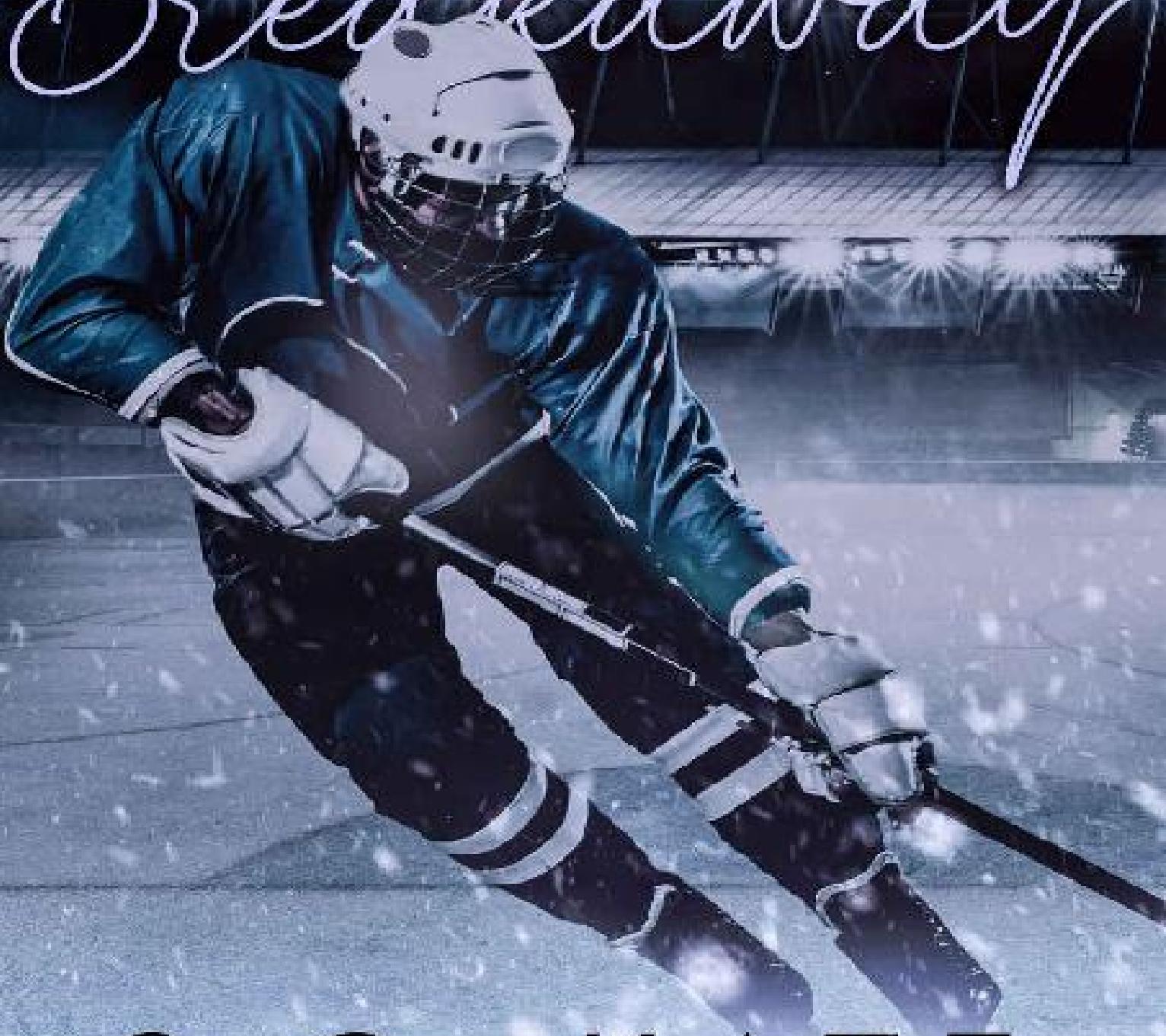


THE ICE
LEAGUE SERIES

Our Breakaway



S.C. KATE

Our Breakaway
The Ice League Series
S.C. Kate

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Cover art by: Books and Moods

Dedication:

Here's to giggling and crying while reading romance novels at 2am instead of sleeping.

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Prologue - Addie

"I can't do this!" Claire burst out. My little sister looked at me with wide eyes. "Fuck it, Addie, I'm out."

I watched her kick off her heels, gather up her poofy white skirts, and start bolting to the door.

"Just tell Duke we'll go to the frickin' courthouse like I wanted to in the first place!" she yelled over her shoulder.

"Oh, no, no, no you don't." I ran on the toes of my stupid heels to catch up with her, but she was almost already out the church door.

I wedged myself between the door and took both of her shoulders in my hands, forcing her to face me.

"Stop, Claire. Focus for a second." I looked straight into her bright, freaked-out eyes and had to tamper down a chuckle. She looked like a total Barbie doll today, which I knew she absolutely despised. She was only dressing up for Duke— who was her childhood nemesis, turned secret teenage crush, turned enemy, turned fiancé.

She shook her head and sputtered, but seemingly couldn't find any real words to say.

"Chill out. It's fine," I demanded. "None of those people matter, but Duke? Duke matters. He wants this wedding to show you off and celebrate with you," I pushed. I could understand her nerves though. She and I were not social butterflies... but her fiancé, Duke? He was Mr. Popular, and the wedding somehow kept getting larger and larger. Now, the intimate Labor Day event she originally planned was promised to be a 250-person rager tonight. "It won't be fair to him if you blow it off and

make him look like a total loser standing up there on the altar all alone in front of everyone he knows.”

Her eyes still looked wide and freaked out.

“Claire?!”

I internally snickered at the sound of Duke’s voice coming from inside the church behind me. Of course these two wouldn’t just play by the book today. They *would* be the ones needing all the dramatics on their wedding day. But who was I to deny Duke his Superman moment? He *lived* for being her hero.

“Baby?” I heard his voice call out again.

I turned to see him craning his neck, looking for my sister.

I pushed myself further between the doorway so she was fully out of his sight. “You want to see him? I think it’s considered bad luck, but I don’t really believe in any of that, do you?”

Her face cracked in disapproval. “Yeah no, fuck that, lemme see him,” she said, roughly shoving me back into the church waiting area.

She made her way past me, and I watched Duke become completely paralyzed as he spotted my sister... and it was adorable.

The concern on his face melted away and he beamed at her as he touched the softly curled, wispy hairs hanging down around her face.

My God, they were so mushy. I crossed my arms and snorted at the two of them.

Within seconds, Duke had her backed up against the wall of the church and was fiercely making out with her.

"Hey, hey, hey! Not in the church!" my dad yelled. His long stride carried him over to the two of them and he promptly ripped Duke away from his youngest daughter. My dad shoved him toward the Church doors, but he still had a dazed, lover-boy look on his face as he kept eye contact with Claire.

"Jeez. Get to the front, Duke. Let's get this thing going," my dad ordered.

"See you up there, baby," Duke said breathlessly, still looking at Claire like she was an angel.

She grinned back at him and nodded.

1. Addie

“Where’s *your* boyfriend, Adelina? Are you next?”

I stood utterly still, squinting at her wrinkly pursed lips, shocked yet again at the nerve of old women.

In my honest opinion, that’s one of the worst questions an almost thirty-year-old can face, and in one of the crappiest scenarios it can be posed in too: At your younger sister’s wedding reception. It’s not that I wasn’t happy for Claire, I really was. I was just also trying to tamper down the disappointment I felt for myself. Questions like this one unfortunately made that disappointment come to the surface.

I felt my face burn red, but Claire’s beside me turned stone cold.

“There’s so many other things you could ask her,” my little sister snapped with her lower jaw jutting out. Her angry face did not match her poofy wedding day white. It was actually shocking she got into a white dress. She’d do it for Duke though, which cracked me up.

“You haven’t seen her in how long and you want to bring that up?” Claire continued her tirade. “How about- *Oh, you got your masters? Oh, you landed your dream job?* Get with the times, old woman. She’s a freaking genius sportswriter. Ask her about that,” Claire demanded, peering down at her. While we were both only 5’2, it seemed like old Aunt Pearl had shrunk, because she was suddenly looking a lot smaller than the two of us. “Why does she need a guy to feel accomplished? That’s not an accomplishment; that’s more like a burden. AND,” she was practically yelling now, “haven’t you been complaining about your husband for like *fifty years*? Maybe she’s just trying to avoid *your life!*”

“What?!” My great aunt’s old, batty face looked aghast. She backed away and fixed us with a disapproving grimace.

“I said what I said.” Claire stuck her chin in the air. “Maybe your generation should’ve done more to prevent your sons from turning out just like the stupid husbands that you despise. Ever think of that? Where is your dusty ass son by the way?”

I bit my lip to suppress a giggle at that. Aunt Pearl’s son, James, really wasn’t what you’d call a catch. He was a lazy, mid-thirty-year-old who was still living in his mother’s basement, wasting his life away playing video games all day.

Old batty turned away slowly, looking absolutely shell-shocked. As soon as she walked a few feet away, Claire downed another glass of champagne and shook her head.

“Old bitches,” she snarled.

“Thank you,” I told her sincerely.

Her eyes softened and she nodded before looking for another champagne flute. “I need to not feel my feet.” Her face scrunched up in pain.

I admired her even more in that moment for going after Aunt Pearl. Even though Claire was my younger sister, she was stronger than me. She said her opinions straight out and never apologized for them. I, on the other hand, spent most of my life hiding my true feelings. I only ever wrote them out... and even then, I usually never reread them again— if I did, I’d probably just break down over old emotions. My google drive was a graveyard for unfinished books and writings— all fiction... with underlying hints of truth— aka my true feelings.

"And I think I need to be drunk for this garter toss," Claire added as she reached for another flute.

I snapped my eyes to hers. "Wait, you're actually doing that?"

She rolled her eyes. "Duke said that was one thing I wasn't allowed to ax for some reason. Oh, and we're doing that dumb bouquet toss too. Your ass better be on the dance floor to support me."

I quickly realized why Duke wanted to do the garter toss: He wanted a show, which was so him.

He walked around the crowd of people lining the black-and-white checkered dance floor and raised his arms for cheers from his hockey boys. When he turned to look at Claire sitting on a chair in the middle of the floor, his face turned fiery. Claire's face, on the other hand, burned bright red, and I could see her trying to stifle a giggle.

He stalked toward her and proceeded to practically give her a lap dance before taking one of her long legs in his hand. He sniffed up her leg before disappearing under her skirt.

"Jesus Christ," my dad muttered next to me. He turned to order another beer from the bar. "I can't watch this."

I laughed and patted him on the back. "You should be happy about this. Don't you want a mini Duke and Claire grandbaby?"

He choked on a sip of beer. "God help us all." The two of them tormented practically everyone in the rink when they were kids.

I let out a wry chuckle and turned back to the happy couple. Claire was most definitely tipsy because she was throwing her head back, laughing at his antics. Knowing them, he was probably narrating the entire experience to her, making it way funnier than it ever could be— that was a total Duke thing to do.

My dad side-eyed me. “I heard you guys went after Aunt Pearl.”

I shrugged. “She had it coming.”

“Guess so,” my dad grumbled. “But now I have to go do damage control.”

I patted him on the back and smiled fake-sweetly at him.

“You tell her off nice and good at least?” he said out of the corner of his mouth as he waved to an old uncle across the room.

“Claire did.”

“Oof.” He winced. “Alright, I’m gonna go have a chat with her. Come save me in fifteen minutes if I’m still talking.”

“Aye-aye-Captain,” I said, saluting him.

He shuffled off and I inconspicuously kicked off my shoes under the bar.

I took a sip of my whiskey coke. It was my drunk drink— the one I only ever ordered when I was already feeling it... when I wanted to drown my sorrows in old memories... because it smelled like *him*. But I’d never admit that to anyone.

“Whatup Kessel?”

I turned to face a scruffy looking Max.

I cleared my throat. “If you ask me when it’s my turn to get married, I will literally deck you in the face, Max. Couldn’t do it to my old batty aunt, but you?” I squinted at him. “You’ll have a shiner for weeks,” I warned.

“Woah, woah, woah.” He laughed and put his hands up in innocence. “No, I was just gonna say it’s nice to see you. I haven’t seen you in forever, girl.”

I side-eyed him, trying to read if he was for real. “Well, it’s nice to see you too then, Max.”

“I’d hug ya, but it still looks like you’re gonna sock me in the eye.”

I snorted.

He put a hand up to track down the bartender and quickly ordered another beer before turning to face me again. “Where ya livin’ now?”

“In Detroit. I had an apartment with Claire, but I’m probably gonna have to start searching for a new place seeing as she’ll be moving out.” I nodded back at Claire on the dance floor.

Max leaned against the bar to watch the newlyweds slow dance. “Yeah, he’s a goner for her though, I bet he’d let you live with them if Claire asked.”

“Nah,” I sighed. “It’s time to get my own place. I’ll let the two love birds have their own space and all that.”

Max squinted his dark eyes at me suspiciously. “You hate being alone, Addie.”

He knew me well. We used to work the concession stand together at the rink as teenagers. I’d always beg him to work during slow shifts with me because I hated feeling lonely.

I shrugged. "I'll be fine, always am," I said before downing the rest of my whiskey coke.

Besides, if things worked out the way I was planning, I wouldn't be alone for long...

2. Addie

Two weeks later, I was back at work in Detroit, feeling like I never even had a vacation home for Claire's wedding. Granted, I was super busy looking for a new apartment as soon as my plane touched down at DTW. There was no way I could continue to afford where Claire and I were living with only my pay, especially considering the fact that I was currently trying to save up for my new life.

Just as Max had predicted, Claire offered to let me stay with her and Duke, but I didn't want to step on their toes.

I ended up securing my own affordable place pretty quickly, and since then, my life turned into going to work, then boxing shit up and walking five blocks to move it all. Duke and Claire helped as much as they could, but I hated being a bother. Besides, every time one of them came to help, they'd have an ice pack wrapped around a different body part because of sore muscles, and I felt guilty putting them to work.

I finally finished moving the last of my boxes last night, and now I was just sore and tired here at work. I'd practically been staring at the clock, willing it to be 5 p.m., all day long.

When it finally hit 4:30 p.m., I pushed out of my pink chair in my little cubicle and slowly followed the rest of the writers into the large glass room for the weekly pitch meeting.

Once I was in the swing of covering the regular season of a sport, I stopped attending these pitch meetings because I knew I'd be writing game recaps. But seeing as it was the beginning of September and hockey— the main sport I covered— was still in their

preseason, I didn't have a story yet. My guess was that I'd be assigned a longer, fluffier feature piece previewing the coming season.

Hank, the spiffy-looking forty-year-old Editor-In-Chief, kicked off the meeting with a bad dad joke as per usual. He'd been practicing all his jokes ever since his wife became pregnant. We all thought the jokes would stop once he wasn't getting as much sleep when the baby arrived, but I think the baby being earth-side just made him kick it up a notch. We laughed politely, but we all just wanted to get the fuck out of work already.

He held up his dry-erase marker and started pitching the stories. He always drew out the story names of each section on the panel of glass behind him, then wrote the person's name who was assigned the story next to it. This wasn't really necessary because a massive weekly google doc containing all the same info would be shared with each of us after the meeting anyway... but I think Hank just liked writing with the marker on the glass.

I stifled a yawn and started chugging the rest of my iced-coffee— I had to savor my fill of caffeine before I was limited to only one cup a day. I never paid too much attention to the meeting until the sports stories were pitched. I was solely a sports section writer for the Detroit Gazette, and I had no cares or qualms about what the US news or city news or weekend life or arts or obituary people were doing.

I only ever knew what was going on with the Arts page because my friend, Erin, was the section editor, and she could talk for days on end. We always grabbed lunch together when we weren't out of the office for a story, which was usually only two or three days a week, but that was enough time for her to feed me all the

gossip. It was an easy friendship—she could talk as much as she wanted, and I just got to listen.

A bony elbow nudged my side, and I looked up to see Brandon, my fellow sportswriting buddy, wearing his large, black-framed, bluelight glasses and pulling a face as he nodded his angular chin toward the front of the room.

I internally cringed and fixed my own glasses before turning to face Hank, who was standing at the head of the table looking directly at me.

“Sor—” I cut myself off and cleared my throat. “Thank you for waiting. You were saying?” I was still trying to force myself out of saying the word ‘sorry’ so much—specifically in situations where I had no real need to apologize. It was a habit I’d developed as a kid, and I couldn’t stand it.

“There’s a new rookie on the Crewmen. His name’s Tyler...” He snapped his fingers, searching for the last name in his mind, but I knew what he was going to say...

Don’t say it, don’t say it, don’t say it.

“Jetterson!” Brandon called out beside me. “He’s going to be great for the team!”

Fuck.

I knew that name. And I wanted no part in reconnecting or writing a story about him.

“Thank you, Brandon,” Hank said. “I’d like the front page of sports to run a feature on Tyler Jetterson. A feel-good, welcome back to Detroit piece. Let’s run it before the first regular season game.”

I grinded my teeth together. He wasn't really from Detroit. Sure, he was born here, but he grew up in Northfield, Minnesota... With his brother... And me...

"Addie, you'll take it?" Hank looked at me expectantly with his dry-erase marker ready and waiting to scrawl my name next to the piece's title.

I chewed my bottom lip for a second, trying to choose my words wisely. "I think there are other more important preseason stories out there that I should be working on," I urged. "What about that ref piece I was telling you about? No one ever pays attention to the refs, but they're banking like six figures and traveling all over the country. I'd love to write a profile piece on some of the industry's big wigs. Maybe that'd inspire kids to dream of becoming refs. Like shoot for the moon, but land among the stars type a deal. Yeah?"

Hank arched an eyebrow at me.

"No?" I asked weakly. I did not want to bring up the fact that writing this story would be a conflict of interest for me. It broke the journalistic code of ethics to write about anyone you had connections with.

"No. I want Jettersen. Top of the fold story as soon as you get it done. You've been begging for this kind of exposure for months," he said, pinning me with his eyes. "Plus, this Tyler kid hasn't given anyone an interview yet, not even the Detroit News. You could be the first."

I sucked in a quick breath of air. "I might have a conflict," I said in a rush.

He motioned to his ear.

"I know his brother," I said, feeling my face heat up as everyone in the office stared at me. "I feel like it's a

conflict of interest for me to write it.”

He looked at me skeptically. “You still know the brother? Still in contact?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Write it. Could be a big opportunity for you, Addie,” he said pointedly. “Okay, and onto the sports news pieces for the week, Brandon...”

I stopped listening. I was wide awake now. I took a shaky breath before closing my laptop. I needed to get home to process this new dilemma.

I tossed and turned in my bed all night.

I could’ve blamed it on the fire truck sirens—my new apartment was right next to a fire station—but that’d be a lie. The truth was that I kept thinking about facing Tyler in the morning.

By 4 a.m. I decided it didn’t matter. I tried to reframe the whole thing in my mind. If I told my brain not to treat it like a big deal, then it wouldn’t be. I’d simply write the piece as quickly as I could. It’d be one week of hating a story. That was it. That was nothing. I typically hated every single second I had to sit through a baseball game and every single story I had to write afterwards—and trust me, there were a *lot* of baseball games this past summer. So, at least I was back on the hockey beat.

I’d do whatever I had to in order to keep my role as the lead writer for the Crewmen because I loved covering Detroit hockey. There was nothing else quite

like it. The game day atmosphere was amazing, the fans were like a family, and the team usually made the playoffs, which was always fun to cover.

It was my job to be at every single game and analyze the hell out of each play, and I always thought I was pretty good at it. But I needed a clear head to be able to do this. I worried that Tyler's presence on the team would distract me...

I already skipped the games against Boston. During those weekends, I conveniently traded Brandon hockey for basketball, claiming that we could both use the practice writing the other sport, which was definitely not true. Both of us could write any kind of game recap with ease. Brandon was practically a walking sports stats book.

Thankfully, Brandon never questioned me when I wanted to swap sports, but I think he started to notice that these offers always conveniently came around when the Boston Badgers were in town.

The real reason, which I would never admit aloud, was that Tyler's brother played for the Badgers...

And I couldn't handle even knowing that I was in the same building as him.

I was already awake before my alarm sounded in the morning. I sat there watching the morning light stream in from my broken bedroom shades. I added bedroom curtains to my mental list of things that needed tending to. I wasn't the best with upkeep and homey things, especially when I was in a good work groove.

Clarie was the one who always cleaned and made things look nice. We were opposites that way— I looked

like I had it together, but was kind of a wreck, where she looked like a wreck, but was very organized and tidy. I mean, she was a frickin' meal-prepper. I'd get into a hyperfocus and completely miss meals by accident and work until my stomach was angrily growling— something I knew I needed to change. It wasn't that I didn't know how to cook, it's just that it felt pointless when I was only doing it for myself. Making food was more of a hassle than grabbing Starbucks sandwiches at random times throughout my day. My pantry currently had one box of CheezIts in it and my fridge housed a single bottle of wine, compliments of Brandon when he heard I'd moved. I blew out a breath. I was definitely going to miss living with Claire and being able to steal her food.

I pushed out of bed and started getting ready. I knew I'd need some extra time trying to cover the bags under my eyes from not sleeping. I usually just ran a straightener through my hair a bit and put on leggings and a jean jacket when I went to the Crewmen practice facility. The players all knew me by now from pestering them for interviews, and I'd noticed over the past couple years that looking more low-key always put them at ease for said interviews... But for some reason, I felt the need to look extra professional today.

I threw my hair in a claw clip and dressed in a plain black, long sleeve t-shirt, a black skirt, some off-black tights, and flat boots.

I quickly threw my laptop in my fake-leather backpack— a steal from Marshalls— and booked it to the Crewmen's stadium, which was about ten blocks down the road from my apartment.

Despite the slight chill in the September air, I was breaking a sweat as I walked up the concrete steps of the arena.

I flashed my badge to Davey, the old dude manning the arena's door, and walked in. There were a few people milling about the stadium's rotunda, so this must've been an open practice.

There was still a little chunk of time before the players were expected out on the ice, so I entered the elevator and made my way down to ice level to try and catch Tyler before he filed onto the ice.

My anxiety peaked as I watched the elevator's electronic numbers go down.

I'd seen Tyler around our hometown in Northfield through the years, and Claire had even hung out with him here and there. But I hadn't really faced him or talked to him in what... nine or ten years? He was still a teenager the last time I drove away from their house... I knew as I drove down their bumpy driveway that it was going to be the last time too...

Shit. Nope. No. Do not go there, Addie, I reminded myself.

I needed to shake off these stupid feelings. I closed my eyes tightly, trying to wash away the memories.

Whatever... It's not like Tyler and I ever really spent a ton of time together. Sure, he came to a couple of those legendary bonfire parties and stood on the edge of them because he was too young to actually join in... but they were at his house, so he was definitely there. I was too busy, wrapped up in my party phase and soaking up every second of sitting on his older brother's

lap, being so unreservedly in love with him to even notice what Tyler was doing.

That mental picture... sitting on his brother's lap, his rough hands rubbing up and down my legs, him kissing my neck, feeling his smile against my skin as his friends chirped him for PDA... It practically made my heart seize.

I placed a hand on my chest and tried to steady my breathing.

As soon as the elevator dinged open, I shook my head out and marched forward with strong strides.

This was my career. I needed to focus. And Hank was right, I'd been begging for a flashy feature that would garner me some attention. This would work. It had to.

I made my way to the hallway that led out to the ice and mentally ticked off each player on the roster as they walked out of the locker room looking huge in their skates and equipment.

Griff, Duke's brother-in-law, gave me a kind smile and reached out for a knuckle punch as he walked past me. Duke, who ran out behind him, picked me up off my feet slightly with a quick hug.

I tried to hold my breath until he placed me back on my feet. Even though I grew up in rinks, I'd never get used to the stink of hockey BO. I didn't want to offend him by saying anything though. He was harmless, like a happy puppy.

Duke let half his mouthguard hang out of mouth and chewed on the rest. "Stop by the apartment for dinner this week, we miss ya," he said, patting me on the head with his glove. "You're workin' too hard."

I gave him an affirmative nod, and softly chuckled as he ran off to catch up with Griff.

The rest of the players gave me quick head nods or raised a gloved hand to say hello...

About three full minutes after everyone else was on the ice, Tyler pushed open the locker room door.

I felt like I stepped into a weird time-warp because he was so much older and larger than the last time that I'd really talked to him. For some reason, I still pictured him as his skinny teenage self. But this Tyler, walking out in his Crewman practice jersey and wearing a helmet with a visor instead of a caged one like a kid usually wore, had actual facial hair. It took my brain a second to catch up. I felt like an older sister who missed out on a whole decade of watching her little brother grow into a man... At one point in time, I really did think of him as family... *which was pretty pathetic of me and a total sham anyway, so it was fine that I was writing the feature piece on him*, I reminded myself... But the whole situation kind of knocked me into a trance, and I almost let him completely pass me by.

“Tyler!” I called out at the last minute. *Damnit*. I never used first names. I needed this interview to happen just like every other one, and I was already making it weird in my mind. “Um... Jettersen!”

He stopped and looked up.

He held a blank face as his eyes settled on me from behind his visor. He rested his chin on the butt of his stick and grinned.

He still had the same scar on his upper lip; the one he blamed on getting hit by a puck... Really, he tried to shotgun a can of coke at 16 but didn't know how to do it and got his lip stuck in the can. He came running to us,

asking for help. I could practically still see his desperate face and his brother— I omitted his name from my vocabulary long ago— next to me, trying so hard to be sympathetic but also dying of laughter inside.

I gave Tyler a professional, tight-lipped smile even though my heart was anxiously beating out of my chest.

“I’m with the Detroit Gazette and we’re looking to run a feature piece on you. I’m wondering if you’d have time to sit down for an interview?”

His face broke into a slow smile, and he raised his eyebrows.

Fuck.

I hated asking him for a favor. I never wanted to ask another Jettersen for anything ever again.

He licked his lips. “How badly do you need this interview of yours?” A boyish grin slid onto his face.

I took in a deep breath and balled my fists at my side before looking back at his expectant eyes.

He’d grown up to be a cute guy. I knew he would. He was always a cutie back in the day... He was different from his brother though. Tyler was all his mother’s side— thinner with chestnut colored hair. He was quick on his feet; a total offensive guy. His brother, on the other hand, was a true Jettersen, which was synonymous with “goon player” around the town we grew up in. An enforcer was prolly a nicer term. He was a defenseman ‘til the very end. *“I’m a lover not a fighter,”* he used to joke... but I knew the truth of it. He craved the fight. He craved it more than he craved me.

I cleared my throat and tried to stomp out all thoughts of the stupid past that I’d kept locked away for years.

“Come on, Tyler. You’ll love having your face in the paper, you know it,” I egged him on. He was a charmer. And dammit all to hell. First name use again. Why did I keep slipping up?

He nodded slowly. “So, here’s the thing Adds...” The name rolled off his tongue so easily, but it made my chest tighten. It was his brother’s nickname for me. No one had called me that in years. “I want to do you a solid, I really do...” He cocked his head to the side. “But only if you do me one first.”

I felt taken aback by that.

“This is more for you than me—” I started, but he shook his head and began moving toward the ice.

“Wait!” I called out, closing my eyes tightly for a second. When I opened them again, he was standing there patiently, waiting for me to ask. “What do you want?” I grinded out.

He narrowed his eyes to mine. “For you to call up Case. I don’t care if you leave him a nice message or not. But call him. I don’t care if you leave him your fucking grocery list.” He laughed dryly. “But you do that,” he pointed a gloved finger at me, “you get an exclusive interview.”

A mental picture of *his* face slammed into my mind, and it hurt my heart.

I swallowed but my throat felt bone dry. My entire body suddenly felt shaky at the prospect of talking to him again.

“Exclusive?” I forced out.

“Yeah. I’ll turn down all those other emails and phone calls and only talk to you,” he said with a smirk. He turned and ran out onto the ice without looking back.

He showed his hand with those parting words. He was waiting for this. He somehow had to know that I'd be coming to ask for this interview... and he was waiting it out, not talking to anyone else just so he could make me do this one thing.

This one thing that I swore I would never ever do again...

Talk to Casey fucking Jettersen.

Late that night, I sat at my tiny dining room table in my apartment with the bottle of red wine in front of me. I still had work to do— all my stuff was still boxed up and pushed against my bedroom wall. Well, my bedroom/living room wall. My apartment was so tiny that my bed was technically in the only living area, and you could walk five steps and be in the kitchen. Other than that, there was just a tiny hallway that led to the bathroom off to the side.

I looked around at my mess and drank straight from the bottle. There was no use of dirtying a glass, especially when I knew I'd just end up letting it sit in the sink for days.

My phone started ringing, and I watched it without answering until Harper's name disappeared. My best friend. I felt slightly guilty letting it go to voicemail because it was hard to maintain a long-distance friendship. I hated that she lived so far away now... her husband, a professional goalie, followed Casey to Boston when he was traded there years ago. The two of them solidified their playing careers there... I knew

Harper would for sure get a kick out of this whole Jettersen brother situation. She'd probably cackle so hard I'd have to hang up on her. I couldn't deal with that right now. I made a mental note to call her back tomorrow.

I slumped back on my chair. What was Tyler's angle here?

From my intense google searching earlier, I found that neither Jettersen brother had given a single quote to the press regarding anything other than game play. Nothing extra, nothing personal. No one knew their backstory...

No one except me...

I drank another gulp and cursed Hank.

Why the fuck did I have to be put on this story? It was *definitely* a conflict of interest for me to even write it considering I already knew way more about that family than anyone else in the world. I probably should've let on just how well I'd known the family during the pitch meeting at the office. Then again, I needed this story. I needed this job. Especially considering I'd rather eat my own hand than move back home again. I'd already done that too many times in this decade of life. I was turning thirty on December 26th, and I wanted to feel secure in at least one area of my life by then, and it'd have to be my professional life. Because I could control how hard I worked. I was the captain of my professional life's metaphorical ship. I could not say the same for my personal life. I wanted what Claire had— a husband and surely a baby as soon as the 2026 Winter Olympics competitive season was over... But I'd pretty much given up the idea of ever meeting anyone that I'd want to settle down with.

I decided a while ago that my problem was that I had found my soulmate...

With Casey, I had that passionate, crazy connection that people sacrificed everything to find. At least I thought we had that because that's how I felt with him. But I wished I never knew that kind of connection existed. I wished I could be completely ignorant that someone could affect me in such a magnetic way. Because if I never knew that existed, I'd be fine with settling down. I'd marry any old regular kind of stable love that I was able to find...

But I wasn't ignorant.

I knew I'd always be searching for what I used to have... So, after about a million shitty first dates, I made it easier on my heart and gave up looking completely.

And that's why I really needed to make a name for myself in the sportswriting world. Everyone else my age was spread thin with their time. They had to focus on their jobs, husbands or boyfriends, their babies, and all their babies' needs... I had none of those things—*yet*—so what would be my excuse if I didn't find success with all my time?

I needed to make myself valuable enough in the writing world that taking a break wouldn't hurt my position. So, I really needed to make this story work...

But something told me Tyler didn't even want me to write an article about him in the first place... So why not just flat out turn me down?

I stared at my phone until my eyes burned.

This was so stupid.

I couldn't imagine hearing his voice on the other end of the phone call... *If* he even answered. And if he

did, what would I even say?

I swallowed hard against the closing sensation in my throat. This was too much. I'd have to tell Tyler tomorrow that we'd need to work out a different deal. I'd do anything... just not *that*.

I pushed up from my seat at the table, but was a bit tipsier than I thought, and I accidentally knocked over the bottle of wine. I rushed for a roll of paper towel and quickly mopped up all the red... then stared at the damp paper towels for a second too long...

3. Addie - Spring 2013

I slowly sat down on the sidewalk curb and dropped my bloodied paper towel onto the concrete in front of me. I think my nosebleed finished its course.

Marina, my coach, was pretty frickin' irritated it happened again. She was mad at anything that took me off the ice for even a single minute.

I stretched my legs out in front of me. I was wholly ignored by the moms ushering their little tykes into the rink for hockey practice and the guys unloading crates of beers and other things from the truck in the parking lot. They were probably restocking Benny's— the little diner in the lobby of the rink.

I blew out a breath and closed my eyes against the headache that was mounting in my brain. I leaned back on my elbows and enjoyed the spring sun's warmth on my face. Enjoying it wouldn't last long though— you could only take wearing black leggings in the sun for so long before you overheated and started sweating.

"You probably shouldn't stick your legs out in the street," a deep voice rumbled.

My eyes flew open to look up at where the voice came from. Standing there, casting his shadow on me, was a very muscular, very tan guy with sunglasses on. He had longer, jaw-length, sandy hair and a scruff covered jaw. The sleeves of his shirt were ripped down so that his tan skin was exposed on the sides. He also wore jogger hockey sweatpants and work boots— a dead giveaway that he worked here at the rink. He was the picture of a rough and tumble hockey player. He was the picture of a fighter.

"Someone could run you right over, girl."

His voice snapped me to attention, and I quickly pulled my knees closer to my chest.

“Might be for the best,” I muttered softly.

I didn’t intend for him to hear it, but he did, and he looked at me like I was crazy.

“Jettersen, what the fuck, man!” another guy, who was struggling carrying crates in, yelled at him.

He held a finger up to him signaling that he needed a minute before turning his attention back to me.

He studied me closer. “You alright?”

I snorted at that. No one had asked me that in forever...

Was I alright? Maybe? Yes? No?

I was having nosebleeds every day. Everyone thought it was because I spun so fast. Nope. It was because I was crying in the bathroom every day and then the pressure it built up in my face was making my nose bleed as soon as I tried to spin.

I balled up the bloody tissues on the ground next to me and quickly shoved them in my pocket...

My eyes wandered back to his face, but his eyes were now glued to my pocket. His eyebrows pinched together in concern and he shifted his weight but didn’t say anything for a second.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” I responded a bit too quickly.

“What happened?” he repeated slower.

I bit my bottom lip preparing the half-truth. “I spin too fast.”

He seemed put at ease by that answer. What had he thought happened? That I took a punch to the face or something? I was a figure skater, not a hockey player.

"Too fast? No such thing." He gave me a devilish smirk.

I rolled my eyes at that.

He ran a hand over his hair. "Wanna uh... pregame with us later?"

Huh? Was he talking to *me*? I looked around me for a second to see if anyone else was around before staring back at him confusedly. I was still unsure why he was talking to me. He looked older than me. He had to be. He had a full face of scruff and half a tattoo sleeve down his right arm.

"Yeah, I'm talking to you." His deep voice rumbled with a chuckle. "What do ya say? Pregame before the game with us?"

"You..." I cleared my throat and covered my forehead to block the sun so I could see him a bit more clearly. "You wanna work out before the game?" That sounded awfully suspicious to me. I was never invited anywhere.

His lips twisted like he was trying hard not to laugh.

"No, Sweetheart. I'm talking about partying. Pregaming means drinking. Some beer pong, maybe some flip cup. We've got a table set up right behind the NHL rink's entrance."

The name 'Sweetheart' came out sounding so rough and low from his lips... everything else sounded like he was speaking a different language. I'd never heard of any of those things, probably because I never

had a normal life. The rink was my entire world, and outside of it, I was just plain stupid. I guess that's what happened when you were "homeschooled" but really just spent all of your hours skating. My dad, Craig, was the rink manager here at the Ice League, my mom was a coach. She was an Olympic pairs skater for Russia back in the eighties. She defected her citizenship and had been coaching here taking different skaters to the Olympics representing almost every country under the sun ever since...

"We always party it up before the beer league games," he continued to say. "It's fun, you should come."

"Uh, who is 'we'?" I asked.

His large shoulders shrugged. "All the guys who work here at the Ice League. When we're done with our shifts, we party, we play, then we go home. Then we wake up and do it all over again," he laughed. "It's a way of life, Sweetheart."

There it was, calling me that name again... and it did something to my chest.

I squinted up at him. So, he was one of the bums still trying to make it in hockey that my dad always complained about. He always warned me to stay away from all hockey players... Which never made sense to me— he had been one of them.

But really, what did my dad know about relationships? He was the one embroiled in a messy divorce, not me.

"So, do ya wanna?" he asked.

Did I? I knew I *shouldn't* want to. I knew I should be getting back out onto the ice just like the perfect daughter I was supposed to be... but a voice in the back

of my head kept asking, *why keep playing this charade? Especially when I'm the only one playing my part?* My parents would go back by the zam entrance and start screaming at each other again, and I'd have to pretend everything was fine for Claire. The whole thing made me feel like I couldn't breathe. I couldn't focus at all and I started to fall on my jumps just because my head wasn't in it. That's why I was nursing a nasty blue ass bruise. I winced just thinking about it.

I took a deep breath and smoothed a hand over my face. "No," I said firmly. "I need to get back to the ice if you'll excuse me," I said quietly.

This little interaction was just weird. I ignored the hand he reached out toward me to help me up and pushed myself off the pavement on my own.

I'm sure he was a fine person, but I didn't need anyone.

He faced me with an open, non-judgmental, almost curious look.

I hesitated for a split second... Because I felt oddly drawn to him, like he was someone I could spill all my worries to... But that would be utterly stupid. Saying worries aloud made them real. I needed to button up my brain and make it shut the hell up.

I shook my head out as I walked, hearing my broken skate guard snapping back at my blade with every step.

"But seriously," he called out to me from where I left him on the sidewalk. "You good?"

I stopped in my tracks and looked up at the rink. I couldn't explain why... but my vision started to blur.

Fuck.

I willed myself to stop crying before anyone could see. I screwed my eyes shut tight, took in a deep breath, and shakily let it out. I squeezed my hands into fists by my side, trying to harness all my emotions.

When I opened my eyes again, he was standing right in front of me. Right between me and the rink.

“It’s a shame to see you so sad. I bet you’re even more beautiful when you smile,” he said softly. There wasn’t a hint of joking on his face anymore. I chewed the inside of my cheek. I did not feel like smiling. I couldn’t even remember the last time I smiled.

“What’s making you cry?” he asked.

“I’m not crying,” I bit back defensively.

“Okay,” he backpedaled. “Well, why do you feel the way you currently feel?”

I didn’t answer. I was still shocked he was paying any attention to me at all, forget the fact that he was asking me how I was feeling... That floored me. And I wondered if my stressed-out brain had somehow made him up out of thin air.

His jaw tightened and he tilted his head to the rink. “Someone in there?”

I felt extremely defensive at that. I was about to lay into him over making assumptions, when he quickly cut me off.

“Okay, not that.” He put his hands down in front of him like he was trying to calm me. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. But why go back in when it’s making you unhappy? Walk away for a bit, come back when you’re feeling better,” he suggested with a shrug.

“I...” I felt stumped at that. Why didn’t I just leave? I swallowed hard and shook my head against his suggestion. “I have to go back in.”

“Have to?” His eyebrow quirked up. “You don’t *have* to do anything. You’re not a prisoner. You do know that, don’t you?”

I stared blankly at his face. He simply did not understand.

I put my head down and started inside, but suddenly large and commanding hands were on my waist stopping me.

My eyes darted to his in shock. “Let me go,” I demanded in a low voice that I hoped relayed the fury I felt rising in my chest.

“Damn, you’re so much smaller than me,” he said with a chuckle. “You hungry? Wanna get some cheeseburgers?”

I felt my mouth drop open, then forced myself to close it. I had to remind myself that I was mad at him. “Not allowed,” I snapped.

He snorted. “Says who?”

My coach. My mom. The whole stupid sport of figure skating. But I didn’t say any of those things.

He stared at me intensely and I was momentarily mesmerized by his light brown eyes.

“Do you want,” he asked very slowly, “a cheeseburger?”

I blew out an exasperated sigh. “Yes, but—”

In a split second, he hoisted me up and threw me over his shoulder. I cried out, shocked really, and completely scared that he was kidnapping me.

I pounded his back with my fists and struggled against his vise-like grip on my body. “Put! Me! Down!” I yelled. “You can’t just kidnap me!”

He chuckled at that. “You’re not a kid,” he pointed out.

“How do you know how old I am?” I demanded.

“You’re Craig’s daughter. You’re nineteen, babe.”

Fuck.

“So that means you can just steal me?” I asked desperately.

“I’m not stealing you. I’m going to feed you. Those are two very different things, Adelina Kessel.”

I slammed my fists into his back again. In response, he jumped and made my stomach slam into his shoulder, probably to stop me from struggling. It worked because that hurt my ribs pretty frickin’ badly.

“And maybe I’ll even make you smile, Sweetheart,” he continued. “Then and only then, will I deposit you right back in front of the rink. After that, you can decide if you wanna walk back in or not.”

“But... but...” I stared down at his very muscular butt walking me down the rink’s large ramp to the parking lot. “I have a lesson.”

“Fuck the lesson,” he responded. “Do you really need it? You and I both know that you don’t. I’ve seen you out there. You’re the best one. You’re probably better than all those coaches ever were. Everyone knows it— even you. You’re just not admitting it to yourself.”

I felt taken aback by that compliment... and I couldn’t really argue against it.

I was the best.

No one could take that from me. I worked harder and longer than everyone in that rink. The only one who would eventually beat me was probably Claire. She was destined to surpass me because she didn't battle the nerves and self-doubt that I did on a daily basis. And she had me fighting for her. I fought my parents to put her in public school. I didn't want her to miss out on everything else in life just for skating like I had. I hoped she wouldn't feel as much pressure as I did because she would have more options than me. Here I was at almost nineteen with no future outside of figure skating. The only job prospect I even had was a skating coach, and I did *not* want that, so what did I even-

"You okay? Bein' awfully quiet," his deep voice rumbled.

My stomach chose that second to growl and he laughed in response.

"Maybe you'll need two cheeseburgers," he said.

4. Addie

The next morning, I had a raging headache from the wine and was super tempted to take a sick day, but I knew I'd just be anxious all day if I didn't settle the score with Tyler.

I threw on sunglasses and showed up to the rink to intercept him before he went in.

I sat there in the parking lot waiting for about fifteen minutes before the guys started showing up. I majorly regretted forgetting to grab something for breakfast before coming here for the stakeout because my stomach was now angrily growling.

I debated going into the rink to find a vending machine when Tyler's silver range rover finally pulled into the parking lot. I watched him grab his hockey bag out of the trunk of his car. The NHL guys could keep all their gear in the stadium's locker room, but many guys didn't choose to do that until the season started. Having their gear meant they could still practice on their own time. He slung his bag over his shoulder and pulled his backwards hat around forward—coaches absolutely hated when guys wore backwards hats.

A couple other guys I recognized were walking toward him and I internally cringed. I wanted to do this without an audience, but I guess I wouldn't have a choice.

“Tyler, wait up!” I walked briskly over to him.

He gave me a bright smile and must've told the guys he'd meet them in the rink because they all gave me head nods and waves as they made their way across the parking lot to the stadium.

He leaned his bag against his car and crossed his feet at the ankles, patiently watching me until I was standing in front of him.

"So, you call him?" he asked.

"No, but—"

He put his hand up to stop me from speaking and his jaw throbbed with frustration— a look that reminded me of his brother.

"Then the answer is no," Tyler said firmly. "Sorry, Adds." His eyes slid over to me, and he did look apologetic.

"Please, Tyler." I felt my nose wrinkle slightly. I hated the way that sounded coming from my own mouth. I didn't beg anyone. But I would beg to get out of calling *him*.

He sighed and shook his head as he pushed forward to walk away from me.

I felt my shoulders drop, feeling helpless. My brain started churning out different excuses I could give Hank, but then Tyler suddenly stopped in the middle of the road and turned back to look at me.

"Are you still mad at him? Is that it?" he asked tersely. His jaw set and he looked stubborn, reminded me of what he looked like as a kid when defending his homework or test scores to his older brother.

I pushed a hand through my hair and closed my eyes. "I don't..." I forced myself to breathe. "I don't think about him anymore, Tyler."

He snorted and shook his head. "Well, you're the only one he thinks about. He's stuck, Addie," he said forcefully.

My eyes flew open. “Well, he seems to be doing quite fine,” I snapped, then chastised myself for showing too much emotion.

It was true though. Nothing happened to him. He seemingly faced no consequences of us. He went on to become a big time NHLer making millions of dollars, and that’s where he still was, a big stupid hero for the Boston Badgers.

Tyler shook his head and let out a sick laugh. “No. He’s stuck in the past, Adds,” he said before turning on his heel. “Deal still stands!” he shouted over his shoulder.

I walked back to my car, absolutely fuming. What was he getting at with all of this? With saying he thinks about me? Was he trying to guilt trip me? Because I didn’t have much sympathy left for his brother. And if his brother had wanted to talk to me, why hadn’t he? It’s not like I was hard to find. And it’s not like I hadn’t opened that door back up for him all those years ago...

I quickly sat in my car and slammed my door shut behind me. I fumbled with my phone, knowing I had to do this while I was still angry.

I dialed up the number I still begrudgingly knew by heart. My whole body anxiously trembled with each ringtone.

A breath of relief punched out of me when it ended on a final beep asking me to leave a message.

“Casey,” I said tightly. “Your brother...” My throat burned. “Your brother made me call you.”

5. Casey

I woke up drenched in sweat. I pushed my hair back and lazily searched around in my sheets for my ringing phone.

Who the fuck was calling me? Everyone knew I hated phone calls. The only person I could think of would be my agent... or maybe Tyler. Wait, fuck. Tyler had his first practice with the Crewmen today, it had to be him.

I quickly found my phone then, but when I picked it up and saw the number flashing on the screen, my entire body froze. It felt like a bucket of cold water had just been drenched down my back.

