



# UNSTEADY



PEYTON CORINNE

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*For my dad,  
Who spent his life with a book in one hand, and my hand in the other.  
It never mattered what the book was going to be about, it was always going  
to be for you.*

# PLAYLIST

It's Called: Freefall – Rainbow Kitten Surprise  
Little Dark Age – MGMT  
American Teenager – Ethel Cain  
Cherry Waves – Deftones  
this is me trying – Taylor Swift  
Heartbeats – José González  
Sleep Alone – Two Door Cinema Club  
Juliet – Cavetown  
No Sleep Til Brooklyn – Beastie Boys  
Waterloo – ABBA  
Fast Car – Tracy Chapman  
The Difference – Flume  
Make This Go On Forever – Snow Patrol  
Uncomfortably Numb – American Football & Hayley Williams  
The Hills – The Weeknd  
Getaway Car – Taylor Swift  
Losing My Religion – R.E.M.  
Barely Breathing – Duncan Sheik  
Let's Get Lost – Beck & Bat for Lashes  
Gilded Lily – Cults  
Meddle About – Chase Atlantic  
Asphalt Meadows – Death Cab for Cutie  
The Kids Aren't Alright – The Offspring  
Sex – The 1975  
A Little Death – The Neighbourhood



Cupid's Chokehold \ Breakfast in America – Gym Class Heroes  
Cherry Flavoured – The Neighbourhood  
peace – Taylor Swift  
Yippie Ki Yay – Hippo Campus  
Killer – Phoebe Bridgers  
Revolution 0 – boygenius  
Don't Look Back in Anger – Oasis  
Savior Complex – Phoebe Bridgers  
Sparks – Coldplay  
California – Lana Del Rey  
Your Best American Girl – Mitski  
R U Mine? – Arctic Monkeys  
When I Get My Hands On You – The New Basement Tapes  
Matilda – Harry Styles  
Family Line – Conan Gray  
Boy With The Blues – Delacey  
Heaven – Brandi Carlisle  
Love song – Lana Del Rey  
Bite the Hand – boygenius  
Delicate – Damien Rice  
Enter Sandman – Metallica  
Repeat Until Death – Novo Amor  
Wish You Were Here – Pink Floyd  
Jackie and Wilson – Hozier  
Space Song – Beach House

# PROLOGUE

## RHYS

### *Three Months Ago*

I can't breathe.

The ice feels cold against my body, seeping in through my jersey. I can feel it on my stomach—*fuck*, I'm on my stomach on the fucking ice. *Did I pass out?*

"Son, you're doing fine—can you lift your head for me?"

Everything is black. I shut my eyes and open them again. Nothing. I keep blinking; at least, I think I am... Fuck, how long was I out?

"Koteskiy, I need you to breathe," another voice says, before there's a hand gripping my arm. "Don't move him, Reiner, not yet."

A scrape of ice against a blade, then my best friend, Bennett's voice, "What's wrong? What happened?"

I want to call for him, trying desperately to push his name through my mouth but it feels like my lips have been fused together.

"Back up, everyone. Back up!"

"I can't see," I manage to wrangle out. "I can't see." The second one comes out like choked sob.

"Calm down," Ben offers, his voice soft, soothing through the fear and adrenaline coursing through me. "Take it easy, Rhys—just breathe."

"Where's my dad? I can't see anything."

My voice is like this foreign thing, echoing in a cavern. Am I speaking or

is it in my head? *Why can't I see?*

It all starts to echo again, and the pain throbs in my head even harder. I want to open my eyes. I want to push my tongue against my teeth to check they're all there, and swear I'll wear a mouth guard next time. I want to go back and pay attention, keep my fucking head up against that hit. I don't want to be here.

I don't want to be here.

I don't want to be here.

The voices around me start to muddle to nothing as I slump into the thick darkness still entrapping me.

ONE

# RHYS

## *Present*

“Just try it today, and if you still feel like shit, I won’t ask you to do it again. Okay?”

Even with the volume on my phone turned so low it should be silent, my father’s voice is a booming echo through the speaker. I wince lightly, using muscle memory to pull the black joggers over my legs in the darkness of my bedroom. Shrugging a hoodie over my head gently, I swipe the phone from where it lays on the dresser.

“I’m fine,” I say. It’s not really an answer, but I know what he’s really asking beneath his command.

We’re cut from the same cloth, my father and I—both calm under pressure, both “dipped like Achilles into a pool of confidence” as my mother so often puts it. I’ve been compared to him all my life—in the way I look, the way I skate, the way I play—and unlike many of the other NHL legacies I’ve played with, I don’t mind it.

My dad has always been my hero.

Which is why knowing that he’s asked me to work with the First Line Foundation today—a charity my father started after retiring from the NHL—is purely as a way to check up on me. The foundation funds scholarship programs for kids who want to play hockey, but don’t have the means to do so. I’ve worked with the program before, I’ve even enjoyed it before, but now...

It feels daunting, like I know even now that the smiles of children won’t drive away the constant dread filling up the void of my body.

“Rhys,” he calls again, his voice still too loud and I huff a breath, sliding my shoes on and grabbing my bag before heading into the warm June air. “Just, try it today. And then, if you feel like it, take the keys tomorrow morning before the rink opens and run a few drills.”

I nod, sliding the bag into the backseat of my BMW. I’d been cleared to drive for a month or so, but have barely left the house in all that time.

“I will,” I finally say, tightening my hands on the steering wheel as I sit in the silence. Only the wisping sound of my father’s crackling speaker tells me he’s driving with the windows down in his ancient truck that my mom refers to as “that *thing*.”

“And if you’re not ready this year, there’s no reason to push yourself. An extra year might be good, make a better impression on the scouts before the next draft—”

I cut him off before his words can send me spiraling and right back into my room with the blackout curtains shut tight.

“I want to play. I feel ready to play again,” I lie. It’s one I’ve been practicing, so it rolls off my tongue easier than breathing. “I’m good.”

A deep sigh over the line, before we exchange quick goodbyes and I finally crank the car.



The rink is crowded, especially for a Thursday evening at dinner time. Kids ranging in age from five to thirteen skirt and swerve around the rink with a few volunteers that I recognize from previous functions—some retired players, some parents with relevant experience. I even spot Lukas Bezek—one of the new star players for the Bruins—with the social media team working with a few of the older kids on slap shots.

Just as I step onto the ice, a little blur slams into my legs with a belatedly screamed, “Watch out!”

I catch the small kid before he can bounce off my thighs and flat onto the ice.

He giggles as I pull him off and hold him by the little pads and jersey he’s wearing, waiting until he gets his feet under him again. He’s looking up at me the entire time, a dusting of freckles and a gap-toothed grin that make him look just like a mini hockey player. He slides a bit again, not quite the best

skater out there, but doesn't frown or seem agitated in the slightest.

"Sorry," he offers, a little whistle sound coming from his missing front tooth. "I'm still working on my stops."

The old Rhys would have laughed and said something gentle, or funny, like "*That's alright, bud. I am too.*" But even the idea of laughing seems impossible, so I offer as much of a grin as my face can manage.

"Good thing we're gonna work on those stops today," a chipper voice announces as a tall, pretty girl glides up and stops short next to us, a gaggle of little ones behind her. "And good job Liam, on finding our special guest coach for today!"

Liam, the boy still clinging to me with a little gloved hand on my leg, laughs again and looks back up at me.

"He's so tall!"

The group of kids now surrounding us all giggle and smile up at me, waiting on something. Sweat slicks the back of my neck at the sight of all their hopeful faces looking up at me, relying on me.

Maybe this was a mistake.

"This is Rhys." The girl takes over. "He's a center for the Waterfell Wolves, so he plays hockey in college, just outside of Boston! He's been playing since he was your age. And he's gonna help you guys with skating today."

"Will we play today?" a little girl asks with her helmet in her hands, cheeks blushing immediately at the attention of her fellow classmates.

"Probably not today. We're gonna mainly work on skating, alright?" The girl offers the group, smiling lightly as they all cheer. "We'll do a bit of stick handling with our hockey captain here." She nods to me. "And then finish with some fun games. How does that sound?"

A consensus of cheering and shouting commences before she dismisses them to some warm up laps.

"Hope you don't mind me taking over," she says, reaching her hand out to shake mine. "I'm Chelsea. One of the leads told me you'd be helping out today with the little ones."

"Yeah," I reply. Skating gently beside her, following her lead to the other side of the rink where a stack of cones sits by the boards, I try to pull it all in. "Thanks for that. Was a little out of it this morning."

"I understand." She chuckles. "We all have some of *those* nights."

I should laugh, or nod and agree—as if my lack of emotion is just a bad



hangover from a rough night out—but I can barely muster a half-grin as we set up for drills.

“Anyway, I’ll make it easy. For the littles, it’s mainly just a skating lesson. The ten and up group is with the Bruins for media today.” She nods towards the stumbling crew headed back towards us. “And the little one who tried to knock you over is Liam—he needs some extra care if you want to focus on him today. Make it easier.”

So I do.

Liam is easy, an eager learner—albeit clumsy, but he never loses his smile. He clings to me easily, watching the other kids every now and then with a little determined scowl.

“My brother’s real good too,” he says, a little breathless as he holds onto the pocket of my joggers once again. The kid’s a terrible skater, but he’s happy.

Chelsea closed the session with a quick round-up huddle, where only half of them were able to kneel, the rest sprawled on the ice with happy smiles.

I keep waiting for that little reminder, of myself at this age, holding my dad’s stick and letting him glide me almost too fast across the ice. Watching his games on the TV, decked out in his jersey and shouting just like my mom. The first time I got a goal on my own, even if it was nearly accidental. I wait... and still, nothing.

“Is he?”

The kid looks over his shoulder at the older group finishing up across the ice.

“Yep. Oliver. I think he’ll be jealous you skated with me today.”

“Jealous?” I quirk a brow at the little guy.

He nods and another giggle escapes. “Oh yeah. You play Wolves hockey, and Oliver wants to go there *bad*.”

I peek over with him, now wondering why exactly Liam hasn’t been called over by the gaggle of parents surrounding the kids gorging on the goodies at the snack table. The older kids scatter, all heading for the gate, except one—a taller boy with hair long enough that it hangs just out of his helmet who is skating right for us.

Chelsea is nowhere to be seen, in fact the ice has cleared. Parents and children cover the bleachers and huddle around the table of snacks, laughing and chatting with each other so much it echoes and bounces lighting off the walls of the open rink. I wait for someone to step up to the glass, notice the

two boys still on the ice but no one bats an eye.

“Is she not here?” the older boy, Oliver, asks, pulling his helmet off to hang in his hands. His hair is darker, but the gray eyes are identical to his brother’s, easy to spot the connection in their youth.

Liam shakes his head, silent for the first time all afternoon.

Oliver makes a frustrated sound, before looking down at Liam with his hands on his hips after a quick wary glance up at me. “I told you, if she’s not here, you wait for me by the snacks with Miss Chelsea.”

Liam pouts, his hand releasing me to skate, or trip, to his brother.

“But it’s a Wolf!” he explains in a semi-hushed voice, letting out a quick little howl. “Like, he plays hockey for Waterfell.”

The kid looks at him, waiting for his brother to do anything, but Oliver looks embarrassed, almost angry. Liam howls again, then turns his head towards me and says, “Right, Rhys?”

I let out a smile and nod. “Right, Liam.”

“He’s gonna teach me so much hockey stuff, I’m gonna be even better than you.”

Oliver smiles, in spite of his brother’s antics, as Liam skates little circles around him. He probably feels like he’s flying, but he’s on one foot tripping along.

It’s easy to see the camaraderie between them, and makes me think of being six and chasing Bennett around like a lunatic because even then, he was always bigger, but I was faster. He’s my brother, even if not by blood, and an ache emanates from my chest at the thought of him, of the one hundred missed calls and texts on my phone that I’ve yet to listen to or answer.

I haven’t seen him since the hospital, despite knowing he’s made multiple visits to my house only to be turned away by my parents over and over.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I grab it.

BENNETT REINER

152 Unread Messages

I know you’re alive dumbass. Answer your...

Not bothering to read more than the preview, I slip it back into my pocket and ignore the niggle of guilt that threatens, and refocus my attention on the boys who are staring blankly up at me.

Chelsea joins us suddenly. She’s smiling brightly at the boys, offering me

a little shrug before leaning over to whisper in my ear.

“They’re always the last ones here.” As she speaks, I look over and see that the snack table has cleared out and we are the only four left in the whole rink. “Someone has to stay with them until—”

A door slams and there’s a girl sprinting down the ramp towards the gate.

She’s slight, covered in tight black leggings and an oversized blue sweatshirt that she’s practically swimming in, her ponytail loose and fluffed up by the hood hanging around her shoulders. It’s the undone-barely-there look on her face that really makes me wonder when was the last time she slept.

As she gets closer and I register how young she looks, I think maybe that assessment is harsh for a mother of two.

I watch Liam’s face light up, his little knees bending like he might jump up and down from excitement if he wasn’t afraid to fall. Chelsea next to me huffs and rolls her eyes, giving me a look that says this is far from the first time she’s been late.

“I’m here,” she shouts, her bag bouncing hard against her back where it’s slinging from her shoulders, as she sprints onto the ice in slip-on sneakers, sliding aimlessly for a moment before she regains her balance and takes quick steps towards us.

“You’re late,” Chelsea sneers. “Again.” Her hand falls to Oliver’s shoulders, in a protective gesture, and red heats against the girl’s already flushed skin.

“I know,” she says, kneeling down onto the ice to get eye level with Liam who is still excited with no sign of frustration towards his... mother? She seems too young, especially with the eldest looking to be around eleven.

She looks around briefly, and it’s only then a flash of recognition hits me. I’ve seen her before, but I can’t place from where.

She doesn’t bother speaking to Chelsea, only giving a big smile to the boy who is looking at her like she’s his entire world, before shifting to speak directly to Oliver, whose face is red and slanted down, disappointment emanating from him.

“I’m sorry, bud.” She bites her lip hard, her wide gray eyes pleading. “I tried so hard.”

“I got even faster today,” Liam offers, completely and blissfully ignorant of his brother’s obvious frustration.

She gives him a wink and rubs his head lightly, mussing his hair. “I’ll bet

you'll be even faster than Crosby one day."

I almost snort, partially because I'm now imagining a Sidney Crosby poster in her childhood bedroom. Despite the fact my lips don't even begin to rise—no hint of a laugh threatening—I am taken aback by how quickly she got any kind of reaction out of my empty body.

"Crosby's not the fastest. And you swore you'd be here to see," Oliver accuses, his brow furrowed, cheeks heated.

"Oliver, killer, I'm sorry. I promise I'll be here—"

"You say that every time, and you only don't show because of *him*." He spits the word like poison and her expression shutters.

It's clear whoever this *him* is, is a constant issue for them. A boyfriend maybe? I cross my arms, finding myself in slight agreement with Chelsea.

"How about you show me now?" she offers, a hopeful tone attempting to turn it around. "Give me a minute to put on my skates and I'll even race you —"

"Actually," Chelsea cuts her off. "We need to be off the ice now. They've got to clear it before the beer league game tonight. Come on, Oliver, let's get you one of the cookies from the snack table. I saved some for you."

Oliver follows Chelsea as she skates off towards the exit together and I realize only now that the girl is staring at me, eyebrows furrowed.

Self-conscious in a way I would have never been before the accident, I fix my stance, straightening my spine. My arms hang loose at my sides for a moment, but somehow that seems worse. So I cross them, before feeling more ridiculous and letting them drop again, one hand finding my pocket.

"Who's the big guy?"

She glances down at Liam, quirking an eyebrow at him before he smiles. "Oh, yeah, I know—stranger danger, but that's Rhys."

"I don't know who Rhys is, bug."

"He's gonna help us get *real* good at hockey," Liam says, just as his skate slides out from underneath him and he slips onto the ice, stomach first.

I reach for him immediately, easily picking him up and holding his arms until he gets steady again. Easy enough, especially after repeating this process about twenty times in the last hour.

"You good?" I ask, bending down to his level and sending another quick, albeit restrained smile to the girl looking down at us. Waiting a beat for something—a smile, a hum of approval, a "*How sweet*" or "*You have such a way with kids*." All normal responses to my easy charm before. But she gives

me nothing but a wide blank stare.

I hate it, feeling like her cat-shaped gray eyes can see everything. Like there's something physically wrong with me that signals the absolute shit show stowed beneath my skin.

"I'm good," Liam replies, skating ahead on shaking legs. "Rhys is, like, the best hockey player."

"Ahh." She nods, eyes still infuriatingly locked on me. "Alright, welp, say goodbye to the hockey hotshot, bug. Time to go home."

"Bye, Rhys! Next week I'll bring my helmet. It's got stickers on it," Liam practically shrieks, picking himself up quickly from another fall before trying another howl with me. I know I should join him, make him feel like I'm his friend, but there's a pressure on my chest that keeps me from moving, let alone breathing.

He falls twice more on his way to the boards and bleacher seats where Oliver is unlacing his skates, watching carefully where the girl still stands, like he's worried about her despite his anger.

She blows a raspberry, her bangs and the multitude of loose tendrils of silk brown whips and whirl around her face. I wait a moment, poised to introduce myself when I spot the hang tag on her bag.

"You go to Waterfell?"

Not just Waterfell itself, but that's a skate embroidered into the end of the logo: a figure skate.

She spins back towards me so fast, her entire balance gets knocked off. I grab her, not shocked that she feels light as air from how small she is, and place her back on solid ice before she can blink.

Her name is lost on me, if I ever knew it, but I remember her. I've seen her in and out of the complex before, always in a rush of some sort, always barely put together.

But the memory that's hitting me hardest is seeing her burst into our practice one day that ran late, shouting the head off our even keeled coach, before a tall, stern-faced man picked her up by the waist and carted her off.

I remember it best because I stayed after, lingering in the tunnels for a moment as she started blasting loud, vibrant music and blazed onto the cut up ice, keeping the Zamboni from clearing while she skated like she wanted to kill someone.

Pure passion.

She's beautiful this close, even in her haphazard look, her hair is shiny

and dark, skin flushed but pale with a unique little patch of freckles under her right eye.

“Glad I caught you.” I try to smile, my old charm covering me like a thick coat, a shield, before she blinks once, twice, then sharpens her brow into a deep frustration and shoves away from me.

“I’m sure you catch all kinds of things.”

Smiling still, in spite of the lack of usual response and the emptiness wading in my gut, I offer, “I play hockey for Waterfell.”

“Alright, kiddos,” she calls, ignoring my words and presence completely as she marches off the ice with an upturned nose. Something twists, whether at her dismissal of the thing that once made me so valuable, or the lack of any recognition. “Let’s go.”

The two boys grab their shared gear bag and strut behind her, Liam just as animated as before, and Oliver just as dejected. It punches in my chest, something twisting as I look at his beaten down expression and rush off the ice, following them.

“Hey,” I call, waiting as all three turn around. “Can I talk to you for a minute—uh, sorry you didn’t say your name.”

Liam giggles and points up at the slip of a girl guarding over him.

“That’s Sadie.”

“Thanks, nugget.” She rolls her eyes, hip-checking him in the shoulder as she looks up at me. “What for?”

“It’s about... the boys. Just—” I cut myself off as she struts down to me. The closer she gets, the faster my heart starts to race at the idea of arguing with her.

“What?” Her tone is just as aggressive as her stance, arms crossed and glaring up at me, as if *she* is the 6’3” center with three extra inches of skates.

“I know I’m new to the scholarship program, but Liam and Oliver are incredible—even as young as they are. “

“I know.”

I manage to keep the smile plastered to my face, mainly because something warm is thrumming in my gut. “And, well, I think parental support is important to kids, especially with their interests—”

“Get to the point, hotshot.”

Alright, fine. No more charm. I harden my stare and cross my arms. “You should make an effort to be here. Not a forgotten promise.”

Her eyes turn molten before me, fire beneath the slate gray, and for a

moment I think she might tackle me; attempt to check me into the boards.

Maybe it'll help, force me to feel something besides the empty chasm of nothingness yawning inside. Maybe, if she turns out to be stronger than she looks, she'll knock me flat on my ass.

Honestly, I hope she does.

“Noted. Anything else you'd like to spout off that high horse of yours?” She doesn't wait even a second before continuing. “Great!” Her hands clap together sharply. “Glad we had that talk.”

“Wait.” I try again, my frustration mounting as I reach to grab her wrist and stop her retreat.

She flares, igniting at the contact and pulling herself from my touch like I've tried to set her on fire. I release her immediately, only to see her little hand now wrapped, as much as it can be, around my wrist. She's bending it, like a bully on the playground, in some attempted self-defense move that sends a zing up my spine.

“Don't ever grab me like that again.” She bends a little more, and I want to ask her to keep it there because this is the first *anything*, other than pain, I've felt in months.

But I can't, because by the time I work a swallow down my throat and unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth, all three of them are gone.

TWO



# SADIE

For me, Tuesdays are the worst day of the week.

“Sade, please.”

Tuesdays are payday, which means my father is more inclined to outright ask me for money rather than drop hints or steal from our food budget.

“I can’t.”

I try not to look, focusing instead on staying at the top of the staircase and lacing up my sneakers, double-checking that my bag has everything I’ll need for practice, as well as clothes for the café. Stuffing an extra pair of socks into the side zipper pocket, I’m forced to look at him as I descend the rickety stairs.

“Just an extra few. I just need something to get me through the week.”

I try to remember that there was a time when it wasn’t like this. When my father was someone who loved us dearly—who put me, and even baby Oliver, first.

“I said, I can’t.” I try again, crossing my arms and wanting so badly to shove past him. His head is hanging lightly, hair shaggier now than it has been, but his eyes are still mine, despite how red-rimmed and dark they are. “Oliver needs new skates; his foot was bleeding yesterday from how tight his old ones are.”

My brother tried to hide it, but I caught him last night in the kitchen putting Band-Aids on his ankles.

My dad’s mouth tightens and I can almost hear the argument in his head, the line he walks so carefully. He’s never hit us, never physically hurt one of us. But his mere presence is enough to feel like someone is pressing down on

my shoulders. He wants to argue that this is his house, it's his money, but it isn't really. Not anymore—not since I got a job at fourteen and saved every penny until I had enough to keep skating. Not since earning my scholarship that assured me I didn't have to take a single one of his handouts, if they could even qualify as one.

My mother had money, from a trust her wealthy family had bestowed to her too early, before her habits got harder to break. She pays child support to my father, checks I work tirelessly to find in the mail before he can blow them on top shelf whiskey.

Once upon a time, I believed they were a cute romantic story; the rich girl falling head over heels for the boy from nothing. But now, I know better.

My mother doesn't love anyone except herself.

And my father might love us, deep down, but he'll always love his vices more.

Maybe that's why I can't stop myself from reaching for the fifty in my jean pocket from tips the day before and slipping it into his hand.

"That's all you can have from me for the week," I warn, a swirl of anxiety threatening my stomach as his eyes light up. "I'm serious, I have to pay for Oliver's skates."

"It's fine," a raspy voice huffs, my brother sliding underneath my arm and into the kitchen. "I can stay in my old ones for another month."

"You can't, killer. Besides, you have a tournament coming up."

Before I can get to it, Oliver fills up the filter and starts a cup of coffee for me. He keeps his back turned to the actual adult still stationed by the doorway, like he might bolt at any moment.

"When's your tournament?" Our father's voice is shaky, eyes still a little bloodshot as he walks further into the kitchen, apprehension in his every move towards Oliver. When he's drunk, he's fearless, but sober he's almost scared of us. "Maybe I could come—"

"Don't bother," Oliver mutters beneath his breath, cutting him off. I hip check him lightly as I grab for creamer from the fridge and happily take the to-go cup my eleven-year-old brother is already holding out to me.

"It's next weekend if you wanna come to mine," a sleepy Liam says from the kitchen door, before dragging his Star Wars blanket across the floor with him and planting a seat at the table. "Are you making pancakes again, sissy?"

I grab my bag from the table, slinging it over my shoulder before ruffling Liam's curls from behind his chair. "Not today, bug. There's some toaster

waffles in the freezer for both of you, and your lunches are packed on the second shelf.”

Liam slumps dramatically in his seat. “No pancakes means a bad day, sissy.”

Oliver grumbles, harshly shoving the plate of already prepared cinnamon toast waffles towards his brother. “Eat and shut it about the pancakes.”

I pull his ear as I pass him. “Be nice,” I reprimand, before softening my voice and giving him a pat. “And thank you.”

“Whatever.”

A pang in my heart weighs my shoulders down, twisting the thing in my chest until the scream is almost bubbling at my lips. It feels like my body is on fire from the inside, every bit of anger and resentment and fear bubbling like an active volcano, and I know I’ll explode on *him* if I don’t get out of this room right now.

*Can’t you see what you’re doing to them? I want to shout. I know what happens next because it’s already happened to me. And I can’t do anything else to stop it—wake up!*

“Do you have to go before the bus comes?” Liam asks, his voice still overly loud for the early hour, but I can almost feel the discomfort in it.

*Do you have to leave us with him?* That’s the real question. Oliver might remember Dad before all of this, but Liam doesn’t. Liam only knows this father, the one who doesn’t show up, who continues to grow weaker and nearer to death every day.

Oliver might be bursting with anger, but Liam is wrestling with fear.

I hate to leave them; I hate sending them to summer camps and endless distractions that don’t break our budget. But without skating, my tuition isn’t paid, and both jobs I currently hold are barely enough to supplement the checks from our mom.

This is for them. One day, maybe, they’ll understand it.

“Love you, nugget,” I whisper, kissing Liam hard on the cheek. He dives in for a hug and latches onto me until I tickle his sides to get him to release me. Oliver is leaned against the kitchen counter, his ever-growing lanky body rigid with arms crossed tight over the hand-me-down USA Nationals shirt. I give him a nod, knowing how much he doesn’t like to be touched, before passing my father’s leaned figure through the doorway.

He opens his mouth like he wants to say something, and I wait, because some part of me is clinging to the possibility that he’ll come back.

But he stays silent.  
And I want to scream.



Blaring Deftones' "Cherry Waves" does little in the way of clearing the fog of anger, but the sight I'm greeted with arriving at the ice plex easily empties every thought out of my mind.

There's an expensive car in the otherwise empty lot, and the lights are on.

I should be the only one here, considering I use Coach Kelley's key before my shifts on concession stand days for extra ice time. Public skate doesn't start until eight a.m. so, double checking my phone again, no one should be here before six in the morning.

And yet, a quick glance at the large panes of glass looking over the ice, I can see a blue figure—a goddamned *hockey* player—*sitting* on the ice in the corner.

I drop my bag, push out of my sneakers by the heel and slip my skates on, lacing them fast. My headphones are still blasting, only amping me up, ready to pick a fight.

Bursting through the doors, I shout a quick, "Hey! You can't be here!" towards him and march myself into the already-lit up rink ready to give whatever moron is hogging *my* ice time the screaming match of the century.

Only, something is wrong.

The man on the ice isn't sitting—he's collapsed, like he's hurt.

He's panting heavily, sweat gleaming on his skin where it's exposed. His hockey sweater is half pulled up over one of his shoulders, like he was in the middle of pulling it off and couldn't finish.

Sweat clings to every part of him, sticking his long dark hair across his forehead and against the back of his neck. His abs are flexing over and over, like he might be hyperventilating. The golden skin is taut and distracting—so much so that I shake my head to clear my derailing train of thought.

I yank off my headphones, the sound of his gasping breath immediately filling the silence of the rink. Sliding the guards off my skates, I launch with a hop onto the ice to skate over to him with a harsh, scraping stop.

"Hey," I call, my voice shakier than I want it to be. "Are you alright?"

Stupid question considering the circumstances.

My hands, still bare where I hadn't put my gloves on, grab at his arms and try to stop his constant shivering. His eyes are dilated, taking me in slowly, almost like he's not sure if I'm real.

This close, I recognize him—the hockey hotshot *Rhys* from the other day. Dark brown hair, pretty brown eyes, and a sharp jawline like hard steel, with a dimple in his right cheek that makes me wonder if there's a matching one on the left when he smiles.

He slumps back again, but his teeth start chattering harder and he swiftly pulls his knees tight against his chest, skate blades slicing against the ice.

"I c-c-can't breathe," he manages to etch out.

He can, he's breathing right now, but I'm no stranger to a panic attack. My mind settles, the focus of someone else always a welcome torrent against the endless screaming in my own head.

"Hey," I call, a little harsher, even while I plaster on a pretty smile; trying my best to look sweet and calm, hoping it will bring him down from whatever dangerous precipice of panic he's hanging from. "Look at me."

He does, brow furrowing lightly, brown eyes glistening beneath.

"You can breathe."

Something wrestles in his eyes, before he shutter and grips his half-on practice sweater in a death grip like he's going to pull it off. My hand closes over his, releasing his grasp and stopping him from nearly choking himself on the collar in his desperation.

"I'm s-s-sorry."

I need to get him off the ice, but I know I won't be able to lift him alone, and it'll be at least an hour before anyone else shows up.

"C'mon, hotshot," I try, hedging for something between gentle exasperation and flirtation in spite of my own racing heart to, hopefully, relax him.

"You're okay," I say, kind of like telling a baby they're fine when they fall to calm them. "We're gonna have to get you off the ice. Can you stand?"

"Y-yeah," he offers, his breaths labored and too fast at the same time. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, just help me, okay?" I reach around the middle of him, grabbing onto the padding of his hockey pants on his lower back and using it to hold him steady as he slowly finds his footing again.

"I don't know if I can skate," he mutters between shuttering breaths, his eyes squeezing closed tightly. "I—"

“You’re fine. I’ll use it as an excuse to get my hands on you,” I say, my nerves fried and mouth stumbling with anything to distract him. “Just stay upright on your skates. I’ve got you.”

He looks at me again, brown eyes still dilated as he locks onto my gaze. A little nod lets me know he’s as stable as he’s going to get, and I dig my skate into the ice to press off, slowly with his added weight.

God, he’s heavy, tall—albeit lankier than most hockey players his height.

Still, it takes almost a full minute to make it to the gate with my careful skating and carrying double my weight. He doesn’t peel his eyes off my profile the entire time, I can feel them almost searing the side of my face. I slowly manage to set him on the bottom step of the short bleachers nearby.

His hands reach down for his laces, finger shaking so hard they keep missing the loops until he’s sawing out a curse beneath his breath with a bitter expression of hopelessness. But I’ve been a caretaker my entire life, and no amount of annoyance can keep me from kneeling before him and taking his hands in mine.

“Focus on slowing your breathing,” I offer, before he can open his mouth for another pitiful apology. My fingers are numb, but make quick work of his laces and pull on the tongues so he can slip out of them easily.

I draw the line at pulling the no doubt foul-smelling hockey boots from this stranger’s feet.

“You got it from here?” I ask, rocking back on my skates and looking up to see his eyes still locked heavily on my face.

“You’re Liam’s mom.”

I snort. *Closest thing to it.*

“Sister, but yeah. We met. Sadie.” I smile brightly at him, praying that he doesn’t really remember meeting me.

“Rhys.” He puffs a few breaths, almost like he might laugh if he could catch his breath. “You wanted to knock me on my ass,” he says with a smile and I see the peek of a dimple on his other cheek. *Knew it.*

“Yeah, well... you did that all on your own today.”

Another one of those light, huffing laughs leaves his open mouth, hands and arms still trembling. It’s silent again, only the buzzing hum of the lights and systems as the background to my second perusal of him. I want to speak, to fill the space with comforting words, but I find myself empty of them.

“You’re the figure skater that looks like fire.”

My brow furrows. “What?”

He huffs and smiles lazily, looking more like a sleepy drunk. “Nevermind.”

*Why is he here? What happened to him on the ice?* The questions are piling up, pushing against my lips to fly out. But one look back at his lax, vulnerable body position and I clam right back up.

*Not my circus. Not my monkeys.*

Cutting my eyes away from the intensity of his, I check my watch.

*Damn it.*

6:30 a.m.

Scooping my hair up into a high bun, I slide my lounge pants off, leaving me in tights under shorts, and plop them into a heap a few feet beside Rhys’ resting body. Part of me feels terrible just leaving him here, but the other part of me—the part of me that knows how easily I could lose *everything* I’ve worked for if I don’t focus—pushes the rest of my resolve. With any luck, Mr. Hotshot here will get it together and get out of here.

I pause at the gate, biting my lip and glancing back over towards him.

“Can you get back out okay? Are you good now?”

He nods slowly, barely opening his eyes and giving me a quick thumbs up. Grabbing his skates in one hand, he braces the other on the railing, leaning on it heavily before he slips his hand to the wall to walk up the ramp to the exit doors.

With the sound of the door slamming shut, I re-center my focus and hook my phone up to the handheld speaker my Coach gave me so I can work on my short program choreography before work.

At least, I try.

But no matter how loud I play the music, or how many times I fall while trying—and failing—a triple axel, nothing can pull my focus from the hockey boy with the sad eyes.



Pushing through the door, a blast of warm air hits my pinkened skin before I stall at the sight of the hockey player I’d assumed would be long gone.

It’s as if he barely made it inside, sitting against the half-wall beneath the window with his eyes closed and head tilted back. The long column of his throat works with a heavy swallow before he opens his eyes to look up at me.

I should ask if he's alright, but the only thing that comes from my lips is a bitter, "Were you watching me skate?"

It isn't a question so much as an accusation.

His familiar brown eyes are less glassy now, but his skin still looks pale, like the panic is taking a long time to truly drain from his system. He shakes his head and a minuscule grin ticks his lips crooked.

"No, but I might like to," he snickers, a little dazed and unkempt. "I'm imagining you skating like Liam, since that's all I have to go off of."

There's no stopping the grin that stretches across my mouth because I know, for as much as Liam loves to "play hockey," he can barely keep his little legs underneath him.

"Well, considering I used my warm up time helping some hockey player, I don't think your imagination is too far off."

I'd meant it as a joke, but hearing myself back I know it sounds like a reprimand—even worse, catching the near-wince of Rhys as he absorbs what I just said.

*God*, has it really gotten this bad? Having things under control has never really been my specialty, nor has self-preservation. Feeling too much all at once until the dam bursts is much more my speed.

I sit down to unlace my skates, pulling my bag closer.

"I don't know what's wrong with me." He laughs.

"I think you're crashing," I offer, crossing my arms. "Looks like from a major panic attack. Has this happened before?"

"I'm good," he says, shrugging off my question.

My spine pricks up, ready again to fight with him if needed. "If it *has*, then it was really stupid for you to be out there without anyone around."

I wait a moment, but he doesn't say anything.

Finally, I ask, "What are you still doing here?"

"I was trying to work up the nerve to drive home." He laughs, but winces at the same time. "If you can get my keys." He wobbles, his footing unsteady until he slumps back against the glass door again.

"Yeah, you're definitely not driving, hotshot."

"What are you even doing here?" he asks, but there's no bite to his tone, just mild curiosity. "My—I was told no one would be here this early."

*Technically, no one is allowed to be.*

"I don't know what you're talking about, because I wasn't here this morning. Just like *you*, hotshot, didn't have a panic attack and nearly pass out



alone on the ice.”

He grimaces, but nods, walking carefully with his bag on his shoulder and his other hand braced almost painfully on my shoulder.

“*No one* was here this early,” I concede, with a pleasant little smile on my lips. “Which is the only reason I’m going to help your big ass to my car and get you wherever it is you need to go.”

“I can drive, honestly. I just need to sit in there for a few.”

I don’t want him to drive, but I know at any moment now Coach Kelley and the rest of the summer staff will start arriving, and I can’t, *god*—if I get any more demerits this year...

*Stop.*

Shaking my head, I straighten. Going down that path will only lead me to my own cryfest in the car and speed skating through my ice time while throwing sloppy jumps.

This year won’t be like last year. This year is going to be better.

“Alright, if you swear.”

He nods again and seems to try a charming sort of boyish smile.

We push through the doors of the ice plex, stepping into the cool morning. My beat-up Jeep Cherokee looks almost ridiculous next to his sleek black BMW, but I manage to keep the snide comment on my tongue from tumbling out.

Releasing him once he has a hold on the driver’s side door, I clasp my hands together and rock back and forth on my heels.

“Thanks,” he begins, looking at me with that same searing, annoying intensity. He looks less vulnerable now, almost tired but forcing some sort of mask. “I genuinely app—”

“Save it.” I hold my palms up to stop him before he can irk me anymore. “I wasn’t here and neither were you. Don’t worry, hotshot.”

His brow furrows, the same sadness from before etching back into his eyes and for a moment, I hate it. Every word out of my mouth towards him is infected with taunting, and I can hear it but I can’t stop it.

I wait for him to chew me out, or push back, but he just looks tired.

“Right. Well... I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

The vulnerability slips slightly as he sighs, unlocking his BMW to slide in. Something is churning in my stomach, almost like I’m going to be sick the longer I stare at his open face, so I turn on my heel in a haze and march back towards the doors.

And no matter how deeply I want to check on him once more before I head back in, I keep my head on straight. The urge to tease and kiss away his despair is too great, and it will only end poorly for me.

“Not if I see you first,” I mutter beneath my breath. A little vow to myself to steer clear of the boy with the sad eyes before I try to take his healing into my own hands.

THREE

## RHYS

Since the accident, waking up drenched in sweat has become my new normal, so it isn't a surprise when I turn over to ice cold, soaked sheets. What *is* a surprise, is the soft voice of my mother, not my alarm pulling me from yet another night terror.

"Shit," I mumble, blinking through the bleary smear of moisture over my eyes.

My mother is leaning over me, her hand brushing the side of my face where I've turned towards her voice.

"You're sleeping on your stomach again," she begins, keeping her voice soft like she has been for the past months. It makes my chest clench tight because that isn't like my mom—she is loud and invasive, and this summer of my demons has turned her into ...this. "You really scared me this morning."

*Shit.*

I close my eyes a little tighter, afraid of the look that I know is plastered across her face. While my father is more like myself, my mother is all heart with zero hard exterior.

Growing up, she'd been the soft place for me to fall; hell, even Bennett had let her tend to every scrape and mend every loss with a proud smile and kiss on the head while our numbers were painted on her cheeks. Now, and especially in the last five months, she'd been almost overwhelming in her care for me.

Nearly to the point I could swear my dad was about to re-enter the NHL and get checked into the boards to gain back her doting attention.

"Did I wake you?"

She's smiling gently, still dressed in long sweatpants pooling on the hardwood and one of my father's old threadbare Winnipeg team shirts. I push up onto my elbow and flip completely over, taking the proffered cup of water in her hands.

"No, your father's getting a cold so he's snoring like the dead." I half-grin and see her real, genuine smile break through. "Are you alright, Rhys?"

If it were my father asking, I wouldn't hesitate to lie, but my mom has something that pulls the truth out of me, no matter how deeply I try to bury it.

"I'm trying to be."

She nods, sitting on the edge of my bed. "School is back in soon. Are you going to stay here this semester?"

"No," I answer, thankful that she's allowing me the space to distract myself. "I'm going back to the apartment next month." And I'm dreading that conversation with Bennett more than I am for my first practice back. "I need to get back into my routine."

While it isn't a lie, it might as well be. Getting into my routine won't help, nothing will.

*Except for a pair of gray eyes and flirty smile.*

It's like a shot to the gut and I have to clench my hands in the bedspread to control the quick reaction.

God, Bennett is going to have to tie me to my damn bed to keep me from seeking that particular vice out. I can feel the thrum of my blood at just the thought of her, the immediate warmth that her voice and scent and face provide.

Whatever control I had before that game is gone—maybe it's a piece of the part of me that died that night, considering nothing that's left seems worth anything anymore and I'm still walking a razor's edge with giving up.

Guilt threatens at the racing, hate-filled, darkened thoughts plaguing me; while my mother sits there, desperately trying to push the sunshine that glows from her towards me. I can't bring myself to tell her that I feel nothing.

*You felt something with Sadie.*

"Yeah," she agrees, before a sneaky grin stretches across her face and she rubs her hands together. "Wanna make biscuits and chocolate gravy?"

"What time is it?"

"Four, but who cares?"

"You know you'll wake dad the second he hears a pot clang," I warn, but I'm already shoving the sheets off my body and heading for clean, non-

sweat-soaked clothes, to change into.

“Serves him right, the little *mudak*.”

My eyebrows shoot up, and I wait for the humor to force the laughter from my chest the way my mother has always been able to do. Yet, nothing comes up.

I try to shove off the self-hatred, shrugging and turning away to head into the bathroom, offering a quick, “Your Russian is getting better, but I doubt that’s what he expected you to use it for.”

“Cursing me out?” My dad’s booming voice is scratchy with sleep as he steps into my room, shirtless, wearing only his sleep pants. “Nah, that’s exactly why I wanted her to learn, my little *rybochka*.”

Tensing until I’m sure my shoulders are at my ears, I clench my fists and take a deep, heaving breath.

I wonder what kind of treatment that expensive sports psychologist would recommend if I told her even my dad’s voice is becoming a trigger for me.

“What are you two doing up?” He comes to stand behind my mom’s still seated form, hands dropping to her shoulders to squeeze before he pulls lightly on the loose ponytail of strawberry blonde hair. “Are you bothering my son?”

*My son.*

I try to breathe again, intentional and slow, relaxing my fists.

Because she’s big talk and no action when it comes to her husband, my mom only smirks up at him and nods. “Yep. Craving some biscuits and chocolate gravy.”

She doesn’t utter a word about what we both know. That my dad doesn’t snore. That she’s become a light sleeper since she found me nearly suffocating through a panic attack in my sleep months ago. That tonight she woke up to the sounds of muffled cries and probably nearly gave herself a heart attack when she realized I was on my goddamn stomach again.

My dad wrinkles his nose, because as much as he loves anything my mother does and would gladly eat raw meat if she served it to him, he hates chocolate gravy with a passion.

“Well, then what are we still doing here? The oven preheating alone takes an hour.”

They both stand and start for the door, but pause and wait for me. My mother is all masked concern, now smiling and love-sick half in my father’s arms.

But my dad's eyes are relentless as they take stock of my every muscle, seeing too much and yet nothing all at once. Does he see a stranger where he once saw a twin?

"I need a shower, and I'll be down," I say, shutting my eyes and then the door before I can hear anything else, desperate for a break to just be empty without the pressure of pretending I'm not.



Seeking any feeling, even pain, has clearly become some sort of hobby of mine, as I find myself at the rink by five a.m. two days later. Even earlier than my last little visit.

I follow my dad's directions again, flipping on the overheads and saying a quick *good morning* to the night shift manager, grateful for Max Koteskiy's celebrity status providing access to slick, fresh ice and an empty rink.

I get through my warm-ups off ice easily, stretching slowly to release all the tension from my horrid night of sleep.

But, sitting in the vacant locker room, it only takes a wave of dizziness to completely derail my focus. My vision goes blurry, hands clenching around nothing as I release the laces that were nearly wrapped around my fingers. I try to stop it as I feel the panic mount, leaning over to hang my head between my knees, forearms pressed to my thighs to keep me somewhat upright. A shiver works down my spine as I fight against the squeezing in my chest, the fear mounting as my eyes blink fuzzy again.

I close them.

"This is pathetic. Stop it."

But speaking the words out loud does little to drown out the sound of my own screaming, "*I can't see,*" like a broken fucking record in my head. My hands reach up and cradle my head as the pounding of my temple rises to a sickening level, and my eyes won't open because I'm too damn afraid that *they won't work*.

"Get it together, goddamnit." I clench my hands in my hair, resisting the urge to slap myself in the face.

"We have to stop meeting like this, hotshot."

*Fuck.*

Even the rasp of her voice is enough to pull me back to this side of the

living.

I gently raise my head, trying to pull myself together enough to sling a smile onto my ashen face.

Without thinking, my eyes open, blinking rapidly to clear away the fog. Still, I see her clearly. Her face is calm, forehead relaxed and mouth set in a sweet little smile—the perfect image of unbothered ease. Except for that tiny divot of her eyebrows and the concern in her gray eyes so deep I could swim in it.

“I’m sorry,” I rasp.

My breathing has already started to calm, distracted by the way she struts around the locker room and makes herself at home, dropping her bag into a corner by one of the long benches.

“Need me to give you mouth-to-mouth?”

The flirty taunt is so sudden it works like a cold water shock to my nervous system. Everything settles, my focus turning away from my half-on skate and wholly onto her.

Her muscular legs are wrapped in smooth black fabric, a school issued athletic long sleeve shirt, tight on her upper body. Her hair is down today, thick and straight with fringe dripping from behind her ear that has my fist closing to prevent reaching out and tucking it back.

Instead, I try to focus my eyes on the cluster of freckles beneath her eye.

“A-are you flirting with me?” The words slip out fast, my voice nowhere near to sounding normal, still breathy and weak and I almost want to take it back because I’m a hollow shell of nothingness and she’s so goddamn *full*.

“Me? Flirting with the hot hockey player who keeps showing up in my space?” She smirks down at me, pulling one of the headphones out of her ear, the cord dangling in her hand. “I’d be stupid not to.”

She’s so upfront, be it anger or teasing, so brutally honest in the face of my weakness that it settles something in me.

Or completely sends every brain cell I have left into an absolute frenzy, which might explain why I suddenly blurt out, “Do you want to do something about that then?”

It’s a taunt more than it is a flirt, and the old me would *never* say something so bold. The old version of my controlled, captain-on-and-off-the-ice persona followed a strict three-date rule before any hook ups, which were already a rarity. I didn’t want distractions—I just wanted hockey.

Until hockey decided it didn’t want me.



Maybe I want a distraction from how much I hate what hockey has become in my head.

She hums, a sound that's both snarky and sweet all at once, her body gliding across to me.

“Put this in.”

I take the earbud from her outstretched fingers, brushing the skin lightly with knuckles as I do, letting the sensation of her nearness coat my stretched, tense muscles. The headphones are old, the cord connecting them dangling between us as she sits on the bench next to me.

Desperate, I spread my legs until my sweatpants are pressed lightly against her legging-covered flesh. She doesn't move away, only watches me patiently as I put the earbud in my left ear.

There's a quiet stillness to the music—soothing and just repetitive enough to drown out the mass of older panic taking over my brain. Like the sound coming from the bud in only my left ear is enough to overpower everything else.

Except for the warmth of her beside me. Somehow, that's more.

FOUR

# SADIE

Seeing him this way hurts.

I've experienced a panic attack before, but the worst weren't mine—they were Oliver's. To the point I could barely help him function before medication. Now, the attacks are fewer and far between, but the sight of Rhys curled in on himself, huffing for breaths like he can't quite catch them, brings back memories of laying a frozen bag of peas on my brother's chest so he could settle his nervous system.

Only, I don't have frozen peas right now.

"Is this helping?" I ask, as Jose Gonzalez's gentle strums echo in our ears.

He nods, his eyes flickering in a little pattern across me—eyes, mouth, the grasp of my hand in his.

*Eyes. Mouth. Hands.*

"You're helping," he blurts, cheeks red whether from embarrassment or exertion.

I nod. "Okay."

"Okay."

We sit back, like every movement is just as in sync, connected by the headphone cord between us.

Music plays, until he slows his breath and I slow my heart. I lose track of how long we've been here.

"Music helps me." And Oliver, though I don't add that even as I see him for a moment in my head, slamming headphones over his ears as his principal and I verbally spar over his "unbecoming" behavior at school and "lack of parenting" outside of it.

There's a tickle to my skin, and I look down, seeing Rhys' hand

absentmindedly playing with my fingers in a too-familiar way.

I stand, stepping back.

“Did you skate?” I ask, suddenly desperate to fill the charged silence.

He smiles in that sleepy way, as he continues to climb down from the high. “Didn’t even make it on the ice.”

“Do you want to skate with me?”

This time it’s a cocky grin. “That’s a line. Now I *know* you’re flirting with me.”

“Am not.”

“Whatever you say, Sadie,” he snorts out.

“I’m offering to...” *What am I offering?* His smiles and taunts are making me lightheaded. “To split the ice.”

“Okay.” He nods, standing over me in his now-laced skates, turning from a ball of anxiety into a tower of a man. “And your music.”

“What?”

“I want your music.” He shrugs. “It feels good. Helps me focus, I guess.”

Something about his words makes me want to hug him, a light burn behind my eyes.

“Okay,” I agree.



Seeing Rhys heading towards me, I realize maybe I wasn’t as sly as I thought in attempting to sneak off the ice while his back was turned.

For a moment, I contemplate slamming the metal door down on the window so I can scream, “We’re closed!” when he approaches.

Unfortunately, that would mean crushing the fingers of the unsuspecting mother who looks close to falling asleep atop my counter space as I slide her coffee to her.

“Thanks,” she offers, taking the second cup of hot chocolate and sheep-dogs two hyperactive hockey kids away.

“Didn’t know you worked here too.” He smiles, pushing a hand through his hair that’s a little wet like he might’ve dunked his head under the sink after finishing his morning skate. A few tendrils keep brushing into his face, too short for him to shove around the curve of his ears.

I clench my hands, because some stupid part of my brain wants to push

those hairs back myself.

“That’s how I have a key.” I shrug. It’s not how I have a key, at all—I don’t think working at the concession stand usually reserved for high schoolers warrants an entrance key to the ice plex.

I only have it because that’s part of my compromise for every summer with Coach Kelley. He won’t hover and drag me across the country when I have my brothers out of school, if I continue to practice at the local rink and send him updated footage of my routines weekly.

“Can I get a coffee?”

I smile, but heat crawls my spine. “All out.”

“Out of coffee at seven-thirty in the morning?”

“Unfortunately,” I say, stirring creamer into the cup in front of me.

“Not even a little bit left for your favorite customer?”

He smiles and it makes me pause, two matching dimple imprints to his otherwise chiseled cheeks, a little bit of light bleeding into his usually saddened brown eyes. I want to stand in that smile like a flower preening in the sun.

“Rhys, you’re not even in my top ten. Besides, I highly doubt your prep-schooled ass has ever purchased anything from a public ice complex concession stand.”

His hand thumps on his chest, like what I’ve said was deeply hurtful. “Consider me a card-holding member of the concession stand loyalty club now.”

“Well, in that case.” I grab a Styrofoam cup before sliding it towards him.

“What do I owe you?” His eyes glimmer at me.

“A break from your continuous presence at my place of work.”

“That’s a high price.”

“I’m expensive.”

He takes a sip of the coffee black and curses.

“Maxwell House,” I say, taking another gulp of my own.

Rhys shakes his head. “That’s shitty coffee.”

“Very,” I agree.

“I think I was just hustled.”

I can’t help but smile. “Hustle my favorite customer? I would never.”

His laugh bursts, beautiful and tinged with the boyish vulnerability of a kid talking to his school crush. It makes me want to bat my eyelashes and preen—which only makes me sick when I realize his presence is turning me

to mush.

“Favorite, huh?”

I shrug, “You tip the best.”

He laughs again and takes out a high bill and slides it my way, before leaning towards me on his elbows. “I guess I do.”

It would be so easy to kiss him. The boy is a hazard to my personal boundaries and health.

“Like I said, I’m expensive.”

His mouth opens for a second, before snapping shut as he shoots upright and shoving away.

“Sorry—I’ll uh, see you.”

He’s gone so fast it gives me whiplash.

I look around for a moment, cheeks heating at how close I’d leaned into him. My eyes flicker over a tall, handsome middle-aged man and a group of players decked in Waterfell hockey t-shirts and hats, and my face flushes with the clear implication.

Good enough for a quick morning flirt, but embarrassing in the face of his friends.

Forget him.



“*Rhys Waterfell hockey*” sits in the search bar of my browser, indicator blinking, waiting for me to make a decision when Rora pops up beside me.

“What’s that?”

“Jesus Christ, Rora,” I seethe, hand on my chest to stop my now-racing heart. “We need to get you a bell.”

She giggles, pulling a cherry lollipop—my favorite—from her waist apron and handing it to me. “I wouldn’t need one if you weren’t so distracted by”—she starts, drawing out the y and leaning across me with her long-limbed form and slamming the enter button on the search bar— “Rhys Maximillian Koteskiy. Sheesh, that’s a mouthful.”

I can only nod, my tongue suddenly stuck to the roof of my mouth at the image of him displayed across my screen.

*Rhys Maximillian Koteskiy: 6’3” 210 lbs. C. Shoots Right.*

“You have that look on your face like you’re thinking about how much

you wanna eat him.”

“I’m only thinking about how obnoxious it is to spell ‘Reece’ like that. God, could he be more cliché?” My finger taps at the screen beneath his stats, at the prep school background I’d been joking about. “Berkshire School? That’s a private hockey academy, Rora. And look, his dad is an NHL hall-of-fame player. He’s been raised like a perfect little prodigy.”

The words feel heavy, but I spit them anyway, ignoring the image of him panting and terror-struck, laying on the ice. The image of him flushed, panicked that he couldn’t breathe sits in such deep contrast to the headshot across my screen.

He looks younger, decked in a navy hockey sweater, the Waterfell University wolf howling across his chest, looking larger than life with a smile meant to be in front of the world. Dimples. Shorter, well-kept hair and clear eyes.

“Sadie?”

I shake my head, exiting the screen as fast as I can, before looking back up at Aurora.

The girl is gorgeous, and it isn’t just her lean, athletic figure and mess of ringlet curls that somehow always seem perfectly styled into a thousand new, different ways; it’s something deeper, like sun is shining from within her bright, tawny skin, stretching out and over everything she sees.

“Yeah?”

“Gonna tell me why you’re looking him up?”

“Because I didn’t know who he was, and he’s been... bothering me lately.”

“We’ll get to the second part, but let’s start here: How in the *world* do you go to Waterfell and *not* recognize that guy! Even I know who he is, and I’ve never been to a game.”

I try to roll my eyes, because while that’s true, Rora is more aware than me. The little wallflower knows so much because she listens, she watches everything.

“You’re in that arena all the time, where I’m sure life-size cutouts of him are lining the tunnels and hallways, if the massive posters of his face on campus are anything to go by.”

God, had I been that bad last semester?

Yes. I can hear Coach Kelley’s voice invading my thoughts, telling me exactly how absent I’d been, how much of a letdown both my programs had

been at the finals.

“I hadn’t noticed, I guess,” I reply, only half-heartedly, because I won’t talk about it. I’ll be better this year, for my team, for Oliver and Liam—but I won’t talk about last year anymore.

Rora has that look on her face now, the arched perfect eyebrows over her sparkling green eyes, pursed lips. She wears her every emotion on her face, and *this* is her concern.

“Alright, well, you said he’s been bothering you,” she reminds me, letting whatever she was going to say die before reaching for the multicolored mugs soaking in the sink. I take the waffled wash cloth from her outstretched hand and help her dry. “Gonna tell me about that?”

“I’ve just run into him a few times lately, in my early practices. He has a tendency to beat me to my pre-skate.” I shrug again, feeling ridiculous as I turn towards her.

Rora’s squeal is immediate and I have the urge to cover her mouth, despite the closed, empty cafe around us. Whatever sharp look I give her seems to be enough as she settles.

“That’s adorable,” she offers, nodding excessively as she starts again on some home-made sunflower shaped mug that’s started to lose its color. “I mean, hockey boy and figure—”

“Nope,” I snap, cutting her off and reaching in to drain the water in the big sink. “Stop it, you cannot go around romanticizing everything—how many times do we have to have this talk?”

She looks at me like I’ve kicked a puppy, but Rora is a hopeless romantic, and she’s been my friend for three years now—my only friend, really. But it doesn’t matter how many guys she watches me take into a bathroom or sneak out of our dorm in the morning, she’s convinced that my love story is out there.

“Understood?” I ask while washing my hands. She nods almost aggressively, moving to the side to take off her apron and allowing me room.

Rora waits only a minute for me to put my apron in the little cubby next to hers and grab my backpack before the dam bursts from her pressed-closed lips.

“So... Can we go to a hockey game?”

This time, I can’t help the smile and slight roll of my eyes. But, the flutter of laughter that etches out of me and the feel of her arm looping over my shoulder as we exit together, giggling over some inside joke, it makes me feel



normal and good. Like a regular twenty-one-year-old college student, if only for a moment.

FIVE

# RHYS

“No.”

“Rhys,” my father calls, the sound of his voice making my fist go white with my grip on the marble counter. “Please. I’ll come with you. We haven’t skated together since…” he trails off combing a hand through his dark salt-and-pepper hair.

“Well aware,” I snap, immediately regretting it as the words slip out. “I know you want to check on me and see how I’m skating but I need to do this on my own, okay?”

There’s a vulnerability in my father for a moment, before he nods and turns back to the expensive espresso machine, working quietly, almost sullenly.

“Another coffee already?” I ask, trying to relieve the tension that keeps my feet stuck to the kitchen floor.

“For your mother.” He smiles, slowly making her overly complicated latte, complete with some sort of foam art that he barely finishes by the time my mother pads lightly into the room. She’s bundled in a fuzzy robe with little fruits and vegetables dotting the material, with thick glasses sitting atop her head, tangled into her hair.

“Morning,” I call, getting a happy smile shot my way as she settles herself on the barstool next to where I’m standing.

“How’d you sleep?” she asks, yawning despite the clear, hidden check-in her question poses.

“Good.”

It isn’t a lie. I got a full night's rest, a rare occurrence that I’m trying to convince myself has nothing to do with distracting thoughts of a certain

figure skater.

“Good.” Mom smiles. My father steps up behind her, setting the steaming cup in front of her and kissing the top of her head, massaging her shoulders.

“What is it today?” I ask, leaning towards them.

“I think... a flower?”

My father frowns. “It was supposed to be a heart.”

“It looks like a big mushroom blob,” my mom says, her tone affectionate.

I laugh, a real one that makes both of my parents look up at me. There’s a guilt that chases away the good almost immediately. Have I been so empty, even with them?

“I’m late,” I say, jumping up and grabbing my bag from beside the door.

“For an empty rink?” My mom smirks.

“I—uh, yeah.” Not bothering to explain, I grab my keys and head out to the garage.



I half expect the rink to be empty when I enter, that Sadie really is just a figment of my imagination, invented so I don’t feel so goddamn alone in my anxiety and nothingness.

What I see on the ice only starts to prove that claim.

