



IN
Pieces

CLEO WHITE

IN PIECES

Cleo White

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CHAPTER ONE

Brooks

“**S**he shouldn’t be walking. Never mind flying down mountains. Delta needs to take this season off. I think surgery could be beneficial, and with the right physical therapy-”

“Out of the question.” The man standing across from my desk scowls at me, eyes flashing with the ever-present, unspoken threat that he can and will walk the hell out of here, taking his daughter with him. “The cortisone injections are working-“

I have to bite back the urge to yell back in frustration.

It won’t be productive, this man is River Jacobs, a living legend and one of the most bull-headed human beings I’ve ever encountered. He’s one of the founding fathers of snowboarding, an Olympian, a national treasure.

The trouble is, he’s so absolutely convinced in *mind over matter* and propping up his own ego, that he’s going to permanently disable his daughter.

Beside River on the exam table, Delta stares at the floor, her expression set and emotionless. Anyone else would think she’s just tired or spaced out, but I know better.

She’s in pain. *Serious* pain.

The injections I’ve been giving her have helped with the pain, but they aren’t actually treating the underlying problem that is getting worse every time I see her. Which means I have two shitty choices.

Refuse to give her the injections unless she seeks actual treatment, in which case River would walk her out of my office to the nearest orthopedic surgeon, who would probably be all too happy to do it.

I’d never see her again.

Or I give her the injection and sit on my hands while Delta gets worse. Possibly doing irreparable damage to her body before she's even legally allowed to drink.

I swallow the lump in my throat, watching River argue his case without really hearing him. My throat is tight and all I want is to throw him out of my office, gather up Delta in my arms and tell her that *it's okay to stop*.

I was never the type of physician to get personally invested in my patients. I give them the best care I can, advice on how to take care of themselves, and send them on their way. I have a thriving practice and a handful of awards that say I'm an excellent surgeon.

That was before Delta Jacobs showed up in my office at seventeen, barely able to walk.

At that point, she was already a decorated athlete in her own right, River's shining star after her two older brothers failed to qualify for their first Olympic games. They sought me out because, surprise surprise, River disagreed with her last physician's opinion.

One look at her medical records was enough to see that Delta had probably been strapped onto a snowboard before she could walk. Broken wrists, concussions, dislocations, fractures, sprains, torn ligaments, the list went on and on.

If she was any other child, protective services would have taken her away from that family. Delta wasn't just any child though, she was special, and the jam-packed trophy case was proof of that. Nobody calls it abuse if the victim gets to stand on a podium and gets a gold medal for their suffering.

I'd met her only a few weeks after she returned from her first Olympic games, her face had been all over the news, the whole country in awe of the sixteen-year-old kid who outperformed seasoned athletes. A second-generation gold medalist.

I'd been a little in awe myself, eager to use her as my chance to break into the closed circle of elite athletes who populated this corner of Colorado.

That hadn't lasted long though. As I got to know her, I started to see cracks in the shiny, Olympian surface. She was suffering, struggling, and her love of the sport wasn't made from her own heart but rather as a desperate desire to please and connect with her father.

Somewhere along the way, maybe a year ago, I'd walked into her exam room and the fierce, protective instinct I've always had for Delta had evolved into something else entirely. It hit me so hard and suddenly I'd never had a damn shot at resisting.

I was in love with her, I *am* in love with her, and not sending her off to another doctor is the single most selfish thing I'll do in my life.

"Enough." I cut sharply across River's rant, unwilling to listen to another word out of his mouth. I see the man's eyes flash furiously but I have eyes only for the young woman sitting on my exam table. "I'd like a word with Delta. *Alone.*"

River snaps back immediately, the vein in his forehead pulsing. "And let you convince her that she needs to sacrifice her career? I don't think so." He turns to his daughter. "Mind over matter, DJ. Let's get you this injection, get you out of here, then we can take the day off to rest and then hit the mountain first thing in the morning."

Delta barely blinks. "Alright."

I've never wanted to hit someone so badly before in my life. "Delta." I implore and those startling slate gray eyes finally rise to meet mine. A single tear tracks down her beautiful cheek.

"It's okay Dad." She says quietly. In a sport full of big personalities, Delta Jacobs is soft spoken and gentle, her determination a low burning fire rather than an inferno. If I met her on the street, I'd never guess she was an Olympic gold medalist.

My heart wrenches, letting myself imagine, just for a moment, a different scenario where I met Delta. We bump into each other on the street. She's older. I'm not wearing my white

coat. I apologize and offer to buy her coffee, she gives me that sweet smile and that would be the beginning of our future.

Make no mistake, I'll never touch her, but a piece of my heart dies in my chest every time I let myself dwell on that too much.

"Delta-" River starts to protest but she shakes her head, wiping away the tear and smiling bravely at the man who should be protecting her.

"Seriously Dad, it'll just take a second. You don't want you to see me getting an injection in my underwear anyway." Her joke is strained but River laughs anyway, his previous reticence vanishing at the sight of his daughter's clearly forced smile.

"Alright." He agrees, backing towards the door. "I'll be in the waiting room if you need me, DJ." His eyes flash to me, an unspoken threat in his tense expression. The message couldn't be clearer, "*don't you dare*", but he exits the room anyway, leaving me and Delta alone.

I cross my arms over my suddenly pounding heart, staring at her.

"You don't need to say it." Delta agrees softly, fiddling with the paper sheet covering her lower half and avoiding making eye contact with me. "I know."

"You're fucking up your body." I remind her for the dozenth time this year, not bothering to mince words or be professional. Professionalism flew out the door a long time ago with this woman.

"Even if you manage to qualify for the games, there's no guarantee you'll be able to compete. Whereas if you take the year off, you might be able to come back."

"In four years." She asks skeptically, raising her eyebrows.

I don't reply. I won't lie to her, four years is a long way off, and professional athletes who compete at her level don't usually last until they're twenty-four. Especially not with existing injuries like Delta's. Asking her to stop now means

she will more-than-likely never compete in another Olympic games.

“Do you really want this?” I finally ask, my throat tight. “Or is this River talking?”

Her hesitation is just a half second too long before she replies, her voice so sure that anyone else would probably believe her. “I want this.”

We look at each other for a moment, but at the end of the day I know what I have to do. She’s going to be getting back on that mountain with or without my help, and letting another doctor, probably a worse one than me treating her... I can’t.

I’m in autopilot as I go to fetch the injection and return to Delta’s exam room. She’s used to this by now and we move through the routine in silence, her laying back on the table, the sheet over her pushed down so I get a glimpse of beautiful skin that’s marred with yellowing bruises.

“Deep breath.”

I feel her trembling as I disinfect the area and push the needle into her hip, my entire body tense and queasy. This is why physicians aren’t supposed to treat family, it’s impossible to be impartial when someone you love is in pain.

The whole thing can’t have taken longer than thirty seconds, but that doesn’t make it any less awful for either of us.

I drop the needle into the sharps container and am back at her side in a flash, rubbing the injection site with one gloved hand, the other flying to hers. She grips it tightly, a quiet sob bubbling in her throat as she squeezes her eyes shut, tears streaming down the sides of her face and onto the paper table covering.

The room is so quiet I can hear the quiet thud of her tears hitting the paper.

“Delta.” My voice breaks. I can’t do this to her anymore. I can’t. I’d rather jab the needle in my own eye.

She shakes her head, eyes still tightly closed. “I’ll be okay Dr. Harrison. Mind over matter.”

I scoff. “Fuck mind over matter.” Delta lets out a noise somewhere between a laugh and a sob. Giving my hand a little squeeze to let me know she’s ready, I help her sit up.

When she finally opens her eyes, we’re only a few inches apart. I can see it all, her exhaustion, her pain, her desperation. I’ve spent my entire career fixing people and the one I want to help most is growing worse by the day.

“You don’t have to say anything.” I say quietly, my hand still pressed against the small of her back.

On the surface, Delta looks like any other petite twenty-year-old, but she’s not. I can feel the strength beneath her skin, the power. Quieter than some, but not any less potent. “I want you to know that you can call me. Any time. If you’re in trouble or-“ I swallow. “Anything. You call me.”

Delta blinks up at me, a playful smile curling her lips. “If I’m excited it’s free waffle day at the mountain?”

I can’t help but grin too. “Free waffles? Hell yes. I’ll shut down the practice for the day for that.”

Her smile widens just a little and my whole fucking heart aches. I love it when we get moments like this. Fun, carefree, silly little glimpses into what our lives might have been like all the time if we’d met on the street instead of inside this room. “If... I get new snow pants?”

I snort. River’s team all wear uniform jackets and hats, however they’re allowed to pick their own snow pants and Delta’s collection is verging on ridiculous. The last time I saw her compete, they had pink flamingos on them.

“If you spent less money on snow pants maybe you wouldn’t have to rely on free waffle day to get your fix.”

Her jaw drops in mock disbelief, and she pushes me playfully, both of us laughing.

Fuck, I like her so much.

“Anytime.” I repeat, pulling one of my cards and a pen from my chest pocket and turning it over to write out my personal number across the back.

It’s crossing a line.

It’s unprofessional.

I should shove the damn thing in my pocket, play it off, and walk out of this room with some shred of the typical doctor patient relationship intact.

I don’t though. Instead, I hand it to her, my whole heart lurching in my chest at the smile she gives me when she takes it.

CHAPTER TWO

Delta

My first crush was on a boy named Jackson Peters. He's on Dad's team, but not nearly as talented as he is pretty. Sponsors love him and even though he's never made the Olympic team, he has more contracts than some of the guys who have. Probably something to do with the flippy blonde hair and line of perfectly straight, white teeth.

I secretly adored him for years, my fourteen-year-old heart breaking when he asked out Anna Cohen right in front of me at the UK Ski and Snowboard Invitational. Nothing says normal childhood quite like getting your heart broken at an elite sporting event rather than the homecoming dance.

That crush was blown to pieces the moment Dr. Brooks Harrison walked into my exam room. After years of doodling *Delta Peters* in all my notebooks, suddenly I wouldn't notice if Jason was on fire right next to me.

Just like that, Dr. Harrison was the only man I saw, and it's been like that for three years now.

Nobody who's ever met the man could blame me. He's hot. Like, *hot hot*. All tall and broad shouldered with hazel eyes that make me feel warm and a jaw that always seems to have just the right amount of stubble.

According to an embarrassing amount of internet searches on him, he's thirty-eight, which is a full eighteen years older than me. I should probably be put off by that alone but for some reason it only makes my attraction to him deeper.

It's not like I've ever had much in common with boys my own age. When you're trained from birth to *focus*, the flighty and inconsistent behavior that is typical for most people my age gets tiresome fast.

Brooks isn't like that. He's like me, dedicated and focused, hardworking to a fault.

It's not just that he's gorgeous and hardworking though. I work with and see plenty of gorgeous, accomplished men and none of them make me feel even the slightest fraction of what Dr. Harrison does. I did a photoshoot for a cereal company with an Olympic swimmer, *in his uniform*, he'd flirted with me the entire time and I didn't feel even the smallest flicker of interest.

I know it's not going to happen with me and Dr. Harrison, I'm not an idiot, but it doesn't stop me from wanting him.

He makes me feel good. Seen. I think he might be the only person in my life who is only looking out for *me* and my wellbeing. Our relationship isn't contingent on how well I perform at the next invitational or how hard I work at practice. Dr. Harrison couldn't give a damn whether I'm a gold medalist or not. He just wants me to be happy.

