

Winter Season

THE CE
LEAGUE SERIES



S.C. KATE

OUR OFFSEASON

Ice League Book 4

S.C. Kate

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Our Offseason: Ice League Book 4

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Dedication:

To all the girls who prefer the weekdays over than the weekends.

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Prologue - Claire

July 5th, 2022

He hurt me. I hurt him back.

Those were the rules I played by, and I didn't really care to explain them to anyone. Because no one else would understand.

This had been going on between the two of us ever since we were seven years old.

So, he may have won this battle, but I'd win the war.

And he'd rue this *fucking* day for making me feel so stupid.

My hands tightened on the wheel of my car, trying to harness all my frustration. I breathed in through my nose slowly and evenly because there's no way I was going to let myself cry. No *fucking* way. Claire Kessel didn't cry over anyone— especially not a stupid boy.

But... a little part of me, the little girl inside, wanted to wallow in my self-pity. Because this was Duke, who I'd been secretly in love with my whole life... And he... He made me get all dressed up. I actually spent time on my hair, I actually asked my sister for help on what to wear, and I actually put on *fucking high heels and lip gloss*.

And the worst thing he did?

He made me excited.

Just so he could *fucking*—

“Claire!”

I slammed on the breaks, noticing the red light at the last second.

Shit. She must've been saying my name about ten times.

“Sorry, what?” I briefly glanced over at my older sister as traffic passed in front of us.

“Where are we going!?” she asked frantically with wide, stressed-out eyes.

I lifted my chin. “It’s your fault you got into this car, now you’re going wherever I choose. I did not ask you to come along, Addie,” I said in a warning tone.

She shook her head and looked at me completely exasperated. “You looked ready to murder or ready to cry, and I’ve never seen you so upset, so yes, as your older sister, I definitely did have to come.”

I turned up Taylor Swift’s “Bad Blood,” and when the light turned green, I slammed on the gas. Forward was the only way to go; it was the only way to feel better.

His subdivision came into sight then and I made a sharp left turn, causing Addie to let out a screech and grab the side handles of the truck.

I whipped through the subdivision and grinded to a stop in front of their stupidly huge house at the end of their cul-de-sac.

Addie let out a sigh of relief but tensed again when she realized where we were. “What the hell are we doing here?” she asked in a low voice.

I promptly unbuckled my seatbelt and shoved my car door open. “Stealing Beau,” I returned matter-of-factly while jumping down from my dad’s truck.

I watched her face turn to panic as she tried to scramble out of her seatbelt. “Claire, are you out of your ever-loving mind? You cannot steal his dog!”

I ignored her voice and threw the car door shut behind me. I had to get this over with quickly.

The passenger’s side window rolled down as soon as my foot touched their grass. “Claire, you can’t—”

I whirled on her and gave her a hard stare. “Yes, I can. He hurt me, Addie.” I felt my voice almost crack, and my throat burned. I squeezed my eyes shut for a second. I couldn’t be sad yet. I had to hold onto my anger long enough to get him back. “Yes, I can,” I repeated to her firmly, “because he crushed my heart, so I’m going to crush his.”

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1. Duke - May 25th, 2022

“Son of a bitch!” I grunted.

“You’re good, you’re good!” my teammate TJ Vonnie yelled down to me over the loud crowd. He was probably trying to convince both of us with his words, but we both knew I was not good at all.

Everyone was focused on the fight going on in front of the net between my team, the Detroit Crewmen, and the New Jersey Bandits. I hoped our enforcer, a Russian guy named Sergei, would take care of business for me. My brother-in-law, Griff, would’ve been the first one ripping a guy’s head off for tripping me if he were here. That was probably why they were after me even more tonight though— they knew Griff was gone because his baby girl, my niece, was currently being born.

I think the shock of the hit was wearing off, because the pain was becoming unbearable by the second.

I turned over on my stomach and went up on all fours, then rested my helmet on the ice. My right foot was hurting like a motherfucker, and I was starting to feel like the whole rink was spinning around me...

TJ grabbed my arm to help me up, but I brushed him off.

“No. I’ll be fine. I just need a second,” I grunted out.

I was tripped while skating for a breakaway toward New Jersey’s net and my whole body slammed into the boards. Unfortunately, most of the impact went to my right foot. I’d be fine though. I’d survived way worse hits before, and at least my head didn’t hit first... That would’ve been really bad.

I screwed my eyes shut against the pain and tried to stand up on my own, but my right leg immediately gave out.

“Fuck!” I yelled out, feeling frustrated.

TJ immediately swooped in to help me stand and another teammate came over to help skate me back to our bench.

I ducked my head, trying to drown out the New Jersey crowd cheering over the fact that I’d probably be out for the rest of the second period, giving their team a chance to win the game— I *was* the leading scorer this year after all— and both teams needed this win to move on to the Conference Championships. Hopefully my guys could keep the lead without me...

I sat in the locker room while our team doc accessed my foot. I grinded my teeth together in an effort to hold in the pain while he poked and prodded my ankle, which was starting to swell up to twice its normal size.

“It’s not looking good, son,” the old doctor said in a disappointed tone.

I bit back my desire to say *no shit*.

He sighed and took off his glasses and began talking more, but I was having a hard time focusing on his words. My adrenaline and patience were starting to wear thin.

I blew out a breath, still not fully believing that I wasn’t going to be able to just pop some meds and head back out on the ice for the last period.

“Yeah, yeah,” I interrupted him. I was feeling a migraine coming on and I wanted to wrap up this little chat. “My sister’s across town at St. Johns having a baby right now, can I just go there?” I asked. Maybe I’d even get to see my niece. Holding a lil squishy baby would probably be the only thing that could make me feel better.

Doc gave me a strange look then. A second later, he was holding my eye wide open and shining a light in it.

I immediately tried to squirm away from him.

“Do you know where you are, son?”

“De-” I cut myself off. We were all taught to hold our tongues and take an extra second before answering to make sure we were correct because no one wanted to be put on concussion protocol, even when it was called for.

I swallowed, hoping Doc hadn't already heard me. “We're in Jersey, duh,” I answered, but my voice sounded strained even to my own ears. Because the truth was, I was starting to feel super disoriented. We *were* in Jersey... right? I tried to think back to how I got here...

“Roger,” Doc called over his shoulder, “get me a replay of what happened. Did he hit his head too?”

Roger, one of the team athletic trainers, snorted. I shook my head at him to shut it, then immediately regretted it when a wave of nausea hit.

I moaned loudly and held my head.

Doc shoved a trash can at my gut.

“He hit his whole body. Foot slammed in first, then the rest of him. He's the fastest guy we've got, which probably wasn't a good thing for the first time in his life,” Roger said. “Looked like he splatted against a brick wall. I was worried his whole right side would be fucked— no offense.” He glanced at me uneasily before looking back at Doc. “I'll get the replay if you still need it though.”

Doc squinted at me again, studying my eyes, and I held my breath.

“Looks like a concussion. We'll have to watch that. You know the drill, right?” he asked Roger.

Roger sighed. There was no way he wanted to babysit me and keep waking me up every couple of

hours to complete concussion protocol. “Yes, sir,” he answered.

“Alright, let’s get moving.”

As soon as Doc left the room, I sat there looking around at my teammates’ cubbies with their bags and extra sticks thrown around haphazardly. I wanted to embrace having my equipment on for one last second. As soon as I took off my jersey, my season was done. The rest of the guys, including Griff, would get to keep pushing for the Stanley Cup again... and I’d have to sit back on my broken ass and watch.

“Need help?” Roger asked.

“Nah.” I took that as my cue to start moving. “Just remember though...”

“Huh?”

“When you’re getting up at 3am and having to wake me from my beauty sleep, just remember that *you’re* the one who roped us into concussion protocol,” I grumbled.

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2. Duke

The next morning, I crutched my way pretty slowly through the long hospital hallway as I followed behind a cute blonde nurse named Maggie. I usually would've turned on my charm and flirted with her— I had a reputation to uphold after all— but I just wasn't feeling it today. I was still bummed out about missing the rest of the playoffs with my team.

Maggie gave me a bright smile and gestured to the door where Sav and Griff were.

"Thanks." I nodded.

She hesitated for a second, and I did feel bad for not giving her the regular old Duke Callahan cheesy pickup lines, but my shit mood won out. I just turned away and knocked on the door instead.

"Come in!" I heard my sister call out.

Of course they wouldn't just come get the door for me. They probably had no clue I was injured. I immediately wished for Maggie back as I struggled to hold down the door handle, shove it open with my hip, then crutch in without the heavy door coming back to hit my banged up right side.

As soon as I entered the room, Sav shouted out, "No! What happened?!"

She looked at me with wide, worried eyes and Griff's face hardened as he took in the sight of the cast on my right foot going up to the base of my knee. Griff was a pretty intimidating looking guy with his crazy fohawk hair, playoff beard, and serious blue eyes.

I sighed. They just had a baby, there was no point in acting all upset and bringing their moods down too.

“Without you there I got broked up!” I said to Griff. “It’s okay though, it’s not my landing foot.” I shot Sav a wink.

She studied my feet, trying to decide if I was right about this “landing foot” statement. I was. She just still didn’t know her lefts and rights, and she probably forgot I was a leftie. When she broke her ankle back when she was a figure skater, she broke her left one, and we always joked it wasn’t so bad because she landed jumps with her right foot anyway.

“Oh, Duke. I’m so sorry,” she said with sympathy.

“Which bastard did it? He’ll be fucking sorry,” Griff growled. I think holding a newborn baby made him even more protective than usual.

“Language! You’re holding a baby!” I chastised him, which made Sav snort. She was always the one correcting my language— I was a bit of a potty mouth growing up. “Yeah, it was a cheap shot. But they’re out of the ploffs now, so whatever. I’m out too though, which sucks.”

“How did it happen?” Sav’s eyebrows scrunched up in concern.

Griff handed my sister the baby very carefully. It’s funny, he made both the baby and my sister look very small. Sav was always on the short side for a girl, where Griff was 6 feet and 3 inches of pure muscle. He gently kissed her forehead, and she closed her eyes, taking in his touch... And that’s why I loved Griff so much. He was great at loving my sister.

As soon as Griff straightened up, he pulled his phone out of his back pocket and started making a call. He looked at my foot again and shook his head furiously.

“I got tripped while heading to the net,” I explained to Sav. “I was moving full speed up ice, so I slammed into the boards and ended up breaking a couple bones in

there. It'll be okay. I'll just be laid up for a couple months. Sucks I won't get to be on the ice if we make it all the way to the Stanley Cup game again though."

"Well, at least you'll have a long offseason to recover?" she asked weakly.

"Yeah, guess it's better to happen now than in September." I made my way to the chair next to her and plopped my cast up on the edge of her bed. I stiffened with a bit of pain but tried to keep a straight face. Today was about Sav, not me. "So how are you feelin? How'd it go?"

"Eh, could be better," she said with a light laugh. Her eyes looked tired and her short blonde hair— which was usually neatly straightened— was sticking out at weird angles. "We're both healthy, so all is well. Want to hold her?" She nodded to the baby.

"Lay her on me," I said with a grin.

After fixing her in my arms, Sav smiled back at me with teary eyes. "You're such a natural. You need to be a daddy one day very soon."

I snorted and shook my head. "No fuckin' way, Sis. I like being a dog dad just fine."

In an effort to brighten her spirits, Griff had gifted Sav a puppy named Beau while she was pregnant with her first son, Johnny. I moved in with them for a while right after the baby came so I could help out. During those weeks, I mostly took care of Beau so they could focus on baby things, and I ended up bonding with the furry guy—even took him to practice at the rink with me sometimes. When I started living on my own again, it became pretty obvious that I'd gotten too used to living in a full house, because the silence of an empty apartment was daunting. I think Sav and Griff sensed that I was lonely, and apparently Beau seemed pretty down in the dumps without me too, so they gifted Beau to me. I was damn

appreciative of the pup. There was no other dog like Beau. He was a spitfire when he was young, but now, he just chilled by my side all the time. I didn't even need a leash anymore because he loved just walking next to me.

"I don't know, you're looking awfully comfy," she mused.

I rolled my eyes, but... looking down at her baby's tiny lips, and tiny nose, and little eyes, my heart softened.

"What do we call her?" I asked, brushing her pink, chubby cheek.

"We're thinking about Indie May Griffiths. What do you think?"

"Oh man," I chuckled. "Griff got to you with his Tyler Childer's playlist, huh?" Dude was constantly humming 'Lady May.'

She laughed, and I loved hearing it. I loved my older sister more than anyone on the planet. She practically raised me after all. But there was a time when I thought I'd never hear her laugh ever again. I watched her completely unravel after she lost her first husband, Nick Johns, about five years ago. Nick was Sav's first love, Griff's best friend, and a stand-in older brother to me. We all grew up together at the Ice League. Speaking of which...

"Well, Sis, I'm thinking about heading back home to the Ice League while I recoup," I told her. "That's what TJ did when he injured his knee. I already called up Max. He said I could have full reign over one of their summer clinics." Max was one of the older guys at the rink when I was a kid. He was now the hockey club's director.

"Really?" She looked at me surprised.

I guess it was an unexpected move. I hadn't been back home to Minnesota since I left for junior hockey at

seventeen.

“Yeah, I miss the old rink,” I said with a chuckle. “Give me some of your guys’ charity stuff for when I head back, yeah?”

After Sav’s first kid, Johnny, was born, she wanted to do more to keep Nick’s memory alive. That’s when she started up Griffin’s Wings. The charity raised money to give all kids safe and organized places to eat and play, and they even sponsored billeting expenses for teens. She thought up the whole initiative because when we first met Nick and Griff, they were teenagers living on their own and surviving off concession stand food so they could play hockey together on the Ice League’s junior team.

“Actually, I think we’re coming to spend a bit of summer with Mom and Dad after...” She stopped herself and grimaced.

I knew she was about to say after the playoffs, which I unfortunately would not get to play in anymore.

I nodded. “It’s alright. I’ll see ya at home then.” I forced a smile despite my absolute shit mood.

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3. Duke - Ice League - June 1st

“You said I’d have full reign of a summer clinic!”

“That’s before I knew you were on crutches, ya dope!” Max threw back at me with wide eyes. “You probably should’ve disclosed that you didn’t meet the physical standards required for the job,” he deadpanned. He glanced at Beau walking by my side and looked pained. “And I love Beau, but you can’t bring your dog in here, man.”

I felt my frustration rising. Why was everyone treating me like I broke my fucking brain along with my foot? I guess I did have a concussion, and I unfortunately was still suffering through the after-effects of it, but it’s not like I was completely useless now. I blew off the comment about Beau, because I knew he didn’t mean it. Beau made everyone happy. There’s no way he’d send him away.

“C’mon Max, I still know hockey better than anyone in this rink,” I argued. “Doesn’t that count for something?”

He just put his hands on his hips and dropped his head down.

“At least I have on-ice experience with offense *and* defense,” I pointed out. I knew that comment would piss him off because he technically didn’t. He grew up playing goalie here at the League. He only briefly left to play college hockey followed by a short stint in the ECHL before coming back here to manage all the youth teams.

He took a deep breath like it was taking all his effort not to blow a gasket on me. He looked at my foot, then Beau, then rubbed his scruffy jaw. He muttered something under his breath about being “too old for this shit” before turning on his heel and walking away from me. I crutched after him through the lobby, trying to keep up with his fast pace. Beau trotted slowly next to me.

“Maxie boy, please, I’m going to go out of my mind if I have to just sit around all summer. Give me something, anything,” I begged.

He finally paused and looked over his shoulder at me. “You can have an *assistant* coaching job. Little kids need coaches on the ice helping them. You can assist Grey’s clinic.”

I slowed to a stop and slumped over my crutches. My armpits were fucking killing me from crutching around all day.

“Greyson Scott?” That did not sound fun. He was a fucking grump. I was just a kid when he first went pro. He spent his first few offseasons training here and he was never very pleasant to be around. Last time I saw him he almost chewed my head off for not spotting him correctly in the weight room above the rink. Hopefully he’d mellowed out over the years.

“Yeah. He’s stopping by in a couple hours if you wanna stick around. Either help him or you can work in the front office.”

I felt my eyebrows pinch together. “Where’s Craig?” He’d worked the front office ever since I could remember. Things couldn’t have changed *that* much around here.

“He’s still here, but he’s looking to retire.” Max began marching towards the zam doors. The goof didn’t have to zam— that was way below his pay grade. Teenage guys usually got shafted to that job, but for some reason, Max actually *liked* zamming. Of course, zamming was just another job I couldn’t even do now because of my damn right foot.

I looked up at the Pepsi clock. I still had a while until Grey showed up, and I didn’t really have the choice to leave. I didn’t want to call up my parents and ask them to come get me. I mean, really, how pathetic... I was

twenty-four years old, back in my hometown, and waiting around for my parents to chauffeur me around because I couldn't even drive myself. If I'd broken my left foot, I'd at least still be able to drive. I looked up to the ceiling and cursed New Jersey for about the millionth time.

I guess I could've salvaged a little dignity by choosing to heal up and rehab in Detroit, but all my teammates started leaving town as soon as our playoff run ended.

It was times like these where I kinda wished I had a girlfriend to help me out. But I had a rule: No situationships or flings were allowed to go over three weeks long. That way, I could avoid any attachments. I saw how a serious relationship could shatter a person. I watched my sister lose Nick, and I never ever wanted to be responsible for making a girl feel that much pain. Yes, she and Griff got together after, and that was a win for the family, but I didn't want to rock the boat and test the Callahan relationship luck anymore. So, I could take care of myself.

And part of taking care of myself included finding some lunch for Beau and I before we starved.

I crutched back to the locker room hallway and tried to find an empty one. I knocked on each door, and every time someone answered, I had to stifle a groan. I was getting tired of crutching and needed to sit for a while.

I ended up having to crutch all the way back to locker room 7 before no one answered my knock. I pushed open the heavy door and allowed Beau inside, then slung my backpack onto the locker room bench and started setting up a little spot for Beau. I took out a blanket, his favorite stuffed toy, and two bowls— one for his food and one for water. I dropped my crutches on the ground and hopped on my good foot over to the little sectioned off bathroom and filled up his water bowl for him.

As soon as his little spot was set up, he nuzzled my good leg for a second, almost like he was saying thank you to me, then paid attention to his food.

I sat with my casted leg extended out on the bench next to me and leaned down to give him some good pets.

Within five minutes, he was snoozing, and I took that as my cue to find my own lunch. I pushed a stopper under the heavy locker room door so that Beau could come out and find me when he was done with his little nap, then I made my way back across the lobby toward the vending machines.

I stood there trying to decide between a very balanced meal of Cheetos or Doritos, but my focus was kind of stolen by the sound of a loud crash behind me.

I wiped my neck around to see a tall, lanky, blond guy in tight, black sweatpants, and a short girl wearing leggings and a tank top, sprawled out on the ground.

“She’s not holding her weight!” the guy shouted at the two coaches standing at the edge of the lobby. It sounded like he had a slight accent... maybe Russian? German? “How many times are we going to have to practice this?”

The guy and girl must’ve been pairs skaters practicing their lifts off the ice first. They always practiced in the lobby in tennis shoes before adding skates and the ice to the equation... I should know... I used to secretly watch *her* practice all the time...

I watched the girl slowly stand and brush herself off. I could only see the back of her, but she was very muscular and the way she moved seemed very familiar. *But it couldn't be...* Last I heard, *she* moved to Canada to train there. Besides, this girl had dark hair. She wore it in french braids that gathered at the base of her neck and ended in a short ponytail.

My subconsciousness was probably just playing tricks on me because I hadn't come back here in years, and whenever I thought of the Ice League, it was synonymous with *her*. All my memories of this place included her.

The two coaches— a Russian guy, who I recognized from working here at the Ice League for years, and a stout, older woman— dissolved into serious discussion as they started making their way back into the East side's rink. The figure skaters always skated on the East side because it housed an Olympic-sized sheet of ice, which was regulation size for figure skating and actually much larger than the NHL-sized rinks. I hated playing on Olympic-sized ice because you had to skate faster and further to catch passes.

I tried to turn my attention back to the vending machine, but the pairs guy's voice made my stomach churn angrily.

"It's no wonder Matty dumped you on your ass. He was jumping ship," he said dryly.

I leaned down to grab my chip bag, then slowly crutched a bit closer to hear the rest of what they were saying.

"Good luck finding a partner when you can't even do a simple lift," he added. "This is for beginners," he spat.

I waited for the girl to say something, anything... but she remained silent and just accepted the insults. She had her back turned to me... and I had to shake off an uneasy feeling that I *knew* that neck. She rested her hands on top of her head and began stretching her hips out, completely ignoring her partner.

"Really, I thought you'd be better than *this*. You should update your videos because you obviously are not so good anymore," he said with a snarl.

She whispered something then, and I watched the guy's face transform into pure rage.

"You cannot speak to me that way!" He started moving closer to her in an aggressive manner, and there was no way I was going to let *that* happen. Even though this girl wasn't *her*, I wasn't about to let anyone charge at another person like that.

"Hey, fuck off, dickhead," I called out, kinda surprising myself with how angry my voice sounded.

He turned, took one look at me, and laughed like it was the funniest shit he'd ever seen. He stretched out an arm toward me. "Says who? Some hockey bum? You don't even know who I am," the arrogant prick returned.

"You don't know who *I am*," I practically growled. "And you really don't want to make me angry."

I mean, really, they didn't call me a "ball of hate" growing up for nothing.

He stepped closer to me then, which made me feel better, because at least that meant he was further away from the petite girl.

But I was still looking at her, trying to study her closer, when he pushed me squarely in the chest with some kinda weird karate move. And here's the thing— if I had maybe one more week on these crutches, I could've probably stood my ground and beat his ass. But I was a beginner on these bad boys. So instead, I fell backwards and I did all I could to keep my right foot from hitting the ground, which resulted in me smacking the back of my head against the stupid lobby floor.

Twirpy douche laughed as he stepped over me, and I could feel the heat rise in my face over the embarrassment of the situation. This was just another tally in the column of things that really sucked lately. I'd never lost a fight before, and I was *known* for throwing huge hits. Now here I was getting tossed on my ass by a

figure skater. I mean, no offense to figure skaters, but they didn't have the same experience with fighting as us hockey players.

I closed my eyes for a second and rested my body. Muscles I didn't even know I had were aching from crutching around all day and the back of my head was now painfully throbbing. Falling down was definitely not on the list of approved concussion protocol activities.

When I opened my eyes again, *her* face filled up my entire vision...

But... no... *my* girl had golden blonde, kinda curly hair...

Awesome, I thought sarcastically, I was fucking hallucinating her face on this random chick.

She leaned closer and her hazel eyes squinted as she studied me. She always had the most unique, hazel eyes; they were serious eyes, even as a kid. The lobby lights outlined her face like she was an angel. If only she didn't have dark hair, she would've looked *just* like her. She had that same little notch in her delicate nose that indicated she'd broken it back when we were young...

And ya know what— it was *my* hallucination after all— so I reached up and put my hands around her face to block her hair more... just to check...

“Oh my God! It *is* you!” I felt myself whisper in awe.

A split-second later, she slapped my hands away real quick. It took me a second to realize that those were real slaps and that I wasn't hallucinating.

She was one and the same with the lobby girl practicing lifts.

I was face-to-face with my childhood archnemesis: Claire Kessel.

I sat up straight and quickly regretted it. I fought off a wave of dizziness while I tried to study her closer. I was

still in complete shock that we were sitting here in front of each other after all these years.

My eyes quickly drifted over her body. She was still so delicately strong and beautiful. She was much smaller than me— which was an excellent thing because she'd be way too powerful of a person if she weren't. Height was practically the only race she lost to me in as a kid. While I shot up to 6'2 in high school, God knew what he was doing when he kept her at the 5'1 height she had reached in middle school. She was also still incredibly ripped— most girls who skated pairs were much stronger than the girls who skated individually. Pairs girls had to be able to practically lift their own weight and land throw jumps that came down with a shit load of force. I could practically see all the muscles in her arms and legs. I bet she could still beat me at off-ice bodyweight workouts just like she always had. It used to piss me the hell off when she won because she'd gloat like crazy. She was a sore winner. Always.

She'd grown up to be even more beautiful than I imagined though. It was just her hair that was different, and it kind of pained me to see that she changed it. She used to look just like the Coach's daughter in "Remember the Titans," which was actually one of her favorite movies growing up— so it secretly became mine as well. I used to love pulling her ponytail or braid just to get her attention. Practically every action I took in school and here at the rink had something to do with Claire.

"You changed your pretty hair," I forced my dry mouth to swallow. "Why?"

She shrunk back like I just insulted her. "So what is it now? Ugly?"

I felt my face immediately heat up. How did she jump to me calling her hair ugly? I sputtered for a second before answering, "I said your hair was pretty before, that doesn't mean I said it looks ugly now."

She looked back at me with a smirk on her face and crossed her arms in front of her chest. She just wanted to make me squirm uncomfortably.

“Well, um,” I cleared my throat. “It’s nice to see you,” I finally said.

She flinched, like hearing those words hurt her. “Wish I could say the same to you,” she said simply.

I sat there blinking in confusion.

She moved with no hesitation then. She reached down to grab my crutches, and my slow brain was thinking maybe I’d gotten her words wrong; maybe she had actually said something nice and was trying to help me up.

But nope.

She wasn’t helping me.

She was walking away with my crutches and leaving me there on the fucking floor completely stranded... She looked hot as hell walking away, but still...

I felt my forehead scrunch in disbelief over her immaturity. “Wow, kick a man while he’s down, why don’t you?!”

“You’re not welcome here, Duke!” she called over her shoulder as she continued walking away, swishing her little hips.

And that just made me mad.

This was my home rink too. Growing up, I had spent just as many hours here as she did.

And the least she could do if she was still pissed at me would be to lie and fake pleasantries with me. We’d known each other probably better than anyone else on the planet at one point in time– didn’t that count for something? And ya know what? Maybe I was still mad at her too.

“I failed English for you!” I hollered after her.

And that got her.

She halted and whirled around. “You’re bringing up the sixth grade?!” Her face cracked in disbelief.

“Yes! I am!” I shouted, pointing at her angrily.

“Oh grow up, Duke!” She fixed me with a dark look before hoisting my crutches up and throwing them in the lobby garbage can with a loud thud. She turned on her skate-guarded heel and marched back into the East side rink.

I laid back on the floor and stared up at the lobby’s wooden rafters.

Jesus. This was not the way I thought we’d greet each other after all these years. In all the times I imagined it, I saw us hugging and being happy to see each other. I thought we’d both let bygones be bygones. I even thought we’d maybe be more than friends if we ever saw each other again. But I guess some things never changed...

And one was the fact that I would never understand Claire Kessel.

I sat there on the rink floor waiting for someone to appear to help me, but it was currently the rink’s dead time. The figure skaters were in the middle of a skating session, which lasted an hour, and none of the hockey guys were around because it was that stupid week between the end of the spring season and the start of summer clinics.

Looking up at the clock, I knew I needed to get my ass moving unless I wanted Grey to come in and see me sprawled out like this. No way would that demand respect. You’d think my resume would help earn me some points with the guy. I already had a few seasons in the Big League under my belt, but that wouldn’t phase a guy like Grey at all. He was an All-Star. Before he

retired, he was the big shot, the real deal, the one with the C on his chest at almost every NHL team he went to.

I pushed myself up to a sitting position and pondered what I should do. I definitely couldn't put any weight on my right foot at all yet. The team doc said if I didn't stabilize it, I'd end up needing surgery... and he told Coach that as well. Coach called me up as soon as I was released from the hospital and basically barked, "If I hear you're not taking care of that foot, I'll tie you to a guest bed in my house. We need you to be just as fast as before this injury. No surgery!" before promptly hanging up. I agreed with his "no surgery" order. I wanted to avoid that at all costs because it would only prolong my recovery time.

So... I needed those crutches.

I could get to a standing position and hop on one foot all the way across the lobby to the garbage can, but that sounded like it would make my already nasty headache worse.

My only other option was to scoot my ass across the ground...

So, that's what I started doing.

I was basically mopping up the lobby floor with my butt, and it was a very slow go.

By the time I made it to the very center of the large lobby, my arms were dead. I took a little break and laid flat on my back for a couple minutes, and that's when Craig finally strolled in.

"Thank the Lord!" I called out. "Help me! Please!" I begged.

He laughed at the sight of me. "Welcome home, kid."

I eyed him darkly. "Wish your evil daughter would've greeted me that way."

He ran a hand through his close-cropped, salt-and-pepper hair and gave me an amused smile. “She did this to you, eh? Wish I could say I was surprised.”

He promptly moved to retrieve my crutches, then reached a hand down to help pull me up. While Craig was somewhere in his sixties, he had superhuman strength— just like his little daughter.

“She said I wasn’t welcome here,” I told him when I was finally standing.

“Oof.” He stood with his hands on his hips, and I could tell he was trying hard not to crack a smile. “I’ll have to talk to her about that one. C’mon,” he said, ushering me to follow him as he shuffled back to his office.

I definitely needed to sit down and elevate my foot for a bit; I could feel it angrily throbbing in the cast.

As soon as I entered his office, I motioned to his leather swivel chair. “Can I?”

“Go for it.”

I plopped down and lifted my leg up onto the lobby’s open window ledge. I took my hat off and wiped an arm across my forehead. Scooching my body weight across the floor made me work up a sweat.