She skates with that same energy I remember from before, all passion, like watching live fire on ice. None of her movements look that fluid, all punchy between delicate dance moves that look like some hybrid powerful gymnast-elegant ballerina, but it works.

Music is playing over a small Bluetooth speaker in the corner, the beat heavy and loud, not what I’ve imagined from her. Her phone is upturned on the bench, so I touch the side, lighting it up where I can see the song title, “Run Boy Run,” scroll across the top. I try to stop myself from reading below the music, but spotting a text from “DO NOT ANSWER,” I can’t stop myself.

Please Sadie I need your...

The rest of the message isn’t visible. Something wrestles in my stomach, making me nauseous at the endless implications. Even looking back at her, gliding on the ice, I can’t get over the overwhelming urge to lock us both in this quiet open rink forever, never having to face anything outside of it.

I'm psychotic. I guess nearly dying on the ice didn't take away my control freak mentality.

She's going fast, spinning backwards and leaning like she's prepping for a jump, which she makes three turns in the air, before slamming down hard enough to slide on her ass towards the curve of the corner boards.

I'm over the boards before I realize, skating to her and stopping short like some strange reverse of that first day she saved me—only I'm still the one panicking.

“Sadie?”

My voice feels hollow, my hands numb.

She blinks up at me, pushing up slightly. “Hey, hotshot.”

Relief blares through me so quickly, I nearly join her in laying on the ice.

“You went down pretty hard. You okay?”

“That was easily the fall that hurt the *least* this morning.” She smirks, a gentle curve of her lips that makes my stomach drop and the back of my neck heat.

And I can't *not* touch her; I grab her biceps and lift her gently, until her skates are steady beneath her body.

There's concern mixed with the light humor still on her face, like even now she's *more* worried about *me*. That little divot between her eyebrows appears, slanting against her beautiful smirk.

“Were you watching me?”

“Maybe.”

“You keep catching my worst moments,” she grumbles, skating slowly. I follow her, trying not to pant like a fucking dog behind her.

“Only fair,” I add. “Considering today might be the only day you're not hauling my big ass off the ice.”

“I've seen bigger.”

Everything in me perks up at the verbal spar, the offer of flirting. Every part of my usual numbness starts to fade away at the promise of *her*.

“Have you? An ass girl?”

She stops and smiles. “Not particularly. But I've heard lots about hockey players having *giant*—”

My palm slaps over her mouth, pushing into her and sending us both landing lightly against the boards. She's a small thing, even the height of her blades don't give her anything since I've got mine on as well. Small, but not delicate, and shapely in a way I can easily see through all the tight black

material covering her muscular body.

She giggles into my hand, gray eyes crinkling with humor at the effect of her taunt.

“Got it out of your system?”

She nods, but I hold on a moment longer, desperate for the feeling of her pressed to me. I want to grab her, caress and touch every inch of her.

I shouldn’t—she’s my *friend*, if even that. But I’m in her orbit now, and she’s becoming my goddamn center of gravity. Whether she realizes it or not.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You ever gonna tell me why I keep pulling your big handsome ass off the ice?”

I smirk. “So you *have* been checking out my ass.”

She’s silent, a half smile still on her face, but there’s clearly a quick search of me reflecting in her eyes. She’s worried about me *again*, and a knot starts to form in my throat.

She pushes me suddenly, switching our positions and pressing me into the boards and plexiglass in a much softer, sensual way than I’m used to, the top of her head just dusting my shoulders.

“Alright, hotshot, let’s make a deal.”

No deal needed—if she keeps looking at me like this, I’ll do anything she says.

“I don’t ask about your shit, you don’t ask about mine. We share the ice —”

“And music,” I butt in.

“And music.” She laughs and my chest feels lighter. “But that’s all. Nothing else, just... partners.”

She pulls back from me and does a little spin, keeping her eyes on mine.

“Don’t look me up,” I add desperately, as she starts to skate to her side.

Her brow wrinkles and her mouth opens like she might tease or ask a follow up question, but she doesn’t. Something she sees on my face must be enough.

“Okay.”



“I think I got it!” Liam shouts, slamming down again as his stick spins away with the puck.

I smile, skating over to scoop him up and hold his arms while he tries to steady his blades underneath his little body.

Volunteering again had originally been my mom’s idea, after hearing my dad pester me each morning about skating together. That, and—as she told me, having to distract him each morning so he didn’t follow me.

I adamantly requested no details of said distraction. My parents have always been affectionate enough to make me sick on a normal basis.

So now, I tensely skate with Liam, desperately trying to ignore my father’s stare from the other side of the rink. He’s helping the older kids, which means he’s with Oliver, so I can’t help but checking on them both.

My father, tall and strong, is still very much the NHL star player he was before retirement, minus the gray now lining his dark hair and wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Just like any time he’s been on the ice with me, he’s smiling as he works with the players on pivot drills around two bright orange cones.

I maneuver Liam so he’s holding the low side pocket of my joggers, before offering my hand after removing my glove.

A loud laugh bursts from the circle waiting on the drill space, alerting me to the group of preteen boys surrounding Oliver.

He’s slightly tall for his age, but mostly from what I’ve seen in the last hour of distracted teaching, Oliver is gifted. Like good enough to be watched by the line of coaches chatting on the side of the rink.

“Oh no,” Liam mutters, sighing like a mother exhausted over her disobedient child.

“What? Oliver?”

Liam nods, looking up at me and releasing my hand. “Yeah. He fights with those boys sometimes—the ones in the red jerseys.”

“He doesn’t like them?”

“They don’t always come here. Only when they’re with their dad I think. Oliver doesn’t like anyone, but he really *really* doesn’t like them.”

The kid is observant, I realize. I have to stop myself from asking him to tell me everything he can remember about his older sister.

“Do you know why?”

“Not really.” He sighs again, mimicking my pose with his arms crossed. “But one time I was playing sharks and minnows with everyone and Coach

Chelsea, and I heard them talking about Sadie.”

My stomach sours as I watch Oliver toss his gloves off and tackle one of the kids. I want to start cheering and whistling like I’m watching his first NHL fight, but I manage to keep myself in check.

Instead, I tell Liam to hold onto the boards while I skate over and insert myself between them.

“Back it up,” I snap, easily yanking them apart. “Calm down.”

My dad tries to hold Oliver’s shoulder but he yanks himself away like he’s been burned.

“Don’t touch me, asshole.”

I blow out a breath. *Jesus, this kid.*

“Calm down, Oliver,” I try, my voice a little softer as I keep a hold of the red shirt kid’s collar.

Oliver’s heated stare shoots to mine, again like a caged animal ready to scratch. He looks like Sadie, defensive and punchy.

“They started it,” he spits out, anger rolling off him in waves. But I can see the vulnerability in his gaze begging for me to believe him.

“I know,” I say calmly, releasing the other kid with a shove towards my dad. “Let Coach Max deal with them. Let’s go cool off.”

Something flickers in his eyes, before he sighs and drops his head. “Okay,” he says and follows me towards where Liam is now lying flat on the ice.

The session is nearly over, but I take a corner of the rink for the three of us, dragging Liam around as I correct Oliver’s edges.

It isn’t until my father joins us that I realize the rink is cleared.

“Where’s Chelsea?”

“I sent her home; told her we would wait on their parents.”

I nod, still keeping my gaze on Liam chasing Oliver around the circle he’s creating with his edges. If I look at my dad, I’ll see the question that I know is there, about these kids and my connection to them.

But he doesn’t pester. Instead, my dad steps forward with his stick, pulling Oliver from his current pattern and shifts his focus to catching a fast shot on his backhand. It takes a few minutes, but he warms up to us easily, following every correction given to him. I can see the spark ignite in my dad, recognizing the level of talent the kid has now as bright potential.

I spot her instinctually, as if she’s a homing beacon, forever drawing me back to her piercing gray stare. She stops mid-step, her bag dropping off her



shoulders as she watches Oliver with apprehension in her eyes, and her guard way up.

Liam is shouting for her as I pick him up and skate us both over. Oliver pauses, but my dad has him run his current drill again.

Sadie watches him, eyes bright—like this isn't something she gets to see that often.

“He’s gifted,” I say, letting Liam climb down from me.

The younger kid shouts, “Watch me!” And tries to join his brother across the rink. Even with his resilience and quick recoveries, he’ll never make it.

I can tell Oliver is showing off a bit and Sadie is glued to his every move. It stirs something in me, like I should apologize for what I cornered her about that first day. Perhaps I read this situation wrong.

But then, I think about that call to her phone.

“Your parents aren’t coming?” I ask, but it feels like testing a field for landmines.

“We have a deal, hotshot,” she answers, refusing to look at me. “They’re busy. I can take care of the boys. Any other questions?”

*Thousands.* Like Why are you so angry? Why do you skate like you’re on fire? Who is that bad that you listed them as DO NOT ANSWER in your phone? Are you safe? Are you okay?

Still, I shake my head.

Crumbs.

I’ll eat every last one.

SIX

# RHYS

It's been two weeks of this routine, getting my feet under me again sans panic attacks while tying skates. Two weeks of waking to the promise of seeing her settling my stomach, skating to her eclectic music taste that swings from Steely Dan to Ethel Cain to Harry Styles in the same hour.

Now, I feel as though what she first selects is how I can read her moods. I can tell she's in need of settling when she plays Phoebe Bridgers, or desperate for a fast dancing skate when she blares Two Door Cinema Club and MGMT back-to-back, usually smiling with endorphins as she freestyles across her side of the ice.

But sometimes, she starts Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car." Those days she doesn't usually speak to me, only stares at me on our way in with eyes that always look half full of tears.

I try to listen most on those days, as if the lyrics she hears might be another language for her, picking up the smallest of hints, desperate for as much of her as I can consume.

Today, however, she's late.

Most days that Sadie comes in late, she's having an angry day, so I prepare to shoot and race the rink to anything loud. But today doesn't seem to be one of those days.

The anxiety at being on the ice without her settles as I hear her coming, echoing from the tunnel into the silent rink.

It takes all my strength not to turn and stare as she comes in, to wait until I hear her skates slice the ice before looking.

She's wearing her usual outfit: a threadbare gray Waterfell University shirt and leggings with a flare over her white skates, hair pulled up and

mostly off her face.

She skates over to me in that same style; a little angry, graceful but with a touch of vengeance.

“I made you something,” she says, and there’s that divot between her eyebrows like she is frustrated or questioning everything at a near constant. Her hands hold nothing, but she sticks them out to me like I’m the one with a gift.

“What?”

“Your phone.”

I open it and hand it to her, watching over her shoulder, where she settles right next to me, as she pulls up the app and selects her profile and clicks the first playlist.

There’s a picture of a very sad looking beagle with a party hat on his head, even while he lays spread flat on the floor, but across it in sparkly letters the name of the album is bright.

“Sadie’s Songs for Reece’s Sad Demon Brain,” I read aloud, before adding, “You spelled Rhys wrong.”

“Your parents spelled your name wrong on the birth certificate. Your way looks like *Rise*. So if anything, I fixed it.” She rolls her eyes, but her teeth clasp onto her lip a little self-consciously. “I made it last night. I... Well, graphic design isn’t my major.”

My heart pinches for a moment, like a lingering stab wound at the thought of her in her bedroom, up all night curating songs and making art for the cover so it looked like this. For me.

“I thought maybe you could listen to it while you skate and... I don’t know. It’s stupid—“

“It’s not,” I cut her off vehemently. “You made me a playlist.”

“Yeah.” She nods, rocking in a wide circle on her skates back and forth, pushing off my chest each time. I grab her when she returns this time, my hands on her wrists to keep her touching me. I transfer her wrists into one of mine, selfish with her touch as much as her time. Digging the second set of AirPods from my pocket, I slip them into her ears and gently let her go.

“Do you want to pick first?”

“I think you should just shuffle it. That’s what I do, then you focus on that instead of panicking.”

I hover my finger over the button as she starts to skate off to the other end, before I see her pause and swizzle backwards.

“It might not work, and I don’t really know what’s bothering you, but music helps me.”

She stops there, but the unspoken words are just as loud. If anything, her eyes say it easily; it’s *I wanted to help and this is all I have and I see you*.

“Thank you,” I offer, but it feels too insufficient.

I press shuffle and chuckle a little laugh when “No Sleep Till Brooklyn” starts blaring in my ears.

She skates around quickly, zigzagging along and warming up, focused like always. But when she passes me again, her eyes meet mine and she mouths along with the words playing through our headphones.

A laugh rumbles in my chest. I want to stay just like this with her forever.



“Your father mentioned something interesting—*damn it!*”

I look up from my perch at the countertop, checking over my mom as she rushes her finger under the tap while boiling sauce bubbles over the pot behind her.

“You okay?” I smile, watching as she wipes her hands on her overalls and turns back to the stove.

My dad might have been an incredible hockey player, but my mother was well known in her own right. “*Architecture's Darling*” according to many news articles and magazines, Anna Koteskiy is mostly known for designing grand gazebos and extravagant gardens. Now, she mostly spends her time running a few charities for sustainable housing projects.

Still, my mother loves to cook—no matter how hazardous it is for her and everyone in the vicinity.

Somehow, my father’s entrance scares her enough to drop the pan on her forearm, shouting a little curse and still managing to keep hold of it. My father and I both race towards her. While I take a mitten from the counter to grab the pan, Dad dotes on her like she’s suffered a life-threatening injury.

As he mutters to her in a mix of Russian and English, my mom and I share an eye roll.

“Maybe I’ll take over dinner.” He sighs, letting her go with another kiss to the burned skin. “It’s nice outside, take our son out to the patio and set the table.”

Mom grabs the stack of dark green pottery plates while I pile silverware, napkins and other table necessities in my arms, and both of us leaving the large kitchen through the attached glass greenhouse and out onto the back patio. The string lights are already on, warm golden light casting an added glow to the amber of the six o'clock sun.

The custom oak wood table needs a slight dust off, which is usual for this time of year, with the obscene amount of flowers and blossoming trees near the outer perimeter of the sunken patio.

“So, who’s the girl?”

I choke on the gulp of water in my mouth, coughing repeatedly as my mother—the traitor—laughs and waits on me to regain my composure.

“What are you talking about?”

“Clearly there’s a girl.”

My fingers dance along the perspiration of my glass. “Did dad say something?”

Her eyes twinkle like I’ve confessed my love for whoever she’s imagining. “Should he have?”

“No.”

“Rhys, if your father knows about a girl before me, I will never forgive you.” She glares daggers at me for a minute, before relaxing with a knowing smile. “Besides, I thought you were still keeping him in the doghouse when it comes to your dating life after the prom incident.”

A full body cringe rolls through at even the mention of prom, shoving the memories back behind the brick wall in my brain.

“Don’t remind me.” I shake my head again. “What makes you think there is someone, anyway?”

I wait for her light teasing, but her voice drops into the soft whisper she’s used on every failure and scrape or bruise as a child.

“Because you are my son; a piece of my heart, love, and you have been *drowning*. Maybe you still are.”

I feel sick. Of course my mother would know, saving me from nightmares as often as she has.

“Probably.” I sigh, my knee kicking up, bouncing anxiously.

“But lately, you’ve seemed different.”

She’s waiting for me to fill in the blanks, but I’m not sure what to say. That there is a girl, at least for me, even if she’ll hold me at arm’s length forever. That’s fine, I’ll stay an arm’s distance away as long as it still means

she's near me, chasing out the shadows crowding my empty body.

I know it isn't healthy. I just don't care.

"Sadie is just a friend."

"Sadie? Pretty name."

*Pretty girl.* I bite down on my tongue, smoothing a hand over my knee to try and slow the shaking.

"We've been splitting our ice time in the mornings. She's a figure skater, for Waterfell actually."

"Yeah?"

"I don't think she really likes me," I snort, unable to stop talking about her now that I've started. "But she's funny. And she has good music."

"Sounds like a cool girl."

"I like skating with her." The words pour like vomit.

"The angry one?" my dad asks, slipping beside me to plate the eggplant parm in the center of the table. "Her brothers are adorable."

"She has brothers?" Mom asks, giving Dad a quick kiss on the cheek before settling as we pass around a blend of roasted veggies, Caesar salad and pasta.

"Oliver and Liam," I offer. "Oliver is pretty good."

"More than good. That kid's a star. And little Liam is the cutest kid I've ever seen, *rybochka*, all his freckles and missing teeth."

Finishing her bite, Mom waits before adding, "They're in the program, then? That's good."

"Didn't know you were skating with someone at the rink those early mornings." There isn't an accusation in his words, not really, but my back is up anyways.

The lie slips quickly. "I invited her. We, uh, had a class together last year."

"World's worst liar award still belongs to you, Rhys." Mom sighs, reaching for the wine bottle across the table. My dad beats her to it, refilling her glass for her.

It feels good to talk about her, at least a little, but it's another reminder that no matter how often I think of her—of the way her gray eyes settle on me, her music in my headphones after another nightmare, the fantasy of her hips in my hands haunting my empty head—Sadie is not really anything to me. I doubt she'd even call us friends.

Meanwhile, I find myself desperate, if only to be near her.

SEVEN



# SADIE

It's a good night. Really, really good.

The warm late July air sails through the rolled down windows while “Waterloo” plays through the staticky speakers. Liam sings every word at the top of his lungs from his car seat, and although I don't know where his ABBA obsession came from, I've definitely encouraged it. Even Oliver smiles and hums along from his seat.

I pull through the drive-thru of Oliver's favorite fast food place, which he swears makes the “perfect milkshake dipper fries.” His face lights up with another bright smile that I pocket away; they're so rare nowadays.

But tonight, he's made of them.

He played the game of his nearly-12-year-old life tonight, scoring two of the team's three-point win. Even playing on this mixed exhibition team, Oliver shines; and I know come fall, he'll shine even more with his school team.

Oliver like this—wet hair drying in the summer heat, mouth smudged with chocolate shake remnants, smiling through too-large waffle fry bites—that's the brother I remember. The one buried beneath the hurt.

He plays the alphabet game with Liam without complaint, both of their giggles giving me more sustenance than the spicy grilled chicken sandwich I'm scarfing down.

I leave the car in park for a while after we're all finished, watching the sunset over the slight hilltop that rolls down to a small park and a popular lake that we have skated on many times when frozen. It's moments like this where I can imagine another life for us all, where I'm torn by the urge to drive off into the sunset, chasing the light until we're somewhere new. I'd

never skate again if it meant an endless supply of nights like this for my brothers.

My phone rings, cutting the low playing music in the background.

*Mitchel Hanburgh.*

The lawyer.

I excuse myself, stepping out of the car and under the cover of a tree, far enough away that their little ears can't hear, close enough to keep watch over them.

"Hi, this is Sadie."

"Sadie." He sighs. I can almost picture him the way I saw on the video call before. "Listen, I still need Oliver's birth certificate—"

"I found it," I cut him off. "I can send it over tomorrow if I go by the school."

"Great," he agrees, but there's enough hesitancy that I know what's coming next. "And your father? Did you speak with him?"

"I-I haven't had time."

"Ms. Brown, I have to have his signature on the consent documents. And I haven't even broached the topic of Liam's—"

"I got it," I snap, then run a hand through my hair, snagging on the tangles before yanking it free. "Sorry, I just—I'll see what I can do."

"Alright," he sighs, resigning. "I'll let you go. Send me what you have and I'll see what I can do on my end with the custody papers."

"Thank you," I reply, before ending the call.

It's like my perfect frozen snow globe moment has been shattered. So, the smile I give my brothers isn't as bright as before.

I hate that Oliver notices, even more that he doesn't ask. Watching his smile sink and dim, until it fades entirely—the tightness in his body as I start to drive towards home—makes tears prick behind my eyes.

The emotion is overwhelming, so much so that the moment we pull into the driveway, I know I won't be able to sleep without something—something to push everything bubbling within me *out*.

My hands are shaking as I type out a quick Busy tn? text to a usual hookup. I don't wait for a response before jumping out, seeing Oliver already unfastening Liam from his seatbelt.

The house seems quiet, but that isn't a good or bad sign, something my eldest little brother and I know well.

I hate that the front door is unlocked, because it means Liam, still

chattering and singing under his breath, is the first through the threshold. It doesn't matter that I shout at him to stop and wait, he takes off, Oliver and myself chasing behind him until we all crash into one another like dominoes.

“Is he asleep—”

Liam's question is cut off by Oliver's hand over his mouth.

Our father isn't asleep—if anything, he's passed out. There's a torn up box of beer cans, empty on the floor of the living room, an empty half-broken bottle of whiskey at the corner of the kitchen just before the stairs.

No, I realize with my heart leaping into my throat. *He's crying.*

“Take Liam to my room.”

That's all it takes before Oliver is ushering a now quiet Liam up the creaking stairs.

“Dad?” I start, inching slowly towards him, unable to decipher his mood.

“I—”

“Oh god,” he cries, lifting his head up from the cradle of his arms. His eyes are red and sunken, cheeks rosy with intoxication and wet with tears. “Sadie, I'm so sorry. I just...”

“I know.” I don't, but I want to stop him now before the pieces of me still held together crack entirely. “I thought you were out of money. How did you get all this?”

“Please. I'm sorry,” he blubbers, ignorant or unhearing of my question, his hand gripping tightly to my wrist.

“Don't touch my sister,” Oliver sneers, storming into the kitchen and grabbing Dad's hand off my arm.

“I'm your father,” he snaps, turning from pathetically sad to heated anger in the blink of an eye.

“Barely,” Oliver spits back, but he's pulling me away from the kitchen. He's brave talk when facing off with Dad, but the fear is in his eyes—he's still scared. We all are.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, rounding the corner to the stairs.

Oliver shakes his head. “There's some fucking woman up there saying she's Liam's mom and now he's hiding.”

My stomach drops.

Liam doesn't know, Oliver probably barely remembers. It was five years ago and I'd woken up early for a before-school practice, hoping to bring Oliver with me to avoid anything with our dad. But when I'd walked down the stairs, Dad was passed out across the couch hugging a bottle, and a baby

was on the floor, just looking at me with wide brown eyes.

I was terrified, a sixteen-year-old high school student with already too much responsibility with Oliver; and suddenly, there's a bouncing little baby boy to add to the absolute shit show of my life.

My coach stepped up. He knew I needed to keep it all a secret until I was eighteen at least, or we'd all be taken away and separated. So, he helped me find sitters, and helped me deal with my father so that I could skate and keep winning.

I owe him everything.

The pit in my stomach churns to anger, feeling my loud steps towards my brother's room. Oliver is on my heels and as much as he is my baby brother, he's a protector through and through—beneath all that anger.

The woman is clearly drunk, swaying on her hands and knees as she tries to draw Liam out from hiding beneath his bed.

I grab her by the collar of her shirt, dragging her back. I'm sure if she were standing, I'd be at a height disadvantage. But, I'm strong and she's strung out.

“Get the hell out, psycho!” Oliver shouts.

I manage to drag her out, demanding Oliver to check on Liam, before shoving her to the top of the stairs like I might fling her off.

“Are you really his mom?” I ask, hating the word. “Did you give birth to him?”

“Yes, I—”

“Prove it.”

“I-I-I think I have the birth certificate. I can't—”

“I don't care. You have two options. Either you sit here while I call the police and my lawyer to make sure you pay the years of missing child support. Or, you go the fuck home and send me that document. And you sign my fucking custody papers.”

It takes barely a minute before she says, “Okay. Just let me go.”

As soon as I hear the door close behind her, I burst into action. My hands won't stop shaking even as I pack Liam's clothes into a bag. Oliver sees what I'm doing and takes off to his room, leaving Liam perched on the bed.

“Spend the night party?”

“Yeah,” I breathe out, pushing his hair back off his little freckled face. “Are you okay, bug?”

“Yeah... Is that weird lady gone?”

“Yeah. She’s not coming back.”

“She said she was my mom.”

“She's not,” I say, fervently.

“Oh.” He nods, thinking hard. “Do you think, maybe, one day I’ll have a mommy?”

My heart hurts.

“Maybe one day, bug.”

His words haunt me the entire drive, so much so it must be written across my face judging by Rora’s reaction. We tuck them in and Rora tells me to shower in her room while she starts a movie for them. She’s already playing Tracy Chapman on the soft speakers by her bed.

I cry until I can’t breathe.

For a moment, while lying on Rora’s bed waiting on her, I think about trying to contact Rhys. Like something about him would make this better—which is ridiculous considering who he is and what he’s dealing with himself. But I can't shake the thought.

Aurora scratches my back and holds me until I fall asleep.

EIGHT

# RHYS

Somehow, she got here before me, which makes me rush to get on the ice like an overeager kid for his first real game.

I don't even bother to try to wipe off the cheesy smile that hangs off my face almost constantly around her. She turns every hesitancy into excitement, every anxiety back into near bliss in the way it used to be for me on this ice.

I wonder if I could convince her to *She's the Man* herself onto the hockey team so I never have to be on the ice without her.

*God*, I've got to get it together if I'm going to be "Captain Rhys" again by next month.

Trying not to disturb her mid-routine—because I can tell it's full out from the intensity of her movements, the artistry woven between so beautifully, it makes my chest ache. I clench my fists to trap the anxious monster in my head that's so desperate for more of her, worried if I even stare too long at her, I won't be able to stop myself from doing something insane—like pin her to the boards again.

Or see how light she is in my hands. Could I hold her up with my hand while the other presses—

A loud crunch and hard bang rip me from replaying my inappropriate dreams, shooting the head in my body away with an ice cold plunge of terror as I watch Sadie slide on her stomach into the boards, hard.

She doesn't move.

She's on her goddamn stomach on the ice and she isn't moving.

*Fuck.*

I think I'm going to be sick.

I'm shouting for her in a blind panic, jumping the boards still in my

sneakers and racing to her sprawled figure. Briefly, I wonder how in the world she stayed calm that day she found me lying on the ice, because I'm losing my mind at just the image of her here now.

When I make it to her side, she's shaking.

"Sadie?" My voice is quiet as I kneel down to pull her up. She's like water in my hands, boneless and slipping through as I try to at least prop her back against the boards.

My hands hover in the air over her body, desperate to check that she's unharmed, but too scared that I'll frighten her or expand her anxiety.

She's crying, near to sobs like she can't take a breath. Panic is still racing through my veins, but I try to concentrate on her.

"Hey, breathe—remember?" My hand presses the tangled loose pieces of her hair that have escaped her ponytail back. "I know it feels like you can't, like you're dying, but focus on my hands."

I reach down and press her hands into mine. For how flushed her cheeks and neck are, her hands feel like the ice we're sitting on.

"Try the three's method," I say, whisper-quiet in the vastness of the rink. "My therapist tells me to think of three things you can hear, three things you can see, and three things you can feel."

"Okay," she huffs, her voice catching in the sob.

"Start with what you can hear."

"My music." She pauses and closes her eyes tightly. "Your breathing. The air conditioning."

"Something you can see."

Her eyes blink open again, tinged red but only with a few tears escaping. "You."

I can't help the smile that slips. "Try to be specific."

"Your dimples when you smile. The pink cap on my skate laces. An old Bruins logo flag."

"Good, last one. What can you feel?"

"The ice under my legs, the boards behind me." She keeps her eyes locked on mine. "You holding my hand."

"Good girl." I squeeze her hands in mine. "Okay, Gray?"

The question makes her smile as she calms further and she nods, tears only slightly leaking down her cheeks. I hate the sight of it, unable to stop myself from bunching my sleeve and wiping beneath her eyes.

"Gray?"



“It’s your eyes.” I smile.

She giggles but it turns into a sob. “Sorry,” she says.

“Nope. Not doing that apology thing.” I wince as my mouth opens again.  
“I know we said no questions—”

“Rhys—”

“But, I have to ask because this is new.”

She starts to stand, climbing me like my body is purely there to support her—a thought that intrigues me more than it should. I help her, still towering over her, even without my skates on, while she steadies on her blades.

Finally releasing her lip from between her teeth, she huffs a breath and lets the words fall from her mouth like a waterfall.

“They’re cutting the concession area hours for the rest of the summer, which means I’m losing that job. And I can’t do coaching on the schedule they offered so I won’t have that to replace it. Not to mention, I wouldn’t be like this if I could just get laid, but apparently that’s not happening for me right now. So I’m trying to just work all the time. But, my job near campus only has so many hours right now until the semester starts. And Oliver needs new skates—”

Her chest starts to heave. I press a hand down firm on her sternum, trying to bring her back.

“Stop for a second.” She nods at me appreciatively. “Let’s go somewhere else today.”

She’s already shaking her head.

“I need to practice. You need the ice time—”

“One day won’t kill us.”

If Bennett or any of the team could hear me now they’d think they’d entered an alternate universe.

Instead of waiting for her to acquiesce, I slip my hands under her legs and pick her up in a bridal carry. She squeals lightly but doesn’t complain as I walk slowly back to the gate and all the way into the locker room.

“Do what you need to do and then come out to the car. I’ll go wait there.”

And without thinking, I drop a kiss to her forehead and pick up my gear bag, turning to leave the room before I can think about how ridiculous that move might have been.



“Extra cream cheese?” I ask, faking a gag that’s quickly rewarded by an angry little push.

“No cream cheese?” She fakes a gag, eyeing my savory breakfast sandwich. “Sweet over savory every time.”

We’re in my car, parked by a lake near town that Sadie had—reluctantly—suggested. It’s gorgeous, and busy, and even with the golden morning light shining like a halo over the painting-esque view, I’m distracted.

By her.

She’s so beautiful; dark lips and thick lashes over her darting, intense eyes. That little patch of freckles that I want to touch almost constantly. Silk brown hair that I imagine feels just like that if I ran my fingers through it.

“I’m glad you seem better.”

“Thanks for the food. I think I was just hungry.”

I don’t think it’s that simple at all. But I can’t help the warm feeling that just feeding her has given me.

“Sure.” I nod. “But, I mean, I’m great at listening. If you want to talk about anything.”

*Especially the part about getting laid.*

I bite my tongue.

“I need another job, I guess, is the main point.” She blushes, but it quickly disappears as she turns away from me. “And usually, I’m not so... sensitive. I have a better handle on things when I’m not so... amped up.”

“Amped up?”

She rolls her eyes, gulping down another sip of her iced coffee.

“I just need to work out my stuff... get laid, you know. Athletes do it all the time.”

“I don’t,” I blurt out, immediately wishing I could take it back. I bite down a little harder on my tongue to keep from asking her if she wants *me* to help with that.

*If she wanted you, she would’ve asked. Fucking look at her—she’s not afraid of anything.*

But the image of her vulnerable, on the ice, looking up at me flashes. I don’t want anyone else to see her that way.

“Serial dater?” she snorts.

“More like serial monogamous. But, not anymore. I don’t—” I shrug, trailing off because I’m not sure what to say.

“Maybe you need to get laid too.”

My face burns, turning red and my hand fumbles to turn my side of the A/C colder, before scratching at the back of my neck.

“I— What—”

“I wasn’t offering, hotshot.” She smiles but turns away just as quickly. “Trust me. That’s just... Not a good idea.”

“Right.” I try to laugh with her. But, I can’t help the tinge of embarrassment staining my cheeks.

*Of course not. Look at her and look at you.*

*Pathetic.*

“For the record,” I say, looking out along the lake across all the life around us. “I am offering.”

She’s silent. But she’s smiling and shaking her head, avoiding every ounce of the eye contact I’m directing towards her.

But I can’t bring myself to regret it.

NINE

# SADIE

“Gorgeous spiral,” Coach Moreau says, her accent thick despite the airy quality of her voice.

Celine Moreau, Canadian bronze medalist and one half of a very famous brother-sister pairs team, is the current pairs team coach. Only two pairs currently train as part of the Waterfell team, plus the eight singles. Today, she’s the only coach present for first season practice; really, it’s more of a warm-up skate mixed with team bonding.

My coach is strangely absent, but I try not to think about that. Try not to let that anxiety even take root.

Instead, I find myself, unfortunately, thinking about Rhys.

His massive hands, his stupid pretty doe eyes and dimpled smile. Everything. I’m distracted—sloppy, if anything, and I know Coach Kelley wouldn’t be pleased, that I’d get reprimanded and do it again until perfect. I’d prefer that, it’s what I need, so I let the compliments roll off my shoulders, passing my ears as background noise.

Eventually, the practice expires, the entire team circling up for a quick meeting. I’ve got blinders on, and thanks to Rhys’ extravagant gift that I begged him to take back last skate, music still plays through the fancy headphones in my ears—which is the only reason I don’t hear him approach.

He plucks a headphone from my ear.

“This is sex music,” Luc whispers. I elbow him discreetly, still pretending to listen to the encouragement from his coach.

Luc Laroux is a handsome—and unfortunately, skilled—pairs skater. Had he stopped dating his partners he might’ve been on his Olympic tour right now. Yet, he’s here, with a set of skills that the other pairs team obviously

envy, and a continuous heartbreaker reputation.

Currently, he's found himself partnerless, again.

"I saw Rose on a magazine cover the other day. Still too proud to grovel?"

His jaw clenches tight, all mirth melting from his face at the mention of his long-time partner, the now popular Olympic prospect currently plastered everywhere in the skating world alongside her new endearing partner.

The ice king himself almost looks jealous.

"Aw," I whimper. "Do you miss her?"

There's a flash in his eyes, before he covers it with a wicked smirk that I know has gotten him under many women's skirts

"Why? Are you offering to be my new partner?"

I fake gag. "Over my dead body."

He snickers, hidden under the loud double clap from Moreau signaling the end of practice.

"You sure? I need to practice my lifts. Was looking for a partner."

I roll my eyes as we slug slowly behind the rest of the team. The innuendo is one I'm unfortunately familiar with. Usually, I'm quite repetitive in my motto of not mixing business with pleasure, but in this case I have already mixed. Which makes it easier to say yes.

And yet, I'm hesitating.

And a stupid pair of brown eyes are taking over my entire brain.

So I shake my head and shove Luc's shoulder. "I've got to get home."



It's a pancake breakfast morning, which, by my brother's standards, assures it will be a good day.

Ms. B, our neighbor who often helps us, offered to watch them today. I don't usually need her on the weekends before noon, but Coach Kelley called a last minute practice at the other rink in a midnight email.

Which means I need to be there a few hours early to make sure my current jump combo—and my spiral—are as clean as possible. I'm desperate for this year to be different; starting with not disappointing Coach Kelley.

But then, I see his car.

Emotions soar through me too quickly to hone in on just one—anger,

frustration, fear, worry... excitement and anticipation.

I want to see him, I realize, as much as I want to scream at him to get out of my rink and out of my head.

*You can't touch him. Stop it.*

I try to chant it, as I march into the rink and down to the locker rooms ready to be firm. To tell him we can't skate together anymore, for my sanity.

*Fuck.*

He's laying against one set of lockers, bent and sweating, skates on, legs splayed out as he hefts breaths like he's been drowning.

My bag falls off my shoulder. My anger falls away into nothing.

The sound alerts him, brown eyes shooting towards me in panic—then slumping half-lidded as he realizes it's just me.

"We have to stop meeting like this," he mutters, his plump mouth arching into what I assume to be some sort of smile, even if it's barely there in exhaustion. My stomach hurts. Finding him like this again... a week before he's going to play—

My heart feels like it's lodged in my throat.

"Rhys," I barely get out, my hand reaching for his face. It's only as he circles my wrist that I realize I'm shaking.

"Worried about me, Gray?"

"Terrified," I admit. "I thought it was better."

"S-so did I." He groans, his head slumping into my palm, as if it's the only thing keeping his neck upright. "Today is just a bad day."

"I should've brought you pancakes," I say, not realizing how insane that sounds on its own.

He laughs, breathless but happy. "Please explain that one."

"Liam thinks when I make pancakes, it'll be a good day."

He smiles at me, doe eyes glittering, dimples deep. "I'll try that one next time. I bet you make the best pancakes, though."

"I'll make you some, sometime," I whisper, sitting next to him as he wipes off his forehead and leans back. "You okay?"

He nods. Sitting up, he takes a few gulps of his water. "Yeah. But just a fair warning, I will take you up on that. I love breakfast food."

"I thought you liked savory over sweet."

"I like anything when it comes to you," he confesses and my heart clenches.

His hand dips into his pocket, handing me a headphone. I realize, only

then, that he's got my old pair in his ears, that he was listening to music.

"I couldn't find mine fast enough," he sighs.

I take the proffered earbud, letting the cord link between us even as he hands me his phone to select the music.



TEN

# SADIE

He might as well have a sign plastered across his forehead saying “*kiss me.*” And I should be wearing one that says, “*this is a horrible idea.*”

None of this has gone according to my plan.

Seeing him like this, hunched over in just his sweatpants and an athletic tee stretched across the broadness of his chest. With his head in his hands, fingers scraping through the thick, unruly brown locks, and breath shuttering from the tight line of his lips.

“Make This Go On Forever” is playing in my right ear, the music of Snow Patrol kicking up intensity every few moments, only feeding the energy between us.

My previous hook-up experience has been all quick, handsy, in-the-dark moments, usually over before it really began. A personal favorite distraction when I felt so much it was seeping from my home life into everything else.

But the way Rhys is looking at me isn’t just lust—it’s that desperation I know so well, in the darker parts of my mind that close me off from everything.

The need to feel something, just to ground myself.

I have to remind myself of what this is, before I dare to touch him. To let myself be this for him. He’s a popular hockey player with a mask that must be as good as gold. I’ve seen him vulnerable, repeatedly now, and I *know* he won’t ask outright, even as he leans in a little closer.

So, I match him, breath-for-breath, move-for-move, until his tensed forehead is pressed to my own, the sweat on his brow now cold in the chill of the room.

His breath is minty and cool as it puffs against my lips, and I *know* how

terrible this is, how much I truly should pull away, take back my headphones and dial in my focus—skate off my bubbling emotions like I usually do; but something is keeping me here, drawn to his deep well of hopelessness like a moth to a flame.

I can't save him. Even if I wanted to, because if anyone needs saving, it's Oliver and Liam before it's me; and it's definitely not my place to try and hold up the drowning hockey boy in front of me now.

He needs me.

*Yeah. Sure. For this, maybe.*

It isn't slow, just a hitch of my breath before I shove myself into him, lips meeting his with no hesitation, only need.

A low moan etches from his throat that sounds like absolute relief, and then he's responding, giving me back the passion I'm feeding him until it feels like we're part of a continuous loop. His hands reach for my waist, pulling almost harshly before I seat myself across his hips, legs straddling him on the low bench. His back hits the brick behind him, finding stability as the skates half-tied on his feet dig into the rubber mat flooring.

Pulling back to look down at him, I take in every detail. The thick brush of his dark hair falling over his forehead, the pink flush of his cheeks and the darkness of his swollen lips that are open lightly, huffing quickened breaths. His hands are still bracketing my hips, making me feel like a feather with the way they span the entirety of my waist.

"Is this what you want?" he breathes out, voice raspy as he gazes half-lidded eyes up to me. I reach out for him, but he catches my wrist and holds it. "Tell me."

My voice is gone, my mouth so dry it feels like I've gone months without a drop of water. I can only nod.

A breathtaking smile I've never seen before breaks through his lips, two dimples showing across his cheeks as he laughs and closes his eyes before pressing his mouth into the skin of my wrist and muttering against my pulse, "Good. Me too."

I can't decide what I want to do with him first.

Sliding my hands up his shoulders, his neck, and into his hair, I grip it lightly and dive back in, only to the strong column of his throat this time, licking and kissing it rapidly. He moans again, long and loud where his lips are right at my ear and I shiver, sending goosebumps across my skin. The movements of our bodies are harsh enough to dislodge both headphones, my

phone clattering to the floor, giving way to echoing silence.

His hands lace a pattern across my lower back, and for a moment they wander south. I wait for him to do *something*, anything—I just need more. But after a brief hesitation, his palms soothe up my covered spine and into the hair at the base of my neck, cradling my face in his hands as he kisses me again.

I grab his massive palms in my own hands, hard and insistent as I slide them down, down, down to cup my ass.

He groans, squeezing me, and I smirk, swallowing the sound as I dive for his swollen lips again.

It's intoxicating, the feeling of being on top of him and in total control. We're only kissing, but it feels like more than any of my late-night hookups before.

Minutes, hours, days—there's no real concept of time while I'm here, across his thighs. The only thing keeping me sane is the space I keep between us, my knees planted on either side of him, hovering from the prominent distraction below me. I won't even allow myself to look.

Which is possibly the only reason I hear the loud, echoing *bang* of the back rolling door slam, signaling someone's arrival.

I scamper from his lap, tossing myself off and onto the floor.

"Jesus," he mutters, but I can't look back towards him as my phone lights up.

It's barely even six, so in reality there shouldn't be anyone strutting the back hallways at this hour. Still, it's enough of a reminder that these aren't our summer mornings together anymore, this is real life.

Which means, a very specific someone will be here before I can remove the blush stain from my cheeks.

Pressing to stand, I fix my hair into a messy bun and spin back towards the hockey boy who will, unfortunately, be staring in my fantasies from now on.

I sit on the bench across from him, as if nothing happened, ignoring the searing feeling of his gaze on me yet again.

"Sadie—"

The spell is broken. Everything warm in my stomach is rotting the longer I look at him, guilt taking over.

*You can't help anyone. You'll just mess them up forever.*

"I need to practice." I slip on my skates and lace them quickly, my hands

shaking now, like I've absorbed every bit of his anxious energy into my body. He opens his mouth, but I raise my hand to stop him. "Seriously, Rhys, don't mention it. It was good."

"Then why are you leaving?" I hate the vulnerability in his voice almost as much as I hate myself.

*Because this changes everything we've built in our quiet mornings. I can't be your savior if I'm pulling you down with me.*

I need to focus. Oliver, Liam, Rora, skating, work, school. That's what matters.

*Don't disappoint Coach Kelley. Don't let this year be like last year.*

*Don't get distracted.*

*Oliver, Liam, Rora. Skating, work, school.*

I want to say something, but the only words that manage to leave my swollen lips is another brittle, "I need to practice." Standing on my covered skates, I finally look at him once more. "And I need to *focus*. This can't happen again."

His brow dips, watching me while I whiz around the room, tossing my hoodie into my bag and nearly running through the tunnel to the ice.

I only skate for thirty minutes before I'm headed back, hoping he's where I left him—I practice the apology in my head once or twice, because apologies aren't exactly a regular event for me, but before I can even round the tunnel into the locker room, I hear two voices.

One, a now-familiar male voice.

The other one I also, unfortunately, recognize.

Turning the corner, I see Rhys standing, sans skates, stretched to his full height, towering over Victoria's lithe spandex clad body. She's gorgeous, with lean muscles easy to see with her tan tights and ruffled skirt, complete with a baby blue jacket and legwarmers. She looks like the posters of girls I had in my room as a child, the cut out Olympians from magazines I pasted to the insides of my school folders. She looks exactly like I thought I would now.

Graceful and strong, yet beautiful.

Not this tired, overly emotional—even hateful—skater that I've become.

She looks good with him, I realize. Both of them long limbed; her buttery blonde bun secured tight, plump lips and skin still tanned from her summer on the Italian coast that I watched play out with envy on social media while underneath the comforter in my bedroom, eating far too many chocolate-

covered cherries.

And Rhys, with his mask of perfection, every trace of fear and vulnerability now gone. In its place is the handsome college hockey star I imagine that he usually is; messy hair like he just came off a hard skate, flushed skin and a smile that looks like stars—bright and glimmering. It even flashes in his irises, the little flecks of hazel brighter as his eyes crinkle and dimples pop.

He's exactly the campus golden boy I imagined. A slightly more rugged version of his team photo that my illicit internet search yielded.

Something about it makes my stomach hurt.

Victoria lays a delicate hand on his arm as she speaks again.

An irrational flare of jealousy has my spine straightening, before I sit as far away from the both of them on the bench, slamming my bag down with more force than necessary.

“Oh!” Victoria perks at the sight of me, turning slightly so she can face us both, her hands holding lightly to the strap of her bag where she clasps and unclasps her pink claw clip. The sound is grating over my ears, but more grating is her chipper giggle.

“Good morning, Sadie. I didn't see you. Have you met Rhys?” She gestures to him, angling her shoulder into his bicep like they are familiar.

*While I can still taste him.*

I lick my lips.

My eyes slide to meet his curious gaze, fixated on my face in the same way it continuously has been.

“I haven't. Didn't know it was ‘bring-your-boy-toy-to-work’ day, otherwise I wouldn't have shown up empty handed.” While the words are voiced towards Victoria, it's Rhys who I want to hear them. The quick set of his jaw and flare of his nostrils are the only proof that I've succeeded.

My phone is buzzing again, and I finally grab for it, answering without even looking.

“What?”

“Sadie.” The tearful voice of my youngest brother comes through the line and my heart slams into my stomach. “You-you have to come back.”

There's not even a moment of hesitation, before I whisper into the receiver, “I'm on my way, bug,” and hang up.

My back still turned away from them, huddling the corner like I might disappear into it, I hear Victoria's audible, heavy sigh.

“I’m sorry,” she says, her voice a soft little whisper intended only for Rhys in this echoing room. “Sadie is... kind of a loner. She doesn’t really play well with others.”

*I’ve played just fine with him for a month.*

The way she speaks over me like some sort of problem child only ratchets up my rising anger at her well-rested face and bright-eyed beauty, until it’s bubbling out of my mouth.

“Well, there’s only room for one person on the first place podium, Vicky,” I snap, with a hateful smirk across my sullen, pale face. “But maybe you’ll get there one day.”

“Sadie.”

The bottom drops out of my stomach, making sweat bead at my brow.

Coach Kelley, standing tall with a glowering stare and furrowed brows. His disappointment has always been a great weakness of mine; the single male figure I’ve looked up to most of my life.

He took me on at age eleven after watching me throw a tantrum for losing my first place streak, with no parental figure to stop me from pulling the plastic crown out of the other girl’s slicked back hair. His coaching career was only five years young at the time, starting immediately after tearing an ACL and never recovering back to his quad lutz status from his previous Olympic run.

He followed me from juniors to college, once I missed the Olympic qualifier. And his disappointment in knowing his prized pupil would never skate for Team USA was something that haunted me. It was part of what caused me to spiral.

And part of the reason I am now on probation, not able to compete until I pull my attendance up to at least seventy percent.

“Coach.” I grimace, nearly unable to swallow under the panic.

*God, why is everyone here so fucking early today?*

I reach to untie my skates to avoid every single eye now directed towards me.

“We gonna have a problem again this year?”

I keep my head held high but my cheeks are warm with embarrassment as the obvious reprimand flares. Even worse, in front of Victoria and Rhys.

“We talked about—” he starts, before realizing that I’m *unlacing* my skates, eyebrows climbing his forehead. “What are you doing?”

I shake my head, frustration, anger, fear swirling to the point that my eyes

are stinging.

*This is your fault. You kissed him. You got distracted.*

*You left them alone.*

“I can’t.” Shaking my head, my teeth grind together until I’m sure my jaw will break. “I have to go.”

“Sadie,” he snaps, gripping my arm as I try to maneuver past him. “You know the rules. You’re on probation still. You can’t miss—”

“I know.” I shrug out of his grip, not bothering to look behind myself as I sprint outside and to my car.

“Sadie,” a voice calls, just as my hand grips the handle to my driver’s side door. “Wait—where are you going?”

Eyes closed tightly, I snap out a quick, “Leave me alone, Rhys.”

“We should talk—”

“We don’t need to talk.” I toss my bag into the passenger seat. “I need to go, and you need to relax. You’re coming off as clingy, hotshot.”

I hate this version of myself—the desperate, fear-driven and hateful girl who wants everyone and everything away from her because it’s too much. But he needs to see this, so he realizes what a mistake that moment in the locker room was.

And all I hear is Liam’s little voice like a record looping in my head.

Slamming my door and locking it, I try to start the car, only to hear the grating scream of my engine refusing to turn over.

“No,” I huff, tears stinging my eyes. “No, no, no!”

Again and again.

Nothing.

There’s a *tap tap tap* on my window, before the hockey golden boy with the sad eyes is plastered to the side of my car, gesturing for me to roll down the window. I want to ignore him, but that heart-pounding fear has my hand reaching for the handle to manually roll it down.

“What?”

He sighs, running a hand through his long, beautiful hair in a way that’s irritatingly distracting. “I know you said we’re not friends.”

I’m being ridiculous, but I can’t stop myself from spitting, “Well-established point there.”

A strange laugh etches from him, and it almost sounds like it’s causing him pain.

“Right, well, you’re the one who stuck your tongue down my throat,



kitten, so your brand of not-friendship is one I can handle, I think.”

“Kitten?” I spit out, before I can even let the embarrassment of his crass comment overtake me completely. “Watch it. Gray was bad enough.”

“It’s the eyes.” He smirks, and for a moment I can see him, from before. Maybe our paths have crossed before, because right now he looks every bit the campus hero, hockey golden boy and exactly the type of one-night-stand I’d be rolling around with.

He holds his hands up, like a quick surrender. “I’ll pick another nickname for you, then.”

“No nicknames,” I barter. Nicknames seem too familiar.

He snorts. “Says the girl who keeps mocking me as the hockey hotshot. Trying to give me a complex?”

“Hard to give you something you already have.”

In truth, I *don’t* know him. In fact, everything I’ve seen from him this far should only prove that he isn’t the hockey *hotshot* I’m so fond of calling him. In the month I’ve skated with him, he’s either been heartbreakingly sweet or devastatingly panicked and sad.

No part he’s shared with me has been the hockey captain, Rhys Koteskiy—until today.

“Right.”

But his face looks a little forlorn, and I wish I could take it back because I hate this, but I choose to bite down on my lip hard, hoping to keep anything else horrible from spewing out of my mouth.

My phone rings again, Oliver and Liam’s grinning faces brightening the screen and sending a heated wave of anxiety through me again. I answer quickly, waiting with my eyes shut tight for Liam’s small sobs, but it’s Oliver this time.

“Sadie?”

“Hey, killer,” I barely etch out. “Are you okay? I’m on my way now.”

“We missed the bus for the early program. And Liam peed his pants again. Are we gonna get in trouble since it’s the first day of school?”

A breath of relief puffs through my lips and I nod, even though he can’t see it. “Alright, that’s okay. And no, you’re not going to be in trouble. Don’t worry. I’ll be home soon and we’ll figure it out.”

Hanging up, I jerk my entire body towards my rolled-down window, hands gripping the ledge.

“Were you going to offer me a ride? Cause I’ll take it.”

“Yeah.” His expression is a mix of relieved confusion, most likely from my extreme hot and cold attitude.

“Great!” I hop out of the car, nearly barreling him over with the unexpected push on my door. He only falters a moment, before grabbing the handle and holding it for me.

He takes my bag from my shoulder, hauling it towards his sleek, shiny car—that I've already admired once this morning—before opening that and dropping my bag in the backseat on his way around.

The leather is cool on my skin. I lean back, as if I've been here in this car with him a million times before.

The bubble that forms around me in his private presence starts to form as he settles next to me and takes my address, his eyes keen on his backup camera and then on the road, as if he's just earned his license.

“I hate driving,” he huffs after a few quiet minutes, cheeks glowing and eyes wide as if he hadn't entirely meant to say that aloud.

“Why did you offer?”

His brow furrows again, hands squeezing tight on the steering wheel before blowing a hefty breath, fluffing the thick hair hanging over his forehead. And then he smiles, that same dimpled shining star smile and I realize—it isn't fake, he's just that goddamn beautiful.

“You needed my help.”

I don't trust my mouth to say anything.

It's quiet in the car, but my ears are keen on the music he plays, as they always are. Still, it's just the main pop station, rolling through top hits. It's like he's too focused on driving to notice anything else. He doesn't sing along, doesn't even tap his fingers, while every muscle in my body is tight with the restraint of just belting out every song or dancing in my seat. Music, like sex, is a form of release for me. When everything feels like too much, it's a safe place for me to channel it all—much safer than my tendency to indulge in late night party bathroom hookups or not-even-one-full-night stands.

Music, any style, makes me feel good.

I'm so tight with the swirling tension in the cabin of the car, that I burst like a spring toy out of the door the second he gets slightly close to my cul-de-sac turnoff.

“Jesus Christ!” he shouts, slamming the brakes so hard, the open door nearly hits me, despite my grip on the handle. “God, Sadie—please don't

ever do that again.”

I want to spout off something sarcastic, but there’s genuine fear in his eyes, and his face looks stricken, like he’s just seen a ghost.

The same face he’d given me when I fell into the boards.

So, I bite down on my lip and mutter an apology, tacked on with a thank you, as I point over the shoulder at the shoddy red brick duplex behind me, the grass too high and filled with weeds. I’m not ashamed, I’ve had enough of that to last me a lifetime, but Rhys in a shiny black BMW screams silver spoons and daddy’s money; even if he has a deep well of secrets and emotional trauma beneath the pretty hair and handsome smile. Showing him my home, where all of *my* secrets live, doesn’t really rank highly on things I’d like to do with the hockey boy.

“I need to go. Seriously, thank you, Rhys.”

He reaches across the console, his massive wingspan stretching until he’s able to keep me from closing the door. It’s surprisingly attractive and my cheeks blush with heat.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asks, the dip of his brow steady. He leaves the rest unsaid, but I can see it in his eyes. I’ve helped him when he couldn’t stand, he’s offering to do the same.

But I know inviting him as my backup, into my prison, will only endanger the ones relying on me. And reveal everything I’ve been able to contain for years. Not to mention, I can still *feel* him—and I know that continuing to allow myself around him will only make it worse. Even now, all I want to do is let his hands grab my hips and haul me across the console into his lap with the strength I know he has, and press me into the steering wheel—

*No. Not with him. Stop it.*

“I have to go. Thank you,” I repeat, closing the door.

The next morning, before I can even consider what I’ll do to get my own car back, I step outside to see my car is in the driveway, freshly detailed and starting without any complaint.

ELEVEN

## RHYS

“Remember what the doctor said about the noise and about drinking, Rhys,” my mother rambles on, her voice crystal clear over the sound system in my car. My head stays pressed lightly against the overly plush material of my seat, trying to keep my breathing even in the cool interior, despite the sun beating down on my window. “In fact, why don’t I just send this all to dear Ben. He’d be glad to help—”

“Mom.” I try again, my fifth attempt to end this anxiety-fueled conversation since I parked in front of the red-brick house. “I’ll be fine, no need to give Ben anything, alright?”

“Rhys,” she half-sobs into the phone and my entire chest constricts. “If you want to come back, you can and we can work something out—”

“*Uspokoit'sya*, my love.”

I shut my eyes tightly, hands gripping the wheel as my father’s voice echoes in the soft space of the car, suddenly making everything feel smaller. Making *me* feel smaller. “Let my son go now, yes? You’ve talked to him since he left half an hour ago, alright. He needs time.”

“I’m alright, Mom.” I agree, swallowing hard at the lump in my throat. “Promise. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

With that promise, she finally agrees to hang up, the sound of my father’s quiet Russian words echoing as he presses the *end call* button for her.

A loud thump draws my attention to the window, seeing the open-mouth exaggerated shock across Freddy’s face, where he’s bent over to knock on my rolled up windows, before pulling the aviators off his face and opening my door.

Matthew Fredderic, left winger and resident pain in my ass. With helmets

on, gliding on a sheet of ice, we could be twins—same height and build, which works wonders for our first line forward play as winger and center. But here, we are night and day. The left winger is blonde, with innocent green eyes and an overly flirty smile to match the “love-‘em-and-leave-‘em” personality that continues to leave a trail of broken hearts in his wake. He’s got a reputation already, has had one since freshman year—and by rumor, he was just as wildly promiscuous in high school.

The kind of guy you’re worried to introduce to your *mother*, let alone your sister.

“I knew I was dying.” He sighs dramatically, resting his body weight against the open door as I step out. “Those fish tacos from that truck have finally done me in, Reiner. I’m having hallucinations.”

I just manage a smile, before my eyes lock onto the looming figure behind him, arms crossed, still standing next to his truck.

Bennett Reiner has been my best friend since we were five years old. Our fathers played in juniors and the NHL together, for only one year before Ben’s father tore an ACL and ended his career in his rookie season. Our first Learn to Skate lesson shoved us together before hockey, before school. We were inseparable, to the point that we were sold like a package deal to high-end coaches for prestigious hockey academies in the area. While my skills and speed developed into offensive positions, eventually landing me at center, Ben just kept getting taller and bigger without any of the aggressive play, before coaches settled him in the goal.

He’s the best goalie I’ve ever had, someone I can rely on to stay just as calm and even keel, no matter the score. Meticulous, especially with his routine, Bennett is a solid presence.

One I haven’t allowed myself to lean on, highly expecting I’d pull him down with me.

“Hey,” I say, nodding my head, letting Freddy close the door behind me. There’s a lot I could say, words muddling together inside my head.

*I’m sorry, Ben. I could barely manage to open my goddamn eyes, let alone look my father in the face.*

*Talking to you, being honest with you, felt like climbing Everest because the idea of never being on the ice again was suddenly just as terrifying as being on the ice again.*

*I hated myself almost as much as hockey hates me, and I didn’t want to feel anything even remotely comfortable, and you’re a savior, a protector—*

*you couldn't protect me from this.*

*I want to tell him: You're my best friend, and I never wanted to hurt you but everything inside me turned black, decayed and it's still nothing good. I am nothing anymore, and it's selfish but I didn't want you to see that.*

Instead, I run a hand through my hair again, before shoving my hands into my shorts pockets, nodding. "How've you been?"

He's silent, staring at me without moving, a stillness only I've seen in him.

"I'm gonna put the beers in the fridge," Freddy offers, his smile faltering as he slaps my shoulder. "Good to have you back, Rhysie."

He stops by Bennett on his way back, squeezing his shoulder tight, and ignoring the way the larger of the two throws his shoulder back slightly to disengage his touch. Freddy grabs the groceries out of the still open door of Bennett's truck, heading past us into the house with arms stacked with paper bags.

The silence stretches between us, just like the immaculate green yard that I know Bennett probably mowed himself this morning. Routines, sameness, that's what keeps Bennett alive.

"Bennett, look—"

His massive hand lifts, stopping whatever word vomit was near to spewing from my mouth.