I can't tell him some things though. Like about the nightmares I've been having that make me wake up in the dead of night, sweating and crying. Or that my workouts begin two hours before my training schedule says. Or that every single day I wonder why I can't handle this like my Dad did, hating myself for my weakness.

A part of me knows it isn't supposed to feel like this, but it's not like I know how to live any other life.

I had a tutor through high school and ended up getting my GED early so I could train full time. I don't have my driver's license or my own apartment. I have no friends that don't call my father "coach" and no life to speak of outside of snowboarding.

Except Dr. Harrison.

This is my life, though. I'm so much more fortunate than some, I have no right to feel this miserable. I have no right to want to quit. I have no right to wonder if I'm even good at this, or if all my success was just some weird fluke.

Like right now.

"Christ, DJ! Where was your head on that run!"

I brace my hands on my knees, gritting my teeth and willing the pain shooting through my right leg and up my back to recede. It's only been a week since my last injection, and I'm normally good to go for at least eight.

This is *not* good to go. My leg feels like it's being ripped out of its socket, and every single step sends a wave of hot, sick nausea through me.

This is bad. Really bad.

"I need a break." I choke, managing to release my boots from my bindings and collapse onto a nearby bench with a hiss of pain.

Dad stops beside me, expression set in his patented hard-ass coach scowl. He competed at his last of three Olympic games with a fractured wrist and still medaled. To River Jacobs, pain only has as much power as you give it.

He's badass.

I don't know why I can't be like that, push through when I need to push through and shove pain aside like it's any other emotion.

"Scale of one to ten?" Dad asks, crossing his arms and turning away from me to watch my brother Lake do a run. I can feel the disappointment and disapproval rolling off him in waves. The qualifiers are in six weeks. I need to be training every day.

I take a shaky breath. *Nine. It's a nine.* "Four." I finally manage to blurt out, the word ripped from my throat even though every single cell in my body is screaming for me to tell the truth.

Dad glances at me and nods approvingly. "You know the rules. Anything below a six and you're on the snow. Get going. I want to see that last run again. I'll have them put the lights on and we'll be here all night if we have to."

He's not just saying that to get my ass in gear. He's done it before, and he'll do it again.

I pick up my board and walk back toward the start of the pipe, refusing to let my limp show. There are people everywhere. Even my teammates will be competitors soon.

I can't show weakness.

"Hey." My eldest brother Bay is waiting up ahead, his eyes on my right leg. "Don't do this run, Delta." He cautions me darkly, gripping his own board and falling into step beside me. "You need to see your doctor. Something isn't right."

I keep my eyes firmly ahead, not daring meet to meet his eyes. "It's a four." I lie so firmly I can almost believe myself. If only I didn't feel like I was about to puke over the side of the halfpipe from the pain.

Bay makes an exasperated sound and shakes his head, like he sees right through me. "A four is a nine in River code. Don't bullshit me." He catches my elbow and I'm forced to stop, yelping in pain at the sudden change in movement. My brother's eyes flash triumphantly as his point is so clearly proven. "Delta. You're already a fucking gold medalist. The best in the world. You don't have a thing to prove to anyone, *especially* Dad."

We both glance behind us to where Dad is chewing out Dustin Freedman for his run. I look back at Bay, steeling myself. "I trust Dad. If he says I'm fine, then I'm fine. Besides, I medaled over three years ago. That doesn't mean anything now."

Dad reminds me of that every single day, and of the fact that there are other dozens of women more naturally gifted than I am, who work harder than I do, and they've all got their eyes on the back of my neck.

If you want to be the best, you don't stop and you don't let up, not for a single day.

Bay shakes his head in disgust. "He has you so fucking brainwashed you don't even realize how backwards this family is."

"Fuck you, Bay." I snap, embarrassment and defensiveness welling in me, making me spit poison. "You're

just bitter because dad and I got to that podium, and *you* didn't."

If my brother is phased or hurt by my words, he doesn't show it. "I'm here because I love what I do." He hisses, dropping his voice so Dustin doesn't hear as he stomps past. "And because I see through Dad's bullshit enough to not let him run me into the ground for the sake of his own ego."

"Dad's *ego* makes Olympians. Go fuck yourself."

Bay's lip curls. "Okay, Delta. Do what you want. I'm sure that hunk of metal on a ribbon will be a real comfort to you when you're a fucking cripple the rest of your life."

I stand there for a moment glaring at my brother, my chest heaving, before I've finally had enough. Shoving past Bay, I march to the end of the pipe.

He's jealous.

All he ever wanted was to be a gold medalist, but he didn't *have it* according to Dad. Now, at twenty-eight, he isn't ranked high enough to meet the eligibility requirements and won't be competing in the final qualifiers. His career is effectively over, even if nobody says it out loud.

He'll be on the sidelines next month while I compete alongside our brother, who has a very good shot of making the men's team this time around. Lake has been training around the clock, he's been more consistent than me, and he doesn't have a chronic injury which forces him to take days off.

Dr. Harrison's words from last week come back to me and the place against my chest where I've stored his card in the little waterproof pocket seems to grow warmer. "*Even if you manage to qualify for the games, there's no guarantee you'll be able to compete.*"

He was just being nice when he gave me that card, he doesn't actually want me to call him. He feels bad for me. I bet he wonders every single time I come in how I managed to get that gold medal.

I remember what Dad said as we drove home after that last appointment. "*He thinks you're weak, so that's how he treats*

you. No more days off, do you hear me? I've been babying you because you're my kid. Any other member of the team would be working through it, so that's what you're going to do."

We'd driven straight to the mountain from Dr. Harrison's office, and by the time I made it home, I'd needed to take two of my emergency pain meds.

It's my turn on the pipe. Ignoring Bay's eyes burning into the back of my head, I reach down and secure my bindings. There are six other top-level women who train with Dad, any one of whom would happily stab me in the throat for my spot.

I don't let myself wince as I move to the edge of the ramp and drop over the edge.

That's the last thing I remember.

CHAPTER THREE

Brooks

“Paging Dr. Harrison to the E.R. Dr. Harrison to the E.R.”

I gaze down at the single bite taken out of my turkey sandwich in dismay, internally cursing the day I thought that medical school was a good idea.

It’s been one of those days. As a private practice physician, I don’t typically round at the local hospital, but a colleague of mine is on maternity leave and we’re all pitching in to cover for her.

Which means my Fridays are now absolute hell.

Abandoning my sandwich, I shove my phone back into my pocket and walk towards the other end of the hospital. Maybe if I’m lucky it’ll be a simple fracture, I can ship the patient off for x-rays and return to my lunch.

The ER is as chaotic as it always is, a mess of harried doctors and nurses ducking in and out of doorways, patients being wheeled around and a drunk guy yelling for someone to bring him a beer. It takes everything in me not to turn around and walk right back out.

“You paged?” I ask the charge nurse, who looks like she’s as exhausted as I feel.

She nods. “We’ve got a snowboarder in room 12, post traumatic head injury. Pritchett is evaluating her, but your name is all over her chart and I thought you’d like to know.”

It feels like my whole world has narrowed down to a single point. “Name?” I manage to choke, my throat constricting and my heart pounding in my ears as I hope and pray it’s not Delta, that this isn’t the call I’ve been terrified to get for years now.

In my heart though, I already know.

The nurse checks the computer in front of her, eyes darting over the screen rapidly. “Delta Jacobs. Birthday December tenth-“ but I’m already running.

The door to room 12 is open and when I skid to a halt in front of it, the place where the bed should be is empty. The room is deserted of medical staff, only occupied by three men in identical white snowboard jackets who are grouped together, arms folded and expressions grave. River looks up as I enter, and for once he actually looks genuinely worried.

My whole soul seems to plummet.

“What the hell happened.” I demand, ripping my gaze from River to look at the two men by his side, each of them older, male versions of Delta. Her brothers.

The younger of the two, Lake I think, glances at his father then back at me before responding. “She went in for a frontside 1080, right off the back. It’s nothing, she’s done it a million times. She landed it fine but then she just...” He looks at the floor and I can fill in what he’s not saying on my own.

My girl went down hard.

I round on River, fury rising in me hot and fast. I have never once told off the family member of a patient, even if they were the reason their loved one ended up on my operating table. This is different though. This is Delta, and River has been ignoring what I’ve been begging him to hear for months now. He did this.

“I told you. *I fucking told you.*” I snarl, jabbing a finger into the center of his chest.

River is apparently not so shaken up he’s lost his pride, because he shoves me away, his voice raising to a level I know will attract attention from the medical staff walking by. “Get the hell out of his room. You’re never treating my daughter again. *DJ knows her limits.* If she didn’t respect them, that’s on *her.*”

I lunge forward but Lake catches my chest and yanks me back. His distraction ends up costing River though, when his eldest son delivers the blow I wanted to throw myself.

“Fuck you!” Roars Bay, towering over his father as River clutches his bleeding nose against the wall. “*Bullshit* she knows her limits. You have her so convinced she’s weak, and

she's so damn desperate to prove that she's not, she has *no idea* when to stop!"

"Where is she?" I demand of Lake, who is watching the display from his brother and father with a grave, set expression.

He turns to look at me reluctantly. "They took her for a CT."

I feel dizzy and realize it's because I've forgotten to breathe. Taking a deep, steady breath I ask, "Was she conscious?"

Bay turns away from his bleeding father to meet my eyes for the first time. They're the precise shade of gray as Delta's, and a new surge of paralyzing fear bubbles inside me. What if I never see hers again?

"In and out. You're Dr. Harrison, right?" I nod. There's something accusatory in Bay's gaze, but I don't have it in me to care what he thinks.

Lake nods in the direction I know they must have wheeled Delta. "She was asking for you."

I don't wait another second before sprinting off.

CT is in the basement, along with all the other imaging services, and I don't bother waiting for an elevator. I vault down the stairs so quickly it's a miracle I don't end up in the bed next to Delta's, but somehow make it to the CT rooms without incident.

I find Dr. Pritchett, the head of neurology talking to one of the radiologists, Dr. Ferguson. Pritchett's eyebrows raise in surprise when I burst in, gazing over their heads through the tinted glass to where a slight female body is laying prone with her head inside the massive machine.

"Harrison." Ferguson frowns at me. "Why did they page you? This isn't an ortho case."

"She's my patient." I look over his shoulder to the computer screen where I can see the scan is still in progress. It's been a long time since my neurology rotation, and I have

no idea what I'm looking at other than the fact it's a brain. I turn desperately to my bewildered colleague. "How is she?"

Pritchett taps the screen. "Grade 3 concussion by the looks of it. We're checking for anything else. Page me when the scans finish, Ferguson. I've got to be on this." He looks back at me, clearly stressed. "Did you know she's an Olympian? River Jacobs' kid."

I nod, my throat tight, my eyes on Delta's motionless feet. "I did."

Pritchett whistles. "Girl was probably born with a snowboard strapped to her feet." He leaves the room. I stand there for a moment, feeling lost and useless, before I catch sight of a lead smock on the wall.

If Ferguson is wondering why I came running in here at top speed and am breaking hospital protocol to go into a room where an active CT is underway, he doesn't say anything.

I don't look back as I push open the door to the room and duck around the lead wall. Delta is only a few feet away, still motionless on the table.

"Delta?" I say quietly, not sure if she's conscious and not wanting to startle her. Her foot twitches and my heart leaps. "It's me. Dr. Harrison. Don't talk, alright? It will mess up the scans." I reach the side of the table and take her hand in mine, practically collapsing with relief when she gives it a little squeeze.

I force myself to draw another deep breath, I can't afford to let the panic take control, it won't do her any good to see me scared.