I re-read the number about ten times while it continued to ring.

Was I still sleeping? Because there was no way *she* was calling me...

I rubbed the sleep out of the eyes, and when I opened them again, her number was still there. I frantically tried to hit the green button to answer, but my shaky hands dropped the damn thing on my hardwood floor and it flew under my bed. I immediately dropped to the ground and reached for it, but it was too late. By the time I had it in hand again, the ringing had stopped.

“Fuck!” I roared aloud. I rolled into a sitting position on the ground and dropped my head back against my bed.

I was such a fucking idiot. I’d waited years for that phone call, always wondering what she’d say, what I’d say... and I couldn’t even pick it up. I grabbed my phone, ready to chuck it against the wall, but a tiny ding stopped me.

She left a message.

The absolute worst scenarios flashed through my mind, skyrocketing my heart rate... Because why would I ever get another call from her? Maybe something happened to her? To Craig? To her sister? Maybe she needed—

“Casey.” She sounded annoyed, bitter even. “Your brother... Your brother made me call you.”

She was okay.

I gingerly sat back on my bed.

What had Tyler done?

I played it over about five times... And looked at the empty right side of my bed.

6. Casey - Spring 2013

I looked over at her in the passenger seat of my truck and felt oddly amused. I'd never taken a girl out to eat before. I usually just talked to girls when they came to watch games at the rink, then invited them to one of my legendary bonfire parties in my backyard. I didn't have the time or desire to take anyone on a real date. Real dating would require allowing someone to actually get to know me, and I had no interest in that. I was a hook-up guy through and through and everyone around here knew that.

So driving a girl to get food—this was new territory for me. My friends would've chirped me out about it for sure if they saw me. And they definitely would've made fun of the fact that she didn't even want me to be doing it in the first place. I know it sounded cocky, but I was pretty confident that many puck bunnies would've loved to be in her current position, but here she was, watching like a hawk to memorize where we were going just in case I really was trying to kidnap her or something crazy like that. The ridiculousness of it actually made me chuckle a bit.

"What?" she snapped.

I slowed to a stop at the traffic light and cracked my knuckles back against the steering wheel. "Nothin' Sweetheart."

"You're smiling," she said.

I rubbed a hand over my jaw. Shit, I guess I was.

"I'm going to take my skates off, okay?" she asked hesitantly.

I felt my eyebrows scrunch together as I looked at her. "Are you asking permission?"

“You’re right, sorry.” Her mouth clamped shut, like she just realized it was bizarre to ask me, then she dipped forward to unlace her skates. Jeez, it was pretty clear she needed to start making her own decisions instead of following so many rules. I crinkled my nose. I hated rules.

As soon as we parked, I hopped out, but she hesitated. She chewed on her bottom lip and looked at me through my open truck window.

I ushered for her to follow me.

“I don’t have shoes. You didn’t let me bring them,” she said in an accusing tone.

I tipped my head back, thinking. She was a bit of a smart ass. I rounded the back of my truck and took out some slides to throw to her.

When she stepped out, she looked back at my beat-up old truck.

“You don’t need to close the windows?” she asked skeptically.

“Nah, don’t have AC, it’ll get too hot.”

She ran back and got her skates out of the car and brought them with her into the fast-food joint.

I held the door open above her head and kinda stifled a laugh at her wearing my slides. They were like boats on her small, bony feet, but she didn’t seem to mind.

As soon as we had our trays of cheeseburgers and drinks, I led the way to a back booth for some privacy.

We sat there in comfortable silence, eating together, but she kept staring at my coke. She chose water and was probably regretting it now.

I swallowed down a chuckle and cleared my throat. "You want some?" I nodded to my cup.

She twisted her lips in thought. "Yeah."

I pushed my cup closer to her.

She ate delicately, but quickly. She was a strikingly beautiful girl. She wasn't the type I usually went for— tall, blonde, big-boobed girls who donned hockey jerseys and usually carried themselves in a way that screamed sex. No, she was almost the exact opposite. This girl was all lean muscle and sharp looking. She had lengthy limbs that made her look tall, but she had to be only about 5'2 or 3. She looked serious, maybe a little too serious. She had dark hair that she kept tied up in a low bun, making me wonder how long it was, and dark blue eyes—a rare combination. There was a curious little beauty mark right below her left eye...

But it didn't really matter how beautiful I thought she was. She was the type who was too good for me... Because she wouldn't be satisfied with a hookup. She was the type of girl who wanted more than she even knew right now... more than I could ever give her.

"So, I don't know anything about you," she said, using her French fry to shovel ranch into her mouth.
"What's your name?"

I snorted and dipped some fries into ketchup. "I'm Casey."

"Casey who?" she inquired.

"Casey Jettersen. Friends call me Case, Jets, Jettersen."

"That sounds like a fake name," she said skeptically.

I arched an eyebrow. "I guess. All the hockey guys go by nicknames. I forget some of my best friends' real names sometimes."

"Hmm... That explains some things."

"Yeah?"

"Well, one day when I was working in the front office, a guy took a puck to the mouth and lost a couple teeth during sticks and pucks. He passed out from the sight of his own blood. I had to look up his info to call his emergency contact, ya know? But his friends just kept saying his name was 'Cap.' I was like, well, I do not have a contact card for 'Cap,' so you all have to give me more than that."

I cracked a smile at that. "Cap, you mean Joey Caprini?"

She nodded, looking unimpressed. "His friends are dumb."

I laughed aloud at that.

"How old are you?" was her next question.

"21."

"Any siblings?"

I wasn't sure why I was continuing to answer. We were both pretty much done with our lunch, so I should've been driving her back to the rink. But it seemed like we were both slowly picking at the fries to stretch out our time here.

"One younger brother named Tyler," I answered. "He's 16. I think he goes to school with Claire."

Her deep blue eyes, almost the color of the lake near my house, narrowed to mine. “You know Claire?”

I nodded. Everyone at the rink knew Claire. She was an outgoing, little spitfire. She challenged grown men to pull-up contests in the work-out room and almost always beat them, including me. When she went up against me, my whole body started shaking, and she was next to me turning red, but not giving up.

She and her sister had similar smiles and facial structures, but it seemed like maybe Claire favored her father’s side of the family, and Addie looked more like her mother. That was the opposite of me and Tyler. I was all my dad’s side, unfortunately.

“You guys are pretty different,” I added. “But I see the resemblance.”

“That’s nice of you to say. Claire is prettier.” She said it with a smile on her face, like she was proud.

I sat back and regarded her. That felt like a loaded statement for some reason. The major difference between the two of them was that Claire had a lightness about her... I wondered if Addie used to have it as well.

“Claire is a pretty girl, but...”

That tore her eyes to mine. She looked ready to pounce if I said anything mean.

“But what?” she snapped with furrowed eyebrows.

I tipped my head towards hers like I was letting her in on a secret. “But... You’re beautiful.”

Her mouth formed a perfect little oh, like she was surprised.

I’m not sure what compelled me to say it. I was supposed to just take her out and have some fun. I

wasn't supposed to be her fucking boyfriend, but something in me told me she needed to hear it. And it was the truth.

"You're much more serious than her. You're maybe a little too serious, Sweetheart," I added with a smirk.

Her jaw tightened and she dropped the fry she'd been holding. I immediately regretted saying anything. I wanted her to eat. It gave me an odd sense of peace that I was able to feed her.

"So, you figure skate?" I asked in a lame attempt to recover and keep the conversation moving.

She looked back at me like she could see right through me. "So, you play hockey?" she countered.

I nodded. Both answers were obvious.

"What position do you play?" she asked.

I sat back and motioned to myself. "What do you think?"

"Goalie," she said firmly.

"Ooh," I felt my face crack in disapproval. "That's an insult."

Her eyebrows knit together in confusion. "Huh?"

"Goalies are crazy," I told her. "You'd have to have a few screws loose to wanna stand in front of pucks being shot atcha."

"Okay, then offense?" she guessed.

"Rrr wrong."

"Well, defense it is, I guess," she said.

"Yupp. I'm not fast enough for offense, but I can hit," I told her with a wink. I reached for my cup for

another sip, but it was empty. She looked away, probably to feign innocence, and I found that even more cute for some reason.

She blew out a sigh and put her hands over her stomach. “I feel pregnant.”

“Food babies are good,” I said with a laugh. “That means you’re full and your body is happy.”

“Nah, too full. Might barf,” she said with a sigh.

“Oh no, no, no. No barfing,” I said sternly. I knew she was joking, but at the same time, we all knew there were some figure skaters who did actually bolt to the bathroom after lunch. Picturing her doing that made me grind my teeth together. The figure skating community, especially the coaches, needed some lessons on nutrition. I moved to slide out of the booth. “Let’s get moving.”

I pulled up to the front of the rink and looked over at her. She was staring at the entrance, still holding her skates in her lap. Her shoulders looked tense as hell, and I wished I could reach over and massage her tension away... which would be way too much. I quickly shook that thought out of my head.

I cleared my throat. “So, what do you say?”

She paused. “Sorry, I’m just taking a minute.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to go in,” I supplied. Internally, I chastised myself for saying that. I knew she needed to hear it, but what business did I have in saying it? Just because her dad wanted me to be her

friend didn't mean I should be taking any extra measures here...

"Yeah, I do," she said with a determined look. She nodded and started to move, but something inside me just didn't feel right about it, and I couldn't squash the feeling away.

"Why?" I asked her.

She turned to look at me. "Because..."

I cocked my head to the side and grinned. "Not good enough."

I threw my car in drive, and she clambered to grab the door handle, but I just hit the lock button, then the child lock button so she couldn't argue with me.

I'm not sure what compelled me to do it, but I turned up the radio and drove away anyway.

She sat hopelessly back in her seat, like she was allowing her brain time to accept that she wouldn't be going back into the rink.

After a beat of silence, she asked, "But what about your beer league game?"

I smirked. "Don't care. There's one every other night."

"Oh," she said, then a little giggle popped out of her mouth, and I knew I'd made the right decision.

When I turned down the long gravel drive that led to our house, I cringed a bit. I should've thought this through more because I didn't really want to show her our place. I'd been trying to fix it up over the last year or two, but I was still embarrassed by it. I knew she lived with her dad and little sister in one of those cookie-cutter,

three-bedroom houses in a nice neighborhood across town, which was a far cry from our house.

Ours was a hodgepodge mess of rooms because my dad never finished anything he started. He'd ripped up carpet in some places and not others, so there were still some rooms that only had floorboards, including my bedroom. He was long gone though, and I squeezed my eyes shut tight for a second to push him out of my head. Maybe I'd confront thoughts of him one day, but today was not that day.

"Oh, do you guys live on the lake?" she asked. It was a natural question. She'd probably only been around this part of town to get to the lake, but we lived on the other side of the gravel road on the less respectable part of town that didn't have lake access.

"Nah, other side of the road, Sweetheart," I told her.

"Oh, sorry. That's... nice," she said, trying to recover.

I threw her a tight-lipped smile to let her know I wasn't mad by the assumption.

Once inside, I kicked off my work boots and walked in, but she stood kinda rooted to her spot on the ancient welcome mat, taking it all in.

I instantly regretted allowing her here.

See, there are two types of hockey families in rink culture. There are the new money dads who paid to get their kids on teams. Those kids have the flashy, new, lightweight sticks and skates and the best of everything. And then there are blue collar dads who grew up playing the game themselves; the good old boys who love beer and are old buddies with the coaches. The old guard

kids grew up with wooden sticks and had hand-me-downs that were falling apart.

It was very obvious that we were part of the old guard and she had to be piecing that together.

I looked at our place through her eyes... The old piano with a bunch of baby pictures of Tyler and I on top of the music sheets– no one had played it since my mom... The messy kitchen with old wallpaper and cigarette smoke stains on the ceiling, the small living room to the left with a single large crappy couch that Tyler and I had found on the side of the road, and a large, new TV that I saved up to buy for a while. It was sitting on the floor because I didn't want to waste money on a stand.

I couldn't take her looking but not saying anything, it was making my skin crawl.

"C'mon." I motioned for her to follow me into the living room and pointed to the couch.

"You can find something to watch if you want? I'll join you in a sec. I'm gonna make a protein shake. You want?"

"Uh, no. Just a bottle of water if you've got one," she said, giving me a smile of thanks.

I nodded. "Coming right up."

A few minutes later, she had on some girly sitcom, and I noticed her yawning on the couch next to me. Figure skating hours started super early in the morning, so it was a given that she was tired. The large lunch on top of that was probably making her fight off a food coma.

I moved to get up and she jumped.

"All good?" I said with a laugh. "Have to switch the laundry."

I walked through the kitchen to get to the mud room, which housed the new washer and dryer I'd recently bought thanks to my job at the Ice League. I took mine and Tyler's warm clothes out of the dryer and came back to the living room to fold them.

She cocked her head and eyed me curiously. "So domestic."

A smile pulled at my lips. "You sound surprised."

She smiled then. "My dad couldn't fold a shirt if his life depended on it. I wash a lot of clothes for my family. I'll help. I love when clothes are all warm, right out of the dryer." She ushered me to bring the basket closer to her on the couch.

She immediately picked out a large shirt of mine and draped it over her shoulders. I paused for a minute, because I definitely liked her wearing my shit. I shook my head out. This girl was getting under my skin way, way too easily.

"Where's your mom?" she asked.

That was another natural question. It probably was a bit odd that at 21 I was doing my younger brother's laundry, but I'd been doing it for years. "Uh.... she's not here," I responded, internally cringing a bit. It wasn't a lie. She hadn't been around in about four years now, but I still struggled to answer that question. "I'm Mr. Mom these days," I said with a smirk.

She must've sensed my response was a bit off, because she murmured, "Oh, sorry I asked," then buttoned her mouth shut.

After lounging around for a bit, I got to work paying some bills at the kitchen table. I watched her pull her hair out of its bun and scrub her head a bit to get more comfortable. I liked her this way— comfortable.

I tried to focus on what I was doing, but I kept sneaking glances at her. I noticed her trying to fall asleep on her right side, but she couldn't... She'd wince then carefully lay back down on her left side.

By the time I came back to the couch, she was almost asleep. I went to rub her back and realized that was a mistake. She jumped away from my hand like I'd scared her.

"Just rubbing your back," I said innocently. She stared at me for a beat, then seemed to relax a bit into me.

"Sor-"

"Nope." I shook my head at her. "We're done doing that."

Her eyes searched mine for an answer. "Huh?"

I pointed a finger at her. "You gotta stop apologizing to me. You have nothing to be sorry about." I stared at her intently. "Do you even realize you've apologized to me about five times today?"

"S—" She cut herself off and looked at the ground, like she was just now realizing she did that.

The thought of her apologizing to everyone in her life when she had nothing to be sorry for drove me absolutely nuts. People would take advantage of that.

"Just say thank you instead," I suggested.

She didn't respond, but I could tell she was processing what I told her.

I continued to massage her shoulders, and she let out a breathy little moan, which drove me fucking crazy. She was totally unaware of how hot she was.

It wasn't long before she fell asleep curled up next to me, her head on my right thigh.

I tried to watch the movie, I really did, but instead, I just kept wondering how people at the rink perceived me and my brother... Because she couldn't be more different from the way I'd originally thought of her this morning...

I always thought she was extremely intimidating— and I wasn't alone. All the guys knew her, but they were scared to talk to her. At one point, some of the guys had a bet going to see if anyone would have the guts to ask her out. Because she was beautiful, but she'd as soon as bite your head off as smile back at you.

But when I saw her out on the curb, I couldn't not talk to her. Something pulled me toward her, like she had some kind of magnetic aura.

Watching her sitting there, it finally clicked. I finally understood why Craig was worried about her— I'd become his confidant in a lot of ways because I worked so closely with him at the rink. I always blew off his worries about her, because inside the rink, she was like an athletic powerhouse. But out on the curb, she just looked sad and lonely. It kinda cracked my ice cold heart. She seemed like the kind of girl who kept it together for everyone else, but was left exhausted and unable to take care of herself— something that I could definitely relate to.

I brushed my fingers gently through her soft hair.

She seemed to be in a pretty deep sleep... And my mind wouldn't get off how she couldn't even stand to

lay on her right side. I got the sense she'd never tell me if something actually was wrong. Besides, I was supposed to be making her feel better with this little afternoon.

Curiosity got the better part of me. I gingerly lifted her leggings ever so carefully and saw deeply bruised blue skin...

My hand was immediately slapped away.

"What the hell?!" she snapped.

I was met with her angry eyes staring daggers at me...

But her anger was nothing compared to mine. I couldn't even place who I was mad at. I just hated that she was hurting.

"Does your coach know how bad that is?" I demanded roughly. She shouldn't have been pushing through that, she needed a break.

"Would you tell your coach?" she returned, pinning me with her serious eyes.

I was silent. She had a point. But that didn't make me feel any better.

"Yeah, didn't think so," she grumbled.

For some reason, I felt extremely disturbed seeing evidence of her pain. I got up and went to the freezer for an ice pack

I held one up. "Will this cover it?"

She flicked her eyes away from me and decided to let her pride down for a brief second. "Two of those."

I turned back to my freezer, trying to control my face. Jesus. How had no one noticed how much pain

she was in?

When I walked back to her with the ice packs, she reached for them, but it was my turn to slap her hands away. I carefully held the packs to the area where the blue skin was.

“I can hold it,” she said tersely.

“Yeah, I know you can. But you won’t hold it long enough.” I turned my attention back to the TV so she’d know this wasn’t up for discussion.

“How do you know?”

“Because I don’t hold it long enough on myself. You start listening to your coldness instead of what your muscles actually need,” I said quietly.

I could feel her eyes studying me.

“How did it happen?” I briefly shifted my eyes to the bruise.

“Well, it doesn’t look like that after one fall, I’ll tell ya that much. I keep flubbing up my triple loop. I hate that jump. I’m not even taking off; I go to jump and slide off my edge. It’s the kind of fall a five-year-old makes, but I keep doing it because I’m so distracted.”

“Why?”

Her jaw tightened and I knew I went too far.

“Doesn’t matter. Go back to sleep. It’s fine. I’ll hold it,” I told her.

She chewed the inside of her cheek. “Thank you, Casey.”

I sat there and inhaled deeply.

That was the moment I knew I was in trouble... Because I wanted to hear her say that again.

We came from different backgrounds, and we were both struggling, but I felt at peace with her lying next to me. My worries drifted away when I could ease hers.

After an hour or so, she woke up and began stretching out her limbs. She looked sideways out the sliding door where the afternoon sun was slanting in. “I’m sorry, I wasted your afternoon.”

“No,” I gave her a stern look.

She rolled her eyes, but a smile tugged at her lips. “Thank you for wasting your afternoon with me.”

I smirked. “Good girl.”

She paused and her gaze fell to my lips.

Shit. I couldn’t kiss her. Not today. Not like this. But I wanted to...

To me, this was one of my favorite afternoons of the year. I took it as a compliment that she could sleep next to me. It meant she felt safe with me, and it made me feel like a good man. “Seems like you needed to catch up on sleep,” I told her.

She shrugged. “Yeah, well, napping pisses me off. It’s unproductive.”

I tried to stifle a chuckle. She was like a tiny robot. She needed to relax. “Yeesh. Okay. Well, how about at night? You sleeping okay?”

She snorted. “Not lately.”

“Mmhmm.” I rubbed my scruff-covered jaw.

“What?” she eyed me suspiciously. “Stop acting all patronizing.”

That made me crack a smile. “It’s not patronizing that I’m trying to help.”

She stiffened. “Well, it feels like you’re looking down on me like I’m some child who can’t take care of herself.”

I leaned back into the couch so that she’d be put at ease. “I know you take care of yourself, Sweetheart.”

“Good,” she said firmly.

I cocked my head toward her. “But maybe you don’t have to. Maybe I want to take care of you.”

She paused and I could see her chest rising and falling heavily.

“Stop thinkin’ so much, Sweetheart.” I felt my face crack into a grin. “Don’t make it a bigger deal than it needs to be.”

7. Addie

When I finally parked back in my apartment's underground garage, I quickly shot off a text to Tyler informing him that I called and left a message for his stupid brother. Within a minute, he texted me back saying that we could meet as soon as he got out of practice.

I wanted to meet him at the rink, but he refused.

I stared down at the message he'd sent: *We'll do it at your place. What's the address?*

I felt my jaw slide out and quickly punched out: *Why my place? Why not your place?*

He returned: *Do you want this interview or not?*

I let out a frustrated growl and sent him my address. Whatever, I needed to get this over with as soon as possible. And maybe this could even work in my favor. He'd be invading my privacy, so I wouldn't feel bad about invading his with personal questions.

Question one was about to be—*So, you were born in Detroit, right? Why was your family here, Tyler?* I could answer that one myself, and I knew it was something he wouldn't want to necessarily share with the world.

While riding the shitty elevator to my apartment on the ground floor, I sent up a prayer hoping it wouldn't get stuck again, then called Harper back. Now that the whole calling Casey situation was over, I felt better about telling her.

"Hey!" she answered breathlessly. She'd been breathless since the day her toddler, Mia, my goddaughter, learned to walk.

"Hi," I said with a laugh. "Chasing Mia?"

"God, you know it," I could practically hear her eyes roll. "She's gotten faster, I swear." I could hear toddler giggles in the background.

"How's your pregnancy going?"

"Good," she said tightly.

I hated how she seemed to shy away from talking to me about it. Just because it was something she knew I wanted too didn't mean that I wasn't happy for her or wanting to hear about her experience. Her almost hiding the news from me somehow made it worse because that made me feel like a shitty best friend.

"Every time I don't feel well, I want to murder Kyle, so, nothing new here. I'm allowed to have one cup of coffee per day, ya know?" She plowed on without letting me answer, which was her typical M.O. "Well, my lovely husband has now decided that that's not okay with *him*, which is fuckin' ridiculous. Like excuse me, but this is *my* body too, ya know? And you are no doctor, sir! Anyway, he tried to throw away my whole coffee machine this morning. He walked outside in his boxers and put it out on the curb, Addie," she deadpanned. "Old Mrs. Holiday across the street was hooting and hollering. I swear I almost stabbed him with a fork during breakfast, then I went directly to Starbucks."

I tried to tamper down a giggle at that. Kyle was constantly trying to make Harper adopt healthier habits. His whole crusade against caffeine was pretty honorable seeing as how he thought it contributed to her anxiety (being her best friend for almost a decade, I knew this was most likely true), but she was not hearing it.

"Oh! And you're getting an invite to Mia's third birthday soon. We're having it at our house again. You-

know-who is also invited, but we'll do the same thing as last year, yeah?"

I breathed out a sigh. "Yeah, that's good."

Kyle was still a good friend and teammate of Casey's, and I was her best friend, so Harper had played mental chess with us for years. When she planned parties, she always had Casey show up for only the second half so that I could leave well before he got there. It was a lot of effort to avoid him, but Harper would go to all lengths to protect my mental peace, which was something I loved about her.

"Anyways, that's all my news. I'm ordering a new coffee machine on Amazon right now," she added with an evil laugh. "I can't wait to see his stupid face when he sees it in the kitchen." I could practically hear her smile as she said it, and that made me laugh.

"You should video his reaction and send it to me."

"Oh, will do. So what's new with you?"

"Ah well, you'll never guess who I'm writing on right now," I said dryly.

She paused.

"Tyler Jettersen."

"Noo," she drawled. "Are you serious? One, that's gotta be awkward for you, and two, Casey might have his head for talking to the press," she whispered into her phone.

"Is Kyle there right now?" I asked.

"No," she laughed. "I don't know why, but I felt like I had to whisper."

"Yeah... well, he wanted the story, but didn't want to upset Casey. I'm interviewing him in a couple hours

here... Harper, he made me call him."

"What?!" she burst out. I could practically see her mouth dropping open in shock. "Way to bury the lede!"

"Yeah. Little brat. I left a message on his phone. So weird. Hopefully he doesn't even listen to it."

"How are you feeling about it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Weird, I guess."

"Yeah... Well, if you want me to make Kyle say something to him, you just let me know."

"No," I quickly replied. I'd already used Kyle once before. That'd make me feel like we were back in high school or something. If Casey wanted to say something back, he would... But if he did call back, would I answer?

No.

There was too much between us.

We both needed to keep living our own lives. Besides, I had a plan, and I wasn't about to let anyone distract me from it.

We spent the rest of the phone call talking about little Mia and what she wanted for her birthday— all princess things to Harper's shock. Harper grew up a tomboy who played hockey with the guys until she was forced to play in a girl league as a teen. Her daughter wanted to be a pink ballerina.

Two hours later, Tyler stood in the middle of my apartment wearing workout clothes and a hat turned backwards over his dark hair. His presence suddenly

made my place feel awfully small, but I forced myself not to feel insecure. I carved out a little life for myself and there was no reason I shouldn't feel proud of it.

"You just move in?" he asked, eyeing the cardboard boxes.

"Yupp, that's why it would've been better to meet at the rink," I said with an annoyed edge to my voice.

He looked around and cringed when his eyes fell on my broken window shades. He wandered over to them and started trying to bend them to cover the gaping holes. He craned his neck to look back at me and worry was clearly etched on his face. "You don't get dressed here, do you? People in the building across the street can see right in."

Something about him being worried pissed me off. "It's perfectly fine," I snapped.

His eyebrows knit together. "Your dad knows you moved here and all?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. He had been like a little brother to me, now he was questioning *my* life choices? I was a grown ass woman. I didn't need my daddy's approval to move into an apartment.

"You chose to meet here, Tyler. Do not insult my place," I said, reprimanding him.

He turned to me quickly and put his hands up in innocence. "I'm not!"

I raised my eyebrows, unimpressed. "Sit," I ordered.

His face cracked in confusion. "On your bed?"

"Oh my God," I mumbled. I moved quickly so that he'd follow me to the small dining room table in my

kitchen. We needed to start so he'd stop gawking at all my stuff.

I ushered him to sit, and he hesitantly listened. I opened up my laptop and hit record on my phone. I always typed as my interviewee spoke, then filled in gaps with my recording afterwards.

“So, you were born in Michigan, but shortly moved back to Minnesota. What was your family’s reason for relocation?”

He propped an elbow on my table and held his head. “See...” he tapped my table with an index finger, “this is also why I’m only granting you an interview,” he said simply.

I cautiously slid my gaze from my computer to him. “Why?”

He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “So you can help me think of ideas on how to spin it so that Casey doesn’t rip my head off.”

“What?” I felt my mouth drop open. He wanted me to help him lie? There was no way that was going to happen.

“Yupp.” He nodded. “See, I’m stuck in a pretty shitty position. Unlike him, I do want the press. But you think he’d be okay with me airing out our dirty laundry to the world? No way in hell.” He laughed dryly. “He’s been in the league for what, almost a decade now? And he’s kept everything super locked up. But he’s also turned down like every single story people wanna write about him. ESPN wanted him as a cover story a couple years back, you know that?” He shook his head like he couldn’t believe it. “I tried to convince him to do it, but you know him. So I gotta figure this out. And you can help me!”

I rubbed my forehead. What had I gotten myself into? “This is not okay, Tyler.”

“Okay, fine, don’t help me, but if Casey rips me to shreds, it’s on your conscience.” He paused, then nodded to my computer. “Okay, my family was just visiting Detroit at the time of my birth, we were stopping through to visit friends when my mom went into labor early. I guess I just liked Detroit and wanted to see it for myself.” He smirked. “How’s that?”

I shook my head and began typing. Whatever. They were his quotes. I’d just make sure not to include anything that could be found as a lie.

“How did you get into hockey?” I asked next.

“Jeez Adds,” he said with a laugh. “You could write this yourself.”

I took my hands away from my keyboard and clasped them together. “You’re going to get me fired. This is going to get me fired,” I repeated. “I do not think this is a good idea.”

“No, no, no,” he backtracked. “Sorry! It is a good idea. Okay... My older brother is the best guy I know.” He watched me closely as he spoke, and I made sure to keep my eyes on my laptop. I could feel my cheeks burning as he pumped his brother’s tires. “He basically raised me because my mom worked a lot.”

“Mmm...” I squinted at my computer screen. I guess it wasn’t a complete lie. Maybe she had worked a lot before she passed away.

“She worked a lot,” he repeated firmly. “So he raised me. He took me to his practices with him all the time. He was a defenseman, so he always had me playing offense. He made me try to get past him all the

time. He'd shout, 'again!' every time I failed." He chuckled. "It worked out quite nicely for both of us I think."

That was true. Tyler was a right winger who went eighth overall in the draft a few years back. Casey was a veteran defenseman whose number would probably hang in his home stadium's rafters as soon as he retired.

It seemed Tyler had gotten comfortable with the interview, because he started wandering into my kitchen as he answered my questions.

"It looks like you went from the Ice League's AAA team to the NAHL, to USHL, to college, to the AHL, and now here, is that the correct order?"

"That is correct," he said. He was now looking inside my stove.

"And where was your favorite place to play?"

"Definitely the Ice League," he said without skipping a beat. "That's when I was with Casey the most, and I loved living with Casey. I mean, he was basically a single dad to me at a super young age. He gave me a great childhood, because he's a great guy." He looked at me pointedly. "But the NAHL was pretty sick too because I had a pretty dope billet family. Shoutout to the Hurley's in—" he cut himself off. "What are these?"

I looked to see him holding pamphlets that were in my designated junk drawer.

"What the fuck, Tyler? You can't just go through people's things," I snapped. I felt my face burn as I quickly stood and tore them from his grip. I shoved them back where he found them, but his eyes stayed on the drawer.

He looked shell-shocked.

"Adds, what are those?" he repeated.

I pushed my hair behind my ears and stood as tall as I could, which made me about eye-level with his chest. "None of your business."

He shoved his hat off and ran a hand through his pretty-boy hair, looking very distressed.

"Come back and take a seat," I ordered, but I knew I needed to say something to get us back on track. I clenched my jaw and leveled him with my gaze. "I'm tired of waiting around and I have no interest in dating, but I do want to start a family, and that is none of your business, Tyler," I said in a gravelly voice.

He stood there blinking for what felt like a whole minute, then he slowly sat back down at the table.

He answered the rest of my questions with very short responses, and the playfulness was gone from his eyes. He seemed shaky and on-edge. He pulled at his T-shirt collar multiple times, like he was itching to get away from me.

I finally slammed my laptop shut. "You're making this harder than it has to be, Tyler. Why don't you get some air, some space, whatever, and we'll finish the interview tomorrow."

He nodded furiously and tore out of my place, mumbling that he'd see me later.

As soon as I heard the door slam shut, I dropped my head in my hands and let out a frustrated growl.

I didn't want anyone else to know... Besides, he'd gotten the wrong idea anyway. I wasn't sure why I kept those IVF pamphlets because I'd already ruled it out as a viable option. It was far too expensive, and my insurance wouldn't cover it. I didn't want to ask my dad for help—

partially in fear that he would try to stop me. So, I figured I'd try my own way...

Regardless of the way I did it, I wanted it to happen. I *needed* it to happen.

The dream of motherhood was the one thing that allowed me to keep pushing the last few years. It was the one thing that I'd wanted my entire adult life, and I wouldn't let not having a relationship gatekeep me from having it.

8. Casey

"You want the good or bad news first, bro?" my little brother asked me on the phone.

I held my hand over my mouth so that no one could lipread what I was saying. There were a bunch of press people present for my team's annual preseason golf outing. "What? I don't want any news. I want to know what's going on. Why did you have—" I cut myself off and swallowed hard. It was difficult to say her name aloud, I always avoided it. "Why did you have her call me?" I demanded.

"I heard you didn't answer," he deadpanned, completely sidestepping my question. "You're running out of time, bro."

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with my arm. It was a September day, but the sun was beating down hard. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

I was already stressed because I had to button up and act all professional today with a bunch of big wigs hanging around and all. I never felt like I belonged around people like this. They wanted to talk with NHL all-stars, but the truth was, I was just a simple beer league guy who got lucky. Even almost a decade after breaking into the NHL and becoming the lead scorer for defensemen in the league, I was still waiting for my luck to run out and for someone to kick me out. And I fucking hated wearing polos and damn golf pants.

"She's... shes..." he stammered.

"She's what?" I spat. I rubbed my forehead and blew out a breath. "I need to get going, Tyler, I'm—"

"She's moving on!" he practically yelled.

I pulled the phone away from my ear. Part of me was elated hearing that, but the other part of me was selfishly overcome with sadness. Only she could make so much mental anguish and confusion battle inside me.

But at the end of the day, I knew it was a good thing. I knew I'd never be able to move on from the past, and I didn't deserve to. But she did.

So why then, did I feel so absolutely fucking gutted hearing it? I ran a hand through my hair.

"Jettersen, let's go!" my teammate, Kyle Markson, who we all called Marksy, yelled at me. He was holding his toddler daughter, Mia, over his shoulders. His pregnant wife, Harper, came up from behind them and cooed at their baby, making me wince like someone just slapped me across the face. I always wondered if our—mine and Addie's—life would've looked so crazy happy like that had everything not gotten so fucked.

Everyone brought their families today—another thing that made me feel like a fucking outsider. The young guys brought their moms and dads or siblings, and the older guys brought their wives and kids. I was always alone. Tyler would've been invited, but he was always busy with his own team's preseason shit. It hurt me from afar that he would have to suffer through this kind of thing alone as well... but hopefully he'd get himself a girl sooner rather than later.

"I looked at the schedule," my brother continued, "and we're playing each other in two weeks. Our first regular season game. You can stay with me an extra night and we can figure out how to talk to her. We can—"

I didn't listen to the rest of his plan. I couldn't expect Tyler to understand everything that had

transpired between us when he didn't know anything about the one night that broke us apart forever.

"She doesn't want anything to do with me, Tyler." It gutted me to admit that to him. "I'm glad if she is..." My throat clogged with emotion and my mouth moved into a grim line. It was hard to lie. "I'm glad if she is moving on," I finished. "I want what's best for her, always."

"But what if *you're* what's best for her?!" he practically shouted at me.

"Jettersen! C'mon!" Now all three guys in my foursome group were yelling at me to take my turn.

"I really gotta go, Ty. I'm at my team's golf outing. Lemme know how yours goes next week and if you need anything."

"But you guys could still work it out! You have to try, Casey. You owe her—"

I hung up on him. I didn't want to do it, but in my defense, I had told him I had to go. And I couldn't hear any more about her. It hurt too much.

Instead, I looked up to see Coleson, one of our new rookies, jogging my way.

I grunted when he reached me. I never spent too much time socializing with the rookies. I hated any kind of hazing and would always make it a point to protect them against shit like that, especially considering what happened to me during my rookie year, but that didn't mean I had to be their buddy. They were like happy puppies, and I couldn't handle their energy.

"Sup, Jetts! This is awesome!" He gestured around us. "You guys get to do this every year?" He shook his head in disbelief. "Wow," he breathed out, then looked back up at me. "Want some?"

I looked down at him handing me some grizzly chewing tobacco. I stared at the green canister. It was like a time portal, bringing me back to my 21-year-old self.

“Sure, bud.” I took it from him, dropped it on the green, backed up, then swung my golf club and slapped the stupid son-of-a-bitch tin canister into non-existence.

“Fore!” Marksy called out, then doubled over in laughter.

I turned and gave the rookie a heavy-handed pat on the back. “Thanks, bud.” I pushed my lips together in a firm line to keep from cracking a smile at his shocked face. I guess sometimes messing with rookies wasn’t such a bad thing.

9. Casey- Summer 2013

She refused to kiss me...

And we'd gone far past kissing in the past few weeks...

We hadn't defined what we were, but I think she was my girlfriend. Everyone called her *my girl*. We just didn't have the official labels because I was too chicken shit to have that talk with her. Deep down, I still didn't feel worthy of her. I was the fun summer fling of her life; the part of a phase that she was bound to grow out of. But she wasn't a fling or phase for me. She was the best I'd ever have, I was sure of it. I was ruined for anyone else. And I knew I was stealing time with her... *and* that I was doing myself a disservice by being with her. I was setting myself up for heartbreak. But I couldn't help it. I couldn't *not* fall in love with Adelina Kessel a little more each day.

We balanced a very delicate line at the rink.

The figure skating community hated me for her.

The hockey community loved her for me.

Her coach and mother stuck their noses up at me every chance they could get. I just balled my fists and walked away when that happened. Their attitudes toward us told me every insecurity I felt about not being good enough for her was right.

But my guys all clapped me on the back and couldn't believe that I'd landed myself a figure skater... And not just any figure skater, but Adelina Kessel, AKA the best skater around. The girl who had a chance to get to the Olympics. The girl who threw triple jumps and landed them with graceful effortlessness. The girl who practically bent herself in half while spinning so fast that

it was insane. The girl who skated to black swan. Watching her was like watching an artist. She painted the rink with her elegance.

We spent almost every single day together since that first day I found her outside the rink with a bloody nose about two months ago.

I either drove her back to her dad's house or she came over to my house every day after practice.

While I fixed dinner or worked on the house, she helped Tyler with homework. She called herself stupid because she didn't have a formal education, but she was smarter than anyone I knew, that was for sure. She helped him with his papers the most. She knew every single book, front to back like an expert... I don't think I'd ever finished a book in my life...

At night, I'd sneak in a workout in our garage, and she'd sit on one of the machines I wasn't using and read one of her romance books she was so fond of.

Every night, I'd ask, "Where ya going this time?"

And she'd answer with whatever setting or time period her books were set in. Sometimes it was a western romance, other times a Victorian age tale, and sometimes even a sports romance.

I'd ask her to read to me sometimes, and I'm not sure if I really listened to the story as much as her voice. I just loved that she loved spending time with me.

Another thing that worked in our favor was her parents' separation, as much as I hated to say that... She'd tell each of them that she was staying at the other's house, and then she'd sleep peacefully tucked next to me all night.

She brought a calming presence to our house, and I didn't want to go back to my stressed-out sleepless nights without her.

I think it was also healing for Tyler to have her presence in the house. I felt proud that I could show him what a good relationship looked like— something that neither of us had seen growing up.

During my late-night beer league games, she'd sit in the timebox, drowning in one of my hockey hoodies. It was like a dress on her, but she looked cozy... And I secretly loved when she wore my last name on her back.

She kept track of the time clock and ran the scoreboard during the games, something that was a luxury for us because no one usually cared enough to pay someone to do it. She did it for free and claimed her payment was watching a good game— something that put a shit-eating grin on all the guys' faces.

But... When I got a penalty the other day that escalated into a brawl— a tiny brawl— she wasn't too happy about it.

We usually just shook hands and kept playing— it was beer league, after all— but that wasn't okay with her. She argued with the ancient ref to make us both sit for two minutes.

And then she had the balls to ignore me as soon as I locked myself in the box.

I sat facing her instead of the play and kept tapping on the glass between us to get her attention.

She finally side-eyed me with thirty seconds left to go in my penalty.

"That wasn't very nice of you," she said with her red-tipped nose stuck up in the air.

I almost laughed out loud. “He started it!” I said, pointing to the guy on the other side of her in his box.

She turned to him, then me, and said, “Be nice,” to both of us.

He scootched back so he could see me behind her. We both cracked up, and I think that just made her even more mad.

After the game, I quickly showered so we could grab some food from Benny’s for dinner—our little tradition lately.

Except, when I found her in the lobby, she was glowering at me and then refused to hold my hand. She actually took off, walking about five paces in front of me. I grabbed hold of my hoodie, pulling her back. “What the heck, babe?” I said with a chuckle.

She slapped my hand away. “Aghhh. Did you just—”

Shit. She really was pissed...

“Sorry, sorry,” I gulped, dropping my bag on the lobby floor in front of Benny’s.

She planted her hands on her hips and it felt like we were in a standoff. “No, you’re not!”

My face faltered, because I really wasn’t that sorry... was I? I knew I shouldn’t have laughed at her, but all I did was play a rough game of hockey. “C’mon. We can talk about it in there.” I nodded to Benny’s. “I’m starving and I know you’ve got about a half hour ‘til you’re hangry,” I said with a grin. “Let’s get food, babe.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and set her jaw. “I’m not eating.”

I searched the ground around us for an answer.
“Uh.. Yes, you are?”

“No, I’m not,” she demanded again.

“Adds, we don’t have any food at home. We have to eat, c’mon.” I really didn’t think she’d be this mad. Now I was starting to panic a bit.

“Maybe you have to, but I don’t,” she said stubbornly.

Except... her stomach betrayed her and chose that moment to growl. I racked a hand through my hair and did my best to keep a straight face.

“Adds...”

She stalked off toward the rink doors, her cute butt moving fast. I sat back for a second, not really sure where she was even going because I had driven us here... So she was going to the dark parking lot alone? That was not happening. I strode after her, grabbed her waist before she could open the doors, and easily threw her over my shoulder. “We’re eating,” I ground out, turning back to Benny’s.

She didn’t even fight me— probably because she really was hungry. She kept her arms crossed over her chest.

When I walked into Benny’s holding her like that, Paige looked taken aback for all of two seconds, then said, “Booth for two?” She knew the two of us. She knew I loved her.

I pleasantly nodded and followed her to the back of the diner.

I placed Addie on her feet. She straightened up her bra under my sweatshirt with a scowl on her face,

then slid into Benny's booth.

She was quiet while we ordered drinks and appetizers, and I knew I had to grovel.

"Adds, I am very sorry I laughed at you in the box," I said slowly, but I was having a hard time controlling my face.

She threw her hands up. "For God's sake stop laughing, Casey!" she demanded.

"Okay, okay!" I told her. "I am sorry! It's just, no one's ever wanted me to *not* fight before, babe."

Her chest moved with a deep breath. "Fighting is fine if it's called for. What you did was just dumb. But fine. You're sorry you laughed at me, *and...?*" She arched a challenging eyebrow at me.

"And I'm very sorry I manhandled you again," I said seriously. "Even though you were being stubborn," I added under my breath.

"Casey, I swear to God—"

"Okay, I'm sorry, babe! I am! For real. Promise."

"Thank you," she leveled me with a glare.

I swallowed hard. "So uh... how'd I play?" I asked her. "Other than the penalty— I promise I'll be nicer," I said, playfully rolling my eyes in an attempt to get her in a better mood.

She shrugged and popped a fry in her mouth.

I laughed because it was pretty damn amusing to me. I scored a hattrick. How could she not be happy with how I played? "I wanna know what you think," I pushed.

"Well," she said, not making eye contact with me, "I think that you're working harder, not smarter."

I felt my eyebrows scrunch together. “What does that mean?”

“I mean, if you looked at the ice a little better sometimes, then you guys would actually win. You showboat all the way up the ice and then your offense guys are all bunched up at the blue line because they don’t want to go off-sides on you, and then there’s only one guy back to stop their breakaway when you lose the puck. You let a lot of two-on-ones happen tonight. You need to play smarter than that, make some plays or something,” she said pointedly.

“You want me to be a stay-at-home defenseman?!” I laughed. Most girls loved the way I showboated. Hell, I loved it. Skating up ice and having your jersey billow back from your speed— that was an amazing feeling.

“No,” she narrowed her eyes to mine. “I want you to be a good teammate and only skate up when the opportunity calls for it and only go for bodies that actually have the puck.”

“Well, if someone pushes my goalie, I’m gonna beat their ass,” I argued.

She pursed her lips. “But they aren’t pushing your goalie on purpose. They’re trying to get a goal. So they’re up by your net, and when they try to walk away, you guys push him back into your goalie! It’s ridiculous! Let the poor guy go back to his bench!” Her voice got louder as her little tirade went on, and I was actually pretty surprised she felt so passionate about it

I shook out my freshly showered hair and smoothed it back. “You just don’t get it,” I said with a smirk. “We have to be ready to fight.”

She rolled her eyes. “I think you just love fighting, but you shouldn’t do it unless the situation actually calls for it. You guys have too much testosterone to see situations clearly sometimes.” She raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

I sat staring at her.

“What?” she asked defensively. “You’re the one who wanted to know what I thought, and I thought you had a bad game.”

My mouth dropped open. “Well babe, I’m not so bad. I still have some big teams wanting me here and there.”

She looked at me curiously, like she wanted to push into that, but she let it go, thank God. I wasn’t sure why I let that slip out.

“Well, maybe you’d have even *more* teams wanting you if you listened to me,” she said.

“Shoot,” I smiled back at my girl and shook my head. “Maybe I’ll try your way next time, Sweetheart.”

But now, I let out a frustrated laugh to the sky... Now, she wouldn’t kiss me... Because I chewed.

The problem started one night in the workout room.

She was reading, and I was in the zone with my workout, so I wasn’t really paying attention to what she was doing.

She reached for a drink of water, but it wasn’t water...

“Wait!” I called out, but it was too late.

She immediately spit it out and doubled over, practically hacking up a lung.

I tried super hard to comfort her but was struggling. I internally screamed at myself, *STOP LAUGHING, DUDE*. Because this was *not* funny at all.... But I couldn't stop.

She looked up at me with panicked eyes. "What the hell was that?!"

I backed up and rubbed a hand over my jaw. "Doesn't matter, babe."

Her eyes bugged out in realization. "Was that...?"

"It was an honest mistake, Adds," I said, putting my hands up in innocence.

"Oh my God!" she screeched. She turned and ran inside, slamming the door behind her, and then proceeded to brush her teeth about twenty times.

I should've known I wouldn't hear the last of that...

The next night, after Tyler had gone off to bed, we laid down on the couch together. She patted my scruffy face with her dainty hand and said, "You have a beautiful smile. And you're going to ruin it."

"No, not me," I told her with a grin. "I won't let anyone punch me in the face."

"I'm not talking about losing your teeth in a hockey fight," she said. She smoothed a finger over my lips and her lip pouted out a bit. "That would make me very sad, though."