"It's not that hard to pick up a phone, Rhys. Even just a text." He waits, silent and stoic, but his blue eyes are a wide depth of hurt and betrayal. "I thought you were going to die."

He might as well have punched me in the gut.

"Ben—"

"No." He shakes his head, pressing his lips together and running a hand through his curly honey brown hair. He takes his sunglasses out of his shirt, sliding them on like blocking the redness of his eyes will do anything to keep me from hearing the hurt in his voice. "The last time I saw you, you were in a fucking hospital bed. Do you realize that? You left me in the dark, begging your mom for any information. Going to summer intensive without you, keeping up the team momentum, telling them you were at some fucking intense recovery camp? I felt like a goddamn idiot, shut out by my best friend."

Every word from his mouth feels like the lash of a whip, but I'll gladly take them all. If anything, it only feeds the festering thing inside me.

*You did this to him. And you can't even feel bad about it, because you're empty. Nothing left, even for your best friend. Selfish.*

So, instead of anything else, I nod. Bennett doesn't like to be touched, otherwise I'd have pulled him into a hug already. He wears his emotions on his sleeve, written across his face and easily seen even half covered by the well-maintained beard and dark Ray-Bans.

"I won't apologize now because it'll sound like I don't mean it." I shrug, before nodding resolutely. "But, I'm back. Moving back in today, going out tonight or something, and practice on Monday. I'm not leaving."

*I'm not leaving you again,* goes unsaid, but I can see that he takes my peace offering as he readjusts the sunglasses tucked into his shirt and closes the door to his glossy, black truck. I reach for my bags in the backseat and turn back towards him, ready to let him have another go. He comes by my side, staying a few feet back as he usually does, but follows behind me as I enter the house.

"Welcome back, Captain," he quietly offers as he maneuvers ahead of me to pull open the front door. "I'm still mad at you."

It's even quieter, but it brings a bursting feeling of home through my body. Because *that* I can repair.

"Glad to be back, Reiner."

And even if it's just for a moment, fleeting and small, that warmth in my chest is enough.

It has to be, for now.



We don't end up at the party, but in a booth at our favorite local burger joint. Bennett sits across from me, Freddy on my right as we pick at the leftovers of our overly large order. Three plates of wings, potato wedges and bowls of veggies scatter across the table, the centerpiece a nearly demolished giant pretzel, the last piece barely hanging on to the hook it was delivered on.

Bennett is smiling now, a genuine one that shows all his teeth as Freddy retells the story of hitting on the Bruins player development coordinator during summer intensive and getting nearly leveled by her NHL boyfriend on the ice right after.

"No way that guy 'gets back to you' on helping you with that fancy little



deke shot,” Bennett says as he gulps down another swig of his nearly orange local IPA. He’s a beer snob, refusing to split the half-empty pitcher between Freddy and me.

“It’s called *the Michigan*.”

Bennett’s smile only widens. “Should be called the mission impossible. No way you’ll get it well enough to use in a game.”

Their chirping forces a smile almost too easily, knowing that last year Bennett was ready to put his blocker through the kid, fed up with his arrogance and obsession with fancy deke-style trick shots. Nothing he could really do during the heat of a game, but Freddy *loved* to piss off our usually calm goalie by treating warm-ups and practices like a damn shootout.

“Heard from Tampa?”

The question comes from Bennett and I have to swallow hard before I shake my head.

I was drafted before Waterfell by Tampa, knowing that after my degree was secured, I’d have my spot with them. But then, after the injury, they’d rescinded their offer, which has left me desperate to prove to any other teams interested that I am just as good—if not better.

I can feel my best friend watching me closely, keeping track of my drink in a way that makes me question whether he received a text from my mother, but I try to ignore it. Even still, sweat starts to gather on my brow and the rush of heat on my neck makes me pull at my collar.

If anyone can sense something wrong with me, it would be Bennett Reiner.

“You have to be kidding me,” Freddy grumbles through a mouthful of pretzel, before groaning and slumping against the booth, slapping his phone down on the sticky table.

“What?”

“Fucking puck bunnies ruining my life,” he moans, ripping off the rest of the pretzel like a caveman, shoving it into his already full mouth. “Paloma’s story is making me regret listening to you two idiots.”

Bennett’s nostrils flare, jaw locking as he bites back a retort. Usually, this would be the minute I bring in some settling peace chat to the group, but I’m distracted by the video playing on a loop off the screen of Freddy’s phone.

Not the blonde in the face of the camera, spinning in a little circle so the entire frat house party is displayed, but by a familiar brunette in the light of the flash as it moves over her too quickly.

It's only there for a brief second, before the image moves on to several snapshots of shot glasses and toasts, and before I can think better of it, I snatch his phone off the table and click on the left screen to go back, pausing the video with my thumb pressed down hard.

It's her.

Sadie, sitting on the arm of a questionable-looking red sofa, her posture terrible and slumped so her chin rests on her palm, nails tapping against her cheek as she empty-stares at the guy sitting on the actual cushions next to her, with his hands drifting up and down her calves.

She looks terribly bored and so beautiful, with the frown I'm now so used to playing across painted lips. She is close enough behind Paloma that I can see her entire face, smoky colored eyes, her hair slicked back into a pretty braided ponytail with a gray slinky dress that looks like it's for a sophisticated night out and not so much a frat party just off campus.

My chest aches, a strange bleed of panic working its way down my spine.

*Don't mention it. It was good.*

That's what she'd said. Not good enough, though, as she didn't seek me out again. Didn't show up at our morning skate or the second night of Learn to Skate.

I don't blame her. I know I've been a husk when it comes to desire or passion—too afraid to try anything with *myself*, let alone another person.

I've thought about it, but the emptiness and depression gnawing in my gut overcame any want. Even in the shower, when I tried once or twice, the pain rushing in my head and lack of anything to think of that felt even remotely *good* made me just feel more broken.

*Pathetic.*

But, I *did* feel something with her, something real and warm that chased every scrap of darkened shadows away from me while I focused on her. Just her.

"Jesus Christ, Rhys," Freddy barks, shaking my shoulders and grabbing his phone from my too-tight grip. "You good?"

My breath comes out a little too loudly for my preference, kicking up at the concern already splayed across both of my friends' faces. Bennett's brow is somehow furrowed deeper, a bit of frustration and anger blending with the distress.

"Are you hooking up with her again?" Bennett asks, his voice low and quiet.

It takes me a moment to realize he isn't talking about Sadie, because of course he isn't. He doesn't know her, let alone anything that happened between us.

No, Bennett is asking about Paloma, puck bunny extraordinaire and a previous go-to of mine. It was only for a few weeks, and I could count the times we'd actually slept together on one hand, but everyone talked about it for months, as if Paloma Blake had officially achieved her ultimate form of bagging the captain.

"No." I shake my head, gripping my thighs under the table to quell the tremors now rocketing through them. "No, I'm not."

"You know her? Sadie?"

My head whips to Freddy, giving me an instant headache at the too-sudden motion. His eyes twinkle, as he screenshots the frozen screen and pulls up the photo, tossing his phone to a curious but quiet Bennett.

"How do you know her?" The words spill out before I can stop them, muscles too tight as I wait for Freddy's answer.

"I barely know her; I've just seen her at a few parties, is all." He waves me off, before smirking too wide. "Now, how do you know her?"

*She pulled my body off the ice after I had a goddamned panic attack just trying to skate, which I can't really do anymore without losing my shit, then flirted and smiled at me until I could breathe right.*

*She kissed me to the point that I almost felt like I wasn't broken anymore.*

"Yeah," Bennett adds, now finished with his perusal of Sadie, sliding the phone back across the crowded table. "Considering you've been locked away all summer."

I wince, but let it roll off my shoulders just like every shot Bennett takes. I deserve it. "She's a figure skater—"

Freddy snaps his fingers and points at me. "I fucking knew I recognized her from somewhere."

"You just said you saw her at a party."

"I mean, like, somewhere *else*. Anyway, continue."

"I've been getting some private ice time over at the community rink, and apparently she had the same idea."

"Are you guys...?"

"Absolutely not."

Freddy raises his hands in quiet surrender. "Just wondering. I mean, you're the one staring at my phone like it's the fucking Stanley Cup."

I don't deny it, but instead opt for the slightest bit of honesty. "She seems cool. I barely know her, but... yeah."

"So, should we head over to the party then?"

A flash of some fantasy fills my head of showing up at the house, walking in and stealing her attention and time, putting my own hands on her bare skin, so much more of it showing than I've seen at the rink. Seeing if her lipstick will stain my skin so I'll wake up from nightmares with some tangible memory of something good.

*Don't mention it.*

Her rejection would work like a shot to the head, but one I'm not ready for, so I catch the yes from spilling out of my mouth and shake my head.

"I need to get some sleep before our preseason meeting tomorrow."

"C'mon, Rhys," Freddy begs. "We'll only stop by—we won't even drink. Promise."

Promises from Freddy are as reliable as they are from a politician, but a thrilling rush raises the hairs on the back of my neck at even the thoughts of tracking down the girl plaguing my psyche.

TWELVE

# SADIE

Getting Rora to a party is like pulling teeth—but somehow, getting her out of it, is even worse. Especially tonight, because despite my efforts to keep her sober, she is bubbly drunk.

I bang on the bathroom door again, brow furrowed in concern.

“Rora?” I call again. “You okay?”

There’s a long moment of silence, and for a moment I think about trying to bust down the door. Instead, I press my ear against the door again and play with a lock of my hair from my now-unbraided ponytail, twirling it round and round, looping through my fingers in a pattern.

Finally, a loud clatter, and then, “I’m okay!” shouted a bit too loudly from inside. I hear the sink running and settle myself against the wall, closing my eyes and tipping my head back.

The party had originally been my idea, but Aurora had agreed after I took a sharpie to her College Bucket List and added attending this specific party with me. It’s partially for me, but also for her to feel something good again instead of getting lost in her head—her “I have a boyfriend now,” complaints were heard and blatantly ignored because no way in *hell* would I be tolerating the way I’d seen him treat her in the very few times we’d met over the summer.

Tyler is still at an intensive program for biomedical engineering. Rora wouldn’t tell me what happened, but I saw the texts over her shoulder while doing her hair in our dorm bathroom. She let him know about going with me to the party, while he requested photos of her and then ghosted her in the middle of their conversation after a flippant text that said “*ok.*”

She isn’t as overtly sad now, buried beneath the shots of tequila we took

before dancing until all she could think of was pulling at the high hem of her patterned lilac shorts, and all I can think about is putting my skate blade through his neck next time I see him.

“That bad of a party?”

His voice feels like cool silk against my heated, flushed skin.

I open my eyes, greeted with the sight of Rhys, looking completely put together and very un-vulnerable—a first for our interactions.

Having not seen him in weeks, the urge to ask him if he’s okay, if he’s had another panic attack or if he’s ready for his first real practice back—still marked in blue sharpie on my own calendar—is overwhelming.

My eyes eat him up. His long, lean body is fitted into dark jeans and a crisp black tee that molds lightly to his biceps as he leans against the wall across from me. I notice the clear quality of his eyes and a light flush to his cheeks; he isn’t drunk, but he’s had something to drink. Which is somehow more confusing because I hadn’t noticed him anywhere in this house.

“Why do you say that?” I ask, pressing my hands down the skirt of my dress, pulling at the hem slightly. I hate the wave of self-consciousness that buzzes through me as he takes me in, his eyes quick in their scan of my very short gray silk dress and white platform Converse that have double insoles for my aching feet.

I might look slightly overdressed in a sea of denim and leather, but I look a thousand times hotter than I actually feel, not to mention that the dress makes it much easier to get in and out of this party with what I came for—a quick distraction.

Which my traitorous mind is now thinking should be the hotshot who has appeared at my side like a wish granted.

“Because, it’s almost one in the morning and you don’t even look buzzed.”

“How do I look then, hotshot?” I ask, smirking despite my earlier self-promises to forget about the boy with the blues.

“Like you’re in pain,” he snaps out, more fire in him now that he’s had in our previous interactions. The snippiness of his statements and the gleam in his eyes, only make me suddenly warmer, flushing red across my pale skin.

*Like you’re in pain.*

Jesus Christ.

Is that how it goes then? All the depth of truth I’ve seen from his eyes and his obvious panic is only reflected back at me—where I saw through him so

easily, he can now see through me, like some twisted, broken mirror.

“Way to ruin a party mood,” I manage to grit out beneath a sudden suffocating wave of nausea before turning to knock at the door again, praying for an escape from the torment of his warm chocolate eyes.

“You weren’t in a party mood.”

“No?” I snap, eyes squinting towards him over my shoulder, tossing my ponytail with the swiftness of my movement. “Why do you think—”

The door bursts open, a tipsy Rora stumbles out, giggling and hiccupping like a drunken little fairy. She spots us both, her eyes going wide as she finishes fixing the strapless striped top to her matching shorts set, before pulling at her tall pale cream boots that give her an extra few inches over me she doesn’t truly need.

Grabbing me around the shoulders, she leans in and offers her hand to Rhys who takes it gently.

“I’m Rora.” She smirks, continuing to side-eye me and wiggle her eyebrows.

“Rhys,” he offers. His smile towards her is dazzling, and I see tipsy, overly romantic Rora looking a little star struck.

“Rora.” I smile, but it comes out more like a grimace. “Can you give us a minute? I’ll come down and meet you, and we can go.”

“I thought you and Sean—”

My hand slaps over her freshly re-glossed lips, before pulling it swiftly away and wiping the sticky residue on my bare legs. Rora frowns dramatically at me, her cheeks burning as she takes in my face while I dutifully ignore the heat of Rhys’ gaze on my skin.

“Tell Sean I changed my mind. Since your English class buddy is hanging around, maybe you can talk to him.”

Rora’s face only flushes further as she giggles and backs up to hold onto the wall—but it isn’t a wall she’s grabbed, it’s a boy. One I also recognize.

The tall, lean and muscular body comes to a halt, letting Aurora completely mold to him as she stumbles and holds onto him. He settles his hands on her hips to catch her stumbling, his boyish face glinting with stars in his eyes like a perfect prize just fell into his lap—and, in all fairness, it kind of did.

“Sorry,” Rora breathes out, her face tilting up towards him. Her curls cascade down her back, the flower clips I spent an hour meticulously putting in sliding down the strands, barely keeping them half up now.



The man holding her bursts another wide smile, his famous one that every girl at this party—hell, nearly every girl on campus—has succumbed to before. It's not hard to guess why—a tall, muscular hockey god himself, yes—but Matt Fredderic looks like pure gold. A handsome face, somehow angular and soft at the same time, with carved smile lines like a supermodel version of a young Heath Ledger.

It definitely doesn't help that he's dressed like he walked off some Greek style vacation ad, the white linen short sleeve button-up offsetting his golden skin and unbuttoned loosely at the top, a chain and medallion of gold glinting in the dim hall light.

"You're good, princess." His mouth curves, hands touching the ends of her curls that draw all the way down her back. "Need some help?"

"Nope," I snap out, grabbing Rora's hand and yanking her away from trouble with a capital T. I know for a fact that if she were sober, her entire body would've jerked away from this man the second she accidentally brushed him. "No funny business, sleeping beauty—now, go. I'll come find you."

Rora grumbles at the nickname, but releases where she's still holding the playboy behind her on his wrist and slinks down the stairs, albeit unsteadily. Matt watches her with that same little glimmer in his eyes.

"Absolutely not," both Rhys and I say quickly and at exactly the same time.

"I didn't do anything!" he barks, hands raising high in surrender. "I was only up here looking for your dumbass." He points an accusatory finger at Rhys. "Text Reiner back, he doesn't believe me that I don't have you drunk off your ass."

"I'll tell him we'll be home soon."

"Why?" I ask, regretting the word vomit immediately as Rhys looks up, a little shell-shocked and a little confused, but the corners of his mouth lift slightly. Freddy is smirking, walking backwards and making himself scarce. "I mean—"

"Want me to stay?" he asks, the smile aching to burst forward is barely held back. He stays where he is, like I might scare off if he gets too close.

"I'd like to see your stamina when you're not fresh off an adrenaline high crash."

He lets out a quick laugh, so unbidden that he looks nearly shocked by it, before shaking his head and closing his eyes, stalking towards me.

Before he gets to me, a different body cuts him off, pressing me into the wall and grinding down—ignorant of present company and oblivious to my disinterest.

Sean—last name redacted since I can't seem to remember it—seemed like a good idea when he joined me on the dance floor earlier in the evening, considering he'd been a regular hook up of mine during the absolute downfall of my life last semester. It seemed even more like a good idea when he'd started drawing circles and massaging my calves while chatting away about nothing I cared to hear. His hands are strong, rough enough that they might leave a mark, so I'd subtly hinted at him earlier.

But it seems after seeing only Rora come back down, he took that as an invite.

“Are you trying to eat me?” I snap, shoving him off in spite of the embarrassment of this happening while Rhys can see.

I hate that prick of self-consciousness as much as I hate the immediate, obvious flush to my cheeks. It's not the hooking up I'm embarrassed of—I've always been unashamed of my sexuality; my choices to do what I want with who I want. Hook-ups only, that's my MO and I refuse to apologize for it; if men don't have to, why should I?

I enjoy myself, and get what I need—most of the time.

So, why does Rhys being here make my stomach hurt?

“That's the plan, babe.” He smirks, crowding into me again. “Ready now?”

My face only flushes further as I shove him off, *again*. “Not interested, actually. Get. Off.”

“That's what I'm trying to do.” He laughs, backing off barely an inch, but enough to notice someone lurking behind him. Spinning on his feet, he braces back against the wall, angling to my shoulder like he might slip around me at any moment, nodding his head towards Rhys with a quick smile. “Oh shit. Koteskiy, hey.”

The drawn out *hey* does nothing to erase the tightness around Rhys' eyes. Still, he plasters a smile across his mouth and drops his chin in a quick, cool acknowledgement, before his eyes are back on me. It's hard to wrestle with the want in my chest, making my heart thrum with the effort not to sprint towards him and use him like a personal shield from the ghost of my lowest moments.

“Gonna make it to Frozen Four this year?”

“That’s the plan,” Rhys replies, hands shoved into pockets, quirking an eyebrow at my tense stance. “Okay, Gray?”

His question to me isn’t any softer, but something about it is different... familiar. Genuine, but quiet, like the soft sadness etched permanently into his eyes that no one besides me seems able to see.

“*Gray?*” Sean mocks, laughing, his arm dropping onto my shoulder like a heavy weight. I wonder if I stopped trying to stay upright, would I sink into the floor? “Oh, am I interrupting something?”

“Yes,” Koteskiy says, at the same time I blurt, “No.”

Rhys’ gaze turns darker, a feat I didn’t think possible, before I shrug Sean off and slink away from them both.

Sean guffaws loudly, the sound grating to my ears. “Koteskiy, huh? Upping the competition this year, Sadie?” He bumps me with his hip, green eyes on fire as he takes me in again.

It’s my fault that he feels this way, because what he’s saying isn’t wrong—it’s completely true. Last semester, I spent an exorbitant amount of time playing with his drunk frat buddies just to get some kind of fire beneath him, so he would pull me upstairs and wreck me instead of trying to romance me. If Sean sees Rhys Koteskiy as some sort of game between us, it’s only because I put that thought there.

I should be nicer about it, but I find myself somehow angrier—at myself, at Sean. Even at Rhys for whatever painful dance we are doing with each other.

“That’s not what this is,” I finally concede, hating that a part of me still wants to grab Sean by the hand and lead him into the now-vacant bathroom, let him slip into my body while I close my eyes and only think of Rhys. His deep brown eyes gazing up at me perched on his lap and the sound of his heavy breaths against my skin...

It would be so much easier to leave after that, to pull down my dress and get the hell out of this suffocating house.

But, I *can’t*.

“Listen—”

Whatever Sean is going to say is cut off sharply, as Rhys grabs a hold of his shoulder and stops him as he attempts to crowd me again.

“Having trouble hearing?” he says, shoving Sean back hard enough that he trips, despite the fact that Rhys has barely moved. “She’s told you to get off of her repeatedly.” His voice is calm even as the storms gather in his eyes.

“You don’t know Sadie, it’s all fucking games to her man.”

Every bit of confidence I walked in here with tonight is gone, shredded. I wait for Rhys to pull away, but he only looks at me. Like he wants me to refute the claims, instead of standing here, avoiding his gaze, completely shrunken in on myself.

Normally, I would. I’d love to bite Sean’s head off. But I feel so full of everything, I *need* a release...

“Fine,” Rhy offers, stepping closer to me. His stance is all power, towering over Sean’s too-relaxed form and semi-shielding mine. His hand settles on my waist, slipping around to press against the low of my middle back. “Then she can play them with me. Get the fuck out of here.”

The warmth building in my chest spreads throughout my body, head to toe, my pulse racing. The weighted heat of his palm is searing through the thin silk of my dress.

I want to kiss him, like some school girl who’s had her virtue protected, like he’s some knight in shining armor.

“It’s my house.”

Warm brown eyes go nearly black, fists clenching, and by Sean’s unintentional step backwards, I realize maybe this erratic behavior isn’t normal for the hockey star. I reach for Rhys’ hand quickly, wrapping a hand around his wrist.

“We’re leaving,” I say, with more confidence than I feel, snapping my entire body forward hard enough that it jolts Rhys into me. His hands mold to my middle, keeping me upright and making me hyper aware of how large his palms compare to my waist.

I stop short as Sean shoves past both of us and stomps down the stairs, his angry mumbles barely audible above music so loud the walls shake.

Rhys’ breath flutters against my hair in the opening of the stairwell where I’ve abruptly stopped. “Some kind of warning would be nice next time, *babe*. Unless you want to sideline me for my last season.”

His use of that little sneered name works like a drug, relaxing every tense muscle through my neck, back and arms. It’s almost ridiculous how much I can tell he’s trying to calm me, when I barely acknowledge my anxiety about it all in the first place.

I snort without meaning to, tilting my head up at him while I snip, “A fall down the stairs would end your entire season? I thought you hockey boys are indestructible.”

It takes only a moment to realize I've said something wrong, crossed some unspoken boundary with my words. His face tightens, eyes filling again with that deep well of pain I've seen in them, more often than not, before he adjusts his mask and grants me a small, quick smile.

"I need to find my friend." It's the only thing I can think of to say.

He nods towards the stairs leading to the thumping party. "Me too."

But neither of us move.

Something is making me hesitate, keeping my body pressed to his as "The Hills" by the Weeknd starts to blare from downstairs. I should go downstairs, find Rora, go back home and finish myself off. I should...

Spinning, I grab Rhys' wrist in my hand and pull him again, straight into the still vacant bathroom, slamming the door shut and locking it behind me. There isn't much light, just a dusty red glow from the painted bulbs someone had installed for the party. The walls shake with the bass from below, the song bleeding loudly through the cracks around the door as I grab onto the black fabric of his shirt.

"Sadie, I—"

"Yes or no, hotshot." It's more of a statement than a question, but my entire brain feels like it's hanging by a thread, barely sane through the overwhelming thoughts that could've been drowned out by someone else's touch by now.

Rhys looks nearly in pain, his brown eyes dilated, red light flickering over his chiseled handsome face where his sharp jaw stays tight. I watch the thick column of his throat work, only getting hotter with the image of him as he makes his decision.

"I'm only doing this if we talk after."

"What if I don't want to?"

"Sadie." He tries again, grasping my hair in his hand and holding me still while angling his mouth to my ear. "I don't do this... party bathroom hookups? That's not..."

The rejection stings, and I jerk out of his hold, ignoring the slight pain of my scalp as I wrench my head from his grasp. "But locker rooms are perfectly fine? As long as it's to soothe your shit, not mine, yeah?"

It doesn't register what I've said, what I've revealed, until I'm reaching for the doorknob, desperate to escape.

THIRTEEN

## RHYS

For once, I'm not thinking. Not as I blindly followed her upstairs. Not as I let her lead me into an empty bathroom. Not now, as I grab at her shoulder to stop her from leaving and spin her, easily pinning her small body against the door.

"This is what you want?" I ask, making sure that this time, she can feel me entirely. Every bit of my body is pressed completely to hers, connecting like a perfect puzzle piece.

She's so much smaller than me, and with our previous interactions being mostly me on the ground looking up at her like some deity coming to save me, it's something I only really notice now, me towering over her with my hand broad against her trim waist.

"I just..." she starts, but fades off again. Her pupils are blown and the faux red light somehow only highlights the freckles beneath her eye, the angular shape of her face.

"Tell me," I nearly beg. Maybe it's the too-loud music giving me a massive headache, or the red light that makes this almost like a foggy dream, but I can't make myself shut up. "Because I'll tell you. I can't stop thinking about the locker room, and I—"

She shuts me up, slamming her lips onto mine. I'm all too eager to reciprocate, tilting down to wrap my arms around her little waist and lift her closer to me, pressing her back into the panels of the door. Her muscular legs twine around my waist in return, holding herself up with ease while grinding lightly down my stomach, chasing friction like a fix.

Sadie's like a goddamned drug, the effect just as immediate, my mind relaxing and something *good* chasing the dark out of my veins until I feel like

*Old Rhys* again; even my headache dulls to an ignorable level. I gulp her presence down like air after breaking the surface from drowning. I soak it all up, knowing from my experiences with her before, the switch will flip.

This won't be enough for her, and I understand it. There's barely enough of me left to make a complete human. Why would I be able to hold her together when she's becoming the one keeping me intact?

My lips take their time, slowing from her frantic beginning, pressing and sweeping my tongue across her mouth. My teeth lightly graze, pulling her plump bottom lip to suck between my own, before releasing and heading south. Two kisses to the corner of her mouth, a drag of my tongue down the underneath of her chin, before I press harder, slowly sucking kisses into the skin of her neck.

The moan she releases is soft and light, so opposite of the intense scratch of her nails on my arms and back of my neck beneath the light shag of my slightly-too-long hair.

My stomach is swirling, nausea from the headache I anticipated coming into the blaring house party stirring with intense lust, and my anxiety at doing this here, with her, in this damn bathroom.

I pull away to tell her that, to ask her to follow me home, to *talk* to me; but she latches herself onto my neck, sucking and licking against the skin so fast my vision blurs and I stumble into the wall, hands gliding underneath her dress to grip her upper thighs to maintain some kind of hold on her.

She's so strong, I feel like I could let go entirely and she'd hold tight, keeping herself up easily.

There's a knock at the door, to which Sadie quickly offers, "Fuck off!"

I smile into her neck, feeling almost high off her.

But the person on the other side is insistent, shouting through the crack in a high melodic voice. "Sadie Brown! You can get off on Sean later."

A wave of frustration rolls through me, as if I have some automatic claim on her, like a fucking third grader. *I licked her so she's mine.*

"What do you want, Victoria?"

"Aurora is jumping off the high dive like a psycho!"

That makes her pause, dropping from my arms entirely, pulling her dress down just as a flash of black peeks at me. Not giving a second thought to her reddened neck, swollen lips or loosened ponytail, she rips the door wide open and takes off in a near sprint.

I'm frozen for a moment, watching her escape me like she's on fire. My



eyes flicker to the mirror, the light of the room half glowing from the overhead bulbs in the hallway, half red cutting me nearly down the middle. My collar's looser now, shirt askew, with marks from her mouth across my neck.

I can't help the warmth that radiates up my spine and turns my cheeks slightly red.

I think I like what the aftermath of Sadie Gray looks like on me.

Victoria stares from the doorway, eyes wide with a pretty smile across her face.

We've crossed paths before, both captains of our sports in our junior years, both communications majors with a few classes together. I've never slept with her, but she was my type, from before. Perfectly put together, at all times. Intelligent, kind, elegant; blonde.

"Rhys," she finally manages to speak. "I didn't know you were here... with Sadie?" She says it like a question, and if it were anyone else, I might refute the claim. But that interaction in the locker room comes to mind too quickly, the hurt defensiveness of Sadie makes me want to protect her—even if I know she wouldn't let me if she were here.

"Yeah, I'm just here to pick her up." *Literally and figuratively, I guess, since her ass was just in my hands.* "I should go see if she needs help."

Victoria smiles at me, even if her eyes look a little less sparkly, and I edge around her and head downstairs.



Thankfully, the music is quieter on the large back porch, only two speakers blasting "Wasted" at max volume. I spot Sadie easily, crouched over the lip of the pool on her knees, only two inches between the hem of her dress and her bare ass.

It's that sliver of pale skin that has me launching down the small set of wooden stairs to stand behind her, blocking her from the small audience forming behind. Only then do I realize that Sadie's friend Aurora isn't the only one in the pool; Freddy is right behind her, a few feet away, but close enough to know whatever this situation is, my winger was involved.

I eye him quickly, shaking my head and pressing my thumb backwards over my shoulder, desperately trying to remove him.

He only shakes his head, crossing his arms like a pouting child and casts a quick hesitant glance towards a very wet Aurora, her curls now pulled high atop her head in some crazy knot that looks like it's tied with—a shoelace?

I try to pay attention to the whispered argument between the two girls, but I'm far too distracted by my stupid friend getting closer and closer to the duet.

Sadie falls back from her whispered conversation, her back tapping against my shins. It doesn't seem to startle her—far from it, so it seems—as she grabs onto my jeans and starts to heft herself back up.

Instead, I grasp her biceps easily and set her on her feet again.

“Can you find a towel?”

“Yeah,” I agree, no hesitation, despite knowing I have no idea where I could find one.

Spinning away, my foot taps against the two sets of shoes sitting perfectly by the pool, one set of flopped over cream boots; the other a pristine set of white and navy Air Forces with a missing shoelace.

“Don't touch my shoes,” Freddy barks, and I'm seconds away from shoving him back into the water for getting snippy with me right now. He walks right past me after barking out the order, heading for a wicker chair and table set beneath the overhang of the porch, where two bath towels lay.

“Planned this one, did you?”

Freddy smiles, that same stupid smirk that's etched nearly permanently to his face, and grabs a towel to sling over his shoulder, taking the other one back to the girls heading towards us.

A quick, “Sure,” is all I get from him, before he's handing the towel to Rora. She fumbles with it for a moment, before a concerned Sadie grabs it and circles it around her like a blanket over her shoulders.

“Thanks for watching out for her,” Sadie says, albeit reluctantly, as she guides Aurora towards the wooden staircase. Freddy nods, swiping the towel over his hair and letting it rest around his shoulders as well.

“Not a hardship to get a beautiful woman soaking wet,” he quips, before I can elbow him in the gut, or tape his mouth shut, or find a way to rewind time and never let him become my friend.

Sadie and I both jump in simultaneously, barking over each other.

“Jesus, Freddy.”

“Back off it, Matt.”

But, there's a loud hiccupping laugh that bursts from the drowned girl,

cutting off every reprimand sitting on my tongue.

“That was a good one, Freddy,” Rora agrees, dropping the towel and stumbling as she attempts to pull on her boots. “At least, *I* thought so.” She nearly falls again, but Freddy wraps a hand around her arm to steady her while she gets her shoes over her wet calves.

My gaze finds Sadie immediately, her arms crossed and lips pursed, looking altogether much smaller than she did mere minutes ago, straddling me against a dingy bathroom wall.

“Okay, Gray?” I ask again.

The question seems to jolt her for a moment, her eyes snapping to mine with such sharpness that a shiver rolls down my spine. She bites down on her lip, and my hands tighten inside the confines of my pockets, keeping myself from reaching to pull it loose.

“Yeah. We just need to call an Uber.”

I’m shaking my head before she can finish. “Don’t. We’ll take you back to...?”

“The dorms,” she finishes. “Not far. Honestly, we could walk—”

Freddy shushes her, making that little divot form between her brow again as he passes by her and taps on her head like a child.

“Rhys is an overprotective crazy person, and Rora here is walking like a baby giraffe, so let us drop you, yeah?”

It’s clear she’s battling her agreement, but there’s no way in hell she’s walking home alone. If she won’t take our offer, I’ll just have Freddy drive slowly alongside them until they get back to the dorms.

“Okay,” she nods, while her friend jumps up and down in place, using Freddy’s arm as a stabilizer shouting a chorus of “*Yay’s!*”

Freddy easily joins in too, a glint of mischief in his squinted eyes that I’m sure is now permanently stuck there.

We leave quickly, piling into Freddy’s ancient SUV that shouldn’t be road legal. It takes a few minutes to maneuver out of the piled-up street parking, which Freddy does one-handed while opening his phone and tossing it to Rora, who has to lean onto the console to use it while it stays connected to the cord hooking it to the outdated system.

“I don’t have connection, but there’s lots in my downloaded. Play whatever, princess.” He smirks, winking over his shoulder at the already flushed girl. I elbow him in the side hard, but he only smiles wider. “Just make it good.”

Rora purses her lips, looking quickly at Sadie who sighs deeply like a parent—but it’s more out of amusement than being annoyed—and she leans forward to sit her chin on Rora’s shoulder.

They both smile brighter as she clicks on something and sets the phone back on the console.

“Oh hell yeah,” Freddy shouts as the song starts, cranking the volume to an absurd level and rolling down all four windows so the heated summer night air breezes through. They all sing at the top of their lungs to the Taylor Swift song blaring, so loud I can’t really make out their voices in the mixed chorus.

My eyes flicker between both the rearview and side mirrors, where I can just see her, dancing side to side, hands in the air, ponytail wild behind her, eyes closed. They open again, her body stretching across the backseat as she and Rora hold hands and yell the chorus into each other’s faces, giggling along.

As many times as I’ve seen her, she’s only really smiled at me twice. But this smile—this is different. It’s so big, her pillowy, faded red lips stretching, the apples of her sharp cheeks softening and creasing the collection of freckles beneath her eyes that I’m just as desperate to touch as I am to get close enough to count them.

Too distracted by the indecent path of my thoughts, my entire body jolts as she suddenly grabs hold of my shoulders, leaning over the middle as far as her seatbelt will let her. Her hands settle and squeeze, and it’s embarrassing how difficult holding back a moan becomes.

Her lips are nearly at my ear as she shouts over the music, “Why aren’t you singing?”

Sadie is infectious, so much so that a smile to match hers dances quickly across my face.

“I don’t know the song.”

“You don’t know ‘Getaway Car?’” Rora joins, smooshing in next to Sadie, which only presses her cheek to mine for a second, the corner of her lips hitting my skin like a goddamn fire poker.

Freddy graciously turns the volume down. “He’s not really a Taylor Swift guy; unless they’re playing it in the arena, I doubt he knows it. And even then” —he shakes his head— “Rhys is too focused to hear anything besides ‘Get. Puck. In. Net.’”

Sadie rolls her eyes at the robotic impression, sharing a look with me like

she understands how deep that implication goes for us.

*If you play it, I'll listen.*

She gestures with her chin towards him. "And you're not focused?"

"I'm a good multitasker," he says, but in usual Freddy fashion, it's ingrained with the perverse double meaning, making Sadie and I groan, while still-drunk Rora laughs again.

I grab the dial and turn the music back up to save us all from Matt Fredderic's relentlessness, letting the music blare as we cross South College and head to the edge of campus.

"We're in Millay," Sadie offers before either of us can ask, pointing to the red brick buildings facing each other at an angle, the fountain and benches between them barely lit by the orange sidewalk lights, disrupted only by the blaring neon blue of an emergency box.

Freddy pulls right up to the curb, and I nearly spring from the car, terrified that if I don't try something now, she's going to slip through my fingers once again.

Sadie looks a little shell shocked at the sight of me standing, but keeps her arm around Rora's waist and doesn't say anything as I walk them both up to their dorm entrance. Sadie swipes her Waterfell ID and lets Rora through with a strict command to wait, before spinning back to me.

"Thanks for the ride," she says. "And for my car. I didn't mention it before, but that was... You didn't have to do that, so thank you."

My head is shaking before she finishes her sentence. "Of course."

From my angle on the ground and her two steps up, she's slightly taller than me so I have to look up at her. I've been looking up at her from every panic induced dream I've had since that day on the ice, like she's meant to be there.

A fucking guardian angel, I guess. Which is something I'll never say out loud because I'd never let myself live that down. Especially considering how much I crave that from her.

Like she would *want* to save me.

*Pathetic.*

Self-hatred swirls again, and now I want to tape my mouth closed before I say something stupid like, "You could repay me by getting coffee. With me, I mean."

My laugh is just as self-deprecating, and I want to tell her that I used to be *good* at this, that I was charming and not whatever this shaking pitiful thing is

that's replaced that part of me.

Sadie doesn't laugh, but she does start shaking her head.

"I'm not really the go and get coffee girl... honestly, not really the get anything together kind of girl. And definitely not the girl to date someone like you."

I smile, completely forced and fake, somehow accepting the absolute kick to the gut her response is. My mouth starts to open, to beg her not to say anything else, but she keeps going.

"Tonight was—"

A groan etches from me, my hands covering my face as I beg, "Please don't say good, I don't think I can handle that again."

She laughs lightly, stepping down to my level.

"Alright, duly noted," she says, reaching her hand into my pocket and grabbing my phone. She doesn't ask, or say anything, but turns it to my face to unlock it, texting herself the most recently used emoji, which is, unfortunately, a hockey stick. Her eyes dart to mine with a quick eye roll as if to say *typical*.

"What's that for?" I ask, taking my phone back from her outstretched hand. We've spent over a month together, but never crossed the line to communicating outside of the rink.

I don't want to get my hopes up.

She takes two steps up the short staircase before turning to look at me and shrugging.

"I don't know yet. Have a goodnight, hotshot."

I can't help the small smile that appears. Despite everything else, I now have something of hers.

"Goodnight, *kotyonok*."

FOURTEEN

# SADIE

Taking on the early shift at the cafe is always a gamble, especially a week before school starts. With everyone returning to campus, it's hit or miss how busy five-to-nine mornings will be.

Thankfully—for my slight headache and the pinch of anxiety at the top of my spine—this morning is a slow one. I had a few regulars, the summer crowd of town locals that will make themselves scarce again once the semester fills the warm brown paneled walls with drowsy students as the morning hotspot.

Since it's hitting half past ten now, I start another roast of the new, but popular, Ethiopian blend, dumping one of the bags into the grinder while I have an empty moment at the register.

“Here,” Luis, our main—and really, only—chef, calls from the slot of the kitchen window. He sets a plate of crunchy avocado toast with two poached eggs and extra chili flakes, a drizzle of honey in the shape of a heart that I *know* will be spicy when it hits my tongue. As if on cue, my stomach growls and I offer him a big smile.

“Thank you,” I say as emphatically as I can, because I'm starving to the point I'm almost dizzy. My hair is a mess of semi-straight tangles and I've lost my trusty wrist elastic, so I can only tuck both sides behind my ears and hike my shoulders up to keep my hair from interrupting my meal.

He smirks and leans on his forearms through the window while I sit on the countertop to easily balance my plate in my lap and eat, while still having a view of the entire cafe.

George, a local writer, sips his coffee that I know has gone cold by now, while a trio—parents and a freshman girl—enjoy a full spread because the



mom was too excited about moving her daughter into her alma mater not to order everything on the menu to sample. Only one table has emptied in the last few minutes, the tabletop scattered with a blueberry dotted ceramic mug and a few empty sugar packets.

“I was planning on trying my cilbir recipe on Rora.”

I smile, swallowing down another too-big bite of messy toast. “She’ll love that; especially knowing she doesn’t have to fly all the way to her mom to get good Turkish food.”

Luis nods again, wiping down the steel top of the window again. I’m quite sure he has a slight crush on Aurora, but he’s gentle about it. If Rora knew, even for a moment, that he felt that way for her, she’d probably never show up for work again; not because of him, or even really the fact that he’s a love-struck high schooler, but because for all of her sunshine personality, she is suddenly a clam when it comes to relationships.

The girl could read chapter-long filthy sex scenes without a flinch, but tell her a boy thinks she’s pretty and she turns into a tomato.

The chime of the door sounds just as I stuff the last bite of my toast into my mouth, sliding the plate into Luis’s outstretched calloused hand. My gaze flickers over to the two patrons now at the cash register while my stomach takes a churning free dive off a cliff somewhere.

Of *course* it’s him.

Of course it’s Rhys, looking like a goddamn wet dream in gray sweatpants and a navy Dri-Fit long sleeve that hugs every single inch of his tight upper body. His smile is soft and a little sleepy as he continues to speak to his very large friend waiting patiently at the counter. His hair looks damp, like he popped out of the shower just before this—which is a dangerous thought because now I’m picturing him beneath the spray of some high-end rain shower, washing his abs and thick thighs.

My eyes trail down him again, before someone clears their throat and I start choking on the bite I didn’t even chew, too struck by the absolute karmic punch that seeing him is.

He’s looking at me now, his eyes like burning fires that scald my skin as I gulp down water and hop from the counter.

“Morning,” I offer, smoothing a hand over my black half apron tied around my black jeans.

I feel that little pinch of anxiety growing as Rhys peruses me just as I did to him, his eyes clocking my tight gray short sleeve that’s most likely littered

with coffee stains and, yep, crumbs of sourdough. I tuck my hair behind my ears again, wiping the back of my hand over my mouth and finding a stain of yellow from the corner of my lips on my hand.

*Jesus.*

“Not the ‘get coffee together’ kind of girl, huh?” Rhys teases, no hint of his hesitation or unease from last night present in his expression now.

“Just the ‘serve it with a smile’ kind,” I quip.

He smiles further, more genuine as it pulls at his mouth, the indent of one dimple showing. “For some reason, I doubt the ‘smile’ part. I don’t remember that from the last time you served me coffee.”

My mouth splits wide into an over exaggerated all teeth grin as I offer to take their order.

Bantering with him brings my anxiety down, calming me in an almost unsettling way, where I crave the next little interaction between us. Maybe it’s the quickness of it, the permanent deep well of sadness in his eyes or the fact that he’s distractingly gorgeous like some old Grecian marble statue of *male beauty*.

“Have a seat and I’ll bring it out to you,” I say, spinning the iPad towards them with the total. Rhys tries to grab for his wallet, but the large, surly-looking man beside him is quicker, tapping his heavy metal card against the system quickly before leaving the counter without another word.

Rhys leans in over the counter and I mimic his movement, watching a light flush paint his cheeks.

“I, uh... I had my first practice back this morning.”

“Yeah?” I have the urge to grab his hand and hold it. “And? All good?”

The idea of him panicked and alone makes my stomach hurt. I can’t explain it, but there is an intense protectiveness I feel over his pain.

“All good. I listened to that song. The one from the locker room with the weird band name?”

My throat feels clogged. “Rainbow Kitten Surprise.”

“Yeah.” He smiles; dimples.

I want to kiss him. Instead, I freeze, because if I move, I will kiss him; grab his usually shaking hands. Tuck my fists against his neck until the heat of his skin releases them from their tight hold. Splay him across the counter and mold my entire body to his. See if the golden boy captain can release his tight control for me.

“Anyways, I’ll wait over there. Thanks Sadie, for everything.” Rhys

lingers for a moment, locking me in his gaze again before ducking away and following his friend to a clean table close by.

I study them while making their orders; an iced black coffee with three tablespoons of almond milk for the grumpy one—Bennett Reiner, going by the name on the ticket order—and a cold brew special, which means maple syrup, toffee nut and a splash of condensed milk, for Rhys—which nearly made me swallow my tongue as I listened to him order my go-to drink.

They're both speaking quietly, both on their phones as much as they are off them, and despite the constant discussion flowing easily between them, they both have a tightness in their shoulders, while Rhys bounces his leg beneath the table.

I've never seen Bennett Reiner before, but I'll never miss him after this—his height alone is like a calling card. He's got to be pushing 6'6", which is daunting to my couple inches over five feet. Rhys is tall, but Bennett is like a mountain, with the broad shoulders and tree-trunk thighs to match. He doesn't look like a college student, really—not only from his size, but his hyper masculine features that make him look a bit like he might be leading stuffy board meetings and rock climbing mountain faces in his spare time.

His light brown hair in a mop of messy waves and curls, a well-maintained scruff of a beard, thin enough to see the masculine squareness of his jaw. His eyes are slanted beneath thick brows, like a permanent furrow even with a smile on his face as he speaks quietly with Rhys.

"Here," I try to announce myself as I step up to their table, setting their drinks down carefully.

Bennett swipes his immediately, sliding a coaster under the plastic and a foam holder over the sweating cup. Rhys takes his from my hands directly, smiling up at me again. It's gentler this time, less fake than I've seen from him, with that lightly bleeding sadness like invisible tears on his cheeks.

"Thanks." He takes a quick sip. "By the way, this is Bennett. Ben, this is Sadie."

"The figure skater." Ben nods to me, not quite meeting my eyes.

"And coffee-maker, apparently," Rhys supplies.

"A good coffee-maker, you mean." I smirk. "The best cup of coffee you'll ever have."

"Should I stand and announce it for everyone? Best coffee in Waterfell?"

The door chimes and I barely have a moment to straighten from where I've leaned forward, a hand on the back of Rhys' wooden chair, before a little

body rocks into my legs with a delighted giggle-scream.

“You almost knocked me over, nugget,” I scold, but a happy grin solidifies on my face as I lean down and ruffle Liam’s hair. He’s got half of a Darth Vader mask painted on his face which I know is thanks to Rora’s artistic abilities. Said artist is speaking lightly to Oliver as they walk into the cafe at a more normal pace. The black paint has smudged a bit now, some of it across his arm where he must’ve been rubbing at it earlier, but the kid adores Star Wars.

I firmly believe it started because Liam witnessed Oliver love the movies first, and was desperate to be just like his big brother. Now, I see the same thing happening with hockey.

“Sorry, sissy.” Liam sighs heavily, not bothering to rest for a moment before launching into the entire story of their very normal morning as if he was telling a daring adventure story. He ends the quick tale with a rushed, “Are you making pancakes?”

Before I can answer, he suddenly freezes, before shooting into a howl so loud I have to slip my hand over his mouth. He’s blubbering through my hand, pointing frantically towards Rhys.

Oliver joins my side, already quite tall, just about equal to me at twelve-years-old. He nods lightly, hefting his bag further on his shoulder.

“Hey, killer.” I nod, letting go of Liam’s mouth but keeping a firm grip on his shoulder. “Was he good today?”

Liam is still nearly shouting, ecstatic to see Rhys again. It’s a little unnerving.

Oliver nods. “Everything was fine. My practice ran over, but Rora kept him occupied.”

My head nods to what Oliver is saying, though he seems hesitant for a reason I plan to flush out later. Right now, I’m more focused on the worry that if I let go of Liam, he will jump into Rhys’ lap.

“Sorry,” I offer quickly. “Liam, remember what we’ve talked about.”

“Rhys isn’t a stranger, right?”

Rhys laughs. “Right.”

“You’re not?” Bennett asks, a little tick of his mouth. “Since when?”

Despite the question being posed to his friend, my little brother decides to intervene again with a screeching, “Since he’s teaching me hockey. Rhys is the best hockey player, probably in the world.”

Bennett smiles lightly, “Humble, too.”

Rhys shakes his head, eyes flickering to Bennett, then to me, before settling back on Liam. There's a new tenseness to him though, I notice. His shoulders are pinched, his smile tight, fake, wearing his mask once more. It bristles me as I realize that Liam's infatuation with Rhys might be uncomfortable.

Grabbing Liam's hand, I nod back towards the counter, the larger table right next to it open. "Wanna chill for a minute while I close out?"

"Sure." Oliver shrugs. He takes Liam's arm and pulls him along behind him. "Come on, Anakin, leave them alone."

Liam's lip furls, his head whipping back and forth between his brother and the table of hockey gods, like he can't decide exactly what to fight for. What ends up spilling from his lips is, "I'm not in my Jedi robes, Oliver. I'm Darth Vader."

I turn to Rora and give her a thankful arm squeeze. "It'll only take a minute for me to close out and change over everything, do you mind? I'll be fast."

"They can sit with us if you need," Rhys says, standing before I can disagree and dragging Liam's chair—with him still in it—back towards their too-small table. Liam squeals a laugh, eyes shining as he looks at Rhys' upside down profile.

Rhys looks up at me, still smiling. "We're friends, yeah?"

I want to stop them, to argue with Rhys but Rora stops me when she smiles and gives him a quick thanks, pulling us both away to change over.

"I don't—"

"Relax." She sighs, dragging the word out four extra syllables. Her hands squeeze my shoulders as she forces me around the counter corner, smacking my ass to send me to the breakroom.

"I'll close your stuff out," she says, pulling an apron off the little hook beneath the POS station and tying it before pulling up her hair of curls into a springy ponytail on top of her head. "You stop trying to control everything and let the nice hockey boys play with your brothers while you take a moment to *not* be their mom."

She pats her fist down in a gentle rhythm on the top of the counter, not that she needed to since Luis is already gazing at her.

"Luis, can you cover the front for a few?"

"Sure," he replies, a little too quickly, as he shrugs off his gloves and hair net. It's wild that he accepts it, considering his family owns the entire cafe

and the restaurants on both sides of us, but his dreamy-eyed look is all the answer I need.

We push into the small break room that doubles as a manager office and connects to the other backrooms of the restaurant to the right of us. Sitting down on one of the chairs, I blow a breath and look up where Rora perches onto the desktop.

“So,” she starts. “How did your meeting go?”

“Okay.” I breathe, nodding as if that will make me more confident. “I think. I mean it was short? So I don’t know. I’ll meet him next week to speak more and bring the documents I have. He said that’ll be all we need for Liam.”

“That’s good, Sade. Honestly.”

“Right? I think it’s a good sign—it has to be.”

It *has* to be. I’m running out of other options, and dragging myself between campus dorms and my home, shelling out money from the already tight budget for babysitters when our neighbor Ms. B is busy—it’s piling up and school hasn’t even started.

Rora helped to untangle me from last year, but I refuse to put myself in that position again. And this is the only way left.

“Yes.” She smiles, all reassuring and supportive. “And if he won’t take you on, we have tons still left on the list, okay?”

Aurora is my best friend, no matter my best efforts at keeping her at arm's length. She shoved her way in freshman year, not deterred by my attitude or attempts to rid myself of her. Instead, she stuck like glue, until she was so attached I couldn’t exist without her. Then she watched me suffer from a paralyzing panic attack and held me through the entire thing, rocking us both on the little twin bed in our freshman dorms.

After that, I showed her everything. It was like I couldn’t stop.

She took it all in stride, a pursed mouth and determined brow, babysitting and helping me get the little ones to and from school while I balanced figure skating, school, and everything else. She tutored me when I fell into probation for my classes, scooped me off the bathroom floor when my hookups didn’t succeed in chasing away the pressure in my chest.

I’ll do anything for her, protect her endlessly, forever.

Oliver, Liam, Rora. My family.

“Okay.”

Rora stands, hugging me tight and letting me breathe for a few moments.

Her hands run gently through my hair, combing out little knots and snags, braiding it loosely down my back.

“Good?” she asks. I nod into her stomach, before pulling away and tucking the loose tendrils behind my ears.

“Good.”

“Okay, then go get the boys and just enjoy some time with them. Why don’t you bring them to the dorm for a sleepover? We can make a pillow-fort and check them into school late tomorrow.”

“Sounds perfect.”

FIFTEEN



# RHYS

With our first preseason team practice and meeting under my belt, I feel somewhat light as I stroll into our second practice of the season.

The first day I'd woken up late on purpose, so Bennett wouldn't try to drive us all together, even if I only waited until he turned off our street to head out. I needed the time in the quiet space of my own car to calm myself, deciding an all-black ensemble might hide the sweat of anxiety nearly dripping from me—at least until dressing out.

I nearly called Dad, letting my finger hover over his contact for a solid three minutes before I tossed my phone to the floorboards of the passenger side and drove in silence.

Somehow, nothing cracked—not my phone or my mind—even through the semi-easy first skate together. I spent time getting to know the new freshmen, apologizing for being the absentee captain over summer intensive camps, and thanking Holden, a defenseman who'd taken up as my alternate after the injury.

Coach had asked Bennett to be captain more times than I could count, but he refused each time.

I'm not sweating as much now, at least not from anxiety, more from the hard pace as I round the rink, working the puck on my stick on the sharp turns before hitting a quick stop as Freddy takes off, our relay team quicker, smoother than the others. Practice is officially over, but that only means it's my time for team-building drills before the conditioning stretches.

Leaning against the boards, I nod to Bennett where he sits with his cage off, spraying water into his mouth.

“They look good.”

Bennett nods. “Better than this summer. That Sinclair kid’s quick as fuck.”

“Yeah?” I smirk at his clearly displeased face. “Got a wicked backhand too.”

Bennett shakes his head again, left shoulder twitching up to his ear, even if it only shifts his pads a hair. “You caught that, yeah? Had to get used to the zig zag he runs for it, but he’s only gotten a few past me. He’s killing Mercy.”

That makes me smile a little, flickering a glance to Bennett’s tandem, Connor Mercer. “Mercy” affectionately, who looks exhausted and soaked, having already emptied his water bottle over his head.

“Mercy needed a little knocking down.”

“Coach wants to start him more this season, and trade off more games.”

That does make me pause, but instead of offering a reaction—because I know Ben—I only flick up an eyebrow.

He shrugs. “Doesn’t bother me.”

“Scouts?”

“They’ll see me. They saw me last year too.” He takes another swig of his water. “Besides, we’re supposed to be a tandem and I played 26 out of 34 games last year in regular season.”

“Because you’re near perfect.”

He shrugs.

Freddy skates up, heaving breaths through a smirk as he pulls his own cage off. “What are we talking about, ladies?”

“Bennett’s not talking to you after that stupid shit you were pulling in the shootout drills.”

My tone is filled with unreleased laughter, but Ben looks like he might be ready to snap Freddy’s stick, if not his spine.

“C’mon, Reiner, you can’t be mad at me for keeping you on your toes.”

“I was in butterfly for so long I thought I pulled something, you blockhead.”

Freddy raises his hands in surrender. “Not my fault the freshies want to be just like me.”

“You had your entire team of fucking wingers dangling all over my zone.”

“You did?” I ask, smiling despite Bennett’s seething tone. “They all just did what you said?”

“Just call me Daddy.” Freddy’s smirk grows teeth and gleams like the sheet of ice we’re standing on. Holden gags, only catching that last golden nugget of our conversation.

As the rest of the team finishes up the race, offense winning by a smidge, I call a quick huddle and plan a team cookout at our house for Wednesday. First day of school, but not the first weekend, so that the freshmen don’t get the wrong idea of what this event is—bonding, not boozing.

The locker room is buzzing lightly after practice, and I feel the want there, to participate and joke around, but each time someone tries to engage with me, there’s only exhaustion. A bone-deep numbness.

It’s something I know easily now; from all the expensive therapy my parents have paid for—*masking*. Dr. Bard calls it a *negative coping mechanism* and says it’s a symptom of PTSD, which I definitely don’t have and she will not convince me otherwise.

I took a hit playing a sport—I wasn’t in a goddamn war.

It’s easier this way, to pretend to be who I was before that game, to be the same team player and leader who earned the *C* on my jersey sophomore year. It’s who I am, who I should be—just lost beneath the dark cloud insistent on following me everywhere.

Stepping into the warm sun outside the athletics complex, I pause to wait for Bennett—who is most likely stacking his pads in the exact order he prefers them.

My phone lights up again, a text from my dad.

Lunch?

Above it sits a trail of long paragraphs and ridiculous uplifting quotes that read like the inside of a self-help journal, along with quick one word responses from my end.

I hesitate in my reply, waiting for an excuse.

It’s not that I don’t want to spend time with him. My dad is my hero, always will be. It’s just confusing and complicated now. And I can’t get the echo of his voice out of my head.

*My son.*

Bennett steps out of the door, hair perfect, decked in slacks and a dark green polo that looks a little out of place considering we should be headed home to gorge on food and rest. His phone is pressed to his ear, using his free hand to slide his Ray-Bans over his eyes against the sunlight.

“I said I was going to be late,” he mutters, jaw tight in a way that quickly

tells me exactly who it is he's talking to. "I told you last time that *this* week was the first week of practices, so I needed to push lunch back."

He's close enough now that I can make out the gruff identical tone of the other caller.

"It's fine, Bennett, I can wait."

Adam Reiner: former NHL prospect, current cutthroat corporate lawyer.

Bennett comes from more money than he'd ever know what to do with, the kind that ensures generations could choose not to work and be fine with it. His father was a silver spoon baby with a trust fund larger than a full roster of NFL contracts, which makes it somewhat surprising that he became best friends with the Russian transplant who'd been living in a dingy apartment after turning eighteen in a boys' home, and learning to speak English from an elderly college professor who lived above him.

The rich kid center whose future wasn't dependent on anything, and the poor, scrappy defenseman whose future was entirely dependent on that rookie year—and yet, they'd never stopped that friendship.

I have no problems with Bennett's father, never have—but after the divorce, Bennett could barely stand to be in the same room with him.

So, his father missed more games than he attended, stopping altogether during our time at Berkshire. Now, I know that once a month Bennett meets his father at Bar Mezzana in South End.

Besides the extravagant gifts that often bless our home or garage—most recently the undriven new Bronco sitting in our garage with a tarp still tucked over it—Bennett and his father do not have a relationship.

"Don't bother," he snaps back. "Go back to work. I'm not driving into the city for twenty minutes of staring at each other over stupidly expensive food."

He hangs up without a second thought.

"Missing another lunch?" I ask, realizing after that I wouldn't know either way.

Bennett shakes his head, rearranging his hair and glasses again, his hands moving with tremors.

"I went to the last one, but it was the first time I'd seen him all summer."

"Still bad?"

"I'm just... My mom's happy, finally. Her and Paul are gone for the next two weeks to Europe. I don't want the reminder."

"I get it."

I don't, actually. Bennett's parents' divorce has always been a strange topic for me.

My parents are sick in love, and always have been. To the world, there's nothing Maximillian Koteskiy loves more than hockey. But to anyone who truly knows him, he'd give up every Stanley Cup win and his entire career if it meant he'd hold onto my mother.

"Headed back to the house?" he asks, holding the button on the side of his phone to turn it completely off.

"I think so—"

"Pool party at Zeta," Holden announces, walking out shoulder to shoulder with Freddy. Both are haphazardly put together in a way that almost makes them look like twins; where Freddy is all playboy smirk, Holden is boyish innocence.

"I'm good," I say. I have other plans in mind, namely attempting to sneak another hour of a certain punky figure skater's time.