The room is completely silent apart from the dull humming of the CT machine. "This is actually perfect." I joke dully. "You'll have to listen to me." Her hand grips mine a little tighter in acknowledgement.

I know I should just be here for her, but every single wall I'd carefully maintained between us came down in the last half hour. She could have died. She could still die.

I bow my head and speak quietly, my voice strained with fear. “I’m not sure if you’ve ever heard this before, but you’re worth so much more as a person than you are as a snowboarder. You’re excellent at what you do, sweetheart, the absolute best, but it’s just *one thing*.”

Inside the machine, Delta sniffs.

My throat tightens. I want to pull her out of this thing. I want to hold her in my arms and never let go.

I want to *protect her*, damn it.

“You light up the whole room when you walk into it, Delta. You’re funny and clever and strong. *So* strong. Anyone who tells you otherwise is fucking delusional. Every time I see you, I wish like hell we’d met under different circumstances.”

I’m edging perilously close to a confession. To a declaration. Any other day I’d be pulling back, trying to minimize my slip, but not now. Now I’m so fucking terrified that something might still go terribly wrong. I’m a doctor, I *know* things go terribly wrong every single day.

What if she dies and she doesn’t know I’m in love with her?

What if she lives and she does?

I look up at the graying ceiling tiles and take another long, steadying breath. “It’s time to stop, sweetheart. You can’t keep going like this. I swear I’ll guard the damn chair lift if that’s what it takes, throw you over my shoulder every time I see you trying to get back on that mountain. Your father will respect your decision, and if he can’t then you don’t need him.” I lace our fingers together and lean forward to kiss the back of her hand, my lips suddenly warm as I pull away. “Do you hear me, Delta? You don’t need him. Not his approval or his pride or his respect. None of it.”

Suddenly, there’s a long beep and the machine quiets, so for a moment there’s only the pair of us breathing.

“I’m going to pull you out now, Delta.” Comes Ferguson’s voice through the intercom system and the bed starts to move.

As her face comes into view, I meet a pair of wide gray eyes, and see they're full of tears.

Delta is in the hospital for four days. In one of the scariest moments of my life, Dr. Pritchett reported that she had a brain bleed and would need to be monitored to make sure it stopped on its own.

Bay, Lake, and I form an unlikely alliance in keeping River away from Delta, despite the former complaining to anyone with a pulse in hospital administration. There's nothing to be done though, in the wake of the accident, something appears to have broken between them. The first thing Delta did when she got back to her hospital room was fill out the paperwork to make *me* her medical proxy and Bay her emergency contact.

Whatever pedestal Delta had kept her father on is gone, and I think she can see him for what he is. An old man, desperate to relive his glory days at the expense of his children.

"I don't want to talk to him." Delta snaps, scowling at the poor nurse who had popped her head into the room to inform Delta that her father was here to see her. *Again.*

"Fuck yeah, D." Says Bay, putting his feet up on the edge of her bed and tossing a piece of popcorn from the bag in his hands for her to catch with her mouth. All three of the Jacobs siblings cheer and I pinch the bridge of my nose, glaring at Bay. "*Stop.* She's just had a head injury."

Delta's lips twitch. "Has anyone ever told you you're overprotective?"

"I'm your doctor, it's my *job* to be overprotective."

From his perch on the AC unit by the window, Lake snorts. "I've seen no evidence of that. It's Tuesday morning and I haven't seen you leave this room to do more than change your clothes and brush your teeth for four days. Don't doctors *work?*"

I ignore him, getting up from my chair to pour Delta a glass of water which she takes with a sweet smile. Lake is right though, I've been sleeping on the couch in Delta's room to "monitor her" even though it's been days since Pritchett concluded her brain bleed wasn't progressing.

I can't shake the fear that I'll leave, and something will happen to her.

"Could you get my phone, Brooks?" Asks Delta. "I think I left it in the bathroom."

I do as she asks, trying not to smile at the sound of my first name on her lips. It's a new development. On the first night of her hospital stay I'd gotten up in the middle of the night to hold her hair back as she vomited.

"Thank you, Dr. Harrison." She'd groaned when I brought her over a glass of water to rinse out her mouth, smoothing her hair back from her sweaty forehead.

I'd laughed and said, *"I think after that, you should probably call me Brooks."*

And that was what I'd been to her from that point on. Brooks.

Just as I pick up Delta's phone, a notification dings on the screen and I glance at it, eyes narrowing at the familiar logo of an apartment search website.

"Thanks." She says when I hand it to her, crossing her legs and taking a long sip from the orange soda someone must have slipped her while my back was turned. I ignore it.

"You're looking for an apartment?"

"Well, yeah." She makes a face. "I can't exactly go home and, no offense guys, but I don't want to live with Lake and Bay and whoever they take home to their all-you-can-bang buffet."

Both of her brothers laugh at this, but I cross my arms, frowning. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to be living alone right now. You just had a head injury, and the issue with

your hip is still unresolved. You might very well need surgery, which is *another* recovery.”

Delta frowns right back at me. “What do you want me to do, Brooks? I’m not sure if you’re aware, but *all I know how to do is snowboard*. I don’t have friends or classmates, and even if I did find a roommate it’s not their responsibility to look after me.”

But as she says the word roommate, an idea begins to take shape in my mind, an idea that’s equal parts mad and wonderful.

“Oh no.” Bay groans, like he knows exactly what is going on in my head.

I sit back down in my place beside Delta’s bed and grin up at her bemused expression. “Delta, how do you feel about dogs?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Delta

It's my first day living with Dr. Brooks Harrison.

In separate rooms, which definitely wasn't part of the elaborate fantasy I've been building in my head for the last three years, but still. I'll take the win.

My heart practically leapt out of my chest when he first suggested it. I'd had to say no at first, of course I did, he's a single man in his late 30's and surely, he doesn't *actually* want a newly retired twenty-year-old living in his bachelor pad.

Apparently, having a newly retired twenty-year-old living with him is exactly what Brooks *does* want, because he wouldn't take no for an answer. He'd even managed to convince Lake and Bay of what a good and not at all weird arrangement this is, then all three of them were on me to accept.

I'd barely agreed before Lake had gone to get my things at the house boxed up while Dad was occupied and move them over to Brooks' place. Bay, who also isn't on speaking terms with Dad for reasons he hasn't told me, went out to get me a new cell phone that isn't on Dad's plan and Brooks called his housekeeper to make sure the spare room was ready.

By the time I was discharged the next morning, the three of them had me all moved into a house I'd never seen before.

Where I would be living with my orthopedic surgeon.

I'm pretty sure that concussion was worse than I thought, because my life has suddenly gotten super weird. That's the only reasonable explanation for the three massive fluffy white dogs laying on top of Brooks in the entryway to his cozy, a-frame house.

He'd insisted on going inside first when we pulled up, and when I saw him taken down by what appeared to be three white fluffy blurs, I knew why.

“I feel like this is weird, Brooks.” I call, lingering by the door while he coos and scratches the three dogs from his place flat on the floor. One of them, the smallest of the three, catches sight of me and gets off Brooks’ leg to trot over, tail wagging.

“That’s Tibia.” Brooks informs me, staggering to his feet and brushing dog hair from his clothing. “This is Fibula, and that’s Femur.”

I giggle, getting down on my knees to let the three of them sniff at me. They’re beautiful dogs, but absolutely enormous. The largest of the three, Femur, must weigh as much as I do. “Really, Brooks? Tibia, Fibula and Femur?”

He grins, making my stomach swoop. “I like what I do, what can I say. Come on, I’ll give you the tour.”

We move deeper into the house, the dogs moving along around us like panting clouds. Brooks must have taken the trouble to have the place professionally decorated because it’s *cute*, a little bit outdoorsy but still cozy and modern. There are no piles of laundry on the couch or beer bottles on the counter, and it’s definitely not the bachelor pad I imagined.

“I pay for all the streaming services, they’re logged in on the big TV there, but if you want the password for your computer or whatever I’ll text it to you.” He leads me around to the sliding doors which open off the kitchen to a huge back deck. He has a stunning view of the mountains, and I can immediately see why he bought the place.

There’s a hot tub.

I’m not sure why, but I feel a sick little twist of jealousy at the sight of it. How had it never occurred to me that I’m here as Brooks’ *roommate*. Which means he can date whoever he wants. *Bring them home if he wants*. What if I have to lay there in my bed listening to the man I’ve been obsessed with for years having sex with someone else?

“Delta?”

I blink, turning to look at Brooks who’s frowning at me. “Sorry. Spaced out.”

“Are you in pain?” He asks, going into doctor mode immediately, eyes darting over my whole body, looking for symptoms of distress. “Should we call Dr. Pritchett?”

He actually takes his phone out of his back pocket before I shake my head. “No. Really, I’m just tired. That hospital bed isn’t exactly restful. I’m sore all over.”

Brooks doesn’t look convinced. “Do you want to try out the hot tub? I thought the heat might be nice on your hip. I got the model with the steps so you wouldn’t have to-“

“Wait.” I interrupt, my chest suddenly so full it could burst. “You got this for me?”

“I mean, I’ll use it too, I’m sure.” Brooks confirms sheepishly, looking anywhere but at me. “It’s nothing. I’ve wanted one for ages.”

I won’t let him blow this off and pretend it’s nothing though because it *isn’t* nothing. “Brooks.” My eyes burn and I close the distance between us, wrapping myself tightly around him.

Brooks hugs me back immediately, tucking my whole body under his chin and pulling me into his warm, hard, Brooks-smelling chest. I could drop dead, right this second, and I’d die happy.

He’s so much bigger than me, I feel small and safe and protected. I’ve never been hugged like this before and my eyes burn because *I don’t want this to be a one off*. I want to hold him like this every single day.

“Hey.” I can feel the deep rumble of his voice from his chest and burrow closer as Brooks weaves a hand through my hair. “I just want you to be comfortable here.”

I laugh weakly. I’m worried I’ll be *too* comfortable, and he’ll end up needing to drag me out kicking and screaming when he gets tired of having me here.

Like he knows that’s what I’m thinking, Brooks pulls back just a little, cupping my face and gently forcing my eyes to meet his. “You can stay as long as you want, alright? Redecorate. Paint the whole house pink. I don’t give a shit.”

I'm barely breathing, all those words from when he met me in the hospital hanging over us as he holds me like a lover might. I haven't dared to think about it too much, firmly convincing myself they were the words of a friend, someone who cares. When he touches me like this though, they take on a whole new meaning.

What if he wants me too?

My whole body feels warmer at the thought.

"Come on." Brooks lets his hands fall from my face but presses one firmly to the small of my back, leading me back inside to where the dogs have dispersed to three huge dog beds along the wall of the living room.

He takes me upstairs, where the landing overlooks the great room below, and three doors lead off. "You're in here." He opens the closer of the two, which has a beautiful view of the backyard, partially obscured by boxes. "Lake dropped this all off last night." Says Brooks, looking embarrassed for the first time. "I was going to unpack for you but I didn't want to overstep."

"Thank you." I tell him gently, reaching out to squeeze his hand reassuringly. "This is beautiful."

Out the corner of my eye, I can see Brooks' pleased smile.

It doesn't take me long to realize that being retired is boring. Like, *really* boring.

I spent the first few days at Brooks' house, which I've yet to actually start calling home, puttering around and tying up loose ends. I'd had to call my agent, who put out a formal statement that I was retiring and withdrawing from the Olympic qualifiers. Apparently, I was already getting job offers from elite snowboard schools to coach, but after a conversation with Brooks and my brothers over dinner, I realized I really wanted a break.