I was about to start talking to him, when a feeling of bittersweet nostalgia hit me right in the chest, stopping me. Looking out into the lobby reminded me of how much I used to love sitting here as a kid. You could see everything from Craig’s spot— including everyone skating out on both sheets of ice thanks to the security footage which showed up on four mini-tv’s on his desk.

Figure skaters practiced right after school, whereas hockey practices were usually around dinner time. So while my sister would skate, I’d sit here and pretend to do homework, but really, I’d just be shooting the shit with Craig. We’d talk hockey most of the time, and I’d help

punch timecards for the figure skaters when they went out for a new session. I always pretended I hated doing it... but I secretly couldn't wait to have an exchange with Claire. Our relationship was confusing even back then. We toed the line of love and hate every day with each other, and I never knew what I'd get with her...

I spent a lot of time in this office over the years, and now I felt kinda bad for never coming back to visit.

"Saw it happen." Craig gestured to my leg. "It was a cheap shot. I've always hated Jersey. Sorry, kid."

I heaved a sigh. "Yeah, just sucks to be laid up like this. I took my health for granted," I snorted.

Craig grimaced. "You still in pain?"

I was about to respond that my ankle and brain were still throbbing, but my train of thought vanished when Claire and her partner came stalking out of the East rink to practice more lifts in the lobby, this time with skates on.

"What's up with the asshole partner?" I asked him.

"Well, she and her old partner split up recently..." His sentence trailed off as he watched the guy hoist Claire up in the air... and my whole body tensed as he almost dropped her right on her head.

"Fucking hell," I breathed out.

"It's better to not look," Craig muttered.

I turned to study him as he leaned back against the office's cinderblock wall. I was struck by how much older he looked. It was kinda sad. I always used to think he was indestructible as a kid. Now, he was hunched over a little more and the wrinkles around his eyes were becoming more apparent. I was about to ask him how he was doing, but I think both of our jaws tightened over the way the douchebag was currently speaking to Claire.

“God. He’s such a prick. Why does she put up with that?” I demanded.

Craig shrugged. “Like I was saying, she and the old partner, Matty, split this past spring, so she came back here to train and test out new partners. She was hoping this guy would be the one.”

I felt my mouth drop open. “No fuckin way.” I stared at him, hoping for a sign that he was joking. “She cannot choose to work with him. You have to tell her she can’t.”

He chuckled and put his hands on his hips. “I’m not exactly happy about it, that’s for sure,” he relented. “But you remember Claire, don’t you? You tell her what to do and she’ll do the exact opposite.”

“Yeah, stubborn as all hell.” I rubbed a hand over my jaw. I sat there feeling so utterly confused as I listened to the douchebag complain about her. “The girl I knew wouldn’t let anyone talk about her that way. What the hell happened?”

He sighed and popped a squat on a foldable chair in the corner of his office. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t pretend to know anything about the girl world.”

I snorted in agreement at that. Poor Craig was outnumbered though— he had two very strong-willed daughters.

“How’s Addie doin?”

Addie was Claire’s older sister by about three years. While they were both very motivated and small in stature, that was about as far as their similarities went. Addie was more reserved, and you could tell she had her own thoughts about things, but Claire was the outspoken one. Claire never feared saying exactly what was on her mind. Looks wise, Addie favored her mother’s side with darker hair, light blue eyes, and she was a gentle, graceful, and lankier skater. Claire was all Kessel— a

bright blonde with hazel eyes who attacked her skating with pizzazz. Ironically, their program music kind of captured their personalities. I remember Addie skating to music from Black Swan. Claire skated to Darude's Sandstorm. Addie also only competed in women's freestyle skating, not pairs and hockey like Claire had, which were far cooler in my opinion.

Addie had retired from skating a while ago. At the time she quit, there were a ton of rumors swirling around about the why and how of it— she scratched at the US Nationals and never stepped foot on the ice again. I was never told the full story, but I did know it was agonizingly hard to quit skating, especially after dedicating your entire youth to it. It was probably even harder for her seeing as both her parents worked at the rink and were so invested.

“Addie's good,” Craig answered with a proud smile on his face. “Just finished up grad school. She's trying to break into the sportswriting world.”

“Damn, that's awesome,” I said, impressed. “If I can do anything to help her out, lemme know.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Thank you, Duke, I appreciate that.”

I smirked. “Actually, she should move to Detroit and take over writing our game recaps. Then I'd be thanking you. Your daughters know more about hockey than most grown ass men who played it. The guy who writes about our games sucks.”

He chuckled at that. “I'll tell her you said that.”

I nodded. “So...” I tried to think of a way to steer the conversation back to Claire without being too obvious about it, but my brain was hurting too badly to care. “What's up with the hair?” I gestured to her.

He shrugged and cracked a small knowing smile. “You guys haven't seen each other in a long time.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek to stop myself from saying anything dumb. “When did she start doing that?”

“Eh... Few years back,” he said vaguely, which irritated me. I knew he knew exactly when, but he was making me work for it.

“How many years back?” I fished.

He squinted his eyes like he was thinking. “Like... seven?”

I sat there counting back the years...

“Right after you left for juniors,” he clarified.

That shut me the hell up.

He patted me on the back before turning to walk out of the office. “Glad you’re back, son. Glad you’re both back. Feels like old times around here.” He smiled. “Feels right.”

4. Claire

I rummaged around in my skating bag looking for my keys while I walked out toward the rink's front office.

"Hey, I'm gonna head out for the day," I rattled off without looking. I had about twenty protein bar wrappers littering the bottom of my bag that must've been hiding my keys. "You want dinner? Addie told me to invite you over because we're making some steak and ah-ha!" I pulled out my keys... And that's when I finally looked up to realize that my dad wasn't sitting in his usual spot where he'd sat for the last twenty years of my life.

In his place was the infuriating, but handsome-as-ever, Duke Callahan.

He flashed me his cocky smile, the same one he regarded me with as a little boy when he thought he was going to beat me in a foot race, and my traitorous heart wobbled a bit. He looked almost pleased with himself that I accidentally spoke to him in a nicer tone than earlier.

I immediately felt a shakiness course through my body, and I forced myself to take in even breaths. It was just too weird to see him back here. I wasn't sure how to interact with him, because his presence confused the hell out of me. There was still that old thrill present in me— that thrill that used to come from spotting him in the rink. But now it was twisted with hurt.

I coached myself to keep a blank face. I already lost control of my emotions around him earlier, and I was kind of embarrassed by that now.

"Steak sounds great, babe." He stretched the office chair back and crossed his hands behind his head. His casted foot was propped up on the open window. He always stretched out, taking up way too much space and

making himself comfortable anywhere. I used to get a kick out of it, but now I just found it obnoxious.

“I wasn’t inviting you,” I snapped. “I was looking for—”

“I know.” He cracked a smile. “I’m just teasing you, Kessel,” he said slowly, looking directly in my eyes.

He knew I was thrown off by him and that I hated it. “Oh, well...” I swallowed and looked away from him. “Where’s my dad?”

He lifted off his hat and ran a hand through his longish, light brown hair. Some of the strands near the front still had natural highlights. I hated that I noticed, and I hated that I still found him so damn attractive. He didn’t deserve his stupidly strong jawline and long eyelashes.

“That wasn’t very nice of you earlier, ya know,” he drawled.

I should’ve known he wouldn’t let me off the hook for that. I felt my face burn over my earlier actions, but I couldn’t help myself. Maybe a better woman would have handled the situation with more class, but I personally could not stop seven years’ worth of a grudge from bursting forward.

I had to remind myself that I had nothing to be sorry for. He was the one who should’ve been groveling at my feet for forgiveness.

“Are you looking for an apology?” I asked skeptically. What I left unsaid was that he wouldn’t get one until I did.

He stuck out his lower lip, contemplating it, but he must’ve sensed it was futile to ask for one because he changed the subject. “When did you move back?”

I shrugged. “Couple weeks ago.”

“You didn’t move back in with your dad?”

“Nope.”

“You live with Addie?”

“Yupp.”

“You’re not gonna give me much, eh?” His jaw ticked uncomfortably despite the easy-going smile he was trying to maintain on his face.

“Nope,” I said with a smile. I apparently still loved getting on his nerves...

“Well,” he let out an exaggerated sigh. “That’ll make it awfully hard to catch up, and I’m going to be here a while.” He gestured to his foot, almost like he was trying to earn sympathy points from me. “Also,” he gave me sly grin, “your dad said I was *very* much welcome here.”

I scowled and was about to say something back, when Greyson Scott interrupted us.

“Hullo guys,” he grunted. He had shades on, probably because he couldn’t take them off seeing as he was carrying his toddler on one hip and a hockey bag over his opposite shoulder. His Underarmour t-shirt outlined his impressive muscles, and his sleeve tattoo was also on full display. Even though Duke had filled out nicely, Grey still looked like he could snap him in half, and I liked that humbling little fact for him.

I dropped my skating bag and immediately went to take Gracie, his toddler, from him. She was going on a year-and-a-half now, and I’d babysat her ever since she was born. “Hi, Graciegoo! How are you?” I cooed at her.

Gracie smiled happily and let out a string of gibberish and Grey regarded her with a proud smile.

“Hey, Claire. Mind watching her for a bit? Jules is on her way with Canyon. We’re swapping kids. Gracie just had swim lessons, didn’t you baby!” he said more to her than me. “And Canyon’s coming back from baseball.”

I twirled Gracie around, making her collapse against my chest in a giggle fit, and I couldn’t help but smile so

hard my face felt like cracking.

When I turned back to Grey, I arched an amused eyebrow at him. “Baseball?” Everyone at the rink knew that Canyon lived and breathed hockey. The kid was like a walking stat book for every player in the league. If he didn’t make it there himself one day, he’d surely make a great coach.

He smirked. “Yeah, Jules made him try it out because she doesn’t want him to think hockey is the only sport in the world, even though it definitely is in his mind,” he chuckled. “He’s not enjoying it though and it’s a fight to make him go, so I doubt it lasts much longer.”

“I bet you’re all torn up about that.” I rolled my eyes playfully.

He tried to keep a straight face but failed. “I mean...”

“Wow,” I laughed. “Well, I get it. If someone would’ve made me or Addie try anything else, we would’ve rioted. That’s nice she’s showing him he has options though; probably takes the pressure off a bit.”

Many rink kids never got the chance to play any other sports because coaches absolutely hated it when they missed practices for anything else. But as a coach, Grey was trying to change things up a bit for the next generation, and he never forced kids to choose one sport over the others.

Grey turned his attention to Duke then, who was watching him with a very confused expression.

“How ya doin, kid?” Grey asked him. “I caught the replay. Sorry ‘bout that.” He gestured to his leg, which Duke had taken off the ledge now. He had it practically touching the ground next to his other foot, almost like he was trying to hide the fact that he was injured.

Duke grimaced. “Yeah, wish they’d replay one of my goals as much as getting hurt.”

Grey cracked a smile at that. “Understandable. Well, the kids’ll all be pumped to have you here. Doubt Canyon will be as impressed with a retired fart like myself now that you’re in the building. You’re a favorite around here.”

Duke’s mouth dropped open, then he quickly recovered. “Thanks, that means a lot. Canyon...?”

“He’s my son,” he said proudly, “and this here’s my daughter.”

Duke looked slightly confused still.

I lightly cleared my throat and shot him a glare that said I’d fill him in later. I had to take pity on him. Something in me— something very small— still felt the need to help him out.

“Hey, you alright?” Grey leaned closer to him, and I wondered what the heck he was talking about. Of course he was alright, he was sitting right there, totally fine.

“C’mere,” Grey ordered him to move forward in the chair. Duke hesitated but did as he was told. Grey held his jaw, looked into his eyes, and frowned. When Grey let go, he quickly patted his shorts before locating his sunglasses again and handing them over to him. “You’ll want these in the rink because it’s way too bright in there for the concussed.”

Duke looked a little agitated. I knew it was because he was annoyed with being hurt and having to baby himself— that was a feeling all athletes knew. But I immediately felt slightly bad for not knowing he had a concussion. The way he reacted after he fell down on the ground earlier kind of made a bit more sense now.

“Bright lights still give me headaches sometimes,” Grey added.

Duke’s face transformed into pure worry.

“Don’t worry,” Grey chuckled. “It’s not permanent, or shouldn’t be for you at least. I’ve just had many concussions. One won’t screw you up like me.”

“Oh... uh, thanks,” Duke responded.

“Alright, well, I’m heading back to lace up my skates. I’ll see ya out there? We can go over some drills we wanna run with the kids.” He cringed looking down at what Duke was wearing— a dry-fit Crewman shirt and athletic shorts. “Next time you might wanna wear sweats. The rink is a different beast when you’re just coaching; it feels about twenty degrees colder.”

“Uh... Okay, yeah,” Duke stammered.

As soon as Grey walked away, Duke turned to me with wide eyes. “What the hell happened to him?”

“Language,” I said tersely. Gracie was always listening now, and she was beginning to pick up words here and there.

He rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean. He’s *nice* now,” he whispered while looking around to make sure no one could hear him. “Having kids did that to him?”

I bounced Gracie a bit and made happy faces at her while talking to Duke. “He was always nice, wasn’t he, Gracie girl?! He just had a few bad years there when he and his wife, Jules, weren’t together.” I cut him a look. “How did you not know that?”

He snorted. “I think you’re forgetting how I was as a kid.”

“Egocentric?” I jabbed.

He smirked and leaned back in my dad’s office chair. Gone was the usual playfulness in his eyes, and instead, he looked serious. It was the determined look that I always fell for; the look that made all the women of Detroit, both young and old, fall for him as well.

“No,” he answered. “The only person I ever paid attention to around here... was you.”

My heart hammered against my chest. I had no clue how to respond to that... Because the truth of the matter was that he was the only one I ever paid attention to as well, and as much as my heart loved hearing him say that, I knew I needed to ignore it. I couldn't allow myself to get sucked back into him. It was too easy for him to come back here and say all the right things like nothing happened between us at all. I couldn't forget how it ended the last time I let my guard down around him.

I cleared my throat and put on a bland smile, trying to swallow down my attraction to him. “Well, I guess I always did beat you, so how could you not pay attention to me?” I turned to Gracie on my hip then. “Let's go watch the skaters, yeah?”

She clapped her little starfish hands happily, so I added a little bounce in my step as I moved back into the East side rink.

... I could feel his eyes on me the entire way.

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5. Claire

My thoughts were still preoccupied by Duke by the time I sat down for dinner with my dad and Addie.

I mentally flipped through multiple ways of asking my dad why Duke was back and how long he'd be sticking around, but I had to be careful not to come off as too interested. My dad would have a field day if he suspected I still had a thing for him, which was totally not the case. I wanted to avoid him.

"You ready for the Timbit camp to start up next week?" my dad asked across the dinner table.

I looked up at him, thankful for the distraction from my thoughts. "Yeah. Can't believe I'll be running it. Feels like a different life ago when I was enrolled in it..." *with Duke*, I mentally added. That's where we met: the summer Timbit kiddie camp (named that way because it was sponsored by Tim Horton's) at the rink. It was the reason my dad originally put me in hockey skates as a kid. I was a figure skater, but he wasn't sure what to do for childcare in the summers, so I started up in hockey. I was conveniently forced to choose only one sport when I turned eleven, which was when kids aged out of the camp.

The camp consisted of running skating drills all morning— pretty sure just so the instructors could tire us out— then we'd head upstairs to the workout room to do some off-ice workouts. We'd then have lunch in the lobby or outside and we'd spend the rest of the day playing games on the rink's black top parking lot or on the baseball fields next door to us when they were open. Sometimes they'd give us free time, other times the instructors would organize races or games, like capture the flag or water balloon fights. It was honestly a blast most of the time. Usually, my whole summer revolved around my rivalry with Duke. We were the two fastest

skaters every summer, so every drill was a race, every workout was a competition, and every game meant a chance to win. During those years, we pretended to hate each other, but we definitely respected one another as competitors.

I guess my dad's mental train of thought was going in the same direction as mine, because then he cleared his throat and added: "So, Duke is back." He scooped some mashed potatoes onto his plate and I could feel his gaze on my cheek, studying me.

I tightened my grip on my fork. "I noticed," I said tightly.

"You didn't have to be quite so mean to him today," he tested.

I stuck out my jaw at him and Addie fixed him with a glare of her own. She was the only person I confided in when I was younger, so she knew the whole story.

"She took the boy's crutches and left him stranded on the floor," he complained to Addie.

She turned to me with a satisfied smile. "Nice work."

"Thank you," I smirked.

Dad rubbed a hand over his eyes. "You two will never get married, eh?"

Addie gasped. "What the fuck?"

"Language, jeez," my dad lamented.

Addie's blue eyes bugged out at that. "Oh, so you and all the hockey guys can say 'fuck,' but I can't? Fuck that, Dad."

"Agreed, fuck that," I added.

He cringed like he knew he just stepped in a land mine.

“Besides, what the fuck does that matter?” Addie asked pointedly.

“For real, Dad.” That didn’t sound like him at all. Throughout our entire lives, he beat into us just how important it was to be strong and independent women... and that was a very helpful mindset. Because I *wanted* to have someone, I wanted a boyfriend, I wanted a life outside of skating, but I never felt I *needed* it. His words suddenly struck a hurt chord inside me, telling me that being alone and fine had an expiration date, and that I wasn’t good enough by myself— which I knew was untrue. And what the actual fuck was right, because he’d never said anything like that at all... Suddenly Duke shows back up and he starts changing his tune? I knew he loved Duke like a son, and he would’ve had to be absolutely oblivious not to realize we liked each other growing up, but *come on*. My dad was way too transparent.

“I’m just saying,” he lamented. “I worry about you guys.”

“Wouldn’t you be more worried if we were *with* guys?” I asked.

He pondered the thought for a minute, then rubbed his jaw to cover a small smile. “I guess I’d be more worried for them. You two can handle yourselves just fine.” He chuckled to himself before cutting into his steak. “I just want you two to be happy,” he added.

“I am happy,” Addie said. She curled up on her chair, tucking one leg under her and hugging one knee to her chest. She was now 27, but I couldn’t remember a dinnertime when she didn’t sit that way. She turned her attention to me. “So, how’s it going with the French skater guy?”

I groaned and dropped my fork. Thinking about him made me lose my appetite. “He’s good, but I don’t think it’s going to work out. We just don’t really match up.”

Addie gave me an apologetic look. “Well, it could take a bit of time to really tell. You and Matty skated together for years. It’s going to be hard to find anyone that fits as well unless you give it time.”

“Yeah,” I shrugged. “He’s just kind of...”

“An asshole,” Dad finished.

I cringed. “He doesn’t have the best attitude.”

“No, he does not,” he agreed. He kept his head low and pretended to be paying very close attention to his food. I knew he was trying hard to keep his opinions to himself, and I did appreciate that.

“And he has some kind of hand issue,” I told Addie. “His thumb pops out of place during lifts, which makes me shift in the air, then he blames me.” I turned to my dad. “I mean, really, have I ever messed up that many lifts in one day?”

Dad frowned. “Have you told Igor?”

Igor was my coach and had been my whole life except for the years I trained in Canada in order to skate with Matty. After Matty and I went our separate ways this past spring, it felt pointless to stick around there. I missed Addie and Dad, and I missed home. Igor was probably just as ecstatic to have me back in Northfield, Minnesota as my family.

“Yeah... he said to give it time.”

Addie shot me a ‘told you so’ look.

“Well, it’s slightly difficult to hear his obnoxious voice in the lobby,” Dad added. “Thought Duke was about to crack his teeth,” he said with a laugh.

Addie’s eyes flashed to mine.

I shook my head and shoved a forkful into my mouth so I wouldn’t be forced to comment.

After Dad took off, I started helping Addie with the dishes, and that's when she started in on me too.

"Okay, I'm going to preface this by saying that he totally deserved the treatment you gave him earlier today, but do you think maybe..." She reached to place the dirty forks in the dishwasher.

I side-eyed her, waiting for her to stand back up. "Maybe what?"

"Maybe Duke still likes you?" she asked with hesitant eyes.

My heart stupidly skipped a beat in my chest, hoping that she was right— but ugh! No!

"Nope, not going there," I said firmly.

"Well, he was obviously feeling defensive over you today," she pointed out. "And I just don't believe in coincidences."

I fished the wine bottle out of the fridge. "This isn't a coincidence," I said dryly.

"Yes, it is," she pushed. "It seems like the universe is throwing the two of you back together because you have unfinished business."

"Oh please," I said sarcastically as I poured myself a very large glass of moscato. "You want?"

She nodded. "I'm just saying... You come back for the summer, then he mysteriously shows back up here for the first time in years?"

"No, it's not like that. He didn't come back here for me. He wouldn't even be thinking of me if he didn't get hurt," I told her, also trying to beat that sense into myself. "Besides, I need to focus on work and finding a partner this summer, and he'll just distract me then leave. You and I both know that."

She scrunched up her face in disbelief. “Work? The kiddie camp? Aren’t you just doing that to offset the cost of your own ice time?”

I shot her a glare.

She sighed. “Okay, forget I said anything. Porch?”

I nodded and followed her out the sliding door of the apartment. Almost every night since I’d been back, Addie and I sat outside with some wine and watched the sunset. Our apartment was tiny, but overlooked Northfield’s nicest golf course, and I loved it.

“This is the life,” I said, stretching out on our frumpy outdoor loveseat.

“We didn’t do so bad, did we?” She clinked her wine glass against mine with a small smile.

“You’re doin’ amazing. Not sure about myself,” I snorted. “Thanks for letting me move in with you.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” she said confidently... but I could tell she still wanted to say something else.

“What?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” she responded in a high-pitched voice.

“You’re not saying something!” I accused.

“Okay... I just wanted to say, you guys are older now. Things are different. I’d never say this in front of dad because he pushes way too hard, but I think it’d be nice for the two of you to get closure on the whole situation. And I just don’t want you to close your mind off completely,” she said innocently.

“Whatever.” I muttered. I should’ve known she would harp on the whole Duke situation.

Regardless of what she thought and regardless of what my stupid heart felt, I knew closing my mind off to him was exactly what I needed to do. Because I knew

how this would play out, and I refused to put myself in the position to cry myself to sleep over him ever again.

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6. Duke

You'd think the elementary school woulda warned the middle school about the two of us and our ongoing war... but nope. And now we were stuck in the very same stupid first hour together.

I sensed her sitting kinda behind me, off to the right.

She was yawning.

I hated that I knew that, but I did.

I knew where she was at all times. It was like she had a beacon system in her stupid, pretty, blonde hair that signaled just for me... She wore it in a braid today. It looked cute like that—

Nope. No.

She was annoying, not cute, I sternly told myself.

I pretended to watch my buddy Luke go to the pencil sharpener, but really, it just gave me a chance to look at her for a couple seconds without anyone catching me and accusing me of liking her again.

She was closing her eyes tightly like she was willing herself to open them up and be more awake... which didn't make sense to me because it was still the beginning of the day. How could she already be tired?

But she always was... Ever since the first day of school, which was six days ago.

Every morning, all I could think about was her... I noticed every time her name was called for attendance. I noticed the way she said "here" like she'd rather be anywhere else. But sadly, I never noticed when she dipped... but she always did.

One minute she was there in her seat, the next, she was gone.

But not today... Today, I was going to pay closer attention. She couldn't get away with just ditching every day. I mean, I was no snitch, so there's no way I'd ever tell the teacher on her, but I would confront her.

Following her is what her dad, Craig, the rink manager and my friend, would want me to do... Right? Craig called me "the man with a plan," and I didn't want to lose that title. It was important to me. I was hoping that would catch on more than stupid "ball of hate," which was what everyone else called me... You get in one too many hockey fights and they all think you're crazy, but as soon as they get cheap-shotted, they're looking to me to defend them. Stupid.

As soon as Luke sat back down, the teacher started moving around the room, checking in everyone's homework.

I pulled my English grammar workbook out and turned to the homework from last night. As soon as Ms. Henry marked my paper with a check mark, I glanced over in Claire's direction.

And she was gone.

So that's how the sly little sucker was doing it.

She knew I'd be the only one watching.

She knew it, so when I was distracted, that's when she struck.

Not tomorrow though.

Nope.

I wasn't planning on doing my homework tonight anyway, so there'd be nothing to check in for me tomorrow.

Tomorrow, I'd catch her.

The following morning, I paid closer attention. This time, I saw her skipping out. As soon as she reached the

hallway, I jumped out of my seat and started toward the door, but Ms. Henry called me out and I blanked... I couldn't think of a single possible reason for being out of my stupid seat. My mouth just dropped open and no words came out, making the rest of the class laugh at me.

So, the next morning, I strategized. Third times the charm, right?

I waited for Claire to be a safe distance down the hall, then hopped to my feet.

"Mr. Callahan!" Ms. Henry called out in a shrill voice.

"Bathroom! Emergency!" I threw over my shoulder as I hurried out. I heard giggles in my wake and felt myself grin. She couldn't stop me today.

I spotted Claire's blonde head bobbing ahead of me by about fifteen feet. I needed to maintain a safe distance because I didn't want her to stop walking. I wanted to follow her and find out what she was doing every day.

I backed behind a locker bank until she turned each corner, then I quickly followed.

But now she was going into the gym...

I stealthily moved to follow her, but as soon as I turned the corner into the gym doorway, I felt the pain like a lightning bolt through my entire body.

"Fuck!" I grunted and doubled over.

She freaking karate chopped me in the balls.

"Shh! Sorry! I didn't know it was you!" she whispered. "Are you even allowed to say the F-word?" she asked skeptically.

I dropped to my knees and tried to slow my breathing by taking deep, deep breaths.

“Were you planning on throwing a nut shot on anyone who was following you? What if you did that to a teacher?” I winced.

She just shrugged and patted my head. “I am sorry. But it is your fault for following me.” She cocked her blonde head to the side. “Why are you following me?”

“I just wanted to know where you were going. You can’t skip class every day,” I told her.

Her face cracked in annoyance. “Says who?” she asked.

I pushed myself to stand tall. She hated that I was now taller and could look down at her. She only made it up to my chest these days, and I loved it. I felt like her protector. “Says me,” I said firmly.

She laughed in my face and turned on her heel. “Oh, Duke. You’re funny,” she said as she walked away.

I felt my face burn red and I was momentarily rooted to the spot.

She was moving quickly toward the workout room, and that pushed me to follow her.

“I wasn’t trying to be funny, Kessel. I’m serious. We should go back to class,” I urged as I fell in step with her.

“You can go if you want. No one’s stopping you.” She pushed the small workout room open.

I felt my eyebrows knit together. Was she planning on working out?

She pulled the mat and a muscle roller out, lined them up against the white cinderblock wall, then laid down and closed her eyes.

“What are you...?”

“I’m sleeping,” she burst out. “Shhh.”

I strolled over to sit down next to her. "But what if someone comes?" I whispered.

She huffed with her eyes still tightly closed. "I am so tired that I do not care, Duke."

That felt like a punch to the gut. I felt bad she wasn't getting enough sleep. What had Griff told me over the summer? Sometimes you didn't know what people were going through at home, so make sure you were always nice to everyone...? Something like that.

Her breath fell into a relaxed rhythm, and I knew she was sleeping... So I took the opportunity to smooth her braid out. Now that I was alone with her, I could admit that she was so pretty. The prettiest girl in the world. She was like an angel. My angel.

I sat there keeping a look out for her almost the whole hour. I kept my brain busy by going through hockey plays. When there was about ten minutes left, I shook her small shoulder to wake her up.

She rolled up to a sitting position against the wall. "I didn't hear the bell," she complained as she rubbed her eyes.

"Ten minutes left," I told her. "So you've been doing this every day?"

"Yeah." She cut her serious hazel eyes to mine and pointed an accusing finger at my chest. "You tell anyone, Duke Callahan, and you're a dead man," she warned.

"Nah," I chuckled. "Your secret's safe with me. But... why aren't you getting enough sleep?"

She twisted her lips, assessing me, then reached toward me to brush her dainty fingers through my hair. My heart pounded hard against my chest. She'd never really touched me like this before.

"Your hair gets lighter in the summer, you know that? Right here on the edges especially." She touched some

corner strands that I knew were sticking up. While I knew she was just trying to avoid telling me the reason why, that was the first compliment she'd ever given me... and I suddenly cared a lot about my hair. Weird.

"I'll miss it when it's mostly brown again," she said with a slight pout on her face.

Great. Now I didn't want it to get brown again either. I shook my head out. "You didn't answer my question."

She sighed and turned away from me. "My parents scream at each other all night. They're getting divorced." She hesitantly looked back at me to see my reaction.

I felt my mouth form an o but wasn't sure what to say.

"Don't tell anyone," she demanded in the usual tone she regarded me with. But I could tell there was worry in her eyes. She stuck out her pinky. "Pinky promise me, Duke Michael Callahan."

I rolled my eyes at her use of my middle name. Sav yelled at me a while back in the rink using my full name and Claire was within earshot. She never forgot it. I quickly reached out to wrap my pinky around hers. "No, I won't tell. Promise."

"Pinky promises are forever," she sing-songed.

"Yeah, I know," I said as we dropped our hands apart. "But you sure this is safe here?" I gestured to the weight room around us. In the back of my mind, I heard my dad lecturing my sister and I about always sticking together and making sure we didn't go anywhere alone...

She shrugged. "It's fine." Then she quickly hopped to her feet and did a handstand against the wall. "I come here all the time. I belong in the gym more than in English class."

I laughed at that. "Yeah, me too."

"Yes, you too," she said earnestly. "Bet I can hold this handstand longer than you though," she challenged with

the regular determined look back in her eyes.