"I'll come," Bennett says, surprisingly. At my look, he shrugs. "Need something to do."

"Fair enough. I'll see you guys back at the house later."

With a final few chin lifts and waves on my way to the car, I tuck in and shoot a quick, *Can't today* text to my father.

My hand is on the handle before I curse, realizing I've left my keys in my locker.

Thankfully, everything is empty now, making it easier to run in, grab my keys out of the cubby and get out without the need to stop and talk with anyone.

Coach's office is lit up, the only room with lights still on, the door half open. I pay no mind to it at first, but the conversation is loud enough it makes me pause against the wall before crossing.

"You swore that it wasn't on the schedule," a deep voice growls. "You said it was a home game."

"It was," Coach sighs. "Look, if you really aren't going to play—"

"What's the consequence of not playing?"

My brows dip. A player then, but I don't recognize the voice. It isn't that surprising though, considering how absent I've been.

A slam like a hand to the desk, and then, "I won't be in that damn arena with even the possibility that she—"

"Okay, Tor. Okay."

I don't recognize the name, an inkling of familiarity that I can't really follow, but he sounds insane. And I trust Coach enough not to have someone like that messing with our team mojo.

I leave, quiet and quick, back to my car before driving to my new favorite coffee shop, hoping for even the slightest chance at spotting her.



It's Rora I find inside the cozy, well-named Brew Haven, standing at the counter chatting with a well-dressed guy.

I stand behind him for only a moment before Rora catches my eye and the strange reserved expression for the enthusiastic girl I only recently met melts from her face. Maybe she is more reserved when not off her ass, drunk and screaming Taylor Swift into the night air.

"Rhys Koteskiy." She smiles, but her eyes track to the guy still next to us, leaning against the counter. "Here for a coffee or for a girl?"

"You two know each other?" the guy asks, eyebrow ticking up as he settles his question to me instead of her.

I reach my hand out with my captain's smile. "Rhys," I offer, reaching my hand out to him. He takes it, a hard quick shake before letting me go.

"Tyler. Aurora's boyfriend."

*Got it.* I keep the smile plastered across my face as I look back to Aurora, her nervous expression making me feel a little nauseous. So, I lean in and pointedly ask, "Is Sadie not working today?"

Tyler laughs, nodding at me with a renewed twinkle in his eye. "Sadie really does have a type, huh? Surprised she isn't the one thirsting after—"

"Tyler, stop. Please," Rora quietly begs, before looking up at me. "She's not, but she is at the dorms—at least, I think." She clicks the side of her phone where it rests on the counter. "Yeah, she's still there, but she'll go home for the weekend so..."

She trails off with a little shrug.

"So I should text her instead of showing up unannounced and sending her into a spiral?"

Rora smiles again, somehow broader, like the thought of me understanding some of the complexities of her dear friend makes her ecstatic. "Exactly."

“Gotcha.” I nod, sticking a five in the overly decorated yellow top jar with multicolored flowers drawn all over it. “I’ll see you around, I’m sure.”

“I hope so. She deserves something good.”

It warms something in me that this enigmatic girl, Sadie’s best—and I honestly think only—friend approves of me. Even if Sadie herself doesn’t.

I do text her, later that night after gorging myself on the meal prep marked with my name that Bennett labored over at the beginning of the week. Laying back on my sloppily made bed, staring at the ceiling with a movie playing off my PS4 on the mounted TV, I can’t get her out of my head. I’ve listened to the playlist until I can pull it up in my head like a file, playing my favorites and trying to imagine what she was thinking when she added them.

“Barely Breathing” —the way she unlaced my skates for me when my hands were shaking.

“Don’t Look Back In Anger” —the raging look in her eyes when she does her long program.

“Sleep Alone” —her smile, her laugh.

My current favorite, Beck and Bat for Lashes’ “Let’s Get Lost,” plays over my speaker as my fingers pull up her contact and shoot off the text before I can think twice about it.

RHYS

Hey.

SADIE

Is this the equivalent of a Koteskiy ‘You up?’ text?

RHYS

Do you want it to be?

Panicking, I send another text right after.

Just laying in bed and listening to music.

Instead of a text back, I get a picture of her that has me shooting upright in bed, dropping my phone through suddenly slippery hands before pulling it up to my face as if I’ll miss it if I close my eyes for even a second.

She’s lying down, her hair in a mess of waves played around a mess of blue sheets and a white comforter. Not smiling, really, but her lips tick up lightly in one corner of their slightly pursed position. Her eyes are sharp, the dark gray piercing even through a screen, skin slightly flushed and the worn

wire of her old headphones—which she must’ve stolen back—dangling across her sharp collarbones.

My eyes trail her bare shoulders, one of the straps of her tank top slinking half off, giving way to a multitude of freckles scattered like stars across her skin.

I wonder how long would be too long not to respond, if I have time for a shower while imagining my fingers touching every single freckle I can find in a very thorough search.

Shaking my head, I spot the text beneath the photo—after I save it to my phone and stare at it for an embarrassing length of time.

SADIE

Funny, I’m doing the same thing.

I feel ridiculous for a moment while retyping my texts four times, knowing full well she can see the little dots appearing and disappearing repeatedly.

RHYS

Too bad I don’t look as good as you doing that.

SADIE

Yeah, then Freddy might try to sleep with you.

A laugh threatens to burst, pulling at my lips, even just this, just her written words are enough to chase a little of the anxiety sitting in this too empty room away.

SADIE

I’m as exhausted as I look tho, so I’m probably gonna crash soon and ghost you.

It takes me another too-long moment to decide what to say, finally settling on:

RHYS

You don’t look exhausted.

I wait, sitting my phone away from me for minutes, then uselessly bringing it up to my face and back face down on the bed, as if it will prevent me from checking again and again. But, her lack of response must mean she’s



sleeping now.

Standing, I leave the phone in my bedroom and head into the large, dark bathroom that's been spotlessly cleaned this summer by Bennett to the point it looks as if no one has ever lived here. I strip and close the door behind me before turning the shower all the way hot.

For a moment, I look in the mirror as I run my hand along the light scar over my eyebrow, a smaller one beneath my eye that's nearly invisible unless touched; both from visor injuries during the hit, both of which I don't remember receiving.

My body is healed, fully, every bit of it pressed back together. My mind is the thing that's broken, permanently.

There is a video out there of the game and the injury. I tried to watch it once, but got sick instead and didn't make it past the first intermission. I couldn't remember when it happened, the constant anticipation made me so nauseous, I gave up.

I wonder if Sadie's seen it, but I'm too afraid to ask her. One Google search is all it would take.

Shaking my head, I step into the steamy warm shower, letting the hot water roll over my tightly coiled muscles, dipping my head under the spray and pushing my hair all off my forehead.

The change of temperature makes me dizzy for a moment, and I try to ground myself, placing both hands against the still-cold tile wall.

*Sadie.*

Sadie with freckles over bare shoulders with her messy waves, bare faced and looking up at me with her gray cat-like eyes.

It settles me immediately, just the thought of her, the image burned into my mind of her hovering me in the locker room, like a queen atop a throne. Does she know I'd kneel for her forever if it meant she'd look at me like that?

My cock hangs heavy between my thighs, pulsing as my thoughts take me past every moment I've touched her soft, supple skin. She's burned into my every thought, like some sweet scent that brings back every *good* memory I've locked away.

I picture her here, in my shower beneath the hot spray, because I want her in my space. To feel like she's wholly mine even for a minute. She's so fucking small, but larger than life to me.

"Rhys," she breathes.

In my head, I press her against the tile and drop to my knees, picturing her above me as my hand glides up and down my shaft, slow. Steady.

*With her, it'll never be slow and steady.*

No. I imagine her bucking wildly as I fight to hold her still, until I sling her legs over my shoulders. Her skin probably feels like silk here, too, even with the hard muscle beneath.

*God*, I know she tastes good, and just the thought of it has me gripping harder, faster. I imagine her climbing with me, her sighs and moans growing louder until the entire house can hear that she's mine. That *I* make her feel like this, like a fucking man pleasing his woman until she can't help but scream.

I chase the high with the Sadie in my head, just wanting to feel the euphoria that I *know* I can make her feel. I'm desperate to please and worship her like this, but to control it—to have the wildcat figure skater at *my* mercy for once.

Her gray taunting eyes forever locked onto mine as I close my eyes and my legs shutter under the effect of the fantasy of her. I brace a hand on the tile, my head fuzzy but no pain.

In my head, she says my name again, that same light whispered moan and it sends me soaring over the edge as I come with her name etching out of my lips like a desperate plea.

My forehead presses into the tile as I nearly collapse under the relief. *Fucking hell.*

Maybe I should feel ashamed for thinking of her like that, but it's hard not to when she's everything good. For the first time since March, I feel... alive. Which is somehow more dangerous, because now, I don't think I *can* let her go.

I want to cling to her, to prove that whatever is left of me is worth something.

I send one more text to her before plugging my phone into the charger.

RHYS

You look beautiful.

SIXTEEN

# SADIE

My skate slides again, not catching the edge in the slightest, and I tumble onto my back and across the ice.

I close my eyes and it's there again.

A flash of a dimple, eyes like chocolate, massive hands gripping my waist so hard I swear I can feel it even now. Rhys, using my body, tossing me around like I'm light as air, his voice a smooth tease in my ear. Calling me his "new favorite distraction" before he flips me over and takes me again from behind.

The same fucking fantasy that's been haunting me for days.

The same fantasy I regrettably indulged in last night, alone in my bed, fingers fast between my thighs.

Just the thought of him had me coming harder than I had in months.

I try to catch my breath and shove the image of him—the invented one that I could swear he'd never truly be like in bed, out of my mind.

Rhys is too golden to fuck me hard enough that I feel nothing.

*That's why he scares you.*

Shutting my eyes tightly, I try to focus on the music still playing before it cuts off.

*Fuck.*

Coach Kelley is standing over me now, arms crossed and eyes narrowed even as I refuse to look at him, like a child avoiding reprimanding.

"You've gotten sloppier," he says, reaching down and roughly jostling my shoulder to pull me to sit up. I shrug him off and stand on my own, skating to the bench for water.

"I'm just tired."

He follows behind me, and only when he's nearly in my ear he adds, "Weigh-in. Tomorrow."

I hate the ease with which that threatens me, the sick feeling that riles in my gut at the obvious implication. I fell because I wasn't paying attention to my edge, treating the axel like it's second nature to me, when it's my worst jump. I fell because I was distracted.

I did not fall because I've gained some miniscule amount of weight.

"Do it one more time, Sadie. Make it fucking perfect," he whispers in my ear, before jolting back.

He cues the music and grabs the water bottle from my hands, tossing it over the bench.

It's always like this with him. My scheduled time is always last so that he can push us over my time, messing with my carefully created personal schedule.

Which is why I find myself grateful for Victoria's late arrival, meaning we've overlapped and she has the last fifteen.

I finish my routine—almost perfect by my own standards and a barely-there improvement by Coach Kelley's. Still, he *has* to focus on Victoria now, so I rest gently on the bench, scraping the ice from my blades with my plastic guards.

"I thought your attitude was just for me on the ice, but it seems like you're just as prickly here."

My heart races, my entire body lighting up like a Christmas tree at the sound of his voice.

He's still *my* Rhys, but he's more now—Rhys Koteskiy, captain of the Waterfell University hockey team. His hair is combed, still shagging a bit, eyes bright and without their usual deep pit of sadness. He almost looks refreshed.

His hand pats his chest as he looks down at me affectionately. "I'm hurt, Gray."

I can't help but match his smile with one of my own.

"I think you'll survive, hotshot." I pat my hand on the bench. He sits beside me, pressing his thigh to mine. "Besides, I save my really *really* bad attitudes for you. No need to get jealous."

Victoria's music cuts off, followed by some loud yelling that carries easily across the cavernous rink. As much as the girl annoys me, she takes his brutal corrections in stride, with a quick nod and a frozen smile, hands

clasped.

“Is he always like this?” Rhys’ mouth is nearly on the skin of my ear, breath cool. I shudder.

“L-like what?”

“So...intense?”

“No,” I say, a fake little smile gracing my lips. The part I don’t say is that he’s usually worse, especially with me.

But, I need that. Coach Kelley’s unflinching severe support only shows his dedication to my success. He’s like that because he believes in me. He’s the only one who does.

“Here early then?” I ask as he settles his body against mine.

“Actually.” He smirks. “You’re the one on my ice time.”

As if planned, the stern-faced hockey coach I’ve seen around a few times comes from the tunnel with a frustrated sigh. His hand taps lightly on Rhys’ shoulder as he steps past us to talk with Coach Kelley, who is blatantly attempting to ignore him.

“Give me five and we’ll be off,” my coach finally snaps, thundering over the surprisingly soft voice of Rhys’ coach. He doesn’t argue with him, only comes back to us.

“Koteskiy.” The coach nods, scratching at his beard. “And?”

“Sadie,” I offer.

I take a sip of my water and nearly spew it back out when his coach asks, “Girlfriend?”

Rhys blushes and I find myself suddenly aching to say *yes* and tackle him to kiss his heated skin. My fingers twitch because just the thought is so intensely overwhelming—to see Victoria’s face of shock, Coach Kelley’s fuming at my disgusting, unprofessional behavior.

To feel him again... suddenly my cheeks are the ones heating.

“A friend,” Rhys corrects. “Her brothers play. They, uh, practice at the foundation.”

My stomach churns, the implication of my brothers as charity cases shines like a flashing sign announcing every shame I carry every day. I hate it.

The girl who kisses his sadness away and needs help with her little brothers.

*Pathetic.*

“Actually, I have to go.” I jump up from the bench with my guards on my

blades. “See you around, hotshot.”

I don’t need him or his help.

Or his stupid dimples.

I’m barely through the tunnel, heading towards the girl’s locker room, which is a ridiculous distance away from the ice—mostly because the hockey team gets most of the arena space, when he catches me, grabbing my arm.

“Listen, Rhys—”

“How humiliating,” a different voice sneers into my ear, fingers curling into my bicep. “My office, now.”

He jostles me hard, and I duck my head following behind the lean body of my coach as he strides forward. Victoria passes me, flickering her gaze over me sympathetically.

When he turns into his office, I pause, but only because Victoria is reaching for me.

“Your practice slot is over.” She clears her throat, looking at me a little hesitantly. I don’t blame her; not only are we not friends, I don’t think I’ve ever been nice to the girl.

She looks around again, before dropping her voice. “You don’t have to follow him in there. He’s our coach, not our parent.”

*He’s been more of a parent to me than my own father,* I think but don’t say.

Instead, I shrug off her concern with an eye roll.

“I can handle Kelley. Worry about yourself.”

I straighten my stance, like preparing for a battle march, before entering his office and closing the door behind us.

“I’m sorry I was distracted—”

“Who’s the boy?” He cuts me off harshly. I turn and watch as he strips his skates off and shoves his feet into overly expensive sneakers, tossing the black skates into his bag.

“What?” I blanch, my face burning.

He sneers at me. “Who is the hockey boy you’re wasting time by making passes at in my practice?”

“I don’t— I’m not—”

“Do it again, you’re back on probation,” he says, snapping his fingers at me. As if this conversation is done.

“You’re not being fair.”

I’m not arguing about Rhys, but one day being a little off center isn’t

going to destroy years of skating ability, years of complete dedication.

“Not fair?” He slams his fist down on the metal desk between us, standing and hovering over me. “Victoria lands her axel better than you every single time. Want to talk about fair?” His voice raises with every word, anxiety rushes down my spine. “I’ve put *years* of money and time and effort into *you* and you’re so ungrateful I can’t keep your attention for an hour.”

“Kelley—”

“You’re back on probation.”

I open my mouth, feeling my entire body shaking with the effort to hold back a scream, maybe even a full-blown tantrum.

“If the next words out of your mouth aren’t *thank you* or *I’m sorry*, then I don’t fucking want to hear it.”

I hold it all back for a minute, souring my stomach as I do, like swallowing bile.

It’s quiet for a moment, and angry tears start to burn the backs of my eyes, until one traitor escapes.

Kelley sighs, standing and crossing his arms as he comes around his desk and stands in front of me. “My terror, come here.”

His arms open and he tucks me into a tight hug. More tears escape, my arms stationary at my sides as I absorb the comfort I don’t even know if I want.

“Now,” he says, angling me back and petting my hair. “Go home. Sleep. And then be back here tomorrow morning. Early.”

My stomach cramps from holding in everything I want to say, to scream. But as usual, somehow I hold it in.

*He is the only one who cares. Who knows everything about my fucked up life. He loves me.*

“I’m sorry,” I say, the words burning like acid as they fall from my lips.



SEVENTEEN

## RHYS

It isn't unusual for Coach Harris to ask to meet with me on an off day; as captain, it is more or less part of my responsibilities.

What *is* unusual is the presence of my father seated to my right, stuffed into a chair now angled into the wall from the incessant tapping of his foot. I wasn't anxious driving in, but now with nothing to distract my mind, I feed off his restlessness.

The door opens and Coach Harris comes in and circles the desk with a quick handshake to my father, the two of them familiar.

"Max." Harris nods, sitting and resting his elbows heavily across the dark oak. "Rhys. Thanks for coming."

Something is wrong.

An unsettled feeling begins to slither in my stomach, swirling like unease in the rapidly shrinking room.

*Why is it so hot in here?*

"I wanted to talk with you both privately about this before his first official practice." Harris pauses and holds a calloused palm up, as if stopping me. "I know you're aware Davidson left, so we are down a defenseman on the first line with Doherty."

While the information isn't news, no one discusses Davidson's sudden drop. Most only leave the team early if they're drafted—he wasn't. Now, Holden is without his usual line match. I'd assumed an underclassman would replace him.

Coach Harris clears his throat, before setting his face firm in a way that only further pricks the hairs on the back of my neck.

"So, we picked up a transfer from Michigan. Toren Kane."

A wave of nausea hits, the massive lump in my throat is the only thing holding back my breakfast from spewing.

*Toren Kane.*

Massive defenseman for Michigan's hockey team. Top NHL prospect for three years running, but consistent fuck-ups have prevented him from making it onto a roster. The player who'd nearly killed me last spring.

And he wants me to play with him—not just on my team, but on my goddamn line?

“Are you fucking serious?”

It isn't me that speaks, but my father, his voice a menacing whisper while his hands white-knuckle the arms of the chair.

“I know—”

“Are you out of your damn mind?” His voice is louder this time, rising over my coach's. “You *know* what he did to my son, Harris. He's a goddamn nightmare.”

Harris looks as if this is the last argument he wants to have, and I know the words coming before he says them.

“It was a legal hit, Max. He's a talented de—”

“He's a liability is what he is. His entire team agreed with us, wanted him suspended.”

“Max—”

“There's a reason he didn't go to the draft, remember? Multiple times. That scandal was *everywhere!*” My father's voice rises again, the light edge of his accent sharper as he mixes Russian curses into his shouting.

“Max—”

“Thousands of kids will come after this one, better than him—but you *need* him? At what cost? We're talking about my *son*, this team's captain!”

Coach doesn't raise his voice or attempt to calm my father down, only nodding and flickering his gaze from me to my father, and back again.

I stand abruptly, accidentally knocking my chair back. They both pause for a moment, but the room keeps shrinking until I'm convinced I'll suffocate if I stay in here for one moment longer.

I stalk out, ignoring their calls to me in both English and Russian, taking the corner by the door too quickly and clipping my shoulder. The halls are empty, my head down even as the pounding starts to overtake it. I try to concentrate; to do the grounding techniques I've learned to stop the real panic attack before it starts.

My body slams into someone and I barely mutter an apology before heading off, my vision hazy and tunneling as I stumble forward.

A hand grabs my wrist hard, little fingernails nearly pressing into my skin and I almost moan because I'd know the feel of her skin, even if I were blind.

I spin easily, letting her back me into the cool blue painted brick behind me. She looks so powerful like this, never mind the fact that I'm physically towering her—she just seems so in control, like she can calm me with a quick press of her skin to mine.

I realize, as my gaze tracks across her face, that she's speaking to me.

"Sorry." I breathe, just as pathetic and shaky as always. Apparently this is to be my new normal. I've never been the aggressive one, always controlled on or off the ice, but now I want to put my fist into something.

I can't help the self-deprecating chuckle that slips free.

*God*, no wonder she doesn't want me. *Pathetic*.

"Rhys, what's wrong?" she asks, in a way that makes me sure she's asked it already, and I'm freaking her out acting like a psych patient in some catatonic state. "You're shaking."

"I—"

I'm not scared—not of Toren Kane—I'm pissed. I feel betrayed by someone who's had my back since freshman year, someone that has never once treated me like I was just some mini clone of my father; that stuck by me through my injury. It doesn't matter that I know my team will have my back, why would he bring him here?

My team screamed dirty hit, and so did his team, but the officials said it was clean. So he's cleared—it doesn't matter he might've cost me my career if I can't get this shit under control, or that he stole everything from me; and he's got the nerve to show up on my team, at my school?

I'm not thinking anymore because everything in my head is swirling around like water through a drain, leaving me with that eerie numbness leaking into my fingertips.

I reach for her, picking her up in my grip easily, while shucking her duffel bag off her shoulder. A second of worry presses into me that she could very well reject me again—and who would blame her—but she doesn't. Her legs slip over my hips, tightening to hold herself up as I press my lips to hers. Once, twice, then biting down on her plush bottom lip and soothing the nip with my tongue.

"Rhys," she half whispers, half moans. "Not here."

It makes me pause for only a moment, because she's right—we're in the middle of a hallway in the ice complex during the day. My dad drove here with me, otherwise I'd be halfway home with her in the passenger seat, creating some reason in my head to keep her in my room, in my bed—anywhere as long as it's in my space.

“I think that you're mad at me for something, but I—”

“I was.” She sighs quickly. “I'm over it.”

She doesn't really look over it, but I feel a little too waterlogged and dizzy to investigate.

“I need you,” bursts from my lips, because it's all I need. I don't care about being in the open, getting caught. But if she does, then it matters to me.

She leaps down from my arms and wraps a hand around my wrist, fingers pressing into my pulse as she drags me down the hall and through into the showers.

It's empty, but she shoves me into the furthest stall, yanking the curtain to close us in with speed and lust bursting in her eyes, only feeding the monster in my veins.

I've never done anything like this, I've never been like Freddy or Holden with their puck bunny hook-ups. I've always been boyfriend material. The good guy all-star athlete, straight A student that she wants to take home to her parents. A serial monogamist.

Not anymore.

Another laugh escapes me while her soft little hands climb up my stomach and chest.

I broke more than my body that game, my mind is fucking splintered.

As she shoves into me, her hands climbing quickly beneath my shirt and slipping into my belt loops, I reel back.

*Nope.* I don't need her in control—I need the control, something to grasp ahold of while I'm spinning out.

I flip our position, letting her shoulders hit the tile as I slip a hand to the soft skin of her inner thigh, slipping a finger along the line of her spandex shorts, pressing hard, demanding kisses to her mouth, her neck, the spot behind her ear.

“I know you like to have control,” I whisper, pressing my lips against the skin of her cheek. “But I'm not some boy you're using to try and feel nothing—you're going to feel everything with me.” My teeth clamp down on her earlobe, just a nip before I cut off her moan with another hard press of my

mouth to hers.

She follows my lead easily, battling me for dominance even still.

I sink to my knees in front of her, pressing kisses to her stomach, covered in that same fucking thread bare Waterfell shirt that only feeds my fantasies of her in a shirt that looks almost identical, except with my name on the back.

Just before I can move further, her hand grasps my chin and tilts my head back.

“I’m exhausted,” she confesses, relaxing back against the tiles and looking down at me, as our breathing still stutters, hands roving each other’s bodies. “Rhys, I’ve been at practice for hours. I should shower—”

“Great. I’ve got enough energy for the both of us.” I turn my head into her palm and plant an open mouth kiss there. “Just relax and let me take care of you.”

I put my hands underneath the long length of her shirt, fingertips dancing along the top of her shorts.

“Tell me, Gray. What do you want?”

Her eyes flash, realizing for a moment that I will do whatever she tells me. “I want you to eat me out.”

A groan leaves my throat before I can stop it.

“Thank god,” I whisper, tugging on her shorts until they pool around her ankles. “Do you trust me?”

Her brow furrows, teeth letting go of their tight hold of her bottom lip. “To eat me out? I think so.” Her tone is still sassy, but filled with a distinct breathiness, lusty haze taking over her face.

A part of me—distinctly old Rhys—wants to stop at that answer, to force myself off her until she can say yes. Trust and sex are one and the same, especially for me.

“Please.”

*I am gone for this girl.*

“Okay, Sadie Gray,” I whisper, before reaching my hands to her knees and pulling them slightly apart.

EIGHTEEN

# SADIE

His hands feel like fire along my cold bare skin, every icy bit of myself melting as he sweeps his fingers over every single piece of me.

I don't let the guys I hook up with eat me out. Not that many offer. Mostly, because for what I want, it's a waste of time. And it usually doesn't feel good—not enough to make the intimacy worth it.

My heart is racing.

He reaches the thin strip of my seamless thong as he curls his fingers around the fabric and pulls it tight so a burst of pressure ignites against my clit. It surprises me so much I cry out, before he yanks them down over my hips, pulling them slower as he reaches my ankles.

His eyes are searing, staring directly into mine as he prompts my feet out from each leg hole, his grasp warm on each ankle. Every ounce of confidence that I usually feel in this situation has simmered into nothing but vulnerability.

He might be the one on his knees, but he is the one in control.

I want to touch him, but I'm not sure where I want to start.

He lifts his hands, one grabbing hold of my hip with a solid pressure. The other drifts softly, almost reverently against the skin of my inner thigh as he finally breaks my gaze and stares down at my bare pussy.

“Fuck, Gray,” he whispers and I can feel his breath against the overly sensitive skin right there. “This for me?” He smirks, all cocky arrogance—a flash of that hotshot hockey captain I know he can be when he wants.

I huff, “Easier to keep it bare for my costumes.” I try to use the words to build a wall because everything with this boy feels dangerous already, like I'm suspended on a tightrope, the threat of falling for him permanently



imminent.

He shuts me up with a warm thumb pressing into his own mouth before lightly playing along my slit.

“That’s not what I meant,” he rasps. He pulls his hand away to show me.

I’m near to dripping, embarrassingly wet considering he hasn’t done a single thing besides kiss me. But he’s gorgeous, a disarray of the perfect picture he’s been before.

The panic is gone from him, his hands steady and eyes bright, but it makes him more beautiful. His brown eyes look warmer even in the yellow light of the showers. He looks just as large, his thick thighs straining against gray sweatpants and a bulge distracting enough that I turn my head. And those goddamn dimples on full display. He’s a blend of boyish excitement and manly self-confidence as he slides my thigh easily over one broad shoulder.

I’m fully exposed, my skin turning pink beneath the sudden stifling heat of the room and his attention.

“So beautiful,” he whispers. Before I can try any response, he licks a wet strip along my slit, flicking his tongue lightly against my clit and then pulling back to blow across it lightly.

“Oh fuck,” I cry, biting down on my lip because my control is slipping.

He peaks up at me, eyes half-lidded, but burning like warm chocolate. “That’s all it takes?” he taunts, but there’s a question in his eyes.

It comes out before I can stop it.

“I don’t usually do this.”

“What? Hook up in a bathroom?” He smirks at me again, eyes twinkling. “Funny—every time I’ve had my mouth on you has been in a bathroom.”

It’s now, when he’s so relaxed, I can see the bright shooting star that is Rhys Koteskiy.

*This is going to burn. He is going to burn me.*

Except, I don’t care. I’ll let him burn me if he keeps touching me like this.

I shake my head, leaning back as he presses his nose into the pale flesh of my pussy, just above where I need him most.

“Please,” I beg, hating myself for it, even as my legs tremble beneath his hands.

He licks another long swipe, before circling my clit.

*Good god, I’m going to melt into the floor. My entire body alight, and*

I'm embarrassingly close already. I keep avoiding looking down towards him, my head tilting back against the brick.

"This is exactly how I pictured it." He breathes in, almost like he didn't mean to say it.

My head tilts down towards him with a smirk alighting my lips—like I might regain control.

"What? A dingy locker room shower stall?"

He huffs out a laugh, his eyes twinkling with mischief as he presses his entire mouth to my clit, sucking hard.

"Fuck," I gasp.

I slip a little, enough that my hands reach for him, before sinking into his soft brown hair. My nails scrape his scalp a little as he circles me in some witchcraft-like pattern that has me gasping like I've been underwater and I'm just breaking the surface.

He groans, jolting my thigh higher, just over the ball of his shoulder. His big hands are holding me nearly off the ground completely, my toes scrambling, and my shoes squeaking as I writhe.

One hand still melded to my ass, squeezing every few moments, he takes his right hand and gently parts me, sliding one finger into me. I cry out, far too loud, but he lets a pleased noise rumble from his plush mouth against my clit. I jerk, but he steadies me, sliding another finger in, speeding his lips and tongue to contrast with the firm, slow stroke of his fingers.

He curls them, just slightly and I make the mistake of looking down at him.

His brown eyes are glowing, locked intently on my face, watching my every move. And then he smirks, letting me see just one goddamn dimple.

I go off like a rocket.

"Already?" he teases, as I pulse around his fingers, gripping them. My shoe squeaks again against the tile beneath me as he puts me back onto my foot. Then, on both feet, after he gently kisses the inside of my thigh as he pulls it from his shoulder. "Fucking perfect. So beautiful."

A lump catches in my throat.

He's still on his knees, his hands gentle on the curve of my calves. His hands find my discarded underwear, and after helping me step into them, he pulls them up my legs.

My heart stutters as he presses another kiss to the fabric, this one more reverent than sensual and I hate the way it makes me ache. The way, "*Do you*

*want to come home with me?*” almost spills from my lips. I feel vulnerable, undone, and somehow more full of feeling than before—not the usual emptiness and restraint I feel after a hookup.

*Dangerous*, my brain repeats, but my body is ready to tackle him to the floor.

So, after he helps me with my spandex, taking his time sliding it over my legs, smoothing his palms over covered and uncovered skin, I grip his wrists and pull him to stand. Ready to take control back. Ready to—

He lifts his hand, his wrist still enclosed in my hand, and presses his fingers into his mouth.

Whatever noise comes from my lips, some sort of whine in the back of my throat, turns my cheeks maroon. Yet, I can’t look away as he pulls his long fingers from his swollen lips.

He’s everything.

The way I think about him scares me. I need distance before this really hurts. And yet—

“We should do this more.”

His smile is like spun gold. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I repeat, feeling a bit like I’m floating. “Yeah, actually, I think this would be good for us both. You need a distraction and I need a... release.”

Something dies in his eyes, his dimples disappearing. It throbs a little pain in my chest, but I ignore it.

“What do you mean, exactly?”

I shrug and play at the hem of my shirt. “Like... hook up? Unless you don’t—”

His hand raises to stop me.

“Friends with benefits. That’s what you’re suggesting.”

I nod.

“I don’t really...” he trails off, seeming to be engaged in some sort of mental battle. “Nevermind—I’m not missing my chance. Yes.”

“Really?” I smile brightly.

He mimics it. “If that’s what you want, Gray, then yes.”

He kisses my forehead on his way out, with a quiet, “Call me,” pressed against my skin.

NINETEEN

# RHYS

“You good, Cap?”

It’s a hard question to answer, but Freddy looks worried—hell, the entire locker room looks apprehensive. I want to say no, but the tension is thick already and I know as captain, I should be defusing it, not adding to it.

Today is our last practice before our first exhibition game, away against a small school in Vermont, whose coach is close with ours—which I anticipate being part of the reason the game is so early in our pre-season.

It is also our first practice with our new defenseman.

News spread quickly, thanks mostly to Freddy and Holden’s big mouths, which made it that much easier for me to play ignorant and drown myself in Sadie.

Nothing further has happened yet, only quick make-outs in my car, hands pressing to cloth or skin, both of us desperate for relief. Some days, we just skate. Some days we never made it to the locker room, intense and rasping into each other’s skin in the wide trunk of her Jeep over the blanket she told me was for “drive-in movie emergencies.”

When I told her that I’d never heard of such a thing, and never been to a drive-in movie, she looked so deeply hurt and I laughed louder than I had in months, a smile stretching my skin until my cheeks hurt.

Then, after class that night, she’d met me outside of her dorm and demanded we take *her* car. She drove, which she often asks to do and I wonder if it’s because she remembered how I blurted out my new anxiety over driving that one day.

We rolled into a drive-in theater, to my surprise, backing in and opening up her trunk again to lay there. I bought two hamburgers and a plethora of

most likely expired candy from a teenager at the single concession booth, then laughed and talked and barely looked at the distorted flickering screen of the double feature, soaking every piece of her up like water to grass after a drought.

She told me at the end that it wasn't a date.

But I didn't care; it *felt* like one. And we hadn't even kissed once.

It's easy to pretend when it's just us, that maybe she is completely mine. My girlfriend. That I could convince her into my arms again and again, somehow smuggle my jersey onto her body, bribe her to cheer for me and stand in the cold bleacher seats because she wants to show everyone I am hers.

And I want to be hers, almost more than I want her to be mine.

"You sure you don't want to say something before?" Freddy asks, probing after my lack of an answer.

Bennett shrugs, shucking his leg pad on. "Why? Everyone knows he's coming. Everyone here has Rhys' back."

"Damn straight." Holden nods.

I shake my head. "He'll be your partner, Dougherty. No reason for us not to take every advantage we have this year."

We are going to the Frozen Four. We are winning it—one player isn't going to change that.

The door opens, slamming closed behind the hulking figure of Toren Kane.

He doesn't glance at anyone, eyes down as he struts to his assigned cubby beside Holden, tossing his gear bag on the floor and begins to change.

Besides last spring through my helmet cage, I've only seen him through photos on Elite Prospects, and the same high school composite plastered across the internet during the height of his scandal years before.

Hockey players, in general, tend to be on the taller side—most at least six feet or over. Height and size are just as much an advantage as speed and skill can be.

Still, Toren Kane is tall—not quite as hulking as broad framed Bennett, but close; probably pushing close to 6'6". As a captain, his size and obviously honed physique should make me happy to have him on first line defense, standing in front of Bennett.

But the only thing I feel is hatred—a foreign, unwelcome well of it.

The silence of the dressing room is deafening, everyone pretending not to

watch us both, their eyes flickering back and forth between us.

“Kane,” I call, gaining some grip on the tsunami within. “We should talk.”

He flickers his eyes at me quickly, before shrugging off his shirt and reaching for a Dri-Fit undershirt from his bag.

“We can’t pretend nothing happened. If you want to be part of this team, we have to talk.”

I hate this. I hate that I have to be the bigger man here, when he’s the one who ruined everything, but I’m trying. I sink into the numbness, hoping that the thing I hate most will keep me from bashing his teeth in and messing with everything.

Kane glares, pulling the shirt down over his abdomen and shaking out his damp black hair.

“Nothing to talk about, Koteskiy. Get over it already.”

My fists clench, body jerking towards him. *So much for numbness.*

“Are you fucking insane?”

Freddy snorts, coming to stand by me. “Certifiable, from what I’ve heard.”

There’s a slight rise in the tension on Kane’s shoulder as chuckles echo in the room. I remember the news covering the hit had called him a psychopath, that he’d shown no remorse, only kept repeating the same sentiment over and over.

“It was a clean hit,” he says.

“Bullshit.”

“He’s fucking crazy.”

“Clean hit, my ass!”

A chorus of support and disbelief rings from behind me.

The weight of the words I want to say—but can’t—feels suffocating, and for a moment I’m Atlas. Ready to drop the entire weight of the world from my shoulders if it means only a minute of relief.

Still, I refuse to drag any of them down. Refuse to see pity in their eyes or, god forbid, their laughs at my pain’s expense; their disbelief in my ability to lead them, even if I’ve lost that belief myself. How would any of them look up to a captain, and trust me to lead them, if they knew every second on the ice I’m fighting an internal war?

“Clean hit?” Freddy jumps in, crossing his arms as he steps forward. “Your own team, hell your *own coach*, wanted you out for that.”

“Refs said it was clean. I didn’t do anything. Grow the fuck up.”

Bennett grumbles at that, his voice still quiet, but thundering in the locker room because it’s rare that he really speaks out. “Take some responsibility for yourself.”

Kane’s tan face flushes red with anger, his eyes narrowing as he takes us all in, realizing he’s cornered.

“I’m not here to fight.” He smirks. “Off the ice, that is. I’m just here to play fucking hockey.” He shrugs again, continuing to unpack and make himself comfortable.

Something about the casualness of it, as if he didn’t end my season, could have easily ended my life, ignites me.

I shoot forward, slamming my hands into his chest, tipping him back into his cubby and knocking his head back against the top shelf.

“This is my fucking team. Show some respect.”

“Fuck off,” he sneers, smirking again like he’s daring me to really hit him.

I slam my fist in his face like a knee jerk reaction. No one will stop me or pull me back. If anything they’ll join in. This is my team.

*You took everything from me.*

“Enough.”

The only voice that can stop this isn’t booming; it’s soft and firm in the way only Coach Harris can be.

It takes a moment for me to realize I’m still locked on Toren Kane, hands gripped into his shirt while he only smiles with a trickle of blood sliding over white teeth, his lips and chin.

“Let him go,” Bennett says. “It’s pointless to fight like this.”

I follow Ben’s instruction, a reverse of how it was between us for so long, letting him lead me away.

Coach Harris stands in the center of the dressing room, holding our attention easily, as he always does. Even, I notice, Toren Kane’s.

“I know that there are a lot of emotions in here right now, but get it together. Let it out on the ice; not on each other.” He looks towards me and sighs. “Toren is a part of this team now, and I expect you to act right and treat him like he’s any other member of this team. Whatever you need to do to get to that point—I don’t care. Just don’t do this shit on my ice or in my dressing room. Hell, nowhere in my goddamn complex. Am I understood?”

“Yes, sir,” we all agree.



“It’s gonna be a long practice. Get the hell out there.”

TWENTY

# SADIE

Falling into Rhys feels like falling into addiction, or what I imagine that might be like.

Everything with him feels easier. This isn't the first time I've had some sort of friends-with-benefits agreement with someone, but it's the first time it's felt like *this*. Before, it was all just to get rid of the boiling inside of me, a form of exercise and relief. With Rhys, waiting longer than a *day* to see him again, to touch him feels like torture.

I'm torn between loving the way it feels to be with him, and hating how much I love the way it feels to be with him.

Not to mention, the man eats my pussy like it's his fucking *job*.

Even currently, stuffed into a storage closet before all the parents of the Learn to Skate classes have vacated the building—when it would make more logistical sense for me to be on my knees for him—he's got me half-hoisted in the air, his face pressed between my thighs as my bare ankles dig into the muscles of his back.

I'm on the cusp of it, can *feel* my legs starting to shake, when he pulls back and I nearly slap him as my hands grab for his silky hair to push him back where I need him most.

"What the hell, hotshot?" I gasp, voice whining as much as I try to make it harsh. "I'm so fucking close."

"My birthday's next week," he says, as if now is a perfect time to have this discussion.

"Happy birthday," I growl, gripping his scalp a little harder, which only makes him smirk.

"Thanks," he sighs, pressing a kiss into my inner thigh that has me

grappling for the wall again because I'm so close that he could *breathe* a little harder on my clit and I'd combust. "But I figured you could tell me that the day of."

My stomach sours a little as I realize what he's asking. And yet, my traitorous body is still reacting like this man isn't holding my orgasm over my head like a carrot.

"Rhys." I breathe.

He licks a solid, hard swipe against my pussy and I bite out another curse.

"If you want to come," he threatens, his voice dropping as I see the darkness he's always trying to hold back bleeding into the edges of his golden boy persona. "Then you'll agree right now to be there, as my birthday present, if that makes it less serious for you."

I can barely register his words because he's fucking *breathing* them into my pussy, dark brown eyes glazed and half-lidded, staring up at me. That one stubborn dimple pulling his smile up lopsidedly.

"Please, Rhys."

"Need an answer, Gray. Then you can have whatever you want."

I close my eyes tight, trying uselessly to erase the image of him on his knees that's forever burned into my brain. I shouldn't. I *really really* fucking shouldn't. But—

"Okay," I whine. "Okay, okay, okay. Just *please*."

He chuckles and presses one hard kiss right on my clit, before leaning back.

"That's my girl." He grins, before his hand that's been resting on my thigh suddenly presses two fingers straight into my dripping center.

I moan, loud and desperately—too loud for where we are hiding, but I don't care. It barely takes a minute of his full attention again to pull the orgasm from me, my lip bruised as I bite down hard enough to break the skin while my entire body combusts.

I come down from the high, slumped against the wall as he cares for me so gently it makes a lump form in my throat. We do this dance every time. Him, too sweet and caring and gentle. And me, shoving his embrace off with some half-hearted excuse to leave while I try to pretend I don't see the sadness re-entering his eyes.

This time, I don't say a word, kissing him hard and nipping lightly at his lips as I carry my discarded skates outside.

He follows quickly behind, shoving his skates off at record breaking

speed, and following behind me. Tossing his bag onto his shoulder, he gets close enough to tap my shoulder.

I can't outright ignore him. Our cars are parked right next to each other.

"So, you'll come?" he asks, and I feel a bit like I'm throwing a puppy in the trash if I reject him now.

"Yeah." I nod as we reach our cars in the empty lot. "Yeah, I'll um... I'll try."

He smiles and nods, bouncing on his toes. For my slightly non-committal response, he's still as excited as if I showed up with a banner and balloons.

"Seeing you will be the best part of my birthday." He smiles a little sheepishly, like he didn't mean to say it. Then rubs the back of his neck and bids me a quick goodbye before hopping into his car.

And, just like every time before, he waits until my car starts and drives to follow me out of the lot.



I almost don't show at all.

But about two hours into the time of the party that he texted me earlier in the week, I show up at the Hockey House, feeling a little ridiculous with getting *this* dressed up—my go-to gray silk slip dress with an oversized leather jacket thrown on—to show up *this* late.

I checked my lipstick twice before I even got out of the car, but I do it once more now on the screen of my phone; wearing a heavier layer of makeup than I usually wear, but it's a special occasion.

*Is it? So Rhys is special?*

Shaking off the conflicting thoughts about the sad hockey captain that constantly plague my brain, I walk through the half-open door and into the clustered throng of people. Some I recognize, some I don't.

But I definitely don't see Rhys Koteskiy.

Making my way back to the kitchen after a full sweep of the downstairs, I spot at least two familiar faces, Freddy and Bennett—both glaring at me unhappily as I saunter in.

"Matt." I nod. "Hey, have you guys seen Rhys?"

"Look who finally decided to show." Matt downs the rest of whatever is in his solo cup. "A little late for him, actually."

I frown, playing with the hem of my dress a little self-consciously, feeling smaller even with the three inches of heels provided by my black boots.

Bennett doesn't speak, but looks uncomfortable as he avoids my eyes from his perch on the barstool, massive shoulders curved inward as he slowly peels the label off the bottle of beer he's drinking from.

"I know I'm late. But I need to talk with him."

Matt sneers, cheeks flushed enough that I can tell he's a little looser with his reactions. "Not happening. Get out."

"Freddy," Bennett snaps, his eyes flutter to me briefly before angling back to his teammates. "Back off it."

"No." Matt crushes the solo cup in his hands, tossing it over his shoulder in a perfect arch into the trash can which garners an ill-timed cheer from the guys gathered there.

The campus playboy looks furious—an expression I'm not used to seeing on his modelesque face, as he flattens his hands on the counter and glares at Bennett.

"You saw him, Reiner. He stared at the fucking door all night waiting for her." Matt jerks back to me, eyes dark as he sizes me up again. "You've already hurt him once tonight. Considering your track record, I think it'd be better if I stop you now. You don't give a shit about him."

I don't know him well enough for it to hurt as bad as it does, and maybe it's his connection with Rhys that makes the words land like a slap.

I do wonder how much Matt Fredderic has divulged of our paths crossing last semester. How often he saw me take one of his athlete friends into a bathroom at one of the house parties, or grind into the lap of some overgrown football star just to feel nothing. I barely remember last semester, spiraling out of control and desperate not to feel so much all at once.

*This year is different. Rhys is different.*

"If I didn't give a shit about him, Matt, I think you'd know. But this isn't like last semester." I push the words through clenched teeth, hating the vulnerability of it all. My eyes flicker to Bennett for a moment, but he's just a stoic. "And Rhys is... different."

"Please." Matt snorts, rolling his eyes.

Fury ratchets up my spine. "I love sex just as much as you do, *Freddy*, and that's not a fucking crime just because I'm a girl. But I *guarantee* I care more about Rhys than you have *ever* cared about a girl you put your dick in."

Now it's Matt that looks like he's been slapped, a little stunned.

“He’s in his room,” Bennet cuts in, jerking his shoulder a little.

I’m gone before either of them can try to change their minds and stop me.

I’ve never been in the Hockey House, that I remember—and definitely not while Rhys Koteskiy was one of its inhabitants. Still, I find his room on the first guess, a 51 poster taped to the wall and signed by all his teammates. I look a little closer and see all of the signatures are marked with “Get well soon,” or “Thinking about you” or “You’re stronger than this.”

“O Captain, My Captain,” written the largest and signed by Matt Fredderic in a script that looks ridiculous next to the size of everyone else’s.

I raise my hand and knock a little beat against the wood.

“For the last time, Freddy...” He huffs, throwing his voice like he’s far from the door. “I knew she might not come, okay? You’re right. It was stupid of me to ask.”

My brow furrows and I knock again even as he’s still speaking.

“She’s not my—”

He throws the door open in the middle of his sentence, angry as he looks for the culprit of the knocking and only finds me. “... girlfriend.”

TWENTY-ONE



# RHYS

She's so goddamn beautiful, I feel every ounce of anger at her fade the longer I look at her.

Sadie Gray is in my house, in the doorway to my room, looking like every fantasy I've ever had, wrapped in a silk bow.

"Hey," I choke out, throat hoarse as my eyes scan the expanse of her pale legs from knee to the high cut of her very short silk dress. I've touched that same silk before, I realize, and there's some dark possessive part of me that warms at the sight of it.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she says, and I realize I'm smiling like an idiot.

I swallow back the immediate insistence I want to make, that this is *fine*.  
*No worries, I'm just glad you're here.*

She could've showed up in a shirt that said *STOP TRYING, HOTSHOT. I'M NOT YOUR GIRLFRIEND*, and I'd still be as happy to see her.

Because I crave Sadie like an addiction.

"You're here now," is the best I can do, because I don't want to waste any of the time I have with her on anything but comfort. She makes me feel warm and solid, whole again.

I step to the side and stretch my arm behind my head, cheeks going pink at the slight disarray of my room. It's not messy, but it's well lived-in, as I've barely left my room this week.

The anxiety has been worse. Enough that I skipped two days of classes, fully unable to get myself out of bed. I rolled through multiple nightmares, showering sweat off and washing my sheets every day because they were soaked through.

But now, everything seems still. And seeing Sadie standing in the middle

of the room, sliding off her leather jacket and hanging it off my desk chair, there's an innate rightness to it. Like she's finally where she's meant to be.

*Here. With me.*

"Happy birthday, hotshot," she says, but there's an apologetic tinge to her usually fiery taunt. It chips away at the lingering resentment until I want to toss her on the bed and shove that silk up to her stomach.

I wonder if she notices it's *her* music playing soft and low through my surround sound, The Neighbourhood crooning "A Little Death" in the background of this fantasy come to life.

"Thanks." I smile, genuine and small, following past her to sit on the bed. She's just a smidge taller than me like this, the heels of her boots—black leather I'll be unable to get out of my fucking head from now on—giving her the added height. She steps between my legs, hand held behind her back with a little pouch that I saw her pull from the pocket of her jacket.

"I got you something."

Her other hand grabs mine from my thigh, before dropping the pouch into my hand. I pull on the ribbon to open the plastic, dumping the contents into my palm.

A black hockey puck, and a stretchy bracelet. I squeeze the hockey puck in my palm, watching it give and release.

"It's, um... a stress ball. Like, you squeeze it and it helps distract your thoughts or center them? My brother has one, and it helps his anxiety," she says, shrugging and tucking her hair back again.

"That's... that's really nice," I say, feeling lame as the words leave my lips. It's more than that. It's *everything*. It's a piece of me that only she holds the key to. It's the acceptance of me as I am, by the only person that matters right now. "And the bracelet?"

She giggles as I pull the blue and gray beaded bracelet up to inspect it, where little block letter beads spell out *hotshot*.

A laugh bursts from me and I slide it on immediately.

"It's a joke."

*Not to me*, I want to say. I'll never take it off.

Instead, I wrap her in my arms and tug her down into my lap with a groan.

"Time for me to show my thanks, yeah?" I ask, breathing lightly into her ear and pressing kisses just beneath it. "Lay back."

She shoves off me too fast, and I grapple for her, but she escapes my

hands.

“Take off your pants.”

I’m standing before I can even think about it, looking at her as she lazily leans back on her elbows on the bed. Her, just like this, with the thin little strap drooping off her freckled shoulder, pulling the gray fabric enough that I’m close to getting a glimpse of her pert, pink nipple.

My mouth waters as she reaches up and pulls all her hair high on her head, cooling her neck, before letting the dark strands spill across her skin.

I shove my jeans to my ankles, stepping out of them without tripping as I refuse to take my eyes off her for one second. Her hands only hesitate once, her fingers curl into the top of my boxer briefs and she looks up at me for assurance.

I nod like a fucking bobble head, groaning as she pulls them down to stretch over my thighs and free my dick.

“Oh.” She breathes, her face so close I can feel it. My hips flex involuntarily, and she stutters the movement as her hand grasps me at the base.

“You’re... very big.” She blushes, and it’s the first time I’ve seen her look at all intimidated.

I’m not small, but she’s a foot shorter than me and so small, she’s making me look huge in her little hand. Too delirious to speak, I just nod.

“I’ve never—I mean; the guys I’ve been with—”

My hand grips her chin hard, jealousy boiling in my gut at the suggestion.

“Finish that sentence, I dare you. I guarantee it’ll be you on your knees this time, not me.”

The mild threat and my hard grip seem to wake her from her shyness.

She bites her lip and sinks to her knees in front of me with a sultry smile.

“You’re acting like that wasn’t the plan all along.”

Without warning, she takes me deep, and my breath stutters out in a moaned curse, my hands gripping into her hair because I feel like my knees are going to give out.

When I regain my balance, I look down to see her wicked attitude still shining through the cat-like gray eyes, watery and still locked on my face.

I’m going to come too fast.

That, or tell her I love her or something worse.

So I pull her back off of me, trying not to focus on the way spit drips from her mouth, and her lips still perfectly colored. Seeing the smudge of her

lipstick on my fucking dick makes me squeeze myself at the base to calm down.

I shove her back onto the bed, covering her little body with mine as I pull that silk between my fingers, shoving it up her stomach to cup her pussy.

“It’s my birthday, so I get to choose my prize, don’t you think?”

Her eyes are glazed, all the fight from my spitfire skater gone. Her body always relaxes under my touch, and it fills me so fully with satisfaction and possession that I have to smother the urge to bang on my chest.

I pull the straps from her shoulders down, seeing her chest bared to me. Braless, skin flushed all the way to her fucking nipples. My mouth seeks them first, licking and sucking softly, almost teasing in a way that drives her wild.

For such a fierce girl, she thrives under a softer touch.

Her body shivers and I grip her bare waist a little harder in my hands.

“Mmm.” I hum against her skin. “Do you like that, Gray?”

She nods and I grab for her chin again, pulling back to look down at her.

“Say it,” I beg.

Instead, she pulls her hand from her side, licking her palm and reaching down to grasp my cock.

I buck instinctually into her fist, whimpering into her neck as she works me.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

She hums a little louder and my eyes blink open to look at her, so small beneath me and yet in total control again.

“Do you like that, hotshot?” she taunts, and I groan.

This. The push and pull for control—*god*, I want her forever.

“You’re killing me, Gray,” I growl out, jerking her up. I’m so fucking close already and seeing her skin flush as she pleasures me only makes it worse. Her eyes are glittering, a little smile quirking the corner of her red mouth.

I kiss her, hard and insistent as we both moan into each other’s mouths at the contact. Her tongue wastes no time in tangling with mine until she rubs her hand over the head of my cock and I pull back with a gasp.

Her lips press their way down my chin, and I hope she leaves a mark on me.

Like granting my birthday wish, Sadie’s teeth sink into the skin at the base of my neck with a little bite and I come hard, stars flashing behind my

eyes.

It takes me longer than normal to come down from the high, but I do, slumping back onto the mattress as Sadie pushes my weight down and climbs over me. I hear her heels on the floor, the sound of the sink on and off, and then look towards my bathroom to see her leaning on the door frame.

She's still dressed, silk straps pushed back up onto her shoulders, leather boots still on, while I'm splayed naked across the bed.

My dick twitches at the sight of her.

I prop my head up, flexing my abs lightly as she saunters towards me.

"It's *my* birthday, remember," I say, eyes sparkling. "And I still want dessert."

She leans over me and we kiss again, slow and steady.

"Whatever you want, hotshot."

I should tell her to climb on top of me and sit on my face in the way I've been thinking about for weeks.

Instead I say, "Stay the night with me?"

She freezes for a second, her body still as she settles straddling my abdomen. I can feel the heat of her against my skin and for a moment I want to say *nevermind* and drag her body up to devour her.

But I wait, and she finally huffs a breath.

"Okay," she whispers. "I'll stay tonight."

I make her come three more times—like a reward for her answer, or proof of why I'm worthy of her time—before we fall asleep naked under the sheets of my bed.

But when my alarm goes off the next morning, she's gone and the sheets are ice cold.

TWENTY-TWO

# RHYS

Nothing is helping the tremors in my hands as I sit on the bus for the last hour of our trip.

I fake slept for the majority of the drive to Vermont, avoiding conversation with Freddy to my left. Growing up, Bennett had always been my seat partner, which was perfect for my focus.

That didn't change at Waterfell, despite the slight discomfort of our oversized bodies shoved into the chairs. I don't think Bennett could change a ritual if he had to.

Freddy cranks the volume on the Bluetooth speaker in his hand after Coach gives him the nod, which means we are close enough to the arena for it.

Gym Class Heroes starts blaring, "Cupid's Chokehold" reverberating throughout the bus and gaining everyone's attention. Smiles on all the upperclassmen, confused interest alighting the freshmen. No one really knows where the tradition started, but music blares on the bus for away games and every locker room—before a game and after a win. A few start to yell and sing along, as Holden and Freddy start rapping back and forth, dancing around the bus.

When I was a freshman, it was fun bonding, a quick hype up. Now, with Freddy and Dougherty it plays out like a full-fledged production.

"He's getting weirdly good at this," I mumble to Bennett, running my fingers along the bracelet on my wrist.

He messes with his baseball cap and shrugs. "Not that weird. Freddy loves this."

"What?"

“Attention.”

I laugh, even though I know Bennett isn't trying to be funny. It feels good for a minute, like I'm me again.

It isn't until I'm in full gear and stuffing myself into an equipment closet to hide the signs of an approaching episode that I'm reminded this is my first game back.

*Fuck.*

The phone in my hand is trembling, shakes wracking my body.

I dial before I can think twice about it.

“Hey, hotshot,” she answers quickly, a smile in her voice that drips through the receiver like syrup. “Miss me already?”

The tightness in my chest starts to ease immediately.

“Hey,” I breathe out.

It's silent for a long moment, before her quiet giggle sears my skin and shoots goosebumps down my arms.

“Just calling to breathe in my ear?”

“Working on my Darth Vader impression.” I flirt, with an ease that reminds me of before. “How am I doing?”

She sighs deeply, something rustling like she's settling against fabric. I picture her in bed, gray sheets that mimic the shade of her eyes.

“I don't know; you haven't said anything about being my daddy—I mean father.”

A laugh bursts from my chest, full and surprising and warming me entirely.

“I'm working up to that one. Too iconic.”

“True. Best to just focus on the breathing.”

There's a quiet surety underneath the joke, enough that it almost feels like she's pressing her hand right to my chest like she has before, calming me down while I hide in a musty storage closet in full gear.

I must be silent for too long again, when she sighs into the phone again, not patronizing, but quietly gentle. Like blowing breath on my overheated skin.

“Are you sure you're okay, Rhys?”

I want to ask her to say my name again, but I manage to hold it together, gnawing on my lips until I'm sure there's blood.

“Yeah.” I shake my head, a chuckle escaping, reverberating in the room.



“Yeah. Actually I have a game today.”

“Your exhibition game against Vermont.”

“Yeah.” I breathe. I love that she knows. “It’s right now.”

“You’ll be okay, hotshot. Besides Oliver, you’re the best player I know.”

I laugh, the conversational, relaxed tone of her voice soothing me. “That’s good company to be in.”

“I need you to go play your game and win so you can get back to the hotel room for me. Otherwise I can’t give you your surprise.”

“Surprise?” I ask, feeling a bit like a kid at how my heart kicks at the idea. Like she’s promised me ice cream to be a good boy.

And I’ll do anything she says.

“Yeah, but only if you hang up with me now. Okay?”

“Okay,” I say, but wait for her to click end.

She pauses and we’re both just breathing again. “Kick their asses, hotshot.”

I walk back into the locker room with a beaming smile on my face. The same smile that stays on my face throughout warms up. The caress of her voice playing on a loop in my head as I play my first game since the accident.



I don’t play much, just a bit with my first line.

Coach spends the majority of time letting the new kids get used to their lines. Holden and Kane play the most, clocking high ice times by the end of every period. The first couple of shifts, they’re a hot fucking mess, to the point that the assistant coach, Johnson, is close to ripping his hair out.

Every time they come back to the bench, Johnson leans over Toren’s hunched body and berates him. Holden picks up a few corrections, but it’s easy to see that Kane shoulders the blame for their terrible coordination.

It makes me smile.

Until Coach Harris jerks Johnson back by his collar, and takes over the defensemen coaching for the third period.

I hate how much it changes, the obvious difference once Holden and Kane learn more of each other’s patterns. The difference in Toren now that Coach offers him slight praise and useful corrections.