The next morning, all my gear and four full bins of multicolored snow pants had vanished from the garage and

Brooks told me he'd boxed it all up and put it in his storage unit for when I was ready.

My father has apparently been grilling Lake, correctly convinced he knows where I am, but Lake says he's been informing him that I'll reach out when I'm ready. If I'm ever ready.

The part of me that's been desperate to make River Jacobs proud of me is itching to reach out to him and salvage whatever scraps are left of our relationship in the shattered wreckage of my career.

Another part, the part that's backed by the unwavering support of my brothers and Brooks, doesn't want to see or speak to him ever again. Removed from the crushing pressure I felt from Dad every day of my life, I realize that Bay was right when he said how messed up our family is.

I love snowboarding, I do, but Dad never *asked* if I wanted to do it eight hours a day. He never asked if I wanted to forgo high school or push through injuries against the advice of my doctors, stick to crazy dietary plans or be anything in the world other than a professional snowboarder.

If he had, I'm not sure what my answer would have been.

Would I have chosen this for myself?

As I lay flat on the exam table in Brooks' office, gritting my teeth against the latest injection into my battered hip, somehow, I doubt it.

"Done." Brooks says smoothly, and I hear the familiar sound of the needle falling into the red bin on the wall and Brooks snapping his gloves off. He's back beside me almost instantly, taking my hand in his and gently massaging the injection site. "You did great, sweetheart. So good."

I love it when he calls me that. I've never been "*sweetheart*" to anyone before. My Dad and brothers always called me DJ and to my grandparents, on the infrequent occasions they check in and risk incurring their son's wrath, I'm Delta-Mae.

Forcing myself to breathe evenly, the pain begins to fade, and I open my eyes. Brooks is looking down at me, his expression tortured. “Hey, I’m okay.” I squeeze his hand reassuringly. “We’re old pros at this.”

He helps me sit up and diverts his eyes as I recover my lap with the paper sheet. “I’m supposed to be comforting *you*.” He grumbles, shaking his head as he busies himself clearing up the medical supplies on little metal table beside me.

“This is nothing compared to the surgery.” I remind him with a little laugh, even though it’s not really funny. We haven’t discussed scheduling the surgery he’s been hinting I need since before my accident. The qualifiers are in two weeks, and the reality that I’m not competing is finally starting to sink in. I’m not scared of Brooks cutting me open and fixing me anymore, on the contrary I’m almost excited. The pain I’ve been in feels like the last thing holding me back from moving on.

I could take art classes, get a normal job, *date*.

My heart flutters at the last one, imagining myself sitting across a table from Brooks, wearing a pretty dress, and he’s looking at me like he *wants me*.

Brooks shoulders stiffen when I mention the surgery through, and when he turns back to face me, I can see the internal battle waging inside him. “What?” I ask, a little alarmed. “Can I not get it now, or-“

He shakes his head immediately. “Of course, you can. *You should*. I just don’t think I should be the one to do it.”

I blink, trying to wrap my mind around what he just said. Brooks has been my doctor for three years, we *live together*, why wouldn’t he want to be the one? “But.” I say lamely. “I want it to be you.”

But Brooks won’t meet my eyes now. He’s fiddling with the computer in the corner, updating my chart, and the usual warmth between us is suddenly ice cold. Pain aside, this is the first time I’ve felt uncomfortable in this cold, clinical room.

Is he sick of having me around already? Is this his way of telling me he doesn't want me in his house, in his practice? My throat tightens more and more the longer he takes to reply.

The paper on the table crinkles as I shift anxiously and it's perhaps this sign of my discomfort that makes Brooks look up, his eyebrows pulling together at the look on my face.

"Delta." He's at my side again, looking stricken. "Sweetheart, this isn't about you at all. It's about me. My ability to be... impartial."

"What do you mean?" I ask feebly, wrapping my arms around myself.

Brooks rakes a hand through his hair, making him look slightly more human in his white coat and pressed shirt. He's always so put together here, even when he's upset or grim, the talented Dr. Harrison doesn't lose his composure for a second.

"We'll talk about it another time." He finally tells me after a pause. "You need to trust me on this, Delta. I'll set up a consult with Dr. Walters. She's excellent, I trust her completely to take good care of you." His hand raises just a little, like he's going to touch me, then falls back to his side just as fast.

"Alright." I agree because what else am I supposed to say? "Are we still on for later?" He's been teaching me to drive for weeks and with my test coming up, we've been practicing every spare moment. He even made me go to the DMV to get a permit before we started.

Brooks nods immediately, looking relieved. "Yes. Absolutely." But there's a faint buzzing sound and he pulls out his phone and looks at the screen, eyebrows creasing and serious doctor frown suddenly back in place. "I need to go down to the hospital, I'm not sure how long it will take."

"It's okay." I force a smile, reaching out to give his arm a little squeeze. "I'll see you later. If you're not back in time we can work on my parallel parking another night."

He leaves quickly, presumably to deal with whatever emergency came in that needs his attention, but I sit on the

table for a long time. I feel numb and confused, thrown off balance by yet another shift in my suddenly upended life.

CHAPTER FIVE

Brooks

It ends up being a compound fracture, and by the time we get into surgery, the break stabilized and then the patient settled in recovery, it's nearly ten at night. I'm sure my portion of whatever Delta made for dinner is wrapped up in the fridge, and she's in bed. I won't see her when I get home.

It's a disquieting feeling, knowing there is someone you care about missing you at the very moment you're drilling rods into a patient's leg, and I have a sudden sympathy for all my colleagues with families at home. It feels terrible enough just missing dinner and driving lessons with Delta, if we had kids-

I freeze, my hands frozen beneath the stream of water to the scrub sink.

She's not my wife or my girlfriend or even my lover. She's the patient and friend who is trusting me to help her escape a tough situation. It's deplorable that I feel the way I do about her, I refuse to let myself imagine a real future between us.

Even as I think it though, an image of Delta bubbles into my imagination, her face full and happy, her belly swollen and round with a child. *My child.*

Christ.

"Dr. Harrison?"

I jump, water splashing, and I realize I've been standing there with my hands under the faucet for far too long, lost in thoughts of an impossible future.

"Sorry, Hannah." I smile apologetically at the startled scrub nurse to my right. "Everything alright?"

She looks nervous. "There's someone waiting for you in the main hospital waiting room. Um. It's River Jacobs? The snowboarder?"

I sigh, grabbing some paper towels and patting my hands dry.

I'd anticipated this. Lake had warned me that River was livid about Delta's disappearance and the press release announcing her retirement a few weeks ago. He'd been questioning her teammates and brothers, convinced one of them was hiding her.

Sooner or later, I figured he would turn to external candidates.

"Thanks." I tell her blandly. "I'll speak to him on my way out."

River is seated in the corner of the deserted waiting room, arms crossed over his team coat, lips turned down in a scowl. He spots me almost the moment I walk into the room and stands, tracking my approach through narrowed eyes.

"Dr. Harrison." He holds out a hand which I reluctantly take for a brief shake.

"River." It's a subtle jab, not calling him *Mr. Jacobs* in return, one that definitely isn't missed by Delta's father judging by the vein pounding in his forehead.

He doesn't bother with small talk. "I'm assuming you know where my daughter is?"

Up close, I can see he looks older than the last time I saw him on the day of Delta's accident. I cross my arms and smile tightly. "I'm sure you can understand why I can't answer that either way. Doctor patient confidentiality."

River nods, as if he was expecting this to be my response. Reaching into his coat pocket, he pulls out a folded piece of paper and holds it out for me to take.

Unfolding it, I see the familiar logo of my practice above the automated email we send out to patients after an appointment, thanking them and offering post-visit instructions for whatever they were treated for. My blood runs cold. "*You hacked her email?*"

River ignores me. “Let’s dispense with the pretense, *Doctor.*” His voice drips with derision. “Please inform my daughter to call me. Immediately. Or I’ll be calling the medical board with my concerns about your relationship with a young woman who was your patient since she was *seventeen.*”

“Nothing’s happened between Delta and myself.” Almost the truth. Nothing *has* happened, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want it to.

River’s lip curls. “I knew about her little crush. I thought it was harmless, but it wasn’t unreciprocated, was it?” Leans forward, his voice drops so I have to strain my hearing to catch his words. “Tell her.”

Despite what he said, I’m not overly concerned about River’s threat. I don’t think he has any intention of drawing attention to his daughter’s brutal medical history, nor the accident which ended her career.

If there’s one thing River Jacobs loves, it’s being the best. Questions about his character or coaching ability would destroy him, and I can’t imagine a way that wouldn’t come up if a full-blown investigation was launched into mine and Delta’s relationship.

I have nothing to hide. River does.

By the time I pull into the driveway, I’d nearly forgotten about the earlier appointment with Delta and our conversation. It was one I hadn’t been planning to have and I’d reacted poorly, I could see it in her face that she felt rejected, but I’m confident it’s just about the only completely right thing I’ve done since the day I met her.

Surgery is brutal, and with the way I feel about her, I have no right to see Delta at her most vulnerable. Nor do I trust myself to make impartial medical decisions about her body. God forbid something were to go wrong, what if I froze? What if I reacted emotionally instead of logically? There are too

many risks, and I won't gamble with Delta's life for the sake of my own ego.

I'm fully prepared to tell her just that, leaving out my encounter with River because she has enough to fucking worry about, but when I walk through the door every single thought is wiped from my mind.

The house is dark, but the back deck isn't. Delta clearly found the Christmas lights in the basement and took the time to string them out over the pergola which I had the delivery guys install the hot tub beneath. The dogs are all laying on the snowy deck, accepting pets from Delta who is dressed in nothing but a tiny black bikini and chunky winter boots.

It feels like all the air has been sucked out of the room while I watch, frozen, as Delta straightens up and crosses over to the hot tub which is on, steam rising into the winter air.

My cock swells and I grip it through my pants, biting back a groan at the pressure. Delta toes off her boots and steps right into the packed down snow around the hot tub, golden skin glowing in the light of the lights strung above her and silhouetted by a cloudless night sky.

I've never seen anything so fucking perfect in my life.

Like a moth to a flame, I find myself walking forward with my heart in my throat until I pull open the door to the deck and step out into the snow. Delta looks around at the noise and watches wordlessly as I slide the door shut behind me.

Kneeling to pet the dogs, I tear my eyes away from her. What the hell am I doing? I should have gone upstairs to jerk myself off *alone* the moment I saw her out here. I'm being reckless.

"Long surgery?" She asks, her sweet voice carrying back to me over the winter air.

"Very." I stand, turning just as she sinks back into the water.

Delta hums thoughtfully, skimming her hand over the surface. "You must be sore. Why don't you put on your suit

and join me?”

A terrible idea if ever I heard one.

“I shouldn’t.”

Her eyes flash and I choke back a groan as she stands, water skimming over her perfect body, barely covered by tiny black triangles of fabric. My eyes must have been glued to her body for my inability to move them, and in a dizzying moment of clarity I know I’ve just walked into a test.

I’m fucked. I’m so fucked.

“Delta.” I mutter desperately, hands fisting at my sides as she steps gracefully up the hot tub stairs, exposing more and more of her body to my hungry gaze.

“Brooks.” She answers me gently, apparently unaffected by the snow beneath her bare feet when she takes the final step out of the tub onto the deck. “Why shouldn’t you?”

I blink, mind wiped clean of every thought except what I want to do to her. I’d forgotten the question she asked me only a minute ago.

She knows I want her. Why the hell am I keeping up this pretense?

“I won’t touch you, Delta.” I swear, even as the once tame beast inside of me is howling its displeasure.