I smirked at her and accepted the challenge.

At some point, one of us started doing handstand push-ups, and then it turned into a competition to see who could do the most. When I noticed her starting to shake and go a little slower, I cheered her on.

“You’re giving up that easy? C’mon, be tough, Kessel, you got it,” I grunted.

She looked at me out of the corner of her eye and gave one last push.

My phone alarm blared. Stupid dream. I quickly sat up to locate my phone.

And then it happened again– the spins.

Fuck this stupid concussion. I closed my eyes tightly and slowly laid back down and waited for my head to feel normal again.

Beau jumped up on the bed next to me and started licking my face.

Jeez. I wondered if my pain-killer medication somehow made my dreams more vivid. I hadn’t thought about sixth grade English in years... or the fact that I failed it because I ditched class so often that semester with Claire. I didn’t regret that though. I’d never regret it. And I’d never told anyone the real reason why I failed it. I don’t think Claire did either. That was a secret we’d take to the grave, I was sure of it. It started out as skipping so she could get a bit of extra sleep, but sometimes we’d just play in the gym together. No one ever caught us either. It was great. It was one of the only times we could enjoy genuine friendship with each other without the outside pressures making us feel weird– meaning stupid kids who made fun of us for liking each other. I hated to admit that I let that get to me, but I was just a little guy, so I couldn’t completely blame myself.

What I could blame myself for was how I left her and Northfield. But again, I was only seventeen when I did that... which was seven fucking years ago. I knew she could hold a grudge, but really, leaving me stranded without my crutches was a bit extreme, no?

The next thing that came to mind was something I really didn't want to think about... But it was true... and it was something I couldn't shake: I still liked her. *Really* liked her. After all these years, I still couldn't not crush on Claire Kessel, at least a little bit. She had a knockout body— totally strong and solid— and pairing that with her competitive, sassy attitude... I was a fucking goner.

But... I needed to push that thought far, far away. I wasn't about to get attached to anyone. And it's not like she liked me anyway, so it shouldn't be that difficult.

I stared up at my bedroom ceiling. This was why I needed to force myself to keep moving. Too much thinking was never a good thing, especially for someone like myself. With all this downtime and no immediate goals to reach, my thoughts just kept pinging around, making me feel too much. Working out— either lifting weights or taking a yoga class or hitting the track— usually helped me a bit, but playing hockey was the only time my thoughts disappeared and I could just be. Maybe coaching would be the answer for the next eight or so weeks.

“Duke Callahan! Number 14 for the Detroit Crewman! Woah!”

I smiled at the tween boys playing air hockey in the lobby. Well, they *were* playing air hockey, now they were both staring at me as I crutched toward Craig's office.

They dropped their air hockey handles and jogged over to me.

“Hi, my name’s Troy. It’s nice to meet you. I play forward too, and I’m just really excited to have you here. But I am sorry you’re here, ya know, because, ya know,” he gestured to my foot. “We uh... we saw—”

The other kid elbowed him in the stomach, making him double over a bit, and I chuckled to myself.

“I’m Canyon. I’m happy you’re here too,” the kid next to him said. I remembered that name. He was Greyson Scott’s kid. He looked like an all-American boy with light brown hair and freckles dotting his nose and cheeks. He licked his lips nervously. “Uh.. can you... uh... Can you teach us the Michigan shot you use all the time? I can’t get it at all. We keep trying.”

I cracked a smile at that. “Sure can, kid. You’ll both be able to nail it by the end of this clinic. Promise.” I reached out for a knuckle punch from both of them. “You guys are here awfully early though, no?” I squinted up at the Pepsi clock. I came in early to catch up with Craig... and to ask him if I could possibly join some of the workout classes upstairs after the clinic today. They usually had some in-house weightlifting, cardio, and yoga instructors.

“Yeah,” Canyon nodded. “We’re early. My mom’s out there coaching figure skating. My dad gets here early sometimes to see her on the ice.” He rolled his eyes. “He’s such a simp.”

My eyes bugged out at that. Greyson Scott. A simp? I laughed at the thought of it. I never would’ve dared to call him that back when he used to train here. He used to scare the living shit out of us.

“Your dad is no simp. He’s a pretty intimidating guy,” I told them. Not only was he a fricken tower with bodybuilder muscles, but he also had a tat sleeve that he started at a way younger age than any of the other hockey guys, and a scarred up face that added to his rough and tough look. He had one scar under his

cheekbone that he kinda hid with scruff, one that ran through an eyebrow, and another on his lip from taking a stick to the face. As a kid, I was definitely scared he'd snap me in half. I looked back down at Canyon. "He yelled at me once back in the day and I almost peed myself."

His face broke into a disbelieving smile. "What?!"

"Yeah," I chuckled. "He's got a mean mug and he was super serious about hockey. Seems like he's chill now though."

"Oh yeah, Coach is super nice. He never yells and stuff when we mess up." Troy sat there and thought for a second. "Actually, he's more likely to laugh." He shrugged his small shoulders. "Remember when Kuddy pooped his pants?"

Canyon cackled at that. "Yeah, in the middle of a game and everything. Dad starts laughing his butt off, can't even keep a straight face. It smelled sooo bad."

"Never eat carnival food before a game," Troy warned.

"I'll have to remember that," I chuckled. Damn. I'd forgotten how much fun youth hockey life was... Everything turned serious when you started playing higher league hockey.

The kids followed me into Craig's office, and the three of us sat there exchanging hockey stories while the figure skaters finished their ice time. I did check Craig's security tv's here and there though. *Not to watch Claire*, I told myself... But I'd be lying if I said I didn't tense up every time I saw her entering a jump and then almost applaud when she landed it cleanly. She was just so good. She still had that extra oomph on the ice; a certain prowess. She attacked her jumps and landed them with exuberance— almost as if she were daring the audience, like *look what I just did, bet you can't do that*. She

jumped higher, spun faster, and just looked strong as all hell.

When the final buzzer went off to signal the end of their practice, I waited on edge to catch a glimpse of her. I'd completely lost track of what Canyon and Troy were talking about, because all I could think about was making eye contact with her...

She was one of the last ones to stroll out. Her hair was in a half-ponytail with the bottom half just grazing her shoulders, and she wore light black tights, lululemon shorts over them, and a crop top that showed off her impressive abs. She probably had better abs than me honestly. I definitely needed to get back in the gym. I shifted uncomfortably in my chair over that thought. For some reason, I still felt an intense need to impress her.

She automatically looked in the office, no doubt for her dad, but instead, our eyes met and locked.

It felt like the whole world stopped for a couple seconds and everything fell away except her hazel eyes.

In my mind, I walked with purpose toward her, put my hands through her hair, and pulled her into a kiss.

But... in reality, there was a thick barrier of tension between us... and I couldn't walk anywhere, let alone march toward her.

She was the first to look away. Her chest visibly moved with a deep breath as she walked back toward the hall where the locker rooms were, and I deflated.

I wasn't sure what I expected, or even wanted, but just something more than that. A smile, a nod, *something*.

"Dude!" Canyon threw a cheetoh at me. "What was that? You simping too?" His eyebrows shot up and Troy snickered next to him.

I shook my head at them and swallowed hard. I wasn't sure what I could even say to describe the situation between Claire and I, so I just kept my mouth shut.

Next out was Jules Scott, followed by Grey.

"Hi, buddy." Jules reached across the counter to mess with her son's hair, then her eyes drifted to me. "Hello!" she said happily.

Looking back at her, it made sense why Grey was in such a happy mood all the time— I'd be pretty damn happy too if I was married to a MILF like her. She had a bright smile and wore her long hazelnut brown hair under a baseball cap.

Grey snapped his fingers in front of my face and regarded me with an unimpressed look. I internally cringed. I guess I had stared at her a little too long.

"Duke, right?" she asked intently.

"Yeah, nice to meet you," I reached over to shake her dainty hand.

"Heard you've got a concussion. Sucks." She looked up at Grey's large frame and smiled knowingly.

"She knows the signs better than anyone," he said, not taking his eyes off her. He grabbed her hips and pulled her into him for a hug. He patted her head against his large chest and whispered something down into her hair before lifting the brim of her hat and kissing her forehead.

I looked down at Canyon who rolled his eyes, but you could tell he had a little smirk on his face, like he was proud to be their son. "Simp," he mouthed at me while nodding at them, and I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Did you drink enough water today?" Grey asked her.

"Yes," she smiled up at him amusedly.

“Did you eat enough?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Feelin’ good?”

“Yes, babe,” she said with a laugh.

Yeesh. He really was totally wrapped around her finger. Although, it was kinda nice seeing how much he loved her and wanted to take care of her.

She reached up and put a hand at the base of his neck to pull him closer. She whispered something in his ear and then kissed him full on the lips.

“Come on! Get a room!” Canyon called out.

I shook my head and let out a chuckle, but my body felt a little tense. It’s almost like I couldn’t look away from them... because you could tell they were really in love... And for the first time in my life, I felt an uncomfortable twinge of jealousy. I wanted someone to touch me like that, look up at me like that, love me like that.

I closed my eyes tightly against it and thought for the hundredth time that maybe coming back here wasn’t such a good idea.

I was used to feeling anger, but I constricted it to the ice, and it worked for me. It’s what compelled me to throw the big hits and score the important goals. Other than that, I was an even keel. Nothing phased me. I honestly didn’t feel much, and I’d been like that ever since I left this place...

It was Claire who always had a way of making me *feel* more... and I’d forgotten about that...

The jealousy I felt over Grey and Jules’ lovey dovey shit was nothing compared to the jealousy I felt about a half hour later when everyone started skate-running out

onto the ice. I pulled my hoodie up over my head and crutched my lame ass over to the teamboxes.

I watched sullenly as the boys skated around for warm-up laps while joking around with each other.

Grey, holding a bucket of pucks, skated across the ice to join me by the box, but his eyes were on Jules, who was now sitting in the stands under a blanket holding their little girl.

“She’s pregnant again.” He turned to me like a little boy who was caught telling a secret. His face broke into a small smile as he rubbed a hand over his face. “I can’t not tell someone and you’re not friends with my wife really, so... Don’t tell anyone. I’m just so fuckin happy, man. I didn’t think I could be this happy.” He dumped the bucket of pucks out onto the ice in front of us for kids to come take. “You gotta girl?”

“Nah,” I chewed the inside of my cheek. “My sister just had her second baby though. Babies are exciting. I’m not cut out for serious relationships though.”

He looked me up and down for a second before turning away. “Ah, one of those guys,” he snickered.

Something in the way he said it pissed me off. He didn’t know me. He didn’t know what I witnessed my sister go through. He didn’t–

But my rebuttal was lost in my throat as soon as I saw Claire’s strong self enter into the viewing windows of the upstairs weight room.

“Ohhh, now that makes a lot more sense.” Grey looked down at his skates and chuckled to himself. He leaned back against the boards and crossed his skates at the ankle.

“What does?” I snapped.

He nodded toward the workout room. “I remember you guys.”

That took me by surprise. “Huh?”

He squinted up at her. “Yeah... She used to be a blondie right?”

I felt my jaw tighten but was extremely curious about what he remembered.

“After I went pro, I came back here to work in the summers. I was pretty banged up and battling my own demons, so you guys were just annoying kids to me. And you two were *always* bickering in the weight room. Craig would always be disciplining y’all.” He laughed then.

“What?” I demanded.

He shook his head. “I just remember this one time she punched you in the eye and you just stood there.” He chuckled. “You just looked shell-shocked. Had a shiner for a couple weeks after that too.”

I smirked at the memory. “Yeah, sounds like us.” I didn’t even see her rage punch coming. That was the summer before middle school. Claire had it in her head that Coca-Cola was alcohol. It was no secret that her and her sister were kinda sheltered, so I kindly corrected her, and it really pissed her off. I learned later, during one of those missed English classes, that one of her mother’s friends told her that in order to get Craig in trouble with the court during her parents’ messy divorce so that her mother could get full custody.

“She’s a piece of work.” He nodded to the weight room.

I instantly felt my shackles raising at that. If that was an insult, he better think again because—

“In a good way,” he added quickly. “Jeez, slow your roll man.” He studied me closer, and I felt awkward under his gaze, but I wanted him to continue... I wanted any piece of information on her that I could get. “She’s mentally tough. Jules says it all the time. Thinks she’s

someone to watch. She and her old partner got second at Nationals last year, did you know?"

I didn't have to tell him that I didn't know, he could see the surprise on my face. And it bugged me. I hadn't kept track of anyone from home since I left, and I was starting to majorly regret it.

"Well, she's probably too good for you anyway," Grey grubbed.

I snapped my neck up to meet his eyes, but he was already gone, skating away. Did he really just say that? What did that mean? I grinded my teeth together, trying to figure out something to say back to defend myself, but I couldn't think of anything really, except...

"Your son calls you a simp!" I yelled at him as he skated by.

"Oh, I know!" He laughed before quickly snatching a puck away from a kid, stickhandling with it, then passing it back to him so he could take a shot at the net.

I sat there struggling to focus on the little guys in front of me, because my eyes kept drifting up to Claire in the weight room... and my mind kept drifting to the cement barrier against relationships that I built up in my mind and wondering if maybe I'd been wrong to construct it in the first place...

Then again, maybe it was only because I was back here that I was suddenly second guessing myself...

Because *she* was the only one I could ever see settling down with anyway...

A loud ding caught my attention, pulling my eyes from the workout room. I turned to see a wobbly looking kid flop to the ice behind the net.

"Yikes," I breathed out. The kids were all rounding the net for shots, as per usual for the end of warm-ups. The

kid must've gone behind the net to grab a puck and gotten nicked by one in the helmet.

Grey was standing over him in a second, surely asking him questions to see if he was alright. When the kid staggered to his feet, the rest of the little guys applauded.

Grey pointed his stick to me in the box and yelled, "Another to the injured reserve list!" and all the tweens laughed like it was the funniest shit they'd ever heard.

I shook my head wryly and crutched over to open the box door for the kid.

I taped his helmet as he moved past me to lay flat on his back on the bench behind me. He let out a loud groan.

"Gonna not wanna skate behind the net during shooting drills, bud," I said with a chuckle.

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7. Duke

When about ten minutes remained of the morning session, Grey invited me to eat lunch with him at Benny's, which was the diner in the lobby of the rink. I begrudgingly declined because I'd forgotten my wallet.

"Kid skates in the pros and can't even buy himself lunch," he chirped.

"Yeah, yeah, settle down," I grumbled.

He searched his pockets for his keys then and handed them over to me. "Get my wallet from the console of my truck and I'll cover you? It'll probably take you a minute." He eyed my crutches warily. "Meet you at the diner?"

"Sure, uh... Thanks, man."

"You probably won't be thanking me after crutching up the ramp in the heat out there," he smirked as he glided backwards toward the kids.

That was probably true. The rink was built up next to a pond, so it had a long ass ramp that went over the water to connect it to the parking lot. It was always awful to walk down it in the winter because the wind harshly whipped at your face and the ramp got pretty icy. Someone always took a spill out there and got teased mercilessly for it in the locker room.

I hoped Grey parked close to the rink because the parking lot was expansive— so much so that the rink rented it to a drive-in movie theater company during summer nights.

As soon as I pushed my way outside, I was thankful for the heat. My limbs could finally de-thaw a bit. I immediately leaned my crutches up against the building and hopped around while trying to rip off my sweatshirt,

when something hit me in the gut and exploded, drenching me in ice cold water...

It took me a second to realize it was a water balloon, and I heard muffled giggles coming from around the side of the building.

The next one hit me square in the chest and almost knocked me on my ass.

I reached to grab my crutches and hopped to dodge the next balloon.

“Watch the cast, guys! Jeez!” I yelled.

Another one came flying in then and I was too clumsy to avoid it. The offending balloon hit me in a place no man wants to be hit...

I released a loud grunt and doubled over. “So you aim for my balls instead?! I surrender!” I yelled.

“Sorry Coach!” Canyon’s voice called out. “Just testing out the balloons for the kiddie camp next week!”

“Yeah, sorry!” Troy could barely say the words because of his laughing.

I heard no words come from the other person who I knew was back there. I’d never forget the sound of *her* giggles. I knew she had to be the one behind this...

“Nice one, Kessel! Real funny!” I held my soaked shirt away from my body and shook my head. Guess I deserved that from her...

While I was annoyed at being soaking wet— because I was about to freeze my ass off in the rink if I didn’t dry up before the end of lunch— I was kind of relieved she targeted me. That meant she was paying attention to me at least...

Any attention was better than no attention... right?

Jeez. I looked to the sky and shook my head.

I'd regressed back to my teenage self.

By the time I made it back up the ramp with his wallet— I had to hold it in my teeth because I needed my hands for crutching— I was sweating bullets and kinda wishing they'd hit me with another water balloon to cool me off, but it looked like they were back inside, probably eating their own lunches by now...

When I finally made it to Benny's, I took in a deep breath and smiled up at the old sign. I always loved Benny's. It was your typical hole-in-the-wall rink diner. The booths were busy with old-timers sipping their coffees in the mornings, then switched to coaches, parents, and players drinking beer and catching games on the TV's later in the day. Christmas lights were strung up in disarray all year round, and patrons' signatures covered the bar. There were probably a million NHL players' youth signatures scrawled out all over it because so many guys passed through here over the years for tournaments or showcases or clinics. I knew mine was somewhere near the dart board.

"Ya made it, finally!" Grey took a swig of his coke and moved a barstool back for me so I could maneuver myself onto it. "What happened to ya, bud?" He laughed looking down at my soaked shirt.

"Claire Kessel happened," I grunted. "And your son... and the other one."

"Yeah, I let them off the ice early at her request. I think she was quite annoyed with you staring at her in the weight room, bud."

Fuck. She noticed? That was pretty embarrassing... I felt my face starting to burn red, which was a joke because I rarely ever got embarrassed. I once farted during a post-game interview in front of a room full of reporters and my face never even turned red. Only she

could do this to me. I dropped my head in my hands and massaged my temples.

“Oh boy.” Paige’s voice came from behind the bar. “I’ve seen way too many of you boys lookin’ like that,” she said more to Grey than me.

He dropped his head back and let out a bark of laughter. “Sorry, you chose the job.”

“What job?” She arched an eyebrow at him and tossed her long blonde hair behind her shoulder.

“Resident Ice League lost boy mom slash psychologist,” he smiled.

She shook her head, but you could tell she was fighting the corners of her lips from curving up.

“Hi, Duke.” She regarded me with her warm smile. She looked almost the exact same as she did when I left this place seven years ago. She had to now be in her early thirties and the only difference was maybe just a few more wrinkles around her eyes from smiling so much over the years. She’d been waitressing at Benny’s since she was a teenager. Now, she and her husband, Max, owned Benny’s. “How’s it goin? I saw—”

Grey held his hand up to stop her. “Don’t say it. Everyone’s been saying it and the kid’s gonna blow up on someone here real soon. Say he had some pretty goals this year instead,” he smirked.

“You had very pretty goals this year,” Paige repeated, looking pretty amused.

I sighed. “Thank you, Paige. I appreciate it. Can I get a beer to drown my sorrows... Ooh, and some of those cheese sticks. I’ve missed those.”

“Eh, nah, he won’t.” Grey squinted at the fridge behind her, seemingly avoiding eye contact with me. “He’ll have one of those chocolate milks, a nice side

salad, and a grilled chicken sandwich. But I'll take some cheese sticks."

I shot him a 'what the fuck' look as Paige quickly tore the menu from my grip.

Grey took his hat off and ran a hand through his short dark hair. "Coach Peterson may have called me... Told me to look out for ya." A corner of his mouth twitched up, like he wanted to laugh, but knew it'd set me off if he did. He knew Coach Petersen, hell, he was Coach's team captain for a couple years.

"Everyone's treating me like I'm a fucking child," I muttered.

His heavy hand slapped me on the back. "Coach just wants you healed up. You should be proud. He thinks you're a big asset to his team, bud."

His cheese sticks came out a minute later. I tried to snatch one, but he quickly slapped my hand away.

"Fuck this," I grumbled. I waited 'til he took a sip of his drink, then added, "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

That got him. He laughed so hard he almost spit out his coke... which just showed the prick really was enjoying it.

"Good. I wanted that to happen. Karma," I told him as he continued to struggle with his fricken giggle fit. "Hope your nose burns."

"Karma is very real!" I heard Paige yell from the back.

8. Claire

I deepened into my downward-facing dog pose, following Darla's instructions. She was the resident yoga instructor for the rink and Max's mom.

She was a figure skater once upon a time and always had a soft spot for me and Addie when we were little. Darla had three very funny, but tough as nails sons who all towered over her and tried to boss her around, so she treated us like the daughters she never had.

Everyone referred to her as just "Darla," even her sons jokingly did it with an eye roll most of the time.

I loved finishing out my day with her classes because her voice was so soothing. Don't get me wrong though, the hockey mom in her started to show real good when people weren't listening. She was a stickler for silence, and she was known for kicking people out of her class when they didn't abide by her rules. But I'd never been asked to leave a class, something I was proud of, and she always used me as an example for younger students.

Today's class was filled with mostly figure skaters with the exception of a couple goalies from the Ice League's junior team who were probably mandated to come by their coach.

I heard a rustling to the side of me, but kept my eyes closed, figuring it must've been another skater running late to class.

"Make sure to distribute the weight evenly through your palms. Lift those hips so the strain isn't in your shoulders," Darla continued with pointers as she walked around the room in her bright pink leggings.

"So, where's the douche today?"

I knew that voice.

My eyes flashed open to see Duke placing his crutches on the ground and leaning down to sit on a blue yoga mat next to me.

Ugh.

I grinded my back teeth together. There went my internal peace. I almost grumbled aloud.

“Where—” he started again.

“Shh,” I responded harshly, cutting him a look to shut it. I nodded toward Darla at the front of the room.

“Now walk your hands out to a plank, my darlings!” Darla advised. “Close your eyes here and envision yourself lifting your shoulders far, far away from the mat.”

Hoping that everyone else listened and closed their eyes, I took the opportunity to sneak a glance at him. I was still getting used to this new Duke. The last time I saw him, he was a tan, lanky teenage boy wearing a puka-shell necklace with long, shaggy hair that he’d snap his neck to the right to shake out of his eyes every couple of minutes. Now, he pushed his floppy hair out of his face and it curled out under his ears like it was permanently sticking out of a hat or helmet. His body was still probably considered lanky by NHL terms, but he looked thicker to me, and his arms were sculpted with impressive muscles... He showed off his strength by holding the pose on only one foot. His casted ankle was resting on the back of his other leg.

I quickly looked away, trying not to blush over the fact that I was checking him out, and hoping that Darla hadn’t noticed. She seemed to notice everything.

“His name is Jacques,” I whispered, finally answering his first question. “And he didn’t come in today. We’re practicing again tomorrow.”

We made eye contact as Darla instructed us to bend our elbows in to do a four-limbed staff pose. “Hold it as

long as you can. Take a rest in cobra pose when you can't hold it any longer!"

Duke pressed his lips together in annoyance. "You going to pick him to skate with?" he asked quietly.

I snorted at his response and ignored my aching muscles wanting me to quit the position. "Doesn't work that way. He needs to pick me."

His face, which was starting to turn red from exertion, scrunched up in confusion. "Come again?"

"There are way more girls than guys in skating," I explained. "So, the guys have the pick of the lot... I simply do not."

"Shh!" Darla shot at us.

Duke strained his neck to look up, and he mouthed sorry to Darla with a flirty grin. Darla looked a little flustered, and I swear to God she actually blushed before shaking her head at his antics.

I felt my jaw angle out to the side and snuck another glance at him. That whole flirt to get out of jail card really pissed me the hell off.

"Really? Do you flirt with everyone?" I asked disdainfully as soon as Darla walked away.

Amusement flashed in his eyes and a wicked grin appeared on his face. "Ooh, is that jealousy, Kessel?"

I shot him a glare, then focused my eyes back on my own mat, trying my hardest to ignore him... But I felt my face burning all the same.

"Alright class, we're moving to side planks. Everyone turn to your right side," Darla said.

Thank God, I internally responded. I'd get to face his back for a minute.

But of course, as soon as I turned to my right, I was staring straight at him, face-to-face.

A shit-eating grin slid onto his eternally boyish face.

“You’re on the wrong side,” I grumbled darkly.

“Foot’s fucked. Have to do this side twice,” he responded nonchalantly. “And there’s no reason to be upset.” His gaze trailed over me, and his eyes practically smoldered. I swear my entire body blushed. “I can flirt with you too. You look good, Kessel.”

My heart practically stopped. I forced myself to take in a deep breath and looked up at my arm instead of at him.

“Now, not many will be able to do this,” Darla continued, “But listen to your body. Lift your knee to the sky, then see if you can grab hold of your foot. Use your big toe as a grip if you have to. Extend your leg straight out and hold.”

Duke grunted as he held his cast and tried to straighten his long leg out. He was very obviously struggling and should’ve quit. I had no problem with this position, I could do it in my sleep.

“Listen to your body, Duke,” I repeated snidely, trying to stifle a giggle.

“I can do it,” he grunted. “Look.”

I snorted. “Right,” I said sarcastically. “I can just do it better, I guess.”

“God, you’re still so competitive,” he bit back, but the look in his eyes told me it wasn’t a complaint. It was our kind of praise, and it made me want to try that much harder.

I breathed in, taking in his strong jawline. “So are you,” I returned.

The corners of his mouth quirked up. “Your competitiveness... It’s fucking lethal to me.”

“It’s fucking deadly,” I countered.

He held my gaze for a beat, then shook his head. "God, you always need the last word," he complained. Then his body shook with laughter... and seeing him happy, seeing him laughing, I don't know, it just overcame me too. Suddenly, we were both struggling to stay in position, trying hard to smother our giggles.

"Claire and Duke, you're acting like middle schoolers. Am I going to have to separate you?" Darla asked in a warning tone.

My eyes found his, and I gave him my best told-you-so look as we moved back into downward-facing dog.

"It's not me!" he whispered, aghast.

"It is to you... 'You look good, Kessel,'" I mimicked him.

"Well, when you're in that position, what's a guy to think?" he whispered in a husky voice.

I immediately dropped down.

"I win." He smirked at me with fiery eyes.

My mouth dropped open in surprise. "No, that was cheating," I argued. But as he continued staring me down with that smug look on his stupidly handsome face, hot fury started rising in my chest.

And... I have no defense for what I did other than the fact that I was momentarily blinded by annoyance... I pushed him.

He splatted to his side and immediately lifted his arms in innocence, clearly shocked I did that. "Kessel!" he burst out, forgetting we were supposed to whisper.

"Enough! Claire. Duke. Out!" Darla yelled.

And he actually tried to argue, "But she-"

"Out!" Darla called out in a shrill voice.

I shot him a glare as I ripped up my mat and angrily rolled it up. I should've known better. This was what always happened. It was fun going back and forth with him until it wasn't.

I stormed into the hallway, pissed off at him. I'd never once been kicked out of class, and of course it happened after one measly day with him here.

I heard him crutching behind me, trying to keep up with me. "At least I won," he said smugly.

I whirled on him and pointed an accusing finger at his chest. "Oh no, you did not!" I countered.

He tipped his chin back and his adam's apple bulged out as he let out a bark of laughter. "Give it up, Kessel, I lasted longer than you."

I clenched my jaw and crossed my arms over my chest. "No. You suck at yoga, I'm better. I can last longer."

His eyes flashed with mischief. "Woah, woah, woah, maybe only at one thing, and that's biology's fault."

"What are you talking about?" I snapped before I could fully process what he's said.

"Oh, you know what I'm talking about," he drawled, crutching closer to me, so close that we were almost touching in the small hallway. I breathed in the scent of him. Woodsy and straight up male. God. Why did he smell so good? "You can last longer than me at maybe one thing... And I want you to say it," he whispered. His breath tingled my skin.

He must've suspected the blush on my face. He licked his lips and swallowed. Suddenly my mouth was incredibly dry.

"There are a lot of things," I croaked out.

"Oh fuck off," he chuckled. "You know what I'm talking about."

I felt my face crack. “When did you become so chauvinistic, Duke Callahan! Women win at a lot of things.” I racked my brain to come up with anything other than what he *wanted* me to say. “We survive in colder temperatures better, we cook better, we’re better at school, *and* we last longer.” Shit. “In life!” I quickly added. “Men almost always die first.”

He snorted and lifted an eyebrow. “Your mind was in the gutter. Admit it. You were thinking about sex. You still like me, Kessel.”

I angled my jaw out at him. He was infuriating. He was the one who got on this stupid topic. But he would never ever admit that. It wasn’t even worth it to sit here and argue. I shook my head and stormed off.

“Kessel, wait,” he said.

I whirled around and almost bumped right into his broad chest.

“Woah, there girl.” He placed his large hand on my waist, and I stared at it. My skin practically burned under his touch. It suddenly felt like all the air in the hallway was sucked out and the space was way too small for the two of us. I could practically feel his body heat.

“I.. You...” I sputtered. “You got me kicked out!”

“You got *me* kicked out!” His eyes blazed, he loved this. He loved arguing. He loved seeing me mad. He cocked his head to the side. “Ya know, I really needed those stretches, Kessel.”

I harrumphed and turned to leave again, but he reached out and grabbed my wrist lightly. “Wait, can we talk a sec?”

I looked at our hands first, then back to his face. The lightness was gone from his eyes, and he looked serious this time. My insides were so confused. I was mad at him. *MAD AT HIM*, I internally yelled at myself.