And then, I hate how good he is, how seamless.

Fighting in an NCAA game is a severe penalty, one Kane's received quite often. He sounds like a team's worst nightmare in the news, but he's a dream on the ice.

If he wasn't my personal nightmare, maybe I'd be able to—

*No.* I stop myself before that ridiculous notion can take hold. *Not my problem.* Toren Kane is a nuisance, a liability to my team. Nothing more.

Not a friend or a teammate, he's a parasite, one I intend to rid if I can. And if not, at least protect as much as I can from his venom.

The game is over with an easy win. The small private school in Vermont is a new team, still learning to mesh and move as one, which is why Coach scheduled the exhibition with them.

We'll stay overnight, because we'll play one more exhibition with them in the morning.

Hotel rules are strict, and as usual I'm with Bennett.

They'd tried to separate us once freshman year, saying we needed to make other friends on the team, but it ruined the surly goalie's routine enough that we lost the game and Coach Harris nearly fired the development coordinator who'd made the decision.

We gorge on catered food in one of the hotel conference rooms, loaded with meat, veggies, and above all else: pasta.

All our plates are piled high, matching our hunger and energy levels. For a moment, it feels good to be back.

Bennett hefts two perfectly plated dishes high as he steps by the jostling of our teammates, sitting to my left while Freddy takes the seat across. He's on a roll now, telling us all the chirps he enjoyed using, and some new ones he picked up from a talkative defender on the other team.

Kane looms like a dark cloud in the background, a loaded plate in his hand as he examines the two long tables before backing out of the room and leaving.

I only see Dougherty notice, watching his partner exit a little wary.

After dinner, we all part ways to our rooms and I bolt for the shower before Bennett can even open his mouth.

I throw on athletic shorts, my hair dripping onto my shoulders as I fluff the pillows, lean back and stare at my phone.

Bennett eyes me again with his bag over his shoulder as he heads to the shower, brows slanting.

“You'd tell me if something was wrong?”

My heart slams into my stomach.

“Yeah,” I lie, hating how easy it comes. “Of course.”

TWENTY-THREE

# SADIE

The incessant flutter in my stomach is the only thing to blame for how quickly I manage to put Liam to bed.

I checked the score for the last time on the couch with Oliver and Liam earlier, which Oliver promptly watched over my shoulder. He tried to play it cool, but I could see the sneaky smile he tamped down after seeing the Waterfell victory.

The point division shows Matt Fredderic as a top scorer, along with two other names I don't recognize. As I mindlessly scroll through the play-by-play, Rhys' name pops up on my screen with an incoming video call.

I check myself in the mirror of my bathroom while swishing mouthwash out of my mouth.

The phone continues to buzz, only further igniting the swarm of bees attacking my belly. I slap off the bathroom light and slide on the wooden floors of the hall in my fuzzy socks, practically vaulting into my bedroom. I answer the phone as soon as the door closes.

"Hey." I check myself in the top corner, making sure he can even see me in the low lamplight of the room.

"Hey Sadie Gray." He smiles.

He's breathtaking, even through the screen of my phone, with damp bedhead hair, resting on a pile of bright white hotel pillows. His skin is shining with a light flush, dimple gleaming with an excited smile I now recognize.

"Where are you?" he asks, and I remember just how often he's been in my dorm room between and after classes. Enough that he would recognize my decorated walls or checkered blue bedding.

“Home.” I move a little and find a comfy spot on my bed, sinking into the old twin mattress. “Congrats on the win, hotshot.”

His mouth opens to speak, but a deep voice rolling from the background cuts him off.

“Don’t congratulate him. He tweaked his ankle in the first shift and rested most of the game.”

My eyebrow crinkles, the words Bennett has said rolling around in my head as I try to make sense of them. The sheepish look on Rhys’ face doesn’t help the inkling of disbelief.

But then he smiles, his eyes glazing.

“I love that,” he says.

“What?”

“When you get that little wrinkle in your eyebrows. Like you’re thinking really hard about something.”

“About you.” I roll my eyes, dropping my phone to point at the ceiling, hiding the blush and kicking my feet.

I’ve never been this way with anyone. Watching my dad mourn my very much alive mother—drowning tears with alcohol, drugs, and women since I was twelve—left a bad taste in my mouth for relationships. Hell, people in general.

But with Rhys, it’s different.

Real.

“You didn’t play?” I ask.

Bennett walks close enough I can just see him out of frame.

“Want me to bring you anything back?” he asks, slapping a baseball cap on his head as he leaves the frame again.

“I’m good,” Rhys replies. The door slams and he visibly relaxes when it’s just us.

Like he always does.

“So.” He sighs, a mischievous glint to his eyes. “My surprise.”

I giggle—not a sound I make often but there’s a thrill to this.

I’m not nervous, I’m excited—and a little worried that I’ll regret this later, when he’s moved on to a real girlfriend and his big career.

Still, I take this moment to be selfish.

“I don’t remember anything about that.” I tease, slipping the stretched neck hole of my oversized t-shirt off my shoulder with a strategic shrug.

His eyes track the movement, shoulders slumping as he relaxes further

into the bed.

I open my mouth, but he cuts me off.

“You’re so beautiful.”

Something warm and unwelcome wriggles in my chest. So, instead of responding, I strip my shirt from my body in one fell swoop. This isn’t romantic. We aren’t a couple—this is sexual only.

“Oh, fuck,” he curses, eyes wide as he takes in the baby blue lingerie set Aurora gifted me for my birthday last year.

“You like it?”

He nods like a bobble head.

“Good. I like that you like that.” I smirk when he almost reflexively flexes his abs. “Do you want to touch yourself?”

“I want to touch *you*,” he responds immediately. The warmth in my stomach tries to grab hold again.

I shove it away, finding a spot to prop up my phone, before sliding my hands across the translucent material against my stomach.

He tracks my every movement, now clearly holding the camera one-handed.

I watch with fire in my eyes as his arm moves up and down.

I’ve felt and seen exactly what he’s packing down there, but even still I bite my lip to stop myself from asking to watch.

Slowly, I slide the straps of the bustier down my shoulders, shimmying closer to the camera for a better view. This way feels safer, cutting off my head from view, so he can’t see my eyes. I’ve already let my guard down too much—this is me taking back my control. I desperately need it, before I drown completely in everything *him*.

He lets out a low moan as I bare my breasts to him, his arm quickening, jostling the camera.

“Fuck, Gray,” he grounds out, before the door clicks and the phone goes flying with a non-pleasurable shout from Rhys.

I knock the phone down, pulling my duvet up and over my head, cloaking myself like an Eskimo with only my face now visible.

Bennett is the next one on my screen, picking the phone up. I see a flash of his blushing, bright red cheeks, before rapid movement and Rhys in the camera again.

He walks somewhere, a bathroom it looks like, before sighing and apologizing over and over.

“It’s okay,” I mumble from my cocoon.

He smirks at my new ensemble even more than he did the lingerie. And I try desperately to smash out the growing warmth when he says, “You look so adorable.”

But that warmth is taking up permanent space in my chest. And so is he.



TWENTY-FOUR

# RHYS

There is just the slightest nip in the air now, enough for the non-northerners to don a light jacket for the treks across campus. We've had two-a-days quite often now that we're a week out from our first home game.

I feel better than I have, partially from how well the team seems to be meshing even with the parasite Kane looming over me every practice; but mostly because of a snarky figure skater who has her little fist clenched into my chest.

Bennett pretends the night in the hotel room never happened. Just like he and Freddy pretend not to notice how often I leave after dark for a quick "midnight run," which is only a mile to the dorms—and back with a little guest in tow. I sneak her in, but I know they know.

I find myself at her door in between classes more often than I'll admit. I go down on her often, my favorite being her on her back on my bed, legs over my shoulders while I kneel and jack myself off. It's impossible not to with the sounds she makes, her taste, her blunt little nails on my scalp.

Her touch soothes me as much as it ignites me. I was floating before, feeling nothing but numbness. She makes me feel alive for the first time since that game. Like a whole man again.

We haven't slept together, not yet. Partially because by the time I get my fill of her, she's come at least three times and I can't keep myself from following her over the edge with a slight touch.

The other reason, the one I can barely admit to myself, is that I'm scared.

Sadie is ingrained into my body and mind in a way that going even a day without her makes me anxious to be near her. I want more than just her hands on my skin in dim light. I want her everywhere—her hair all over my room,

her voice in the noise at my games, her toothbrush in my bathroom—and I worry she'll get her fill of me and move on. So I hold back the one card I have to play in our friends-with-benefits agreement.

Like the mythical cheerleader waiting to give it up to the quarterback, I'm waiting for her.

I walk beside Bennett from our calculus class, one I've put off until now. I'm not even sure why Bennett is taking the class because I'm fairly certain he took it freshman year. Not to mention he's a genius in his own right.

Freddy and Holden, with freshmen in tow, meet us on the green and we all head towards the wellness cafe for lunch.

"Do we have a two-a-day Friday?" Holden asks, sliding his backpack strap over his shoulder again from where it slipped.

"No, just an early day."

He nods. "Great, then party?"

"Which house?" Freddy asks, his eyes flickering to Bennett like he really wants to beg. Bennett's face is a little harsh, but he blows a breath and shrugs.

"We can use ours, or theirs—I don't care."

Freddy and Holden slap hands like twins and start to discuss which of the two off-campus hockey houses we want to use to host our annual back-to-school party.

We live in the "Hockey House." It's been passed down to teammates for longer than I really know. Bennett and I got first pick the year the seniors moved out, and we took the nicer, slightly more expensive choice—a two-story colonial painted pale blue with the Waterfell Wolfe's flag flying off the wide front porch.

It's closer too, an easy walking distance to the main hub of shops on South College and only a little further to hit the dorms and campus. The other house, affectionately called the "hockey dorms" is a seven-bedroom with a split on bathrooms that wasn't so appealing to Bennett who likes full control of his spaces. Still, Holden and Freddy lived there happily their first year. Freddy moved in with us last year after he joined the first line, like a bonding experiment. The fourth bedroom that's been vacant since Davidson left will be filled once one of the underclassmen decides.

"The dorms are bigger," I offer, before trailing off.

Because she's here.

I spot her just as she spots me. She's across the green, walking in the

direction of the arena, dressed like she might be headed to practice.

There's a guy with her. Tall, muscular, dressed in a similar tight all black ensemble with her bag—complete with that same fucking hang tag, slung on his shoulder. And just that sight shoots a pang through my already tight chest.

She says something to him quickly, before running towards me with a wave. I preen under her open attention; the way her eyes never leave mine as she jogs over.

Sadie bounces on her toes for a minute, smiling as she blurts, “I found a song—oh.”

She takes a step back, cheeks glowing as she takes in the group around me. Freddy smirks at her, Bennett raising a quiet eyebrow while Holden and the freshman stop their conversation to look at us.

“Sorry.” She steps back again. “You're busy.”

“I'm not.” I laugh, but there's a kick in my chest like maybe this isn't what she wants. *Is this a secret too?*

Afraid to think about what that means, I nod towards the guys and cart her off with my hands on her wrists again pulling her a few feet away.

“You found a song?”

She smiles again and it feeds my soul. “It reminds me of you, I added it to the end of the playlist last night.”

“I'll listen to it on the way to my class.”

That sentence alone makes her smile somehow grow until her eyes nearly disappear, crinkling at the edges.

It makes me want to do more of whatever makes her look at me like that, so I add, “I'll text you what I think.”

“I won't see you tomorrow morning?”

My stomach drops. Fuck.

“Shit,” I mutter. “Gray—I'm so sorry. I have... fuck, I have two-a-days all week. I have to be at the arena in the morning.”

Her face shutters, a glimpse of real, raw disappointment before she builds a wall of resentment. I've seen it before, the movements of her face almost identical to Oliver's. It's just another sign, one that I slip under a list of things that make me worried about that family—something else has happened to them, made them like this.

“I'm sorry—”

“Don't apologize to me, Oliver's the one you promised.”

I try to reach for her as she shuffles back, hating how quickly this

conversation has changed. “Sadie—”

“It’s fine, Rhys. We aren’t dating, you don’t owe me anything. We’re fine without you.”

It feels like I’ve been punched in the stomach, and again when she stalks back to the handsome, arrogant fucker still holding her bag for her as they take off together.

The boys are gone from the green, Bennett strict enough about his schedule not to bother waiting, but Freddy has waited, for some reason that I don’t care to know. He settles in step next to me, backpack half-slung over his shoulder as a girl sends him a happy, coy greeting when she passes, which he enthusiastically returns while slapping an arm over my shoulders and pulling me away, breaking my view of Sadie.

“Still *just* sharing ice time?” Freddy asks, his tone serious despite the easygoing smile he has. “Cause with the death glare you’re giving Luc; I’m thinking it’s a bit more than that.”

“If it was more, I think I just fucked it up.”

“One step forward, two steps back. You’ll be fine.”

I shake my head. “Who’s Luc? The guy she’s with?”

“Oh god, you don’t know that guy?” I shake my head and Freddy laughs, patting my chest before pushing the doors to the cafe open, blasting us with a burst of cold air. “Good for you. I can’t fucking stand him.”

That doesn’t help considering Freddy likes everyone. “Who the hell is he?”

We grab trays for the food line—it’s the major hub for athletes here at Waterfell for any meal. Serving grilled chicken, full-fledged salad bars with every topping imaginable. Greens, potatoes—mashed or baked or diced—it has anything we can and will eat, especially during the season.

“He’s a figure skater, a pair; or he was. He has trouble staying with his partners and not sleeping with them.”

There’s nothing I can do to stop the slight surge of adrenaline that surges through me, fingers gripping the tray tight as I grab nearly every piece of grilled lime chicken that Freddy leaves behind. I take a calming breath.

It’s not like he said Sadie’s sleeping with him.

“He was Olympic bound before he ended up here, I think. Thinks he’s god’s gift to women, or some shit.”

I snort. “Takes one to know one, eh, Freddy?”

He laughs, nodding. “Sure, sure.” He’s already got a little potato popped

into his mouth as he chews and talks, walking us towards the hockey table.

A couple of people nod their heads as we settle, myself at Bennett's right, Freddy directly across from me. Where we all have heavy smorgasbords of food within our set diets, Bennett has a sectioned bento box of his meals he makes at home.

"I know you said you're not together or anything," Freddy continues, his voice quiet even amidst the roar of the crowd. He rubs a hand along the back of his neck. "But I swear I think he and Sadie used to be a thing."

*Damnit.*

Bennett looks up at me for a second. "Sadie likes Rhys. She's at our place all the time. I don't think she'd have time for anyone else."

I sigh and nod towards him in a silent thanks. "She's got plenty of time for it now."

"Yep—and if that's the case, Captain, you've got plenty of time for other girls. What about P?"

As if she's been wished into existence by the utterance of her own name—let alone just the letter—Paloma sinks between Bennett and I, her arms dusting both our shoulders while she angles a wink to Freddy.

"Bragging about me again?" She smirks, stealing a potato wedge from my plate and dancing it around her painted lips.

Paloma Blake is gorgeous and she knows it. Blonde hair, lightly tanned skin, thick, pouty lips and a body nearly every player at the table—hell, maybe the entire male population of the school, has salivated over at one point. Everything about her looks like a sexed up runway model, with an overconfident attitude to match. She might be all flirty winks and blown kisses, but I've always suspected the girl has hidden claws.

"Rhys pretends you guys never dated." Holden laughs, flicking his head with a wink towards her. "If you want someone to brag, just give me a night, P. I'll never shut up about it."

Paloma smiles again, all sultry, and every piece of it so fake I want to jerk my entire body away.

Bennett does, pulling away entirely and she melts into his seat without a second thought as he leaves the cafeteria.

"What's his problem?" she sneers, body spinning to watch Bennett leave, leaning entirely on my side. I lightly jostle her off me.

"Maybe he didn't want you all over him," I whisper. I'm not mean, I just don't care anymore. Old Rhys would've let her lay there, let her flirt a bit

before refocusing on practice. “You know how he is.”

“I don’t, actually,” she argues, her tone defensive. “But what’s your fucking problem?”

“No problem.”

“Clearly.” She rolls her eyes. “What crawled up his ass and died?”

Holden snorts, stuffing the last of his grilled chicken in his mouth in one overly large bite. Freddy looks up and laughs, shuffling his head towards me as he answers Paloma.

“He likes a girl that isn’t falling all over him for once.”

Paloma raises one perfectly plucked eyebrow as she peels back the lid of a brightly colored kid’s yogurt that seems like it appeared from nowhere.

“Who?”

I don’t want to say, because if her reaction is anything to go by, Sadie might be keeping us a secret. But I know that if anyone on this campus knows everything, it’s Paloma.

“Sadie Brown.”

There’s barely a twitch in her face, her perfect features forever in place against any reaction.

“The figure skater?”

I pause and look at her. “Yeah—you know her?”

She smiles and it makes my stomach hurt. “Oh I know her—she’s fun.”

Something about the way she says it makes me uneasy.

“Fun?”

Paloma shrugs, but that gleam in her eye doesn’t disappear. “She’s wild. She pops into parties for quick, not-so-quiet hookups and bounces, so it’s given her a reputation. I don’t think she slept with anyone on the hockey team, but... the others? Yeah. She has a type—athletic, rough. I haven’t seen her around in a while, but last semester she was *wild*.”

I want to ask, but I force my mouth closed. If I’ve learned anything from the time I spent dating her, Paloma isn’t who this information should come from.

I force myself to eat, despite the sour feeling in my stomach. We’ve got practice in a few hours, which might give me enough time to talk to her and make it up to her if she wasn’t already at practice.

But I know her schedule like I know my own, because I *want* to know it. I want to see her every second I can, and for two busy student athletes, that’s a scheduling game itself. It’s surprisingly easier for me to find the time for her

than she can for me. More often than not, she is taking care of her brothers. I get the sinking feeling in my gut, the more I am around her, that she is the *only* one taking care of them.

Shoving back from the table, I excuse myself quickly and toss my scraps in the bin on my way out. Then dive into my phone and pull up Sadie's text thread, debating exactly how to fix it.

But not before opening her playlist for me, queuing up the new song "Yippie Ki Yay" by Hippo Campus. I can't help the smile that spreads at knowing *exactly* why she chose it.



TWENTY-FIVE

# SADIE

It's Friday night and I have a shift at the cafe that I'm already late for.

Practice was awful, focusing on the jumps for my long program which I ran through angrily, sloppy the first handful of times because all I could think about was Rhys.

He texted me last week, after our mishap on the quad, but I'd ignored it at first, focused solely on the week's schedule—work, practice and Oliver's game.

I planned to message him back, to apologize for getting so upset—because the truth was that Oliver didn't care, not enough for this to bother him. I was the one who was hurt and I should have been honest with him about it.

But then, Friday night came.

Instead of making it to the competition, I spent the night hunting down my father—who'd stolen my car while we were packing Oliver's gear bag—and getting Liam dressed from his bath. Oliver missed his game, Liam became more aware of exactly how terrifying his father could be, and I called every bar within fifteen miles until I found him.

I had to hitch a ride from a too-expensive taxi, fight off grabby hands from drunk older men in a seedy dive bar and fight my own father for my car keys back.

So, Rhys' text sat unanswered, and the self-hatred that lingered around me swallowed me whole until I'd made my decision. Bringing Rhys Koteskiy into the mess of my life was something I wasn't willing to do.

I texted a quick, *I don't think we should do this anymore*. Then left the rest of his messages unread and unopened, because I couldn't bring myself to

block him.

It has been a week of absolute hell since then, avoiding him at every turn and focusing solely on work, skating and my family.

Tonight, my coach kept me far past practice, running me ragged with new additions to level up my short program.

Then, because of my academic probation, he had me do my homework in front of him, sitting in his little office until well past my in-time for work. I knew Aurora will cover me, but it makes me sick with anxiety. Being at the rink late meant I wouldn't have time to see my brothers before work, that I would have to trust that Ms. B, our elderly neighbor, would hold down the fort until I clock out.

I know that Coach Kelley is very aware of that fact, of my responsibilities, but I can't hate him for pushing me to be my best.

*He's only like this because he believes in me. He's the only one who does.*

Still, as much as I hate how *much* I have to work, I love weekends at Brew Haven. Especially Friday and Saturday nights, where the shop stays open late for open mic nights.

Some people sing or play the guitar, some do poetry or excerpt readings—we've even had a stand-up comic before, which, while cringy, was definitely a fun distraction while washing dishes after closing out the register.

Tonight, being the first open mic night on campus, we're expecting a semi-small crowd. Partially because it's the first one and it's on the very first week. But mostly, because there are about a hundred parties on and off campus we will have to compete with until close. Including one at the "hockey dorms" that both Rora and I received invitations to via text.

I was surprised to receive one, from Freddy of all people, but I know I can't go—I can't risk running into Rhys because I know I'll give in.

"Are you going to go?" I ask her, nodding towards where she's sitting on the countertop staring intently at her phone as I make a decaf latte. I imagine she's pouring over Matt Fredderic's text again. "You should."

"I can't," she answers, but her eyes don't leave the screen and she's near to drawing blood where she's gnawing on her bottom lip.

There's only one reason I know of holding her back.

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Satan—I mean, your boyfriend." I giggle, but cut myself off at the sight of her slightly stricken expression.

“He... he blocked me again. I think we’re broken up.” There’s a little quiver in her voice as she says it, even as her shoulders try to shrug.

It isn’t the first time Tyler has done something like this. I try to limit my time around him as much as possible because I have neither the patience or self-restraint not to cause a problem, and the little I’ve seen of him, I despise.

It’s a vicious cycle too; if Rora breaks up with him, he pesters our apartment and place of work for weeks until they get back together. But when he decides he’s changed his mind, or Rora has messed up in some way, he blocks all contact from her with no notice.

Once, I had to pick her up off the side of the road ten miles from campus because they’d fought at dinner and he left her there.

I hand the latte I’ve finished to Ellis, one of the new freshmen working, before walking to put my hands on either side of the counter where Rora’s perched, trying to cut off her legs from their anxious swinging.

“You okay, Ror?”

She smiles, but it doesn’t meet her eyes. “Yeah. Actually, I think I’ll go home after shift and have a little self-care night.”

I smile back. “I’ll see if Betty can keep the boys at her place tonight and we can do face masks and watch *Because I Said So*.”

Her smile grows as she spoons another heap of homemade whipped cream into her mouth and nods, letting the spoon dangle as she pushes off the top. “Perfect.”

The door chime goes off and I look over my shoulder to see Paloma Blake flounce through the door.

As usual, she’s dressed in a way that makes me want to simultaneously tear her hair out and steal the clothes off her body for myself. Sometimes, when our paths unfortunately cross, I imagine she’s walking in slow motion to something like “Maneater” or “Bubblegum Bitch,” like a personalized soundtrack, the click of her heeled knee-high boots on beat.

Paloma Blake and I have woven in and out of each other’s lives since sophomore year, both attending most of the same parties and often, we realized, hooking up with the same guys. For that reason, it almost felt like a competition between us.

She comes to stand right in front of Ellis, but her eyes are only on mine as she leans lightly on the counter, like a feline stretching in the sun.

“Paloma.” I nod, crossing my arms subconsciously as I can’t help staring at her cleavage sitting like a display, almost spilling from her lavender corset

top.

“Sadie Brown,” she coos, plump lips spreading wide over white teeth. “Just the person I was hoping to see. Mind if we chat?”

Yes.

But still, I slink around the countertop, promising Ellis to be right back, and slip out the front door. We walk together to the little alleyway between Brew Haven and the off campus bookstore.

“What do you need?”

“I hear you and Rhys are talking.” She leans back against the brick.

The sound of his name hurts and I hate it.

“Fascinating.” I deadpan. “Nothing better to do with your time than play town crier?”

She rolls her eyes. “I came to ask if it’s true.”

“Paloma.” I scrub my face with my hands. “You are constantly dating someone, particularly in the sports arena. Why don’t you just ask him?”

“I dated Rhys,” she spouts.

I hate the possessive clench in my gut. I know he’s dated before—*look* at him, but hearing it makes me a little nauseous.

“And?”

“And so, I know him. And, unfortunately for my psyche, I know you.” She drops her fake smile and stands up straight. “He doesn’t need you around him. It’s their final year to win the Frozen Four and get attention for the draft.”

I clench my jaw, hating that as much as I want to try my strength in fighting her in the alley, I can understand her worries.

Not only that, but I agree.

*You think he gives a shit about taking time away from your dreams? From your brothers?*

Coach Kelley’s heated whisper reverberates in my head.

*He’ll never understand.*

“Last year—”

“This isn’t like last year,” I snap, cutting her off.

For a moment last year, Paloma and I had almost been friends. A little truce as we self-destructed together. I’d seen her spiraling the same way I was, so the accusation cuts deeper. As if she’s suddenly all better, with her refreshed highlights and summer tan.

If she gets a fresh start, why not me?

Paloma starts to speak again, but I raise my palm.

“Save it,” I whisper. “I was talking to him, I guess. But you’re right. Don’t worry, I’ve already told him it’s over. I’m leaving him alone.”

I wondered briefly if he was doing the same thing, but I put his contact on Do Not Disturb, trying to quell my need to look.

“If you want him, fine. Just leave me out of it.”

*Oliver. Liam. Rora. The custody hearings. Work. School. Skating.*

Surviving. That’s what is important.

“It’s not a question of if I want him.” She rolls her eyes, adjusting her top just so. “It’s just—you know what? Nevermind.”

I walk away before she can.

I expect to feel lighter somehow, as if I’m truly shedding Rhys and his haunting, sad eyes.

But, I don’t. If anything, I feel worse.

TWENTY-SIX

# SADIE

“You swear you haven’t had sex with him yet?”

We’re sitting on a pallet of pillows and blankets—almost all of them Aurora’s, half homemade gifts from her grandmother, a whole assortment of colors that looks like a muted rainbow threw up. Both lying flat on our backs, nearly cheek to cheek with legs outstretched to either side of our small living room area. Rora’s lengthy curls fan around me, tangling with the straight silk of my own.

My cheeks heat under the slight embarrassment at Rora’s question. If anyone else asked, I might rip their head off, but I know Rora means well.

“I swear.” I sigh.

And it’s the truth. We’ve done nearly everything else, but every time we start to go in that direction—with me leading the charge—he redirects me with his mouth on me so quickly I can’t complain before he’s wrenching endless orgasms from me.

The boy has a magic tongue.

“Why not?”

There’s a lot of ways I could answer, but I don’t want to say what I really think—that he didn’t want me in that way. Maybe he heard about last year after all.

“I think he was taking things slow,” I say, the sting of past tense hot on my tongue as it falls from my lips. *Was*. “But it doesn’t matter. And besides,” I say, sitting up on my elbows and leaning over her so my hair forms a little curtain over us. “I thought *you* said no talking about boys. If that’s back on the table, you need to tell me about the student.”

*The Student.*



Rora is an accomplished student, a tutor in mathematics, English and multiple sciences. She's an overachiever in all aspects, and has been since freshman year. In that, she has kept herself professional.

Until recently, where she keeps talking about one of the people she tutors, labeled in her phone as *Student* which is odd already because she uses email to track students, not her personal number.

I haven't seen the messages, but I know they are there and she likes him—just from her perpetual smile while she schedules their sessions.

If that's even what she's doing.

“Oh, suddenly someone is silent.” I laugh.

We both push up and rest our backs against the small sage sofa we found on the side of the road and spent weeks cleaning, only to spill an entire glass of red wine on it while celebrating the following weekend.

She shrugs, but still refuses to say a word about it.

“Right.” I sigh. “Well, how is tutoring Matt Fredderic going then?”

She takes a big gulp of her Big Gulp that we filled with cherry slush earlier. “It's fine. Easy.”

“I'm surprised he needs a tutor. Isn't he sleeping with all his professors for good grades? Or does he just not have any female teachers to seduce this year?”

Rora rolls her eyes. “Very funny.”

I start to say something again, when my phone starts ringing.

It's an unknown number, but the area code is local. Normally I wouldn't answer, but I've had too many scares when it comes to Oliver and Liam that I'd never forgive myself, so I hold up a finger for Rora and quickly apologize before answering.

“Hello?”

There's loud music for a moment, before a door slams and it's slightly quieter.

“Is this Sadie Gray?”

“Sadie Brown,” I correct, my stomach sinking because there's only one person who calls me that.

“The figure skater?” the guy asks, sounding puzzled with my correction.

“Yeah.” I breathe. “Who is this?”

“Bennett Reiner. I'm Rhys' friend. We met once at the coffee shop.”

I nod, even though he can't see it. “I remember. Bennett—what's, I mean... Why are you calling me?”

He takes a deep breath, seeming to struggle to get his words out. “I didn’t want to call you unless I had to, but I think something’s wrong with Rhys.”

My stomach drops, a flare of heat over the back of my neck. *What’s wrong? Is he okay? Is he hurt? Did he have another panic attack?*

“Why are you calling me?” I finally blurt, anxiety mixing with anger—not at him, but at *everything*.

*He’s not mine. We aren’t dating.*

“I thought look, I don’t know what’s going on between you two—”

“Nothing is—”

“—but I know that Rhys isn’t okay. I don’t think he’s been okay for a while, and for some reason, I think you know that. So, if he’s told you or confided in you, it’s not *nothing*.” He spits the last bit out, like he’s angry with me for calling it that.

“Bennett, I can’t—”

“You don’t have to date him or whatever it is, but please, can you just come help him? I can’t get him to leave and he’s locked himself in a bathroom and said only Sadie can come in. If he doesn’t want people to see him like this, he needs to get the hell out of here and none of us can drive.”

*Oh my god.*

Rora cocks her head at me, and I know the call is loud enough that she can hear at least some of it. She shrugs, letting me know it’s my choice.

“Send me the address. I’ll come take him home.”



We look terribly out of place; Rora in her blue and white striped silk pajama set—because the girl doesn’t own a simple t-shirt, and me—swimming in an old ratty band tee that comes down mid-thigh, covering my shorts entirely.

After I park the Jeep, we both hop out and walk the short distance from the street parking to the bumping, loud, aptly named *hockey dorms*. Rora crosses her arms, hands gripping her shoulders self-consciously. It doesn’t help, especially with her hair piled into a pretty ribbon-bound ponytail, all bare tawny skin.

Still, she braves the murmurs when we walk the stone steps to the porch and front door, where a few stragglers are talking and laughing. Walking through the opened door, I look around for the mountain that is Bennett

Reiner.

I see far too many familiar faces, a few brave my angry bare-faced stare to tell me they're happy to see me or glad I'm back on my "usual shit." Shoving past them all, I'm a second away from calling him when a shoulder slams me hard enough to toss my bodyweight into the wall.

"Nice outfit, Aurora," a snarky voice taunts.

I'm spinning around, ready to knock him on his ass before I can blink, but Rora stops me, stepping in front of me to block my path to Tyler. He's flushed, clearly more than a little drunk and something about it makes me nervous.

"I can deal with this," Rora tells me calmly, but her eyes are dilated and there's gooseflesh across her bare skin. "Go find Rhys."

"I won't leave you here—"

"It's fine." She smiles. "I can handle him. Besides, we're in the crowded front room at a party. What could happen?"

*A lot.* I want to argue, but I catch a familiar set of bodies approaching from the back of the room near the kitchen. One, hulking and decked in a long sleeve and jeans, backwards baseball cap and a scowl. The other, slightly shorter, but still out-measuring most of the guys in the room, dressed in his usual Matt Fredderic fashion: a semi-unbuttoned shirt and the glint of the same chain around his neck.

I head towards them, pushing through the throng of people surrounding every corner.

Bennett spots me first, both of us now heading towards each other, cutting the distance in half. Matt comes too, but his eyes aren't really focused on me, he keeps glancing behind.

"Your friend okay?" he asks when we're close enough to hear.

"You mean your tutor?" I joke, but my mouth can barely get the hint of a smile. "No, she's not. I-I need to... Can you just, like, go hover around her and make sure she's okay?"

He nods and taps me on the shoulder, scooting by.

Bennett looks unflinchingly calm, but there's a flush to his cheeks like he might have had a few drinks. He messes with his baseball cap and looks towards my shoes, a hand-me-down pair of slip-on clogs, and nods over his shoulder.

I follow him through the kitchen toward a narrow back stairwell that is, thankfully, empty.

Bennett takes them two at a time, and I follow close behind until we reach a closed bathroom door. He takes off his baseball cap, rakes a hand through a mass of messy amber brown curls and readjusts the hat back on his head, gesturing towards the door with his other hand.

“Right,” I whisper, hating the clamminess of my hands and seasick stomach. My hand knocks on the door.

“Busy!” a female voice yells. Her tone is angry, but that doesn’t stop me from grasping the wall like I might pass out, or vomit—or both.

Bennett huffs a little derisive sound and slams his fist so hard on the door it rattles.

“Open the fuck up.” He doesn’t yell, but it has the same effect.

“Go away,” Rhys slurs through the door, and I’m sure my face is ash now. “I’m fine, Ben.”

“Rhys?” I ask, pressing my entire face nearly into the wood. “It’s Sadie. Can you open the door for me?”

It’s barely a second, and he does.

Or she, because the girl is the first to slip out of the room, adjusting her high ponytail and jeans as she does. She gives a sneer of disgust towards the room and flickers her eyes to me, before snapping towards a fuming Bennett.

“Freddy told you not to mess with him,” Bennett practically growls.

She rolls her eyes. “Whatever—he’s a mess. Threw up for the last ten minutes while I just stood there. I’m assuming you’re—”

“Gray,” a voice croaks.

We all whip our heads towards Rhys.

His body is slumped into the frame, his gray shirt slightly darker around the collar that tells me he was either sweating or tossing water from the faucet onto his face. His skin is flushed, hair a tangled mess that he tries to curl behind his ear as some of it plasters to his damp face.

He looks... terrible. Yet—he’s smiling at me, dimples deep and eyes foggy.

“You’re so beautiful,” he slurs, so much that his words all come out as one.

Another wave of heat as a light pulsing starts up in my head.

“Was he this drunk when you went in there with him?” I ask, vision hazing as I glare at the girl trying to leave our little alcove.

Rhys stumbles, catching his weight on the frame again as he looks between us. “She pulled me in there,” he hurries to say, as if it’s him I’m

accusing. “But I didn’t want to—”

He hiccups and I see Bennett step towards him, like a shield in case he throws up again, or passes out.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I ask, whipping back towards the girl. She’s tall, even more so with her heels; a pair of shoes I wish I was wearing now so I could take one off and stab her in the eye with it. “He’s blackout wasted and you took him in there? For what? To hook up with the hockey star while he’s literally so drunk he can’t see straight?”

The girl’s cheeks go red, a little widening to her eyes. As if she’s just realizing what she did. She might’ve had a drink or two, but she’s not drunk.

“I didn’t know he had a girlfriend.”

Flames shoot off from the sides of my head.

I launch myself towards her before I really think it through. We tumble into the wall, my arms around her waist as I use my foot, now missing a clog from my jump, to take her down to the hardwood flooring.

“We didn’t do anything!” she screams. “He threw up all over the place before—”

I hit her—which unfortunately isn’t a first for me.

The very few people in the hallway around us are starting to chant or yell. I only get two good hits—one to her face, the other to her arm—when she finally blocks me, screaming at me. But I can’t hear her beyond the red haze.

*She touched Rhys. She took advantage of him.*

Then, I’m pulled away.

Bennett easily walks me backwards, even as I squirm in his arms. He’s huge, and I’m sure it looks like a Newfoundland taking a Chihuahua by the scruff. My ears are still ringing as I try to come down from the burst of adrenaline—so I can’t hear as he barks something at her over my shoulders.

Rhys is sitting in front of the bathroom, looking up at me in Bennett’s arms with watery brown eyes.

I hate how vulnerable he looks, but it brings me back.

*Focus on Rhys.*

Easy.

I stop fighting against Bennett and he drops me after I nod again. He switches me for Rhys, tucking an arm around his waist as Rhys leans heavily on him.

“I didn’t want her here, Sadie,” Rhys coos, his voice slurring even as his eyes shine. He reaches for me but I sidestep him. “I promise.”

“It’s fine, Rhys. I know.” I sigh. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I think I’m in love with her.” I hear Rhys tell Bennett, but his voice doesn’t lower even a notch. “And she won’t let me *in*.”

My heart clenches and I can’t help glancing over my shoulder, maneuvering quickly down the stairs.

Bennett winces, helping Rhys along as we walk out the back door. “Calm down, bud.”

“Sade doesn’t think I’m a golden boy, Ben.” Rhys smiles, but it’s all wrong. “I don’t have to pretend now that she’s here. She *knows* I’m broken.” He lets out a huffed laugh.

“Rhys... you’re not broken.” Bennett sounds as distraught as I feel, despite the hard wall of steel I have raised, my last ditch effort to protect myself.

“I am, Ben. And she’s the only one who sees it.”

Bennett gives me an unsettled look, but continues on.

“Let’s get you out of here, man,” he says, softer in his tone.

Bennett leads, staying close to the side of the house and avoiding the other half of the party enjoying the cool autumn air.

As we make it to the front lawn, I step forward to navigate towards my car.

“Where are you going?” a voice shouts—Paloma, I realize—as I turn towards her.

She’s standing just slightly in front of the front steps, having leapt up from the lap of a very large, very terrifying-looking man I’ve never seen before. Her eyes keep flickering between the three of us, like she isn’t sure who she addressed with her question.

Maybe it’s the already high adrenaline echoing in my veins, or the vulnerable, heart wrenching words spilling from Rhys’ drunken lips, but I can’t seem to stop myself from heading towards her.

I must look slightly unhinged, because a little bit of fear widens her eyes as she steps back.

“If you want him, Paloma,” I snap. “Take better fucking care of him. Or leave him alone.”

She flushes, crossing her arms. “I didn’t say that—”

“Whatever. Be with him or don’t, I don’t fucking care,” I lie, my teeth aching as I push out the words. “Just—” I’m sputtering and then a laugh etches out of me before I can stop it. “You know what? Nevermind. You

can't have him, okay? I don't get him and neither do you. Leave him the fuck alone and we don't have a problem."

She nods, but she isn't looking at me. No, she's looking past me towards Rhys. Bennett scoffs and calls for me to leave.

"Stay out of my way," I whisper. I look over her shoulder at the little crowd gathered. The black-haired, golden-skinned guy is watching it all with a sinful smirk across his lips, leaning back as if this is his favorite reality show. But above him, sitting on the highest step and being tended to by some football player, is the girl from earlier.

I gesture to her, making her face turn ashen as I call a little louder. "And tell your little friend up there to watch her fucking back. I don't need unbruised knuckles to skate."

It's easy now, to leave, something in my gut is satisfied by the red skin on her cheek, the thoroughly reprimanded look on Paloma Blake's otherwise perfect face, all of it surges me forward, leading them to my car down just two rows from the lawn.

Bennett sits Rhys in, gentle as the giant can be. Rhys tucks against the seat and I turn to see a running Rora headed my way. Her sandals smack on the pavement, the silk of her pajamas rippling in the cool wind.

She grabs onto Bennett's arm, who flinches under her touch and draws back.

"Someone's gotta stop him."

"Who?"

"Freddy."

Bennett curses and takes off back towards the party with Aurora in tow, leaving me with Rhys.

It's quiet, the wild whipping through the trees and the muted party noise gentle in the background. And because I can't stand the silence, boygenius' "Revolution 0" plays on a little loop in my head.

He's just breathing, but I glance quickly to make sure he's still awake and alive, and despite his drunken stupor, he sees it.

"I'm good." He sighs deep again, pressing a hand to his chest before letting it fall. "Just those Darth Vader impressions again."

The words are still slurred, but it's the droopy smile that has me looking away fast.

"I can't believe you're here," Rhys whispers, his voice fitting seamlessly with the sounds around me and in me.

It's almost painful not to look at him.

"Where've you been?"

"Rhys..." I beg.

He reaches out, almost falling out of the car, grabbing my hand. It forces me to look, to see the glittering pain like drops of a deep blue in his dark brown eyes.

"I called you over and over. I just... Sadie, please."

"Don't do this right now. You're drunk and I'm tired."

He bites his lip and nods, but the movement is slow and lethargic.

I want to kiss him again, but it's selfish because it's my need.

It's overwhelming, the way I feel around him. The need to touch him, to hold him—and not in a way that how I *feel* usually overwhelms me. This is—it's soothing, like it melts away all the bad thoughts in my head.

"Close your eyes," I murmur, letting my thumb run circles around his warm hand. Letting myself bask in the comfort of *him*. "You should sleep it off, hotshot."

His lips tilt at the nickname, with his eyes still closed and his hand still folded in mine.

"You'll still be here when I wake up?"

"Yeah," I murmur, stealing a moment to caress his overheated forehead and run my fingers through his hair. "I've got you."

Even like this, perched in my backseat with a boyish sleepy smile across his face, he looks larger than life. He's destined to be something *great*.

I drop him off with Freddy at their house, who's sporting bruised knuckles and a red cheek. I don't ask, because the only thing I'm concerned over is Rhys.

I hate leaving him there, even with Freddy. It feels wrong, leaving him alone.

Because I've begun to think of him as mine, I realize as I pull away from their nice little house.

*He deserves so much more. He's temporarily broken—there's no fixing me.*

That thought stays with me like a mantra, far into the night and through the next day.



TWENTY-SEVEN

# RHYS

My hands are shaking.

Considering there is nothing on the table, albeit a misshapen mug from my mother's limited foray into pottery, I clench my fists as I wait.

*This is ridiculous. A bad idea.*

Except I know this is the right choice.

After waking to a pounding headache and an exhausted Bennett slumped against my bedroom wall where he'd kept watch over me all night, I was tormented to a replay of the evening.

*I think I'm in love with her.*

Good god. But fuck, if it wasn't true, at least somewhat.

Give me two more weeks of her snappy attitude and smoky giggle and I would be.

Immediately after he finished telling me what I did—and said—I reached for my phone and sent an apology—arguably too quickly and desperately. And, like all my messages since her last one, it went unanswered. If she's still receiving my texts, I'm sure I look insane. Maybe she thinks I am, considering we were only hooking up in her eyes and I told the girl I was falling in *love* with her.

Bennett hadn't been willing to let it go—so, I told him. He looked angry the entire time, but that's a usual expression for the controlled goalie.

But then, he hugged me. Tight. Loving.

His eyes were wet with tears as he looked at me and said, "If you'd told us, told me, we could've helped. Things would've been different."

I knew that was true as he said it, but still, I told him not to tell anyone else on the team. Bennett could know, he should have known from the start,

but this wasn't just for everyone. This pain is my own, as is who I choose to share it with.

But... there is one more who deserves to know.

"*Chto eto?*" The gruff Russian is still chipper as my father pads down the last step into the kitchen. "What's this?" he repeats in English, finishing off the top button of his shirt.

He's dressed for work—which for him means an interview, a press event or something for my mother.

"Do you have a minute?"

I watch as he measures the expression on my face, perhaps even my body language. He's always been good at that, one of his strengths in the league. His face turns stern and he nods.

"Do we need your mother here?"

"No." I shake my head. Mostly because no matter how I try to hide, she knows everything. "Just you."

He sits at the table without prompting. I'm at the head, where he takes the side closest to me.

"Do you want a coffee?" I ask, suddenly desperate to stall.

He shakes his head, waiting patiently.

My parents and I have always been close. I think if I'd chosen to go anywhere else in the world for school, they would've found themselves moving there. And... I've never minded it. It was a saving grace when I was hurt, even if it was hard to see through the pain.

"My son," he whispers, his hand patting mine before mimicking my posture almost exactly. Not intentionally, but because we are made of the same materials. Like a replica of his youth—is that what he sees?

*My son. My son. My son.*

It plays again, like that permanent scratch on a record, a glitch in my memory that brings an immediate headache. I try to play Sadie's songs in my head, looping the Oasis song again and again.

Still, I can't get the goddamn words out.

"I'm not okay," I shove through my lips.

"*Vchistuyu,*" he whispers, a sad smile stretching across his face. It's a word I don't recognize from my partial, limited Russian.

"I don't know that." I shake my head, my throat catching.

"Finally." He smiles but it's watery. Between him and my mother, the intensity of emotions in this house has always been welcoming. After the hit,

it was stifling. Now... now it is starting to feel like *home* again. “It means *finally*, Rhys. You’re going to tell me what’s going on now. What is hurting you?”

My brow furrows as I look up at him. “How did you—”

“I know I am not your mother.” He raises his hand to silence my protests. “But along with her, you are the most important thing in my life. I would bleed myself dry if it meant I could take your pain for you. Now, tell me.”

So I do. Working all out of order, because I know what is going to be hardest to say.

I tell him of the panic attacks at night, the night terrors that Mom had to shake me awake from multiple times. I tell him about starting the sleeping pills prescribed to me, how it made me lose memory, or how one minute I’d be in the kitchen making lunch, and then suddenly I’d drive nearly to the harbor—that it scared me enough to stop taking them and just deal with the nightmares.

I’m honest when he asks if I still have them. I do.

I tell him about the panic attacks on the ice when I first started back, and his face looks distraught with the details. I know it’s because I didn’t ask for his help, that he knows I was hurting and scared and alone—only I wasn’t alone. So, I tell him that too, about Sadie and her music and everything else about her that brings me some kind of peace.

He smiles at that, his eyes wet as he stays silent and lets me get it all out.

And then, I tell him why this is the first time he’s heard it.

“In the hospital,” I begin, looking at my hands splayed on the oak. “I couldn’t really see anything or remember much that I could. But I could hear you, over everyone that was there, I kept hearing you.”

I could still smell that harsh antiseptic mixed with metal, my hands trying to pat down and rub at my unseeing eyes, when a nurse had to hold them down. My mother was crying; I could just faintly tell because the loudest noise was my father’s sobbing yells.

*My son! My son—help him. Please.*

And then, *I can’t live without him. Not my son—he can’t do this to me.*

It wasn’t some grand hurtful thing, and it would take more than two sessions of therapy to understand it, but his screams haunted me. I’d never seen my dad upset or afraid before. And when I was at my highest point of fear, the calm, steady presence of my father wasn’t there—just panic.

So, I keep everything to myself. Because I love my dad, and I never want

to hear him like that again.

I tell him all of this before I work up the courage to look at him.

His eyes, so like my own, are shining as tears drop down his face.

And then, he's moving, his arms around me before I can blink, trapping me to my seat in a fierce hug.

"My son," he whispers into my hair, and this time there isn't a bolt of fear or panic that rushes my spine. Just warmth. "I'm so sorry, Rhys. *Prosti menya, pozhaluysta.*" *Forgive me, please.*

"You didn't do anything—"

"I did," he says, holding me somehow tighter, before letting go and settling back into his seat. The lump in my throat is still there, hard enough to swallow through, so I don't reach for the coffee that I desperately want. "I should have been there, should have stepped back to see what it was you needed. But seeing you like that, the blood on the ice, the way your body gave out—"

I stop him with a hand and he nods.

"It's still too hard to think about it. Makes my head swim."

"Because you can't remember it?"

I nod.

"Thank you, Rhys. For telling me everything, for letting me in." He clears his throat and wipes away the tears from his cheeks before meeting my gaze. "Listen to me closely. I don't care if you toss your skates in the trash tomorrow, I don't care what you choose to do for the rest of your life as long as you're happy." He chuckles and relaxes back into the chair.

"If you'd picked up a basketball all those years ago, I'd be courtside for the rest of my life with one of those big foam fingers. If you take up a paint brush, I'll buy every piece that we have walls for. If you use that big brain of yours for engineering or law—I'll do whatever I can to show I support you until my last breath."

"I want to play hockey. I do," I insist, because I know I still want this—it's just buried beneath panic and pain.

"Still. This"—he gestures widely—"this life we have, it's *nothing* without you safe and happy. That is all I want. I love you, son."

Tears form at the corners of my eyes and I try to hold them back. "I love you."

There is a long stretch of silence, as something new settles into my bones. The numbness is still there, but it isn't overwhelming. It's... it's just *there*.

“Let’s go to the rink today,” he offers just as my mother descends the staircase, dressed in slacks and a nice shirt. He goes to her instantly, like it’s muscle memory and I wonder if he felt this all-consuming craze for my mother like I do with Sadie.

I shake my head. “You’ve got things to do today—and I do too. But, this week?”

He smiles and nods. I do the same.

It feels a bit more like I’m really home.

TWENTY-EIGHT

# RHYS

It's been a week without Sadie now, sober or otherwise, and it's started to affect my game. We played home and away last weekend and are scheduled for two away games this coming weekend. So far, we're sitting about where we were last year—close to the top, with Boston College, Michigan, and Harvard being the top competitors.

My focus is good, but not great—disrupted a bit as I find myself lingering and arriving earlier every day to the rink, hoping to catch even a glimpse of her.

I miss the way she makes me calm, sure.

But I miss her.

Sadie was my friend before anything else, even if her stubborn mouth wouldn't let her call me that out loud. Those two months of morning skates are now some of my favorite memories on and off the ice. I want more of it.

And yet, she is out of reach.

For the time being, I am waiting on her and making myself worthy of her.

A week of therapy isn't enough, but it's a start. Sadie can't be my crutch if I want her to be *mine*. I won't put that on her ever again.

The library is slightly cool, matching the temperature outside. Like most of the old, on-campus buildings, it's usually either freezing cold or boiling.

I've stayed up on my studies, as is required for the team, but even further I've stayed up on my captain duties—which includes hosting team study days so we can all exchange professor information, helpful hints or common test questions. It's still hard, being around them and faking smiles, but there is still a wound in me that hasn't healed. It won't be overnight.

I have to remind myself of that a lot.



The good thing is that Toren Kane usually makes himself scarce for anything team related, which means the ever present reminder on our ice time doesn't follow me off it.

Before I can make it to the table in the back of the first floor that's slightly rowdier than the rest, something else catches my eye.

The little figure skater that I've been looking for, dressed in tight jeans and another large t-shirt, half-huddled beneath the brawny figure skater, Luc. The one that makes my spine prick with uncomfortable jealousy—something I'm not exactly used to.

“Wait, Sadie,” I call out, getting a stern glare from the librarian at the desk nearby. I shrug at her, considering we aren't on the silent floor.

They're both ignoring me, I realize with a rise of frustration, and they don't stop their hurried movements through the front doors, but I follow anyway.

Slamming out of the library, I start shouting a little louder as we empty into the small parking lot.

Sadie spins, her ear to her phone and a panicked look in her wide gray eyes as she takes me in—and for some reason, my presence seems to make her more upset. It feels like a kick to the gut. She spins away, marching in a little pattern as she continues to dial and redial someone.

Luc sighs, and nods towards me—like we're friends.

Which is fine, unless he's sleeping with Sadie, and then I think I'd like to knock him on his ass.

He walks to stand next to me, about my height and build—an athlete through and through, which somehow makes me more infuriated with him, despite having never spoken to the man before.

Shoving a hand through his jet black hair, he cocks his head towards me, while I refuse to take my eyes off the pacing angry figure skater in front of us, wishing I could do *something*.

“Rhys, yeah?”

I nod, clenching my jaw a little while Freddy's voice rings in my ears. *Has trouble staying with skating partners and not sleeping with them. I think he and Sadie used to be a thing.*

“Luc.” He looks over at Sadie again. Another possessive urge to rip his eyes out rolls through me, but I manage to hold onto my sanity. “This is ridiculous. She shouldn't be this scared to miss practice.”

“What's happening?”

He starts to speak, but stops.

Sadie shoves her phone into her back pocket and spins with a little shriek, kicking at the ground hard enough that both Luc and myself jump forward like we can stop her.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, suddenly feeling like I’m intruding and hating every second. It’s hard to swallow; harder not to reach for her.

“Rhys, please, I can’t do this with you right now.” She dismisses me, her hand waving as she curses and redials on her phone again. “Where is she?”

“Relax, Sadie—just miss the fucking practice,” Luc says as he steps closer to her and I feel a little sick. “He can’t—”

“He *can*. And it doesn’t matter—if I miss, then by the school standards I could lose my scholarship.”

Swallowing down the doubt aching against my skin, I step forward again, tightening my hand on the strap of my backpack. “Can I help?”

“Rhys.” She sighs, looking a little like a volcano about to erupt. “Please, I —”

“I know,” I cut her off, stepping closer until my shoulder lightly pushes Luc out of our little bubble. She starts to soften just under my gaze, enough that I dare to touch her, reaching out and grabbing her hand, rubbing circles into the skin of her palm. “Just tell me how I can help you, Gray. Fuck—I hate seeing you look like you’re about to panic.”

Growing bolder with her, I release her hand and grasp her chin lightly, tilting her eyes to mine, heart aching at the hopeless, frightened look in her eyes.

“Tell me.”

She melts into my hand and nods, and part of me—the very ridiculously male part of my brain wants to look at Luc now and smirk at him, display her in my arms as if to say *See? She’s only soft for me. I’m the one she comes to—not you*. But I manage to keep my attention on her.

“My brothers are home from school—and my neighbor usually watches them.” I nod as she whispers everything to me, never letting go of my gentle grip on her chin. “A-and Aurora should be home, but she’s not answering her phone, and I can’t miss my practice—”

“You need me to get your brothers?” I nod. “And take them where?”

“It’s fine.” She jerks back, immediately defensive of the help being offered. “No, I just—”

“Sadie,” I say a little firmer, hardening my tone. “I know where your

house is, I remember it. Where do I need to take them?”

Her eyes line with tears, but she doesn't let one of them free as she nods to me. “Okay, yeah. Just... Can you bring them to the dorms? Rora's probably napping between her classes. Just—yeah. I'll give you her number and she can pick them up outside the dorms.”

I nod, and let her take my phone to input Aurora's number. “Now, just go —”

She hesitates, even as Luc picks up her bag from the ground and waits for her. “Rhys—”

“I know...” I swallow down every word I want to say and offer her one of my masked smiles. “It changes nothing. Doesn't mean we can't be friends. Okay, Gray?”

She bites down on her lip hard, nodding her head even as her eyes refuse to stop scanning over my form. “Okay, Rhys.”

I can't explain why it hurts so much that she doesn't call me *hotshot*.

She grabs her bag from Luc's outstretched hand and turns on her heel, not bothering to wait for him. When she's out of earshot, Luc turns to me and slaps a hand on my shoulder.

“I don't know if you've met Coach Kelley.”

I shake my head. “Only briefly.”

“Well,” he huffs another breath, closing his eyes and shaking his head—as if this is the last thing he wants to do. “If you have feelings for her—real feelings, and I think it's clear you do, then you need to watch out for her.”

I fight the urge to shove him and growl, *I do watch out for her*, paying attention to the tone of his voice, the defeated look in his eyes.

“She might listen to you about that overly intense coach of hers.”

My brow furrows and I adjust my backpack on my right shoulder, slipping the other strap on. “She said that's normal—that he's just like that with everyone.”

He shakes his head with a huff. “Kelley's not normal. And if you don't know what's going on in that fucking *rink*—”

“Laroux!” Sadie shouts, stamping her foot. “If you make me late, I'll cut your fucking balls off and hang them on my dash.”

A smile pulls at my mouth just watching her, and Luc takes off, not bothering to finish his statement before he's jogging after her.



On the front steps of an identical, but slightly brighter house than the one I recognize as Sadie's, Liam and Oliver sit with their backpacks on, alone.

And next door, on their own lawn, there's a man lying flat, facedown.

The sight of the body so close to the boys scares me enough that I barely get the car in park before sprinting towards them. Liam howls when he sees me, a confused little smile taking over his face as he stands, slapping Oliver's shoulders.

"Hey, buds," I call, slowing my gait and donning a smile as if that could distract them from my thoughts screaming *danger* over the stranger mere yards from them. "You okay?"

"Are you here for us?" Liam asks, instead of answering my question and a pit starts to form in my stomach. "Ms. B isn't home, so we don't know what we're supposed to do." He shrugs his little shoulders.

I look over towards their house again. The man is surrounded by a few cans and bottles, as well as a puddle of vomit, but he's breathing. I step back and survey the rest of the cul-de-sac.

"Yeah, I am."

Liam howls again, jumping up and down in place like he can't hold in any of his enthusiasm.

Looking toward Oliver, I ask, "Do you two know that man?"

Liam chews on his lip but nods, albeit hesitantly. "That's my dad."

*Fuck*. I think I'm going to be sick.

"Sadie's gonna be mad," Oliver says, standing beside his brother, his backpack sliding off one shoulder. The look he gives me is wary at best. "She hates when people know about him."

Liam looks a little worried at that. "But she *likes* Rhys."

"Exactly." His brother chuckles, before staring back at me with that same skeptical gaze. "Sadie sent you here?"

It's clear Liam doesn't understand, but I do. Oliver's twelve, but he knows Sadie didn't tell me; that she hid this from me.

I try to focus through the racing thoughts in my head.

"Yeah. I'm just your chauffeur."

"I don't know what that is." Liam sighs.

"It means I'm driving you guys to Rora."

"Yes!" Liam shouts, fist punching into the air and darting to my car without a second glance at his father passed out in a twisted mosaic of beer bottles across the green.

As if this is a regular occurrence.

Oliver waits, a strange mix of fear and want across his face, hidden just slightly behind his mask of anger.

“I’ll stop by The Chick if you want,” I offer. “We’ve got time.”

A hint of a smile pulls at Oliver’s face and Liam squeals, “That’s Ollie’s favorite!” while continuing to pull at the door handle on the car.

I know it’s his favorite. I asked Sadie weeks before, after a grinding make-out session in the passenger side of her car, with her straddling my thighs. I saw yet another bag of to-go trash from a trip to The Chick and teased her about her addiction, which she clarified was Oliver’s addiction. She made it sound like a convenience at the time.

Now, I know better.

“Let’s go.” I nod over my shoulder. “Get some food and I’ll let you control the music.”

And just like his sister, Oliver brightens. My heart is twisting in my chest, but I keep it together and let them sing ABBA songs the entire way to the drive-thru, trying to latch onto their happiness as if it’ll erase the anxiety of Luc’s words mixing with the image of their house.

TWENTY-NINE

## RHYS

After they've eaten their fill of chicken sandwiches, fries and milkshakes while parked at a nearby park that Sadie took me to months before, I open my phone and pull up Aurora's contact, stepping out of the car and slightly to the side before dialing her.