Delta stops only a foot away from me. “So, I can find someone else then? If you’re not interested.”

For the first time since we’ve met, I can truly see the heart of the champion burning in her eyes. Unwittingly, I’ve just given Delta Jacobs her next goal. I know her though, and I know she won’t go off and fuck someone else just to force my hand. She isn’t like that.

“Do you want someone else?” I bite back, annoyed at the very thought of it.

We’re standing so close that the vapor from our breaths curl together in the icy air.

Delta's lips curl into a dangerous little smile. "Not at the moment. Someday though. A girl has needs after all."

I bite back the instinct to throw her over my shoulder, lock us in my bedroom for a week and show her exactly what her *needs* are.

She's right though. I'm obsessed with her, admittedly in love with her, and there is no finish line in sight for when I could allow myself to truly be with her. Never, is the cold hard reality. This woman, an actual gold medalist, will conquer the world if given the chance. What would she do trapped in her hometown with an older doctor for a husband? She deserves so much more.

She'll regret me, regret wasting her youth on an old man, and it would break me.

I've already been selfish enough. I know her, I know myself, and the moment I gave in to the burning attraction I feel for her, it would all be over. She'd be mine, and it would ruin us both.

Slowly, I take a step back and watch her expression shudder.

"I'm not interested in you like that, Delta. I'm sorry if I've misled you."

Like a coward, I turn back toward the house, not waiting to see the damage my words inflict.

CHAPTER SIX

Delta

I'm sure Brooks expects me to be wounded and resentful, maybe even avoid him for the next few days. That's what most women would react to the man they're in love with telling her he isn't interested.

Don't get me wrong, being flat out rejected right to your face sucks. I was hurt. Then, just like I've been doing my entire life, I dusted myself off and planned my next attack.

I might be young, but I'm not a child. I know what I want, I know what I'm doing, and I know what I see when Brooks looks at me. I might have doubted before, so wrapped up in my own shit that I missed what was right in front of me, but the look in his eyes last night confirmed what I've known deep down for a long time.

He wants me, he might even love me as much as I love him, but Dr. Brooks Harrison also a neurotic, type-A nutcase who can't stand stepping off the beaten trail even for a second.

This is a man who wouldn't let me use the new toaster until he read the booklet that came taped to the box. Falling for someone so much younger than him, *his patient*, must be eating him up inside.

The trouble for poor Brooks is, the *someone* he wants is me. I've spent my whole life falling and getting back up. I've battered my body, broken my own heart, and pieced it all back together again.

I can do anything.

Even convince the stubborn doctor we're meant to be together.

“Good morning!” Brooks stops short on the second to last stair, his hands frozen in the act of adjusting his tie and face rigid with surprise at the sight of me.

It's only six, he's usually out of here before I wake up, but this morning I was sure to set an alarm. I'd slipped down here while he was in the shower to begin stage one of my plan.

"Good morning." He finally replies, continuing his journey down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Coffee's fresh."

He makes a noncommittal noise, avoiding looking directly at me as I scramble eggs. "Smells good. Thank you."

"Want a breakfast burrito? I put kale in them, you can't even taste it."

"Sure." He looks over at me, just as he's pouring the coffee into his travel mug, and I pretend not to notice. Out the corner of my eye, I see the coffee overflow the cup and I have to bite back a smile. "What. Um. Where are you going?" He finally asks while he mops up the coffee, taking a stab at the same nonchalance I'm employing, as if last night didn't happen.

"Oh!" I look down at myself, like I'd forgotten what I was wearing. It's nothing over the top, just a pair of jeans I know make my butt look amazing and a soft white sweater, much nicer than the oversized t-shirt and leggings I usually wear in the morning. "I have a meeting with my agent. She's been getting a lot of job offers for me and stuff. I thought I should hear them out. I can't be a stay-at-home dog mom forever." I reach down and scratch my always present shadow, Tibia, behind the ear.

Brooks frowns. "Shouldn't you wait until after we figure out the next steps for your hip?"

I shrug. "That could be months from now." I flip the eggs off the pan on the tortilla I have waiting. "Lake is competing this afternoon, will you be home? It's streaming live."

"I have it in my schedule."

"Cool." I hand him his breakfast and stretch up on my toes to kiss his cheek. We're practically the picture of domesticity. "Bay might come watch with us with his friend Emmett."

Emmett Marsh is like me, a retiree before the age of twenty-five. He never advanced too far in the sport due to a chronic back injury, but he has a fat trust fund from his tech founder Daddy and, conveniently, is completely obsessed with me. I was never into him, locked firmly in love with Brooks since he made his interest clear, and I went out of my way to make it perfectly clear to Marsh that it was never going to happen. He saw this as a challenge, which annoyed the hell out of me.

Ordinarily I would feel bad about using another person with feelings for a prop in my game to win Brooks, but Marsh needs to be taken down a few pegs, so I see it as killing two birds with one stone.

I meet with my agent, who is getting increasingly annoyed with me for accepting none of the lucrative offers she's brought to me. The truth is, none of them interest me. I'm not sure what my next chapter is, but it's starting to feel like it will be completely separate from snowboarding.

If I ever get back on a snowboard again, it will be because I want to.

By the time Brooks gets home at noon, I've put together a spread of snack food and the TV is on to the pre-game commentary. It's super weird not being there, but I don't feel jealous.

“And there's Lake Jacobs, son of the legendary River Jacobs and older brother of gold medalist Delta Jacobs, which would make him the third member of the Jacobs family on the Olympic snowboarding team. Delta announced her retirement just a month ago at twenty years old, and while details haven't been made public, there's been quite a lot of speculation in the snowboarding community about River Jacob's unconventional training techniques. His team members statistically rank high but retire early, suggesting he pushes too hard and too fast, and his own daughter is becoming a case study in that-“

I freeze, knife in my hand and a half-cut pile of baby carrots beside it. “Delta.” Brooks says gently from beside me,

making me jump. “Are you alright?”

Shit. No. This wasn't how today was supposed to go. I don't want Brooks to see me as a broken child anymore. Today was about making him realize there is no universe where he will be alright with other men flirting with me I wanted to make him *jealous* damn it!

“I'm fine.” I assure him, my voice falsely bright as I go back to cutting the carrots.

Brooks doesn't move though, he hovers at my side, watching as I work. “I'm sorry about last night. I didn't-“ he runs a hand through his hair, lips turned down unhappily, “I don't want you to think you're crazy. There something here, but that doesn't mean we should act on it.”

I set the knife down and turn to face him, leaning my uninjured hip against the counter. Up close, I can see the dark shadows beneath his eyes, like he spent the whole night tossing and turning. My heart aches at the sight and guilt bubbles up inside me, sudden and awful. “I'm sorry too.”

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “You didn't do anything wrong, Delta.”

I let out a hysterical little laugh. “Bay's friend has a thing for me. I invited him because I thought it would make you jealous.”

Brooks' lips twitch like he's going to smile. “It would have worked.”

I sigh, the sense of purpose I'd been instilled with since last night draining out of me all at once, like a balloon deflating. I don't want him to hate himself for being with me. Brooks isn't the next thing in my life to conquer, he's worth so much more than that.

It hurts.

He must see my inner anguish because Brooks steps forward, pulling me into his arms. “It's not about you, sweetheart. It's me. All me.” He says gently above my head, one hand tangling in my hair and the other wrapped around my shoulders.

My eyes burn as I curl into him, allowing myself to enjoy the feeling of being in his arms for just a moment. “I know I’m younger than you, but I have heard the “*it’s not you, it’s me*” cliché before, Brooks.”

I feel his low laugh through my whole body. His lips press against my hair. “I don’t want you to resent me for not giving you the life you deserve.” He murmurs. “I couldn’t bear it.”

That’s why he won’t do this? Not because of how we met or my age, but because he thinks I would resent him? Suddenly dizzy, I pull back and stare up at his face. “Brooks, why would you think that? What exactly do you think I want that I couldn’t have or achieve with you?”

His eyebrows knit together in confusion and his mouth opens to reply but at that moment the doorbell rings and the dogs all start barking. We break apart, still staring at each other.

“Heyo!” Bay’s voice calls through the house. “We brought hot wings!”

Lake does well. *Really* well. So much so that he officially earns a spot on the Olympic team.

I can see the triumph in his eyes when the camera zooms in on him, yanking off his helmet to hug the familiar faces of our teammates and Dad who looks like he is bursting with pride.

I’ve been so removed from the world of snowboarding. My old “friends” having dropped me the moment it was made clear I wouldn’t be returning to the sport that I have no idea what’s going on anymore. It’s only been six weeks, but it feels like another life.

Brooks sits beside me the entire time, the arm flung casually over the couch behind me and offers to bring me food or drinks, providing enough suggestion we’re in a relationship to put off Emmett’s usual flirting attempts.

He still corners me in the kitchen when the games are officially over, winking like we’re in on some secret.

“It’s been a while. I heard you retired, obviously. How’s that going?”

“Oh, you know.” I say noncommittally as I rinse off plates to put in the dishwasher.

“I bought a gym a few months ago.” He says eagerly. “If you’re looking for work, we’d love to get you on board for a promotional campaign or something.”

Fat chance.

I’d always hated modeling. I’m too short and boyish for anyone to actually want me in a dress or tank top or anything sexy, so instead I stand there grinning like an idiot with my Team-USA gear and a gold medal hanging around my neck. “No thanks.” I reply firmly, closing the dishwasher and going to wash my hands. “I’m not much of a model.”

Emmett laughs. “Are you kidding? You’re way prettier than the guy we have doing it now. Let me give you my card, you can text me and-“

“She said she’s not interested.” Brooks’ cool voice cuts over Emmett’s chatter and we both look around to find him standing in the doorway, arms crossed tightly over his chest, eyes narrowed on the man beside me.

I’m not a guy, but I do have two brothers and an egomaniac father, so I know a show of “*my balls are bigger than yours*” when I see one.

Emmett laughs determinately, as if convincing himself that Brooks is making a joke will keep him from getting punched in the face. “She’s a friend of mine, man. Just trying to help her out.”

When neither Brooks or I respond to that, he slides away from the counter and grabs his coat and hat off the back of one of the kitchen chairs. “I’m going to take off. You want a ride, Bay?”

“Sure.” My brother agrees, walking into the kitchen, looking far away and a little sad. He’s been quiet all day, and I feel guilty again for the words I spat at him the day of my accident. I’d apologized in the hospital, and we’d made up, but

I know I'd poured salt in a very real wound. He's now the only non-Olympian in the family.

I also know he loves it so much more than Lake and I do.

My chest aching for my big brother, I walk over and wrap my arms around his waist. "I love you." I tell him gently and he squeezes me back.

"I love you too, DJ." He pulls back, squeezing the tops of my arms affectionately. "I'm seriously alright, don't worry about me." He glances over my shoulder at where I know Brooks is standing. "Take good care of my sister, yeah?"

Brooks' voice is strained when he agrees. "Yeah. I'll take good care of your sister."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Brooks

It's still dark outside when I wake, disoriented. Blinking at the ceiling, I try to understand what startled me from what must have been a dead sleep, when I hear it. Across the hall, through two closed doors, a desperate cry.

As suddenly as if I'd been doused in ice cold water, I'm on my feet. Wrenching open my door I cross the landing in three steps to Delta's door just as another cry shatters the silence of the house. I don't knock or even hesitate before pushing inside.

Inside, the room is lit only by the first traces of hazy morning sunlight through the blinds. On the bed, Delta thrashes, her legs tangled in the sheets, sweet face contorted in fear.