But the truth was... I thought he looked good too. Really good. And my stupid body betrayed me by nodding and following him into the workout room.

He immediately found the chairs where the scouts usually sat. They were pushed up against the windows so that people could view down into the rink.

“Here, take a seat for a bit, you’ve been working all day,” he motioned to the chair next to him.

I crossed my arms over my chest and looked at him skeptically.

“I’m serious, c’mon. Let’s catch up for a minute,” he said with a tight chuckle.

I was still questioning myself for following him in here... but if I was being honest with myself, I really *did* want to talk to him. While I didn’t trust him, I still respected him as an athlete— and as an old rival. And... I was still a sucker for his playful brown eyes. Deep down, I knew he could convince me to do anything, and I hated that about myself. But here I still was, being pushed forward by his words.

The only problem— when I went to sit down next to him, my butt was met with air where there should’ve been chair... and I fell flat on my ass.

I gaped up at him in shock, then immediately snapped my mouth shut.

He just regarded me with a proud smirk. “That’s for the water balloons, Kessel. I know it was you. Now we’re even,” he said with a grin.

I felt my jaw angle to the side as I inconspicuously searched for a water bottle on the ground next to me.

He reached a hand down to help me up, but instead, I squirted the water bottle— a bit aggressively— directly in his face.

He sat completely still for a second, just blinking, as the water droplets dripped down his face and clung to his long eyelashes.

“*Not* even,” I said. “I win.”

He was so still and silent that I was slightly worried he was actually angry at me... It felt like someone had hit pause, and we were both staring at each other.

Until his laughter finally broke the silence.

His shoulders shook as he full-on belly laughed and covered his eyes.

Something cracked in me at that moment, and I couldn't stop a laugh from bubbling up inside of me as well. And it felt good to laugh with him; to be happy for a small moment together.

He smoothed a hand through his hair. “We're way too old for this,” he finally said when he calmed down.

I wiped the tears from the corners of my eyes. “Yeah, maybe.”

He stuck his rough, large hand out to shake mine. “Truce?”

I smiled sadly at his hand. I wasn't sure if there would ever be a truce between us... because wouldn't that mean that I'd have to forgive him? And I couldn't. Why would I forgive him when he never asked me to in the first place? So instead, I pushed into a handstand and walked on my hands to lean up against the back cinderblock wall.

“Bet I can still hold it longer than you,” I grunted.

His eyebrows flew up. “Finally, something I can do without my foot. I'll take that challenge.”

He carefully kicked himself into a sloppy handstand against the wall next to me, then just because of who he is, he started doing push-ups.

“Showoff,” I grunted.

“Eh, not gonna lie, I’m getting pretty dizzy,” he returned.

I craned my neck to look at his face, which was definitely starting to turn red from being upside down. I kicked off against the wall to land on my feet, then grabbed his legs to help him down.

When he was sitting on the floor, he leaned his head against the wall, and smiled with his eyes closed.

“What?” I prodded him.

“I lasted longer than you,” he grinned like the troublemaker he really was.

I shook my head at him. Of course he would say that. “Still dizzy?”

“Eh.” He shrugged and wrinkled his nose. “Can’t wait ‘til I stop feeling so weak. This sucks ass.”

I could understand that. I hated when I had to baby myself because of an injury, and I always chastised myself for not fully enjoying how good it felt to be completely healthy and strong.

Looking at him now, I noticed his face was starting to look a little pale. I pushed myself off the floor and went to my cubby on the sidewall of the workout room to retrieve some candy from my bag.

“Sugar always helps,” I said while ripping open the package and handing him a Reese’s cup. “Sorry it’s not a Snickers.”

The corners of his eyes crinkled happily. “You remembered.”

I slowly lowered myself to sit next to him on the floor and hugged my knees close to my chest. He was sitting in his usual way— slouched and taking up a lot of space with his long legs spread out in front of him.

“I think everyone here remembers. You were crazy about having it. When the vending machines were out, you’d be all over my dad’s case like no other. Snickers and Mountain Dew had to be stocked to the max, always.” I smiled at the memory.

He nodded. “It’s my pre-game snack. Only eat them when I need some luck though. Don’t wanna get sick of them.”

“You say that like you don’t have many games. I’m surprised you don’t hate them by now,” I pointed out. NHL guys played close to 80 games a year, more if they made it to the postseason play-offs.

“Nah, I do love a good Reese’s here and there though. Nothin’ like taking their panties off.” He eyed me, waiting for my reaction, and I tried to hold it in, but I couldn’t not smirk at his ridiculousness.

I swatted his shoulder. “You are still twelve years old, aren’t you?”

“Just call me Peter Pan. Always will be,” he smirked, and he did look just like the little boy I once knew. He gazed around the weight room then. “Remember when you used to sleep in the gym in middle school? I had a dream about that last night.”

His openness was kind of shocking... But I guess he had always spoken candidly when it was just the two of us.

“Yeah, I remember.” I swallowed. That was a tough time in life, and he’d been there for me. I’d always remember it. And after all was said and done with us, that memory was part of what made hating him so hard.

“So, now you’re back to skate with that asshole, huh? I don’t get why *you* don’t have the pick of the lot when you’re the champ. Heard you crushed it at Nationals.”

I finally let myself look up into his light brown eyes. “Sounds like you’ve done some research.”

He took in a slow breath. The strained silence between us was weird, but so was the fact that we now *had* to do research to know anything about one another.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I think you’re too good for him,” he shrugged.

I snorted at that.

He drew his eyebrows together. “It’s true.”

We sat in comfortable silence for a beat, until he asked, “Where’d your mom go? She doesn’t coach here anymore?”

Of course he’d notice that. I guess I just hoped he’d stay away from that topic.

“Nope. She went with me to Canada. We left soon after you did. I couldn’t move alone,” I said tightly.

“Ah...” He raised his eyebrows. “Stinks that figure skating doesn’t have billet families like hockey does.”

“Yeah... But it worked out. It got my parents away from each other, and I was able to skate with Matty.” I sighed. “But, after Matty and I ended our partnership, I wanted to come home. I missed Addie and Dad. Mom wanted to stay out there.”

“Oh... sorry,” he said.

I shrugged it off and turned to face the rink behind us so I didn’t have to look him in the eye. I could still read him, so I bet it went both ways, and that was a bit unnerving. He’d be able to tell that it did bug me. For a girl who was never anyone’s first choice, it burned that my own mother didn’t pick me either. “Not a big deal,” I lied. “Better that the two of them stay a country apart from each other. Crazy how some people really are meant to be together and others just... aren’t.”

He maneuvered sideways so he could follow my gaze. Jules and Grey were on the ice below us teaching their little girl how to skate.

“Yeah, some people get it right,” he agreed.

I nodded. “Watching them, it’s hard not to believe in soulmates,” I joked. I peeked over at him, and he tensed in the same way he did as a pre-teen: his jaw tightened, and his nose slightly flared.

After a beat of silence, he said, “Yeah, they exist, but kinda wish they didn’t.”

That statement jarred me a bit inside. “What do you mean?”

He looked at me with serious eyes. “It’s a lot on a person when it doesn’t work out.”

The conversation suddenly felt way too serious, and I felt the need to lighten it up. I cleared my throat. “Oh, so you’re scared,” I teased.

He sucked in his top lip and nodded. “Yeah, I am.”

I wasn’t expecting that answer. I started to say something but stopped myself. For some reason, my heart felt like it was sinking, and I suddenly felt the need to move away from him.

I hoisted myself up and wandered over to the weights to make sure they were racked correctly, which I knew they were.

“Hey, Kessel,” he said, pulling my eyes back to his. His eyebrows raised. “Maybe... Maybe we could be friends again?”

I quickly looked down and felt my face burning. He wanted to be friends. *We* were never *just* friends. There was always something more between us. But he’d never admit that. And I never wanted to go back to that kind of situation. It was too frustrating. I didn’t want to have to fight for attention and love ever again. It had to be more simple than that.

“What? Why not?” He crunched closer to me.

“I just don’t think...” I started, but my throat clogged with emotion.

“C’mon,” he said in a lighter tone. “You can’t still be mad at me because...”

“Because?” I looked up at his light brown eyes. “Because what, Duke?”

“Because...” His eyes searched mine, but he couldn’t admit it. He knew what he did, yet he wanted to bury the past and never revisit it again... which was rich because I still hurt from it every time I looked at him.

I pushed past him to leave.

When I reached the doors, his voice stopped me in my tracks.

“I know what I did was bad,” he called out. “But it wasn’t *that* bad. C’mon, Kessel,” he pleaded.

I paused, caught between wanting to blow up on him or ignore his plea and leave him standing there alone.

I closed my eyes tightly, willing myself not to break down or let my voice crack.

“You saying that is very telling,” I whispered to keep my voice even. I couldn’t look back at him.

“What do you mean?”

I cleared my painfully tight throat. “Well Duke, I wasn’t worthy of a goodbye, and now I guess I’m not even worthy of an apology. If that’s the kind of friendship you’re offering... I don’t want it.”

I left without looking back.

He would never understand just how bad his actions hurt someone like me in the first place.

9. Claire

I sat there trying to forget it all, but my brain wouldn't let me move forward. Seeing him again brought me right back to that hurt place that I'd tried so hard to move on from.

Now, sitting in the back of Benny's all alone, I let the memories flood forward...

We're seven years old. His dirty blonde hair keeps getting lighter all summer. He has a lot of freckles. He's always making other kids laugh. I want to hear what they joke about, but he only talks with the boys. He's the only kid enrolled in the summer kiddie camp at the rink who is any good at skating. And he's very cute. I need him to notice me because I want to be included in their conversations.

Maybe if I beat him, I can join them...

So, I need to win this next race...

We're nine and I think Duke and his buddies whisper about me. It makes me mad. So, I beat him. I beat him at everything. I'd rather die than lose to him, because that makes him mad, so now he knows how I feel.

We're ten. Everyone at the rink calls him a "ball of hate" because he gets in so many hockey fights.

I overhear my dad lecturing him in the rink office.

Duke looks really upset, like he's about to cry. I want to tell him that everyone gets yelled at, and that it doesn't really matter. I want to give him a hug, but I know I can't...

We're eleven now, and I'm so tired...

My parents are getting a divorce. They yell at each other all night.

I thought Coca-Cola was alcohol. No, I was told that it was alcohol and that daddy drinks it when he drives us to skating. I said he was a drunk driver to those people in suits...

The next morning, Duke comes up to me– he’s wearing his puka shell summer necklace– and he tells me that Coca-Cola is only pop. I’m so angry. I wish he didn’t tell me because now I know I’m being manipulated. I’m so mad at everyone...

So, I punch him in the eye...

It’s the first day of middle school. We have first hour English together. He’s way taller than me now. He keeps growing and I don’t.

I catch him looking at me sometimes. He turns away real quick, but I can still see that his cheeks turn red.

All of a sudden, we have a secret that we’re taking to the grave...

In seventh grade gym class, the boys are told they have to pick a girl to be on their team. Reggie picks me first. Duke’s mad. So mad that he won’t even look at me.

The gym teacher blows the whistle to start the game, and Duke chucks the ball hard right at Reggie’s face. Reggie falls back on his butt and holds his nose. Blood immediately starts trickling down his face.

Reggie is sent to the office. Duke is sent to the locker rooms to change.

Everyone starts teasing Duke and calling him a “ball of hate” at school now too. He acts like he doesn’t care, but his jaw tightens up and his nose flares a bit, and I can tell that he does care. A lot.

We’re in eighth grade. His freckles have faded a lot and he has shaggy hair now. He swings his neck to the side to get it out of his eyes. I want to touch his hair; to

brush it out of his eyes gently. But that would be stupid... right?

We both missed the same day of school— him because of a hockey tourney, me because of a figure skating competition. So, we both have to take our math test out in the hallway.

We sit on opposite sides of the hall. He's sticking his tongue out, so I know he's concentrating hard. I think he's doing badly on the test because he keeps looking at me. Maybe he wants help?

'Why are you looking at me?' I ask him quietly.

'Your pretty hair,' he says while looking back at his test. 'It's so shiny when the sun hits it.'

It's the last day of eighth grade now... He comes up to my locker and all the kids around us start whispering. I feel my cheeks heat up a bit, which is odd. That never happened to me around him before, but we barely see each other anymore.

'Can you uh... sign my yearbook?' He gives me his usual lopsided grin.

I haven't signed any yearbooks yet because I don't really have friends here at school. It makes me feel special that he wants me to sign it. I nod and tell him I'll give it back after first period...

But as I flip through the pages, I see that my face has been scribbled out, and the word 'fugly' is written on top of it. It feels like my throat is closing up. I will myself not to start crying. I will not. Because I'm in the middle of math class and everyone will see, and they'll know why...

But why... Why had I been thinking so stupidly?

I don't want to face him. So, I open his yearbook up to the offending page and leave it at the foot of his locker.

At lunch... the gossip spreads like wildfire...

Duke got suspended. On the very last day of school. His mom had to come pick him up and everything...

Apparently, he tackled his friend Tyler and beat him up. The whole time, Tyler was yelling that it was just a joke...

It's the summer before high school. We aged out of the kiddie camp at the rink a while ago. I miss it. I miss him. Even though we only ever chirped insults at each other, I miss the interaction.

On Wednesdays we cross paths in the weight room though, and we still compete. It's the only way to make him notice me.

I continue to do pull-ups 'til I feel my body shaking and my face turning red... but I will not lose to him. I want to impress him...

So, I win.

His face turns red... but not from effort. I think he's embarrassed? He was never embarrassed to lose to me before...

His friends are teasing him. 'You lost to a girl!' they yell.

'She's not a normal girl, look at her arms,' he says with a smile...

But he won't look at me...

My stomach sinks...

Why am I not a normal girl?

We're freshmen in high school. He's dating that bitch Daniella. She made fun of me for being 'short and stocky.' I'd like to punch her in the nose. She's the total opposite of me— tall with long, black hair.

It crushes my heart when I see him carrying her backpack. It hurts even more when I see her wearing his sweatshirt with 'CALLAHAN' stitched to the back overtop of a large #14. It's his favorite hoodie... And he gave it to her...

For some reason, I felt like it should be mine...

But why does he still pull my ponytail whenever he sees me in the hall if he likes Daniella so much? I heard she told him to stop doing that. Why does he still look at me first every time someone says or does something funny in class? It's almost like he wants to check if I heard and found it funny too...

We're sophomores in high school. We don't have any classes together this year because I took honors courses and he took regular ones. It sucks. I think I'll stick with the regular track next year.

I see him here and there in the hallway, and he always gives me a head nod with a lopsided grin on his face. I give him a head nod right back, and that's sadly the extent of our relationship now.

When walking out of biology one day, I feel a wake of whispers behind me as I continue to my locker. I look around wondering what the heck everyone's talking about.

And then I see him.

Daniella's looking at me and whispering in his ear. Is she laughing? At me? What the hell did I do? Duke looks pissed. He kinda snarls at her and pulls his arm away, then breaks into a jog to catch up to me.

He clears his throat behind me and rips off his hoodie. I get a peek of his impressive abs when his shirt gets pulled up a bit, but I force myself to turn and keep walking.

But he's following me pretty closely now, and I'm kinda weirded out by it. I immediately pick up my pace,

but he lunges forward and grips my waist to pull me back toward him so that we're almost touching.

"Uh?" I look up at him with wide eyes wondering what the hell he's doing. Daniella or one of her groupies will see us and torment the hell out of me.

He clenches his jaw, and nods to someone across the hall as he ties his hoodie around my waist. "You have some uh... stuff on your pants, Kessel," he whispers.

My face burns. My eyes burn. My throat burns.

"Hey, it's okay," he says, but I can't even form words. I want to disappear.

He slides in front of me and pulls me by the hand toward the art wing, not caring that the minute bell for class just rang and everyone else is scurrying to class.

He dips behind the art wing's doors where there's a little privacy, and he immediately pulls me into a hug. It's so warm and comforting that I feel like breaking down.

After a minute, he pulls back and his eyebrows scrunch down like he's concerned. He bends his head to look into my eyes. "It's okay, Kessel."

But my eyes are still burning.

I don't cry, but when he pulls me into a warm hug, it's so comforting that it makes me want to cry even more, but not because of embarrassment anymore...

Because I want him, but he's not mine.

"C'mon, you're my tough girl. Be tough," he says.

It's the summer before senior year. He broke up with Daniella before summer break. His hair doesn't get as light in the summer anymore; it mostly stays a brown-ish color now, which matches his eyes, but the front strands still have natural highlights.

We're at a Fourth of July party at Max and Paige's new house. While yes, it's the Fourth of July, it's also my

seventeenth birthday.

I braid my hair and catch him looking at me. If I'm not a normal girl, why does he always watch me?

I wonder if he remembers it's my birthday? They always passed out cupcakes for me at the kiddie camp each year, so he did know when it was at one point in time...

After I finish my turn wakeboarding, I pull myself into the boat on my own. In the back of my head, I chastise myself for doing that. I forgot it's apparently not cute when a girl is stronger than all the guys. I wished I could look like my sister Addie. She's lanky and delicate. But I'm a pairs skater. I need muscles.

One of his hockey buds named Trevor is making fun of me.

I feel my face turning bright red.

But Duke is calm. Duke's not laughing. Duke shoves Trevor into the water.

"My girl is stronger than you, ya wuss," he calls out to Trevor who's flailing in the water...

I stop breathing... Duke called me his girl in front of everyone...

I hesitantly look at him, and he gives me a shy smile.

"Fireworks at midnight!" Max calls out while running past us, breaking our connection. He shoves Duke in the water.

I immediately look over the edge of the boat. He resurfaces and shakes his hair out before smoothing it back. He's still smiling at me.

After dinner, someone grabs my hand. I turn and see Duke.

"Wanna sit at the end of the dock with me?" He sucks in his lower lip, and he looks kinda sheepish, like he's

nervous. I've never seen him look nervous before.

I stare at him in the dark. His sharp cheekbones and jaw line are outlined by the light from the tiki-torches. I jump as the first firework pops in the air with a huge boom.

He laughs at my reaction and interlaces his rough, long fingers with mine.

I cannot believe he's holding my hand. I want to hold onto this moment forever.

He's pulling me toward the empty dock, and my heart is pounding with so many questions. Did we finally figure it out? Is it finally okay that we like each other?

We sit there together, just watching each firework explode above us. He's tapping on the dock next to us, and I chuckle to myself. He's always moving. He can't stop.

He looks around to make sure no one is watching us, then turns back to me.

"Can I kiss you?" he asks in a husky voice.

I bite my lip and look at his rosy ones. I nod.

He leans forward, and his soft lips meet mine. I feel the boom in my chest, and I don't know if it's only from the fireworks or from how happy I am. My first kiss.

He smiles wryly at me when he pulls back. "Happy Birthday, Kessel."

We stay up until 3am laying out on the dock under the stars talking to each other about everything.

I think we're finally going to be together.

I'd finally have a friend. I'd finally wear his sweatshirt. I'd finally be asked to a school dance. For once in my life, someone was choosing me.

At one point he rolls me onto his chest and pushes my hair behind my ears as he's telling me a story about his sister and her friends.

I struggle to keep up with the story because I just love when he touches me. I never want him to stop touching me.

I could stare at his long eyelash-rimmed, brown eyes forever.

This is special.

The next morning, Duke isn't at the rink.

I ponder how to ask someone about his absence all day.

By dinnertime, I bite the bullet and ask my dad.

He doesn't even look up from his meal. "He left for juniors, honey. He's skating out in South Dakota this year. He went early because..."

I don't hear another word he says...

Because with those first two sentences, the bottom of my world falls through.

It feels like I just took a punch to the stomach.

Because how could I be so stupid?

I was planning everything in my head around him... And the whole time, he was planning on leaving.

And I wasn't even worthy of a goodbye?

His absence in my world is like a huge hole.

Life just isn't the same.

There's no little thrill in my chest when I see him at school or the rink.

There's no one to compete against.

There's no one to look at when something's funny.

There's just loneliness.

And it's suffocating.

*I suddenly need to leave. I need to change. I cannot
be here and be the same anymore.*

So, I do change.

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10. Duke

I tossed and turned all night... well, as much as I could while trying to keep my fucked-up foot flat on the bed.

I just couldn't seem to shut off my thoughts. Every time I closed my eyes, all I could see was that hurt look on Claire's face, and it gutted me.

God. I couldn't stand that I hurt her. I hated myself for it. I wanted to make it up to her. I wanted to show her that I did care about her, and she was important to me. But I couldn't fully do that...

While I wanted to grab her up and kiss her deeply and never let go... Deep down, I knew that would only be leading her on. I would still never enter a serious relationship, and with her, it would be impossible to break it off after only three weeks.

I did not possess the kind of willpower that would take...

In the dark, I bit my lip and shook my head. I had no business flirting with her like I had after yoga class either.

I couldn't go there with her.

But I also couldn't stay away from her.

I knew my eyes would go straight to hers in every room I ever saw her in.

So, Friendship.

That would have to be the answer. I could give her that. But only if she accepted it.

I needed to somehow make it up to her. The first step would be to fully apologize. And grovel until she accepted my apology.

I needed to find her first thing tomorrow before practice and lay it all out to her. It needed to be the best apology of my damn life.

Except, when I made my way into the rink, she was already practicing with the major douche.

I acted like I meant to be there that early to talk to her dad... because I was honestly slightly embarrassed about the whole thing. If I could strangle my spineless seventeen-year-old self for putting me in this position, I would.

So, I made my way very slowly to Craig's office, ignoring the way the douche was watching me with an amused look on his face as I crutched across the lobby.

"Okay, let's try it again," Igor, Claire's coach, said.

"Yes, I think that's a good plan," the older, plump lady, who was probably the douche's coach, added.

Following Craig's advice, I looked away when they set up the lift... but when I heard Claire cry out, my neck snapped back to where she was... which was now on the floor.

Pretty sure her hitting the floor was against every rule of off-ice training. The guy partner was supposed to do everything in his power to make sure she didn't fall on the ground. But apparently this guy didn't play by those rules. He was standing straight up, like he hadn't even made an effort.

Igor was standing over Claire assessing her, and I held my breath until she stood back up and brushed herself off.

The woman coach was trying to say something to Igor, but he was shaking his head. When the douche stepped closer to him and Claire, he held his hand up to make him back off.

“I think we’re done for today,” Igor said firmly.

I held my tongue, but I really wanted to shout out some colorful words at the asshole who dropped her.

“Today is not over. We train until I say so,” the douche demanded.

And that pulled me to my feet... well, foot.

Claire’s eyes went directly to mine in the office. Her mouth stayed in a firm line as she gave me a slight negative head shake to make me back down.

I shook my head back at her and started moving... which prompted her to start walking toward me.

Good. I felt a small smile slide onto my face. Mission accomplished. I got my girl away from that whole situation without even having to go over there.

But... as she walked closer to Craig’s office, I could see the cross look on her face, and I forced myself to stop grinning...

She walked right up to me with that determined look on her dainty face, then blew her hair out of her face in a very unladylike but very Claire-like fashion.

She pushed a finger into my chest. “*You* don’t get to do that whole protective thing, Duke, so stop it. You have no right,” she said through clenched teeth.

I forced myself not to laugh at the fact that she was so tiny but had to look way up to give me a talking to. She would be much more intimidating if she weren’t so cute. My eyes drifted to her piercing hazel eyes, with flicks of green, brown, and gold in them, to her lips, to her—

“Duke!” she disciplined.

“I know,” I quickly supplied. “I have no right.”

She seemed surprised by my answer because her mouth slightly dropped open, but she quickly recovered.

“Good. And another thing-”

“I’m sorry.”

She paused before looking up to my eyes again. Her face cracked in confusion. “What?”

“C’mon, let’s go to Benny’s.” I started moving forward, but she stood still, rooted to her spot. “Please?”

“I have to—”

“No, you don’t. You’re done with practice,” I smiled smugly at her.

Her jaw clenched. “Ya know Duke, you make me want to punch you in the face when you look at me like that.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time, babe.” I winked at her as I held the office door open for her.

That pushed her forward... but I think only so she could punch me in the gut as she passed me.

I buckled forward and shook my head as I watched her cute butt march across the lobby toward Benny’s.

By the time I crutched my way into Benny’s, she was already sitting in the very last booth drinking a cup of coffee.

I was happy she chose to sit at a booth because it gave us a bit more privacy than the bar. While I knew Paige, who’d surely be manning the bar, would give us helpful insight, I didn’t want Claire to hold back or measure her words... I wanted everything out in the open so we could move forward. We had the whole summer in front of us, and I wanted it to be a good one... like the kinds of summers we had as kids.

I carefully slid into the booth and Paige was there in a second, waiting to take my order.

“Wow, it’s like deja-vu seeing the two of you here again,” Paige said in her usual peppy voice.

I smirked. "Yeah, except now we're old farts."

She smiled. "True. Coffee for you?"

I nodded. "And I know it's early, but can you get me an order of cheese sticks by any chance? Before Grey gets here if possible?"

Paige snickered at that. "You sure? He'll be here pretty soon."

"Fine. Eggs and toast, please," I grumbled.

She nodded and patted my head. "Good boy."

As soon as Paige left, Claire gave me a questioning look.

"My Coach called Grey and told him to make sure I was taking care of myself."

"You don't take care of yourself usually?" she asked skeptically.

I rolled my eyes. "Grew up on concession stand food and all of a sudden they decide it's bad for me. Stupid."

"You really are Peter Pan," she smirked.

"Maybe."

She eyed me as she sipped her coffee and gestured for me to begin.

But I was too nervous to go right into the apology. I cleared my throat. "Well, I hope this means you're done with Jackie boy."

"Jacques," she corrected, looking unimpressed.

"Whatever. He's-"

"You're changing the subject," she said, staring directly into my eyes.

"Damn, okay, yeah." I drew in a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I am very truly sorry for the way I left, Claire. If I

could knock some sense into my dopey teenage self, I would. Believe me.”

She held her mouth in a firm line for what felt like a whole minute.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” I felt my eyebrows knit together. That was all it took?

She tilted her head to the side, studying me. “I’ve always wanted to ask you why you did that to me though. Why make my birthday so special and kiss me and go along with the idea that we were going to date just to then make me feel stupid? You know that you made me feel stupid, don’t you?”

I closed my eyes and cringed.

“I think it hurt differently because you were my only friend,” she added.

That felt like a knife to the heart.

“No one ever wanted to hang around me, Duke,” she powered on, continuing to twist the knife. “Girls would make plans with me as a placeholder until something else or *someone* else better came around.” She looked away for a second before continuing. “I think I was the only kid who hated weekends. I still do. I like the weekday grind better because I have a purpose and people have to talk to me. On the weekends, I’m untethered, disconnected from everyone else.” She cut herself off and paused, then looked back at me again. “Ya know when you used to have to pick partners in class? And other kids would look around the room and make eye contact with who they wanted to be with? I never had anyone to look at. I was always the one walking up to the teacher because I didn’t have a partner. I felt like no one actually wanted to be around me.” She held her hand up and shook her head. “No, don’t feel bad. I don’t want your pity over it... I just

wanted to say, I always figured well, they didn't really know me, so who cares, ya know?"

I was shaking my head no, because she was so incredibly wrong. I always wanted to be around her back then; how could she have missed that?

She gave me a sad smile. "I know. You always paid attention to me. In quiet ways, and that was okay. You saw me. You noticed me. And that was enough. And then on my seventeenth birthday, you were magically choosing me in front of everyone. And it felt so good to be chosen for once..." she trailed off.

I ripped off my hat and rubbed a hand over my forehead. It took all of me to stay sitting, because I didn't want to relive how I hurt her. The guilt was eating me alive.

"But the next day, I felt like a total idiot. I felt like the butt of a joke that you of all people played on me. Because how important could I really be to you if you didn't even care to say goodbye? And then my mind spun to an even worse conclusion... You *did* truly know me, and you still discarded me like I was a piece of trash. That hurt, Duke. You ghosted me before ghosting was even a term. And the whole thing reaffirmed that I wasn't good enough to ever be anyone's priority. So, I needed to become my own priority. I needed to choose myself, and part of that was doing what I wanted regardless of what anyone else thought."

I forced myself to swallow and eyed her black hair. I was vibing with it before because it made her colorful eyes pop out even more than they naturally did. But to be honest, I now hated it. She basically just admitted she only changed it because of my dickhead moves.

I shifted in my seat uncomfortably. "Your hair?" I asked.

“Yes, my hair was one of the first things I did. This suits me better. I was never a bubbly blonde.” She shrugged.

I propped my elbows on the table and dropped my head in my hands, feeling disgusted with myself. When I left without saying goodbye, I hadn’t meant to hurt her.

“But you were my kind of blonde,” I mumbled.

“Again, you have no right to say that, Duke,” she said gently.

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. I was a dick, okay? I did think of you though, all the time.” I looked at her desperately, hoping that she believed me. “That’s what’s so ironic about it.” I choked back a sick laugh. “I was choosing other people to make myself *stop* prioritizing you. I was just a stupid kid.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Why did you want to stop?”

When I didn’t say anything, she started to exit the booth.

“No, stay, please...”

She took a deep breath and slowly sat back down.

“When we were little, I had a short fuse, everyone knew that,” I said.

She nodded.

I kept my eyes on my hands in front of me. “I got teased for liking you and I hated it. You know how that was, it was like the worst thing at the time... The boys would do things just to get under my skin— like Reggie picking you first in kickball. He knew I wanted to pick you. And Tyler scribbling your face out in my yearbook— I didn’t know he did that when I gave it to you by the way,” I quickly added, “and when I saw what happened, I beat his ass.”

