes are a bright emerald green... the same eyes that manage to catch girls attention with just one look, and for good reason.

Nicholas and Lucas are best friends, from what I've heard they have been for a *very* long time.

“Oh shit, you must be Claire” he says, reaching out to shake my hand before quickly pulling it away and laughing, “sorry, I guess you can’t really do that right now.”

Well, he’s definitely more personable than Lucas is.

Nicholas opens the door wider, gesturing for me to enter. My worry eases as I walk past Lucas and into the foyer, completely dumb-struck by how beautiful this house is.

“Blair, why is this girl in our house with a box of shit?” Lucas questions.

“Jesus Christ, I told you *eight* times that Claire is moving in with us today” Blair —I guess that’s what they call him— explains. “Coach knew we had an extra room and asked if it was cool for Claire to take it...” he continues, but Lucas looks just as confused, “she’s the new assistant coach this year dip shit. She’ll be helping us train.”

I wait for a second to see how he’s going to respond, but of course, Lucas bursts into laughter. The kind where he keels over with tears running down his face.

“What’s so funny?” I snap.

“*You? Coaching us?*” he says in between breaths, “that’s fucking hilarious.” He takes a step towards me and his face hardens, “you can’t teach us shit, pretty girl.”

I feel the anger bubbling in my chest, he knows nothing about me and yet he’s already made so many assumptions.

Blair grabs my arm and leads me further into the house, pointing out a couple things as we go before stopping in front of the living room, where the rest of the boys are currently sitting. “Guys, this is Claire” he announces.

“Yeah, nice to meet you—” Johnny Davis says, half paying attention before doing a double take and standing up. He rushes towards me and shoots out a hand for me to shake, “you are fucking gorgeous, it really is a pleasure to meet you...”

“Claire” I finish for him, repeating my name even though Blair just told him, “and you’re Johnny Davis.” His eyes

widen when he realizes I know who he is, and then his face twists into a smirk, seemingly pleased with himself.

It's no secret that he's the biggest flirt on the team, he's got a dating history longer than most, and a line of girls waiting for their chance that's even longer. Unfortunately for him though, I am *not* interested, and it's best I make that clear right now.

“Relax, I'm not one of your groupies. I've been watching you practice, so I know all your names.”

Johnny Davis, all star player, both on and off the ice. Black hair and green eyes to match Blairs, I swear the only reason why I can tell them apart is cause of the name plates on their jerseys... well that and Davis has this energy about him, one that makes me feel like he's the only person in this world who would understand anything and everything that comes out of my mouth. He's also the shit disturber of the group and loves to target August, I see it all the time on campus and it's even worse when they're on the bench together.

I point over to Lucas, who is leaning against the kitchen counter and watching me with a blank expression, “that douche back there is Lucas St. James.” I turn back to Davis and point to Blair, “this is Nicholas Blair, and then the two sitting next to you are Joshua Miller and August Write.”

Joshua Miller, a big teddy bear. He's the first one to break up a fight on the ice and hold his friends back during a game. His dark blue eyes and fluffy brown hair match his personality perfectly, cute and kind. Unlike the other boys his features aren't as defined, but that doesn't take away from his looks, it actually works for him. I've also heard that he has a wild side to him. I can't even count the number of times I've heard people talk about how crazy he can get at parties, he's known for never backing down from a dare, especially when he's got a couple shots in him.

August Write, red hair and bright blue eyes. Freckles cover his pale skin, kind of like me. I swear that kid could make me weak in the knees with just one glance. He's competitive as fuck, I don't think I've ever seen him do anything just for fun,

but I guess that's part of the reason why Davis can get under his skin so easily. August is a hard line and Davis goes with the flow. I've heard he's smart, and I've seen him hiding in the library some nights reading... maybe he's kinder than he lets on.

"Yeah, that about sums it up," Blair says. "Here, follow me, I'll show you to your room."

I follow him onto the second floor, watching as he points out all the rooms while we walk down the hall before finally stopping in front of a door at the very end.

"This used to be my room" he smiles, "but I switched to the one across the hall so you could have your own bathroom. I figured you wouldn't want to share with four stinky hockey players."

Blair really *does* seem like a good guy, and my heart melts a little knowing he was looking out for me, "that's really nice of you, but you didn't have to do that." He didn't have to kick himself out of his own room just for me.

"I know, but it's the right thing to do, so" he shrugs.

"Well, thank you." I say, walking into the room. A large window sits on the wall opposite of the door, and to my right is a private bathroom and a walk-in closet.

I drop my box onto the floor and then realize that Blair just said. "Wait... you said *four* of you are sharing a bathroom, but there are *five* of you living here."

"Yeah, St. James also has his own bathroom, but he wasn't giving up his precious master bath for anything."

"Yeah, that seems about right from what I saw downstairs. Is he always that much of a dick?" I slap my hand over my mouth the second the words come out, that's Blair's best friend... and I just insulted him.

I'm a fucking idiot.

It doesn't seem to faze him at all, he just laughs "nah, he's nice once you get to know him." He turns and pokes his head

out into the hall and yells at the guys to help me bring in my stuff.

There's a collective groan before I hear them stomp their way towards the door.

"Welcome home Claire" Blair smiles before running off.



I'm putting down the last of my boxes when August comes running up the stairs and into my room, holding a massive frame.

"No fucking way" he says, turning it around and presenting it to the group. "How the hell did you get a signed jersey from *Chris Taylor*?"

"Wait what? Let me see" Davis says, fumbling off my bed and running up to get a closer look.

"Claire, he *never* signs original merchandise, how the fuck did you get this?" August questions.

I shrug, it's not like I'm ashamed that he's my brother, I'm just used to people using me to get close to him so I stopped telling them.

"Can I have it?" Miller asks hopefully.

I laugh, "no you cannot." I pull the framed jersey out of August's hands and give the guys a pointed look, "this is mine, and it's going to stay in my room." My brother gifted this to me, and it means a lot because—whether the boys know it or not—this is his very first jersey from when he got drafted. I respect him for his career, he's worked hard to get where he is, but we don't make a big deal out of it.

The guys all pout, including Lucas, which surprises me. Who knew he had more than just the default of 'massive ass-wipe'.

I feel kind of bad though, they seem like they are genuinely disappointed. "*Fine*," I relent, "we can put it in the living room... but if anyone damages it, I will murder you."

Blair runs up and hugs me, “best roommate ever.”

They all scramble out of my room and run downstairs, arguing over the perfect spot to hang it up.

Are they always this childish?

My phone rings from my bed and when I look to see who’s calling I see Chris’s name. I put in some earphones and smile when I see his face take over my screen.

“Angel! I missed your face” he says.

“We saw each other like two days ago when you were helping me pack” I laugh.

He rolls his eyes at me, but his smile stays nonetheless, “how is everything? You get moved in alright?”

I look around, seeing boxes scattered about, “uh, yeah. All good here.”

“Glad to hear it. How are the roommates?”

“Well, one of the guys gave me his room, and the rest are...” I trail off. Telling my big brother that I’ve barely spoken to two of them, one hates my guts, and the other will most likely try to get into my pants at some point, probably isn’t the best idea. “I’m still getting to know them.”

“I like one of them already, thank him for me.”

“Will do, although I will say I’ve moved into my worst nightmare” I joke, “the guys saw the signed jersey you gave me and lost it. I guess they’re mega fans or some shit.” Chris tries to hide the smirk on his face but I see right through his little act, he’s eating this shit up, and probably going to laugh about it later.

“The guys guilted me into putting it in the living room. Here, i’ll show you.” I walk downstairs, where the guys are all hanging out, flipping my camera so Chris can see, I point at Blair, “the guy sitting on the floor is the one who gave up his room.”

“Thanks for giving her your room!” Chris shouts, causing me to flinch.

“Holy fuck, I’m wearing headphones. They can’t fucking hear you.” He laughs and smiles nervously at me.

Fucking idiot.

I take out one headphone, “Hey Blair!” He looks up at me, “my brother says thanks for being a decent guy and giving me my own space.”

“No problem” he responds, standing up from the ground and walking towards me. “Can I say hi?”

My heart starts to pound in my chest, and I quickly turn as he walks beside me, freaking out because I don’t think I could handle the guys finding out who my brother is just yet. I want to build a relationship with them first, I don’t want it to all be based on who I’m related to.

“What the fuck Claire? Let the kid say hi” my brother scolds. I look down at him and give him a look, and it doesn’t take long for him to realize that he’s not just my brother, he’s someone most people idolize.

“Sorry, he’s actually gotta go. Bye bro.” I quickly hang up the phone, finally feeling like I can breathe before running upstairs and hiding in my room.

two

CLAIRE

The house is quiet, the rest of them are still sleeping. I like when things are peaceful, when I don't have to worry about bothering anyone or anyone bothering me.

But as I sit at the kitchen island taking in the new house, I see a picture of the boys. It looks like they're at a party or something. Miller has Davis in a headlock, both of them laughing. August has his eyes closed with his tongue sticking out and Lucas has Blair in his arms —bridal style— while Blair gives him a big kiss on the cheek.

I laugh, the photo perfectly encompasses all boys, but after the quick moment of entertainment I get from looking at it... I'm left feeling sad.

I've never had friends like that, the kind where you go to parties together and have fun, the kind where you'd do anything for them even if they annoy you beyond all means. Maybe we'll grow to love each other, and then maybe I can finally feel like I'm part of a family.

My phone buzzes, and there's a reminder that I have to leave for practice, so I grab my skating bag and head out the front door.

Crystal and Sharron are waiting for me at the entrance of the arena when I get there, both of which have massive smiles on their faces as I walk up to them.

When I moved out to Texas my old coaches couldn't come with me, so they made some calls and asked if Crystal and Sharron would take over my training. The two of them said *yes instantly*, and as soon as I got here we started practicing together. I love both of them, they're supportive but also push me to be the best I can. I don't know what I would do without them.

“Good morning beautiful” Crystal says, “ready to practice?”

“Of course she’s ready, she’s our champion” Sharron smiles brightly.

“What’s got you two in such good moods?” I ask as we walk through the front doors. Normally they’re not this happy, so every alarm bell possible is ringing inside my head.

“Well, if you must know, you’ve been invited to a private competition next week. They called us last night and specifically asked that you be there” Crystal claps.

I stop in my tracks and slowly turn around to face them. I examine their faces, trying to figure out whether or not this is a joke, but the unwavering grins on their faces is enough for me to know that they are dead serious. “Holy shit, no way!” I squeal.

“Yes way.” Sharron puts her arm around me and leads us towards the bench, “so let’s get to work, we don’t want you embarrassing us.”

“I would *never*.” They know me better than that, even if they are one-hundred percent confident in me, I wouldn’t go out on the ice without knowing I’m at my very best.

We start with the routine I’ve been practicing for the past month, it’s one of my most challenging. We were going to use it for sectionals but decided that we needed something a little more intense. I manage to get it perfect the first couple tries, but after an hour of practicing I can feel myself starting to lose steam.

My coaches have this rule that before I can leave I have to land each of the jumps in my routine back to back without any mistakes. It’s a kind of endurance training or some shit, but because I’m so tired I can’t do it, so I end up staying a half hour later than expected.

The entire walk back to my car the two of them lecture me about being perfect, and the moment I’m alone, I break down.

Champions don’t make mistakes

My mothers words echo in my head. Every rude, snarky, belittling thing she’s ever said to me pounds in my skull while

I gasp for air. Anxiety floods my system and the world around me starts to fade at the edges.

I was diagnosed with a generalized anxiety disorder when I was twelve. At first my parents didn't believe me, they said I was just making excuses for my mistakes, that I was being *dramatic*. About two months after the panic attacks started, Chris finally took me to the doctor and they gave me my diagnoses. The doctors had my parents come in to discuss ways to help, but they weren't having it. They still don't believe it, even after multiple doctors have told them the same thing, over and over again.

I turn up my music as loud as it can go, trying to drown out the sound of my mother's voice inside my head. The entire drive home I'm begging for it to stop, to make the tears stop, to make her go away, but it doesn't work. By the time I'm parked in my driveway I'm in full panic mode. My breathing is too quick, and my heart feels like it's about to beat out of my chest.

I think I'm drowning.

Normally I can calm myself down, pressing my fingers to the pulse point in my neck and counting my heartbeats gives me something to distract myself with... except this time it doesn't work, so I switch to plan B. Resting my head against the seat, I close my eyes and try to envision the tricks throughout my routine. I list them off, one by one, and eventually my breathing slows and I calm down enough to think straight.

I look in my rearview mirror, wiping the tears off of my face, trying to make myself look presentable. The last thing I need is to walk into the house looking like a fucking disaster.

August is cooking breakfast, Miller and Davis are sitting on the barstools next to the counter and Blair is halfway in the fridge. I toss my bag on the floor next to the barstools and take a seat.

"August" I sing.

He turns, sighing, "how do you like your eggs cooked?"

“Over easy” I smile innocently, “you are officially my favourite in the house.”

“Hey! What about me?” Blair pouts, pulling himself out of the fridge.

“You’re my brother’s favourite, and as much as I appreciate you giving me your room, August is the one currently holding the spatula” I tease. He huffs before taking a big swig out of the orange juice container he’s holding.

Gross.

“Where were *you* so early?” Miller asks, turning to face me.

“Practice” I say passively as August slides a plate of eggs, toast, and bacon my way. I take a massive bite and groan, “August this is fucking amazing.”

“Practice for what? We don’t have practice until four” Davis says, his eyebrows creasing.

“Figure skating, I practice three days a week at five in the morning.”

Did Tony tell them fucking anything?

“Sounds like an understatement to me.” I jump at the sound of Lucas’s deep voice, I didn’t realize he came in. “Looks like you’ve won three consecutive nationals, pretty girl.” The boys all crowd around his phone, looking down at whatever article or google page he has pulled up.

My heart drops to my stomach as I jump off the stool and speed towards them, praying that there’s nothing there about my brother. We’ve tried our best to keep our lives separate, I even changed my last name for all my figure skating stuff to Loyola —my middle name— but sometimes things happen and people find out. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see they have an article pulled up that was written about me a couple months ago, praising me for my accomplishments and rooting for me to win nationals again this year.

“Guess we have an ice princess in our midsts, should we bow?” Lucas quips, venom laced in his tone.

I don't understand what I did to make him dislike me this much, I've known him less than twenty-four hours.

"If I'm a princess, would that make you a peasant?" I ask mockingly. The others let out a round of laughter, while Lucas just scoffs. "Oh lighten up, I'm only joking." He isn't having it though, he scowls at me and then storms off.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No, not at all. He's just annoyed cause he thinks you don't know shit about hockey. He also thinks we don't need the help" Blair explains, trying to comfort me.

But I just nod my head, silently agreeing and pushing away any thoughts that I did something to upset him. I feel bad, even though I know I shouldn't.

Why does he get to joke around and I can't?

I thank August for the food and head upstairs, embarrassed that I've managed to piss off my roommate so easily. I get halfway down the hallway, with tears a second away from falling, when Miller comes rushing up behind me and pulls me into a tight hug. I stiffen for a moment before returning it.

My face is against his chest, and his chin rests on the top of my head, "I thought you could use this" he mumbles into my hair.

He isn't wrong. "What would make you think that?"

"I saw how you looked when you first walked into the house. You aren't very good at hiding your emotions."

If only he knew how wrong he is.

I feel my cheeks heat up, feeling ashamed that I keep so many secrets from my brother, and my body stiffens again.

"Don't worry, I don't think the others noticed."

His words calm me, at the very least there weren't more people noticing how pathetic I looked. "Thank you Miller" I say, pulling away and smiling.

"No problem Claire Bear."

I laugh at his nickname, it's kind of ironic that I'm Claire Bear and he's a teddy bear. Miller has a good heart, I can tell he's one of the good ones. The kind of guy who will always be there for you and never pass judgment even in the darkest of times. I really like him, and even as he walks away, all I want to do is take a fucking shower and see Steph.

Stephanie Saunders is my best friend. I met her during orientation week in my first year at Livler, and we've been best friends ever since. She's this short blonde girl with green eyes, super bubbly and adorable... except when she's angry. She's terrifying when she's mad. The girl is a total hot head, and ready to defend her friends no matter what. She doesn't take shit from anyone and makes sure they know it.

I love her with my whole heart, and trust her more than anything. She's one of the few people who know about my brother... she's never told a soul.

Water drips from my body as I walk out of the shower, dripping all over the bathroom floor. Steam still floats around me as I start to towel myself off, but when I go to take the first step... I eat shit. My ass and skull smash onto the tile and I let out a scream as pain shoots throughout my entire body. I've fallen plenty of times on the ice, but this hurts ten times worse than any of my mistakes.

I lay there for a moment, trying to compose myself before making an attempt at moving. I don't think anything is broken—*thank god*— but I don't want to hurt myself further by moving the wrong way.

The door to my bedroom swings open and four of my roommates come barging in. I scramble to make sure my towel covers my body, while also yelling at the boys to not come in, but it's too late. They're standing over top of me, and while Miller slams a hand over his eyes, Blair, Davis and August all try to not laugh at me.

“No it's fine guys, just stare at your naked roommate who busted her ass” I deadpan.

“I'm not staring!” Miller yells.

I smile softly, “I know, thank you for being a gentleman.”

“Sorry, it’s just... it’s kind of funny” August laughs, “none of us were expecting you to be naked.”

“*Okay?*” I sneer, “So get the fuck out. Miller, can you help me up?”

Davis winks, “why not me?”

“Because Miller won’t try to sneak a peak or cop a feel. Now get out before I kick your ass” I grit out, grabbing a brush from my counter throwing it at him.

The boys leave, all chuckling and cracking jokes with one another... I’m never going to live this down.

“You can look Miller, I’m covered” I tell him softly.

He slowly lowers his hand and hesitantly looks at me before completely opening his eyes and letting out a breath. He reached out his hand and helps me up, “are you okay?”

“Yeah I’m good, but am I really *that* repulsive that you’re scared to see any part of me naked?” I joke, hoping to lighten the mood. His face goes red and he starts stuttering, rambling on about how ‘he doesn’t think that at all’ and ‘I’m a really attractive girl’.

“Miller it’s okay, I’m just joking” I laugh.

He lets out a breath and smiles, “not funny.”



“You’re joking” Steph says, jaw practically on the floor.

“Nope” I reply, slowly sipping on my iced tea while we wait for our lecture to start.

When I met up with Steph for class, I didn’t hesitate to update her on the events from the last twenty-four hours. She sat and listened to every single detail, she eats this kind of shit up. She actually made me promise to give her constant updates, so she could know ‘everything about the untouchable bachelors of Livler University’ —her words not mine.

“I feel for you babes, but you shouldn’t have expected anything less from Lucas St. James” she says, “I mean, you’ve seen how he acts around campus, not to mention how he treats girls. He’s a certified ass.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, but we’re going to be living together for the next year, he could at least *try* to get along with me” I sigh.

Lucas really is a dick for no reason, I haven’t done anything to him. I can only imagine the things he says about me to the others. All the mean, disgusting, horrible things... my heart rate begins to pick up as my mind spirals.

What if he makes the others hate me? What am I supposed to do then?

“Stop that” Steph says, elbowing me. “You’re freaking yourself out, I can see it on your face. Just take a deep breath, he’ll get used to it eventually and realize how much of a dick he’s being.”

“I just wish there was something I could do, you know? Like a peace offering or something.”

She stares at me for a second like I’m a complete idiot, “if only you had a *super* famous brother who could get you *amazing* tickets to a hockey game tonight” she says sarcastically.

“Steph, you are hands down the most annoying but most amazing best friend ever” I squeal before smacking a kiss on her cheek and sending a text off to Chris.

Chances you’d be able to get me a couple more passes for the game tonight?

BIG BRO

Absolutely, I’ll get them sent over to you ASAP.

Best big brother ever!!

BIG BRO

I know.



It's official, I'm going to kill the guys.

Before they came out of the dressing room, Tony kindly informed me that he overheard them all talking about the bathroom incident this morning, and now the whole team is standing in front of Tony and I on the ice, looking at me like I'm naked.

I fucking hate this.

“Alright boys, before we start the practice, I want to introduce you to someone” Tony says placing a hand on my back. “This is Claire, she's going to be my new assistant coach.”

I nod my head, trying my best to keep a straight face and ignore the butterflies filling my stomach.

“Claire's a figure skater with impeccable technique, not only will she be able to teach you to be more graceful on the ice, but also how to maneuver through the competition.”

Lucas raises his hand, and I feel my heart drop, “Coach, how is the pretty girl going to help us? She's a figure skater, what the hell would she know about hockey?” He gives me a cocky smile, feeling as though he's got the best of me.

It hits me then, what his nickname really means. He's saying I'm pretty and that's about all I have going for me. That I'm more beauty than brains...

What an *asshole*.

Tony goes to say something but I stop him before he has the chance. No way am I letting Lucas —ass hat— St. James, make a fool of me on my very first day.

I skate towards him, all the boys making room for me to pass through. “You’re crossovers suck, they’re slowing you down when you try to switch directions, you rely too much on your inside edge, your slap shot is less than impressive and you don’t know how to control the puck properly.” The confidence that he once had, slowly disappears as I speak, and that only encourages me to keep going. “You rely on Blair more than you should, allowing the other team to read you like a goddamn book, they know your next move before you even think of it. Five minutes into a game and they’ve already won because you make it easy for them.” I wait a second, daring Lucas—or any of the others—to say something. When they don’t, I allow myself to claim this little victory and turn to face the whole group.

“None of you know me, so before you go making assumptions about who I am and what I know, maybe listen to what I have to say. I may be a figure skater but I know my shit, so if you’re all done being insecure little boys... can we start practice?”

three

LUCAS

When I get home I go straight up to my room. I'm so fucking embarrassed and annoyed that she called me out at practice today, and then proceeded to show all of us that she may actually be able to help us this season.

God, I don't know why that girl annoys me so much, but she does. She manages to hit that one nerve, that one stupid nerve that makes me go fucking crazy.

My music blasts, drowning out all the thoughts running through my head as I lay in my bed and stare at the ceiling. I need to stop replaying her little victory over and over. Just as I'm about to, she opens the door and sticks her head in. I'm instantly filled with rage, her stupid face, and her stupid freckles, and her stupid captivating blue eyes, and that stupidly cute way she plays with her long, dark brown hair when she's nervous... it's all just so stupid.

Okay, *fine*. Maybe I do know why she's so annoying.

I had a plan this year, one filled with parties, chicks, victories and hanging out with my best friends... and now all of that is ruined. How am I supposed to bring a girl home? What if she sees Claire and then decides to leave? What if Claire gets all weird about it and cock blocks me before I even get through the front door?

Before I have the chance to think about what I'm doing, I'm moving forward and slamming the door in her face. Her hand gets caught though, and I hear her yelp before pulling it back.

Fuck. Is she okay?

I didn't mean to hurt her. Fucking fuck. I may not like her but I would never lay a hand on a girl, and I definitely never have the intention to physically harm one on purpose.

I whip the door open as fast as I can, “aw, you *do* care” she says sarcastically. She’s gripping her hand, but otherwise seems okay. If she’s in pain, then she’s doing a damn good job at hiding it.

I’m not like him, I remind myself, the mantra filling my head, and I do my best to convince myself of that.

I glare down at her anyway, hiding the internal panic ripping me apart, “it’s your fault. You left your hand in the way.”

“I just came to give you something but if you’re going to be an ass I’ll find someone else to come with me.” She goes to turn away but I grab her by the shoulder, spinning her back around.

What the fuck does she mean she has something for me?

A smirk makes its way onto her lips and I frown... I fell right into that one.

“Are you done being an ass to me?” When I don’t answer she huffs and crosses her arms, “you’ve been rude to me since I got here, and I don’t even know what I did to piss you off. I just want to be friends Lucas, can we at least try?”

I feel kind of bad, but she barged her way into my life and I’ll be damned if she fucks anything else up for me. “*Fine*. We’re good, I’m sorry for being a dick” I mumble, “now what did you get me?”

She smiles triumphantly before pulling a lanyard from her back pocket, swaying it back and forth in front of my face. I snatch it out of her hands, making her giggle, and read the words written across the front. When it finally clicks, my jaw drops and I stare at her like she just grew a second head.

Claire nods, knowing damn well I can’t argue with box tickets to the Dallas game tonight.

“Why are you giving this to me?” I ask, my defence mechanisms instantly sliding into place. This isn’t a normal thing to do.

“Because” she says, looking down at her feet, “I want to be friends. I already had a bunch of passes and thought I might as well use them as a peace offering.”

I’m still not buying it, there’s more to this than she’s letting on.

“I’m sorry if I messed anything up for you, I really am just trying to help. I’m doing Tony a favour, trust me when I say it wasn’t my idea.”

Okay, so maybe I’m being a bit of a dick assuming that she’s up to no good, but I’ve learned the hard way that it’s best to keep people at a distance... So that’s what I’m doing.

“So it’s just going to be you and me at this game?”

“Um, no. I have passes for the whole house” she replies sheepishly.

“Have you told them yet?”

“Nope,” she smiles, “I was just about to go downstairs and mess with them a little. Wanna come?”

I feel a small smile of my own breakthrough, this girl learns quick. In this house we fuck with one another as much as possible, if she wants to survive then she has to learn to throw punches of her own.

Claire skips down the hallway —yes, fucking *skips*— but when she makes it to the top of the stairs she stops “oh boys!” She looks back at me with mischief dancing in her eyes, and I would be straight up lying if I said it isn’t hot as fuck. She waves me over, forcing me to meet her before she leans over and whispers, “follow my lead.”

The heat from her mouth fans over my neck, and the little hairs stand up all over my body. Shivers run down my spine and I feel my stomach twist as the heat disappears and is replaced by the suddenly ice cold air around me.

Nope, that’s not the feeling I think it is... *get it together*.

I follow her into the kitchen, where all of the guys are staring at her from the couch, waiting to hear what she has to

say, and I for one, can't wait to hear what kind of bullshit comes out of her mouth.

"I got tickets today for some hockey game tonight, I guess they're box seats or something?" She looks them all with this doe eyed, confused look on her face, making everything she says just that much more convincing.

It's so hard not to burst into laughter when I see the look on the guys faces. This is great.

"Do you mean for Dallas?" Miller yells.

"Are they good seats or something?" She asks them.

"*Are those good seats?*" August mocks. "Those are fucking *amazing* seats, they're like hundreds of dollars. How the fuck did you get them?"

If I didn't already know that she's lying, I would definitely believe her right now.

"I just have them, but there's one problem... I only have two extra tickets." Claire bites her bottom lip and looks away while the guys start arguing about who's going to get to go. When she notices they aren't looking at her anymore she winks at me.

I can't help but shake my head at her, she's pretty funny, but only when she's messing with my dip-shit friends.

"Claire, I will literally name my first child after you for that ticket" Davis screams.

"I'll do your homework for a month" Blair chimes in.

Davis scoffs, "that is *so* not better than naming a child after her."

They all break into a full on fight, and I'm talking pushing each other, followed by violent threats, kind of fighting. Claire and I stare at them a moment before looking at one another and bursting into laughter. She falls to the floor, and I keel over from how badly my abs hurt.

"They actually believed you" I say between loud laughs.

She wipes a tear from her eye , “I didn’t think they were this gullible.”

The boys stare at us like we’ve officially lost it, and I don’t really blame them. Just a couple of hours ago I was ready to start a war with this girl, and now we’re both maniacally laughing at them.

“I have enough tickets for all of you,” she says, pulling the rest of the tickets from her back pocket and handing it to them, “I just wanted to mess with you a bit.”

They look at the passes she just handed them like it’s the key to the damn universe, holding them so delicately, like they might disintegrate in their hands at any moment.

August looks back up at her, confusion laid across his face, “these aren’t just box tickets, these are in the friends and family section.”

My eyes widen in shock, I rip the pass out of Blair’s hand and inspect it. August’s right, I didn’t even notice the section they’re in, I was too excited that we even had tickets.

I turn to Claire, her face is flat, but the look in her eyes is telling me everything I need to know... she’s trying to figure out what she’s going to say to explain this. “Claire...” I start hesitantly, “how did you get your hands on family and friends box seats?”

She chews on the inside of her cheek, “my brother knows a guy.”

I can tell there’s more to the story, but I really don’t care, as long as these tickets are real, I’m happy.

Miller runs over to her and pulls her into a tight hug, yanking her off the ground and spinning her in the air. Giggles escape her lips as she begs for him to put her down.

I’m slowly realizing that I’ve never heard her laugh before, and I’m not just talking about at the house. I’ve seen her a couple of times walking around campus, and she’s always got this straight face on.

The sound of her laugh is creating this internal battle, part of me wants to hear that sound over and over again, and the other part is screaming at me to snap out of it.

I am *not* starting to like her. No way.



We're all piled into August's truck, Claire offered to drive so that we could drink at the game, and while that seemed like a good idea at the time... we're all starting to regret it now. August is in the passenger seat watching her like a hawk, this truck is his baby, and the only reason why he let us all pile in here is because it's the only car big enough for us to fit. Davis, Miller and I are sitting on the seat in the back, while Blair is stretched out across our laps complaining about how uncomfortable we are.

"Will you shut up?" Claire snaps. "We could have taken two separate cars but you all wanted to drink, so deal with it cause I'm trying to focus." She stares at us like we're children and it kind of works cause we all shrink back in our seats and stop talking.

When she finally looks back towards the road, I keep my eyes on her, trying to get a fucking read on her cause it's weird as hell for someone to drop hundreds —if not *thousands*— of dollars on five guys they barely know.

"Stop staring at her, you look creepy" Blair whispers.

I push my knee into his shoulder blades, making him grunt in pain as I sarcastically smile down at him. He really needs to learn when to shut the fuck up.

Claire pulls into the parking lot, but instead of the general parking for attendees, she swings us around back to a private entrance. The guard steps out of his booth and she rolls down her window, "heya Claire, how are you?" he asks.

"I'm good Chuck, how are you today? Anyone giving you a hard time?" she responds, a massive smile filling her face.

Chuck looks as though he's in his mid to late seventies, and not equipped to handle the crazy hockey crowd at all. His eyes are bright and filled with life, but the tired look on the rest of his face reveals just how long he's been kicking.

"Eh, you know, just the usual" he shrugs, "are these boys with you? And why on god's green earth is one of them not in a seat?"

She shrugs, "they wanted to drink so I offered to drive but we had to pile into the car. I know we aren't supposed to do this but it's their first time in the family and friends section, I want them to have fun."

He gives her a disapproving look, clearly unhappy with her choices, "I'll let it slide this time, just don't let your brother catch you doing this."

Her cheeks glow red and she shifts uncomfortably at the mention of her brother, "well, we're going to go in. Say hi to Lizzy for me."

She speeds off before he has the chance to say anything else and parks the car. The rest of us are slightly confused but I get the feeling she isn't going to talk to us about it any time soon.

When we walk into the arena, I'm stunned. It's fucking gorgeous back here, private concession stands, a row of private boxes, and photos of the legends who played here. Claire is the only one out of us who doesn't seem impressed, she walks by all the cool shit and heads straight for the box on the right.

The nameplate on the door says Taylor, and I look to the guys to see if they're seeing the same thing. She's acting so chill about all this, I really don't understand how.

She walks towards the fridge, grabbing a bottle of water. While she's turned around, we surround her, staring at the back of her head. Claire jumps and holds her hand over her heart when she sees us, "what the fuck is wrong with you guys? You scared the shit out of me."

“Why the fuck does the plaque on the door say *Taylor*?” Miller asks.

She tries to find an answer, but stumbles over her words before giving up and running away from us. She fiddles with the water bottle, shaking a little bit and starting to breathe ten times faster than she was a moment ago. I wonder why she’s so freaked out right now.

I eye the guys, they see what I see and mirror my worried look. Whatever is going through her head right now, isn’t good.

I go to make my way over to her but August stops me, “let me go talk to her. You guys aren’t exactly friends, she’ll probably be more forthcoming with me.”

He’s right, I’ve been nothing but a dick to her... the last thing she’ll want to do is talk to me.

four

CLAIRE

I completely fucking forgot about the plaque on the door, not to mention everyone who works at the stadium knows that Chris is my brother. What if someone says something to the guys?

I'm freaking the fuck out, I feel my lungs getting tight and my heart starts to race. The last thing I need is to have a panic attack around them.

I jump when I feel a hand land on my shoulder, "hey, is everything okay?" August asks softly, almost like he's scared to speak too loudly.

I nod my head yes, knowing that if I open my mouth, nothing but a strangled sob will come out.

Over the years I've gotten pretty good at masking the panic, but right now my wall is slowly crumbling as I progress further and further down this dark tunnel. The walls are closing in, August is too close, everything is too loud, my shirt is too tight, the water bottle in my hands is too cold. God I'm freaking the fuck out, I need to leave.

I need Steph.

And almost as if God himself is looking out for me, the door swings open and Steph walks in. Her gaze instantly finds mine, and like the best friend she is, she knows what's going on and comes to my rescue.

"Hey, it's August right?" she asks, trying to get his attention off of me and onto her.

"Yeah" he responds, keeping his eyes locked on me.

Please, just look away, stop staring, let me leave. I beg and beg and beg, silently hoping that he'll finally relent and let me suffer in peace.

“So you’re living with Claire right? How’s that going?” Steph places a hand on his shoulder, which distracts him just enough to let me slip out and run to the nearest bathroom.

My vision is going blurry, slowly fading to black around the edges as I slam through the door and collapse to the ground. I yank off my jacket, trying to get cool air to touch my skin, trying to do anything to make this overwhelming feeling stop. I place my fingers against my throat, counting the beats of my heart as it hammers in my chest. I can barely see anything as tears fall, so instead I close them tight, trying to get my shit together so I can go back into that stupid box and enjoy my brother’s game.

I’m gasping for air and clawing at my chest with the other hand when I hear the door to the bathroom slam open, “Claire what the fuck? What’s happening? Are you okay?”

The voice is off in the distance, too far away for me to really process what’s happening. My heartbeat is too loud, my eyes are shut too tight, everything’s too much.

I can’t do this, it’s not fucking stopping.

Hands grip my face, forcing me to finally open my eyes and snap back to some semblance of reality... it’s August.

“Steph” I manage to choke out, and then his warm hands leave my face.



“It’s okay, you’re okay. Just take some deep breaths for me... there you go.” Steph’s calming voice soothes me as she holds me in her lap, playing with my hair as I take deep breaths and sip water.

August grabbed Steph from the box, and the moment she saw the state I was in she knew what to do.

I still remember the first time I had an anxiety attack in front of her, she freaked the fuck out. But after explaining everything to her, she understood. She took the time to learn

how to help me, what to say or do when I start to spiral out of control... I knew then that she would always have my back.

August uncrosses his arms and moves off the wall he was just leaning on, coming over to me and crouching down next to Steph. “Claire, what just happened? You need to tell me.”

“She doesn’t need to tell you shit” Steph snaps.

I sit up and try to gather my bearings, “it’s okay Steph, I’m living with the guy, he’ll find out sooner or later.”

Sighing, I look at August. His eyes are pleading with me to explain, he wants to help, he wants to be a friend. “It was a panic attack, I get them sometimes. I’m good now though.”

“What caused it?” he asks.

“I was overwhelmed.” I’m not exactly ready to put my whole life story on display.

He just nods his head, understanding that even though there is more to it than that, I don’t want to talk about it, and after seeing a tiny little glimpse of what Steph is like when she’s angry... I don’t think he’ll push his luck when she’s around.

August leaves, and Steph starts to help me up off the ground, “okay so what *really* happened?” she asks knowingly.

“They were asking so many questions about Chris. I’m so scared that they’re going to find out, but I just met them, they won’t treat me like a real person if they know about him. Steph, I’m thinking this was a bad idea.”

“It’s going to be okay, I promise. They won’t know until you tell them, just make sure it’s when *you’re* ready, not when you feel like you *have* to tell them.”



“Seriously Miller, you really need to help me out here, you weigh a ton” I say, struggling to get Miller up the stairs. I’ve been trying to get him to his room for what feels like forever.

“I do not weigh a ton” he pouts.

“You’re right, you’re as light as a feather” I deadpan, and a drunken smile takes over his face.

I finally get him into bed, and by the time I’m done with getting him settled, August already has the rest of the drunk idiots in their rooms. For a second I think that maybe I’ve dodged any more questions from him about the whole panic attack thing, so I change into more comfortable clothes and sit on the back deck to relax

Unfortunately for me though, he comes outside not long after and takes a seat next to me. “So,” he says after a couple moments of silence, “are we going to talk about what happened?” He looks at me like I’m broken, like I’m a glass doll that will shatter if I’m not coddled like a child.

I try to delay the inevitable, taking my sweet ass time to avoid this conversation for as long as possible, “Do I have a choice?” I eventually ask.

I know he’s doing it because he cares, but I really don’t like how he’s acting. The idea of people treating me differently because of the shit I’ve been through is my worst nightmare, it makes my skin crawl. I’m a big girl, I can handle myself, I don’t need to be an issue for other people. I’ve dealt with my shit –basically by myself– for years, I don’t need other people to start giving a fuck now.

“Please stop looking at me like that” I say, turning away and looking down at my feet. I listen to the breeze brush its way through the leaves of the trees surrounding us, trying not to focus on the suffocating silence between August and I, the kind that makes me want to throw up from how tense the air feels.

“Stop looking at you like what?” he questions.

“Like I’m some broken, helpless creature that needs to be babied twenty-four seven” I snap. “I’m not *broken*, I’m a big girl and I’ve dealt with this for the majority of my life.”

He lets out a laugh, like actually laughs in my fucking face.

I can't believe him.

“This was a mistake” I scoff, standing up and spinning towards the door.

“I’m sorry” he says, grabbing my arm and pulling me back down. “I really wasn’t thinking that, I’m worried for you, I care about you so I want to make sure you’re okay. Please stay and talk to me.”

I take a seat again and sigh. “Nothing leaves this step,” I point my finger at him, “I mean it August, no one other than Steph, Tony and my brother knows, this is not to be repeated to anyone.”

He smiles softly at me and nods his head, fake locking his lips and throwing away the key. I close my eyes for a moment, trying to centre myself, this talk never gets any easier.

“When I was twelve I was diagnosed with anxiety, I had a panic attack after a practice and my brother rushed me to the hospital, he thought I was having an asthma attack or something, even though I’ve never had asthma. The hospital confirmed that I was okay physically, so they sent a psych doctor down to examine me, and after a ten minute conversation he knew what was going on.”

August sits patiently, listening to what I have to say with no judgment on his face. He’s genuinely just trying to understand.

“For the first two years, the anxiety attacks were constant, and they didn’t have a specific trigger, so I went to therapy. We worked on ways to help me cope, hence the whole fingers on my heart beat thing” I say, motioning to my neck. “Eventually I figured out my trigger but I didn’t share it with anyone.”

He nods his head, finally understanding what I was doing earlier tonight. “Do you mind me asking what the trigger was?” His voice is quiet, just loud enough to hear over the wind.

“Well it has a lot to do with my parents. It’s a long and complicated story that I really don’t want to get into right now,

but it had a big role in what caused all of this to start in the first place. I love them to death, and they always meant well, just not the best relationship between us.” My voice is shaky, I’m trying really hard not to cry right now and I think August can tell because he pulls me into his side and holds me close.

I can hear his heart beating, it’s pumping so fast. “Anyways, I dealt with it for years and it got a lot better, I haven’t had attacks on the regular since I was about seventeen. They don’t happen out of the blue anymore either, there’s almost always a trigger.”

“What triggered you tonight then?”

I freeze. How on earth am I supposed to explain to him that I was triggered by the thought of them figuring out who my brother is?

The answer is, *I can’t*.

“I was overwhelmed, like I said before, I felt backed into a corner.” I look down at my fingers, picking at the skin around my nail bed.

“I’m so sorry, I had no idea Claire.” His voice turns raspy, as if he’s holding back tears of his own.

“No it’s okay.” I don’t want him to feel bad, he didn’t actually do anything wrong. “You didn’t know, no one did. I can’t expect you guys to ignore any curiosity you have. I’m not mad or upset with anyone, I just needed to get out of the room.” I grab his hand, reassuring him that I mean every word, he doesn’t deserve to feel guilty over something he didn’t know.

“Thank you for caring, but you seriously can’t tell anyone else. I’ll tell the guys when I’m ready. I just don’t want them to see me any differently, or feel like they have to be extra careful around me. I can function as a regular human, but a lot of people think I can’t.”

All I can do at this point is hope to god that he won’t tell the guys, I don’t know what I would do if he did.

“Don’t worry, I won’t say anything. Just know that I’m here for you, and I don’t see you any differently.” His soft eyes

and smile are all the reassurance I need. He puts up this big front that he's an uncaring ass hole but in reality he's a big softie. "And the others won't either... even Lucas, who acts like he doesn't care about anything."

"You know, you're a really sweet guy when you want to be" I chuckle.

He sends me a death glare, "if you ever tell anyone, I'll shun you for life." His face melts into a smile and I shove his shoulder, feeling at peace for the first time all night.

five

LUCAS

Drinking on a Wednesday night probably wasn't my best idea. Waking up with a splitting headache and wanting to puke my guts out is my karma.

I remember most of last night, and while it's a little fuzzy, the memories are still there. Claire had a moment, we were told that she was fine but it was very clear that she wasn't. Not only *that*, but there was no bruise on her hand, and there definitely should've been after I slammed the door on it yesterday.

I throw on a t-shirt and make my way downstairs, only to be met with my roommates sitting around our table, which is completely filled with food. I stand in my place for a moment, still unnoticed by the rest of the house, as I try to figure out who cooked all this shit.

I know it wasn't August, you have to beg him to make you food, and the rest of them can't cook for shit. Then my eyes trail to Claire, she probably did all of this.

"Oh hey, I made breakfast for everyone. Figured you guys would need it after last night" she laughs. Her chipper tone irritates me, so I just grunt in response and take the empty seat at the table.

Claire comes up beside me and sets down a bottle of gatorade and an Advil, "seeing as you didn't take the opportunity to make a jab at me, I'm assuming you need this."

She isn't wrong, but fuck her for being so observant.

I *do*, however, take the opportunity to be observant myself. I try to be discreet in my actions, checking out her hand to see if there's any sign of what happened yesterday. When I see that there's no mark or bruise, I have to mask my shock. Nothing but smooth, even toned skin.

"Claire?" I question.

“What’s up?” She asks, sitting down with the rest of us.

“Why isn’t there a bruise on your hand?”

The boys all stop what they’re doing, freezing exactly how they are. They look up to me with their brows drawn together, confused.

Claire stiffens, shifting in her seat as she avoids eye contact with me, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Why would I have a bruise?”

She’s fucking lying, why the fuck would she be lying?

My mind races with about a hundred different questions, many of them make me sick to my stomach. “Because yesterday after practice I slammed a door on your hand hard enough for it to be *black*, and yet, I don’t see any kind of mark.”

“What’s he talking about Claire?” Blair turns in his seat, dropping his fork onto his plate.

All the attention is on her now, and by the looks of it the guys are just as curious as I am.

“I- I uh, I don’t know” she sputters.

Miller –who’s sitting right next to her– grabs her hand and inspects it. He takes his thumb and gently wipes over her knuckles, revealing a smudged line and a dark bruise under a layer of makeup. His eyes widen in shock, and she rips her hand out of his grasp.

“*Claire?*” Miller asks, trying not to cry.

She remains silent though, completely still in her seat as the rest of us throw questions at her.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Why did you lie?”

“Why would you pretend like nothing happened?”

“That must hurt like a bitch, you should have said something.”

While the others continue their attacks, something clicks in my head. The reason why I felt so uneasy before, its because I've seen it. I've seen first hand why people cover up their bruises and pretend like they aren't in pain.

"Who hurt you?" I don't look up from the table, staring at my plate while everyone goes dead silent.

"That's such a stupid question, you hurt her dumbass" Davis snarks.

I finally look up, scanning the boys before looking over at Claire. Her eyes tell me everything I need to know, the question scares her, and I can't help the growing rage inside of me. Why? I couldn't tell you, but I know that it's there whether I like it or not.

"Who's hurt you so badly before that you learned how to cover up your bruises?" I clarify.

Claire's eyes dart around the table, she's in complete shock, not knowing how to navigate this minefield. It's like no one's actually cared before, she didn't have to prepare for these kinds of questions because it's never happened before. She makes eye contact with August before darting away from the table and up the stairs. Not a single word is passed between us, no one knows what to say.

"I'll go check on her," Miller finally says, getting up from the table.

But before he has the chance, August stops him, "no, don't" he snaps. "I'll go, just... all of you stay down here."

His chair scrapes against the floor as he gets up. He walks towards the stairs, stopping at the first one to check over his shoulder and make sure we're staying put.

"That was weird right? It isn't just me?" Blair says.

Yes Blair, that was definitely weird. It's weird that August is the one to go and talk to her. I love the guy but he hates everyone. I'm honestly surprised that he hasn't completely ignored her since her arrival.

Don't get me wrong, the man is good with the ladies, but I think we all knew it was gonna be a 'no touchy touchy' with Claire. Instead, he's running upstairs acting like a knight in shining armour.

I'm actively trying to ignore the shitty feeling growing inside of me, should I have called her out in front of everyone? Probably not. Do I feel like an absolute douche canoe right now? Definitely. However, I *will* be getting answers out of her. No one puts their hands on a girl. I may be an ass, but that's a line I'll never cross.

six

CLAIRE

“You’re doing so good,” August says as we sit on the floor of my room.

After Lucas called me out —suddenly interested in my well-being— I lost it. Normally I’m able to handle my panic attacks by myself, but having someone to work through it with me, makes it all so much easier.

I really don’t deserve August.

I pull away from his chest, not daring to make eye contact with him, I’m too raw... too emotional. “Thank you” I mutter, my voice hoarse and strained.

“Don’t thank me. I told you, I’m here for you Claire bear.” He places a gentle hand on my chin, forcing me to look at him. I feel so naked under his gaze. He’s seeing the darkest parts of me, trying to figure me out in the one fleeting moment I allow it. Unfortunately for him, I learned long ago to control what people do and don’t see. Unfortunately for me, I didn’t have that kind of control earlier... I know Lucas saw the fear inside of me after his one little question. No one —and I mean no one— has ever given enough fucks to ask me something like that, to check in on me when they notice something so small.

The real problems started after Chris left, so I never had him around long enough to notice, and even then it’s too embarrassing, so I wouldn’t have told him anyway. He obviously knows about how our parents talk to me, but I won’t crush whatever hope he has left that our parents are good people.

I mean, they are good people. I just got in the way sometimes.

I pull myself back into August’s chest, and as much as I hate relying on others to feel secure... he just feels so safe. He makes me feel like nothing in this world can hurt me. The warmth radiating off of his body is enough to make me melt

into my most vulnerable state, and for the first time in forever, I'm not scared off.

“Can we talk about it?” He asks, holding me tightly.

“There's nothing to talk about. I hid the bruise for skating, my coaches would kill me if they saw it.” The lie tastes bitter on my tongue, I never liked lying to people, but in the eye of self preservation, it became necessary.

“But you didn't have skating today.” I can hear the inference in his tone, but he stays quiet and calm nonetheless.

“The skating community is tight, if someone saw me, word would have gotten back to them. I didn't want to hear any lectures about being careful, especially with one of my first private competitions coming up.”

I hope the lie is enough to convince him, there's some things that no one ever needs to know about. My family and my past are just two of those things.

“I don't think you're telling me the whole story but I'm not going to pry, you'll tell me when you're ready” he says softly.

“Thank you.” When he goes to speak I stop him, “please don't say anything. Just accept my thank you and move on, you stubborn prick.”

He lets out a loud laugh, pulling me back into him as he completely crushes me, “alright babe, but don't expect me to be this nice all the time.”

“Mhm, sure. You're a big softie and you know it.”

“I'm gonna punch you in the face” he deadpans.

“No you won't, you love me too much” I tease. I know what I'm saying is true, he does love me, I can see it in the way that he treats others differently. He has a huge soft spot for me. I couldn't tell you why, but I'm glad he does.



The house is eerily quiet, the air is stiff, everything about it feels so wrong. August promised he would talk to the guys, make sure they stayed off my back after this morning. I don't particularly want to know how that conversation went, so I've been hiding in my room the entire day.

My brain's happy that I haven't had to face any of my problems, but my stomach is angry that I've neglected food since breakfast. The loud rumbling is a good enough reason for me to finally leave my safety bubble and venture into the wild place that is this hockey house.

I make my way downstairs, trying to keep my steps light as I check to make sure no one else is down here. To my relief, there is not a single boy in sight. I breathe out a shaky breath and walk over to the fridge. As I start taking out ingredients to make my food, I stop. I feel bad that I worried the guys, the look on their faces was hard to see, and I know that I'm the only person to blame.

I pull out extra of everything so I can make them dinner as well, and while it isn't a perfect apology, I expect it'll be good enough. They must be starving. No one made a sound all day, so I think it's safe to assume that no one else has eaten either.

I twirl my hair nervously as I finish setting the table and walk back upstairs.

Breathe Claire, you can do this. All you have to do is knock on their doors and tell them.

Three quiet knocks, Miller opens his door. "Hey, I just wanted to let you know that I made dinner. I'm gonna go let the others know." My voice is just over a whisper, I'm trying my hardest to keep it from cracking because I don't need to have another breakdown today. I turn away before Miller has the chance to say anything, and continue down the hall, letting each of my roommates know one by one.

They all sit down, still silent. None of them utter a word as we all sit at the table awkwardly.

I should say something right? I mean, I didn't mean to scare them earlier. It was my fault that I got hurt, it's my fault

that I lied and covered everything up, they don't deserve to feel like they have to tiptoe around me in their own home.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry for this morning. I didn't mean to freak anyone out." All of their eyes snap to me, "I know August already explained everything to you guys, and I just hope you can understand." They don't say a word, but they don't look away from me either.

"It was none of our business, we shouldn't have pressed" Miller finally responds.

The guys nod their heads in agreement, and then things just go back to normal. Like nothing ever happened, like it was all just some silly misunderstanding over leftovers or some shit.

Lucas though, he looks at me like he's still mulling over the past two days. I try my best to ignore him but it's hard, he's burning holes into the side of my face.

I watch everyone very closely as they clean, how naturally they all interact, how they're like a family. Even though I've started to make myself at home, slowly becoming friends with them, I can't help but feel so out of place. This is their home, their lives, and I've come and flipped everything upside down.

I feel a warm hand wrap itself around my wrist and pull me towards the hallway, away from the kitchen. When I look up I see Lucas leading me, pulling me out of earshot. He drops my wrist and turns around, then crosses his arms and leans against the wall, waiting for me to say something. It's almost like he expects me to read his damn mind and know what he wants from me.

"Care to explain why I was just kidnapped?" I snark.

"Okay, first of all, you were not kidnapped. We're still in the house. Second, why were you so reluctant to explain what really happened to the guys?" His question sends shivers down my spine, and goosebumps erupt all over my skin. I thought we would have dropped this and moved on, but Lucas St. James is one stubborn son of a bitch.

“I didn’t want them to be angry with you. I know you didn’t mean to do it, but how was I supposed to know the guys wouldn’t think otherwise?” He stays silent, waiting for me to continue, “we aren’t exactly BFF’s if you haven’t noticed. I thought that maybe the other would think you had enough after a solid twenty-four hours of knowing me.”

He shrugs, “yeah, I guess.”

He guesses? We’ve been in each other’s lives for less than two days and we are the epitome of the whole ‘we hate each other’ thing. It’s no secret that we aren’t in the other’s good graces.

The way he shifts his arms further into the defensive position has my eyes flicking down, his muscles ripple under his shirt and I feel myself losing the tiny grip on sanity I have left.

“Look” I say, “we’re going to be living with one another whether we like it or not, Tony will make sure of that. So even though I’ve already given my peace offering, I’m going to be the bigger person and ask for a truce.”

He ponders my proposal for a moment before sticking out his hand, “fine. But don’t expect me to give up all my tormenting, it’s kinda fun.”

I let out a loud laugh, “I wouldn’t dream of it.” I shake his hand and my body feels like it’s on fire, electricity buzzes through me, forcing me to pull away quickly... and he does the same.

Lucas clears his throat and brushes past me, making his way back into the kitchen to join the others.

I don’t really know how to rationalize what just happened. That fire that ignited when our hands touched? It was like nothing I’ve ever felt before.

The boys start yelling, going on and on about whatever video game they’re playing, so I pull myself together and join them on the couch.

Huh, I played this game with Tony and Chris all the time.

I have so much to teach them, both on and off the ice, but I'm sure they're about to teach me more about myself than I ever thought possible.

seven

CLAIRE

I have never felt so proud after a morning practice, and hearing praise from Crystal and Sharron only reinforces how I was already feeling.

I nailed every single skill and routine. Not only did I nail them... I perfected them. Not a single thing went wrong today, and after the last couple days, I really needed this.

I pull out of the parking lot and stop to get myself a celebratory orange slushie –my one kryptonite.

You tell me you have a slushie for me... we're instantly best friends.

Walking into the house, I debate whether or not I should tell the guys how great my morning went, would it be weird? Or would it be something that normal friends slash roommates share with one another? Maybe I'll just tell August, I know he'll listen to me and be super supportive.