I made a vow right then to never let anyone get a jab in on my jaw— I personally didn't give a shit what I looked like, but I would care for her. But if she wasn't

talking about that, then... “Then what are you talking about?”

“Ya know last night? How I... blah,” she mimicked throwing up. “Well, that’s never gonna happen again, Casey,” she warned.

“I am very sorry. I will never leave it laying around, I promise.” I squeezed her against me.

“You need to stop chewing tobacco,” she said firmly.

I laughed her off, thinking it was cute. It wasn’t a big deal. All the guys did it.

She swatted at my chest. “Besides it being absolutely disgusting, it’s bad for you!”

“Not me, babe. I’m good,” I said, trying to swallow down a chuckle. It was cute when she was all protective over me. I brushed her hair behind her ear and sunk further into the couch, hoping she’d lay back down against me... but she had other plans.

She pursed her lips and put a hand on my chest to push herself up, then she fixed me with a disappointed look. “That’s it,” she said. “I have no choice.” She started getting off the couch then, but I grabbed her hips and pulled her back against me.

“What’s it?” I asked, still smiling at her.

She heaved a sigh. “I’ve decided I’m not kissing you ‘til you quit.”

That wiped the smile clean off my face.

“I’m serious,” she argued, staring at me. “You need to stop, okay?” She pushed out of my lap and marched away before I could answer her.

After that discussion, the next five days were filled with her texting me links to those terrifying TV commercials detailing the dangers of chewing tobacco.

And on the sixth day, she broke me.

That's all I could take.

At the rink, I strolled into the east side arena and leaned against the railing. She was dressed in black leggings and a black long sleeve top—her usual outfit—and she looked gorgeous as she ran through a section of her program. She never smiled when she skated though, and I always wondered why. Maybe because she was so focused on her movements.

When she landed a triple lutz combo jump, I clapped for her, and the sound carried pretty far because she was the only one out there.

Seeing me, she smiled and skated to the open board door near where I was. She stood on the ice about ten feet away from me, making it feel like we were in a standoff.

I rolled the toothpick in my mouth and fought the corners of my lips from smiling. I couldn't help it. She always brought a smile to my face.

I cleared my throat. "Okay, I got the hint, Sweetheart," I grinded out.

She looked back at me with a playfulness in her eyes. "Did you? Did you really?" she drawled and squinted her eyes at me. "Or do you just want me to stop sending you the scary commercials?" She planted her hands on her hips, making her look sassy.

I tipped my head back and let out another frustrated laugh. When my eyes landed back on her, I nodded. "I got it."

"So, you're going to stop doing it?" she challenged.

I heaved a sigh. "Yes, dear."

"What's that?" she asked, motioning to her ear. Now she was just playing with me.

I took the toothpick from my mouth and tossed it in the garbage. "Yes."

"Huh?"

"I got the hint." I ran a hand through my tangled hair. "You have my word. I will never chew again. Now can I please kiss you?"

She glided backwards on her skates and popped a hip out. But she must not have realized how determined I was, nor how much I missed kissing her.

I looked down at my work boots and smirked. I was willing to take the risk. I got a running start, then slid onto the ice toward her and grabbed her little waist before she could get away.

"Casey!" She cackled and collapsed against my chest in giggles. "You're gonna fall!"

"Nah, not me babe," I mumbled as I trailed kisses all the way up her delicate neck to her face, then paused. "Missed this. Love this," I said, brushing my thumb across her cheek, then I kissed her full on the lips.

When I pulled back, she paused and searched my eyes. "I love this too," she said softly. She swallowed hard like her words just made her incredibly nervous.

And that took away all my nerves.

I wanted to be strong for her. I wanted to be the security she needed.

I felt my voice go hoarse as I whispered, “I love you, Adelina Kessel.”

She bit her lip, then a giddy smile lit up her entire face. She touched my cheek with her gloved-hand. “I love you too, Casey Jettersen.”

10. Addie

Today, Brandon joined me for the first preseason game. He wasn't writing a piece, but he loved coming to any game he could on the company's dime. While the rest of us actually reporting on the game were busy requesting updated stats, speaking into headsets, and tweeting out predictions, he sat there eating a hot dog and sucking down a concession stand slurpee. The only thing that told people he was actually part of the press were his checkered button down and tight lululemon dress pants.

I side-eyed him when his slurping got a bit too loud. The old geezers around us were starting to give him death glares. I was currently the only girl up in the box. While there were many girls involved in sports reporting, they were more so concentrated in television, social media, and radio. The old school print world was still dominated by old men... probably because it was a dying medium. I loved it though, and always would. I never wanted to be on camera, and I hated the sound of my own voice. Those mediums also made me feel like I was part of the story... kind of like how this Jettersen piece was making me feel— and I wasn't a fan.

"Sorry, very sorry," Brandon muttered to the old guys around us.

"You are a child," I whispered to him.

He smiled pleasantly. "When I get to enjoy a game for free without working, yes, I do view the experience with a child-like wonder, my friend."

I looked over at his perfectly coiffed, wavy brown hair. "Child-like wonder? You writing for the artsy section and not telling me about it?" I jabbed.

“Ooh, feisty today, jeez,” he said with an arched eyebrow. “So, how’s the team looking this year?”

I studied the guys warming up on the ice way below us. “Eh, Okay. We could make it pretty far in the postseason this year as long as Coach plays things the right way. I’ll be curious to see what lines he’s got going this year. If he puts Callahan, Griffiths, and Vonnie together again, that could be magic.”

He chewed on his bottom lip, assessing the guys I just named off. “What about the new rookie?”

I heaved a sigh. “Jetersen?”

“Yeah. He could have some fun headlines.” He motioned in the air with his hand like he was presenting a title. “Tyler the Jett, Jetersen.”

I gave him an unimpressed look. “We cannot steal from *The Sandlot*.”

His mouth dropped open. “It’s not!”

“It totally is!” I argued.

He hesitated.

I narrowed my eyes to his. “Have you used *The Sandlot* for headlines before?”

“No,” he paused, then shrugged. “Okay, *Friday Night Lights* maybe,” he relented.

“Brandon!” I exclaimed, trying to fight back my laughter. “You cannot—” I immediately got shushed by the old men around us and lowered my voice. “You cannot do that. Hank would have your head,” I laughed.

He shrugged again and pursed his lips. “Nah, Hank’s never seen a sports drama in his entire life. He’d only notice if I stole from like... the housewives shows.”

I snickered at the truth of that. Hank was clueless about the entire sports world. He scoured every single word of the other sections' pieces with his bright red pen, but he looked over our articles for all of two seconds before sending them to print. If I wrote the words "touchdown" or "two minutes for slashing" in a baseball recap, he'd prolly be like, "Sounds good, solid work."

As soon as the game started, I could tell Tyler was getting targeted. As the new rookie, it was bound to happen, but jeez, it looked like he couldn't breathe out there without getting hammered. I tweeted a couple times about it— I had a pretty large following because of my position— and I kind of hoped someone would notice and help him figure out how to handle it. In the back of my mind, I kind of hoped it would be his older brother. I always wondered if Casey knew that I was a sportswriter in his hockey world and if he'd seen any of my stuff... Then again, if he hadn't noticed, he probably would pretty soon considering the fact that my next feature story would be the one on Tyler. The thought of him reading it made my stomach churn uncomfortably. I knew he liked his privacy more than anyone else, yet I was the one impeding on it... Then again, I didn't have any loyalty to him anymore, so I wasn't sure why it bothered me so much.

"You good?" Brandon asked beside me with his concerned brown eyes.

I nodded quickly. "Just don't like the hitting," I said as an excuse, which was true— I was never one to like the cheap shots, and Tyler just took a jab to the face behind the net.

Brandon looked at me strangely. "I forget you're a girl sometimes."

I elbowed his arm. “Jeez, Brandon, just what every woman wants to hear. And that’s pretty stereotypical of you to say. Some girls only come to games to see the fighting.”

He shrugged and continued slurping his slushee. “Have you looked at the schedule by the way?” he asked, changing the subject.

I eyed him suspiciously. “Not yet, why?”

“You’re not gonna like this...” he shook his head at me.

“What?”

“Well, you’re not gonna be able to get out of reporting on the next game against Boston. It’s the first regular season matchup, so you can’t miss it. Plus, it’ll be big Jettersen versus little Jettersen. That could give you some good insight into their family dynamic if you want to write a follow up piece. And...” He cringed. “Hank already told me I couldn’t switch with you.”

My face burned. Hank, *my frickin boss*, knew I’d been avoiding all Badgers games?

“You’re pretty obvious about it, Adds,” he said.

My body went rigid.

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped.

After a beat, I looked over at him and regretted being so harsh. It wasn’t his fault I was sensitive to it.

“Sorry,” I muttered, quickly looking away.

I knew it was rather immature that I’d been skipping those games anyways, and it went against one of my biggest rules— never alter your plans for a man. But I had a pretty solid reason for avoiding being around him... Seeing him made all the memories I had of us

come flooding back, and it was too painful. The good made me miss him, the bad made me pity him.

Brandon patted my leg. "No worries, Ms. Kessel. If it's any consolation, I'm assuming it has to do with the other Jettersen brother that you mentioned, and well, if it were me, I'd be the sorry one. Any guy would be lucky if you gave him the time of day."

I felt his gaze on my cheek, and I knew he wanted me to look at him, but I couldn't. He was too close to the truth and he'd see it written all over my face.

"Thank you," I said calmly, but inside, I was feeling anything but calm.

After the game, I played my usual game of sitting at the bar by myself. I always went to The Blitz, which was about a block down the road from the rink. The Blitz was your typical hole-in-the-wall sports bar. It had low-lighting and signed Detroit sports flags and jerseys hung up all over in disarray, as well as plenty of flat screens for watching games. The bar was basically a large square island, with seats on all four sides, and then tables and lounge areas surrounded it.

I'd written a piece on The Blitz a few years back, and they had the article framed and hung up behind the bar. I always looked at it with a bit of pride—because it was one time where my writing actually made a difference. I wrote about how the Crewmen organization had tried to buy out The Blitz's owners for their property for the new stadium, but they stood firm, even though the city was pressuring them. My article made local patrons

aware of the issue, and they started a petition to keep The Blitz alive. After all was said and done, the city backed down. Now, because of its location and the buzz it got from the whole ordeal, a lot of hockey fans grabbed drinks here either before or after games.

The best part of The Blitz though, was that it was full of men... And I was after one of those.

The bartender, Adrienne, knew me from my frequent visits. She had long black hair and a half sleeve of black ink tattoos. She was definitely a badass, and I aspired to handle men the way she did. She had them eating out of the palm of her hand, egging them on to buy more shots and give her larger tips. Then she'd flip her hair over her shoulder and prance away. I also loved her because she always helped the females at the bar first and made the men wait. If the men were impatient, she ignored them for even longer.

I'd come here enough nights to know that she did have a soft spot for one of the Crewmen's defensemen named Brody. He always came in right before close and they'd leave together more often than not.

"Pinot Grigio?" Adrienne asked me.

I was sitting at the corner of the bar, away from the growing crowd.

"Yes, please," I answered.

"What is that?" she asked, nodding to my notebook. "Writing another helpful article?" she grinned.

I met her very heavy eyeliner-coated eyes and paused. While I could probably recruit her to help me find a guy, I wasn't sure I wanted to. I hated when people pushed too hard, and I was afraid she'd put more

pressure on the situation. “Not quite,” I said, and decided to leave it at that.

Besides, there’s no way I’d tell her about my notebook. I didn’t need her thinking I was a total creep, because what I was actually doing was admittedly slightly creep-ish. I was taking notes on the bar’s regulars, trying to decide who was a good guy and who I needed to avoid. So far, the pickings seemed pretty slim.

I was after a one-night-stand... that could possibly lead to a pregnancy...

God. Was I crazy?

Was this so totally wrong of me?

I dropped my head in my hands and heaved a sigh.

“You good?” Adrienne asked, placing my glass of wine on the bar. “You look like you’re battling a war, girl.”

“Yeah...” I said tightly.

I knew that having a one-night-stand and hoping for a pregnancy to come from it wouldn’t be very fair to the guy...but I just wanted a baby so so badly, and was that such a terrible thing? Every time I saw a mother and her babies, an intense longing pulled at my heart. I had so much love to give, but no one to give it to...

What if I did tell a guy that?

That’s what I’d do... I’d propose the situation to a guy and ask if it would be something they’d be okay with. There had to be a guy longing for fatherhood the same way I wanted to be a mother... right? And let’s face it, it felt like everyone my age had completely checked out of the dating scene...

I'd just have to do a really good job at scoping out the potentials that I brought it up to, or else I could be inviting a shit load of trouble into my life.

Father figures were a tricky thing...

Having a good father was great and all, but not having one at all was sometimes better than having the worst one.

I knew that from Casey's experience...

11. Addie - Fall 2013

"If you're not going to work, then get off the ice!"
Marina yelled in a harsh tone across the ice at me.
"Skate America is only a few weeks away, Adelina."

I hung my head and closed my eyes for a brief second, taking in the low hum of the rink around me. It was three weeks away. 21 more afternoons. 18 more practice days— I only didn't skate on Sundays. If I didn't stop myself, I would've calculated exactly how many more hours there were until my exact competition time. That's how fucking nervous I was for it. I needed to place top three in the short program, top five in the long program, then top three in the final round.

I replayed Marina's words. *If you're not going to work?* I was working. I was past working. I wasn't even sure what this was anymore.

This was my third attempt at a program run through.

Every time I made a mistake, she cut my music, then made me start all over again without a break, which was a Russian figure skating tactic, and I highly doubted it'd be approved by the USFSA.

This last time, I made it about three fourths of the way through my program, just to pop my last triple lutz-combo.

I forced myself not to give in and let my face crack in pain.

That would probably send Marina over the edge and she'd really lay into me.

I tried to catch my breath as I slowly glided back toward where she was standing in the home teambox,

looking extremely disappointed.

I leaned over the boards to grab my water bottle, trying to show her that I needed a fucking minute.

"You have yet to do a clean program. We go until you do," she barked.

My breath was still pretty choppy from a mixture of exhaustion and battling emotions. I could feel her eyes on me. When I looked over and met her gaze, there was no sympathy on her face. She was steel, with her bluntly cut short, red-ish-brown bangs, weathered skin, and Burberry scarf. She could see I was struggling, but all she did was nod to my starting spot by the far blue line.

"I see weakness." She scoffed. "No emotions, Adelina. Go."

Bitch, bitch, bitch, I mentally snapped back. I swallowed down the complaints at the tip of my tongue and pushed off the boards to skate back to my starting spot.

On the way, I cut my eyes to my mom, who was coaching a younger girl by the zam doors. I knew it was stupid of me to look to her for any kind of support. Everything about her was sharp, fierce... Hopefully my dad's genes had mellowed out the Anastasia Kessel harshness inside of me. She angled her jaw to the side and gave me a nod, like get on with it.

My mom would always be more of a coach than an actual mother to me. I used to hold a deep resentment over it. I'd watch other girls cry to their moms, and in return, their moms gave them comfort, rubbing their backs, brushing their tears away. She was not capable of such affection and support. I only ever received any sort of validation from her when I medaled at a competition.

My resentment toward her had eased recently though. It was definitely still there, but it felt like the cold that used to have a vise-like grip around my heart had been warmed.

Because now I had Casey.

A mental picture of his rueful smile popped into my brain, making me actually smile as I moved into my first stretch of footwork.

Casey didn't restrict his love to tough love. He treated me with warmth, always. He stood out above everyone else in my life— besides my sister— because his kindness was unconditional. He didn't have a scoreboard in his mind. He wasn't playing mental chess with me— *give her too much assurance, and she won't work so hard to keep it coming*. No. He gave affection freely.

If Casey and I had kids together, I'd only let them skate if they wanted to. I'd never force them. And I'd be the supportive kind of mother that my own wasn't capable of being.

If Casey and I had kids...

Damn. Butterflies happily fluttered in my stomach as I entered my layback-beillmann combo spin.

He was so rugged, and wild, and mine. I loved when he pulled me into a hug, holding my lower back with his large, protective arms. I loved when I challenged him with sass and he'd tip his head back and laugh wryly at the sky, like he wasn't cut out to handle me, but he'd try anyway, then he'd pull me in closer to him and I'd feel the scruff on his face as he kissed my forehead. It's like he was made for me, and I was made for him.

It was a good thing I hadn't seen him here at the rink today though. He would not like the workout I was

being put through... and that would definitely cause more friction between him and Marina and my mom.

It was clear they didn't approve of me spending so much time with him. And maybe this was punishment. They figured I was distracted and needed a kick in the ass.

But that wasn't true.

Thinking of Casey is what got me through the perfect program I just finished...

As soon as the buzzer went off signaling the end of the practice session, I gathered up my sweater, water, and skate guards, and tore off the ice.

Through the windows that spied into the lobby, I saw Tyler and a couple of his buddies enter the rink a few minutes ago with hockey bags slung over their shoulders, but there was still no sign of Casey, which was extremely odd. He hadn't missed a single day of work at the rink since I met him back in the summer.

In the lobby, I made my way over to the concession stand where Tyler was holding court, making his buddies laugh.

But when he looked up and saw me, the smile fell from his face, making my heart beat faster. He looked caught. Was something wrong? Why wouldn't Casey have called and told me?

I swallowed hard and motioned Tyler to join me by the arcade games lining the lobby's back wall.

He leaned down to say something to his buddies and excused himself to join me. I leaned against the

motorcycle game as his lanky legs carried him over to me.

“What’s uh… up, Adds?” he said, in a forced voice. He reached up to pull his hat off his hair and scratched his head.

I looked up into his eyes; they were too tired for a sixteen-year-old boy’s. He wasn’t as tall as his brother, but he was still almost a head taller than me. I didn’t have brothers, so it felt weird to look up at someone who was younger than me.

“What do you mean what’s up? Where’s Casey?” I asked him, feeling my eyebrows knit together.

“He might’ve skipped today,” he said, cringing. “This isn’t usually the best day for him…” he trailed off, his shoulders slumping a bit.

I searched his face, trying to read what he was saying. “Okay,” I said slowly. “Do you have a ride home at least?”

He craned his neck to look back at his buddies, who were now throwing popcorn at each other. “Yeah, I’ll just ask Reggie’s mom.”

I nodded, then turned on my skate-guarded heel to leave.

“Wait, Adds,” he called out and started jogging to catch up to me. I slowed to a stop, waiting for him to say something, but he was silent.

“Tyler, what-”

“I don’t know if you should go over there. He’s not himself today…” He grimaced. “I don’t want him to ruin things between you guys. He loves you,” he implored with serious eyes. “I’ve never seen him this happy, and I

just... He can be his own worst enemy sometimes. A lot of times..."

His words melted my heart, and I could see how distressed he was over the situation... So much so that it brought a bit of glassiness to my eyes. I pulled his skinny frame into a hug, and his rigid body relaxed after a beat, like he wasn't used to receiving hugs, and that broke my heart a little more for him too.

"It's okay." I gave him a reassuring smile. "I won't let him. Y'all are stuck with me," I told him.

He nodded, but still looked a bit uneasy as he turned to rejoin his buddies.

"Casey!" I yelled into their house. His truck was still parked on the gravel driveway up front, so he was definitely here somewhere.

I made my way through the living room, the kitchen, then his bedroom. I paused for a second in his room, taking in the familiar exposed floorboards, the small tv with a pile of neatly stacked dvd's next to it, and his worn blue quilt comforter. The quilt was laying in tangles with the sheets though, which was weird—he always made his bed... And the other oddity, which made my heart beat faster with a new urgency to find him: an empty bottle of jack on the floor next to his bed...

I tore out of his room, feeling my heart pound as I searched for him.

I only relaxed when I saw his figure in the backyard, but then I was worried for different reasons...

He was slumped in a chair by their firepit. The stoking log that he was holding was sticking in the burning embers, and it looked like he'd fallen asleep—which was pretty fucking dangerous.

I threw the sliding door open and marched over to him. I roughly snatched the log away from him and threw it, then slapped him awake.

His brown eyes flew open and he started tugging away from me.

“Casey!” I yelled at him.

My voice finally made him stop.

But his usual easy-going lopsided grin was missing.

Today, he rubbed his forehead and leaned forward, muttering, “Why’re you here. You shouldn’t be here today, Adds.”

I felt my eyebrows scrunch together as I took in the sight of him. His eyes were bloodshot, he clearly hadn’t showered, and he smelled like a brewery.

“Have you been drinking all morning?” I asked him incredulously.

“Why’re you here? Did Tyler...” He groaned and held his head. “Adds, I jus...” His words were slurring together, so I guess that answered my question. That was extremely unusual for him. He liked drinking, but only socially and on the weekends, mostly. I normally couldn’t even tell he’d drank anything. He stayed in control. He stayed strong. But this version of him looked vulnerable... No, vulnerability would’ve been okay; it would’ve been good actually. Today he just looked broken.

"You can't be here," he repeated, looking up at me with regret in his eyes.

I put my hands on my hips. "Why shouldn't I be here today, Casey?" I demanded.

"Because I... You shouldn't see me," he said so quietly I barely heard. "I can't today."

"Well, I *can* today," I said in a firm tone. "I can help you." I decided not to question him any further. He rarely showed emotion like this, and I had a feeling I needed to give him space and support without demanding why. "You need food, c'mon." I patted his large shoulder, urging him to get up.

When he stood, he almost stumbled over to the side, but caught himself last minute, which was good. I wasn't sure I'd be able to lift him if he truly fell down. He raked a hand through his hair and followed me.

Once inside their house, I led him to the couch. I quickly handed him a water bottle and ordered him to drink the whole thing, then got to work making some pasta on their old gas stove.

While cooking, I heard him making a strangled noise. I looked over my shoulder at him, and my heart squeezed.

Casey, the strong, ever sure of himself guy, was breaking down. For a split second I did regret coming here to their house, because I knew his sober self would be mad that I was seeing him this way; and honestly, it was hard to see him this way. But I knew this was needed. I needed to show him I'd stay, no matter what. He had forced his way into my life and helped me. I'd do the same for him.

I gave him space as I finished cooking the pasta, but when I plated it and handed it over to him, he just stared at it.

"C'mon, Case. You need to eat to feel better," I pushed.

His eyes flicked toward mine and they were lined in red. "I'm not good enough for you."

I froze. "Why would you say that? You're perfect for me. I'm perfect for you."

"I have *him* in me," he said, pulling at the collar of his Bauer T-shirt.

I shook my head, confused. "Who, Casey?"

"Him," he said grimly.

"I— you're going to have to—"

He was staring at the floor in front of him. "He hit her," he said in a strangled voice. "And I wanted him to die. But she did instead."

My heart practically stopped. "Who did, Casey?"

He heaved a sigh. "My dad. He was caught once, but she helped him get off the hook." Hurt was etched on his face. "You have to promise me... You have to promise me, Addie, that if I'm not good for you, you leave and you don't look back. Okay? Because I could never leave you. I'm afraid I'm not strong enough to let you go if I have to. Promise me?"

My face cracked in confusion. "Casey, you're not making any sense. Why—"

He swallowed hard, his adam's apple bobbing up and down. "I don't remember much of the beginning. I just remember that they'd argue a lot, and then things would be good for a long stretch. Until that *fucking* night."

He looked like he was going to be sick and he stared at the ground in front of him. “I learned real quick that if I played good, he wouldn’t be so mad. So, I played my ass off all the time. I played like a selfish prick just to get my own goals, even if the team lost, I didn’t care. All I knew was that if I scored a hattrick, he’d stay with us and leave her alone. I played like shit, he’d go out with the guys, get drunk, then come back and...” he swallowed. “But one night, my whole team went out to celebrate a tournament win. He got trashed. She said something he didn’t like, I guess... And when we got home, it was bad. So bad, Addie.” He dropped his head in his hands. “I was just a kid. I called the cops. He was hauled away. I’ll never forget the look on his face. He looked at me like...” his voice cracked.

“That’s not your fault, Casey. You were helping your mom.” I rubbed his back, and he accepted the comfort.

“She got him out on bail. She fucking ran with him. We lived in Michigan for a bit. You asked when I played for Victory— that’s when.” Victory was a AAA team in Michigan. I saw his picture in a jersey on their front wall and questioned him about it. I didn’t know he ever left Minnesota.

“He was caught when my mom went into labor with Tyler. I don’t know if it’s because the hospital suspected something or what. I have no clue what happened there, but that’s when he was taken away for real.”

“Well, that’s—”

“It gets worse,” he warned, cutting his sad eyes to mine.

I continued to rub his back.

“When I was seventeen, he was getting out. She wanted to invite him back into the house, and I knew it was a horrible idea. I begged her, pleaded with her, did everything I could...” He shook his head. “I finally threatened to run with Tyler. I thought I was a man,” he scoffed, “now I realize how young I was. I was only a year older than Tyler is now. I had no right to talk to her like that.” He broke down crying, and I moved closer to him, pulling him into a hug. “I thought I was protecting her. It’s my fault. I should’ve... I should’ve...”

“It’s not your fault, Casey. It is not,” I said firmly, trying to hold back my own tears as I comforted him. He shouldn’t have had to grow up protecting his mother. That was a father’s job. I hated his father for him.

“Well, he’s in jail now. She’s gone. So it is my fault. I could’ve protected her. I could’ve beat him. I, I—” he mumbled into my shoulder. “I didn’t know she’d leave to be with him.”

“You were *seventeen*, Casey. You did what you thought was best. You said so yourself, you were a child. You tried to prevent it. That’s what’s important. You tried.”

His body shook under my arms. “I’m afraid. I’m afraid I’ll be like him.”

That had to be the alcohol talking. Because he was nothing like that. He appeared to be a tower of muscles, but he had the softest heart of any guy I knew.

“No, Casey,” I said gently. I placed my hands on his cheeks and forced him to look at me. “Have you ever thought of hurting anyone?”

“No, but—”

“On the ice, I’ve seen you go to check someone, then back off a bit, Casey. I’ve watched a lot of hockey. Not many guys have the ability to do that. What your family has done in the past does not define you.”

“I’m just afraid. I’m...”

“No. Don’t let anyone like him have any power over your emotions. Maybe you have some of the same genes, but what you do with those genes is up to you. Look at my mom. If I have kids, will I be cold like her? No, because I decide how to be. The way I choose to act is not left up to fate, Casey. The way you treat others, your ability to have empathy, your ability to pull back from a fight, that’s not left up to fate,” I patted his cheek, “that’s a choice.”

This time, I pressed a kiss to his forehead and comforted him.

12. Addie

At my desk, I scanned through my feature piece on Tyler. It was just about done, but I did need to call him back to double check the years on a couple things.

We'd completed the rest of his interview on the phone last week. That definitely worked better for us. He sounded a bit skittish with me at the beginning, but once he got the chance to push good information about Casey at me, he seemed more at ease. I swear, he acted like a fucking walking advertisement for his brother's sportsmanship and manhood. I snorted thinking about how he even tried to get me to call him for the article.

"I did research, Adds," he said. "I know you need three sources. You should talk to him about me... For a quote, ya know, to make it all well rounded and all that."

I felt myself smirking. He was still such a smart ass. "I talked to your old coach at the Ice League, your current coach, and a couple old and current teammates. All good on that front, Tyler. And you and I both know that Casey would probably pull the article somehow anyway."

"Yeah, okay," he relented. "What are you gonna do about the whole uh... daddy issues thing?"

"Doesn't need to be included. I danced around it. I did mention your mother, but only that she passed away and Casey became your legal guardian."

He coughed a bit. "Good. All good things about her, right? If not, Casey will rip me in half."

It was sweet how much Casey cared about his mother's reputation. It could've been easy for him to hate her.

“Yes, all good.”

“Perfect. So when’s this coming out?” he asked.

“They want to run it the day of the first season game. October 14.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah,” I breathed out.

Since the home opener was against the Badgers, we both knew that Casey would be in town and would most likely see a paper floating around that day.

But looking over my draft of the article, I was honestly thinking he’d be okay with it. I didn’t include any private information beyond what was necessary to get the reader up to speed. Most of the article focused on Tyler breaking into the league with the help of Casey as a role model. It honestly made Casey look great. It probably would’ve been better to interview Casey as well, but I ended up pulling tiny quotes he’d given to other outlets bragging about Tyler, and I think that rounded it up just fine.

I pulled my hands away from my keyboard and muttered a curse as I massaged my wrists.

Brandon rolled his office chair out of his cubby to look at me. He had bags under his eyes, his shirt— the same one he had on yesterday— was all rumpled and had a nacho cheese stain on it. His short dark hair, which was usually neatly combed to the right, was sticking up in the back. “Carpal tunnel getting you again?” he asked.

“Yupp, this is not the time,” I lamented with an annoyed eye roll. “What’s up with you?”

He scrubbed his hands through his messy hair.
“Trying to hit a deadline with this basketball piece.
Everything fell apart last night.” He threw his pen back at
his desk.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, some of the players were messing with me
and gave me a fake ass story about the new rookie. I fell
for it and wrote the whole thing. I’ll get ‘em back though,”
he said with a smirk.

Brandon had great rapport with almost all Detroit
teams, but especially the basketball team. They were
always messing with each other... And I think it was fun
for them... Guys were so strange.

“It’s never the time for The Carp to strike,” he said
with a rueful smile. “Get some hand warmers and strap
‘em to your wrists. You’ll look like a nerd, but the heat
always helps me.”

13. Casey

As soon as Tyler answered his phone, I laid into him. “You can’t take shit when you’re out there, you need to fight back, lay some hits.”

He grunted. “You watched the game, eh?”

“Hell yeah I did. It was your NHL debut. I would’ve been there if I could’ve,” I told him.

“Yeah, well, glad you weren’t there. It wasn’t great. I’m fucking icing my whole body right now. Like seriously, I just left the trainers and they taped like five ice packs on me.”

The usual playfulness in his voice was gone, and I knew I needed to build him back up. His current attitude wasn’t the kind he needed moving into the regular season.

“You did well, you kept your head,” I said, trying to encourage him. “You just can’t get anything done when you’re constantly targeted, so you need to show you won’t take shit. You’re a rookie, so the old guard defensemen will be looking to get you in the corners. Sticks to the face, slashes to the back of your legs, jabs to the nuts, you name it. You have to be so fast they can’t get you. Don’t back away from the corners— that’s a one-way ticket back to the minors— just be quicker than them. Grab the puck and go. Maybe lay a couple hits so they know you’ll retaliate.”

He snickered. “Well, I could hit you next game.”

I snorted at that. “You don’t wanna mess with me, little brother. They treating you alright in Detroit?”

“Eh... yeah. Except...” his voice trailed off.

“Except?” I pushed.

“Shampoo prank,” he mumbled.

I let out a bark of laughter at that. The shampoo prank was a regular rookie one. When newbies showered, someone would keep dumping shampoo on their heads. They couldn’t open their eyes, so it usually took a while for them to catch on—sometimes a whole container’s worth of shampoo. He should’ve known that was coming for him, I told him all about my first few years in the league.

“When do you get to Detroit?” he asked, probably trying to switch topics away from him being the butt of the joke.

I heaved a sigh. “I’m at the airport right now.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” I choked out.

“You nervous?”

I looked at the plane through the gateway’s large windows and felt anxiety rise up in my chest. “Don’t ask questions you already know the fuckin’ answers to.”

He paused on the other end of the line before quietly adding, “You owe her everything, you know.”

I clenched my jaw and my nose flared with a heavy breath. Not this again.

“You have to talk to her, Case. You need to see if things could still work. It’s been a long time, but I’m sure everything could be patched up! You need to try one more—”

“Yeah, I don’t know, Ty.” The words felt stuck in my throat. “My meds are startin’ to fuck with my head. I can’t do this right now.” The team trainer always shoved pills at me to help get me on flights.

He sighed on the other end of the line, clearly annoyed with me. “Everything you have, everything we have, it’s all because of her,” he snapped. “Now, she needs-”

“Tyler, stop,” I barked harshly. I fought off the temptation to chuck my phone away from me. Did he think I didn’t know all that? I swallowed down my frustration. “I gotta go.”

He started to argue, but I hung up on him.

I couldn’t take another stressor at the moment. Not when it still took everything in me to get on the fucking plane.

And really... did he think I’d forgotten about her?

I didn’t need reminding.

She was never too far off my mind’s radar.

You have this life because of her. It was a mantra I repeated every time the national anthems played before my games when I was looking way up at the stands. I thanked God for her, and I always shot up a little prayer hoping that wherever she was, she was happy.

14. Casey - Fall 2013

The nights she didn't sleepover, I had a hard time sleeping. When she was pressed against me, my racing thoughts seemed to slow, and I was more present and could actually relax.

She hadn't been to a bonfire party yet though, but I was about to fix that this coming weekend. That's why I was currently in our backyard chopping wood.

As much as our house needed major help, our backyard was perfect. It was easy to maintain because unlike the house, I enjoyed working out here. Mowing the lawn and keeping up the little garden areas was a stress reliever. At the back of our property was a cove of pine trees. In the opening between those trees, we built a bonfire area and our best rendition of a tiki bar behind it.

While I worked out here, Tyler was inside doing homework— at least that's what he was supposed to be doing— and Addie was starting dinner. I knew I'd have to go in soon because she never actually *finished* making dinner. She'd get distracted or bored and walk completely away from the food, which I always found funny. The first time she decided to “cook for us” she burnt half the meal to bits, but now, I was expecting her to abandon the stove, and I always finished up the meal for us. I actually started to look forward to her leaving the food because I found I liked cooking. A goofy smile slid onto my face. We were like a little family.

She came over still wearing her skating outfit today— off-black tights with lululemon shorts overtop, and a crop top over a sports bra... So many layers. I shook my head. I'd definitely be stripping all that off her as soon as I could. I pictured dumping her on my bed, climbing overtop of her, and-

The sound of our sliding door made my daydream dissipate...

And as soon as I made eye contact with Addie, the smile was wiped clean off my face.

She was storming toward me, eyebrows furrowed, holding up a letter in her hand.

"I thought you were just a beer league guy?!" she practically shouted at me.

Shit.

That was how I described myself to her, and that's what I'd always be. I chose it for myself. I dropped my ax and reached for my water bottle. I was sweating fucking bullets out in the summer sun. "I am a beer league guy, Sweetheart."

Her mouth dropped open. "But you have a chance not to be." She held up the letter, practically jumping up and down excitedly. "Casey, this is amazing!"

"Nah," I said between sips of water, trying to avoid her gaze.

I knew what she was holding in her hand. It was a letter from a minor league coach wanting me to come to a tryout next month. But how could she have found it...

Looking back at the house, I saw Tyler poking his head out the window to watch us. This was definitely his doing. He probably put it right in front of her eyes. I put my hands on my hips and shot him a daring glare. He immediately dipped back into the house.

Her face fell. "What do you mean?"

"Shit babe," I shook my head and let out a chuckle. "I get those every year, it doesn't mean anything."

Her eyes bugged out. "Uh, yes! It really does mean something! And you're 21, they're going to stop coming after you real soon here. This could be your last chance. Don't you want to be more than a beer league guy?!"

I placed my water bottle back on the ground and slowly stalked over to her, giving her my best smolder look. "No," I said in a low voice. I placed my hands in her dark hair and gave her a head massage, her face melted and she leaned her head on my chest, enjoying my touch. I loved that I could disarm her like that. I lightly tugged her hair back to angle her face up to mine. I was so close to her now that our lips were almost touching. "I just want to be your guy."

Her face broke into a grin and she pulled me closer, pushing into a fierce kiss. My tongue pushed into her mouth and I squeezed her butt, hard, making her let out a breathy little moan, which went straight to my groin. Then I inconspicuously tried to take the paper from her hand.

Unfortunately, she was quicker.

She pushed me away, shock written all over her face. "You tried to distract me!"

I sucked in my bottom lip, trying to hold back a chuckle. "Wasn't doing that. Just wanted to kiss you, Sweetheart," I said innocently.

"No!" She practically stomped her foot on the ground. "I know you're a man of few words, and normally I love that, but right now I'm really annoyed. Why aren't you explaining yourself? Why aren't you calling this coach right now?!"

I moved closer to her again and lightly trailed my fingertips up and down her arms. "You *love* that about

me?” I drawled.

She pursed her lips and her cheeks turned a cute shade of pink. She seemed very flustered all of a sudden and I loved it.

“I love a lot of things about you...” She swatted at my chest. “But don’t think that you’re distracting me, Casey Patrick!”

I traced her jawline with my fingers and dipped to whisper in her ear. “I guess I’m not doing a good enough job then...”

“Casey!” she complained. “I’m being serious.”

I pulled away from her and shook my head. “You’re ruining all the fun.” I gave her a wink to make sure I didn’t come off as too harsh.

Her eyebrows knit together. “Why aren’t you following up with this coach?”

I moved to pick my ax back up and chopped a few more pieces to avoid this conversation, but she wasn’t budging.

I finally looked at her. “I can’t.”

She paused. “Can’t, or won’t?”

“Can’t, won’t, does it make a difference?” I squinted at her.

She dropped the letter by her side now. “Case, why are you acting this way?”

“What way?” I asked, amused now.

“Negative!” she snapped.

“Not negative. I told you, I can’t. That’s simple.”

She looked at me skeptically, and I felt awkward under her intense gaze. “Tyler almost has his license. He

can practically take care of himself. Besides, you've got me. I can help around here. If you want to do it, you definitely can," she pushed. "This team is only a half hour from here. Do you know how lucky that is?"

I cleared my throat, not wanting to make her upset, but needing her to understand that it wasn't going to happen. "No."

Her face cracked. "No? That's it?"

I picked up the smaller pieces of wood and stacked them in our little rack.

"Casey, look at me," she demanded.

I flinched at her tone. I felt like I was being disciplined by a parent or teacher or something. I let out a resigned sigh and slowly turned to face her. "While I love that you want this for me, it's not in my cards. It costs money, it's time I don't have, and it's a lot of travel. Can we just drop it?"

"None of those things are a big deal... I'm still not getting it, Casey," she said.

"No. You're not. Those people fly all over, I... can't," I mumbled.

She threw her arms up in annoyance and turned on her heel to walk back in the house where Tyler was watching us.

I ran my hands through my hair. "Shit," I mumbled to myself. I hated when she was mad at me... But she didn't necessarily seem mad, more like disappointed, and I think that was worse.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead and dropped the ax to head back inside. I'd finish up dinner and then maybe she'd forget all about it... I hoped at least...

I made my way to the garage door so I could pass our extra fridge, deemed the “beer fridge” because that was the only thing it ever housed.

I popped the top open of a Bud Light and took a long swig, knowing that our conversation about the letter probably wasn’t over. I didn’t want to disappoint her, but I also didn’t want to admit the full truth of it to her... She’d see the chink in my armor then and one of my worst fears was that she’d doubt my strength. That was all I had to offer her...

Neither Addie nor Tyler heard me enter the house, and I knew it was wrong, but I hesitated by the door to eavesdrop.

“He’s blowing it off again, isn’t he? Knew it. He always does,” Tyler said in a bitter voice.

“What?” Addie asked, clearly shocked. I could picture the look on her face, and that made me smirk despite the topic at hand.

“Adds, the AHL has wanted him since he was 18. He won’t do it because he’s scared of flying.”

Fuck. I winced. It sounded lame even to my own ears, but it was true. The thought of it... of actually stepping into that tiny tube that would launch away above the earth’s surface... It made me so queasy I could barf.

“Flying?” She almost laughed aloud. “Casey Patrick, *my* Casey? Big tough man with all those muscles, Mr. Nonchalant out there chopping wood like some kinda lumberjack... *He* is scared of flying in a plane? And he’s going to let that stop him!?” she practically shrieked.

My body couldn't decide if her little rant made me feel ecstatic or weak as fuck. I loved her use of *my* Casey, but I hated that she wanted to fix this. I was scared of what that meant...

"Well, that just isn't going to stand anymore," she said confidently. "I won't let him throw this opportunity away."

I heard Tyler's footsteps taking him into the kitchen. "You have a plan? What are you gonna do?"

"I am calling this coach!" she announced.

Shit. I couldn't stay silent any longer.

"No, don't do that," I said, feeling shaky as I walked purposely into the kitchen to join them.

Tyler, sitting on an ancient kitchen barstool, crossed his skinny arms over his chest and grinned at me, like he'd won an argument or something... I shook my head at him. Little twerp.

I scanned the room for the letter, but couldn't find it. "Where is it?" I demanded.

"Oooh, his demanding voice," Addie said to Tyler, totally teasing me.

I had to school myself not to crack a smile. "I'm serious. Give me the paper, Adelina."

"Adelina!?" she burst out with wide eyes. "Someone is a scaredy-pants over what I'm gonna do with this, huh?" she asked Tyler. She lifted her shirt a little and I could see she'd stuffed the letter in the waistband of her shorts. "You can have it back when I am done with it, sir," she said, sticking her nose up in the air as she stirred the pot of raviolis.

I tipped my head back and let out an incredulous laugh. It was comical to me that she was bossing *me* around while having to look way up at me. I stood closer to her and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Ooh,” she mimicked me, “I’m a big tough man, who is scared of-”

“That’s it,” I ground out. I reached for her waist, but she yelped and dropped her wooden spoon by the stove. She dodged my grasp and ran.

“C’mere!”

I looked around me and found Tyler already in the short hallway leading to our bedrooms, ushering her in like some kind of third-base coach.

These little rascals... I ran to catch them and slid on the hardwood, but they slammed my bedroom door right in my face.

“Don’t forget the raviolis!” She giggled.

Son of a bitch. I wasn’t sure how I was even supposed to feel about them pulling this shit. “Guys.” I jiggled my door handle. “This is stupid. They’ll just cut me. Besides, if I do this, then word will get out and everyone will know!”

No response...

And then I heard her voice. “Hello, is this Coach Bruce Browning?” Jesus. I rubbed my eyes. She sounded so official. “Yes, I am calling on behalf of Casey Jettersen,” she continued. “I’m sorry for the delay in response, but he *will* be at the tryout.”

Right then, I heard the sound the stove makes when water overflows. I cursed under my breath and had to tear myself away from the door.

I quickly strained the raviolis and turned the sauce on low. My hands shook as I dolled out the raviolis onto three plates for us, making sure to give Tyler extra— the kid wasn't eating enough for how fast he was growing. I poured sauce on mine, a little pool of sauce on the side of Addie's plate, and no sauce for Tyler. I carried the plates to our small dining room table and watched the steam rise from them. I wouldn't start eating without them. I ate way faster and would be done before both of them anyway. So, I slouched back and took another swig of beer, contemplating what just went down.

I was frustrated as all hell at the two of them... But their antics were also pretty endearing. Deep down, I wanted to go to that tryout... I always wanted to go... but I knew nothing would come of it. No coach would take on a guy with a phobia of planes. It was unheard of. It'd be too much to deal with for them and I wasn't good enough to be worth the extra trouble. So, wouldn't the humiliation and the disappointment to follow be worse than never showing up?

15. Casey - Fall 2013

I was fucking stupid for going along with Addie and Tyler's plan.

I went to the stupid tryout. I made the stupid team. And I'll admit it— the first game was amazing. It was the biggest high I'd ever experienced. The crowd, the guys, the locker room, the press afterwards... I had no clue people cared that much about minor league hockey...

I played an entire month into the fall with the team and I felt like the luckiest bastard on the planet. For some reason, playing against these guys felt easy. Maybe because I'd kept up my training regime for years and the beer league games I played in at the Ice League all summer were actually a higher level of hockey. The Ice League was home to a bunch of current and retired NHL guys who all came back to play in the summers, and I used that to better myself.

I wished I knew earlier that the minor league teams rarely ever used planes. We mostly used buses to roadtrip, which was annoying, but manageable... And I didn't really care so long as I got to keep playing and making more money than I previously had at the Ice League working for Craig.

I was glad I waited this long to follow up with a team, though. I wouldn't have felt comfortable leaving Tyler for long weekends before this year. Now, I had Addie to help watch him when I was gone and that gave me the security I needed.

I loved watching Addie and Tyler in the stands supporting me at home games. It looked like they were always conferencing and pointing things out to each other, and I always wished I could've heard what they were saying. We'd all debrief about the game afterwards

and I was always slightly nervous to ask Addie what she thought of my performance. She was a no-bullshit kinda girl when it came to things like that. I always took her critiques with a bit of push back, just like I had when she used to criticize some of my beer league moves, but I'd end up mulling over her words for a few days before realizing she was always right, and then I'd use her advice to better my game.

When she told me to make sure I held the puck for one extra split second to stress out the goalie, I had originally argued with her over it... But after her advice helped me score a game winning goal in overtime, I pointed my stick at her in the stands, and we both knew that was all her.

It seemed like everything had worked out, and I honestly thought it'd stay like that for the whole season...

I did not expect to be called up to play for the Minnesota Wolves in the Big League...

We were at Applebee's celebrating a home win when I saw the number flash on my phone. I was tempted to ignore it, but Tyler and Addie both reached for it. I snatched it up before either of them could, shaking my head at them.

My stomach churned nervously as soon as the coach introduced himself. I honestly wished I would've played a little worse so he hadn't noticed me, because then I wouldn't even be in the position to turn down the opportunity to play in an away game with them in Detroit. Their team plane would leave the following morning...

My problem, well, two problems, were Addie and Tyler. They overheard the phone call, so I knew there was no getting out of it.

As soon as I hung up the phone, they tried their best to keep somber looks on their faces.

I shook my head at them. “You might as well celebrate, you little brats.”

They let out cheers in the booth that made the whole restaurant turn and look at us, and I’ll admit, I even cracked a smile.