It rings twice, before a gruff voice snarls, "What the fuck do you want, asshole?"

I pause, nearly choking on my own spit at the furious male growl that definitely isn't Aurora. Something uncomfortable slithers down my spine.

"Is this not Aurora's number?" I ask, my voice steady, slightly calm—but still firm. My "Captain Rhys" voice, some on my team might call it.

There's a long pause, then a much lighter sounding, "Rhys?"

My eyes bug and I cough. "Freddy?"

I've never heard Freddy sound like that in my life.

I hear some fussing in background, before Matt fucking Fredderic is back. "We're, um, studying right now." His voice drops, like he's further away from the phone and I can just make out a quiet, "It's Rhys, princess—I can handle it."

Suddenly, he's back at full volume. "Sorry—um, wait—why the fuck are you calling Aurora?"

His voice is almost gruff, like he's a little annoyed with me.

"Why am I—" I cut myself off from the tirade I'd like to spring on my forward that definitely ends with *Find a new fucking tutor and leave that girl alone*. But, instead, I run a hand over my face and sigh. "Sadie wants me to bring her brothers to Aurora at the dorms."

Another bout of rustling, and I can hear Freddy complaining in the

background as Aurora takes over.

“Hey,” she starts, voice light and airy. “Sorry, I’ve been having a problem with spam calls. Um, I can—I won’t be back for a few hours. Shoot.”

“It’s fine, Rora.” I smile and look back at my car, seeing the boys dipping the last of their friends into the shakes, chocolate smeared all over Liam’s mouth. They look calm—even Oliver, to a degree, has relaxed just a bit. “I can keep them with me until later, if you want. Just let me know when you’re ready for them, okay? Take as long as you need.”

She sighs into the phone with an audible smile. “Thanks, Rhys.”

“No problem.”



As I pull up to my parent’s house, I hear Oliver almost choke on his milkshake—that is somehow not empty, while Liam audibly squeals.

“You live in a castle?” Liam asks, blinking wide at the colonial that’s been completely refurbished.

The front retains its original style, but the back has been added onto and stretches further than whoever owned it first. It’s painted gray, but it’s bursting with life from multiple trellises and trees, one of the gardens viewable even from here where bright colored flowers dot the canvas of summer green.

It’s a pain during the winter months, but my mother’s green thumb in the spring and summer shows brightly, even now in the beginnings of fall.

I smile. “No, but my parents do.”

Speaking of, I see my mom step out of the garden, hearing my car approach. Her face is all happy surprise when she steps down from the raised terrace, tall green gardening boots and overalls queuing me that she is in the middle of a project.

My windows are too tinted and I want to give her a warning, so I idle the car and tell the boys I’ll be right back, before slipping out.

She hugs me first, and I kiss her cheek lightly before whispering, “I need your help.”

“What’s wrong, Rhys?”

My voice is shaking as I nod over to the car. “Sadie’s brothers are here with me. She needed help—”



“Have they eaten?” she cuts me off, only worried over them—exactly as I expected she’d be. “Rhys, calm down.”

Why am I so upset?

*Because Sadie has been alone, taking care of them and you made her take care of you too. Selfish.*

I close my eyes tight and nod. “Yeah. Yeah, okay.” I swallow again, brushing a hand through my tangled hair. “And yes, I took them for food. Sadie—she wanted me to drop them home, but—I don’t know. It’s complicated. And they’re kids, so I didn’t want to take them to the Hockey House in case some of the players were there, or what if they don’t like strangers?”

My mom smiles again and pats my cheek. “Just get them out of your car and we’ll bring them inside for some cookies, okay?”

“Okay.”

She stands back as I return to the car and open their doors. They both hesitate, Liam looking at my mom curiously, straining over the seat to see her out of the window.

“Who is that? She’s really pretty.”

I smile as I unbuckle him. He should probably be in a car seat, but that’s not something I currently have on hand. I barely stop myself from pulling out my phone to blindly order one off of Amazon. “That’s my mom.”

“Is she nice?”

“Yeah,” I say gently, fighting over the lump in my throat at the question. “She’s very nice. She would love to meet you.”

Liam nods, but his eyes never leave her.

Oliver lets himself out and closes the door, standing at the side of the car and waiting for me to get Liam out.

“That’s nice,” Liam mumbles quietly as I pull him out.

“What is, bud?”

He tucks his head into my neck. “That you have a mommy. And a nice one.”

I have to close my eyes for a second. *Fuck fuck fuck.*

“Yeah bud, I’m very thankful.” I am now, and always will be, because this kid is hurting my soul.

I decide to carry him, since I suddenly don’t want to set him down. His arms are wrapped around my neck anyway, head ducked seeming slightly shy—the first time I’ve seen the brave little one shy about anything.

Oliver walks just a step behind as we approach my still-smiling mother.

“Hi there,” she offers, her attention solely on Oliver first. “I’m Anna, Rhys’ mom. What’s your name?”

“Oliver. I’m Sadie’s brother.”

My mom nods, still smiling brightly. “I’ve heard a lot about you. My husband says you’re a really, *really* good hockey player.”

He blushes under her attention, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck and nodding. My mom doesn’t reach for him, but I see her hesitate with her hand raised like she wants to. Maybe she can see what I see, that he’s a bit like Bennett, tense and desperate for space—at least physically.

“And who are you, love?” She gentles her voice even further, stepping up to look at Liam who’s ducked his head back into my neck while his little fingers play with the hem of my shirt.

He doesn’t speak, just continuing to glance up at her like he doesn’t want to look away.

“Jesus.” Oliver sighs, rolling his eyes while his cheeks blush like he’s slightly embarrassed by his brother’s hesitancy. “You can tell her.”

“Liam,” he finally murmurs, slinking from beneath my chin just barely. But I know, if I look at him, I’ll see the same stars in his eyes from before, like she’s a magic fairy that’s come to grant his every wish.

“Liam.” She savors his name. “You are a cutie. Let’s go inside now and have some cookies, yeah? I haven’t made them yet but you can help if you want.”

“Really?” His eyes go wide. “With chocolate chips?” He jumps from my arms, wriggling until I finally let him down.

Liam takes her outstretched hand, but only after checking back over his shoulder for a nod from Oliver.

Oliver hangs back, just behind me as Mom and Liam step forward. I wait for the kid, settling into a slow pace as my mom takes the long way through the garden and into the house.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I check to see a text from Rora—several crazy, but happy-looking emojis followed by an all-caps text that she would make sure Sadie got rest.

*You should make an effort to be here,* I’d chided her, the first day we spoke. The memory of my words makes me trip in my steps. Oliver looks at me for a moment and the guilt hits harder.

*Selfish, entitled asshole.*

I can feel it again now, that voice that left me alone whenever Sadie's entire presence muted it. The dark thing that lives in my skin ever since the day I hit the ice. The day I woke up to gauze all over my face and my body, still having trouble breathing, and feeling angry.

The anger only faded, until it was just emptiness and then I missed the anger.

Now, it's only self-hatred left.

But I'm learning the tools for it. I'm also learning that I might need better tools when it comes to handling Sadie Gray.

"Is your dad normally like that?"

Oliver tenses for a moment, but avoids my eyes while he nods.

"Your mom?"

It's hard to talk around the knot in my throat, but I try to clear it, try to keep my wits through this landmine of a conversation.

"Sadie and I have a mom, but she..." He shrugs. "She didn't want us. So we stayed with my dad when she left."

We walk a few more steps, just up to the door. He stays just outside of the open door, the smell of cookie dough and sugar slowly beginning to permeate the air, and his expression is one of anxiety mixed with fear.

But I'm patient. I'll be patient with him just how I will be with Sadie.

"Are we staying here long?"

"As long as you want," slips from my mouth before I can think twice.

Oliver nods though, accepting it. "Well, you should tell Rora. Maybe she can make sissy get some sleep—she never gets any sleep."

"Because of your dad?"

I've stepped into one of the landmines when his stance turns defensive, eyes sharp.

"She takes good care of us," he cuts back over his shoulder, like he can't quite look fully at me as he says it. He's defensive, sure, but he's scared. "Sadie—she takes care of me and Liam; and I help. We don't need anything."

He steps into the house without pausing, and I know that's all I'll get from him for now. He doesn't trust me yet, not really. But I'm keying into his words—*Sadie and I*. Does that mean that Liam's mom is someone else? Is she in their lives?

Or is Sadie alone?

Oliver hangs back in the kitchen, unsure of what to do, while Liam spends every second looking at my mom, watching her every move and

following each command.

I finally get him to sit at one of the barstools. He nervously taps his fingers over the marble—quiet, almost pensive in his guardianship over his younger brother. They're both mostly quiet as my mom and Liam finally put the cookies in the oven.

They grow even quieter when my father enters the room.

He's loud, as usual, singing some Russian song that I don't know but have heard so many times in this exact manner that I often find myself humming it in class.

He doesn't stop when he sees the boys, only pauses to kiss my mom and greet Liam with a pat on the head. That's all it takes for the youngest of the Brown children.

Oliver is more cautious, observing my dad's routine quietly. Eventually, he grabs a bag of chips from the pantry and a dip from the fridge, sitting at the counter and placing all the goods between us three.

Oliver looks at the food, then to me, before quietly informing my dad that I already gave them food and thanking me again.

"You're a growing boy, Oliver. Rhys used to clean out the entire pantry in one sitting at your age."

His hesitancy grows, but there's a little smile from my father's words working its way onto his face.

"Are you sure?"

My dad smiles, a little sadly, and drops his shoulder so his words are quiet enough that I can just make them out.

"I know how hard it can be to accept things when you've spent your life working very hard for very little. Saving up and being a little hungry."

My chest clenches, and I see Oliver trying to understand how the famous man, someone he's probably idolized in his own head, was once a hungry boy surviving in cold Russian winters.

"Yeah." Oliver swallows lightly, but he continues listening intently.

"But, it's okay. I want you to eat it all. In fact"—he opens the container of buffalo chicken dip—"I want you to try it first, and if you hate it, we have tons more you can try."

Oliver softens slightly, enough that my dad manages to pat his back and he melts into it slightly.

"Okay."

THIRTY

# SADIE

I'm exhausted.

I'm sure there are tears leaking from my eyes but my skin is so clammy I don't think I can tell the difference.

"Again."

His voice isn't booming, it's calm. I wonder exactly how much pressure it would take to cut him with my blade if I spun a little too close.

"I have to—"

"I didn't ask."

My lips part like I might scream and whatever he reads on my face makes him gleam, practically giddy as he claps his hands.

He starts my music, the heavy beat of the instrumental wild against my chest, in my throat. Kelley doesn't even give me a second to find my position, he doesn't care about it. All he wants out of me is power.

And it works—like it always does. I hit every jump better than I have all night, every pose is powerful, thrilling even. I feel electric, so much so that there's a bright smile on my face after it's over as I head towards him.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

I smile and nod, because it does feel good—it feels amazing. Kelley's praise is just the cherry on top. I go to grab my water, but he stops me with a hand on my arm, and then clasps my chin to meet my eyes.

"Beautiful, okay? You are so strong." If possible, my smile grows wider. But then he adds, "See how capable you are when you're not so distracted. Leave the stupid boy in the past, yes?"

I jerk my head out of his grasp because just the mention of Rhys is enough for a bolt of longing to wrack through my chest.

“Yes,” I mutter, pulling my guards from the board they’re resting on.

“Have you given any more thought to what I offered for your brothers?”

*Yes, and the answer is and will always be no.*

“I’m thinking about it,” I lie.

I haven’t told Coach Kelley about the meetings with the lawyer, or accidentally stumbling across Liam’s birth mother and basically blackmailing her into signing away her parental rights. Not that it would’ve taken much convincing. “I haven’t made a decision.”

He says he knows a lawyer who would help me make sure they go to a family who can properly care for them.

It doesn’t matter. I’ll give Coach Kelley every part of me to succeed. But I won’t give up my brothers.

“You know I am only thinking of you, my terror.” He’s called me that since I was twelve, probably because I was terrorizing every other girl in my age bracket at the time. “I have your best interest at heart.” He touches my shoulder as he walks by, leaving me in the arena alone.

I sit on the bench for a long moment, trying not to overwhelm myself with the sudden racing thoughts he’s left me with. But, when I realize I’ve left my phone in the locker room—which means I’ve had no contact with my brothers, or Miss B, or Aurora—then I shoot up, sliding my left guard on as I step.

There’s a figure in the stands, just above the tunnel, still seated quietly. I squint up at him in the muted light of the arena.

“You can’t be in here—it’s a closed practice,” I grumble, loud enough to be heard.

A smoky chuckle reverberates in the empty room.

“I can see why,” he says with the kind of voice that makes my subconscious scream *DANGER*.

“Who the hell are you?” I bite, feeling myself raise up like a feral animal.

He jumps over the lowest railing, which still sits fairly high, and lands like a jungle cat. He straightens, towering over me in black track pants and a black Dri-Fit, looking so much like what meeting the devil might look like.

Especially his eyes—bright gold, almost ethereal even in the dark. His mouth is tilted half up, a crooked grin that looks like an insane GQ model just finished a killing spree.

“Kane,” he supplies. “And you’re the little figure skater that knows all of Captain’s secrets.”

He's unfortunately attractive, golden tan skin and black hair, slightly shorter on the sides and a rasping mess of waves on the top that looked repeatedly combed through. His face is all sharp angles, highlighted by a scar down one side of his cheek and jaw, another nick on the skin of his neck, a small one pulling at the cupid's bow on his pouty lips.

"Are we on a fucking pirate ship? You're pulling a real evil villain thing right now."

He shrugs and rolls his eyes, still grinning, crossing his arms casually.

"Aren't I always?" He's speaking more to himself as he rolls a stick between his sharp, gleaming teeth—a lollipop, I realize with a jolt.

Satan is sucking on a lollipop.

I almost want to laugh, but I'm anxious enough in this rink alone with him that I manage to snuff it out before it bubbles over.

"Look, I don't know who you are or what your deal is, but I've got all the annoying assholes I can deal with right now, okay? Move."

"Does your perfect little boyfriend know that your coach overtrains you?"

I growl, which in this face off probably looks like a feral toy poodle barking at a German Shepard.

"One—he's not my boyfriend—"

"Does he know that?" he asks, removing the lollipop, it's purple so I assume it's grape flavored, before swirling it on his tongue and biting lightly on the stick as he smiles.

"And second—my coach doesn't overtrain me. I'm just the best one on the team." I grin brightly at him, eyebrows fluttering in my taunt. "Jealous? What? Is your coach too busy with his star center not to mess with whatever the hell you are?"

He smirks, eyes light fire. "Considering I'm on this team *at all*, I don't think Coach gives that big of a shit about Rhys."

I wait for a moment, trying not to let my confusion show. I'm not very good at it.

His eyes light up. "Oh my god." He laughs, and I get that same flash of a sinister comic book villain trapping the hero. "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Who I am?"

"I don't really give a shit—"

He holds a hand up, smile widening until I can see a slip of sharp canines that somehow just add to his villainous look. "You will. Google him—or



better yet, Google me. Toren Kane, I've got better articles. Just see what you can find."

He pushes past me, reaching beneath the end of the home team bench furthest from me and grabbing a bag. I realize he's putting on skates, and I'm dumbstruck and a little shaken by the conversation, before taking off to definitely *not* Google him.



I have First Aid Kit blaring, windows rolled down so that by the time I stop in front of my assigned parking for the dorms, my cheeks are pink and flushed from the wind.

I'm quick, rushing and very nearly forgetting to put my car in park before lurching out and towards the dorms, catching the door from someone on their way out.

We're on the third floor, but I take the stairs anyway to avoid any waiting time.

I have exactly *zero* texts from Aurora or Rhys, which gives me just as much anxiety as if I'd missed an emergency text. But I'm already extremely late for my meeting with the lawyer. So, I spent most of my definitely-speeding drive here planning exactly how to beg Rora to bring them food and spend the night with them at our house—something I would *never* ask her to do otherwise, so that I can still possibly try to make the meeting.

When I burst through our door, Aurora is in the kitchen and the smell wafting over is mouth-watering.

She gives me a bright beaming smile that I definitely don't deserve, considering the amount of her texts and calls I've let go unanswered as of late.

"Hey," I drag out, slumping against our wrapping paper decorated door.

I wait for the onslaught of noise from the boys that is normal for nights they spend here.

She's got a wooden spoon in her mouth, like she's just finished tasting whatever's in the pot on our sketchy stove, and a bright orange scrunchie keeping her hair up high on her head.

"What's wrong?" she asks, mumbling around the spoon as she drops everything she's doing and comes towards me. "Everything is okay."

“No.” I shake my head. “Where... The boys. They aren’t here? What the hell?” I rake my hands through my hair, pulling out my bun and redoing it again. “I need to call Rhys, and then after I’m done losing my shit with him, I *have* to meet with the lawyer—”

“Hey. It’s okay—my, uh, seminar went over and Rhys offered to grab them food.” Rora smiles, but there’s a hesitancy in her eyes. “Actually, I’m going to go pick up the boys in, like...” She glances at her watch. “An hour. Trust me, he’s probably showing Oliver some fun hockey moves while Liam laughs like it’s the funniest thing ever.”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing thoughts. Because she’s *right*; as much as I’m furious with the hockey boy haunting my every thought, I do trust him. Especially with the boys.

Even if this feels like a trial by fire.

“And I made *you* dinner. So, eat,” she says, shuffling me to sit at our little table. “And then sleep. I’ll take care of everything, okay? Trust me.”

There’s a sinking feeling in my gut, a slight unease. But if there is anyone in this entire world I trust, it’s Rora.

“Okay.”

“Good.” She smiles. “I’ll call the lawyer and reschedule. Now eat.”

I smile as she sets a heaping plate of chicken pesto pasta in front of me. “Smells amazing.”

She bats her hands at the compliment. “Yeah, yeah—you know cooking isn’t my thing. But, I need to keep my little skating rock star fed.”

She sits to eat with me and we talk about everything. It feels good, and I find myself relaxing and getting more tired as I polish off the entire bowl. Soon after, she leaves to get the boys and I set up their cots in my room, laid out like a big pallet on my floor.

It used to make me happy to look at it, because I knew they’d be here with me; safe. Now, it fills me with dread. Can I do this? If I get custody of them, can I even stay here?

I know the answer already; which is why I overloaded my courses this semester to try and graduate in the fall. But I’m already just off academic probation, barely clearing my check-ins with my counselor and Coach Kelley. Which is ridiculous for a simple communications major.

By the time I’ve circled my thoughts back around, I’m standing dead on my feet. So I laze to the shower and then back to bed, only waking briefly when I hear the pitter-patter of little feet.

Oliver crashes to the floor almost instantly, quietly begging Liam not to wake me. But Liam ignores his every plea and walks right over to my bed. I shut my eyes tight, feigning sleep, and he presses a little kiss to my forehead before whispering, “Sweet dreams, sissy.”

I don't know how I'll manage it. But I know I *will*, somehow.  
Because those two boys deserve so much more than this.

THIRTY-ONE

# RHYS

It's Thursday night, which usually means we're out at a team dinner or floating through a few parties. Nothing too crazy, because we travel tomorrow, but something to get everyone excited in a controlled environment.

Tonight, however, Freddy, Bennett and I are hosting most of the team at our house for dinner, drinks and bonding.

Holden even invited Kane.

He ran it by me first, in a stumbling phone call that made me feel strangely guilty. He wasn't trying to take sides; he was actually doing his job—getting to know his defensive partner.

Kane didn't show, and I see the slight disappointment on Holden's face where he sits next to an empty seat he insisted people save for the missing teammate.

Now, dinner is over, but we sit with dirty plates and full bellies, laughing and talking. And even though I don't participate as much as I did before, it feels... normal.

A loud, swift knock interrupts the laughing, and Holden looks up at me, pushing back and offering to get it. I know he's anticipating the black sheep to have finally made an appearance. But after only a few moments, he comes rushing back to me.

"Who is it?"

"Um." He rubs the back of his neck. "It's Sadie, the figure skater? She asked to talk to you."

There's a brief flare of irritation that everyone seems to know her—which only makes the irrational part of me want to take her and her brothers and

keep them for myself. Still, I nod and stand, trying to stop my shaking hands and breeze too quickly towards the door. So quickly I jam my hip into the entryway table where all our keys and wallets lay.

Cursing lightly, I pull open the door, a little miffed he closed her outside instead of inviting her in.

And she's there.

Beautiful—like always—in a way that catches in my throat.

Her hair is down, damp and I want to touch it because I know how silky it is after she's showered. Her skin looks a little pink, sensitive in the wind and that stupid divot between her brows that makes me nearly sigh. I start to wonder if cartoon hearts are popping up over my head.

Everything in my system calms.

It's never like this with anyone else. Absolute peace. It leaves me full, unprotected, unaware of anything except the softness of her skin and the hard pillars of stone that guard her heart. And how much I want to sink into her skin, or nip at her neck—leave some kind of evidence that I've affected her as much as she has me.

“Hey,” she starts, her voice gruff. I can't tell if she's going to cry or yell at me, but she doesn't sound happy.

“Hey?” I try to say, but it comes out like a question. “Do you want to come in?”

A loud laugh from the kitchen rumbles like thunder and she winces.

“I didn't realize you'd be busy—I mean, god, that sounds so conceited—”

It doesn't. It sounds *good*. Like she thinks she could show up out of the blue and I'd drop everything for time with her, and she's right. It's just how our arrangement was before—and still is for me.

I don't give a shit what's happening in this house, she's the first priority I have.

I don't care if she never wants to touch me again, I won't leave her alone when it comes to her brothers and whatever is going on with her dad.

“Okay, Gray?”

It slips from my mouth before I even think about it.

Her face crumbles, tears weaving her cheeks and into slightly shuddering sobs—like she's holding back a complete meltdown.

“Why did you take my brothers to your house?”

My eyes widen. This isn't what I expected her to be upset about, but if I've crossed a line—

“I just took them to get some food,” I whisper, crossing and uncrossing my arms. “Aurora was busy, and I didn’t have anywhere else to take them.” It doesn’t matter how soft and understanding I make my words; I still watch them hit her like a slap.

“You could’ve just called me. I mean, why didn’t you? You didn’t have to be the fucking knight in shining armor—”

She stops, and I can see the anger slip over her skin like a veil. But she looks exhausted, so it’s almost too weak to hide the pain in her eyes when she stares back up at me.

“I was just trying to do the right thing.” I try to get her to understand.

I prepare myself, knowing what’s about to happen.

“Is that an accusation? Am I not doing the *right thing*?”

“Sadie—”

“You have no *right* to judge me.”

I’ll take all the anger she needs to give; I’ll be her punching bag if I need to. If it helps. I don’t care, as long as it wipes that despaired, empty look from her eyes.

“I am not some charity case for you and your rich little family to use. We don’t need your help. I can take care of them by myself—I’ve been doing it for years.” The last word is a ragged sob.

The match is lit, fury, dark and coiled releases through my veins as the implication of her words takes root.

*For years.* It echoes in my head like a pounding war drum.

“You shouldn’t have to. Not alone,” I snap, but my voice doesn’t rise even a notch. “You’re not their parent, Sadie.”

“I am!” she shouts back, and I realize that there is only silence behind me. “For now—I am. I’ll be whatever they need.”

I lower my voice, hoping she’ll follow suit.

“I just wanted your brothers to be safe. And Oliver wanted you to get some rest. Your brothers are worried for you—Oliver probably more than he worries for himself.”

“Stop.”

I step forward, crowding her just slightly towards the door. “Be mad. Yell at me if you want, but it’s not going to stop me from caring, and it’s not going to stop me from trying to help you, no matter how many times you push me away.”

“I—” She lets another shuddering breath out and I wonder if she’s ever

felt as helpless with my demons as I do facing her now, worried that any moment is going to devolve into panic.

“I didn’t come here t-to yell at you.” She swipes at her eyes, her chin tilting down. But I catch a glimpse of her resigned features.

Shame.

That’s one I’m all too familiar with.

“Sadie,” I whisper, my hand raising just slightly. Her pretty gray eyes flicker up to me, a softness in her eyes appearing as she takes me in. It makes my chest tight. “Why did you come here, Gray?”

Her throat works, the slim column of it distracting enough that I cup her jaw, letting my fingertips dip to the skin along her neck.

“I don’t know how to say it,” she grumbles, a little half-whine, half-sob. It brings a strange smile to my face and she mimics it just slightly.

“Just try.”

It takes a long moment, but she does.

“Besides Rora,” she starts. “No one has ever done anything like that for them. For me. No one cares—and I... I’m sorry. That text—”

My brow furrows, but I can’t bring myself to care much about it when I’m touching her now. Who cares what she thought weeks before? She isn’t pushing me away now.

“I think I was trying to keep you away from all that.”

“All what?”

“My life.” She shrugs, and then her hands grasp my wrists. “And you still just...” Again she finds no words, but she shakes her head and looks up at me now in a way I’m not sure I’ve seen from her before.

She looks... wonderstruck. Like she’s seeing something for the first time. There is still that softness that’s new to her features and I desperately want to put this moment in a snow globe so I can see this, us in this semi-embrace, forever.

Too soon though, she pulls back.

“So I just...” A little dazed, she shakes her head. “Sorry. I didn’t come for this—I-I came to apologize, and to say *thank you*. So, thank you.”

I can feel her slipping away, and I don’t want to. I don’t want to do this dance with her anymore, because it doesn’t matter if I never see her again. I won’t be able to stop wanting her.

“Sadie?”

She spins back to me, the divot forming against her brow. “Yes?”



“I don’t want you to keep me away, okay? I want to be part of your life.”

“No,” she chokes out. “You don’t, Rhys. It’s messy and way too complicated.”

“I don’t care.”

“Rhys.”

“Sadie, if you told me you were joining the Witness Protection Program, I’d ask where are we going and can I pull off a beard.”

It makes her laugh, and the sound turns my skin to gooseflesh.

“Gray?”

“Yes?”

“I want to kiss you.”

If she rejects me again, I think I can take it. In fact, I worry more that if she lets me, that dark thing that lives in me will just want to take and take and take from her. I worry I will be too much, and yet still not enough.

Sadie doesn’t speak anymore, just deep breaths, mouth parted as we stare at each other.

And then, she jumps for me.

THIRTY-TWO

# RHYS

I catch her easily, like I've been doing it my entire life. Her legs wrap around my waist, tight enough that I wonder if my belt will leave an imprint beneath the leggings on her pale skin that I can trace later with my mouth.

Her lips slam into mine with no hesitation, no battle for control. Just pure want, affection, and admiration pouring from her lips and sinking so deep into my skin that I know I'll never get her out.

I don't want to.

I cup her ass, squeezing because it's impossible not to, keeping her on me even as I pull away from her mouth to eye the stairs. I climb them, hoping I don't send us both careening back down in my clumsy hurry.

She never stops, her mouth achingly sweet in little presses and licks against my neck, my chin, and my collar bone with her hand tugging lightly at my button down. I'm worried she'll rip the buttons in her haste. I think I'd like her to.

My room is directly across from Freddy's, the two on the right side of the second story, whereas Bennett claims the entire left half currently.

I slam into the side of my door jam, knocking us both into the door and wall like a small set of dominoes.

"Shit," I start cursing, pulling her off of my neck to make sure she isn't hurt.

She's smiling, teeth bright against lips that are now flushed and swollen. I want to make every part of her flush, to match the slight pink running down her cheeks, neck and towards her chest that I can just see beneath the white long sleeve she's wearing.

"Sorry. You okay?"

Sadie laughs, leaning in to kiss me again, tightening her legs around my waist. The groan that etches from my mouth doesn't sound human, but I can't help it. Her laugh. Her smile—that damn mouth of hers.

I kick the door closed behind us, tossing her lightly onto my bed.

“Where are your brothers?” I feel like kicking myself for asking, in the middle of this moment, but I'll be damned if I take any more time from them.

“With Rora at the dorms.”

She's stripping before I can say anything else, her shirt disappearing somewhere off the end of my bed, just a thin blue bra in its place. It looks soft, and I find myself frozen, waiting to see what happens next.

I've dreamed about this moment for months; dreamed about Sadie for months. It feels surreal to really have her *here*.

“Take off your shirt,” she demands. My hands work at the buttons furiously, slipping; and I'm sure it isn't a turn on, how uncoordinated it is. So, I slow down as I slip it off and lay it across the desk chair in the corner.

I reach for my belt, settling just in front of her perch on my bed. But her hands knock mine out of the way, reaching for the buckle and slipping it out. It hits the ground with a *thud* that I barely hear over my racing heartbeat.

My jeans come off, leaving only black boxer briefs that she pauses on, before her hand tentatively reaches for the bulge beneath the fabric.

She's touched me many times, always with her hand, usually while my fingers played between her thighs; but this is the first time I've let her *really* touch me, without trying to shift the focus to her.

She grips along my length, caressing me slowly.

Then, Sadie peers up at me. Gray cat-like eyes and a patch of freckles I know better than the back of my hand. Her mouth parts, my name whispered like a caress before she reaches for my waistband. A determined look passes over her face making that crinkle in her brow appear and I'm suddenly worried I'll come before I'm even inside her.

I pull her hand away—ignoring the little frustrated growl she releases—and step closer, moving over her.

The lamp on my nightstand is the only light in the room, making a dusk-like glow around her as I press her back into the mattress.

“Your bed is so comfortable,” she moans as I settle my weight between her thighs.

“Sleep here forever, then,” I whisper, pressing a soft kiss to the skin beneath her ear. I can feel the goosebumps ripple across her arm where my

hand rubs up and down her skin.

My hand trails up her shoulder, pulling the little strap of her bra down until the soft, thin fabric reveals her small breasts to me. I suck in a breath at her perfect, pinked skin, leading my fingers across her little pink nipples.

“S-so good,” she whispers, her hands stretching up into my hair and pulling gently. I smile, obliging her silent demand and pressing my mouth to lick gently across her nipple.

She cries out louder than I’m expecting and my hands closes over her mouth as I look at her, grinning wildly.

I stretch back to hover over her and lean in towards her ear.

“The entire hockey team is in my kitchen,” I whisper, my hand trailing her side to tuck against the soft fabric of her thong, tugging it down over her hips. “So, maybe I should let you scream as loud as you want, Gray. Then, there’ll be no mistaking who exactly you belong to.”

“Oh god,” she whimpers, shoving my hand off her mouth, but gripping it in her own hands like a lifeline. “Rhys.”

“Fuck, I love that.”

She says my name again, as I press my fingers against her, finding her hot and wet. I glide into her easily, still as shocked as the first time kneeling beneath her in the showers, at how perfect she feels.

She comes, a keening sound from her lips before she’s sucking on air, pulling my hand to her mouth to bite on my fingers.

I want to be inside of her, so desperately I have to close my eyes and focus not to spill in my boxers like a teenager.

I *know* I can love her. I just don’t know if she’ll let me. And for now, this—her like this for me, soft for *me*. That’s enough.

As I slip my boxers off, she slides her bra completely off, bared beneath me. I lean over her to grab a condom from my nightstand and take a minute just to admire her, the back of my hand coasting her stomach and resting on her hip.

She’s staring too, but there isn’t that fervent need in her eyes like there usually is, like she might explode if I make her go any slower.

Her small hand grips my chin lightly, pointing my eyes to her—the move so similar to the times she’s attempted to take control before, but then her soft mouth parts on a breath and she asks, “Are you sure?”

My chest aches and I copy her move, except my hand caresses and cups her cheek. “I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

I almost say *I love you* but manage to strangle the words in my throat because I know she'll think it's ridiculous.

She smiles at me, her eyes vibrant in a way I rarely get to see, before they haze over at the first push of me inside her.

"Fuck," she gasps, her hands pressing my shoulders for a second and I pause, a mix of apprehension and pride swirling. "God, I really forgot about how big you are. You're going to tear my poor pussy."

I kiss the bridge of her nose, sliding slowly in another inch. "Don't be ridiculous, *kotyonok*. You can take it."

She pulses at my words, moaning as the discomfort disappears and a little writhe of pleasure moves through her body. Another moan pulls from her as I press all the way in.

"Seems like your little pussy *wants* me," I manage to grunt, but my voice isn't rasping with sex like I intend. It's grappling for some semblance of control as she grips me like a vise.

"I want you," she clarifies, and it breaks the leash.

My hips snap, working into a steady, quick pace.

It's almost ridiculous how much such a little thing can move and wiggle around beneath me. She's driving me insane to the point I snap my hand out and steady her with a light grip on the back of her neck.

A grip she uses to pull me closer, forcing my weight more heavily onto her as I falter in my perfected pace, barely holding myself up on a knee.

"I'll crush you." I chuckle into the mess of her hair tickling my nose, pressing my hand to the mattress to lift up.

"I don't care." She smiles, a little giggle. "Please. Harder."

*Please. Giggles.*

It's never been like this before, so simple and perfect and playful. More than sex, something else is forming between us.

I work my body around hers, like a snake winding around her waist easily, lifting her off the bed and into my arms. So she feels closer to me without my entire body crushing hers.

The strong muscles of her legs grip my waist in a way that's so comfortingly familiar, I nuzzle into her.

"I'm gonna come," she says, her tone so breathy it's almost a whisper.

"Come," I whisper, my hand gentle against the top of her sex between her body. "That's my girl. So good, baby."

My words only drive her off the cliff faster, and I'm leaping right behind

her, my body frantic with life and feeling and everything I've buried as I catch her mouth and move her hips up and down my length, coming so hard I'm sure I'll black out.

When it crests, I keep her close and she wraps her arms around my neck, skin damp. Her head falls back against the cradle of my hand, eyes lazy as they take me in. She's sleepy and sated, but I'm still wired. Peaceful, but desperate not to take my hands or eyes off of her for a second.

This is where she usually disappears and I'll be damned if I let that happen.

"Shower?" I ask, combing back her hair. She nods and doesn't wiggle or complain even once as I lift her and carry her to the bathroom. Only a hiss of breath as I ease out of her and lean her body towards the cool tile wall of the shower, making sure the water is warm enough.

I step under the spray first, pulling her carefully so that she's the one under the water, using my soap and hands to suds up her body, gently cleaning and slightly playing with the tender space between her legs until she's gripping my shoulder with her hands and stubby little nails.

I make her come again, slow and soft, and she rests against me as I wash her hair. Her eyes never leave mine, despite the languidness of her body, she seems in awe of me.

It makes my chest throb.

The way I feel about her is real, so deep it feels like a cord loops from inside of me to her, tethering me to her. But Sadie's an enigma, all steel walls and eye rolls. I don't know how deep this is for her, and I'll be damned before I scare her off with my level of need for her.

I'll take any of her she'll give to me—a dog begging for scraps, until she lets me in. I'm patient.

I can wait.

Once we lay back in the bed together, naked and warm beneath my blankets, I stroke her back even as she faces away from me and scoots closer to the edge.

"I'm not really a cuddler," she argues over her shoulder, biting on her lip.

"Okay," I acquiesce.

But I wake up with her little body pressed to my chest early the next morning, and blissfully cancel every alarm to fall back asleep with her in my arms.

THIRTY-THREE



# SADIE

I had the best sleep of my life.

Considering it comes right after the best sex of my life, I count the entire week as a win. Those are few and far between for me.

There isn't even a bite of anxiety when I wake, because I know exactly who I've wrapped myself around like a monkey.

And I know my brothers are safe.

I didn't intend to spend all night away from them, but I think Aurora wanted me to—judging by her continuous stream of all-caps texts to “Climb him like a tree.” So, when I told her I'd be staying over, I got a stream of ecstatic emojis.

I should probably pull away, but I don't, content to look up at his soft, sleeping face. He's completely at peace, his forehead relaxed and a contented slip of a smile pulling at his mouth.

It borders on weird, I'm sure, how long I watch him. But it takes all that time to gather the strength to pull myself away and relieve myself in the bathroom, searching for a toothbrush or mouthwash—anything to help with the grime I feel in my mouth.

I splash my face with water and help myself to a clean shirt from his adjoining closet.

He pushes up onto his elbows when I come back in; a wide, dimpled smile spreading across his face.

“You have no idea how many times I've imagined you in that shirt.”

I look down at the gray material, realizing it's almost identical to my usual practice shirt, but with *hockey* printed in big bold letters beneath the university logo.

“This shirt?” I laugh, walking slowly towards him.

He pushes up fully, turning over to prop up against the headboard. The sheets pool at his waist, hiding his very naked, very generous lower half.

“Yeah,” he says, grappling for me as I crawl across the bed. Ignoring my attempt at being sensual, he sits me on his lap, just the sheet between us. “It’s got my last name on it.”

My cheeks blaze, satisfaction rolling through me. His hands tighten briefly on my thighs, like he’s worried I might bolt at any moment. But I’ve decided. He’s worth any of it—and if he doesn’t mind how fucked up and messy my life is, how little time I can afford to lose, then I’m not telling him to go.

“Hey, hotshot.”

“Hey, Gray.” Another grin I bottle up tight and hold close in my chest. It makes my heart skip and my body warm. I snuggle deeper into him, just breathing in the smell of his skin.

“If I’d known my dick would make you this docile, I would’ve done that a lot sooner,” he teases. “It’s like magic.”

“Why didn’t you?” I try to ask it just as teasing, but there is a slip of vulnerability in the words.

Rhys angles my head out from my hiding place in his neck and rubs at my cheek lovingly. “Because it was never going to be just sex for me with you. And I knew you weren’t ready for that.”

My cheeks blaze. My eyes burn and I want to bolt as much as I want to handcuff him to me.

“You think I wasn’t ready for your magical dick?”

He laughs, his head tipped back against the headboard and I can’t help latching my mouth to his pulse and laving over it with my tongue. His laugh cuts off into a moan, hands gripping, but not to encourage. To stop me.

“Come on,” I whisper, nipping at his ear. I’m addicted to him. I want more—endless more.

“Hold on, Gray,” he pleads, groaning as I suck beneath his ear. “Baby, please.”

The soft name makes me want to giggle and twirl my hair, and bask in everything that he is. I manage to only pull back and look at him, my hand splayed across his well-defined stomach, trailing blunt fingernails across his abs.

“What?” I ask.

His hand tilts my chin so he can meet my eyes. And he's still smiling. I smile too.

"I just want to check in. We didn't talk last night after everything."

After he fucked me speechless, he means. In a way that made me regret everything I'd ever wasted on another man because that wasn't sex—this, it feels like even more. I didn't know it could be like this.

"I'm good," I say, probably too chipper. "I'm—it was amazing."

He smirks, a little bit of arrogance pushing through. "That's not what I meant. But good for my ego. I haven't—" His brow furrows, mouth freezing open for a moment. "Did you really never look me up?"

"I told you I wouldn't. Though, now that you know my secrets, do I get to know yours?" I say it mostly in jest.

"Actually, yes."

My heart leaps into my throat. "Rhys—"

"I want you to know everything, Sadie."

He tackles me to the mattress with kisses that are cut too short when he stands. I watch him move, mouthwatering at the taunt shape of his ass—even more at his half-hard cock hanging between his legs when he starts back towards me. I'm distracted enough that I don't notice that he's got his laptop in hand.

He opens it, sitting back next to me and types a few things before he finds what he's looking for. Then, he spins the computer towards me and steps away.

"I'm gonna shower. Just—look at the video."

The screen is paused, but the title reads *Rhys Koteskiy Stretched Off by Kane Hit (Graphic)* and that is enough for me to feel my stomach fall out of my ass.

For a moment, I just stare, hovering over the play button until I can force myself to click it.

The game starts up, it's the middle of the period and Rhys looks to be on fire. His face is happy and open, but there's an underlying intensity and focus. The puck drops and they're off—speeding towards the other end after Rhys won the face off. He's fast, beautiful and powerful as his legs push him towards the goal. Another player passes it back to him and they're closing in on the boards so fast. But the other team has someone right on top of him, who goes for the hit just as Rhys passes it backwards.

The hit is hard, like I've seen in hockey many times, but it isn't the hit

that does him in—it's his bent posture, hitting the boards full speed, head first.

He bounces off, slamming into the knees of the defenseman face first and then falling flat on the ice on his stomach.

There's a large crack, and then silence.

But only for a moment, before the entire team starts attacking the player who hit him: Kane, I see in big bold yellow letters on the back of his jersey.

Toren Kane, I realize.

As in, the guy at my practice.

*Oh my god.*

I open another tab and search his name and, just like he said, there's a wealth of knowledge there. Headline after headline—kicked out of Boston College, released from Michigan for unknown circumstances, banned from playing in Harvard's arena. And, most recently, a surprise move to Waterfall University.

Page after page of attempted, *and denied*, interviews about his hit on Rhys.

I shake my head, feeling my fingers go numb as I click back to the main video and search the *suggested* for more angles.

I find one dual view, where I can see him, sprawled on the ice on his stomach, out cold. A medic comes, trying not to move him, but there's blood on the ice and they can't see where it's coming from.

Then, he starts shaking on the ice, little tremors through his heavily padded body. A massive goalie decked in blue and gray, who I know easily to be Bennett Reiner is next to him now, helmet off and face pinched in concern as he starts looking around the crowd for someone, all the while kneeling and holding Rhys' leg.

I see him start to turn over, which is good—it means he's awake. But as soon as he pushes up, he flops backwards as if his neck is broken. His helmet is off, blood pouring down his face from a pressure cut.

Terror claws at my throat, tears welling as if he's not in the next room. As if he's not okay. I suddenly, desperately, need to put my eyes on him to assure myself he's still okay.

The camera cuts to the boards where both teams are standing, the coach of the opposing team furious, his hand gripping Toren Kane by the neck of his jersey, which is already ripped from the fight. The refs come over and there's a lot of silence before a stretcher is wheeled out, several people

walking with it across the ice—one of them a tall, well-dressed man crying out for him.

And then, the video ends.

I shut the screen just as Rhys comes back, towel wrapped around his taunt, trim waist. His hair is damp, and he shoves it back behind his ears, a few loose tendrils stubbornly dancing in front of his eyes. He tries to grin, but stops when he takes in my face.

“Hey,” he coos, rushing towards me and holding my face in his big hands. “You’re okay?”

“Are you?” I ask, a tremble working down my spine. “God, Rhys—”

“I didn’t show you that for you to pity me,” he gruffly, shrugging off where my hands have absentmindedly reached for his cheek. “I just wanted you to know.”

I nod. “I know. But, be real—you can’t show me that and expect me to shrug it off.”

“It was just a hit. Happens all the time. Hockey is a contact sport.”

*Doesn’t matter*, I want to say—clearly this video, the hit itself is the smallest part of this problem.

I remember, for a moment, the look of him that first day, slumped against the boards on the ice, the fear and panic blowing his pupils wide. His shaking hands, the tremble of his muscles beneath my hands.

“If it was just a hit,” I start. “Then what happened after?”

THIRTY-FOUR

# SADIE

For a moment, I think he will deny me and shut it down.

But he only breathes a little heavier and asks if he can put clothes on. I want to say no, because covering his body feels like a crime. But his skin is already distracting enough, so he dresses in gray sweatpants and a shirt just like the one I stole, and returns to his spot across from me on the bed.

“Everything hurt, I remember. But I don’t really remember the hit. I remember seeing him coming, then I remember the panic of not being able to see anything. I thought I was dying.” He laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “And then, I thought I was dying *every night*.”

I wonder if I’ll pass out with how hard my heart is hammering, like I’m absorbing his anxiety and fear from those days.

“I couldn’t sleep. At first, it was just the flashbacks keeping me from even fading off. Then, when I did fall asleep, I’d wake up—or my mom would shake me awake—because I was screaming face-first in a pillow and I couldn’t breathe.” He huffs, closing his eyes tight and pulling on his shirt. “I really scared her the first month.”

*God.*

“So I just... stopped.”

“Stopped what?”

“Sleeping.”

My chest burns at the nonchalant shrug that accompanies the heartbreaking confession. “F-for how long?”

“I could go about ten days in a row before I passed out somewhere, and because I was recovering at home, my mom realized something was wrong. So I got some sleeping pills in addition to the pain pills, and a very irritating

therapist.”

“Like, for your recovery? A sports therapist?”

He shakes his head. “No. I had one of those too, but my parents insisted on a therapist who focused on mental health for athletes. I can’t imagine how much she cost them, but...” He shrugs again, his fingers start a pattern across my exposed thigh, just brushing beneath the pooled fabric.

It’s distracting, but it’s more comforting than anything else.

“Rhys.”

“And then, after that... I just felt *numb*. Like there was this dark shadow where everything *good* was and I couldn’t reach it anymore.” He laughs, a real one this time, and raises his eyes to mine. “And *then*.” He stretches out the word and kisses my nose. “This little punk figure skater grabbed my wrist and told me not to touch her, and I felt *something*. I was scared I’d never see her again.”

“Oh?” I’m dizzy, spinning in the well of his brown eyes. I think I’ll drown in his dimples if they grow any deeper. “And then?”

I probably sound like a blubbering idiot but as long as he’s looking at me like that, I don’t care.

He nuzzles my cheek with his, a slight scrape from the stubble that he hasn’t shaved yet, and then his mouth is at my ear.

“And then, she was there with me. Again and again.” But he pulls back, a serious look in his eyes as he keeps his grip on my jaw and draws my eyes to his. “And then, I started to use her like a crutch.”

I wince at the harsh truth. “It’s okay—”

“It’s not,” he cuts me off. But he smiles lightly, and continues, “I’m back in therapy. I shouldn’t have left—and I should not have used you like that.”

I want to tell him that I *want* him to use me forever, but I know he’s confessing something deep. Showing me that this between us isn’t just shared pain anymore; it isn’t emotional release—it’s something real. Something precious.

He kisses my cheek and wraps my hair into the tangle of his fingers, bracing my head. “*You* were the only time I felt *anything* for a long time.”

I open to him, our mouths tangling as he holds me completely at his mercy.

Because of how small I am—even though I’m pretty sure my thigh muscles could kill a guy if I really needed to—I’ve always maintained control when it comes to hook-ups. Being on top, making it solely about my



pleasure, keeping strict boundaries about what they could touch. But with him, I don't need to.

*Because I trust him.*

I say it aloud as soon as I realize it, basking in the light that ignites in his eyes.

He looks like he wants to say something, but shakes his head and kisses me through endless smiles and laughter, until we tumble back beneath the sheets together.



We emerge from his room in the midmorning when our stomachs are both growling and we've run out of the expensive protein bars stashed in Rhys' mini fridge.

He goes down before me so that I can freshen up—again, since we've been unable to remove our hands from each other, and gives me time to call Aurora to check on the boys.

She dropped them at school this morning, happy and fed, and I know they both have after-school programs until late. I also know, from the very well-maintained whiteboard calendar above Rhys' desk, that he has to get on a bus in two hours for his away game. It's at Union College tonight, and to complete the little picture of Waterfell Hockey Captain Rhys, I see a print out of their stats with scribbled notes about different players.

Smirking, I grab a pen from the holder and scrawl a quick *Good luck, hotshot* with a wink across the bottom.

I find my leggings from the night before, as well as my bra and underwear, but I *do* wear the shirt with his name on the back for my trek to the kitchen.

Only, when I step out, there's a shuffling noise. A leggy blonde is bouncing on the balls of her tall sock-clad feet, shoving a very large black lab back from one of the bedroom doors. She finally gets the whining animal back, murmuring softly to it, before closing the door as quietly as possible. It's clear she's trying to leave without getting caught, her hair in a high messy bun and a massive threadbare shirt covering her like a dress.

"You okay?" I ask, walking towards her.

But I freeze completely when she spins towards me, a set of wide anxious

brown eyes locking to me. Eyes that belong to none other than Paloma Blake.

We both gape at each other, frozen and unsure.

She straightens first, pulling her back tight so her posture is more confident.

“Slept over, did you?” I say, sounding snarky, then step past her to lumber down the stairs.

“Seems you did too, huh?” She smiles, stepping with me. Whatever prevented her from descending the stairs earlier is swallowed by her want to banter with me. “I guess I should just disregard our little conversation, huh?”

My temper flares, but I don’t know how amendable the team would be to my pushing their precious puck bunny down the stairs. Or clawing her eyes out—though I don’t think my short nails will hold up to her sharp ones.

We nearly reach the bottom when a booming laugh echoes from nearby and Paloma grabs my arm *tight*.

“Jesus, Blake,” I snap, but her other hand slaps over my mouth.

“Can you just...” She sighs, and I swear if I didn’t know any better I’d think she was going to cry. “Can you not say anything about me? Just go in there and keep *all* of them in there?”

I don’t want to help her. In reality, I can’t *stand* her. But she looks remarkably desperate.

“What the hell is your problem?” I whisper, my words barely audible over her firm hand.

Her eyes flare. “God, Sadie, don’t be such a bitch.”

“Takes one to know one,” I say, pulling her hand off. “Now get out of here before I change my mind and decide to announce your presence like we’re at medieval court.”

She’s gone faster than the words come, but still manages to close the door carefully.

Just as she does, a player I recognize from answering the door last night appears around the corner. He looks like a sweeter version of Freddy, like an innocent handsome boy instead of the cat that caught the canary.

“Hey, sweetheart.” He smiles, but it’s all disarming. The pet name doesn’t seem to be a flirt, more like manners from somewhere south of the Mason-Dixon. “Lost?”

“Looking for your captain, actually.”

He laughs and points over his shoulder. “He seems in a good mood. I think this might be his new pregame ritual.” I walk past him with a smile, but

I know my cheeks are turning bright red and I curse myself again for being so pale.

The kitchen, much like the rest of the house, is fairly spotless. Rhys is standing at the bar top, Freddy sitting on the stool on his furthest side. And there's a magnificent smell permeating the air—bacon grease and maple syrup—all coming from the hulking goalie hunched over the stove with a towel over his shoulder.

Bennett looks over at me with a chin lift, not even a slight hint of a smile. Rhys tracks his friend's movement, cutting himself off mid-sentence and smiling at me like we haven't seen each other in weeks.

If I wasn't already blushing, I'm full-on cherry red now.

So, I walk towards him, letting him play this because it's his team and we haven't talked about what exactly this is between us. All I know is that he's never going to be *just* my friend—with or without benefits. He's always going to be more.

He loops an arm around me, kissing the top of my head and continues his game-talk with the boys in the kitchen. He doesn't stop talking, even as he lifts me to sit in the barstool in front of him and rests his arms on the counter, caging me in between them.

I listen, sort of, but perk up fully when a steaming plate of bacon strips, scrambled egg whites, avocado toast on expensive-looking sourdough and diced fruit lands in front of me.

“Oh, I don't have to eat first.”

Rhys shakes his head. “We have a very specific set of pregame meals, Gray. That's all yours.”

My mouth is watering even as I look up at Bennett. “Are you sure?”

He grunts and nods, flickering the stove off a little angrily. “There's plenty more if you want more. You can have it.” He smiles a little brittle, before excusing himself back upstairs.

“He's always like that,” Freddy says, stealing a piece of bacon off my plate before Rhys can slap at his hand. “It's his headspace before games. Sooo,” he drags out, shuffling his shoulder into mine as Rhys heads over to a fancy-looking coffee machine. “What's going on here?”

“Freddy,” Rhys warns above the whirl of espresso. “Leave her alone.”

“C'mon, Cap. I need the juicy details.” His brows waver exaggeratedly.

I roll my eyes before returning to chewing and watching Rhys move around the kitchen like a scene from my favorite comfort movie. He plays

with a frother for a moment and my eyes alight at his concentrated face, wishing I had my phone to take a picture of it.

“Are you two dating now?” Freddy asks, whining like a kid when Rhys reprimands him again.

I swallow every hesitation; every moment I’ve doubted because I know Rhys wants more. And, for the first time, I do too.

“Yeah,” I say, trying to ignore the pinch of discomfort when they both go silent. “I’m his girlfriend.”

The word might feel foreign on my tongue, but the sparkling glint in his eyes and his unabashed smile—with both dimples—make it taste sweeter. He doesn’t correct me, which I only realize after I’ve blurted the title that he absolutely could.

*Oh god. My stomach cramps. Does he want that? Or was last night just a breaking point for him?*

I start to spiral through my thoughts, ignoring whatever it is Freddy is saying as he stands up from his stool.

“My girlfriend?” he asks, smugly hovering over my shoulder.

I can’t look at him, terrified that I’ve made everything up in my head and that wasn’t what he wanted.

But, a green mug with some sort of slightly misshapen flower design in the foam slides in front me.

“What’s this?”

“It’s... ah, latte foam art. It’s supposed to be a flower,” he says it sheepishly, quiet.

“I love it.”

Rhys kisses my neck, tucking my hair up in his hands and I have the ridiculous urge to cut it all off so he has better access to my skin there constantly.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been happier, Gray,” he whispers. Another kiss to the corner of my mouth. “My girl.”

Like a balm to a wound I didn’t know I carried, Rhys holds me close. And that’s more than enough.

THIRTY-FIVE

# SADIE

It's my first game, and specifically as Rhys Koteskiy's *girlfriend*. I'm half thrilled, half terrified.

Only officially a week into our relationship—a week in which I've seen him only twice, briefly between my practices and his. But, having him wait a little after his early practices to kiss me before my ice time always puts me in a good mood. In fact, I think my routines get higher praise from Coach Kelley the more Rhys' kisses and touches ignite me beforehand.

Still, I'm nervous.

Add to that pressure that I'd accidentally met Rhys' mom when they came into the cafe on my usual off day.

Rhys was smiling brightly and kissed me chastely on the cheek. The little slip of a woman next to him was beautiful and I was pretty sure she wanted to do a little dance when he kissed me, which made me blush further when she introduced herself as Anna Koteskiy.

I'd ended up taking my lunch to sit with them, feeling a mixture of anxiety and terror until I was wiping my palms on my jeans from the constant clamminess. Adult female figures in my life had been few and far between, so I wasn't exactly sure how it was best to behave.

Still, as she left, she gave me a tight, squeezing hug, not letting go until I finally relaxed.

Into my ear, she said she was proud of me. And then, she was gone.

Three days since that interaction, and I still haven't seen Rhys on his own. They played against Colgate last night and won in the first overtime, but from what I read online, it was a pretty rough game for Waterfell and they ultimately “played like shit.”

Tonight, they play Boston College, and it's supposed to be pretty important.

My brothers are coming, too. Rhys secured them spots and told me that they'd sit with his mom so I could spend time with my friends. I'm still slightly wary of her, and I haven't officially met his dad yet, despite the times I saw him at Oliver and Liam's summer practices.

Still, I find myself changing three times before even sitting down in front of the standing mirror in Aurora's room to do my makeup.

She finishes much quicker, offering to do my hair into two short, loose braids with thin blue ribbons tying them off. I feel a little funny, but... pretty, for the first time in a while. I wonder if Rhys will think I'm pretty like this.

My chest squeezes at the thought and I feel a little nauseous.

As I pull on my white sneakers, Rora rounds the doorway from her closet and I pause.

"What are you wearing?" I ask, eyebrows skyrocketing at the vintage patchwork style jacket she's sliding on, black denim with the back cut out, some sort of Waterfell University shirt stitched into its place. The sleeve is bedazzled with blue lettering "Wolves" down one sleeve, with stars blazing up the other.

"What are *you* wearing?" she asks back, her arms crossing at my black jeans and white top. "I thought you were going to wear the dress."

I ignore her question. I *was* going to wear the silk dress until it didn't fit over my ass, which made me feel worse because I can already hear Coach Kelley in my ear about the weigh in before the next comp—which is in Denver for an entire four days, so I know I'll be opting out, again.

"Did you make that?"

"Yes." She grabs something off her desk, tossing it so quickly I barely have time to reach my hands out. "I made you one too."

I expect a copy of hers, but I shouldn't because this is Aurora—with more creativity and brains in her pinky that I have in my whole body.

It's a vintage bomber, with a navy and teal striped collar and cuffs, a large Waterfell Wolves logo emblazoned on one side, offset with a patch of denim, while the other side hosts a large 51 in a pearlescent white with navy stitching.

Rhys Koteskiy's number.

"I was gonna put his name on the back too, but I didn't have enough time." She shrugs. "Not to mention I'm pretty sure I'd misspell it, even if I

was copying it letter for letter.”

Part of me wants to snip at her for meddling, for thinking this was something either of us would want. But I bite my tongue because my eyes are burning with tears at the gentle thoughtfulness of my friend.

“You didn’t want to stitch a number into yours?” I ask, turning back to the mirror and picking up the maroon lipstick laying across the vanity.

She smirks, cheeks flushing. “I did,” she replies, showing her sleeve where a small 27 is stitched into the star closest to her hand.

I don’t have to pull up the roster to guess that number 27 is the only player she semi-knows on the team.

“For your favorite student, huh?”

“I wanna surprise him with his test score.” She smiles, and this time there’s real excitement in her gaze, something that’s been missing from her since the breakup. And even before, really. “He passed the midterm.”

“He’ll be excited to know he doesn’t have a suspension coming. And maybe to shut everyone up about exactly how dumb—”

Something in my comment makes her bristle, face tight as she pulls her hair from beneath the jacket.

“He’s not dumb,” she huffs. “He’s actually really smart. I mean, look at him play—he reads every move so well. He and Rhys are like, perfect together.”

I nod, admonished, but my brow furrows. “You’ve seen them play?”

“I’ve gone to a game or two.”

That’s news to me; but I can’t say I’m surprised I *didn’t* know. With everything still going on around us—skating, my distraction of Rhys, the boys, the custody case, my father—I haven’t really been paying attention.

“So, you understand hockey now?”

She nods. “I read a few books about it at work before I went to a game. Wanted to fully understand it.”

I laugh lightly, not mocking but more impressed as she wraps an arm across my back. “I’ve been watching Oliver play for years now and I’m still learning.”

But, I know Aurora learned it all. She could probably coach a team if she wanted to, because she doesn’t do anything halfway.

Just as we finish, there’s a flurry of knocks on Rora’s door, accompanied with high pitch giggling that could only be from Liam.

Rora opens the door with a grin, shouting “Boo!” to start up another



round of six-year-old giggles. She chases after him as he runs, and Oliver is left standing by the kitchenette.