The guys are sitting in the living room watching old tapes, specifically whatever team they're playing on Saturday. Lucas looks like he's about to rip someone's head off, and I'm not gonna lie... seeing him red faced and angry is kind of funny. It's also nice to see him so infuriated by something other than myself.

I toss my bags onto the kitchen counter and watch them all scream and yell at a complete break away. A massive laugh leaves my lips, the others are intense, but Lucas is absolutely losing his mind at a game that is no longer in his control.

This is totally blackmail material.

I pull out my phone and snap a picture of the grown ass man throwing a temper tantrum like a child. My flash goes off and all of them whip their heads around, now very aware of me.

Lucas freezes in his spot, Davis tries to act cool, Blair smiles at me, Miller looks embarrassed, and August holds in a laugh.

I feel like they keep forgetting that I live with them.

“Delete that right now” Lucas orders. I shake my head and take a sip of my slushie, trying my best to keep my composure.

This is too fucking good.

“I swear to god pretty girl, if you show anyone that picture I will commit a felony.” His face doesn’t break into a smile – like I thought it would– and now I want to piss my pants.

I’m not small by any means, I’m only an inch or two shy of six feet, but he’s still much larger than I am.

Just as I’m about to make some snappy comeback to his blatant threat, my phone rings. I look down to see Chris’s name across my screen and pick up.

I can barely understand a word he’s saying, he’s speaking too fast, “Can you calm down for two seconds? You’re not making any sense.”

The boys look at me, furrowing their brows. I mouth the word ‘brother’ to them and they nod their heads in understanding.

“Our parents are fucking insane” Chris says after a deep breath, “they called me this morning, complaining about the fact that you haven’t spoken to them in almost two months... as if they don’t know *why*.”

I can tell he’s about to boil over with rage, so now I have to go into defensive sister mode and calm his crazy ass down. He helps me with my crap, and I help him. It’s a team effort to keep one another sane, “okay, first of all, they never think they do anything wrong. Second, why is it affecting you so much? They pull this shit like every other week.”

“Because they kept me on the phone for over *two hours*. Two fucking hours of non stop talking about how ungrateful

you are, I almost snapped at them. If I could cut them out without it hurting you, I would.”

I feel awful, he shouldn't have to put up with our parents shit, and it's definitely not fair that he has to put up with it because of me.

“I appreciate you backing me up, I'll call them this weekend to try and appease them.” God I hate that they have me so under their thumb, “I'm sorry they're using you as the middle man.”

“Don't let them push you around please. I just wanted to call and give you the heads up that Satan one and Satan two might be blowing up your phone at some point soon.” I laugh at the nicknames he's given our parents, quite fitting if you ask me. “Oh, and what did your roommates think of the game the other night? I hope everything was to their liking.”

I almost want to tell him how much of a disaster it was, he's the one of the only people I can truly tell everything and anything to. But after a split second, I decide to keep my mouth shut. It's not going to end well if he thinks these boys hurt me, he'd be on the first flight here just to kick their ass's.

“It went well, the guys had a great time. Thanks again for getting those extra tickets for me, I really appreciate it.”

“Do the guys know I'm me yet?”

A laugh escapes me, “nope, no clue. But I promise I'll do it at some point, I just need more time.”

I can practically see the sad smile on his face. He's heard all about my adventures in high school with the fake friends and non-stop berating from my fellow classmates. I hope he knows it's not him, he's not the problem. I'm not ashamed that I'm related to Chris, not in the slightest, I just don't want to deal with the headache of other people not knowing how to handle themselves.

“Okay Angel, I gotta go but we'll talk soon okay?”

I don't even need to answer, he knows what I'm going to say before I even say it.



I love the guys, I really do, but I think they're scaring Steph.

I invited her over for dinner tonight, completely forgetting that I live with a pack of wild animals. These boys have way too much energy for people who just had a two hour hockey practice.

They're currently blasting music and playing some random ass video game I've never heard. August and I, however, are in the kitchen cooking for the rest of them like the parents we are.

Steph comes and wraps her hands around my shoulders from behind, she gets up onto her tiptoes and whispers in my ear, "these boys scare me. Help."

"Oh come on, they're not that bad" I laugh. "They're just really into kicking each other's butts. They'll calm down eventually, promise."

She backs away from me, hopping onto the counter to watch August and I work away, "that smells so fucking good. I can't wait to try."

"August's recipe, I'm just helping," I say.

"Really? Well I might need to have you cook for me more often if it tastes as good as it smells." She smiles shyly at him, and that look in her eyes can only mean one thing... She's flirting.

I suppress a smile of my own as I look up to see August blushing, stammering his way through a thank you like a first grader with a crush.

"Steph, can you let the others know that the food is almost ready? If they don't listen then just stand in front of the TV, they *probably* won't throw anything at you." She nods her head and walks away, giving me a chance to talk to August. He's watching her, he's totally fucking watching her right now.

"You're so into her" I tease.

“No I’m not” he rushes out, and strangely enough... I don’t believe him.

“Liar.” A devilish smirk takes over my face, “you were totally just checking her out, and I saw you blushing when she complimented your cooking.”

His face hardens and he turns his focus back onto the food, so I slap his hand with my wooden spoon to force his attention back to me. “You should go for it, she was flirting with you. I give you full permission to go after my best friend, but if you break her heart I’ll break you.”

His laugh booms through the house, and I’m a little offended. If I wanted to, I could hurt him. “Why would I go after her when I have you baby?” He tilts his head and plasters a smirk on his face, but I’m not buying into it.

It’s all just an act, he’s trying to deflect.

“Yeah, sure. Enough with the flirting dumbass, never going to happen. In all seriousness though, you should talk to her, she’s a great person, you’d really get along.”

He gives me a side eye before looking back up to Steph and then completely turning around... I won’t push him, at least not yet.

eight

CLAIRE

When I was younger, I thought that all hockey looked the same, but watching these boys play right now is making me think twice. All of them have the skills to make it to the pro's and succeed with hockey as a career.

I can notice small differences in the way they're playing, their turns are sharper, they're also more aware of any patterns they're creating and then changing those patterns before the other team catches on.

Maybe they'll finally realize that I'm not such a clueless idiot after all.

I laugh to myself when Steph shoots out of her seat as the guys steal the puck and make a break towards the other teams net. She's really getting into this game.

Lucas passes the puck to Blair –predictable– and then Blair manages to score the last goal of the game. The entire Livler U student section jumps up and roars with cheers as the team celebrates their first official win of the season. I'm so happy they won. Not only because I would have gotten ragged on if they lost, but also because I don't want to see what these man-babies look like when they throw temper tantrums.

Chris always takes it hard, so I can only imagine my roommates aren't much different.

God, I hated saying that.

Steph and I make our way to the back parking lot, and as we walk I hear my phone ring... it's my mother.

Steph sees the caller ID and looks at me with a worried expression. She knows the majority of the shit with my parents, so she knows I've been avoiding them for a while.

I give her a half hearted smile and take a couple steps away. I trust her, but I don't think she needs to hear how ugly

this is going to get. Taking a deep breath, I answer the phone “hey mom.”

“Why haven’t you answered any of my messages?”

Alright then, no ‘hi Claire, how are you? How’s school been? Are you still enjoying figure skating?’ Just straight into me being the disappointment of the family.

“I’m sorry mom, I’ve just been super busy with everything and I really needed to focus on school and skating.”

A tight laugh comes from the other end of the line, “your brother is a professional hockey player with a full schedule and even he manages to talk to his parents every once in a while.”

Yeah, but he didn’t have his parents scream at him for his overall standing in the National Figure Skating Committee. I placed second –fucking second– out of thousands of skaters, and that still wasn’t good enough for them.

I can never please their overly high expectations.

“I’m sorry. I’ll try to call more often, I’ll make more of an effort.”

“You better. Now, what’s this I hear about you coaching a hockey team?”

Part of me wants to lie and tell her it’s nothing, that it was one time and she doesn’t have to worry about it anymore.

“Tony asked me–”

The loudest, rudest, most irritating laugh rips through the phone, causing me to flinch. My mother is laughing at me like I’m a fucking idiot.

I look up to Steph as she continues to watch me closely, worry and fear written across her face. We both see the guys exiting the rink at the same time, and she waves me over. We both know I don’t want to deal with all their questions, so we jump in the car and rip out of there.

“They must be really terrible if they’re asking you for help,” my mother says, “I never liked that man.”

I know you don't mom, you make that very clear. She knows that he was a better parent than she ever was, and she hates him for it.

“Anyway, gotta go sweetheart, important people to see and talk to. Kisses.”

My hand collapses into my lap, I feel so fucking defeated every time I talk to her or my father. They're just so draining, like they suck every ounce of happiness out of me any chance they get.

Steph knows better than to ask me a long list of questions, so instead she just looks at me and waits for me to share. “It's fine, nothing new in the Taylor family.”

I can tell she wants to apologize to me, she wants to express how bad she feels that I've been dealt a shitty hand in life. It wasn't always like this though, my parents used to love me, they used to be supportive and kind and caring. They still are sometimes, I can still see my old parents in them... I just don't know what I did to make them hate me so much.

“Can we just go back to my place, I need some time to myself” I mumble.



You know what fucking sucks? When your roommates throw a god damn party and don't invite you. They invited half the fucking school over and didn't even tell me, they didn't invite me to a party in my own fucking house.

I've had a shit night, between that stupid phone-call with my mom and the texts from my dad about all these events I have to attend –and me fighting to not go– I want to crawl into a hole and die. Now add on the fact that I'm probably the only person on campus not attending this thing... I'm basically ready to explode.

When I say explode, I don't mean I'm going to go down there and start screaming at people. No, I mean I'm going to

sit in my room and cry my fucking eyes out because I'm so violently alone in this world that it hurts.

So that's what I do, I sit and cry and wallow in my own self-pity until I literally can't cry anymore.

Maybe I'm not actually upset about not being invited to a party, and maybe it's just the final breaking point, and maybe I actually just want someone to keep me company instead of spending my Friday night completely alone like a loser.

It only takes one text and Steph is instantly face-timing me.

"Who am I murdering?" she asks.

I laugh softly, "no one. Can you come over though?"

She scrunches up her face, "what's all that noise?"

"Party, the guys have a bunch of people over right now." She hangs up the phone, leaving me in the darkness of my room, presumably already on her way here.

Those boys have no idea what's coming their way, my best friend is pissed...

nine

LUCAS

Music bounces off the walls, people scream the lyrics of whatever popular party song is currently playing, and I'm having the best night ever.

A massive win for the Livler team, and an awesome party?

Life is good.

The guys sit around me, planted in various positions around the couch. Davis and Blair both have girls sitting on their laps, clearly enjoying whatever attention those girls are ready to give them, while I indulge in the cheapest tequila the local liquor store had to offer.

A couple girls have tried their luck with me, but no matter how interested I am in whatever they have to offer, I say no. How the hell am I supposed to enjoy the company of a girl when I know Claire is right next door, probably ready to bust in and cockblock me the first chance she gets.

I can't even remember the last time I said no to a girl offering to get down on her knees for me, or do other unholy things with absolutely no desire for me to return the favour.

Claire is the ultimate fun-sponge.

"I really feel like someone should go check on Claire. She's been hiding in her room the entire night and she won't answer my texts." August says, showing me his phone. I can see all the messages he's sent her asking if she's okay, but there's no response.

You thinking of joining us?

There's free boozeeeee

C'mon it's actually really fun

You okay?

Claireeeeeeeee

“I tried going upstairs earlier and she didn’t answer, she probably just wants to be left alone” Davis chimes in.

The chick sucking on his neck finally comes up for air, “You live with a girl?”

“Shhh darling, it’s fine” Davis coos before shoving his tongue down her throat.

I guess I’ve gotten so used to Claire sticking her nose in places it doesn’t belong, that I just assumed she would be down here somewhere. Although, it does feel weird that I haven’t seen her, she’s normally so social with us.

Just then, I hear the front door bang open. Steph comes marching in with this angry little look on her face and stops right in front of us.

“You guys fucking suck” she seethes. “Like really fucking suck.”

Miller chokes on his drink, spitting it all over the floor in front of him, “what the hell did I do?” We all look at him, why is he only including himself in that sentence?

He shrugs in response, “I’m the good one, but it makes sense that you guys would be the ones to fuck up. You’re all dipshits.”

Fair.

Steph rolls her eyes, “Claire is upstairs, all alone, and you’re all down here partying it up?”

“Hey, we tried to talk to-” August starts to say.

“Let me tell you a secret about her” Steph interrupts, “you can’t just ask her if she’s okay, she’ll lie right through her teeth. You have to show your face and show her that you actually care and want to hear what she has to say.”

“Why is that our duty though? Pretty girl chose to stay upstairs” I say, annoyed that we’re getting reamed out because

Claire isn't in the mood to party.

I don't think I've ever seen someone as angry as Steph when the words leave my mouth. She's so small but damn can that girl scare the shit out of anyone she wants.

"You're so thick headed St. James. She's been upstairs upset for hours, and she didn't say it but I could tell that she wished she was invited tonight. It actually would have helped, she could have used this to blow off steam after her bitch of a mother went off on her earlier." She's breathing harder now, taking slow steps towards me as she speaks until she's an inch away from my face. "Her relationship with her parents is strained, they don't really get along. She doesn't like to talk about it but just know that it's slowly killing her."

I know the feeling.

Steph storms off, up the stairs to check on Claire while the rest of us sit down here feeling slightly guilty. She isn't my best friend in this whole world, but we should be making more of an effort to include her... even if that does kill me to say.

The last thing I want is a mopey Claire walking around the house and bringing the mood down for everyone.

"Anyone else feel like their balls were just chopped off?" Blair mutters.



It's been an hour since Steph went upstairs, and for a while there I thought that maybe she would bring Claire down with her, but I haven't seen either of them.

Blair looks at me, "maybe you should go up there and ask them to come join us."

"Why me?" I ask. Wouldn't it make more sense for someone who actually likes Claire to go ask her?

"Because, she'd probably think the rest of us are inviting her out of pity, you're the no bullshit guy. She'd believe it more if it came from you."

Why do I get the feeling that my best friend is trying to set me up right now?

With a sigh, I get up from my seat and walk towards the stairs. I'd rather just get this over with than have to deal with Blair and his disappointment for the rest of the night.

I look up the staircase, debating on whether Steph will kick my ass the moment I step foot into Claire's room or not. I gather there's about a ten percent chance that I'll make it out alive.

There's a small sound coming from her room, which causes me to stop before I knock. It sounds like someone's crying, and the first thing that comes to mind is that she's upset we didn't invite her. I mean come on, we're all adults here... we don't need to be acting like children.

"Steph, I just can't deal with them anymore, they're driving me insane. My parents fucking hate me and I don't know what to do about it" Claire sobs.

Never mind then, I'm *way* off.

"I know babe, but you have enough saved up right? You can cut them off now?"

I crack the door slightly, looking inside to see Claire and Steph sitting on the floor. The two of them look so sad, like they're stuck, like they're trying to figure out a way to escape.

"You know it's not that simple, I can't just cut them off... they're my parents. Besides, what would that do to Chris" Claire says as she shakes her head.

I lean forward, trying to get a better view when I accidentally bang my elbow on the door frame and both of them snap their heads in my direction.

No going back now.

"Sorry" I half smile, "I didn't mean to interrupt. I just came up to see if you two were thinking of joining us?"

Steph glares at me, clearly seeing through my little act, and Claire turns her face away from me to wipe whatever tears were sitting on her cheeks. She turns back and gives me a

smile, “I’m not feeling up to it, but I’m sure Steph would love to hangout.”

I stand in the doorway, feeling kind of awkward.

“Are you sure?” Steph asks wryly.

Claire nods her head, urging her best friend to go have fun even though she’s clearly in a rough spot.

They’re a lot like Blair and I, both of us would sacrifice our own feelings to help the other, to make sure the other has fun.

Steph hesitates but gets up anyway, and as she walks past me I get the dirtiest look known to man.

When she’s finally far enough down the hall, I turn back to Claire, “are you okay?” I ask.

“Nope” she snuffles, “but I will be.”

There’s that fucking wall, that wall that she always puts up and forces between her and everything that could ever hurt her. This girl really doesn’t like being vulnerable.

I kick at nothing, staring down at my feet, “I know I’m not the person you want to confide in or whatever, but you can talk to me if you need to.”

A startled laugh comes from her side of the room, “I don’t think I’ll ever confide in you. You’d probably go telling everyone my darkest secrets the first chance you get.”

What the fuck? Does she actually think that low of me?

“Fine then, I was just trying to be nice, you didn’t have to be such a bitch about it” I snap.

“The *last* thing I think of you as... is nice.” Her tone is cold, rough, the completely opposite of the kind and caring girl I’ve known this past week.

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

We stare at one another for a few tense beats before I storm out and slam the door behind me. I was trying to be nice to

her, and instead she bites my head off and makes me feel stupid.

God she pisses me off.

ten

CLAIRE

I stare out my window, watching the leaves blow in the wind and light flickering as it streams through the trees. The leaves are dancing against the sunlight, creating beautiful patterns on the floor of my room.

Things are peaceful, simple.

If I could hide in my room all day and be at peace like this all the time, I would be truly happy.

But that's not reality. Reality is knowing that no matter what you do, your parents will always find something to hate about you. Reality is knowing that the moment you show your face, you're going to feel guilty about losing your temper on Lucas last night.

My reality is that I'm a mess and I can't do anything about it.

I turn over, expecting to see Steph's stupid face in bed next to me, but instead I'm met with nothing. Where the hell is she?

I check the clock sitting on my bedside table, it's only eleven, so I'm going to assume that she's downstairs already.

I have mixed feelings about her disappearance, on one hand she isn't assaulting me with a pillow and pissing me off first thing in the morning, but on the other... it means I can't use her as my shield when I walk downstairs.

I'm really hoping that her and August hit it off, they're hands down some of the best people I know, and I can only assume they had at least a couple conversations last night.

My bedroom door busts open, and I hear loud footsteps as someone runs over to my bed. I throw the blankets over my head and groan as they jump on top of me and start to suffocate me.

“Come on Claire bear, it’s time to get up. You’ve slept enough and we’re all looking forward to seeing that wonderful face of yours.” Blair’s voice bounces off my walls, definitely way too loud for someone I assume is hungover.

I groan again in response, trying to hint at the fact that I am not ready to leave the comfort of my own bed, but instead he rips the blankets off of me and jumps on top of me like I’m a fucking bouncy house. “If I get up will you stop heaving your body weight on top of me and leave me the fuck alone?” I snap.

“Well, *someones* testy this morning” he laughs.

Maybe the court will be nice to me, maybe they wont sentence me to life in prison for murdering him if I give them the whole story.

“Shut up and get off of me you big oaf.”

He finally stops and helps me out of bed. Grabbing a hold of my hand, he swings it back and forth while dragging me downstairs.

I’m met with Steph, August, Miller and Lucas all pigging out on takeout from Estellas, the diner that Steph works at. She makes decent money, she doesn’t really need it though, Her parents are pretty wealthy, but she likes working.

She is far from spoiled, her parents did a good job raising her. She’s grateful for the things she has and works hard no matter what. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her take something for granted. She works hard for what she has, and seeing her bust her butt to make sure she doesn’t have to rely on anyone, makes me proud.

I, on the other hand, don’t work. My parents don’t really like me, but they still send me an allowance every month. They’re more worried about their reputation than anything, so if someone found out their daughter was sporting anything less than designer clothing, they’d be embarrassed. I don’t really care about that kind of stuff, but it’s nice to have it stored off in my savings.

I see a couple extra boxes and take one, setting it on the counter before grabbing a red-bull from the fridge. I crack it open and take a sip, eyeing the group while they eye me right back. “What?” I ask, taking another sip to busy myself through the silence.

“How ya feeling this morning?” Lucas asks, a little too smug for my liking.

I hate that he’s making light of my bad mood yesterday. He should be pissed at me, not joking around and treating it like it was nothing.

“I feel fine thanks.” I try to keep my face neutral but I know that I definitely look a little annoyed, “I just need some food in me.”

The guy infuriates me. Like crawls under my skin, seeps into my bones, kind of infuriation. He’s just always so smug, constantly trying to prove a point and being a complete smart ass.

I open the takeout box, seeing the best fucking breakfast in town, and thanking my lucky stars that my best friend knows me so well. I have zero interest in talking to anyone right now, so I shove as much food into my mouth as possible and hope to god everyone ignores me.

Lucas is a dick, and while I’m sure he’s already told everyone about our little conversation last night... I don’t really want it to come up while I’m in the room.

The front door opens and closes, whoever it was leaving before they could be seen. I can only assume it was Davis’s girl from last night.

I don’t know what the fuck he was doing to her but they were loud as fuck, and by the time five in the morning rolled around, I was wide awake and trying my hardest not to lose my mind. I was slamming my face so hard into the pillows on my bed, I’m surprised that I don’t have a concussion right now.

Wait... five. Steph wasn’t in bed with me at five, and she wasn’t with me this morning. I assumed she had slept with me

because, well, there's no reason for her not- holy shit.

I gasp and drop the fork I was holding, sending it clattering to the floor. I turn my wide eyes to Steph and stare at her, there's no way. Everyone gives me a weird look –and to be fair I would too. I will be getting some fucking information out of that girl as soon as I possibly can.

“Sorry” I say, bending over to pick up my fork, “I just thought of something I forgot for school.”

There are so many things running through my head right now, and I don't want to make assumptions but the girl isn't giving me many options to choose from. I think it's safe to say she didn't sleep on the couch, I mean she would fight Lucas before she let herself sleep in the living room. I know for a fact that she wouldn't crawl into bed with Lucas, and seeing as Davis had a girl spend the night, he's out too. Blair is a gentleman and would offer to give Steph his bed, so would Miller... but I think out of all the options, August is the safest bet.

Speaking of Davis and his sexual adventures last night, the stupid fuck is finally joining the rest of us. I'm genuinely considering throwing this can at his big stupid head.

Look, I get it, I really do... he's a college guy and I don't expect him to change his ways just because I'm living with him now. But for the love of god, he could at least try to be quiet.

Scratch that, I'm no longer thinking about it, I down the rest of my red-bull and chuck the can at the back of his head.

He turns around, rubbing the spot with furrowed brows, “what the fuck was that for Claire?” He grumbles.

“You woke me up at five in the fucking morning, and kept me up for hours with your god damn fuckathon. Next time can you be fucking quiet?” I scream. I swear this mother fucker is going to get a foot up his ass in two seconds because he has the audacity to smirk at me. This isn't a fucking joke.

“I can't help that I'm a good lay Claire bear, the girl was feeling good.” He shrugs his shoulders, causing Blair and

Lucas to burst into a fit of laughter.

I glare at them both, and turn back to Davis, “then slap your hand over her mouth or something, I don’t exactly want to hear her chanting your name over and over again the whole night.”

“What if *you* were the one chanting my name?” he winks, blowing me a kiss.

That’s it. I’m kicking his ass.

I jump from my spot in the kitchen, and he instantly starts running in the other direction, laughing his ass off. I chase him into the living room and tackle him to the ground. I sit on his chest, pinning his arms under my knees and hold his face in my hands, squishing his cheeks together.

“Make another smart-ass comment and I will not hesitate to kick your ass.” I move in closer to his face, trying to hide my smile, “am I clear?” He nods his head and I roll off of him.

His comments don’t actually bother me, and yeah he can be a little sexual sometimes, but I don’t think he would actually try anything.

Blair comes over and wraps his arms around my shoulders, “I think you’re fitting in quite nicely.”

I finally let go of the smile I’ve been holding in as I watch my friends. Laughing together, arguing, talking about stupid shit... almost like we’ve known each other for years.



I’m wrapped up in a blanket on the couch with Steph, watching a movie. The credits start to roll and I turn to her, “can I ask you a question?”

“What’s up?” she says, pulling out her phone.

“Where did you end up sleeping last night?”

She looks up slightly, freezing for a moment before her cheeks blaze bright red. She puts her phone down and looks at

me, “I slept in August’s room.” Her voice is soft, like if she says it quiet enough then it won’t be true or I won’t hear her.

I squeal, “no fucking way! No fucking way!” She tries to shush me but I won’t let her, “no, we are not going to just breeze by this, I want all the details.”

“It’s not a big deal, nothing happened, so get those nasty thoughts out of your head right now.” I giggle at how well she knows me, “we did sleep in the same bed but there was nothing romantic or sexual about it. You were asleep and I didn’t want to wake you up, so when I got upstairs and he offered I just took it.”

I can’t lie, I’m a little disappointed that there wasn’t at least a little kissing, but baby steps are good.

She can deny it all she wants, but I know that she likes August. I can see it in her eyes when she looks at him, or the way she blushes when I mention his name. There is a crush growing, and I think she should go for it. She hides her feelings from people because she’s scared of getting hurt, but August would never hurt her like that.

“I believe you, but can you do me one little favour please?” I ask, “can you just admit that you have a little crush on him?”

Her eyes grow wide and she blushes even darker than before. Biting her lip she thinks about it for a second before nodding her head.

I lose it and squeal again, jumping on top of her and shaking her shoulders while she laughs.

“My best friend has a crush!” I sing over and over again, laughing along with her.

Just then the door swings open, we both jump from our spots on the couch and Lucas gives us a confused look, “I don’t even want to know” he mutters.



“Hey, where are you off to?” Miller asks from the kitchen.

“Just heading off to the rink.” I’m really hoping the guys don’t know that it’s closed right now, I don’t want to have to make up some excuse.

“Isn’t it closed?” Blair questions.

Fuck.

“Yeah, but I managed to convince them to let me have ice time tonight.” Lie. The rink keys sitting in my pocket feel heavier, like the universe is trying to remind me how many lies are piling on top of one another.

The nice thing about your parents owning the university arena? You have access twenty-four-seven. None of the employees bat an eye at me, especially if I come in at odd hours. When I’m there after close it’s just a security guard or two, and they mind their own business.

“Do you want company?” Miller looks at me expectantly, and as much as I would like to spend more time with him, I need to clear my head.

“No, thanks though. I just need to get out and do my own thing, next time though” I say, smiling softly at him.

I close the front door behind me as I walk out, getting into the driver’s seat of my car and tossing my bag on the passenger side. I rest my head on the steering wheel and blow out a deep breath, I feel so drained.

I have the windows down as I drive, letting the cool night air whirl through the car and hit my skin, relaxing me.

The thoughts about my parents, my brother, the guys, school, all mix around in my head like an awful nightmare. I try to push them back but they won’t leave, so when my skates finally hit the ice, I let all of the emotions flow through me. I let every thought consume me as I glide across the cold surface.

No matter how much I hate my parents, I hate myself even more for caring about what they think. I just want them to be proud of me, I want them to hug me and tell me how proud

they are of my accomplishments. That's why I push myself to my limits every practice, every damn competition. I burn myself out because that's the only way for me to be good enough for them.

I just want the love I used to have. I want to feel happy when my moms name pops up on my phone, I want to be excited when she calls me. I want my mom to be my mom and not just some woman who provides me with financial support and criticism.

I don't want to hide who my brother is, I want to be openly proud of him without fear that others are going to use me. I want him to come to my competitions and not have to hide in the corner so he won't be recognized. I want to go out to dinner with him and not have fifty people come up to us.

I want a normal relationship with my family.

I want to be appreciated for once, I want to do what makes me happy and not have to think about everyone else. I want to be unapologetically me, and have people who love every piece.

I'm so thankful for Steph and Tony, but I want to have a group of friends I can be completely honest with, I don't want to be a burden to them.

I don't want to live in fear anymore, I don't want to wear this mask of happiness around everyone. I want to be *seen*, I want to be *heard*.

I come crashing down to the ice when I wobble on the landing of a jump. I don't even try to get up, I just sit there, letting the cold feeling sink deep into my bones.

I let the tears fall from my eyes and drip onto the ice, I let the sobs wrack out of me, I let myself fall apart in the one place I feel safe. I look up, closing my eyes and let out a gut wrenching scream.

I want to be okay again.

eleven

LUCAS

I've never seen anyone skate with such precision and power, it looks like she's putting everything she has into it. She's so graceful as she glides across the ice, and the way she can launch herself into the air is incredible.

I know we shouldn't be here right now, but how can we not be curious? The girl was coming to an empty rink, and we barely know anything about her.

We're all staring at her in awe, watching her glide against the ice... and then she crashes to the ground.

August jolts, moving to go help her but Davis holds him back, "we aren't supposed to be here" he whispers. When August creeps back down, we hear it. Claire screams.

It's so loud, so filled with pain that it makes me want to puke. Her body shakes as she cries, sitting on the ice while the sound echoes against the blank walls.

I look to the others as we slide our backs down the brick underneath the windows. I can see the pain in August's eyes, Miller looks like he's about to sob, Davis and Blair sit with blank expressions.

"We really shouldn't be here right now," Miller chokes out.

None of us move, we all stay rooted to our spots in silence. I feel my stomach twist, I can tell that she's filled with sadness and anger. That phone call with her mom must have really done a number on her.

After what feels like forever, Blair finally gets up and starts walking away. The rest of us follow him to the parking lot where we get into Davis's car, and the entire ride home is silent.

We're all sitting in the living room, complete silence taking over as I think things through.

Steph told us the relationship Claire has with her parents isn't good, but based on what just happened, I would say it's worse than 'not good'.

"We do not speak of what just happened," August says, "not to anyone. We weren't supposed to see that and for all she knows we didn't, so everything has to be normal when she gets home. Got it?"

We all nod our heads in agreement, but continue to sit in silence anyway.

The door swings open and Claire comes in with her skates hung over her shoulder. She has four boxes of pizza stacked up in her hands, looking like nothing happened.

"Y'all want pizza?" she asks, her smile beaming.

If I hadn't seen what happened at the rink, I would think she's perfectly fine... but that's not the case. Her eyes, they're like the window to her real feelings. I can see through that stupid facade, I can see that she's putting on this brave face for us.

I shoot a look at August and he raises his eyebrows at me, a warning that I need to keep my shit together and act normal. I take a deep breath before getting up and grabbing a slice, followed by the others as we sit around the table, trying to be the regular guys she knows.

I have my bets on Miller cracking first, he's barely looked at her since she got home, and is eating pizza like a five year old who just had a meltdown.

Blair is chatting with Claire while Davis pretends to listen and act interested. August has his phone out texting someone, and I am mulling over every thought inside my head as I try to figure her out.

She's like this puzzle I can't quite put together, every time I think I have all the pieces put together, I realize there's one missing and restart. At first I thought she was this annoying, sarcastic, in-over her head rando who was being forced into our lives. Then I thought she was a bubbly, kind, overdramatic, sarcastic girl who was just trying to fit into our

house. Now I see her as this girl putting on a mask for all of those around her, just to keep things simple. I don't even know if I've got all the pieces this time, but I'm sure I'll find out soon enough when she throws another curve ball and says something none of us are expecting.

Miller scrapes his chair back, scaring all of us, and throws his plate on the counter. I hear him sniffle then dart upstairs, leaving all of us alone.

Claire looks confused, "is everything okay with Miller? Did I say something wrong?"

"I'm not sure," I lie, "but I'll go check on him."

I slowly push away from the table, stacking my plate on top of his before walking up to his room. I lightly knock before opening the door, and see him sitting at his desk, face in his hands, while he cries.

Now I'm not one to say a guy is a bitch if he cries, especially Miller. That kid may be emotional but he's a baddass. He cares about his friends and has no issue backing us up when it really counts, but right now he's being a bitch, not because he's crying, but because he has to keep it together in front of Claire.

He looks up to me with red rimmed eyes and rosy cheeks, "I can't do it man. I can't just sit there and watch her act like everything's fine."

"I know, but maybe she just needed to have a moment. Let go of some pent up emotions and then move on." I don't even know if I fully believe what I'm saying, but I'm trying to. I pat Miller's back and kneel down in front of him, he knows I'm always here for him but sometimes he needs a little reminder.

"She needs someone, someone to talk to about this shit because even though we're here, she won't tell us" he cries. "She's got Steph but she's not here all the time, and God knows she can't talk to her parents because they seem to be the root of all this shit."

"I know man, I'm sure she'll open up to us at some point. She's known us for a week, you just gotta give her time."

Miller cares for her, but we can't force her to trust us. We can't force her to be completely open about her life, or her family.

I leave Miller with his thoughts, hoping that maybe he'll calm down enough to come and join the rest of us later.



I'm going to kill her, she's been giggling for the past fifteen minutes. I'm trying to focus on getting notes done for class this week and she's giggling her ass off over –well I don't know what, but it's annoying.

I finally break after five more minutes and slam her door open. I was ready to yell at her, but when I see her and August sitting on the bed watching something on her laptop, I stop.

I choke on my words as August clears his throat. He asks what I'm doing and all I can think to say in response is, “uh... can you guys quiet down a little? I'm trying to get school done and it's really distracting.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Claire smiles awkwardly.

I slowly back out of the room and close the door, frowning my brows and shaking my head. They were both so calm, acting like it was the most natural thing in the world.

I walk into Blair's room, needing to talk to someone about how weird August and Claire are. He's sitting on his bed, headphones in and reading something from his textbook. I take a seat next to him and close the book.

“Hey! What the fuck was that for?” He asks, ripping out his headphones.

“Claire and August are giggling in her room, basically cuddling in bed watching something” I blurt out.

Blair's eyebrows skyrocket and his eyes widen, “isn't he into her friend?” he asks.

“That's what I thought too.”

I know August tries to hide it but it's so painfully obvious that he's into Steph. The guy can barely keep himself from drooling whenever she's around, so why the fuck would he be flirting with Claire?

"Maybe they're just close?" He says hesitantly, but even *I* know he's not fully convinced.

"I don't think so."

Blair shrugs his shoulders and gives me a half hearted smile, neither of us really know what to say. I doubt he's just friends with her, there has to be more to it than that. I've never seen him become friends with someone that quickly... like ever.

He hates everyone, and yeah he's friends with us but it took him a couple months to warm up to the group.

I let Blair get back to his studying and head back to my room, left to my own thoughts and the twisting facts in my brain. Between the things that happened a couple days ago, and the way August is acting, I'm left with a boat load of information and no clue what to do with it.

I mean, August said to act like everything's normal, but he's being all lovey-dovey with her... that's the opposite of normal.

I have no idea what this girl is doing to us, but I don't like the fact that my thoughts have been completely consumed by her. I need to keep focus on what matters and not let her ruin everything I've worked towards my entire life. Hockey has been my dream since I was a little boy, but after seeing Chris Taylor drafted to Dallas, that became my number one choice for teams.

I made a promise to my mom that I would finish college before entering the draft, and I intend to keep that promise. That woman is the reason why I'm here today. She raised me with good values, and worked two jobs so I wouldn't have to worry about tuition for college. She's a badass and I love that woman with my whole heart.

I intend to repay everything she's ever done for me when I make it to the pros. I'm going to spoil that woman with everything she's ever wanted, but the first thing I'm doing is getting her out of that god awful apartment she lives in, and then I'm paying off any debt she has. I need to stay on track, because she's has gone through hell and back, she's put herself in danger more times than I can count just so I could live in blissful ignorance.

Hockey is the only thing I want to do in life, and I'll be damned if it all gets ripped away because I'm wrapped up in Claire's drama.



It's the middle of the night, the house is quiet and everyone is asleep, or at least I thought everyone was. I enter the kitchen and see Claire standing half naked with her back towards me. She has this long t-shirt on, barely covering the tight boxer shorts she's wearing.

I feel my cheeks heat up as she turns around, rubbing her eyes and staring at me with this cute little confused look on her face. Claire leans against the sink as I walk over to the fridge and grab a bottle of water. When I turn around she's sitting on the counter with a glass of water in her hands... just watching me.

We sit in uncomfortable silence for a moment before she finally speaks up, "I didn't wake you, did I?" Her voice is so soft and sweet, but with that raw rasp people get when they just wake up.

"No no, I just finished doing some school work. I was up anyway" I respond quickly, scrambling to fill the silence.

She nods her head, taking a slow sip from her water while I play with my bottle cap. The silence is suffocating, it's charged with tension and I fucking hate it.

When I finally go to speak, she does as well.

"Oh sorry."

“Shit, my bad.”

“You can go first,” she says, a light smile dancing on her lips.

“Why are you up so late?” I feel uncomfortable asking this question, it feels weird trying to force conversation with her.

She plays with the hem of her shirt, looking away from me and giving me the opportunity to take in her long, smooth legs. “I couldn’t sleep, thought I’d come down for some water. I would have put some pants on if I thought anyone else was gonna be down here” she says as she lets out a tight laugh.

“It’s all good, not the first time I’ve seen a girl half naked” I say easily, but after a beat I realize how that sounds.

“Such a playboy” she says between giggles, shaking her head as her hair falls in front of her face.

She really doesn't care that she's half naked in front of me?

“I will admit though, I am a little embarrassed right now, but we live together so it was bound to happen at some point right? Besides, it’s not like anything’s going to happen between any of us, Tony would chop off your balls with a hockey skate if any of you tried anything.”

“How presumptuous of you to think we’d even *want* to try something with you” I say mockingly.

“Touché.” She raises her glass towards me before taking another sip.

“What were you going to ask?”

She swallows before answering, “oh, I was just wondering if you’re always trying to figure everyone out or if it’s just me.”

Her question shocks me, this girl is crazy observant. I didn’t even know she caught me trying to do that, “what do you mean?”

“Well, you’re always staring at me like if you look long enough then the answers will fall right in front of you. Do you

do that with everyone or just me?” Even though it’s dark, I can see the light blush tinting her cheeks.

“You’re a mystery, there’s still so much to find out about you. You’re always throwing curve balls at me, but I’ll figure you out one day pretty girl.”

I get up from my seat and walk out of the kitchen, leaving the conversation on an ominous note. She makes my brain whirl, but in some ways I don’t mind it. As long as I can keep my shit together long enough to get drafted, I have no problem seeing where this girl leads us and what she’s going to reveal next.

twelve

CLAIRE

I'm sitting in the living room with Lucas, Blair, Davis and August. We're watching game tapes to prepare for their upcoming games, the teams we face off against next are our two closest rivals, so it's safe to say we have our work cut out for us.

Miller walks into the room with a pained look on his face. He's been so weird these last couple days and I can't figure out why. Usually he's quiet, but not *this* quiet.

Years of analyzing my parents, reading their mannerisms and tone of voice has made me especially sensitive to the little things that change in people. Even the slightest difference can set me on edge... it's a blessing and a curse.

I can tell when someones sad, or when they're about to get violently angry, and that's all great for self preservation... but when you read so much into nothing, it takes a toll on you.

"I need to talk to you about something serious" he says, "and I need you to not freak out on me."

My stomach knots, I can barely hear anything over the sound of my own heartbeat. The pounding in my ears grows louder and louder with every passing moment.

"We were at the rink yesterday, we saw and heard everything. I'm so sorry, I know you said not to go and we should have listened to you but we were so curious and we just wanted to know what your skating looked like and why you were at the rink after it closed." He pauses to catch his breath before continuing, "I'm so sorry Claire, it was eating me alive trying to act like everything was fine when it clearly wasn't. I couldn't just sit back and watch you act like everything was fine."

Time stops. I mean it actually stops. It feels like hours go by while I sit in this stool looking at him. My face stays flat, no expression forming as the emotions and feelings rush into

me like a massive tidal wave. They saw me skate, they disregarded my privacy, they ignored my request for space and to be alone... they heard me scream and saw me sobbing. They all acted like they hadn't seen anything –hadn't witnessed my breakdown– for days. They saw me at my most vulnerable, they invaded my safe space, they've taken away any ounce of safety I feel when I'm alone on the ice.

“You're fucking kidding me right?”

“No, I'm so sorry. I just want to let you know that I'm here to talk if you need to, I don't want you to think that you're alone when you aren't.”

“Stop apologizing” I scream, “I don't want to talk and I don't need you guys rushing to my aid.”

I'm shaking, but I can't tell if it's from fear or from anger. They took away the one place I felt safe, *my* place. The rink is where I go when I need to clear my head, somewhere I can truly be alone.

“I asked for one goddamn thing, to be left *alone*, and you guys couldn't listen? You couldn't give me an hour of my own time to get my shit together?”

They all stare at me, looking guilty and ashamed... good. They should feel like shit.

“I needed one fucking hour to just be by myself. You do realize you just took whatever privacy I had left and threw it out the window, right?”

“Okay, just calm down. Let's talk about this for a second” August says.

I spin around, storming up to him. I have to physically hold myself back from slapping him across the face. “No. I will not calm down. I have the right to be pissed right now.”

“You're right, you do have the right to be pissed, but can you sit down for a second so we can talk about this please?” Davis begs.

I take a deep breath and sit across the room from them, “you have five minutes to apologize and explain yourselves.”

“We were wrong, we shouldn’t have followed you,” August says.

I scoff, “obviously.”

He tilts his head, “but... we let our curiosity get the best of us. I know it was wrong, but we’re all curious about you Claire. We don’t know you very well, and we still have a lot of questions. I’m really sorry for what we did, and I promise to never violate your privacy ever again.”

“I feel awful, I’m sorry I didn’t respect your wishes. I’ll do anything to make it up to you” Miller adds.

“I hope you can forgive us, we didn’t realize it was going to be something so intimate. I would have never gone if I thought it was so serious.” Davis looks down at his hands, playing with the silver ring around his finger.

“I’m sorry too” Lucas says passively. Why is he so hot and cold all the time?

“We will never do it again” Blair finally chimes in.

I take a deep breath. I can understand them being curious, but being so raw in front of other people isn’t really something I do. Especially because these guys have no clue what I’ve been through.

“I forgive you, but for the love of god, when I say I need to be alone... I mean it.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have forgiven them so easily, but seeing the pain in their eyes and the regret in their voices was too much. I don’t ever want to be the reason why other people are hurting or upset, I’ve been on the receiving end of rage and hate... it sucks. I refuse to turn into my parents, I won’t cause unnecessary harm, I won’t hold a grudge, and I *definitely* won’t be a hateful person. I can’t be the cause of someone’s pain, I can’t be the reason why someone else cries.



We're acting like nothing just happened, which I'm thankful for, I don't want to be stuck in an awkward silence.

We're playing Call of Duty, and I'm absolutely dominating. The guys aren't bad but holy shit they aren't good either. I laugh as I kill Davis for the eighth time, *he* isn't laughing though, he looks like he's about to punch me in the face.

He tosses his controller on the couch, throws me over his shoulder and starts spinning like his life depends on it before running over to the kitchen sink, "apologize for laughing at my misfortune or you get soaked."

"Not a chance, I will never apologize for being better than you at video games."

He bends down and puts my head in the sink, then turns the tap onto cold. I scream as the water runs down the back of my head, "Davis I swear to god I will fucking run you into the ground at practice tonight if you don't get me out of this sink right now you psychopath!"

Everyone is keeled over with laughter while Davis puts me down and my wet hair flops in front of my face. I look like a wet fucking dog right now, and as I part my hair out of my face I storm over to everyone sitting on the couch. I shake my head, splattering water all over them. They scream and yell at me, but I don't fucking care, they deserve it.

"Serves you right, if I'm wet, y'all will be too." I instantly regret my words because of course the first thing that jumps into their dirty ass minds is something... well, *dirty*. "That's not what I meant and you know it," but it's too late, they've already thought it and now I'm doomed.

"Claire wants to get us wet!" Blair laughs.

"She's a nasty one, boys" Davis chimes in.

Fuck my life.



Tony leads the team in some passing drills while I grab some water, but I notice that he's getting frustrated with the team cause they aren't following orders or taking his advice. I skate over to Tony, grabbing the stick out of his hand and stealing the puck from Lucas.

"Give that back! I was in the middle of a drill," he shrieks.

I get behind the net and move the puck back and forth, "y'all don't want to listen to direction? Maybe having me kick your ass's will change your minds."

I can see the rage build on their faces, I toss a glance over to Tony and he smiles. He's proud.

A couple of them come after me and I deek them out, moving the puck between their legs and around their feet. For college hockey players, they really do suck at doing what they do best... especially against someone who hasn't done this in months.

August and Davis step up, August manages to get the puck away from me but I steal it right back. Lucas appears and hip bumps me, hitting me just hard enough to knock me off balance. I smirk as he tries to skate away with the puck, jabbing my stick out to trip him. He falls to the ground and groans in pain.

"You wanna play dirty? I can play dirty too." I stick out my hand to help him up, but he pulls me down onto the ice and I crash into his body.

I slap him on the chest while he laughs, "I hate you."

thirteen

LUCAS

I'm downstairs eating breakfast when the front door opens. Steph comes strutting in like she owns the fucking place. I don't know what it was like when Claire lived with Coach, but knocking is kind of a thing you should do when you're walking into a home that isn't yours.

"Hey" she says gleefully.

"Hi..."

I hear someone running down the stairs, Steph and I both look and see that Claire has her head poked around the corner, "sorry, I told her to just walk in."

At least Steph didn't do it completely on her own.

"I'm almost done getting ready, I'll be down in a second." Claire disappears once again, leaving Steph and I alone.

Steph takes the seat next to me, tapping away at her phone before turning towards me, "don't break her heart, okay?"

What? Break who's heart? "Are you on something right now?"

All I get in response is a small laugh, and a shake of her head while I sit here like I have a thumb up my ass, waiting for an explanation as to what the fuck she is talking about, "I said, don't break her heart."

"Why the hell would I break her heart? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, sorry. I just thought that the way you look at her... you know what? Never mind." She bites her lip for a second before changing the topic, "how's hockey going?"

These two girls are made for one another, they're both off their ass's crazy, but I indulge in her conversation regardless. "It's been good, Coach has been pushing us in practice. I think he's worried we won't make it to the playoffs."

I take a bite of the cereal in front of me, trying to distract myself from how fucking awkward this conversation is. It's one thing to be living with Claire, she's always around, but interacting with Steph –and her acting all buddy buddy– is so fucking strange.

“And how are the others doing?” she asks.

“August is fine.” I know that's what she's really trying to ask about. It's so painfully clear that they're into one another.

“Oh, that's not what I was asking.”

I give her a look, she was definitely trying to ask about him.

“Is it that obvious?” She laughs tightly.

“Yes, it is. You know, you should just be direct with him about how you're feeling. He doesn't like games and although he's one of the toughest guys I know, he's a bit of a pussy when it comes to feelings” I tell her, “he definitely feels the same as you.”

I see her cheeks turn a light shade of pink, and when she finally looks me in the eyes, I can see that hers are sparkling. This girl's got it bad, I mean they met a week ago and she's already head over heels.



I'm walking to my car after class when I see my moms name on my screen, “hey.”

“Hey honey, how are you?” Her voice is so soft, even after everything she's been through, she's still the kindest person I've ever met.

“I'm good, just heading home before practice. Is everything okay?”

“I'm okay, don't worry. I just wanted to call and talk to you about something, but I need you to promise you won't be upset with me.”

Panic instantly rushes through me, what could she have possibly done now? Why would I be upset with her?

I realize that maybe driving while having this conversation probably isn't the best idea, so I do the safe thing and keep my car in park.

"What is it mom?" I ask, brushing my hand over my face.

"Your father called-"

"No" I say, cutting her off.

She's silent for a second, probably contemplating whether or not she wants to have this argument with me. We both know she isn't going to win. My father is a piece of shit, he hasn't been part of my life for a very long time, I don't *want* him to be part of it. "You haven't even heard what I have to say!" she finally protests.

"I know what you're going to say. He wants to talk or meet me or whatever, and I don't want to."

"He's been very insistent on wanting to figure things out with you. I think he means it hon."

"He also meant it when he was beating you bloody on a regular basis." I regret the words the moment they leave my mouth. My mom doesn't deserve to be ridiculed, I just don't understand how she can possibly still see the good in him after all he's done.

Ten Years Ago

He's drunk again, I can hear him yelling as I try to drown out the sound by putting my hands over my ears. I hear my heart beating while I hide in the corner of my room, trying to forget that any of this is happening.

Why does he come home like this? Why does she try to calm him down? Why won't she just leave?

I don't like any of this. I don't like hearing them scream at one another.

There's a loud smash, followed by more of my fathers yelling. I jump in place when I hear the fridge door slam closed.

My mom needs me. I need to be brave.

I run downstairs, instantly met with my mom on her knees, blood dripping from her lip and a fresh bruise forming on her left eye. She looks up to me while my fathers back is turned, 'go hide' she mouths to me.

Present

I never liked hiding from my father while he hurt my mom, I also didn't like when she would act like she was in a happy marriage. She would always cover up her bruises, hide the cuts, smile and laugh when surrounded by her friends and family.

No one ever noticed, no one ever asked, no one ever cared.

When I turned sixteen, everything changed. I grew, I got bigger –stronger– and returned the favour one night when he was upset over something at work. He always took it out on her, and I just snapped. I had enough.

I remember begging her to leave after that, begging her to get us out and save us. Then for the first time in my life... she listened to me. She saved us. My mom left my dad right there and then, taking me to my grandma's and figuring out where to go from there.

"I'm sorry, but he really has changed. He's sober now, he's cleaned up his life and wants a relationship with his son."

I hate this, I hate this more than anything... but I love my mom and I want to do right by her. If she wants me to try and have a relationship with the man who made her life hell —if she can forgive him— then maybe I can at least think about it.

"I can't promise anything, but I'll take some time to think it over" I tell her.

"Thank you honey, I love you. Say hi to Nicholas for me."

“I love you too.”

The line disconnects and I slowly bring the phone down from my ear, placing it on the seat next to me. “Fuck” I scream, slamming my fists into the steering wheel.

fourteen

LUCAS

We're taking Claire to our secret spot. It's this lake on the outskirts of town, it's a bit of a drive but so worth it. We found it during our first year after we got lost coming home from an away game. We spent the entire night swimming under the stars, and I have to say, it's probably one of my favourite memories since coming to Livler.

I was the one who suggested bringing her here, I promised her we'd make peace and I meant it. She's part of our group now, so she might as well be in on this little secret of ours. Don't get me wrong, she still pisses me off, but I think that's mostly because I can't crack her. She dishes out the same shit I give her, and she can hold her own when she wants to, I like that about her.

"You guys know we're driving out of town right?" Claire says from the back seat.

"Yeah, we know pretty girl," I say. Looking through the rearview mirror, I see her roll her eyes.

Always the sass with this one.

Claire rolls down her window and I turn up the music, her and Blair sing along to the lyrics while I check to make sure the others are still following behind me. Out the corner of my eye, I see her lean out her window. My heart drops into my stomach, panic rushing through me while I wonder what the fuck she's doing.

She waves to the boys behind us, laughing while the wind blows through her hair. She looks genuinely happy right now, happier than I've ever seen her.

There's this thing she does where she seems happy on the outside but her smile never reaches her eyes, I can tell she's putting on a front for everyone around her... and I kind of hate it.

Why is she trying so hard to hide her pain?

I park the car and watch as the others pull in next to me, we get out and everyone smiles instantly while Claire's smile fades away. She looks confused, but before she has the chance to say anything to us, August picks her up and starts walking over to the water.

“What the fuck are you doing?” She screeches.

“Just let it happen,” August yells back. He throws her into the lake and a moment later she's splashing into the water. Claire comes up with the biggest scowl on her face, worse than when she looks at me, eyeing August while the rest of us double over with laughter. We all look to one another, then sprint towards the lake, splashing water as we run.

She laughs and starts swimming towards August. He realizes she's out for blood and goes as fast as he can in the opposite direction.

“You better get your ass back here August Write!” she screams. She pushes him under the water when she finally catches up, laughing while he swats her hands away and throws her a couple feet away from him.

I'm out of breath from laughing so hard, and I'm ninety percent sure that I've swallowed enough water to fill a pool... but I wouldn't do anything differently.

“No one is getting into my car while they're wet!” I yell.

“Stop being such a grump about everything!” Claire yells back, “just admit you're having fun!” The smile on her face is clear as day, she's trying to stir the pot.

And because I can't let anything slide, I decide to be snarky, “your clothes are dripping... maybe we should just leave you here to dry off.”

There's this defiant look on her face before she tilts her head and walks back onto shore. She doesn't break eye contact with me, she doesn't fucking blink while she *takes off her clothes*. A lump lodges in my throat and I swear I stop breathing for a second.

Miller instantly clamps a hand over his eyes, Blair's eyes grow wide, August stifles a laugh, and Davis whistles at her while she strikes a pose.

This is not how I saw this day going.



Sweat drips down my back while I stare up at the clock, five minutes left and down by one. The entire game has been touch and go, and if it weren't for them pulling that nasty move in the second, we'd be tied right now.

Claire's been trying to help when she can, but she can only help so much. Coach has been losing his shit, screaming at us like a bunch of children making stupid mistakes... which we kind of have been.

He finally gets fed up and calls a time-out, "I don't know what the hell is happening out there, but I know you can play better than this" he says as we all circle the bench.

"But coach, we're working our asses off out there" Davis says.

"I don't give a fuck about how hard you think you're working, I need you to work harder."

I look over his shoulder as he starts laying out a plan of action, Claire is biting on her lip with her eyebrows pulled together. She's so deep in thought that even the coach's yelling and hand gestures aren't breaking her out of it, "what ya thinking about over there pretty girl?" I ask.