"Delta." I sink down at the edge of the bed, heart thundering in my chest. Her skin is clammy as I smooth back her hair from her forehead, trying to gently wake her from her nightmare. "Delta, sweetheart--"

"No." She cries, thrashing away from me. "No, please--"

To hell with gentle. "Delta!" I shake her a little, gripping her shoulders.

"It hurts." She whimpers, tears leaking from beneath her closed eyes. "Brooks!"

The sound of my name on her lips breaks me. I slide onto the bed beside her, lifting her back so she's sitting up limply. "Delta. You're dreaming." I choke desperately, feeling as terrified as if it was me having this dream. "It's just a dream."

Her eyes are moving rapidly beneath their lids and, to my relief, start to flutter.

"Hey." I smooth back her hair again. "You're okay. Everything's okay."

"Brooks." She mutters again and, finally, her eyes open.

“I’m here.” I gather her up against my chest, both of us breathing unevenly. “Everything’s alright. It was a nightmare, Delta.”

She trembles against me, her eyes wide and unblinking in the darkness. After a long moment she finally seems to jerk herself from whatever was lingering from the nightmare and looks down at the sheets. “I’m sorry, Brooks. For waking you. I don’t usually-“

“This happens often?” I hiss in horror. I feel sick thinking of myself sleeping peacefully just across the hall every night while Delta suffers alone through whatever that was.

She rubs her hands over her face, not looking at me. “I’m fine. Seriously.”

I open my mouth to begin a speech on therapy and sleep clinics but close it just as quickly as Delta throws me a tired, warning look over her shoulder.

“Don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

Delta rolls her eyes and flops back onto the mattress, lips turned down unhappily. She looks exhausted. Something about seeing her alone in that bed, hurting, chips away a little more at the tattered remnants of my self-control.

“Move over.”

Her eyes snap back onto me, widening in surprise. She doesn’t ask questions though, just scoots closer to the center of the bed so I can swing both my legs up onto the mattress and pull the blankets she’d kicked to the end over us.

I curl myself against her back, realizing too late that I’d jumped out of bed without bothering to put something else on. I’m dressed only in a paint splattered pair of gym shorts and my bare chest presses directly against Delta’s back, her tiny tank-top and panties the only things separating us. I have to bite back a groan at feeling of her skin on mine.

She must be suffering similarly because I hear a soft gasp as I wrap my arm around her waist, pulling us securely

together.

“Tell me about your dream.” I ask gently, the scent of her surrounding me as we settle in.

Delta sucks in a breath. Her fingers fiddle with the strap of her shirt, and I lace mine over them, tucking her closer. “It’s different every time.” She admits softly. “Sometimes I’m trapped under the snow, or in my old bedroom, or alone in the woods. My leg is black or hurt or something.” She exhales shakily and I kiss her shoulder, heart aching for her. She doesn’t deserve this pain or fear, if I could, I would take it from her a hundred times over.

We’re silent for a long time before Delta speaks again. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what I want. Who I want to be now that I’ve given up snowboarding.”

“What have you decided?”

Delta shifts closer to me, one toned, soft skinned leg tangling with my own. “My Mom was an actress; did you know that?”

“I didn’t.” Though it makes sense, given the beauty of her daughter. God knows she doesn’t take after River.

“She died when I was about six months old. Car accident. I don’t remember her.”

“I’m sorry.”

Delta shrugs against me. “I don’t know a lot about her. She and Dad had a contentious relationship, so I think he saw it as a blessing that he could raise us how he wanted, without interference. I’ve never met her parents or that side of my family.”

My hand tightens on hers reflexively but she soothes my tension with a gentle squeeze. There will never be a day that I don’t detest River Jacobs for what he did to Delta and, now that I’ve gotten to know them, Lake and Bay. They all carry the same trauma in different ways.

She sighs. “I guess my point is I’ve done the success thing, and it didn’t make me happy. I want to be happy now. I

want people to love, who love me.” It feels like my heart is breaking apart and being put back together at her words, love for this woman filling me up so much it’s almost unbearable.

My arms tighten around her so there isn’t an inch between us, and still, it isn’t enough. “That’s all you want? To be loved?” I ask.

Delta exhales shakily and nods against my arm which she’s using as a pillow. “I know it’s a small thing, *unexceptional* as my Dad would say, but that’s it. I want to be a wife, a Mom, and do it so well, you know?” I feel a tear drop to my arm, but she keeps speaking into the quiet room, battering away at what was left of my self-control.

I’d thought I was strong, I’d thought I was steady, but it was never enough to resist the storm that is Delta Jacobs.

“I won’t throw myself at you again, you don’t need to worry about that, Brooks. If you’re going to hate yourself for being with me, you won’t be with me at all-“

But whatever she was going to say is lost as the last fragment of my doubt crumbles away and I don’t wait a single second longer to crash my lips down on hers.

Delta’s lips part in a gasp and I take control of her mouth, kissing and biting and licking so fiercely my head spins. I’m out of control, spurred on by the noises of desperate pleasure from the woman beneath me.

I’m kissing her. I’m kissing Delta. The realization hits me over and over again, so utterly insane it doesn’t seem possible. *But it is.*

I break away, staring down into the wide eyes of the woman I love, and despite the fact it feels like we’re doing everything out of order, I can’t wait another second to tell her. “I love you.” My voice is rough and desperate. “*I fucking love you, Delta.* You want to be loved? You are. You want a family? I’ll give you one.” I’ll give her anything, just so long as she keeps looking at me like that.

Tears are shining in her eyes now and a joyful little laugh bubbles from her lips, quickly silenced by another desperate

kiss.

Her legs part, wrapping securely around my waist so there's nothing between us but my thin shorts and her panties. I can feel her wetness sliding against the iron hard length of my cock as I grind into her. I could spill just from this feeling and the knowledge that *I made her wet*.

"Brooks!" Delta's hands on my face pull me back from her, even as she keeps her legs locked around my waist, sopping wet pussy nestled against my cock. She smiles, and it's the most radiant thing I've ever seen in my life. "I love you too."

I know she does. I can feel it.

Our lips meet again, just for a second before I rock back on my heels, pulling off her tiny sleep shorts and panties so she's laying sprawled on the bed beneath me, legs spread.

"Is all this for me?" I dip two fingers between the lips of her pussy, and we groan in unison.

"It's for you!" She whimpers, spreading her legs wider as I circle her hard little nub.

"Have you had sex before, sweetheart?" I've only thought about that in my filthiest, most depraved fantasies. Late at night with my hand fisting my cock, imagining what it would be like if Delta were mine, *only* mine.

I could roar when she shakes her head slightly, her cheeks flushed and eyes bright.

"I won't fuck you tonight." I say it out loud while I still have a shred of my wits about me so I'm not tempted later. I've made such a damnable mess of this, of Delta, the least I can do is treat her as she ought to be treated before she gives herself to me completely.

Delta laughs breathily, eyes on the thick bulge tenting my gym shorts. "Why not?"

Growling, I drop back down over her to nip and suck at her neck, the hand not supporting me coming down to pull her tank top down. Her tits are small and perky and practically

begging for me to mark them. She moans loudly as I latch onto one fiercely, sucking and grazing my teeth over the sweet tasting bud.

I grunt in surprise when a small hand wraps around my cock through my shorts, stroking and squeezing it experimentally. “I had my first orgasm to thoughts of you.” She confesses and I growl pumping my hips into her hand, the head of my cock already leaking.

“Shit, sweetheart.” I bite gently on her nipple, sending her back arching off the bed with another cry. I’m turned on beyond comprehension at the thought of her alone in her bed, rubbing her clit and wishing it was me. “I’m going to make you show me one day, but not tonight.”

I pull back so her hand falls away from my cock, kissing down her flat belly until I can smell her arousal. She’s drenched, wetness spreading onto her inner thighs and the bed beneath us. “You’re so beautiful.” I run my fingers over the lips of her pussy, gazing at her in awe.

“Brooks!” Delta whines, shifting anxiously.

I grin, reaching up to give her nipple a sharp pinch. “Patience, sweetheart. Sometimes a man likes to look at his food before he eats it.”

I’m done looking through. Leaning forward, I run my tongue down her slit, groaning as the taste of her, earthy and sweet, explodes on my tongue. It’s intoxicating, knowing I’m the first man to touch her like this, that I’ll be the one to introduce her to this feeling.

The only one, if I have anything to say about it.

I eat her like I’m starving. Above me, my sweet girl moans and whines, her hands gripping my hair so tightly it hurts and her hips lift desperately off the bed whenever I pull back even the slightest bit, trying to force feed me.

Grinning, I pull back enough to smack her inner thigh lightly. “Greedy girl.” Before diving back in.

I latch onto her clit, suckling gently and ease two fingers past her entrance. If I hadn’t known she was a virgin, I would

now. I've never felt anything so fucking tight and perfect in my life. Curling my fingers, I rub her secret spot, and Delta explodes.

Wetness floods my tongue, her thighs clamp down on my ears, and still, I don't stop eating her pussy. I'm a man possessed, near feral with the need to wring every drop of pleasure from my girl's body until she can't take any more. When the last of her orgasm finally fade away and she tries to pull me away from her swollen, sensitive little clit, I finally let go.

Throwing myself forward I brace myself over her, kissing her fiercely as I rip down my shorts and fist my cock roughly. It only takes a few vicious strokes before I'm finished. My seed jets out of me in powerful spurts, painting her pussy while we both watch, transfixed.

Neither of us speak as I sit back on my heels and draw two fingers through the white stripes on her belly. Gathering my own cum, my heart pounds as I slowly push it to her tight opening. I feel Delta's wide eyes on me, but I can't tear my eyes away from what I'm doing.

It's insane. Absolutely mad. I know it, but I still don't stop.

I'm her doctor. I know what medications she's on and, more importantly in this situation, what medications she's *not* on.

"Brooks." Delta breathes, her hand coming down to wrap around my wrist as I gather more of my cum. I hesitate, just for a second, my eyes flicking up to meet hers where I see the tiniest of nods.

Together, we push my cum covered fingers into her virgin pussy.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Delta

“Good morning.” A pair of strong male arms wrap around my waist as Brooks pulls me firmly against him, pressing bristly kisses over my neck and shoulder. I smile, my heart soaring as I turn, standing on my toes to meet his lips. It’s been a full week since my nightmare somehow resulted in my dream come true, and I’m still not used to being able to kiss Brooks whenever I want.

We’d stayed up late last night, making up for lost opportunities to desecrate the hot tub, but he’d had an early morning knee replacement, so I’d woken up alone.

“I missed you this morning.” I pout playfully and Brooks grins, leaning forward to nip at my bottom lip. My heart swells at how happy and carefree he looks, a man in love, not a man wracked with guilt for his feelings.

“I’ll make it up to you.” He bends down and grips the back of my thighs, lifting me up easily to sit on the kitchen counter where he can stand between my thighs, our kiss turning from sweet to heated in seconds.

I moan, rocking against him as my center grows hot and slippery almost instantly. It doesn’t matter how many times he brings to me orgasm with his tongue or fingers, I can never get enough. “Brooks, I want you.” I whine when we break for air, and I can feel his groan against my neck.

He bites my collar bone lightly. “Don’t tempt me.”

We’d agreed to “*take things slow*” that first morning together, but that’s the kind of thing that’s much easier said than done. It’s been a week. A week of Brooks giving me mind-blowing orgasms with his tongue or fingers or both and waking him up with my mouth around his long, thick cock. If he doesn’t fuck me soon, I might actually drop dead from sheer desperation.