Addie spent last night in my bed with her head propped up on an arm, giving me pep speeches and saying that she would take Tyler to all his games over the weekend and that I would be totally fine and back in bed with her on Monday like it hadn’t even happened...

“You know what you need to make it?” she asked.

“What?”

“Someone behind you who has delusional confidence in you,” she said with a grin. “And you have two of those.”

I rolled my eyes at her, but I did appreciate her support. I also made her promise me that she’d be waiting here for me the night I got back. I honestly woke up feeling pretty motivated about the whole situation.

Unfortunately, the morning’s optimism did not last.

My feet were now planted firmly on the tarmac and I was staring up at the team’s Boeing 757. Everyone else on the team had already boarded.

I scrubbed a hand over my face. I was in way over my head. I wasn’t worried at all about the actual hockey game. That would be easy. But this... I looked at the plane. This was why I never even tried.

Maybe if I stayed right here on the plane's steps, I'd be cut before I even had the chance to play with them. I could go back to Addie and Tyler and tell them I just wasn't wanted after all and then everything would go back to normal... Normal was good. Normal was comfortable.

But the Coach, the legendary Herb Blackshaw—was seemingly determined not to make it that easy on me. He kept trying to talk me down from the ledge.

"C'mon son. We've all seen what you can do in the minors. You're going to be a superstar if you just *get on this fucking plane*," he said.

Some of the players were now yelling complaints at him.

He frowned and shook his head, then yelled over his shoulder, "Give me a fucking minute, assholes!"

But I could tell even his patience was starting to wear thin. I didn't blame him.

He looked at me with wary eyes and rubbed a hand over his buzzed gray hair. His mouth formed a firm line. "It's too late to call anyone else up, besides, we want you. What will make you get on this plane, son?"

I blanched. He was still thinking I was actually going to get on? I was hoping he was going to cut me right here.

My knees felt weak. A horrible, terrible, sinking feeling overcame me. My airway felt like it was closing off completely.

His heavy hand came down on my shoulder.
"Focus. How can we make this better for you?"

My eyes darted around, not really able to focus on anything. I wheezed in a breath of air. “Addie... Addie,” I stuttered.

“Addie?” He squinted at me, trying to read my lips. “An adderall?” He gruffly yelled back in the plane, “Anyone have an adderall?”

“No,” I forced a swallow. My throat felt like it was coated in ash. My whole body was trembling. “Addie, Addie, Addie.” I fumbled to take out my phone. I showed him my phone screensaver of Addie sitting on my lap, laughing. “Addie Kessel.”

His old face cracked in confusion. “Craig’s girl? The figure skater?”

It didn’t surprise me that he knew her. Everyone in the hockey world knew Craig.

“Yes.” I nodded dumbly. “Addie.”

“Okay! We’ll get your Addie, son!”

I turned and basically ran off the steps of the plane.

I spent the next ten minutes pacing the tarmac, stopping here and there to put my hands on my knees to try and breathe deeper. I wondered how long a panic attack even lasted? I’d never experienced this level of panic before, and I wasn’t sure how to make it stop...

Coach was whispering outside the plane with a couple airport guys. I wondered how he was going to actually swing this... If he’d actually allow Addie to board the plane with me. I knew for sure that I wouldn’t be able to without her.

And then, like a full breath of Minnesota fall air, I saw her in the windows of the airport's gate. Dressed in leggings and boots with a long tan peacoat overtop, she looked like she was on a mission.

Her dark hair fell freely around her shoulders, and when she stepped on the tarmac, she immediately rushed forward and slammed into my chest, pulling me into a hug.

"You okay?" she mumbled against my chest. She held me for what felt like a whole minute, and I closed my eyes, embracing her comfort. "Casey, you're trembling."

I tried to cradle the back of her head like I usually did, but my hand was still shaking.

She pulled back and held my scruff covered jaw with both her hands. Her round eyes looked worried. "Breathe, Casey," she ordered.

"I can't seem to... uh..." I winced. "Sorry, I..."

She pulled me into another hug. "Don't be sorry! You've come this far, Casey. Me and Tyler are both proud of you for facing your fear."

Coach cleared his throat, making both of us look at him. He made a twirl motion with his index finger. *Wrap it up.*

She held her hands around my waist, under my suit jacket, and looked up at me. She pursed her lips. "Look in my eyes and breathe," she ordered. "Can we get on the plane together?"

I gulped.

"Here, focus on holding my hand," she said. She interlaced her fingers with mine and I held her hand

tightly. “Only focus on what that feels like. And count.”

“Count?” I wheezed out.

“Yes,” she said simply, raising her eyebrows.
“Count everything you can. At a competition, I count how many beads are on my dress. I count my laces. I count any and all things. You need to distract your brain. Right now, count how many buttons you are wearing, and just follow me. Don’t look up.”

I followed her firm directions and tried like hell to ignore my surroundings. I kept my eyes on my stupid ass dress shoes, which totally weren’t me. I preferred my work boots.

As soon as I stepped on the plane, the entire team, who I hadn’t really met yet, started clapping and cheering.

And I never should’ve looked up.

Two seconds later, I ripped my hand from Addie’s grasp, bent at the waist, and barfed.

“Gross!”

“Woooow, boys, we gotta barfer, eh!”

“Fuckin’ Jettersen.”

“I’m gonna blow next. Can we even open a fuckin window?”

“Smells like dog shit.”

“Someone needs to knock him out. Clock him in the head, buad.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off my own mess. My whole face was burning up over the embarrassment of this situation. If only everyone would’ve just let me be, this never would’ve happened.

Addie held up her hands like a strict teacher and spoke harshly, but I couldn't even make out what she was saying. I felt like I was hearing her from underwater. My own thoughts were overshadowing reality.

She leaned down then and her hot breath whispered in my ear, "You feel better now, baby?"

Still embarrassed, I quickly nodded.

She took my hand again and I had to side-step my puke as she led me to an open seat.

I couldn't even make eye-contact with the stewardesses who had to clean up my mess.

"I am so sorry," I told them as earnestly as I could while we walked by.

16. Addie - Fall 2013

I studied Casey as I sat next to him on the plane's cushy team seats.

He was such a tough looking guy, rugged even, with his messy hair and sandy scruff covering his square jaw. But when you looked closer, you could see smaller, softer qualities about him. Like the very faint freckles that dotted the skin under his eyes, a reminder that he'd had very prominent freckles when he was a little kid, which made him look just that much more adorable.

Right now, his eyes were squeezed tight and he was holding my hand like he'd never let go. I gave it a little squeeze.

He cracked an eye open to glance at me. "Can we please drive home?"

"Nope. We are going to be fine flying, babe."

He was sitting straight up with his head against the backrest, I'd never seen him sit so straight, I'd never seen him so scared. Him showing vulnerability was very rare.

"You sure you don't wanna roadtrip. It could be fun. You could be my passenger princess, control the radio. Listen to all the Taylor Swift you want," he offered.

I patted our hands. "Yes, I'm sure that would be fun, but this will be fine. You just have to keep your mind distracted. What will distract you?"

"You," he said with a weak smile.

That brought a smile to my face. I unbuckled and sat on his lap facing him. He closed his eyes and finally took a deep breath. He moved his rough hands slowly up

and down my thighs. I leaned forward and kissed his neck.

He squirmed a bit under me. “You’re gonna get me all turned on babe,” he whispered in my ear before kissing my hair.

A giggle popped out of me. “Who cares. No one’s paying attention to what I’m doing so long as you’re on this plane, honey.”

“Honey?” He smiled weakly again. “I like that.”

I smoothed his eyebrow. “Do you?” I always thought of him as a “babe” kinda guy, but “honey” just slipped out because I was trying to be nurturing.

He brushed my hair behind my ear. “I like being your honey,” he said with a goofy grin on his face.

“Good,” I said confidently. “What else will distract you?”

His eyebrows pinched. “How’s your skating goin’? Ready for Skate America?”

I cringed. My coach was not going to be happy with me for leaving this weekend. The competition was only a week away, and I was supposed to be training every day.

“Yeah. I’ll be ready.”

“No nosebleeds?”

I gave him a funny look. “I still spin fast.”

He tilted his head back and kept eye contact with me. “Good. No nosebleeds?”

His words shocked me. I wasn’t sure how he knew, but he did. He either knew I’d lied to him the first time we met, or he figured out that it was from crying.

He smoothed his thumb under my eye and brought my forehead to his lips.

"You'd tell me, right? If you were ever upset?"

Nodding, I gave him a small smile. "I'm good. Promise."

His arms drifted up my back, hugging me closer. "Thank God. Don't want you stressing for any reason at all. The thought of you hiding away to cry kills me, babe."

I couldn't respond to that or I would cry. They'd be grateful tears, grateful for him tears. "You stressed for the game?" I asked him instead.

"Nope."

I snorted. "Casey Patrick Jettersen... How are you more stressed over a plane ride than your NHL debut? If only I could figure out how to block my own nerves the way you do."

His shoulders shook with a chuckle. "Ahh, babe, I think I just don't care enough. I care about you and Tyler. If both of you are fine, what do I have to be nervous about? Everything else in life is just an added bonus. But if I die in a fiery plane crash, what good would I be to you guys?"

I cocked my head to the side, studying his bright eyes. "That is the sweetest thing I've ever heard you say, Casey."

"Oh I got a lot more than that." He winked, then squeezed my ass. I tried to control my face, but he noticed the flinch.

His eyes immediately searched mine. "What?"

"Nothing!" I said tightly.

He gave me a look that said he didn't believe me at all. In fact, he looked very bothered. He quickly lifted the back of my leggings and took in a rush of air.

"You gotta tell me when you're hurting, Adds. Here, lay down."

He pretty much lifted me off him and laid me across the seat so that my head was on his lap. He was so large that he could reach my right hip and leg, and he started massaging out the muscles.

His brow furrowed. "Triple loop giving you trouble again?"

I nodded and closed my eyes, enjoying his touch. I knew I'd be the one giving him a massage after his game soon enough, and if this took his mind off the flight, I'd gladly take it.

"God, that feels so good," I mumbled.

"That's what she said!"

My eyes flew open. That was definitely not Casey's voice.

Casey's face hardened in an instant, and I thought he was gonna pummel someone

"What?!" a guy asked defensively. "Jetersen's girl's gonna give everyone a boner," he complained.

That was really the wrong thing to say.

His face read murder and he hugged me tighter, making me giggle.

"Don't worry, honey," I whispered in his ear. "I only see you... and you've got me, right?"

He brushed my hair back and kissed my forehead, scanning around him like he was ready to fight

off the entire world for us. “Absolutely right. You’re mine.” His brow furrowed. “If you want that?” he asked, suddenly looking a bit unsure of himself, which was so adorable to me.

I held a palm to his cheek and cracked a grin. “I love being yours, baby.”

When we reached the super fancy hotel in North Carolina, the coach pulled Casey to the side and whispered to him before handing him his hotel room key. It looked like a tense conversation, but I could tell Casey laughed a bit, so I guess that was good.

I sat on a velvet covered couch and looked up at the high ornate ceilings and huge chandeliers. I’d never stayed in a place this fancy, and I doubted Casey had either.

“I feel like I don’t belong here,” Casey whispered when he plopped down next to me.

I laughed. “I was just thinking I don’t either.” I nodded to his Coach. “What was that about?”

His face cracked into a grin. “Said not to get the wrong idea, girls usually aren’t allowed in the hotel rooms. He’s only making an exception this one time.”

“Oh jeez. I hope I didn’t hurt your chances,” I said, suddenly worried I had... Then again, there was no way he would’ve gotten on the plane had I not come.

He grinned. “Nah. I’ll play extra good so you can always come,” he said with a wink.

I rolled my eyes, but I hoped he did play well.

A few hours later, I was in a lower bowl stadium seat. Casey bought me a ticket next to where his teammate's families would be sitting. When I offered to pay, he wouldn't hear it. I guess the cost of the tickets were deducted from how much Casey would earn that night.

There was still over an hour until game time and the stands were mostly empty, but both NHL teams had a mini practice before the game. After that mini practice, they announced Casey and two other players on the other team who were making their NHL debuts.

When his name was announced, he skate-ran onto the ice without a helmet and held his stick in the air for a little half lap around the arena. I jumped to my feet and cheered as loud as I could. When he looked over at me, he shot me a little wink.

"Oh man, he's gotta put his helmet back on," a girl a few seats away from me joked. She was dressed in leggings, hiking boots, a plaid green and blue button down— the Minnesota Wolves colors— and wore a baseball hat turned backwards over her blonde hair which just grazed her shoulders.

I looked at her in confusion.

She held a hand out to shake mine. "I'm Harper. Kyle Markson's my boy," she clarified.

I'd been introduced to a few of the guys, but I couldn't place the name.

"Marksy," she said with a knowing smile. "Goalie."

"Ah, okay."

"Heard your boy up-chucked," she snorted.

I cringed, hoping she wasn't going to be mean.

"Don't worry about it. The guys probably find it funny as all hell. Usually the new rookies wait to barf 'til right before the games, he just got it out early."

I laughed lightly at that. "Okay, well yeah, I'd be right there with them. Casey's not nervous about the game though, he just doesn't like flying."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Ah, that makes more sense. I was like how the hell did this new girl get a ride on the team plane?"

"Yeahhh," I drawled. "The coach already warned him I wouldn't be allowed next time... If he's called back up again and stuff," I added. I didn't want to come off conceited, even though I knew Casey would definitely end up playing more games in this league if he played like he usually did. "Wait, why did you say that about his helmet?"

She smirked. "With a face like that, the puck bunnies will be all over him."

Now I paused. In the whole scheme of Tyler and I pushing him to play, I never once thought about having to share him with the world.

I think she could sense my hesitation, because she quickly said, "Don't worry, they're good boys about it." She rolled her eyes. "Well, most of them anyway. Wanna get some starbs before the game?" She checked her watch. "We've still got a while and I think there's one on the other side of the rotunda."

"Uh..." I suddenly felt extremely awkward. I didn't have any girlfriends, and the more time I talked to her, the more likely it'd be that I'd say something stupid and ruin it.

She rolled her eyes and grabbed my hand, tugging me out of my seat. “C’mon. I need a girlfriend. All the other girls on the team are older and in Mommy mode.” She paused and eyed my stomach. “Sorry, I shouldn’t assume. You’re not—”

“No,” I laughed. Her stumble put me at ease. “Casey and I are serious, but not there yet.”

“Okay, cool. Me and Kyle met in college. He quit school because, ya know,” she motioned to the ice. “But I’m still working toward my dumb degree. I only get to see him on weekends now, so after I graduate, I think I wanna thrive being a booze bag with him for a while. Def not ready for the whole family thing yet. You?”

“I’d like to have a party phase,” I said, feeling my cheeks heat up. It was the truth. It’d be fun to get drunk in a bar with Casey with no worries. “And I think I’d like to go to school... That sounds kinda fun,” I said enviously.

“Really? Why don’t you go then?”

“I can’t until after this year. I’m training,” I told her.

“Oh, you play hockey too?” She eyed me curiously. “I play for Belmont U up in Rhode Island right now. But in the summer, we could use another girl on our pickup team if you do play.”

She was already inviting me? This girl was so nice. Were all girls outside of figure skating this nice?

“No, I figure skate,” I clarified. “That... that sounds fun though,” I added.

She nodded. “Lemme know when you wanna hang up those toepicks, girl. Ooh, I see it!” She picked up her pace. “I’m a caffeine fiend. This is my third cup of coffee today. Don’t tell Kyle,” she added with an eye roll.

“He tells me every two seconds to drink more water. He thinks the caffeine adds to my anxiety and impulsiveness.”

“Does it?”

She pursed her lips and cocked her head to the side. “Maybe, but I love it anyway.”

After we were situated in our seats with coffees, a soft pretzel, and some popcorn, nerves started to settle into my stomach.

“What?” Harper cut her green eyes to mine.

“Huh?”

“Your leg is bouncing a mile a minute,” she pointed out before shoving a large chunk of pretzel dipped in cheese in her mouth. She couldn’t fit it all in her mouth and cheese dripped down her chin. “Sorry,” she said with a mouthful, trying not to laugh as she reached for napkins.

It was nice she was so comfortable around me. It made me feel like I’d already known her for years and that I could share anything with her.

“I’m just a little nervous for him,” I admitted.

“Pshhh, don’t be,” she said. “He’ll be fine. He’s a frickin tower of muscles, unlike my skinny ass hubby,” she joked. “Maybe Casey can help Kyle with his workout routine.”

“Hopefully,” I said. Because that would mean Casey would be staying in the NHL...

My nerves disappeared as soon as his first shift was over. He played just like his usual self, and what's more: He looked like he belonged.

I think the coach liked how he was playing, because he put him out after Marks got a penalty for shoving a guy in front of the net. A goalie getting a penalty was unusual, and a rookie getting penalty kill ice time was unheard of.

"Ugh. I told Kyle he needed to be more inconspicuous when playing dirty," Harper said beside me.

North Carolina's crowd cheered loudly as the referee announced the penalty.

The next face-off was in the defensive zone, so Casey was on high alert, standing in front of the goalie just in case they decided to charge the net.

No such luck for Carolina though, seeing as we won the face off. Unfortunately, Casey's D partner was checked pretty roughly and lost the puck back to them.

Carolina's offense men were passing the puck back and forth, trying to get a good angle for a shot, but Casey and the other three were doing a good job boxing up to prevent that opportunity.

I knew it was good that he was out there for a penalty kill, but I hated it all the same because of how tense it was.

When the puck got passed to North Carolina's defenseman, I held my breath.

Casey skated forward to try and block the shot...

And that's what he did...

He blocked it alright... With his face.

He immediately dropped his stick and fell to the ice. I popped out of my seat and my hands flew to my mouth.

The ref blew the whistle, and the crowd quieted down... Either that, or I lost the ability to hear.

"Get up, get up, get up," I mumbled, willing him to stand and be totally fine.

But I knew he wouldn't be. I could see the blood on the ice.

"He's holding his jaw." I hadn't noticed that Harper had also jumped to her feet. "He probably just lost a tooth," she said in a wary voice.

I hoped it was that simple. I would've whined about that before, but now I just wanted him to be okay.

He sat up so that one knee was propped up, one was on the ice, and I breathed a little easier. His teammates were gathering around him, and they started showing the replay on the jumbotron. I refused to watch. My eyes were glued to his back.

He finally stood and glided back to the bench, and the whole stadium politely cheered for him.

"He jumped inside the teambox. That's good," Harper said optimistically. "That means he's ready to keep playing."

But I could see the blood stains on his Jersey all the way from my seat. They wouldn't let him play like that... Would they? I kinda hoped they wouldn't...

I wrung my sweaty hands together, not able to take my eyes off him.

A shift later, I got my wish. A trainer was pulling his jersey back toward the locker room. He tried to brush

it off, but the Coach motioned for him to leave.

17. Casey - Fall 2013

"Thought for sure you'd lose more teeth than that. You're lucky, son," the team trainer joked.

I cut him a sarcastic look. *Yeah... Lucky, we'll go with that,* I thought. It felt like my jaw had fallen off my face.

"How many?" I asked. I internally groaned. Addie was gonna be pissed I fucked up my teeth... And she was here and had to watch it happen.

"How many teeth did you lose?" His face scrunched up in concentration while looking inside my mouth. "Looks like one's gone, one's chipped. That lip is definitely going to need stitches. I'm guessing twenty. Hey, Rog," he called to another medic on staff. "What's your guess?"

I swear these assholes were having fun with this.

Rog choked out a laugh. "Ima say upwards of thirty."

I blanched. Thirty? I had stitches before, but only five to six at a time. The way you could literally feel them tugging your skin with thread was not a pleasant experience, and I did not want to sit through it thirty times.

"We're numbing you up for it, don't worry. Here, lose this jersey, we'll get you another."

I quickly peeled off my bloodied jersey and flung it to the floor. That's when I saw the huge needle coming closer to me.

"Oh fuck," I breathed out.

"Yeah, I know, kid. Looks scarier than it is," the team doc said. "This'll make you numb so we can stitch it

back up. You passed concussion protocol, so you'll be able to skate the third period if we get it done here. Your choice."

I cursed again and shook my head, gearing myself up. "Okay, yeah," I breathed out.

18. Addie - Fall 2013

“Think he’s alright?”

I gasped at the sound of that voice and snapped my neck to the side.

He looked disheveled with bags under his eyes like he hadn’t slept. He was holding an energy drink in one hand and wore a wrinkled Minnesota jersey.

“Tyler! How the heck are you here right now?!” I yelled at him, completely shocked by his presence.

He smirked. “I have my ways,” he said, trying to sound cool.

I grabbed his ear. “You tell me right now,” I yelled at him. Casey was going to have his head. The kid ditched school and would surely be missing his own games to be here.

“Ow! Ow! Some help here!” he yelled at Harper with wide eyes.

She held her hands up innocently. “I do not have a dog in this fight,” she said, clearly amused by the show we were giving her.

I let go of his ear and shook my head at him. “Harper, this is Casey’s little brother,” I told her. “And he is supposed to be back in Minnesota right now,” I said through clenched teeth. “How did you get here?!” I repeated.

He sighed. “If I tell you, promise you can’t get mad?”

“I will make no such prom-” He turned to walk away. “Fine!” I called out.

He plopped down in the empty seat next to me. “Reggie.”

“Reggie?! Reggie, who only has a learner’s permit, not a legit license?!”

“Woah, okay!” His eyebrows drew down defensively. “He has half a license, so chill out. And that’s more than what I’ve got. I convinced him to do it, so don’t get mad at him.”

I was sure steam was coming out of my ears. “How did you... When did you... Oh my God, did you guys drive through the night to get here?! Where is he?!”

He motioned to some nosebleed seats above us.

“Have him come down right now. You two are staying here,” I said firmly.

“Sick,” he smirked. “These are way better seats.”

I shot him a warning look to let him know I was not playing around.

“Love you!” he said sweetly before running up the steps to retrieve his buddy.

I shook my head. Now Casey was going to make up a dumb excuse that he had to drive back with them. He needed to face his plane fears. I rubbed my temples. These boys were too much.

My phone pinged with an incoming text. I was grateful for the distraction, but when I looked down at the name of the texter, my anxiety spiked again.

“Wait, it’s Casey.” I showed Harper the text. “He wants me to go down to the locker room. Is that allowed?”

She shrugged and shoved more popcorn in her mouth. “Beats me. You guys are breaking all the rules

anyways.”

I swallowed hard, looking at the mess of people in every direction. “Okay... Can you keep an eye on the two jailbreakers when they get down here?”

“Yeah,” she laughed. “Will do. I’d head down to the security guy by the hallway. Casey might’ve given your name or something.”

Harper was right. Security led me back. Once inside the training room, I could see Casey’s large, sweaty frame sitting on a patient table.

I rushed toward him... until he looked up at me.

The sight of bloody gauze in his mouth and his jaw all swollen up to twice its normal size stopped me in my tracks.

“We numbed him up,” a middle-aged man, who I’m guessing was the team trainer, said. “We’ll stitch his lip up in...” He checked his watch. “About three minutes.”

I looked at Casey dressed in all his gear except a jersey. I tried to keep the worry out of my voice when I asked, “Is he going back out?”

The team trainer had gone back to working on paperwork, so he answered without looking. “Yeah, he should be good for the third period. Passed the concussion check.”

I wanted to desperately shout out, “How?!” because he took a slapshot to the freaking face.

Casey’s eyebrows scrunched together and he patted the spot next to him, willing me to sit with him. The look on his face, the way he was imploring me,

pulled me forward. His gear made him seem so much larger than usual.

"You okay? Anything I can do to help? What will make you feel better?" I whispered to him.

He shook his glove off and then put his hand to my boob overtop my shirt and closed his eyes like it relaxed him. I couldn't stop a giggle from erupting. He was always so flirty, always showing me how much he wanted me, even at the most inappropriate times.

He tried to smirk at me, but his lip started bleeding even more.

I jumped off the table and quickly rearranged the gauze to help him a bit.

"You not 'onna wanna ki' me agin," he said with serious eyes, making me pause.

The gauze was definitely affecting his speech, and the numbing shot probably didn't help things either. He looked like someone kicked his puppy when he said it, and that all but cracked my heart wide open... But at the same time, I was so relieved he was okay. So, so damn relieved. And the relief washing over me came out as me laughing.

He shook his head wryly at me.

"I'll kiss you on this side," I whispered, touching his left cheek.

"Promise?"

"No talking," the trainer snapped without looking at us.

He arched an eyebrow at his back. "Promise?" he repeated to me.

"Promise," I said, sitting back down beside him.

After a beat of silence, he asked, “Did it loo’ bad?”

“Taking that shot to the face?”

He nodded.

I cringed a bit. “It scared me. But if you go back out and score after this, everyone will forget!” I said optimistically.

He breathed deeply through his nose and looked straight ahead, like he was building himself back up.

He started to ask another question then, but I shushed him. I didn’t want his lip to start bleeding bad again.

He held his large hand out so I could hold it. I thought about telling him Tyler was here, but decided against it. That would just distract him, plus, nothing could be done about it now anyway. Might as well let both of them enjoy the rest of the game.

I did want to share one little thing with him before he went back out onto the ice though. I leaned my head against his arm and looked up at him. “I made a friend,” I told him quietly. My cheeks reddened. I felt kinda shy about telling him this for some reason.

He almost smiled, despite the gauze and the numbness and the doctor ordering him to “stop moving.”

When he went back out on the ice for the third period, he ended up scoring two goals, which pretty much cemented his spot on the team and made headlines: “Rookie takes slapshot to face, comes back to win game.” I carefully studied each article before cutting it out to collect for him.

19. Addie

I sat at my desk, trying to massage my wrists. It really was awful when your brain was able to think through a story faster than your fingers could type it all up, and that was definitely the case now that my carpal tunnel was flaring back up.

At least I had a little break from writing longer stories. I had turned in my Tyler feature piece and was now just writing little season opener previews for social media.

I was about to close my laptop and head out for the day, when I spotted Hank walking toward my cubicle. I internally groaned.

He looked spiffy as always in a gray checkered suit with his hair neatly combed back. “So, how’s it goin’ in the sportsball world?” he asked hesitantly.

I arched a skeptical eyebrow at him. “You seriously want to know?”

Brandon rolled his chair out of his cubicle to add, “Respectfully, sir, you must stop using the term ‘sportsball.’”

Hank waved away his concern like shoo-ing a fly.

I crossed my arms over my chest and tried to keep a straight face. “What do you need, Hank?”

“So... Skate America is coming to town next month...” he said with an enticing smile. “The Crewmen stadium is hosting it. Will you take it?”

I covered my face and let out a groan. “Hank, no, I told you I wouldn’t cover figure skating.”

He may have trapped me with the Tyler story, but I wouldn’t bend with this one. I didn’t want to be back in

the toxic skating orb with judges who never even knew what it was like to compete themselves and coaches who weren't ever even as good as the kids they yelled at. Let's face it, most of the good skaters all left the rink behind because they were too burnt out to continue with it. Hell, after I quit, I thought I'd never walk into another rink again. Writing, hockey, and teaching Learn to Skates brought me back to it... not figure skating. And honestly, I was afraid being back in the competition setting would set my teeth on edge and give me PTSD.

"But you're the best at it!" Hank exclaimed, clearly trying to butter me up to take it.

"Ah, can't!" I said, thinking quickly. "My sister's competing in it." I smirked.

"But you could write as an expert insider, not as a reporter. Didn't you win it back in your skating days?"

Brandon rolled his chair back out. "Wait, really? I gotta look this up."

"No, you will not!" I reprimanded Brandon and glared at Hank.

"Ooh, feisty," Brandon said, trying to joke.

I wasn't budging. "I will give a quote, I will help edit, but I will not write it. Ever. Have Erin take it," I said helpfully.

My tone must not have been firm enough for Brandon, because two seconds later, the first few chords of my old program music sounded from his computer, snapping me back to 2013...

20. Addie - Fall 2013

Skate America was hosted by a different city each year. This year's competition was in downtown Boston. The stadium hosted practice sessions the entire week leading up to the competition so skaters could get used to the ice. I wanted to say to hell with those sessions and only show up in Boston for the actual competition, but Marina wasn't hearing it. She demanded that we have a hotel for the entire week so I would be well-adjusted and rested by Saturday.

What she didn't know was that I wouldn't be well-rested anyway because I had shit sleep unless I felt Casey's hard, protective body behind me, curled around me.

I'd been texting him whenever I could this week, but I was really missing his calming presence.

On Friday, the day before I was supposed to compete, I couldn't stop shaking during my practice ice. I tried to drink more water, but then my hand would visibly shake for everyone to see, and Marina would start going off about how I was going to blow it because I couldn't keep my nerves under control... which just made me *more nervous*.

I hated practicing with competitors. If you fell on a jump, there'd be three more girls behind you trying to land that jump right where you fell just to get in your head... And believe me, I fell a lot during that particular session.

After getting off the ice and receiving a pretty harsh lecture from my mom, who was definitely in Russian coach mode, I told her I'd be walking back to the hotel alone.

She gave me a swift nod. She knew I needed walks to clear my head after bad practices.

As soon as I started walking, I realized I had a couple missed calls from Casey. I hit redial, then immediately regretted it. I wasn't really in the mood to keep up my positive facade. I could only wear that mask for so long.

He answered on the second ring. "Hey! How'd practice go?"

My throat clogged with emotion. How would I be able to keep my voice normal to answer him? I squeezed my eyes shut for a second before letting out a strangled, "Okay."

"Shit babe," he breathed out. "You don't sound good. You feeling okay?"

I covered my mouth so I wouldn't cry. I couldn't fall apart right here on the sidewalk. I couldn't fall apart until I was finished competing. I'd held it together all week, but for some reason, hearing his concerned voice gave me permission to be vulnerable, and I suddenly wanted, no, *needed*, to crumble.

"So, I figured you might need a distraction. If it's a bad idea, just tell me, but... look up, babe."

I did as he said... Then dropped my phone on the cement.

There he was, standing about fifty yards ahead of me in some lulu slacks, a button down, and a charcoal peacoat with a hockey beanie over his messy hair.

My vision started to blur as I ran up to him. I pretty much charged at him, and he immediately picked me up and swung me around.

"How's my girl, doin?" he said with a laugh.

"Better now," I said into his neck. I pulled back and touched his scruffy cheek, then pushed into him for a kiss. "I don't know how you're here, but thank you."

He set me down and laughed as he swiped a couple tears off my cheeks with his thumbs. "Well, you should thank Coach. I just flew in for the night. We have a game tomorrow at the Garden, which is why I'm dressed this way," he said with a snort. "Usually Coach doesn't let players play the same day they fly in, but he made an exception for me. For us," he said, giving me a wink.

My mouth dropped open. "Oh my God. You flew by yourself... for me?"

He pulled me into a hug, my face smothered by his chest. I breathed in the scent of him and it immediately relaxed me a bit. "I'd do anything for you, babe."

I let out a little giggle then. "I'm so happy I could kiss your Coach."

He made a yuck face. "Please don't," he said, then reached to hold my hand.

At dinner, I barely touched my food. I pushed it around a lot so Casey would think I was eating, but nothing ever got past him.

"Hey." His deep, kind voice caught me off guard. "We're not doin' that," he said firmly, looking from my plate back to my face with kind eyes.

I forced myself to take a couple bites, but my food tasted like gravel, not 5-star Italian cuisine.

I was so nauseous I couldn't imagine actually keeping down anything I put in my mouth, and I really didn't want to throw up in front of Casey.

When Casey finished eating— he always finished eating within five minutes of receiving his food— he sat back in his chair and gave me an encouraging nod toward my plate.

I gulped and reached for my water, trying to stop my hand from shaking as I drank a small sip.

“Pasta is good before skating,” he said softly. He reached under the tablecloth and smoothed his strong hand down my leg, which had been bouncing hard all dinner. He gave my calf a squeeze then, letting me know without words that he was trying to help me. His comforting touch usually calmed me right down, but it wasn’t working as well tonight, and I think he could sense that.

After a few more minutes of watching me struggle, he cleared his throat. “That food’s just stressing you out more, isn’t it?” he asked. His concerned gaze bore into me, and I knew I couldn’t lie.

I put my elbows up on the table and covered my face. I willed myself not to break down, but my breathing was becoming shallow and choppy.

He threw a wad of cash down on the table and gently grabbed my shoulders to lead me out of the restaurant.

As soon as we exited, I bolted for the trash can.

I spent the next five minutes pretty much dry heaving because there wasn’t enough in my stomach to actually throw up. He rubbed my back and I felt him behind me, shielded me with his body. He whispered into

my hair that everything would be okay... but I really wasn't sure how it would be. At this rate, I'd have a heart attack before tomorrow. If by chance I survived to see the competition ice, I'd be on empty. I'd barely eaten all day, and I knew I wouldn't have enough energy to get through an entire long program tomorrow.

When I was finally still for a few minutes, he tugged my hand. "Let's sit a while, yeah?"

I nodded and followed him.

We wandered through the city streets as the sun was setting, and we made it all the way to the harbor area. He pulled me toward the marina where fancy yachts were docked in the water and benches lined the wooden planks so people could view out into the ocean. He sat and pulled me into his lap. He rested his chin on my shoulder and held me tight against the cool fall breeze.

We sat in comfortable silence for a while, but I could still feel myself trembling.

"How are you never nervous to skate?" my teeth were chattering, and I wasn't sure if it was from the cold outside or because that's how badly my nerves were getting to me.

He raised his eyebrows. "Not really fair to you to compare. We have more opportunities than you guys. We have many shifts. You guys only get one."

I blew out a breath, kind of grateful that he understood just how hard figure skating was. He wasn't trying to diminish the importance or the difficulty like most hockey players did.

"But for me personally," he continued, "I just figure, it is what you decide it to be."

I replayed his words and gave him a confused look. I didn't have enough brain space to figure out riddles in my current state.

He unbuttoned his coat and pulled me inside it to share his warmth. "Skating out on the ice in front of a crowd... I have decided that it's exciting to me, not nerve-wracking. It's in my control. It's all about how you frame it in your mind, Addie. I can do it for just about everything except planes," he joked.

I pictured myself skating out there tomorrow when they announced my name. I tried to swallow, but my throat was bone dry.

"Do you usually get this nervous?" he asked me curiously.

I shook my head. "It's just because this is the most important season of my life. It's my shot. I just think of everything that's gone into this. All the money my family poured into it, all the time I spent working for it... I just don't want to fail."

He nodded. "That's understandable, but there is more after this," he said, pushing a kiss to my temple. I closed my eyes and appreciated his words. "Breathe deeply right now and memorize how this feels, this moment." He held me tighter. "You will have more moments after you skate tomorrow. The world won't end. The sun will set again tomorrow and we'll watch it together again. And then, come Monday, we'll both be back in my bed. And honestly, I can't fuckin wait for that." His chest rumbled with a chuckle. "If you skate amazing, then cool, awesome. If you skate horribly, so what? Who cares? Nothing disastrous will happen. Nothing will change."

Sitting there on that bench with him, I finally felt more at ease. I wrapped my arms around his neck and laid my head on his shoulder, appreciating how solid and loving he was. Appreciating that he was mine.

"So..." he said. "You have two choices, babe."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Shake Shack or MickyD's?" he asked with a boyish grin. "Both are dinners of champions, if I do say so myself."

I repeated Casey's words the next morning as I applied my makeup and smoothed my hair into a low bun. I replayed them as I walked around the ground floor of the stadium's cement rotunda in my sweatpants and zip up over my tights and competition dress, and I replayed them again as I did a program walkthrough in my tennis shoes.

I always chose to be left alone on competition days. I didn't want any last minute coaching before going out to skate because that felt pointless to me.

By the time I took the ice and held Marina's bony hands over the boards before they announced my name, I felt okay.

And by the time I skated out to present myself in front of the crowd, I actually felt strong.

I could do this...

And if I didn't, well, then I decided it didn't matter.

I would still sleep peacefully with Casey on Monday night, and that suddenly mattered more than anything.

I waited patiently in my opening position for what felt like five full minutes while the judges were finishing calculating the scores of the girl who skated before me.

Their gray heads started popping up one by one.

And then my music started...

21. Addie

It seemed like the entire city of Detroit came out for the season's home opener. I watched a sea of red and white jerseys enter their stadium seats from my spot up on the press's mezzanine.

There was nothing quite like the season opener. Almost every seat was bound to be filled, and the stadium was decked out. There would definitely be appearances by some of the team's old alums and someone would definitely be trying to throw stuff on the ice in celebration if they won the game.

I watched as both teams entered the ice. The music was pumping so loud I could feel the pulse through my body... Or that was just my heart hammering in my chest as I quickly scanned the away team players for *him*...

It took me all of two seconds to find him.

I'd be able to pick his stance, his stride, out of any team, any day.

When the two teams were ready to face off, I reread the name on the back of his jersey a couple of times.

I'd worn that last name on the back of sweatshirts for years... It hurt to think that at one point in time, I was so confident in thinking it'd be my last name too.

To add insult to injury, the camera guy showed Tyler's face on the jumbo screen right next to Casey's. The whole world knew it was a face off of brothers and they loved it.

And Casey... He was even hotter now if that were possible.

Our break away from each other was evident in the subtle changes in his appearance, but he somehow managed to look better at 32 than he had at 22. With the camera on him now, I could tell he was a bit more banged up. He had a few new scars on his face, from hockey no doubt, and a few more wrinkles around his eyes. But he still had the same scruff covering his strong jaw, and he still kept his hair on the longer side, so that it fanned out under his helmet.

I knew right then that I was in trouble.

Old habits were hard to break, and it was going to struggle to watch anyone besides him.

22. Casey

As soon as the game started, I knew it was gonna be a tough one. I hated when we played a shitty team before a good team like the Crewmen because our legs seemed to take a second to get back under us...

The Crewmen's roster was full of fast, young kids, and it looked like we were about to get out-skated.

My first shift out, the Crewmen won the faceoff, and kicked it back to their defense. They were setting up now. Their D passed to Tyler, who was moving into our zone by the blue line.

I went to check him, and if it were anyone else, I would've laid them out... but because it was him, I pulled back a little and ended up hitting the boards. He quickly passed the puck off to his teammate who was cutting up the center.

The fans by the glass went nuts over Tyler out-maneuvering me.

I was thankful my guys were able to stop the Crewmen's center from getting a shot off, or else that goal would've been my fault.

As soon as the ref blew the whistle, Tyler chirped me with a grin on his face. "Oof, slow go, bro! You're gettin' old!"

I shook my head at him.

We glided next to each other toward the ref for the next puck drop, and I elbowed him in the gut a little, just to rile him up.

"Sure get your jabs in, I'm gonna score right now," he said, giving me a head nod as he went into position.

And sure enough... The puck slid right to him off the face-off and he slapped a one-timer at our unexpecting goaling.

The goal light went off and the entire stadium jumped to their feet.

I skated over to Kyle in the net and tapped his helmet in encouragement. Even though it was a goal against my team, I couldn't help but feel proud of Tyler. He had an entire city rooting for him. It was an incredible feeling when it happened for yourself, but it was something entirely different when it was for someone you loved.

Except as my brother glided off the ice, he pointed his stick at me and grinned, taunting me.

The entire stadium let out a collective "ooooh!"

And that woke the competitive beast inside me.

"Ah... He shouldn't have done that," I told my teammates, shaking my head. "Should *not* have done *that*." I looked up at the jumbotron to see my face. They definitely caught me saying that. *Good.*

My next shift out, it was go time.

My center won the faceoff and kicked it back to me. I passed it up to my winger, then, even though I knew my coach would be pissed at me, I bolted up ice as fast as I could like a forward to catch a pass.

I was thankful I did.

My teammate, Whitty, aka Charles Whitman, carried the puck near the boards, then deked around their defensemen to slide it over to me. I took a one-timer just like Tyler had last shift to score our first goal.

My teammates smashed into me for a hug, and I smirked up at the jumbotron, which was now showing Tyler's pissed off face.

This was going to be fun.

Late in the third period was when things started to get a little less fun.

Tyler and I both racked up two goals, and the score was currently tied up.

Coach stopped playing me the same shifts as Tyler at the start of the third period, which was good. I always hesitated to hit him, and Coach hadn't said anything about it, but he must've noticed to switch the lines.

The only issue was that when I went to lay out a guy in the corner to pop the puck out, I reinjured my shoulder.

I knew right after the hit that I must've torn something again.

The ref blew the whistle and motioned for me to go to the box.

I immediately protested because that was a clean hit, but the zebra just shook his head at me. Britney Spears' song "Oops I did it Again" blasted through the rink as I glided to the box and the entire crowd boo-ed me.

I sat in the box with my head down. I was tempted to stretch out my shoulder and test the muscles, but I didn't want to bring attention to a potential injury...

23. Addie

Today mentally fucked with me.

Detroit won the game by one point, but it ended up being a total brother versus brother matchup, played up by the camera men, and played up even more by the Jettersen brothers themselves. They both left the game with a couple goals each and seemed to be competing solely against each other every chance they got. At one point, Tyler was able to deke by Casey with a pretty smooth move, but the next shirt, Casey checked him pretty hard, but very cleanly.

Usually I could keep it together... but as soon as I emailed in my finished game recap, I closed my laptop and called up Claire.

I didn't want to be alone tonight. I knew I'd just be replaying the game over and over again in my brain... Watching Casey.

And I didn't want to think about Casey. I didn't want to think about my problems or my plans or anything, really. It was one of those rare nights where I just wanted to get drunk.

Claire answered on the second ring. "Hey!" There was loud commotion in the background. It sounded like little kids were screaming. She must've been in the player's family room.

"Hi... Are you guys going out tonight?" I asked hesitantly. She probably thought it was weird for me to ask. She occasionally asked me if I wanted to join, but I'd turned her down enough times in the past for her to stop asking all the time.

She paused for a second, and then there was silence on the other end of the line. "Sorry, it was way

too loud in there. Yeah, we are! We're all going to the Blitz. It's usually a lot of fun after the home opener. Are you still in the arena?"

I shoved my laptop in my leather backpack and slouched it over my shoulders.

"Yeah, I am, but..." I looked down at my outfit. I was still dressed pretty professionally. I had on an oversized blazer, silk button down, black skirt, nylons, and boots... Not exactly partying attire. "I'm not really dressed for a bar night."

"Who cares? I'm wearing one of Duke's jerseys," she said. I could practically hear her eyes roll. "No one gives a shit. Meet me outside the player's family room."

Claire had enough confidence to wear anything to the bar. She could go in her pajamas for all she cared, but I was not like that. I constantly second guessed myself.

"You're not overthinking this are you?" she sighed, jokingly. "Have a long island with me, then you won't care."

I snorted at that. We were so close she could practically read my mind. "Okay, I'll see you soon."

When we arrived at the Blitz, there was already a huge line-up of customers waiting to get inside. I internally groaned wishing I had a heavier jacket. While it was October, it seemed like we were skipping fall and going right into winter this year. It was definitely going to be one of those Halloweens where kids were forced to put sweatshirts on under their costumes or wear coats over top.

The group we were with— about five other players and a couple of their girlfriends— started walking to the back of the line.

I leaned against the brick wall and faced Claire. My teeth were chattering. “It’s a bit chilly.”

“It’s not too bad,” Claire said, but I could tell her teeth were chattering too. “We’ll be inside before you know it.”

Duke smirked and took that as his cue to rub Claire’s arms to give her some warmth. We both knew Claire would rather bite her hand off than admit any weakness.

I was kind of relieved when one of the girlfriends named Quinn started urging her boyfriend to talk to the bouncer to get us in quicker. I know some of the players hated using that privilege because according to Duke, they felt like douchebags skipping the line. I could understand that, but I was even wanting them to use their special line-skipping privileges tonight just to get out of the cold quicker.

Quinn’s boyfriend and Campbell were the ones to talk to the bouncer. A few seconds later, they were ushering us forward. I kept my head down as we moved forward, hoping no one in line would be mad at us.

Inside, I had to push through the initial feelings of claustrophobia that I always felt when entering a crowded bar.

Claire, following in the wake made by Duke and the guys, grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the bar for drinks.

At this point, I was way too aware of everything irritating me. My tights were too tight, my feet were already aching in these boots, and my backpack was too heavy. I really wished I would've left it at the rink.

I was grateful when Duke handed Claire and I some fruity looking drinks.

I took a large gulp, then made a face. Oof. That was strong.

"Careful," Duke chuckled. "Claire made me order Long Islands." He made an ick face. "Wait, why don't you ask Adrienne to stuff your backpack behind the bar for you. You don't wanna carry that around all night. Your laptop might get ruined."

I cringed. He was definitely right. I strained my neck to see over the line of tall people at the bar. There's no way I'd be able to get Adrienne's attention.

"Here, lemme take it," Duke offered.

Claire and I watched him make his way to the bar again. He squeezed between a couple people and motioned for Adrienne to come near him. He leaned over the polished wooden bar and whispered in her ear before pulling back. She gave an affirmative nod, then held her hand open for my backpack without even looking at it. She was always moving, taking orders, making drinks, and collecting money. It was like a dance for her. She single handedly probably served eighty percent of the people in this place. The other two bartenders had nothing on her.

When Duke came back to us, Claire patted him on the chest. "Good idea, babe!"

He smiled at her praise.

I was about to add my thanks, when a wave across the bar caught my eye. My face faltered a bit. It was Tyler.

His lips curved up in a smile. He whispered to the guys next to him as he pointed to us. I returned a nod, hoping to God that his older brother was not with him. I could practically hear my heart thumping wildly in my chest. I hadn't even thought of Casey being here as a possibility when wanting to go out tonight. Now I felt stupid for not even realizing that he could've easily planned to stay an extra day or so in Detroit to visit with his little brother...