She snaps out of whatever daze she's in, coming back to reality as everyone turns their focus onto her, "oh nothing... It's just-"

Coach raises his brows and motions for her to spit it out.

"It's just that I don't think your plan would be the best course of action."

"Well seeing as none of my ideas are working, I'm willing to try anything" Tony says, throwing his hands in the air

exasperatedly.

She's hesitant to speak, but I can see her brain working overtime, trying to figure out what to do. "Number twelve has a weak left ankle, I'm pretty sure he got hurt in the first period but they keep playing him. He's been turning on his right ankle to prevent from putting weight on his left, so you need to force him to turn him towards his bad side to slow him down."

Huh, I never would have thought of that. I remember Jurian being pulled for a while after he crashed into the boards but he seemed fine when he came back out.

I felt bad, he may be on the opposing team but I've known him for years. He's a good guy, probably the only one I'd actually like to hangout with from that team.

"Number seventy-six is a freshman, his lack of technique and lack of chemistry with the rest of the team really shows. He's good—he's got the raw talent—but he doesn't know when to pinch or how to control the puck properly, which makes him an easy target for high-skilled players like yourselves. As long as you can out-handle him, you should be fine."

I noticed that too, he's their shiny new star, but he's still raw... not refined yet.

"The last player you need to worry about is number three. He's hands down the strongest player on their team, but he rushes the puck too much. He draws himself too deep into our end zone, leaving the rest of his team vulnerable. If you can get him into our end and then pass the puck far enough out, he won't have the chance to save it."

Nathan Thomas, their all-star. I fucking hate that guy more than anything, he's such a dick, and he's been out to get me since high-school. He broke Blair's leg in a game a couple years back.

He took our rivalry to a whole new level, he took a cheap shot at Blair from behind and sent him flying into the boards. Blair was in the hospital for weeks after that, had to have surgery, then went through months of physical therapy so he

could get back to playing hockey. He lost an entire year of experience and exposure just because Nathan's a little bitch.

Blair lost it when he couldn't play, hockey is his *life*... and I watched my best friend spiral into the darkest depression I've ever witnessed. No one thought he would play again, and to make things worse, Nathan never faced punishment for what he did.

"Those are the three main people you guys have to worry about. Everyone else you can handle, but I think using those players against their own team will give you the edge you need to pull ahead."

I think I speak for everyone when I say we're shocked. I mean we knew Claire knows her shit, but I didn't think she knew this much. She can see the little things no one else can, and that's fucking impressive.

No one says anything until the buzzer sounds and marks the end of our time-out. Snapping us back into reality, coach claps his hands and shouts, "you heard the girl, now go play some fucking hockey."

My four roommates and I line up for the puck drop. If we're going to test Claire's theories, we need to have the strongest line possible to make sure it doesn't back-fire on us. Not to toot my own horn or anything, but the five of us are the best shot we have at winning this game. We're the strongest players on the team, we're the ones who will make this shit work.

I'm face to face with Nathan, he's got this nasty ass smile across his pretty face, the same face that I've deemed 'punchable'. I look to my left and see Blair, I know damn well he's thinking the exact same thing I am... let's humble this asshole.

The puck drops and Nathan goes speeding past me, he manages to make it past Miller but then Davis stops him and steals the puck. Just like Claire said, he dives too deep into our end-zone. Davis passes it up to August who goes around number 12, forcing him to either crash into the boards or use his weak ankle.

Twelve turns on his left, and it slows him down just enough to let August get past him. He passes it up to Blair who then slides it to me and I get it through the goalkeeper's legs.

Holy shit, it fucking worked.

The boys jump on top of me in celebration, cheering me on while we skate past the bench and high-five the team. Coach actually has a smile on his face, for the first time ever I think he's actually enjoying a game.

"Claire, you're a goddamn genius!" Blair bellows from in front of me, she laughs and takes a little bow before giving him a big smile.

We line back up at centre ice, this time I'm lucky enough not to be looking at Nathan, and when the puck drops we make a beeline to the other team's zone. Blair passes the puck to me, then I pass it to August. We keep bouncing it back and forth to keep seventy-six off his game. There's thirty seconds left on the clock, we make a break for their net and just before the buzzer rings... we score.

The entire team skates onto the ice and piles onto the five of us. Screams of joy are heard all around the rink as Livler fans celebrate our win.

We skate back to the bench and I pull Claire up into a massive hug, twirling her in the air, "Claire Loyola, I could fucking kiss you right now!" I laugh, my voice muffled by her hair.

"You better not, you're all sweaty and gross." She wiggles in my arms trying to get away from me, but I know she's just doing it for show.

"So pretty girl, you *would* kiss me if I wasn't dripping in sweat right now?" I tease.

"Ew, no. Never in a million years, jackass" she laughs.

I place Claire back down on the ice, and a second later she's being swept up by the others. She gets thrown on their shoulders as everyone praises her. She deserves it, she's the reason why we won. She set out every piece we needed in

order to take this victory, we just had to put the puzzle together.

I look over to where the Longhorns are exiting the rink, I make eye contact with Nathan before his gaze wanders up towards Claire. He looks back to me, smirking, then leaves with the rest of his team.

I'll choke him if he even *thinks* about going after her.

I turn back to my team, brushing any thoughts of him from my mind as I stare at Claire's smile.

You are a mystery waiting to be solved pretty girl, but I like the clues I'm getting along the way.

fifteen

CLAIRE

Holy shit, it actually worked, they actually won because of something I had to say. I almost didn't say anything at all because I was too scared of speaking up.

It felt good to know that Lucas actually listened to me. It was weird when he picked me up though, I don't like the feeling I got in the pit of my stomach.

We pull into the driveway, and Blair instantly throws me over his shoulder. I let out a loud laugh, looking up at the others while he bolts into the house. They're all laughing with me—or at me—but I really don't care because I'm having the best day ever.

“Claire is a badass, Claire is a badass” Blair sings over and over again while running around the living room. He stands me up onto the coffee table and then gets down onto one knee, “bow down to the all knowing, queen Claire bear.” The others all join him on the ground, bowing before me as I let out a loud, deep laugh. These boys are crazier than anyone I've ever met.

“Stand before me as I give a speech, my royal subject.” They all stand as I clear my throat, saluting to me as if I'm some general in the army. “I cannot take all the credit, I must thank you all for the absolutely horrid playing you did today. Without you, I would have never had this opportunity, so I say... lets throw a fucking party!”

Taunting these boys will never get old.

“You little shit” August laughs some more, lunging towards me.

I screech and jump off the table. Running towards the kitchen, I hear the boys laughing while they chase after me. I climb onto the counter top and swat away their hands.

Davis accidentally hits me behind my knee, and I lose my balance, falling off the counter and towards the floor. Before I can fully register what's about to happen, I feel a pair of hands catch me. I look up to see Lucas's brown eyes looking down with concern as he sets me down.

Is he being... *gentle*?

His soft touch leaves my body and I'm stunned for a moment while I process. His arms felt so warm, so safe.

"Careful Claire, almost hurt that pretty little head of yours" he whispers. Goosebumps erupt all along my neck, and my spine begins to tingle. What the fuck is happening to me right now?



"Mister Miller... truth or dare?" Davis asks.

"Dare, *obviously*" Miller responds, rolling his eyes.

Davis thinks about it for a second before smiling devilishly, "I dare you to run the naked mile down the street."

Without hesitation, Miller starts stripping off his clothes while Steph and I whistle and cheer him on. He sends us a wink and we fake fangirl. He sprints towards the door, running out onto the street while the rest of us chase after him to watch. He runs to the end of our block and just as he's coming back... security turns the corner.

"Miller!" I yell, pointing towards the campus security car.

Usually I wouldn't care about campus security, but some of us are underage, and the hockey team being drunk on a Wednesday night isn't the *best* look for the university.

Everyone rushes into the house, and I wait for Miller to get inside before I follow. I want to make sure the guy doesn't get charged with public nudity, or intoxication for that matter. Once the door is closed, we burst into laughter. A round of applause is directed towards Miller while he takes a bow.

We go back to the living room and continue our game. I take a seat on the floor and tell August that the spot on the couch –next to Steph– is all his.

Steph's eyes widen and August blushes before finally sitting next to her. They both sit a little stiff before finally relaxing, and to my surprise, August puts his arm around her. It's not wrapped around her shoulder or anything, just resting behind her, but it's a start.

“Alright, I choose Steph” Miller says, putting his clothes back on. “Truth or dare?”

“Truth” she says.

“What's your most embarrassing story?”

She thinks about it for a second before looking down and giggling. I know exactly what she's about to say.

“During our freshman year, I got a little too drunk in the residence and threw my bra out of the window of my dorm. *Unfortunately* that bra landed on one of the RA's standing outside and he walked all the way up to my room to give it back.” She slaps a hand over her face while the boys kill themselves with laughter.

“The worst part is her name was sewn into the band cause her mom wanted to make sure none of her clothes got mixed up, he looked down and read her name while asking if it was hers” I say, rolling around on the floor as Steph kicks me.

Steph leans her head on the back of the couch, hitting August's arm. He moves it down and slowly rubs her shoulder, consoling my poor embarrassed friend while she tries to hide her face. To my surprise, he doesn't move when we continue the game.

He better make a move soon, he doesn't know what he's missing out on.

We go in circles, dishes out dares and questions when Lucas finally turns to me and ropes me into this mess. Something tells me that I'm not going to like whatever dare he has to offer, so I quickly pick truth.

“How many boyfriends have you had?” he asks, leaning in as if I’m about to give him the secrets to life itself.

“Two, one in the tenth grade and then another at the beginning of senior year. Both were only a couple of months.”

“Only two?” Blair gasps.

“What?” I genuinely don’t get what the big deal is.

Everyone is looking at me like I have two heads, except for Steph, but she knows this shit already.

“Well first of all, you’re hot as fuck Claire bear” Davis winks, “I’m surprised you don’t have half the campus jumping all over you. Second, the fact you haven’t had a boyfriend in almost *four years* is crazy.”

“Why’d you guys break up?” Lucas asks.

“Nope, that’s another question. Take a shot if you want the answer.” I point my finger at the vodka bottle sitting on the table as he weighs his options, but in the end he takes the shot anyway.

I was really hoping he would let this one go. Both of those relationships are the reason I don’t date anymore, it always ties back to my brother.

In the first relationship I thought he actually liked me, I mean he was dropping hints for months before finally asking me out, and for the first while it was really good.

By that time, Chris was already away at college, so he wasn’t home all that often. Then around thanksgiving the guy thought Chris would be coming home and he started asking all these questions. My brother wasn’t in the pros yet, but he had definitely made a name for himself in college hockey. Unfortunately though, Chris couldn’t come home because they had a game scheduled for that weekend.

When Christmas came around, everything changed. All this guy could talk about was my brother and how awesome it would be to meet him. Then when he actually met Chris, I was ignored by my so-called boyfriend. I heard him talking with

his friends two weeks later, how he just wanted to meet Chris and be connected to him via me.

I dumped him that day.

The second boyfriend was less discrete with his intentions. At this point Chris was playing professional hockey and it really hit me that I had a famous brother. About three weeks into the relationship I knew he was only dating me because of Chris, but I didn't want to believe it. I needed something to distract me from everything else going on.

We used each other.

We broke up, I dove into my skating and distanced myself from everyone at school. I didn't talk to anyone, didn't eat lunch with anyone, and didn't have any friends... then I graduated.

"Um, I realized they weren't with me for the right reasons," I answer carefully.

Before anyone has the chance to ask me any more questions, I turn to August and force him to take his turn. He chooses dare and I know exactly what I'm going to ask him.

"I dare you to kiss Steph."

He looks to her, waiting for her to look him in the eyes, but she keeps her gaze locked on her hands. He bites the inside of his cheeks before looking away. "I'll take the shot," he mumbles.

I don't think the others pick up on how upset he sounds, but I definitely hear his heart cracking in half. He throws the liquor back and we all go silent, sitting awkwardly as we try to figure out what to say next.

"I think we should head to bed, we have practice in the morning" Lucas finally says.

Steph heads to my room while I wait back to talk to August, "I'm sorry" I whisper to him. "I thought she would take the chance. She really likes you, but she doesn't do well with her own feelings."

“I just wish she would have looked at me.” He walks away with his head hung, closing his door quietly behind him.

Okay, now I’m going to go kick her ass. I storm into my room and close the door, Steph is standing in my bathroom brushing her teeth when I walk in and slap her on the shoulder.

“Ow! What the hell was that for?” She whines.

“For being an idiot, why didn’t you look at him? He wanted to kiss you, dumbass” I whisper yell.

“I know” she says, “I just couldn’t do it. Not with everyone watching us like that.”

She rinses off her toothbrush before walking back into my room and throwing her stuff in her bag, “I don’t want him to kiss me because of a stupid dare, I want him to do it when the moment feels right... I want him to do it because *he* wants to.”

I feel myself deflate, the anger leaving my body as I process her words.

These two are so head over heels for one another, it’s painful.

“I’m sorry, I just wanted to speed things up a bit, but I promise I’ll let it happen at its own pace.”

“Thank you” she says, smiling softly at me.

sixteen

LUCAS

“Wakey, Wakey Lukiepool” Blair whispers in my ear.

I’m laying on my side, and like the very normal person I am, I slap in front of me. I feel skin hit my hand, followed by an ‘ow’ before I open my eyes. Blair sits in front of me, rubbing his cheek, it’s his own fault he got hit.

“Why the hell are you waking me up right now?” I groan, “if you don’t have a good reason I’m slapping you again.”

He sheepishly smiles before sitting up, “I wanted to talk to you about your dad.”

I’m going to kill him, he woke me up to talk about my *dad*? I don’t care how long I’ve known the kid, I’m about to put him six feet under. I only told him about the phone call with my mom because I needed to let out steam before I snapped and did something I would regret... now it’s coming back to bite me in the ass.

“Before you go freaking out, just listen. I think you should talk to him.”

I can’t help but glare at him, is he fucking serious right now?

“You never got closure, you and your mom just disappeared from his life and you never got to tell him how you feel, or find out why he was such a piece of shit. I’m not saying forgive him or anything, just go talk to him and get the answers you need to finally move on.”

He has the audacity to sit there and give me puppy dog eyes, and as ugly as those are on him, I guess he’s right. I should—at the very least— get to tell him how much I hate him.

“As long as you come to stop me from beating his ass, then yes” I mumble.

“Deal.” He throws his arms around me and squeezes as tight as he can... is he actually hugging me right now?

Before I have the chance to change my mind, he leaves my room. Blair knows me better than anyone else, he’s stuck by my side no matter what, I owe it to him and *myself* to at least try.

I pull out my phone and shoot a text off to my dad, asking when we should meet.

Six years ago

I’m sitting at a cafeteria table, forehead down on the cold wood as Blair tries to comfort me. Mom and I left a couple weeks ago, and after sending the divorce papers to him via mail, it somehow got out that he’s a piece of shit.

No one knows about the abuse, they just know he isn’t a good dad, and I know for a fact that everyone has been talking about it at school, but no one has the balls to say anything to my face.

“Just ignore them, they’re all assholes anyway. They have no idea what actually happened so don’t worry” Blair says, shoving more sandwich into his face.

I groan in response.

Why in hell am I protecting him? Why do I give a fuck if people know about how shit of a person he is?

I look up, only to see Nathan Thomas. The guy’s nothing but a basic bully with an inflated ego, “what the fuck do you want?” I ask.

He smirks at me, “how’s daddy doing?”

I clench my fists, he’s begging for a fucking beating right now.

“Go annoy someone else Nathan” Blair growls.

Nathan gets closer –too close for comfort– and leans in so no one else can hear him, “does anyone else know daddy’s a piece of shit who likes to hit women?”

He pulls away and I can see Blair looking at me wearily, but a moment later my vision turns red.

I'm going to put my fist through his face like it's a sheet of fucking paper.

I jump out of my seat and connect my fist with his jaw, I tackle him to the ground while he tries to gain his bearings. I'm throwing punches left and right, relishing in the sight of blood dripping out of his mouth and nose. But my glory is short-lived when his friends pull me off of him and start laying into me.

It turns into an all out brawl when Blair jumps in, and the whole cafeteria goes wild. Teachers eventually come and break up the fight, pulling us apart from one another. I look at the three of them and I'm pleased with the results, they look like shit.

Blair and I sit in the office in silence, waiting to hear what punishment we're about to receive when I turn to him, "thanks for having my back."

"Always bro" he responds, lightly punching my shoulder.

"Ow" I chuckle, that fucking hurt.

Present

The entire workout I wanted to die, that shit was so ass. I'm not going to be able to walk for the next two days.

I'm spotting Davis on his last set of bench presses when the door to the locker room swings open and we all get sprayed with freezing cold water. I turn to see Claire, Steph, and even Coach with water guns.

What the fuck?

"Water fight!" Steph screams.

They run out the back doors and we chase after them. As we run out we see a bucket filled with water balloons and water guns. When the team grabs their weapons, it turns into an all out war.

Cold water flies everywhere while we all scream and laugh at one another. August picks Steph up and throws her over his shoulder, both smiling as wide as possible with red tints to their cheeks.

Claire comes sneaking up behind me and dumps a bucket over my head, “you’re so dead” I bellow as she runs away giggling.

I grab the boys and corner her against the building, we all empty the guns while she shrieks. We throw our empty water guns back into the bucket and then walk over to Coach with the girls.

“Even you?” August asks Tony.

“Yeah, Steph and Claire texted me before practice about letting you guys have a bit of fun and I thought, what the hell, why not?” he chuckles.

Wow, Coach is letting loose and actually having fun for once?

“Alright, now get your ass’s home, get some rest, and I’ll see you Saturday.”

We turn back towards the building, grabbing our stuff from the locker room and then head back to the parking lot to get in our cars. Steph and Claire are waiting for us, and the smiles on their faces are priceless.

I lean in close to Claire as I walk past, “I’ll be getting you back for this pretty girl, it may have been fun but I don’t like being messed with.”

When I get into the car next to Blair he’s staring at his phone blankly, his face void of emotion. I rest a hand on his shoulder, “what’s going on?”

He doesn’t look up, but answers me regardless, “Jurian Price just died.”

Holy shit.

Jurian price plays for the Longhorns —the same team as Nathan— and he’s damn good. He got drafted to Boston this past year but wanted to stick out the rest of his college career

before making the shift. We knew him in high school, we got along with him great, even though he was friends with Nathan.

“He got into a car accident with Ian Troy, they both died on impact” Blair whispers. “It says his sister survived, I didn’t even know Jurian *had* a sister.”

My eyebrows soar, “how do you know all of this?”

Blair finally turns his eyes to me, and all I see is a boat load of emotion he’s trying to hold back. “There’s an article about it, they had a ceremony last night at their game to commemorate them. There’s a picture of both their families.”

I lean back in my seat, letting out a deep breath. After years of knowing Jurian, it feels weird that we’re never going to see him again.

Sure, we never really hung out in the first place, but that doesn’t mean he won’t be missed.

“Did *you* know he had a sister?” Blair asks. “We’ve known him for years and somehow I don’t even recognize the girl in the photo. It says they’re twins, so she must have gone to school with us.”

He tilts his phone towards me and I inspect the photo. The girl has short black hair, cropped just below her jaw line. Her eyes are a piercing grey, not that anyone would focus on them with all the emotion pouring out of her.

She looks heart broken.

I shake my head, “she looks kind of familiar but I don’t remember her.”

Blair turns off his phone and sets it in the cupholder, “that poor family.”

seventeen

CLAIRE

I'm very nervous to see Steph's parents. They're really nice and have always treated me like their own, but that doesn't mean I'm not nervous.

They know who my parents are, as well as my brother, they recognized me from some galas they attended when I still lived in Vancouver. They were very understanding of my request to keep the relationship to my family on the down low.

I appreciate them a *ton*.

They always pick the most expensive restaurants to have dinner, and sometimes I can even pretend that this is what my life used to be like. Nice family dinners where there was no pressure or fear of pissing off my parents. I can pretend that I had a normal life, that I was raised by loving parents who wanted to see me smile.

I fidget with my hands as I step out of the cab with Steph, "they love you. You don't have to be nervous around them" she says.

"I know, but I still want them to like me. I'm scared of saying something that changes the way they look at me."

"They have me as a daughter, there's nothing you could do or say that would make them love you any less."

Must be nice.

We walk into the black building, met with crystal chandeliers and beautiful centrepieces. Tables are decked out in black and silver detailing, people are dressed to the nines, wait staff walk around with a mix of cocktails and beautiful food.

I see Steph's mom wave to us, and we walk to the table to greet her. Heather —the aforementioned mom— instantly stands up and gives each of us a hug. Shane —her dad— stands behind her and waits patiently for his turn.

“Oh girls, you look fantastic! I missed you both so much” she exclaims.

“I missed you too mom” Steph smiles before giving her dad a big bear hug.

We take a seat across from them and the questions instantly start. They ask us about everything they can think of, and then the question about relationships comes up, Steph and I keep our lips shut. Whether we’re in one or not is irrelevant, they’ll pester us until we give them the answer they want to hear.

“I saw your parents the other night” Shane says passively, taking a sip of his red wine.

I feel a pang of anxiety hit me, “how are they?”

“Dave and Olivia are fine, not very chatty, *as usual*,” he rolls his eyes. “Sorry, that’s rude of me, I shouldn’t be speaking ill of your parents in front of you.”

Please keep going.

“Don’t apologize, they tend to only talk to a handful of people. They see events as a business meeting, if you aren’t on their radar for investments or partnerships, they’ll avoid any unnecessary conversation with you.” It’s true, my parents will play nice if you come up to them, but they won’t speak to you out of their own free will.

“I don’t know how they managed to raise such a kind and loving daughter. You are nothing like Olivia, she’s cold and you’re like the sun my dear” Heather beams.

You can whip your children into shape mighty fast when you break down their confidence and beat them.

The familiar sounds of clicking comes from outside the building. Camera flashes go off as someone walks into the restaurant, and —to my surprise— Sam comes strolling in with Chris by his side.

He and my brother have been best friends since college, they met playing on the Livler team and both ended up playing for Dallas. Sam has nothing but air between his ears, but I love

him anyway. He has a lot of love in his heart, and is just as protective as Chris when it counts.

My heart swells, I love seeing them both, even more when they surprise me. I get out of my chair and rush up to them, acting like I haven't seen them in months.

Chris picks me up and spins me around, "how's my favourite sister?" He asks.

"I'm great now that you're here!"

I feel Sam wrap his arms around me and take me out of Chris's grasp, "my favourite human being ever!" The people around us shoot us nasty looks before returning to whatever boring conversation they were having before we interrupted.

Sorry I'm happy you Debby-downers.

The sound of clicking cameras continues, usually I would be worried but all the windows are tinted, and there's a zero percent chance security at the front door will let them in.

Steph walks up to us, giving both the boys a side hug before standing next to me. "How's my favourite little shit?" Chris asks, cocking an eyebrow in Steph's direction.

"Causing just as much trouble as ever, you'd be proud" she responds, pretending to be bored.

"I bet *I* would be" Sam laughs.

We walk back to the table, my arm linked with Chris's and I catch the last bit of Heathers conversation with the waiter, "that would be amazing, thank you."

"What would be amazing?" I ask.

"They just offered to give us a separate room for some more privacy. I figured it would be nice."

We move into the back of the restaurant and take a seat in the dimly lit room. Black and white pictures cover the walls, mostly consisting of different cities, but some of beautiful women as well.

I can't help but be jealous of them. Their effortless beauty and genuine smiles make my heart clench... I wish I were

more like that.

“I guess I have you two to thank for these idiots showing up?” I ask Steph’s parents.

“I thought it would be nice, they’re never in town for long and I wanted to catch up with them as well. Might as well take the opportunity while it’s there” Shane smiles, clamping a hand on Chris’s shoulder.

I can’t stop smiling.

Dinner flies by, not a single thing went wrong and I got to spend some time with my big brother. When we start to exit the restaurant, saying goodbye to Heather and Shane, the paparazzi come barreling out of their cars.

Sam instantly covers Steph’s face, hiding her from view, while Chris does the same with me.

“Chris, we can’t let them see us” I yell over the loud questions being thrown at us from every direction.

“I know, we’ll get you out of here” he yells back. “Sam. Car, now!” He barks.

They push through the crowd of people, keeping Steph and I as concealed as possible. My heart pounds in my chest, the thought of my picture being plastered over every single magazine and gossip website makes my stomach churn.

I can’t have anyone find out who I am.

Everything would change, no one would treat me the same, I would get used, my skating career would turn into something about my brother. I would be in the spotlight, but for reasons I don’t want. I want to be the centre of attention because I did something great, not because TMZ is spreading rumours about me being my brothers new conquest.

Gross.

I feel sick to my stomach, I lurch, but manage to keep it in.

Chris opens the car door and I jump in, instantly shielding my face away from the window and looking to Steph. We sit huddled together until the boys can get us the fuck out of here.

She has the same fear in her eyes, but it's not for herself... it's for me.

A stray tear falls down my cheek. It may seem dramatic to some, but when you've spent your entire life being compared to your brother—or used to get to him—you live in fear that you'll never be good enough on your own.

The feeling of dozens of people harassing you, way too close, yelling at you, flashing bright lights in your face, disrespecting any ounce of humanity you have in you... well, it's a whole other kind of fear.

“Keep your heads down, I'll let you know when it's safe” Sam tells us from the front seat.

Steph grabs my hand, holding tight while Chris rips out of the parking lot. The sound of screeching tires and burnt rubber tells me he's more than aware of how I'm feeling right now.

I'm so thankful for him.

“You can come up now” Chris says quietly.

I slowly sit up, making eye contact with him through the rearview mirror. He's sorry, he doesn't have to say it. I can see it in his eyes.

“Pull over” I gag. There's no hesitation, he pulls over instantly. I open the door and puke out the side of it, this is too fucking much. When I get back in, I wipe my chin, “you can go now.”

“I'm so sorry Angel, I didn't know they were still there. I wouldn't have walked you to out if I thought you would be in danger.”

“It's not your fault, none of us knew they were there. I just want to go home.” I wrap my arms around myself, I feel fucking violated.

eighteen

CLAIRE

I walk into the locker room and as soon as I round the corner I'm greeted by a bunch of shirtless hockey players. My cheeks heat up but I put on a brave face nonetheless.

You've seen shirtless guys before Claire, this is your new normal, just get over it. *Move on.*

I keep my head held high as I walk past them, averting my gaze and staring at the wall straight ahead. I'll be damned if I give them another reason to pick on me.

Tony stands at the centre of the room as I take a seat at the back, gearing up for one of his legendary pre-game talks. I remember my brother going on and on about how fucking amazing they are, and I have to say after hearing another, he was right.

"I know today we have an easy game ahead of us, but that doesn't mean you get to slack off. They deserve respect, and if you half-ass the game then you won't be giving that to them. I have put my blood, sweat, and tears into this team, so you better not disappoint me." Tony motions for me to come join him, and when I'm standing at his side he smiles down at me. "I'm lucky enough to have the best not-daughter to stand by my side this year. She is passionate about everything she does and today she's given us the tools we need to succeed. She's got better hockey IQ than all of you combined, she deserves our respect just like the other team does."

The boys start cheering, jumping out of their seats and banging on the lockers behind them.

"Now go out there and show me that my faith is being placed in the right group of men" Tony yells. He pulls me off to the side and wraps his arms around me while we watch the guys, "your brother was just like them, probably still is. Always so excited and amped up right before a game."

I nod my head, knowing damn well that Chris is still the same little boy Tony coached.

“I’m proud of you, you know that right?” He says suddenly.

“Yeah, I do.” I smile, “but what’s with the mushy gushy stuff all of a sudden?”

“Cause I know you don’t hear it *nearly* enough, and I’m so insanely thankful to have you here coaching with me. I know your brother is proud, he’d kill to see you bossing around a bunch of grown men.”

“He’d tell me I’m right where I belong.”

“He told me I was an idiot for letting you into this world” he says.

I turn to him, shocked. Chris always loved when I came to his practices and games, he loves it when I’m involved in his hockey. I was the only one in the family who would be honest with him about how he played, and tell him when he needed to pull his pants up and act like a big boy.

“You know he loves that you love hockey, but he was nervous about letting you dive head first into all this. He was very against me asking you to move in with the guys, but I scolded him for not trusting me, I would never put you in harm’s way.”

“Funny” I say dryly, “he acted like he fully trusted you when we called that first day in the house.”

“Confession time?” He asks and I nod my head, “remember how I said I wanted you to move in so you could keep an eye on the guys?”

“Yeah...” where is he going with this?

“I actually did it for *your* sake. The guys can be idiots, and assholes, and do the dumbest shit known to man, but they’re good people. You never wanted to leave your comfort zone, you stayed in your bubble and kept your head down. I was worried, I wanted you to go out and live life, I wanted you to have some fun for once.”

Do people really see me like that?

“So I threw you into a house of rowdy college boys in hopes that you would make some new friends and let loose a little.” He scratches the back of his head, waiting anxiously for my reaction.

That’s definitely not what I was expecting him to say, “alright, um okay.”

“I’m so proud to see how you’ve changed in the little time you’ve lived with them. I can see how close you’ve grown already and I’m just happy you have your spark back. The same spark I saw in that little girl fifteen years ago, when you ran up to me at six years old and yelled at me for hurting your brother’s feelings after I benched him.”

I laugh, remembering that day perfectly. I was so angry, not cause Chris didn’t play, but because he was so upset after the game. I hadn’t understood that he had done something wrong, all I knew was he was sad and I wanted to help. I lean my head on Tony’s shoulder, “thank you for giving me the chance to live again. Thank you for giving me a group of people who make me want to live again.”

“I knew I made the right choice,” he laughs. “Can you tell your brother that after fifteen years of knowing you both, I deserve a little trust now and again.”

“I’ll be telling him a lot of things.”



The guys didn’t even need my help tonight, the other team was good but nowhere close to Livler kind of good.

Steph spent the whole game sending me texts, she sat right behind the bench and wanted to know what the guys were saying to one another. August kept looking back and smiling at her, I think he liked being able to see her during the game.

We came straight to the bar after, but the guys didn’t tell me it’s karaoke night. I refuse to get up on that little stage and sing in front of all these people.

The boys boo'd me.

Steph, however, has been waiting with excitement for her chance to go up there and rock everyone's world. When they finally call her name she goes up there and treats it like she's at a stadium performing a concert.

I laugh and cheer her on, while August watches every little thing she does. He looks at her like she's the only girl in the room, like she holds the secrets to life, like she's oxygen and without her... he wouldn't be able to breathe.

I want someone to look at me like that. I so desperately want to feel unconditional love like you read in books. I'm happy for them –I really am– but I can't help feeling jealous.

Maybe I'm not built to be loved like that, maybe I was built to help others find *their* love. I don't want to believe that's true, but I think I can accept that I'm the cupid behind other people's love stories.

She comes off the stage, flopping in her seat while August leans over and whispers something in her ear.

They're just so perfect for one another.

Blair and Lucas get called up and my jaw drops. I had no idea they even signed up, but based on how aggressively Blair is dragging Lucas up there... I'd say Lucas isn't all for it.

I pull out my phone, because whatever happens, I want proof of it.

Material Girl by Madonna comes on and I look at Steph, we stare at one another, not knowing what to say because so many things come to mind.

This has to be a mistake, right? There's no way *Nicholas Blair* and *Lucas St. James* are about to sing a fucking Madonna song.

When Lucas starts to sing, I snap my head back to watch every moment. I'm permanently engraving this into my brain.

The chorus comes on, and Blair goes full pop-star. He's singing his heart out, dancing around the stage, and trying to get Lucas to join in.

“Go Blair!” I scream over the music.

He sends me a wink and continues to sing like a complete diva. The entire thing is priceless, the contrast between Lucas hating his life and Blair living it up makes it *so* much better.

They sit back down at our table and I feel my phone get ripped out of my hands, Lucas snatches it away before I have the chance to lock it, and he goes searching for the new blackmail material I have on him.

“Give that back you jackass” I screech.

“Not until this god forsaken video is deleted. There is no way I’m taking a chance of it ending up on the internet.”

“C’mon, please” I beg. “I won’t show anyone, I just want it for the memories.”

He rolls his eyes at me, “I’m still deleting it.”

I refuse to let him get rid of that video, it’s pure gold.

I get up from my seat and rush over to him, I lean over his body as he extends his arm back. He holds my phone just out of reach so I inch forward a bit more to try and get it.

Someone clears their throat and I realize to that I’m basically straddling Lucas. My entire body feels like it’s engulfed in flames, this is so embarrassing.

He smirks at me before clicking delete on the video and tossing my phone at me.

“You’re an ass” I grumble.

“I know, at least I’m self aware.”

Such an arrogant prick.

I finish my drink and walk over to the bar. Standing there patiently, waiting for the bartender to come to me, and look to my right. There’s a guy standing to my right, not paying attention to me at all.

He’s really cute, brown hair laying in loose waves, with full lips and freckles lining his cheekbones.

His eyes flick to me and I'm embarrassed for a second before he smiles at me softly. His eyes are deep green, and his smile is fucking perfect.

I smile back, only looking away when the bartender grabs my attention and I order a drink.

When the bartender comes back she hands me the drink and the bill, but before I have the chance to pay, the mystery guy speaks up. "You can put her drink on my tab."

I look at him, "you don't have to do that."

"Yeah, but a pretty girl like you deserves to have a drink bought for her every once in a while." His smile glows, and my heart melts knowing it's for me.

"Thank you" I say, biting the inside of my cheek.

"Don't mention it." He starts to walk away, taking a sip of his drink.

"Wait!" I yell after him, and he turns around, raising his eyebrows at me. "Aren't you going to ask me my name?"

"That depends, do you want me to ask you your name, mystery girl?" A smile dances on his lips as he takes a step towards me.

"Maybe" I shrug.

He laughs, "what's your name?"

"Claire, the name's Claire."

"Pretty name for a pretty girl."

He goes to turn away again and I jump out to grab his arm. The moment he turns around I drop my hand, "don't I get to know yours? It's only fair."

"Nathan, it's nice to meet you Claire." He disappears into the crowd, leaving me with blushing cheeks and a stomach full of butterflies.

"It's nice to meet you too Nathan" I whisper to myself.

nineteen

CLAIRE

Wanna know what's anxiety inducing? Being thrown into a party at a house where you only know six people and you can't find a single one.

We got to the football guys house about an hour ago, and for the first little bit it was fun, but I turned around for like five seconds to grab another drink and everyone just fucked off.

I don't know anyone, I don't know what to do with myself, and I'm like ninety-nine percent sure that every single person here is staring at me.

I can feel tears beginning to form, my heart rate rises and that awful butterfly feeling fills my stomach. I want to puke right now, but I think that would bring even *more* attention to me.

Someone bumps into me from behind and my drink spills all down the front of me. Heat crawls its way onto my cheeks and I feel the first tear fall down my face.

"Fuck, my bad" the guy says.

I can't do this right now. I drop my cup on the nearest table and run outside for some fresh air. I try calling Steph a couple times, then August, but neither of them answer. I'm too embarrassed to call any of the others so I call Chris, I really hope he isn't sleeping right now.

"My little Angel" he greets me.

"Hi," I say meekly.

"Who do I have to beat up?" he growls.

I laugh at his protectiveness, "no one, unless you want to kick my friends ass's for leaving me alone in a house of strangers."

"They all just ditched you like that?"

“I don’t think they meant to, but I can’t find any of them. It doesn’t help that some guy bumped into me and I spilled my drink everywhere, I’m all sticky now.”

I hear him sigh on the other end of the line, we both know he wants to say something motivational or whatever to make me feel better, but he stays silent.

Those stupid speeches almost never work, so I’m thankful he’s spared both of us.

Just as I’m about to say something to change the topic, I hear the door open. I move to the side to let whoever it is by, but I feel a set of arms wrap around me instead.

“There you are,” Steph slurs.

“Is that mini shitface?” Chris asks.

He started calling her that whenever she drinks cause the second time they met, she was drunk off her ass and Chris had to come pick us up.

“Put me on speaker please” he asks nicely.

“You’re on.”

“Stephanie Saunders I swear to god if you ever leave Claire alone again I will personally come to your apartment and beat your ass.”

Steph salutes to the phone, “Aye aye captain.”

“Thanks for talking to me Chris, I’ll text you when I get home.”

“Okay, I love you angel. Go have some fun.” I hang-up, turning to my drunk friend. She gives me this lazy smile and lays her head on my shoulder.

“Why are you so sticky?” she whines.

“Cause I got left alone and some guy bumped into me.”

“No more leaving you unattended, I promise... but I do have a good reason.”

I better be about to hear she found the cure to a disease or some shit, she knows better than to leave me alone at a party...

It's part of our best friend's code.

She bites her bottom lip and plays with the rings on her slim fingers, "I was with August, and... he kissed me." She throws her hands up to her face, squealing with excitement. I squeal with her and do a little happy dance, the kid actually grew some balls and did it. Now we just have to wait for them to figure out that they should be in a relationship, and we're golden.

"You need to tell me everything."

"He told me he wanted to talk to me, so we went upstairs and into this random bedroom. He said he knew the guy so it was fine but I don't really know if that's true or not... it was actually a really nice room but there was a bunch of clothes scattered-

"Steph, you're rambling. Get to the good part" I interrupt.

"Right, sorry" She smiles sheepishly. "Anyway, so we get in there and the minute the door closes he grabs my face and kisses me. Like heart melting, earth shattering, spark inducing kind of kiss. I don't even know how long it lasted but it was the best, however many seconds, of my life."

She falls back onto the porch, sighing in content. I lay down next to her and turn my face so I can see her, "did either of you say anything after?"

"He leaned his forehead against mine and told me that he'd been wanting to do that since the first day he met me. Claire, I swear to god my heart exploded right there and then."

The door opens and we both sit up to see who it is. Lucas looks down at us, "you guys coming in or are you just gonna sit on the steps the whole night like a bunch of losers?"

Didn't expect anything less from the douche who just ditched me.

"We're coming, don't get your little panties in a twist" Steph laughs as she gets up and extends a hand to me.

When we walk past him, his face is all scrunched up in confusion, "I don't wear panties" he says. When we don't

respond he starts to panic and chases after us, “wait you guys know I don’t wear panties right? *Right?*”



The music’s blasting, people are singing, and I’m currently kicking Millers ass at pong.

I throw another shot and it lands perfectly in the back right cup, he sticks his tongue out at me and I stick out mine right back. I never took Miller to be a sore loser but here we are I guess. He throws his shot and it just misses the cup, I can’t help but laugh as he pulls his hair.

My last shot lands, “get fucked Miller!” I yell over the loud noise.

“You really suck, like suck more than the girl attached to Blairs neck” he retorts.

I look over my shoulder to see exactly what Miller described, Blair sits on the couch with a chick vacuum sucking his neck. He looks up and makes eye contact with me, winks, then blows me a kiss.

Steph and August are sitting on the couch behind Miller, August has his arm wrapped protectively around her while he eyes every single guy at this party. You’d think he’s a dog protecting the only food he’s found in weeks with the way he’s acting. Davis snuck off with a girl a while ago, and Lucas is sitting next to Blair, scrolling on his phone.

We’re re-setting the cups for the next group of people to play when someone places their hand on my back. I jump – shaken from the sudden contact– and look up to see the guy from before, the same guy who bumped into me.

He leans in close, his hot breath fanning my face. The beer on his breath hits me like a damn truck, “I just want to apologize for earlier, I didn’t mean to bump into you. I kinda feel like an ass cause you’re drop dead gorgeous and you ran out before I had the chance to talk to you.” A nasty-ass grin slides across his face, it gives me the ick.

I don't know why but I have a really bad feeling about him.

“Uh, thanks” I say, taking a step back. “But don't worry about earlier, I just needed some air.”

I turn around and continue resetting my cups, but his hand grabs my wrist. He squeezes it a little *too* tight and forces me to turn to face him, “my name's Jacob by the way, maybe we can go outside and grab some more air?”

“No. I'm good, thanks though.” Why am I thanking him for his offer? Why do I feel like I owe him the courtesy of kindness when he's clearly a sleaze-bag.

His hand gets a little tighter and I have to hold back a yelp of pain, “I really think we should head outside. It would be nice to get to know you a bit better.” His eyes flick up and down my body, lingering a little too long on my tits.

I feel like I'm going to throw up.

Next thing I know I feel four tall bodies standing on either side of me, and I breathe a sigh of relief when I see that my friends have come to my rescue.

“I think she said she's good. You can leave now.” August says, and I don't miss the venom laced in his tone.

“Stay out of this asshole, it's none of your business” Jacob bites back.

“That's where you're wrong...” Blair says.

“It's completely our business...” Miller continues.

“You see, this girl right here is our roommate, and she's under our protection. So if she thinks there's a problem with some low-life, scumbag, piece of shit, then we have no problem stepping in and dealing with it” Lucas says, placing a warm hand on my back and taking a step forward.

Jacob swallows hard, realizing he fucked with the wrong girl. I can see the panic as he looks back and forth between the guys.

“Now,” Lucas looks down at me, “is there a problem here pretty girl?”

“Yes,” I reply quietly. I’m too afraid to speak any louder because the guy still has his hand wrapped around my wrist.

Lucas looks back to Jacob, “now, you can either walk away and hope to god none of us ever see you again, or we can go outside and get to know *each other* a little better.”

Jacob releases my wrist and runs off into the crowd, while the guys step in front of me. I massage my wrist, trying to ease the pain throbbing up my arm, and even though I’m still shaken up... I’m glad the guys are here with me. They make me feel safe.

“You okay Claire bear?” Miller asks.

“Yeah, thanks guys.”

“You don’t need to thank us, we’ve got your back.” August smiles warmly, pulling me into a hug.

Lucas gives him a weird look before shoving his hands in his pockets and looking around, “just make sure to stay close, I don’t want him coming back if we aren’t around.”

I move over to the couch –sitting next to Steph– while the guys chat with some of the football players.

“You okay?” Steph asks.

Smiling towards the guys I nod my head, “I am now.” She pulls me into a hug and holds onto me tight.

“Wanna go dance?”

“Fuck yes.” I pull her off the couch and into the crowd of people dancing in the kitchen, we sway our hips and sing our hearts out, but I make sure the guys can still see us.

Davis finally comes back down and joins the others, Blair leans in close to him, saying something. Davis’s smile instantly disappears, his eyes search frantically around the room until they finally land on me.

He makes a beeline towards me, ignoring any protests from the guys as he pushes his way through everyone. When

he reaches me, I get thrown over his shoulder and brought back to the living room.

“Davis, put me down” I scream.

He doesn't say anything, instead he stays silent until I'm placed on the couch. Davis crouches down so he's eye level with me, “You are not leaving this spot for the rest of the night. You're going to stay here –where I can see you– until we leave.”

“But-”

“Actually, scratch that. I'm going to sit here with you for the rest of the night and beat the crap out of any guy who dares to come close.”

“Blair told you what happened?”

He nods his head and plops down next to me, ignoring all of my protests as he watches the party going on around us.

“Davis, I'm *fine*. Seriously, you don't need to go full protective brother mode. I just want to have fun and I can't do that if I'm on time-out for the rest of the night.”

He stands back up, “fine, but I'm sticking by your side until we leave.”

“Great, that works for me. As long as I get to actually *enjoy* tonight I don't care.” I get back up and walk over to Steph—who is now standing with the rest of the house— my newly found shadow following close behind.

“Do I get my best friend back now?” Steph asks him.

“Yeah, but you're gonna have to share her tonight Cupcake” he smirks.

“Don't call me that.”

“Whatever you say, *sweet cheeks*.”

“Don't call me sweet cheeks either” she snaps.

“Well then what can I call you?”

She ponders it for a moment, “Goddess, Queen, best human being on this planet...”

“Yeah, as fucking if” he says, rolling his eyes.

Steph pulls out her phone, “okay get into the frame, I want a picture of you guys.”

Blair jumps into Lucas’s arms and poses by giving him a kiss on the cheek, August sticks his tongue out and holds bunny ears behind Miller’s head. Miller looks at August out of the corner of his eye and flips him the middle finger. Davis throws me over his shoulder and slaps his hand on my ass, angling himself so you can see my face in the picture. I smile up at him while I place both my hands on his ass.

Steph snaps the photo and smiles down at her phone, “this one’s a keeper for sure.”

twenty

CLAIRE

This is it, the first competition of the season. I'm gonna do great, I know this routine like the back of my hand.

My hair sits in a bun on the top of my head, white crystal flowers bloom from the edges, silver glitter is dusted over my bare skin, and I have tears of gold streaming from my eyes.

Crystal and Sharron did an amazing job, when I looked in the mirror I barely recognized myself. Between the little details, the shiny silver dress dripping with crystals and baby blue blending in from the seams, I look like a goddess.

I'm by the doors to the ice, waiting for my name to be announced before I go on to perform. My stomach twists and I have to keep myself from puking everywhere, the nerves are getting to me.

When I'm finally called, I head to centre ice, hoping to god that I don't make a fool of myself right now. The music starts and I move, feeling everything I felt the first day I choreographed it with my coaches.

I forget that I'm skating, and become consumed by my thoughts. Moving wherever my body takes me, while I feel my heart breaking in two.

This is one of my more emotional routines, it's deep and dark, every twisted thought I've ever had put is on display for the world to see. It's my soul placed on a silver platter.

Part of the reason why I'm a champion skater is because I don't just skate, I put everything into the routines I do. I use this sport as a way to disconnect from reality, I use it to filter all my emotions. I use skating as a way to cope, when everything else in my life falls to pieces, I've always had this to fall back on. It's been consistent, it's been safe.

I want to cry, want to break down and let go. I hate the way I felt when I made this, I hate how dark my life was when

I first strung together this series of moves. I hate that no matter how happy I am, there is always something new to ruin it. I have *never* been as happy as I am with my new friends, they bring out the best in me.

I want them to see the real me, and I can't do that if I'm not completely honest with them. I guess the final decision has been made, I'm telling them everything tonight. They deserve to know.

The music fades away and I come to a stop on the ice. The crowd cheers and I take a bow.



“Hey Angel, what’s up?” Chris asks me, his face filling my screen.

I sit in my car, twisting my hands nervously around the wheel, “are you going to be home tonight?” I ask.

“I think so-”

The phone is being jostled and the image of my brother goes blurry before his best friend pops up on the screen.

“Claire!” Sam screams into the phone.

“Sam, you don’t need to yell. I can hear you perfectly fine.”

“Oops, sorry” he shrugs. “Anyway, how’s my favourite little sister?”

“She’s not your sister” Chris grumbles.

I choose to ignore his little tantrum, they do this all the time, him and Sam argue over it constantly. “I’m okay, I just wanted to see if Chris was going to be home tonight, and I guess you’re there too.”

“Yup, you gonna come over?” He asks excitedly.

I bite my lip, am I really about to do this? “Actually, I was thinking that maybe I could bring the guys over to meet y’all.”

They're both silent, and I see Sam's jaw drop before Chris rips his phone back and stares at me, "are you sure about this angel?"

Nodding my head I give him a hesitant smile, "it's time. They've shown me that I can trust them, they're worth the risk."

"I'm glad you finally found your people." I know he means it, he just wants the best for me.

With as much courage as I can muster, I finally walk into the house. The guys are in the living room, which gives me no excuse to put this off like I want to. Nerves tunnel through my stomach, I feel like it's about to drop out of my ass. I've never been this scared to have a conversation.

"Can we talk for a second?" I ask them all.

"What's up?" Davis turns down the volume on our TV so they can hear me properly.

Deep breaths Claire, deep breaths.

"I have some stuff I want to talk to you guys about, it's really important so I need you to just listen before you say anything."

My friends look at me confused, but stay silent nonetheless. I almost never sit them down to talk like this, so I'm thankful they're taking me seriously.

"I haven't been completely honest with you guys, and I think that I'm ready to come clean." I'm not ready to just whip out the fact that Chris is my brother, I need to ease into it first. "My parents and I don't have the best relationship, it's been messy for a long time now and they're part of the reason why I have issues trusting people. August has been helping me, I get these panic attacks that make it really hard to function." I laugh under my breath, "so I guess that's the next thing I wanted to tell you guys."

"So that's why August has been so protective over you?" Lucas asks.

I nod my head, “I haven’t felt at home with other people for a long time now, and after these last weeks with you guys, I’ve realized that you’re becoming my family and you deserve to know the truth.”

Miller comes and gives me a hug, “you’re definitely part of the family Claire bear.”

“There’s one last thing I need to tell you guys, but I think it’s better if I show you in person.”

They all pile into their cars, while I drive mine... alone. I need time to prepare for this, I need time to figure out what all I’m going to say and how to explain all of this to them.

When we finally get to Chris’s house, Blair steps out of his car, “why are we here? What is this place?” Blair asks.

“Who the hell owns this house?” Davis takes in the multi-million dollar home that my brother lives in, and I have to stifle a laugh at how ridiculous he looks.

“Come on, you’ll see” I say. We all walk to the front door, and I can see the confusion etched onto their faces when I walk right in.

“Claire, I don’t think we can just walk into this person’s house” Miller whisper yells.

“We can, because this is my brother’s house.”

I hear footsteps running from around the corner and next thing I know, Sam is scooping me up into the air, “baby sis is in the house” he laughs.

“Hi Sam.” His blonde hair is just as messy as always, his blue eyes and tanned skin doesn’t help with the lazy surfer boy look he sports. He’s gorgeous, but I grew up around him, I see him as nothing more than a brother.

“Y- your brother is Sam Connors?” Blair yells.

“No actually, *I* am. Sam just likes to act like he is” Chris says as he rounds the corner. He gives me a kiss on my temple before wrapping an arm around my shoulder, “you doing okay?”

“I think so,” I tell him, looking up and giving my most convincing smile.

Chris looks at the guys and sticks out his hand, “it’s nice to meet you all. We have a lot to talk about.”

twenty-one

LUCAS

Chris Taylor and Sam Connors are sitting at the same dinner table as me... what the fuck is going on right now?

Everything *does* make sense now though, the tickets she got us, the signed jersey, all the secrets surrounding her family. I feel kind of stupid to be honest, I mean, Tony coached Chris for Christs sake. I get why Claire and Tony are so close.

It was all right in front of me.

“Wait, I’m still confused. Explain it to me again” Blair says, shoving homemade pizza in his mouth.

Claire stares down at the table, “my actual last name is Taylor, I use my middle name so I can keep my life separate from his. I didn’t want my figure skating to be linked to his hockey career, I wanted to be successful because of my own talent, not of my family name.”

I don’t blame her. I can’t say that I know what she’s going through or how it would feel to be in that situation, but I can imagine that it’s caused a lot of trouble for her in the past.

“A lot of people used me in high school, like those boyfriends I told you guys about. I guess I just wanted a fresh start at Livler, one where people didn’t see me as a stepping stone to my brother. I wanted my own life.”

Chris smiles softly at her, grabbing her hand and turning to us, “she isn’t ashamed of me, but my fame has brought her some uncomfortable situations. We *both* decided a long time ago that it’s better for her to live a normal life.”

“It may seem fun, but there’s a lot of stuff you don’t get when you’re affiliated with someone like Chris, I learned that the hard way,” Tash says.

I’m not really in a position to question her, they’ve been together for a long time now, pretty much since college. I’ve seen pictures of Tash, she’s pretty, with long curly hair and

dark eyes, but I always thought she'd be the basic hockey wife type. In reality she's the farthest thing from it, she's kind and down to earth. She has no problem telling Chris off when she wants, she's actually a lot like Claire.

"So, what's it like living with my little sis?" Sam asks us.

"She's not your sister!" Chris yells. Tash slaps him over the head and tells him to shush, "sorry" he grumbles.

Davis throws an arm around Claire but takes it off when both Chris and Sam send him death glares, "she's awesome. I've never met anyone like her."

"We're very lucky to have her in our lives," August smiles.

That we are.

Claire and Chris get along so well, and I can see how much they care about one another. Even though I haven't known her very long, I can see why Chris is so protective.

Hell, *I'm* protective over her and I didn't even like her that much at the start.



"Can we talk?" I ask, walking into Claire's room.

"For sure, just give me a second to submit this report." She types away on her laptop, glasses sitting on the bridge of her nose as her eyes dance around the screen.

I take a seat on the edge of her bed and wait patiently, I feel like a dick after how I've treated her. I know that if I wasn't such an ass she probably would've felt comfortable enough to tell us that stuff sooner.

She admitted to us yesterday that we're starting to feel like her family, and she hasn't had a lot of people she can trust... I don't want to be lumped in with that group of people.

"Alright shoot" she smiles, closing her laptop and putting it to the side.

“I just wanted to apologize for how I’ve been acting. I know I can be an ass and I tease you and stuff, but I want you to know that you *really can* trust me.” I shift uncomfortably on her bed, “if you tell anyone I said this to you I’ll hurt you, but I like you being here. You’re my friend and I want you to feel safe living with us.”

“That hurt you to say didn’t it?” She laughs.

I chuckle along with her, “yeah a little, but that doesn’t make it any less true.”