She snorted. “*That* I remember.”

“It just felt like I wasn’t allowed to like you... but as we got older...” I swallowed hard before choking out the truth: “It’s like, I knew you were it for me.”

I finally looked up at her and she looked frozen in place.

“But then I knew I was leaving, and I couldn’t leave without trying to kiss you. I couldn’t do it. I needed you to know how much I liked you. But I sat there and figured you had your own thing going with skating, and we were so young. I had this weird confidence that we’d make it back together one day after I was in the NHL and you won the Olympics. Then we would get married and make a bunch of babies together. Like that’s really what I thought. It was so simple in my mind.” I shrugged. “I’m very sorry.”

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11. Claire

Looking across the booth at his sorry self, I deflated a bit... because my young self was finally justified in a way for feeling so hurt. I knew what I felt between us was real, and I knew I couldn't find that with anyone else. I bet he struggled to find a connection with anyone else as well and that's why he probably stayed single.

But things would've been so different if he would've just been honest with me back then...

"That still doesn't explain why you didn't say goodbye to me, Duke. You could've told me all that," I said.

He closed his eyes tightly, like it pained him, and his throat rolled. "Because it was too hard. I almost did it about five times... but that night was perfect. I think you might agree maybe?" he asked weakly. "Because it was perfect in my eyes. And I didn't want to ruin the memory. I just... got caught up in dreaming of what we could be. The next morning, I thought about going to your house... the rink... anywhere I knew you'd be... I thought about it, but I froze. I was scared. I didn't want to upset you or let you down or make you cry. I just..." He shook his head. "I couldn't do it. I already didn't want to leave, and I thought if I went to say goodbye to you, I'd blow off juniors and never go."

"So you made me cry myself to sleep because I thought you didn't care about me instead," I deadpanned.

He flinched at my words. "I deserved that." He rubbed a hand over his face. "You could have reached out though," he argued.

My mouth dropped open at that. "You could've too! Why would I reach out, Duke?! I was the one who felt rejected!"

He quickly backpedaled and shook his head. "I know. I'm sorry. I was a stupid, scared kid... But now..." He looked at me with hopeful eyes.

"Now?" I repeated. Because if I were honest with myself, I still wanted a 'now' with him. Deep down, I still wanted more than anything else in the world for him to choose me.

"Can we be friends?" he asked.

Across the booth from me, I saw the little boy who I so desperately wanted to be friends with as a kid.

"Yes," I croaked out.

He started exiting the booth then, and I felt my eyebrows knit together in confusion.

"We have to hug now, shorty. We need to seal the deal, duh." He gave me his signature boyish grin that told me he really was happy. He reached for my hand to pull me up.

I smirked. "If you say so."

As soon as I stood, he pulled my head into his broad chest, and I felt his steady heartbeat. We fit together perfectly like puzzle pieces, and it felt so comforting and so right. A laugh bubbled up in my throat. "This doesn't change *some* things though," I clarified.

His body froze a bit, but he kept me in a tight hug and peered down at me with a questioning look.

"You'll still be the kiddie camp's target practice with water balloons if you don't watch it," I clarified.

His eyebrows popped up in shock. "Even though I'm injured?!"

I laughed and patted his chest. "Especially because of that. You need to keep up your other fast twitch muscles. Beware, buddy boy." I grinned.

12. Claire

The first official week of summer work went well... but it was exhausting. I felt like I barely had a second to breathe all day. I ran the kiddie camp until three, which was draining in and of itself. I realized real quick that working with kids was rewarding, but very taxing, because you always had to be 'on.' If I didn't smile for a second, at least a couple kids thought I was upset with them, which definitely wasn't the case, and definitely told me that I had a resting-bitch-face.

After the camp ended for the day, I'd practice for an hour by myself, running through all my jumps and spins, and then Jacques would come in around 4pm and we'd get to work with the partner tryout.

The only oddity was that while the entire rink emptied out, Duke still hung around in the front office...

The clinic he was coaching ended at three, so I knew he didn't have a reason to hang around, but he still did. Each day when I walked out practically last, he and Beau— who he brought to the rink with him every day— would join me on my way to my car. We'd joke around about some funny thing that some kid said that day, and it was nice.

And a secret little hope started to grow in my heart...

This hope whispered, what a wonderful life this would be. Working side-by-side with him at the rink and then ending the day together. It was comfortable. Just walking beside him gave me a sense of belonging, a sense of understanding. I never had to over explain anything to him, because he could track the way I was thinking and the conclusions I jumped to. I think it was because our mindsets were rare and the same. As kids, we were never the ones who were nervous about taking up space at the rink, or anywhere, really. We demanded attention,

and we demanded respect, and we never ever second-guessed ourselves. Both of us knew without a doubt that we would reach our goals. It was never a matter of *if*, it was just a matter of *when*.

After our talk in Benny's it was pretty clear that both of us thought the same thing with respect to one another: We both dreamed that we'd end up together, and again, it wasn't as much a matter of if, but when. And while I had extinguished that little dream years ago, it was now back and growing with the same quiet, but sound confidence I had when performing.

I couldn't completely silence the voice in the back of my head cautioning me to slow down though...

By Wednesday, I went up to the lobby office where Duke was eating his lunch and asked why he was sticking around late, and he just shrugged. Even though I did love talking to him and I was looking forward to debriefing our days together, I needed to know why he was doing it. It's almost like I needed to seek reassurance before I could let myself fall too hard for him.

"It's so nice out today. Why stay here if you don't have to?" I asked him. You'd think he'd want to walk out into the summer heat and spend some time on the golf course or at the lake with his old hockey buds. A lot of the guys he played with still came back from wherever they were playing during the year to coach here in the summers.

"Well, for one, I can't really enjoy doing much with this shit." He ushered to his cast. "And this shit." He pointed to his head. "So, I'm trying my best to enjoy what little I can this summer."

I looked at him dubiously. "So, you enjoy sitting in the office all day?"

He sucked in his bottom lip like he was thinking.
“Well, I don’t just sit here, I watch-”

My dad, who just entered the lobby, interrupted us at the worst possible moment. He called across the lobby, “Mind if you close up shop if you’re still gonna be hangin here, Duke?”

“Sure, boss,” Duke said while saluting him. Then he turned to me and shrugged. “Have a reason to be here now.”

My eyes narrowed to his. “What were you going to say? You watch what?”

He gave me a lopsided grin and pulled the brim of his hat lower. “Doesn’t matter, Kessel.”

I felt the need to practically stomp my foot and demand that yes, it did matter. A lot. To me. But, Jacques was walking in...

“Johnny boy awaits,” Duke said without looking at me.

“Jacques,” I corrected under my breath as I turned to walk away.

I did finally get the answer to why Duke was hanging around at the rink during dinner on Thursday night with Addie and my dad.

“How’s it going with Jack?” Dad asked me.

“Oh my God,” I rolled my eyes, feeling quite annoyed with the two of them. “Duke is getting to you. It’s Jacques.”

His shoulders shook with silent laughter. “That guy needs to get knocked down a peg or two, honey.”

“And you think that’s the way to do it?” I asked incredulously.

He shrugged. “Duke doesn’t like leaving you there alone with him.”

I snapped my neck up to look at him. “What?”

“Yeah.” He avoided eye contact and shoved a forkful into his mouth. I stared at his salt-and-pepper head, waiting impatiently for him to explain further.

When he didn’t say anything else, I added, “I’m not alone, I’m with Igor and his coach, Miranda. Besides, I can take care of myself.”

He just shrugged again and quickly changed the subject to Addie’s current job search... but my mind couldn’t get off Duke saying that to my dad. Staying late so I wasn’t alone with Jacques was a nice gesture, but I could take care of myself. And while the independent woman side of me felt a bit miffed, my stupid heart softened.

Duke was always looking out for me when we were young, and my mind filled with a vision of him staying by my side as I slept in the weight room in the sixth grade. He wanted to puff out his chest and be the hero even as an eleven-year-old.

A little flutter of butterflies erupted in my stomach over him still caring so much about me... Because that small part of me that hoped we really would connect again and pick up where we left off wasn’t so small anymore.

I knew it was stupid to hope for all the things I hoped for back when I was seventeen. But he had said something that was true on my end too— I felt like he was it for me. He was the one... And was it really so bad to want that?

“Earth to Claire...” Addie said.

“Oh, sorry. What?”

She studied me for an extra second and pursed her lips like she was about to say something else but decided to let it go. “I was saying, you want to hit up Bullfrogs with me tomorrow night, right?”

Every summer, the staff at the rink would cut loose and hang out at Bullfrogs, which was the bar across the lake from our apartment complex. While Addie wasn't a current Ice League employee and hadn't been in years, she was always considered an honorary staff member, so she was always invited. Bullfrogs was a nice spot because we could walk to it— meaning, we could both drink and not worry about getting home. I wasn't a big drinker, but after this week of starting work, Jacques being annoying as hell, and my mind trying to dissect every single interaction with Duke, I could use a long island or two.

And maybe... just maybe... Duke would be there too.

“For sure,” I answered her.

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13. Duke

“You see that, Coach?!” Troy yelled at me from across the ice.

“Yeah, buddy!” I called out, feeling myself cheesing hard. He finally nailed the Michigan Shot he and Canyon had been trying all week. The kid was definitely talented, seeing as they started trying it on Monday and he nailed it by Friday morning.

Canyon skated over to me by the boards then. “Dang Coach. You’re gonna have to show me something cooler now.” He let out a little chuckle, but I could tell he was feeling pretty bummed. “I don’t think I’m gonna be able to get this one,” he admitted.

I tapped his helmet. “You’ll get it. You just gotta keep trying.”

He pushed his helmet up a bit and cringed. “I don’t know...”

“Try again.” I nodded to the goalie. “Flick your wrists a bit faster like this.” I motioned to him.

As soon as Canyon skated off toward the net, my buddy Reggie, who was also assistant coaching for Grey, skated over and hopped up to sit on the boards next to me. He’d been playing for an AHL team in Texas for the past couple years and was back up here for the summer in order to coach and visit his family. He asked Max for a job a couple days after me. He was probably trying to escape his house because he forgot what it was like to live with three little sisters again.

“How’s it goin, bud?” he asked. He reached for a water bottle and squirted some in his mouth.

“Could be better. My toes feel like they’re going to freeze off.” That was the only part of my foot the cast

didn't cover. I needed to buy a fat person's sock or something to be able to fit it over the whole thing.

"Sucks man," he chuckled. "Is your head feelin' any better at least?"

"Yeah, a bit," I sighed. "I've stopped getting the spins which is a nice development."

"Good to hear. So, you up for a drink later? We all go to Bullfrogs on Fridays."

"Uh... who all goes?"

"All the instructors and some Ice Leaguers who've come back to hang with their parents for the summer. If you rounded up everyone around here for the summer, you'd probably be able to put together a pretty decent NHL team," he snorted. That was probably true. The hockey world was small, and the high-caliber hockey world was even smaller. Almost everyone we played with growing up ended up in a pretty decent hockey position, whether that meant they were still playing or if they moved on to scouting or coaching. Now that the season was over, everyone was back here just hanging around.

While catching up with some of the boys sounded like a fun night, I looked down at my bum foot. "Uh... Can't," I responded.

He arched an eyebrow at me. "Your foot is stopping you from sitting your ass on a barstool and drinking a beer?" he deadpanned.

"Nah, it's stopped me from driving my ass," I corrected him.

"Yeah... that must suck. Couldn't have broken your other one, eh?"

I side-eyed him, feeling annoyed.

"Okay, okay. I can come by your house and pick you up. It's a date," he winked at me. "What do ya say?"

“Yes!” I threw my arms up and accidentally dropped my crutches. Canyon finally nailed the shot. I heard kids’ cheers from across the rink, and Canyon did a little show of bowing toward me... The first thing that popped into my head was that I couldn’t wait to tell Claire about this little coaching triumph of mine after practice today...

Every day this week, I waited for her to finish up practicing with that douche-canoe to be able to walk out with her. I felt a weird vibe coming from him and didn’t feel comfortable leaving her in the rink with only him. While I knew the coaches were usually around, there were times when the two of them were alone... and something in the back of my brain just nagged me to stay... Plus, I’d been living for those few minutes when we could chat every day. We’d swap funny stories of the day, and I loved when she threw her head back laughing just like she used to...

Reggie chuckled next to me. “How does it feel to be the favorite Coach?”

“Nice consolation prize I guess.” I looked over at him. “And yeah, a drink could be good if you’d be willing to drive.”

After leaving the rink every day, I’d just been locked up in my parents’ house and pretty much dying of boredom and fighting myself over calling up Claire. I wanted to hang out with her so bad... but I didn’t want to complicate things. We had a nice friendship going, and I didn’t want to lead her on. I wouldn’t cross that line with her again. I wasn’t a relationship guy, and I didn’t want to confuse her and end up hurting her all over again... Even though I’d give anything to be up in the work out room with her right now...

“Dude.” Reggie shoved my shoulder. “You’re supposed to be watching the ice, not the workout room.” His eyes traveled up to where I was looking, and I felt like pretending to have another dizzy spell just to distract

him. No way did I want him to realize how hung up I was on her...

“Shit...” He gave me the side-eye. “Her again?” He laughed and shook his head.

“Shut it,” I grumbled defensively.

“You’ve got to be shitting me, bud!”

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing.” He put his hands up innocently. “You gonna tap that or what?”

My jaw clamped shut over him talking about her like that. “Watch it,” I demanded.

My reaction just made him cackle, and I swore under my breath over showing him my hand.

“Well, if you’re not gonna, can I?” he asked.

The idea of that made me see red. I threw my crutches against the boards and turned to him, but he just threw his head back laughing.

“Ball of hate is back in business, baby!” he called out.

I would’ve given anything to be able to check him right off the boards and into the teambox.

When he finally calmed down from laughing, he said, “Well, the Kessel girls will probably be at Bullfrogs tonight,” he said, wagging his eyebrows. “Addie usually comes. She lives in the apartments right across the lake from it.”

I raised my own eyebrows at that tidbit of information, then scowled at the fact that he knew more about the Kessel girls than I did. That just felt wrong.

“Hey, Reggie.”

He looked at me in question.

I smiled calmly. “Just know, if you talk about her like that again, I’ll fuckin’ wreck you.”

With that, he hopped off the boards and skated away laughing, making me wish I wasn't hurt for the millionth time.

"Make sure you're nice and pretty by 8, babe!" he called back to me.

The sun was just setting by the time we made our way into Bullfrogs. I'd heard a lot of stories about this bar growing up, but I was never able to go seeing as I left when I was just a teen... but now, I realized why so many people liked this spot. It was a large cabin-looking bar that sat on the edge of the lake and next to the golf course. Tons of people who enjoyed boating or golfing would come here at the end of the day to wind down. They also had a huge screened-in deck that housed an outside bar, and that's where a lot of the hockey guys were currently sitting, as well as some figure skating instructors...

Including Claire and Addie.

And Claire looked fan-fucking-tastic. She was wearing a sleek, black halter-top shirt and cut-off jean shorts which showed off her muscular butt and legs. It was the first time I'd seen her out of skating clothes, and I couldn't stop stealing glances at her.

God. I needed to get her out of my mind...

I dropped my head and closed my eyes tightly, trying to erase the fact that I just ogled her. I wasn't about to date anyone, so why was I so focused on her? We were *just friends*, I repeated to myself.

I forced myself to pay attention to Tampa's Conference Championship game playing on the TV above the bar. They were kicking ass this year, and they definitely had my vote of confidence that they'd take home the cup. I was trying to find holes in their defense, but every couple of minutes, I found myself straining my

neck to see who Claire was talking to... I told myself it was just because I was feeling protective over her and I didn't want her getting mixed up with any assholes at the bar... but in the back of my mind, I knew I'd be jealous the instant she started talking to anyone...

I clenched my jaw and forced myself to look in the opposite direction of her, and that's when a welcome blast from the past came walking directly into my line of sight in the form of a low-cut shirt with boobs spilling out of it and legs for days.

"Duke Callahan!" Daniella called out from across the bar deck. "Is that really you?!"

I put on my best flirtatious grin and nodded.

She scampered over to me with her friends flanking her sides. She looked like she was about to launch herself into my arms, but thank God she pulled back at the last second seeing as I wouldn't be able to catch her.

Her eyes were a little unfocused from drinking. "How are you?! It's been so long!" Her whole face lit up with a wide smile.

Daniella was a very pretty girl with olive Italian skin that always looked sunkissed. She had always been nice to me back in the day... more than nice in some ways. Hell, she was my *first* kiss. But she just wasn't *her*. She never held a special place in my heart the way Claire did. I knew I was a total prick for thinking about it like that, and I had no business dating her back in high school in the first place, especially because I knew that I would never be hers, and she would never be mine... but I think she knew the score and didn't mind. She was all about the game. She had fun bouncing from guy to guy, and I think the only thing she feared was settling down.

"Not bad," I chuckled tightly and took a swig of my beer. "How about yourself?"

“Better now that you’re here.” She dragged her long fingernails up my stomach, and I almost choked on a sip of my drink.

I pulled back a little with a hesitant cringe on my face.

But she moved forward to whisper in my ear anyway. “That’s the look of a taken man.” Her hot breath sent an involuntary shiver up my spine. “But aren’t you single, Duke Callahan?” She trailed her long, fake nail up my neck, making me let out a strangled noise.

I pulled back a bit and looked in her dark brown eyes. “You’ve still got a way with those.” I nodded toward her nails. She had a way with them as a freshman in high school, and she’d only improved her moves since then.

She threw her head back laughing before looking at me again. “Don’t take things so seriously, Dukiepoo. Let’s have some fun tonight, yeah?” She grinned at me daringly.

While I absolutely hated it when she called me ‘Dukiepoo’ and I should’ve just politely declined, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of hazel eyes staring at me...

So, I didn’t push her away. I mean, I *couldn’t* push Daniella away, because I needed to push a certain 5’1, competitive, small girl away instead.

Daniella: good.

Claire: not so good.

I wouldn’t get attached to Daniella. Daniella didn’t expect anything from me. She wasn’t dangerous.

Jeez. I felt like I was back in the ninth grade again—only spending time with Daniella to try and get Claire out of my mind...

“I saw the hit,” she pouted. I forced myself not to roll my eyes. That was a given, it seemed like everyone in the world had seen it. Mentally, I wondered if she’d seen

any of my highlights... Probably not. I knew she didn't watch hockey. Nah, Daniella sat in the stands googling the roster and then trying to figure out which players were single. She used to do it "for her friends" way back when we were together, so she probably did it more intensely for herself now. There was no shame in that game, I just hated when she'd pretend that she watched the game when it was very clear she didn't give two shits about it.

"Yeah, it sucks," I answered kind of lamely for what felt like the hundredth time.

I tried to focus on what she said back, I really did... but my eyes kept wandering over to where Claire was now holding court with about three of the hockey guys, one of which was Tyler fricken Jettersen— the one and only who scribbled Claire's face out in my eighth grade yearbook. He had newly bleached hair thanks to his AHL team's playoff tradition. It apparently had brought them luck, because they won, and he scored the winning goal in the championship game. There was no doubt in my mind that he'd be called up or traded into the big league this coming fall. All three guys towered over her, and she kept them all looking down at her, laughing. They were probably trying to look at her boobs. Fuck. Boobs. I looked back down at Daniella in front of me.

"So, what do you say?" she asked with happy puppy dog eyes.

"Um, to what? Sorry, I'm currently concussed." I motioned toward my head and gave an apologetic smile.

"Oh, poor baby!" she whined. I internally cringed at the high-pitched sound of her voice. "We were saying we should go play bags out on the lawn. Wanna?"

I knew she was asking because I used to love playing bags, but in my current state there was no way that would be a good idea. Hell, even crutching on the uneven grass after one beer sounded like a shit idea.

“Um... Not sure that would work out great, Dee,” I told her.

“Oh my gosh,” she giggled. “You remembered my nickname!”

“Yeah,” I smiled wryly and brought my beer to my lips again as an excuse not to say anything else. Claire was currently dragging Tyler by the hand over to the beer pong tables.

And I will never know what compelled me to ask, but ask away I did anyway: “Hey, Dee, wanna play some beer pong?”

It looked like I made her whole night with the question, and she made way for me to crutch over there first.

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14. Claire

“How about we play you guys?”

I looked up to see an expectant looking Duke with a backwards hat over his flowy hair, wearing a CCM dry-fit hockey shirt, and sweatpants that covered most of his cast except his foot popping out. The temperature definitely dipped around here at night, so I was pretty jealous of his sweatpants. It really wasn't fair that guys got to wear comfy clothes to the bar when girls were expected to wear something short, tight, and cute. Then again, I definitely purposely picked out this outfit... for *him*.

Yet here he was... with *her*.

I internally scowled over the fact that I was still so attracted to him, yet he could still make me so so angry.

Because I honestly thought that when I walked in here tonight, I'd end up leaving with him... Why the hell was he being so nice to me all week if that wasn't his intention?

He and I agreed on friendship when we sat in that back booth at Benny's, but I guess I automatically expected it to go back to how it was right before he ditched out of here: AKA back when we were growing beyond friendship. So, I truly thought he'd try to... I don't know... *get with me*, I guess?

But now he was with Daniella.

And it burned me from the inside out.

While I'm sure she grew up to be a nicer person than she was back in high school— well, at least I hope she grew out of rolling her eyes and giggling at other people's expense and calling people (me) 'stocky'— she was by his side... and wasn't that supposed to be my place?

Honestly, her being with him made me want to jump her and pull each and every one of her stupid, fake extension hairs out of her head. I knew I didn't really have any right to say that because I had no real claim to Duke.... but I just had this unexplainable feeling that him and I were meant to be together. I had tampered down that feeling for so long, but this week, I finally let that stupid hope grow...

Just for it to be squashed on the sticky floor of Bullfrogs.

Because here he was, still finding other people to fill the space that I thought was for me.

"Sure," Tyler answered beside me.

I turned away from the tables and took a deep breath.

"You okay?" Tyler whispered down to me with wholesome, worried eyes. "Is that a problem? I thought you wanted to play?"

I rolled my eyes disdainfully. Guys were so oblivious sometimes. I wanted to come over to the tables so I could be further away from Daniella and her cronies.

"If you don't want to play that's fine—"

"No." I stubbornly crossed my arms over my chest. "We're playing, and we're winning," I said through gritted teeth. I grabbed Tyler's hand and turned back toward the beer pong table with a fake smile planted on my face. Duke eyed me curiously, but I completely ignored him.

Once the game got started, it became obvious that we were going to crush them because Daniella sucked so bad. I wasn't sure if she really threw that pathetically, or she was just trying to be girly and use her feminine wiles to attract Duke by making him feel more confident in his own abilities... Whatever it was, it annoyed the fuck out of me. I wasn't sure how some girls could allow themselves to suck so badly just so that boys wouldn't feel threatened. You had to win these types of things—

because if a boy was threatened by your athleticism, why would you want him in the first place? And that was definitely not the kind of guy Duke was... he wanted competition; he craved it. He'd be bored with someone like her, and I could tell he was getting annoyed with her fake terribleness. The girl was playing him all wrong, and that made me smirk.

But when she did finally make her ping pong ball land in one of the red solo cups, she practically screeched and jumped up and down happily, making her boobs almost fall out of her shirt. I swear to God, almost every guy's head turned toward her... And then, she had the *audacity* to loop her arms around Duke's neck and plant a sloppy ass kiss right on his lips.

Red hot fury pumped through my veins and Tyler had to nudge me kind of hard to make me quit glaring.

I set myself up for this though.

I knew Duke was an expert at not choosing me. I fully knew it. Yet I still let that hope that we'd be together. And now this felt like betrayal.

I grinded my teeth together. I needed to rethink this whole thing. Maybe I needed to use my own feminine wiles. I had some, didn't I?

I turned away from the table where Duke and Daniella were flirtatiously whispering to each other, and I pulled Tyler's waist closer to me.

I could do this, I pep-talked myself.

I kept my head kinda even with Tyler's chest and looked up at him with big, doe eyes, and licked my lips.

"So, Tyler," I began. I put my hand up on his bare chest—he was wearing a baseball jersey that he had neglected to button up. "How was this season for you?"

He cringed and looked away from me uneasily and it felt like a slap to the face. I quickly backed up, feeling

embarrassed. Why was it that girls like Daniella could make any guy eat out of the palm of their hand, yet when I tried to interest *anyone* it seemed like I got this same reaction.

“Ah... Don’t look like that Claire,” Tyler murmured awkwardly.

“Like what?” I snapped.

“Like I just kicked your puppy,” he whispered calmly. “It’s not that I don’t like you, it’s just that...” His eyes darted around quickly.

“It’s just that what?” I demanded. I peered over at Duke, and they were still freaking flirting.

“You know you don’t like me like that and I don’t like you like that,” he said in a resigned voice.

My brain started turning then. I needed to quickly fix this.

I looked back up at him with a sickly sweet smile. “Well Tyler, fucking act like you like me or I will tell everyone that you pooped your pants during beer league last summer.”

His face dropped. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would.” I cocked my head to the side. “Besides, you called me fugly in middle school. You owe me.”

He cringed. “I do feel bad about being a little shit in grade school. We all just wanted to make Duke go nuclear.”

I tapped my foot, waiting for him to make a move.

He sighed then moved closer to me and put his hands around my waist. I was wearing a crop top, so my skin above my shorts was exposed and his touch made goosebumps rise across my stomach. I liked feeling touched. Even though this was completely fake, I liked feeling taken for a minute... And I absolutely loved the

way Duke suddenly couldn't take his eyes off me and Tyler.

Tyler dipped closer to me and whispered in my ear, "And I didn't mean to make you feel bad by turning you down, Kessel. I just don't wanna have to fight a hurt guy."

I touched his scruffy cheek to keep up the act. "What is this, the dark ages where you have to duel for a woman's hand? I am not directing you to fight him," I said through an icy smile. "Besides, he seems fine and dandy with Daniella."

"That's just an act. He'll beat up anyone's ass who touches you," he whispered in my ear.

My heart practically stopped, and my eyes snapped to his dark ones.

"Says who?" I demanded.

He gave me a 'duh' look. "Says him growing up, and I doubt much has changed over the years seeing as you two are still playing twisted mind games with each other."

I ignored his little dig and focused on the part I wanted to know more about. "He did not say that when we were little," I challenged.

He pulled back and looked at me with lifted eyebrows. "Well, he made it pretty clear back then."

I grabbed fistfuls of his shirt and jerked him back closer to me. "Well, things *are* different now. And you don't want to be known as poopy pants, so play along, Jetersen," I said tightly.

He laughed. "That is something I definitely don't want."

"Hold me," I ordered.

His warm arms immediately went around my body, and he smoothed a hand over my butt and heaved a

deep sigh. “If only you actually wanted me for me...” he said wistfully.

I frowned. “I’m sorry—”

“No, it’s okay,” Tyler said with a laugh. “I’m not complaining about getting to do this I guess.”

My lips twisted. “Well, I am sorry.”

“You said that. Here, let’s go over to the couches.” He nodded toward them.

I looked back at the beer pong table. “But we didn’t win yet.”

He rolled his eyes. “I know you’re competitive, but let this one battle go so you can win the war, Kessel.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Point taken. Lead the way, sir.”

He nodded, then bent his knees and lifted me in the air. His arms held the crook of my back and under my knees.

“I can walk,” I muttered.

“Yeah, but Duke can’t currently do this. I know him. It’ll eat him up inside,” he said with a shit-eating grin.

I shook my head and viewed him with a bit of admiration. “You play dirty, Jetterson. I like it.”

I tried to only have eyes for him as he walked me through the crowded deck area. He really wasn’t a bad looking guy. He definitely had the look of a hockey player— I think all of them looked and walked slightly similar, and I wasn’t sure if that was because they were all a little bit Canadian or if hockey kind of molded their bodies to look that way. Tyler was currently sporting bleached hair under his hat because his minor league teammates all did that during the playoffs. His hair and eyes were naturally darker, so bright blond hair didn’t go with his coloring. I was sure he’d end up cleaning up his

look in the next few weeks because he was looking to break into the NHL next season and there's no way the big wig coaches would like that— they were all about looking clean cut.

As soon as we sat, he kept me in his lap. I started to take my arms away from where they were— looped around his neck— but he stopped me.

“Keep them there. And don't look at Duke, it'll ruin the effect. He's staring daggers at me right now.”

His words made me feel vindicated. I knew Duke wanted me. I guess I just needed to give him this little push to show *him* that.

I forced myself to pay attention to Tyler. “How'd you get this scar?” I traced a finger over the indented line stemming out of the side of his top lip. “Hockey fight?”

“Errr, I kinda wish. Yeah, let's go with that.” He nodded.

“No, now you need to tell me,” I demanded.

“Eh... I'd rather not... Can't give you any more ammo over me. The poopy pants story is enough.” His eyes quickly shifted beyond me. “Daniella's really pushing her boobs at him... You gotta arch your back more into me, like this.” He pushed the middle of my back toward him.

“I wish I had boobs,” I sighed, looking down.

His eyebrows scrunched down in confusion as he studied my chest. “You do.”

I rolled my eyes. “No... like hers.”

He shrugged. “You got enough. Don't feel bad. She bought 'em.”

“Well, that's okay. Do what you gotta do to feel good. Maybe I'll get a boob job,” I pondered.