Duke and Claire were engrossed in a conversation over the "cheap penalty" given to Campbell late in the third period— it was not cheap, he clearly slashed— but my mind wouldn't let me listen all too well to them. I looked at the drink in my hand and weighed my options... I could just ditch out and go home, but I didn't want to end up staring at my bedroom ceiling thinking myself into a bad mood the whole night. Plus, Claire seemed so happy to have me here with her... I drew in a deep breath. I had to swallow down my fear of the possibility of seeing him. And if that was going to happen, well, I needed to drain this drink. I needed to feel numb.

Claire looked over at me every couple minutes and shot me a hesitant smile with her eyebrows raised in question, as if asking, *are you having fun?* I knew my presence was probably distracting her from having a carefree night with Duke, but it was sweet she felt the need to check up on me.

I squeezed her arm and gave a firm nod. "I'm good. Thanks for letting me join."

"Good! I'm so glad you wanted to!" she shouted over the loud bar. "This is fun, right?!"

Duke picked her up from behind then and she let out a yelp. He was carrying her to the dance floor. She fought against him for a second, but I shook my head and motioned for her to go. She gave me an eyeroll, but I could tell she was trying to tamper down her laughter.

After that, I ended up standing in a circle with some of the players' girlfriends and wives, adding to the conversation here and there just to make sure I wasn't being rude. I initially felt a bit out of place because they all seemed close, but the alcohol was definitely getting to my head, because hearing them talk about their guys made me wistfully think of that year I got to love Casey.

When they asked each other about different stadiums, I gave my input. When they asked if anyone knew about the away family spaces in Anaheim, I was the one with an answer. When they wanted to know which fan base was the worst to visiting teams, I told them my honest opinion.

Quinn finally looked at me skeptically. "How do you know all this?" She immediately reminded me of Harper, and I smiled.

"I dated..." I swallowed. I still couldn't not choke on his name, despite how drunk I was currently feeling. "Someone," I said with an eye roll. "A long time ago."

"Stupid boy, sounds like it, if he let you get away," Savannah Griffiths, Duke's older sister and Griff's wife said, giving me a playful nudge.

"Thank you," I told her earnestly.

"You're very welcome," she returned.

At some point, someone said we should all dance... And I thought that sounded like a spectacular idea.

When Claire saw me on the dance floor, she let out a screech and reached her hand out. I pulled her into the girl group and we all screamed out the words to "Mr. Brightside."

The thing about the dance floor though, is that you don't realize just how much the alcohol is affecting you... because you're constantly moving. And my issue is that once I finished my drink and placed my empty glass on the bar, I felt pretty awkward no longer having anything to hold while I danced... Like suddenly I wasn't sure what to do with my hands. So, I inconspicuously ordered another drink... And another... And another...

24. Casey

I slowly laid my aching body down on my fancy hotel bed. Each year, my body protested a little more over the pain I put it through on the ice. I currently had an ice pack taped to my shoulder. The trainers told me I'd have to have surgery to repair it eventually, but for now, icing would have to do.

Most of my teammates had taken the team jet back home after the game to spend time with their families. We had a few short days off until our next practices before our home weekend games. I decided to stay here in Detroit to spend some time with Tyler. He had offered to let me stay at his apartment, but he lived with a couple other young guys on the team in a small flat. I knew they'd be going out and getting rowdy tonight. I didn't want to stop their fun, they were young bucks who wanted to sow their wild oats. I on the other hand, at almost 32, wanted nothing to do with the bars tonight. I'd already done the bar scene after games for over a decade. I wanted something different now.

I flipped the channel to a couple different stations before landing on a girly sitcom. It was one of the shows Addie used to love turning on with good looking guy vampires and shit.

I was just closing my eyes, when my phone started ringing. I let out a groan of protest and reached for it on the bedside table. Tyler. He must've been still trying to get me to come out... I almost didn't answer it... But part of me was worried he needed help, so the older brother in me answered quickly.

“Ty-”

“Brooo! You gotta come get me!” he shouted out over loud bar music.

I pulled the phone away from my ear. “Tyler. What are you talking about? Where are you?” I pushed myself to sit up against the headboard and turned on the little lamp.

“I’m not feelin’ so good,” he said in a slurred voice. “Come get me?”

I rubbed my forehead. “You sure you need help? Where’s your roommates?”

“Gone!” He laughed.

“What do you mean, gone? Who did you go there with?” I was getting out of bed now, searching for my jeans and t-shirt. I let out a hiss of pain as I untapped the ice pack on my shoulder.

“I dunno. I think I’m gonna be sick,” he said seriously now.

“What? Tyler, how much did you have to drink?” I asked incredulously.

“I dunno. I’m fucked, bro,” he said gravely. “I lost my keys... and wallet.”

Everyone always fucked with rookies. If it was harmless, whatever... but I despised this kind of shit. I had zero desire to go to the club, but there’s no way I was going to leave him there. “You have to be more careful than this, Ty.”

“Are you coming then?”

“Yeah,” I blew out a resigned sigh and tugged on my stupid peacoat that made me look like a prick.
“Which bar?”

I threw The Blitz’s door open and stalked in, ready to grab him and get out, which was kind of a shame

considering that I probably would've actually liked this bar under different circumstances. It had more of a townie sports bar feel to it.

As soon as I looked up to search for Tyler though, it felt like I took a punch to the gut. My breath was knocked clean out of me.

I'd never been hit that hard with emotion.

I stood there blinking, wondering if my eyes were playing tricks on me... Wondering if I'd maybe sustained a concussion or something earlier...

Because I didn't see my little brother.

No.

I saw *her*.

Addie. *My* Addie.

My heart practically jumped to my throat as I stared at her like a deer caught in headlights. She was swaying her hips on the dance floor, completely unaware of my presence...

That made sense for the two of us, though. I wasn't sure if she ever thought of me over the last decade, but her ghost haunted me every day. I still pathetically had her extra fucking toothbrush in my travel toiletry bag. I still even owned our old house in Northfield for the sole reason that I didn't want to let that little connection between the two of us go... I hadn't even stepped foot back in town for years, so it never made sense why I kept it to anyone who looked at my finances.

Every time I thought of her in my mind though, she was still her twenty-year-old self... But looking at her now, it was easy to tell she'd matured. She'd grown even more beautiful, which I thought was impossible. She still

carried herself in the same graceful way, but her muscle tone was different now, probably because she wasn't skating competitively every single day anymore. Her hips flared out a bit wider, she looked curvier and healthier, and her long dark hair tumbled down to the middle of her back. She'd added long bangs that framed her face, making her look less girlish and more mature. She still had those same high, sharp cheekbones which contrasted with the rest of her gentleness.

Fuck.

A supercut of all our memories flashed through my mind.

I wondered if her voice still had a slight rasp to it... If she still did a little happy dance when she liked her food... If her leg still bounced crazily when she was anxious... If rainy days were still her favorite...

I wasn't sure about any of those things... But I did know one thing for certain: I was even more attracted to this mature version of her. It's like my body was struggling to remember everything that came between us, because I still felt pulled toward her. Our connection still existed... at least for me.

And that hurt.

Upon watching her for all of a minute, it was very clear that she was absolutely wasted. Her movements were too loose, her eyes were fluttering a little too sleepily.

I clenched my jaw tightly and looked down. In my mind, I had her being doted on by some nerdy tech guy in a fancy house in Northfield, maybe with a baby or two or one on the way. I just envisioned her as a different kind of happy, the kind of happy she'd always described to me... Not dancing between two guys like she was

currently doing. If this was what she wanted now, that was fine, but it never had been.

When I looked back up at her, I finally took in the people around her... And that made me want to throw her over my shoulder and run away with her...

Were those men around her feeling her up without her really knowing? Were they laughing about it?

Bile rose up in my throat and I could feel the blood rush to my head, my adrenaline kicking in hard. One of the guys next to her had his phone out. He swiped a couple times, winked at the guy on the other side of her, and was now stretching his arm out to reach under Addie's skirt.

Without another thought, I bulldozed through the dance floor. I grabbed the collar of the guy's shirt and backed him all the way against the bar, snarling at him as I went, ready to snap him in half. He looked like a fish out of water, gulping and pathetically looking around for anyone to help him. I practically growled as I twisted his arm until he dropped his phone to the ground.

"You think that's funny?" I ground out, grinding my teeth so hard they could crack. "Do you?!" I yelled, staring into his eyes. "One little twist and this arm is snapped. Do. You. Think. That. Was. Funny?" I repeated, shaking his shirt, shaking his whole body.

"No! No! I... I..." he stammered. His eyes caught on something behind me. I knew what was coming. I threw him away from me and dunked.

A second later, I turned and shoved the other guy away from me, but that gave the twerp behind me a second to recoup and swing at me too. It was two against one, but I was still going to win. The sight of them touching her without her fully knowing... It was still

stuck in my mind, amping me up, making me wildly, dangerously angry.

I took a shitty punch to the jaw, but hit back twice as hard before a few Crewmen players were separating all of us.

Two Detroit players were now shoving the assholes toward the side door. I was about to follow them, when someone grabbed my injured shoulder and pulled back.

I released a grunt and immediately threw the guy off me. I rubbed my shoulder and prepared to lay into the guy, but when I turned, I faced my little brother.

“Sorry!” Tyler said. “You can’t go after them, bro. You gotta settle down,” he warned.

I clenched my jaw and shook my head at him. He wasn’t drunk at all. I felt my nose flare, trying to control how pissed I was at him... but I’d take care of this later. I was now frantically scanning the room for Addie...

“Where’d she-” Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of her long hair fluttering behind her as she ran out of the bar.

I immediately took off after her.

I pushed open the door and ran into the cold. My voice was hoarse as I shouted out, “Addie! Please wait!”

She was already walking down the dark sidewalk by herself, head down, rubbing her arms to stay warm. I wanted so badly to put my arm around her, share my warmth with her. I wanted her to turn and smile and be happy to see me. I don’t think I’d ever wanted something

so badly in my life... But that clearly wasn't going to happen.

I jogged after her. "Wait," I pleaded.

Head still down, she picked up her pace. "Leave me alone, *please*."

My face felt tight with tension. I paused and watched her walk away, but as soon as she stumbled and almost fell on the sidewalk, I shook my head against this.

"You need help," I said softly, coming up next to her.

She breathed out a sigh and it hung in the cold air in front of her. She turned to me now, and I was finally seeing her up close. After all these years, she was still so delicately beautiful. But her normally bright blue eyes looked completely bloodshot from the alcohol. The tip of her nose and the lower rims of her eyelids were red. Her teeth were practically chattering, and her whole body was trembling. One look at her like this and it roused every protective instinct inside me....

But she had other thoughts.

"No, I don't," she snapped, "and I especially don't need help from *you*."

I winced. Those words... how she said them... hit me dead center in the chest.

"Just go, please," she practically begged, shaking her head.

I stopped following her. My frustration was off the charts. I clasped my hands behind my head and looked up at the night sky for an answer. I didn't want to push my presence on her, but I wouldn't leave her to walk all

alone in the dark in her current state. Couldn't she just let me see her home? She knew how dangerous this was, yet she hated me that much that she wouldn't even take my help? I looked at her figure walking away from me, swaying a bit, not able to walk in a straight line.

"Do you still hate me?" I called out to her, my voice almost cracking. "Is that it?"

She stopped walking. Her back was still to me. She raised a hand to her mouth and sobbed. Her shoulders shook. She looked like she was breaking.

I moved quickly, instinctively pulling her into a hug. My hand pushed up into her hair to cradle her head against my chest like I'd done hundreds of times in the past. I closed my eyes, and rested my chin on her head, loving her warm presence in my arms. It simultaneously felt like no time and so much time had passed.

After a minute, she sniffled and patted my chest for me to back away from her. I let go and reluctantly took a step back. I cleared my throat and knew to look away. She wouldn't want me seeing her swiping tears off her face. "How far is your place?"

She let out a resigned sigh and squinted at the road in front of us. "Ten minute walk."

There's no way she should be out walking that long without a heavier coat, and I kinda doubted it was only ten minutes.

I pulled my phone out, ready to call an uber. "It's cold. Let's get a car?" I suggested.

She glanced up at my eyes, then quickly looked away. "Yeah."

"Five minutes away," I told her. "Let's walk back to the bar. Get out of the cold."

She nodded.

As we walked, she maintained a three-foot distance from me at all times, and that hurt. Being this close but not being able to actually touch her felt like a sick joke... But I'd take this over her walking alone. At least this way, I knew she'd be safe.

She suddenly stopped in her tracks. A hand flew to her chest and her eyes widened. "My backpack. I almost forgot." She looked at me with worried eyes.

"Where is it?"

She chewed on her bottom lip, thinking back. She was definitely wasted. "Duke gave it to Adrienne, the bartender with long, black hair."

Duke? Who the fuck was Duke? That felt like a sucker punch to the gut. Did she already have a guy at the bar and that was why she was so adamant about wanting me to stay away from her? I shook that thought out of my head. *I wanted her to have someone*, I repeated to myself.

"I'll get it," I offered.

I reached for the bar door, but hesitated. "Just... don't leave. Please." I looked at her, hoping to convey how much I needed her to wait for me.

She sighed again and nodded.

Five minutes later, she stretched out on the backseat of the deluxe Uber and promptly closed her eyes to fall asleep. That was good. She looked like she was about to fall asleep standing while we were waiting.

I knew she was drunk, but part of me felt proud that she still felt safe enough with me to actually sleep in

my presence.

I placed her backpack on the bucket seat next to me, but when the uber stopped short at a light, it fell open and her stuff scattered on the floor.

She was still asleep, so I quickly tried to pick everything back up and put it back inside the bag, but her journal had fallen open... And I paused before picking it up...

It looked like she'd drawn some kind of chart... And she had men's names and their potential written down... Their "father potential."

What the fuck?

I rubbed my forehead. What the hell was she doing? She had IUI and IVF crossed off, and the words "one night stand" next to question marks.

My stomach twisted. Was she trying to baby trap a guy or something? And what about this "Duke" person?

I knew I needed to ask her before jumping to conclusions, but what was she thinking? Didn't she know that this wasn't safe? That this wasn't right? She was going to just invite anyone into her life for a permanent position without their knowing and without vetting them first?

By the time we pulled up to her apartment complex, I was fuming. I knew I had no right to be upset, but I couldn't tamper down my frustration. She deserved so much more than this. I forced myself to let her go all those years ago thinking she'd find better. She *needed* better. But a random stranger? That could be so so much worse.

"Uh... we're here," the uber driver said awkwardly.

I nodded and held up a finger. I'd pay for the extra time; I didn't give a shit. I needed a minute to compose myself. I closed my eyes tightly, willing myself to shove back my anger. She wasn't mine to protect.

"Addie," I croaked out, trying to wake her.

She groaned and closed her eyes tighter.

"C'mon, Adds. Let's get inside."

She reluctantly rubbed her eyes and sat up, then grabbed her head and let out a moan.

"I don't feel so good," she said, looking at me with a wary panic in her eyes.

"C'mon," I told her more sternly. "You need some water." I grabbed her backpack, then got out of the car and held her hand to help her out. I didn't let go as we walked up the sidewalk, and she either didn't notice or didn't seem to mind.

"Keys?" I asked her.

"Backp-" She gagged and quickly covered her mouth.

"Shit." I quickly searched her bag and grabbed out her keys. "Take deep breaths, Adds." Thank God I didn't have to test a bunch of keys for the right one because her keychain only had a car key and two others on it. The first key I tried worked and she bolted inside.

I hadn't been sure if she was going to invite me in, but I couldn't just leave her door wide open...

I quickly jimmied the key out and entered her apartment. When closing the door, I realized her deadbolt was broken. She only had the handle lock, which could easily be broken. I shook my head at this before walking inside. I'd have to tell her to fix that... I'd

tell Craig to fix it, but he probably still hated my guts. I could tell Tyler to tell him though, that would be okay. I just knew I wouldn't be able to forget about it. I had to know she was safe.

An awful retching sound came from the bathroom, and I instantly walked toward it.

She'd left the bathroom door open too, probably not having enough time to close it. The sight of her leaning her elbows on the toilet looking absolutely miserable ate at my heart.

But as I stepped into the threshold of the bathroom, she cut me a glare and kicked the door shut with her leg.

I swallowed hard and hung my head back, looking up at her hallway ceiling. I didn't deserve to comfort her anymore. I knew that. So I'm not sure why it still hurt so badly being shut out like that. I'd held her hair and rubbed her back so many times in the past that it felt natural to go to her.

I felt too helpless standing there alone in the hall and had to turn away.

I went back into the little kitchenette and finally looked around at her apartment. It was only about 500 square feet. You could see her bed in the living area right outside the kitchen. She had no dressers though, and it looked like her clothes were still in cardboard boxes. I wondered how long she'd been in this apartment because it lacked any type of hominess. It struck me again how different her life was from what I expected. This was a typical city living apartment, which was never something she'd mentioned wanting. She dreamed of a house in the suburbs... Then again, my life

was a far cry from what I'd wanted it to look like as well...

The toilet flushed a couple times and she sounded about done. I opened her fridge door, thinking she needed some water and food, but quickly realized there wasn't anything in there to even eat. There was only a bottle ranch, a few waters, a couple half empty bottles of wine, and a Styrofoam take-out box that kinda smelled.

"Hey, uh... I'm gonna order a pizza, okay?" I called out.

She stalked out of the bathroom and grabbed some clothes off her bed. "I'm not hungry," she said, then moved back to the bathroom again.

She was definitely hungry. She was always hungry after that happened and she'd definitely have a nasty hangover if she didn't eat something tonight. I quickly put in an order for some takeout pizza to be delivered.

Sirens started wailing and I had to hold my ears. I moved to her little window next to her kitchen table and pulled down a shade. She was right next door to a fire station. Jeez, that had to be annoying as all hell.

I slowly sat down at her table, studying her things as I waited for her. She had sticky notes all over the small table, all with to-do lists scrawled over them in her rushed, half-cursive handwriting. She had a stack of romance books mixed in with non-fiction hockey books, as well as a stack of newspaper cut-outs. I felt an uncomfortable tightness in my chest over the reminder that she used to cut out and collect every article with my name mentioned in it. I took a closer look at these articles and realized she'd written them. I sat back and

shook my head in awe. She'd really carved out a life for herself.

As I leafed through the cut-outs, I noticed she had a few cards mixed in with the articles. I immediately recognized one... Mia's 3rd birthday invitation. It was next month. I knew because I'd received the same one. I'd thought all our connections were severed, but I guess she still kept in contact with Harper. I wondered if Marksy knew and just decided to never say anything to me about it? What would've happened if we'd both shown up there next month? Then again, would she make the trek to Boston just for a toddler's birthday party?

"Don't judge me," she snapped when she walked out in jogger sweatpants and a ratty, old, men's CCM hockey T-shirt that went way past her butt. She must've taken out her contacts, because she wore cream-color framed glasses. She stood there in her kitchen and tied her hair up in a messy bun. I used to love when she'd get comfortable like this with me, that was practically my kryptonite. I wanted so badly to pull her into my lap, kiss her neck, take her hair back down... I was starving for her touch...

Nope, do not go there, man. Box that shit up, I ordered myself, because I couldn't touch her. She was only mine in a different life. The shirt she was wearing all but told me that. For all I knew, it could've been that Duke guy's shirt.

I cleared my throat and stared down at her table. "Not judging," I finally responded.

She regarded me with an unimpressed expression. "You're lying."

I shook my head. "No."

"Well, you did that jaw thing, so yes, you are lying," she said pointedly.

"Oh man," I rubbed a hand over my scruff to cover a small, sad smile. She still knew me so well.

She padded barefoot toward the fridge to retrieve a water bottle, then wordlessly asked me if I wanted one too. I nodded.

I picked up the invitation on her table. "You still talk to Harper?"

She paused, like she'd been caught. "Don't be mad," she said quietly.

"No, I'm..." I let out an incredulous laugh. She'd been so happy to tell me she made a friend the first day she met Harper. I had no clue how much she had needed that at the time. "I'm glad you guys are still friends. I'm just shocked. I didn't have a clue..."

A small smile tugged at her lips as she handed me the water bottle. "You don't know who Mia's godmother is, huh?"

My mouth dropped open, then I quickly snapped it shut. "Wow, no, I didn't know... So, you're coming to Boston... To go to the party then?" I asked her. I pushed a hand through my hair. "I went to her other parties, I never saw you."

She gave a sad smile. "I know. Harper had us come at different times."

I blew out a sigh. "Why-

The doorbell rang, letting us know the pizza was there.

"I'll get it," I said quickly. I needed a breather to straighten out my thoughts.

She'd been coming to Boston for years without me knowing? She hated me so much that she still couldn't stand to even be at the same party as me?

Then again, she just broke down crying when I asked her if she hated me on the sidewalk...

This was too fucking complicated. The way my heart was experiencing whiplash from seeing her again... I should've just left, but I guess I was a glutton for punishment.

I paused in front of her door with the pizza.

If I only had this one night with her, I wanted it to be good. We were good together all those years ago. We were torn by terrible circumstances, but that didn't mean we couldn't try to attain closure. I wanted to leave here with her knowing that I'd always be here for her, even from a distance.

"I got extra ranch," I told her as I walked back in the kitchen, setting the pizza on the table. "Figured you still liked it more than actual food seeing as it's one of the only things in your fridge," I joked. "And I know how you like restaurant ranch better."

Her blue eyes looked guarded, like she wasn't expecting me to be friendly. "Thank you," she said, biting her lip.

I took off my coat and grabbed a pizza. I leaned back in her chair, trying to put her at ease. "So, this is weird, huh?"

That cracked her a bit. She smirked and nodded a bit as she cut her pizza with a fork and knife like she always had in the past.

"How's life?" I asked, trying again. It felt unfair that she knew exactly how my life was going and what I was

up to, but I didn't really have much information about her.

"Good," she said after swallowing. "I'm a beat reporter for the Crewmen," she offered.

I tapped on the table in front of her stack of cut-outs. "I saw. That's incredible, Addie. How long have you been doing it? You travel with the team to away games?"

"No, and thank God," she said with a little laugh. "I've been doing it for about two years. I just watch away games on TV. I don't envy that part of your guys' job."

"Yeah," I drawled. "I still hate traveling."

She covered her smile by leaning her chin on her hand. "I've wondered about that."

My eyebrows raised. "About how I'm doing with flying?"

She nodded and shifted to tuck one of her legs under her to get more comfortable. I couldn't remember a meal at home when she didn't sit like that.

"Well, I have a routine. It's shitty, but it gets me there. The team trainer basically shoves pills at me before I get on so I'm knocked out the whole way."

She laughed with her mouth full and it did something in my chest. I still felt so connected to her. I wondered if she felt the same way or if I was just delusional.

"What else?" she asked, surprising me that she was taking the lead in questioning.

I leaned forward and scootched my chair in as I went for another slice. "What do you mean?"

She looked a little sheepish now. "You have anyone else in your life... who'd be mad you're here right

now?" She quickly added, "Just want the heads up if I'm going to be attacked by puck bunnies tomorrow."

I laughed at that. "Nah, S—" I covered my mouth for a cough. No way was I about to call her 'Sweetheart' and risk her getting mad at me. It just almost slipped out. "Nah. Just Tyler, and he'd be ecstatic I'm here. Still likes you more than me I think."

She shook her head at that and a smile played on her lips. "No, that kid pumps your tires every chance he gets."

"Kinda jealous he's on the Crewmen now. You probably interview him twice a week," I said, then immediately regretted it. I stepped too far. "Well, what about you? Whose shirt?" I asked quickly, trying to recover. I took a big bite before she could answer. I didn't want to look upset when she twisted the knife in my chest.

She looked down at it. "Stole it from home, it's gotta be dad's. Claire had it for a while. We kept stealing it from each other when we lived together. I bet she looks for it in a few days then sneaks over here to steal it back."

"Ha," I smiled. "I could see that... So who is Duke then?"

She looked taken aback.

"You said Duke gave your backpack to the bartender," I pushed.

Her face scrunched up in confusion. "Duke? My brother-in-law?"

I almost choked on my pizza, but felt so relieved a laugh popped out of me. "Oh ok, good." Then internally

cringed over my words. *Why would I say “good”? I shouldn’t have said that.*

“You don’t remember Duke and Claire at the rink?” She looked at me dubiously. “Always competing against each other and getting in fist fights? She gave him a shiner with her right hook? I was out with them tonight. He’s on the Crewmen too. Number 14? He’s friends with Tyler.”

“Oh shit... Yeah, now I remember. Damn. Those two grew up and got married?”

“Yeah,” she smiled, looking happy for her sister, but I could detect a twinge of something else... Wistfulness maybe?

She got up then to throw her plate in the trash, then moved her backpack up onto an extra chair. It felt like a brick wall slammed down between us.

I dropped my pizza, no longer having an appetite.

“Addie...” It was nice to catch up, but I needed to address this. I couldn’t leave with the regret of not saying my piece. “Your backpack spilled open in the car,” I admitted, twisting a paper towel in my hands, suddenly feeling super nervous about how she’d react. “I saw your notebook,” I said slowly.

Her jaw angled out to the side, telling me she was pissed. She sat up straighter and held up her hand to stop me from speaking anymore about it. “I already watched your brother freak out about it, I don’t want to hear it from you too, Casey. You have no right to say-”

“Wait, wait, wait, Tyler?” I interrupted her, feeling my face crack in annoyance. I pushed out of my chair and paced her little kitchen. The little twerp did *not* tell me all this. I held my forehead, thinking back. He said

she was *moving on*, but not that she was moving on like this. I would've... I would've... I don't even know what I would've done, but at least I'd have my thoughts together right now had I known. I let out a frustrated groan. "Tyler knew you were trying to hook up with random guys to get... to get... ?" I couldn't even say it because I still couldn't wrap my mind around it.

"No," she snapped. "Tyler just knew I was trying to have a baby. He saw IVF pamphlets when I was interviewing him for a story. That's all."

Okay, I was a little less mad at him.

"Addie..." I looked at her desperately. "You can't just hook up with a random guy. That's not... right. It affects him too. And this," I motioned around me. She lived by herself with a door that barely locked and right next to a fire station that would wake a sleeping baby in a second. She didn't even have food in her fridge, she was hardly taking care of herself for God's sake. "This isn't... right."

She leveled me with a dangerous glare. "Do not come in here and criticize *my life*, Casey Jettersen. You have no fucking right." She pointed at me accusingly. "And you have no clue what I was even planning to do."

I backpedaled, feeling my frustration building. I pinched the bridge of my nose and looked at her ceiling. "I'm sorry, it's not coming out right. It's just... Addie... You have time," I said desperately. "So much time. And there are other ways. Why do it this way? You aren't ready right now for a... a..."

Her blue eyes seared into me. "A baby? Yes, I am. I've been ready since I was twenty years old, Casey." Her tone was harsh, but her eyes were welling up with tears. That sad look on her face snapped me

back in time. “I’ve tried everything, okay?! And I know there’s other ways, but I want a redo!” She was fully crying now.

“Fuck, Addie,” I rasped out. I put a hand over my eyes because I couldn’t look at the hurt in hers anymore.

It was all coming at me right now, all the painful snapshots of the past, and I couldn’t stop it... It was hitting me too hard. How badly everything had turned out. How I couldn’t comfort her. How both of our lives got so fucking derailed away from what we wanted. And it was all my fault.

She wanted a baby.

My shoulders shook. I backed against her fridge, slid down to my butt. “I’m... I’m so sorry,” I blubbered on her floor, repeating it over and over, hoping she would understand.

25. Casey - Fall 2013

I threw a couple more logs on the fire.

“The girls are toasted. They’re dangerous together. They party harder than us now,” Marksy said, shaking his head. He strained his neck to get a better look at them and his forehead creased with worry. “Wait, is Harper making a mixed drink with a Red Bull right now?”

“Looks like it, my friend,” I said, taking a sip of my whiskey coke.

He took off toward the tiki bar muttering something about “way too much caffeine.”

We were having a friendsgiving bonfire party in the backyard. Thanksgiving was still a couple weeks away, but we wanted to have it when we’d all be home together. This little celebration was Addie’s idea. She was shy when she first asked me about it, but once I was in for it too, I could tell she was super excited about the prospect of hosting. I was determined to make it a fun night for her. I even went out and bought heat lamps just to make sure people wouldn’t be too cold.

I also wanted this to give her a small reprieve from her crazy training schedule. I missed this past spring and summer when we could be together almost every day. Now, I was on the road half the time, and the days I was home, she was sometimes too tired to come over. Nationals were coming up for her in January and she was determined to place in the top three. If she did, she’d be going to the Olympics in February. Everything she was working for was coming up. Both of us needed to stay focused for just a little while longer.

Right then, Addie almost fell off the bench she was dancing on next to Harper, and Marksy had to grab her waist to steady her. She just threw her head back laughing.

Sometimes I wondered if I was just distracting her. I wanted to show her there was more to life than the rink... but I was afraid I'd shown her a bit too much when she was wasted like this. She needed a healthy balance, and she currently did not have that. I hated leaving her for road trips and coming back to see her so worn down and tired. She was training so hard she was losing weight. When I brought it up to her, she flat out denied it. But I knew. I was the one holding her at night. I could tell. And now, while she should've been resting, she was here partying like there was no tomorrow.

Marksy was now taking Harper's cup away and giving her a new one, probably one without Red Bull.

And damn... Addie was still dancing like they weren't arguing right next to her. I shook my head.

She made eye contact with me then and I watched her dance suggestively, trying to arouse me... Well, she did. That was for sure. She didn't have to do much to do that to me. I burned for her. I sighed and adjusted my pants, making her giggle.

I tried to keep a straight face, but failed and took a sip of my drink to cover it up.

I kept eye contact with her as I drained my glass, then made my way through the little crowd to get to her.

The smile on her face disappeared when she realized I wasn't going to dance with her though. Instead, I grabbed her waist and hoisted her over my shoulder.

She wriggled around and pounded on my back, but I just held her tighter. People called out their casual goodbyes. They knew she was too wasted and that she was in good hands with me.

“Ahh, the picture of a man in love,” Max, one of the guys from the Ice League, snickered.

I punched him in the gut as I passed him.

She’d be barfing here probably pretty soon if she didn’t watch it. I needed to get some food and water in her before putting her to bed in my room.

Except while I was walking back to our house, right after I passed through the cove of pine trees that hid the tiki bar, she wriggled out of my grasp and flopped onto the ground in a giggle fit. Her dark hair fanned out around her.

I sighed to the sky and moved my hands to my hips.

“You’ll be the death of me, Adds,” I said as I towered over her.

“Nope. No!” she pointed her finger and barked at me like I was a dog. She sprawled her limbs out so she’d be harder to pick up and looked straight up at the sky. “You can’t manhandle me, remember?” she complained. “Everyone thinks they can. You can’t too,” she said quietly.

That hurt. There’s no way I wanted to be categorized with everyone else in her world. I wanted to be her hero.

Instead of grabbing her back up, I laid down on the cold, hard ground beside her and folded my hands behind my head.

"This is a nice piece of property you've got here, Jettersen," she told me.

I tried to see it through her eyes. Take away the shitty, falling apart house and you did have a nice area. It's almost like the trees created a circle, just for us, so we could look straight up into the night sky. Without any light pollution, you could see all the stars here.

"Well, I'm glad ya like it. It's the only thing I do have."

She turned her head and gazed at me with her dark blue eyes. "I don't like when you say things like that," she said while looping her arms around my neck. "Besides, you *could* buy something else now, but this is home."

She was right. I probably could buy a house on the nicer side of town with the money I'd made so far, but my mind was on a different purchase...

"Say things like what?" I studied her beautiful face. Her strong cheekbones, her delicate features, the beauty mark under her left eye, her long eyelashes. I'd memorized her every look, but I'd never get tired of staring at her.

"Say things that demean yourself."

I turned back to the sky, mulling over her words. "That's the big dipper right there," I pointed it out to her.

"Yeah?" she asked. "You know any other ones?"

"Yes, I do actually... Might be the only thing I retained from high school."

"That's not true," she said with a laugh.

"Oh yes, it is, Ms. Kessel."

“You were just studying hockey and no one knew it,” she said. She reached over to smooth one of my eyebrows and left her cold hand on my cheek. “And now you’re a big superstar.”

“Nah, you’ve had a lot to drink for you to say such things. And I’m only where I’m at because of you,” I said, leaning forward to kiss her smile.

When I pulled back, she was still closing her eyes. “I want to stay here in this moment with you forever,” she said wistfully.

“Nah, it’s too cold, babe,” I cracked an easy smile as I rolled her on top of my chest. She laid her head down on me and I smoothed a hand down her back. “I’ll make even greater moments for you.”

In fact, the picture of the one purchase I was planning popped to the forefront of my mind, and now I was bursting with wanting to talk about it. It was easiest to bring it up now while she was drunk, that way, if she laughed at me, she might not even remember it.

I cleared my throat and decided to buck up and just say it. “Like when we get married. It’ll have to be soon, right?”

Her head popped up. The look on her face... Her smile at that moment... It was the happiest I’d ever seen her. And I felt so proud for being the one to make her feel that way.

“Really?” Her eyes were looking a little glassy now, and it was the first time I didn’t mind it, because I knew they were happy tears.

I nodded, grinning like a ridiculously happy schoolboy.

When I said those words to her, about getting married soon, I fully believed them. I thought of her as more than a girlfriend. I thought of her as my wife already, and I'd already walked through a few jewelry stores downtown looking for the perfect ring for her. I fully thought we'd have a whole grand life together, making moments like these.

Over the years, I wished so, so badly to go back to that night. To re-do that very next morning.

Because to us, when we made love that following morning, we thought we were cementing us, our relationship, for the next decade to come.

I had no way of knowing that it was just the start of us breaking apart, both inside, and away from each other.

26. Casey - Winter 2013

I was partying after a home game with some teammates, kind of bummed that Addie couldn't come out because of her schedule. I couldn't wait until this competitive season was over for her.

I knew it was shitty of me to think— but a part of me almost didn't want her to make the Olympic team. I'd go with her and try to help as much as I could, but it was going to be hard to watch her go through it. If she was that nervous at Skate America, what were Nationals going to be like in a couple weeks? What were the Olympics going to be like? That level of anxiety couldn't be healthy.

The whole fucking sport wasn't healthy. Her period had disappeared, and she was so casual about it. I brought it up to her that it seemed like it'd been a while, but she just explained it away, saying it had happened to her before. She said it was because of stress and over-training and that it'd come back when she was more relaxed again... but *fuck*. This was taking a large toll on her body...

After a couple beers, I really regretted not skipping out tonight. I wanted to sneak in her window to pull her body close and sleep behind her instead. The only thing that stopped me was Craig. If he found me in her bed, he'd probably break my legs with a bat. I wasn't scared of any man in this world... but I was scared of losing his respect. Because one day soon, I knew I'd be asking him for Addie's hand.

But partying without her? It just felt dumb. This whole night felt empty without having her here to end it with.

I tried to give the guys an excuse and leave the bar early, but they weren't having it.

"Rookie wants to ditch out?! No fuckin' way!" one teammate named Sorello called out. I wasn't a big fan of his. There was always at least one asshole on every team. Sorello was an instigator who was always pushing people too far. I threw some cash on the bar, and Sorello took the opportunity to snatch my phone from my jacket pocket.

My face turned stone cold.

"Dude," Marksy warned him from beside me.
"Give it back."

"Nah," Sorello smiled smugly. "He can get it back when we say so." A couple older guys from the team gathered around him then, thinking he was funny as shit.

I stood a little taller. Sorello was on the shorter end of the team and definitely had a grudge about it. I cleared my throat. "Please give it back. I gotta get back to my little brother," I lied. Tyler was sleeping over Reggie's house tonight, but I needed to get out of here. The guys were too far gone, and I was starting to feel uneasy about the whole situation. Nothing good ever happened to me in a bar after 1am.

My phone started ringing then, and I swear the piece of shit started smiling even harder.

"Oooh, who is this?!" Sorello called out, showing everyone my phone.

I reached for it, but he quickly moved back, away from me. The older guys let out an "oooh."

I could feel my neck turning red with frustration as my phone continued ringing.

"Addie with little hearts?! Is this the babe from the plane?!" Sorello asked with a wicked grin. He pressed ignore, making me want to slug him in the fucking face.

"C'mon Sorells. He's gotta get home," Marksy said, now standing next to me.

"No, he doesn't. He's gotta stay right here and buy us a round. Rookie rules," he retorted. "And I'll letcha in on a little secret," he said, leaning close to me. I did my best to look unaffected, but I was practically grinding my teeth to bits. "Hoes ain't loyal," he said.

I shoved him. Hard. "Fuck off, Sorello," I spat angrily.

He just laughed and looked at me like I was crazy. "Chill, rookie! I'm trying to save you from trouble. Addie with the hearts is prolly bangin' some other dude right now."

I shoved him again.

"Oh shit! She's calling again!" Sorello laughed.

Panic swelled up in my chest. She was supposed to be sleeping. Something was wrong... and this fucker wouldn't let me answer her. I saw red.

"She'd probably bang me, you guys think?" Sorello showed the other guys my screensaver and that cracked something inside me.

I swung at him, and then everything was a blur of fists and bodies.

I took a punch square to the jaw and my vision went a little gray around the edges, but that just made me punch back harder, faster.

"Shit, cops!" someone yelled out.

Marksy tried to pull me out of the fray, but he was too late...

So much for being a good role model for Tyler.

I spent the night in jail. At least Sorello was in a different cell. I'd probably smash his teeth out if we were trapped together. It was his fault I was now sitting here worried like hell about Adds.

Someone from the organization was sent to get our asses out and settle everything. But by the time I was holding my phone in my hands again, it was 9am... And Addie had left a message. A horrible chill ran down my spine as I stared at it.

And then I played it.

"Casey... something's... something's wrong..."
Her voice wobbled.

I held my jaw in apprehension.

A sob escaped her mouth on the other end of the line, and it physically hurt me to hear. She never cried like that. "I'm bleeding. Can you please come get me?"

"Fuck!" I roared. I slammed my hands against my steering wheel before throwing my truck in drive and making my way to Addie's. I trembled the entire way, scared as hell about what I'd find.

Claire threw the front door open as I approached, but I didn't make it very far inside their house.

As soon as I rushed into their foyer, I was pummeled.

My neck snapped back from taking a punch squarely to the face and my ears started ringing. I squeezed my eyes shut tight a couple times and shook my head out. I'd ended up on the floor.

By the time I was seeing straight again, Craig was screaming at me, and his ex-wife was trying to pull him away.

"You! You son of a bitch!" he was yelling at me. The veins in his throat were bulging out. His face was pure red. "It was you! You were supposed to take her out! I didn't pay you to *knock her up!*"

Craig's furious words grinded my world to a halt.

My heart stopped.

Knock her up...

She said she was bleeding...

Craig could see the moment of realization in my face, and he snarled.

The puzzle was solved in my mind. It formed a grim, horribly sad picture. I wished I could destroy it, throw it away, erase it. Because it made me feel like the most helpless piece of shit on the planet, and I knew nothing would ever be the same.

My whole body shook with rage, but there was nowhere for the rage to go. I stayed on the ground, my head between my knees.

The rage turned into tears. I cried like I never had before. Not even when my dad was arrested, or when

my mom left, or when I'd heard about my mom's fate, or when Tyler asked me when they were coming back...

I'd never before cried so hard that my entire body shook down to its core.

Because we'd had a baby.

Me and Addie.

Past tense.

27. Addie - Winter 2013

"...You were supposed to take her out. I didn't pay you to *knock her up!*"

Pay you.

Pay...

I was going to be sick.

My entire reality shifted on its axis.

Everything I thought I knew, every memory I had... I was now seeing it through a distorted filter. The color drained from my life.

I let him in. I let him know me. So *intimately well*... He knew every piece of me. And it was all a lie? I suddenly felt disgusted by him. I shivered, wanting to shed my skin. Every piece of me he touched.

My whole body hurt... Ached.

Just minutes ago, I thought my life was over... I was drowning in my grief over losing what I didn't even know we had. But Casey was the one lifeline that I knew would bring me back to shore.

And now even that line had been severed.

And I went through all of this because of what? When I thought it was because of love, it was heartbreak... Now that I knew it wasn't real, or true, it was all a fabrication, a simulation of love...

This wasn't heartbreak.

It was soul shattering.

I suddenly felt tainted, jaded, like I wasn't pure anymore because he'd stolen my innocence. And I wasn't talking about my virginity, even though I'd given him that too. No. I was talking about hatred. I was talking

about regret. My heart had never before known what those words truly meant. I didn't know until that moment. And I hated him all the more for making me feel them. For making me know them.

Later that night, he knocked on my bedroom window. I was still up; I hadn't been able to sleep at all. I just kept replaying everything. Every mistake I made leading up to this... He continued to knock, but I didn't want to look at him. I wasn't ready for this. For the end of us. For my heart to fully break. For us to completely shatter.

"Addie..." he whispered against the glass.
"Please, Addie..." he cried.

I tugged the blankets tighter and refused to look at him.

"Just hear me out, please..." his muffled voice said.

I walked to the window, feeling numb, and gave him a cold glare.

His eyes were all welled up and red, like he'd been crying. He looked weak, so totally unlike the way I always viewed him. He wasn't larger than life. No. He was just a twenty-two-year-old boy. Just a boy. Who wrecked my heart.

He had a bruised jaw and the beginnings of a black eye. So that's where he was when I needed him the most. Fighting. He loved fighting more than he loved me.

I cracked the window open.

“What do you have to say?” I demanded. The vision of him in front of me went blurry. “What could you possibly say to make this better, Casey?” I felt my face crumple, and I asked through my tears, “Where were you?”

“Addie... I... This fucking asshole took my phone and wouldn’t give it back and it started a fucking brawl. I would’ve been here. I wanted to be here. The cops came and I ended up spending the night in jail, and I—”

I shook my head. It didn’t even matter where he was, only that he hadn’t been with me. “Casey... Did he pay you to take me out? Was this all fake?” My voice cracked, and I hated how weak I sounded.

“No! I promise you.” His shoulders shook with his own tears. “It was just that first time. That day I came up to you on the ramp when you were crying. I came up to you because he said he was worried about you. The next morning, I tried to give the money back, I really did. But everything after that, it was because I wanted to. Your dad just didn’t know. He still doesn’t. He doesn’t know that I love you, Addie.”

“You should’ve told me.” I cried. “I feel so *stupid*.” I covered my face. I’d spent all day hating him for the wrong things... But it didn’t change the fact that I wished I could go back in time and never know him. Because then I’d never know this hurt.

When I finally looked back at him, I hated that he was standing out there, free from my pain. And I wanted him to hurt as badly as I did. “You made me promise that I’d leave you if you hurt me. And you fucking did, okay? You *did*. I *hate* you, Casey,” I sobbed. I looked him right

in the eye. “I regret you, and I hate you, and I never want to see you again.”

His face remained the same, but his eyes teared up. He swiped the palm of his hand against his eyes. He looked beaten.

When he didn’t move to leave, I screamed, “Go!”

He jumped at my shrill voice, but didn’t move from my window.

“Now, Casey! Go the *fuck* away!”

And I hated him even more when he did.

My grief had intertwined with anger and my heart couldn’t take it. He was the only one there. He was part of this, and from my point of view, he wasn’t hurting enough. I was stuck with this consequence of us and he was off free. So all of my anger was directed at him.

For days after, I just wished he wouldn’t have come into my room to see me right then.

I hated him for coming to see me.

I hated him for leaving.

Nothing he could’ve said or done would’ve helped. He couldn’t win that night.

Because we had both already lost so much.

28. Addie

I didn't know how badly he still hurt from our past too. I thought I'd been injured beyond repair, and he'd be fine. I thought I was the only one carrying around the scars. But seeing him cry, it cracked my heart in a needed way.

And now that I knew this, I didn't want to be apart from him tonight.

I tugged on his hand and led him to bed.

29. Casey

I was finally able to hold her like I so desperately wanted to all those years ago. I was finally able to comfort her for all that she lost...

For all that we lost...

30. Addie

I could hear the rain pounding outside. It had to be around eight in the morning, but it was still dark outside, almost like the day was dying, not just starting. These were my favorite kinds of mornings, because it's almost like even outside was saying it was okay to feel down sometimes; like it was saying, even when things weren't shiny and new, they still held their own unique kind of beauty.

This morning, it felt like I was stealing time. I never thought I'd share a bed with him again. I thought it would be too painful. I wasn't wrong about that— it was painful. We both cried our fair share last night. But laying with him now, I felt oddly at peace.

His large comforting hand was under my shirt. He held me just like he always had, his outstretched hand on my stomach, his pinky grazing my boy shorts, his thumb brushing under my boob. At some point in the night, we had smooshed close together as one, and he didn't seem to want to let go.

I curled tighter into him. How could things still feel this right? Like no time had passed, when in fact, so much had...

I always thought he was manly when I was young, but that was in comparison to the boys he worked with at the Ice League. Now, he was more filled out with solid muscles.

My favorite things about him had stayed the same though. When I looked at him, I could still see the faded freckles under his eyes that gave him an eternally boy-ish quality even though he was a ruggedly handsome man.

He also exuded the same safety and stability that he always had when we were young. He was so solidly in charge when defending me at the bar. The last time I saw him, I thought I'd never feel those qualities from him again... I thought I'd never feel safe with him again. But maybe I'd been wrong...