Her smile softens, there’s something in this girl that I can’t quite make sense of. I’m jealous of her, she’s so calm, caring and forgiving. I turned into someone who holds onto rage, into someone who holds grudges against people for as long as possible. I hate that I’ve turned into such a hateful and angry person, but that’s normal, right? It’s normal to take what life’s given you and run with it?

I wish more than anything that I could be less like my dad. I don’t lose control of my anger and hurt people like he did, but I’m like him in so many other ways.

Despite what people may think about me, I’m still a kid at heart. Sure I’m opinionated and loud, but I care about my friends. I care about them more than anything, cause when things go to shit, they’re the ones who stick by your side.

Claire may be new but she’s made her place in this group. She belongs with us, she fits in perfectly, she doesn’t take us too seriously, and she’s always there for us.

“I know I haven’t been completely honest with you guys, but thank you for not getting upset about all the lies.” She pulls her eyes away from mine and stares down at her hands, “lying is safe, it’s a big bubble of security I can hide behind when things are tough... and as much as I hate it, it’s survival. It’s been the only thing I can control when everything else is spiralling.”

“I get it.” I mean it when I say that, I know what it feels like to have to lie to survive. You play nice in front of other people when in reality, you’re *drowning*.

“Can I be real with you for a second? I just know you won’t say some bullshit just to make me feel better.” She looks up at me with those bright blue eyes, and I nod my head. “I didn’t want to be a burden to you all, between my family, the anxiety, and the shit storm that seems to be my life... I was worried I would make your lives harder. I know you’re all focused on hockey, you have enough on your plates.”

“You’re one of us now, and trust me, once you’re seen as part of the group nothing can stop us from wanting to help.”

Her smile grows wide, and a small dimple pops out on her right cheek as she lunges towards me. Her arms wrap around me and I fall against her bed. “You, Lucas St. James, are a very sweet guy when you want to be.”

I stiffen before returning her hug, “if you ever tell anyone outside of this friend group, I *will* hurt you.”

twenty-two

LUCAS

I'm so fucking nervous right now.

I couldn't sleep last night, so I spent hours planning this surprise for her. After she introduced us to her brother, I realized I need to do more.

I'm not one to go out and do this kind of thing for just anyone. Hell, I barely do anything for Blair and he's my best fucking friend. Claire deserves the goddamn world, she's amazingly smart and insanely funny —when she wants to be. I want to show her how much I appreciate her.

I hear the front door swing open and peek my head out of the kitchen, watching her walk into the house like all of our lives weren't flipped upside down last night.

“Oh hey” she says.

“Hey, so I need you to go get changed into something comfortable” I tell her.

“Okay!” Her smile glows as we stare at one another, “give me like five minutes.”



“No peeking” I say to Claire as we walk down a path.

“Lucas I can't peek, you have your hands over my eyes” she laughs.

Oh... right.

As we get closer and closer to the surprise, I get *more and more* nervous. I put so much effort into this for her, I really hope she likes it.

I stop about five feet away from where I have everything set up, and slowly pull my hands away, telling her to open her

eyes. I watch as her face morphs from shock to pure happiness while my heart pounds in my chest.

“Lucas... this is so fucking cute. You really did all this?” She turns to me, eyes sparkling with something I’ve never seen in her before.

I nod my head, I knew this was a good fucking idea.

She slowly walks over to the blanket I have set on the grass by the lake, the moonlight reflects off the water, making it look magical. The air is warm, but the breeze that drifts across our skin sends shivers down my spine. I have lanterns on all four corners of the blanket, just in case it gets too dark and we need a little light, but the glow of them makes this look like a dream.

She looks like a dream.

As crazy as it sounds, I like being around her. There’s something so comforting about Claire, something that makes me want to have her in my life forever. She’s quickly becoming a very close friend and I’m more than happy to let her into my life. It’s so natural to have her around now... I can barely remember what life was like before her.

I pull snacks out of a cooler I have off to the side while she sits down on the blanket, “hand me those twizzlers” she smiles.

Claire turns her body so she can lay her head on my lap, getting comfortable as we look up to the sky. The main reason why I wanted to come out here is because the sky is clear and you can see the stars. I want to show her the constellations and teach her about them, it’s something that means a lot to me and I want to prove to her that she can trust me, by giving her a secret of my own.

“Okay, so there” I say, pointing up at the sky, “that’s the north star. If you follow this line here, it leads to the little dipper.” She follows my finger, watching as I draw out the constellation.

She looks up at me, watching my face while I continue to look up at the night sky, “where’d you learn about all this?”

“Blair’s dad taught me, I would go over a lot as a kid and we’d spend our nights learning about the worlds beyond ours.” I look down at her, staring into her eyes while she stares at me with wonder.

“You guys are really close, huh?”

“He’s been my best friend for as long as I can remember. He’s been with me through everything, he’s always had my back.”

She gives me that gorgeous smile, the dimple on her cheek coming out full force. *I* managed to make Claire Taylor —the queen of fake smiles and pretending— genuinely smile.

“Blaire’s family was always welcoming me into their home, they’d let me go over whenever things were bad, and gave me a place to stay when I didn’t want to be at home.”

“I know the feeling.” Her tone drops, instead of the happy, curious Claire that I’m used to... she sounds solemn and sad.

“I’m sorry, it sucks not having your parents be real parents. I at least had Blair, did you have anyone like him at home?”

She takes a piece of her hair and starts twirling it between her fingers, but her focus never leaves me. “Not really. I mean I have my brother, he was always there for me no matter what. He was the only person who took care of me no matter how bad things were. Tony was there too, he just wasn’t a person I could go over and see whenever I wanted.”

“What about your friends?” I prompt. I mean she had to have had some friends, right?

“None of them were super close to me. I kinda bounced between friends my whole life, sometimes I would distance myself on purpose out of fear, and other times they would say or do something that made me realize I didn’t want people like that in my life.”

“I’m sorry.” I feel like I’ve been saying that a lot recently.

“You shouldn’t be, I learned a lot from it all, and without them I wouldn’t be here with you right now. Besides, I have

Steph, she's more than made up for all the shitty friends I had growing up."

She's really opening up to me. This was supposed to be about proving that I can be in her life and not fuck it all up, but instead she's proving to me that she's more incredible than I ever thought.

I obviously don't know *all* the details, but it sounds like growing up kinda sucked for her too, and I'm in awe at how she managed to come out of it as such a good person.

"Claire, you are amazing, I hope you never forget that. I'm trying to be better to you, because I want to prove that I'm worth your time and energy." She bites her lip and looks up at me.

I don't know what's going through that head of hers, but I really wish I could read her mind right about now.

twenty-three

CLAIRE

I think I'm falling in love with Lucas St. James.

Holy... Fucking... Shit.

Nope, no. I am *not* falling in love with him. I can't be falling in love with the guy who laughed in my face when I first met him. I can't be falling in love with the guy who hated my guts a couple months ago. I can't be falling in love with the guy who stopped a creep from grabbing me at the party, smiles when I make stupid jokes, and tries to prove to me that he's worth being in my life. Nope.

Fuck. I totally am falling for him.

I get up from my position, needing to get out of his lap as quickly as I can.

He jumps back a little, "are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just cold" I rush out. "Can we go home?"

"Of course. Here, take my jacket and keys, I'll meet you in the car." He smiles at me while taking off his black coat, wrapping it around my shoulder and placing the keys in my hand.

I feel myself melt a little, and a millisecond later I'm scolding myself for it. He needs to stop doing what he's doing, he needs to stop being so sweet because I can't fall for him more than I already have. I just can't.

I hop into the passenger side of the car and turn up the heat, sitting with nothing but the sound of the engine. His scent fills the air around me, and I pull his jacket closer to me.

For fucks sake, I need to stop.

I rip it off of me and throw it into the back seat, but I feel cold now... lost.

He walks around to the back side of the car, opening the trunk and throwing everything in. When he gets in, he gives me a side-eye before looking into the back seat, seeing his coat laying there. Lucas looks back at me, blinking a couple times and turning to face forward.

The entire car ride is filled with tension, or maybe it's just me? I don't fucking know, but I hate it more than anything. Everything was just starting to feel normal with him, natural, *easy*.

As soon as he parks in the driveway, I get out of the damn car as fast as I can. I bolt into the house, but he follows closely behind me. I'm about to take my first step onto the stairs when he stops me, his fingertips brush my shoulder and I feel like my heart is going to explode.

Stop touching me and making me feel things.

“Did I do something wrong? I thought you liked my surprise, but you wanted to get out of there so quickly and then you ran into the house...” he looks like a sad puppy.

“No, everything was perfect” I breathe. A little *too* perfect, “I'm just tired and we have practice tomorrow. Thank you for everything, you did a great job.”

Did a great job? Seriously? That's what I fucking say to him?

“Okay, well goodnight then. I'll see you in the morning, pretty girl.”

I run to my room as fast as I can, closing the door before sliding down the back of it and curling into myself.

Maybe I'm not actually falling for him. Maybe I'm just not used to someone doing something so sweet and kind and caring for me.

I lean my head back against the door, sighing softly while my brain spins 'round and 'round. How the hell does anyone deal with this stuff? I haven't let myself feel for anyone since high school.

When I'm with Lucas, it feels like my whole world stops, like everything else is blurred and he's the only thing in focus.

His touch sets my skin on fire and a flurry of butterflies to my stomach. His laugh makes my chest ache, and that smile... god that smile is so perfect.

Never mind. I'm totally, irrefutably, head over heels in love with him.

And that fucking nickname... it started off as something to mock me, to say I'm more beauty than brains, but somewhere along the way it turned into some sort of endearment.

Why did I have to fall for the one guy I wasn't supposed to? Why couldn't I have fallen for any of the others? Literally anyone else would be better than Lucas.

Miller has the biggest heart ever, he's the softest person I know and I'm sure he'd make an amazing boyfriend.

Blair is smart and kind, sure he's a bit of a whore... but he's a good guy at heart.

Davis is caring and funny beyond belief, he has this soft side to him that I'm sure no one ever sees.

August was like an instant best friend, if I didn't see him like a brother –and if he and Steph weren't a thing– he'd be my first choice.

Lucas St. James dug his way into my head and managed to make me fall in love with him without even trying.

God fucking damn it.

Hours go by, hours of not being able to sleep and spending the entire time tormenting myself with thoughts of the stupid sandy-haired boy I thought I hated.

The more I think of him the more knots start to grow in my stomach, the kind of knots that have my hands slipping under my shorts and into my panties.

I can feel how wet I am, it's dripping out of me, like every smutty book describes.

God I'm so turned on right now.

I close my eyes, rubbing circles over my clit as I think of Lucas. I imagine him in his hockey gear —sweaty hair and all — as he skates up to me and pins me against the boards.

He throws off his gloves and tangles his hands in my hair, holding me still as he brings his mouth to mine in a crushing kiss.

I start to pant while my fingers work faster, one hand slipping inside of me while the other continues to work on my clit. Every part of me is hot, my skin feels like it's on fire, but I don't stop.

Imaginary Lucas picks me up and wraps my legs around his waist, *'pretty girl'* he groans.

A whimper leaves my lips before I have the chance to stop it, the way he looks down at me makes me want to melt, he looks at me like I'm the only thing he wants.

Suddenly he has me pressed against the bench, my back colliding with the cold wood as he rips off his jersey.

He's so hot.

In my little fantasy world, I don't have to watch him take off every piece of his gear one by one, I just get to see him half-naked in the blink of an eye.

His abs glistening with sweat, the veins on his arms in full view, all of it makes me even hotter.

'Let me make you feel good pretty girl. I want to devour you.'

My back arches off my bed, my fingers hit the perfect spot inside of me and I moan louder than I intend to.

“Claire?”

God his voice.

My stomach starts to tighten, my clit starts to throb and I thrash around in my bed, desperate to cum.

“Lucas” I call out.

“Claire is everything alright in there?”

Fireworks go off inside of me at the same time I realize that wasn't fantasy Lucas... that was real Lucas.

I slap one hand over my mouth while the other continues to circle my clit, drawing out my orgasm.

This is so fucking wrong, Lucas is right outside of my door and I'm *fucking cumming*.

Jesus Christ.

"I'm okay" I manage to choke out.

He hesitates for a moment before walking away. When I hear his door close I allow myself to relax a little, but my mind is still hazy from the orgasm.

What the actual fuck did I just do?



This is a Steph level crisis. I spent the whole night lying awake in my bed thinking about the boy down the hall from me.

She –of course– was all smiles the moment I told her, but I kind of want to die inside because how the hell am I supposed to live with him now?

"I say take a leap of faith and tell him how you feel," she says, trying on a pair of sunglasses that were sitting on my desk. "Or even better, show him how you feel."

"And how do you expect me to do that?"

The way she giggles tells me everything I need to know. "Grab him by the face, and kiss the shit out of him."

I flop back on my bed, burying myself in a mountain of pillows and sighing while I try to imagine doing just that. The idea of kissing him makes me all dizzy, it tilts my world on its side and kind of makes me want to puke from how scary it is. "I'm not like you Steph, I'm not daring or sexy, and I definitely don't jump out of my comfort zone and kiss a boy out of nowhere."

Apparently I have fucking orgasms with him on the other side of the door though.

“I’m just saying,” she sighs, joining me in my little fortress of solitude, “you’re never going to know if the chemistry is there if you don’t try. What’s the worst he can do? Reject you?”

“Yes actually. Don’t forget, I have to live with the guy after all this.”

Steph rolls her eyes and slaps me gently on my arm, “you’re going to have to make a leap at some point, you can’t spend the rest of your life hiding in your room just because some things are scary.”

I actually can. Hiding is good. I can’t get hurt if I don’t try.

“Speaking of things that are scary, how’s the whole August thing going?” It’s been a while since I’ve checked in on the love birds, and I haven’t heard any new revelations about taking the next big step and finally declaring that they’re officially together.

We all know that they want to be, they’re perfect for one another, but for some reason they haven’t done anything about it.

“Everything’s good. He’s great, I’m great, I couldn’t be happier” she says.

“But...”

“But we’re stuck in fucking limbo Claire!” she shouts, tossing her hands up in the air. “We’ve been seeing each other for what? A couple weeks now and neither of us have done anything to actually express how we feel. It’s like we’re tiptoeing around the subject and I hate it.”

I refrain from shaking my head, the solution is easy, all she has to do is take her own damn advice and make the leap. “Sounds like you need a reality check.” Steph smiles at me, nodding her head vigorously. “You are the worst with feelings, and the fact that you’ve admitted that it bothers you... well that’s a huge step.”

“Okay first of all, ouch. Second, you’re right.”

“Of course I am.”

She stares at me annoyed, “continue before your head grows ten more sizes.”

“My point is... are you actually happy with how things are going?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t rush things, it’ll happen. I can see how much he likes you, he’ll come around eventually.”

I know she wants to be with him, and he wants to be with her, but not everything has to happen quickly. Sometimes the best relationships come from the long game.

twenty-four

LUCAS

“Are you ready?” Blair asks.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready, but I gotta do it at some point right?” I look at him, my best friend who knows it all, and search for something that tells me I’m doing the right thing.

“I’ll be waiting, go get some closure.”

The bell above the door to the coffee shop rings, and most people ignore it... but one man doesn’t.

His hair has faded to silver, the dark circles I remember sitting under his eyes aren’t there anymore, and he’s dressed in a suit. He *never* wore suits.

I feel my palms start to sweat, my stomach knots as I get closer to him and I have to fight back the urge to run in the opposite direction. When I get to him, he doesn’t say anything, he just looks at me and takes in every inch of the son he hasn’t seen in six years.

He doesn’t look like the man I knew, the dad that would beat my mother and then act like he didn’t do anything wrong.

“Have a seat” he says hesitantly. I don’t answer, I don’t even know what to say to him, so I just sit. “I didn’t know what to get you so I just got a hot chocolate. I remember you liking those when you were younger.”

Right, when I was fifteen. He doesn’t know that I drink coffee now, or that I haven’t had hot chocolate since I graduated high school. He has no idea that I’m a star athlete with a full ride to one of the best schools in the country, or that I’ve been drowning for years because of what he’s done. “Thanks.”

He nods his head and we sit in an uncomfortable silence for a moment before he speaks again, “how’ve you been?”

“Let’s not act like you care about my life” I snap. “I didn’t come here to catch up like old friends, I came here to get closure. I don’t want to be in your life and I think it would be best if you stayed out of mine.” My chest heaves up and down, I always imagined what it would be like to finally stand up to him, I just never thought it would actually happen. “Let’s get this over with so I can move on, I’m tired of carrying your shit around with me.”

“I don’t blame you,” he hangs his head low, fiddling with the coffee cup in front of him. “I just want to say that I’m sorry, I don’t have any excuses for my actions but the least I can do is tell you why.”

There is nothing in this world that will make what he did make sense.

“I lost my job a couple months before your sixth birthday, things were tough and I knew I had you and your mother to provide for. Liquor became my coping mechanism and I fell down a hole, by the time I found a new job I was already a drunk. No one kept me for more than a year, and that just added fuel to my fire.” He looks up at me and I can see tears in his eyes, “I took out my anger on your mother, and I will never forgive myself for it.”

“I’ll never forgive you either.” He doesn’t deserve my forgiveness.

“You didn’t deserve to grow up in a home like that, if I could go back and change everything I would. I hope you know that whether or not I’m in your life, I *do* love you, and I really am sorry for everything I did.”

Anger bubbles up in my chest, you don’t treat someone you love like he did, you don’t hit and scream and hurt those that you claim to love. Tears start to form in my eyes and I shove my chair out from underneath me, “I don’t even have photos of myself as a kid, do you know that? Mom and I only took the essentials cause we were in such a hurry to leave.”

“I know,” he whispers.

“I didn’t need you then, and I sure as hell don’t need you now. I hope you treat the next family you have with the love and respect you never gave *us*.” It’s all a lie though, I did need him. I so badly wanted my father to be a part of my life and I couldn’t have that. It’s not fair... none of it is.

Storming out of the shop, I slam the door behind me, wincing at how loud it was.

“How’d it go?” Blair asks cautiously as I take a seat in his car.

“We’re going to a bar.”



Walking into the house, stupid drunk, I can’t help but hate myself. I’m no better than he is, I’m getting drunk to avoid my problems.

“Here, just get some sleep man,” Blair says, laying me down in my bed.

But I don’t want to sleep, I want to curl up into a ball and cry because I’ve turned into the man I hate more than anything. So I lay in my bed for a while, thinking of every stupid memory and every stupid thing I did tonight.

After an hour of tossing and turning, I finally get up and stumble my way downstairs to the kitchen. I go to grab a glass and it slips out of my hand, smashing against the floor into a million little pieces.

“*Fuck.*”

I try picking up the pieces and cut myself, the stinging sensation brings back memories, the kind where I would do this to myself on purpose. Part of me wants to do it again.

“What happened?” Claire asks groggily, walking into the kitchen.

Tears sting my eyes, “I dropped a glass.”

“Okay” she says, crouching down next to me. She gently grabs the side of my face and forces me to look at her, “let me clean it up later, let’s go sit outside for a second.”

Nodding my head, I grab her hand and let her guide me into the cool night air. We sit on the back porch and I rest my head on her shoulder. When she starts rubbing slow circles on my back, I completely fall apart.

“It’s okay” she whispers me.

I take my head off her shoulder and turn to look at her, “tell me I’m not like him, I need to know I’m nothing like my dad.”

Her eyes grow wide, “Lucas, what are you talking about?”

“Please, I need to know I’m not like him. I know I can be an ass and selfish and rude, but I need to know I’m not becoming the same man who hit my mom.”

She stiffens, her whole body goes rigid and I can see her starting to crack. Her eyes begin to tear up, and when the first one falls she can no longer stop them, “Lucas I’m so sorry.”

“Please pretty girl” I beg.

She quickly wipes her cheeks and holds me close to her, “you are kind, you love your friends more than anything and you’re the first one to protect them when they need it. You are so caring, you are a *good* person and I know you would never hurt someone... not like they hurt me.”

In this moment, all I can do is stare at her. There’s so much she’s not telling me, so much unsaid, and it terrifies me.

twenty-five

CLAIRE

I'm looking into the mirror and I don't recognize myself. I look like the person I tried to leave behind in Vancouver, the daughter my parents brought to fancy dinners, *the perfect daughter*.

Last night replays over and over again on a loop in my head. Sharing such a raw moment with Lucas, telling him way more than I should have, was overwhelming.

He knows what I went through —or at least a piece of it— and part of me thinks that maybe I can tell him about what I went through all those years. He won't judge me, or make me feel little... he'll get it.

Maybe that's just the crush talking, hoping and praying that he's the same guy I've built up in my head, but I do believe he'd know the right thing to say.

My hands tremble as I try to do up my necklace, I feel like I'm going to puke everywhere. I can't believe my parents are in town, and I can't believe that I'm about to go to this fucking fundraiser with them.

On the bright side, Chris will be there, he'll act like a buffer. They never do anything to hurt me when he's around.

Steph watches me struggling, she walks over to me and lightly touches my hand, "let me help." I nod my head, handing her the silver jewelry and turning around. "It's going to be okay, you know. They're only here for one night and then they're gone." Her voice is soft like her touch, and I can only hope she's right.

I take a final look in the mirror, biting back the bitter taste of bile as I try to keep myself composed. I try to fight back all the memories, all the fights after events, the criticism of my dresses and the hours I would spend trying to cover my bruises.

My eyes start watering, I fucking *hate* this.

“Just breathe, it’s only a couple of hours and you know you can call me if anything gets out of hand.”

“Thank you, but I don’t think that’s an option tonight.”

I thought I had finally escaped the grasp my parents had on me, but I guess I’m still just as trapped as before, still just as tangled in their web, still just as small as when I was fifteen.

I know if it were up to them, I wouldn’t be coming tonight. I was always ‘making a fool out of myself’. Their reputation is more important to them than anything else.

To be seen as the perfect family is their number one priority. The successful father who owns multiple businesses, the trophy wife who helps manage his companies and holds the family together, the perfect son who makes millions playing professional hockey, and the daughter who is humble and quiet –hiding in the shadows.

Humble and quiet my ass, I was told not to speak unless spoken to, and I learned to listen quickly.

The only thing I’m excited for is getting to hangout with Chris and Sam, plus maybe seeing a couple of my parents’ friends. I dislike most of them, and I can tell with their fake smiles and false support, that they aren’t big fans of my parents either. They only stick around because connections are *everything* in this world.

I’m hoping that Craig is there tonight, he’s closer to my brother’s age than my parents, but a good friend nonetheless. He was a resident when my parents first met him, just a boy working towards being the top surgeon in the country, but now he’s the chief at the Presbyterian in Dallas.

He’s always been kind to me, and always looked out for my family when we needed it most. Any medical scares? We called Craig. Any issues with a doctor? Craig called and pulled strings to get the problem fixed. The man has a big heart, and I know that if I were to ever need anything, he’d be happy to help.

“At least my mom can’t criticize the dress, she’s the one who picked it out. She had it flown in before I even knew this thing was happening” I mumble.

The dress is pretty, light blue satin covers my body, hanging loose around my legs and hugging tight around my waist. The cowl neck sits perfectly, just enough fabric to look pretty, not enough to look tacky.

I look like a princess.

I feel anything but.

The driver is already waiting for me by the time I walk outside. He opens the back door as I approach the limo and slide onto the seat next to Chris and Sam. I give Chris a big hug, and smile towards Sam, they both look great.

My father clears his throat and my attention is drawn towards him. He’s sitting next to my mother, wearing a dark grey suit that screams everything my father is about. Simple, and clean.

My mother, on the other hand, is wearing a skin tight, floor length, red dress. She’s decked out in her favourite diamonds, looking elegant as ever.

“Mom, Dad,” I greet them.

“Hello Claire, I see you made the sensible decision and wore the dress I chose for you.” She looks to my father, almost as though she’s waiting for his approval.

“You look amazing, Angel,” Chris says.

My father rolls his eyes, “again with that silly nickname? She isn’t a child anymore, and neither are you. I expect you both to act like it.”

I place a soft hand on Chris when I feel his fists clench. There’s no use in starting a fight we won’t ever win.

My chest is heavy with sadness though, that nickname is important to both of us. It’s a constant reminder of how important I am to him, it holds too much weight to be mocked by my father. I have a lot of regrets in life, that day being the main one. I never wanted to hurt him, I never wanted him to

see me like that. It wasn't supposed to be him that found me, no one was supposed to find me until it was too late.

I feel bad for Sam, he shouldn't have to sit here awkwardly while we make passive aggressive comments to one another. He's one of the few people who know about that day, he's been my brother's best friend for years, he's our family... but being family isn't the same as being blood.

My parents shift so they can exit first, and I follow behind them, walking next to my father, watching as my mother straightens her back and holds herself high. I link my arms with his before walking down the carpet and up the stairs.

Chris and Sam always wait a little longer so I don't get caught in their pictures, they both know why I separate myself from them and they respect it.

It's too loud in here, fake laughs bounce off the walls while everyone mingles, pretending to care about people's children or jobs. Besides the fact that I have to spend the night with my parents, I always hated the fakeness that surrounds these events.

No one actually cares how your kids soccer team is doing, or what your latest investment is, all they want is money –or a connection to help them later on. These stupid 'fundraisers' are an excuse to make friends with your enemies. To try and suck someone into a business deal or to weasel your way into a high power position in a company.

My parents wander off to god knows where, probably grabbing the first of many glasses of champagne of the night, while I wait for my brother to catch up. Chris links arms with mine and whisks me away to a quieter area of the museum, somewhere the three of us can hide away from prying eyes and judgemental glares.

Sam steals a bottle of champagne off a table and giggles to himself as we run away from all the stupid, snotty, rich people.

We've always done this, sneaking off and getting drunk, exploring the venue and laughing with one another about

whatever is going on in our lives at the moment, it's the only thing that makes these events bearable.



“No, no, no. You’ve got it all wrong, you gotta make them jump through hoops for you when they fuck up” Sam slurs, taking another sip from the bottle.

I rip it out of his hands, annoyed that he’s not just listening. It’s all in the past, we’re good now. “No way, that’s not nice” I say, taking a swig.

“I agree with Sam on this one, you should have given them hell.” Chris lifts his head slightly off the floor to look at me, but I can’t take him seriously with how drunk he is.

“No. If I fucked up, you’d want people to forgive me” I challenge.

He frowns, “true, but you’re my baby sister. They’re just stupid boys.”

“All boys are stupid.” Sam points his finger at me as if he’s just made this insane revelation all by himself.

“You’re a boy.”

“Oh... right.”

We start giggling, and my favourite surgeon walks into the room. “I knew I’d find you all somewhere, drunk and giggling about god knows what.” He flashes a bright smile and takes a seat next to me, then grabs the bottle out of my hands and takes a drink, “how’ve ya been kiddo?”

“Oh you know, messy as ever.” Okay, time to stop drinking. No deep dark secret telling to your parents’ friend.

He places a hand around my shoulder and pulls me into a side hug, so I rest my head on his shoulder and get comfy, “how’s the Presbyterian treating you?”

“Great! You should really come by soon, I could give you guys a super secret tour.”

“Sure, but maybe not when I’m drunk? I don’t think your bosses would like that” I slur, shaking my head.

That made me dizzy.

Craig smirks, “I *am* the boss, little miss.”

“Oh right.”

Alcohol can be a wonderful thing, but also the worst. For the past couple of hours I’ve been having the time of my life, laughing with my brother and his friend, drama and stress free. But the moment my father walks into the room, I feel sick to my stomach.

A child should never be scared of their parents, they should never have to close their eyes and hope for the best when the person who’s supposed to *protect* them, comes around. I find myself doing that a lot when he’s near me.

“So *this* is where you’ve been hiding? You’ve been in here with your brother getting *drunk* when you know it’s important we’re all out there together?” His voice is so cold, so hateful, so spiteful. “I can’t believe you would influence your brother like this.”

Right, cause it’s always my fault.

“Dad, she didn’t-”

“Save it Chris. I know you wouldn’t normally do this, I know it’s only because *she’s* around.” He says the word *she* like I’m some monster, like I’ve ruined his perfect son. “You aren’t even old enough to drink Claire, do you know what would happen if someone were to find out that my daughter is underage drinking at a formal event?”

“I’m about to be twenty-one” I mutter, “and they’d probably see we aren’t perfect.”

“Excuse me, what did you just say?” He growls.

Craig clears his throat and my dad instantly backs down, walking out of the room before he has the opportunity to show people who he really is.



I stumble my way into the house, giggling and drunk off my ass. Everyone is in the living room, watching me struggle to take my shoes off.

Miller rushes over to help me, “thank you Miller. You know I really like you?” I sigh.

“I know Claire bear” he replies, wrapping an arm around my waist and helping me into the living room.

Steph eyes me hesitantly, “so how was it?”

“Oh you know, mom was a bitch, dad lost it, and I got drunk with tweedledum and tweedledee.”

Everyone’s eyes go wide, except Steph. Unfortunately, she knows how these things go. She knows that this is the norm.

“Relax” I grumble to the others, “it’s fine. Mom’s always like that, and so is dad. Nothing new here.” I giggle and point to myself, always a mess, always cleaning up other people’s messes, always dealing with the cruel reality that my parents don’t love me like they should.

“Okay, I think you and I are going to go upstairs to bed now” Lucas says, grabbing my hand and leading me towards the stairs.

All I can think about doing is kissing him. I dream of what he tastes like, what his lips would feel like against mine, what he would do... but I’m brought back to reality when he sits me down on my bed and tells me to stay put.

Lucas lets go of my hand, and it leaves me feeling cold, I don’t want him to let go. He comes back from my bathroom with my makeup remover, and kneels in front of me, slowly wiping across my hot skin.

“You need to get changed,” he whispers.

“I need help,” I pout.

He sighs before standing back up and grabbing me a change of clothes, “stand up.” His breath fans my face, sending goosebumps racing along my spine. When I finally stand he slowly unzips my dress, letting it drop to the floor before kneeling in front of me again and guiding my feet into my sweatpants. His fingers graze my legs as he pulls them up, his breath hitches when he gets to my upper thighs, staring at the dark scars on my hip. His fingers pass over them, reminding me of all the pain I went through.

“What are these?” he asks quietly.

“Scars.”

“From what?” His question isn’t really a question, I can tell he knows the answer.

“I think you know” I say breathless as his fingers graze over the spot again.

“You’re always so happy though.”

“Not everyone is as happy as they seem.”

Lucas pulls my pants up the rest of the way, then quickly slides my shirt over my head. He sets me down and pulls the covers over me, and when he goes to walk away, I stop him.

“Please don’t tell the others” I beg.

“Your secret is safe with me, pretty girl.”

I pull him towards me and he lays down, stiff for a moment before finally relaxing and letting me curl up next to him. I just need someone –anyone– to hold me and help me remember that I’m safe.

Sometimes I just want the world to stop so I can catch my breath, just one second to feel like everything isn’t falling apart around me.

twenty-six

CLAIRE

I feel sick. I've never liked waking up on my birthday, surrounded by bad memories and old wounds. It doesn't help that I'm hungover and embarrassed about what happened last night with Lucas.

I find myself opening up to him more and more, telling him every little secret I've kept close to me for as long as I can remember. He's dangerous, he makes me want to confide in him, tell him every twisted thing from my past and never look back.

My parents never really celebrated my birthday, the most I would get was a happy birthday by text –if I was lucky. Neither one of them said anything to me last night about it either, they ignored the fact that their daughter was about to turn twenty-one.

I didn't really have any friends to celebrate with, and when I did they would all go out to party cause, well it's halloween. I never took it personally, it definitely sucked, but I was used to it.

Chris, Tony and Sam are the only ones who have ever cared. When Chris and I were little, he would go and buy me a cupcake, he would ride down to the grocery store on his bike and return with it wrapped up all pretty. It became a tradition, every single year he gets me one, even if he's traveling for work he has always found a way to get one in my hands on my birthday.

I don't ever celebrate it, only a handful of people know and I plan on keeping it that way. Don't get me wrong, I love the guys and I know they would care enough about me to want to do something, but that's what I don't want. Every birthday has been a disappointment in one way or another, so I don't want to get my hopes up, just for them to be crushed later on when something inevitably goes wrong.

My phone buzzes on my nightstand and I reach over to pick it up. Chris's voice comes blaring through the speaker as he sings the worst rendition of happy birthday I've ever heard.

"Oh my god, you're making my ears bleed. Can you stop singing before I go deaf?" I laugh.

"I told him it was a bad idea" Tash yells from a distance.

"You both suck, but happy birthday Angel. I love you and I will forever be grateful to this day because it's the day I got to meet you for the very first time." His voice is soft, wavering slightly as though he's about to cry.

"Chris, don't get all emotional on me. It's not that big of a deal."

He gasps, "not that big of a deal? Are you shitting me? You're turning *twenty-one*, you should be celebrating!"

I know he loves me, and he wants me to feel special on a day that most people do, but he knows how this goes. I get his cupcake, spend five minutes pretending like I don't hate today, then move on and forget about it.

"Do me a favour, send me a picture of you and your cupcake so I can send it to Sam. He's gonna lose his mind that he didn't get to tell you happy birthday first."

Remind me why those two are best friends again? All they do is torment one another.

"I will, I'll talk to you later." When I open the front door, the little box is already sitting there, so like I promised, I take a picture and send it Chris's way. The text from Sam comes in not long after, and he's definitely not happy.

Tell your brother to screw off. He KNEW I wanted to be the first to wish you a happy birthday.

I'm gonna punch him in the face.

You're never going to win that fight, sorry sammy boy.

Anyway...

HAPPY BIRTHDAY BABY-SIS!!! GET DRUNK
AND MAKE POOR CHOICES.

Maybe even get laid ;)

You're gross.

But thank you.

I sit down at the kitchen island and take my five minutes to wish myself a happy birthday before tucking all the bullshit away and forgetting every awful memory I have attached to today.

The boys are nowhere to be seen, usually they would be tormenting me by now, or screaming at one another over a video game. I shoot them a text and ask where they all went, only to be told that they're helping the football guys set up for a party tonight.

How much do you wanna bet that they're gonna drag me there against my will?

I throw the wrapping for the cupcake in the garbage and head upstairs, I already know that my plans of having a chill night at home with Steph are not going to happen.



Steph heard about the party and went costume shopping literally right away. How the girl managed to get her hands on two costumes —that don't totally suck— the *day* of Halloween, I'll never know. She forced me into a Lana Croft costume and threw a bottle of tequila in my hand, knowing it would be the only thing to shut me up. I hate that she knows me so well.

“Are you really not going to tell them?” She asks as we walk into the house.

I shrug, “what's the point? My birthdays always go poorly one way or another so I might as well just act like it's not

happening. I love them but they'll just try to make today special and I don't want that."

Steph gives me a pity smile, she knows all of this already, but it's never stopped her from trying. Unfortunately, people just can't understand how I feel about the matter unless they've gone through it themselves. She's been lucky, her parents love her to death and always make her birthdays the best.

The guys are already here, partying it up in the corner –as usual– with beers in their hands and lazy smiles on their faces. Steph drops into August's lap the first chance she gets.

Steph and August aren't obvious about their relationship like most people are, they act like friends most of the time. It works for them though, they aren't throwing it in our faces or making a huge deal out of it. Both of them are low-key, and after knowing Steph for three years, I know she doesn't like the flashy couples who suck each others faces off every chance they get.

I take a seat next to Lucas, and when he puts an arm around me, butterflies crawl their way into my stomach. It's so weird to think that only a couple weeks ago this wouldn't have had any effect on me... and now I'm trying not to scream at the fact that Lucas is touching me.

Steph smiles knowingly, probably doing a celebratory dance in her head while the man of her dreams traces circles on her arm. The fact that she's always right pisses me off...

"I'm out" Lucas says, crushing an empty can in his hand, "anyone want another?"

Blair and Miller nod, and the moment I see Lucas get up, I jump at my chance. "I'll come with you" I shout, cringing at how eager I sound. "I mean, I need a drink too, so I might as well join you."

Great save Claire.

I follow Lucas, looking back at Steph as she gives me two thumbs up. My heart races while I search for something to talk

about, anything to help myself calm down from the excitement and fear coursing through my veins.

But then I realize, I don't need to say anything if I'm going to kiss him. No words could truly calm me down.

When we finally enter the kitchen, away from prying eyes, I grab his hand. Lucas looks back at me with nothing but kindness, staring at me expectantly. I can do this, he's just a guy.

A guy who makes me want to do stupid things.

“What's up pretty girl?”

My body leans in before I have the chance to talk myself out of this, and when my lips connect with his.. my whole world comes crashing to a halt. My body feels like it's on fire, he presses up against me in the best way possible, and for a single second he melts into the kiss with me.

And then he pulls away.

His hands push me back and my heart breaks in two, the moment of bliss ripped away from me. “What the fuck was that?” he yells.

“I'm sorry I- fuck I read you completely wrong.” I want to crawl into a hole and die, this is so fucking embarrassing.

“Yeah... you did,” Lucas scoffs, storming out of the kitchen.

I don't know how much time passes, or why I've been standing here completely frozen, but I *do* know that Steph reads me like a damn book the moment she sets her eyes on me.

“He rejected me” I whisper as she wraps her arms around me.

“Are you okay?”

I don't know if I am or not. How am I supposed to feel when the guy I like reacts like that to a kiss? How am I supposed to live with him now? But even though my night is

ruined, hers shouldn't be. "I will be, go have some fun" I nudge her.

"Only if you promise to try to do the same."

She runs off, probably to find August, while I hide in the kitchen, trying not to lose my sanity. This party sucks, everyone's too drunk, the music is too loud, and I'm less than interested in playing whatever drinking game my roommates are participating in right now.

"Wow, two times in a row we bump into one another at a bar. I'm gonna start thinking you're an alcoholic if you aren't careful."

A small smile plays on my lips, "technically this isn't a bar, it's just alcohol on a counter" I say, turning around.

Nathan flashes that heart stopping smile, he says something to a girl with short black hair and tattoos before she glances at me and walks away. He leans against the counter next to me, "Why are you hiding in here?"

I shrug, "I'm not a big fan of halloween." His jaw drops, and I can't help but let out a laugh.

"But, everyone likes halloween. It's like the best party night of the year."

"Not for everyone" I mutter, bringing a plastic cup to my lips.

He seems to have caught that little detail because his eyebrows pinch together, "sounds like you need to talk about some stuff. Do you wanna go upstairs?"

I think about it for a second, maybe confiding in him will stop this ache in my chest. I smile and Nathan grabs my hand, pulling me off towards a set of stairs. He leads me to an empty bedroom and makes me sit down on the bed before taking a seat across from me on a little couch. "Time for you to spill."

A startled laugh escapes me, "I'm not sure why you think I'm about to tell a stranger my problems, you overestimate my ability to trust."

My little quip is rewarded with another smile, one that makes me wish he was a little closer. “That’s why I’m the perfect person to tell, no preconceived notions and no judgment,” he holds up two fingers, “scouts honour.”

I don’t know why, but there’s something inside me that says I can trust him. He’s easy to talk to, I don’t feel like I have to put on this front with him, I can be myself. So I tell him why I hate halloween, feeling my heart sink as I think about the fact that my birthday is a bust yet again... I got rejected on my fucking birthday. How pathetic is that?

“Wow, that’s kinda heavy,” he whispers. I nod my head, it seems like most of my life is like that. “Do you mind if I come join you on the bed?”

“I would really like that.”

Nathan slowly walks over to me, sitting so close I can feel him breathing. Our legs brush against one another and this rush of energy goes through me, his touch is like fire, and my whole body goes hot.

“I’m sorry you’ve had shit luck with birthdays, we can just hang out here if you want, no pressure or anything.” His hand snakes behind me and he puts his weight on it, leaning in a little closer as his eyes drift down to my lips.

He’s looking at me like I’m the only thing he wants right now, like I’m desirable, the complete opposite of how I was feeling with Lucas. There’s so much sexual tension in the air, it feels thick, like a fucking fog.

I don’t know what the hell has gotten into me, but when I start to move towards him all I can think of is what his lips taste like. He doesn’t stop me, he just tilts his head and lets me press my lips against his. He wraps one arm around my lower back and the other rests on the nape of my neck. His lips are so soft and they fit effortlessly with mine.

He starts to speed up the kiss, moving fast and faster until I go dizzy. His hands roam my body, feeling, touching, savouring every part of me that he can get. He picks me up,

and on instinct I wrap my legs around his waist to steady myself.

Nathan pins me against the wall, peppering kisses along my neck. I tilt my head to give him better access, letting out breathy moans as he sucks on my pulse point.

He drops my legs and presses harder into me, I can feel his erection poking me in the stomach as he grabs both of my hands and pins them above my head. He pulls away and looks me in the eyes, "Lucas is such an idiot."

"What?" I laugh.

"I *said*, Lucas is an idiot. I managed to steal his girl right from under his nose... and there's nothing he can do about it." His eyes trail from my lips, down to my chest, the warm feeling that was growing in my stomach vanishes.

He knows Lucas? He was watching us?

"Nathan, what are you talking about?" I start to panic, he's not letting go of my wrists, he's holding onto them tighter, "Nathan please let go, you're scaring me." He doesn't let go, his hold gets tighter and tighter until my eyes begin to water from the pain. His face dives back into my neck, harsh kisses left on my collar bone and chest while I try to get out of his grasp.

When I manage to get out of his hold, I try pushing his head away but he turns and slams us back on the bed.

This isn't happening right now, he's going to stop any second, he's going to see that he's scaring me and stop and apologize.

But he doesn't... instead holds my arms above my head. My legs are shaking from holding them together so tightly, my muscles burn as I fight to keep them closed, but I'm no match for him. He places his knee in between my legs, using his other hand to pry them apart.

He's gripping my leg too tight, it hurts, like really fucking hurts. Tears stream down my face, "Nathan please stop, you're hurting me. I don't want to do this anymore, just please stop so we can go back downstairs." I'm pleading with a fucking wall

right now, he's not listening to me. "Nathan stop!" I scream, "someone help!"

He slams his hand over my mouth, finally freeing my hands. I try to push him off of me but it isn't working, he's too big, he's too strong. "*Shut the fuck up*" he growls. When he takes his hand away, I don't say a word. I'm too scared of the man on top of me, the same guy who I thought was kind and sweet.

How could things have gone *so* wrong *so* quickly?

His hands roam my body, grabbing at my thighs too harshly, grabbing my waist and squeezing. Every touch elicits a whimper from me, I just want him to stop.

I want to scream until my throat is bloody, but I know it's no use. No one can hear me over the loud music, there's no one else up here, and none of my friends know where I am.

His hand reaches under my shirt, grabbing at my bra, trying to pull it down. His touch is like acid against my skin, it *burns*.

I flinch when he rips my shorts open, sending the button clattering to the floor. A sick and twisted smile comes across his face as he looks down at me, "you look so good. When I saw you I just couldn't help myself."

I can feel tears roll down my cheeks as I sob silently, turning my face away from him so I don't have to watch what he's about to do to me. His hands are everywhere, his eyes eat me up, and when he finally pulls the trigger and does what he intends to do... I lose it.

I hate the way my body burns, I hate how much this fucking hurts, and most of all I *hate* the way he's enjoying this.

"Happy birthday Claire" he whispers. I can hear how wide he's smiling as he says it, like he's doing me a favour, like he's giving me a birthday gift.

twenty-seven

LUCAS

“Anyone seen Claire?” I yell over the loud music.

Guilt gnaws at me, I don’t know why I lost it on her when she kissed me. She took me by surprise, I wasn’t expecting her to do that... but fuck was it fucking earth shattering.

I have *never*, had someone completely wreck me like that. It was like everything else faded away and all that was left was her and I.

For a single second I let myself believe that we could work, that she and I could be something more than just roommates, more than just coach and player.

And then I remembered everything else.

I pictured Coach chasing me out of the rink with a fucking baseball bat and threatening me within an inch of my life, her brother ripping my balls off then nailing me to a fucking net then shooting pucks at me, and breaking her heart cause that’s all I know how to do.

She deserves better than me.

I know it, and eventually she will too.

I’m not her prince charming, even though I want to re-live that kiss over and over again until I’m dizzy and begging her to never leave me.

“She’s probably on her way home already” Steph slurs, hanging onto August for dear life, “she never likes to party on her birthday.” Her bottom lip juts out like she’s genuinely upset, but I can’t really tell because all I can focus on is the ringing in my ears.

“What did you just say?” Davis says flatly.

Claire.

Birthday.

Kiss.

Rejection.

My brain ceases function as the details crash into one another, every piece falls to the floor as my heart drops into my stomach.

I feel sick.

“She didn’t tell us it was her birthday?” Miller sounds heartbroken.

Steph furrows her brows and looks to the floor, “she doesn’t like her birthday. It’s sad for her, and I try to make it better but it never works. I guess she just thought it didn’t matter.”

“She always matters,” August states.

Correction, she’s the *only* thing that matters... and I let the fear of everything else stop me from doing what my heart really wants.

From the very first time she walked in our front door, she consumed me. Every thought, every action, everything I’ve done has been about *her*. She is fucking everything, she’s air, she’s sunshine, moonlight, rain, flowers... all of it.

My feet move before I have the chance to talk myself out of searching for her. I don’t know what I’m going to do when I find her, but I *do* know she’s going to have the best damn birthday. We’re her fucking family now, and family doesn’t let family celebrate their birthdays alone.

I can’t see her through the crowd of people, the faces blur together, none of them standing out like hers does, none of them making me want to smile until I melt into a tiny little puddle on the floor like hers does.

I stand on the stairs, trying to get a better look when I hear a thud come from one of the bedrooms. “You look so good. When I saw you I just couldn’t help myself” I hear Nathan say.

There’s no way right? She wouldn’t.

Right?

The thrumming in my ears blocks out all other sounds, and my limbs go numb as I race up the stairs and start opening each door one by one, searching for the brown haired girl who put her fucking heart on the line tonight.

The last door I open reveals Nathan on top of her. I can't see her face, but I can see the sick smile plastered all over his. My vision goes red, and all I can think to do is rip him apart.

I grab him by the shoulders, throwing him to the floor and off of Claire, "get the fuck off of her you prick" I yell.

He scrambles to get himself up, his pants hang loosely around his hips and I have to fight the wave of nausea that hits me as I process what was happening up here. I mean, I knew it was, but to see it with my own eyes is so much worse.

There's a crazed look in his eyes when he goes to take a swing at me. He's drunk though, and I easily move out of the way in time. Nathan falls back to the ground and despite the rational part of me screaming to just let it go –to grab Claire and make sure she's safe– I give in to the rage flowing through my veins and kick him in the ribs.

He sputters out a cough while I whip around to look at Claire. Her face is red and tears roll down her cheek while she stares down at Nathan. There's no life in her eyes, just a blank face with a hint of fear...

"Fuck you St. James" Nathan spits.

I turn my head over my shoulder, "get lost before I fucking kill you."

He walks out of the room, leaving Claire and I completely alone. It's quiet in here, an awkward, stale silence that leaves every inch of my skin itchy and uncomfortable. For what feels like the first time since she moved in, I don't know what to say to her. I'm at a loss for words, and it seems as though she is as well.

"What were you thinking?" I finally say, my tone sharper than I intend. Claire just shrugs –avoiding eye contact with me– and when I take a step towards her, she flinches. "You try to make a move on me, and then when I don't want you, you

come up here and fuck him?” The words come out before I can stop them, and regret pools in my stomach the moment she looks into my eyes. Apparently I’m a fucking masochist though because I just dig the knife deeper, “was he a good fuck at least?”

“That’s not what happened,” she whispers.

I beat myself up for being such an idiot. Of course she doesn’t actually want me, and I’m stupid for thinking otherwise. I was just another fuck to her, easily replaced. “You drive me fucking crazy, you know that? After that kiss in the living room I was starting to think that maybe-” the words stop short on my tongue, refusing to be spoken while I stand here and stare at her.

“Say it” she says, looking up at me with wide, hopeful eyes.

“Nathan Thomas is a piece of shit, he was awful when we were kids and he’s awful now. Did you know he broke Blair’s leg on purpose a couple years ago? Almost took him out of the game for good.” Shaking my head, I start to back out of the room, “don’t come home tonight. I can’t look at you.” Her eyes start to water again, and just as I’m rounding the corner... sobs echo against the walls.

twenty-eight

CLAIRE

The room is dark, the only light is the gentle glow coming from my laptop. My phone is laying, untouched, on the floor somewhere. I haven't checked it since I threw it across my room a couple days ago.

Chris and Tash have tried to talk to me, tried to figure out why I so desperately needed to come to their house in the middle of the night without warning, but I don't know how to tell them.

I would do anything for the people that I love, but it has become very clear —like a slap to the face— that they wouldn't do anything for me. Lucas didn't even *try* to hear me out, he just attacked me and accused me of something I would never do. I didn't even know who Nathan was to them, I had no clue there was a monster hiding under that gorgeous exterior.

My friends turned their backs on me, they all left me there at that party, alone and afraid to sort through the rubble by myself. I figured Lucas would leave, but Miller didn't even stay to make sure I was okay.

It's been five days since that night, five days since I left this room, and five days since I've spoken to another human being. I haven't eaten, I feel too sick for that, every time I think I'm getting better I get hit with another wave of nausea and run to the bathroom to puke.

I scrubbed my body so hard that night it made my skin bleed, and I've showered more times that I can count since then. I can't shake this feeling that I'm dirty, that I'm tainted and gross.

Nathan blew up my phone that night, how he got my number I don't know, but I *do* know that the things he had to say were nasty and heartless.

There's a light knock on my door, and without turning around I can tell that it's Chris. Tash wouldn't just walk in, she would wait for me to invite her, Chris knows he can get away with it. The bed shifts behind me as he sits, and the moment he wraps his arms around me I fall apart.

I hate the feeling of another person's hands on me. I can't do it, all I can think about is the burning path Nathan's fingertips left on my skin. The permanent, unseen scars that will forever haunt me.

"Please Claire, talk to me. What's going on?"

I choke on my sobs, unable to get the words out. It's too hard, I can't sit here and tell my brother that I was raped, he'd lose it. He'd never forgive himself, even though there's nothing he could have done to stop it.

I go to wipe a tear off of my cheek, forgetting about the bruises that cover my wrist. Chris gasps and grabs my arm to get a closer look, rage instantly clouding his eyes before he gets up and storms out of my room. "I'm going to fucking kill them" he yells.

I scramble out of the bed and chase after him, begging for him to stop and listen to me.

He suddenly stops and turns to face me, tears of his own dripping down his face, "how could Tony put you in a house with those animals? How could he *ever* put you in harm's way like that?"

It dawns on me that he thinks the boys did this to me, that they're the ones who put these bruises all over my body. "Chris no, it wasn't them. I swear."

"You're defending them?" He shakes his head and storms down the stairs, ignoring my protests. Tash comes around the corner from the kitchen and looks between the two of us like we've gone insane, waiting for one of us to give her some sort of an explanation.

Chris is about to leave the house when I clench my fists and snap, "I was raped at a party!" Tash's hands fly to her face and Chris freezes in his spot.

“What?” He whispers.

More sobs wrack out of me, “I was *raped*.”

He walks over to me, pulling me into the tightest hug he’s ever given me, and doesn’t let go for a very, *very* long time.



Tash hands me a warm cup of tea as she takes a seat next to Chris. They both stare into nothing, processessing everything. I had to tell them, even though I still don’t know all the details myself.

“I’m so sorry Angel” Chris whispers.

I just shrug, there’s nothing him or I could have done to change the way things played out. I can’t change the past, even though I would do anything to make this all go away.

“Where is she?” I hear Steph scream as the front door slams shut.

I brace for impact as my best friend comes flying into the kitchen and wraps her arms around me, “Steph... I can’t breathe” I choke out.

“Sorry” she smiles, “I’m just so glad you’re okay.”

I wouldn’t say okay, *alive* maybe, but definitely not okay.

“You need to tell her Claire” Chris says quietly, eyeing me from across the table. Steph looks between the two of us confused, trying to figure out what Chris means.

So with the little energy I have left, I tell her the same story I just told Chris and Tash. I watch my best friend fall apart just like my brother, and just like I have the past couple days.

“You need to go to the cops,” she says.

“No.”

Chris slams his fist on the table, and I have to hide the fear in my eyes when he does so, “what do you mean no? He

fucking *raped* you Claire. You need to press charges.”

I don't think they understand, I've done nothing but think about what I'm supposed to do for the last five days. I've had nothing but time to figure out my plan... and there *isn't* one.

“You don't get it” I say, “there's nothing I can do. If I press charges Chris's reputation will be ruined, *my* reputation will be ruined. Everyone will know that he's my brother and everything I've worked for my entire life will be gone in an instant.”

Chris shakes his head, and Tash holds his hand, “you shouldn't be worried about what will happen to me right now.”

“It's not just about you.” There's so many things in play right now, it's hurting my head just thinking about it. “If I don't win the case, I'll be the girl who cried wolf, the girl who falsely accused the beloved hockey star of being a rapist. No one would want to work with me, I'd never be able to skate again. Not to mention I don't have proof.”

“What do you mean no proof? You have bruises covering your body” Tash says. She sounds like she's in disbelief.

I don't know how to explain to them that there's no use. No one saw what actually happened, and no one was up there to hear me screaming for help. It's my word against his.