“Ha. that would get him riled up for sure,” he said with a smirk.

“What would?”

“Saying you’re going to get a boob job,” he said matter-of-factly.

It was my turn to look confused. “Really? Why?”

“Don’t look at me like that. You gotta look like you’re really into me if we want to sell this,” he ordered. “And believe me, it just will. Want to get him really pissed though?”

I traced his thick eyebrow and nodded.

His hands trailed down my back and stayed on my butt. “I’ll have to act like I think I’m gonna score with you,” he warned. “That okay?”

“Uh...” Did I want that? Why was I doing this with Tyler if I didn’t want Duke riled up? I just wanted Duke to know that I was as good as Daniella. I was a catch too. It wasn’t the most bizarre thing in the world for a guy to choose me in front of all his friends. “Does it make me a shitty person if I say yes?” I asked him.

“Not at all, Kessel. Here, wait a sec.” He effortlessly lifted my body off him and planted me back on the couch.

Tyler quickly went over to the bar for more drinks and chatted with some hockey guys standing around.

I watched as Tyler came back over to me and slid on the couch next to me.

“Now watch,” Tyler whispered in my ear. “Duke is going to make an excuse to those girls, then go and talk to the guys to see what I just told them.”

I looked over at Duke, who was now eyeing the guys by the bar. Just like clockwork, he said a few words to the girls, then we watched a grumpy looking Duke make his way back towards the bar to the guys that Tyler had just left. I felt like laughing haughtily in his stupidly cute face.

“Don’t look at him,” Tyler whispered.

I turned back to Tyler, who was very much in my personal space. “How do you know so much about this?” I asked him.

“I just know what I’d be thinking.” He took a sip of his drink and his adam’s apple bobbed up and down.

I stared up at his dark rimmed eyes. He had so many eyelashes that it practically looked like he wore faint eyeliner. He really was quite the looker. “Ya know, if it wasn’t for him... You’re a good guy Tyler,” I said, patting his chest and feeling very appreciative toward him.

He moved my crossed legs onto his lap and laughed. “Thank you, but don’t worry about my feelings, I know soulmates when I see ‘em.”

I snorted. “Duke is not my soulmate,” I said automatically.

He arched an eyebrow at me. “Keep telling yourself that, hun. You and I both know it’s true.”

“Bleh, don’t call me.” Pet names gave me the ick.

“Don’t look disgusted with me, *hun*,” he countered.

I rolled my eyes. “What do you know about soulmates anyway?”

He gave me a hard stare. “Same stuff as you. Didn’t you grow up with Addie the same way that I grew up with Case?”

I eyed my sister across the bar.

She had dated Tyler’s older brother, Casey, back in the day. They were good together, but they weren’t *soulmates*, were they? First loves maybe, but I think she would have talked to me more about him if they were true soulmates.

“That was a long time ago. They were young.” I shrugged it off.

His serious eyes bored holes into mine. “He’s not young anymore, and he still thinks about her.”

I wasn’t really sure what I was supposed to do with that information. I didn’t want Addie to go back into that broken shell of a person she was after she and Casey broke up. I never even knew what happened to break the two of them apart. I was too young for her to confide in me at that point in time. All I knew was that he made her life better for a small time, then he broke her for a larger period of time. But she was happy now and she had big plans for her life. And Casey was one of the top NHL defensemen in the league. He was probably doing just fine without her.

Tyler shrugged his large shoulder. “Forget I said anything. She doin’ alright?”

I nodded. “She’s good. She’s excited about her work,” I said gently. Why did it feel like my words were letting him down?

“Good, I’m glad for her. My family will always be in debt to her.” He gave a sad smile and took another swig of his beer.

His words completely confused me, but he quickly changed the subject. “Back to our mission, Kessel. For the icing on the cake, how about we whisper like this...” He leaned in. “I’m going to kiss your neck, don’t hit me away, okay?” He proceeded to trace his tongue up my neck, and while it did feel like a turn-on, it felt a little slimy... because I did not actually like Tyler in that way. “Now we’re both going to go outside for a couple minutes,” he directed me.

“Why—”

He gave me an exasperated look. “This is ‘hot girl summer 101.’”

I stared at him blankly and he cursed under his breath.

“You need to go outside so he comes looking for you, duh,” he whispered in my ear.

“How do you know—”

He pulled back and gave me a stern look. “Believe me. He will definitely come looking for you... and for me. Hopefully I won’t have to take a punch for you. And if he doesn’t come looking for you, well, then...”

I sighed. “Then I’ll know he doesn’t want me,” I said, feeling suddenly shaky...

He kissed my neck again and slowly made his way up to my ear. “He wants you, don’t worry so much. Us guys are simple creatures, Claire. But now, I am going to ask Reggie for a condom.”

I pulled back from him. “Um, why the hell are you telling me?” I asked, feeling alarmed.

“Take it down a notch,” he warned.

I immediately wiped the disgruntled look off my face.

He reached up and pulled a lock of my hair. “I am telling you,” he drawled, “so you won’t freak out like this if you hear about it later. It is part of the plan, Kessel. Head out to my car. Silver Range Rover. Code to get in is 1980. I’ll come get you if he doesn’t go outside... but he will.”

I nervously bit my lip. “Thank you, Tyler.”

“My pleasure, *hun*,” he said with a lopsided grin before pulling himself away from me and making his way toward Reggie.

I weaved my way through the sweaty crowded porch, then the packed inside of the bar where a DJ was getting ready to start playing and people were beginning to line the edges of the sticky, weathered dance floor. When I finally pushed through the doors to exit, it felt amazing to breathe in the cool beginning of summer breeze.

I scampered across the dark parking lot to Tyler's car. The only other people out here were a group of girls. Two of them were rubbing their friend's back who was doubled over barfing in the bushes. They looked to be newly twenty-one and it seemed like they had everything under control.

I quickly punched in the code to enter Tyler's car feeling a bit icky. I didn't want people to think of me as the type to get drunk then hook up in a car, but what other choice did I have at this point? I needed confirmation that Duke did care about me. Sure, my heart would break a little if he didn't care that I was hooking up with someone else, but at least I would know.

I sat there for a full minute, trying to still my anxious body, but it really felt like my heart was going to explode in anticipation at any given second.

Just when I was about to give in and walk back into Bullfrogs, the doors flew open, and I chalked a point up to Tyler for being right again. Because there he was—crutching toward the car with his jaw set, his nose flaring, and a scowl on his handsome, but determined face.

I coached myself to keep an even face, even though I felt like shouting out, 'HA!'

He crossed the parking lot with remarkable speed considering he was still new on crutches. In what felt like a split second, he threw the car door open, threw his crutches on the cement in a loud clatter, then hopped around until he was steady enough to lift himself into the driver's seat.

He slammed Tyler's door closed and sat there fuming.

"Duke— you can't just—"

The veins in his neck were practically bulging and his nose was flaring with anger. He took a deep breath then said very evenly, "You are not getting a boob job, Claire.

And you cannot be serious about hooking up with Jettensen.”

I blinked for a second, realizing he never called me Claire; it was always just ‘Kessel.’ My first name sounded foreign on his lips.

I swallowed and quickly recovered. “Who says?!” I yelled at him. “Like you have any power to order me around?” I looked at him like he’d lost his ever-loving mind... but, I’d have to analyze later why I felt such a sense of satisfaction over him not wanting me to get plastic surgery.

“Me!” he said with wide eyes. “I say. Okay?” He covered his eyes with his hand like I’d made him exhausted. “Please don’t, okay?”

It was my turn to take a deep breath. “Why?”

He peaked up at me. “Why? Why what?”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Why no boob job?”

His eyes darted a couple directions before looking back at me. “Because skating!” he yelled. “Aren’t you a possible contender to go to the Olympics?! That’ll mess you all up with balance and everything, Kessel.”

I wanted to shout, ‘*Not good enough*’ in his face. But instead, I crossed my hands over my chest and grumbled at the windshield. Of course. Of course he’d say skating and not what I so desperately wanted to hear from him, which was that he didn’t want me to change because he liked me the way I was.

“And hooking up with Jettensen? What is this? This isn’t you. It’s like I don’t even know you anymore.”

I gave him a cold stare for that comment, and he actually flinched away from me.

“You *don’t* know me anymore,” I said as cruelly as I could. “And whose fault is that?!”

He looked away from me before moving his gaze back to my chest.

“I just don’t understand...” he trailed off.

“What?” I spat.

He tipped his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. “Why you insist on changing things about yourself.”

“Well, you don’t want me,” I snapped.

His eyes went directly to mine, and he looked at me like I’d just accused him of murder. “Who says?”

“You!” I said, feeling completely exasperated. “You, Duke!” I pointed at him. “You say! If you wanted to be with me tonight, you would’ve been. Instead, I had to watch you feeling up Daniella.”

All the tension rose to his face and he looked like he was ready to explode. “What about Jetterson?!”

I shook my head and let out a pathetic laugh, resigning myself to the fact that we were both too messed up to ever be vulnerable enough with one another to actually get together. I couldn’t admit that being with Tyler was only a ploy to get his attention. Stripping the night of all the secrets and lies was what we so desperately needed, but the Tyler lie felt like my only armor right now. Without it, I’d lose the feeling that I was good enough to be chosen.

I closed my eyes tightly. I was so over these stupid games. I played tonight against my better judgment, and I knew I was way too old for this.

I took a deep breath, then pushed Tyler’s car door open and jumped out, ignoring Duke’s pleas for me to stay.

Walking across the empty parking lot, I felt all the confrontational adrenaline leaving my body, and I was left feeling drained.

As I pushed my way into the bar, I realized Tyler had been waiting for me in the little entrance sitting room.

He looked at me with a hesitant face from his seat on the bench, and I knew he was trying to gauge if Duke and I just had a good time or horrible time in his car.

“How did it—”

I felt my face crack and quickly covered it up with my hands. Tyler was up in a second, wrapping me in a warm, bear hug.

He rested his chin on the top of my head. “Dang. I really thought I was helping you guys and maybe tonight would be your night. I’m sorry, Claire.”

A split second later, the entrance door was ripped open. Duke was standing there, fuming. I watched him take in the picture of Tyler hugging me.

He let out a disgusted grunt, then moved past us.

“Shoot. I’m sorry,” Tyler murmured when he was gone.

I shook my head and swallowed the burning lump in my throat. “Not your fault he’s too stupid to realize you’re just being a nice friend.”

He squeezed my hand. “I like that.”

I looked up at his dark eyes in question.

“I’d like to be your friend, Claire. I’m sorry I was such a dick as a kid,” he said with a cringe. “That is one major regret that I have.”

I let out a pathetic laugh and patted his chest. “You are forgiven, sir. Walk me home?”

I was done with Bullfrogs for the night, maybe even for the rest of summer if Duke was going to be around the whole time. It would hurt too badly to see him with a different girl every Friday night.

Tyler held out his elbow for me to take.

“What a gentleman,” I said, to which he gave me a bright grin.

I quickly wiped my eyes and sniffled and then we were off.

We walked in comfortable silence across the parking lot and made our way to the golf course. There was no point in walking around the golf course at night seeing as no one would be playing.

“In my defense,” Tyler said as we walked through the dewy grass, “we never meant to hurt you. You were just collateral damage back in the day— which I am sorry for,” he quickly added. “But really, everything we did was just to get a rise out of Callahan.”

I sat there in thought for a second. “So, that condom Reggie put on my desk in tenth grade biology class?” The whole class was snickering behind my back, and I was mortified. I had no clue what a condom even was at the time, and I had to ask Addie about it after school. I should’ve never gotten so mixed up with those hockey boys.

Tyler laughed out loud and rubbed a hand through his hair. “Damn. I forgot about that one. Yeah, we dared Reggie to do it just to see what Duke would do. He was so fun to mess with. He really was a ball of hate.”

I gave him a resigned look. “He was suspended because of that and his parents almost made him miss the state playoffs.”

“Yeah, well, we didn’t think he’d go as far as tackling Reggie in the middle of class. Thought he’d be a bit smarter about not getting caught. Poor Reggie,” he said with a laugh.

“Poor Reggie?” I asked incredulously. “Poor me! That was harassment. You guys were assholes.”

He put his hands up in innocence. “You’re very right. But...”

I gave him a stern look. There was no excuse for their obnoxious behavior.

“Weren’t you doing something similar tonight? Trying to get a reaction from Callahan?” he challenged.

I took in a deep breath and shook my head. “You’re no fun.”

He snorted. “Yes, I am, hun.”

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15. Duke

I was stuck at the bar until close because Reggie was hitting it off with a girl and I couldn't exactly make him drop everything to drive my sorry ass home. So, I sat there stewing in my own misery and ordering beer after beer until the bartender shouted out last call.

Daniella had tried to come back up to me after I walked in from the parking lot, but I shrugged her off with an apologetic smile and told her I wasn't feeling it anymore tonight.

I never should've engaged with her in the first place.

She dragged her long nails through my hair and gave me a kiss on the cheek, then moved on to Coleson, another hockey guy, pretty quickly, so I don't think I bummed her out too much. She was having a good time. I on the other hand, was not.

I leaned my head against the bar counter. I was such an idiot. I messed everything up again.

I couldn't exactly take all the blame though, could I? I had told Claire I wanted to be *friends*. I never said I was looking for anything more than that, so she shouldn't have taken such offense to me hanging with Daniella... Then again, that wasn't fair of me to say because I hadn't been giving Claire just friends vibes by staring at her all the time and by marching out of the bar after her.

But she was going to hook up with Jettensen? Really?

It churned my gut seeing him with her. I wanted to rip his fucking hands off her body and carry her away from him.

And a boob job? That's what the guys said to me at the bar when I went up to buy a drink. Had I gone up to them just to see what Tyler had said to them about Claire? Yeah. But I was doing it for her own good. And

them saying, “Your girlie’s getting her boobs done” was the last thing I thought I’d hear.

And that’s the other thing– everyone called her *my* girl.

That was a mindfuck.

She wasn’t my girl. And I knew she could do whatever she wanted, but she didn’t have to do that. She was perfect the way she was.

God. I ripped my hat off and brushed my hands through my hair. What could it really hurt if I did go out with her? Like on a real date?

I shook my head out.

No.

Don’t even go there, man, I repeated to myself. I’d just end up making it harder for myself at the end of the summer when I had to go back to Detroit all alone.

Then again, I couldn’t stomach the fact that she would probably go back to ignoring me at the rink this coming week. Knowing that felt like a kick to the stomach. We had finally been in a nice place and now she’d be out of reach again.

“Callahan!” Reggie finally called out to me. “Let’s get goin’.”

He was holding hands with the girl he’d been chatting up, and it looked like she was coming with us.

I blew out a sign and slid off the barstool.

At least someone wouldn’t be lonely tonight.

I fumbled with my keys on my parent’s dark doorstep and tried my best to quietly let myself in.

I hadn’t felt that drunk when I left the bar, but now my head was spinning. I did my best to carefully crutch my

way into the kitchen. I desperately needed some carbs in my stomach to soak up the alcohol.

I'd probably just crash on the living room couch. There's no way I wanted to scaffold the steps in my current condition. My parents tried to offer me the downstairs guest room when I first arrived, but I refused because I didn't want to be baby-ed at all. I was majorly regretting that decision now. Whatever, Beau was probably enjoying my bed to himself.

I pulled the fridge open and scoured the inside before locating a leftover pizza box. I quickly pulled it out and threw it on the island kitchen counter, then went back for the ranch when the lights suddenly flashed on, practically blinding me.

I was seconds away from hurling the ranch bottle at the intruder when I realized it was only Griff.

"Easy, bud, easy." He laughed and ran a hand through his messy, fohawk hair. He was still sporting his playoff beard- which I still felt miffed over. I was practically the only teammate who couldn't successfully grow out a nice looking beard, I only ever got patchy scruff.

"What're you doing up?" My words sounded slurred to my own ears, and I cringed.

"Oof. Have some drinks there, bud?" He flashed me a grin that said he was holding back full-out laughing at me.

I rolled my eyes. "When did you guys get here? And why are you still up, old man?"

He strolled into the kitchen and reached for the paper plates. "Can I have some?" he nodded to the pizza box.

I held it out to him and he took it to the kitchen table. I slowly trailed after him.

“We got in around 9pm. The baby was great on the flight, but it messed up her sleep schedule, so now she’s been crying every other hour.” He set the baby monitor on the table so he could watch her sleep. “I’m on night shift duty.”

“How’d you pull the short straw?”

“Sav picked up my slack ‘til we got kicked out of playoffs. I could tell she was struggling but she pushed me to get a full night’s sleep every night.” He shook his head. “I felt super bad, but I also wanted to play well. Always aim for births to be in July or August,” he advised.

I looked at him like he was crazy. “Don’t tell me, tell yourself.” I took a large bite of my ranch-doused, cold pizza and closed my eyes and nodded. Great decision, so fucking good.

“So what’s up with—” He cut himself off and motioned to my whole drunk state.

I side-eyed him for a second before grumbling, “Claire Kessel.”

His eyes went wide. “You’re kidding me!”

When I didn’t say anything, he threw his head back and let out a loud bark of laughter.

“Shut it, man,” I said darkly. “It’s not funny.”

“Hell yeah it is, bud.” He took another bite of his pizza, then said with a mouthful, “I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“Knew you’d get tangled up with her when you came back here,” he said with a laugh. “Me and Sav were placing bets actually. I said you’d hate-fuck within the first week of seeing each other. She said you’d ‘make love’ in July,” he said, imitating her voice. He rapped his knuckles on the table. “So... have you hooked up yet?”

I sighed. “Nope, and it’s not going to happen. It’s not like that with us. Besides, she hates me more now than ever I think.”

“Damn. We might both lose then.” He shrugged.

My mouth dropped open. “How can you act so casual over my love life!” I burst out.

He paused, then his face broke into a huge smile. “You *do* love her!”

“No!” I practically shouted, to which he just started laughing even more. I dropped my pizza, not feeling very hungry anymore. “You’re ruining my pizza time,” I slurred.

“Sorry, sorry. It’s just... you two make sense.”

“We make no sense,” I countered.

A loud cry erupted from the baby monitor, and Griff shoved the last of his pizza in his mouth.

“We’ll talk more about it tomorrow. Sorry you’re goin’ through it, bud,” he said while reaching to give me a rough head pat as he stood.

“Have fun on diaper duty,” I called after him. “Hope you have to clean up a huge, yellow blow out for laughing at me.”

Griff just shook his head and chuckled as he climbed the stairs by two. I sat there lamely replaying what he said about Claire and I making sense.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like hearing it.

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16. Duke

I was right.

Claire did go back to ignoring me at the rink.

When I came back home from the rink after the first day of receiving her cold shoulder, I guess I looked upset, because Sav pestered me with questions the rest of the night, and then continued to do so every time she saw me for the rest of the week.

I made a practice of avoiding her because I didn't want to get all deep and end up having to explain my feelings, but she finally trapped me one night with her baby.

She rounded the living room corner in a pair of Griff's old sweatpants. Her short blonde hair was completely messy, and she had about three spit-up stains on her shirt. Her eyes had dark circles under them, and I immediately felt bad for not helping out more. Beau was trailing after her. It seemed he had a new favorite in the family because he followed around anyone who held Indie.

"Wanna hold the baby? You've barely spent any time with her and she's your goddaughter you know," she said pointedly.

I looked at her incredulously. "That's how you tell me?!"

She smiled sweetly then kissed Indie's squishy, happy face. "Yes. What do you say, up for being godfather times two?" I was already Godfather to her son, Johnny.

I crutched over to Sav and gave her a quick side hug. "I'm honored, Sis." I lingered near her for a sec and tried to smooth down her hair that was sticking up.

She shot me a glare and shooed me towards the couch. As soon as I sat down, she placed the lil squish on me. Indie blinked a couple times, but the blinks were pretty slow, and she was soon snoozing in my arms. Beau came closer to me and laid by the foot of the couch. I reached down and lazily scratched between his ears while keeping my eyes on the baby.

“Damn. She’s a gorgeous little thing. Looks like she might be a lil red head.” I inspected her baby hairs closer.

Sav slowly sat down on the recliner closest to us. “Yeah, we think it might be from Griff’s side of the family. He doesn’t really want to ask though.” She shrugged.

Griff hadn’t talked to his father in years, and his mother left when he was just a kid.

“She looks like a little porcelain doll with these super long eyelashes,” I said. I still couldn’t believe my sister made her. Like this pretty little squishy thing was a combination of my two favorite people, and now she was just here, snoozing away, completely ignorant of the fact that she was a little miracle. “Sometimes it blows my mind that she came out of you,” I told her.

Sav smiled. “Yupp, made her from scratch, all the way down to the teeny tiny toesies.”

“You guys think you’ll have more?” I asked.

She sighed and looked at Indie adoringly in my arms. “It’s going to be pretty tough during the season.”

I nodded at that. Griff and I were on the road a lot during the regular season, which lasted from October through April, and that was never really the end of it either. The travel actually kicked up a notch from April to June because of playoffs. I think sometimes Sav wished we played for a different organization so we’d finish up earlier. The Crewman had made the playoffs for the last

25 consecutive years, and there's no way we were about to let that streak die anytime soon.

"I think maybe we'll try for more after Griff slows down," she added.

"Oh, so not for a while then," I joked.

A hesitant expression overtook her face and my stomach dropped. She tucked her short hair behind her ears and bit her lip nervously.

"He's not retiring. He's not allowed," I demanded.

She rolled her eyes playfully. "Yeah, yeah. Well, there will come a day when he does, Duke. I think you forget that he's a lot older than you."

"He's not *that* old though," I deadpanned. He was still in his early-thirties. Plenty of guys skated at least til their mid-thirties, some even pushed forty.

She arched an eyebrow at me. "You call him 'old man.'"

"That's a joke!" Indie flinched on my chest, and I immediately felt bad for the loud outburst and slowed my breathing. "That's a joke," I repeated quietly to Sav.

"I know." She nodded. "But I think Griff also feels like he's missing out on watching Johnny's games now." She scrunched her nose. "I think he gets envious when Johnny starts talking about what his coaches said."

"Oh... Shoot." I could understand that.

Griff had always planned on taking up a coaching position when he was done skating himself... but I thought he meant NHL coaching, not youth hockey coaching. I selfishly wanted him to be on the bench with me through my entire career... which thinking about it now, I guess wouldn't necessarily be fair to Johnny. Griff was Johnny's dad... and I knew it would be selfish to counter that with saying '*well, he's my brother!*' even though I kinda wanted to.

“Don’t worry though. He’s definitely going to be playing another season. He wants another Stanley Cup. Just...”

“Huh?”

“Maybe try to be quick about getting another one,” she said with a smile.

“Got it. Secure the cup this season.” I winked at her.

“So... now that I have you here, and you cannot move because Indie is *finally* sleeping, what’s going on with you? Why are you all bummed out lately?”

I shook my head. “Nothin.”

She gave me a look that said she didn’t believe that at all. “Griff told me something about a little blondie pairs skater...” she fished.

“She’s not blonde anymore,” I quickly corrected, then regretted it. She smiled like she was oh so satisfied with herself for being right. I rolled my eyes at her.

“Well, what’s going on with you two?” she urged.

I sighed. “I asked to be friends, she thought I meant more than friends. She then got *very* offended that I was with another girl—”

“Wait, wait, wait... Did you make it seem like you wanted to be more than friends?”

I looked at her like she was crazy. “I don’t know. I fricken said ‘friends.’”

Sav shook her head at me like I was dumb. “Well, she likes you, and she could probably tell that you like her, so she probably thought you two would get together.”

“That’s exactly what she thought. Then she got with someone else, and that made me mad, so then I marched outside to stop her from hooking up with him—”

“You did what?!” she practically screeched at me.
“You can’t have your cake and eat it too!”

I squirmed away from her. She looked angry with me.
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, if you wanted to be with another girl, then you shouldn’t have cared that she was with another guy. The fact that you marched out to stop her shows that she was right and that you did give off the vibe that you wanted to be more than friends.”

I stopped and rubbed a hand over my face. “My brain hurts.”

She shook her head at me disappointingly.

“Well, now she’s ignoring me,” I told her.

She pursed her lips. “And how do you feel about that?”

I blew out a sigh. “Fucking terrible. I just watch her and it’s so... so...” I struggled to explain it to her because it made me feel too weak. But the truth was, I hated it. I felt like all the potential between the two of us was burning to the ground, and I was powerless to stop it.

She smirked. “This sounds like a Taylor Swift song.”

“Everything sounds like a Taylor Swift song to you,” I pointed out.

“Duh,” she told me like I was a young kid who was totally clueless. “There is one for every life occasion, little brother. Listen to ‘The Story of Us’ later,” she advised.

I coached myself not to roll my eyes. Maybe she had a point, and I needed all the help I could get.

Sav pushed off the couch and reached to retrieve Indie, but I shook my head and swatted her hands away. This was the most at peace I’d felt in a long time. There was just something about holding a sleeping baby.

Sav laughed. "Guess I'll go find Griff and Johnny. Give me a holler if she wakes up."

I nodded. God knew I wouldn't be able to walk her around if she started crying.

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17. Duke

Craig started expecting me to lock up every day because I made a routine of staying 'til close... But now, Claire just slyly avoided coming through the lobby on her way out. Instead, she used the secret exit only rink regulars knew about— through the zamboni doors.

My jaw clenched every time I saw her leaving on the security camera. She knew I was watching her too, because she'd look directly at the camera and flip me the bird with a sassy smirk on her face.

That was alright. She didn't have to like that I stayed here to watch over her from a distance. The rink was my place of employment, so I was allowed to be here. Plus, I was doing it more for my own benefit than hers anyway. That Jacques douche was probably harmless, but when I tried to walk out early on Tuesday, extreme panic starting rising up in my chest. I knew I wouldn't be able to calm down unless I walked back in the rink to make sure she was alright.

The crazy thing about it is that I'd never experienced anxiety before this. Now I understood my teammate TJ's fiancée, Ellie, a bit better. Ellie was a power skating instructor for the Crewman and every season she gave a presentation on how to handle anxiety and nerves before games. I always blew it off and laughed to myself about it because nothing ever shook me. I actually pitied the guys who got the shaky nerves. But now, I wished I would've paid more attention to the tips she gave... because this feeling sucked ass.

By the end of the last week of June, I realized maybe it wasn't so much anxiety as it was intuition... And I thanked God I listened to it.

That Friday morning, Claire marched up to the office lobby with a determined look on her face.

“You do not have to stay here until I finish every day. It’s weird, Duke. I can take care of myself,” she said.

I forced myself not to say, ‘that’s what she said’ and fought off a grin. I was damn happy she finally decided to talk to me again, even if it was just to yell at me.

“I know you can take care of yourself,” I told her plainly.

She narrowed her eyes at me in annoyance and placed her hands on her hips. I forced myself to keep eye contact and not stare at the skin exposed between her crop top and her leggings like a lovesick puppy; it would 100 percent break my resolve.

“Then why the hell are you still staying here?” she demanded.

I shrugged nonchalantly. “Just because you can take care of yourself doesn’t mean you have to.”

She looked taken aback by that. She stood there stumbling over what to say. Her dad finally saved us by popping his head in and telling me that Grey needed me out on the ice. I could practically feel her gaze on me until I entered the cool rink.

The rest of the day, every time my eyes wandered to her, she was already looking at me. She’d quickly snap her neck to look away, but even from across the rink, I could tell that her cheeks would start turning a cute shade of pink.

By the time the rink started to clear out, I was dead tired and set on chugging an energy drink to stay alert.

Claire and Jackie boy were practicing lifts in the lobby— something that no longer made me as nervous. I was getting more used to seeing her body thrown in the air. When we were kids, she had kid partners who couldn’t really manage throwing her very high, so there wasn’t much danger there... Now, she was doing more advanced throws with a man double her size and she

had to be coming down with a shit load of force. I was shocked her knee held up; then again, that's why she worked out so much. She was trained in technique, but her athletic prowess made up for any human errors, and she rarely messed up. That was true when it came to her individual skating as well— while some girls mopped up the ice with their bodies, Claire rarely fell. She was like a cat: always landing on her feet.

But for some reason, today was a bit different... and I rubbed my forehead, wondering if maybe I was to blame. While I felt confident about our little morning interaction at the time, now I worried I accidentally messed with her focus. During her individual skating session today, I could tell she was either not thinking enough or overthinking, because she kept pulling into her jumps a bit too hard and over-rotating, making her land hard on her left hip. She did it so many times that Igor made her stick a butt pad in her pants to cover that hip. The butt pads were just pieces of foam— I knew because Sav used to use 'em all the time when trying new jumps. But Claire wasn't trying anything new. She was just having a shit day...

It wasn't until I was comfortably seated back in my chair in the office and eating a snickers bar that I allowed myself to watch Claire and Jackie boy in the lobby.

He bent his knees, held her waist, and powered her up in the air. She hit the peak of the throw and pulled in to spin, but something went a bit wrong. She came spilling down at a weird angle. Her stomach slammed into his shoulder, her chest fell on his forearm, and he struggled to grab hold of her body to stop her from hitting the ground.

I immediately stood to get a better look at her.

Claire took a couple steps away from him and hunched over, holding her knees and breathing deeply. I knew that look... She had the wind knocked out of her. It

used to happen every time she took a hit to the chest when we played capture the flag or dodgeball.

Jacques shook his limbs out and demanded, "Again."

Claire held up a finger, seemingly struggling for air.

I had my eyes trained on her, waiting for her to look over at me and let me know that she was okay.