When he opened Pandora's box by bringing up my journal... When his mind wandered to the topic of a "baby," which he couldn't even say aloud in my presence, he looked broken, and it was clear he hadn't been able to fully process and heal from what had happened that night so many years ago either. The way he recited "sorry" over and over again... It was probably my fault for how I reacted in that moment. But I had been dying inside at the time. I couldn't save him or his feelings because I had been trying too hard to save myself.

If last night made anything clear, it was the fact that he needed me just as much as I needed him. Maybe we needed this one final time... To see to it that we were both okay... And to finally have some closure.

After lying there with him peacefully snoozing behind me for about a half hour, my need to go to the bathroom finally overcame my desire to stay in our little cocoon. I tried not to wake him up as I carefully extricated myself and then padded over to the bathroom.

Embarrassment kind of slammed into me when I remembered I'd thrown up here just last night. But he was never one to hold anything over your head. He'd be sweet and want to help in the moment, then never bring it up again, and I always appreciated that about him.

Part of me wanted to lay back down with him, but I forced myself to make some coffee and start the day.

31. Casey

The smell of coffee wafting into the room and the sound of light rain pattering against the windows were two things that always made me think of Addie...

Addie. For the first time, thinking of her didn't cause a horrible knot to form in my stomach.

I paused for a second, remembering where I was. Remembering last night. Realizing she wasn't in bed with me anymore...

I sat up quickly and my heart rate skyrocketed.

I only relaxed when I spotted her in the kitchen, pouring a cup of coffee in a mug.

She turned to look back at me and gave a small smile. "Want some?" she asked, gesturing to the coffee machine.

I nodded and rubbed a hand over my face. I slept like a baby, not even waking up once in the middle of the night for the first time in years... But for some reason, I still felt exhausted. Yesterday physically and mentally drained me.

I stretched my shoulder out a bit as I made my way into her little kitchenette. I definitely should've iced it more last night, but other things were more important.

She handed me a hot mug, and we both leaned against her kitchen cabinets about three feet apart.

It would be so natural for me to pull her close, kiss her neck, dance with her here in the kitchen... I could practically still hear her giggles... But instead, she gave me a strained smile and it seemed like neither of us knew what to say.

My stomach growled loudly then, breaking the silence, and she gave a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry... I’d offer something more, but I wasn’t expecting to have a guest.”

“All good. I usually just eat as soon as I get up. Want to uh... ” I spied her fridge; I hated that it was empty. “Go to the grocery store?” I really hoped she’d take me up on the offer. I still wanted to broach a couple topics with her that I was nervous to bring up and walking there would hopefully let out some of my pent-up energy.

Her eyebrows raised. “Uh... sure. Just let me get ready for a sec.”

A few minutes later, she emerged from her bathroom in leggings and an old hoodie that read “Belmont University” across the front... I missed the days she would’ve worn one of my stolen hoodies. She pulled the hood over her long hair and threw on a heavier flannel.

“Ready?”

I nodded. This felt so normal, to be going on a grocery run with her... But there was a pang in my chest knowing it would only be for this one time.

I threw on my peacoat, really wishing I had my old Carhartt jacket I wore every day.

“Fancy,” she said, pulling the sleeve of my coat as I shut her door behind us.

I snorted. “Yeah. It’s my pre-game jacket that goes over my suit. Hate it. I just didn’t pack anything else.”

Her eyes crinkled at the corners as she laughed. “Good. I was sitting here thinking you must’ve changed a

lot if you enjoyed wearing peacoats now.”

“Nah,” I said with a chuckle, shoving my hands in my pockets. “Same old me. Still hate dressing the part.”

When she locked only the handle, I internally cringed. I wanted to address it, but I couldn’t bring up too many things all at once. I didn’t want it to make it sound like I was criticizing her life... because as she said last night, I really didn’t have any say in where she lived and how she decided to go about her life. But maybe I could convince her to stop by a Home Depot on our way back...

As soon as we walked outside, she shivered a bit. “It’s not even that cold out, but the drizzle in the air makes it feel like it’s below freezing.”

I smiled down at her. It’d been a long time since I was around her, I’d almost forgotten how much shorter she was than me. “True.”

We spent most of the walk talking about last night’s game. She was careful not to say anything too critical or too complimentary of either team. I had a hard time focusing on the conversation because I knew I needed to transition us back to the past so that we could both move forward in a healthy way.

“Addie...” I interrupted her.

She stopped on the sidewalk for a second and the smile dropped off her face. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” she said quietly. “And I want to forget about the past for today, okay?”

I paused for a beat. “I just have to say that I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “I wasn’t able to get it out very clearly last night. I can’t forget because I just... Is there

any way that you could forgive me? I go back to that night all the fucking time, wishing I could do it differently, wishing I would've just left my phone and walked away and been there with you... And the whole thing with your dad..." I shook my head, feeling disgusted with myself. "Our relationship, that was the realest fucking thing in my life, Addie. And I'm so fucking sorry I wasn't there for you."

She started walking again but was silent. I could see her squinting her eyes though, like she was gathering her thoughts. I stayed quiet, not wanting to interrupt what was going on in that brain of hers.

"I do forgive you," she said, turning to look up at me. "I said things I regret. It wasn't your fault that it happened that night. It just...happened." She gave a disappointed shrug. "I needed someone to pin it on. I needed someone to be angry at and it was easy to blame you, especially when you weren't there... And then I found out about my dad paying you and all that in the worst possible way. That whole day, I was thinking he paid you the entire time, not just the first date, which I don't even care about. I've thought a lot about it over the years, and honestly, we probably would've laughed about it had you told me the truth and explained that to me at some other time. Because I knew how much you loved me. But that night, everything kind of morphed together in my mind and my world was just crumbling down. Hearing that felt like the final blow."

I felt my nose flare as I breathed out. Her words felt like a weight coming off me. I hadn't known just how much I needed to hear that from her.

"Do you..." she cleared her throat and closed her eyes. "Do you blame me?" She looked up at me with the saddest eyes and it nearly killed me.

“No, God, Addie, no.” I shook my head. “Definitely not.” I pulled her into a hug before I could think too much of it. My throat burned. “You know it wasn’t your fault, right?”

She squeezed her eyes shut and nodded, like she needed to hear me say those things to her too.

We walked in silence for a block or so before I found myself wanting to transition to the future. “And now you want to have a baby.”

“I’ve always wanted to have a baby,” she returned with a sad smile.

I could see the grocery store up ahead of us now. I purposefully slowed my pace so we could stretch out our talk.

“Why can’t you do that sperm donor thing?”

She twisted her lips and squinted again. “Already tried that actually.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, wanting to ask so many more questions, but knowing I had to limit myself. “Is that why you mentioned IVF? Why can’t you do that?”

She breathed out a sigh, and I could see her breath hanging in the air in front of us. I wanted so badly to hold her hand at that moment, because I could see how tense this conversation made her.

“It’s too expensive.” Her forehead creased. “Casey, this is really weird to talk about with you. Can we please just drop it?”

I shook my head. “Not weird at all. I’m an old friend who has always loved you and wants what’s best for you. I think that’s pretty simple.”

She rolled her eyes, which looked kind of glassy now. "You know it's not that simple."

"It is only what you decide it to be," I said with a grin, and that finally made her crack a little knowing smile. "Let me pay for it," I said suddenly. "Please." In my mind, I was already thinking of ways I could help get her into a new place as well. I'd give her extra and she'd have to use it.

Her face cracked in disapproval. "No way."

"Why not?"

We were at the doors of the grocery store now. She hurried ahead of me and grabbed a cart, seemingly trying to distance herself from our conversation.

I quietly walked next to her as she picked up some eggs, bacon, orange juice, English muffins, and butter.

At the checkout, I inconspicuously handed my card to the cashier over her head as she loaded stuff onto the conveyor belt.

When she realized I'd already paid, she stuck her jaw out at me, but I lifted my hands innocently. "I made you come here, I pay."

She was still grumbling as I lifted the groceries and walked out behind her, and I couldn't help but grin at her same old stubbornness.

We walked in silence for about a block until I started in on her again. "You can't just go out and try to get pregnant off a one-night-stand, Addie."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Why not?"

Pressure built up in my chest just from thinking about it. "Because it's not safe, Adds." It came out

harsher than I intended. “It’s not safe,” I repeated more gently. But honestly, the thought of her inviting a random guy into a permanent spot in her life like that scared the shit out of me. “You have no clue if the guy is a fuckin’ murderer. And what happens if you do get pregnant? Have you really thought of that? Have you thought of custody agreements? Or were you just going to ride off into the sun without telling him? Because that’s not fair, Addie.”

She kicked a rock off the sidewalk. “What *is* safe? You were safe for me, Casey?” she asked.

That felt like a knife to the chest. I used to love that I gave her safety, and even if she couldn’t see it that way I did, trying to pay for this was me still trying to provide that for her.

“Besides, I was going to tell the guy. I was just looking for someone who wanted the same things as me.”

I swallowed hard. “Please, Addie. I’m begging you to go the IVF way instead. Let me pay for it. Tyler is all set with money, I’m set. I have no use for my money. You wouldn’t ever have to tell a soul. I never would either. I’ll sign an NDA,” I said with a dry laugh. “I hate all that legal bullshit, but that’s how serious I am about this. And Addie, I really want this to work for you,” I said earnestly.

In the back of my mind, I knew I’d do anything, pay anything, to make her happy.

She sucked in her top lip in thought. “Maybe.”

I felt my shoulders relax a bit, but not all the way. “And you have to get your shit together, girl.” I said it jokingly, but I was dead serious.

She rolled her eyes.

“I’m worried about you. If you’re really going to do this, you need to take care of yourself.”

She looked tense now and I knew I was walking a thin line.

“I know you, Addie. I know you have a lot going on in that head of yours and you get so focused you forget to prioritize your health. There’s been times in the past where I’m cooking and a thought will pop into my mind like, ‘*Ya know, I really hope someone’s taking over the stove when she decides cooking is too boring. Hopefully she hasn’t burnt down an entire apartment complex.*’”

I finally earned a little laugh from that.

“But maybe fix your door, fill up your fridge...” I said hesitantly.

She sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

32. Addie

It was probably stupid of me, but I was going to take him up on his offer.

He wore me down by dangling in front of me the actual possibility of what I wanted most in the world.

Besides, if I were honest with myself, I wasn't sure if I could even get pregnant by having a one-night-stand seeing as how the IUI route hadn't even worked.

Talking about it with him... it planted this little seed of possibility in me... and it gave me hope.

After breakfast, he stood and pulled me into a hug. With my head on his chest and his arms squeezing around me, a bittersweet nostalgia hit me. His hug still felt the same. He still smelled the same—like a woodsy candle scent mixed with clean laundry. It honestly felt so familiar and warm that I felt like breaking down. His presence could always do that to me. When I was with him, I felt like I could drop trying to be so tough and independent all the time; I could just let go and lean into him.

I took in a deep breath and broke the hug. I nodded up at him and gave a reassuring smile. This was good. We were both good now, and we could move forward.

He turned to leave, but paused in the hallway. His back was so large and broad, but the way his shoulders tensed told me he was feeling unsure of himself.

I knew I should've just let him go and we'd be able to finally close this part of our lives, but I honestly wasn't ready yet either. As soon as he left, I knew I'd miss his

masculine presence taking up space in my place again. And what harm could a few more hours do? What harm could one final nice day be?

I cleared my throat. “When’s your next practice?”

He ran a hand through his hair and turned to look at me. “I don’t have to leave for Boston until tomorrow afternoon. I’m supposed to hang with Tyler, but he’d probably be mad at me for leaving you to hang with him,” he said with a shy grin.

I rolled my eyes. “That might be true... What if... Never mind, it’s probably stupid,” I said, waving off my thoughts.

“No, what were you gonna say?”

My heart pounded anxiously in my chest. “I was just thinking,” I said hesitantly, “what if we had a final day together. Just for fun, no talking about the sad stuff.”

His face broke into a grin. “I think that’s a great idea.”

“Okay, how about— oh, shoot,” I cut myself off. “What time is it?” I searched around for my phone. “I have to leave soon.”

His face fell.

“You could come with me?” I offered. “You have your skates?”

He let out a deep rumble of a laugh as he sat next to me on the rink lobby bench.

“What?” I asked, pausing to tie my skates to look up at him skeptically. He had his tied up within two minutes and was lounging against the cinderblock wall, watching me.

“Still tie your right one first for luck, eh?” he asked with a lopsided grin.

I shrugged. “Old habits die hard. You still have the same lucky undies?”

He looked a bit sheepish and tried to stop his lips from curving up. “Ah, change of topic. You’re telling me you do this every weekend?” He looked around the lobby at all the parents helping their wobbly toddlers on skates.

“Yupp, ever since I moved here. The club needed extra Learn to Skate coaches and I couldn’t say no to teaching the little babies.” I searched through my skate bag for my dumb wrist guards. I hated wearing them, but I couldn’t afford to let my carpal tunnel get worse—lifting kids in the cold definitely wouldn’t help things.

His brow furrowed. “Why?” he motioned to them.

I pulled the Velcro straps to secure my wrists in place. “Carpal tunnel. Not a big deal. This is probably overkill.”

He sucked in his upper lip. “Definitely not. That could get bad.”

“Yeah, already bad,” I sighed. “Just trying not to let it get worse. Some days out here it feels like all I’m doing is picking the little ones up over and over again,” I said with a laugh. “You’ll see.”

He shook his head. “I haven’t been on skates with little kids since I was teaching Tyler, and that was... decades ago.”

I smiled at that. I loved how much he put into helping Tyler back at the Ice League. Tyler was destined for greatness in the NHL and everyone knew Casey had a huge hand in getting him there.

“Ms. Addie!”

I turned to see the three little Mariano sisters walking toward me holding hands. At 3, 4, and 5 years old, they were some of the cutest little tots out here. They were all dressed in striped tights, tutus, and sweatshirts for their lessons today. I’d taught the older two in previous sessions, and now I had littlest, Arabella, in my class.

“Hi!” I said brightly. “Are you guys ready to skate today?”

Arabella jumped up and down, the older two nodded.

“Alright, well, I’ll see you out there, okay?”

They all nodded and continued trotting to the rink door. Their mom gave me a little wave from across the lobby.

“Wow.” Casey practically gulped. “They’re so... teeny.”

I laughed at his response and patted his large shoulder. “They’ll probably think you’re a giant.”

“I hope I don’t scare them,” he said seriously.

I laughed more at that. “If that’s the case, you can be excused and go down to the Timbits end of the rink.” The last little section of the rink down by the Zamboni doors was always blocked off with cones for a mini hockey class. The classes were sponsored by Tim

Hortons, and all the little tykes wore jerseys that said “TimBits” on the front.

Casey relaxed at that. “That would be fun... but I’d like to stay with you.” He placed a comforting, heavy hand on my thigh. I hadn’t even realized I’d been bouncing my leg.

I tried to swallow down what that meant for now.

“Just a reminder—make sure you don’t get too close to their helmets with your face,” I told him. “Good way for them to launch back unexpectedly and give you a bloody nose. And make sure you always celebrate when they fall. Almost always they aren’t hurt, just scared.”

“Right,” he nodded.

“Are you nervous?” I teased.

His ears turned a little red, which was super endearing. “They’re just really little.”

“Oh my God, you *are* nervous!” I said, swatting his chest. “It’ll be fun, let’s go.”

33. Casey

Watching her run onto the ice with the same ease that she always did warmed my chest. I hated the whole sport of figure skating and all the stress it caused her, and for the part it played in our history... but it was obvious she was at home on the ice.

"Who're you?" a voice laced in annoyance asked me.

I looked down to see a girl probably around the age of fourteen wearing an unimpressed expression on her face.

I pointed to myself and lifted my eyebrows.

"Who do you think I'm talkin' to?" she asked dubiously. "That baby?" She pointed to the helmet-headed toddler trying to step onto the ice. "Yes, you, ya dummy."

"Oh," I licked my dry lips, suddenly feeling a bit nervous without Addie to explain my presence. "I'm with Addie." I pointed to her. "I'm uh... helping today."

"I'm her helper," the girl snapped.

I looked to Addie for some guidance. She was trying to tamper down a giggle while holding a snowsuit-clad three-year-old under the arms. She glided him away toward the blue line.

"Uh... Can I help her today?" I asked the teen girl tentatively. The look on her face was scarier than some league defensemen.

She looked me up and down like I was a waste of space. "Whatever. I'll help Eden. Just make sure you take the kids with blue circles on their name tags," she

pointed to a name tag and spoke slowly like she thought I was an idiot, “to the blue line.”

“Got it, ma’am.”

She rolled her eyes and skated off, but yelled over her shoulder, “We’re switching for the last round!”

I got to work skating the little toddlers over to where Addie stood with a clipboard.

She was busy taking attendance when I finally rounded up the last kid.

“That was Izzy, my regular assistant,” she said quietly. “She reminds me of—”

“Claire,” I finished for her with a knowing look.

She laughed as she moved forward to start leading the little ones in a march across the ice.

I did my best to lift every kid who fell before she could get to them. I wanted to be able to give her wrists a rest. It was almost like a game of whack-a-mole, but the opposite, and I was honestly having a blast. I couldn’t not laugh when the kids were talking to me about any and all things. They were like cute, little drunk people who had no filters. They’d get so caught up in talking that they forgot they were even skating—or I guess marching. None of them could really skate yet.

Every half hour, a loud whistle sounded. The kids in the lessons would go to the lobby end of the ice for “free skating” time, and we’d have the next level of kids in class. It was funny to see the class ability go up as we moved through the three hour session.

In the third group, a little guy in hockey skates was refusing to skate, and his eyes were welled up, like he was about to start crying.

I cut Addie a nervous look.

"He's usually the best in the class, but he was using rental figure skates. His mom switched him to hockey skates, now he feels like he can't do anything," she whispered quickly. "Can you..."

I gave her a swift nod, then went to the kid. My knees cracked as I knelt down next to him.

"How's it goin..." I read the name scribbled on the tape across his hockey helmet, "Knox?"

He crossed his little arms over his chest and wouldn't look at me. "That's my brudder," he said grumpily. "This is his helmet. And his stupid skates."

"Ah, a hand-me-downs, eh?"

"Huh?" He lifted his little face now. He had freckles smattering his nose and cheeks, and light brown eyes.

"So you're the little brother then, eh?"

He nodded.

"I have a little brother. He's my favorite person in the world. I bet your brother thinks you're his favorite person too."

He shrugged.

"Can I tell you a secret?" I asked him.

"My little brother used to wear my stuff. And guess what?"

He kept eye contact with me, wanting to know.

"He's on the Crewmen."

His little mouth dropped open.

“Little brothers make the best hockey players.
What’s your name?”

“Wyder.”

“Wyder?” I repeated.

“Noo, Wyyy-der,” he said.

“Oh, Ryder?” I tried.

He nodded.

“Alright Ryder, we’re gonna be pros by the end of this lesson. I’ll tell ya what you gotta do. The trick to these skates is bending your knees a bit more.” I demonstrated sitting down into my knees for a skating stance. “And make sure you don’t tip forward too much like this.” I showed him what it would look like and pretended to fall down. “Wanna try?”

He cracked a smile and nodded.

During the little zam break halfway between the session, Addie was following me off the ice, but she got intercepted by parents as soon as her blades hit the rubber. I watched her speak animatedly about their kids while also doling out advice with a smile on her face. She clearly enjoyed this job.

I snuck away to the concession stand and ordered two hot chocolates from the teenager behind the counter. He looked at me in awe for a second, probably recognizing me, before turning to get the hot chocolates.

By the time I was stepping back on the ice, the new session was already starting. I watched Addie for a second as she spoke with a couple little girls. Emotion lodged in my throat. It couldn’t not cross my mind what our life would’ve looked like had things worked out

differently. Would we both be here every weekend watching our own kids?

I blew out a sigh. As much as I wanted to, I knew I couldn't go back and redo things, so I needed to stop thinking about it. I needed to be grateful that I was finally here, sharing the ice with her again.

When I handed her the hot Styrofoam cup, her face brightened. "Ooh, you're a mind reader." She took a sip and scrunched her shoulders up, clearly pleased with the concession stand's concoction. "Thank you, Casey."

I knew I was in trouble right then... Because just like when we were young, I wanted to hear her say that again...

And a little voice in my head whispered, why couldn't we still have everything we ever wanted together?

We ate at an Italian brick oven pizzeria in Downtown Detroit for dinner. She ordered a glass of Pinot Grigio, and I ordered a bud light, and we cheers-ed to old friends.

When the pizza came, I asked for a side of ranch before she could, and she just shook her head and smiled. She looked beautiful with her hair down, wearing a hoodie and leggings.

I couldn't help but feel like *this* was what life was about... and this was why I'd been so miserable, just going through the motions in a fog for the last few years.

We stayed there a while, swapping stories and reminiscing about the past, but not daring to go anywhere near our sad parts.

As we walked back, both tipsy and enjoying the cold, calm night, I reached to hold her hand, and I thanked God she let me. It seemed like an unspoken agreement that I'd be staying at her place. That would let us finish out this one wonderfully stolen day together.

"Hey, Casey..." she said softly. Her eyebrows drew together in a pensive expression "Remember, this is just for tonight, right?"

I nodded, even though my chest felt tight. I'd take what I could get. This night just had to be able to last me for the next decade.

34. Addie

It made me nervous how much I wanted him to come back with me. I had to say it aloud that this was only for one night because I didn't want to allow myself to start romanticizing everything. I finally had things figured out and I wouldn't let my stupid heart start derailing my plans. Besides, he had a whole life back in Boston that he'd be leaving for very soon.

"Hey Adds," he said quietly as he held my hand on the sidewalk.

I looked up at his amused eyes.

"What?" I nudged him.

"Don't think too much, Sweetheart. Let us have this one night," he said with a small smile. "I think we deserve it." He gave my hand a squeeze.

I wasn't sure if it was a good idea, but I tried to box up my worries and listen to him. I leaned against him and slowed my pace.

"So this is what it's like," he said with a sigh.

"Huh?" I strained my neck to look up at him.

"Mature love." I could feel his body rumble with a deep chuckle. "Not throwing you over my shoulder to get back to bed as fast as we can... Just strolling it out, enjoying our time."

I smirked up at him, but felt a painful ache in my chest, wondering if it was my fault... If I robbed us of this... Then again, I *had* tried to extend an olive branch all those years ago...

Inside my apartment, I stood in the bathroom brushing my teeth when I heard him strumming his fingers against the doorframe. I looked over at him and almost choked on my toothpaste.

He was shirtless, holding his toiletry bag up with a lopsided grin.

I was now leaning over the sink, pretty much hacking up a lung, trying to keep my eyes away from him. He moved behind me and I could feel him chuckle as he rubbed my back. “You good?”

Real smooth, Adelina, I chastised myself, feeling my face burn.

“Scared me,” I mumbled before jamming my toothbrush back in my mouth. He didn’t scare me; I was just shocked at seeing him shirtless and in my personal space. He was still so ruggedly attractive.

I could see a smirk pulling at his lips as he wet his own toothbrush next to me, then we were both standing there. It felt slightly awkward, but he looked completely comfortable encroaching in my space.

He tilted his head toward me and spoke through his toothpastey mouth. “Nice jammies.”

I was wearing my CCM shirt again, but as a nightgown with just boy shorts underneath, which was knowledge he already had...

Then he nudged me.

My eyebrows drew down and I nudged him right back, hip-checking his thigh... which started a checking war between us. He was struggling not to laugh. To

seemingly even the playing field, he reached over and tickled me.

I tried hard not to let toothpaste spill out of my mouth, but he wasn't letting up. He knew my sides were my weakness. I struggled to move away from his grip, but it seemed like he was hell bent on making us laugh until we broke the rest of the tension between us.

I finally tapped his forearm, surrendering, then both of us were losing our shit as we spit the rest of our toothpaste out and cleaned our faces.

He stayed close behind me. As soon as I looked up, he grabbed my hips and pulled me against him. His commandment in that little movement sparked an old, intense attraction in me...

And then I caught his gaze in the mirror. His eyes smoldered over.

Looking at our reflections, it was like seeing a glimmer of who we used to be.

I tried to swallow down the intense feelings I was suddenly having from feeling him hard behind me. "You added more tattoos," I said in a strangled voice, breaking the silence.

"Mmhmm."

"Lemme see," I turned in his arms and traced my fingers over his rigid muscles, feeling a mixture of anxiety and anticipation. I knew the cross on his chest, right over his heart, with his mother's dates underneath. The ink had faded slightly through the years. I turned him around and my fingers danced over the scar that he got when someone accidentally stepped on him with a skate blade during a brawl. It appeared as two thin lines next to each other about five inches long. His right arm was

next, he'd finished the sleeve with skillfully drawn tatts all the way down to his wrist. He seemed to be trying to keep his arm lowered, but I spotted the ink on his ribs... A date spelled out in roman numerals. He angled away from me and his throat rolled with a swallow.

I lightly touched his side. "What is this date, Casey?"

He stared at me. His jaw clenched and that told me exactly what it was. I could see the vulnerability in his eyes. He was nervous. His eyebrows drew together. "I really, really hope it doesn't upset you, Addie. I didn't mean to... upset you."

I searched his eyes. "Is it...?"

He gave a swift nod and a breath punch out of me.

"Adds, I'm sorry."

I stared at the numbers. The date of the miscarriage. It was just more evidence that my past, *our* past, was still woven into him too...

Without thinking, I looped my arms around his neck and pulled him down to kiss me.

He took a second to reciprocate, almost like I'd caught him off guard, then he was pushing into me, hooking an arm under my leg so he could move closer to me. The familiarity in his touch, his kiss... I hadn't known I'd been craving it this much.

His callused hands explored my body, squeezing my butt, pulling me against him. His body banged against the bathroom door as he frantically moved us out to the hallway. He groaned against me and scooped me up in a powerful motion. He swung me around, making

me feel disoriented and completely lost in him before dumping me on the bed.

In seconds, he was overtop of me, kissing my neck, touching the end of my shirt.

“Is this okay? Want me to stop?” he rasped out, looking like it was torture to slow down.

I trailed a nail down his neck and his body shuddered.

“Don’t stop,” I breathed out.

35. Casey

We laid there catching our breaths with our limbs still tangled together.

She was on her stomach, her face pressed against the mattress.

“I want to stay in this moment,” she said, closing her eyes, looking so incredibly serene.

Her words felt like deja-vu. But I didn’t have the same confidence I did when we were young. I couldn’t say that there would be greater moments ahead of us, even though I so desperately wanted to. Now I wanted to stay in this moment too.

I reached out and brushed a thumb under her eye, over her beauty mark, loving that I was allowed to touch her, loving that she wasn’t just a haunting memory right now. “Me too.”

She smiled at my words.

We laid there for a while, enjoying each other’s comfort.

But as she laid on my chest and I held her body close, my chest squeezed painfully, knowing that this was what we were meant to have every night.

My voice felt hoarse as I spoke. “Addie, I feel like this is perfect.”

She trailed her fingernails over my abs and half of my brain was yelling at me to shut up and just enjoy this. The other half wanted more....

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you for years...”

Her hand paused and my body was immediately annoyed with me.

I scrubbed a frustrated hand over my face. “I really don’t want to ruin this, but we’ve only got this one night, right? And I’ve just always wondered... Why did you leave? Why couldn’t I have comforted you? I know I made mistakes, but why couldn’t we have repaired things and had everything together still? We could’ve tried again for babies right then had I known that’s what you wanted.” I felt my face crack in pain.

Her smile wobbled and I felt horrible for bringing it up.

“I’m sorry,” I patted her hand, trying to go back to a minute ago. “I guess you needed space to start over without me and I did want to give you that. I’m sorry I brought it up, I can’t pretend to understand how it was for you.”

She was shaking her head no. She covered her face and her shoulders shook.

I immediately felt horrible for bringing it up. I knew I should’ve just forgotten about it and left it alone... I’m not sure why I could never just leave things alone.

“Adds, c’mon, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

I gently pulled her hands back. As much as I hated seeing her cry, I wanted to show her she didn’t need to hide it from me, we could talk about this. We *needed* to talk about this.

“Casey,” she said my name so sorrowfully. Her lips twisted as she tried to hold back the tears. “I regretted saying those things so badly. But I thought you’d follow me. I thought you’d come looking for me

when I told you where I was. Why didn't you come after me?" she whispered.

I was not prepared for those words... For her to pull the ground out from underneath me.

"Kyle told me where you were... But you never asked me to come back to you, Addie," I said, feeling my own eyes burn.

"I told Kyle to tell you."

36. Addie - January 2014

I listened to the message back again, gearing myself up.

"I need help, Addie," Tyler said in a quiet voice. He must've been calling from school. "I don't know what happened between you guys but he's not doing good and he's gonna get fired or something. I emailed his Coach pretending to be him and said it was a family emergency, but I don't know how much time that will give him. I don't know what happened, but you guys are acting like children. You guys need to fix this," he said forcefully.

Tyler left that message on my phone an hour ago. I wished so badly I could give him a hug before I left, because he'd become like a little brother to me. And the hurt in his voice made me question leaving...

But I had to.

Figure skating was agonizingly hard to quit.

Quitting Casey was even harder.

They were addictions that gave me a high... but the lows tore me down too far. I knew it'd be so easy to slide back into what we had... To let my coping mechanisms disappear around him like they usually did and allow myself to depend solely on him... But what good would it do for me? For us? I needed to heal on my own or else I'd be dependent on him for the rest of my life.

I wasn't ready to face Casey yet, but I'd do it for Tyler.

So here I was, sitting in my car in their driveway, staring up at their house, trying to prepare for what I

hoped wasn't a forever goodbye.

Walking up to their porch, I was crushed by the weight of our fun memories here. Those memories used to make me smile. Now, they only served as a grim reminder that I wasn't that person anymore.

I took a deep breath, then pushed their door open.

"Casey?" I called into their house.

No answer.

I pushed the door wider and spotted a pile of empty beer bottles next to the couch. I couldn't pinpoint exactly why, but seeing them infuriated me. Then again, I knew I had no right to feel that way. I screamed at him to leave... And he could just as easily be hating me.

I felt guilty. Everyone continued to tell me it wasn't my fault... but I couldn't hear them. I should've noticed. I should've realized and stopped training. I should've... done so many things differently...

I held a hand over my mouth and my body shook uncontrollably as I silently cried. I closed my eyes tightly, willing myself to get back on track.

Tyler.

I needed to help Tyler.

I gave myself a minute to calm down my breathing, then I stomped inside.

But there was no sign of him...

I took one last look around, then left.

Driving down their dirt road, I knew that it would be the last time I'd see their house in my rearview mirror.

Wherever Casey was, I hoped he'd get it together. Tyler needed him, and a few days ago, I would've said I

needed him too. But that wasn't true. I *wanted* him. I didn't need him.

Those were two very different things.

Right now, what I needed was to stand on my own two feet.

The morning of Nationals, I woke up in Harper's dorm room and was hit with the realization that it was amazingly just another regular, old boring day.

As soon as I left the hospital, I needed to leave town. I only secretly said goodbye to Claire, then I hit the road. I had no clue where I was going, and I didn't care. I blasted my music and just drove, enjoying the freezing day in my warm car.

Two hours into randomly driving, Harper called me and basically begged me to roadtrip to her school, Belmont University, in Rhode Island. I was grateful for that phone call because who knew where I would've been had she not reached out. She said she was overcome with a feeling she needed to call me, and I thanked God she listened to it.

Harper was already in class this morning, so I left and drove around for a while, finally stopping at a Marshalls.

I walked around the racks in the store realizing that not one other single person around me even knew it was such a monumental day for figure skating. And I loved it.

The world was so much larger than just the figure skating bubble.

I pulled a couple zip-ups out of the rack to look at them and paused. I didn't need skating clothes... So what clothes did I even like?

What in this world did I even like? I suddenly felt paralyzed by independence...

My whole life, I looked at things through a figure skating lens— I couldn't do this or that because of skating. I needed to buy these clothes for skating. I needed to keep my hair this way for skating...

And then I'd added a lens because of Casey— to no fault of his own.

I'd let those two things influence all my choices...

But now, I could do whatever I wanted.

I could eat whatever food I wanted without any input from anyone, without any care of calorie intake...

I could do my hair however I wanted. I could cut it all off and no one could say a damn thing about it.

Hell, I could move to NYC if I wanted.

But what did I want?

I looked in the mirror and a manic little giggle erupted out of me... and then I quickly wondered if I was losing my mind...

But no, I decided. I wasn't crazy, I was just free. I could actually breathe without a tight chest for the first time in a while because it was truly over. That life was behind me, and I was relieved.

I was relieved I wasn't standing by the boards, shaking and feeling nauseous.

And in an instant, I knew what I wanted to do...

I'd stay here with Harper and start a degree as soon as I could. I'd be starting later than everyone else. I was already twenty, but that didn't matter much, did it? I could be accepted by next semester, I was sure of it. That was one thing Casey had given me—confidence. He made me feel intelligent.

Casey...

I thought about him every day. I even thought of texting him now, just to tell him my plans... but I stopped myself.

We needed more time.

What I didn't know was that the more time I let pass by, the harder it would become to pick up my phone and make the first move to reach out to him...

37. Casey - January 2014

I turned the TV on to the figure skating National Championship with Tyler on the couch next to me doing homework.

“You ever read this?” he asked, holding up a ragged old school copy of “The Great Gatsby.”

“No,” I gruffly returned. It was one of Addie’s favorites.

“You suck,” he grumbled

“I know,” I breathed out. I didn’t need reminding that I wasn’t equipped to raise him by myself. I never doubted my ability until Addie came around. I saw how her care changed things in our house. It was like her feminine touch softened things around here in a needed way.

The TV glowed in the dark room. I liked the lights off better these days. I didn’t want to see the mess around us.

“You should call her. You suck without her, ya know,” he said without looking up from his schoolwork.

“Shut up,” I snapped a bit too harshly.

“You should,” he pushed.

I shook my head. I didn’t want to tell him everything, but without all the pieces, he just thought it was some little misunderstanding.

“She left, okay? Now shut up, Tyler, or I’ll turn it off.”

“And you’re mean now,” he quipped.

I shot him a warning look and pointed to the TV. That finally buttoned him up. I knew he wanted to watch

her too.

But as we watched skater after skater without seeing her, I felt like I was shrinking.

The camera finally panned to the analysts before a commercial break.

"Well, there's a little more room at the top for some of the rookie skaters, seeing as senior ladies reigning champ Adelina Kessel of the Ice League arena in Minnesota has scratched," a spiffy looking guy in a suit said.

"No reason given for that yet either, I'm hearing," the woman analyst commented.

"That is correct. We have yet to see-

I hurled the clicker at the TV, completely shattering it. What was left of the screen went black.

Tyler sat stock still, not saying anything, afraid to look at me.

It was the first time I'd done anything violent off the ice. I immediately tasted bile at the back of my throat. I couldn't look at Tyler by my side or I'd hate myself even more.

I mumbled an apology that I'm not even sure made sense.

Then I went to bed and broke down.

When Kyle told me a few weeks later that Addie was staying with Harper up at her school, I was glad for the knowledge. I'd been worried like crazy about her ever since she scratched at Nationals.

But when he asked if I wanted to go with him to visit the girls... I knew I couldn't. I no longer felt welcome in her life.

She regretted me. She hated me. She never wanted to speak to me again.

And she left me.

I told her to leave me if I wasn't good for her.

She did.

If I loved her, wasn't I supposed to let her go?

She needed someone who actually deserved her. She needed a better man. Someone who wouldn't miss being with her because they were in a jail cell. She'd find some smart university guy and she'd have babies with him.

I'd be relegated to a small memory in time... That one summer fling that lasted way too long for its own good.

And I'd been right about us when we first started dating... I knew she would ruin me for any other girl...

I didn't know that she'd also ruin Minnesota for me.

I couldn't stay here surrounded by our memories, and I decided right then to get traded away as soon as I could.

38. Addie- Three weeks later

I hung up my phone with the IVF specialist's office and felt a giddy bubble of excitement course through my body. Things were finally coming together.

Casey had inevitably been on my mind all morning because this was all thanks to him.

The morning he left, it was sad to watch him go, but he looked lighter than he had when I first saw him at the start of that weekend.

Maybe because we both finally attained closure.

As I opened up my laptop to work on my preview story for the next Crewmen game, my phone started ringing again.

"Wait, so you're coming to Mia's birthday, right?" Harper answered as a hello.

"OhmyGod, I'm so sorry I forgot to rsvp! Yes!" Between thoughts of Casey and work and learning the whole IVF schedule, I'd been so distracted lately.

"So here's the thing," she whispered. "Do you want me to give Jettersen the right time? Like do you *want* to see him? Because Kyle is trying to convince me to double cross you, the asshole," she mumbled. "So if Kyle asks, I never brought this up. Chicks before dicks. But where's your head at?"

I had to laugh at that. I loved her loyalty. "Thank you," I told her earnestly. "But I don't know. Maybe? Is it stupid to think that we could be friends now?"

"Well, do you want my hot take about being friends with an ex?"

"Yes, please." Her hot takes were usually harsh, but greatly needed reality checks.

"I just think if you still want to be friends with an ex, why wouldn't you just still want to be with them? Like if you still like them, why aren't you together? Ya know? But I'm making it simple, your guys' history isn't' simple. Let me know what you want me to do, I don't mind either way."

39. Casey

I rushed to check the St. Louis guy in the corner, but he slipped through and I ended up hitting boards.

I spit out a curse and made it to the front of the net again to give Marks more protection in net.

Their D guy took a slapshot and I chuckled to myself. Had to be a rookie. Slapshots rarely went in. It was smarter to set up a play and only take that shot if there was no other choice. He'd had choices though, and now he'd be regretting his actions.

Markey easily tossed the puck to the side so I could scoop it up, then I was off to the races. I deeked a couple guys mid-ice. I usually would've been looking to pass it up, but my offense guys were in the middle of a line change.

It was now a two-on-one. I had no one to pass it to, and I was moving too fast to get a good angle to shoot. I went for a wrap around the net to give my teammates a chance to get their butts down here, and it worked.

I passed it up to Coleson just before a St. Louis guy sandwiched me to the ground, crushing my injured shoulder at a weird angle into the ice. I let out a strangled yell just as the goal light went off.

"Surry 'bout da'!" the St. Louis rookie let out. He pretty much fell flat on top of me.

I grunted in return, forcing myself to calm down and not shove him the fuck off me. I stayed on the ice for a beat, trying to talk myself down. The pain wasn't that bad; it was nothing I wasn't used to.

As soon as I stood, Coleson slammed into me for a hug, and I released another grunt. My shoulder fucking killed.

"Thanks, old man!" he shouted out.

I felt the corner of my lips tugging up despite my pain. It was his first NHL goal and the kid was ecstatic.

"No problem, bud. Got the monkey off your back, now get two more, eh?"

"Yeah, yeah, you're right! Simple!" he laughed aloud as he skated back to the bench to tap gloves with the rest of the team.

Kuddy, my D partner, glided next to me.

"You good?" he asked.

I just nodded and fixed my helmet.

His eyebrows popped up. "Thought you died for a second, bro. Your whole body kinda shook. That did not look good."

As soon as I sat my ass on the bench, Coach came over to me.

He snapped his gum behind me. "How's the shoulder?"

"Eh, okay. Just stiff," I returned.

We both kept our eyes on the ice. "That was quite the fall," he said.

"I've had worse."

"Ready to go back out?" he asked.

I just nodded and squirted some water into my helmet.

His heavy hand came down on my shoulder for a pat, and my entire body involuntarily jolted.

"Yeah, okay," he said sarcastically. "Rog?" He motioned for the team trainer to take me back.

I knew the drill. I was going to the locker room for a dose of painkiller shots to be able to get back on the ice. I quickly followed Roger as he briskly walked back to the locker room, knowing all the while that I was probably getting too old to keep this up.

As soon as I had my jersey and chest pads carefully stripped off, Roger was pointing to the patient table.

But when he came back with the shot of painkillers, he froze.

"*Oh fuck,*" Roger breathed out while inspecting my shoulder. "Did this *just* happen?"

"What?" I asked, alarmed now.

"Dude, you fuckin' broke your collarbone." Roger called other team personnel to come take a look. "We can't send you back out there," he said, shaking his head. "No painkiller's gonna fix this. It's smoked."

While the rest of my team celebrated the win in the locker room, I stayed in my cubby, looking down at my skates. I wasn't sure how much more of this I could take. I was breaking down, both physically and mentally.

The wins used to give me at least a little high... Now they just didn't feel worth it anymore. So didn't that mean I needed out?

"Buddy," Marksy said, plopping down next to me. "Why the long face?"

"Don't!" I barked, staring at his hand that was about to come down on me for a pat on the back, "Touch me," I finished.

"Okay, jeez." He held his hands up innocently and backed off a bit. "Hurts that bad?"

I grinded my teeth together. "Hurts like a motherfucker. Don't really wanna undress." Now that the painkillers they'd given me were starting to wear off, I couldn't imagine using my arm to untie my skates or take my pants off or anything.

Marksy cringed. "That sucks. Think you need to get it looked at?"

I blew out a sigh. "They already did. I'ma be out for a bit, buddy."

He smoothed a hand through his sweaty hair so it stuck up at all angles. "Wait, really? You sure?"

You sure? That's what I would've said in the past too. A lot of guys tried like hell not to go in for injuries because they feared someone telling them they couldn't play. I was now questioning when I stopped feeling that way... I was always so focused on hockey. It was all I thought about from the time I woke up to when I went to bed, but lately, I'd been wanting something more... Lately, it occurred to me that I needed an "after."

And now I was actually glad that I was injured because it would force me to take a break.

“They think at least six to eight weeks. Collarbone’s fucked. Rog thinks it might need surgery to fix.”

“Oh shit,” he breathed out.

As soon as I bent down to unlace my skates, my phone started ringing. I quickly fished through my bag with my good arm to find it.

“Dude you better get that quick,” Marksy warned, looking around us. Coach had a zero tolerance policy for phones in the locker room because he was known for screaming at us that we were a bunch of pussies when we did something wrong and he feared being recorded. I just never bothered to turn my phone off seeing as Tyler and my agent were the only two who ever called me, and they knew when not to call.

As soon as I pulled it out, my blood rushed to my head and I could feel my heart’s rhythmic pumping in my ears.

Marksy could tell by the look on my face that something was wrong. “What? Who is it?” He craned his neck to get a look at the number.

I swallowed and stared at him as I answered.
“Adds?”

Marksy’s eyes widened, then he fist pumped the air... but he wouldn’t be doing that if he heard her pissed off voice.

“How the hell could you do that to me?” she snapped. “I feel so stupid!”

“Wait what?” I asked, feeling my eyebrows knit together.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Casey Patrick Jettersen! You canceled my appointment!?”

Now my mouth was dropping open from shock.
“No...”

“Why the hell did you do that?” she demanded. “Did you think it’d be funny? Because I’m not laughing, Casey. Fine, if you were still mad at me, whatever. But that was a low blow.”

I felt like she was speaking a different language. Marksy bent closer so he could hear what she was saying and I had to shove his sweaty head away.

“Addie, I swear I didn’t,” I told her with as much conviction as I could.

“Well, the receptionist said that it was a Mr. Jettersen who called and canceled my appointment. Since that’s the name on the fucking payment, she did,” she said with an accusing edge to her voice.

It took me all of two seconds to figure it out. I shook my head incredulously. I wasn’t quite sure how she hadn’t put the dots together yet.

“Did you think after one good weekend we’d be getting back together or something? Are you that *fucking delusional*, Casey?” she continued on her tirade of reaming me out. “I just feel so stupid for telling you everything. Like you really thought because of that one weekend that I would give you another chance or something?”

Some sick part of me liked that she was yelling at me again and I had to tamper down a chuckle because I could practically see the way she’d have a hand on her hip as she talked.

“Well, Sweetheart...” I drawled, trying to keep a smile off my face. “What would I have to do to get another chance?”

That seemed to shock her into silence.

After a beat, she asked point blank, “Did you cancel my appointment?”

“No, I promise you,” I told her slowly, trying to talk her off the ledge. “I did not.”

“Then who-”

“I’ll give you one guess,” I sighed, “his last name is Jettersen.”

“What does that even-” she cut herself off, finally piecing it together. “Are you *kidding me*?! That little-”

“I’d bet any amount of money, Sweetheart. Not sure how he figured it out, but I’ll handle it.” I paused. “But Addie... Is there a chance?”

She was silent... but that was better than a no, wasn’t it?

“Can I take that as a maybe?” I hedged.

Marksy’s eyes were bugged out. “Maybe is good!” he whispered. “Get a maybe!” He nodded urgently.

“I don’t think I can trust you, Casey. I can’t trust anyone. I finally have a plan, and I-”

“Well, can I prove myself to you?” I asked, closing my eyes and hoping she’d say something, *anything*, positive.

“Casey... This is stupid. I need to move on... We both need to move on.”

Marksy was shaking his head furiously and making a bunch of hand motions at me. I shook my head

at him and tried to focus on the phone call.

“Can I be your friend?” I quickly asked. “Please? One shot at being your friend. You can reschedule your appointment. I will take care of the Tyler situation. But I want to be there for you, as much as you’ll let me.”

She let out an exasperated sigh.

“C’mon,” I couldn’t stop a small smile from sliding onto my face, because I knew that sigh. I knew I was close to wearing her down. “Stop thinkin’ so much, Sweetheart. Don’t make it a bigger deal than it needs to be.”

“Friends don’t call each other ‘Sweetheart,’” she snapped in what I detected as a slightly panicked voice.

“Okay,” I said calmly, trying to put her at ease.

“Okay,” she said quietly before hanging up.