“The defence can twist these stupid bruises into whatever sick fucking story they want. They'll say that I liked it rough, that things got a little too out of hand.” I quickly wipe the tears from my eyes, remembering every sick word he said a couple days ago, “he's right you know. No one is going to believe me over him, he's an outstanding student, he's the captain of a top university's hockey team, he's respected in the community...”

“He also has a big, rich, lawyer daddy” Steph finishes for me.

All it took was one google search to find everything about him, I'm screwed if I ever take him to court.

I hate him.

“Do the boys know?” Tash asks.

I shake my head, “Lucas walked in and stopped it that night. He thought I was trying to get back at him for...” Chris and Tash look at me confused, but Steph understands what I don’t say.

I’ve seen my best friend angry plenty of times, but the murder in her eyes is like nothing I’ve ever seen. Without another word... she walks out of the house.

twenty-nine

LUCAS

“Claire wouldn’t do that to us” Miller says, a note of finality to his voice.

I’ve spent the last couple days completely isolated, no hockey, no hanging out with my friends, and no contact with anyone outside of my room. Sickness still pools in my stomach as the events from Friday night replay in my mind over and over again.

“Yeah, she *would*. I saw it with my own eyes guys, she was there –in bed with him– I don’t know what else to tell you. She did it to fucking spite me, that’s the worst part about all of this.” I mutter the last part to myself, knowing deep down I’m falling apart.

Blair looks at me confused, “what do you mean to spite you?”

The others stare at me, trying to read me while I figure out how to explain what happened the other night. “She tried to kiss me, and when I rejected her I guess she found the one person who could hurt me more than anyone else.”

“Wait, you rejected her?” Blair asks. When I give him a look, he just shrugs, “I assumed you were into her. I mean you’re always teasing her and shit.”

Annoyance bubbles up while I try not to roll my eyes at my best friend. I know I like her, but the fact that he could read me like that is irritating at best.

“To be completely honest we all thought that” August says, a small smile playing on his lips.

Groaning, I rest my face in the palms of my hands, “did everyone know how I felt before I did?” When nothing but silence follows, I look back up, every single one of my friends stare at me with massive grins on their faces. “Shut up, I hate you guys.”

“You’re into Claire,” Davis teases.

“And you’re forgetting she fucked someone else.”

August scratches the back of his neck, “I mean you did reject her...”

“You guys are so pig-headed,” Steph says from our entryway.

I jump at the sound of her voice, I didn’t hear her walk in. She looks pissed though, and angry Steph is the last thing I want to see. She may be small, but the fear that girl can put into a grown ass man is no joke.

“I came to talk some sense into Lucas, but it seems as though the rest of you need a fucking lashing as well.” Steam rolls off of her, and the energy in the entire room seems to shift. “Before you go making assumptions about what really happened, how about you get her side of the story. My best friend is in so much pain right now... but all you can think of is yourselves.”

My stomach twists as Steph takes calculated steps towards us, “I saw what I needed to” I tell her.

“You saw what you wanted to see, St. James. You missed everything else. My best friend was upset on her birthday, heartbroken and conflicted by her own emotions, don’t forget she’s human too. Not just the problem solving machine you all see her as.” August goes to stand up but she stops him, “come find me when you guys decide to do the right thing. Until then don’t fucking talk to me.”

She storms out of the house, and for the first time since meeting him, August shrinks into himself and starts to tear up. “I can’t lose her guys, she’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Blair slaps a hand on my back, “is it possible there’s another side to this story?”

Shaking my head I stand up, “does it matter? I think I’ve lost her either way.”



Watching Nathan skate circles around me has to be the most frustrating thing in this entire world. He's done nothing but taunt me since this game started, and I want to fucking throttle him for it.

"Damn Lucas, guess losing your girl really did a number on you" he laughs as Coach calls for a time-out.

I lunge at him but two sets of hands hold me back, both Davis and Blair shake their heads at me. "Just let me hit him, I don't care if I get thrown out of the game, it's his fault I lost her."

Davis gives me a sad smile, "I think you did that to yourself."

Now I want to punch *him*.

Blair pulls me to our bench while I watch Nathan laugh with his teammates, like nothing happened last week, like he didn't just ruin my life.

The game continues and I bubble with anger on the bench, watching players move on the ice and ram into one another while fighting for the puck, but I'm barely paying attention. My mind is overrun with Claire, with thoughts of whether she's okay or not, of what she's doing and who she's with. Everything revolves around her these days, and I'm helpless to stop it.

I come back to reality when a hand slaps down on my shoulder, Tony looks down at me with a scowl, "I don't know what the hell is going on with you lately, but you need to sort your shit out. Now is not the time to have your emotions running wild."

My whole world is shifting, how the hell am I supposed to focus when all I can think about is... The sound of sobbing shakes the arena, and the entire place goes dead silent.

thirty

CLAIRE

Tears burn in my eyes as Nathan spits venom at me over the phone, and even though I know that I need him to keep talking in order for my plan to work... I want to throw up.

Hearing his voice makes me sick to my stomach, and all the memories from that night come flooding back, just as raw and hurtful.

“There is nothing you can do about it, sorry sweetheart” he chuckles. “No one is going to believe you over me, I’m untouchable.”

Untouchable my ass, he has no fucking idea who he messed with, “no one’s untouchable, not even you.”

“Keep your mouth shut and everything will be fine, I have a game to get to. See you around, Claire.”

A smirk twists my lips as he hangs up, and I stop the recording. Nathan Thomas is such an egotistical prick, he doesn’t believe anyone would dare to cross him...

I’m sick and tired of being everyone’s victim, of being the helpless princess who doesn’t know how to stand on her own two feet. The world is going to see who Nathan really is, and I’m about to tear through his life like a fucking tornado.

I hope Lucas feels like shit.

He’s going to be in tears by the time I’m done with him, both of them are actually.

It’s going to be glorious.

My fingers itch to rip them apart like they did to me, and even though I’m no better for wanting this... it feels so fucking good. I’m always fighting that instinct that my parents instilled in me, to fight dirty and make those around me feel like shit, but for once I’m going to give in and let them see that I’m no longer going to just lay down and take it.

I cringe at my choice of words, feeling like there's a million spiders crawling up my spine pumping poison into my blood.

I've been falling apart for days –I'll probably continue to for the next week– but for now, I want to be a brick wall, concrete, *steel*. I want to be an impenetrable force.

My bag hangs over my shoulder, and the thumb drive in my hand weighs a million pounds. So much tension, so much excitement. I just hope it works.

I can't help but wonder what exactly is going to happen when I do this, there's so many factors that I can't even begin to consider. What if the staff stop me? What if Nathan gains enough courage and hurts me despite the crowd of people that will be watching? What if I lose my friends for good?

They aren't your friends anymore.



My hands shake as I tie my skates in one of the unoccupied change rooms. Walking through the sea of people to get here was harder than I thought, there was so much noise, so many people... I thought my heart was going to beat out of my chest.

Even though this is quite possibly the scariest thing I've ever done, I know that I have to do it. If not for myself, then for every girl he's possibly hurt in the past, and to prevent him from hurting anyone else.

I wait, wait for the pounding in my chest to stop, wait for the strength I had before I got here to come back, wait for the sound of the arena going silent... wait for everything to change.

The sound of sobbing fills my ears, and the once fired up crowd goes completely silent. I take a deep breath and stand up, walking towards the door of the locker room, and out to the ice.

Each step brings back one painful memory after the other, the way Lucas looked at me, my parents, the people I thought were my friends, Nathan, crying myself to sleep every night and begging for the pain to stop, watching Chris's face contort with relief when I woke up in that hospital room at fifteen.

Even though my entire body is screaming at me, I keep going. I step onto the ice and skate towards the middle, listening to Nathans voice spit cruelties at me, listening to my own sobs as I try not to flinch at the recording from this morning.

All eyes are on me, but the only pair I can truly feel are Lucas's. I feel them burning a hole into the back of my head, begging me to turn around and look at him, to explain what's going on... but I won't do that

He doesn't deserve an explanation after what he did.

I look up into the stands, slowly turning so I can get a good look at everyone sitting around me, feeling like the world has stopped and I'm the only one moving. The players stand silent on the ice, all of them frozen in time, staring at me.

When the crowd gasps, I know the photos have made their way onto the screen above the ice. My bruised body is on full display, and even though the thought of it makes me want to curl up and die, I know I need to show them what monster lays beneath his surface.

The moment I feel someone at my back I know it's him, I know it's Nathan overcome with anger. When I finally whip around, my nostrils flare in defiance, we're nose to nose, in a complete standoff.

He towers over me, and the combination of his height and hockey pads make him feel larger than he is, but I won't back down... not this time.

People bully me into backing down every time I have the courage to stand up for myself, I'm sick and fucking tired of it.

The eerie quietness weighs on me, everyone is waiting for one of us to make the first move, watching as we fight for dominance in a silent battle.

His eyes burn with hatred, but that's not the only thing there... he's scared. Fear is crawling up his spine just like it did to me the night he chose to take something that wasn't his. Nathans jaw ticks, and the scowl on my face falters for just a moment as he morphs into my father.

The familiar itch to back away and bow my head creeps up on me, every single self-preservation instinct kicks in and I have to fight to stop myself from becoming that scared little girl again. He's not my dad, and I'm not a kid anymore. I'm a grown woman, I refuse to let anyone make me feel inferior.

My resolve strengthens as he melts back into himself, and that fear I saw before, becomes the only thing hiding behind his eyes. He's terrified that I'm not backing down, he doesn't know what to do... and it makes me feel invincible.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” He growls at me, a vein popping out of his forehead.

How did I ever find him attractive?

“I'm the girl who is going to teach you a fucking lesson” I grit out, “you will never put your hands on another girl, you will never hurt *anyone* ever again.”

“And what makes you think I'm going to listen to you?”

“Because, *Thomas*, I have the power to ruin your life... in fact I already have.” A cruel laugh escapes my lips as I take a stride towards him, forcing him to back away. I continue to push forward, loving the feeling of him backing down. “Your father is nothing compared to my army of lawyers, they will bury your father, and after they do that, they'll make sure neither of you have a dime to your name. Your hockey career is over, my brother is a powerful man, and after hearing about what you did to me... he's made sure every coach in the pros knows what you really are.”

Nathan's back thumps against the boards, and he swallows whatever acid lump is sitting in his throat as I lean in and whisper in his ear, “they don't take too kindly to those who disrespect women.”

“You're lying,” he chokes out.

My gaze drifts just above his head. Chris, Sam and Leo stand just above us, looking down at Nathan like he's their next meal. "Take a look behind you, I don't think I am."

He looks back, noticing the menacing glares being tossed his way from the three scary men behind him. His eyes widen with this crazed look while I back away from him, but before he has the chance to do anything, Lucas comes flying at us and tackles him to the ground, nearly taking me with them.

Everyone goes crazy, members from both teams rush towards us to join in on the fight. Lucas has Nathan by the neck, throwing punches more violent than I've ever seen before.

Blair and Davis shove a few guys away from the grown men ready to rip each other apart, trying to keep the other team from going after Lucas. Miller steps in front of me, pushing me out of the way and attempting to keep me safe, but sends me flying to the ice instead.

My back hits the ground so quickly that the wind is knocked out of my lungs, and I gasp for air. No one notices me in the commotion though, Miller hasn't even looked back to see if I'm okay, his gaze stays on his friends in front of him.

I finally stand once my lungs decide to start working again, and the sight before me sends me into a tailspin. August is being ripped off of someone by a ref, Davis is in a headlock while another player taunts him, Blair spits out blood as he tackles a guy to the ground.

This isn't how it was supposed to go, this isn't what I wanted.

But isn't it?

The cruel voice inside my head laughs maniacally at the chaos I've created, the same voice that my parents probably have inside *their* heads.

"Stop it Lucas!" I scream over the roar of men trying to kill each other.

"Get back" Miller growls at me, levelling me with a look I never thought could come from him. "What made you think

this was a good idea? What the fuck were you thinking?” His words cut deep, hurting me beyond anything anyone’s ever done... because he’s right. What *was* I thinking?

There’s so much going on, I don’t even know where to look. Everyone’s yelling, there’s blood all over the ice, people are being booted from the stadium and I’m at the centre of it all.

“Enough!” Tony’s loud voice cracks through the violence and forces everyone to freeze. He walks over to me calmly, glaring at everyone he passes until he finally reaches me.

I feel ashamed, especially because he’s looking at me with nothing behind his eyes. He’s angry with me... I can feel it.

His arms suddenly shoot out and tug me into him, taking me by surprise as he buries his face into my hair. His body starts to shake with silent sobs, holding me tighter with each passing second, “I can’t believe this happened to you, sweet girl” he cries. “Why wouldn’t you come to me?”

“I-” the words die on my lips as the pain I’ve been feeling for the last week crashes into me for what seems like the millionth time. Sobs wrack through my body while I grip onto Tony’s suit like it’s the only thing keeping me grounded, and an overwhelming wave of nausea hits me. Everyone else is silent while my not-father and I hold each other close, at least I thought they were silent because of us...

Someone hugs me from behind, trapping me in between two body’s. I look up just enough to see it’s Chris, and the realization hits me that I can no longer go back to how things were, everyone knows I’m linked to him now. Everything has changed.

thirty-one

LUCAS

My fists are flying into Nathan's face with more strength than I thought possible. I've never been so angry in my entire life... but the anger that's sitting low in my stomach isn't all because of him. I'm mad at myself too.

For thinking she would ever hurt me like that.

For hurting her.

For believing things that weren't true.

"I'm going to fucking *kill* you" I bellow, watching blood pour from his face like a fucking fountain.

A sick smile comes across his lips and whatever amount of humanity I was holding onto, disappears. I couldn't care less if I kill him right now, in front of all of these people. Sure, my career would be over, and I would never get the chance to live my dream... but it would be worth it if I knew he could never hurt Claire again.

"Stop it Lucas!" I hear Claire yelling over the sounds of my own heartbeat, but it just fuels my fire even more.

"She was a pretty good fuck" Nathan laughs, "you should try it some time."

What a piece of fucking shit.

I line my fist up for another punch when Tony's voice rips through me and forces me to freeze. I watch him walk up to Claire, whisper something in her ear and then hold onto her close. She sobs in his arms while everyone watches, and by the looks on the other team's faces, they finally realize that there's a girl at the centre of all this.

It's almost as if they didn't know what was going on, like they didn't see that it's *their* teammate who caused all of this.

Everyone's eyes leave the two of them as Chris steps onto the ice, they watch him walk towards his sister and wrap her in

a tight hug, alongside Tony, with awe. They don't realize the relationship those three have, and I'm not quite sure I completely do either, but I'm sure they don't know that it's a familial bond and not a romantic one.

Camera lights flash as the crowd eagerly takes photos, excited to see one of the most famous hockey players instead of being sensitive to the events unfolding before them.

I turn back to Nathan, "if you ever lay a finger on her again... I'll fucking kill you." I shove him one more time for good measure before getting up and making my way towards the girl with a golden heart.

My girl with a golden heart, although I don't know if I can even call her that after everything that's happened.

"Claire, I'm so sorry-" I say, reaching out for her.

Chris holds up a hand, "don't even try." The look in his eyes tells me everything I need to know, he's not playing around, and I've lost my chance at ever getting her back.

Coach wraps a hand around her shoulder, turning her away from me, "let's get you home."

She's walking away from me and I'm completely helpless to stop it. I feel like she's slipping through my fingers.

The refs send everyone to their designated locker rooms while they decide what action to take against both teams.

Steph is waiting for all of us when we walk in, her arms crossed and the nastiest glare I've ever seen on her face. The wall behind her is covered in photos, text messages from Nathan, bruises on Claire's body... it rips me apart. I walk up to them, completely ignoring the angry girl next to me. I deserve to stare at these for the rest of eternity, I deserve to fucking *suffer*.

"Take a good, long look Lucas," Steph whispers in my ear. "Fucking burn." It's like she can read my mind, hear the words bouncing around the inside of my skull. She turns on her heel and walks away, brushing past August without so much as glancing at him.

Miller rips his gaze away from the wall, his hand flying up to his face, “I think I’m going to be sick.” He runs off towards the bathrooms, the sound of gagging following soon after.

The change room is silent while we stew in our own self-hatred. We should have done something, *I* should have done something.

None of us really know what to say right now, so we walk out to our cars. When we get to the parking lot, Nathan is losing his shit by his car. The windshield is smashed and there’s giant red letters sprayed on the side of his car that spell out ‘rapist’.

I have to smother a laugh at the sight of it all.

You did good Claire.

Steph is leaning against a car not far away, and when Nathan see’s her, he rushes over and starts screaming in her face. August goes to step in but I stop him, “she’s pissed at you right now. Let her do her thing, she can hold her own.” He steps back and watches his girl helplessly.

“What the fuck is wrong with you two?” Nathan yells at Steph.

She smiles at him, “oh this was all me, Claire is way too nice to ever do this, but no one fucks with my best friend and gets away with it.” She sends a glare in our direction, and I shrink into myself. “Anyway, here. This should be enough to buy you a new car... have a shit life Nathan.”

He holds the envelope filled with cash, trying not to boil over with rage as she walks away triumphantly.



“Fuck!” I yell, cradling my hand. Pain radiates through it, but punching a wall is nothing compared to knowing I’ve just lost the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

The rest of the boys sit silently on the couch, watching me throw the biggest temper tantrum anyone’s ever seen. I don’t

blame them though, I wouldn't want to talk to me right now either.

I grab a bag of frozen peas from the freezer, placing it on my hand and sitting down on the couch next to Blair. "Stop being a brooding piece of shit" he mutters, "you know you fucked up... now what are you going to do to fix it?"

I send a glare his way, "you guys fucked up too. I didn't see any of you reaching out to get the truth."

Davis snorts, "yeah but we aren't the ones who told her not to come home."

Do you think the cops would understand if I killed him?

"Claire, *my* Claire got fucking hurt and you're worried about the fucking details?" I yell at him.

August slaps a hand on my back, then quickly takes it away. "Blair's right, we know we all fucked up, but now it's time for us to do something about it. She wont stay away forever, she'll eventually want to come and talk things out with us... it's who she is."

Miller groans from across the room, "ever think that maybe this was her tipping point? Are we *really* sure she'll still be as forgiving?"

His words dig their way into my stomach, hitting just the right nerve to send me into a mental tailspin. What if I never get to see her smile or laugh again? What if she moves back to Canada and the only time I ever get to hear about her is through Steph?

That's if Steph ever talks to you losers again.

"I guess we just have to hope she loves us enough to give us another shot," Davis says.

thirty-two

CLAIRE

“Where is she?”

I wake up at the sound of my mother screaming downstairs, her shrill voice bounces up the walls and into my room. My whole body goes rigid, fear racing up my spine.

Footsteps stomp their way up the stairs, my heart pounds.

My brother yells, my heart pounds harder.

My father yells after my mother, my heart *stops*.

Both of my parents are here, which is never a good thing. I can't imagine why they're so upset with me, or why they're storming their way through Chris's house, but I have a feeling I'm about to find out.

“Claire?” I hear my mother say softly, walking into my room.

Tears sit in her eyes as she stares at me, watching me, waiting for me to say something to her.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, choking back the fear that has me wrapped tightly in its grasp.

She storms towards me —causing me to flinch— before throwing her arms around me the moment I'm within reach. This is the first time she's hugged me in a very long time, and for just a moment, I feel myself recoil at her touch before giving in and letting myself feel the love I haven't felt since I was a kid. I should be pushing her away right now, screaming at her to let go of me, but I can't bring myself to do it. So much has happened these last days, I just want my mom right now. I need her to be here for me and tell me that everything is going to be alright, just for these next few seconds.

“Olivia let go of that girl right now” my father orders from the hallway.

She pushes me back but doesn't leave my side, she refuses to look at my father and instead stares into my eyes. I can see something, she's trying to tell me something but I just can't figure out what. I place my hand on the side of her face and she winces. My eyebrows knit together, feeling the greasy texture of thick makeup under my fingertips.

My mom never wears makeup, she may put on some mascara and a little eyeliner every once in a while, but she never wears foundation unless she's going to a big event.

Or...

I snap my head towards my father, hate boiling off of me as I realize he's not just an asshole who likes to hit his daughter... he also likes to hit his wife.

"You motherfucker" I scream, jumping from the bed. Before I know it, I'm slamming my fists against his chest, tears of anger flowing down my cheeks while I push my father closer and closer to the wall behind him. "How dare you touch her! She's done nothing but obey you, done every little thing you ask of her, and you fucking hit her?"

His hands wrap around my throat, he turns me around and slams me against the wall, putting more and more pressure while I claw at his hands. A sick smile slides its way onto his face as he looks at my wrists, staring at the bruises that Nathan left only a week ago. "I see someone else took on my role. Good to know there are other people keeping you in check, little one."

Darkness licks at the edges of my vision, my world slowly fading to black. He backhand slaps me across the face, his rings cutting my eyebrow. Blood drips down into my eye, clouding my vision even more than before, as my father slams me into the ground, knocking the air right out of me.

I can hear my mothers screams from far away, her voice growing farther and farther...



“Claire? You’re okay, I’m here” Chris says, helping me sit up.

Cold water drips from my forehead, confusion clouds my mind as I take in my surroundings.

My mom is next to me, holding my hand. Chris is in front of me, holding an ice pack and wiping away tears with his other hand. I’m sitting on his counter right now, in the middle of his kitchen.

Panic crashes into me when I remember what just happened, “Dad, he...”

“He’s gone Claire, I got to you in time” Chris whispers, a slight waver to his voice.

There have been very few times that I’ve seen my brother cry. The first was when my grandmother passed away, the next was when I woke up in the hospital after my attempt, and *now*. I don’t really know how to comfort him, it’s usually the opposite. He’s always so strong, he’s always the one taking care of *me*, I guess I never thought I would have to take care of him one day.

“I’ve never seen him like that” Chris chokes, “why would he do that?” His question isn’t directed towards me, he’s staring at my mother, but she just looks away.

“I’m okay” I promise, trying to convince both of us.

“For fucks sake, you’re bleeding.” Chris stands up and grabs a clean towel from a drawer, pressing it to the side of my face before wrapping me in a tight hug. “I just don’t know what went through his head, he’s never been like that before.”

In this moment I realize that my brother is searching for the answers I never got. He’s going through the same process I did when it first started happening, trying to find a logical reason behind my fathers actions.

I can say with full certainty that there isn’t one.

“This isn’t the first time,” my mother says. “I can’t say that I was innocent in any of it, cause I wasn’t, but I would like to tell you guys a story... if you’ll let me.”

She goes on to tell us about how her and dad met, how he swept her off her feet with fancy gifts and trips to tropical countries. He was the perfect man... until she signed the papers making their marriage official. I guess my dad started to cheat, going on last minute 'work' trips and spending money on things she never saw.

My mom confronted him after my brother and I were born, telling him that she wouldn't put her children through his shit, that she was going to have more respect for herself than that.

He hit her for the very first time that day.

He never stopped.

He used his power and money against her, threatening her and us, saying that he'd make sure we were miserable. She stayed through everything to give us the life she thought we deserved, she put up with his shit because she thought she was doing what was best.

"He would punish me whenever you made a mistake, told me that it was my fault. I know it wasn't right, but that's why I was always so hard on you" she sobs.

I rest a hand on hers, trying my best to give her comfort. She was wrong in how she treated me, but that doesn't mean she deserves how my father treated *her*.

"Why didn't you say anything when he started to hit Claire?" my brother asks her.

"I tried, but he had me so wrapped up in his lies that I couldn't tell what was right or wrong anymore. Deep down I knew it wasn't okay, but I didn't know how to leave him, I didn't know what I was going to do after I walked out."

Chris wipes a tear off of his cheek, "you could have come to me. I would have helped you."

I don't think I've ever seen my mom look ashamed, but right now that's all I can see. She picks at her perfectly manicured fingers, refusing to look at either of us while tears fall down her face.

My mother and I may have had a complicated relationship, and I may hate her for what she's done to me all these years... but she's still my mom. We are bonded through the pain we've suffered at my father's hand.

I reach out to her, wrapping my arms around her shoulder and holding her close, "I'm so sorry" she sobs. "I will never forgive myself for putting you through this."

"Maybe we can start over." I give her a pathetic smile, the taste of salt coating my tongue while I try to convince everyone that I'm okay.

I don't know why I always do that –pretend like I'm not falling apart inside– it's not like I can't rely on people for help. I know deep down that my friends, or I guess it's just Steph now, will have my back and support me through it all. Life is fucking hard, I don't think anyone expects me to have it all figured out.

"Forgive me, I need to go pull myself together before calling the lawyers." My mom takes a step back from me and runs her hand over my cheek, giving me a kiss on top of my head, "I'm going to be better, I promise."

As she walks away, Chris collapses onto my lap, sobs wracking through his entire body while I hold back my own. "It's okay" I whisper, "it's okay, it's okay."

He's my big brother, he's supposed to protect me and keep me safe. But I think for the first time he's realizing that not only did he fail, but he can't protect me from everything bad in this world.

thirty-three

LUCAS

My stomach is twisted in knots, every part of me feels like it's falling apart with every passing moment Claire doesn't walk back into this house.

I told her not to come home, I fucking told her to go away... why the hell did I do that?

Claire won't answer her phone, and while I don't blame her for ignoring all of us, I wish she would let us fix it. I want to fix it, even knowing my chance to be her person is done and gone, I just want her in my life again.

This last week has felt like an eternity, a never ending punishment for my own wrongdoings... but I deserve it.

I'm such a piece of shit, I believed something that wasn't true, all because I never bothered to ask. I let the hate I have for Nathan overshadow the friendship I built with Claire.

"Guys..." Miller says, "you should come take a look at this."

Fear coils in my gut, and I don't know if I want to see what he's talking about. There's been so much shit going on, I don't think I can handle another blow.

August beats me there though, and the smile that takes over his face is enough to have my shoulders sagging in relief, "holy shit" he laughs.

When I finally make it to the kitchen island –where both Miller and his computer are sitting– I choke on a laugh of my own. It's an article about how Nathan Thomas has been permanently banned from being signed to any professional team, alongside a photo of him and Claire nose to nose at the rink.

"Guess Chris doesn't take too kindly to people fucking with his sister" Blair smiles.

“Yeah but that also means he can fuck *us* over for screwing with his sister” I say solemnly.

We're all fucked.

There's a knock at the door, jolting all of us from our train of thought, but I ignore it. There's no one I want to see or talk to other than the pretty girl I find myself thinking of every moment of every day.

“Hi,” she says meekly, letting herself in with a bag on her shoulder. “I know I'm probably the last person you want to see right now, but I need you to forget about that for a second and just be my friends. I- I really need a friend right now.”

I rush up to her without thinking, wrapping my arms around her and holding on tighter than I intend to. I bury my face into the top of her head and melt at the smell of fresh flowers, how the hell does she always smell so good?

“What the hell happened to your face?” Davis blurts.

Claire lets out a soft chuckle, “you really suck at making a girl feel better, Davis.”

I push her away to take a look, and my body turns stiff the moment I realize she's covered in bruises. Her lip is split, there's a scab covering the top of her brow, there's a dark bruise covering her left eye and... a handprint around her neck.

Those weren't there before.

I see August take a tentative step towards us out of the corner of my eye, “seriously though, what happened?” His voice is soft, like he's scared of what her answer is going to be, and I think I'm a little afraid as well.

Tears well in her eyes, and she swallows, “that's why I came back.”

My body instantly hums with anger, itching to punch something as I go through the events of the last couple months. She lied about the bruise on her hand and covered it in makeup, she's jumpy and nervous when people raise their voice at her, the bruises on her face now... she's been abused.

Even though she'll never admit it, I know what it looks like and how someone acts when they've gone through that.

"I'm going to beat him into a bloody fucking pulp" I say through gritted teeth, storming towards the door. Claire tries to grab my arm but I shove her back, "don't try to stop me. How dare he pretend he cares for you but then turn around and do *that*."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Blair yells.

I throw my arms up, "fucking Chris. He's the one that did this to her."

Claire stares at me like I'm stupid, her lips slightly parted making me want to pull her close and taste her again.

Nope, not the time.

"You're so fucking stupid," her whole body shakes from how hard she's laughing right now. "Chris would never lay a hand on me, he may be scary, but he's a huge softie."

"Then who the hell did that to you?" Miller asks.

She takes my hand, fire spreading throughout my fingers as she pulls me towards the living room, "I promise I'll tell you guys, but you need to relax first. It's being dealt with, I'm okay, and for the first time in my life I actually mean it."



The world is tilting, she just told us *everything*, and I don't know how to process it all. Between what she went through growing up —being used by her friends to get to Chris, and her parents abusing her— I don't know how she's still standing in front of us. Any normal person would be ruined by *one* of these things happening to them, let alone all of it combined.

"Claire, we had no idea," August says, grabbing her hand.

She smiles sadly at him, "it's okay. I didn't want any of you to know."

My body begs for me to wrap her up and hold her, to let her cry into my shoulder and release everything that's built up inside. She's so strong —stronger than I ever thought— and she's been doing it all alone for years.

“Why didn't Chris do anything?” I ask.

She gives me a pointed look, “don't you dare make him the villain here. He didn't know, he wasn't home when it started and I hid it from him... he was there when it counted, that's all that matters.”

We all nod, understanding that she won't let anyone think poorly of her brother, even though he *should* have been around to see it. He should have been able to tell.

“Claire?” Davis says, “can I ask a question?” She nods her head, and he continues, “why'd you think we'd be the last people that wanted to see you?”

She sighs, melting into the couch and looking up at the ceiling. Tears well in her eyes, and she bites her lip to keep them at bay, “because I'd made a huge mess of your game, I figured you'd be angry with me. *Miller* sure was.”

Miller stiffens beside me, “I-” he hangs his head, “I'm sorry. I was just angry you put yourself in a position to get hurt. I didn't mean to make you think I was angry.”

“If anything *you* should be the one angry with *us*” August whispers, placing his head in his hands.

August's words hit me hard, and I start to wonder *why* she isn't angry with any of us. She has every right to be, after everything we've done —everything *I've* done— she should be ripping us apart... and the fact that she isn't just pisses me off. I stand up and explode, “why aren't you angry? You should be screaming and yelling at all of us.”

Claire shrinks into herself, “I don't want to be angry with any of you.”

I get closer to her, leaning in a few inches away from her face, “but you have every right to be!” I yell. “I don't understand why you aren't losing your shit on us, making us feel like garbage.”

The anger in my voice isn't for her, it's for me. I'm angry at myself for letting any of this happen, I need her to be angry with me, because if she isn't then it means I'm not worth being angry with.

"You want me to yell?" She screams, bashing a fist on my chest.

Yes, hit me pretty girl. Make me hurt.

"You want me to do this?" Tears of anger flow down her cheeks as she continues to hit me, pushing me farther and farther away. "I hate you, *IhateyouIhateyouIhateyou*" she sobs. "Fuck you, I fucking hate you. You didn't listen, you refused to listen to me. Fuck you."

She stops hitting me, she just stops while she sobs in front of us. I make an attempt to hug her and she lets me, and for the first time in a long time, I feel tears of my own start to flow as I listen to her cries.

"You didn't listen to me, I needed you and you guys just shut me out." She slowly falls to the floor, and I follow her, still wrapping her in my arms. When we finally make it to the ground the guys run over to sit with us.

My fucking heart hurts, she's in so much pain... she's in so much pain because *we* tossed her aside.

"I would have at least heard you out. I would have listened to what you had to say. All I wanted was for my friends to hug me and tell me everything was going to be alright... and instead I got yelled at and mocked, I had to face it all by myself. I hate you all." Her cries of pain make me want to crawl into a hole and never leave.

Miller is crying, August and Davis are trying to hold back their tears, and Blair is looking at me, basically begging me to make it stop.

"I am so fucking sorry, I feel so fucking awful. I'm so sorry I didn't listen to you, I'm sorry I assumed the worst and cast you aside like you were nothing. Please pretty girl, I need to know what I can do to make this better." I plead with her.

“Claire I don’t even know what to say, we are the worst friends ever. We’re assholes and douche bags and any other term you can think of. I can’t believe we did that to you, I’m so sorry you had to deal with all of this.” Miller sobs.

Her touch is soft as she places a hand on his face, forcing him to look at her. “I *am* angry... but I’m also ready to forgive.” She bats away the last remaining tear and re-builds that wall that seems to appear any time someone gets close to her.

My stomach sinks at how perfect she is, how amazing it is that she can forgive despite people only ever letting her down. I don’t deserve her forgiveness though, I know that, and I think the boys are all thinking the same thing based on the way they’re looking at me. I don’t understand how she turned into such an amazing person, even after all of this. She’s so kind, caring, and beautiful. God she’s so so so beautiful.

Why did I ever let her slip through my fingers?

“Just,” she pauses, “promise me you’ll hear me out next time.”

We all nod our heads, willing to do anything if it means we get our Claire bear back, cause in reality that’s all we really want. We just want to have her skipping through the house again, smiling and laughing at us while we do our stupid shit. She’s the best one of us, and I think I can speak for everyone when I say we never want to lose her again.

“Good. Now, I want to talk to Lucas alone, if you guys don’t mind.” She motions for the others to disperse, and my heart falls into my asshole. I have no clue what she’s about to say, but I sure as hell hope it ends with a happily ever after and another mind-altering kiss.

When we’re finally alone, I start to sweat. This is either going to be the start of a broken heart, or the start of an amazing story. I don’t think I’ll survive if she snaps my heart in half, even though I’ve done that exact thing to her.

She picks at her fingers, refusing to look at me, trying to figure out the right words. It makes me even more nervous,

because who the hell has to think this long if they're going to give you *good* news?

"I think I'm falling in love with you" I blurt out before she has the chance to crush me.

She shakes her head, "that's not fair." I go to reach for her hand but she pulls away before I can touch her, her lips are pulled into a tight frown, and her eyes start to water. "You can't just say that and expect everything to be okay." Her chest starts to rise faster as she stares at me, "it's not fair."

When she goes to turn away, I grab her by the shoulders and spin her back around. My forehead rests on hers, closing my eyes, making the leap I was too afraid to make before, "can't you feel it? Can't you feel how right this is?"

"Stop it" she yells, shoving me away. She takes a couple steps back, looking at me as if I've slapped her. "For fucks sake Lucas, you barely even know me."

She doesn't think I know her? How could she possibly think that when I've done nothing *but* learn things about her these last few months. She starts to walk away and the only thing I can think to do is tell her everything I know about her, "you play with your hair when you're nervous!" I yell. Claire freezes in place, so I take the opportunity to keep going, "you always offer to drive when we go drinking, not because you hate drinking or anything, but because secretly you like to be in control, you want to be aware of your surroundings. You never wear anything other than black to practice so no one can see blood if you fall, because you don't want us to worry about you. You never wear your hair up because it hurts your scalp, and you love orange slushies, even when it's cold as balls out." She turns to look at me, and I take tentative steps towards her, hoping that she'll let me get close again, "you have a dimple on your right cheek, but it only comes out when you're truly happy, and there's this one piece of hair that never seems to stay in place, but you don't fuss with it because you don't want to draw attention to it."

She takes in a staggered breath, and lets me grab her hand, "how?"

A smile stretches out over my lips, “because I know you pretty girl, and if you’ll let me... I’ll prove to you that I’m worth another shot.” I interlace our fingers and place a soft kiss on the top of her head.

“But what about all the girls you bring home? Won’t they be disappointed?” Her smile is gentle, and I can see her spark starting to come back, but she still refuses to look at me.

The question stings though, I never thought that she’d think of me that way, even though she’d be completely justified. I was a sleaze bag these last couple years, but things have changed since she showed up. “Have you seen me bring home a single girl since you got here?”

She shakes her head no, “I just figured it was cause you were scared of being cockblocked.”

“It was like that at first,” I shrug, “but eventually I lost interest in bringing girls home because no one interested me.” My fingers drift up to her chin, forcing her to meet my gaze, “because I really am falling for you. Everyone else pales in comparison, I didn’t realize it then, but somehow my body already knew you were the one for me.”

thirty-four

CLAIRE

It's weird to think about how everything can change so quickly in life.

Your friends can turn their backs on you and come back in the same breath, your parents can hurt you and then tell you they love you, your choice at an intersection can be the reason you live or die. Things aren't guaranteed, you never know what's going to happen next, you never know who's going to walk around the corner, or how they'll change your life.

These boys, have all changed me in one way or another. I don't know whether or not they'll be in my life forever... but I sure as hell hope they're around for the good stuff. I want them here, with me, for every life-changing moment.

I believe the things we deserve are based on what we've done... how we've lived our lives is what guides the future. I see it in other people, I see it in the way that good people are given good things, they *deserve* good things.

It's been hard to think about what I could have possibly done to deserve the life I have, and I'm not talking about the money and privilege I've been given. I'm talking about the way I've been treated by almost everyone I've ever known, and the things that I've had to go through.

But today I realized that every negative piece to my puzzle, has lead me to something good.

It's like a domino effect, my parents abuse and torment lead me to Texas to follow Tony and Chris. Being so closed off lead Tony to ask me to help coach his team and move in with the guys. The guys have given me a family, a home to call my own... and then there's Lucas.

Lucas was a part of the bad stuff for a second, but if I've learned anything over these last few months, it's that he never ceases to surprise me. He has a good heart, and I know that he'll eventually crack through my shell. He'll have my heart

again one day... I'm just not sure whether or not I'm willing to give it up just yet.

It's bruised and battered, covered in band-aids and tape. It's holding on for dear life, waiting for the day that someone heals it.

The gentle breeze blows my curtains, and light pours into my room as I lay underneath my sheets, hiding from the world yet again, terrified of everything that comes now.

A little part of me is screaming to be let out, the part of me that wants to stay bitter and angry with the guys for what they did, but I can't. I know what it feels like to have someone be angry with you, to hold something against you. My parents did that, they did it my whole life. I can't be like them though, I can't do that to another human being. People deserve better than that, people deserve to have chances and be forgiven for their mistakes.

The fire alarm starts going off, and any hope for a calm morning in bed disappears. I groan before running down the stairs, "what the hell is going on down here?" Davis waves a cloth in front of the fire alarm, while Blair is opening up the back door to air out the smoke. The pan on the stove is covered in dark ash, and I laugh at the pathetic mess.

"I was trying to make you breakfast, but I guess we see how that turned out" Davis shrugs.

"And why were you trying to make me breakfast?"

August rolls his eyes, "he was trying to do something nice, something to make up for these past weeks."

I walk up to Davis, placing my hand on his shoulder and pulling him in for a hug. No one, and I mean no one, has ever tried to make up for something they've done to me before. I've heard empty apologies and seen fake tears of remorse, but no ones ever actually tried to prove to me that they're sorry.

I know deep down that breakfast isn't the key to fixing this whole mess, but the only one who has anything to make up for, is Lucas. Sure none of the others stuck up for me, and they didn't try to call to get my side of the story... but I don't

blame them. When your best friend of years tells you something, you're inclined to believe them.

If it was Steph, I would believe her in a heartbeat.

“Thank you” I say quietly, breaking the hug.

Blair walks over to me with his hands behind his back, “I also have something to give you” he smiles.

I can smell them, he doesn't even have to tell me what it is. I close my eyes as the scent of fresh flowers fills my nose, and a wide smile comes across my face. “How'd you know” I ask, opening my eyes again.

He hands me the baby's breath, “I asked Steph, she was reluctant to tell me but I annoyed her until she broke” he chuckles.

Baby's breath holds a special place in my heart, they were my safe place. There was this field behind my house, hidden away behind a wall of trees, covered in flowers. I used to play there when I was little, and eventually it became my safe place. I would go there and lay in the flowers until it was dark. I loved the idea of being so free, being able to hide when things got rough at home.

Steph knows the story behind my love for them, but what she doesn't know is why they became my safe place... I guess I should share that little detail with her now.

“You guys know that you don't have to do all this right?” I ask. “I appreciate you for trying to make things better and I understand you're trying to prove to me that you're really sorry... but I just want my friends back. I want everything to be exactly how it was before I left.”

Lucas walks in from the backyard, drenched in sweat and looking like he just walked off the set of a god damn photo shoot or something. He throws on a shirt as he walks towards me, “you do have your friends back.”

My heart constricts, I want him, I *know* I do. He's a beautiful disaster, one that makes my heart hurt, but also one that makes me want the world to fade away until it's just him and I.

“Don’t go thinking we’re gonna to tip-toe around your ass” Lucas smiles, walking up behind me. His arm wraps around my waist, pulling me close to him so he can whisper in my ear, “not *everything* will be the same as it was...”

He doesn’t need to say anything else, I know he’s talking about us. He made it very clear that he has feelings for me, but how am I supposed to know they’re real? How am I supposed to know if it’s the guilt driving his emotions? I need to know for sure before I make the leap.

Davis and Blair start gagging, clearly disgusted by Lucas’s public display of affection. I flip them off before grabbing Lucas’s arm and removing it from me... it takes everything I have not to melt into him. “I’m not going to make it that easy on you St. James... you have so much grovelling to do.”



Steph’s been sitting in my passenger seat absolutely silent after throwing the biggest temper tantrum known to man. We got lunch together and I told her that we were going to go back to my place instead of hers. She hasn’t spoken to August yet, and I know it’s slowly killing him.

“Alright, let’s go” I say, unbuckling my seat belt and reaching for the door handle.

She looks at me suspiciously, “you aren’t going to tell me to behave myself, or to play nice?”

“Nope.” I shake my head, “do whatever you have to. I’ll be watching and enjoying the show.”

She nods her head and follow me in. The second we step through the front door she’s making a beline towards the living room where the boys are sitting. I grab a seat on the kitchen counter, crossing my legs and leaning back on my arms. She starts it off with a string of curses, screaming at them about what shitty friends they are. The fear in their eyes is enough to make me cough over a laugh, they’re so scared of this girl, it’s hilarious.

“And you...” she turns to face August. “I swear to god I’m going to kick your ass. What the hell were you thinking? You should have spoken to her, to me, fucking anyone other than your idiot friend who can’t tell his ass from his head. If you ever do anything to hurt her ever again—even if it’s unintentional—I will make you feel every ounce of pain this world has to offer.”

Oh how I love to see six-foot hockey players terrified of a five-foot-five, tiny, blonde girl. A tiny blonde girl who I love more than anything on this planet.

“Does this mean we’re talking again?” The hope in August’s voice is almost painful to hear.

Steph looks to me, and I nod. She doesn’t need my permission, but she won’t consider being with him if it’s going to hurt me. August fucked up, he knows that... but he doesn’t deserve to lose Steph.

Her smile is soft, a silent thank you for letting her follow her heart. She’d deny it, but she’s been missing him too. She turns back to face him and nods her head, and the relief that washes over him is adorable.

I think that she might let Lucas get out of this with minimal damage, but that all changes the moment she walks up to him and gets in his face, “I will end you St. James. I will stomp all over you and never let you get up if you *ever* let some petty bullshit come in between my best friend and her safety ever again. I will rain hell fire down on you and I promise you *will* be sorry.”

“Yes ma’am” he says shakily.



The night I confronted Nathan, Tony and I didn’t have a proper conversation, but I don’t think I can avoid it for much longer. He’s been giving me space to sort through my thoughts, but when I pull up to the rink and he’s waiting by the doors for me, I realize that my time is up.

Why do I feel like a child about to get grounded?

“In my office... now” he says.

I follow closely behind him, keeping my head down as we walk through the arena. He closes the door behind me, and starts to pace around the room. “You know better than anyone that I brush things off as if it’s nothing. This is nothing... the boys know they fucked up but I promise it’s okay” I say, breaking the crushing silence.

“That’s exactly why I’m worried Claire, you brush everything off like it’s nothing. Well, *this isn’t nothing*. The people I expected to protect you and keep you safe, failed. They let one of the worst things imaginable happen to you and you had to suffer through it all alone. You may brush it off, but deep down I know it’s killing you inside.” He runs his fingers through his silver hair and pulls, “I’ve known you since you were five years old, a god damn *child*. I see the way things hurt you but you put up this mask to keep others happy, to keep everyone else guilt free while you die inside. I’m sick of it, I hate seeing you pretend all the time.”

I break down into tears, and he pulls me into a hug so tight I can barely breathe, but I need this. I need him —out of all people— to tell me that I’m going to be okay.

“Why didn’t you tell me about your parents? Why was Chris the one to tell me after all these years? I could have helped you.”

My muscles freeze, everything inside me goes cold knowing that I forgot to tell him. “I’m so sorry” I sob. “I was going to tell you, I swear, but I didn’t know how to tell anyone, I didn’t know what was happening until it was too late.”

“Sweet girl” he says, pulling my head into his chest. “I’m always here for you.”

“But you were gone, Chris was happy, everyone was happy and I didn’t want to ruin it.”

“Claire, you deserve to be happy too.”

His words hurt, I know they're true, I know I deserve to be happy but it just doesn't seem like a possibility. He's been my family for a really long time, longer than I can remember, I should have gone to him... but I was so scared.

He grabs my shoulders and pushes me back to I can look him in the eyes, "I will always be here for you. Never think you're a burden for something that isn't in your control... you are not a burden to anyone Claire Taylor."

I nod my head, willing myself to believe his words.

"Good, now wipe those tears. There's some hockey boys waiting for you out there."



As I finish lacing up my skates, a few of the other team-members surround me. They tower over me, watching me carefully and blocking my view.

I raise a brow at them and go to stand, "what's going on?" I ask carefully. No one answers me, instead I get offered a hand and brought to centre ice. I don't notice the chair until I'm being placed on it, and the guys continue to stand around me in a circle.

"Guys, we have to practice, stop fucking around or Tony will have all of our heads on a stick" I say, still wondering what the *everliving fuck* is going on with them.

"He knows what we're doing" one of them shrugs. "Hit it Tony!"

Everything by Micheal Bible comes blasting through the speakers, bouncing off the walls and filling the arena. The group of hockey players part and August comes skating towards me. He lip-syncs the words, smiling at me while he skates closer.

My eyes grow wide while my brain searches for a reasonable explanation to all of this. The last person I would expect to serenade me, is *August*. He's so serious all the time, this can't be his idea.

Miller comes out next, and I have to slam a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing. He tousles my hair then joins August at my side, both of them laughing while Davis comes bursting through the group of men. He's definitely the most theatrical so far, with that goofy smile splayed across his face and the wild hand gestures.

I finally remove my hand and let my smile break free, a mixture of shock and pure joy swirling around inside me. These boys never cease to amaze me.

Blair rolls his eyes, and proceeds to try and top Davis's performance. I have to hand it to him, he does a great job, but I don't know who beat who.

My laugh can barely be heard over the music, but I can tell the boys are happy with my reaction, seeing as they're smiling just as hard.

My whole world slows as Lucas comes into view. I grip the sides of my chair and pray that no one can hear how hard my heart is beating. He looks fucking *beautiful*.

His hair is pushed back, and the hockey equipment does nothing to hide how big he is... it almost enhances his natural physique. When he gets close I can smell his cologne, it's woody and dark and perfectly him.

Lucas grabs the arms to the chair and starts spinning me around, the rest of them spinning with me while singing the lyrics to the song. Every part of me vibrates with happiness, they're doing this for *me*. They're doing it to put a smile back on my face, to bring back the old me.

Davis takes over, grabbing the chair and turning me away from everyone. He smacks a big kiss on my cheek, and I swear I hear Lucas growl from behind me. Maybe it's bad, but I like that he's jealous... it makes me feel wanted.

Even though there's nothing to worry about between Johnny and I... I kind of want to make Lucas sweat a little bit.

My hands reach for Davis, and he grabs them. I pull him into a hug and hold on for dear life, I don't want him—or any of them for that matter—to leave me ever again.

“Don’t let go” I whisper in his ear.

He holds on tighter, “never again... but I think I’ll have to fight Lucas for you.”

I look over my shoulder, Lucas has a tight scowl on his face with his arms crossed. He looks like he’s about to blow a fuse.

I throw my head back and laugh, “no offence, but he doesn’t have anything to worry about. I’m his, I always have been.”

Davis smirks, “make him sweat before you tell him that. I like watching him squirm.” He winks at me before spinning the chair back to the group, then joins the very long line in front of me.

One by one, the team hands me individual stems of my favourite flower. By the end I’m a crying mess, I’m so overwhelmed by all of this. Sure it’s not anything crazy, but it’s still special. They put in time and effort to organize this, not to mention they had to buck up and ask Tony for permission.

Tony would do anything for me, but the boys were definitely afraid to ask him to delay practice for this.

My eyes are clouded with tears, I barely see Lucas as he gets down on his knees in front of me. A soft hand makes its way to my face, wiping the tears from my cheeks, “read this when you’re alone...” he says.

My arms wrap tightly around him, “you made me cry ass-hat.”

“Good tears I hope.” His voice is strong, and even if I wasn’t looking at him I could tell you that he’s got a smirk on his face.

thirty-five

LUCAS

I stare at Claire and Davis from across the bar, she's leaning against him, her back is against his chest, his arms are wrapped around her waist, she laughs at something he says.

I hate how comfortable she is with him. *I* should be the one wrapping my hands around her waist and holding her close. *I* should be the one making her smile and laugh, not him, not any of them.

August watches Claire, closer than he ever has before, waiting for the moment she snaps and tells us she takes back her forgiveness.

I can't lie, I'm waiting for that too.

She's too perfect for this world, too perfect for any of us to have her in our lives. The rest of us are broken, and break perfect little things because they scare us... or maybe that's just me. Claire scares me, the way she makes me feel scares me. I've never felt like this towards anyone, and while I'm terrified, I'm also excited to see what could happen.

She'll bring me to new worlds.

I want to know if she read my letter, what she thought... if she's ready to forgive me and give me a chance to win her heart. All I want is to have her, even if it took me too long to realize it.

Why the fuck did it take me so long to realize how I felt about her?

I tried to hate her for so long, I thought I did hate her, but she nudged her way into my heart and stayed put until I was finally honest with myself.

Whether she's mine in the way I want or not, I'm going to take care of her, I'm going to make sure she's happy.

I don't think there's anything I *wouldn't* do for her. I mean, she could tell me to run my car into a lamp post, and with the right look... I would. I'm not the only one who feels that way either, all of us would do whatever she wants.

Miller just likes seeing people happy, and he's grown attached to her. He's gotten used to her soft voice and how gentle she is with him.

August instantly became one of her closest friends, he understands her in a way I don't. She opened up to him and as much as that bothers me now, I'm happy they have each other.

Davis thought she was the hottest thing to walk the planet when he first met her, he still does, but he's become protective of her in a way I don't think any of us will ever understand.

Blair loves her, he loves that she challenges me and forces me to be myself, he loves that she keeps up with our crap and puts us in our places when we deserve it. He thinks she brings a perfect balance to the house... and he's right.

Steph is her best friend, the one she's closest to out of anyone, the one person who knows every single one of her deepest darkest secrets. She's already made it clear that Claire comes before all else, her love is rooted deep.

Tony is like her dad, they love each other in a way only family can. He watched her grow up. We all see how proud he is of her, and how excited he gets when he talks about her accomplishments, there is no question in my mind about whether or not he'd do anything for her.

Our worlds revolve around her, she's the centre of our universe, she's everything.

I lock eyes with August, and something passes between the two of us.

She hides it well, but I can see it... I can see her.

She'll close her eyes for a brief moment when something hurts her, then laugh it off to convince herself that she's fine. She's trained herself well, she can lie in a split second, she can hide everything she's feeling, except for when she can't.

There's always this brief moment, between her hurting and covering it up, where everything shows.

If you watch someone close enough you can start to understand everything about them.

I may not have seen it before, been able to put the pieces together as to why she's like this... but I sure as hell spent enough time watching her to see bits and pieces of who she is.

She's strong, she holds on for others, she absorbs everything around her.

She's resilient.

"There's still something bothering her you know" He says, slamming back a shot before waving over the bartender for another.

I take a sip of my beer, looking back at Claire when I feel her eyes on me. She looks at me like she wants to come over here and say something, even though I know she won't. "I know, but she won't talk to us unless she's ready."

She sucks her bottom lip in, biting on it as Davis whispers something in her ear. Her eyes never leave mine, she watches me with an intensity I've never felt before.

"God you two are so gross" Blair gags, walking up to August and I. "It's painful watching you two long for one another like those stupid characters in romance movies."

I roll my eyes and refocus on Claire, except she's no longer up against a wall with Davis, they're moving to the centre of the dance floor. My stomach churns at the thought of her grinding up against him, the thought of him touching her everywhere I want my own hands to be.

"Relax" Steph laughs, slapping me on the back as she walks past. She stands next to August and places a kiss on his cheek before turning back to me, "they're just friends... she's only doing this to prove a point."

"And what point would that be?" I ask before chugging the rest of my beer.

Steph looks over her shoulder, a small smile playing on her lips as she watches her best friend dance, “that you can’t stand the sight of her with anyone else, and that you need to prove you’re worth her heart so she can finally give it to you.”

Claire wraps her arms around the back of Davis’s neck, swaying her hips while he places his hands on her hips. She grinds into him, and as the lyrics to whatever song continues to echo against the bar walls, I feel my face growing hot. My fists clench at my sides while I watch Claire dance with my friend.