“You look cool,” he says.

It makes me pause for a moment, because it’s the equivalent of an *I love you* and extreme approval wrapped into three words.

“Yeah?”

He nods. “Rhys’ll like it.”

Oliver and Liam both are everything to me. But with Oliver, anything other than anger is hard to come by. Even if I know he doesn’t blame me, sometimes it’s hard to know if I’m doing the right thing. So, I squeeze his shoulder and thank him as we all head outside.



The walk on the concourse to the arena is busy, hockey being one of the top performing sports around here. It’s Saturday, too, which means we avoided most of the disapproving stares from our RA who spotted my little brothers trailing us out of the dorms.

We used to get fined for it, until Rora worked some kind of magic. Since then, I haven’t heard a peep.

Rhys’ mom is standing just inside the complex as we enter, a tall suit-clad man with a broad smile next to her. I know he isn’t Rhys’ dad, and that alone makes me pause, gripping Liam’s hand in mine a little tighter.

“Oh, beautiful.” She sighs, her hand reaching out to caress the sleeve of my jacket. “Did you make these?”

“My roommate did,” I answer, a little short in my response as my eyes flicker back to the man behind her. “This is Rora.”

They shake hands, and I can feel Liam trying to maneuver from my grip to go to her—but I won’t let him go.

Thankfully, I don’t have to ask because Aurora introduces herself to the man, probably assuming it’s Rhys’ father.

“Adam.” He nods, smiling.

“Are you a coach?” I ask, brows dipping.

“Lawyer.” He smiles, all calm and collected. Meanwhile, my heart rate skyrockets and I start to feel the panic building.

A lawyer? Why did she bring him here? Is this... Is it Liam and Oliver?

Are they going to take them from me?

My grip tightens, and even Oliver steps back. The man seems a little surprised at our joint reaction, but I barely notice, too busy trying to find an exit route and hoping Rora will do something insane and distract them.

“Oh,” Anna says, her face dropping into pure devastation. I’m too busy panicking to be embarrassed by my reaction, but she puts her hand out towards the lawyer. “No, this is a family friend—Adam Reiner. Bennett’s father.”

It doesn’t calm me, nothing does until Aurora presses a hand to my shoulder and catches my eyes.

“They’re not trying to take them from you,” she whispers. But I know Mrs. Koteskiy can hear her words by the shuddering noise that comes from her.

“No, Sadie, god—I’m so sorry. No, my husband had to go to a press event and his flight was delayed back. Mr. Reiner just offered to accompany us today. Only if that’s alright with you.”

*He’s not here to take them. No one is going to take them.*

Oliver keeps holding onto me, even as I release Liam so he can run to Anna Koteskiy’s side and begins babbling to her about his morning. But, Bennett’s father—which now I can easily see the resemblance from the quaff sun-kissed brown hair and strong features, not to mention the height—steps over to us.

“I’ll grab us some drinks.” Rora excuses herself.

He smiles at her, something I’ve never really seen from his stoic son, but then looks down at Oliver and me.

“If you need anything—”

“We don’t,” I cut him off. “I mean; I have a lawyer. I have the custody papers and everything. I’m just in a waiting period.”

I have the trial date set for January, and my lawyer hopes we can convince my dad to sign away his rights instead. Then, all I’ll need to prove is that I can provide for them and house them—take care of them.

He smiles again, and it’s so perfect it looks like a mask. “Alright.”

Mrs. Koteskiy surprises them with school jerseys, Liam is swimming in his, but they’re happy as I leave them with the two very well put together adults.

“Do you think she hates me?” I ask, following Rora to our seats a few rows above the glass close to the goal.

Aurora gentles me with a shoulder shove, but her face is open and bright. “Don’t be ridiculous. All that woman wants to do is scoop you *all* up and take you home in her pocket.”

“She thinks I can’t take care of them—”

“No. She thinks the same thing we *all* do. That you shouldn’t have to.” She stops for a moment, setting a hand on my shoulder and playing with the end of my braid.

“*Both* of your parents are still alive, and you’re a talented figure skater and smart girl who spends the majority of her time balancing three jobs, keeping her brothers fed and on a schedule and in your dorm. You haven’t done something for just you since Liam showed up.”

She’s right. I hate how much she’s right.

“Well, except for Rhys. That was definitely for you. And you deserve it; you deserve him.”

I blush again, settling into our spot and watching as the teams come out for warmups. We’re on the home ice side, so Bennett leads, settling his water bottle on the net and heading to a corner to stretch.

The boys look like they’re running on ice, something I’ve always thought looks powerful but choppy. And annoying, considering the state it leaves the ice in when I have to skate behind them.

I spot him easily, his hair flowing from the breeze by how quickly he skates. He makes a loop with Matt Fredderic on his heels before they come to a stop and start a little stretch routine as some of the other guys start dribbling and taking practice shots at an empty net.

Then, as they line up to take shots on Bennett in the goal, he spots me and smiles. He elbows Freddy, who glints up at us with a big grin and winks. After they take their next shot, they make their way over to our side of the glass.

A girl seated in front of us goes bug-eyed at their approach, squealing about how hot they are to her friend and it makes me smile, albeit a bit smugly.

But then, Freddy taps on the glass above them, completely directed at Rora who glitters under his attention, before making some ridiculous face at him that has Freddy laughing loud enough to hear through the plexiglass.

Rhys only smiles at me and waves—which I happily do back.

“Get it together, son,” an older gentleman to our right yells towards Rhys. “Don’t let that Kane fucker get in your head. Eye on the prize.”

I can see the way Rhys ignores him, but I *know* he can hear it.

My hackles are raised, ready to bite the guy's head off no matter how good his intentions are, but then another asshole a few seats past Aurora and down at the glass—decked in Boston College maroon—starts shouting at the pair.

“Hey, look at that. Their little captain managed to get himself back on the ice,” he yells. “How many hits does it take for you to toughen up, pussy?”

“Let's see you take one, asshole,” I snap, whirling towards them so hard one of my braids slaps me in the mouth.

The boys around him make a collective “ooo” as if they're watching a 2000s rap battle begin.

My eyes flicker back to Rhys, who seems like he's torn between a swell of pride and wanting me to stop engaging with them. I shoot him a quick wink to show I'm fine, but cross my arms and meet the smirk of the heckler with one of my own.

“Is that your boyfriend, huh? Poor girl seems upset,” he says, walking up the steps and scooting past the empty set of seats to lean over a seated Aurora and whisper. “Does the brain damage hurt his ability to fuck? I'll volunteer if you need—”

I knee him in the balls, swift and hard, and then watch with a satisfied smile as he trips over Rora's feet and falls on his ass. He stands and ambles back down, embarrassed.

Rhys taps on the glass with his glove, waiting until the guy stares him down. My boyfriend is smiling, his eyes dark. “Look at her again, see what happens.” The threat is clear, menacing despite the dimpled fake smile stretching his cheeks. He smacks the glass hard with the end of his stick, making the guy jump back as a roar of laughter echoes around them.

I catch his eye again before he leaves the ice, getting a little wink from him that fills every empty piece of my soul.

THIRTY-SIX

# SADIE

I can tell Aurora is annoyed—more annoyed than I’ve seen her in a while.

It’s the end of the second period and they’re up by two. Boston College fans who made the short trip to our arena are very loud in their grumbling, but Waterfell is louder. We’ve been shouting sieve chants all night, singing songs and listening to some more intoxicated fans call out players by name and bang on the glass.

And then, there’s watching Rhys.

He skates like he was born with blades attached to his feet, like he’s got more coordination there than running or walking on land. His ability to read every single other player—in maroon and in blue—is borderline magical.

He’s just as I imagined, the boy with the blues turns gold under the arena lights and the cheers of adoring fans. His face-offs are at 100% tonight, and he might as well be glowing. And I can see him years from now, playing professionally and lighting up the jumbotron and the screens of phones everywhere with his dimpled smile beneath his visor.

Rhys scored twice, once during the first on the other end, skating through his team to high five and humbly angling his stick in the air as celebration. Then, again in the second period, on our side of the ice—the same celebration, only he pointed his stick right at me.

And I turned into a gooey mess.

Overall, it’s been an incredible night.

Though, watching Aurora fight the trio of girls in front of us would also be incredible.

Freddy scored just before the buzzer ending the second period, skating in a lunge and playing his stick like an air guitar which got several laughs out of

both Rora and me—only after she finished screaming like a banshee for him.

But then, the pretty black-haired girl in a Waterfell jersey in front of us says, “God, he’s so hot.”

“Have you seen his OnlyFans?” the blonde next to her asks. If she thinks she is whispering, it’s not even close. “If you think he’s drool worthy now...”

“Oh my god, Ericka.” The boy on her left with strawberry curls, also decked in a jersey—and a pair of black leather lugged Converse that I’ve been drooling over since I spotted them—sighs. “That was a *rumor*. The guy doesn’t even show his face.”

Ericka rolls her eyes and flecks a piece of popcorn at his face. “Oh my god, Ron, his *ex* was the one who told everyone. It has to be him.”

The other girl pipes up with, “I don’t think so. He denied it—and, I mean, he has a reputation on campus, sure, but that doesn’t mean he’s selling sex.”

“He could if he wanted to. I mean, good *god*, he’s mouthwatering. And I’ve heard he’s not only generous, but *hu*—”

“Oh my god!” Rora squeals, jerking forward between their seats, head level with them, a mop of curls cascading like water around them all. “He’s not a fucking object. Shut the hell up and stop gossiping about rumors you know *nothing* about.”

She stands then, grumbling about getting something to drink and takes off before I can ask if she wants company.

Rora looks a little worse for wear when she comes back, but it melts away as the third period starts up again.

The boys are dominating, the clock is dwindling and I’m...

I’m very aroused.

Rhys is clearly one of their best players, and I can see many of the hits hammered towards him—but his teammates on every line do a good job of protecting him.

It’s actually Kane who they continue to target. Whether from knowing his skill and size give an advantage to Waterfell, or from some sort of bad blood between the teams, it’s surprising, considering he used to play for Boston College.

They seem to hate him.

His own team now doesn’t seem to like him either, but I don’t blame them. Part of me wants to confront him, but the other part just hopes he leaves the team before the year is up.

I haven’t told Rhys about our standoff at practice, not because I’m hiding

it, but more because every small piece of time I have with Rhys I want to use for other things.

“Have you seen where they sat the boys?” Rora asks, gulping down another hard cider.

“Yeah.” I nod, pointing across towards where the home and away benches are. Just beyond the end, pressed right up against the glass, sit Oliver and Liam, with Rhys’ mom and Bennett’s father to their right. Considering the wealth of attention most of the players have given them, I’d say it’s a win for them. Even this far away, Liam is beaming.

And Oliver looks refreshed and happy.

A loud crash sounds, followed by the roar of the crowd as everyone shoots up to stand over a fight.

I try to decipher what happened, at first only able to spot Toren Kane locked in a brawl with one of the larger BC players.

But then I see Rhys, sprawled on his back, not moving—his chest or his head.

I’m on the stairs before I can blink, heart in my throat as I press my hands to the glass and bang on it. He’s nowhere close enough, but Bennett hears, turning to look over at me through his cage—I can’t see his expression, but he turns away and skates towards his captain.

*God*, it doesn’t look like he’s even breathing.

There are trainers already around him, quicker than I’ve seen in most games and I know it’s because of his history. Because he’s likely already on their watch list.

Bennett is skating back towards his net, slow and graceful for all his hulking size. But he passes right by the net and stops next to me.

I feel like a child staring up at him through the glass, he’s so massive. He pulls his helmet off and shakes out the sweat wet curls, brow furrowing.

“He’s okay,” he says. “Sit down.”

“Ben—”

“If he sees you panicking, it’s gonna make him feel worse. Sit. Down.”

I do as he says, nearly tripping up the stairs while I try to walk with my head on a swivel.

He does get up, met with a round of cheers from everyone in the arena, both teams slapping their sticks against the ice. Still, they force him off and through the tunnel.

Considering I don’t think I’ll be able to breathe properly until I lay my



eyes on him, I tell Rora where I'll meet her afterwards, and thank my figure skating competition knowledge to know the paths of the arena like the back of my hand. I don't care if they won't let me see him, I just want to be close enough.

I pace the alcove near the locker room hallway for a moment, before a hand on my shoulder makes me jolt.

I glance up, seeing a disheveled looking man towering over me. It's only after I flinch backwards into the wall before I realize exactly who I'm looking at.

They are copies of one another, Rhys and his father. And though I've met the man in passing, I've never seen him up close. Rhys has the same chocolate eyes that give a boyish hint, even to his father's slightly aged face. He looks young, but disarming in a way I know Rhys looks too. Strong jaw, plush lips, same dark hair.

"Sorry," he says, followed by a word I don't recognize but sounds like a harsh language—Russian or Polish? "Are you here for my son?"

"Yeah, I—" I clear my stuck throat, my heart still racing. "I just want to know he's okay."

The smile he gives me is gentle and warm, and achingly familiar, except he only has one dimple.

"Come, *dochka*," he beckons with that same word, putting a firm hand between my shoulders and guiding me around the loop and through the pungent locker rooms to a smaller room fitted with a medical table and supplies.

Rhys is there, shirtless and sweating, with his thick hockey pants still on. The trainer has his hands on his head, running a small flashlight in his pupils, while Rhys repeats the months of the year in reverse order.

"One moment," his father whispers, stepping in front of me towards his son.

He gets stuck on June for a moment, which seems to alarm the trainer just slightly, before he peeks at Mr. Koteskiy hovering over his shoulder, spotting his player's distraction.

"Rhys." His father sighs. "Alright?"

"Fine." He sighs back and they sound just as much alike as they look, minus the slight hint of an accent from his father. "You just got back?"

"Yeah—walked into the rink to see my son on his back on the ice. What the hell kind of welcome back is that, eh?"

Rhys chuckles, just a light huff. “Just got the breath knocked from me. Is Mom freaked out?”

“*Nyet*, but there is someone I found a little flustered out there.” He steps back, immediately placing me in view where I’m hovering in the doorway.

“Gray.” He sighs, a giant smile across his face. The trainers go back to their duties now that their center is cleared, so it’s just the three of us. “Come here.”

Two words are all it takes for me to rush him, letting his arms wrap around me and his sweaty head to press against my chest.

“You smell awful,” I say snarkily, a little huff of anger while my heart still won’t stop racing.

“I’ll give you two a minute,” his father says, before he leaves us in the training room alone.

THIRTY-SEVEN

# RHYS

She's perfect.

I can feel a little hint of anger rolling off her and it's intoxicating. She's intoxicating.

Sadie Gray is my fucking *girlfriend* now. I want to shout it in the little room so that my dad, the trainers—hell, the whole building—can hear me.

My mouth opens, desperate to find some reason to refer to her as *my girlfriend*, when her little hand smacks me in the chest. Once, twice—before I grip her wrists in one hand and use the other to angle her chin where she's hiding from me

"I'm starting to think I can't do this," she mumbles, closing her eyes. My stomach drops out of my ass, and I can't stop myself from grabbing her wrists a little tighter.

*It's hockey, that dark, mocking voice that I'm realizing is a version of my own beckons. Hockey makes you something useless and pathetic. She can see what you were before, and she doesn't want this thing you are now. The thing you'll be forever.*

But I've been through this before, and as much as I want to use her to push away the darkness, I want to love her more. So I close my eyes and remind myself that I'm okay. I'm healing.

"Sadie." I breathe, my hand tucking into her hair.

Her eyes blink open, swimming with tears and I take in the sight like a hit to the gut. A hit she makes good on.

"You scared me," she cries—angry and sad, and so beautiful it hurts. "You were just lying there and I-I couldn't tell if you were okay or alive—"

She smacks me again, just a little flick of her palm to my chest.

I huff a laugh and draw her closer, kissing her cheek.

“I was just doing my Darth Vader impression. Trying to do his death justice.”

She laughs, the sound almost jarring against the red splotches of her cheeks, tears still free flowing. “I thought you weren’t breathing.”

“Dedicated to the role.” I smirk.

She shoves me off of her completely, her brow furrowing as she takes me in again. I take the moment to examine her back, eyes widening and smile broadening at the 51 over the right chest plate of her oversized bomber.

“You look so fucking perfect, Gray. I like the jacket.”

She furrows the divot in her brow further. “Rora made it.”

“I want you in my jersey, too.”

She ignores me, still examining every piece of exposed skin, flickering her gaze between my eyes. “You’re okay?”

I whisper, “I’m perfect, baby.”

The soft name does her in.

Her body slams onto mine, knocking me flat back on the table as she climbs me. She’s layering kisses to me between laughs and sobs, and I think I could stay like this forever, with the comforting weight of her on top of me.



It feels like before, the Hockey House packed with people—half of whom I’ve never seen in my life—and then the circle of us; Freddy, Bennett, Holden and myself along with most of our second line; Caleb, Sanders, and a freshman who’s become a regular.

Sadie and Rora should be here by now—even if it had been like pulling teeth to get them here. My parents nearly got on their knees to beg for her to let Liam and Oliver have a slumber party at their house, but only after coaxing from Rora and myself, did she agree.

She trusts them.

Something I plan to reward her for later.

Despite the win, and the fact that he only let in two goals, Bennett looks pissed.

Next to me, he sips on a beer—still quite a rare sight for the meticulous goalie—but he’s distracted, frustrated more than usual.

A few of the football players we hang out with come to join us by the campfire, followed by Rora and Sadie—still in their homemade jackets, but now decked in scarves and hats.

I stand so quickly that there's a little chuckle from Holden as Paloma plants herself into his lap and tries to distract him from the conversation he was having with Freddy. But she doesn't need to, because Freddy's already up and getting laughs from Aurora who plays self-consciously with her straight hair.

"Hey." I smile, grabbing Sadie and yanking her close to me, planting a kiss on her forehead and rubbing my hands up and down her arms. "Rora, your hair looks pretty."

She flushes, but I can tell by the squeeze of Sadie's hand and her smiling nod that I did right with the compliment. Freddy tucks her up under his arm and yells something about beer pong, and she gives him another startling grin.

I would worry, but Freddy has assured me he's purely in friend mode. Still, it makes me slightly nervous because Rora looks at him with stars in her eyes—romantic and gooey. Even if Bennett and I warned him, Aurora might still get hurt by the flirty forward.

"Wanna play?" I ask, kissing Sadie again but she shakes her head.

"Just wanna be around you, actually." Her hands snake up over my shoulders and grip the muscles there, eliciting a quiet groan as she presses. "Can we go to your room?"

"Already?" I tease, pulling back and flicking her nose. "I'm not that kind of man, Gray."

She laughs, husky and sexy and my jeans feel tight.

"A bathroom, then," she teases back.

I grip her chin with a growl and lean down to kiss her softly. "Whatever my girlfriend wants, she gets."

And then, I embarrass her, tossing her up and over my shoulder as she squeals in protest—but it's lighthearted and full of giggles.

"Sorry, guys—raincheck on the beer pong. Have to go take care of my very needy girlfriend," I announce, beaming with pride.

Cheers and laughter boast around us as I offer a quick salute to my team and take my light little prize, with soft fists against my back, through the back door and up to my room.

I sit her down and turn to click the door closed, but she's already

stripping off her jacket as I turn back to her. Before I can move, she shoves me against the door and sinks to her knees.

“Oh, *fuck*,” I etch out, releasing the door handle and scooping her hair up off her face and neck gently. “Sadie.”

“Yes, Captain?” she says, her hands eager and swift as they undo my belt and pull my shorts and boxers down in one fell swoop. I can’t even attempt another word from my mouth before her lips—dark cherry red and freshly bitten—are pressed to the crown of my dick. Her mouth opens then, tongue licking lightly before she takes her small hand and wraps it around my dick, tapping me on her tongue.

I’m going to come and my girl has barely done a thing.

My hands grip into her hair, massaging the base of her neck and down to her shoulders as she takes her time exploring me with her mouth.

She is perfect, and I want her to know how deep my feelings run. I’d put a ring on her finger if it wouldn’t terrify her. I know she won’t run from me now, but I’m prepared for the strength it’ll take in the future.

“You’re so beautiful,” I repeat, pressing my finger to her cheek tenderly. “So fucking perfect. God, seeing you like this—”

She moans and the reverberations travel up my cock like a shiver. I barely grab hold of my slipping control, as her hands rest on her knees and she looks up at me, my cock halfway out of her mouth.

She’s giving me control. Our push and pull, she’s letting me have this moment.

“That’s my girl,” I whisper, thrusting, slow and gentle into her mouth. She squirms beneath the praise, like she wants to touch herself but won’t. Unless...

“Are you wet for me baby?” I ask, and she keens, rocking slightly and taking me deeper. “Do you need me?”

“Want you,” she gasps, pulling off and then sucking me right back in with an intoxicating noise.

“Touch yourself, Gray. Take what you need.”

Her hand dives into the band of her jeans, shoving down and I hate that I can’t see what she’s doing up close, but her movements give me enough to imagine. And when it comes to Sadie Gray, I have an incredible imagination.

She rocks back and forth, using her hand to grind on.

Sadie moans again, her eyes shuttering with relief before blinking up at me, wicked delight stretching her mouth like she’s smiling around my dick.

I barely have time to warn her, trying to pull myself back, but she shoves up higher on her knees and grabs my ass, pulling me far into her throat. Stars shoot behind my eyes, lost between needing to throw my head back but desperate to keep my gaze on her as I come.

Waiting even a second seems too long, so when I reach for her and nearly trip out of my pants, we both divulge into laughter. I manage to get my shoes off, along with everything but my shirt, and then grab for her hips, pulling her jeans to roll down her thighs. I try not to get too distracted by the expanse of her skin beneath my hands. It's when she takes off her shirt, revealing *no fucking bra* that I can't stop from grabbing her up into my arms and tossing her little muscled body onto the bed.

I press her back and try to eat her out, but she begs and yanks on my arms until I pull back.

"This was supposed to be a treat."

I laugh. "You're always a treat, baby."

"A reward," she groans. "For winning—though I'm thinking 'for being alive' might be a better incentive for you, Captain." Her foot connects with my chest and I wrap a hand around her ankle, raising an eyebrow.

"Don't be a brat." I chuckle. "Just tell me what you want, I'll give you anything."

Her head shakes and she sighs into the mattress, lulling side to side. "You're too good to me. Stop it—I was trying to be sexy and... and I had this whole plan. And your stupid ass is ruining it."

The way she's whining sounds too much like her sex kitten voice and I'm rock hard again.

"Want to start over?"

She huffs and crosses her arms, pouting like a grumpy teen—but eventually nods.

"Alright. What do you want me to do, Gray?"

Her body pushes up off the mattress, hair cascading around her in little waves that show it was braided earlier. Her hands press to my chest and push me back, to which I easily comply, stretching out beneath her as she straddles my hips. There is only a slip of silk fabric keeping the heat of her from directly pressing to my very hard cock.

Her eyes are dark beneath the smoky eyeshadow, darker as she takes me in, completely at her mercy.

"Alright, hotshot." She smirks and my hips pulse upwards. "Easy." She



giggles.

But Sadie turns slightly serious as she reverses our usual stance and grips my chin in her little hand.

“I want to make you feel good, because you always make me feel good. And you’re not going to control it, okay? You’re just going to lay back.” She leans forward, pressing her bare chest to mine. “Relax,” she drags out, nipping and licking my ear. “And let me take care of you.”

I shudder violently as she tongues my neck, biting down on my collarbone until I hiss.

As she draws back, her hands squeeze at the muscles in my shoulders as best she can—her hands are too small, even if they're strong, to really do much. But it feels heavenly.

Everything she does feels heavenly, because it’s her.

She pushes her satin thong to the side, before sliding on top of me, warm and wet and endlessly ready for me.

“God, *Rhys*,” she groans. I thrust up again at the noise. “You’re so fucking perfect.”

Her praise feels like standing in the sun, warming me everywhere.

She rides me slowly, gripping me like a vice between her legs while praise pours from her lips like water. It doesn’t matter how small she looks right now, perched on top of me like this, she could kill me if she wanted and I’d say thank you as I bleed out beneath her.

She comes, and it's just like every time I’ve seen it before—like she’s a little surprised, like it catches the careful, controlled girl totally off guard. And then, her lips spread into a little sleepy smile and she looks down at me

I’m overwhelmed with *that* feeling again—the want to keep her here, protected and safe and mine. Until I’m biting down on my tongue, desperate to shove the *I love you, I love you, I love you* back down my throat.

I’m not sure how much longer I can hold it back, but I’m desperate to keep her. And this—her melting into my arms and kissing my shoulders, peppering me with gentle movements that I copy until we’re laying with our heads at the footboard, whispering quiet secrets into the glittering dark—this is more than enough.

THIRTY-EIGHT

# RHYS

We won. Again.

*Fucking finally.*

The team is riding the high, Gym Class Heroes blaring somehow louder as I walk through the tunnel into the dressing room. I smile brightly as my team smacks my back, Freddy and Dougherty skipping around and singing with a few of the more outgoing underclassmen.

Every single one of them deserves this; not to mention it pushes our points finally high enough not to give me as much worry before the Cornell game next weekend. Harvard still looms on the horizon, one of our top competitors this year, but for tonight—a win is a win.

“A motherfucking Reiner *shutout!*” Freddy shouts, whistles blaring all around as he takes the sacred knot of rope, looped from cut strands of conference-winning nets, and hands it to Bennett, declaring him our player of the game. Everyone cheers as Bennett, still in his thick leg pads, but stripped down to a long sleeve compression shirt up top, stands and accepts it with a nod.

I know better than to expect any sort of speech, and he doesn’t offer anything other than, “Couldn’t have done it without my defensemen and this entire team. Go Wolves.” He lifts the long drape of rope again, before sitting back against his cubby.

Coach Harris smiles, because he knows his star goalie in the same way I do, appreciates his quirks and rituals. He’s built trust with Bennett, with us all, but I know personally how much he’s worked with Bennett.

He nods at all of us once, and leaves with a quick, “Enjoy your evening, boys. Don’t be stupid,” tossed over his shoulder.

But it's Toren Kane, sitting sullenly in the corner with his arms crossed over his chest, sweat dripping from his wet black hair, that he pats on the shoulder as goes.

Something pulls tight in my chest at the sight.

Freddy is already announcing the party at the Hockey Dorms—which will be massive, as our Halloween parties always are. And if the large bags of face paint that currently sit on our kitchen counter are anything to go off of, he will be forcing any of the unprepared underclassmen into designated costumes.

We, as a team, usually go all out.

But, considering *my girlfriend* bailed just before the second period via text, I have other plans in mind.

*My girlfriend*. Two weeks later and it still tastes just as fucking sweet.

Last night, I'd gotten her to agree to attending one of my parents' schmoozy galas with my face buried between her thighs.

I shower quickly, changing into gray sweatpants and a neon orange shirt that says *I'm Only Here for the Boos* with a ghost sporting heart eyes—a gift from Freddy his freshman year when I said I was too busy to dress up before we went downtown. Definitely part of the way he's wormed his way into my heart as one of my best friends. Since then, the cheesy shirts for every major holiday have become a sort of strange tradition between the two of us.

I'm gone before Freddy can try to stop me, only telling Bennett where I'm going. I know the drive like the back of my hand now, as I spend any of my minimal free time with her—and being with Sadie often means running her brothers around, getting them dinner or picking them up from practices.

Still, I've yet to have a run in with her dad. Which, I'm sure, is a very purposeful thing for her.

If I'm involved in the plans, we never end up at her house for the night. She avoids it—even if it means I end the night helping her tuck sleepy kids into an air mattress on her dorm floor. Sometimes I can convince them to sleep at the Hockey House, where Liam and Oliver get showered with endless attention of whatever players are at our house—playing games with them until Sadie turns her stern voice on and forces them to their respective beds.

Beds I purchased impulsively one day and put into the unused room at the end of the hall.

I know she's home tonight, because there's only a handful of reasons she

would cancel. Aurora attended the game, our new loyal fan, but she gave me a quick shake of her head to tell me Sadie wouldn't be showing.

The street she lives on is dark, no real decoration, all porch lights off except theirs. I knock in a pattern before stepping back so she can see me in the peephole before she answers.

"Holy shit," I mutter, smiling broadly as I take in her appearance at the front door.

She's dressed in a brown, fuzzy onesie—complete with a floppy hood—a big plastic pumpkin bowl full of candy hefted on her waist, and a tiny Darth Vader hanging onto her leg.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, but there's nothing but joy on her face, hidden lightly beneath my favorite little furrowed brow expression.

"Who are you supposed to be?" I ask, ignoring her question completely. Because it's ridiculous—where else would I be but with her?

Sadie smirks, but it's Liam who shouts, "A Wookiee!" as he leaps for me.

I grab him, follow Sadie into the house, then shut and lock the door behind me. This is the furthest I've been into her home, which is small and cold. It feels like there isn't any heat on—and maybe there isn't.

There's a set of stairs that look a little worse for wear. Directly to the right is a small, blue tiled kitchen with cookies in a pan on the stovetop, which explains the sugary smell. To my left, I spot Oliver perched on a stained floral couch, a lamp on the side table and the flickering TV the only lights on.

"Hey, bud."

"Koteskiy." He nods, before shifting his attention back to the screen.

My eyebrows shoot to my hairline. Sadie covers her mouth to keep the laugh from bursting, turning towards the kitchen. I follow with Liam still on my hip as he tells me about trick-or-treating in the "rich people neighborhood" and that Sadie won't let him have any more candy tonight.

I reach for a cookie off the tray, but Liam slaps my hands and screeches, "We have to sing first!"

"Sing what?"

"Happy birthday!"

"Is it your birthday, bud?" My eyes dance as I look between him and a blushing Sadie.

He laughs, bright and loud, like I've told some ridiculous joke. "No, it's sissy's. She's... um..." He leans into his sister and loudly whispers, "How

old are you again?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Twenty-two,” he shouts to me immediately.

My heart drops, eyebrows furrowing as I look at her again. “I... I had no idea.”

Sadie shakes her head and crosses her arms. “Obviously, because I didn’t tell you, hotshot.” She shoves a sugar cookie into her mouth before Liam can stop her, smiling wickedly at him as she chews.

It might be ridiculous, but I’m slightly hurt that she didn’t tell me.

Liam climbs down from my arms and demands that I get his brother so they can sing and Sadie can make her birthday wish. I take a cookie, imprinted with a little orange pumpkin, and head back into the living room.

I lean over the back of the couch, seeing *Halloween 3* play over the TV with that same stupid song that plagued my nightmares as a kid.

“How was your game?” I ask Oliver, remembering he had one this afternoon.

He doesn’t look at me. “We won.”

“Score anything?” I smirk, jostling his shoulder. He shifts to stand, coming around the back of the couch and stopping in front of me, closer than he’s ever been to me. Hell, closer than I’ve seen him get to anyone besides Sadie.

He scratches the back of his neck, before dropping his voice to whisper.

“My therapist said Sadie has trauma with her birthday because when she was my age something happened with our mom.” He shrugs. “I always thought it was because dad gets really, *really* drunk on holidays. On Christmas, he’s sad. On Halloween, he’s usually angry. But, I don’t know.”

I look at him for a long time, stomach sick, souring the leftover taste of the cookie still on my tongue.

“But, that’s probably why she didn’t tell you. And... I don’t want you to be mad at her.”

I try to swallow past the lump forming in my throat.

“I’m not mad at Sadie,” I tell him quietly. There’s a hesitancy to his stance, every line of his face, like he wants to say more but he doesn’t know how. So, I take a guess. “I’m not gonna leave her, Oliver. Never, okay? She may ask me to go one day, but I will *never* leave her. Not her, or your brother or *you*. Tell me you understand that.”

His cheeks blush as he angles his eyes down to the ground. “I

understand.”

“Good,” I say, and for a moment I feel like crying. I want to wrap this kid in my arms, because his shoulders look heavy with the weight he carries—but I know he’s a bit like Bennett, he doesn’t really like touch.

So I pat his shoulder once and angle us towards the kitchen, following behind him.

We sing *Happy Birthday* at the top of our lungs, and clap as Liam adds his own little version at the end that seems completely made up as he goes, adding lots of silly noises with his mouth until he’s laughing at his own joke so hard he can’t keep it going.

I kiss Sadie on the temple when she goes for another cookie and she lulls into my touch for a moment.

I’m in love with her.

THIRTY-NINE



# RHYS

We're laying in her bed, just breathing each other in and I can tell she's trying to read me.

I'm doing the same to her.

After tucking Liam into bed, which took three bedtime stories at minimum, and making Oliver swear he'd go to his own room after one more hour of scary movies, Sadie led me to her room.

It was hard—seeing the pretty blue sheets and little figure skating trophies and medals, photos from competitions and of baby versions of Liam and Oliver—to pretend I hadn't been imagining her in this room every time I called her from the road. That my dream fantasies when in the hotel shower or bed at an away game weren't of me pleasuring her for hours, of taking her slowly from behind while gray cat eyes looked over one delicate, freckled shoulder at me.

But that isn't what I want now.

I brush my hand through her hair, her head on my chest while my other arm is wrapped around her, skating circles on her back beneath her oversized threadbare shirt.

“Why didn't you tell me about your birthday?”

She mildly shrugs. “It never came up.”

*Liar.* I kiss her forehead again. “Oliver thinks it has to do with your mom.”

Silence.

“You never talk about her.”

I can't say I wasn't expecting it, but knowing it's coming doesn't hurt any less as she pulls her body away from me, sitting up.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she snaps, whispered venom echoing in the dark of her childhood bedroom.

“Sadie—”

“Drop it, Rhys.”

If she expects me to slink back and let her work whatever she’s feeling out on my body—like I’m sure many boys before me have—she’s about to try something new.

I sit up, leaning back to relax against the headboard.

“I won’t. What happened on Halloween?” When she doesn’t speak, I continue. “I’m not here for *just* happy Sadie in my bed. I’m here for my frustrated, angry Gray. For my scared *kotyonok*.”

“That fucking word again,” she huffs beneath her breath. She keeps asking me what it means, so I know she hasn’t looked it up yet. If she really knew what it meant, she’d probably slap me. “I’m not scared of you, Rhys.”

I wonder if she knows she’s worked herself into a fetal position, arms protectively wrapped around herself.

“What happened on your birthday?” I ask again. My voice stays just as gentle and soft.

She eyes me like a stranger in her bed, and though the look burns, I endure it.

“My mom left when I was probably Liam’s age. And then, she came back. Got pregnant with Oliver, and for a few years... it was amazing. And then, she just started to disappear.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugs. “She started having these, like, manic episodes. She would decide in the morning to go on a trip—it didn’t matter if I had a skating competition or practice or school, she would just... leave. Like gone—sometimes for weeks, sometimes for a day or two. Every now and then, she’d take me or Oliver with her.

“And then one day, Dad came home and Oliver was in his crib alone. He panicked, called the school and found out I hadn’t been for three days.”

My brow furrows and I resist the urge to reach for her. “Why did it take him so long to realize?”

“He played hockey back then. Nothing like your dad, but he played in a minor league and he was traveling for away games.”

“And... Oliver?” I don’t want to voice the implication.

She does. “He’d been alone, unfed in his crib for days.” A few tears

escape her eyes, though they don't move from staring a hole in the sheets between us. "I don't know how he's alive."

"But then, my dad made her go to therapy. Me too, for a while. And things were okay for a month? I don't remember. I just remember waking up one day and my dad was crying, holding Oliver on the couch and he told me she wasn't coming home."

I shudder a breath, because I can *feel* that this isn't getting better, only worse. And I can bet this isn't the worst of the memories trapped in her beautiful mind, tormenting her.

I wonder if she's ever spoken all of this out loud. Can she feel the way she trembled through some of the words so hard the bed shakes?

"Then, when I was twelve, I think? She came home. It was... the best day ever. She picked me up from school in this shiny, red convertible and took me to the mall to try on Halloween costumes. She wanted us to match and have a party just the two of us. We got a cake, balloons—everything.

"And when we got home, she sent the nanny home, got Oliver in his costume and told me to go upstairs to get ready, she was going to grab some candles for my cake."

A sob wells in her throat, but I watch her strangle it down before she lifts her burning, smoky eyes to me and finishes, "I sat outside on the curb with a three-year-old Oliver until my neighbors called my dad."

"Gray," I choke out, wishing desperately I could hold her. Hell, my arms raise, like I might try, but she flinches.

I think if she hit me, it would hurt less.

"When my mom left Oliver, I knew she wasn't coming back."

She says it matter-of-factly, as if it hadn't altered her world.

"She didn't just leave Ollie, Gray," I whisper, gentle but imploring all the same. "She left you, too."

But she shakes her head. "She left me when I was much younger. She came back to have Oliver, then left him."

She'd been abandoned by her mom twice. *Twice*.

"And your dad?"

"He started drinking, more than he already was. Showed up to a game or two drunk and eventually, they fired him. But that's about when my coach started helping, opening a scholarship program for me to keep skating. Oliver started hockey because the ice rink was my safe haven, so it became his too."

I don't want to ask it, but I have to.

“Liam?”

“Um,” she huffs out a breath and bites her lip. “Yeah. I don’t know much. But I came downstairs one morning for school and there was a baby on the floor, next to my passed out dad.”

I swallow. “How old were you?”

“Sixteen. It was... scary, for a while. But, I started working around then and my mom started paying her court-ordered child support. So, my dad was at least sober enough to get something done.” She laughs at this, but there’s no humor in it.

I picture her, as a sixteen-year-old girl, less angry and caring for children, budgeting, cleaning up her father even when he didn’t deserve it. To protect her brothers. To keep them close, because there wasn’t one adult in her life she could trust.

And no one was taking care of her.

Just like it had been for years. This was her normal.

My chest squeezes tight again.

*Not anymore.*

“Can I hold you?” I ask, before I can stop myself. “Please.”

I wait for the rejection, for the wall of frustration—and I’m prepared to fight for her. I always will.

But, she only nods, exhausted as she slinks towards me and tucks herself back into my side.

It isn’t until she’s fast asleep, drained but so beautiful that I whisper, “I’ll never leave you. Happy birthday, Sadie.”

I swear she smiles in her sleep, but I’m borderline delusional when it comes to this girl.

“I love you,” I mouth, pressing the words into the skin of her forehead, hoping that somehow, she hears them. Somehow, she knows.



I jolt awake.

The clock on her bedside table is blinking 3:47 a.m. in bright red font. My brow furrows as I rub my eyes a moment, trying to figure out what woke me. Did I have another nightmare? I haven’t had one in months, but sleeping somewhere foreign I absolutely could—

Something slams again, loud, making Sadie shift and curl tighter against me.

She's barely opening her eyes, when I press her back into the mattress.

"Stay asleep, baby. I'm just gonna check on the boys."

Her body rolls pliantly to the other side, and I shuck my sweatpants back on before heading out.

It's icy cold in this house, which Sadie explained was, in fact, an issue with their house being quite old and their astronomical gas bill last year; they'd planned to avoid it until they absolutely had to.

A problem I'd already planned on solving as soon as possible.

Liam is fast asleep, not moving an inch as I shut back his door. But Oliver is awake, standing at the top of the stairs, listening.

"Hey bud," I whisper, worried about the angry look on his face. "What's up? Can't sleep?"

His brow furrows. "You didn't hear that?"

"I did. Did it wake you?"

He snorts. "Dad always wakes us. Liam will sleep through anything." He eyes me up and down again. "Surprised Sadie's asleep though."

"I tried to keep her from waking up." Except now, I feel ridiculous. I've never had to handle an alcoholic, except in the context of drunken college or high school friends. Not an adult. "Does he... is he violent?"

"Not usually. But Halloween makes him angry." Oliver shrugs his shoulders and crosses his arms. "Usually he just breaks a few things, and then passes out on the couch. But..."

"What is it?"

Oliver has that same look again, like he's not sure if what he's saying is allowed or right— like someone will be upset with him. A little like confusion mixed with anger.

"You can tell me anything, remember?" I try to remind him of my words from earlier. *I won't leave you.*

"It's Sadie's purse. I know it's downstairs still. She usually remembers to hide it, but she..."

"I distracted her."

He nods.

*Fuck.* "Does he steal from her?"

"All the time. And... I know she just saved up enough for her tournament in December. I'm scared he'll—"

My hand raises to stop the slight panic I can hear etching into his voice.  
“I’ll get it, okay?”

“What if he fights with you?”

I smile, all disarming charm. “C’mon, Ollie—look at me.”

“I just don’t want this to be why you leave.”

Another punch to the stomach. Another reason I’m planning to never let these kids out of my sight again. I’d marry Sadie tomorrow if it meant it got them out of this damn house.

*Who am I kidding? I’d marry Sadie tomorrow. Period. No stipulations.*

“Let me deal with it, okay?”

FORTY

# SADIE

I wake up to yelling.

My body jolts like I've been electrocuted. One of my biggest fears of being in this house is Oliver growing up and his anger driving him to confrontation. Of waking up to screams and a fight between a drunken man and a child.

*I have to get them out of here.*

I'm flying down the stairs, two at a time, seeing Oliver at the base, angled in the kitchen. He tries to stop me, but I push past him to see my dad with a broken beer bottle stretched like a weapon over his head. And Rhys, palms up, arms stretched, trying to calm him down.

My dad's gaze shifts to me and he drops his stance.

"Sade," he cries, dissolving into tears almost immediately.

I don't want Rhys to see this part. Where my dad apologizes and cries, and begs me to help him. I don't want him to know that sometimes he tells me he hates me because I look *just like her*. I don't want Rhys to see the way that when I get close enough to help him, he pats my head gently or shoves my face away so hard that he nearly broke my jaw on the cabinet once.

*I hate this.*

"You need to go," I snap, stepping in front of him.

Rhys' voice turns almost desperate. "Sadie, stop."

"I can handle him. I always do—and never with your help. Now, go."

Oliver looks distraught, only for a moment before he storms off as I get to my dad and pry the bottle from his hand. He pulls it back and hurls it at the wall, screaming something about this all being my fault, before he's blubbing again.



There's glass everywhere and Rhys still. Won't. Leave.

"Sadie, be careful," he begs.

"Go—please, Rhys. I don't need your help!"

"Please, baby. There's glass *everywhere*. Just... just let me help."

I whirl on him. "Stop it! I don't need you to fix me, Rhys. I don't need to be *fixed*. I have everything under control. Oliver gets to his practices and I make sure he has new skates and gear when he needs them. *I* do that! Liam learned how to read because I taught him—before he ever got to fucking school, because I was nineteen and I honestly had no *clue* what he was supposed to know. I didn't need your help then, and I don't need it now."

I wait for him to leave. To tell me that he knew I was like this, worthless, terrible. A bitch, too angry and unlovable.

But he only stands there, quiet and solemn.

My breath is shuttering and I'm pretty sure I'm crying—which is embarrassing enough, but I keep my face furious, arms crossed. I want him to leave, I need him to—

He grabs the tiny duster and pan hanging off the wall, and starts to sweep up the glass, on his knees in front of me.

"Rhys," I nearly shout it this time, my fury only ratcheting higher.

He shakes his head, before finally looking up at me, all dark chocolate eyes and a stern expression I rarely see from him. "No. I'm not going fucking anywhere. Not now, not ever. We're going to talk about it all once this is done being dealt with. Now..." He shudders out a breath and rolls his massive, muscular shoulders. "I'm going to clean this glass up, because if you cut your fucking foot in here—even a goddamn nick, I don't think I will be able to hold back from kicking his face in, okay?"

Every word is calm, almost serene, but I can see his own anger and fury beneath the surface. Like he's holding it back because he *knows* I can't handle it.

"Okay," I say, surprising myself.

My dad is nearly passed out already, leaned against the wall behind me, his crying now silent but for snores. I grab his ever-thinning frame and walk him into the living room, mindful of the glass, before tossing him onto the recliner and hoping he stays passed out.

"Rhys—"

He holds a hand up to me and looks over his shoulder. "Go upstairs, Sadie. Wait for me there. I need a minute."



My skin feels like it's going to start melting off, and I'm quite sure I'm on the verge of a psychotic break, when Rhys finally comes upstairs.

He closes the door behind himself, turning completely towards it and resting his forehead. It takes several long breaths before he turns around and walks the space of my room, avoiding my eyes. He places something on the desk—my purse, I realize, and my stomach clenches.

“Are you leaving?”

That makes him look up, before away again. I feel that panicked breathing rise, like I'm drowning and kicking for the surface. I want to grab onto his wrist and beg him, so I cross my arms to hold myself back.

“I don't know what I'm going to have to do to prove to you and Oliver that I'm not leaving—and honestly, I don't care what it is, I'll do it.”

“Wait—” I stall, stunned and lost for words. “Then... then why won't you look at me?”

Loathing, self-hatred. If you feed them enough they grow like irremovable vines. Mine grew thorns and wrapped around me as a kid, and no one has ever bothered to try and get in. Until now.

“Because, Sadie,” he grits out, a harsher voice than I've ever heard him use—especially with me. “If I look at you, I'm going to see that fear I *clearly* saw when you walked into the kitchen. I can't get Oliver's face out of my brain, and now yours. And if I see that, I don't think I'll be able to stop myself from confronting *him*.”

I don't say anything. I barely breathe, as if any noise might ruin this moment.

*You ruin everything. Look at him—the golden boy who's never angry, suddenly furious. You take everything good and ruin it. Oliver's next, already so angry. Liam won't be far behind.*

I close my eyes.

“Look at me,” he commands, and I do, instantly. He's pacing at the foot of my bed, aglow in the muted light of my bedside lamp. He looks larger than life, he always has. Like what I imagine the children of ancient gods might have looked like, in some way that marked them different than mere mortals.

“I thought you were like me,” I whisper, the words pouring. “But you're not. You're... Rhys, you're amazing. You're everything to the people around you, even the ones who don't know you. Out there? On campus or on the ice?”

You're a shooting star out there. Fucking golden. And you might've been hurting when you met me, but... you're getting better. And my life is going to be like this for a long time.

"Like—I'm in the middle of trying to win custody of the boys, trying to graduate early this semester so I can get a job and prove to a bunch of adults that I'm enough to take care of these boys. And I—" My voice chokes off, because I realize I might've been about to say something insane. "I care about you enough to see that you're on your way to this massive, loud, amazing life."

Rhys' hand raises to stop me, and I do, easily. Partially because I don't *want* to say what I was about to say. I selfishly *want* him, always, no matter that I'll always be pulling him down or holding him back.

"I'm gonna say something now, Gray. And I need you to hear me. Really hear me, okay?"

I nod.

"I love you." He breathes, and he's smiling—both dimples glimmering. As if I didn't just spill the mess of my life, first with my mother, then my drunk father trying to attack him—and now with my speech about how terrible it is for him to have me in his life.

My anger has never worked on Rhys; neither has my efforts to shove him away.

So I listen, my heart hammering so fast I'm sure it'll sprout wings and soar from my chest.

"I love you. I love everything about you. I love your anger and your snark. I love the way you skate—like you're full of fire, and it makes me remember when I fell in love with hockey. I love how you take care of your brothers, how you protect and love Aurora. I love the way you get that frustrated-confused look on your face—the same one you have right now—with the little divot between your brows."

I laugh with him now, but my eyes never leave his face even as he tilts his head back and smiles again.

"And nothing—no dark part of you, or your life, will ever change that. So, like I told Oliver, if you don't want me anymore, that's something I'll have to deal with. But there will *never* be a day that I do not want you."

He's walked to the side of the bed now, towering me where I sit, my fingers twisting around the blankets. He leans down and grasps my chin gently. "Tell me you understand."

“I do.”

He nods. “Good.”

My mouth opens for a moment, like I might say it back, but then I just leave it there. Gaping like a fish out of water.

He uses the moment to kiss my bottom lip, sucking it softly between his lips and teeth. Our foreheads press together as he sits on the bed, closing me in the comfort of his warmth.

“You don’t need to say anything right now, okay? I can love you enough for the both of us.”

“For now,” I blurt.

He smiles, and I can see the glimmer in his warm eyes now. That he understands the words I’ve given are a promise.

“For now, *kotyonok*.”

“You ever gonna tell me what that word means?”

“Maybe one day,” he says before pushing me back into the mattress and pressing *I love you* into every inch of my skin while he makes love to me, soft and sweet and slow.

After, he asks for my little Bluetooth speaker, setting it on the bed between us. The big window over my bed leaks moonlight over his naked skin like it’s bathing him in the glow.

While he fumbles for his phone, I lean forward and kiss and nip at his neck again.

Two clicks, and then music plays. A song I know well, but not one from my playlists.

Brandi Carlisle’s voice is soft, the pluck of the guitar strings slow and gentle, as Rhys Koteskiy plays “Heaven” through the suddenly soft speakers in my room.

“It’s my song for you.” The automatic response is to stop him there. Convince him that he shouldn’t have a song for me. Especially not this one.

But his face is so open, every muscle relaxed, and I *do* believe him. That he loves me.

There’s a boyish innocence on his face as if he didn’t just fuck me slow into the mattress with his hand over my mouth to keep me quiet, before he asks, “Do you have one for us?”

*Only a million*, I want to say.

But Rhys Koteskiy could never be confined to just one song—he’s a symphony, a never ending playlist that I want to repeat forever.

“I’ll think of one,” I say, curling into his skin.  
He’s burned into me, I think, like a brand.  
I’ll never recover from him.

FORTY-ONE

# SADIE

I look beautiful.

Rora found the dress, though she refused to tell me where, but it fits like a glove. Black silk down to my ankles with a single slit to mid-thigh. Just enough to be sexy without being indecent.

My best friend slaved over my hair while I did my makeup, slicking it all back into a bun, letting two tendrils hang from the front and frame my face. I still sport my usual dark cherry lips and smoky eyes, but it's more regal. Less competition Sadie. More like Rhys' Gray.

*Rhys'*. His.

I've never belonged to anyone, or anywhere.

It's a warm feeling when I thought it would be suffocating.

We're at the Hockey House, Rora offering to pick up the boys after they carpool home from practice—something I'm quite sure Rhys' parents had a hand in creating. So, it feels a bit like Prom when I descend the stairs to a room full of tuxedo-clad boys.

Rhys, Freddy and Bennett—the latter two going solo, look mouthwatering.

Bennett resembles his father even more now, his height and width just as daunting, but now in a crisp black tux, sans tie. His unruly golden brown curls are smoothed only somewhat, but his face is clean shaven—which somehow makes him more intimidating.

Freddy is in a blue suit, his hair combed back, shirt open just enough for a glint of the metal he usually wears.

Maybe I'm biased, but Rhys looks like the cover of a magazine, or some celebrity mid-red carpet. His hair is cut shorter now, not so shaggy as it's

been, and he's put something in it to keep it tamed. His tux is black, simple with a crisp, perfect bowtie at the center of his collar.

A bowtie I decided to fix anyway, even knowing nothing about it. Just shifting it this way and that, because this moment feels like a dream and I want it to stay that way.

He grasps my wrists either way, stopping me for a gentle kiss, his eyes smoldering as he pulls away and takes me in.

"You're so goddamn perfect, Gray." He smiles. "And I'm so fucking lucky."

I almost say it again, tell him the words on the tip of my tongue, that have been hanging there for five days, ever since Halloween. But we're surrounded by friends, and if I know Rhys, the moment those words leave my mouth, we won't be leaving his room for a while.

So instead, I kiss his hand. Softer in my affection, and I see the way it makes his cheeks blush.

He might be a solid ice captain when in a pair of skates, the Waterfell Wolves' fearless leader. But for me, he'll always be soft.

His parents planned to meet us at the entrance, but they're already swarmed in the corner when we get there. It's a fundraiser for the First Line Foundation—which I recently realized was not just a volunteer opportunity for Max Koteskiy; it's *his* charity. He started it, funds it, and everything, so that all kids get a chance to skate.

Anna, Rhys' mother, looks dazzling in her deep green dress. I've heard the boys tease Rhys endlessly about how beautiful his mother is—and they are not wrong. She's gorgeous, clearly fit and always bright-eyed. But it's easy to be around her; she makes everyone smile and I think that's the real reason everyone finds themselves drawn to her.

This is only my fifth or sixth time around them, and without the buffer of the boys occupying their attention, I'm nervous. I'm learning to trust her. Slowly. His father, too.

Eventually, after a few spins on the checked dance floor—which I was pleasantly surprised with Rhys' waltzing ability, we make our way to them.

The photographers jump at the chance for photos of the great Maximillian Koteskiy with his up-and-coming hockey star son, Rhys Maximillian Koteskiy. They don't bother with Anna, until his father makes a fuss and starts shouting about her architectural achievements, that he says matter much more than a washed up NHL player.



And I see it then, the reason Rhys loves me the way he does. The reason he cares for the boys and wants to keep us close. Because he's seen this, his whole life. Has been surrounded by love.

Loving me, loving my brothers—it's easy for him.

My chest tightens.

And I can't stop it, it keeps squeezing until I'm almost sure I'll die.

So, when they finish photos, I drag him into the conference center's carpeted hallway and down towards the staff entrances, shoving him into an empty conference hall, vast, dark and full of tables and chairs in disarray.

He laughs even as I pin him feebly to the wall. His eyes smoldering down at me, half-lidded and all warm chocolate, heating me in his gaze.

“Can't even make it through a few hours, huh? Need me that badly, *kotyonok?*”

He doesn't use the word often, but it never fails to light me up when he speaks Russian.

“I love you.”

It isn't exactly how I planned it in my head, no beautiful speech to match the one he gave that I replay in my head almost constantly. So, I keep going.

“And I'm sorry that I didn't—”

He shuts me up with a kiss, gripping my hips in his hands that nearly span my entire waist, hefting me so I can wrap my legs around him. It causes the silk to slip all the way up my legs and bunch at my waist, which seems to be his goal.

“No apologies, Gray.” He kisses down my neck. “Never apologies, with you. I love you so much. I love you.”

He never stops saying it as he lays me across one of the cloth covered tables, the glow of moonlight illuminating my skin. His bowtie disappears along with his suit jacket, before he latches his mouth to my collarbones and gently slides the thin straps of my dress down my arms, until my breasts are bared to him.

My breath shutters out of me as his hand drifts to my center. He hisses when he finds only bare skin.

“All night?” he asks, pressing firmly against my clit, drifting his fingers lighter down my lips before circling back in a cruel, little pattern.

“No panty lines.” I barely push through my lips, followed by a desperate, loud moan as his fingers enter me.

I try to calm myself down and not come yet, because I *know* Rhys is

about to sink to his knees and lick me until I'm a shaking mess, but nothing I do is working.

I'm already on the precipice, just looking at him in the dark shadows of the room. Golden boy Rhys Koteskiy has disappeared, and in his place is the darkness that I know thrums in his veins. Maybe it scared him before, but this unleashed version of him—I love him just as much as the shining star.

He gives me that dark, teasing look, like he knows exactly how close I am.

“Say it again,” he demands.

“I love you.”

“Good girl,” he says, sinking to his knees and teasing my slit with his tongue, not bothering to remove the two fingers he has stilled inside me. It takes barely two minutes with his lips around my clit, sucking and tonguing in rapid succession that I go off like a bomb.

I clench around his fingers, even as his lips leave me. He appears over me again, kissing me and the taste of myself on his lips, in his mouth, is so erotic I pulse again.

He uses his hands now to undo his belt and pants, pulling himself free while I lay like a boneless mass of muscle.

I think I'd do anything he wanted right now.

“God,” he grounds out, sliding slowly into me, even as my still pulsing pussy clenches up around him. It doesn't matter that I've barely come down from my orgasm, I can feel that my heartbeat has taken up residence in my center, like it's begging for more.

“The first time I saw you like this, I thought you were too fucking small for me.”

I whine, high and loud as he inches forward, again, still holding back.

“But you fit me like a fucking glove, baby,” he coos, before slamming in to the hilt. My back bows, breasts heaving as he starts to fuck me, hard and insistent.

It always feels like the first time with him, and I wonder if years from now, when we have kids and a yard and a dog, if I'll still feel this way.

He doesn't let up, doesn't pause, continues to thrust and work me through another orgasm, before he's pinching my nipple with one hand and holding my chin with the other.

“Give me one more, *kotyonok*.” His voice is hoarse now, his temple shining with a light sheen of sweat.

“Rhys—I-I can’t,” I cry.

“You can. Say it again, and come for me.”

He plays his fingers across my clit again, waiting until the words, “I love you,” pour from my lips, before pressing on me, like striking a match, I lose myself again.

He follows me, telling me loves me, a constant stream of praise as he discards the condom and cleans me up, putting my straps back over my shoulder and helping me up. And he never stops kissing me. I straighten my dress as he tosses the tablecloth we used in the corner trash can.

I can’t stop smiling at him, but do turn to grab for my phone while he gets redressed.

Because it’s lighting up, with five missed calls from an unknown number, but a local area code.

Just as I go to click, the call comes in again.

“Hello?”

“Is this Sadie Brown?”

Rhys’ eyes flicker to me in mild concern and I know in the quiet of the room he can hear every word.

“Yeah, who is this?”

“I’m Samantha, a nurse at Greenwood General.” My stomach drops at the mention of the hospital one town over from Waterfell. “We’ve been trying to reach you. Your father was brought in about an hour ago after a drunk driving accident.”

My eyes burn, but I try to keep it together until she finishes.

“But, um, your brothers, I think? Liam and Oliver? They were in the car with him. And you’re listed after your father as next-of-kin.”

“Oh my god,” I cry, already running barefoot for the door and into the bright, loud hallway. “Are they okay? Are they—”

I can’t breathe, I can barely hear what she says. My vision grays out for a moment, and I stumble into the wall.

Rhys is there, like he always is, his hand wraps around mine and gently pries the phone from my grip, taking over.

And I still can’t breathe.



The room is cold; I know because Rhys' mom is wrapping her husband's jacket around her arms as we listen to the doctor speak about my father. But I can't feel anything, just numbness.

And embarrassment.

Rhys' mother and father took me straight back, but I didn't see where Rhys went. He might've told me, but I can't remember. I feel like I'm watching it all from far away.

Finally, they let us in.

My father is in a four-point restraint. I'd heard the nurse try to warn the Koteskiys about that before we went up, but it's a bit worse to see than I thought. He's still flailing, yelling at the nurse who ignores everything and finishes her dosages and notes, before leaving with a sympathetic smile.