“Fuck yes!” Marksy yelled out and slapped my shoulder.

My whole body recoiled.

“Sorry! Sorry! But yesss!” he called out, throwing his arms in the air.

I couldn’t help but laugh as I held my throbbing shoulder.

The rest of the team cheered, probably thinking we were happy about the win, but the two of us were on a different level of happiness right then.

40. Addie

The next morning, I was still feeling anxious over the whole Casey situation while I walked up the concrete steps of the Crewmen Stadium.

Deep down, I did want to be friends with him... but how would that even work? He was probably just blowing smoke to heal his own conscience, which was fine, whatever. Because how could we even have a friendship seeing as he lived in Boston part time and the road the rest of the time?

I punched the elevator button to get me to the business offices and tried to force away thoughts of Casey. I needed to focus on my work.

The Crewmen had just hired a temporary defense coach, which was just as strange as it was newsworthy. Those hires were usually dealt with way earlier in the year, before the preseason even started. The Crewmen were already in the swing of regular play and were on a winning streak, so why call in a new coach now?

As I stepped up to speak with the receptionist, my phone started ringing in my bag. I spoke to her over my ringtone, trying to ignore it and remain professional. "Hi, I called earlier to speak with the new assistant coach?" I handed over my Detroit Gazette badge.

"Down the hall, first door to the left," she said without really looking at me.

I walked further into the office. The walls were painted red and white, the team's colors, and well-placed framed jerseys and signed pictures that illustrated the team's rich history lined the hallways. The plush red carpet that ran throughout these offices was super soft, but annoying to walk on when wearing heels. Seeing as

I'd be interviewing a coach and not just players, I dressed a little more professional today. I felt confident in my button-down black dress cinched at the waist paired with heels. I parted my hair down the middle and smoothed it into a low claw clip.

But as soon as I knocked on the door, my professional air quickly dissolved...

The Coach spun around in his leather swivel chair, and my mouth dropped open.

I sat there pretty much gawking, frozen in place.

Gazing back at me with newly cut short hair, wearing lulu slacks and a team polo stretched over his broad soldiers... was Casey.

What. The. Hell.

He gave me a sheepish grin and brushed a hand through his hair. "I know." He cringed. "Coach said I needed to clean up before I could be on his staff. Not getting rid of the scruff though. That'd be too much of a shock for us both," he said with a laugh. "Might not wear my fake tooth to the next game just to piss him off, though. How'd that be for clean-cut, eh?"

I gulped. I felt heat climbing up my neck and hoped he wouldn't notice. He looked good— not that he didn't before— but this version of him... He looked *mature* hot now. He looked *professional* hot.

"What... What are you doing here?" I stammered out, trying to mentally pull myself back together.

He smoothed a hand over his desk. "Coaching."

"Uh... I see that... Why?"

"Why not?" he smirked.

I stared at him a beat, trying to figure out what the hell he was playing at. “Because of your career, Casey. You can’t let that one phone call where you basically strong-armed me into being friends again let you interrupt your *entire life*. It’s not going to happen between us,” I warned, feeling anxiety rising in my chest.

He leaned forward, like he was letting me in on a secret. “But it *might* happen...right?” He motioned to the chair across from him with a lopsided grin.

I plopped down and pulled out my laptop, feeling frustrated with both him and myself... But something deep inside me, probably just old love, felt a thrill from being in presence again, and I couldn’t bring myself to kill his hope by snapping back at him that he was wrong.

“I’ll try not to take it personally that you didn’t watch my last game,” he said with a wry grin.

“What does that have to-”

“I’m on the injured reserve list for the next few weeks, at least.”

My mouth dropped open again. I internally slapped myself for sounding like a total idiot and assuming he came here just because of me. “Are you okay?” Feeling equal parts embarrassed and concerned, I scanned over his body.

“My collarbone’s smoked.” He gently touched his left side. “They think it might need surgery. I already needed surgery to repair my shoulder. I’m breaking down. That’s a secret of course,” he said, nodding to my computer. “Can’t let anyone know about that. Team just said I sustained an ‘upper body injury,’” he said, using air quotes.

“Your shoulder? You were injured the last time I saw you?” I couldn’t fathom the fact that he was injured because he looked totally strong and healthy. He was just picking me up the other night. He was just... Oh God... pushing my leg onto his shoulder, his *injured* shoulder. My face was really burning up now.

I think he could sense where my head was at because he smirked. “Yeah... Sucks I won’t be able to give ya a repeat performance for a while,” he winked at me.

His words sent a jolt through my body. I shook my head, trying to dispel any more mental images of the other night from my mind.

“They’ve been shooting me up with painkillers to keep me playing for a while,” he explained, “but I’m talking with specialists later today. I’m staying with Tyler for now. This just works. The universe was basically telling me to come here.”

“Why?”

“Because Michigan has the best shoulder surgeons.”

“Really?” I arched an eyebrow at him.

He sucked in his top lip, looking reflective. “It’s all subjective.”

“No, it’s really not, Casey,” I snapped.

“Okay.” His mouth did a funny thing like he was trying hard not to grin. “Shall we proceed?”

I let silence fall between us and I messed with my laptop for a bit. I may have taken a few more minutes than needed to pull up my already typed out questions because I needed to let my brain play catch up. This was

just like every other interview, I told myself. Part of me argued back that that wasn't true... and now I felt like he was seeing too much of me... He was seeping into my workplace now.

I cleared my throat. "This is a conflict of interest. I'll just interview you, then give the transcript to my coworker."

His eyebrows popped up. "A conflict of interest? Are you interested?" he teased with his deep voice... And fuck me, because that did something to my insides.

"That's not what that means, I just—"

"I know," he said, giving me a kind smile then.

I breathed out deeply, trying to relay to him that I just wanted to get this over with.

"I'll be professional now, promise," he said, holding his right hand up innocently. He hadn't moved his left arm since I'd been in the office, and I hoped he wasn't in too much pain.

"Okay. Well, let's start with the most obvious question. How are you allowed to help the Crewmen when you're still technically on Boston's injured reserve list?"

"Ah," he tipped his head back and looked up at the office ceiling. "You know better than anyone that the hockey world is a very small one, Adds," he said with a knowing smile. "The Coaches are old buddies— that'd prolly be a fun story to write. But my Coach knew if I stayed in Boston, I wouldn't have anyone around to help me recoup. Here, I have Tyler. My Coach also knows I'm getting to the end of my playing career, and I want to coach next, so this is a nice little trial run." He cut his eyes to mine and they sobered up a bit. "Can I say

something to just you, not to... Ya know." He nodded to my laptop.

I shut off my recorder. "Off the record, sure."

"I might be done. Not sure if I wanna make a comeback and I do want to coach next. I would've retired but Coach forced me to stay on the injured reserve list because he thinks I'll change my mind after a break. Who knows."

"Oh," I felt my eyebrows raise. "Okay. Good to know. Thank you for giving me context."

He nodded and his nose flared with a deep breath. That was probably hard for him to admit aloud.

"Okay, so how is this arrangement going to work? You're temporary and only working with the D?"

"Yeah, only coming in when I can. More of a voluntary position. I'm trying to learn the ropes of coaching. Hey, you okay?"

I paused. "Yeah, why?"

He frowned and pointed to my hands. "Keep stretching out your hands. Carpal tunnel?"

I hesitated. "I'm fine. Let's keep going." But stupid butterflies fluttered in my chest over the fact that he remembered...

I was at war with myself.

Half of me melted over him, the other half knew that I needed to shut off my emotions and stay strong. I needed to keep my eyes on my laptop because I was afraid that looking at him would make me slip.

We continued the interview, him answering all my questions with thoughtful answers until I didn't have any left.

When I finally closed my laptop and started putting it away, he dropped his professional act. He walked around his desk and leaned back against it right in front of me, crossing his feet at the ankles like it was oh-so-casual to enter my personal space.

"I don't like seeing that look on your face," he said in a husky voice.

He reached for my hands and started massaging my wrists, and the rest of my resolve basically melted.

His eyebrows pinched together in concern. "You work too much."

I swallowed hard and was tempted to pull my hands away, but the way his strong hands were working my muscles felt so incredibly nice.

"I like my work," I said simply.

"Do you?" He cocked his head to the side. "I hope you don't mind me saying this, but you don't light up doing this like you did with Learn to Skates."

I shrugged. "It's not what I want forever, but it pays the bills. I need it if I want to be a single parent."

His nose flared, like he was trying to control himself. "That's very admirable."

"Thank you," I said smoothly.

"But I want to be with you if you'll take me, Adds."

I looked at him, really looked at him, and I saw some of myself in him. He was lonely too. But while that was nice of him to say, I needed to protect myself. I wouldn't let a man alter my plans. I wasn't willing to tailor my life to anyone else's anymore. I wouldn't run the risk of giving in to him just to end up in another break up a few months down the line. I didn't want to have to crawl

out of a hole again. I couldn't. That would push me even further from my goal of starting a family.

"Thank you, but I don't need anyone, Casey," I said gently. "I don't want to change my plans."

He gave me a sad smile. "Okay."

He stopped massaging my wrists then, and my body internally whined. He backed away quickly, and I had to ignore the part of me that was disappointed. I needed to get out of there quickly before I said something I'd regret. I didn't want to need him again, even though my body basically ached for him. I needed to stay independent, to stay my course...

As soon as my heels hit the concrete, I pulled out my phone to see that the missed call was from Harper.

She answered on the first ring and sing-songed, "I was trying to warn you!"

"About Casey?"

"Yupp."

"Is that Addie?!" I heard Kyle yell in the background. "Addie! Casey is a great guy! A solid one, such a nice soul, a real-"

"Get out of here!" I heard Harper struggling. "I'm sorry about that. He found out you called Casey and he basically kicked him off the team himself. Told him if he didn't get back to Michigan on his own, he'd knock him out and drive him there himself."

"What, why?"

"He just wants Casey to be happy. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"Honestly... I don't know."

I struggled to stay focused the rest of the day at work. I ended up handing over my interview notes to Brandon and told him he had to write the story on Casey. He gave me a curious look, but I quickly snapped at him that I didn't want to hear anything about it.

After work, I walked to my apartment, but didn't enter. I stared at my door from the sidewalk. I knew my thoughts would just be a merry-go-round with Casey at the center of it for the rest of the night... So, I called Claire.

"I need girl talk," I told her before she could greet me.

"Girl talk? How much wine are we gonna need?" she asked.

I blew out a sigh. "A lot."

"Okay," she let out a nervous chuckle. "I'll call in reinforcements."

When I got to her place holding multiple bottles of wine, Duke was laying on the couch, and two other girls who I remembered from the club— Sav and Quinn— were at her kitchen table. They were busy spreading out different pieces of wood and paints.

"He needs to go." I pointed at Duke.

"What?! Why?" he called out, looking like I'd just accused him of sticking gum in my hair. "I didn't do anything wrong!"

“You’re a boy, so you probably have done something wrong in the last twenty-four hours,” I grumbled.

Claire tried not to laugh.

“That’s not fair, no I haven’t!” he argued, looking to Claire to defend him.

“Oh really?!” Claire challenged him, her eyebrows popping up. Quinn and Sav were now watching with smirks on their faces. “It’s funny now, Duke, but I almost murdered you last night. Tell them what you did!” My sister threw her arms wide.

He grumbled to himself and picked up his stuff.

“What’s that?” My sister popped a hip and put a hand to her ear. “You left the toilet seat up and I fell in last night at 3am, and you had the audacity to laugh at me about it?!”

“Booo!” Quinn and Sav chorused.

Duke kept his head down while grabbing a jacket and shoes.

Claire flashed me a grin and mouthed, “yay” then scurried after Duke down the hallway to their door. She stood on her tiptoes to pull a beanie over his hair, then gave him a quick kiss. He was still grumbling something about it being “unfair” as he left.

“Thank you,” I told Claire seriously when she walked back into her kitchen.

She pulled me into a hug. “No problem. C’mon, we’re crafting.”

“Crafting?” I pulled a face. Since when did my sister do crafts?

"I know," she said with an eye roll. "I used to think it was lame too, but it's actually kinda therapeutic, and it's funny to watch Duke lie and say what I made looks nice," she let out an evil laugh while guiding me to the table.

41. Casey

The next morning, I stood on the team bench in slacks, a quarter zip, and a team hat covering my stupid ass haircut. I tried to convince Coach that I'd be fine on skates, but he argued that I was a liability, especially now that I was ordered to wear my left arm in a sling.

The specialist yesterday afternoon basically chewed me out for not wearing a sling as soon as the injury happened, but I hated feeling restricted, even if it was good for me.

I had my eyes glued to their defensemen the whole practice, but I kind of lost my focus when Griff came over to the bench for water. I'd been wanting to strike up a conversation with him. He was on the older end of the roster, somewhere in his thirties, and if I was going to get advice from anyone, it'd be him.

"You got kids?" I asked him kinda awkwardly as he sat on the bench for a break.

He stared up at me, studying me with his serious sky-blue eyes. I immediately looked back to the ice, feeling uncomfortable under his gaze.

"Yeah, two right now," he finally said with a wry grin. "I want more, but my wife, Sav, is hesitant. We tabled that discussion until I'm done playing, which I get," he shrugged. "It's hard on her when I'm gone so much. When she was pregnant, she'd always worry something would go wrong while I was on the road. It's a bit easier now that our son, Johnny, is old enough to call for help, but it's still hard when your teammate's gone so much."

That made sense. Part of the reason I was thinking of retiring and going into coaching was because I was starting to think about the logistics of everything.

Addie wanted a family... and if there was even a slight chance I could be included, I'd do anything to make it work. I knew coaching would probably also be a lot of time on the road, but I wouldn't be putting my body at risk, and it wouldn't be the end of the world if I missed a game.

"I like that," I said, chewing on my lip as I thought through his response.

He looked up at me in question.

"That she's your teammate," I offered.

He nodded.

"Where do you guys live?"

He squirted some water in his helmet. "Plymouth."

"Good school district?"

"Yeah..." Griff eyed me skeptically. "What's your plan here, bud?"

"Well, I-"

Griff's eyes shifted to the side, warning me to watch it. Duke and Tyler were now at the far edge of the teambox, leaning over the boards, listening in.

"Get outta here." I shooed them away with my right arm, then regretted it when a painful shock ran through my left shoulder. "You're forwards."

"So is Griff!" Tyler argued.

"Yeah well, he'll be playing D during the next power play, get out of here, assholes."

"I am?" Griff grinned at me. "They're gonna hound me to know what you're saying as soon as you leave," he added.

"Fuckin' rookies." I shook my head.

"Hey! I'm not a rookie!" Duke called out.

I watched Duke and Tyler skate away for a second, their helmets bent toward each other, talking, then they glided right back to the bench.

"You can't deny us water, bro. Wanna end up in a lawsuit? I'll call my agent right now," Tyler said with his eyebrows raised.

Duke shoved him and cackled. "Good one!"

I leveled my brother with a glare as he reached for the water bottles.

"Hey, just gotta make sure you're gettin' good advice," Tyler said seriously. "Don't want you to fumble the bag again. I can only get you so many chances."

Duke laughed aloud again, and my brother grinned. The two of them were enjoying this way too much.

I clenched my jaw, wishing I was still on skates so I could rough them up a bit.

"Some advice?" Griff said, cutting through their chirping. "We are talking about Addie Kessel, right?"

I set my jaw, hesitating for a second. But what the hell, they all knew already. I nodded.

"Okay, well, don't push yourself on her. That'll make her want to keep pushing you away," Griff said, taking off his helmet and shaking out his sweaty brown fauxhawk hair.

"Yes!" Duke said. "Tell him about the feminine energy." He made a magic motion with his hands.

"What?" I asked dryly, not really believing he'd have any good ideas.

“Like Claire,” Duke started, “she can do everything herself, right? The Kessel girls— they’re strong, independent boss bitches, you know that.”

“Bitches?” I growled, moving toward him in a threatening way.

He immediately hopped over the boards and glided backwards to put some space between us. “Claire’s my wife! She knows I call her that, it’s a compliment, bud,” he said in a placating way. I wasn’t placated. “Anyways, Claire can do everything on her own, right? But once I walk in the room, she’s like, ‘Duke, can you open this? Can you help me with this? Oh wait, I have this idea, can you do this?’” He imitated her voice. “And it’s like fuck yeah, she *wants me*.” He puffed out his chest. “When I piss her off, she doesn’t ask me for shit, and it’s sad.”

Griff rolled his eyes. “Very stupid way of explaining it, but basically, yeah.”

“Hey!” Duke called out defensively.

I grunted. I felt too exposed asking for help in front of these two dimwits. At least Griff had that whole older and wiser vibe goin’ on, so it didn’t feel too pathetic. “So how do I get to that place with her?” I mumbled.

Griff shook his head and snorted. “You need to allow her to feel free to be in that place of trust and vulnerability with you.”

“Yes!” Trust!“ Duke chorused, nodding his head.

“And vulnerability,” Tyler added, pointing a gloved index finger at me.

“So first off, get it through your head that she does not *need* you.” Griff smoothed his helmet back on.

"Yeah, doesn't need you," Duke repeated, shaking his head.

"Yeah—" my brother started, but I cut him off with a glare.

"Shut the fuck up, you two," I growled at them.

Griff laughed. "Just do things with her. Give her comfort, peace of mind. Be there for her. Be a good listener. It's not that hard. Then she'll *want* you around."

"Yeah, that's good," Tyler chimed in. "Wait, you should Pavlov her."

I cut my eyes to his. "Huh?"

"Call her every day at the same time, then when you don't, she'll be like, wait what?"

"Oh, that's good," Duke said, clapping him on the back.

I looked at the two of them like they were stupid. That was definitely young guy mentality. I would *not* be doing that. I squinted at my brother. "Did you get dropped on your head as a baby? That's just mean. You better not do that." I turned to Duke. "And you," I pointed at him, "How the fuck are you married?"

Duke shrugged and a love-sick grin slid on his face.

"Yeah, don't listen to that unless you want a shit load of misunderstanding," Griff interrupted. "When he got with Claire, the two of them were in arguments every two seconds. One stolen dog and multiple hospital trips later, they finally got together. Just be super helpful so she feels comfortable enough to let her guard down around you, but *don't* push yourself on her. If you treat

her like she's not independent, she'll wanna prove to you how much she really is," he warned.

I stood there on the bench, mulling that over.

"If it makes you feel better, she's a bit fucked up over this whole thing too," Duke added charismatically. "Claire had a girls night at our apartment last night. I tried to stay and eavesdrop for ya, but they kicked me out. When I came back, they were all super shwasted," he laughed. "I had to force Claire to eat some food and drink water before she went to bed."

My chest felt tight at that... "What about Addie?" I asked gruffly.

He squirted some water into the side of his mouth. "I tried to make her stay on our couch, but she refused. I got her an uber back to her place." He shrugged like it wasn't a big deal.

My face flinched. I wanted to roar at him, *Why didn't you try harder?* And I was suddenly itching for practice to be over so I could make sure she was feeling alright...

"Yeah... Sav came back a bit fucked up too," Griff said with a wry chuckle. "Kept wanting to undress me, then got pissed when I wouldn't let her. Then she started crying that she couldn't go to bed because I was wearing her favorite pajama pants."

"Were you?" Tyler asked.

His eyes bugged out. "They're *my* pants! They don't even fit her." He shook his head and grinned. "Can't wait to give her shit about that later today." He hopped over the boards and skated off.

Their words caused a bitter jealousy to whirl in my chest. I grinded my teeth together to harness my

frustration. My thoughts kept pinging around in my brain asking, *why couldn't we be like that?* I loved her, and unless she was an Academy Award winning actress, it seemed like she still had feelings for me too... So why couldn't we be together like that? Why couldn't I take care of her after a girls' nights and then we could laugh about it together the next day? That sounded like heaven, and I hoped these guys appreciated what they had.

I looked up at the time clock and forced myself to calm down. I needed to be patient. I had to play the long game with her. Griff was right. I couldn't push myself on her...

But nothing would be stopping me from going to check on her as soon as practice was out.

42. Addie

I rolled to my side and squinted at my alarm clock. 10am. I never slept in this late, but I also wasn't used to drinking that much wine, especially on an empty stomach, and I was hoping extra time in bed would make me feel better. Because right then, I was not doing great.

I felt the usual hangover headache, but I was super weak on top of that. It almost felt like my sugar level was messed up. I was afraid if I got up too quickly, I'd pass out.

I forced myself to breathe evenly through my nose as I slowly sat up.

Something like this always seemed to happen right when I was feeling confident about my independence. Now, intrusive thoughts popped into my mind, chiming in, what if I passed out? Or what if I had a seizure or something else horrible? I was here by myself and no one would know... No one would be here to help me... And a secret worried voice in my head whispered, maybe I did need someone around...

But no. Nope.

I could handle this.

I shakily got out of bed to grab something, anything, to eat, but I knew before I reached my fridge that I wouldn't find anything in it.

Fuck.

I tried to calm myself down and take in deep breaths as I fumbled with my phone to order UberEats. I wasn't sure if I was shaking because of low blood sugar levels or dehydration or if it was just because I was

panicking over those two possibilities... *And that's on having anxiety*, I retorted to myself.

I needed to get a grip on my thoughts. As soon as I ate some food, things would be fine. *I would be fine*, I repeated to myself.

I was two seconds away from placing my order when my doorbell rang.

Half annoyed, half relieved, I flung the door open, expecting to find a disheveled-looking Claire, but instead... I faced *him*.

And my heart jumped to my throat.

A Crewmen hat turned backwards, a thick flannel making him look impossibly bigger, some slacks, and his arm now in a sling. All in all, he was still the most attractive man I'd ever laid eyes on. I, on the other hand, internally cringed over what he probably thought of me at that moment, with huge bags under my eyes and looking like the picture definition of a hangover. My hand was shaking as I covered my eyes and blew out a breath.

"I can't talk right now, Casey, I-"

"You okay?" His eyes zeroed in on me.

I forced myself to swallow the lump in my throat. This just felt so pathetic of me. Maybe this was Claire's plan, fuck me up 'til i was weak and needed help. Ugh. I leaned against my door frame. I didn't have the time or energy to argue with him. My vision was starting to go a little gray on the edges and I reached out my arm to steady myself.

"Casey, I-"

"Wait a sec, don't close the door," he ordered in a firm voice before turning and jogging back to his truck

that he'd parked by the curb.

Two seconds later, he was pushing a half empty Gatorade into my hands and pulling me inside my own apartment. "Drink. Drink the whole thing," he ordered, guiding me toward my kitchen chairs.

I sat there in silence, closing my eyes and drinking. I definitely needed this little pick me up. I just stupidly let myself get too low. I knew I shouldn't have drank last night without having dinner beforehand. I just wanted to get to Claire's as quickly as I could to talk about everything.

His heavy hand patted my leg, and I wasn't sure if it was the nostalgia or the comfort that made me want to lean into him. I had to swallow back those feelings, though. *I was fine on my own*, I repeated to myself.

"Feelin' better?" he asked in a gruff voice.

I nodded, closing the cap back on the Gatorade.

He shook his head. "Don't you dare give that back to me without finishing it, Adds," he joked, but his eyes were serious.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself, then listened to him.

"You okay to get in my car?"

I tensed as I eyed him. "I'm not dressed..."

"What do you need?" he responded quickly.

"It's fine." I said, still feeling weak, but definitely better. "I just needed some sugar. Thank you." I tried to hand his Gatorade back to him, but he ignored it and walked into my bedroom. I was too drained to argue with him.

A minute later, he handed me three bras—“an assortment,” he said, along with a hoodie, sweatpants, and boots.

“C’mon,” he nodded toward the door. When I didn’t move, he sighed. “Claire, you’ll dip again if we don’t get food in you, c’mon. This is what...” I saw the roll of his throat as he swallowed, like he was struggling not to choke on his own words, “friends do,” he finished.

Ten minutes later, I was eating greasy breakfast food in the shotgun seat of Casey’s nice truck. I closed my eyes, savoring every last bite of my sandwich.

“Feeling good?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Yes,” I breathed out, suddenly embarrassed by the way I was foaming at the mouth over my food. I straightened up in my seat a bit. “Sor-” I cut myself off and swallowed. “Thank you, Casey.”

His eyes slid to mine. “Good girl,” he said in a gravelly voice, a little grin playing on his lips.

Oof. I breathed in a sharp intake of air. Those words. The way I felt them down to my core. That look on his face. I was taken back to a time where that would’ve started something hot and heavy between us. I suddenly felt like I was burning up.

He ruffled through the take-out bag for his second sandwich, completely unaware of what his words did to me. “Want more?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m good. Thanks.”

“My pleasure. Timmy Ho’s has a way with breakfast,” he said. “Grocery shopping after this?”

“Uh... That’s okay, thank you for the offer though,” I responded.

He paused chewing.

I felt the need to defend myself. I wasn’t some weak damsel in distress, he just caught me at a bad moment.

“I was going to get UberEats. I would’ve been fine, but I appreciate your help. Thank you, Casey.”

It looked like he wanted to argue, but instead, he pressed his lips into a firm line and nodded. “Anytime, Adds.”

43. Casey

When I pulled to a stop in front of her apartment, she hesitated to get out, and it felt like a time warp back to when I dropped her off at the Ice League after cheeseburgers. She clearly did not want to get out, but her brain was waging a war over what to do.

I was so tempted to throw my car in drive and force her to come with me to the grocery store, but we weren't young anymore, and I didn't want to force her to do anything.

"Hey, Addie," I said slowly. She looked at me with those serious blue eyes of hers. "I want you to know that I'm hearing you loud and clear. You don't need anyone. But I'm going to prove to you that I can be who you want."

She quickly turned to look at her front door again, but I knew she was mulling over my words, strangling them for hidden meaning.

I also knew she would've been fine on her own earlier, but I saw the slight sign of relief on her face when she opened the door and found me, and my mood fuckin' soared.

I just needed to think about how I could ask to stick around in a roundabout way... Because I knew she wouldn't ask me to stay even if she wanted me to.

I realized then that I posed the grocery store question all wrong. She was already feeling defensive, and I think my question made her feel like I was accusing her of not having food at her place, which was not my intent...

"I was coming over to ask you to come with me to the grocery store. I'm gonna be laid up for a few days

and I wanna have stuff that I actually like, not just the crap Tyler eats. I swear he lives off only carbs,” I joked.

Her mouth formed a perfect ‘oh.’

“My surgery is tomorrow,” I added.

“Oh, okay, yeah.” She nodded and finally faced forward again. “That’s a good idea to have stuff.” She still looked a bit uneasy; her thigh was bouncing up and down like crazy. I had to stop myself from rubbing a hand down her leg.

“Want me to come by and check on you? Tomorrow?” she asked hesitantly.

“Sure,” I tried not to smile as I eased my truck into drive. I didn’t wanna scare her off with my own excitement. “I’m staying at Tyler’s. I’ll get you the address.”

She turned to me with a shocked face. “With the rookies?! You hate rookies,” she said with a laugh.

Her smile loosened my chest. It finally seemed like she was more at ease, thank God... I hated that my presence gave me any kind of tension.

“Yeah,” I drawled. This time I didn’t stop my grin. “Karma’s biting me in the ass, I guess.”

44. Addie

The next day at work, anxiety coursed through my chest knowing that Casey was going under the knife.

I tried to stop myself from contacting him, but a half hour before his surgery was scheduled, I shot off a text: *Hope it's quick and painless. Let me know if you need anything.*

He returned a text a minute later.

Thanks, Adds. Hopefully I'll see ya later.

That text kind of cemented that I would be going to check on him... As a friend. That's something a friend would do... right?

But honestly, I wasn't sure I even cared what it would mean anymore...

And that scared me the most.

After work, I drove over to check on him.

Tyler threw the door open for me, wearing a video game headset and holding a controller, then ran and slid on his dark hardwood to get back to the living room where two other players in their early twenties were sitting on the carpet staring up at the huge flat screen TV above the fireplace.

Their apartment was a huge, modern loft with exposed brick and bedrooms off to the side.

The three rookies who lived here were yelling at the TV, which was blaring crash and gun sounds, while

Casey was laying on the large living room sectional, closing his eyes and grimacing, like he was in pain.

I dropped my purse and rushed toward him.
“Casey?” I whispered.

“Hey Adds,” he grumbled with a small smile. His face was drained of all color and he looked completely out of it.

I whirled on the three sitting on the floor like children. “Why isn’t he in bed?!”

“Uh... He doesn’t have one?” Tyler shrugged, not even taking his eyes off the TV. “He’s just crashing here.”

“He can’t rest on *your* bed?” I asked incredulously.

“He complained that my sheets were yellow, said he didn’t want to,” Tyler responded. “Nooo!” he yelled at the TV.

I huffed and ignored them. “Casey, you can’t stay on a couch, and you’ll never get sleep with all this noise.”

He cleared his throat and closed his eyes again.
“It’s okay.”

“Are you in pain?” I asked.

“He won’t take the hardcore stuff, so yeah, he prolly is,” Tyler deadpanned, then shouted a bunch of insults into his headset.

We both knew why he didn’t want to take the stronger meds. He was afraid of his family’s history with addiction.

I looked around feeling helpless. I couldn’t allow him to stay on this couch. That would not help his recovery... Tyler should’ve known that... I didn’t have much of a choice here...

“Okay,” I said with a resigned sigh. “You’re coming back with me. This isn’t okay. You won’t be able to get any rest here,” I told him firmly, almost like I was trying to convince myself that it was the right move as well.

“Where’s his pills?” I snapped at Tyler.

“Oh, uh, cabinet above the sink!” he said quickly.

The three boys all let out rambunctious cheers. Casey used his good arm to rub a hand over his face, looking absolutely miserable.

I quickly snatched the pharmacy bag from the cabinet, then went to the living room and ripped the cord out of the TV, making it go black.

The three boys let out shouts of protest, acting more like teenagers instead of the twenty-somethings that they were. I pointed an accusing finger at them. “Help me get him to my car right now,” I demanded.

The three boys just stared at me.

“Move it, now!” I snapped my fingers at them. “You!” I said, pointing to a taxi squad player I’d only interviewed once. “Get some of the food Casey bought and bring it to my car.”

We were loaded up about five minutes later. Casey leaned back in the front seat so he could rest, and I eased my car into drive.

I swear I saw Tyler smirking in my rearview mirror.

In my apartment, I led Casey to bed, then brought him over some water and Tylenol.

I gently sat on the edge of my bed beside him. “You comfortable?”

He nodded. "Much better. Thank you," he said earnestly.

"Need anything else?"

"No, I'm just gonna sleep if that's okay," he said weakly.

"Yes," I told him, patting his chest. "You need to rest." I fluffed up a pillow and gently placed it under his left arm. He winced as I moved him, but let me fix his positioning.

I'm not sure if it was just instinct or what, but I couldn't stop myself from leaning forward and kissing his forehead, then I quickly moved back to my kitchen to work quietly on my laptop.

A few minutes later, he groggily said, "I keep thinking about it..."

"Shh, don't think, go to bed," I told him gently.

He ignored me. "I just... I know you don't need me and stuff... But what if I need you?"

I sat there stunned at his words, not quite knowing how to respond, but I didn't even have to... A minute later, his breathing relaxed into a rhythm that told me he was sleeping.

45. Addie

A week later, he was still staying at my place. He probably could've gone back to Tyler's, but at the same time, when would it be okay for him to be sleeping all scrunched up on a couch? And honestly, I was happy for the excuse to sleep next to him. This felt like a weird little way to steal some extra time together without having to define it.

He'd lay flat on his back each night to let his left side heal, and he never even tried to cuddle. But, each night, after we'd turned off the lights and said goodnight, he'd find my hand with his and my traitorous heart would wobble in the dark, loving how secretly loved I felt by him.

He'd started back at work only three days after his surgery, and now I was in the rink as well, reporting on practice.

I was having a hard time assessing the players, because my eyes kept going to him standing on the team bench.

He was laser focused on the defensemen as they ran drills, calling out numbers here and there and making them skate to the bench to go over certain skills. He didn't talk with his hands normally, but it was obvious that he coached with his hands. I had to stifle a laugh as he used only half his body when trying to demonstrate how to move.

I couldn't help but think that younger us would probably take in this scene and think that we were still together... But the younger version of me was naive. She didn't know that being with a man she loved could come at a cost... And honestly, I was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. I knew he'd probably be leaving as

soon as he recovered, so I could enjoy this little time with him, then move forward...

That night, when I got home from work, he was already making dinner in the kitchen.

Seeing his large, masculine frame leaning over my tiny stove was comforting. He looked comfy himself in a t-shirt, sweatpants, and socks. It was still strange to see him with short, “clean-cut” hair.

“Thank you, you didn’t have to do that,” I said, coming up from behind him.

“Hey,” he gave me a smile and quickly touched the small of my back as a greeting. I liked his hand on me... As soon as he took it away, I missed it.

“Whatcha making?” I asked, placing my backpack down on the table.

“Vodka pasta.”

“Oh? You just wanted my favorite meal?” I asked wryly.

“Who says it’s not my favorite?” he threw back at me with a wink.

“It’s not. Your favorite is steak,” I told him dubiously.

He laughed. “True. But this is a thank you meal for letting me stay here. Your bed is way more comfortable than Tyler’s couch,” he said. “And cooking is kinda my hobby. I’ve been missing it.”

But the next week, I started to freak out by just how comfortable he was becoming in my space.

I came back to him and Tyler both wearing heavy flannels, kneeling down in front of my door handle. You could tell their age difference from the way they wore their hats. Casey's was turned backwards, Tyler's was turned straight and sitting on top of his head, not fully pulled down.

Casey held a screw in his mouth as he held out a metal piece to Tyler.

I blinked a couple times, realizing they were replacing the broken deadbolt.

"But I'm... I'm renting..." I told them.

"And the next girl will be renting too, I'll fix it," Casey said, without taking his eyes off the door.

I swallowed hard. "What makes you think there will be a next girl? I live here. This is my place," I told him firmly, trying not to shiver in the cold. I really wanted to get into my place and crawl under my heated blanket.

"Maybe not forever," he said softly.

I felt like stomping my foot. "Yes, forever, Casey."

He finally looked at me with a blank face. "Okay."

"Okay, so stop," I told them.

Tyler hesitated.

"Tyler, don't stop," Casey said gruffly.

"Tyler, don't listen to your brother," I said, cocking my head to the side.

"Tyler-" he started.

"Hey guys," he dropped his screwdriver and held his hands up in innocence. "I'm not in this."

"You're being stubborn, Adds," Casey said quietly, picking up the screwdriver himself.

"No, I'm not," I responded.

His eyebrows shot up and he motioned to the way I was standing.

"I'm not!" I argued.

Tyler squinted up at me. "Ya kinda are, Adds."

A smile tugged at the corner of Casey's lips.

"That's it," I ground out. I snatched up the loose screws on the ground and walked toward the garbage can on the sidewalk.

"Don't you dare, Adelina Kessel," Casey said, standing up and stalking over to me now. "We're freezing our asses off and we're almost done. *I* want to stay in a place that I know is deadbolted," he said. "It's for me, okay?"

"Oh, yeah right, Casey," I said sarcastically. While I knew I was acting completely irrationally, when he acted all protective, it freaked me out. We weren't dating and he had no right to act like he had any say over where or how I lived... Saying I might not be here forever? Where did he think I was gonna go? Move to Boston with him? I had a life of my own that I wouldn't abandon.

"Just put the old one back on. It was fine before," I said, holding the screws over the garbage can.

His face cracked in annoyance. "Are you crazy? No," he said, aghast.

I shook my hand. "Do it."

He quickly moved in front of me, blocking me from Tyler's view. His hand suddenly brushed my cheek, and he leaned down to me so I could feel his breath on my skin. "Addie, let's just get you inside, you can have a hot

chocolate and warm up and Tyler and I will be done before ya know it.”

I looked up into his round eyes.

“You’re freezing out here,” he urged. He brushed my hair behind my ear and then trailed his hand down my back.

I was almost going to give him back the screws, but then he had the audacity to try and sneak them away from me.

“Trying to distract me?!” I yelled at him. I promptly threw the screws into the garbage can.

He tipped his head back and his lips twisted into a reluctant smile. “Well, Sweetheart, I already got rid of your old one.”

I couldn’t even process the meaning of what he said because I was too transfixed on stamping out how much I loved hearing him call me “Sweetheart” again.

46. Casey

I walked back into Addie's apartment holding a bag of barbecue food from a nearby restaurant that was probably one of my favorites in the whole country. I found the best way to feed her was not to say I got her something, because she was still a bit timid about me doing things for her. But lately, I found that if I just spread the food out, she'd come and pick at things until she ate a whole meal.

As nice as our little routine was, I knew I needed to change things up for us to move forward. We established a solid friendship again, which was amazing, but going off what Griff had suggested at practice earlier this week, I needed her to miss me.

That night, she was wearing an old country concert shirt over some jogger sweatpants. I wondered if she remembered that we went to that concert together... The memory made me smile. We were a drunken mess on the floor of the venue with a bunch of the hockey guys. At one point, I had her on my shoulders.

As we sat in front of her small TV eating brisket mac and cheese, I finally addressed Mia's birthday party.

"So, you're goin' to Boston this weekend, right?"

"Yeah," she said, not taking her eyes off the Hallmark movie playing. I stared at her profile, wishing I could see what was going on in that brain of hers.

"Well, it feels dumb that we'd be goin' separately, ya know?"

She shrugged like she couldn't care less, but her leg was slightly bouncing now.

I cleared my throat and tried again. “Well, it feels like the least I could do for you letting me stay here is to let you come to my place out there?”

“Um... Okay, yeah.”

“Okay, I’ll get the plane tickets then.”

Her eyes snapped to mine now. “No, I can pay for my own ticket. Let’s just get on the same flight,” she suggested.

“Addie, I know you can get your own ticket, but you’ve been saving me a shit load of money on rent by letting me stay, it’s the least I can do, okay?”

She bit her lip and nodded. “Okay.”

“And I think this’ll be my last night here.” The words were agonizing to say, but I knew I needed to say them.

She looked at me with those serious blue eyes of hers. Her gaze fell briefly to my lips. She opened her mouth to start talking, but stopped herself.

“I’m feelin’ good now, and I feel like I should give you your space back. I really do appreciate you letting me stay here,” I told her.

Her mouth clamped shut and her lips pressed into a thin line, like she was trying to hide her disappointment. “Okay,” she said quietly with a nod, like she was trying to convince herself that that’s what she wanted as well.

“I’ll miss ya, though,” I told her. “This has been way nicer than Tyler’s,” I laughed. “No one playing video games ‘til 3 fucking a.m.”

She was silent for a while, but pretty soon, she was leaning against my good shoulder, still watching the

show when she said, "Me too."

My chest swelled hearing those two words.

It was painful pulling myself away from her, but I knew I had to do it... For us.

On Saturday morning, I eased my truck up to her curb. We still had about an hour before we were supposed to head to the airport, but I'd been itching to see her and I figured she wouldn't turn down the offer to get coffee together. The past week, we'd only seen each other at practice at the stadium, and she never got too close during practice unless she wanted to pull a player aside for an interview, and that only happened once this week.

Right as I was about to knock on her door, she threw it open.

"Hey!" She said with her face flushed. She looked ready for the party later, wearing a maroon sweater dress, black tights, and boots. Killed me when she wore tights, always did. Her hair was down in waves, and she moved it to lay over just one shoulder, exposing her neck and collarbone on one side... What I wouldn't have given to slide back into our habits... I would've breathed kisses up her neck until her knees buckled.

"Can you...uh..." I snapped my eyes to hers. Jeez, I'd basically been ogling her. "Help me?" she asked sheepishly.

Duke's dumb rant about Claire asking him for help slammed into my mind and I had to cough to cover up a

chuckle. “Sure, what’s up?”

She led me into her room and pointed to her suitcase, which was clearly overflowing.

I leaned against her door frame and smiled ruefully, thinking that some things really hadn’t changed. “That’s not closing, Sweetheart. Give me some of your stuff, I’ll put it in my bag,” I offered.

“What?” she asked with wide eyes. “No, that’s okay. I’ll just empty some then.”

“Nah.” I knelt down and pulled multiple big sweaters out of her bag. “You know we’re only stayin’ two nights, right?”

She rolled her eyes. “I might get cold. I hate being cold.”

“And-” I swallowed my words... because I spied what could’ve been lacy, flimsy lingerie in her bag. “I’ll just put these in mine,” I said carefully, hoping she wouldn’t unpack anything else... And hoping to God that maybe, just maybe, she’d packed that with me in mind. Could I really be that lucky? Shit... now I felt myself getting hard at the thought of that...

“If you’re sure?” she asked.

“Damn straight,” I said, easily zipping the carry-on duffle bag and swinging it over my good shoulder. No use in letting her think any more about the contents of her bag. “Let’s head out,” I said with a wink.

47. Addie

When we got to the airport parking lot, I noticed he left my sweaters in his backseat.

"Hey!" I said defensively, standing by his truck as he started striding toward the airport. "I thought you said you'd bring them for me."

He eyed me with amusement. "Is being cold your only concern with those?" he asked.

"Well, yeah."

"You can borrow a hoodie," he said.

I paused at that. I definitely wouldn't argue that point. I did want his hoodie. I used to love wearing his last name and number on my back and being able to smell him in the material. *Dear God.* I shook my head out. I needed to get my shit together. *He's probably leaving as soon as he's healed,* I reminded myself... But that didn't mean I couldn't enjoy the now... And that didn't mean I couldn't steal a hoodie... right? Just one...

As we walked, Casey took my duffle bag off my shoulder and slung it over his good one, basically growling that I wasn't gonna be carrying anything when I was with him.

But now that we were sitting on the plane, his tough guy attitude had all but vanished. He was breathing deeply through his nose and his hand was white-knuckling the handle of his seat.

My heart kinda cracked seeing how he was still struggling with flying. I knew he didn't want anyone else to know about his insecurities because it made him feel vulnerable, but to me, it just made him human.

I held my hand out on his thigh and he wordlessly took it.

“Thank you,” he rasped out.

“You hold my bag, I’ll hold your hand,” I joked.

He smiled, closing his eyes tightly as we took off.

Somewhere in the air, still holding his hand, I stopped anxiously thinking of all the question marks surrounding Casey, and excitement over seeing Harper went to the forefront of my mind. I hadn’t seen her in almost a year, and phone calls were great and all, but they couldn’t completely make up for in-person visits. I missed the days when we were college roommates and I could come out to the common area and call her name and she’d appear in a second.

When we landed, Casey and I let everyone else exit, and we were the last on the plane, still holding hands.

“You look happy,” he said, craning his neck to study me for a second.

“I am,” I couldn’t help but smile. “I haven’t seen them since last year, I can’t wait to get there.”

He nodded but looked a bit more chagrined.

And then I realized why... What I’d said was just a reminder that I was here last year too, and I’d avoided him.

We were dropped off in a Lyft at Harper and Kyle’s house in a super nice suburb of Boston. They had

a sizeable old brick home with huge windows that all had clean white shutters. Cars were jammed in their driveway making it look like a parking lot, and more lined the front of their house, telling us that we were some of the last to arrive. Their lawn had a nice dusting of snow, and it was lightly falling as we walked up the stairs to their front porch. We'd only been having the bone-dry cold winter weather so far in Michigan, so seeing the snow made me excited for December.

"It looks so pretty. I love their house," I told Casey.

He looked up at it and nodded. "They nailed the cozy vibe."

I quickly reached for the doorbell, then hugged myself as I stood there on the porch.

The longer we waited there, the more awkward I started to feel about showing up with Casey— the guy I'd been avoiding at all their other parties. But now here we were, together, but not together, going to see the couple that we befriended when we were actually together. I really hoped Kyle and Harper would let it slide and not say anything too weird about it.

"You good?" Casey whispered down to me.

"Yeah, why?" I could see my breath hanging in the cool air in front of us, and snowflakes clung to his dark coat which was only half on because it was too painful for him to take his arm out of the sling to put it fully on.

He moved closer behind me and smoothed his right hand up and down my arm, giving me comfort. His touch still somehow put me at ease.

Seconds later, Harper threw the door open and darted off, yelling, "Come on in!"

Casey touched the small of my back, alerting me he was following, as I walked in their door.

Cheers erupted as soon as we were seen by the hockey guys all sitting on the couches in her living room. Their manly selves looked completely out of place because their cozy brick living room looked like it was thrown up on by a unicorn or something. There were sparkly, pink balloons and pink ballerina decorations everywhere, and one of the players, probably a rookie, was wearing a pink tutu over his hockey sweats.

“Jetterson, back in Boston!” one of the guys with a missing front tooth called out as he hopped up from the couch and made his way over to us. He gave Casey one of those guy handshake-back slap hugs, then turned to me. “And... Addie, right? I think I remember you from last year. Harp’s best bud, right?”

I could practically feel Casey tensing up behind me, like he was upset they already knew me, and he’d been wholly unaware.

“Yes, nice to see you again,” I said smoothly with a smile. “Now where’s the birthday girl?” I asked, looking around for an escape from what I was afraid would turn into an awkwardly tense situation.

“And where’s the beer?” Casey asked in a gruff voice.

“Can you even have any, bud?” the rookie in a tutu asked from the couch, eyeing Casey’s sling holding his left arm in place.

Casey’s face cracked in annoyance.

“He fucked himself up giving you a goal, if the man wants a beer, you go get him a beer, Coleson,” Kyle bit back as he walked in the room.

The rest of the guys let out “oooh” sounds and Coleson pushed himself up and saluted Kyle and Casey, then went to retrieve drinks.