Davis smirks at me before wrapping a hand around Claire’s throat, and her eyes close for a brief moment as she melts into him. When she finally opens them again she locks eyes with me, she tries to fight back a smile but I can see the corners of her mouth twitching.

“I’m going to kill him” I growl. My feet propel me in their direction, and without thinking I grab Davis and throw him off of her.

Claire plants her hands on her hips before looking up at me defiantly, “what the hell did you do that for?”

I wrap a hand around her waist and pull her in, the possessive asshole in me completely taking over, “you know how I feel and I know how you feel... stop trying to make me jealous.”

She snorts, “it’s working though, and I like seeing you at my mercy *St. James*.”

I close my eyes and revel at my name on her lips, “god I love when you mock me.”

She removes my arm from her back and leans in close, the smell of her shampoo wafting into my nose as she whispers in my ear, “prove to me that you won’t hurt me again and I’m all yours.” Her hands drift down my chest and towards my waist, they hover just above my belt before she walks away.

Tease.



Walking into the house after the bar, we're all watching Claire carefully, waiting for her to notice.

We had that picture of the six of us printed out a while ago, but we thought we should wait to put it out until things cooled off between us. We replaced the original right before we left for the bar, and I think we're a little anxious to see what she has to say.

She reaches into the fridge to grab a water, and when she comes out she looks at us weird, "why are all of you staring at me like that?"

"Can we just tell her? She's clearly not gonna notice and I want her to know!" Miller whines.

"Tell me what?" She places both hands on her hips and waits for someone to spit it out.

I point to the photo sitting on the counter behind her, she slowly turns and walks towards it before grabbing the edges of the frame. A small smile grows and when she turns back around, she has tears in her eyes.

I feel myself start to worry, "shit, we didn't mean to upset you." I rush towards her, "we thought you would like it."

Claire wipes a tear from under her eye while she nods her head, "I do, thank you guys."

Her arms wrap around me, holding me tight. I melt into her touch, basking in what feels like the only time she'll ever let herself love me again.

I understand why she's hesitant to let me back in, but I'll be damned if I don't try my fucking hardest to sweep her off her feet.

"Don't get too used to this St. James" she whispers against my chest, "you still have a lot of work to do." Chills run down my spine as she drags her fingers up my arm, they land on the back of my neck as she leans up and smiles. Her lips are so

close to mine, with one move I could have her sweet taste consuming every inch of my body.

She smirks at me and backs away, winking before hugging the others.

She's going to be the death of me.

thirty-six

CLAIRE

Crystal and Sharron are going to fucking kill me. I haven't practiced for almost two weeks now, and like the god damn coward I am, I've dodged every single one of their calls.

The bruises have faded—for the most part—but the ones around my eyes and neck are still visible if you look close enough. My eyebrow has a massive scab where my father cut me, no amount of makeup will be able to cover that up.

I don't doubt they'll be understanding and concerned for me, but that doesn't make this any easier. Part of me is hoping they won't show up this morning, neither of them answered my text last night saying I would be at practice today... and *that* makes me nervous.

The doors to the rink swing closed behind me, and a cloud of air puffs in front of my face as I exhale. My coaches are waiting for me on the ice, watching me silently as I lace up my skates and meet them at the centre.

Sharron surprises me when she wraps me in a tight hug, "I was fucking worried about you" she says.

Crystal laughs, "we *both* were. Don't do that to us ever again." I nod my head, knowing that even though they're my coaches... they still care about me. "Do you want to talk about it?" She asks.

"Nope, I'd much rather skate and forget about my disastrous life."

I like that they don't question me, don't ask for answers or push me to talk about what's going on when I'm not ready. They let me work through everything on the ice.

My coaches are one of the few people in my life who allow me to sort through my shit by myself. I know the others push because they care, but sometimes a girl just has to deal with everything on her own, in her own time.

Crystal focuses on my technique, while Sharron is always one for flair. They balance one another perfectly, and the combination of the two of them together is deadly.

Without having to say anything, they push me harder than they ever have before. They make me skate harder, train harder, knowing it's what I need. By the time practice is over, I'm covered in bruises, my feet are bleeding, and I feel like my body is about to fall apart.

It's amazing.

"Ice those god damn feet when you get home, we've lost too much time already" Crystal says, grabbing my hand. She interlocks our fingers and places a kiss on my knuckles. "We love you Claire, you're our shining star."

Sharon wraps her arms around me as Crystal takes a step back, "I slipped an address into your bag. Don't tell Crystal but I got you a little surprise" she whispers.

Should I be scared? Probably not.

Am I? Definitely.

We all walk out together, stopping for only a second when we see the rain pouring down onto the concrete. Without hesitation I make a run for my car, holding my bag above my head to avoid getting wet for as long as possible.

When I'm finally safe in my seat, I watch my coaches running to their car together. They hold hands in the rain, splashing through water in what seems to be the most rain Texas has seen in years.

They've never told me that they're together, but they don't have to. I can see the way they look at one another, the way they're always together.

It makes me happy.



The front door slams, and I jolt in bed.

What the fuck?

Lightning flashes through the darkness of my room, thunder following shortly after. I stay still for another moment, basking in the sound of rain hitting my window.

Storms always comfort me, they always make me feel just a little bit more at home. Vancouver wasn't always a happy place for me, but the rain storms were beautiful. When everything else was falling apart, it made me feel just a little bit better knowing that someone out there was just as scared as I was.

I tap my phone, checking the time, seeing that it's two in the morning. I groan and tip toe out of my room, creeping down the hall towards the stairs to see what's going on.

I sure as hell hope the wind didn't break open our door.

The others follow shortly after me, sleep deprived and yawning. Steph has her arms wrapped around Augusts, holding on tight as she rubs sleep out of her eyes, "what's going on?" She asks.

"I was having the best dream," Blair smiles, "this girl was on her knees, crawling toward—"

I put a hand in the air, "don't finish that sentence." He gives me a wicked grin in return, while Miller attempts to hold in a laugh.

Lucas stands on the other side of the room, arms crossed against his chest, looking at me like all he wants is to wrap me up tight. Shivers run down my spine, all the way to my toes as I remember the way he interrupted Davis and I the other night. The look on his face was priceless, but the jealousy and his overwhelming possessiveness almost made me cave. I want this boy more than I want oxygen, I'm so close to giving in, one more grand gesture and I'm all his. I lick my lips before tearing my gaze away from his, and look around the room for Davis.

He's not here.

"Davis wouldn't have slept through that noise, would he?" I ask. Everyone shakes their heads no... and a pit starts to

grow in my stomach.

I brush off the feeling, knowing he probably just left for some late night hook-up.

In the middle of a storm, the voice inside my head reminds me.



I glance at the clock, the ache in my stomach growing with each minute that passes. It's almost four in the morning, he hasn't answered a single one of my texts.

Even Davis —the man whore himself— doesn't have sex for two straight hours. He *has* to have checked his phone by now.

I crawl out of bed and walk down the hall to where Davis's door is slightly open. Maybe I shouldn't invade his privacy, but I'm worried about him, and lord knows he would break down *my* door if he was in my position right now.

The door creaks as I push it open, hoping that maybe he came home and I just didn't hear him. But there's no one in here. His room is dark, the sheets on his bed are all messed up, and his phone sits on his pillow.

Shit.

I've never really been in here before, there's a lot going on. Photos cover his wall, pictures of him and his friends, hockey team posters, Livler University banners... it all feels a little too much.

Something eery creeps up my spine as I wonder why his room would be filled with so many things. Sure it's nothing crazy, nothing people would really think about... but I know him. Davis is simple, minimalistic, not the type of guy to have a decked out room with shit everywhere.

Maybe it's stupid, but it just feels *wrong*.

His phone lights up, glowing in the dark while I itch to look. I shouldn't.

But I do.

I grab it and read the messages that I've sent him over the past couple hours;

CLAIRE-BEAR

Heard you leave, hope you're being safe <3

Hey, are you okay?

Davis I'm starting to worry. Please text me.

Seriously where are you???

Davis

But it's the other messages that makes me flinch;

FUCKING ASSHOLE

You're just as deranged as when you were a kid.
Tell your mother that I want nothing to do with
any of this, it's not worth my time or energy.

You aren't worth my time or energy.

Who the hell is this? And why are they so cruel? Davis is one of the best people I know, I can't imagine anyone hating him enough to say something like that.

My worry only grows as I realize this person is probably part of the reason why he's not home... and why he left his god damned phone.

I run back to my room and get dressed, throwing on a pair of shorts and a hoodie before scouring the whole house for a fucking umbrella... how does no one own an umbrella?

Fuck it. I don't care.

Grabbing my keys off the counter, I run to my car. The rain pelts against my skin, and by the time I'm sitting in my seat, I'm drenched. Water leaks everywhere, but that's the least of

my worries as I turn the ignition and pray that Davis is somewhere close.

I can barely see the roads as I drive all around town, my windshield wipers moving as fast as they can to give me some sort of clarity. I enter the outskirts of town, realizing there's one place Davis would go. I take the next left turn and pray to every god that's ever existed.

The lake is a special place for them, just like the field behind my childhood home is a special place for me. There's nowhere else I can think of right now, *please let him be there.*

Street lamps disappear behind me, the only source of light coming from my headlights as I drive towards the middle of nowhere. The darkness around me has the hairs on my arms standing up, even if he was out here, I have no way of contacting him or even seeing him for that matter.

Something appears on the road in front of me and I slam on my breaks, turning the wheel sharply to avoid hitting the person in the middle of the road.

The roads are too slick, my tires skid across the asphalt. My breath catches as I slam into a telephone pole. My head crashes against my headrest from the force of my airbag, my entire body tingles with adrenaline while my nose throbs.

After a moment of feeling dazed, I bring my fingers up to my nose. Blood coats the tips of them, and a shaky exhale is finally released when I know my body parts are all still connected.

What the actual fuck.

The hood of my car is smashed in, steam rising as my engine overheats. One of my headlights is out, and my front windshield is shattered. Glass covers the ground around me as I step out of my car, furious at whoever is laying in the road like a fucking idiot.

I place a hand over my eyes, shielding them from the rain while I try to see if the person is okay. Black hair and a Livler University sweater soaked from rain feels all too familiar.

“Davis?” I yell over the loud storm.

He doesn't move, he continues laying in the flooding street, completely unfazed by the fact that I almost hit him with my fucking car. "Go away Claire" he calls back.

I rush towards him, sliding down to him on my knees and shredding them. Blood slowly pools in the water, surrounding both of us while I grab his hand.

He takes in a staggered breath, choking on a sob before finally looking at me, "I don't know how to do this anymore, I'm so tired all the time."

My heart breaks for him. This isn't him, he's the happy, laughing, joking boy who always gets on my nerves but makes me smile nonetheless. He's my sunlight.

"Please Davis, just come home" I beg. "Whatever it is, we can figure it out together."

He grips my hand harder, "help make it stop" he sobs, looking away from me and back to the sky. "Make it all okay again."

God, I don't know what to do. I don't know how to help him. I don't even know what any of this is about for fucks sake.

Panic hits me as headlights come barreling towards us, I try to pull him but he's too heavy. I try waving my hands at the vehicle, hoping that they see us... but they don't stop.

"Davis please" I scream, "please get up!"

He doesn't move.

I grab the sides of his face and force him meet my eyes, "Davis we're both going to die if you don't get up right fucking now." The strain of me yelling is scratching at my throat, tearing my vocal cords apart as I beg and beg.

At the last second, Davis grabs both of us and rolls us out of the way. His strong arms holding me tight as a tidal wave of water hits us.

It's cold, and sharp.

But at least I feel it

I'm not dead.

“You were going to let yourself get hit?” He yells at me, anger thick on his tongue. His chest heaves up and down, “what the hell is wrong with you Claire?”

I scramble out of his grasp and up onto my feet, clenching my fists at my side as he stands as well. “Me?” I shout, “you were about to get hit too, you fucking idiot.” My fists bash on his chest, pounding at him with anger for scaring the fuck out of me.

Davis grabs my arms and traps them at my sides, “don’t ever put yourself in danger for me ever again! Got it?”

My lower lip wobbles, tears making their way down my face, “I was so worried about you.”

He pulls me into a hug, “I’m so sorry.”

We don’t say anything to one another for a very long time, instead we stand in the pouring rain. I’m grateful I’m the one who found him, and not some cop after he was hit —and killed — by some car.

“Please talk to me Davis, this isn’t you. I’ve never seen you like this, it scares me.” I lift my hand and rest it on his cheek before he hides his face in my chest.

“I don’t know how many more lies and secrets I can keep up with, I don’t even know what’s real anymore” he says, words muffled from my hoodie and the loud crack of lightning that splits the sky.

I feel a stab in my heart, his words hitting a little too close to home. My first instinct is to say something to comfort him, but I know that he needs the space to speak freely, so instead I just rub my hand up and down his back.

“I have major depressive disorder” he chokes out. “My dad left my mom because of it... because of *me*. He said it was too hard to take care of a son who didn’t want to be alive most of the time.”

A father not wanting his child? Sounds familiar.

It suddenly clicks that the person who texted him earlier was his dad, and it makes it that much sadder.

He continues, "I'm on a cocktail of meds to keep myself out of the danger zone, but it only does so much." He pulls himself away from me and turns around, "I'm mostly numb to everything, the meds make it hard to feel. I do a lot of pretending, but it's really draining to do that every day.

The pictures and crap on his wall makes a lot more sense now, he was trying to overcompensate.

Another crack of lighting flashes across the sky, the thunder sounding not too long after... making me nervous. It feels like with every confession, the lighting gets closer.

"They tried to take me off of them a couple years ago, but it didn't end very well and I was hospitalized. The guys don't know why but they do know I had to take a break from hockey during our sophomore year."

I walk up behind him, wrapping my arms around his torso and resting my cheek on his back. He doesn't need words right now, he needs to feel grounded, connected to someone.

"I hate the feeling of being on them, I don't feel like myself... but it's dangerous when I'm not. I don't win either way."

My heart breaks for him even more, every word he says is like a dagger to my heart and I can't stop the pain radiating from every ounce of me. "I'm so sorry, I had no idea" I say softly, hoping he heard me.

His body shakes with a laugh, "that was kinda the whole point, I don't want people to know." He flips around and grabs my hands, shrugging before finally asking, "secret for a secret?"

I take a deep breath, I don't even know why I'm telling him this. I could pick any number of my secrets to share, but it feels like he needs to know he isn't alone. "Well..."

5 years ago

I sit on the edge of my bathtub, staring at the bottle in my hands, water running behind me. Am I really about to go through with this? Is this the road I want to go down?

Chris, he's all I have running through my head as I contemplate this decision. He's gonna be okay, right? He has friends with him, he has Sam. He's going to go somewhere with hockey, he has a future, he has Tash. I really like her, she's perfect for him.

He'll be sad for a while, but he'll move on.

I should call —no, I can't do that. He'll talk me out of it, I'll only bother him. He's busy anyway, with his own life... away from Vancouver, from this family, from me.

He doesn't need to be bothered, he's all the way in Texas right now, he's in a game. He's going to be okay, he won't have to worry about me anymore, he won't have to check on me or feel any pressure to make sure I'm okay.

It'll be a weight off his shoulders. I love him more than anything, he's the only good thing in my life, he keeps me grounded... and I only drag him down.

I just can't see myself in the future, I can't see myself with kids or a husband. I can't see anything past this moment. I don't want to be anywhere past this moment.

Pulling out my phone, tears spring to my eyes, but not because I'm sad. I'm relieved.

I love you. You were the best big brother I could have ever asked for, you loved me to the ends of the earth and I felt it every day. Don't blame yourself, okay? I'm a lost cause, there's not much left for me to keep fighting for. Make tash happy, make it to the big leagues and tell Tony I missed him.

I turn off my phone and throw it across the bathroom, then slide into the water, leaving my clothes on and feeling the weight of the fabric as it gets wetter and wetter. Minutes go by, minutes of me making amends with myself and trying to believe that it's all going to be okay.

I open the cap of the pill bottle, and throw a handful of pills into my mouth. I'm scared of dying, but I'm even more scared of living. More time passes, and eventually my eyes start to close, but I feel nothing except for peace.

This is the most calm and happy I've felt in months, I wish it could have been like this all the time.

CHRIS

“So where are you coming from?” the taxi driver asks me as he pulls out of the airport.

“Texas, I go to school there. Just coming home to surprise my little sister, she had a huge competition today, and I couldn’t make it for the actual event, but I thought I should at least come home to congratulate her.”

I’m so fucking proud of her, she works like crazy and it pays off. When I got the notification that she came in first, I started dancing in the airport. I got a lot of weird looks.

I didn’t care though, my little sister won nationals.

“You must be really proud of her,” he says.

“I am, I’m so proud of her,” I beam.

It goes silent for a moment before he looks at me through the rearview mirror, “do you play hockey by any chance? I feel like I recognize you.”

I grin and nod my head, “yeah. I play for Livler U.”

“I thought I knew you, Chris Taylor right?” I nod my head again, “I’m a big fan. You’ve had an amazing season so far. You set the team up to win the playoffs, I’m rooting for you guys.”

“Thanks man, I’m hoping we can pull through to the end. Although I can’t take all the credit, my coach and teammates help set me up for success. Couldn’t do it without them.”

He merges onto the highway, checking over his left shoulder as I feel my phone buzzing in my pocket. I see my sisters name and open her text.

ANGEL

I love you. You were the best big brother I could have ever asked for, you loved me to the ends of the earth and I felt it every day. Don't blame yourself, okay? I'm a lost cause, there's not much left for me to keep fighting for. Make Tash happy, make it to the big leagues and tell Tony I missed him.

What? What the fuck is she talking about.

Heat courses through my body, hot anxiety takes over. I re-read the text, over and over, trying to process the words I have on my screen.

She's not... right?

I can't take that chance. "You need to go" I rush out to the driver.

"What?"

"My sister texted me, I think she's... I don't know. You need to get there as quickly as you can." I feel a tear fall down my cheek, my breathing is rapid and my heart is beating so fucking fast, "please."

He steps on the gas and we fly down the highway, he weaves in and out of cars, causing them to break fast or honk their horns. I text her back, I call her, I blow up her fucking phone but she isn't answering. It's going straight to voicemail.

"Claire pick up the fucking phone" I growl.

Fuck it, I call my mom.

"Hi honey, how'd the game go?"

"Are you at home?" I ask.

"No, your father and I are out at dinner, why baby? What's wrong?"

"Please tell me Claire is with you."

"No, she's at home pouting."

I feel my heart being crushed, I can't breathe. She's home alone, no one's there with her. No one to help her.

The car jolts suddenly, and my seatbelt slams against my chest. I look up and see traffic, “fuck” I yell.

“Honey? What’s wrong?” I hear my mothers voice ask. My phone is in my hand, resting on my lap as I lose hope.

My sister is going to die.

I hang up, not giving a fuck if she’s pissed at me, I don’t care anymore. I’m going to lose my sister.

“I’m sorry man, I can’t get around it.”

“It’s okay. I understand.” I take a deep breath before slamming my fist into my thigh. “Fuck!” I yell, “Fuck fuck fuck!”



“Claire!” I scream, running into the house, she sent that text fifteen minutes ago.

I just hope I’m not too late.

I left the taxi driver and my bags sitting in the driveway, I don’t have time to grab all my shit. Everything in my bags is replaceable, my sister isn’t.

I rush up the stairs, running down the hall to her bedroom. The door’s unlocked so I barge in, I look around frantically, trying to catch sight of her. I look towards the bathroom, and see water leaking out from under the door.

It’s fucking locked.

“God damn it Claire!” I scream.

I slam my body into the door, hitting it as hard as I can until it busts from the door frame and swings open.

She’s under the water, her head is under the fucking water. I walk over, seeing a half empty pill bottle spilled out over the floor. The tap is still gushing water, leaking it all over the floor. I’m standing in a god damn puddle right now. I yank her out of the tub, laying her limp body onto the tiled floor and dial 911.

God, why didn't I think about doing this earlier. The paramedics would have been here by now and I've wasted precious time... time that could be the death of her. Fuck I'm such an idiot.

"911 what's your emergency?" The operator asks.

"Please, I need help. My sister, she isn't breathing, I think she took a bunch of pills."

I can barely think, my entire body is on high alert as I start CPR. I heave my body onto hers, sobbing and begging for her to come back.

"Don't leave me. Please god don't let her leave me. I need her here, she's my light."

"Sir, what's your name?"

"Chris, my name is Chris" I stutter.

"Okay Chris, my name is Sheila. Do you know CPR?"

"Yes," I say, wiping the tears from under my eyes, "I'm doing it right now."

Her ribs snap under my weight, it makes me wince, but I know I'm doing it right, so I keep going. "Her ribs just broke." I cry harder.

"That's okay, it's better for her to have a couple broken ribs, and live to deal with it than the alternative."

She's right.

"I need your address Chris."

"Uhm, it's 263 Crane Court, the last house on the right."

"Emergency services are on their way, they'll be there in five minutes. You're doing great, I'm going to stay on the line with you, okay?"

"Okay." I lean down, pinching her nose and tilting her head back. I breathe into her lungs, watching her chest move up and down with the breath. "Claire I swear to god I'm going to kick your ass if you don't live through this. I won't ever forgive you."

Sirens come down the street, and I hear the front door swing open, “hello?” A man calls out.

“I’m up here!” I yell down. “Emergency services just got here” I let Sheila know.

“You did great Chris” she replies.

A man with broad shoulders and a med bag comes walking into the bathroom.

“Please, save my sister” I sob. He pushes me out of the way and starts working. He injects her with something, then attaches a defibrillator onto her chest.

I curl up into a ball in the corner, holding my legs to my chest as I watch him shock my little sister back to life.



Claire stirs in her bed, and any sort of fatigue I was feeling before melts away as I watch her open her eyes. I jolt forward, collapsing on top of her and hugging her tight while tears of relief drip onto her hospital gown.

“What’s going on?” She asks. Her voice is gravely, raw from the tube that’s been down her throat for the last couple days.

“My sweet Angel” I whisper, “you came back to me.”

Her entire body goes rigid at my words, and when I pull back to look at her, she starts to shake. Her eyes well with tears, and she breaks down.

“No! No this isn’t how it was supposed to go. I don’t want to feel anymore, I just want it to stop.” Claire claws at her chest, trying hard to force air into her lungs while I watch helplessly. “Please just make it stop, I don’t want to be here anymore.”

The heart monitor next to us beeps uncontrollably, and doctors rush in to see what’s going on. The nurse puts an oxygen mask over her face, while the rest of the staff shove me out of the way to assess my sister.

“You need to breathe” one of the nurses says. “Deep breaths, just like me.”

My heart breaks as I watch my sister spiral, screaming at doctors to get away, begging them to let her die. She scratches one of the nurses, drawing blood, and they finally inject her with something to calm her down.

Claire’s body slows, she looks towards me, “please just let me die.”

The staff collectively take a breath when she goes unconscious, able to relax now that my sister is out of harms way. Though, I feel like my lungs have ceased function as I think about my poor little sister who want’s nothing more than to leave this earth.

“Has she ever shown symptoms of depression before?” The doctor asks, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I shake my head, walking towards Claire and grabbing her hand. “She’s always been so happy, I didn’t even know anything was wrong until-“

Until I found her laying in that tub.

“Are you her legal guardian?”

Again, I shake my head no. “My parents are at an event, I think they should be back in a couple hours.”

I can see the judgment in his eyes. He’s probably wondering what kind of parents leave their sick child to go to an event, and I’m thinking the exact same thing.

My parents should be here. They should be the ones holding her hand right now... not me.



“Sir, I really recommend that you allow us to place your daughter in psychiatric care. She’s just been through an intense trauma and is showing signs of severe depression. It is not safe for her to leave this building, she could try to harm herself again.” The doctor has spent the last ten minutes

trying to convince my parents that Claire needs to stay, but they aren't having it.

I sit next to her, one arm wrapped around her shoulder while we watch my mother pack all of Claire's things in a bag. She looks up at us with no hint of remorse, then continues to fold clothes while my sister stays silent next to me.

"She's fine, and she's coming home with us" my father growls. The finality to his tone is enough to make the doctor back off, grumbling about having paperwork for them to sign.

No part of me agrees with taking her home, but I'm not about to argue with my father after seeing the way he just spoke to the medical professional.

A knock at the door causes me to jump, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I see my sister smile at the familiar face walking through the door.

"Hey kiddos" Craig says. He's dressed in scrubs, with his badge hanging off the waistband of his pants. It's crazy to think he's already up for promotion, he'd be the youngest chief the hospital has ever seen. "Dave, Olivia" he nods.

"How are you?" My father asks, shaking Craig's hand.

He smiles, looking at Claire, "would be better if my favourite figure skater wasn't sitting in my hospital right now."

Claire sticks her tongue out at him, and I feel the heavy weight that's been hanging off my shoulders lighten a bit. It's good to see her joke around again.

"Well, she'll be gone soon. We're taking her home today." My father's voice has an edge to it as he cuts a glance towards Claire. She shrinks back into herself and the worry I had before returns.

What the hell have I missed these last couple years?

I can see Craig wanting to say something, but he holds his tongue. His eyes shift to my mother, watching her work, "and how do you feel about this?"

My mother's eyes widen, her mouth opens and closes like a fish before my father steps between them and speaks for her,

“she’s on the same page as I am. Our daughter is fine, and it’s none of your business.”

My fists clench and I lose all sense of control, “you’re the only one who thinks this is a good idea. Claire is sick,” she flinches at my words and I silently curse myself, “she’s not okay. The doctors know what they’re talking about, and they say we should make her stay.”

Fathers eyes go wild with rage for a moment before he slides his perfect dad persona back into place. “We can take care of her at home.”

There’s nothing any of us can do to stop him, and I don’t know what the hell has been happening in the house recently but I do know they won’t be keeping a close enough eye on her, they never have.

I already have permission from the school to do a couple weeks of classes online, and Tony obviously was all for letting me stay here when he found out what happened.

“Everything is going to be alright Angel” I tell her, running my fingers through her hair. “I’m going to take care of you.”

thirty-seven

CLAIRE

Davis looks at me with sadness in his eyes, but not for himself. Every ounce of pain he's feeling right now is for *me*.

I want to shrink into myself, even though I promised I wouldn't do that anymore. Laying myself bare for others to see isn't something I'm good at. I've grown up being told that my emotions make me weak, undesirable, ugly.

"Guess we're both pretty fucked up, huh?" He grins, making the energy around us feel lighter.

Shrugging I wrap my arms around myself, trying to gain any semblance of warmth that I can. "Your parents don't define you, your *past* doesn't define you. What your dad did is really messed up, but you came out swinging." My hip bumps against his, "despite all the hatred you grew up with, you chose your own path. You're kind, Davis. You're funny and smart too, you just haven't found your peace yet."

I guess the same can be said for me.

"I know you've probably seen a million doctors, but I think if you come with me to see someone we can get you put on the right dosage. You shouldn't have to feel like this all the time."

He chuckles, places a kiss on the tip of my nose before smiling at me tenderly. "You're like Clarity in human form, I don't know how you do it."

"Broken recognize broken, we tend to heal others because we don't know how to help ourselves."



Davis and I spent more time than I'd like to admit standing in the rain. I'm pretty sure our entire bodies are pruned up and wrinkly now.

Our clothes stick to us, moulding to our bodies with little to be imagined.

It's weird though, normally he would be checking me out by now —seeing as my entire body is basically on display— but we've come to a new understanding. We get each other.

I called Steph to come pick us up, and like the idiot Davis is, he asked me why *I* couldn't drive home. He genuinely didn't notice the fact that I had crashed by car after almost hitting him.

Brain cells = zero.

She drives in silence, understanding that whatever happened out there is something between us, and no one else.

We're about two minutes from the house when she clears her throat, "so..."

I look at her with narrowed eyes, "what did you do?"

She smiles sheepishly at me, "well when you called me I kind of, *accidentally*, woke the others up while I was panicking."

Davis and I both groan, "someones going to kill me" he mutters.

Yeah, Lucas is. I can feel it in my bones.

He's already waiting on the doorstep when we drive up, and the moment Davis steps out of the car, he gets a nice big punch to the face.

I gasp and turn towards my bloody-nosed friend, "Lucas what the fuck?" I yell, grabbing Davis's face. He seems to be okay, you know... other than the possible broken nose.

"Don't steal my girl again," he orders. "Jackass."

My girl.

My girl.

My girl.

He wraps his hands around my waist and spins me to face him, "god look at your nose. What happened out there?" The

concern on his face makes my heart melt, but when I don't answer he turns angry. "Davis I swear to god I'm going to kill you for putting her in danger like that!"

I grab his cheek, "I'm okay. I promise."

He melts into my touch for a moment before grabbing my wrist, holding onto it while staring deep into my eyes, "why the hell would you leave without telling anyone? That was really fucking stupid, pretty girl." I go to respond but before I have the chance to, Lucas notices the blood dripping down my knees, "I really am gonna kill him you know."

"Can it wait until later? I'm tired" I laugh. Lucas places an arm across my shoulder and leads me back into the house. The rest of the crew are stress eating at the kitchen island, August obviously couldn't sleep so he made breakfast for everyone "Your girl, huh?" I tease in a low whisper.

He rolls his eyes, "we both know you are. Now shut up and eat your food."

I wave a finger in his face, smiling despite myself, "not quite yet St. James... not quite yet."



I'm in my room doing homework when I hear snickers coming from the hallway. The house has been quiet all day, but in this place, peace only lasts for so long.

My door bursts open and a bluetooth speaker rolls in, playing the *Mission Impossible* theme song. I furrow my brows in confusion as Davis somersaults into my room, Blair following soon after.

The two of them dart around, pretending to be spies. They look like god damn idiots but hell do I love them. I can't help but laugh when they go back to back, holding up finger guns and pretending to fight off whatever invisible enemy is attacking.

Without warning I get swept up, Davis holding my feet with the biggest grin on his face, Blair holding under my arms

while he laughs maniacally.

“Put me down” I scream, trying to kick myself free.

Davis narrows his eyes at me, “we’re kidnapping you Clarity, just let it happen.”

I pause at the nickname, bouncing slightly with each step the guys take down the stairs, “what?”

Blair seems just as confused as I am because his laughing stops. When I crane my neck backwards to look at his face, his brows knit together. “Yeah, what she said.”

He shrugs casually with that goofy little smile on his face, “you know, like Claire-ity. You’re my clarity and your name is Claire... it just kinda makes sense.”

My jaw drops a little. “Johnny Davis, are you being... adorable right now?”

“Don’t act like I’m not *always* adorable, and don’t use my first name. Only my mother gets to call me that.” His tone is serious, but the slight tilt at the corner of his mouth tells me he’s partially joking.

The two of them say nothing else as I’m thrown into the backseat of my rental car and locked in by the child locks. Blair takes the drivers seat while Davis sits shotgun, the two of them ignoring all my questions as they rip down the quiet street.

I swear to god if I end up at some stupid hazing event or something I might actually kill them.

Slowly they come to a stop at the American Airlines Centre, and all that pending doom feels like it’s rushing out of me all at once. Why the fuck did they bring me here, and what absurd bullshit am I about to walk into?

“Words anyone?” I ask.

Neither of them speak as they grab my hands and yank me inside. I start to shake, nerves getting the better of me as my mind spirals into infinite possibilities.

The panic sets in a second later, the world starts to tilt on its side. My lungs turn to steel —hard, unmoving *steel*. Memories rush in, every time I was forced to attend an event without warning, brought to unfamiliar places with no knowledge of what I was walking into, the way my father would beat me when we got home if I didn't live up to his expectations... I can't breathe.

Six Years Ago

“You look beautiful” my mother smiles softly at me. Her white teeth and subtle dimples flash against the mirror I'm staring into.

A white dress hangs off my shoulders, long sleeves covering the aching bruises on my wrists from my fathers intense hold. The delicate fabric hugs my curves and brushes against the floor with every step I take.

My back throbs, a constant reminder to keep my perfect daughter facade in place tonight. Father didn't like my 'stunt' last night.

Three days of endless events, three days of disappointing my family, three days of wishing to be hit by a fucking truck.

It looks like I'm getting married, and the thought of that makes my gut twist. I don't see myself ever getting married, so my mother better soak it in now while she can... it's the only time she'll ever see me in a wedding dress.

I've been paraded around, introduced to so many people that my head is hazy with names. Part of me believes my father is trying to set up an arranged marriage, but the other part of me knows that he'll never let anyone take me away from him.

In any other circumstance, those words may seem sweet.

But in my case, they taste bitter.

“Let's go!” My father barks. “Stop wasting time staring at yourselves.”

Bile creeps up my throat.

My palms sweat.

My world starts to fade at the edges.

A sharp slap stings my cheek.

Copper coats my tongue.

“Clean that up in the car, I don’t need anyone asking why my daughter is bleeding like a stuck pig.”

Present

“Clarity?” Davis’s broken voice breaks through my walls like a sledgehammer. His hard, calloused hands grip my face and forces me back to reality. “Clarity what’s wrong?”

I shake my head, “just- I need a second” I manage to force out.

I watch both Blair and Davis taking deep breaths in front of me, trying their best to have me mimic their actions and calm down. I suck oxygen into my lungs, finally easing the pain in my chest and floating back down to earth.

“Want to talk about it?” Blair asks softly.

Shaking my head, I grab his hand, “sometimes ignorance is bliss my friend.”

I want to feel bad for keeping these little secrets to myself, the boys know the gist of what I went through, but I can’t bring myself to care. It’s *my* dirty laundry, I don’t have to air it out if I don’t want to.

With understanding, they lead me to the tunnels that players use to get onto the ice. The path is covered in twinkle lights and rose petals, soft music drifts towards us from the ice, and the boys let go of my hands.

I stare ahead of me, and the overhead lights shut off. The tunnel is dark, the only thing lighting my path is the soft glow of the lights strung along the walls.

“Be kind to him.” Blair says as I continue to walk forward, “he’s hurting too.”

My heart pounds in my chest, butterflies erupt in my stomach as I step foot onto the cold surface. Hundreds of candles are placed along the ice, flickering in the darkness while a certain asshole I love stands at the centre.

There's a blanket behind him, flowers scattered along its edges. Lucas holds a speaker above his head, staring at me like I'm the only person in this entire world.

His eyes bore into mine, emotion pooling the closer I get. His lips turn up slightly, and tears well in his eyes.

When I'm finally close enough to smell his cologne, I chuckle nervously, "I didn't know you were such a big baby St. James."

"I'm scared" he admits, taking me off guard. "I'm so terrified of the way you make me feel, I'm terrified of losing you forever or having to watch you fall in love with someone else. I hate the idea of you looking at someone the way I look at you, and fuck I hate myself for not realizing any of this sooner."

My chest aches, I want to touch him.

"I'm far from perfect, and I know I have so much to make up for, but I really, *really* want you to give me a shot. Let me show you that love can be gentle."

I wrap my arms around his neck, letting my fingers intertwine with the soft waves. Our breaths combine and his heartbeat thunders against me as our chests press against one another. "You are such a loser" I snort.

He looks down at my lips, "a loser you're really into."

That might just be the truest thing he's ever said.

I lean in towards him, teasing him by hovering just a breath away from his lips, "I expect your little promise to be fulfilled at the next game."

"I haven't been able to forget about that fucking kiss" he says, practically begging me to give him what he wants. "I'd do anything if it mean't I got a re-do."

A wicked smile takes over my face, and I pull away. He groans when he realizes that I will not be indulging him, “not so fast St. James... I may forgive you but I still want you to fight for my heart.”

Lucas licks his lips, “I’ll get you to kiss me one day.” He turns towards the stands and cups his hands around his mouth, “she forgives me!”

Cheers echo against the walls, and I look up to see all of our friends clapping in excitement.

We both laugh, holding onto one another while Steph screams at the tops of her lungs, “finally!”

“Way to go Clarity!” Davis cheers.

Lucas lifts me up, holding me while I wrap my legs around his waist, “wanna put on a little show for them?”

An embarrassingly loud laugh escapes my lips and I throw my head back, “nice try, but I’m not that easy.” As we walk over to my friends I have to ask, “How’d you get all of this set up anyway?”

“My girl *might* be related to a hockey player, who may or may not have told me that I needed to get my head out of my ass and make things right with you.” My jaw drops. Lucas shakes with laughter before placing a gentle kiss on the tip of my nose, “he’s a big softie when you get to know him.”

thirty-eight

LUCAS

She's stunning, absolutely stunning.

This sorority on campus is throwing a party to raise money for sick kids, and even though Claire is wearing the same jeans and crop-top combo she always goes for, I can't help but drool at the sight of her.

I walk to the base of the stairs, and hold out a hand for her, she grabs it and as she goes to take the last step... she stumbles.

My arms wrap around her on instinct, catching her before she can fully fall, "already falling for me I see."

"Shut up" she giggles, rolling her eyes.

Please keep laughing, please keep entertaining this idea with me.

I want her to keep playing these games with me, I'm having fun. I don't want it to end.

"You whore's ready to go?" Steph yells as she runs down the stairs. She makes her way towards August and jumps on his back, and we walk outside to get in the Ubers.

Steph, August, Davis and Miller all get into one, while Blair, Claire and I get into the other. She sits right in between the two of us, and the entire drive she's got her hand on my thigh.

Jesus fucking christ, this girl is driving me absolutely insane. We've spent the last couple days messing with one another, teasing and joking around like we used to. Neither of us will let up, and I think I'm starting to actually lose my mind. She's got me so riled up I don't know how much longer I can wait to scoop her up in my arms and steal her away.

The first chance I get, I hop out of the car and take a deep ass breath to calm myself down.

The music is blaring, people are playing various party games, and the house is packed. Normally I would be scouting which girls I want to hook up with, but now everyone seems... meh. No one's nearly as beautiful or fascinating as the girl right behind me.

Steph and Claire instantly run off to find the booze, leaving us five guys to figure out what we're going to do while we're here. We find the beer pong table and hang around there. At the very least it's something to do, and maybe even a great way to get closer to Claire without any of our friends butting in.

I mean, obviously everyone knows what's going on between us, but that doesn't mean I want them in my business. This thing —whatever it is— is between Claire and I.

“How's things going between you and Steph?” I ask, turning to August.

“Amazing, she's better than I could have ever imagined. She's hard headed and opinionated but not in a pushy way, she's just got a certain outlook on life and won't compromise who she is just because I may not agree with her. I think I love her man.”

“Wow.” He's got it bad for Steph, but then again I've got it just as bad for her best friend.

August grins, “I know, me? In love? Who woulda thought?” He chuckles. “Any movement on the Claire front?”

“I think? Maybe? I have no fucking clue. We're stuck in this game of chicken, we're both pushing one another and doing things to get the other riled up but we're both too stubborn to actually do anything.” My fingers run through my hair and I have to fight the urge to pull on the strands, “I have no clue what's going through her head, but I just hope she's close to letting me have her.”

He pats me on the shoulder. “That sucks, but it seems like y'all are having fun so I wouldn't worry about it. Sorry I can't help.”

I perk up, “maybe you can be my middle man. You can get the four-one-one from Steph and then relay the information to me.”

“Fat fucking chance” he laughs, “Steph would castrate me... you’re on your own with this one.”

I grown in frustration as I see the woman of the hour approaching me. I can’t hear her or Steph but I can tell that they’re laughing by the way Claire’s head tips back and her body slightly shakes.

Steph hands August a drink, kissing him on the cheek while Claire hands me a beer and takes a long sip from hers, keeping eye contact with me the entire time.

God fucking damn it.

I adjust my pants as discretely as possible, but the fucking CIA agent in front of me sees. Her tongue darts out of her mouth, wetting her lips and drawing attention towards them. She flicks her hair behind her shoulder and extends her neck to the opposite side, revealing that slender neck I love so much.

She’s getting too good at this game.

Claire goes to walk away but before she has the chance I wrap my arm around her waist and spin her back towards me. I pull her in close, resting my forehead on hers, “I’ll be getting you back for that one pretty girl, don’t think I can’t play this game better than you.”

I see goosebumps rise across her tan skin, and her body shivers as she sucks in air.

I love the effect I have on her, watching how her eyes light up and how her body shakes whenever I make contact with her.

“Guess we’ll find out... won’t we Lukiepoo.” Her eyes flick down to my lips and then slowly come back to meet mine. She looks up at me through her eyelashes and gives me the most innocent looking smile before walking away from me.

I curse under my breath, there's no way I can play this game better than her. She has me wrapped around her fucking pinkie.

After managing to compose myself, I take a step back towards the guys. They're definitely going to harass me with questions about tonight when we get home. I swear they're worse than teenage girls, they're always wanting to hear about gossip or what's happening in everyone else's love lives. It's kinda funny but also *very* annoying cause they'll pester me until I give them something.

"She's going to kill you" Blair chuckles when I sit next to him on the couch.



The girls are evil, straight up *evil* I tell you. August and I are standing in the corner —completely alone— and it took me way too long to notice that the others had disappeared.

They've been dancing on one another, looking at us every once in a while, just to make sure we're still watching. We're always still looking, we can't take our eyes off of them.

"How much longer do we have to stand here and endure this torture?" August groans.

"I have no fucking idea" I tell him, wishing I knew the answer.

Maneater by Nelly Furtado comes on, blasting through the speakers and everyone cheers. Claire and Steph look at one another, mischievous grins plastered across their faces as they whisper in each others ears.

I don't think I can take whatever it is they're about to do.

They face one another, pressing their bodies close and swaying their hips, grabbing one another, touching one another... god what I wouldn't do to be pressed against Claire like that right now.

I feel my heart pound in my chest while I watch them laugh and make their way over to us. Steph grabs August while Claire grabs me. They turn us so my back is against his, and I can feel how hard both of us are breathing.

Claire runs her hands down my body, then slowly lowers herself so she's balanced on the balls of her feet. She looks up at me before coming back up to face me. I go to put my hands on her swaying hips but she blocks me, "no touching" she says.

The chorus of the song comes on as she turns around, flipping her hair, running her hands all over her own body, grinding up against me.

It's taking everything I have not to touch her right now.

She looks over her shoulder before walking away, Steph follows her and they both return to their original positions across the room. They continue their dancing on one another while August and I stand in shock, watching them, trying to process what the fuck just happened. I look to him and instantly catch the fire in his eyes, I can see the way he's ready to lose control.

To be completely honest, I'm just about there as well.

We nod at each other and charge towards the girls. I grab my girls hand while he grabs Stephs, both of us pull them towards the couches and then onto our laps.

"No one gets to watch you move like that" I whisper in Claire's ear. "I won't let another man set his eyes on you, not if I can help it."

"I don't *want* anyone else to watch me move like that" she replies breathlessly.

Her gaze lowers to my lips, and god damn if I don't give into every single urge I've felt right there and then. I place a finger under her chin, forcing her to look up at me.

She looks me in my eyes and I slowly start moving towards her, keeping a steady eye for any signal she might give me that she doesn't want this. I won't do anything she doesn't want, I won't push her into something she isn't ready

for... but if she'll let me, I'm going to kiss the ever living shit out of her.

My mind races with dirty thoughts as she bites her lip, sparks igniting behind those beautiful blue eyes, and I know she wants this just as much as I do.

A smirk twists my lips, "I told you I'd get you to kiss me."

"Shut up" she grumbles, grabbing the back of my neck and pulling me closer, finally connecting our lips.

I come completely undone, my entire body is on fire. It feels like I'm whole, *she* makes me feel whole. Her lips taste sweet, they're so fucking soft.

I could kiss her forever.

A low groan rumbles in my chest as she speeds up the kiss, using her tongue to ask permission to enter, and hell if I don't instantly let her in. She turns her body so she can straddle me, running her fingers through my hair.

This girl is addictive... *so fucking addictive.*

CLAIRE

I'm completely consumed by the feeling of his lips on mine.

It's so painful loving him, but I can't stop. There are days where I wonder if I'd be happier not knowing him, and then there's days where I realize he has brought me a lot of the happiness I have now. He breaks my heart and I continue to let him, but it's the kind of heartbreak that makes me want more. His attention is like a drug, and if I can just capture it for long enough maybe I'll forget about everything. He's hurt me more than anyone else, but I think it might be worth it. It's a beautiful kind of pain.

His lips fit perfectly with mine, every second we sit here I feel myself falling for him more and more. No matter what's happened in the past, this moment is what changes everything.

I grind against him, my body begging for more friction as his teeth pull at my lower lip, breaking the kiss for just a moment before reconnecting.

He's got my head spinning, everything around us disappears as I get lost in his touch, allowing myself to feel good for once, to do something *I* want without thinking about anything else going on around me.

I want this, I want *him*.

He pulls away and rests his forehead on mine, "you taste like fucking candy" he rasps.

I don't think I've ever smiled so wide.

"Could you guys like, *not* fuck one another while we're sitting right here" Steph laughs, "I love you both, but I don't want to watch you get it on right now."

I pull myself off of him, hiding my face as my cheeks glow red with embarrassment. The world around us starts to come back into focus and I realize just how many people are around. "Sorry" I mumble.

“Do you wanna go upstairs? Somewhere quiet where we can be alone to talk?” Lucas whispers to me, brushing the hair out of my face.

Do you wanna go upstairs.

Do you wanna go upstairs.

Do you wanna go upstairs.

Nathans twisted grin flashes in my head, the way he was so calm when he asked me the very same thing, the way he made me feel this false sense of security with him. The way his whole personality changed the moment that door closed behind us.

He became a monster.

“Claire?” Lucas asks, worry pouring out of him. “Are you okay? I didn’t mean to push, there’s no pressure or anything.”

No pressure.

No pressure.

No pressure.

He said that too. He said that right before he climbed on top of me and took something that wasn’t his.

I scramble out of Lucas’s hold, breathing heavy as I pull my hair in between my fingers. My stomach twists and panic rushes through my veins.

No, no, no, no.

I pace around in front of my friends, trying to catch my breath. The noise around me fades, the lights become fuzzy, my vision clouds as I try to stop the tidal wave of panic taking over.

“She’s having a panic attack, help me get her outside” I hear Steph say, her voice distant and muffled.

“No, I got it” Lucas barks. His warm hands pick me up and hold me tight, keeping me safe.

But I’m not safe.

Hands. Touching me. All over my body.

I scream and kick and cry, begging for him to let me go and stop touching me.

Fuck, it burns.

He looks down at me with worried eyes, “I’m sorry pretty girl, I just need to get you outside.”

When we finally make it to the porch he drops me like I’m on fire and I scramble away from him. I clutch at my shirt and suck in oxygen, trying to sort out my brain before it becomes the death of me.

Lucas is safe. He wouldn’t hurt me like that. He’s safe.

“You’re okay” he says, taking a couple steps back. “I’m here, I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

I look up, seeing the confusion and pain swirling around behind those beautiful brown eyes. He’s worried.

My body relaxes, finally understanding that he’s not Nathan. My fight or flight dies down and breathing becomes easier. I take a step towards him and wrap my arms around his torso. He holds me tight, like if he lets go I’ll disappear.

“Thank you” I whisper, voice cracking while I take a seat.

“Claire, I’m so unbelievably sorry. I didn’t mean to push you, I didn’t mean to force you into something you didn’t want.” He takes a seat next to me and places a rough, calloused hand on my leg.

“No.”

“No?”

“No. You didn’t make me do anything I didn’t want. I wanted to kiss you, fuck I’ve wanted to kiss you for a long time but I couldn’t figure out what was going through that thick head of yours until after...” He nods in understanding. “You know you’re like really confusing, right?”

He smiles at me, “says you. You’re like a god damn safe that I have to crack into if I want to learn anything new.”

I laugh, not because what he said was funny, but because we were both so fucking blind. “You didn’t push me. You

just... you sounded like him” I explain, returning to the original topic of conversation.

“Who?” His head tips to the side.

How am I supposed to tell the guy I like that he reminds me of my rapist? How am I supposed to spark romance and get this guy to be with me if I compare him to someone who hurt me so badly?

How am I supposed to sit here and explain that he scared me?

I take a deep breath, “you sounded like Nathan. He said something similar that night. He said the same things and I freaked, it’s not you. I swear to god Lucas it’s not you.” My heart breaks at how wounded he looks, but he needs to understand that I need time to heal. “You are so fucking caring and you make my heart explode. You’re an ass and sarcastic and a fucking loser sometimes but you’re sweet when you want to be. You do these little things that make me want to scream, but in a good way. Holy shit I’m rambling right now and I’m probably scaring you but-“

He places both of his hands on the sides of my face, he kisses me, forcing me to shut up. He leans his forehead against mine, “I like you too. You aren’t scaring me.”

“Please do that again.”

So he does, he pulls me in and kisses me softly. “Just- let’s take this slow, okay?” He says as he pulls away, brushing the side of my cheek with his thumb. “I don’t know what’s going to happen after we graduate, I don’t know what’s going to happen with hockey and I’m scared that I’m going to start something with you that I can’t finish. I want you to be okay before you commit yourself to me. I want you to be happy for yourself before you try to be happy for me, because if things don’t work out, then I need to know you weren’t just pretending or forcing yourself to be okay.”

How could he possibly think that I’m not ready to be with him? I’ve been ready for weeks. I may need some time to heal

after Nathan, but I definitely don't want to take things with him slowly. I want it all.

"I want this." His hands scrape through his hair, "I want this so fucking badly, but I don't know how to do relationships and I don't want to fuck this up. I don't want this to burn out like any other meaningless hookup."

He looks... different. He doesn't look like the Lucas I knew, he doesn't look like the smart ass I've lived with for the past couple months. He looks like someone fighting for the things he wants.

"I want this Lucas. I don't want to take things slow, I want all of you." A sly smirk takes over his face, *there's the Lucas I know*. "Fuck whatever it is that's scaring you, you aren't going to hurt me. We're inevitable Lucas, we have been since I walked through that front door."

He stares at me, "does this mean you'll agree to be mine?"

"Obviously" I start to lean in towards him, but the front door swings open before our lips can connect.

"You guys okay out here?" August asks. He stops and smiles when he sees us frozen, inches apart from one another. "Guess that answers my question."

"Wait how's she doing?"

"Is she okay?"

"What happened? I'm going to kick someones ass."

I hear Blair, Miller and Davis before I see them, and when they see me sitting so close to Lucas, they all start to dance.

"Don't you guys want to hear the good news before you start celebrating?" Lucas taunts. The boys look at him, pausing for a moment while they wait on the edge of their metaphorical seats. He grabs my hand in his and smiles widely, "she's mine boys."

"Fucking finally!" Blair hoots.

"God damn, took y'all long enough" Davis laughs.

Miller reaches out to grab my hand, pulling me onto my feet and stepping in between Lucas and I. He glares down at him, “I know we’re friends and all, but if you hurt her... *I will hurt you.*”

Lucas rolls his eyes, “I’m not gonna hurt her Miller.”

Blair drops to his knees and clasps his hands, “oh my god. Claire, what have you done to my best friend? He actually admitted that he likes you? Please teach me your ways of getting him to open up.”

I let out a snort, “well unless you’re ready to make out and grind on the guy, I don’t think you’ll be able to use my methods.” Everyone looks at me in shock, “what? Don’t act like I haven’t heard y’all talking about being balls deep in a girl.”

They all shrug in response, laughing as they guide me back into the party.



When we walk back into our house, Steph grabs my hand and heads towards the stairs, “don’t wait up for me babe, I’m staying with Claire tonight” she yells over her shoulder.

“What what?” August’s jaw drops, realizing his girlfriend is ditching him for her bestie... sorry August, I’ll always come first.

“If you get lonely cuddle with Lucas or something.” I laugh as the aforementioned parties start to gag.

Once we’re in my room, Steph closes the door and jumps on my bed. She pulls a pillow onto her lap and looks up at me like a child looking at their favourite Disney character, “tell me everything.”

So I do. I tell her every last detail of our conversation and how fucking amazing kissing him was. She held onto my every word, soaking it up like a god damn sponge.

“About fucking time. Christ, I thought I was going to have to lock you two in a room together until you finally talked about it” she giggles.

I nod my head, “I thought so too. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to go sleep in my boyfriends room.”

thirty-nine

LUCAS

Having my girl in my arms has never felt so fucking good. Her hair smells like flowers, her skin is soft to the touch as I run my fingers over her arm, and her lips are slightly parted as she sleeps.

The fact that I can kiss her whenever I want, blows my fucking mind. I spent all of last night touching her, holding her close, kissing her like she was my fucking oxygen.

I so badly wanted to do more, to bury myself inside of her and make her scream so loud that she would wake the fucking dead, but she stopped me when I tried. I understand why, she's still reeling from what Nathan did to her.

When I saw how scared she was to tell me, my blood boiled, I wanted to beat his god damn face in all over again for making her so afraid of being intimate.

How is it fair that she's terrified, and he gets to walk around with absolutely no care in the world?

I will do anything to make sure my pretty girl is comfortable in her own skin, she will never have to worry about me taking something that she doesn't want me to. I will worship her until the end of time, and I'm going to do my best to convince her of that.

"You're staring at me." Her gravelly voice sends shivers down my spine, and a smile cracks my face.

"That's because you're so pretty to look at" I laugh, placing a kiss on the tip of her nose, right where a soft dusting of freckles are. "How'd you sleep pretty girl?"