“That’s exactly what I want to do.” I smile mischievously, warm tension settling low in my belly and my panties growing damp when Brooks looks back up, his eyes dark and hungry.

“We should wait until after you meet with Dr. Walters.”

Another hard conversation we’d had to have.

If it turns out I need surgery immediately, something that is still unclear since I haven’t had new scans since I stopped snowboarding eight hours a day, being pregnant would not be good. My surgery would have to be postponed and I’d likely be in a lot of pain for months on end with a growing baby sitting on my damaged hip.

Still, we did nothing about the cum he fucked into me with his fingers, so the damage might already be done.

Which would make me the Virgin Delta.

Nope. No way.

“You know there are such things as condoms, *Doctor Harrison*.” I wind my arms around his neck and Brooks rolls his eyes at my cheek.

“Yes, I might be old, but I did attend health class.”

“So?” I raise my eyebrows hopefully, pushing one hand between us to rub the thick cock tenting his scrubs.

Brooks bucks into my hand, his breathing already growing uneven. “Fuck, Delta. I’m trying to show some restraint here.”

In response, I pull the tie to his pants and slip my hand inside, wrapping around his length. “Can I put my mouth on you, Doctor Harrison?” I ask sweetly as I stroke him more firmly, my thumb swiping up to gather the precum dripping from the head of his swollen cock.

Cursing, Brooks lifts me off the counter and strides over to the couch where he drops me back into the cushions. “Take off your clothes, you little brat.” He orders me roughly, sitting down beside me. I’m transfixed by the sight of him stroking himself, and fumble to pull off my clothes. The moment I’m

naked, Brooks pulls me onto his lap, my wet pussy spread over his cock.

“Ride it, sweetheart.” He grits out, gripping my waist and guiding me over him.

Holy shit.

The head of his cock bumps against my swollen clit on every pass, and my head drops back, a moan tearing from my throat. “Brooks!”

He groans too, thrusting from beneath me. “You have no idea what you do to me, Delta. Oh fuck yes, you’re so wet-“

The doorbell rings and immediately all three dogs start barking.

We both freeze, staring at each other. “Ignore it, probably a delivery.” Brooks says gruffly, pulling me close so my tits are pressed against this rock-hard chest and we can kiss desperately as I begin to move again.

“You feel so good.” I whimper, feeling my orgasm beginning to build deep inside me. Brooks must be able to tell because his hand move down to grip my ass, speeding up his rhythm.

“Shit, come on baby, cum for me-“

The doorbell rings again.

We both groan and I drop off Brooks lap, covering my face in frustration. I was *so close*.

“God damnit.” He curses, standing up and pulling his scrubs back on. “You’re going to have to get it, Delta.” He grumbles apologetically, nodding toward the very noticeable tent in his scrubs, which hide absolutely nothing.

I giggle reluctantly and roll off the couch, throwing on my clothes just as the doorbell rings a third time. Tibia, Fibula and Femur are beside themselves, barking and whining in the entryway when I turn the corner. “Shush.” I point toward the kitchen and they comply reluctantly, padding off.

Pulling open the front door, the heat lingering through my body from Brooks' touches turns cold so suddenly I sway on the spot, staring at the grave faced man standing on the top step.

My father.

"DJ." His eyes look me up and down, lingering on my bare feet and messy hair. "Good to see you."

My throat tightens. I open my mouth to speak but shut it almost immediately, had I always felt this *afraid* of him?

"Dad." I finally utter, my hand gripping the door, not sure if I should slam it shut or not. How did he find out where I'm living? Does he know about me and Brooks?

Dad raises his eyebrow expectantly. "Are you going to invite me inside, or do we have to have this conversation in the cold?"

A dark voice comes from behind me. "You won't be having any conversation with Delta. Not until she's ready." Brooks stops at my side, looking more furious than I've ever seen him. "Leave my property. Immediately."

Turning his eyes to Brooks, Dad's lip curls. "You know, I didn't think you had it in you, *Doctor*. My mistake." He looks back at me, expression softening and voice becoming gentle and persuasive. "Let's sit down and have a conversation, DJ."

I swallow the lump in my throat. "If I talk to you, will you promise to not come back here without my permission?"

Something in Dad's expression flickers and with a sudden rush of pride I realize what it is. Surprise. I've never spoken to him like this before. Ever.

"DJ-" He clears his throat and shakes his head, as if clearing it of whatever he was going to say. When he speaks again, his tone is perfectly composed. "You have my word."

Wordlessly, I step back to let him inside, Brooks' hand squeezing my shoulder in a silent show of support. He takes my hand, leading the way over to the kitchen table where we

sit down on one side, a unified force against my father who takes the chair across from us.

Leaning back in his seat, Dad stares at me for a long moment. When it becomes clear I'm not going to lead this conversation or apologize for anything, he clears his throat.

"I want to apologize." I blink in surprise, gripping Brooks' hand tighter beneath the table. Dad rubs his beard, frowning. "Things got out of hand. In the run up to the qualifiers. I've only ever wanted the best for you, DJ. I've seen too many incredible athletes live with regret because they pulled back when they should have pushed through."

My mouth is dry by the time he stops speaking, my heart hammering against my ribcage so much louder than usual. *This is his apology? This is what he's sorry for?*

"You never asked, Dad." I tell him, my voice strained. "This was the end of the road, but there were so many other times I got hurt. So many other times I sacrificed having a normal life to snowboard. You never once stopped and had a conversation with me about what *I* wanted."

Dad's nostrils flair. "You are an Olympic gold medalist. Do you know how many people can say that? I refuse to apologize for helping you realize your true potential, DJ. Did I sometimes push too hard? Yes. I acknowledge that, and I'm sorry for it. You're my daughter. I love you. If you're truly done with snowboarding, I can accept that--"

But I interrupt him with a cold, sharp laugh. "*You can accept that?*" I spit the words back at him in disbelief. "It's not your life! It's not your body! I don't need you to accept it, I need you to *support it!*"

Across from me, Dad's shoulders sag. "I'm trying here, DJ."

He is trying, I can see that, but it's not good enough. He still doesn't get it. "I know you are." My eyes burn. "I'm not saying I'm out, and I never want a relationship with you again, but your actions did damage. Physical and emotional damage

that *I* have to repair.” Brooks laces his fingers through mine and my heart swells. I won’t be alone.

Dad nods slowly, like he’s trying to wrap his mind around the fact that sometimes the ends do not justify the means. “I understand.” Reaching into his jacket, he pulls out a slim, flat box and pushes it across the table to me. “This was in the safe when your brother got your things. I... thought you’d want it.”

My hands tremble as I pull back the lid and stare down at the gold medallion nestled in velvet. Beside me, I feel Brooks still.

I’d been deliberately not thinking about my medal. There are two more bronze ones just like it, stored in a box upstairs, but nobody ever remembers those.

I laugh slightly as I pick it up, turning it over in my fingers. “I don’t know what to do with it.”

Brooks laughs too and gets up from the table. On the far wall, his college and med school diplomas are hung, beside a shadow case filled with a few intimidating looking medical instruments. Dad and I watch as he plucks it right off the wall and dumps the tools onto the table with a clatter.

I hand him the metal mutely and his large hands arrange it carefully over the metal pins inside the box before he shuts it and takes it back to the wall.

All three of us stare for a minute.

Dad clears his throat and when he speaks, his voice is thick with emotion. “It looks good there.”

CHAPTER NINE

Delta

Despite his constant assurances that he trusts Dr. Walters completely, Brooks still hovers at the side of the exam table, supervising my entire exam and reviewing my brand-new scans.

“She’s *my* patient now, Harrison.” Dr. Walters reminds him waspishly when Brooks makes his third noise of disapproval in the space of about sixty seconds. Holding out her hand, she helps me sit up. “Well, Delta, apart from having a pain-in-the-ass husband, I’d say you’re looking good.”

“Boyfriend.” I correct her, even though my belly flips at the thought.

Dr. Walters raises her eyebrows at Brooks. “You said she was your wife, Harrison.”

Brooks blinks at her innocently. “Did I?”

Apparently deciding not to engage, Dr. Walters leans casually back against the counter in the corner. “So, your pain is manageable, and it’s been how long since your last injection again?”

“About six weeks.” Brooks replies.

She hums thoughtfully. “I do think we’re in the watch and wait stage, then. We’ll continue with your inflammation management, which should keep you relatively pain free so long as you’re not working out full time. Any plans to return to snowboarding?”

I think of my stuff all boxed up in Brooks’ storage unit and shake my head. “Maybe for fun with my brothers, but no professional training, no.”

Dr. Walters nods approvingly before turning to Brooks. “Thoughts, Harrison? Since I’m sure you have them.”

Brooks sighs, his doctor frown in place. “I think she’s right, Delta. Your pain is manageable, your condition isn’t

deteriorating, I do think surgery is inevitable but if you keep up with your physical therapy there's no reason it can't be put off for a few years at least."

My heart soars and I reach out to take Brooks' hand, unable to contain my smile. "No surgery?"

The two surgeons in the room nod decisively and Brooks confirms, the corners of his eyes creasing. "No surgery."

We barely make it home.

The moment we get in the car outside Dr. Walter's office I squeal, lunging over the center console to shower kisses over Brooks' smiling cheek. "Are you happy?" He laughs, putting the car in drive and reaching over to squeeze my thigh.

I nod, beaming at him. I'd been so nervous before this appointment, terrified Dr. Walters would tell me that I'd need major surgery or would need to put my life on pause for a while longer.

I won't have to though. My body, my life, they're all mine, and I know the first thing I want to do with them. As usual, Brooks must be able to read my mind because his hand tightens on my thigh. "Do you want to get lunch?" His voice is trained, like he's forcing himself to do the right thing and not pull over to the side of the road and give me what we've both wanted for weeks now.

I shake my head and his hand moves up, cupping my throbbing pussy through my leggings. The material is thin enough that he must be able to feel the wetness spreading onto my inner thighs. He hisses, rubbing me teasingly. "You're so wet, sweetheart. Such a needy little thing. Do you want my tongue, my fingers, or my cock?"

Whimpering, I arch my back, spreading my legs as I try to increase the pressure against my pussy. Brooks gives a little slap firmly over my throbbing clit and I hiss, gazing over at him with wide eyes.

His free hand is gripping the wheel and he's staring determinately forward at the road. "I asked you a question,

Delta.” He spans my pussy again.

I whimper. “I want your cock, Brooks. I don’t want to wait anymore.”

He grunts his approval, resuming the slow, measured strokes over the seam of my pants. My head drops back against the headrest and my eyes flutter shut, rolling my hips into his fingers.

We’re on a public street. Anyone who looked into our car too long would notice Brooks’ muscular arm stretched over into my lap and my head thrown back in pleasure, but I can’t bring myself to care.

“That’s it. Don’t be shy.” Brooks’ quiet praise makes me shudder and quake in my seat, arching against the seatbelt desperately. “Let’s get that tight little pussy ready for me.”

Holy shit. My eyes snap open when Brooks pulls his hand away for a fraction of a second, only to be rewarded when he shoves it beneath my leggings and panties, coming in direct contact with my swollen and wet center.

We groan in unison.

Not wasting another second, Brooks pushes two fingers into me roughly and it’s all I need to send me over the edge.

I cum, bucking and gasping, more slick wetness flooding over Brooks’ hand just as he turns the steering wheel into the driveway. He turns and looks over at me when the car stops, jaw tight and eyes dark. “Get in the house, Delta.”

Even though we haven’t had sex yet, I’ve learned that Brooks *really* likes being in charge, and that I *really really* like it when he is.