“Hey Addie,” Kyle said warmly as he leaned down to give me a hug. I was hit with a surprising rush of happiness seeing him. He’d become one of my best friends by extension. He’d been hearing my drama and giving me advice from a guy’s perspective—whether wanted or not— for the better part of a decade now, and he’d never double crossed me—so far. “Prolly wanna get away from these ugly mugs. Girls are all in the kitchen,” he said when he pulled back.

I could hear Kyle chirping Casey’s sling as I made my way through the hallway lined with framed family pictures. I briefly touched one frame which had a picture of the four of us... I wondered if Casey would see it. I begged Harper to take it down a while back, but she refused, saying I couldn’t just block out all the good memories because of the bad...

I looked back to the guys before entering the kitchen... Casey’s eyes were still on me, looking almost like he wanted to follow me...

As soon as I entered the kitchen, Harper let out a screech and ran to me, almost barreling me over with a hug.

“OhmyGod,” I breathed out in awe, feeling her large pregnant stomach, which was on full display in her tight, black dress. “Wow,” I said with a laugh, “You look like you’re ready to go!”

She rolled her eyes and pushed her shoulder length blonde hair behind her ears. “I cannot wait. Two

full freaking months to go, though. This baby's just way bigger than Mia was... I bet it's a boy."

"Oh, it's definitely a boy!" a woman with sleek blonde hair called out from the kitchen table. "Hubby and I have a bet goin', and I need this win, Harper," she said. She turned to me then. "Hi, I'm Mari."

The rest of the women, about ten in total, all called out their hellos. I recognized a few of them from past years. Some were hockey wives or girlfriends, others were mothers of Mia's friends.

Before I could find a seat at their long, white, wooden dining room table, a line of little kids came running through. There were about six little boys and then Mia, who was decked out in a sparkly pink tutu, and they were all holding mini-hockey sticks.

"Mia's the queen of the court," one of the women laughed as the kids ran into the den to play.

"Y'all need to start popping out some girls," Harper said, giving them and then me a pointed look.

If she'd said that in previous years, I probably would've felt a painful ping in my chest, but this time, I laughed. This time, it felt like maybe that could actually be in my future. Just thinking about it almost made my eyes mist over.

Harper gave me a knowing look.

"God, I just missed you so much," I told her, giving her another hug.

When she pulled back, she waved a hand in front of her face and sniffled a bit. "You're going to ruin my makeup and it's like one of only three days in the whole year I actually put it on," she complained. "Come on,"

she ushered me toward the table. “We’re playing a game and you need to drink for me.”

“Drink for you?” I asked curiously as I sat at her table.

She went to her fridge and pulled out a bunch of baby bottles filled with colorful liquid. The women all shouted out cheers.

“Okay, so for the first game,” Harper said, “you will all receive a bottle filled with an alcoholic beverage of my choosing. The first person to finish their drink and guess what it is correctly is the winner!”

Harper inspected each bottle, then passed it to the woman of her choosing.

She eventually passed me two. “You have to drink mine too,” she said with a wink at me.

“What, why?!” I complained. I thought she’d been joking.

“I mean… Or you could give us entertainment by telling us what’s going on with Mr. Lonely boy.” She held her lower back as she sat down beside me. Her belly was practically hitting the table.

“For real! I wanna know!” Suzie, who was dating a right winger nicknamed Whitty, called out. “Jetersen’s never even *looked* at a woman in all the years we’ve been on this team.”

Harper gave me an inconspicuous “told-ya-so” look.

“Sounds like it’s time to drink!” I said, clasping my hands together, to which the rest of the women laughed knowingly.

48. Casey

"Chug, chug, chug!!" women were calling out from the kitchen.

All the guys kinda looked around, making confused faces.

Kyle finally addressed it. "Are they having more fun than us?" he asked, his forehead creasing.

"It sounds like it," Coleson said with a laugh, standing up. "I think I'm gonna walk my tutu wearing ass over there. You guys are losers."

We watched him strut down the hall to the kitchen, then the women erupted, cheering for *him*.

"The fuck?" Whitty's face cracked, then all six feet and eight inches of him stood and jaunted over to the hall as well.

"Wait, wait, wait," Kyle told the rest of us. "We can have fun, too."

"I don't know..." Kuddy said, his eyebrows knitting together. "I think our wives made us the DD's without even telling us."

"Pssh," Kyle responded. "That's what driving services are for. Leave your cars here. Lets get those two lost puppies and play some flip cup in the garage, yeah? We'll make them wanna join us," he said, puffing his chest out a bit, determined not to be outdone by his wife.

"Okay, so this is a three-year-old's birthday party though, right?" I asked, taking another swig of my beer.

Kyle shrugged. "Yes, but she won't even remember it. You remember turning three?" he asked dryly.

I tipped my head to him, “Good point.”

“Besides, she’s probably having the time of her little life killing your boys at mini-sticks in the den right now,” he said to some of the other guys on the team.

They chuckled and nodded. As much as Mia was a girly-girl, she was a cut-throat competitor, a trait she’d definitely inherited from her mother. I’d heard jokes through the years that some of their sons were actually scared of playing with Mia because she’d wrestle them to the ground before she lost.

Kyle pushed off the couch and started toward the kitchen to bring Coleson and Whitty back to the guy side of the party, and I followed close on his heels... I couldn’t care less about the other two, I just used it as an excuse to see what Addie was up to...

As soon as I spotted her, it felt like another damn time warp...

Her face was flushed from drinking and she and Harper had their heads close together and were busting up laughing at something. She just looked so damn carefree and happy. All her anxiety, all her over-thinking, it seemed to dissipate when she was with her best friend... It used to dissipate with me.

Kyle cleared his throat and made all the women look at him.

“Get out of here, Kyle! This is a girl only area!”
Harper yelled at him.

“Yes! Girls only!” Suzie said, pushing Whitty away.

Whitty looked at her like he’d been betrayed.

Suzie stood up to push him away, but he just grabbed her waist and started pushing sloppy kisses

onto her neck and face while she cackled.

"Oh cut it with the lovey-dovey shit, let's go boys!" Kyle shouted, motioning for all us to follow him into the garage.

Addie almost fell off her chair then, making Harper and her start laughing even more.

I cut her a concerned look, but Harper waved me away. I ignored this and walked closer to look at the cards on the table. I picked up one that had Addie's handwriting on it, I still knew her half-cursive writing by heart.

I felt my eyes bugging out. Were these drink guesses? "Jesus, Harper, you gave her two angry pirates?" I'm sure there was a legit angry pirate drink recipe, but the way Harper made them, they were strong as hell.

Addie hiccupped. "S'fine."

Harper shooed me away and tossed her hair over her shoulder. "You guys can go do whatever you want, we have more games to play," she said stubbornly.

"Well, take it easy on her, Harps," I said quietly, feeling my face burn up now that all the women were looking at me.

"Too late!" Harper called out happily, then physically pushed me toward the garage. "Goodbye, sir!"

Before the door to the garage closed behind the last guy, we could all hear the women whispering and giggling. Without their warmth, it felt like we'd been shut out in the cold. I think it was a mutual feeling around the guys.

“Oh, come on!” Kyle roared, setting up a flip cup table. “We’re gonna have fun, dammit! Coleson, Kuddy, grab the drinks from the fridge. Jettersen, crack the door open a little so the girls can hear us.”

I did as he told and listened closely for a second. I could hear Addie saying, “I don’t know, guys!” and the musical lilt to her laughter hit me square in the chest.

“Don’t make me beat you up, Jetts,” Kyle warned. “First round, let’s go!”

“Like you could beat me up,” I bit back sarcastically, moving away from the door.

“Eh, you’ve only got one arm, buad,” Coleson said, taking another drink.

I stood taller so I’d tower over him. “And whose fault is that?”

He squirmed away from me and went to the other side of the table, laughing as he went.

49. Addie

"Wait, remember when we went camping way up north in Michigan?"

"No! Don't tell that story!" I laughed quietly. Mia was now sitting on my lap, sleeping against my chest. I brushed her wispy hair back and kissed her forehead.

Harper erupted in giggles and turned to the women, who now had most of their sleepy kids on their laps. "Okay, so we were camping and the guys were telling scary stories, right? So then Addie, who'd never been camping before, goes, 'Casey, I have to go to the bathroom, where is it?'"

I shook my head and covered my face to muffle my giggles.

"And I'm like, this chick has no clue. So, I handed her the toilet paper and pointed to the woods. But she's freaking out because of the scary stories, right? So I take pity on her and go with her... But then the guys decided that now is the time to scare the ever-loving shit out of us. They come sneaking around the woods right as she's gonna squat..."

"So mean!" I interjected.

"And she peed all over her pants. She had to wear a pair of my sweatpants for the rest of the weekend," she said laughing.

"Yeah, yeah," I said, talking over her. "That has nothing on your Thanksgiving run story!"

The rest of the girls laughed and wanted to know more.

"That was bad, I admit it," Harper said gravely while rubbing her belly.

“So, Harper goes to visit Kyle’s family in Northfield, where I’m from, for Thanksgiving,” I started. “The night before, Kyle’s family had this crazy ass spicy food for dinner.”

“Oh nooo,” someone called out, and I nodded.

“But you know Harper, she’ll grin and bear it,” I continued, “So, the next morning, Kyle and his dad and sister want to do the Thanksgiving 5K.”

“Torture!” Harper yelled out. “I will be pregnant every Thanksgiving for the rest of my life to get out of it!”

“And mid-run,” I started laughing uncontrollably just thinking about it.

“Mid-run, she shits her pants, okay?!” Harper finished the story.

Everyone was dying of laughter now.

“So she called me to come get her. She kept yelling at Kyle and his sister to stay away from her. It was priceless. She thought Kyle was going to break up with her after that, but he felt really bad about the whole thing.”

“I think his sister still hates me,” she grimaced.

“I do not!” Kelly said, totally knowing it was a joke.

An uproar coming from the garage made us all pause.

“What do you think they’re doing?” Suzie asked.

Harper sighed. “Trying to make us go in there.”

“Want to?” Kelly asked... I had a feeling she had a thing for Coleson.

Harper clapped her hands together. “Addie and I will go in there saying we need to get new drinks. We’ll

let you know what they're doing."

I reluctantly passed Mia off to Kelly, not wanting to end my dose of toddler cuddles. Each time I visited, Mia got a bit more independent, and one day very soon, I knew I'd deeply miss the way she crawled onto my lap and curled up.

I followed Harper as she quickly padded barefoot through her kitchen to the garage door. She turned to me and raised her eyebrows when she realized the door was already slightly cracked open and we could overhear the guys talking.

Casey and Kyle must've been right by the door, because we heard their voices clearly. I shook my head at her and pulled her arm, wanting to go back to the kitchen, but she held a finger to her lips and listened closer.

"So, you think it'll work?" Kyle asked.

"I don't know, but I'm gonna keep trying. Hope it'll work out," Casey responded.

"Well, you know that time only paused, it doesn't start over, right?" Kyle said. "You guys just had a break away from each other. You were almost engaged when things ended, right?"

"Yeah," Casey said tightly. "We weren't *almost*. We were, to me at least. I kinda asked her... before. I had a ring."

"Oh shit," Kyle responded. "Okay, well, there is one thing you need to think about... She's still going through with the whole process to get preggers, right?"

My breathing all but stopped, waiting for his response.

"Through IVF, yeah, so what?" Casey responded with a sharp edge to his voice.

"Jeez, calm down. Not being mean here, just want to make sure you're okay with that."

"I think it's great. I just want to be with her. I want whatever she wants."

Harper jerked the door open wider and cleared her throat, making her presence known, then she pulled me into the doorway with her.

Casey stared right at me. I could tell he'd been drinking quite a bit because his eyes were lined in red. He looked me dead in the eye and said, "She doesn't have to change her plans because of me, I just want to be with her, whatever that looks like."

My drunk heart flopped around happily in my chest.

The girls came barreling behind us then, wanting to enter the garage, and we all spilled into the little concrete room.

I immediately went to the beer fridge to start resetting up the game table for the guys because I needed to busy myself instead of replaying Casey's words in my head over and over again.

"Where's Suzie?" Whitty asked, searching the room for her.

"Watching the kids for us! They're all conked out. She said she needed more baby time!"

The guys immediately started yelling out chirps.

"Someone's got baby fever!" one of the guys said.

Another shoved him. "Sounds like we'll need a diaper party soon, eh, boys?"

His face turned a little red from the attention. He turned to Harper. "You think she has... uh... baby fever?" he asked hesitantly.

"I don't know! You think because I'm preggers I'm all mother nature-y? Fuck off, Whitty." She flicked his ear.

He stood there looking a little shell-shocked, and I took pity on him.

"I think she does," I whispered up to him. I knew the look of baby fever well.

His face cracked into a shit-eating grin before he bounded up the two steps toward the house and flung open the door to go find her.

We started a guys versus girls flip cup tourney then. Harper was the best at it by far, probably because she was playing with water while the rest of us had to use beer. Every time she beat Kyle, she stayed right in front of him and teased him mercilessly while he continued to try and flip his cup. He struggled hard because he couldn't stop laughing at his wife's chirps.

After a couple rounds, Harper rubbed her belly and leaned into me. "Hey, can you grab some of the leftover pizza from the kitchen fridge and bring it out? We can eat it cold, right? I don't wanna heat it up," she whined.

"No one will even notice. I think food is food at this point," I told her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her elbow Kyle in the stomach. He doubled over a bit, then cleared his throat. "Jetts, go help her," he said authoritatively.

Casey fell in step behind me as I walked into the house, and a jittery feeling rose in my chest.

Someone turned up the music so Sam Hunt's "House Party" followed us into the house. I almost tripped up the steps, and Casey clumsily caught me around the waist and hoisted me up.

"Was this their plan?" He chuckled in my ear. "Get us messed up then send us in here together so we'd talk?"

"Maybe," I said, trying to tamper down a giggle fit I knew was brewing inside me. I was feeling light and tipsy and brave. I was here with my best friends. I was here with him. We were standing in their kitchen now, and he hadn't backed away from me. I looked into his eyes. In a moment of bravery, I reached up and traced his jaw line with a finger. "Did you mean that? What you said about me not having to change my plans?" I asked quietly.

He stared down at me with an intense gaze, then grabbed my hand in his and squeezed it. "Yes." He moved closer, backing me against the kitchen counter.

I didn't move away. I felt pulled toward him, like I was stuck in his magnetic orbit, and even if I wanted out, I wouldn't be able to leave... because I wanted him to kiss me more than anything.

"Can I?" He breathed out huskily, his eyes searching mine. "Can I kiss you?

I stood on my tiptoes and looped my arms around his neck. I cocked my head to the side and bit my lip, looking at him thoughtfully. "Well that depends," I said coyly, "have you chewed lately?"

His lips curved into an amused smile. "Kept my word. Never did ever again, Adds."

I nodded shyly, and in a split second, his mouth found mine. My whole body curved into him as his good

hand worked my body until he pulled my bottom up, closer to him.

"God," he mumbled into my mouth, "missed this." He used his good arm to pick me up and roughly set me on the counter. My legs naturally parted for him, and then we were closer. His callused hand was snaking up the back of my shirt. I ran my hands over his head, knocking his hat off.

He brushed my hair back, then pulled it to angle my head to his so he could kiss me deeper, rougher.

With a feeling of reckless abandon, I reached for his belt and started tugging. As soon as I could, I reached my hand right where he wanted it. He let out a strangled noise into my mouth.

His hand snaked up the front of my shirt now. He ripped down my bra and squeezed, making me want more.

"Oh shit, sorry!" Coleson's voice interrupted us.

I pulled away, feeling completely disoriented and high on him.

Casey stood squarely in front of me, blocking me from view. His hand stayed where it was. He stared daggers at Coleson 'til he backed out of the room.

As soon as he was gone, I leaned my head against his good collarbone and giggled into him.

Casey ran a hand through his hair and shook his head out.

"We should probably bring the pizza out," I said, slightly loving how disappointed he looked that we'd been caught.

He took his hand back now, and I immediately missed his warmth.

He backed up so I could jump down from the counter. A goofy smile slid onto his face. “I hate my arm right now. I can’t wait ‘til I can have both hands on ya again.”

His words sent a jolt straight to my core. “Is that so?” I asked.

While retrieving the pizza boxes, I was tempted to stand in front of the open fridge for an extra minute to cool off.

He came up from behind me and pulled me against his body so I could feel how hard he still was. “And I can’t wait til later,” he whispered huskily into my ear, making me shiver.

I reached my arm around his neck and turned my face to kiss him again.

I couldn’t wait either.

We were both drunk and not thinking clearly, but I didn’t care.

All I wanted was him, and I was sick of denying myself his touch.

50. Casey

I could live this way forever.

The Boston trip seemed to ease away the last of Addie's reservations about us, and since then, we'd spent almost every second of our free time together.

My mind was already wandering to buying a house or a larger apartment for us... one with a top-of-the-line shower instead of the prison shower her apartment had. I swear I got burned every time I showered, but I forced myself to slow down and just enjoy our time here together. I was sure we'd figure it out soon enough... and the routine we fell into, it was pretty damn close to heaven. This was the happiest and calmest I'd felt since my first year in the NHL when I had Addie and Tyler by my side almost all the time. Now that I had a taste of living near both of them again, I wouldn't be giving it up for anything.

At the next Crewmen's practice, I stood on the bench chatting with some of the taxi squad guys on how to keep their game reflexes sharp while not playing in actual games, when I felt Coach Petersen's gaze on me.

Feeling like he wanted to talk to me, I quickly dismissed the guys.

"So what are you thinking?" Coach asked me as soon as we were alone. He was on skates, leaning over the team box, his eyes still on his players running drills.

"Huh?"

"Playing next season or hanging 'em up?" he barked.

“Ah...” I breathed out a sigh and looked around the stadium, taking in the hum of the arena. My eyes landed on Addie, who was up in a section of seats reserved for the press. “I think I’m done.” I tried to choose my words carefully. “I’m tired of the constant travel, having to build myself up to fly all the time. My shoulder still needs to be repaired, but it kinda took a backseat to this,” I motioned to my sling. “And I have other, uh... priorities.” I squinted.

“The reporter?” he asked gruffly.

I swallowed. For an old guy who claimed he couldn’t see well, nothing got past him. “Yeah.”

He sighed. “I like that one. She covers fair. If she can’t report on us because you end up having the same last name, I choose her. You gotta find a new coaching post. This is temporary anyway. You want a more permanent spot around here?”

I couldn’t stop from cracking a smirk. “Yes, sir. That would be great.”

“Good. Was hoping you’d say that. I already told a local AAA team you might be able to help them out of a bind. U16’s. My buddy can’t do it anymore. I’ll have him call you.”

I nodded. I wouldn’t mind that. So long as it was local, I’d be down. Plus, I did enjoy training Tyler back at the Ice League. I always thought I was pretty good at coaching, and the older guys didn’t need too much direction... They mainly needed more motivation.

“Pops on Fourth,” he said suddenly, keeping his eyes on the ice.

“Huh?”

“Little Italian spot. My wife, she loves it. Always makes her happy.”

Now I was grinning. “Noted. Thank you, sir.”

He just grunted then skated off, yelling at Campbell for messing up his favorite drill.

On Sunday morning, I sat in the stands and watched Addie teach learn to skates, wishing I could join her on the ice again so I could hear what she was saying.

She spoke animatedly with the three-year-olds, encouraging them to try and get up by themselves after they fell.

During the zam, I watched her speak with parents, and slid her a hot chocolate inconspicuously. She kept glancing at me appreciatively, and I shot her a wink.

Later in the session, I watched her laugh like she was completely carefree as she chased around the little TimBit hockey boys, and I was reminded that while I could live like this forever, she wanted more...

After the session was over, we drove back downtown, but I passed the turn for her apartment. She chatted on, filling me in on all the funny things the kids said during skating, and I felt a happiness settle over me knowing that she trusted me completely again.

We walked around Campus Martius for a while, taking in all the lights and the huge Christmas tree they erected next to the little sheet of ice where kids were skating around.

"I'd love a backyard rink one day," she said wistfully.

I squeezed her hand. "Yeah?"

She paused when she looked up at me, and a smile slid onto her face. "You've got...whipped cream." She laughed and swiped her fingers over my smile. I knew I had it there, I just wanted her to touch me.

I pushed a kiss into her hair. "A backyard rink would be nice. But not sure how that would work with your apartment right now."

"I know."

"You said you'd live there forever," I teased.

She rolled her eyes. "Do you want to say 'told-you-so?'"

I ignored her question and pulled her closer to me. "I can make that happen, babe."

"Yeah?" She looked up at me hopefully.

I loved when she looked at me like that. Like I could fix anything. I hadn't seen that look on her face in so long, and I cherished it now.

I couldn't help but notice that with age, the way I thought about that look had changed. Before, I was grateful she thought of me as her hero, but I was almost scared of it too. I feared I didn't deserve her love. Now, I was determined to work to deserve it for the rest of my life.

"Oh yeah. It'll have to be big. I'm sure we could find some boards from old rinks. Maybe we'd even need a warming area for putting skates on."

"Yes! And we'd need a good stereo system out there so we could play Christmas music... And we'll

have to have a lot of Christmas lights. We could even have a big bonfire and host a party, just like we used to,” she smiled, “Yeah?”

Her words warmed my chest. For the longest time, I had blocked out all the bonfire parties of the past from my mind because they were too painful to think about and those memories had a way of making me tailspin into grieving the life we lost... But now, it felt like what we had in front of us would become even happier and stronger than what we had in the past.

The next Monday after practice, we went out to the bar with the Crewmen guys as a goodbye. I still hadn’t told Addie I’d be leaving the Crewmen staff because it felt kind of presumptuous to say, *Hey, so since we’re basically dating now, I don’t want to be a complication for your job, so I’m finding a new job.* We hadn’t really said aloud what we were yet. I just knew we were forever, and I think she did too.

But as soon as the guys cheers-ed to me leaving the bench, her eyes snapped to mine.

“You’re leaving the Crewmen? Why?” she whispered up to me.

I backed us away from the group a bit. “I don’t want to complicate your job,” I told her. “We’re really graying the lines on that whole conflict of interest thing, aren’t we?”

Her eyes softened. “Yeah, I guess.” She chewed on her bottom lip and her shoulders tensed. “When are you leaving? I guess you’ll be going back to Boston next

season?" Her face fell. "I guess I forgot to think about when you'd be leaving. I never even asked..."

I chuckled as I pulled her into me for a hug, looping my arms around her lower back. "I'm not going anywhere, Adds." I kissed her hair. "I'm coaching a U16 team here. Coach Petersen basically said he chooses you over me, so I was kinda kicked off the bench," I said with a laugh.

Her mouth dropped open and she hesitantly looked back up to me. "Oh." I watched her process everything I'd said and then a giggle popped out of her. "I'm sorry, but that makes me so incredibly happy."

I laughed with her then. "Me too, babe. I'm not leaving. I'm retiring and staying here with you and Tyler."

She buried her head in my chest, and I couldn't tell if she was laughing or crying anymore, but I *could* tell that I made the right decision.

Tyler made eye contact with me across the bar and lifted his drink with a cocky smile on his face.

51. Addie - present

That night, we laid in bed together, him cuddling me from behind, holding my stomach, and it finally felt permanent, not like a long sleepover that I hoped wouldn't ever end.

"There is one thing we should probably talk about," he said quietly in the dark.

I reached around me and patted his scruffy face.
"What's that?"

"When's your next appointment?"

"Tomorrow."

He froze behind me. "Want me to go with you?"

"It's okay. You have the first practice with your new team." I turned in his arm and faced him. He'd already assured me plenty of times that I could move forward with my plan, but now, I could detect something else in his face.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

He swallowed. "I'm... I'm..." His face cracked a bit and his nose flared. "I'm just afraid of you going through that again. I'm scared of you getting pregnant. I'm scared of losing you again."

He rubbed his eyes, like he didn't want me to know he was tearing up.

"Casey," I held my palm to his face, "You won't lose me, I promise. This time is so much different," I felt my voice crack. "Back then, I wasn't equipped to handle losing our baby because I didn't even know it existed. And then my brain couldn't take it on top of everything else. I was so stressed with skating, then I blamed skating. I blamed myself. I blamed you. I couldn't reason

through it. I was mad at the whole world. But this is a very different situation. I'm going in with my eyes wide open. You won't lose me," I repeated slowly, looking in his eyes. "No matter what."

He kissed me then, slowly, passionately, like he wanted to make the moment last forever.

When he pulled back, he swiped his thumb under my eye. "Thank God, because Addie, I love you. I've always loved you."

I laid on his chest and felt his heart beat steadily beneath me. "I love you too."

I slept more peacefully that night than I ever have.

The next afternoon, I went into the office for my IVF appointment.

I sat in the waiting room, reading through one of the articles I was writing on my phone when a very pregnant woman and husband wandered in.

I watched the husband hover over her, making sure she was comfortable, asking if she needed anything.

She rubbed her very large stomach and asked, "Can you get the extra sandwich from the car? You were right, I think I do want it."

A few minutes later, she was unwrapping her food and treating it like a treasure.

"Sorry," she cringed, looking at me. "I know it's really smelly. I'm just craving it more than anything right

now."

I smiled politely. "Oh, it's no problem." I tried to hide my twinge of jealousy. She had everything I hoped to have, but God, that smell... It really was awful...

I swallowed hard, trying not to breathe too deeply. "What did you say was in that?" I asked weakly, feeling a bit shaky all of a sudden.

Before she could answer, I was running to the trash in the corner of the room.

The woman laughed behind me as my body heaved.

"I am so sorry I'm laughing! I shouldn't be laughing," she said. "It's just, that's exactly what I was like in my first trimester. I'm just so happy not to be you anymore."

I paused and looked down. *Wait... her first... trimester...?*

52. Casey

I was in a damn good mood after my first practice with the U16's. I could tell right away that I was going to love coaching this age. They were all so hopeful and loved horsing around with each other, and I'd already picked up on a few of their nicknames.

I walked in the locker room to find them all cackling because one kid hid old slices of pizza in another kid's bag during the last practice.

They immediately buttoned up when they saw me walk in.

I looked around them, eyeing them seriously, then said, "So who smells like a pizzeria?" And that kinda broke the ice.

Addie was still on the way home from her appointment, so I started cooking up some dinner on her shitty, teeny stove. We definitely needed to open up some dialogue on moving real soon here.

As soon as I heard the front door open, I called out, "How was your day, babe?"

She walked in the kitchen wearing a beanie, leggings, and a long sweater under her coat. She gave me a bright smile and her face seemed relaxed, peaceful even. She came behind me and hugged me around the waist to peer at the stove. "Whatcha making?"

"Well, I'm thinking some chicken parm. I have some garlic goin' right—"

She gagged.

She slapped a hand over her mouth and her eyes widened.

I zeroed my eyes to hers. "You good?"

Her face turned completely white, and a second later, she was running to her bathroom.

I turned the stove down and quickly followed her retching sounds to the bathroom.

Her knees were bent on the tile in front of the toilet and her body heaved. I immediately grabbed up her hair in a fist and felt kinda shitty that my other arm was still in a sling and I couldn't rub her back. It sounded violent.

I fired off all the questions. "Are you okay? What happened? Did you eat something bad? Are you sick?"

As soon as her body relaxed, she eased against the tub and closed her eyes. I gingerly sat down across from her because her face looked serious.

"I'm, um... I'm not sick..." she said lightly.

The absolute worst scenarios flashed through my mind. "Well," I swallowed hard, "what's wrong then?"

"Casey... I'm... I'm pregnant," she said.

I felt my mouth drop open, then rubbed my jaw. "IVF works that fast?"

"No!" She started laughing, then crying. She covered her face.

I leaned forward and pulled her hands away.

"I'm confused, Addie... When...?"

"Casey..." her smile wobbled.

"Me?! You? Us?" I asked. "We used protection?" I was sure of it. "I used the condom in my wallet."

She paused.

"I can't believe this happened to us again," I said, running a hand over my hair, feeling completely shocked.

Her eyes bugged out. “I can! You keep condoms in your wallet? Have you always kept them there?! That makes it a pretty shitty goalie, Casey.”

I felt the color drain from my face. “Wait, what?”

Her body shook with laughter.

A baby. Our baby. Half of Addie, half of me. I gulped and eyed her abdomen. “How are you feeling about this?”

“I’m... I’m happy... I’m really happy.” Her eyes glistened. “I was told it’d be almost impossible to get pregnant without IVF. How are you?”

“Addie, I’m fucking ecstatic,” I said honestly. Now that I knew she was happy about it, I allowed myself to really feel my own emotions. “I’m staying, okay? I’m staying here. No, not here. What am I saying? We’re moving into a house. With a big backyard. And we’re getting a big dog. And I’ll build that backyard rink. I’m never leaving. I’m yours, baby... If you want that? Please tell me that’s what you want too?” I’d beg on my knees to stay.

“Oh, you’re mine,” she said, her face breaking into a huge smile. She practically jumped in my arms, hugging me tightly. “Wait,” she pulled back and tried to keep a straight face, “this will be our secret though, okay? Just for now though, just in case.”

It looked like she was waging a war inside her. She wanted to be happy, but part of her was very clearly scared... Shit, I was scared too.

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay.” She laughed and it was the happiest moment of my life.

53. Casey

Three weeks later, all of us, Claire, Duke, Tyler, Addie, and I, were back home in Northfield for Christmas.

Addie wanted to spend the first night home with just her dad and Claire. Duke trailed after Claire, holding her bags, and I felt shitty not being able to follow Addie into her childhood home... And I kinda hated Duke because he was so accepted.

Addie hadn't told her dad we were together again yet, and she hadn't told anyone she was pregnant yet... Although, I wasn't quite sure how long she'd be able to keep that secret. She turned into a barfing machine. I had no clue why they called it "morning sickness" because she was sick all day long, and I felt bad for her. Every time I told her this though, she brushed me off saying she was happy about it, because it told her she was still pregnant.

She wanted to ease into telling her dad about the new developments, especially seeing as Craig wanted me dead all those years ago. I would follow her lead when it came to things because I didn't want to stress her out... But damn, it was hard to watch her walk away from me, even if it was only for the night.

"What are we doin' tomorrow?" Tyler asked from the shotgun seat of my truck.

I looked over at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, are you not gonna see her on Christmas?" He chewed on his bottom lip. "Aren't we gonna do dinner together? Isn't that what families do?"

I internally winced. I could remember the first few years of my life when our parents gave us a normal

Christmas. Tyler was too young to remember that. He never experienced a family Christmas. I realized now that when me and Addie started a family, he would be included... and this was his way of telling me he wanted it.

"I'll call her tonight and ask," I told him.

"Good. Do it. I bet they have good food," he joked, but his smile didn't make it up to his eyes.

When we got back to the house, we both kinda just stared at it. It no longer felt like home. It crossed my mind then that maybe we should sell it... I'd never thought that before because I always wanted something to attach me to Northfield... To attach me to Addie... But now that we were together, we could build a home wherever we wanted.

"I don't really feel like going in right now..." I told him. "You?"

"Honestly?" he looked at me. "I don't either. Duke's goin' to Benny's."

"The rink diner? Why?"

He shrugged.

I backed out of our drive and promptly drove to the Ice League.

Inside, I could see people gathered in Benny's. Max and Paige were clearly hosting a Christmas party.

I kinda hung back when we first saw everyone, because I felt like I was intruding where I wasn't invited.

"Maybe you should just go," I told Tyler, hesitating in the rink's un-lit lobby.

His face cracked in disbelief. "No way. C'mon. You drink if you want. I'll drive us back," he said, holding his

hand out for my keys.

I knew he just wanted to get the keys from me so he'd be in charge of when we left.

I cocked an eyebrow at him. "It's fine." I nodded for him to start walking and I fell in step behind him. I'd have to just suck up my anxiety because what else did we have to do tonight? Hang out at our cold, empty house full of crappy memories?

Inside Benny's, tinsel was hanging everywhere from the ceiling, and even more Christmas lights than usual were hung up around the exposed brick walls. The best part of Benny's though, was that they allowed all the hockey guys to sign the bar. There were probably dozens of youth signatures of NHL guys scrawled all over it. I knew mine was written by the first barstool seat, and Tyler's was right above mine.

Paige called out a warm hello to us, and I instantly felt a little more at ease. She had that way about her, she could disarm anyone with her inclusive attitude.

I recognized a lot of guys standing around. There was Greysen Scott— who I played against for years— standing next to his wife, Jules. Reggie and Smitty, who I worked shifts with here, were chirping Paige as she poured drinks, and a few other Crewmen players were chatting together— TJ and his wife, Griff and his wife, and of course, Duke.

Tyler marched into the group and patted Duke on the back. "Thanks for the invite, bud." But he didn't leave it at that. "Are you going to Claire's for Christmas dinner tomorrow?" he inquired.

"Hell no," Duke said. "Craig and the Kessel girls can't cook for shit, no offense," he said, tossing me a look.

"None taken," I cracked a grin. I knew my girl's cooking limits.

"Their family has been coming over to my parents' house for years for Christmas dinner. You guys can come too if you want. My parents host Ice League lost boys all the time. They like adopting people," he laughed. "Griff's been coming to Christmas since before Sav and him ever even dated."

Tyler made eye contact with me, wordlessly asking permission to accept the invitation.

I still felt uneasy about potentially upsetting Addie by getting into it with Craig, but this felt like the best way to face him... AKA when there were other witnesses around, just in case he tried to kill me. There's no way I'd be able to hit him back if he swung at me... But I did need to eventually man up and ask him an important question.

The next night, I stood on the Callahans' front porch wearing my stiff peacoat, lulu slacks, and a polo, feeling myself shaking from nerves.

"C'mon, we can't stand out here forever," Tyler pushed, his teeth chattering from the cold.

I tried to swallow but my mouth was bone dry.
"Yeah."

"C'mon, Craig *won't* kill you, bro. Besides, we're all adults, who cares if you're bangin' his daughter now? He can't exactly tell her what to do. She's turning thirty in two days," he scoffed.

“Fuck, Tyler. Don’t talk like that,” I chastised him. I rubbed a hand over my forehead. He had no clue why I was so nervous. He hadn’t seen Craig’s face that morning when I came over here all those years ago... It was burned in my memory. Now that Adds was pregnant, now that we were going to have a child, I could understand why he wanted to kill me. I’d murder any man who hurt Adds or our baby.

“Relax,” Tyler tried again. “You’re way different now than a decade ago. You’re not some bum who needs a haircut. I think you’ve proved yourself enough,” he snorted. “Thanks for that by the way. Big fuckin’ shoes for me to fill in the league,” he said, shaking his head.

I just grunted, staring at the door, trying to work myself up to enter. This was possibly worse than getting on a plane...

“Oh for God’s sake,” Tyler said, reaching to ring the doorbell before I could stop him. “Duke’s parents are doctors. If Craig fucks you up that bad, they’ll fix ya up.”

My stomach dropped while we waited for someone to answer the door.

Addie flung the door open, thank God, and gave me a bright smile. She looked gorgeous in a plaid skirt and tight black top. I could already tell her boobs were swollen, but so far that was the only change.

“Merry Christmas!” she said, then her eyes zeroed in on us. “OhmyGod, you guys are covered in snowflakes! How long have you been standing out here?!”

“Too long,” Tyler grunted and pushed inside. He bent down to quickly hug her, then kicked off his shoes and wandered into the Callahans’ huge house.

I looked around cautiously, waiting for Craig to appear, then hesitantly stepped over the threshold into the warm foyer.

Addie smirked up at me and grabbed the lapels of my coat. "It's fine," she said calmly. "I told him you were coming."

I blanched. "What? What did he say?"

"He-"

"I'm not prepared to take another punch from him. He almost knocked me out last time, Adds." I rubbed a hand over my jaw as panic coursed through my body.

Craig appeared in the foyer hallway then with a stony face, and I froze.

"Fuck," I muttered. I instinctively stood in front of Addie, even though I knew she was his daughter... I just wasn't thinking.

He walked closer, puffing out his chest. Even though he was an older guy and shuffled around now, he was still built like a tank. He craned his neck to make eye contact with Addie, then arched an eyebrow.

Addie nodded encouragingly.

"Okay," he said firmly. He sucked in his top lip and nodded. "Okay, son."

He stepped closer, and I flinched... but then he was pulling me into a hug, patting me on the back.

I was momentarily paralyzed. I looked to Addie. She motioned for me to hug him back. I think I was just shocked at his use of the word "son," and I had to furiously blink back tears as I returned the hug.

The day after Christmas, we went out to Addie's favorite restaurant in downtown Northfield for her 30th birthday.

When the waiter went around the table taking drink orders, Addie and I made eye contact. A secret smile tugged at her lips and then I was suddenly grinning too. Her leg was bouncing like crazy under the table. I chuckled as I reached under the table and secretly rubbed her thigh.

"I'll just stick with water," Addie told the waiter when it was her turn.

Tyler's mouth dropped open. His gaze whipped from me to Addie and back again. "IVF works that fast?"

"IV huh?" Craig asked, squinting at Tyler like he'd lost his damn mind.

I cleared my throat and cut Tyler a 'shut-it' look. "No, it doesn't," I said quietly.

Shock registered on Tyler's face. He immediately scraped his chair back and stood up, pumping his fist in the air. "Yes! I knew it! I knew it!" he shouted happily.

I grabbed his shirt and pulled him back into his seat, but he couldn't stop grinning like a wise-ass.

Addie cracked up at my side.

"What the hell is going on?" Craig demanded.

"Addie?" Claire asked with wide eyes. Duke was scarfing down the bread, not even paying attention to what was going on. Claire elbowed him in the stomach to make him stop.

Addie's cheeks reddened a bit and she shrugged.
"I'm pregnant."

"Wooh!" Tyler screamed out the same way he would've if he scored a goal, and I swear the whole restaurant was now staring at us.

I shook my head at him and let out a resigned sigh.

"I'm the MVP," he said, pointing to himself, "I better be Godfather."

"Hey, what about me?!" Duke added, finally clueing into the conversation.

Addie snorted at the two of them, then looked pointedly at Tyler. "Only if you stop running interference in our lives." She raised her water to make a toast with him.

He clinked his glass to hers. "Okay, no more. I promise I'll retire. You're getting married though, right?" he asked, waging a finger between the two of us.

Addie looked at me with a hopeful expression on her face. "We're getting married right?" she whispered.

This time, I was prepared.

I pushed my chair back and got down on one knee.

I looked into her eyes and instantly got choked up. What could you possibly say to the woman who had owned your heart for a decade?

Looking at her blue eyes, I saw the lonely skater on the sidewalk, the drunk on love young adult, a grief stricken girl, and then a strong woman who carved out a life for herself.... All those phases built her. They made

her the woman who loved me, despite my faults. The woman who-

“Well, say something, bro,” Tyler quietly said, coughing into his hand.

I’d written everything down earlier, but now I was struggling to formulate anything. “Adelina Kessel, I love you so damn much.” I was shaking now. “Will you—”

Her face broke into a grin and she was instantly hugging me around the neck.

“Yes,” she whispered into my neck, and that became my new happiest moment...

Until about eight months later, that is...

Addie - Epilogue

I zipped up Casey's jacket, then pulled a beanie over his hair. He gave me a wry smile and pulled my hips to his, then craned his neck to drop a kiss on my lips. "Love you, Adds."

"Love you, Casey," I returned, smiling up at him.

"Love you, Mommy!" a little voice yelled as a tiny body crashed into our legs for a hug.

"Love you, Daddy!" another voice chimed, and the same size body crashed into us from the other side.

Casey chuckled and looked down at our twin boys. He bent and lifted each one of them so they sat on his arms. They were turning three soon, and I wondered how much longer he'd be able to hold the both of them. They must've been a bit heavier now with their snowsuits on.

I giggled as they looped their arms around our necks. Casey called this our "huddle hug."

"So team, we'll split up. Who wants to get the hot chocolates with me and who wants to get the tickets for skating with mommy?" Casey asked.

"Mommy!" they both called out at the same time.

Casey rolled his eyes, but a smile played on his lips. "Can't blame them," he whispered to me.

"Okay, Beau, you come with me for hot chocolates, TJ, you go with your mom to pay for skating," he directed, "Next time, you'll swap. Good?"

They both gave firm nods and Casey turned to carry them out to the car.

I could feel Casey's excitement as we walked closer to Campus Martius's little winter wonderland rink, and I couldn't help but smile over at my husband.

Casey had been waiting for this moment the last couple Christmases. He couldn't wait to skate out on the rink with his boys. In preparation, he'd been bringing them to his U16 team's practices every other night since the season started. I loved watching the teenagers play pass with our boys. They were all so kind, and I think some of them got a kick out of how our boys would try to chase them.

While standing in line for wrist bands holding TJ's hand, Tyler came up to us and gave me a hug, then bent to scoop up TJ in his arms.

"How's my namesake doin? Wait," Tyler pulled TJ's scarf down from his mouth, "I was right when I ran into Casey a minute ago! *That* was Tyler James. You're Beau. Admit it!" Tyler said, tickling him.

When he stopped laughing, I studied my son closer and noticed that Tyler was right, I'd been holding Beau's little hand. The two of them had been switching on us a lot recently and I needed to start paying closer attention so they knew they couldn't get away with it. I couldn't imagine what they'd do in school if they felt they had amazing switching powers.

Beau gave us a sheepish grin. "TJ let me come with you, Mommy," he admitted.

That response melted my heart. TJ was so giving. They both were. They were very determined and feisty when playing with each other, but they loved with their whole hearts.

Tyler chatted with Beau while I paid for our wrist bands to skate, but when we walked away, he gave me a

confused look. “You only paid for four? You’re not skating?”

“Umm...” I could see Casey holding TJ, still in line for hot chocolates for us.

I didn’t want to tell Tyler without Casey, but I had a feeling Tyler would quickly piece it together for himself anyway. Tyler was too smart for his own good sometimes.

“Oh shoot,” Tyler glanced down at my stomach. His face broke into a grin.

I nodded, giving him a secret smile. I put a finger to my lips, giving him a shush sign. We hadn’t told the boys yet because it was still early. I just didn’t want to skate on a packed public rink when pregnant just in case someone accidentally ran into me. I knew it would probably be fine, but I was overly cautious during pregnancy because of my past, and I think Casey was even worse than me. He took over cooking throughout my whole first pregnancy to help me make sure I was eating all the right things, and he continued after that. The way he loved preparing food, someone could definitely mistake him for a professionally trained chef.

Beau was curiously watching the skaters with his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth, so Tyler stole the opportunity to lean in and whisper, “Girl or boy?”

I bit my bottom lip to stop from smiling and shook my head. “You don’t know anything,” I warned. “Casey wants to tell you... And we’re not finding out.”

But this time, I had a feeling we’d need to pick out a girl’s name. Her heartbeat sounded different than the boys’ had. The rhythm was a tad bit calmer.

“*Oh shit,*” Tyler breathed out.

My eyebrows scrunched together. “What?”

He shook his head and his nose flared. While he and Casey didn’t look too much alike, their body language was so damn similar sometimes.

“Look at me,” Tyler ordered through gritted teeth. “Pretend to be engrossed in a super important conversation with me, *please*.” His round eyes begged.

A laugh popped out of my mouth. “Why?”

He was now using Beau as a human shield. “The rink monitor. Red scarf.”

“Okay?” I drawled. I looked out at the ice. She was helping a child back to their feet. She looked like a nice enough girl. “Do you know her or something?”

“Not really,” he grumbled.

“Then why all this?” I motioned to him looking all freaked out.

Tyler pinched the bridge of his nose and his body looked tense as hell. “Okay, I’ll tell you,” he finally said, looking at me. “So you know how we have to go read in schools for community involvement? Well, I was reading to *her* second grade class, but then a kid sneezed and got a big, fat snot rocket all up on my nice shoes, and I said...”

I looked at him and groaned.

He clamped his hands over Beau’s ears. “Fuck,” he confirmed. “The whole class gasped and she yelled at me to go out in the hall and wait for her.”

“Did you?” I asked.

His eyes got wide. “Well, yeah, duh. What was I supposed to do?” He shook his head. “So then she met me in the hall and chewed me out like I was back in

school. Humiliating." He visibly shivered. "Gave me flashbacks."

I clapped a hand over my mouth to stop from laughing at him. Tyler was a troublemaker who was always getting into trouble at school when he was young.

He just sat there grumbling more.

"I'm sorry, that's kind of funny." I patted his shoulder.

He shook his head seriously. "No, it's really not, Adds," he said incredulously. "She hates my guts, and I..." He blew out a breath. "I can't get her out of my head," he added quietly.

"Aww, well, maybe I should go talk to her," I said, smiling now. "It would be a bit of karmic justice for *your* meddling, I think." I pretended to start getting up, but he grabbed my arm and panic overcame his face.

"I'm just—"

"Tyler Jettersen? Is that you?" a female voice interrupted us.

We both looked over to see the second grade teacher in question leaning over the boards in her rink monitor jacket.

She pointed an accusing finger at him. "There's a lot of kids out here. You *better* not forget what I said," she ordered in a very authoritative teacher voice, then skated off.

I died laughing. Tyler dropped his head in his hands and groaned.

The End

About the Author

As a former competitive figure skater, S.C. Kate grew up in ice rinks and loves them as settings for her contemporary sports romance stories. She lives in metro-Detroit and still frequents arenas to cheer on her siblings during hockey games.

When not writing, she is obsessed with finding cool outdoor rinks, Dunkin Donuts iced coffee, and traveling around Northern Michigan.

She is currently busy writing Ice League Book 3 (coming soon!).

S.C. loves to hear from her readers. Visit [@authorsc_kate](#) on Instagram or [@sc_kate](#) on TikTok.