She sighs and closes her eyes, "better than I have in a long time."

"Well in that case..." I flip over on top of her and pin her to my bed. Her cheeks flush and she stares up at me with wide eyes, "how's a little date night sound to you?"

Claire's brows knit in confusion, "what?"

I bend down and kiss her lips, groaning when she wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me in closer. My dick starts to twitch, begging me to give it what it wants.

She pulls away and chuckles, "tell your mini-me to calm down."

"It has a mind of its own babe, I can't control it."

Rolling her eyes, she pushes me off of her. She sits on the edge of the bed and throws her hair up into a pony tail, giving me the perfect view of her long, toned back as her shirt rides up.

I crawl over to her, placing soft kisses on her neck. Her skin is warm, almost hot to the touch, and after goose bumps erupt all over her skin... I realize that she wants me just as much as I want her. She just needs time.

"Let me take you on a proper date tonight, I want to do this right, and that means wining and dining you."

She bites her lip to hold back a smile, "don't think I'm going to drop my panties for you just because you spend a little money on me St. James."

"You'll do that all on your own, I have faith in my seduction abilities."

Her giggles are like heaven to my ears, and even though my ego it taking a blow because she doesn't believe I can seduce her, I don't really care. She's spent so much time hurting, to finally see her happy and carefree is a relief.

She ruffles my hair like I'm some cute little child, and stands up, "good luck with that St. James, you have a lot of making up to do before we get there."

"Don't call me that."

"Don't call you what?" She asks.

"St. James."

"Scared of a little teasing now that we've admitted our feelings? I don't think our little games should stop just

because we're together..." she gives me those fuck me eyes, "do you?"

"Fuck no."



Blair laughs as we battle it out on the couch, he's kicking my ass in the video game we just bought... and I'm slowly losing my mind. I've always been better than him at games, even when we were kids, but for some reason he's suddenly a *god*.

"Get it together Lukie-poo" he shoves my shoulder, "I might just come for your girl next if it's this easy."

My jaw ticks. Even though I know he's joking, I still have to fight back the urge to sock him in the face. "Not funny" I grind out. Blair may be my best friend, but there are some lines we don't cross.

Even when we were in high-school, we had a no banging each others ex's rule. We've always respected it, and seeing as we've been best friends since child-hood... I'd say it's working for us.

He brushes me off and continues focusing on the TV, when the door swings shut and Claire walks in, I throw my remote onto the couch and cut my loses.

"Hey" Blair yells from behind me, "we aren't done yet!"

Claire's on the phone so she doesn't notice me until I'm right in front of her face. She smiles softly before re-focusing on the call and her face turns serious. "Yes, I understand. Thank you."

When she hangs up, I wrap an arm around her shoulder leading her towards the living room. "What was all that about?"

Her hands sake, causing alarm bells to ring in my head. Something's wrong, but I don't know what. She takes a seat on the couch and stares at the wall blankly, "my mom is getting

the Livler arena in the divorce... she's signing it over to me." Her voice is soft, almost a whisper.

Blair and I stare at her... *she's what?*

"So that means you'll be the big boss" Blair states.

Claire nods her head slowly, "technically the rights to the rink also comes with ownership of the team... I'm going to be the *big big boss.*"

I start howling with laughter. "Holy shit, you're going to be Tony's boss."

Claire grins, "I've always been the boss of him."

Her being the owner of the team is probably one of the hottest things I've ever heard. I can't wait for her to boss us around and shit... more than she usually does at least.

Blair gets up off the couch and walks towards the kitchen, Claire notices the bulge in my pants and leans in close, "put it away St. James, there's plenty of time for that later."

How the fuck am I supposed to calm myself down when she's saying nasty things in my ear like that? "Go get ready for our date pretty girl, I have big plans for us."



Claire sits in front of me in a pretty little black dress. Her smooth, tan legs were driving me wild the entire drive here. I couldn't help rubbing my hands up and down her thighs while she danced around to music.

I brought her to one of the nicer restaurants in the college area, so nice in fact that they have a god damn dress code.

This suit is really starting to itch.

She almost choked when she saw me waiting outside for her in my black dress pants and button down. I had to try so hard to pretend like I didn't notice her clench her legs... who knew all it would take was a simple outfit to get this girl riled up.

A menu covers the bottom half of her face, and every once in a while she'll glance up at me nervously. She stares at the chain around my neck, then my lips, and then finally makes her way up to my eyes before re-focusing on the menu.

I haven't picked up my menu once, and it's making her uncomfortable. That doesn't stop me from staring at her though, she looks *stunning*. Every man in this restaurant knows it too. They look at her like she's their next meal, completely ignoring the deadly glare I send their way.

I think I've plotted about twelve murders so far.

The waiter comes over and very politely asks what we'd like to eat. She hesitates for a moment before pulling herself together and beaming at him, "I'll have the chef's choice. Tell him he has full creative freedom and cost isn't an issue."

I keep forgetting she grew up in a well-off family, she's used to places like this and knows exactly how to act. I, on the other hand, feel like a damn fish out of water.

"And for yourself sir?" The waiter asks, turning towards me with his notepad ready.

"That's all, thank you."

He walks away, and Claire looks at me, "aren't you going to order?" She shifts uncomfortably in her chair before mumbling, "I wouldn't have ordered anything if I knew you weren't eating."

She's self-conscious, worried I'm going to judge her because of her eating habits even though I've been living with her for almost three months. "Eat whatever you want pretty girl, my meal comes later." Her cheeks tint with a heavy blush, and I can't help but smirk. I love messing with her.

We spend the next twenty-minutes making stupid small-talk. It's stiff and awkward, the kind of conversations you have at some stuffy event with a bunch of snotty rich people... not with the girl you're falling for.

"This is so stupid" she mutters, "why the hell are we acting like this is the first time we've ever met?"

My shoulders relax, “thank god. I was starting to think I was the only one.”

She laughs, “there is no way we’re going to change who we are just because we’re dating. That’s so stupid.”

“I know right, I mean I don’t want to turn out like that couple over there.” I point behind her and she looks over her shoulder to the couple who seem to be in their late fifty’s. Both of which haven’t said a single word to one another, and keep staring at every other attractive man and woman in here.

Claire smothered a laugh by taking a sip of her water, but accidentally spits it out when I make a grossed out face.

Things seem to relax after that, and while I can tell everything is different between us now, I don’t think it’s a bad different. We spend most of our night laughing and joking about the other people around us, when she got her food she moaned so loudly the tables around us gave us questioning looks.

She lifted her fork to my lips and let me take a bite of the steak looking thing, I have to admit it was pretty damn good. I didn’t hesitate to lick my lips and say “you definitely taste better.”

She asked for the check immediately.

Now I’m driving her to the batting cages where I have an extra special surprise for her.

“What the hell are we doing here?” She asks, stepping out of the car and taking my hand.

Leading her towards the last cage without saying a word, I hand her a bat and get behind the gate. “You got a lot of anger in you sunshine, figured you could use the release.”

“I can’t bat in heels!”

She definitely can, she spins in the air on knifes for fucks sake, I’m sure she’ll manage. “Imagine the balls are the faces of the people who have fucked you over. You might be pleasantly surprised.”

The machine whirls to life and the first ball comes flying at her. She closes her eyes tight and swings, unfortunately missing.

The ball smacks against the cage in front of me and lands with a thud. She turns back and scowls, “I told you so.”

God that *sass*.

“First of all, your eyes were closed” I deadpan. “Second, pick up the ball.”

She grabs it sceptically, but freezes when she see’s what I’ve printed on it. A sharp laugh echos through the night, she keels over and tries to catch her breath before turning it around so I can see. Nathans big ugly face is stretched around it. “There’s no way” she says between wheezes.

I nod my head, “now actually *try* this time.”

Claire manages to hit every ball after that, images of her father and Nathan come flying at her and with as much power as she can, she swings.

“So how’d I do?” I ask, throwing my arm around her shoulders and walking her back to the car.

She pretends to ponder it for a moment before stopping and pulling me against her, “best first date ever.”

forty

CLAIRE

I'm sitting on my bed when I feel someone watching me from my doorway, I flick my eyes up to see Lucas leaning against my doorframe. My heart starts to beat rapidly in my chest, making my stomach flip while I watch the boy I'm falling for smile at me.

It is very rare to see a genuine Lucas St. James smile. I mean sure, he smiles all the time, but to see a smile that's one hundred percent genuine, it's uncommon. The fact that it's directed towards me, makes my heart swim in happiness.

"Mind if I hangout with you?" He asks.

"Sure, if you want." Things were so much simpler when I didn't know I was in love with the guy, I mean, now I get all nervous and clammy when he's around me. I tumble over my words and stutter, he makes me feel crazy, but the kind of crazy I can't get enough of.

He sits down next to me on my bed, leaning back against my headboard and watching me as I work. "Did you just come in here to watch me?"

"Yes."

Holy fuck, don't say things like that St. James, you're going to make my heart explode.

"Stalker" I joke. Pushing him away as he chuckles.

"I'm serious," he says, leaning in close to my ear, "I like being around you pretty girl. You make my life interesting." His hot breath hits my ear, I can feel him looking down at my lips as he speaks. I swallow thickly, trying to get rid of the sudden dryness in my mouth. He leans back against my bed frame and I try to compose myself the best I can.

Lucas, you are playing a nasty little game right now. You're making me fall further and further in love with you and I really don't know how to stop it. I don't want to stop it.

“You’re really annoying, you know that?”

“Why? Do I make you uncomfortable Claire? Do I make you feel things you’ve never felt before?” He leans into me again, he grabs my cheek lightly and forces me to make eye contact with him, “You have no idea what kind of things I can make you feel, pretty girl, you have no idea what kinds of things you make *me* feel.”

I’m breathless, breathless and shocked and- oh my god I think I’m having a heart attack.

He gets up and walks out of my room.

Who the fuck does that? Who the actual fuck says something like that and then just walks away?

So now, instead of finishing notes, I’m gonna sit here for the next hour and a half thinking about that whole exchange over and over again.

For fucks sake Lucas, what are you doing to me.



I hear screaming coming from downstairs, I bolt out of my room and run to find Davis on the counter holding Luna, and the rest of the guys standing on the couch.

“What the hell is going on down here?” I ask.

“Spider!” Miller screeches, pointing towards the floor.

I look down to see the smallest spider I’ve ever seen in my entire life. These grown ass men are a bunch of babies. I roll my eyes before walking over to the spider and stomping on it. “There, the it’s dead. Can we all go back to being normal people now?” I ask.

The boys slowly get off of the furniture and stand awkwardly.

“Claire, you will not tell a single soul about this” August threatens, pointing a finger in my direction.

“Fat fucking chance, I’m calling Steph right now.” I pull out my phone and the guys chase me, “leave me alone, the line is ringing!” I scream over my shoulder, running into the bathroom and locking the door. Steph *finally* picks up after the fifth ring, “you will never guess what just happened” I laugh.

“Is that the boys I hear banging on the door right now?” Steph asks.

“Claire I swear to god, hang up that phone right now. She’ll make fun of us for life.” August’s voice is muffled slightly through the door.

“Oh my god, no you have to tell me now... how bad is it?”

“So bad, I walk downstairs and they’re all standing on the furniture screaming about a god damn spider on the ground” I laugh.

“No way.”

“Yes way, they were acting like complete babies!”

“Claire!” They all scream at me.

I fall into a complete fit of laughter, and Steph does the same. They are never going to live this down, like *never*. Knowing Steph, she’s gonna use this against them any chance she gets. I can’t wait.

“I gotta go, my shift starts soon but text me later” she says.

We hang up and I listen to silence. Guess the guys gave up on trying to murder me. I peek my head out to find the hallway empty, weird. As soon as I make it two feet into the living room, I feel arms wrap around my waist and yank me into the air. I twist my head and see August, he looks very unhappy right now.

He marches towards the back door while I protest, kicking and screaming for him to put me down, this isn’t going to be good. He opens the glass door and throws me onto the deck, then slides it shut and locks it.

Lucas, Miller, Blair and Davis all come from around the side of the house... and they’re holding the hose.

Blair points it towards me and I throw my hands up, “guys, let’s talk about this. You don’t have to do this.”

“Too late” Blair grins as he turns on the water. I get hit with high pressure, cold as fuck water.

I scream as he soaks me.

When he finally stops, he passes it to Davis, then he sprays me, followed by Lucas and even Miller. Fuck these guys. “Okay, now you all have to give me a hug as an apology” I say, smiling sweetly with my arms spread out as I walk towards them.

They start backing away from me, “no need for that Clarity, you’re all wet” Davis says.

“Nope, come give me a hug!” I yell, chasing after them.

They run around the side of the house, I follow them into the front yard and chase them back and forth down the street. I’m sure all of our neighbours think we’re absently insane but I don’t care. I love these guys. Even though they piss me off sometimes —and I wanna kick them in the balls— I love them. They’re my family, they’re here for me and they take care of me. Besides, Tony is leading practice tomorrow, so they’ll get their punishment then.

“Leave us alone!” Miller screeches, running into the house.

“Never! Get your ass back here Joshua.”

August, being the only one not afraid of water, pulls me into a hug so tight I can barely breathe. “Happy now?” He asks.

“Yes, thank you.” I give him a kiss on the cheek before turning and scowling at the others, “he’s my favourite. Always will be.”

Lucas furrows his brows, “shouldn’t I be your favourite?”

“Nope, you didn’t want to give me a hug so fuck you. You suck.”



I'm finally getting around to checking out that address Sharron slipped in my bag a couple days ago. I had no clue where I was going, but after parking in front of a shop with pretty dresses in the windows... I think I have a pretty good idea.

"Hello?" I ask, the bell above the door chiming as it closes.

A young girl pokes her head out from below the counter, "oh hi! Can I help you?" She looks to be about my age, with pretty blonde hair and the darkest brown eyes I've ever seen.

"Sharron gave me this address, I'm not really sure why but I'm assuming you do?"

Her smile shines as she nods her head, "I absolutely do! Sharron came in a couple weeks ago and asked that we make a custom dress for you, I think you're gonna love it."

I have no doubt, Sharron has great taste.

The young girl leads me to the fitting rooms, handing me a black garment bag before closing the curtains. I unzip the front of the bag and smile to myself, I was totally right.

Sharron had them make a gorgeous black dress, with sheer sleeves that come with built in gloves and crystals everywhere. The back dips low, leaving nothing but exposed skin. There's not a single part of this dress that I hate.

I quickly change into it and stare at myself in the mirror. There have been very few times I've felt beautiful, but this is definitely one of them.

"How's it going in there?" The girl asks.

"Everything is great" I respond, "I'll take it. How much do I owe you guys?"

There's silence on the other side of the curtain, so I stick my head out to see if she's still there. "Hello?"

"Sorry! I had to go grab this from the front." She hands me a note before giving me a once over, "I absolutely love that

dress, it's probably my favourite out of every one we've made."

I look down to the note, laughing.

Cost is covered, you have a very amazing boyfriend. His friend with the black hair tried to hit on me though, you should put a muzzle on him.

forty-one

CLAIRE

Our house is packed with people, the boys invited the football team over for some drinks and it somehow tail-spinned into a whole party.

Lucas and I haven't exactly advertised the fact that we're together, but walking around campus holding hands doesn't scream indiscreet. Most people go about their business, completely ignoring us but a lot of the others stare. My skin crawls while we walk around the house, *my* fucking house. Their gaze's hold so much weight, so many unsaid things that I'm happy I don't have to hear. I'm sure none of them are very nice.

This isn't new, people know I live with the boys, but none of them really know what's going on between Lucas and I, let alone what we've been through.

The girls here don't like me, I can feel it. They think I'm taking something that's theirs, but he was never theirs in the first place.

It's taken me a while to realize, even after he admitted it to me, but he was always mine. I knew Lucas to be a player, always hoping from one girl to the next and that was my expectation when moving into the house. I expected there to be a new girl every morning, a rotating door of girls coming through the house... but he never brought anyone home. There were never any girls in his room, he never had anyone over and in the months I've known him, he hasn't even hooked up with anyone.

There's nothing that could take me from him. He has all of me, every fucking inch of me and I'm never pulling away from him again. All I can hope for it that he feels the same, that his heart is completely mine and he won't ever think to give it to anyone else.

I'm afraid of losing him.

I'm even more afraid he'll find someone better.

His hand squeezes tighter, reassuring me, and the look in his eyes tells me that he knows I'm in my own head. He's pulling me out, saving me from myself before I can spiral.

Steph steals my other hand, pulling me away while screaming over her shoulder, "I'm stealing your girlfriend, I'm getting her drunk."

I let out a loud laugh, of course she is.

"Keep her in one piece please" Lucas yells back.

Steph guides me through the crowd, blissfully unaware of everything around us. She continues to pull me towards the kitchen, and as soon as she's within reach of a bottle, she grabs it. The girl swipes a whole ass bottle of rum off the counter and cracks it open like it's no biggie. She pulls me into the corner and thrusts it in my direction, "drink bitch."

"I appreciate the booze, but why are you in such a hurry to get me drunk?"

She looks over my shoulder, "cause these girls look like they're going to eat you alive and if we're going to make it through the night we're gonna need some in our system."

I guess she isn't as unaware as I thought.

Although, I can't really argue with her. I do *not* want to be dealing with any of this sober, so I tip the bottle back and take a massive gulp.

We hop onto the counters, sitting and observing the people around us. Parties are fun, but when you feel like no one wants you there—even though this is my fucking house—sitting in the corner is the safest option. My eyes catch on Lucas, he's thriving in all of this. He's smiling and laughing while talking to everyone who surrounds him. He's made for this, everyone loves him and he loves the attention. He's popular and everyone is fighting for a second of his time.

He belongs here, I don't.

"I'm gonna go dance!" Steph shouts over the music. I nod my head and motion for her to go ahead, "aren't you coming?"

“Nope, I’m gonna hang here for a little while longer.”

“Promise you won’t sit and sulk on this counter all night?”

I give her a tight smile, “I promise.” Steph runs off, and part of me feels guilty for kind of lying to her. I’m not gonna sit here all night, but I *will* be going up to my room, trying to ignore the pit in my stomach.

Maybe I should go tell Lucas that I’m leaving, he’ll worry if he can’t find me. I place the bottle of rum on the counter and head towards him, hoping he’ll let me go in peace.

He’s in the middle of a conversation right now, and while I know he has no intention of doing anything with these girls, I still feel a little sick to my stomach. I see the way they’re looking at him, they want him.

So I stand slightly behind him, waiting for them to finish so I don’t interrupt. Lucas on the other hand, has another idea. He sees me out the corner of his eye and wraps an arm around me, pulling me into his side and continuing on.

If looks could kill, I’d be dead right now.

I shrink into myself, trying to become as little as possible. This is embarrassing, I really don’t fit in with these people. All these girls are wearing tiny shorts and bra-tops, while I opted to dress in the same thing I always do...

Lucas notices my reaction and quickly ends the conversation, despite all the protest from the girls, he walks away with me and pulls me into the hallway. “What’s wrong baby” he says softly.

“Nothing” I rush out. “I think I’m going to go upstairs though.” I refuse to look him in the eyes, I know what he’s going to say, that he’ll come with me... but I don’t want him to stop having fun.

“Okay, let me tell the guys to keep an eye on things down here and then we’ll go.”

He tries to walk away but I grab him by the hand, “don’t.” I can tell he’s staring at me now, wondering what the hell as gotten into me.

His feet move closer, directly blocking my line of sight to the floor. His fingers come up to my chin and he tilts my head, forcing me to look at him, “whose ass do I gotta kick?”

Butterflies erupt in my stomach, his brown eyes burn with anger... he thinks someone hurt me. “No one, I just want to be alone” I mumble.

“You’re lying to me.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. Now tell me what’s wrong” he says sternly.

My heart beats harder in my chest, all the music is gone and the only thing I can hear is the blood pumping through my body. His hair, his body, all of him has me on edge right now, he’s so fucking protective.

What the hell did I do to deserve him?

“I just feel like I don’t belong here with you. You’re the life of the party, and I would rather sit in the corner and observe. I just don’t fit in with this kind of stuff, okay?” I want to fucking cry right now, I hate that I’m dragging him down.

Part of me expects him to flip and lose his mind, but instead he surprises me and wraps me into a tight hug. He rests his chin on the top of my head and breaths deeply, “you belong here because you’re one of us. People are going to be assholes no matter what, so fuck what they think.”

My throat gets scratchy as he speaks, and I choke down a sob that starts to crawl its way out.

“If you really aren’t comfortable then I’m coming with you, I’m not about to let you sit upstairs all by yourself while the rest of us have fun down here.” He pulls back and takes my face in the palms of his hands, “you matter Claire Taylor, don’t let anyone convince you otherwise.”

Wiping the tears from under my eyes, I take a deep breath. “Let’s go have fun.”



I don't know why I'm the one carrying this poor girl up the stairs right now, but here I am. She clearly had too much to drink, and keeps saying incoherent babble about how sorry she is about what happened to me.

It doesn't take a detective to realize she's talking about Nathan. I try my best to ignore it, she's fucked up and I don't need some random girl trying to convince me that it wasn't my fault.

"Come on, you gotta work with me here" I grunt.

She looks up at me with glassy eyes, "I swear I didn't know, I would have stopped him if I did."

That makes me pause. "What?" I ask confused.

She slumps against the stairs and holds her head in her hands. Quiet sobs wrack out of her as she tries to catch her breath, "he isn't all bad you know. I don't know what got into him."

She's just drunk, I remind myself.

I pick her back up and drag her into my room, hoping that if she gets some sleep she'll settle down and be normal by the morning.

"You don't remember me, none of you do... but I really, really want you to know--"

"Please stop talking" I snap. I don't mean to, but this is the last thing I need tonight.

She looks up at me with pleading eyes, I can tell she wants to keep apologizing but she doesn't. Instead, she crawls under my covers and falls asleep.

I feel kind of creepy just watching her right now, but I can't get her words out of my head.

You don't remember me, none of you do.

She looks eerily familiar, something about her short black hair and body covered in tattoos makes my skin crawl, but I can't figure out why.

When I walk back downstairs, Lucas is waiting for me on the couch. He looks extremely annoyed right now, I don't think he cares too much for random girls getting blackout drunk and crashing in his girlfriends bed.

We spent like twenty minutes running around trying to find her friends so they could take her home, but no one here seemed to know who she was. I'm pretty sure she came here alone, or her shitty friends ditched her.

"Cheer up" I say, sitting on his lap. "This means we get to crash in your room tonight."

He doesn't even attempt to smile.

I have the grumpiest boyfriend in this entire world sometimes, I swear to god.

"Would you smile if I told you I'm like super horny right now and want you to take me upstairs?"

He instantly perks up at that, "but wait. I thought you said you needed time?"

That's true, I did need time, but not as much as I thought. Lucas makes me feel safe, and even though I still think of the way Nathan's hands felt on me, I know he would never do the same.

Rolling my eyes I stand up from the couch, "either you're with me or not... either way I'm going to have an orgasm tonight." I try my best to stop the laugh from bubbling up, but when Lucas aggressively throws himself off of the couch and almost barrels down party-goers, I can't help it.

"Night boys!" He yells over his shoulder.

I scream as he picks me up and throws me over his shoulder, slapping my ass while he carries me up the stairs.

LUCAS

I drop her to the ground and shut my bedroom door. My heart pounds while I look at her, I haven't been able to touch her the way I desperately want to.

Her hands push lightly against my chest, sending me to the bed before she climbs on top of me and grabs the base of my neck. Her fingers tangle in my hair and she looks into my eyes, her breathing is heavy, like she's waiting for the other shoe to drop or for something bad to happen.

I wait for her to make the first move, she needs to know that she's the one in control right now. I've hurt her too much in the past, and I will never do that again. She needs to know that she can trust me. She also needs to know that her sexual experiences are up to her, that people don't just get to take what they want without her say so.

If she decides she wants to wait longer, stop all of this and go back downstairs, then we will. If she wants to completely swear off sex forever, I'll do the same. I don't care, as long as she's happy.

Before I have the chance to tell her any of this, she crashes her lips against mine. A blistering hot kiss, like she's been starved of the only thing she's ever wanted.

A low groan escapes me, pulling deep from my gut as my hands move up to hold her hips. I can feel her muscles flexing as she grinds on top of me. She's tiny, almost nothing to her, but the muscles in her legs are strong from years of skating.

She's telling me how much she hates me —and loves me — all at the same time. Showing me that she hates how much she missed me after all that I did, this is a fire fuelled moment and I am consuming all of it before it can be ripped away from me.

Claire leans back, slowly pulling away from me until she's standing at the foot of the bed, her absence actually physically

pains me, and for a second I think she's about to change her mind before she starts ripping her clothes off.

My mouth waters at the sight of her. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I go to follow her lead until she stops me, "I'm going to torture you St. James, I'm going to tease you until you're practically begging me to give you what you want."

My heart rate sky-rockets. She's taking every ounce of control there is and absolutely dominating me with it. She's the sexiest woman I have ever met in my life, I would let her dominate me every day and night if she wanted to.

I'm at this woman's mercy, I come completely undone when I'm near her and I have no urge to stop it.

She stalks towards me, slowly, painfully, until she's back on my lap and holding my head. Her lips come so close to mine, *so* close that I actually push forwards just to feel them again, but she pulls away before I have the chance.

Her lips hover over the skin of my neck, close enough to send chills down my spine. She touches me all over, teasing me just like she promised until I whine, "baby, you're killing me here."

"Keep your hands to yourself St. James, and I might play nice later."

Holy shit. This woman is going to kill me one day... but in the best way possible. She's everything, fucking everything.

"Please don't make me regret this" she whispers.

"Darling, I will never make you regret anything ever again."

She takes a shuttering breath before resting her head on my chest, "I don't think I like having all this power. I don't like feeling like I control people. Control makes you crazy, it makes you mean."

I take her hands and place them on the back of my shoulders, then grab her face and rest my forehead on hers. "You will always have control over me, Claire Taylor. You are

the brightest thing this world has ever seen and there is nothing you can do to dim that light. You are the farthest thing from mean, there isn't a mean bone in your body." I mean every word, she's the kindest person I have ever met. She does everything she can to make the people around her happy, and even if she doesn't see it herself, she's loved deeply. "Control isn't always a bad thing" I continue. "You can have it without being a wrecking ball, but if you want me to take over I will."

"Take over" she pleads. "I don't know if I like this version of myself."

"I love it." I flip us over, hovering overtop of her as I glance down her amazing body, "I've got you baby." I kiss her gentle and sweet, allowing my hands to touch her. To touch her where I've been craving to, to touch her and show her that not everything is bad in this world... not everything is out to hurt her.

She moans, feeling me getting closer and closer to her core. Her eyes beg me not to stop, and when I finally touch her where her body craves friction, she arches into my touch and whimpers.

I let my fingers trace lazy circles over her clit, exploring every inch of her and drinking in the sight of her shaking underneath me. She's soaking.

She continues to make the most amazing sounds, drawing every primal instinct out of me until I lose it completely. I jump off the bed, pulling her legs towards me until she's hanging off the edge.

My body moves before I can think, my tongue darts out, licking her entirely. She moans and grabs onto the back of my head, urging me to continue... so I do. I lap her up like she's water and I've been lost in the desert for years. I swirl my tongue and trace circles around her clit until I can feel her heartbeat.

"Lucas" she breathes, "don't stop."

I lick my lips, "never sweetheart." I keep going, inserting a finger until her moans become higher and faster. Her pussy

clenches onto my fingers the moment I enter them inside of her, and she screams out. If there wasn't a party going on downstairs—which I've kinda forgotten about until now—I would be worried about someone hearing us. But everyone is too drunk, and the music is too loud, for anyone to notice.

Her body trembles under my touch, but I can't stop. I need to make her cum more times than she ever has before. It's like this dark part of me needs to show her I'm the only one who can make her feel good, that no man can do what I do.

I want to show her she was made for me. We fit together like a puzzle, completing one another. She's my woman, and I'm going to show her how well I treat my woman.

"It's too much" she cries.

I wrap my arms around her thighs, holding her in place. "Stay still, it's going to feel so good when you cum on my face again."

"So crude" she says with a hazy smile.

"Shut up. I'm eating you out better than anyone ever has. Enjoy the ride baby, cause it's not ending any time soon." Her loud moan is enough to make me spring back into action. She's so turned on right now, hearing me say that made her even hornier. I'm about two seconds away from cumming myself.

I have never finished while eating a girl out, but I think tonight will be the night to achieve that first.

She's got my head spinning, her taste, her noises, her body... all of it is pushing me towards the edge. Her second orgasm shoots off, and I follow closely behind her.

Embarrassment washes over me. I literally just came in my pants without her even touching me... what have I become?

I let her breathe for a moment before standing up and smiling down at her. Her hair fans out above her, there's a slight flush to her cheeks and her eyes are half-closed from the pleasure.

Claire cranes her neck to look at me, but her gaze instantly drops down to my crotch. She starts dying of laughter after a moment, “oh my god. There’s no way you just came.”

“Believe it baby, you could make me cum with just one look.” Even though I could die of humiliation right now, I’m trying to play it off.

Her laughter dies down and she stares at me, “thank you for making me feel good in my own body.”

“Anything for you pretty girl.”

forty-two

LUCAS

Everyone is in the kitchen eating the best hangover cure known to man, Estellas. Steph saved the day by waking up early and grabbing food. Her boss was super nice and gave it to us on the house, which we will definitely re-pay the next time we go in.

What I could really use is a truckload of coffee right now though. Claire and I stayed up all night doing nasty things to one another. It was the best night of my life.

There's some noise coming from the stairs and we all turn to watch the mystery girl walk down the stairs.

She's got short black hair, light grey eyes, and tattoos on every inch of her body. She's definitely pretty, but nowhere near as pretty as Claire.

She looks familiar as fuck though.

The girl doesn't notice all of us until she's a few feet away, she makes a weird screeching sound before ducking her head. "I'm so sorry about all of this. I don't know what happened last night, I never do things like that."

Sure you don't.

Listen, I'm not a complete asshole, I know accidents happen, but this girl was off the rails. I don't even know how someone gets that fucked up.

"I'm just glad you're okay" Claire says kindly.

The girl scratches the inside of her wrist, turning it red and angry, "I'm just kinda going through something right now and I guess alcohol was my way of coping."

I don't care, get out of my house.

Almost as if Claire can hear my thoughts, she turns and glares at me. *Be nice* she mouths before turning back around

and handing the girl a bottle of water. “You gonna be okay to get home?”

With a nod, the girl grabs the water and leaves.

Blair stuffs his face with toast and leans towards me, “that was Jurian’s sister” he whispers.

Holy fuck, he’s right. Now I feel like an ass cause the girl just lost her fucking brother and I’m here complaining about her bring a drunk mess.

“I think she’s in my roman history class, she’s normally really low-key though, doesn’t say much.” Davis scratches his jaw, “weird that she got so fucked up, didn’t peg her for the type.”

“She did say she never does that kind of stuff” August points out, throwing an arm around Steph. “Maybe she really *is* having a tough time, and seeing as we couldn’t find her friends last night, she’s probably dealing with it alone.”

He has no idea how bang on he is.

Miller wipes the back of his hand over his mouth before saying some incoherent bullshit because his mouth is full. Blair slaps him upside the head, “swallow before you speak dumbass.”

“I said, I feel bad for her.”

Steph shrugs, “Do you mind if I take a shower Claire? I have class in an hour and I don’t think my seat-mates are gonna appreciate it if I come in smelling like sewer-rat.”

“Why do you have to use Claire’s shower?” August asks.

Getting up from her seat and walking towards the stairs she smirks, “because Claire has products that girls use, and you’re bathroom is nasty after having eight-hundred people using it all last night.”

Moments after we resume our conversation, Steph screams from upstairs. All of us run to go check on her, only to find her out in the hallway gagging, “you do not want to go in there. It fucking reeks.”

I poke my head in, smelling a foul odour and immediately recognizing it as puke. That girl puked all over Claire's bathroom.

Nasty.

Claire holds her nose, turning away from the scent, "get to cleaning boys."

Blair turns around and looks at her disgusted, "why us?"

"I don't clean up puke, thank you very much. Plus you guys owe me for being shitty friends."



"Why did we all have to come grocery shopping with you" August groans, "you couldn't have gone by yourself?"

Claire smiles while pushing the cart, "oh come on you big babies, it's not that bad... besides you guys eat most of the food in the house so it's only fair you have to tag along."

She's got a point I guess.

She walks in front of me, and while the others moan and groan about how boring this is, I'm enjoying the view. The way her hips sway and her hair bounces as she walks has me completely mesmerized.

It's still so crazy to me that she's decided to let me off the hook, and even went so far as to give me a shot at being her boyfriend. I can tell she's still a little uneasy because of everything, but her heart is slowly opening to us again.

"Claire?" An old woman turns the corner, leaning against her cart filled with groceries and an oxygen tank that connects through tubing to her nose.

"Lizzy" Claire smiles, rushing up to her. "What the hell are you doing here? And where's chuck?" She looks frantically around the store for the security guard we met at the first game, "you shouldn't be here without him."

Lizzy waves her hand in the air, “you know that man has no say on what I do, he’s wrapped around my damn finger.”

I chuckle to myself, I think I like her.

The older woman looks worn down and tired, but there’s a fire behind her eyes that makes me think she has a wild spirit. I’m examining her when her gaze drifts to me and she gives me a once over. “Is that the fine young man you were telling me about?”

“It sure is” I say cockily, “at least I hope so.”

Claire blushes, hiding her face behind her hair before clearing her throat and addressing the group of us, “guys, this is Lizzy. Lizzy these are the dumbass boys that I live with.”

Davis huffs, “we’re not all dumbass’s.”

Sure Davis... the only one who could be exempt from that statement is Miller, and even he’s nodding his damn head right now.

“Lizzy is Chucks wife, they’ve been together forever. I swear they love each other, even though they bicker constantly and fight like there’s no tomorrow” Claire continues, ignoring Davis’s comment.

I walk over to her and throw my arm around her shoulder, placing a gentle kiss on the top of her head. Lizzy keeps sizing me up, and there’s something about her that makes me want to gain her approval. From the very little I’ve hear about her, she’s important to Claire. Leaning over I whisper in Claire’s ear, “I’m going to make this woman love me. If she’s important to you then she’s important to me.”

She shivers in my arms before turning her attention back to Lizzy, “give me the rest of your list. I’ll go grab your things then meet you at the cash register.” When the older woman goes to protest, Claire holds up a finger, “nope. You were ordered to bed-rest, it’s already bad enough you’re here, so at least let me make your life easier.” Claire rips the shopping list out of Lizzy’s hands and runs off without so much of a glance back.

“So, how long have you been denying your heart for that girl?” Lizzy asks casually.

I sputter for a moment while the others pretend to analyze various items on the shelves... this is awkward. “What are you talking about?” I laugh, “I’m not denying my heart for her...”

She gives me a side eye, “I’m not blind, young man. I’m very good at reading people, and even though you may not be denying your heart to her anymore, you have for a long time.”

“You only know this because Claire told you” I accuse, trying my hardest to get this weird feeling out of my stomach. There’s no way this woman can know that unless she was told.

Shaking her head she chuckles, “the only thing that precious girl told me is that she was falling head over heels for a boy she didn’t think loved her back. I guess now that’s changed but I can still read you like a damn book.” Her hands grab mine, “you look at her like she hung the moon, and she looks at you like you hung the stars. Don’t let whatever it is you’re afraid of stop you from following your heart.”

Her words stir something inside of me that I didn’t really know was there, I’m scared of loving Claire through and through. Not because she’s unlovable, but because I’m scared that *I* am. Handing someone your heart and showing them the darkest parts of you isn’t easy. What if Claire doesn’t like what she sees after everything we’ve been through?

“She’s special,” Lizzy continues. “Very special, and I know she’s going to change your entire world.”

She already has, and I think I need to stop being such a pussy and let her in.

“Go away.” I hear Claire’s voice from an isle over, it’s shaky and high-pitched. Something isn’t right.

I run over to her, only to find Nathan on the opposite end with his hands in the air, “I swear I wasn’t going to hurt her. I just want to talk.”

My fists clench at my sides, Blair and Davis flank me while August and Miller stand with Lizzy.

The poor old woman looks so confused right now, “what is going on over here?” She shrieks.

“I don’t want to talk to you” Claire chokes. Her whole body is shaking uncontrollably, “please leave.”

When Nathan goes to take a step towards her, I wrap a protective arm around her and force her behind me. I’m more than aware that she can hold her own, she’s already proven that, but I don’t trust Nathan more than I trust my own father. He’s bigger and stronger than her, he could do anything to hurt her and I’ll be damned if I let that happen on my watch.

“Shouldn’t you be in prison or some shit right now?” August growls from behind me.

The asshole in front of me shrinks into himself, having the decency to look ashamed for once. “I know, I did some fucked up shit. I’ll never forgive myself for it.”

Claire breaks past me and rushes towards him, when I go to stop her, Blair grabs me by the shoulder and holds me back, “don’t. She needs to do this on her own.”

I don’t know what I’ll do if he hurts her and I’m standing right here... I don’t think I’d be able to live with myself.

She slaps him across the face, breathing heavily as he grips his burning cheek.

“I guess I deserve that” he says.

Claire nods her head, “you fucking think?”

Proud. That’s the only word I can think of right now.

“I will never forgive you for what you did to me, I don’t care how much you apologize or how far away you are.”

Miller leans forward, “why is she kinda scary?”

I laugh harder than I have in a very long time at that, “because my pretty girl has grown, she’s not going to let people push her around anymore.”

Claire turns on her heel and walks away, head held high but with tears in her eyes as she throws over her shoulder,

“just because you apologized *does not* mean you’re suddenly a better guy.”

She buries her face in my chest, holding me tightly while I grip the back of her head and glare at Nathan. He stands stunned for a moment before accepting that there’s nothing he can do, and walks away.

There’s a tense silence between the group of us before Lizzy breaks it, “you guys are good for her. Keep her close.”

forty-three

LUCAS

Although the day didn't go how any of us expected, we somehow managed to be in good spirits. Claire brushed off the incident like it was nothing and went back to her beautiful, shiny self.

The whole thing left a bad taste in myself, for multiple reasons. The first being Nathan, obviously. The fact that he thought he could just show up out of nowhere and apologize like that would fix everything? Who the hell does he think he is? The second being what Lizzy said to me, her words play on repeat in my head while I question myself.

Loving Claire is the best feeling I've ever experienced, she's perfect for me in every sense of the word... but what if she isn't able to love me.

I'm a crazy, stupid, mess of a person.

But what if the thing that scares me isn't leaving her behind for hockey... but leaving hockey behind for her.

It's the first time I genuinely feel like I would drop my dreams and ambitions for someone. I would put everything I've ever hoped for aside and follow her to the ends of the earth.

Fuck.

Quiet footsteps walk through the hall, padding across the hardwood floor. The light steps come to a stop in front of my door, and they stay there for quite a long time. I have a sneaking suspicion I know who it is, and my heart starts beating harder in my chest.

Please come in, please.

She calms the storm inside of me, puts me at ease whenever she's around. I could use that more than ever right now.

She finally makes up her mind and opens the door, closing it behind her before standing at the foot of my bed like a weirdo. I move my head slightly, trying to get a good look at her, and of course, she's looking down at me with that god damn look in her eyes. The one that tells me she's wondering if she's doing the right thing.

"Can I help you?" I ask innocently.

"Shut up" she huffs before finally coming around to the side of the bed and climbing in. She folds the sheets back over top of her and settles on her side, chewing on the inside of her cheeks as she does so.

I don't really know what to do right now, I don't want to scare her off with my weird late-night thoughts, but I also know babying her isn't going to get us anywhere.

"I'm cold" she whispers.

I turn over, moving my body against her and draping my arm over her side to give her the warmth she wants. I'd do anything to make her happy —no matter what it is— so cuddling her is the easiest decision I've ever had to make.

"Claire—" I start to say.

"This is me giving you my heart again" she interrupts, "please be nice to it. It's a little scuffed up."

"I thought you already gave me your heart?"

She shoves me with her shoulder, "well this is me giving it to you for real this time."

I cuddle further into her, holding her tight while she relaxes into me. I burry my face into the crook of her neck and inhale, she smells so fucking good. She fits perfectly into me, like I was built for her. I *am* built for her. She's mine and I'll be damned if I fuck it up again.

"Mine" I mumble into her neck, "all fucking mine."

"I love you Lucas St. James, you make my heart hurt so good."

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

She said she fucking *loves* me.

I quickly sit up, Claire yelps as she stares at me with wide eyes, “what the hell is wrong with you?”

“Say it again.”

She looks at me questioningly, “What? That I love you?”

“Yes. That.” My stomach does a million flips and my body buzzes, adrenaline and happiness coursing through my veins while the prettiest girl in the world lays in my bed.

A wide smile takes over her face, and it’s the brightest thing I’ve ever seen, “I love you Lucas St. James.”

“Fuck yes!” I yell, pumping my fist into the air and jumping out of the bed.

Her giggles fill my room while I dance around like a god damn idiot, but I couldn’t care less. The girl I love more than anything loves me back, despite all the fucked-up, twisted, dark shit she’s seen in me.

I grab her face in my hands, peppering her face with kisses as she squirms in my hold. Resting my forehead against hers, I smile, “I love you Claire Taylor. You’re my goddamn sun, my moon, and my stars. You’re everything.”

Without a thought, I slam her to the bed, connecting our lips. Our kisses are rushes and hungry, we’re devouring each other like we haven’t eaten in weeks.

My hands trace the contours of her body, feeling every curve and line. Her hands hold tight around the back of my neck, forcing me to deepen the kiss.

I move my hands up, squeezing her breasts, playing with her hard nipples through the light fabric of her shirt. She arches into my touch and moans, gripping my hair like it’s the only thing keeping her from floating away to heaven.

I don’t stop until she’s grinding up against my body, begging for the friction I know she craves. “Someones getting

a little needy now, aren't we?" I mock.

"Shut up and touch me" she rushes out before smashing her lips back onto mine.

I trail a path down her body with my fingertips, all the way down to the hem of her shorts. I stop for a moment, playing with the waist band before she takes matters into her own hands.

She grips my wrist and grinds her teeth, "don't be a bitch St. James."

Oh now she's done it.

Yank her shorts down, I throw them across the room. My fingers make contact with her clit, tracing circles while she throws back her head and rewards me with another loud moan. I take the opportunity to start kissing her neck, biting around her pulse point. My free hand covers her mouth, "we don't want anyone hearing you, do we pretty girl?" I whisper against her skin.

She shakes her head no.

"Are you going to be quiet?"

She nods.

"Good girl." I remove my hand from her mouth and resume kissing her neck, the other moves in different patterns, trying to figure out what she likes best.

Her body tenses, her fingers scratch at my back and her breaths become more and more rushed as I play with her. When I finally dip into her dripping pussy, I do my best to hold back a groan.

So fucking tight.

I move my fingers in and out feeling her clench around them, her legs are violently shaking.

Oh Claire, I'm about to make you into a soaking little mess.

I stop playing with her, but before she has the chance to protest, I drop to my knees and look up at her. She won't look

at me though, she has her fingers tangled in her own hair, looking up at the ceiling. Her chest heaves up and down, her face contorted in agony.

“Look at me” I say, half begging and half telling.

Her head lifts up slightly, a nasty smirk on her face as she looks down at me, “who’s begging now?”

I keep eye contact as I lick all the way up her pussy, she groans and slams her head back down on the bed. A triumphant smile takes over my face, I love driving her crazy.

My mouth covers her clit, flicking my tongue and sucking lightly until I find the spot she favours the most. I keep going until she’s yanking on my hair and convulsing under my tongue.

“I’m-“

“I know” I interrupt. I can feel her heart beat against my lips, I know she’s close. I insert another finger, pumping them in and out until she’s screaming.

“Oh my god Lucas.”

Pulling myself back up onto the bed, I hover over her, “how was that?”

“So mind shattering, I don’t think I have any brain cells left” she says, eyes hazy.

I chuckle, giving her a sweet kiss before she surprises me and flips me onto my back. She straddles my waist, staring into my eyes, “my turn.”

My eyes grow wide with excitement. She looks downright evil right now, I have no idea what she’s about to do to me but I can say —without a doubt— I’m gonna enjoy it.

She slowly crawls backwards, edging farther and farther away from me until her face is hovering over my cock. She looks up at me and smirks, slowly unfastening the belt around my waist, her slim fingers moving at an agonizing pace.

She knows what she’s doing, she’s doing this on purpose.

I watch as patiently as I can, waiting for when she finally decides that she's teased me enough.

Claire undoes the button of my jeans just as slowly, "take off your shirt" she says, pulling off my pants.

There is absolutely zero hesitation on my end, I rip my shirt off my body as fast as I can. No way am I gonna pass up the opportunity for her to do whatever she wants to me. I will welcome it with open arms.

She laughs, seeing how desperate I am for her touch. She thumbs the waistband of my boxers, touching my v-line so delicately it drives me nuts.

"I really don't have to do much to turn you on, huh?"

"I was just eating you out" I groan, "of fucking course I'm turned on."

Shrugging her shoulders, she reaches into my boxers and pulls out my cock. Her delicate fingers stroke it in long, slow motions, every second of it lighting me on fire. She licks her lips, staring at me, waiting to see if I crack.

Of course I do, I shatter into a million pieces, "this teasing seriously sucks. I would like it a lot more if *you* were the one sucking." The moment the words leave my lips, she wraps hers around me, using her tongue to trace little circles around the head.

I groan while I watch her throat slide down my dick, and on the way back up, she extends her tongue out to lick me from base to tip. Claire does this thing where she sucks just a little bit harder when she reaches the top, and it drives me absolutely nuts.

I don't know where she learned to do this, but holy fuck I'm grateful.

Wait. Hold on.

No, I'm not. How the fuck does she know how to do this?

I don't like the idea of her wrapping her pretty little lips around another mans cock. I grab her chin, forcing her to make eye contact with me, "I can't stop thinking about you with

another man” I growl. She yelps when I flip us over, pinning her to the bed I lean down close to her face, “and I don’t like it pretty girl, I don’t like it at all.”

“Maybe you should show me that no other man is comparable to you then” she grins. A fire ignites in her eyes, she likes it when I get possessive.

Noted.

I reach over the side of the bed, digging into my pants pocket to pull out a condom. After rolling it over my cock, I run the tip from her entrance to her clit, teasing her for a moment so I can hear those beautiful sounds again, then sliding my way back down and easing my way into her.

“Are you going to move or?” She questions.

“Baby, you’re going to have to give me a second here. I’m trying very hard to keep my composure.”

“What do you mean?” I can’t tell if she’s challenging me or if she’s genuinely asking.

With a deep breath I respond, “if I start moving right now, this activity will only last about three seconds.”

She smiles and bites her lip.

I swear to god if she starts laughing right now i’ll- and she’s laughing.

“I’m sorry” she says between giggles, “but I can’t. I’ve managed to defeat *the* Lucas St. James.”

“Fuck off.” I pull out and slam into her, causing her to arch her back and release a breathy moan.

I continue to relentlessly pound into her, going at a steady pace and making sure I don’t change a single thing. Her body is reacting to me right now, and if I switch things up I might just ruin her orgasm for her.

“What were you saying?” I tease.

“Nothing, I wasn’t saying anything. God, please don’t stop.” She wraps her hands around my back and claws at the

skin. I'm sure by the end of this, I'm going to be all kinds of marked up.

Her eyes roll to the back of her head and I can't help the pride that fills my chest. I'm doing this to her, I'm making her feel good, and I'm dead set on making sure nothing could ever compare to what I'm doing to her right now.

I'm going to ruin other men for her.

Even if she does eventually move on to find someone else, no one will ever be able to fuck her like I do.

Our skin sticks together, it's damp with sweat, but fuck she looks sexy. That light sheen to her skin makes her look like she's glowing, she looks like a fucking angel right now.

I lean down, sucking on her neck. I want everyone to know she's mine, I want everyone to look at her and see what I did to her. I focus on one spot at a time, making sure to leave little dark marks as I go. When she extends her neck and claws harder at my back, I realize she's more into it than I thought.

I pull away, seeing the masterpiece I've left on her skin. There won't be a doubt in anyones minds that she's mine after this.

Claire grips the sheets, holding onto them tight. My fingers grip into her hips, I can tell it stings but she doesn't stop me.

I pull out for a moment, eliciting a whine from her pretty mouth, but the moment I flip her onto her stomach and bring her up to her hands and knees, she realizes what I'm doing.

She looks back at me, the most dazzling look in her eyes as she bites her lip. Her eyes roll to the back of her head when I slam back into her.

I reach a hand around the front of her body, circling her clit while I leave light kisses down her spine. Goosebumps erupt all over her body, "fucking christ Lucas" she screams out.

"That's right pretty girl, cum for me."

She falls apart at my words, melting onto the bed while the orgasm wracks through her body with a force I'm sure she's never felt before.

Her pussy clenches around my cock, sending me soaring off the edge. I lay against her while I spill into the condom, praising whatever fucking god led this woman to me and thanking them a million and one times.

She breathes heavily underneath me, waiting a couple moments to calm down before standing up and walking towards her bathroom.

I lean over the side of the bed and slap her ass, causing her to yelp. "Sorry" I chuckle, "I had to. I love your ass."

One second goes by, and then another... the whole time I wait for her reaction to the masterpiece I left on her body.

"What the fuck is all of this?" She screeches, running back into the room and pointing at herself.

I take her in, dark bruises all over her neck, and deep red indents on her hips from where I was holding her. I love it. "A little art piece I worked on... like it?"

She lunges towards me, tackling me into the sheets before I pin her sown and assault her with kisses. She laughs as I mutter words under my breath, praising every inch of her.

"Fucking perfect" I kiss her jaw.

"So sweet" I kiss the side of her neck.

"Flawless" I kiss her collarbone.

"Beautiful" I kiss the tip of her nose.

This... this right here? Is happiness.

forty-four

CLAIRE

Sweat drips down my back, my breathing is heavy as I continue to skate laps around the ice. Crystal and Sharron reacted well when I told them I didn't want to compete anymore. I thought they'd be angry with me but instead they smiled and told me that they're proud I'm finally speaking my mind.

I spent a long time trying to figure out what I wanted to do, and while competition skating will always be near and dear to my heart... skating without the pressure seems to be like the best thing for me right now. I was so busy trying to be the best, and win my parents approval, that I completely lost my love for the sport in the process.

I push myself harder and harder, gaining as much speed as I can during this last lap before thrusting myself into the air and landing.

My breath comes out in harsh pants while I unlace my skates. I grab my phone from my bag and swing it over shoulder, only to see that Chris, Tash and the boys have been blowing it up for the last two hours.

I quickly dial Chris back, and within two rings he's panicking in my ear. His words are a jumbled mess, but as I walk through the double doors, his words become clear, "don't leave the rink!"

Flashing lights blind me, the sounds of camera shutters and scattered questions fill my head, completely disorienting me.

"Claire? Are you there?" Chris's voice is distant. My phone is no longer against my ear, it's in front of my face shielding me from the paparazzi.

"Claire is it true you're related to Chris Taylor?"

"Why did you keep your relation to him a secret?"

"Is he ashamed of you?"

“Did you two have a good relationship growing up?”

“Is Lucas St. James using you to get ahead?”

“Are you using your brother?”

“Claire look over here!”

“Claire smile for the camera!”

They bark order at me as if they own me. Like I'm nothing but another dollar to them. So many people are around, they're too close, they're moving closer.

Jesus Christ, this is suffocating.

Strong hands grab me, and a startled scream rips from my throat. This is where I get kidnapped and held for ransom, isn't it? Thrown into a basement and tied up while they wait for money from my family? Send them a stupid video of me begging for help?

I hear the sounds get quieter while the hands drag me into the rink.

“Shh, it's okay. You're safe now” Lucas whispers, holding me tight against his chest and kissing the top of my head.

“What's happening?” I ask him, tears rolling onto his shirt from my cheek.

“Your brother will explain, let's get you home. Okay baby?”

I nod my head, letting him guide me through the back door and into the car where Blair and Miller are waiting for us.

Lucas hops up front as Blair speeds off, Miller is sitting next to me and pulls my head into his lap, he plays with my hair while they all try to comfort me.

They try to make me feel better, and while I'm definitely shaken up, I'm just angry. I don't care that people know I'm related to Chris, I don't care that they're making up wild stories about me... I care that my entire life is no longer mine.

I sit up straight, pulling out of Millers grasps and wiping my tears.

I'm not going to let this ruin me, I've been through too much shit to let a couple greedy bastards be the reason I fall apart. These people don't know the first thing about me, they haven't lived in my shoes, they don't know what it's been like for me.

"We've got your back Claire Bear" Blair says, turning around for a moment to look at me.

"I know you do."



"Chris mother fucking Taylor I'm going to kill you" I yell, walking through the front door.

He thrusts Tash in front of him. "Seriously?" She screams.

Chris laughs sheepishly, "what? She's much less likely to hurt a pregnant woman than her big brother."

Pause.

Tash is pregnant?

"You're pregnant" I gape.

She glares at Chris before looking back at me, "surprise! We were going to wait to tell you, but I guess not anymore."