"Again," he demanded as he moved into position.

His cold voice infuriated me. I was grinding my teeth so hard they could crack. Couldn't he tell she needed a fucking minute?

Claire's watery eyes flicked over to me briefly. I immediately began moving toward them.

As soon as Jacques realized I wasn't walking past them, he put his hands on his hips and studied me with an unimpressed expression. "What are you, her boyfriend?" he asked snidely.

"No." I shook my head calmly. "But I *will* rip you to shreds if you touch her again," I growled in a deep voice.

He snorted like it was funny. "Well, that's definitely going to happen. It's her job, dumbass."

It looked like something finally snapped in Claire. She sucked in a deep breath before saying, "No it is not my job, Jacques, and you are most definitely not my boss."

I felt like chiming in *hell yeah*, but kept quiet.

She chewed her lip for a second, then said, "This tryout is over. I'm done." She started walking away from him, but he wouldn't let her go that easily. He grabbed her forearm, and roughly pulled her back, jarring her a bit.

Her gaze landed on his hand, then her eyes met mine. My heartbeat kicked up a notch. I trained myself to look only at him. I'd handle the situation, but the panicked look on her face would send me over the edge.

“No, it is not over,” he ordered.

“Let go,” I demanded in a low voice.

He looked me up and down and just smirked, almost as if saying, *and what are you going to do about it?*

In my defense, I gave him a warning. He did nothing about it. So, I took that as the permission I needed to unleash.

In a quick motion, I dropped my crutches, wound up, and punched him square in the face. His nose immediately started gushing blood, but I didn't give him a second glance. All I cared about is that he released Claire's arm.

I nodded for Claire to leave.

She rubbed her forearm and looked shaky, but she listened to me for once. She quickly turned to walk back to the locker rooms.

Jacques wiped the blood from his nose and looked like he was ready to cry. “That's aggravated assault! I will sue you! You'll be in jail!”

Now I let out a harsh laugh and looked at him like it was funny. “Oh, Jackie boy,” I said, shaking my head. “Touch her again, and you'll be fucking sorry.”

Igor and his coach walked into the lobby then. His coach ran to him on the ground and started comforting him. Igor jogged to catch up to me. I was moving fast back to the locker rooms to check on Claire.

Within seconds, I could feel Igor fall in step by my side. “What happened?”

I stopped and gave him a serious stare. “He grabbed Claire roughly and wouldn't let go, so I roughed him up. It was defense. There's security footage if you want it. All she said was that she was done with the tryout. He didn't like that.”

He shook his head in disgust. “Doubt it will be necessary. He won’t want to stick around after being rejected. He’ll probably want to lick his wounds back at his home rink.”

“Good.”

Igor paused for a moment, then stuck his hand out to shake mine. We locked eyes and I could tell he wanted to say thank you, but he was still wary of me. He knew who I was. He knew me as Claire’s rival. He probably didn’t know that I was in love with her.

Wait...

I blinked for a couple seconds before returning the handshake.

Love.

I was still in love with her...

I silently watched Igor stalk off toward the lobby, then turned my attention to the large number five drawn on the locker room door in chipped paint. I felt a goofy grin slide onto my myself. I’d always wanted to go in this room after her when we were younger, but I never dared to enter the figure skaters’ locker room. It was always after a stupid interaction that I regretted... My brain flashed back to a moment in the workout room the summer before high school.

I dropped down from the pullup bar, but Claire was still going. Her body was shaking and she was turning red, but she was still pulling herself up, showing that she was the clear winner.

The guys mercilessly sang out insults, teasing the shit out of me for losing to a girl.

‘She’s not a normal girl, look at her arms,’ I tried to argue. I avoided looking at her. She’d be able to tell how much I liked her if she saw my face right then— it felt fire truck red.

But... after the teasing died down, I did look around the room for her.

And that's when I caught sight of her blonde ponytail. She was walking at a fast pace with her head down toward the exit.

Had what I said upset her? Why? That was the biggest compliment I could think of. She wasn't a normal girl. She was better.

I ran to the workout room stairs, ignoring the guys all shouting at me... but by the time I caught up to her, she was already pushing her way into locker room #5. And I couldn't follow her in there...

I kicked open the door and crutched inside.

Claire obviously thought I was just another figure skater because she didn't even look up. She sat there with her head in her hand.

I cleared my throat. "Sorry..." Her eyes met mine and my heart stopped for a second. She looked beaten. I wish I could take all her disappointment away. I cleared my throat. "Sorry about that asshole."

I slowly crossed the room and sat on the locker room bench a couple of feet away from her. She shrugged, then busied herself with unlacing her skates.

"Why can't you skate with that Matty guy anymore?" Matty seemed like a decently solid dude. I watched a rerun of their program at Nationals, and they were excellent together. They skated to a pretty romantic song, and it actually made me a bit jealous the way he touched her face and held her. They only had one small mishap when Claire fell out of a jump. After they took a bow, he looked disappointed, but he still gave her a hug and acted like he was happy. And, after a bit of research on social media, I decided the best part about Matty was that he had a boyfriend. There was no danger with him wanting her the way I wanted her.

She paused. “Want the political answer or the real one?”

Skating and hockey were riddled with politics. If you said one wrong thing, you could be blackballed for life. In hockey, if you told an OHL scout that you want to play for the USHL, then you’d be done— off every draft list in Canada before you could even blink. It went the same way if you said you wanted to play in Canada to USA hockey scouts. Just not a good idea. You had to talk through landmines when trying to make it. In figure skating, it was more like if you pissed off the wrong coaches or judges, they’d make your life a living hell. The sport had changed the whole scoring system, but politics were still at play. In competitions nowadays, each element was worth a certain amount of technical points, but even if a girl skated a completely clean and beautiful program, they could still ding her on “artistry points” and claim that she just wasn’t graceful enough or some dumb shit like that. It was all still very subjective and unfair at times.

I scooted closer to her and nudged her shoulder. “It’s me. The real answer, duh,” I said gently.

She chewed on her bottom lip for a second. “It’s hard for me to admit, but I was just unfocused and messing up a lot last competitive season. I was the reason we got second and not first at Nationals. But instead of working through my rut together— which, let me tell you, I stayed with him through many of his mental ruts— he just dumped me. And now,” she looked at me with a serious face, “I want to crush him in competition.”

I regarded her with a proud smile. “Thatta girl.” I patted her leg. “Now that finally sounds like the real you. So, you were only trying to stick with Jackson because maybe he could help you beat Matty?”

She sighed and looked at me pointedly. “It’s Jacques. And yes, but...”

“But he’s a total asshole.”

She slouched against the cinderblock wall behind her. “Yupp.”

“Skating with him and taking all his nasty shit-talking isn’t worth it. I think you can do better,” I told her earnestly.

“Thanks,” she said lamely. “I just don’t...” her voice trailed off and she cringed. She quickly looked away from me, like if she didn’t, she’d break down. I felt an intense need to comfort her, but I pulled back. I couldn’t come on too strong.

“What?”

She pulled a foot into her lap to massage it. “I’m starting to get used to being around here... I don’t want to move again.”

I tried to keep the emotion off my face. I didn’t want her to move either and I hoped she’d at least be around for the rest of the summer.

I gently pulled her foot into my lap and started rubbing it out for her. She looked at me like I’d lost my mind.

“I don’t want you to move either, Kessel.”

She looked caught off guard and continued to stare at her foot in my hands.

“Ya know...” I cocked my head to the side. “I’d skate with you if I could.”

She cracked a smile at that. “You couldn’t skate pretty if your life depended on it, Duke Callahan. You’re practically a bender out there.”

I look at her in mock-hurt. “That’s pretty harsh, Kessel. One, I am not a bender. And two, yes, I could totally skate pretty!” I did a little flicking motion with my

hands, trying to copy her movements. “See, I got your princess hands down pat.”

“Princess hands?!” Her hazel eyes danced with amusement. I loved that I put a smile back on her face. In fact, I wanted to keep putting smiles on her face, all the time if I could...

“Listen, Claire...” I started, then kinda lost my words.

She stopped laughing and looked at me in question.

I closed my eyes for a second and shook my head. I couldn’t believe I was going to use Sav’s words, but I guess it was worth a try. “Have you uh... Have you ever listened to The Story of Us?” I powered on, not waiting for a response, “Because that’s what we are right now... But I’d rather be like any other song, I’d rather be like... like Love Story.”

She pressed her lips together and nodded solemnly, then dropped her head back against the cinderblock wall and cackled like it was the funniest shit she’d ever heard.

My face immediately flamed red. I pushed her foot off my lap. “I’m leaving now.”

Her cackles quieted to chuckles and she wiped the corner of her eyes. “When did you become such a romantic, Duke Callahan? Talking Taylor Swift to me?”

I blew out a sigh. “Forget it. Forget I said anything.”

“When did Savannah get home?” she asked knowingly.

Everyone knew my sister was a Swiftie. She used to blast her Taylor Swift CDs through the rink speakers every time she got a chance to control the stereo.

“Couple weeks ago,” I grumbled.

“Sorry,” she called out just as I was reaching for the locker room door. I paused to hear her out, even though I was still slightly embarrassed. “I’m just a little shaken

up. My brain is already spiraling about Jacques. Now I'll have to start back at square one again," she said quietly.

I immediately felt dumb for bringing up our drama when she was dealing with her own professional shit here in the rink.

I nodded. "We'll talk soon."

She gave me a small, earnest smile. "I'd like that, Duke. And..."

I looked back at her.

"Thank you."

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18. Claire

On the Fourth of July, the rink was technically closed, but because of an extenuating circumstance, I convinced my dad to give me the keys to the Ice League. The circumstance: my twenty-fourth birthday.

I walked into the dimly lit rink and felt a giddy bubble of excitement rise in my chest over getting the ice completely to myself.

I didn't bother heading back to the locker room to get ready because I didn't need the privacy; I was already alone, and it was glorious. I quickly laced up my skates on the rubber covered picnic tables in the lobby, then walked into the cold, dimly lit rink.

It's not that I didn't know how to turn on all the bright lights, it's just that I preferred to skate with only the backup generator lights on— because then it felt like I had a spotlight and it reminded me of ice show skating. Ice shows were exactly what they sounded like— an annual time to show off for family and friends. And the Ice League always went all out for ice shows— we always had the best themes, the best costumes, and the best routines. It was the only time of year that all us girls in the rink got along because there were no results at the end; we weren't competing against each other for once, we were just skating for fun.

I was actually pretty sad I missed the ice show this past April. Addie never skated for herself anymore, but she did always come back into the rink in the spring to help out with the show. This past year's theme was 'A Trip to the Movies,' and Addie choreographed a program for five-year-olds to the Top Gun theme song.

Maybe I'd be able to stick around here long enough to be in next year's show if I could figure out a partner

situation that allowed me to train here. I just needed to stay focused and keep manifesting the perfect partner.

I skate ran onto the ice and then smoothed into long strides, listening to my edges cut deeply into the clean surface.

After warming up with a couple laps in silence, I hoisted myself up on the boards and swung my legs around to enter the teambox. I made my way to the timekeeper's box where the stereo was located and turned on my favorite playlist. I had it down to a science: I needed girl-power pop tunes for jumping, then the playlist kind of mellowed out into more soul songs for practicing my spins, footwork, and spiral sequences.

Today's practice was just one of those days where I felt on top of the world. I started with single jumps, then moved to doubles, then practiced all my triple jumps with ease. It was amazing how much more energy I had and how much more powerful I felt when I didn't have to work the kiddie camp all day before practicing.

After running through my spins, I skated a lap with my hands clasped together behind my neck. I did this to fully open my lungs and breathe in the cold air. It helped me relax before leaving the rink for the day.

When I pushed the doors to the lobby open, I was a little surprised to see that the lights were turned on and that Benny's, the diner, was open today.

After unlacing my skates and drying off my blades, I loaded everything into my skate bag and strolled to Benny's to see that it was completely empty besides Paige behind the bar and her little three-year-old son, Frankie, sitting on the bar drawing pictures with crayons.

"Hi!" I called out.

Paige jumped a little like I freaked her out, then placed a hand on her chest and laughed. "Hey Claire.

How's it going?" She did a double take as I walked closer. "Love the hair, girlie!"

I smiled my thanks as I walked closer to the bar. After the whole Jacques fiasco, I took a personal day away from the rink. But I regretted that decision about an hour into my day. I was never one to sit still for too long because that usually caused me to overthink myself into a bad mood. I ended up popping off our couch and taking a walk all the way to Northfield's cute downtown. The only two shops that happened to be open that early in the day were a Starbucks and a hair salon. So, with a rapidly melting frappuccino in hand, I decided I needed a change. I spent the rest of my morning adding caramel and blonde highlights to my hair, thinking maybe I'd transition back to my blonde roots soon. I would never admit it aloud, but I was maybe a *little* motivated by hearing Duke's voice in the back of my mind saying, "But you were my kind of blonde." That comment made my heart flop around pathetically in my chest.

Paige reached for her son sitting on the bar. "Ope, gotta get you off of here, buddy."

"Not on account of me I hope," I said, pulling a bar chair out for myself. "Actually, I think my Benny's experience would be better if I could have a one of a kind Frankie picture." I smiled at the two of them. Frankie looked like a perfect little blend of his parents. He had Max's dark hair, but Paige's bright blue eyes and wide smile. He was definitely going to be a heartbreaker one day.

Paige tucked her long blonde hair behind her ears. "You sure?"

"Definitely. He looks comfy right where he is," I told her as I took a seat. "I'm surprised you guys are open today."

"Yeah, we figured why not because we're cleaning the back anyways." She nodded over her shoulder. I

peeked around to see Max stacking cardboard boxes in the long hall that led to their office.

“Hi Max!” I called back to him.

He strained his neck to see who was sitting at the bar, then almost dropped the whole stack of boxes.

“So, what’ll you have?” Paige asked, pulling my attention back to her.

“If your kitchen’s not fully open, no worries. I just wanted to see who all was in here.”

“Nonsense. What’ll it be?”

“Pancakes!” Frankie called out happily.

“What?” Paige looked defeated. “You just had cereal, honey!”

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing and gave him a head pat. “I would love some pancakes, but only if Frankie gets some too,” I said.

He gave me a bright smile, then looked at his mom with a hopeful expression on his little face.

“Alright,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Two orders of pancakes comin up. Anything to drink?”

I checked my watch. “Is it too early for a Long Island?”

Paige just laughed. “I knew I liked you. But why not wait til my party later. You and Addie are coming, aren’t you?” she asked excitedly.

“Hey, I thought it was my party!” Max argued as he walked up to the bar.

Paige turned to him and patted his scruffy cheek. “It’s my party because I’m doing all the organizing for it, honey. If I wasn’t there, you’d have nothing to eat or drink and no one would clean up,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Is that so?!” Max asked with wide eyes. He began tickle-attacking her sides, and she fell into him. “I’d make the rookies do all that work, babe. I’d get it done. Say I could do it.”

“Okay, okay!” Paige said through her laughs.

I found myself smiling right along with them. I loved the playfulness of their relationship.

“Do you wanna cowor?” a raspy, little voice with a slight lisp asked me.

I turned to see Frankie looking at me with wide, round eyes, holding a broken blue crayon and napkin out to me.

Paige interrupted us with a pointed look in her son’s direction and she said, “Col-or.”

He looked at her obediently and repeated, “Co-wor.”

Paige nodded, and gave him an encouraging smile, like he was doing better, and that made my heart squeeze.

He nudged me again as soon as his mom turned away. “Do you?”

I smiled down at him and accepted the crayon and napkin. “Sure. What should I draw?”

He leaned his head on his arms across the bar and gave me a sideways glance. “A dog.”

I got to work on the dog, and a couple minutes later, Paige was putting the plates of pancakes and canisters of syrup in front of us.

“So, the party starts at 2, but you can come over at any time,” Paige said with hopeful eyes.

“Sounds good. Is um...” I trailed off. I wracked my brain trying to come up with ways to ask if Duke would be going as well. We hadn’t talked since the day he defended me against Jaques, and I definitely had not

been in the right headspace to talk about us. “Who is all going this year?”

Paige snickered and leaned her elbows against the wooden bar. “Is that your way of asking if a certain busted up hockey player will be attending?”

Max suddenly stopped what he was doing behind the bar and watched us curiously.

I nodded inconspicuously toward him to alert Paige that our conversation was being overheard by Max, who was probably team Greyson, who was definitely team Duke.

She sighed and turned to face him. “Max, I thought you needed to crunch some numbers in the back office. This bar has never been this tidy, so I know you’re not cleaning it right now.”

Max bit his lip and looked like he was mentally debating what to say. “You see, Claire,” he said, like he was oh-so-wise, “we could help each other out.” He gestured with his hand between the two of us. “I am supposed to report back to Grey, who is supposed to report back to you-know-who, about how you are currently feeling about you-know-who. And when you think about it, that could really help you out, ya know?”

I looked at him crossly. “If you-know-who wants to know what I’m thinking, then you-know-who should man up and ask me himself.”

“Exactly.” Paige crossed her arms over her chest and stared Max down ‘til he raised his hands in innocence and started making his way back to the office.

“I’ll let you girls talk!” Max called over his shoulder.

Paige let out a laugh as soon as he closed his office door. “These boys think they’re so smart, but they’re so obvious sometimes.”

I couldn't help but laugh at that as well. And... my heart kinda loved hearing how Duke was trying to check in on me. Maybe, just maybe, things would actually work tonight.

"I do understand why you were asking though," Paige said while she cleaned wine glasses. "I know that if the guy I was interested in would be coming, it would greatly dictate my fashion choices for the evening." She looked at me pointedly. "I've heard a little rumor that he'll be coming around three with his sister's family." Paige smiled wryly. "Mind watching Frankie for a bit while I help Max out in the back?"

"No problem," I said, ruffling Frankie's hair. He was already busy digging into his pancakes. "Hey, Paige." She paused and looked up. "Thank you," I said, struggling to keep a straight face. I didn't want to show how giddy I felt over knowing that Duke was going to be at the party.

She gave me a wink, then turned on her heel to head back to the office.

By the time I finished up my breakfast and called to Paige that I was going to head out soon, she was running to the front to say goodbye. I threw some cash on the bar to cover my breakfast and a nice tip for Paige before hopping down from the barstool.

When she reached the front, she handed me a hot chocolate over the bar. "For the road. It's still kinda chilly this morning. And Claire, happy birthday," she said with a smile.

"Thank you." I felt my face heat up a bit. Birthdays were always weird because you never wanted to sit there and announce that it was your birthday to everyone you came across that day, but you did hope to be wished a happy birthday, and you really appreciated the people who took the time to do so.

As I walked out of Benny's, I heard Frankie's little voice yell, "Wait!"

I turned to see him running on his little legs after me. He had his bottom lip sucked in like he was really concentrating, and the front of his hair was blowing up in the air from the wind of his little speed.

I bent down to his level and caught him as he launched himself toward me for a hug. When he pulled back, he held up a scribbly drawing for me to see.

"It says," he said authoritatively while pointing to the green scribbles, "happy birffday, Cwaire." He was still having trouble pronouncing some of his letters, and his little raspy voice was adorable.

"Oh, I do see! Thank you, Frankie. It's beautiful." I smoothed his hair back before standing up. "I'm going to pin this to my fridge so everyone can see it." He smiled proudly at that. "I'll see you later at your house, okay?"

"Okay!" he said before running back into Benny's.

I wistfully watched through the diner windows as Paige picked up Frankie and put him on her hip and talked to him as she continued putting things away. Max came running up behind them and exaggeratingly bulldozed into them for a bear hug. Paige threw her head back laughing. It was clear that she adored her little family.

And a little bit of jealousy pulled at my heart.

I wanted a family one day. I definitely did. But I also wanted to accomplish things in my skating career first, or else I knew I'd be thinking 'what if' for the rest of my life. *What if I could've gotten another shot at Nationals during an Olympic year?* I knew I was close... but I also knew I had a tight timeline. That's why I needed to solidify a skating partner like yesterday. The 2026 Winter Olympics was my deadline. If I didn't reach the Olympics by then, I never would. I'd be over the hill and tired, and I

knew I couldn't skate forever. I needed to eventually start building my life outside the rink...

I pushed pause on my life goals for my skating ones. Skating was all consuming and required selfishness. I knew other people had very different priorities, and they were growing up and falling in love and I was potentially wasting all my time here. And because of that, I knew I most likely wouldn't get the chance to be anyone's first love... But I could still hope to be the love of someone's life, couldn't I? Besides, whoever wanted to marry me wouldn't be my first love either...

Unless... that person was Duke.

Begrudgingly or not, I did fall in love with him all those years ago, and a part of my heart would always want him.

And maybe... Duke had been kind of right in a way. Maybe he had been right about leaving and not starting something with me all those years ago. He had big dreams to chase back then, and he reached his goals. I was still chasing mine.

I wished I could talk to my younger self... Because I had wanted a boyfriend so so badly all those years ago. I jealously watched other girls get "chosen," and I had a chip on my shoulder over being alone all the time. I had taken my alone time as a punishment. I figured I must've gone wrong somewhere. I hadn't been outgoing enough or flirty enough or cute enough. But now, I was starting to think that maybe all that time alone was actually a gift. A gift of time to accomplish my goals...

And now that Duke and I were mature enough, and now that he had reached his goals and I was very very close to reaching mine, maybe this was our time. Maybe everything truly did happen for a reason, and things really would work out the way they were supposed to. We could finish the last stretch together... What if this time around, we could make it work?

That was a big if though.

And it stressed me out.

My focus should've been more on finding a partner for skating instead of a partner for life. But Igor already put out some calls to other coaches asking about potential partners for me, and that's all that could be done for now.

I needed to stop overthinking everything. I wanted my twenty-fourth birthday to be happy, not a day of dwelling on how I was narrowing down on time to accomplish all my goals in life.

I pushed the doors open and breathed in the fresh, still-cold morning air and made my way down the rink's long ramp to my car. I had a little pep in my step over the fact that I'd already gotten a full workout while the rest of the world slept.

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19. Duke

I sat there all morning waiting for Max to text me advice on how to move forward with Claire. I wasn't sure if today was the day to try and win her over or if she was still too stressed with skating stuff.

But it was her birthday and the Fourth of July. This day seven years ago still held a special place in my mine, and I bet it did for her too. So, wouldn't today be the right time?

I debated it all morning. While I wanted to walk up to her and confess everything I was feeling for her, I was actually scared shitless to put myself out there and risk getting turned down. It would hurt too badly. She was the only girl who could wound me in a way that I'd never be able to ever recover from... Because she was the only girl I'd want for way more than just three weeks— and that still scared me as well.

When a text finally did come in, it was useless.

All Max typed out was basically an apology for failing at his mission: *Hey man, the girls wouldn't let me eavesdrop. Sorry. Shorty said you should ask her what she's feeling yourself.*

I stared down at my phone realizing that he actually made things worse. That meant Max showed her my hand. He told her I was wondering how to approach today. God, couldn't a guy catch a break? I was already nervous.

I dropped my head down on my parents' kitchen table and let out a growl.

"That doesn't sound like someone who is ready for a lake day!" Sav said cheerily. She moved into the kitchen and gave me a pat on the back. "Everyone's in the car waiting for you. Coming?"

I breathed out a heavy sigh. It was now or never. I pushed off my seat and Beau trailed after me to Sav's Range Rover in the driveway.

"You took my seat!" Johnny announced when I plopped in the first available bucket seat.

"Sorry about that, bud. This okay?" I looked back at him in his kid booster seat. Every time I saw him, I saw his birth father, Nick Johns. He had the same round brown eyes and spiky dark hair. I wondered if he'd continue to look like him as he grew up. Nick's life had been cut short and seeing Johnny age past him and into his thirties would probably be the weirdest but happiest feeling. I didn't want to wish the time away though, it already seemed like he grew about five inches every time I looked away. He was turning five, and it seemed like I was helping paint his nursery just yesterday.

He looked at my foot and contemplated for a second. "Guess so. Long as you can play hockey with me as soon as you're better." He twisted his little mouth. "You are going to get better soon, right?"

I smiled at his concern. "Yeah. I'm hoping to be on my skates again by the end of the summer, bud."

"Good," he said, rubbing his hands together like I just fell into his master plan. "I need you on my fantasy team."

I stared at him. "You're already into fantasy hockey?"

"Oh yeah," Griff interrupted and eyed me through his sunglasses in the rearview mirror. "His hockey team's fantasy league rules are cut-throat. I had kids booing me when I entered his locker room after the game against Anaheim."

"Oh shoot," I said with a laugh. That was not Griff's best game, but having a bunch of little kids humble you like that had to be hard.

“No kidding,” he retorted.

Sav rolled her eyes and handed me back a box of cheez-its.

I dug my hand in the box and threw a bunch in my mouth. “Thanks, sis,” I said with a mouth full.

“Hey,” Johnny whined and kicked the back of my chair. “Those were mine.”

I paused chewing. Sav held a cringe on her face and tried not to laugh. “I really was just handing them to you to hand back to Johnny.” She covered her mouth so I wouldn’t see her laughing at me. It didn’t do much.

I shot her a dark look before handing the box back to Johnny.

“What?!” she asked innocently. “I’m *his* snack bishhh, not yours.”

“Used to be mine,” I grumbled.

“What’s a snack bishhh, mom?” Johnny asked curiously.

I grinned and was about to encourage his use of the phrase, but Griff shot me a warning look in the rearview mirror, and I felt my shoulder’s slump. He was always taking away my fun. Griff promptly turned up the country song he was playing and rolled down the windows, definitely trying to distract Johnny.

We drove through Northfield’s busy downtown and made our way to the less-populated, more woodsy part of town where Max and Paige lived.

As soon as we turned on the gravel road that went around the lake, I knew we were close. A nervous energy coursed through my body at the prospect of seeing Claire so soon...

20. Claire

Addie and I went over to Paige and Max's a little before two just in case they needed any help setting up. Adhering to Addie's advice, I wore a bikini under some cut-off shorts and a tank top; however, I was already regretting this outfit choice. While Addie was perfectly fine flouncing around in whatever, I already had a huge wedgie and was pissed about it. As soon as I could, I was going to run back to the car and fetch my regular undies. I'd rather just keep my high-waisted shorts on for comfort for the rest of the day. Besides, I was already looking forward to tubing today, and I always kept belted jeans on when doing so thanks to an unfortunate clothing malfunction when I was a tween in which my bathing suit bottoms fell clean off. Everyone in the boat laughed at my poor 12-year-old-self while I had to keep dunking underwater to try and find the bright pink material before it became one with the bottom of the lake forever.

Addie and I brought a whole cooler full of Jell-O shots with us because those were her favorite, and she said they were the perfect summer party favor. Her ability to make perfect Jell-O shots reminded me that she went through a pretty intense party stage back when she was younger, which seemed so out of character for her now because she was practically a twenty-seven-year-old grandma. She was in bed by nine almost every single night, and she claimed she was drunk after one and a half glasses of wine.

We both carried one end of the cooler as we trekked down the sidewalk that ran alongside their house and down to their lakefront backyard. It was a very long, sloped walk down to the lake. In the winter, it was perfect for sledding, but you always wound up on the frozen lake — which wasn't the safest. Max and Paige bought this

place when it looked super shabby for a cheap price right after they got out of college. And when I say shabby, I'm talking seventies shag carpets, pink tile bathrooms, a collapsing roof, a collapsing dock, and in desperate need of a paint job. But even though it was kind of a shithole, it was always a fun place to hang out. They played host to all the rink kids through the years, giving them a little respite from the serious rink culture.

Over the past few years, the two of them flipped the said shithole house into a beautiful home. They painted it all a dark blue color with white trim and did some impressive landscaping work to make a sandy beach at the base of the lake. Their old dock did still sag and look like it was about to fall into the water though.

As soon as we turned the corner into their backyard, Paige spotted us and waved excitedly. Max followed the direction of her wave and immediately ran over to us and lifted Addie off her feet into a big bear hug. Where I saw Max all the time at the rink, Addie probably hadn't seen him for a while. She laughed and patted his shaggy black hair. The two of them had become best buds as teens when they worked together at the Ice League's concession stand.

"How's it going? How's Paige and Frankie? How's Darla? Is she here today?" Addie asked, excitedly looking over his shoulder for her.

He shook his head out as he set her back on the ground and gave me a knuckle punch. "So many questions, woman! And she is!" he said with a proud missing tooth smile. He usually kept his fake tooth in, except when he played pick-up hockey or helped coach older kids. I sensed he was prepared for rough play today with the guys. "Darla's on kiddie duty inside. She'd probably love to see you though." He hitched a thumb toward the screened-in sunroom addition they built onto their house.

“Kiddie duty?”

“Yeah, everyone’s bringing their kids here, so she volunteered to help watch them inside so we can party. It honestly made her whole day... maybe even her whole month,” he said with a laugh. “Darla loves living her best Grandma life.”

Max then lifted our cooler onto his shoulder and started forward. We fell in step behind him and walked down the sidewalk toward the lake past the huge bonfire pit— already stacked with logs and ready for later that night— and then past the Swedish lawn bowling and corn-hole tournament set up, as well as the designated beer pong table. Ahead of us, the wobbly looking old dock had an ancient pontoon waiting at the end of it, as well as one brand new jetski, and one empty jetski lift.

“TJ and Ellie took out the other jetski,” Max said, nodding toward the empty lift.