My hand fumbles for my seatbelt and I wrench the door open. Brooks is around to my side in a flash, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me securely to his side as we walk quickly toward the house.

“Upstairs.” He orders gruffly once we’re inside. The dogs are, thankfully, at doggy daycare today and the house is silent as I run upstairs, Brooks on my heels.

We've been sleeping in his room and I almost trip in my haste to get through the door, spinning around just in time for Brooks' to pull me into his arms, his crashing down on mine. We kiss frantically in the center of the room, clawing at each other's clothes without making any real progress.

"Off." He orders, wrenching himself off me to yank my shirt over my head. My bra follows and Brooks descends on my breasts, kissing and biting and sucking while his hands work my leggings and panties down my legs.

"Please." I beg, clutching his hair as he pushes two fingers into me roughly, sending me to the tips of my toes with a gasp. "I'm ready. I'm so ready, Brooks. I want you. Please--"

"Shhh." He stands, walking us back toward the bed. "I won't let you rush this, sweetheart. I'm only going to have one chance to fuck this tight little cunt for the first time. I'm going to enjoy it."

I fall back onto the mattress, legs spread wantonly and Brooks stares down at me, rubbing the outline of his hard cock through his jeans. "So fucking perfect." He unbuttons his jeans and shoves them down to join the rest of our discarded clothes.

God, he's so hot.

"Brooks." I reach for him and he obliges, kneeling on the bed between my spread thighs.

His cock stands between us, impossibly thick and long, the head already shiny with his cum. "You're sure?" He asks again, though his eyes don't move from my pussy, like he's transfixed by the sight of me.

I nod, my heart fluttering nervously now that it's actually time. I've wanted this for so long, but everyone knows their first-time hurts, and Brooks is *big*.

"I'm sure." I whisper, suddenly transfixed too as he takes his cock in his hand, stroking it almost thoughtfully.

Brooks leans forward to give me one last kiss, and I gasp against his lips as the head of his cock nudges my entrance.

Without warning, he thrusts forward, claiming me in a single brutal thrust that tears a cry from my throat and makes

my back arch, instinctively trying to find more space inside me for the massive cock that is *everywhere*.

“That’s it.” Brooks murmurs soothingly, stroking my hair as if this were any of the medical procedures that he held my hand through over the years. “You did so well, sweetheart. Look, you’re taking all of me.”

The stretch of him burns, but I feel a burst of pride and arousal at his words, following his gaze down to where we’re connected in the most intimate way, the lips of my pussy stretched wide around the base of his cock.

“I’m going to start to move now. Wrap your legs around me, yes that’s it. Good girl, Delta. Fuck, you feel good.”

I hold on, gripping his shoulders and wrapping around his waist, opening myself up even more as Brooks begins to move. Dragging his length out and pushing back in, the slight movements are still enough to send waves of pain and pleasure through me.

I make a noise somewhere between a moan and a sob, pressing my forehead to Brooks’ shoulder as he changes the angle, somehow going even deeper, hitting a place inside me that didn’t feel possible.

“How does that feel?” He asks, pressing a hand between us to rub circles over my clit which make me buck and gasp.

“Good.” I reluctantly giggle. It feels weird to laugh with him inside me, but also perfect. The pain is starting to fade now, and I wiggle experimentally, pressing back against him on his next thrust.

Brooks groans, thrusting a little harder now. “You like my cock in you, don’t you baby? You wanted this so badly, begged me for fucking weeks. Never again. You get it whenever you want now.”

The combination of his fingers on my clit and the brand-new sensation of being filled completely is making the coil inside me wind tighter and tighter. Brooks must sense I’m close because he redoubles his efforts, pounding into me desperately.

I break, crying out into the empty house as Brooks fucks me through my orgasm, his thrusts growing uneven and jerky as my inner walls clutch at his cock.

“Fuck yes.” He groans, dropping his forehead to mine. “I’m going to cum, sweetheart. Do you want it inside you? Do you want me to fill you up?”

“Yes, oh my god, yes.” I babble, reaching up to clutch his face to mine, kissing him just as he stills, pressing as deep into me as he can with a grunt of pleasure.

His cock twitches and I feel spurt after spurt of wet warmth filling me.

“I love you.” I whisper, my whole heart full to bursting as Brooks slips out of me and gathers me in his arms, raining kisses over my face. I never felt *adored* before this man made me his, and now I do every single day.

“I love you too, sweetheart. So fucking much.” Our lips meet and we kiss slowly, savoring the taste of each other as the emotions and desperation drain away.

When I move to sit up though, Brooks holds me in place, his eyes sparkling. “Lay still.”

“Why?” I laugh, trying to get up again only to be pushed back down.

Brooks raises his eyebrows at me threateningly. “I told you I’d give you everything you wanted, didn’t I?”

My stomach flips. “*Really?*”

Laughing, he kisses my shoulder. “Yes, *really.*” Leaning up to look me directly in the eyes, Brooks looks suddenly grave. “I’m going to make you happy, Delta. I swear.”

Tears blur my vision and I pull him down for another long, deep kiss. “You already do.” I murmur as we break apart, panting, his cock already twitching against my hip.

A slow, mischievous smile curls Brooks’ lips as his hand slips back down my belly. “Shall I start right now?”

EPILOGUE

Brooks

4 Years Later

“**A**nd that does it, folks, Bay Jacobs has officially taken the gold medal, a first for the oldest member of Team USA -”

The rest of announcer’s words are drowned out by screaming and laughing, I look around to watch as my wife and brother-in-law jumping up and down, waving their little flags and yelling their support of their older brother.

In my arms, my son covers his ears, wrinkling his nose at the enthusiastic display from his mother and uncle. At just over three years old, Harbor Jacobs-Harrison is already proving to be much more of Delta than me, softspoken but determined with the same bright gray eyes and pouty lips. Our daughter, Spring, is sleeping right through the commotion in a sling on Delta’s chest.

“Mama!” Harbor squawks his protest, looking to me, with his little eyebrows raised in alarm.

“Mama is excited.” I laugh, pulling him close and kissing his dark hair. “Uncle Bay is the winner!”

“Uncle Bay?” Harbor frowns, looking around the crowded section where friends and family members of the team members are gathered for a sight of his favorite Uncle.

Conspicuously absent from the group, is River.

His relationship with my wife and her brothers hasn’t improved a lot over the last few years. All three of them have their own resentments and trauma from their years as River’s trophy-children, and he’s too wrapped up in his own shit to put that much effort into repairing the damage.

A few months after Delta and I got married, a national magazine published a very well-read exposé about River Jacob’s brutal coaching style and his reputation never recovered. The article was littered with stories of promising

athletes who trained too hard, pushed through pain they should have treated and ended up losing everything. Among them, his own daughter.

A figure breaks away from the crowd of athletes a hundred yards away and jogs right for us, smile visible even from here.

“Uncle Bay!” Harbor squeals, spotting him and stretching out his arms over the metal partition as Bay approaches to take him from me.

“Congratulations!” I laugh, gripping his shoulder as Delta and Lake engulf Bay in a hug, Harbor’s smiling face sticking out of the mess of jacketed arms.

I can see media cameras zooming in on the scene, eager for a clip of the legendary Jacobs siblings celebrating Bay’s triumph.

“Can you believe it?” Delta cries, wiping her eyes when Bay hands back our son and heads off to the podium for his big moment.

She’d gotten back on a snowboard for the first time since she retired only a few months ago. Lake and Bay were over at our house and showing the kids a video of their Mama’s gold medal event. Our son had excitedly asked Delta if *he could do that too*.

The next day, when I got home from work, I’d found Lake standing on the deck with Spring in his arms, watching two figures wearing snowboards on the back hill. I stood with them for a long time, my heart in my throat as Delta taught our son to snowboard. They’d been out there over an hour, and when Harbor started sniffing that he’d had enough, Delta picked him up and headed right back to the house. No questions asked.

Every time I’ve thought I couldn’t possibly love her more; she finds a way to prove me wrong.

“What?” Delta laughs, wiping her eyes again and elbowing me in the side. “Don’t laugh. I know I’m a sap, I’m just so proud of him.”

I smile, wrapping an arm around her waist and kissing the top of her head. “I love you, that’s all.”

My wife sighs, leaning her head against my shoulder as Bay steps up on the podium to accept his medal and the crowd roars around us.

“You know, the last time you cried this much, you were pregnant.” I muse, just loud enough for Delta to hear.

Her head snaps back to look at me, eyes huge. “Oh no. No way. Spring isn’t even one!”

I chuckle. “Just pointing it out.” But I can see she’s thinking over the last few weeks, trying to remember when her period is due. Four days ago, but I’m going to let her realize that on her own. It’s been a chaotic week, traveling overseas with the kids to see Bay compete, and her being late *could* be put down to stress.

It isn’t though. It’s down to the full weekend we spent in a hotel room, celebrating our anniversary.

Delta shakes her head in disbelief, but I can see she isn’t really upset. “We’re insane. I can’t believe this.”

I chuckle, unable to wipe the grin off my face. “We are. We’re running out of bodies of water we can use for names.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cleo White

Cleo White is a 29 year old caffeine addict who lives with her family in Vermont. After accepting the unfortunate reality that she has the attention-span of a fruit fly and finishing a whole-ass novel was never going to happen, she found a love of writing short, spicy, insta-love stories that always have a happy ending. When she isn't writing, Cleo can be found avoiding social obligations, gardening and painting.

BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

For Always

Huck Foster is my boss, my best friend's father and twice my age.

There are a million reasons why us being together is a terrible idea, but it hasn't stopped me from wanting him for so much longer than I should.

Huck has only ever been kind and respectful towards me, he's never put a toe out of line, even though I feel his eyes on me when I'm not looking. I have no reason to believe anything is going to change. He sees me as a kid, as his daughter's best friend and his star employee, nothing more.

I want him. I want to please him and have him boss me around outside of work.

Fingers crossed this holiday season brings a change, because it turns out you can only pine after your best friend's father for so long before something's gotta give.

Mixed Up

I've had a crush on the ice-cold biology professor, Dr. Damon Faust, for years now. He's a grump, a bully, and definitely too old for me.

I'm doing everything I can do live my life differently than my family, so can't I stop myself from wanting him? Fate keeps pushing us together and even when he's indifferent or hurtful or just plain mean, I keep coming back for more.

I want him to see me, even if it's crazy.

Even if it's pathetic.

Even if it's a mistake I won't be able to walk away from with my heart unscathed.

Into Alaska

I came to Alaska to escape my life.

Getting caught staring at the ass of my town's local gruff, tattooed, much-older mechanic Wyatt Dawson was not the plan.

I was dying in New York. Suffocating under the unbearable pressure of what it takes to be a Marks, buried alive in designer heels, a smile plastered on my face even when I felt like screaming.

Wyatt is a walking, talking reminder of everything my mother doesn't want for me, and a life I'm not sure I'll ever get to have. He deserves the truth of why I ran thousands of miles away from my family, but I can't bring myself to shatter the new happiness I find with him and in my new home.

Unfortunately for me, most secrets don't stay buried for long.

End Game

Noah isn't just my boss's obscenely hot brother, he's one of the most famous pro footballers in the country.

I've never been so attracted to anyone in my whole life. Too bad I asked him out the first time we met and he turned me down flat.

It's not like I can blame him, Noah's a living legend, while I'm just trying work in his brother's store and fix up my grandmother's abandoned cottage. I'm no-one, and he can't even walk down the street without getting asked for an autograph. Our lives are worlds apart.

So why can't I shake this feeling that he might just regret telling me no?