I start to smile, "awww. I'm so happy for you- hold up. Nope, I can celebrate later." I continue my march towards Chris, "explain" I growl.

Chris straightens and starts word vomiting, "I swear this isn't my fault. Dad sent photos of us to the press and they're eating it up."

Freezing in my spot, I close my eyes. My dad, of fucking course it was him. "How bad is it?" I sigh.

"Claire I don't-" August tries to say, but I shush him the moment he speaks.

"They're mostly just asking a bunch of questions, it's nothing crazy, but they're trying to say that your success is

linked to mine. We can have a press conference organized by the end of day tomorrow... if you want of course.”

I take a moment to process. On one hand, I knew this was a possibility. On the other, the idea of talking to a shit ton of press about my personal life is scary as fuck.

Whatever, I don't need to explain myself to them. They can think whatever they want, *I* know what the truth is and that's all that matters. “It doesn't matter. They don't get to dictate my life any more than dad does, let them believe what they want.”

“Wait really?” Everyone asks in unison.

I shrug, “being a pro figure skater would be a dream, but I don't know if that's what I want to do anymore.” This is the first time I'm telling anyone other than my coaches what my plan is, I don't really know how they're going to react. “I'm thinking of starting a skating program after college, helping kids who can't necessarily afford to skate otherwise. I have the ability to do that now, seeing as I own the arena and all.”

Chris smiles while the rest of them gape at me, “that's my girl” he says.

“You own the fucking arena?” Davis yells.

Miller knits his eyebrows, trying to piece something together, “so you're like... the owner of our hockey team?”

Nodding my head I smirk, “watch your ass Miller, I could boot you at any time.” He shrinks into himself and I laugh, he knows I would never do that to him.

The door slams behind me, Steph storms into the house “Claire Taylor I swear to god you need to learn how to answer your phone!” She yells, pulling me into a bone crushing hug.

She continues to bitch me out, which is how I learn that the guys —and Chris— had told her what was happening. When I didn't answer, she went ape shit outside the arena on all those nasty reporters. I laughed the *entire* time she told me. I can't wait to see articles about her going nuts on all of them.

Tears start to form in her eyes after she asks how I'm feeling, and when I tell her the exact same thing I told the guys only moments ago, she wraps her arms around me again. "I'm sorry, but I can't help it. A couple months ago you would have let today's events be all consuming, you wouldn't be able to see any bright side to anything, and now you're brushing it off and looking for the good despite all that. I'm so lucky to have you as my best friend, and I'm even luckier to get to see you change into the woman I've always known you could be."

Stephanie Saunders will always be my best friend, not because we giggle like little girls, or because she knows me better than anyone... but because she's stuck by my side through it all. She's been there through the worst days of my life and there's nothing anyone can do to break the bond we've built.

She wipes her tears and snot on her sleeve, "these boys really did a number on you, in the best way possible. Even though they fucked up more times than they should have, they forced you into becoming a badass who rolls with the punches."

We both look to the boys, who are clearly uncomfortable with all the emotions going around right now, "they're idiots, but they're *our* idiots" I giggle.

The boys pull us into a group hug, despite being weirded out by the tears. I glance over August's shoulder and see the picture of us all at the party. That feels like a million years ago.

We've grown so much since then, we look like babies.

"Do I get a hug too?" Tash asks, standing up from the couch and walking towards me with open arms.

"Of course" I smile, breaking away from my friends and hugging the mother of my future niece or nephew. "You're going to be the best mom" I tell her.

forty-five

CLAIRE

August taps on my door frame, and the moment look at him, a small smile takes over his face. “Can I come in?” He asks softly.

I nod my head, that shouldn’t ever be a question, he’s always welcome. He takes a seat on my bed next to me and pulls me into a tight hug, one much tighter than he’s given me in a very long time. “Are you dying or something?” I giggle. “What’s with the sudden physical affection?”

“I miss you.”

“August, we live in the same house.”

He runs a hand through his red hair, messing it up a little as he does so. I can tell he has something on his mind, but he isn’t spitting it out... he knows I’m not going to judge him, I’ll always listen. “I know you’re *physically* here, and I see you every day but I miss you. I miss the way we used to be closest in the house, when I was your bestie, and how much fun we use to have. I miss when you didn’t tip toe around me.”

Oh.

Tears fill his eyes and —for a moment— I’m in shock. August doesn’t cry, at least not very often.

“I don’t tip toe around you” I say, trying to comfort him.

“You do. You’re still learning to trust me again, and I know that it’s mainly my fault for being a jackass and all... but I just want us back.” He reaches out, holding my hand and stares at the wall across from us.

I guess I didn’t really see how much things have changed. I guess I’m closer with Davis and Lucas now, and in all honesty, I miss August too. He was my saving grace, my salvation for so long. My heart breaks thinking about how I cast him aside and moved on with no regard for how he feels.

“I’m sorry, I miss you too” I choke. “I know things have changed, but I still love you. You’ll always be the person who help on tight when I wanted to let go and quit. I’m so happy for you and Steph, I wanted to give you space to grow with her, but I guess I gave you a little too much space.”

I never thought I’d be sitting in my bedroom, with a gigantic hockey player, crying about how much we missed each other.... When we fucking live with one another.

“You’re such an ugly cryer” he snorts.

“You take that back right now August Write” I gasp, “you’re no better.” He hugs me tight again, “Thank you—all of you—for saving me in a way I didn’t know I needed.”

“We didn’t save you” he whispers, “you saved us.

Fuck this guy. He’s making me way too emotional right now, and I don’t know if I can handle it. I don’t want to cry with them anymore, I’m done with the tears and the anger, I just want to catch up on all the things I’ve missed with them.

“Hugs!” Miller yells from the hallway, and before I know it, the mother fucker is tackling August and I on the bed. He elbows me in the face, blood rushes out of my nose, and while he stares at me in horror... I just laugh.

“You’re getting blood all over me you psycho” August groans in disgust.

I stick my tongue out at him, tasting the blood on my lips and try to wipe some of it off my face. My fingers are all bloody, and while I should be rushing to clean myself up and stop this nose bleed, I can’t help but just look at it.

Through everything, every sick and twisted thing that has happened, I’m still fucking here. I made it, I kicked life’s ass.

I burst into hysterics, laughing over the fact that somehow I managed to survive everything. My two friends stare at me confused as fuck while I break down in front of them.

“You’re actually crazy” Miller whispers, eyes wide with shock.

Catching my breath, I lean my head forward and pinch my nose. “Sometimes you gotta be a little crazy” I wink at him.



Lucas spent like an hour on my bed this afternoon, moaning and groaning about how bored he is. Every five minutes he would sigh, completely distracting me of all the school work I was trying to get done.

After the last couple weeks, I have a lot of catching up to do. Luckily after news broke about the incident with Nathan, my professors were very understanding. They gave me extensions on all my work as well as letting me re-take any tests I missed.

Lucas has been obsessed with taking me out and showing me off since our first little date. He loves the idea of us being out in public together... never thought I'd say that. Either way he wore me down and I finally agreed to a date —despite my best judgement.

His arm is thrown across my shoulders as we walk into the theatre, our hands filled with various snacks and drinks while he laughs at me for my choice of candy.

“Twizzlers are fucking amazing, they’re a staple back in Canada. I can never find them here, so *excuse me* for being excited.”

He kisses the top of my head and smiles down at me, “I think it’s cute how excited you are.”

“Sure, keep acting like you weren’t just making fun of-“ I stop mid-sentence when I see a group of four men sitting at the very back of the theatre. “Is that who I think it is?” I laugh. The boys are in the worst disguises I’ve ever seen. Bucket hats, sunglasses, hoodies, and Davis even has a paper moustache.

Lucas groans and marches up the stairs, “what the fuck are you guys doing here?”

Blair stifles a laugh while August and Miller sink deeper into their seats and try to hide their faces. Davis smirks at him, looking him dead in the eyes before saying “we’re on a super secret mission Lukie, and right now you’re blowing our cover, so if you wouldn’t mind” he shoos us away with his hands.

I lean into Lucas, shaking with laughter while he glares at the boys in shock. “Oh come on, let’s just get in our seats, let them be nosy if they want” I say, pulling him down a couple rows and settling in the middle.

“They’re going to ruin this whole thing” he pouts.

I’m dating a child, “chill, it’ll be fine.”

The lights dim and screen lights up with trailers for upcoming films, most of them seem like they’re gonna be pretty good... unfortunately though, the laughs from my friends behind me are very distracting and I can’t focus for longer than two seconds.

What is with everyone and breaking my fucking focus today?

I don’t mind them being here, I actually think it’s quite funny, but the grump next to me doesn’t seem to agree. I never would have pegged him as the lovey-dovey, let’s go on cute dates, kind of guy... but here we are I guess.

Lucas wraps an arm around me, “if the boys weren’t in this theatre right now, we’d be the only ones in here” he whispers.

“So?”

“So, if we were completely alone I would be burying my face in your pussy right now.”

Fuck.

I don’t understand how he just say things like that.

My stomach fills with butterflies and my pussy starts to throb, every inch of my body lights on fire at the idea of Lucas using that magical tongue of his. I try my best to pretend like I’m not completely losing it right now, but based on the smirk he has on his lips, he knows what he’s doing to me.

“Don’t worry pretty girl, you’ll get your fill later.”

I hate him. I really fucking hate him.

He leans in to kiss me, but stops when a handful of popcorn hits the sides of our faces. “Stop whispering you two! It’s impolite to keep secrets” Davis laughs.

Miller throws another handful of popcorn at us, kicking his feet in a fit of laughter while Lucas starts to boil over with rage. His face turns red, annoyed that our date is being ruined by his friends... as if he expected anything less from them.

“Just get down here already!” I yell back to them. They aren’t here to ruin our fun, I know them better than that. They’re upset that they weren’t invited.

“Why the hell are you encouraging this?” Lucas whisper yells as the boys scramble out of their seats and rush to join us.

“Because” I smile, “they’re like little kids, they just don’t want to feel left out.”

Even if our date is being crashed by our friends, it’s not like we’re completely losing out on spending time together. Besides, we both know our relationship is anything but conventional, so why try to fit into that silly little box now?

Blair plops next to Lucas, with August on the other side of him, while Davis sits next to me with Miller. Davis reaches out a hand and intertwines our fingers while the others get sucked into the movie.

Lucas doesn’t notice, if he did... well, Davis probably wouldn’t have fingers anymore.

Davis looks at me, eyes filled with so much emotion I can’t quite decode what he’s got going on in that head of his. He may be an idiot, but he’s one of my favourite idiots.

‘We made it’ he mouths to me.

I smile, knowing that him and I have dealt with the worst of the worst, and despite it all we’ve somehow found the people in this world who can make it all better.



Miller runs around the parking lot with me on his back, laughing while running away from Lucas who threatens him to give me back. “She’s all of ours Lucas! You’re gonna have to learn to share” he yells.

“I don’t share” Lucas growls.

I feel his fingers graze my back, sending shivers down my spine. “Hurry Miller, he’s gaining on us” I screech.

August and Blair laugh from the hood of the car, smiling from ear to ear at our antics. I thought Davis was sitting with them, but I can’t spot him anywhere.

“Davis get off of me, you *fuck*” Lucas yells from behind me. I whip my head around to see Davis has him pinned to the ground. “Seriously bro this isn’t funny.”

“It’s fucking hilarious from where we’re standing” Blair calls out.

Miller sets me on the ground, patting me on the shoulder before leaning in close, “maybe you wanna go break that up before Davis ends up with a black eye and a broken arm.”

He’s probably right. The last thing I need is to end up at the hospital, trying to explain that my boyfriend lost his shit and broke one of his best friends bones.

I leisurely walk over, trying to cover up the entertainment that I know is written all across my face right now, while Davis continues to mock Lucas on the ground.

“Alright you two, enough it enough.” I clap my hands and motion for the two of them to get up. Davis does so, but scrambles away quickly when Lucas goes to lunge at him. The coward has the nerve to hide behind me and use me as a human shield. “Seriously?” I laugh.

“He’s scary” Davis whispers. I don’t even need to look at him to know that he’s smirking.

Lucas grabs my hand and yanks me towards him, I stumble for a second but he catches me, steadying me by his side. I'm slightly annoyed at him for being so grumpy when all we're trying to do is mess around, but it doesn't last long because he kisses the top of my head and looks down at me lovingly. "I don't share you with anyone, you're all mine pretty girl."

"I love you" I tell him.

"I love you too."

Gagging noises erupt from behind us, the boys have gathered by the car and pretend to shove fingers down their throat while we have our little moment.

"Grow up" Lucas snaps.

I roll my eyes, pulling him towards the group. "What's the plan stalkers?"

Blair gets a dubious look on his face, "I think we should get tattoos."

Tattoos? Where the hell is that coming from? From what I know, none of us have tattoos, so the fact that he would suggest it so casually is kind of surprising.

"I'm down" Davis says.

August eyes him, "you're *always* down."

Davis sticks his tongue out at him while Miller thinks the idea over, "what would we get?"

Lucas holds me tighter, pressing my back against his chest. I sigh in content, melting into his touch and accepting every ounce of warmth he's willing to give me.

The weather has taken a turn these last couple days, it's finally starting to feel like winter, even though it's nothing like the winters back in Vancouver. I like the cold, even though it chills me down to my bones... there's a kind of comfort that it brings that I don't know how to describe.

Blair grins, "a Celtic Knott."

Everyone looks at him confused, but not me. I know exactly what it means, what it *symbolizes*, and it's fucking

perfect.

forty-six

LUCAS

Claire stares down at her right middle finger, tracing over the thin lines of the fresh ink. She's been looking at it for ages, smiling happily to herself. She's laying on her stomach, feet crossed in the air, giving me the perfect view of her ass.

It's all I want to do anymore... look at her that is.

"Are you sure you're okay with the tattoo? I feel bad that you were kind of pressured into it with everyone" she says absentmindedly from the end of my bed.

I cross my arms against my chest, feeling the burn of my own tattoo on my left peck, "if I wasn't okay with it then I wouldn't have gotten it" I tell her.

It's true though, even Blair wouldn't be able to convince me to mark my body permanently. The only thing I was a little worried about was relapsing, I thought the pain of the needle would cause me to want the sting of a blade again.

But it didn't.

All I felt after was peace, a wave of calm knowing I would be connected to my friends no matter where we end up in life. Our bond is unbreakable, and now it's forever engrained on our bodies.

Miller got it on the inside of his wrist, Blair got it on his rib, Davis got it on the outside of his right thigh, August got it on the outside of his shoulder, and Steph got it right in between her tits.

August was a little apprehensive about that one.

She put up a good fight and told him to go fuck himself, 'if you didn't want me to have the freedom of deciding where to put it, you shouldn't have invited me. You also don't get a say because you aren't actually my boyfriend.' I laughed so hard when she said that, August looked like he was about to blow.

But none of us could argue with her, for one she's *Steph*, and two... we couldn't *not* invite her. She's just as much part of this group as the rest of us.

The boyfriend comment was a little bit of a low blow though. August still hasn't asked Steph to officially be his, none of us talk about it cause it's between them, they've been pretty private with what's been going on.

Claire cranes her neck to look back at me, "I just don't want you to regret it."

I could never regret it, I'm tied to her even more now.

"Stop overthinking and get your cute butt over here" I say, rolling my eyes and opening my arms. She gets up quickly, rolling over and rushing into my lap. She straddles me, wrapping her arms around my neck before leaning in for a kiss.

This girl is like candy, she's so sweet, I want to taste her forever.

Her lips press against mine softly, more gentle than we have ever kissed before, and I can't help but wonder why that is. We've always been full throttle. From the first moment we met, we were all in, we never had a moment to stop and enjoy the lives we have now.

Maybe we're finally at that point.

Claire sure as hell deserves it.

"Come on love-birds, we've got a game to go to" August says through my bedroom door. "Tony will rip us a new asshole if we're late."

Correction, Tony would kill us if we're late. Claire gets a free pass cause... well cause she's her. Claire does no wrong in Tony's eyes, but I'm already in a grave with that man because of everything that happened with her, not to mention the little stunt I'm about to pull.

"Come on" she tells me, hopping off my lap and reaching out a hand towards me. "You owe me the show of a lifetime."

She's going to piss her pants when she sees what Davis picked out for me. I figured if anyone was going to pick out the most embarrassing option... it would be him.

And let me tell you, he did a *damn* good job.



The cheers from the crowd make me smile, there's nothing like the rush you get before hitting the ice.

The guys have been ragging on me for the last hour, laughing at the tutu and dress combo I have over my gear, but I'm not as embarrassed as I thought I would be. Knowing that Claire is mine, and this is the last thing I have to do in order to make sure she knows I'm serious about us, it makes me happy.

"You should do a little dance for us Lu" one of the freshmen laughs.

I slap him on the back, "I don't want to give you any material for your spank bank bud, but thanks for the offer."

His jaw drops and his eyes dart around the room, "I'm not into guys, I swear."

Blair and August burst into laughter, along with a few of the others at the absolute panic our teammate is experiencing.

"It's okay man" I say, "I'm just fucking with you."

The intro song for our team starts to play while the announcer pumps the crowd up. One by one, my friends skate onto the ice and do a lap, each of them soaking in the feeling of how excited the crowd is to see us play.

After the rest of the team follows them out, I roll my shoulders and wait for the special announcement I asked for. Tony is going to lose his mind, but I won't be playing in this god forsaken thing the whole time... just for the warm-up.

I look down at my outfit, laughing despite myself at the neon pink tutu and bright purple barbie dress that's a few sizes too small for me in all my gear.

“And now, please welcome, your captain... Lucas St. James!”

Show time baby.

I take a step out onto the ice and smile broadly up at the crowd, there's a mix of confusion, laughter, and photos as they stare down at the most bizarre spectacle to happen on this ice.

Claire clamps a hand over her mouth while my teammates whistle in appreciation.

I do a lap of the rink, trying to avoid looking at Tony, before stopping in front of the bench and blowing a kiss at my girl, “this is all for you... better enjoy it while you can.”

“Oh, I'm going to get a printed photo of you and tape it to my wall” she laughs.

Tony takes a step off of the bench and motions for me to come over to him, he looks angry. I skate over and bite my tongue while I wait for what should be the biggest tongue lashing I've ever received. But when I stop in front of him, he breaks out into a smile. “I'm proud of you kid, the Lucas I knew a couple months ago would have never done anything like this... especially not for some girl.”

I shrug, “what can I say, she's got me wrapped around her finger.”

“And don't you ever forget that” he says. Slapping me on the shoulder before calling a huddle.

As I try my best to listen to what he has to say, I can't help but let my thoughts wander. It hits me that beyond the boards we're just a couple kids trying to figure out what the hell is going on in life. Sure hockey is my everything, but at the end of the day it means nothing if I have no one to go home to.

“I won't be with you guys this game, but I'll still be watching you all from the stands, so don't even *think* about pulling some bullshit on that ice” Claire announces.

I want to know why she won't be with us, but I don't bother asking, there's obviously a good reason why.

CLAIRE

I could have told the guys ahead of time why I wasn't going to be on the bench this game, but that wouldn't be nearly as fun as waiting until after. Plus I didn't want to mess with their heads before a game.

If they knew that Chris, and his head coach, were coming to the game for the sole reason of watching them... well, lets just say they would absolutely shit the bed and probably tank whatever chances they have of impressing Leonard.

As much as Chris likes to pretend like Leo was doing this for him, it was because *I* asked. The moment Chris dropped my name, Leo was all smiles and willing to do whatever I wanted.

It's like that with most of his team, I'm like a little sister to them, they all see me as one of their own. I'm thankful for all of them, and how welcoming they were when Chris first signed, it made the transition from having a semi-famous older brother, to full on super-star, a lot easier.

Either way, the point is that I'm sitting in the stands biting off my cuticles and chewing the inside of my cheeks raw because of how god damn nervous I am. This is the first time in years that I've allowed myself to be openly seen with Chris.

The only exception is when I confronted Nathan, but I wasn't exactly focused on everyone else's reactions.

Chris and Leo said they would come just before the game started so the guys wouldn't notice them, and like they promised, they enter just as the puck drops. It's not hard to know when they enter, even if I wasn't obsessively checking the doors for their arrival, I would be able to tell they were here by the way everyone gasps and starts whispering about the amazing Chris Taylor being at their schools hockey game.

I love the guy, but I can't help rolling my eyes. We may be siblings but the thought of girls having his poster stuck on

their walls and guys having a big fat man crush on him is irritating. He doesn't let it go to his head, but sometimes I can see in his eyes that he eats this shit up.

Chris takes a seat on my left, and wraps his arm around me. "Release that breath you're holding angel, it's going to be okay. I can see it in your eyes, the panicked look you get when you go into survival mode. No one's going to do anything, and if they *do*, I have your back."

He knows me too well.

Leonard takes a seat on my right and gives me the biggest bear hug known to man, "my days... it's so good to see you again Claire."

When he pulls away, I give him a genuine smile. "Thank you for coming, I know the guys would really appreciate it, plus I thought you might want to get a first look at the up and coming talent that Livler has to offer."

He releases a soft chuckle, "I know you wouldn't have me come all the way over here to check them out if they weren't the best of the best. Plus if it means I can possibly elbow my way into getting a couple star players on my team under everyone else's noses, then I'm all for it."

The pros are competitive, and every team has their rivals that they hate more than others, but Leonard is one of those coaches who is friends with everyone, yet he doesn't let that get in the way of trying to kick their ass's.

"I didn't look at any old game tapes, I wanted fresh eyes on these boys. Would you mind giving me a run down on who I should be watching?"

When I don't respond, Chris nudges me in the side. It's very unusual for a coach to come out to watch someone into person without knowing if it's worth their time or not. I guess I just kind of expected him to do some digging rather than just take me at my word, whether he loves me or not doesn't matter. This is *his* team, he shouldn't be blindly trusting me on this. Even though we both know I'm the furthest thing from clueless when it comes to hockey.

“August Write, Lucas St. James, Joshua Miller, Nicholas Blair, and Johnny Davis. The boys usually play on one line together but Tony will switch things up if the other team gets too used to how they play” I explain. “I’ve worked with them for a couple months now, but they still have some work to do. They’re stuck in their ways, like to revert to the same couple moves when under pressure, but I’m slowly breaking that nasty nasty habit of theirs.” I never take my eyes off the game, trying my hardest to make notes for our next practice.

I’ve missed so much already, I need to catch up to keep these boys on top of their game.

“She’s definitely related to you” I hear Leo say to Chris, “you both like breaking people.”

“Difference is she does it for their benefit, I do it cause the guys on the team are asshole” Chris grumbles.

I snort, I’m not used to hearing about the dictator version of my brother. I’m so used to him being soft and kind with me that I can’t imagine him any other way.

Everyones attention gets brought to the ice when Blair makes a break for the other teams net, he swerves between their players, just like I taught him.

Leo leans over his knees, trying to get a better look at Blair as he absolutely obliterates the other team. “You trained him well, kid.”

Blair takes a shot, and it slides right between the goalies legs. The crowd goes fucking crazy, cheering him on as he joins the team in celebration. Everyone pats him on the helmet and they begin to skate back to centre ice for the face off.

Blair points up at the stands to me, nodding his head once before taking his position and fighting for the puck again.

My heart warms, even when I’m not on the bench with them, they still include me. This team may be a bunch of idiots, but they’re *my* idiots.

The game continues, each team fighting back and forth for power, one goal after another. Everyone is on the edge of their seats, waiting to see how the game will end.

The other team is aggressive, doling out nasty hits and trying to sneak illegal moves when the refs aren't looking. We're struggling to stay on our feet, but we're keeping up the best we can.

The boys are holding their own.

Miller get's hit from behind, going down for a moment before he pops back up and skates towards the guy that hit him. They exchange a few words before Miller takes a swing at him.

My hands fly up to my face and a gasp escapes me. Miller is not one to get violent, let alone throw the first punch, so when the ref throws him in the penalty box I can't help but jump out of my seat and run down to the bench.

Security doesn't even try to stop me, they know who I am and wouldn't dare risk pissing Tony off. I breeze by the away team bench and stop right behind where Miller is sitting in time-out. When I knock on the glass, his head whips around and he faces me, "what the hell happened?" I question.

"Said some nasty shit" he says through the glass between us.

"Keep your head straight, they're going to say shit to get you riled up. They're only goal is to get you guys in shit so they can get one over on us. You're better than that Miller, c'mon."

His eyes drift to the floor, "they said something about you."

My stomach drops, "what the fuck did they say?" Miller refuses to look at me, he stays silent. I bang on the glass to get his attention, "speak."

"He said that you're just part of the team cause you have tits and an ass, that you're nothing more than something pretty for us to look at."

Heat and anger fill my stomach, that stupid piece of shit. "How did he even know who to talk about?" I demand.

“He recognized you in the stands when Blair pointed to you. I just couldn’t sit back and let that happen, I’m sorry.” Millers stupid, big puppy dog eyes are killing me.

“It’s okay, just try to keep it together.”



We won. The other team tried their fucking best but even after all the stupid shit they pulled, the boys managed to get it together and make me proud.

I stayed long after everyone else to hammer out some of the details about being the owner of the Livler arena now. It’s fucking crazy to me that I have full ownership.

I walk into the change room that’s attached to Tony’s office, I left my stuff in there before the game and I want to grab it before I head home to celebrate with the guys.

Lucas is waiting for me though.

“Jesus Christ,” I gasp, “you scared the shit out of me. I thought you went home with the others.”

A smirk twists his lips, “I had something I wanted to do.”

“And what would that be?” I ask as he stands up, making his way towards me.

Without another word, he grabs the back of my neck and kisses me. His lips move against mine quickly, like a starving man eating his first meal in ages.

Lucas uses his other hand to grab my waist and guide us towards the wall. My back presses against the cold concrete while he grinds into me and moans. His hands roam my body, grabbing at my curves. His touch feels so good, and every time he brushes against a new area, my skin lights on fire.

“You feel so fucking good” he grumbles against my neck, placing soft kisses just below my ear. “I’ve always fantasized about fucking in a locker room.”

My cheeks heat knowing that a couple weeks ago I made myself cum at a similar fantasy. Just thinking about it makes my stomach coil with pleasure.

“God this is just like before” I say without thinking.

Lucas stops, “what?”

Fuck.

He takes a step back and looks at me skeptically, “what do you mean like before? Did we fuck in here before and I just don’t remember?”

I’m so fucking embarrassed right now, I don’t want to tell him but I have a feeling I won’t be able to get out of this without an explanation. “I kind of had a fantasy about us fucking in the hockey rink a couple weeks ago... after you brought me to the lake” I whisper.

Please don’t be weirded out.

“That’s so fucking hot” he grumbles, grabbing me again and crashing our lips together.

I grab the back of his neck, threading my fingers through his hair and hoping to god that no one walks in on us.

His hands find their way to the hem of my sweater and he rips it off of me. With a crazy amount of ease, he unclasps my bra and attaches his lips around my nipple. He sucks and laps at the sensitive flesh, causing me to arch my back and moan his name.

We’re a mess of tangled limbs, crude noises, and messy kisses. There’s no thoughts, we’re just moving where our bodies take us and enjoying every second of it.

I don’t notice that he’s guided us towards the shower until I hear the water hitting the tiled floor. Steam floats around us, making our skin sticky and wet while we undress.

“This anything like your fantasy?” Lucas asks, stalking towards me while I take a couple steps back.

Shaking my head with a coy smile on my lips, I laugh, “it’s so much better.”

He makes me feel more alive than I have in years, he's like a walking adrenaline shot, and I fucking love it.

We're so much alike, it's scary. We're two pieces of the same puzzle, hurt, broken, and scared of what's lurking around the corner. Trying to learn how to love again, trying to learn how to trust.

But we're doing it *together*.

His fingers connect with my pussy at the same time that my back hits the hot water, the combination sending my head into a hazy spiral.

His fingers rub circles around my clit, my toes curl at the sensation and I claw my fingers down his back. I don't think either of us care if I leave a mark, I'm actually pretty sure he'd enjoy showing it off.

Lucas stops for a second, making me whine. The lack of contact makes me want to cry, I'm so fucking riled up that I'm seconds away from taking matters into my own hands and finishing myself off.

But he surprises me when he bends down and wraps his arms around my legs and hoists me up against the wall. His cock rubs against my slit, causing both of our eyes to roll back.

"Don't drop me" I beg, scared that my head will crack open.

Lucas licks his lips, "please. I can body men triple your weight, I think I can handle holding you up."

I think I might die of a god damn heart attack.

He slips his cock inside of me, searing pain takes over as he splits me in half. I'm not equip to fitting that thing inside me, and I don't think I'll ever get used to it.

"Christ, you're squeezing my dick sweetheart."

If I could formulate a single thought right now, I would probably give him some snarky remark, but I can't think of anything other than the growing pleasure as the pain disappears.

He pounds into me, thrusting hard and fast while I try not to scream in the empty locker room. There are still people here, employees that would probably be scarred for life if they walked in on the two of us having sex right now.

Every time he enters me, I fall more and more in love with him. He's perfect for me in every way, even though there were a couple bumps in the road, I know that we're going to be together forever.

I can feel my release fast approaching, "fucking christ Lucas" I moan.

"That's it pretty girl, cum for me."

So I do. All it takes is a couple words and I'm toppling over the edge. I shake in his arms, my entire body tensing from the force of my orgasm. I'm going to be sore tomorrow, but I can't find it in myself to care.

Lucas gives me a moment to breathe, and once my mind clears, I unhook my legs and drop to the ground. The tile is hard against my knees, and the water makes it hard to breathe as I wrap my lips around his hard cock, but the look on his face makes it so worth it.

"Do you like tasting yourself?" He asks, one hand pressed against the wall and another wrapped around the back of my head.

I smile, slowly working him with my hands while I bob my head. The tip of his dick hits the back of my throat and I gag, pulling back immediately while Lucas groans.

All I want to do right now is make him cum just as hard as he made me. It's my one focus.

I wonder what his cum would taste like on my lips.

I keep going, taking him further and further down my throat and forcing myself to go deeper even when my body tells me to stop. He makes the most amazing noise when I do it, and I'm fucking addicted.

"Don't stop, I'm so close" he mumbles.

Seconds later he grips my hair between his fingers and thrusts. His cum leaks into my mouth and I swallow every drop, completely hypnotized at the look on his face. I wipe the excess off my lips as I stand, smirking at him.

“How the hell did you learn to do that?”

Answering that question is only going to make him angry, we both know we have pasts, but talking about them isn't a good idea. I don't need to know the finer details and neither does he.

“Even though I know you've changed, don't forget how good that just felt, and how horrible it would feel knowing someone else is going to feel if you fuck up again.” I start walking away, picking up my things on my way out of the showers. When I've collected all my clothes I look back at him and drop my gaze down to his still-hard dick, “but I can say, nothing will *ever* compare to that.”

forty-seven

LUCAS

Chris scares the ever-living shit out of me. The guy is so fucking intimidating. He's been staring at me from across the room for the last twenty-minutes, glaring at me like I kicked a fucking puppy or something.

"It's beautiful, thank you" Tash says, placing the baby mobile Claire and I got her to the side. She hugs Claire before turning back towards the tree and grabbing another gift.

My mom was kind of upset that I wouldn't be home for Christmas this year, but I promised that Claire and I would visit soon. She's so insanely excited to meet the first girl to have my heart. I don't think she actually believes that Claire exists, even though we face-timed earlier today.

Sam Connors bounces on the couch next to me, he's been bragging about his gift to Tash since we got here, and I'm actually kind of excited to see what he got her.

Tash rips off the teddy-bear wrapping paper and reveals a tiny little football, leaving all of us confused.

"Isn't it adorable?" He exclaims.

Claire turns her head to look at him, "it is... but I don't get it."

He shrugs, "maybe the kid will want to play football, follow in the footsteps of yours truly."

Chris turns his gaze away from me, giving me a second of peace while he looks at Sam like he's a fucking idiot, "you're a hockey player Sammy."

"I played football in high school" he says defensively, "a man can have more than one interest."

Tash giggles and places the ball to the side, along with all the other gifts we have stacked up next to the fireplace. "What do you guys say about starting dinner? I'm fucking starving."

The group stands up, making their way towards the dining room but Chris grabs my shoulder and holds me back. To say I'm shitting my pants right now would be an understatement.

"You fight for her, you hear me?" He says sternly, "you fight for her like you've never fought before. She loves you, and whether you prove it to her or not, she'll come back."

"I will always be the man she deserves. Her and I are the same, we get one another" I promise him.

"You and her are not the same. You and *I*, however, are."

I look at him confused, *what the hell is that supposed to mean?*

He sighs, "I was a mess when I first met Tash, her and I weren't always this power couple who could get through anything. I was a jerk, a *selfish* jerk who was high on all the attention I was getting from hockey. No matter how much I pushed her away, or how hard I fought her, she stayed with me." He looks towards the kitchen, watching Tash carefully as she rubs her pregnant stomach and laughs at something Sam says. "I put her through hell, and even though I totally didn't deserve a second, third *or* fourth chance... she gave them to me."

Wow, he must have been one gigantic asshole to be given multiple chances.

"You and I are the ones who destroy, we hurt so we won't be hurt. Claire's the type of person to smile through the pain, to let herself get hurt so those around her won't feel bad about themselves."

She is, she's the light I've needed in my life since I was a little kid. She makes everything better. Her laugh, her smile, it's everything I need in life. It's like a breath of fresh air, it's like that first breath after being under water for a little too long.

"So take care of her, fight for her, and make sure you don't let her down again because she'll give you infinite chances." He pats me on the shoulder and walks off, leaving me to let it all sink in.

He doesn't have anything to worry about though, I don't plan on fucking things up ever again.

I look at Claire, admiring the way her hair falls in soft curls, and the way she laughs so carelessly with her family. Sam and Tash may not be related by blood, but they're sure as hell the closest thing to family she has.

Her mom isn't here, and even though I may not like her for everything she put Claire through, I can't help but feel bad that she couldn't come. The divorce is hard on her, so she flew out to Italy or some shit to visit a friend for support.

I join the others at the table and we dive into the food that Tash cooked earlier this afternoon. Everything is amazing, but I kind of wish my friends could be here with us.

When we're done eating, Claire takes me out back to the patio and we snuggle up under a blanket to look at the stars.

"I'm glad you came" she says, eyes on the sky.

"I'm glad I came too, I think Chris is finally starting to come around." He may have given me that big ass speech, but he wouldn't have done it if he didn't want to give me a chance.

"I love you" Claire whispers, folding her arm over me and snuggling into my side.

I kiss the top of her head, happy to have her in my life and forever grateful that she's mine, "I love you too."

Lucas from a couple months ago would have never believed me if I told him that we're spending Christmas at Chris Taylors house, with my girlfriend, who also happens to be the girl he hated. I'm pretty sure he would laugh in my face and tell me to fuck off.

This feels like a dream, but one I never want to wake up from.

"So what's the plan after we graduate?" She asks me.

"I don't know, that feels like ages away, but I do know we'll figure it out. We've made it this far... I'm pretty sure we can make it through anything."

She smiles up at me, that cute little dimple on full display.

epilogue

LUCAS

My phone rings, and I jump across the bed to get it. My hands shake as I answer the call, hoping to god it's good news.

"Hi, could I speak with Lucas please?" The woman says.

"Speaking." I try so hard to keep the anxiety contained, but I genuinely don't know what I'm going to do if she says the offer wasn't accepted.

She clears her throat, each second she doesn't say something causes my stomach to churn more and more. "They've accepted your offer, and would like me to send over the paperwork straight away. There are a few things about the property that we should go over but otherwise everything should be easy."

"Yes" I yell, pumping my fist into the air. "Thank you so much, I'll sign everything right now."

"Don't you want to know the issues with the house?" She asks, clearly confused.

I smile, knowing that my plans are to rip that place down and start from scratch anyway. "I'm okay, I didn't care when putting the offer in and I don't care now."

That place could burn down tonight and I would barely blink. The pain that comes with that house is nothing but a burden for Claire, I refuse to let it stand when I have the opportunity to build something so much better.

"Very well then," she sighs, "it was a pleasure doing business with you. Please don't hesitate to call if you have any questions or concerns."

I hang up and dance around the apartment, unable to contain my excitement. Everything is going to be *perfect*.

After I got signed to a team in Vancouver, I told Claire I didn't expect her to follow me. I knew what this place meant

to her, how broken it made her feel, so I didn't want her to have to re-live the past.

She didn't hesitate, she wanted to come with me and build new memories in a place that made her feel like she was nothing. She wanted to replace the bad memories with good ones.

We've been living in an apartment downtown for the last year, she hasn't been too focused on finding a house, so I've spent the last couple weeks secretly looking. When I heard her father was selling her childhood home I knew I wanted to buy it.

Not because the house itself was nice, but because of the land it's built on. That forest behind her house where she found refuge for so many years, is technically part of the property, I couldn't let him give that away.

It's important to her.

The salary I got when I joined the NHL is more than enough to pay for it, and enough leftover to completely tear down that god forsaken house and build a new one.

I want a life with her, I want a family... I just hope I'm making the right decision.

The sound of our front door opening echos against the apartment walls, Claire walks in with her phone pressed to her ear. She's deep in conversation, and doesn't even notice me come up behind her.

My arms wrap around her waist, my lips press to her neck while she sighs in content, completely forgetting about whatever it is that she's talking about.

"I'm going to have to go, but we can sort this out tomorrow when I come in" she says quickly. She pulls the phone away from her ear and throws it on the counter before fully melting into my touch. "A girl could get used to being greeted like this."

I continue pressing soft kisses against her neck and shoulder, forever grateful that she's mine. "Well get used to it baby, cause this is how it's always going to be."

Her soft laugh fills the air around me, “what’s got you in such a good mood?”

“Just happy” I shrug. Maybe that’s a bit cryptic, but I’m not ready to tell her my plans just yet. I need to get rid of that fucking house first.



My fingers rub against my temple, massaging it in hopes to ease the headache that’s been plaguing me for the last couple months.

All this stress will be worth it in the end though.

Today is the day I tell her, the house isn’t ready yet but she’s starting to get suspicious. All the secretive calls and outings are taking a toll on her, I can see it.

She’s not sleeping as much, she’s always on edge, her shoulders slump when I walk into another room to take a call. I feel fucking awful about keeping this secret, but I had to if I wanted this to work.

Bringing her to her trauma filled childhood home was not going to elicit the desired reaction. She needs to see the new house being built for it to properly sink in.

“Baby?” I say, walking into our bedroom. She’s laying on the bed, staring at the wall and playing with her hair. My heart breaks at the sight of her, “I have some errands to run.”

She deflates even more at my words, and starts to play with her hair faster, “okay” she whispers.

I take a seat on the bed next to her and grab her hands lightly, “I want you to come with me.” Claire’s head snaps towards me, her eyes wide with hope before she nods her head and smiles.

There’s my girl.

We get into the car, and the closer we get to the house, the more confused she gets. She knows this place like the back of her hand, even if it has been years since she’s been here. She

watches the trees roll past us, watching the houses grow further and further apart, until finally freezing up when we pull into the long driveway.

“Wha-“ she opens and shuts her mouth a couple times before continuing, “why are we here?”

I don't say anything, instead I let everything speak for itself when the estate finally comes into view.

The house is far from being finished, the holes where windows are supposed to go are covered in plastic, and the roof is being completed by a group of men.

The inside is still rough, but you can see the potential as you walk through it. I can't even count how many times I've envisioned it fully furnished with the two of us living in it.

Sleepless nights in front of the fire place, slow dancing in the kitchen, spending afternoons on the back porch watching the sun set... all of the things I never thought I wanted.

I put the car in park and grab my awe-struck girlfriend's hand, “promise you won't make a decision until you see the whole thing.”

She nods her head silently, still staring at the house in front of us before following me out of the car. She stays by my side while I lead her into the house, saying hi to the workers as I pass by them.

I show her every inch of the place, tell her which rooms are which, silently praying that she likes it.

Even if she doesn't that's okay, I can change the plans, I don't care how long it takes to make it her dream house... I don't even care if I have to sell it once it's finished.

This very well could be a bad idea, she could hate it and never want to step foot in this place ever again.

But I have to try.

I want to try.

She's quiet the whole time, her face is neutral, it's impossible to get a read on her. At least until I lead her into the

backyard and towards the forest she loves so much.

Tears start to well in her eyes as we approach the field of baby's-breath. She looks around before closing her eyes and breathing in, letting the smell of flowers and fresh air wash over her.

The first time I came here I was overwhelmed, I instantly understood why she loves this place so much. There's a huge tree just across the clearing—a willow tree I think—that blows in the wind. I can picture her sitting under it as a child, tear soaked cheeks, puffy red eyes, playing with the grass at her feet after getting into a fight with her parents.

I can picture her slowly relaxing, taking deep breaths and finally allowing herself to smile as she day-dreams of all the possibilities her future holds.

Claire turns to me, “why would you do all of this for me?” Her voice wavers ever so slightly, and my heart clenches.

“I didn't want you to lose your favourite place on earth.” I reach my hand up and brush a tear off her face, staring into those beautiful blue eyes that I love so much.

She wraps her arms around me “I thought you were cheating on me” she mumbles.

Without thinking, I laugh. My whole body shakes and I hold her as close as I can, “you're absolutely delusional for thinking that I would ever *look* at another woman.”

“Can you blame me?” She looks up at me and smiles, “you were being so weird and secretive all the time, how was I supposed to know you bought my childhood home?”

I kiss the top of her head, “so you like it?”

Her hands snake around the back of my head, clasping around my neck. She places a kiss on my lips but before I have the chance to be a greedy little bastard and continue, she pulls back. “I love it... but you were wrong about one thing.” She bites her lip, leans in close and whispers, “my favourite place on this earth, is with *you*.”

CLAIRE

When we re-enter the house, all of our friends are waiting for us. They're holding glasses of champagne and smiling, every single one of them happy to see us.

We haven't seen them a lot recently, other than the occasional game where our teams face off, we mostly just communicate over text and face-time.

Davis wastes no time, he pulls me into a hug and twirls me through the air, "I missed you Clarity!"

Giggles bubble up while I squeeze him tight, "I missed you too."

Steph runs up to me next, "congrats on the new house" she gushes as she hugs me. "I'm happy that you can finally take back the power this place had over you."

I nod my head, "it feels good."

She steps back in line with August, he wraps his arm across her back and rests his hand on her hip. The two of them are happy, and the engagement ring sparkling on Stephs finger is proof of that.

We sit on the half-finished back deck and talk until the sun sets. We reminisce on the times we had almost two years ago, about how crazy and stupid we used to be.

I look at my friends, watching them laugh while I lay in Lucas's lap. These people are my family, always have been and always will be. I love them more than they could ever know, and there's no doubt that it's reciprocated.

Even after two years of barely seeing one another, we're still close as ever. We're always up to date on each others lives, we congratulate one another when the good stuff happens, and share tears after the bad stuff.

“I kind of wish I could have watched them tear this place down” I say quietly, “it would have felt good.” The boys all share a look, one that tells me I’m not in the loop on everything quite yet. “Alright, spill it” I say, sitting up and sighing.

When these boys get together, chaos ensues.

Blair smiles sheepishly, looking at me like a scared puppy, “we kind of all came together and personally broke down the walls and stuff.”

Oh? I was *not* expecting that.

“We took a video of it” Miller says quickly. “We figured you’d want to see it.”

This... this is why I love these people.



“I don’t want to talk about it Chris!” I yell over my shoulder as I storm away from him.

“Come on, we have to talk about it” he screams back.

The two of us have been fighting for the last couple days, ever since we got a call from Craig that our father landed himself in the hospital. The bastard took pills, tried to fucking kill himself just to get us to see him.

He’s been trying for the better half of a year to get in contact with us. He blew up my phone every day, leaving stupid voice mails about how he wants to see both of us, about how sorry he is that he hurt me.

It was all crap and we both know it.

He wants us back in his grasp because he knows he has nothing without us. His pristine reputation is tattered, and without us by his side selling a story of forgiveness to every one of his business partners, they won’t go near him.

Seems like a lot of people don’t like doing business with abusers.

Crazy.

Don't ask me why I haven't blocked his number, because honestly I don't know. He hurt me so badly, so many times... but I can't bring myself to block my only form of contact with him —even though I haven't actually answered any of his calls or texts.

Chris thinks we should go talk to him in person and tell him to leave us the fuck alone. *I* think we should let him rot in whatever state he's put himself in. He doesn't deserve to see my face, or to hear my voice. I've wasted too much time on him already.

“Chris just let it go” I beg. “Please.”

He goes to say something else but he's interrupted by his phone ringing. He answers the call, and gives me a look that says ‘we aren't finished yet’.

Chris continues to follow behind me to his kitchen, where I throw the fridge open and search for anything, something, to distract myself with.

“What?” Chris's voice breaks. Without hesitation I turn around. My brother never cries. His eyes are glassy, and the shaking of his hands as he hangs up has me on high alert. “Dad's dead” he whispers, staring at nothing in particular.

Crushing relief —and grief— flood my system.

Dad.

My dad... is dead

My brain goes in a million different directions all at once, every single emotion humanly possible rushes through me at the speed of light. I don't know what to think, what to say, what to do.

“They said the damage to his organs was too much for his body. His organs failed.” My brother is a ghost, his face is without colour, his emotions are slammed back behind an iron gate. The only hint to him feeling anything at all is the single tear that rolls down his cheek.

“It's over?” I ask, my voice sounding distant and wrong.

Chris nods, “it’s over.” He closes his eyes, a painfully relieved smile spreading across his lips as he sobs.

I run over, both of us holding onto the other for dear life. We use each other to stand, leaning and crying and laughing with twisted smiles on our faces.

My father is dead, he’s gone, he doesn’t exist anymore.

But then why does it feel like I’ve lost a part of myself? Why does it hurt so much? It shouldn’t hurt that he’s gone, he did nothing but torture me for twenty-one years. He was an awful man, an even worse father... and yet I’m still sad that he’s gone.

No matter how much I hated him, I could never picture a life where he didn’t exist at the same time as me.

Suddenly —without warning— I burst into a fit of laughter. Chris jumps, startled from the sound, and takes a step back while I hold my stomach and keel over.

“Are you okay?” He asks, concern dripping from every part of him.

I take a deep breath in, “yeah. It’s just funny that he always told me I was an attention seeking little bitch who tried to kill herself because people lost interest in me... then turned around and did the exact same thing.”

His eyes go wide for a moment before a crooked smile cracks his face and he joins my little laughing fit. “Dad died” Chris says between wheezes.

“We don’t have a dad anymore” I laugh harder.

God, I don’t even want to imagine what other people would think about us if they saw this right now. We probably look like maniacs, laughing about our dad dying.

Tash walks in and stares at us for a moment before waving a hand and brushing us off.



Tanner runs circles around Steph and I as we walk to our seats. The kid has so much energy it almost hurts to watch.

Tash holds baby Charlotte, the chubby little angel she gave birth to three months ago. I still laugh at the photos I have of Chris ugly crying when he first met her, he was so happy to have a daughter, I thought he was going to pass out. “Can you please take her? I’ve had to pee for the last hour, that drive was awful” she says to Steph before handing her the child and running off.

Steph looks down at her, smiling softly. She keeps saying she doesn’t want kids, but I have a feeling that’s going to change very soon. Every part of her screams ‘mom’, I don’t understand why she thinks she’d fuck her kids up.

We take a seat in the box with Lucas’s name written on the door, ready to watch him duke it out with August and Miller.

It’s weird, finally being happy and having life work out for me. I spent so long fighting for peace and trying to survive, and now that the waters have calmed... I feel uneasy.

Part of me wonders when the other shoe will drop, when the universe will finally throw something at me and laugh in my face for thinking I could have it this good. But it’s been years since my life has fallen apart, so I’m trying to be hopeful.

The game’s been great so far, Vancouver is kicking L.A.’s ass, but then Miller goes in for a hit and drops Lucas.

My heart starts to thud against my ribs the longer he lays on the ice. The entire arena goes silent, not a single person dares to speak while the medical staff run out to check on my boyfriend.

An assistant comes crashing into our box and tells me I’m needed on the ice. Tears well in my eyes as I rush out, following closely behind as every bad thought possible races through my head.

God, what if his career is over? He’ll be heartbroken.

My feet slip on the ice, my lungs constrict at the sight of him laying there motionless.

This is bad.

“I’m so sorry Claire! I didn’t mean to” Miller yells from his bench.

I give him a half hearted smile, reassuring him that it’s okay before sliding to my knees at Lucas’s side. His eyes are closed, his breathing is rapid, he looks like he’s in so much pain.

“Lucas?” I ask. “Lucas it’s me.”

His eyes shoot open and a massive grin takes over his face, “hey baby. I missed you.”

My jaw drops, he’s fine. He’s literally fine, and I *know* he is because his chest starts to shake with laughter as I stare at him, “Lucas St. James you did not just pretend to get hurt in a professional hockey game.”

He sits up and motions for someone to give him something. “I did, and I’d do it again pretty girl, but I needed to get you out here somehow so I could do this.”

Confusion contorts my face, my eyes fixed on his as he moves to get on one knee. He opens a small little box and a glittering ring comes into view.

I slap him on the side of the head, “what the hell is wrong with you?”

He smirks, “good to know I can still shock you all these years later.” The crowd around us goes wild, screams erupting from the stands.

Lucas St. James will never cease to amaze me. He literally stopped a whole hockey game just to ask me to marry him.

“So... you gonna be able to deal with me for the rest of your life? Or do you wanna get out now while you can?”

I mirror his smirk and jump on him, both of us falling to the ice. As I lay on top of him, staring into those brown eyes that make my stomach do a million flips, I realize that I want nothing more than to be tied to him for eternity.

“You? Marry me?” I laugh, mocking the first thing he said to me when I moved into the Livler house, “that’s hilarious.”

He groans, “c’mon pretty girl. You can’t do me like that in front of all these people. They’re expecting a happily every after here.”

I lean in close, brushing my lips against his before pulling back and smiling. “I’m all yours St. James.”

The End

the letter

Dear Claire,

I know that I messed up, I know that I've hurt you, I know that I've betrayed your trust and turned your world upside down. I don't think I can ever forgive myself for the things I've done. You're special, and not in the way that you think. You are perfectly imperfect, every flaw you see in yourself is something that I love about you. I will do whatever it takes to have you, I will spend the rest of eternity proving to you that you are worth so much more than you think. You make my head spin. You make my heart pound. You make me freeze in my tracks every time you walk down those stairs. Please let me love you the way you should be loved, even though it took me just a little too long to figure it out. The things we deserve are defined by who we are as people... and you deserve the world, Claire Taylor. Let me give it to you. Let me try.

P.S. If you give me a shot I'll show up to a hockey game in a dress, I know you'd kill to see that.

Sincerely, the asshat extraordinaire.

acknowledgments

I can't even believe this is real. Writing this right now has a whole flurry of emotions circling through me. There are so many people who deserve recognition, I don't even know where to start.

Cait, my rock, my biggest supporter, my number one fan... I don't even have the words to describe how much it means to me that you've been apart of this journey. From hyping me up on social media, to FaceTime calls at three in the morning talking about absolutely nothing at all, to long plane rides and horrible experiences with Montreal border control. You've been my wall to bounce ideas off of, my creative director, and my biggest critic (thank you for hating on me at the right times, some of my ideas were truly awful). You are just as much apart of this book as I am.

P.S. I would definitely call your mom.

To Sarah, my real life Steph... we may not see each other often, but you'll always have a special place in my heart. Thank you for years of bullshit and laughs. I really don't want to know who I would be if I didn't have you in my life.

Gabi, thank you for poking me with your stupid ink gun. Your tattoos have been a way for me to express myself when I didn't know how. Thank you for listening to me ramble on for hours about my silly little book and bullying me into letting you read it. I appreciate you.

Mich, thank you for being such an amazing friend. You've brought me some of the happiest days, given me courage to be bold, taught me that people may suck but it's worth it when you find the right ones. Hope you enjoy this book, and hope you don't worry about my sanity too much after reading it.

To all my friends that work with me at the bar , thank you for being excited with me about this stupid book, I'm sorry if

you're scarred after reading it, please don't judge me. I love you all.

To Bri, I hope you enjoyed reading this after bullying me for weeks about when you would get to read it. Sorry my cat bullies Rocky, and sorry he's an absolute menace but he means well.

To my Parents, I hope to god you never actually read this book because I will never be able to look you in the eyes again. Thank you anyway though, because without you I never would have had the courage to chase after my dreams and make this a reality.

To Owen, my stupid little brother who makes fun of me and makes me want to pull my hair out. You have been the biggest pest in my life, but I don't know what I would do without you. Here's to both of us achieving our dreams, I know you'll make it to the NHL one day... just don't forget to give me free tickets for life.

To Madison, thank you for designing the cover of my dreams, I couldn't make it more perfect if I tried. I'm so thankful I had you here to guide me through this journey, and I can't wait to work with you again.

To my beautiful readers who have been with me since my Wattpad days, you are the reason why this happened. Without your support and encouragement, I would have never believed my work was good enough to get this far. I can never thank you enough for the things you have done for me.

To my grandfather, you never got to read this book, but I sure as hell hope I made you proud.

And finally, to everyone who said I couldn't...

FUCK YOU.