No, not sympathetic. Pitying.

"Sadie," he saws out, chest heaving. His gray, reddened eyes a mockery of my own. "God, Sade, please get me out of here. They're trying to take the boys. C'mon, sweetheart."

I can't look at him; I feel a bit like I'm dying.

He switches like a trapdoor. "Don't be a fucking brat, Sadie. I need you."

Anna Koteskiy stands in front of me suddenly, arms crossed. She's a small woman, but still taller than me, and she covers me completely; intentionally.

"Calm yourself down if you want to speak to her," she demands, keeping her voice semi-quiet but firm. "You need to calm down either way."

"You're the people trying to take my kids."

He's turning manic, but I don't say anything. No one is trying to take anyone. Doesn't he realize he's already fucked us up enough? That no family like the Koteskiys would want us?

"Stay away from my fucking kids," he shouts, tearing at the restraints, kicking against the bed. "Sade and I take care of them just fine."

A fire lights within Anna's eyes, her slight form seeming to expand in the room as she continues to stand in front of me, her beautiful gown brushing the harsh hospital flooring.

"Your child is taking care of your children. Sadie should not be responsible for those little boys, all while going to school, working and taking care of her alcoholic father."

I stand in shock, floored by the overwhelming wave of emotions that roll through me. Anger, fear, confusion all muddled under the weight of shame

and embarrassment. Even still, I can't recall a time that someone has stood up for me like this—and not just someone, a mother.

“You fucking bitch,” he shouts, spitting towards her in a move that makes my stomach drop.

“That’s enough.”

Max Koteskiy steps forward abruptly, his face a hard mask of anger. He looks so much like Rhys; apart from the slight lines of age and the gray strands to Max Koteskiy’s darker hair, they could pass for brothers.

He grabs his wife in a gentle grip, pulling her slightly behind him. And even when she begins to protest that she’s fine, he brushes a hand along her cheek and whispers, “I know you are, Trouble. But let me handle this, okay? For my own *stupid male pride*.”

I can tell it’s some sort of inside joke between them, just from the way it softens her.

“Why don’t you take Sadie to see her brothers?” he suggests, all while his eyes never leave their watch over my father.

She nods, albeit slightly reluctantly, and he grants her a private smile.

“I love you so much it hurts, *rybochka*.”

His words are soft, but it’s clear his intention. Protection.

Still, the sound of them echoes in my head like gunshots. Affection, open and honesty and deep—it’s what Rhys would be like, as a father or husband. If this were something I could have. It’s something I don’t know; something I’ve never seen before seeing his parents.

I didn’t have time for friends.

The girls I skated with were competitors, and according to Coach Kelley, I wasn’t allowed to skate or play with them. At school, I was too concerned with keeping my secret. So I never saw what real parents and real love really looked like.

“Come on, Sadie girl,” she coos, her tone suddenly gentle, gentler than the harshness of her beautifully round features as she pulls my nearly catatonic body into the hallway. “Rhys and Matt are with your brother’s in the waiting room.”

*Matt?*

“Freddy’s here?”

Another wave of embarrassment blushes my skin, an itch starting down my spine that I know I won’t scratch away.

They see it, they know now—everyone knows. My father called her a

bitch. Spat at her. I know they won't want their family near mine—especially Rhys.

I try to repeat his words from Halloween again, but all I hear is my father's shouting. My coach's honesty. I'll never be like these people, just like I'll never skate like any of the girls I looked up to. I'm destined to be just *this*.

*My terror.*

I hate how much I have to resist the urge to call Kelley, to ask him for help. Because Rhys loves me, but he thinks I can be better, can heal.

Will he love me when he realizes that this thing I am is all I will ever be?

We turn the corner into another room, almost like a conference room, but I don't question Anna as she leads me through it.

The view alone is a shot to the gut.

Freddy is holding Liam, perched on his knees as my youngest brother giggles and plays a game on an iPad that definitely isn't ours. And Rhys...

Rhys is holding my twelve-year-old brother in a tight hug, sitting on the large ledge of the hospital window so that Oliver can stand between his legs and keep his head against Rhys' chest. Rhys is whispering into his ear at a constant rate, and the nods of my brother's head without leaving the embrace, fists tugging at his suit jacket, tells me everything.

Oliver hates being touched, and yet he's wrapped completely in Rhys' arms.

The door closes softly behind us, but it still pulls their attention, Liam first with a shout of, "Sissy!" and an unceremonious leap from Freddy's lap that leaves the man holding himself in pain.

I scoop him up quickly, the practiced expression of serenity slipping into place easily as my brothers both look at me. Liam, still bright eyed and somehow okay, but Oliver's eyes are bright red, cheeks puffy as he looks towards me without leaving the bubble of safety around Rhys.

And I don't blame him—I've been there. I know how warm and safe it is.

"Hey, bug." I smirk, kissing his cheek hard and wrapping him in my arms. "Did they get you all checked out?"

He smiles and lifts his elbow, where a bright orange Bluey Band-Aid gleams. It makes my chest ache.

"He's alright, just scratched up his elbow a little—right, little man?" Freddy says, standing and messing with Liam's mop of hair. The Waterfall playboy is still dressed to the nines, looking more like he should be on the

cover of GQ and not in a hospital boardroom. But beneath the smile he keeps offering to my brother, there's a sympathetic look in his eyes.

"Freddy said I'm the same age as him when he started playing hockey," Liam offers, skipping to a new subject just as quickly as usual. "He says I'm gonna be even bigger than him one day."

"I did not!"

My brother dissolves into a fit of laughter, but my eyes never leave the window, watching Oliver and Rhys with a desperate ache gnawing at my chest.

FORTY-TWO



## RHYS

I'm careful in every movement, stepping slowly towards her despite the clog of fear in my chest. I can't swallow around the rock lodged in my throat at the sight of her like this.

Hours ago, I had her in my arms. Why does it feel like she is suddenly completely out of reach?

Staying calm, I reach my hand out to her, because I just want to hold her.

Her father scared her, almost hurt her brothers, and I can feel her racing thoughts from across the space—if I can just talk to her, just calm her and reassure her that I'm here, then she won't leave, she won't panic and pack up her smile and her snark and her brothers and everything that I love, to take it away from me.

God, even in my head, I'm a fucking control freak.

She doesn't move towards me, but she doesn't move away either.

My mom took Liam and Oliver, along with Freddy, to get some food from whatever might be open at this hour in the cafeteria. Both, to distract the boys who looked a little worse for wear this time, and to give Sadie and me some time.

"Rhys," she starts, her eyes empty in a way I haven't seen since summer, really. Since "Fast Car" skates in the early morning, where I could feel her hopelessness through her movements.

I wish I'd known then what I know now.

"Sadie," I say back, but cross my arms to prepare myself. Push me out again, love. Go ahead, try and make me think that you would be better off without me.

It doesn't matter what she says right now, I'm not letting go.

“We need to stop this. I need to leave you alone and you need to—”

“No.” I stop her. “I’ll let you say whatever it is that you need to right now, to get it all out. But, I will tell you right now what it is I need, so there’s no confusion. I need you. Now, you can decide what *you* need.”

I can see the anger blanket her, as she dons her trusty shield. I prepare myself for the hit of her best weapon.

“You’re a fucking hockey player who has enough bullshit in his life to deal with without adding a fucked up family of three into the mix. That is the stupidest shit I can think of. God, Rhys, barely a few months ago you were too panicked to fucking skate—what makes you think you could help any of us when you can barely help yourself?”

It stings, but I can take it. Because I know she doesn’t mean it. I can see it in the sobs wracking her body, the tears running down her cheeks, the way her hand moves to almost cup her mouth.

As if she’s in shock of what she just said.

“Finished?” I ask, breathing slow, staying calm in spite of my own want to panic.

“I-I—”

“I know. You shouldn’t have said it. But it’s okay, Sadie. I know you’re scared and angry and hurt. But I told you, I’m not leaving—”

“I know,” she cuts me off, and a nigger of fear roots itself in my chest. Her anger, I can take. I’m ready for it. This... whatever this is, it scares me. “But I think... I think we need to slow down.”

“Gray—”

“Hear me out, please.” I nod and bite down hard enough on my tongue to taste blood. “You and your parents are incredible. But I need to make sure Liam and Oliver are safe. And *you*, you’re supposed to be my college boyfriend; the hockey hotshot of Waterfell University, currently being scouted by at least three NHL teams.”

I smile despite her words, because the girl can grumble about hockey players and ruined ice all she wants, but I know my girl keeps tabs on me.

I bet she could name the teams.

“And that’s who you should be right now. Not taking care of me, or my brothers or worrying about me. You should be *thriving* and showing those scouts why they should pick you. Right?”

I don’t want to agree, but I’ll listen. So I shrug.

Her eyes roll, but I can tell this is getting harder for her. “Rhys, please.”

“What do you want me to say? I’m not going to agree with you. I can do both.”

“You shouldn’t have to.”

“Neither should you!” I finally break. “You should be enjoying your life—not worrying over if you can feed two growing boys or how you’re going to pay bills on a house you don’t even live in all the time. You shouldn’t have to do it at all—but you *definitely* shouldn’t have to do it alone.”

She sighs, but I can see her soaking in my words, working them through that big brain in her beautiful head.

*Please.* I want to beg, but I don’t want to be a manipulator. If she wants me, she has to *want* me.

“I don’t know what to do, Rhys. I just... I need us to slow down okay?”

“We’re not breaking up.”

I don’t even attempt to make it sound like a question. But she shakes her head.

“No. I don’t want to break up. I just... I don’t know. I *can’t* love you how you want me to right now. There’s nothing left in me.”

“Alright,” I agree, because what else can I do? I step to her, hold her face in my hands and let her nuzzle into my palms, eyes closed. “But here’s the deal, Gray. You’re going to let my parents help, okay? My dad will help with the custody and lawyer stuff, my parents and Bennett and Freddy and Rora—and me. We are all helping you, okay? If you need some space and some time, to move a little slower, fine. I’ll give you that. But you will not be alone. Okay?”

“Okay,” she agrees, tears finally falling from her beautiful eyes.

I trace my thumb along the clutter of freckles beneath the corner of her cat-eyes, before kissing her forehead solidly.

“I’ll be here, for whatever you need.” *Even if it’s not me.*

FORTY-THREE

## RHYS

Liam is already grinning, his face pressed against the screen door when I pull up. Just like he has been every time I've showed up unannounced.

Her car died on her way home the night before, and Rora called Freddy to get a hold of me at the house to go get her—because she wouldn't ask for my help.

I'd found her on the side of the street walking home, taking a solid minute to stew in my anger and breathe so that I didn't make her own anger that covered her fear worse.

I'd calmly stopped my car on the side and walked by her side for a little, just keeping watch over her, until she finally turned towards me. I would've walked beside her for miles, but I was glad she gave up the defense sooner rather than later.

She didn't speak, only sunk her head like a reprimanded child and slunk behind me back to my car. I hated how she was shivering, getting a blanket from the truck of my car—a blanket I'd planned to call our drive-in blanket; big enough for the two of us and her brothers—to wrap her in.

We didn't speak, but I turned on one of her playlists and let the soothing sounds of Damien Rice echo in the space between us. The space I hated that existed.

But she didn't push my hand off her thigh as I settled it there like a brand. She sat in the quiet of the cabin of my car until the entire album finished, letting me trace patterns on her hand even as she stared at her darkened childhood home like it was the thing that tortured her each and every day. Like she wanted to burn it down.

Eventually, she got out and I walked her to the door, forcing her inside so

I could make sure the heat was on inside, before offering to get the boys from Miss B's next door myself. Partially so she could rest and stay warm. Mostly, so I could hear from Liam and Oliver exactly how things were going.

So, even if we haven't spoken about it, she's right behind her brother now—a gray Waterfell Wolves toque pulled down on her head, thick gray scarf looped so it covers her nearly to her eyes. She's looking at me, a gentle expression in her eyes. Like she knew I would show. Like she trusts me.

That's enough.

Oliver looks angrier than I've seen him, shuffling past his sister and me so that I don't really know who he's mad at most, his hockey bag swinging wildly off his side.

Liam is in another Star Wars costume, but with a thick coat overtop that makes him look like a big stuffed blue marshmallow. Sadie yanks his scrambling body back as he howls at me, shoving a little wool cap on his curls before releasing him into the snow, slamming into my legs in a hug.

"Missed you," he mumbles.

"Miss you too, bud." I ruffle his hat and curls before bending down to fix it. I stand back up, straightening my dark navy dress coat, and smiling at her.

She is layered in black and still—she is everything bright in my life. I love her, I'd do anything for her.

And right now that means giving support, but the space to work out her own feelings.

I wanted to connect her with my therapist, but Dr. Bard said that was a decision that Sadie needed to make on her own.

I hope she does. I just want her to feel good again.

Happy.

"Hey, Gray," I say, my hand scratching at the back of my neck to distract myself from reaching for her.

"Hotshot." She smiles and my knees wobble. A good mood today, then. She walks right up to me and fiddles with my collar. "You look good."

My cheeks heat, a smile growing under her attention and the familiarity of the teasing nickname. "Yeah... I, uh—we've got a home game today. We usually dress nice."

Her eyebrows dip and she lets go of me, ducking her head a bit as she says, "Oh. I, um—I can't go. I have a group project due for my final and they agreed to meet near the rink where Oliver's practice is. And Liam—"

The kid pokes his head out of the car, where Oliver's already strapped

him into his car seat, that I definitely hadn't purchased before the gala when I first realized being with Sadie meant being responsible enough to handle her brothers.

"I wanna watch Rhys!"

Sadie's exhausted. It's easy to see in her eyes and her posture, but I can tell this will help her. Even if she won't ask.

"My parents have seats, and they wanted to invite Liam if you needed some help.

She bites her lip. "They wouldn't mind?"

"No." I smile sadly at her. "They'd love it. They love them."

"Yeah." She nods, biting her lip.

*They love you too, you just need to let them in.* I want to say, but keep it quiet.

"What are you doing after your game?"

I smile again, because I can tell she's mildly stalling. And to be honest, I'd happily be late to my game for a few more moments with her.

"What time are you done?" I ask, being a little bolder and pulling her hat from her shining hair, tucking a few strands back and smoothing them before putting it back on. "I'll be there to pick you guys up."

"Rhys—"

"Quiet. That one's non-negotiable."

She nods again, cheeks pink; whether from the weather or me, I'll never know.

We all pile into my mom's car, an SUV for kids—where my dad and I spent the entire morning trying to get the car seat in properly. The thing was like a fucking spaceship.

The entire drive to the local rink is twenty minutes of ABBA, with Liam scream-singing at the top of his lungs. It's ridiculous, and loud, and yet, I can see it soften both Oliver and Sadie.

When I pull into the parking lot, before Oliver can slam out of the car, I pause and look at Sadie.

"I just want you to know that taking care of your brothers by yourself is very brave. You're so strong and smart, and I hope I can be half as incredible one day."

I say it in front of her brothers, because I need them to understand how brave and amazing their big sister is—and how nothing that's coming will change that. That no one wants to take them from her, nor her from them.

“I’m here, for all of you, okay? I love you.”

My eyes flicker in the rearview mirror, locking with Oliver’s. “I love all of you.”

Liam giggles. “I love you too, Rhys.”

I unlock the car and Oliver waits a bit before getting half out of the car. He turns back to me, because he’s on my side of the car and nods. “Love you.”

My heart clenches because I know how rare those words are from him even to his own family.

He shuts the door and starts towards the ice plex entrance.

Sadie hesitates, but turns and kisses me on the cheek. For a moment I think about turning to try to catch her lips, but I stay still as she leans her mouth to my ear.

“Love you,” she repeats. “And thank you, hotshot. Now go kick their asses.”



We do.

It was an overtime game, and we didn’t play well enough for what’s coming—but I’m fucking beaming as I shower afterwards because that last goal was mine.

That, and because I know my girl saw it, because right at the glass was Aurora, decked in our colors, videoing with her phone nearly constantly. And when we came off to celebrate in the dressing room, her text was the first thing I saw.

You’re golden, hotshot. Can’t wait to watch you on my television soon.

I pick her and Oliver up, Liam fast asleep in the car seat—he’d been asleep in my father’s arms for half the game. So, the ride back is nearly silent.

I carry Liam in, laying him on the sofa and hating how cold it feels in her house. But I can tell she thinks I’m hovering, so I walk back out the front door, praying she’ll follow.

She does.

Sadie stands in front of her house, backpack hanging from one shoulder. I



want to ask to stay over tonight, just to make sure they're okay, but I hold back. Only if she asks me.

“I, um, I have a competition next week.” Her hand plays with a lock of hair and she looks more nervous than I think I've seen her before. “It's three days, in New Hampshire. I missed the last one cause it was all the way in Colorado. And I was going to back out to take care of the boys, but...”

My chest squeezes. She's asking for help.

“My parents would love it if the boys stayed with them for a few days, Sadie.”

“Really?” she asks, but I'm already striding to her.

I take her head in my hands and kiss her forehead hard, before tucking her whole body into a tight hug that I need just as desperately as she does—even if she won't ask for it. She sinks into my arms, tension melting away.

“I'm so proud of you,” I whisper. “I know it takes a lot for you to ask for help. But, I'm so proud.”

FORTY-FOUR

## RHYS

It takes one sentence out of my mouth to convince my parents to let me take the boys to Sadie's competition. Even more, they decide they want to be there as well.

My mom, most of all. Something about Sadie turns her fierce in her protectiveness, stronger than it was over me as a child. She doesn't tell me anything about it, but I can see the way she feels written across her face and in her frequent questions about my girlfriend—beyond the normal amount.

So, Thursday, the day of her long program for the competition, we leave before the sun is up, and while the boys sleep in the car my dad ordered, I chat quietly with my parents.

The rink is slightly crowded, but the majority of people in the ice plex are coaches and teams, a few news crews and reporters preparing for the streams, and a rather small audience.

Which means, we get good seats.

"I've never got to do this before," Liam says, kicking his feet back and forth in the seat next to me. My mom sits on his other side, only because Oliver opted to sit between my father and I.

"What?"

"He means see Sadie skate," Oliver says, eyes scanning the far boards as he searches for his sister. I'm doing the same, but neither of us have spotted her yet. "We never get to. Not like this."

Another lump forms in my throat, and my mom clearly picks up on it as she jumps in with, "Well, then this will be a first for all of us. And we have to cheer really loud for her, okay?"

Liam howls, and elbows me in the side. "I'm gonna be the loudest one so

Sissy knows it's me.”

The competition is slow as they move through their groups. But about an hour in, Sadie appears in the warm-up skate with her blocked group.

She's wearing a Waterfell zip-up over her dress, so I can only see a bit of black fabric beneath it, her legs in mesh black instead of the tan of her competitors. Her hair is braided tight against her head, back into an equally tight and shiny bun, not a strand out of place.

She isn't smiling, none of them are as they take the ice and skate a bit. She throws a few jumps, spins a bit, but I can tell by the lines of her tight-clad legs, she's waiting. She's holding it all back right now.

I spot Victoria skating around as well, just as focused and determined. I see their coach as well, arms crossed as he stands at the boards and watches. I watch him for a few minutes and realize he's *only* watching Sadie.

Judging by the jackets circling, half his team is out there, and yet he's focused solely on her. Correcting her, calling her over repeatedly.

Still, I wait. And still, he never does it for another skater.

Luc's words haunt me again. *Kelley's not normal. And if you don't know what's going on in that fucking rink...*

I cross my arms, heat licking the back of my neck as Coach Kelley speaks harshly to her. I see Sadie roll her eyes, and it almost makes me smile, until I see him grip the sleeve of her jacket and twist it until it works like a leash.

*What the fuck?*

Standing before I can think twice about it, I excuse myself for the bathroom and instead head straight to the other side entrance where the teams are. I wait for someone to stop me, but then realize wearing my Waterfell athletics issued jacket is working in my favor.

Sadie spots me before I make it to the boards, her eyes shooting wide as she jerks back from Kelley and skates briskly towards the exit.

There's a mix of apprehension and excitement across her face, like she might want to smack me, but that she also can't believe I'm here.

Because no one ever has been before.

I wait for her coach to kick me out once he spots me, but another one of his skaters is too busy arguing with him at the gate—or maybe they're just talking, but he's the one spitting his words.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she asks, but her cheeks are flush as she pulls me along into a back spot against the wall, away from the clamoring of skaters and the smell of fresh ice and hairspray. “Where are my brothers?”

I smile, and put my hands on her shoulders, spinning her so I can point to the group of us on the far right.

“They wanted to see their *sissy* skate.” I pause, dipping my head into her neck to breathe in her perfume against her skin. “And so did I.”

“You’ve seen me skate a thousand times,” she murmurs, but softens under my hands, relaxing lightly.

“Not like this.”

“You never know. I might suck,” she retorts, turning to gaze up at me, eyes somehow more intense with the darkened shadow and glitter. Lips still the same signature dark cherry color, more matte and fierce now against her very pale skin.

My hand raises almost subconsciously, finding my favorite little patch of freckles beneath her eye, letting my palm graze her face just slightly.

“You’ll be the best one out there,” I whisper. “Okay?”

“You’re not allowed to be back here,” her coach hisses as he approaches from behind, standing so close that if Sadie stepped back, she’d barrel into his chest. “You’re third, my terror.”

He hisses the name, and fury—white-hot and terrifying—crawls my spine at the sound of it. At the implication. His hand wraps up around her neck, before coasting her spine and pressing his fist into the center until she straightens, shoulders back.

She tries to hide it, but I see the wince—my eyes shooting to her coach’s with a threat pooling in my mouth. But before I can say a word, just as I pull Sadie into my arms, he storms off. A legion of skaters are exiting behind him, the warm-up likely over.

“Stop,” she whispers, and for a moment I think I’ve held her too tight, that I’ve *hurt* her. My arms drop from her as if I’ve laid flat against a burning stove.

It only takes a moment for me to realize she’s warning me off her coach.

“He can’t touch you like that, Gray,” I whisper, albeit a bit harshly.

Her back is up, again, the divot of her brow that I love so much taunting me as she crosses her arms. “You don’t know him. He just cares about me. He wants me to do well, work hard.”

“You work harder than most of the athletes I know, Gray. And I know a fucking lot.”

“He just doesn’t want me distracted. He’s focused.”

“*You* are focused. No one is more determined than you.”

What I want to say is that what her coach had the balls to do in front of me is only the tip of the iceberg, that it can only mean how he treats her behind closed doors is worse. And sure, I didn't figure skate *ever*, but I grew up in a rink. I went to a goddamn private hockey academy with some of the strictest coaching staff I've ever experienced.

And not one of them ever raised a hand to me.

But she's about to skate, and the last thing I want is to pull her down. Never again.

So, I swallow my words for another time and press a deep kiss to her forehead, before tilting her chin up.

"You're a killer, Gray. Say it."

"I'm a killer," she mutters, rolling her eyes even as I bottle up the slipping smile.

"Good girl." I smirk. "I'd kiss you but I don't want to mess up your lipstick." As I say it, she presses a dark red kiss mark into my palm, so I can hold it.

"I'm proud of you, and so are your brothers. Now, go show them their sissy is a badass."

She does.

By the time I'm back to my seat—with hot chocolates for the boys, she's next.

Without the jacket, Sadie is dressed in a strappy black mesh dress that matches the thin black of her tights, long mesh sleeves that sit just on the cusp of her shoulders, strategic panels of thick black covering some, while the other see-through panels display the hard lines of her stomach and waistline.

She takes her place at the center, poised and beautiful, before the speakers begin blasting Metallica's "Enter Sandman," which sends a vibrating laugh through both my father and I.

And just like the first time I saw her skate while hiding in the tunnel, Sadie Brown skates like she's on fire. Pure passion, pure unrelenting strength. Her movements are hard and fast, her spins so quick she turns into a blur. She hits every jump hard, but lands them. Every. Single. One.

My fingers are melded into the chair by the end of her program from keeping myself seated when I want to jump up every time and scream, "That's my girl," at the top of my lungs.

Liam cheers just as loudly as he promised. Oliver grins happily, watching

his sister with wonder in his eyes. *Me too, bud.*

By the end of it, my cheeks hurt from my uncontrollable beaming smile. I'm so goddamn proud of her, so lucky to call her *mine*.

So lucky that she calls me hers.

She bows and looks over at us, winking at her brothers and blowing a snarky little kiss that I know is all mine. I clench my hand a little tighter where her dark lipstick mark still lies.

It doesn't matter how much distance there is right now, as long as she'll have me, I'll be right here. Waiting and cheering from the bleachers, if that's what she needs.



Another anxiety disappears overnight.

Kane isn't just opting out of the Harvard game—Freddy apparently did some digging, as he hurried to inform me when I enter the Hockey House.

Toren Kane isn't allowed to play at Harvard.

It took some intense scouring of the internet to find a video, as it seems someone tried to have it covered up. But there is a quick clip of the incident, shot on a shaking cellphone.

Someone says something taunting, spitting in his face. Kane grasps the kid's cage and flings him off like an irritating insect, before entering some trance, easily seen with his helmet discarded. There's a girl, a little redheaded Harvard student by the sweater she wears, sitting two rows from the glass, staring at him in that same wonder-filled way.

His teammate jerks on the collar of his jersey, pulling him out of the staring contest, and suddenly, he jerks forward and slams his glove against the glass.

"Get the fuck out of here!" he screams, and the already pale girl goes nearly white, standing and stumbling up the stairs to the exit, the boy next to her following blindly.

Still, Kane continues to wail on the glass for a moment before there's a sound of shattering glass and the video cuts off.

"At least we won't have to deal with him tomorrow," Freddy says.

It's a small gift, but I'll happily take it.

FORTY-FIVE



# SADIE

It doesn't matter how many times I've been here in the past weeks, the Koteskiy household always looks like a dream house.

And lately, I've been here a lot. Even without Rhys.

Today, they're letting me use Anna's office for a meeting with my attorney, who seems a bit more motivated since Max Koteskiy and Adam Reiner got involved. Bennett's father had apparently offered to help, but admitted that it wasn't his area of expertise.

I have practice in an hour by the time the meeting finishes. I plan to get there early anyway—mostly to avoid standing awkwardly in the Koteskiy house with just Anna since my brothers are off with Max at a First Line Foundation event. Rhys is traveling to the Harvard game.

But just as I'm sliding on my thick jacket, Anna descends the stairs.

"Sadie." She smiles. "How did it go?"

"Great. I think I'll be good until January for the hearing—but, thanks for letting me use your office. I'm gonna head—"

"Do you have a minute, love?"

I do, but I wish I didn't. She frightens me, and maybe if I looked a little deeper—or went to much-needed therapy, I would realize why.

She sits at the kitchen counter bar stool and taps the one beside her for me to follow.

"You know I was thirty-three years old and pregnant when I met Max?"

I don't move, just sitting quietly as Rhys' mother sits beside me. I can't look at her, because it feels like too much.

"With Rhys?"

"No." She smiles, shaking her head and scooting just a bit closer to my

hunched form. “It was before Rhys, and the father was my ex-husband who I was running from, absolutely terrified. And when hiding from someone, running into the arms of an up-and-coming twenty-four-year-old hockey star was not a good start.”

“I didn’t know he’s younger than you.” The words slip free too quickly, and my cheeks heat at how rude that might’ve sounded. “Sorry, I just mean —”

“No, Sadie girl, I take that as a compliment.” She sighs. “Max was so mature for his age, but he should’ve been out galavanting around and being messy in his rookie years, not taking care of a woman pregnant with someone else’s baby. But he did. Because... well, that’s Maxmillian. He was so handsome, so sure—and the peak of his accent came out whenever he called me *rybochka*, which I believed to be something sweet until he told me at our wedding it meant little fish!”

I can’t help the burst of laughter that pours from my lips.

“He didn’t.”

“Oh he did, and even worse he’d been calling me *rybochka* in bed for years!” She laughs as I blush, remembering how much Rhys had stressed that his mother had no filter.

“Anyways, I’m not here to talk about that. I want to say that I was running from someone that hurt me, and as much as I begged Max to leave me alone, knowing how much shit I was pulling into his very public life, he never let it go. I was a secret for a long time, but only because I begged to be—I was still hiding and refused to tell him anything despite how much Max wanted to handle my problems for me.

“Rhys is a lot like his father; physically, I made a mini Max, but mentally, too. He’s strong and very capable and he loves with every cell in his body.”

“But I—”

She holds up a hand. “My son has more protectiveness stacked into his body than he knows what to do with. It makes him a good hockey player, it makes him a good friend, and it makes him a good son. But with you? I know... he wants to protect you more than anything.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

She sighs deeply, running a soft hand over my cheek and straightening the hair around my ear.

“Because I wish there had been someone there to tell me it was okay to ask for help, and that I wasn’t weak or a burden to accept it.”

She starts to stand, to allow me to leave for my practice, before I stop her.

“Do you know any Russian?”

“Only a little. Not as much as Rhys or Max; language was never my specialty.”

“Do you know what *kotyonok* means?”

She laughs, smiling wider than I’m sure I’ve ever seen. “It means kitten, my love.”

My skin blushes and I have the urge to call him now, and threaten him as much as tell him I love him.

But it can wait. Even still, I’ve had enough space. The second he gets back, I’ll tell him.



Practice is brutal.

And my ankle is throbbing—I’m almost positive I’ve sprained it, but Coach Kelley won’t let up for a fucking second. I try to put pressure on it again, my head spinning as I look at the stadium clock and see we are well past my two-hour mark.

He’s refused every water break I’ve asked for, ignored my complaints, and now, I’m pretty sure he’s injured me.

“I can’t.”

“You can. Do the fucking jump again.”

I limp-skate towards where he stands to block my exit to the tunnels. Close enough to see the fury in his eyes, before I try to skirt past him again.

He grabs my wrist, *again*.

“Is this about the boy again? The pathetic little hockey player?”

“This is about you *hurting* me. My ankle is killing me. Please, I need just a few minutes.”

I don’t sound angry, I realize. I sound like I’m about to cry.

“Don’t be a baby, my terror. Stop being lazy and do the jump again. We will do it ‘til it’s perfect.”

“You’re going to make me seriously hurt myself.”

He grips me tighter on my wrist, before shifting up my arm to leer over me. “Not if you do it right. Again.”

I can’t take it anymore. I don’t *need* this.

“No.”

“Try again.” He grasps my arm somehow harder, twisting enough that there's a sharp pain and suddenly I'm worried that he might break my arm. My stomach drops as I take in exactly how much danger I could be in. I've trusted him for years. Now...

A terrified sound rumbles out of me, before I gather the breath to scream. But I don't have to.

Someone grabs Kelley from behind, yanking him off of me and slamming one fist into his face, sending him down, out cold.

Toren Kane.

His eyes are bright embers of gold, just as unsettling and intoxicating. He glares down at my unconscious coach before looking up at me with a half-smile that's so fake I'm sure I could peel it off.

“Tell your little boyfriend we're fucking even.”

I don't have a single word left in me that's not a sob or scream so I nod jerkily and nearly trip in my skates over the mats.

FORTY-SIX

## RHYS

I'm not sure what makes me turn away from the road leading to the Hockey House. Possibly the weight of our Harvard loss, or the desire to avoid my fellow teammates' frustrations and sorrows.

But either way, I find myself pulling into my parents' driveway thirty minutes after the bus dropped us at the arena.

My heart squeezes lightly, the weight of the team's loss lifting from my shoulders at just the knowledge that she's here.

When I come in through the garage, I hear cackling laughter of kids in the distance—Liam and Oliver.

In the living room, however, I only find Adam Reiner and Sadie's brothers playing Xbox—but no sign of Sadie or my parents.

Just as I open my mouth to ask, a figure descends the stairs and turns for the front door. A tall figure I recognize.

"Kane," I belt out.

My shout gathers the attention of the boys, Liam yelling for my attention immediately. Oliver looks apprehensively at the other, very large hockey player in the foyer.

"Talk to your girlfriend, Koteskiy. Not me," he says, but he doesn't move.

My heart rate skyrockets and fear wars with my anger—no matter how irrational, as I look at Toren Kane in my house, talking about my girl.

Oliver steps up beside me. "Who is that? Is he why Sadie was crying?"

Throat closing up, I look down at her brother. "Sadie was crying? Is she okay?"

Oliver shrugs and crosses his arms, glaring daggers at Kane.

“Your mom took her upstairs and then your dad brought that guy in here. Can you just see if she’s okay? Does she need us?” The anxious tone of his voice makes me feel a little lightheaded.

I blow a breath and nod to Oliver. “You’re a good brother. Let me just see what’s going on.”

I walk into the foyer, fists clenched and about to start a real fucking fight with the asshole, but his gaze darts over my shoulder.

“Rhys,” my dad calls.

A wicked little smile takes over Kane's face and he chuckles. “Better answer to your daddy, Cap.” His hand pats my chest condescendingly, shoving a little rough. “And tell your girl I’ll skate with her anytime”

“You motherfu—”

“Stop it,” my dad snaps, grabbing me by the shoulder.

Kane slips out the front door without another word, and I hear what sounds like a motorcycle take off.

“What the fuck? Why was Toren Kane in our house?” I round on my father.

He holds his hands up in surrender but I can hear my heartbeat in my ears, anxiety and frustration starting to ratchet higher.

“Calm down, Rhys. Please. Sadie really needs you right now. Do your exercises.”

I start counting immediately, desperate to bring myself down from it. When I can breathe normally again, my dad beckons me up the stairs and towards my room.

The door opens and my mom comes out, leaving it lightly cracked behind her.

“Rhys,” she whispers, eyes red like she’s been crying. She tries to stop me from entering the room, but I move around her.

I open the door gently, stepping in quietly as I take note of her sleeping form.

Except, I’ve slept next to the girl for months, seen exactly how she sleeps. And this isn’t it. She’s pretending.

Her eyes look swollen shut, face pink and her ankle is elevated with ice and a wrap around it.

I leave quietly, trying desperately to hold into the shredded threads of my current temper.

“I’m gonna kill him,” I rasp, but there’s a catch in my throat as I look

towards my room, where I know Sadie's pretending to sleep. Tears burn in my eyes as I turn back towards my mom and reach for her.

“Oh Rhys, honey.” She envelops me in her arms. “No, it’s okay. She twisted her ankle skating and she couldn’t get home. Toren followed her here to make sure she didn’t crash. She was... upset.”

“About what? If he so much as—”

“She wouldn’t say,” my mom says, her eyes closed flickering to my father in the same way they have been almost constantly.

My dad steps forwards. “How much do you know about the figure skating coach she trains under?”

I shrug, a little uncomfortably. Is this something I should’ve paid attention to? Why are they asking me that?

“Sadie’s never complained or anything. But... I saw him get physical with her at the competition.”

My dad nods as if this is something he expected, then shares a knowing look with my mom. I comb and pull at my hair again, because I’m still shaking and if I don’t do something with my hands, I’m scared my whole body will start shaking.

“Know anything about him as a skater? Alexan Kelchevsky?”

“Kelchevsky? He goes by Kelley. Is he Russian?” My dad nods. I shake my head, but I’m starting to feel sick. “What is this about? You’re freaking me out—both of you.”

“You need to see this, then.”



FORTY-SEVEN

# SADIE

When I wake up, I have no concept of what time it is, barely realizing where I am.

“Hey.”

My head spins.

Rhys is there, sitting in the plush loveseat catty cornered to the bed. His hair is messy, like he’s been messing with it for hours, dressed in gray joggers and his Waterfell Hockey shirt.

“What time is it?” My voice sounds groggy and foreign.

He hands me a water bottle, opening it for me as he does.

“Six a.m. You managed to sleep through the night.”

Yet he doesn’t look like he slept a wink. He looks exhausted, like he got back from his game already tired and still didn’t sleep. Like he’s been sitting there, watching over me all night.

“How was your game?”

For some reason, the question seems to upset him. “I don’t want to talk about my game. What happened to your foot?”

*Oh.*

“I sprained it, I think. While skating.”

The stern face I rarely see from him is back in full force as he stands and crosses his arms. Like this, he towers over me. He’s so strong—so handsome. I’m almost too distracted by his beauty to realize exactly what he’s angry about.

“Overtraining, you mean. You sprained it because you were overtraining.”

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

My heart hammers against my ribcage. “No. Why would you—”

“Please Sadie,” he whispers. And then, something changes as he watches me. He blows out a breath and tucks his messy hair behind his ears. “Take your time, my bathroom’s right there if you want to shower. But meet me in my mom’s office when you’re done.”

He bends and kisses my forehead hard, before leaving.



It’s quiet in Anna Koteskiy’s office.

Rhys and his father are standing, talking quietly when I enter. Anna is sitting, and she’s pulled up a chair by her computer for me.

“What’s wrong?” I ask before I can think twice about it. “Did I do something—”

“You’re not in trouble, Sadie girl,” she whispers, beckoning me again. I sit, back straight and stiff as I look only at her.

“We just want to ask you about your coach.”

“Coach Kelley?” She nods. “Oh, well, he’s been my coach since I was like, eleven maybe? He followed me here. Um, he’s helped me with my brothers before, but...” I take another breath because I don’t know what they expect me to say here.

Though, it’s clear they’re waiting on something.

Rhys breaks first. “He’s never hurt you? Overtrained you?”

I’m careful with how I choose my words. “Everything he does is because he believes in me. He can be tough, but it’s only because he loves me.”

My words only make Rhys huff out an angry sound, his arms coming around my form and waking the monitor. On it, pulled wide, is a video—a competition video from years ago. It’s four hours long, but paused somewhere in the middle.

I knew it was out there somewhere, but it wasn’t at some major competition so I’d never thought he’d find it.

But, there it is, playing for me like an endless nightmare loop. I’m fifteen, dressed in a black and red number and finishing a routine I still know like the back of my hand. I fell during my combination that was going to secure me first place and a shot at Olympic qualifiers, and I hadn’t been able to shake the anxiety, so the rest of my movements and spins were jerky, robotic, with

no feeling.

It's clear how anxious I am as I skate off, red-faced and teary towards my coach who is fuming. His hand grips the back of my neck, hard—even on the camera you can see it, as he berates me, whispering into my ear.

I hate that now, I wait for myself to pull back, to slap him or push away or throw a tantrum. Instead, I burrow into him, holding for dear life like he's my anchor, despite the white knuckle grip he has on me beneath the warm up jacket he's put over my shoulders. I can practically hear his words in my ears still.

*You look heavy, lost your rotation.*

*Weak ankles aren't something I can fix, terror. You must train harder.*

It was always to be helpful, to push me—I thought. Unlike the other girls in my group, I didn't have parents to watch and cheer me, or a retired skating family to coach me. I'd been alone until Coach Kelley found me.

“That looks normal to you?” Rhys asks, his arms crossed, anger clear across his face.

There's no words when I open my mouth, but I gauge his parents' reaction as I wait.

“He's been my coach since I was eleven.” It isn't the right thing to say, but it's all that comes out. “He's—he loves me, but he pushes me. That isn't bad.”

*Lies lies lies.*

A hand falls to my shoulder so suddenly I flinch, watching Mr. Koteskiy pull back with a somber look on his face, apologies in his eyes. But it's Anna who wraps me up from behind, her chin settling over the top of my head as she holds me close.

“You've done nothing wrong,” she whispers into my hair. “Nothing, okay? But you deserve better than this.”

“I don't—”

“Sadie,” Rhys beckons. He's still fuming, but his fierce expression softens as he looks at me. “You've got to report him.”

I can't speak, my tongue heavy in my mouth. It isn't until his mom grabs me in a tight hug that I even realize I'm shaking.

The tears come easily then, and Anna Koteskiy holds me until they stop.



Rhys follows me upstairs after I tuck my brothers into their temporary rooms.

“I’m not sure where I’m supposed to go,” I admit, the hopeless, lost feeling in my stomach climbing up until it tightens my throat. “I don’t—”

“Come here, Gray,” he whispers, opening his arms so I can crawl into the safe, warm space of his embrace. He just holds me there for a moment, murmuring soft words into my hair and littering kisses along my scalp and forehead.

“I’m sorry I pushed you away,” I murmur into the fabric of his shirt.

“I was never going anywhere, anyway.” He chuckles, the words serious even as he tries to pull a smile from me.

It works, like it always does.

I pull back just slightly, keeping my fists balled into the fabric of his shirt at his waist. Like I’m holding tight just in case. But if there’s anything this man has shown me, it’s that he’s not leaving.

Guilt tries to take root, and he must see it cross my face because he’s gripping my chin and angling my gaze to his before the first tear can fly free.

“I will spend every day forever reminding you how amazing and special you are. How lucky I am to have someone so brave and smart and talented and beautiful love me. I see the way you love your brothers. I know how special your kind of love is.”

He tucks my hair behind my ears and holds my entire face in the cradle of his massive palms.

“You are worth it. And if I have to fight the little demons in your mind that convince you otherwise for every day for the rest of our lives? I’ll happily do it. Do you understand?”

He waits for an answer.

“I love you,” I say instead. “I trust you. And I’m sorry I didn’t show you that sooner.”

He kisses me, soft and sweet.

“We have all the time in the world for you to make it up to me.” He smirks, all boyish and it makes my heart flip and my entire body turn to mush in his arms.

I love Rhys Koteskiy. And I’m learning that I do deserve him.

I’m never letting go of his hand again.

FORTY-EIGHT

# SADIE

## *Three Weeks Later*

“Today was great, Sadie,” the woman says over the screen. I nod gently and furrow a little deeper into the covers.

“Yeah, I think so too.”

She smiles warmly, “Okay. Good. Today’s our last session before the holidays, and you don’t have another session until January. Anything else we should talk about before then?”

“I don’t think so.”

“If you think of anything, remember you have my number now, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Oh and Sadie?” She manages to say before either of us end the call. “You’re gonna do amazing tonight, okay?”

I thank her again before we hang up, before laying on the big sofa in Anna Koteskiy’s office while I decompress.

I started therapy two days after reporting Coach Kelley to the Dean. When I showed up for practice for the Christmas Gala, he’d been in his car in the parking lot ready to try to ambush me, to talk.

Thankfully, I brought backup.

Max Koteskiy walked me from his car to the ice rink entrance, only making it half way before turning towards my coach, stalking in behind us and starting to argue with him. It had taken me a full minute to realize they weren’t arguing in English, but Russian. I knew my coach had been born there, before being adopted and brought to America, but I’d never heard him speak it before.

His face paled over whatever it was Mr. Koteskiy sprouted and I hadn't heard from or seen him since.

I teased Rhys' dad for his savior complex. He didn't deny it once.

It was Anna Koteskiy who got me connected with my new therapist and I like her a lot. We have a lot to go through, and some days I like therapy while some days I hate it and I sit sullenly instead of really trying—but my therapist says that's normal. And it's okay.

Whatever I'm feeling right now is okay.

Today, we really talked mostly about the holidays and Christmas—so, inevitably, we talked about my dad.

My dad is in rehab, but it hasn't changed my plans in getting custody. Mainly because we've done this song and dance before with court-mandated rehab. It never sticks.

There's a knock on the door, and I sit up slowly.

I raise up just as Rhys pops his head in just slightly, a warm and gentle look on his face as he takes me in.

“Hey,” he says, coming in and shutting the door behind him. “You alright?”

“Yeah. Today was good.”

He sits next to me and I curl myself into his lap like a cat. His hand starts smoothing through my hair and up and down my back. This has become our post-therapy routine—for both of us. My therapy is on Thursdays and his is every other Wednesday.

Sometimes we talk about our sessions with each other, sometimes we don't.

But we always make a point to tell each other when we see a “good” change. To praise each other where we can.

My brothers have also started therapy, thanks to the Koteskiys. I want to say I owe them everything, but I'm learning that it's okay to ask for help and accept it without constantly worrying about how to repay them.

We've stayed with them all of winter break, which started as a necessity during a snowstorm, and then at their insistence, we all stayed. The boys are happy, and I see them falling a little more in love with Anna and Max every day. It heals a deep wound in me every time Oliver lets Anna hug him, or decides to lay on the sofa a little closer to Max while they watch hockey on the “biggest TV in the whole world,” according to Liam.

Liam is also thriving. He settled in overnight as if this place was a new



home. Rhys and his parents spoil them, but they deserve it.

“What time do you need to be at the rink?” he asks, kissing my forehead and cheeks respectively.

I smile and yawn, a little exhausted emotionally and physically.

“In two hours?”

“Great.” He smiles, picking me up bridal style and carrying me out of the room. “Let’s take a nap.”

Singles skating got a new coach overnight—and I speculate how much Koteskiy family funding helped pull that off, even if none of the three of them will admit it.

She’s nice, but firm. In a way I can see it as a healthy firmness, like a real coach. Not manipulation or isolation or brutality. I’m learning that wasn’t my fault either—I was too young with no adults around me to keep it from happening or notice that it wasn’t okay.

She also let me choreograph my entire Christmas Gala routine, which I’m performing tonight. It’s to Pink Floyd’s “Wish You Were Here.” Coach Kelley would never let me pick something so lyrical, swearing my strength was only in my brutality; but Coach Amber encourages me to try something new all the time, even when I fall.

I’m tired but I don’t sleep, even as Rhys crashes the moment his head hits the pillow. Daylight peaks through the closed blinds in his rooms, dancing across his handsome face as I stare at him a little in awe.

I watched him grow, change since that day on the ice this past summer. I’ve seen his body shift and change, fill out again now that anxiety doesn’t stifle his usual massive appetite.

He is beautiful.

In his easy love for my brothers, his support of everything I do. His gentleness with my heart, but stubbornness against my anger. He cut through the vines of my anger and self-hatred like it was the only thing he was meant for.

It’s taken me this long, but I know who he is now.

Rhys Koteskiy is pure gold. I know it. And soon the entire world will, too.

So I soak up these moments, just the two of us between the dark blue sheets of his bed. Under the flickering light of day, safe and warm in the comfort of his arms, falling asleep to the sound of his steady, strong heartbeat.

# EPILOGUE

RHYS



*Three Years Later*

If I thought the press would be worse with me officially in the NHL *alone*, it doesn't compare in the slightest to when my father and I are in the same vicinity.

His fame will never wear off. He still holds the record for most Stanley Cup wins. And while this is my third year with the New York Rangers, the rumors of a trade are endless, which means I'm being hounded by sports broadcasters constantly.

Yet, somehow, my dad has managed to keep Waterfell's local rink and the First Line Foundation it houses there, away from it all.

Entering my hometown rink feels like a little slice of privacy.

Privacy and utter happiness, thanks to the girl dressed in my old Waterfell University sweatshirt and leggings, looking a bit more like a sleepy college student and not the current head coach for the new figure skating sector of my family's charity.

Sadie Brown will always be the only thing I want to look at, shining and blazing like fire on ice. She's always been beautiful, but I think my attraction to her grows with every day.

She cut her hair recently and didn't tell me before, just showed up at my apartment with her dark shiny hair in a blunt chop dusting her shoulders, skin pink from the New York winter winds and I nearly attacked her in the

hallway.

I've turned into an animal when it comes to her, with no signs of stopping.

"Was that good?" a reluctant little voice asks.

While I should be in my apartment, sleeping as much as possible before my next string of three away games—this time to Montreal and Florida in the same week—I took the train straight here. Because even if it means a few days of minor exhaustion, I'll do anything for just an hour with her.

I hang back near the cluster of parents waiting for their children to be dismissed, watching her.

I could watch her every minute and it would never be enough.

"Great, Tiff." She nods towards the slender young girl dressed in all pinks and golds. "You'll be spinning even faster in no time."

The words of praise practically send the girl glowing as she darts off for another lap.

A loud thump followed by a frustrated little scream draws the entire rink's attention to the shorter girl in a pair of older, tan skates and a big t-shirt. It's the girl Sadie talks about, complains about, and defends in the same breath. Looks like her mini-me if you ask me, but I keep my mouth shut.

The girl fights tooth and nail with Sadie's corrections, but dresses like her, and—no matter how reluctantly—does everything she's asked. I can tell she's just like my pretty girlfriend. A little prickly, but soft underneath; just needs the right care and attention. The right type of guidance.

And as much as she might not see it, Sadie is that guidance.

"Everly," she snaps at her. "You don't have to make a scene every time you *don't* do what I say." She crosses her arms and skates a little closer to the girl. "Now, try it again. You're so close."

"This is bullshit."

"Language," she snaps, like she doesn't have the mouth of a sailor most of the time. I can see the little threats of a smirk from here. "Please."

"Whatever."

Sadie sighs and cups her hands around her mouth. "Okay, circle up."

She dismisses them all, ignorant as usual to the way her little protégés watch her with stars in their eyes. They all exit quickly and Sadie starts to gather her mini cones and erase the whiteboard marker from the ice.

I'm smiling and probably looking obviously lovesick as I lean against the open board entry and wait for her to notice me.

She does, eyes shooting wide, a smile quickly following as she races towards me, tossing everything over the threshold before grabbing my jacket and jerking me almost onto the ice. I grab tight to the glass on the side, letting her devour my mouth for a moment, before I reach for her waist and pick her up.

“I missed you,” she murmurs into my neck as I carry her to the bleachers.

“I missed you more, Gray.” I kiss the top of her head. “Where’s your bag?”

She points to it, and I grab it, undoing her skates and massaging her little feet before slipping them into her sneakers. All the while, she keeps staring at me like I might disappear.

The distance isn’t too much, but it’s enough that it’s hard—especially my first year.

I wanted her to come with me to New York when they drafted me, but I knew she wouldn’t leave Oliver and Liam behind. I also knew she wanted to take care of them, and was too scared to rely completely on my parents.

My rookie year had been tough and a learning process, especially on how little time I would have during the season, but it also came with a lot of rewards. Not only did we make it to the playoffs, despite getting knocked in the first round, I made friends. One, who opened up to me about his own struggles with an injury and mental health.

We even co-wrote an article for *Sports Illustrated* about men’s mental health and how to ask for help when you need it. I’d almost say that was more successful than any of my plays during that first year, garnering worldwide media attention, interviews, TikTok fan accounts and the works.

It also garnered enough attention to leave me with a jealous Sadie ready to pounce and devour me every time I picked her up from the train station, or after games that she could come to, and especially coming home to where she’d moved into my old room at my parents’ house.

Which, made my protective instincts at not being near her feel calm, settling some strange primal part of me, knowing she was falling asleep each night in *my* bed.

She ended up graduating late, finishing the next fall after everyone graduated in the spring. It helped her graduate with more pride in herself and her work, and to have another round of competitive skating without the pressure of her abusive coach.

“I can’t believe you’re here. I thought you only had like two days before

you travel.”

I wince, pressing a few circles into her legging-clad calves. “I do. But I’d rather be here, than there.”

Sadie took the job my dad offered when she graduated, wanting her to help him open up an entire sector of the First Line Foundation dedicated to figure skaters in need.

She is happy now, helping and still doing what she loves.

“Did you drive?”

She shakes her head. “Your dad picked me up this morning before our meeting with the Trust executives. So, I’m all yours.”

We drive back to her new apartment—a beautiful development slightly outside of Waterfell, on the road leading into Boston. It’s only a few minutes walk to the train there, where our small university town is starting to really grow.

But we don’t make it into the house before Sadie is climbing the console of my rented car, into my lap, hands in my hair and lips pressed hard to mine. It’s borderline freezing outside, but I’m sweating, panting beneath her by the time she releases me.

“Let’s go inside, hotshot,” she murmurs, laying her head on my chest, underneath my chin. I squeeze her a little tighter and smile. “I need more of you.”

“Okay, Gray.”



# SADIE

I wake up to a loud bang, and turn over to cold sheets.

Both which prick my irritation. But mostly, at the lack of 6'3" muscle that should be naked and curled around me asleep.

Instead of shouting for him, I roll out of bed and into my little bathroom, slipping on one of his old t-shirts that I practically live in now, and a pair of long pajama pants because it's *freezing*.

Born and raised in the northeast and still, I'll never get used to how cold it can feel.

After brushing my teeth and combing through my shortened hair, I bump up the heat a little as I pad towards the kitchen, pausing when I hear a familiar giggle.

I hover just around the cover, seeing Rhys in sweatpants and a navy Rangers sweatshirt that's big enough for the renewed broadness of his shoulders, setting plates onto my little breakfast table right outside the green tiled kitchen that sold me on the entire apartment.

He looks larger than life, just like I've always thought he would. The NHL has beefed him up even more, his body in peak condition, and my mouth waters despite still feeling the ache from the multiple times he took me last night.

But with him, it'll never be enough. I'll crave every part of him inside and out forever.

Oliver, fifteen and so tall he towers over me now, sits at one of the chairs, shaking his head at eight-year-old Liam grabbing pancakes with his bare hands and ripping into them like a dog with a steak.

He laughs and looks up at Rhys, making sure the guy he idolizes more than anyone is still watching. Rhys laughs wholeheartedly, mussing his auburn curls playfully.

It doesn't matter that Liam doesn't play hockey anymore—now fully obsessed with Marvel comics and art, spending most of his time drawing his own superhero stories onto endless art pads provided by Anna Koteskiy—he still looks at Rhys like he put the stars in the sky.

Our therapist believes the hero-worship comes from Rhys' treatment of

me in front of the boys, the way he cares for me. For Liam, he's the first male role model he ever had; the first adult man to take care of him. To say *I love you* to him.

Oliver is different. He *loves* Rhys, and since Oliver is still playing hockey, he sees him as someone to look up to, something to aspire to be. But it's the Koteskiys who've made him feel safe for the first time in his life.

Which I've had to learn doesn't mean I did a bad job with them. I did the best I could; I protected them. But Oliver was too old, and he understood everything—which meant that he wanted to protect *me*. So he always lived on edge, ready to fight for me.

When my father went to jail over the drunk driving incident, and a backlog of warrants that I had no clue about, he gave up custody easily. I signed as the primary guardian, with Anna and Max at my side.

From there, after several months of discussions—and a promise that no matter what, I would always be their real guardian, Anna and Max Koteskiy adopted my brothers.

Still, it's been a journey for the three of us, and therapy has made it better.

But now, I get to be their sister. Love them, lift them up, watch them grow up—and not worry about where their next meal comes from or how I'll pay for our rent.

Now, Oliver gets to go to private hockey academies and training camps, if he wants. Now, Liam gets to see his grades and art projects displayed on a fridge that doesn't contain beer bottles and empty promises.

Now, I can watch them flourish and know that when I sleep at night, they're happy.

That *I* did it. I got them out.

I lean against the entryway arch, relaxed while I watch my brothers ask question after question about his games, which they watch on TV religiously, decked out in his jersey—his jersey that's been a top seller everywhere. They nearly rival Rhys' dad in their energy level on the couch, when he's not traveling to Rhys' games.

“Pancakes today, huh?” I ask, smiling as I come up behind Oliver and comb my hands through his shaggy dark hair.

“Means it's gonna be a good day,” Rhys answers, leaning over to kiss my cheek. “Right, boys?”

“Yep,” Liam sings, taking a gargantuan bite of pancakes dripping with



syrup, bopping in his seat like he's dancing to music that's not playing. "Gonna be a good day cause Rhys is asking you to marry—"

Rhys' hand plops over Liam's mouth, while I feel a thud of Oliver kicking Liam under the table. Liam looks thoroughly embarrassed and apologetic as he swallows and ducks his head.

"Sorry."

A smile slips across my skin, happiness bubbling in my stomach until I'm practically giggling, watching as Rhys rubs the back of his neck anxiously, but fights a laugh himself.

"Let me get your pancakes," he mumbles, turning towards the alcove of the little kitchen.

I follow behind him, quietly and quickly slipping my arms around his trim waist from the back, my face pressed into the middle of his back and inhaling his clean summer rain scent.

"Rhys is going to do what?" I ask, pressing kisses between words.

I'm almost certain I know, but I'm bursting with a desperate need for him to say it *now*. I don't want to wait. I want to be *his* Gray forever.

He sighs and slumps forward before turning around in my arms, tilting my chin up in a light grasp.

"Marry me," he breathes out, cheeks pink and a little tremor in his hand. He's nervous.

It makes me feel warm, so warm I'm sure my cheeks are flushed darker than his but I pull his hand up to my lips and kiss his palm.

"Yes, hotshot," I say into his skin, like telling a secret. "Forever, yes."

He shouts, "She said yes!" at the top of his lungs, before hoisting me into the air with a yelp. And while Oliver smiles and claps, and Liam howls like a little wolf, I stare right down into the eyes of my golden boy, whose sad eyes aren't sad anymore.

And if I have anything to do with it, they never will be again.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every time I start to write, I think of a million people out there that have a favorite book, well-loved and tabbed on top of their bedside table. Or maybe in perfect condition, placed on a special shelf and admired.

When I was scared to pick up my metaphorical pen and continue on, I kept hearing the same words: “Every book is someone’s favorite book.” And if this book brings someone comfort, becomes just one someone’s favorite, then it’s worth the fear, isn’t it?

Heck, I’m just happy (and still a little shocked) this thing that started as a few swirling thoughts about a boy healing and a girl desperate to heal but unsure how, exists beyond my notes app.

To my dad, the best man I’ve ever known. I don’t think I’ll ever meet someone like him again. Maybe one day, the wound won’t ache so much and I’ll be able to talk about you without my throat closing up. But for now, I love you. I miss you. I see little pieces of you in Max Koteskiy and hold this book a little closer to my heart just for that.

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And lastly, to myself. I finally did it. I wrote a whole book and put it out in the world. For that, I'm proud of *me*.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peyton Corinne, who grew up on swoony vampire books and Harry Potter FanFiction, has always known she wanted to be a writer. Now, achieving that dream, she is an author of romances with imperfect characters, angst and lots of heart. Her stories come with a healthy dose of swoon and angst, of hurt and comfort, and—though it may take them some time, they always end with a happily ever after.

If she's not writing, she's probably making another cup of coffee, rewatching the entire *Twilight Saga* and frantically reading through her own endless TBR.

Peyton loves to hear from her readers. Visit her website [www.peytoncorinne.com](http://www.peytoncorinne.com) or sign up for her newsletter to receive updates and snippets from upcoming works. You can also find her on Instagram (@peytoncorinneauthor) and TikTok (@peytoncorinne).