“They stayed here last night because they got a bit shwasty,” Paige explained as she hugged both of us hello. “They used the jetski this morning to go see his family. No point in driving because they’re spending the night here again. See that yellow house across the lake...” She pointed out a sunny looking ranch-style home. “That’s TJ’s family’s house.”

Addie squinted, trying to recall who he was from the rink. “TJ... Vonnie? Kinda Italian looking?”

“Yupp,” Max confirmed. “He’s a bit younger than us, and a bit older than Claire.”

It dawned on me then. “I remember TJ! He’s the one who was pinning after that Clarrisa bitch a couple years ago!”

Max immediately started laughing. “That’s the one! Except he’s wifed up now to a much nicer girl.”

“His wife is named Ellie,” Paige added. “She’s a power skating instructor in Detroit. I’ll introduce you

guys, you'll like her," Paige said confidently. "But other than those two, you guys are the first here." She checked her phone. "I think Jules and Grey should be here soon too."

Seconds later, Canyon and his buddy Troy came sprinting down the hill towards the lake. They threw off their shirts and shoes and shouted out hellos to us all without breaking their stride. The entire dock wobbled under them as they ran, but they continued until they jumped off the end of it into the lake with loud splashes.

Max strolled down to the end of the dock to look at them as soon as they resurfaced.

"Who won?!" Troy shouted up at him.

Max put his hands on his hips. "Tie. Need a tiebreaker. Let's see it again." He nodded toward the hill.

They both shouted out complaints over this but were secretly smiling. They definitely wanted another go at jumping in.

Paige turned to us with a bright smile on her face. "Guess the Scotts are here."

After we were finished putting all the snacks and drinks outside for people, Paige made the three of us some strong mixed drinks and we all pulled plastic adirondack chairs onto the wobbly dock. We sat there working on our baby tans through SPF and chatting while people started streaming into their backyard. I recognized most of the people from the rink— there were tons of tanned, tatted hockey dudes, as well as fellow figure skating instructors— but there were others who were coming over on kayaks or boats and anchoring them, then swimming into their property to join the party.

Unfortunately, one of the people in one of those boats was Daniella. I put my sunglasses on and faced the sun, trying to remain unbothered that she was stripping her clothes off suggestively and diving into the water in her

skimpy bikini. I really had no issue with her other than the fact that she was the one who Duke chose to make-out with the other night... which I knew wasn't exactly fair to her. Duke was a great looking guy. You'd have to have zero pulse to think otherwise... with his swoopy hair, impressive looking biceps, especially when he reached up and pushed said fluffy hair back, and his—

“Claire?!”

I ripped off my sunglasses and looked at Paige in question.

“Jeez,” Addie arched a suspicious eyebrow at me. “What’s got you so distracted?”

“Bet I know,” Paige said with a wink, to which I rolled my eyes. “I was just asking if you wanted to play cornhole with the boys?” She pointed to Max and Tyler, who were standing on the lawn trying to wave us down.

I laughed at their over the top presentation of the corn-hole board in front of them, like they were trying to be Vanna White. It’s as if they were saying, *this could be allll yours, if you only just walk up here and join us*. Tyler motioned to my drink, silently asking if I wanted more. I quickly drained what was left of my cocktail and nodded. Call me a coward, but I wanted to be sporting a good buzz when Duke finally arrived... I wasn't sure how I'd be able to deal with this day if he didn't want to be near me. One could point out that he did say he wanted us not to be a tragedy back at the rink. But he was so hot and cold I never knew what I'd be getting with him. His devil-may-care attitude was part of what made him attractive, but when you were on the receiving end of his carelessness, it wasn't so fun.

21. Duke

I was ready for a fun day. I was ready for a fun day with *Claire* specifically.

What I wasn't ready for: Walking into the party to see Claire practically jumping into Tyler fucking Jettensen's arms to hug him over winning corn-hole together. Her muscular legs were wrapped around his waist, and he threw his fist high in the air. You could hear her cackles probably all around the lake. *What the hell?* Had he already moved in on her?

Call me a coward, but that made me shuffle straight over to the nearest cooler to pop open a beer instead of going directly to see her, which was what I had originally planned to do.

She looked unbelievably hot in cut-off jeans and bikini top, which she had pressed against Tyler's chest seconds ago. And I think she lightened her hair... I wanted to get a closer look to be sure, but I forced myself to stop staring at her like a creep.

While it only took me a split-second to locate her, I doubted she had even noticed me entering the party. I tried to swallow back that specific ding to my ego and pleasantly greet the guys around me, but it honestly put a major damper on my mood. I wanted to be her partner today... and not *just* cornhole partner... I wanted to be *with* her today. For real with her. Like pulling her close to me and making out on the dock during the fireworks kind of with her. But how could we possibly get to that scene with how the day was currently looking?

I grinded my teeth together as Tyler placed her back on her feet and gave her a high-five.

I'd get my time with her. I just needed patience...

Because, let's face it, I was way way better for her than stupid Tyler. I had years of Claire knowledge over him. Tyler didn't know her favorite color was black (second grade), or that too much movie theater popcorn made her sick (fourth grade), or the fact that she got that little notch in her nose during a rough game of capture the flag (fifth grade, end of the school year party), or that the scar on her right temple happened when she was working on double axels (sixth grade). That particular scar resulted from the strap of the figure skating harness hitting her face. I remember feeling shaky the rest of that day because when I saw her in the lobby of the Ice League, there was a lot of blood coming from her head, and I had no way of knowing if she was alright until the next morning at school.

So, Tyler? Yeah, fuck him. He didn't know her the way I knew her.

Beau next to me was now whining for me to let him off his leash. He looked at me then to the water with sad eyes, as if he was asking, '*Please, dad? Pretty please.*'

"Go ahead," I told him as I quickly unhooked his leash.

He bolted for the water, making a path straight through Claire and Tyler's cornhole game. Recognizing him, Claire's head immediately snapped up to look for me.

As soon as our eyes met, all the people, the noise, everything, it all just faded away. All I could see was her beautiful hazel eyes. I gave her a small smile, and she hesitated a little before returning one.

I was about to start moving toward her, when Tyler picked her up, forcibly breaking our little connection by moving her to her spot for the next round of throws. She laughed like it was the funniest shit in the world...

She laughed like she liked him...

And my stomach sank as disappointment settled there.

Before her next throw, she adjusted her bikini top... and *Oh My God*...

Claire Kessel had a tattoo.

I gulped and squinted at the delicate lettering scrawled under her right boob, wondering if my mind was playing tricks on me. There's no way that could be real. Craig wouldn't allow that...

But wait, we were almost halfway through our twenties— she was literally turning twenty-four today. Craig couldn't say shit about it.

It's almost like she could sense I was staring at it, because her eyes drifted to mine, and she quirked her eyebrow up before quickly covering the tattoo again with her top.

Fuck.

I rubbed my forehead. I was in over my head. I didn't think I could be more tempted by her, but that just did it. I needed to see it for myself. God. I needed... I needed her. I didn't want the dock scene as much anymore... Now my mind was filled with images of her in my bedroom... Tossing her on my bed, untying that bikini, inspecting that tattoo, licking it... making a hot trail with my tongue down her muscular stomach, down—

A heavy hand landed on my shoulder, and I immediately smelled the beer on Max's breath.

"Dude, you gotta not be soo obvious about it. You look like a lovesick puppy. Chill out for a bit and have some fun. You'll get the chance to talk to her, promise," Max wagged his eyebrows, and I immediately felt a bit queasy. Max's plans never worked out the way they were supposed to.

I straightened up so I was taller than him. I did have a few inches on the guy, but lately, I'd been leaning over on my crutches a lot. "I'll chill... But only if you promise you won't interfere," I warned him.

"Me?" He feigned innocence. "I'd never!"

I took an uneasy breath and started to argue, but he ran off as soon as he noticed a jetski was moving fast toward his dock.

I slowly but surely crutched after him, but my mind couldn't move forward. My brain kept repeating on a loop: *Claire Kessel has a tattoo. Claire Anne Kessel has a tattoo and I saw it with my very own eyes.*

"Fuck!" I almost tripped and fell down the hill. His damn lawn was super lumpy and hard to navigate on crutches. I'd have to be careful not to ingest too much alcohol through this day or else I really would fall. "You need lawn care!" I frustratingly yelled at Max, to which many of the hockey guys started laughing at my expense.

By the time I made it to the edge of the water, I could easily tell that it was TJ and Ellie waving from the jetski. TJ had a deep summer tan going, thanks to his Italian roots, and Ellie's pretty auburn hair always stood out. TJ carefully navigated the jetski onto the lift, then quickly hopped onto the dock, making the whole thing shake.

"Careful!" Max warned.

Ellie jumped onto the dock after him, holding her hand over her mouth to stop from giggling. She gave Max a quick hug, then started walking toward me.

"Hi Duke!" She wove her long, wet auburn hair into a messy bun on top of her head and regarded me with a bright smile. "How ya feelin?"

"Could be better." I forced myself not to look back at Claire and Tyler. "Kinda bummed I can't do much," I

mumbled, using my broken foot as a cover up for why I was really upset.

“You don’t have to do much to enjoy a lake day.” She rolled her eyes playfully at me. “Take off that shirt, get some vitamin D,” she urged. “We’re going tubing in a couple minutes. You can’t do that, but you could still go for a boat ride! I’ll go get you another beer and lifejacket, okay, bud?”

I laughed at her use of bud. She pronounced it ‘buad,’ just like TJ. He was definitely rubbing off on her.

“That doesn’t sound bad I guess.” *And hopefully Claire would be done hanging out with stupid Tyler by the time we got back,* I mentally added.

TJ sprinted past us, yelling, “Sup, Callahan! Bathroom, sorry!”

Ellie rolled her eyes and scurried to follow him up to the house, while shouting out to everyone their intentions: “Be on the boat in five minutes! Five minutes if you’d like to tube today, people!” She was used to ordering us hockey guys around. She was one of our power skating coaches back in Detroit. I think she got a kick out of rounding us up and making us do figure skating stroking exercises that whooped our asses— like physically— they actually really made my butt sore.

I watched as two of the guys, who had the tube lifted on their shoulders, walked down the dock to the boat, followed by a group of others carrying life jackets, towels, and drinks.

Just as I expected, Claire was one of the people walking toward the boat. She’d never skip out on tubing. She was a daredevil who loved speed. She’d be the one out there on the water constantly putting her thumb up, urging the driver to go faster.

And while I couldn’t go tubing, Ellie was right— I could still go for a boat ride...

I started making my way down the dock, holding my breath and praying that Tyler wouldn't be joining the whole group on the boat. There was currently an open seat right next to Claire... That seat was mine. She could lean against me, and I could hold her as we watched the sunset while cruising on the open water. It honestly sounded like paradise.

I was about to push open the pontoon's little door to let myself in, when Max made a loud, "Errrr," noise and used his forearm to block my chest from moving forward. "You may not enter the boat."

I ripped my sunglasses off and gave him a death stare. "Says who?"

He lifted his hands in innocence. "Dude, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but think about it— you might get your cast wet. I'm not too sure if that's a good idea. Plus, it's super choppy out, what about your brain?"

Now everyone on the boat was watching us, including Claire. I felt like a little kid who was just told he was too short to ride a rollercoaster.

I leaned in a little closer to him so no one else could hear. "I don't care," I whispered sternly. "Help me out, c'mon," I pleaded. I could feel my face heating up.

"Grey!" he called over my shoulder and waved him over from the lawn. I instantly felt betrayed. "Rookie here wants to go on the boat!"

"I'm not a fucking rookie," I ground out.

That made him, as well as some of the older, retired guys on the boat laugh out loud.

"Round here ya are, bud," Max said with an arched eyebrow.

Grey came up behind me and patted my shoulder with his thick hand. His St. Christopher medallion caught the sun and shone brightly. He had stripped his shirt to

play a skins vs. shirts game of spikeball, and now he was getting his gross sweat on me. I tried to shrug his arm off my shoulder, but he was stronger.

“No, no, no boating for you. Not a good idea,” he said, taking a sip of his beer.

“Who put you in charge?” I snapped.

He gave a wry grin. “Your Coach.”

“And you’re going to tell him?” I asked incredulously. “What happened to snitches get stitches?” I looked to Max to confer, and he tipped his head in my favor, almost as if saying- *he does have a point.*

Grey tried to hide his smile. “I’m a coach too. It’s rough out here.”

I looked at him dumbfounded. “You’re a fuckin peewee coach, asshole.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Yeah well, you’re kinda fun to mess with, maybe I’ll try big league coaching next season.”

“No. You wouldn’t,” I deadpanned. No way did I want him to follow me back to Detroit. He took it easy on the kids, but he was a hockey monster. Having his hard ass on the bench during games and practices would be a nightmare. Plus, if he were in Detroit, I’d never get to eat my cheese sticks in peace.

“Go back and take a seat, bud. I’ll get you a nice, cold beer,” Grey said, nodding back to the lawn.

“Grey?” Jules’ sweet voice inquired from the beach. “Are you drinking?” she asked warily.

I arched an eyebrow at him.

“Here, take this one, bud.” Grey forced his beer in my hand, then whispered, “I told her I’d stay sober too. Pregnancy solidarity and all that.”

I smirked at him. “Good luck with that, you smell like a brewery, dickhead.”

“Shit.” He dropped his head as he made his way back to Jules, looking like a little boy walking to the principal’s office. “Let’s go, rookie!” He made a hand motion over his shoulder that told me to follow him.

I grinded my teeth. I hated being ordered around, but what choice did I have? I could practically feel Claire’s eyes on me, waiting to see what I was going to do. The younger rebellious version of me that Claire knew would’ve jumped in the boat regardless of what anyone else said. But my older, hurt, professional athlete self knew there were some rules I couldn’t break anymore... Including going against Coach’s wishes.

I heaved a sigh and started crutching back to the lawn. The guys in the boat all chirped at me and clapped, making fun of me. One of them even called out, “I would *never* take that kind of disrespect!” I knew he was just trying to get under my skin and goad me into overreacting. Fuck them.

To pour salt in the wound, Tyler came running down the hill toward the dock. Of course he was going to join Claire.

Only, this could be the perfect opportunity, I thought. We’d meet in the middle, and I’d shove him in the water, making him look like the little bitch he was.

I paused in the middle of the dock waiting for him... and I was going to do it, I really was...but then Griff caught my eye.

He was holding Indie in the crook of his arm under some shade like the responsible dad that he was, and he lifted his hand and made the hand sign for ‘Calm’ at me.

I cursed and shook my head at him. How had he known what I was thinking? He started doing that to me when I was a kid when he reffed my games because I’d

overreact out of anger and take stupid penalties. When we first made it to the NHL together, he made that motion to me almost every other game, and the entire Detroit crowd even started doing it. I'd like to think that with age, I matured out of impulsively reacting based on emotions... *most* of the time.

So, I started crunching the rest of my dignity back to the lawn, and when Tyler crossed my path, I kept my eyes straight ahead.

"Hey bud," he said, patting me on the back as he passed me.

My jaw ticked angrily, and it took all my willpower just to grunt at him in return.

As I continued down the dock, I ordered myself, *Do not look back at the boat, do not look.*

But of course, look is exactly what I did. And when I peered back at it, all I could see was Tyler sliding into the seat right next to Claire. My seat.

As soon as I plopped my ass down on an Adirondack chair and dropped my crutches to the lumpy ground next to me, Grey walked over with his sleeping toddler and placed her in my arms.

"Watch Gracie for us? Need to have some fun with my girl. Might get lucky." He waged his eyebrows at me. "You understand, right?"

I regarded him with a dark look. Yes, of course I understood. That's what I had been trying to do by going on the boat. Before I could argue, he took off jogging back toward Jules.

"Just me and you now, I guess," I muttered down to the kiddo.

As if he heard me, Beau came trotting out of the water toward me. He shook himself off on the sand, then continued forward until he laid down by my feet.

I reached down to pet him. “Thanks for joining me, bud.”

I took another swig of beer, noticing that the boat was still docked. They must’ve been waiting for someone...

As if on cue, TJ and Ellie came strolling down from the house, holding hands and looking completely in love with each other... *and*, completely ignorant of the fact that a whole boat full of people were waiting for them... a boat full of people that she told to hurry up.

“Do not shake that baby or else,” TJ called out to me.

“Or else what?” I asked as they neared.

“Or else you’ll be wifed up like me!” he shouted with a laugh while flashing me his tattooed ring finger.

Ellie shoved him and rolled her eyes.

“Shit. You know I love you baby!” He kissed the side of her head and she struggled to keep a straight face.

She took off running toward the dock, and he let out a bark of laughter before charging after her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and swung her around to stop her from winning their little foot race to the boat.

I snorted at the two of them. They were always racing everywhere... And TJ was always cheating to win— like picking her up before she crossed the finish line.

As the boat roared to life and pulled away, I tried to drown out the people partying around me— the loud flip-cup game, the on-going Swedish lawn bowling tourney, and the people playing volleyball in the water. I was pretty decent at drowning the world out. That’s what I did every time I laced up my skates and played in a stadium after all.

I stared down at Grey’s cute kid soundly sleeping in the crook of my arm. By passing her to me, Grey pretty much dumped a bucket of water on my internal flames. I couldn’t stay in a negative mood while holding a baby.

Maybe Grey knew that would happen because that's kinda what happened to him— maybe Jules was his bucket of water that calmed the anger out of him.

Gracie was an adorable little girl with sweaty, hazelnut ringlets and a cute button nose. You could definitely see both Grey and Jules' genes inside of her.

And looking down at her, for the first time in my life, I wondered what it would be like to have kids of my own one day... Like what if there was a little kid running around here that was half of Claire and half of me? He or she would be the best kid alive, I was sure of it.

I never let myself even think of a future with kids as a possibility... Until I was back here with Claire. She was the only girl I ever thought about being serious with before life got so complicated and difficult. Now, I was sitting here thinking I'd have ten of these little guys if Claire wanted them... But that'd only be possible if Claire wanted *me*.

After about a half hour, the boat was still gone and I was still holding Gracie, but I was itching to get up and move around.

Not wanting to wake the snoozing toddler, I craned my neck to search around for Grey and Jules. I squinted my eyes to spot them a ways off in Max and Paige's rickety, old gazebo. It looked like they were slow dancing to no music at all. Jules had her head leaned against Grey's chest, and every once in a while she'd look up at him and smile, like he was some kind of superhero... It kinda blew my mind that such a tough ass like Greyson Scott could act so gentle with her.

All I could think of while I watched them was that I'd give anything for that to be me and Claire at the moment...

I decided giving them some extra time together wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. Maybe it'd bring me some good karma.

At one point, Paige came around with lemon squares, and I grabbed two. I knew Claire loved them, so I wanted to save one for her just in case they were all gone by the time they got off the boat...

By the time the boat came back into sight, I was no longer babysitting. I crutched near the bonfire that my teammate Campbell had started. It was still only dinnertime, but someone had probably told him to start it up to keep bugs away.

I decided to stand there because it would give me the optimum chance to intercept Claire. She'd have to pass the bonfire pit to get up to the house for the bathroom... My thinking was that there was no way the ladies on the boat wouldn't all be heading to the bathroom.

But as soon as Max docked the boat, I regretted everything I'd been thinking.

I gulped as I watched Tyler jump out of the boat first, then reach to hold Claire's hand to help her out.

My eyebrows drew down angrily. Claire didn't need help. She was a better athlete than almost everyone here.

But he did help, and then he led her to the edge of the dock where they both took a seat to splash their feet in the water.

It felt like a punch to the gut. Because that was *our spot*. That's where I kissed her all those years ago...

I quickly turned away from them and stared at the bonfire's dancing flames.

Had I really just built a whole fucking future for us in my head while she was falling for someone else...?

I chucked her lemon square in the fire.

I had to do something drastic. Something that I didn't *want* to do, but that I knew would save us. Something to show her that she would miss me if she didn't have me...

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22. Claire

As soon as I started walking up the lawn, I heard the beginnings of the happy birthday song, and I felt a giddy bubble of nervous energy rising in my chest.

I had thought it was weird that Tyler wanted to just chat with me after we got off the boat, and I was kind of annoyed because I wanted a chance to talk to Duke, but now it all made sense. He was just part of a stalling plan so that Paige could get everyone up on the patio to sing happy birthday around a cake for me.

I eyed Tyler next to me, and he shrugged nonchalantly. I playfully shoved him, then jogged the rest of the way up their lawn.

The hockey guys cracked me up as they sang their hearts out totally off-key and over-the-top. They actually put their arms around each other and swayed as they sang.

And I can't lie, I smiled at each one of them, but I was really trying to locate Duke. I'd been waiting for him to come chat with me all day. I felt too awkward to approach him. I strategically chose a spot on the boat where he could sit behind me and I'd be able to lean against him, and dear Lord, maybe he'd even put those sculpted arms of his around me.... but that plan got thwarted by Max and Grey... I figured maybe after tubing we'd get our opportunity.

At the close of the song, Paige happily placed the homemade birthday cake that looked like it was about to melt away with lit candles decorating it in front of me...

And that's when I saw him. He was standing across their outdoor patio table from me and my glowing cake... And I instantly envisioned chucking it at him.

My heart sunk.

Because he wasn't looking back at me. No, he wasn't concerned with me at all. He was concerned with Daniella's tongue inside his mouth.

Paige's face faltered as she saw what I was staring at. She made a look at Max, as if saying, *take care of that*. But there was nothing either of them could do to fix this, and they shouldn't have felt responsible to do anything anyway. It wasn't their fault. They'd been nice enough to put this little birthday moment together for me, and I wouldn't let Duke ruin it.

I put a smile on my face even though my heart hurt. I blew out my candles, wishing and hoping for the same things I always did, but that year after year continued to elude me...

As soon as I finished cutting the cake and passing out pieces, I stood and gave Max a hug, then turned to Paige.

She looked at me with a very sorry expression on her face and it took all of me not to break down as I hugged her.

"Everything will work out the way it's supposed to. I promise," she said into my hair.

I nodded as I pulled back. "Bathroom," I said tightly, and then I quickly excused myself.

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23. Duke

I clenched my jaw as Claire ducked her head and tore away into the house.

The guilt over making her so upset ate at my conscience, but I had to do it. Now she knew how I felt all day while she ran around with Tyler.

I shot a satisfied snarl in Tyler's direction, but all he did was bow his head and awkwardly look away.

Whatever. What I did was justified, and not even Paige marching toward me with a pissed off look on her face and Max in tow as back-up could make me regret my actions.

"What is wrong with you?!" Paige whispered harshly at me.

I stuck my jaw out at her defiantly. "Me?"

"Yes, you! You stupid idiot!" She wacked my chest.

"Hey, don't—"

I was cut off by Max shaking his head at me— a warning not to speak out of line to his girl.

I rolled my eyes and waited for her to rip into me.

But instead of using words, she slapped me across my face.

I looked down at her in shock and touched my stinging cheek.

She pointed her finger at me and fumed, "You, Duke Callahan, just broke her heart on her birthday!"

The disappointment on her face bit into me, but I argued back anyway. "No! She broke my heart! She was off with stupid Tyler—"

Paige threw her hands up in the air. “Because I asked him to distract her so we could surprise her with this cake! She’s been stealing glances at you all day long hoping you come talk to her! How are you this stupid?”

“No-” I was about to challenge her claims, but Max nodded at me, telling me that she was correct, and I paused...

Fuck.

“Yeah,” Paige said. “Go fix it,” she demanded. “You’re ruining my party, Duke Michael Callahan.”

“Jeez, okay, Mom,” I said sarcastically. “I’m going,” I told her with wide eyes.

But my body trembled with confusion as I moved forward. Part of me hoped Paige was right, but the other half of me couldn’t be that easily convinced...

Maybe it was just because it was a hard thing for me to admit that I was wrong...

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24. Claire

In their house, I slammed the bathroom door shut behind me.

I hugged myself tightly and broke down crying. The tears were fueled by alcohol and crushed hope.

Stupid Daniella. No, it wasn't her fault. Stupid Duke. He was the one who put potential love out there between us just to steal it back so quickly that it gave me whiplash.

Someone was now knocking urgently on the door.

I quickly sniffled up my tears and wiped my face. "Occupied," I called out.

But the knocking continued.

I rolled my teary eyes and moved to open the door, feeling annoyed that they couldn't just take the hint and find a different bathroom.

When I flung it open, the first thing I saw were his crutches.

He forcefully pushed past me to join me in the little bathroom.

"Duke, stop," I complained. "I'm leaving."

But he grabbed my hand and pulled me back lightly. "Wait, please."

I looked up to his round brown eyes and my heart paused. I guess we were doing this now.

"Fine. I can't take this anymore, Duke!" I flung my hands down by my sides. "Is that what you wanted to hear? Every time I think we're in a good place, every time I try to give you my heart, you act like I'm holding a gun to your head," I complained. "And I'm sick of it. I'm sick of you messing with my head."

His nose flared. He placed his crutches against the wall and leaned his body against the bathroom sink. “You’re the one messing with my head, Kessel,” he practically growled. “How am I supposed to feel when you’re running around all day with Tyler?”

“Tyler is my friend!” I shouted, feeling exasperated. “And he was trying to help me figure out what to say to you all day!”

God, I felt so stupid about the whole thing. I covered my eyes and ordered myself not to cry. I hated crying in front of people. The stupid alcohol in my system was making it harder than usual to keep the tears at bay.

When I looked back at him, his face was blank, unreadable, like he was trying to keep his guard up. And that was our problem—both of us always had a barrier up when around each other. But I couldn’t do it anymore. I was done pretending like what he did didn’t affect me.

“Don’t you get it, Duke? I’m sitting here hoping and wishing for you to say and do all the right things. But you just... don’t. And it makes me feel like a total idiot.” I swallowed the burning lump in my throat and looked at him desperately. “You’re not supposed to be my friend.” He looked like he wanted to argue, but I talked over him. “You’re supposed to love me. It’s supposed to be you,” my voice cracked as I said it, and I hated it. I hated how weak I sounded.

But when I looked back up at him, it was like recognition dawned in his eyes.

He placed his large hand around my waist and backed me against the bathroom wall, and I just stared at him. His eyes locked on mine, and his gaze filled with heat, like he would burn up if he didn’t do something.

“You want me?” he choked out.

“That’s what I’ve been trying—”

“Thank God,” he said in a hoarse whisper.

And then his lips were on mine, kissing me fiercely.

I immediately gave in, shuddering against his lips. I wrapped my arms around his neck to pull him closer, feeling like I was drowning in him as his hands explored my body with an urgent need.

This. I knew this would be perfect. This was why I couldn't get him out of my head. I knew I wasn't crazy at seventeen. We fit together perfectly. With him, I belonged. I took in the scent of him, the feel of his muscular body pressed against mine, the way his rough hands—

No, no, no. Not like this, I internally shouted at myself. *He was just making out with Daniella.*

My stupid brain finally caught up to my body and I used my forearm to push back on his chest.

We were both breathing heavily, and I think he could tell I was about to yell at him, because his eyes swam with regret. It was clear he thought kissing me would make everything better.

"If you think you can just—"

"I'm in love with you, Claire," he said, cutting me off.

He ruefully pulled back from me and leaned against the sink again. He brushed a hand through his flowy hair. Then he looked back at me with wide, worried eyes.

"I'm scared shitless over this, but I..." He shook his head and looked at me like he was shocked at himself over what he was going to say. "I want to be the love of your life. Me. I want to love you. No one else. It drives me insane, makes me go absolutely *nuclear* when I see you with someone else. It always has. And I'm so sorry I've made us wait and put us through all this shit. I've just been..." He swallowed, like it was hard for him to admit. "Scared," he finished.

My mouth went dry. I stood there flushing over his words, replaying them in my mind. This guy. This NHL player who feared nothing... was scared of telling me how he felt...

And he finally laid his heart down at my feet.

The barrier between us had finally cracked.

I grabbed fistfuls of his shirt and pulled him closer to kiss me more. He looked shocked for a split second before reciprocating.

“It’s about time,” I said against his lips, and I could feel his smile as his strong arms snaked around my body.

I ran my hands through his soft hair, and he grunted, deepening the perfect kiss. He grabbed my butt to pull me closer. I felt all the worries, all the madness, all the frustration leaving us.

After pulling back an inch, his eyes searched mine and the corners of his lips quirked up. He had both his hands gripping the wall on either side of me to balance. “Wow.”

I grinned, and his whole face lit up with a smile.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all day,” he confessed.

I bit my lip.

“I have been wanting to do one other thing...” he said, gently fingering the bottom strap of my bikini, but not breaking eye contact with me.

“Yeah?” I asked him coyly.

His eyes flamed over. “Can I?” he asked, licking his bottom lip.

I nodded.

He expertly unknotted my bikini top in one pull, but he didn’t move it completely out of the way. He scootched

the right side up to reveal the tattoo scrawled along the underside of my boob.

“Oh my God,” he said breathlessly. “I was right.” His voice was laced with awe as he rasped out, “Claire Anne Kessel has a tattoo.”

I laughed at his surprise.

He pulled me closer to get a better look at it and smoothed his rough fingertips over the Russian lettering, making me shiver. “What’s it say?”

“Guess,” I replied.

He held my ribs with his outstretched hand and studied the writing, then my eyes. “Something about strength... or beauty... or both...”

“Be tough,” I told him.

He shot me a wicked grin before bending down to kiss the lettering, making my entire body tremble. “God, you’re so beautiful,” he whispered against my skin, and I practically felt my knees buckle. He held my waist. “Careful,” he said with a chuckle.

When he stood back up, he pulled me into his chest and rested his chin on my head. We stayed there for a beat, just enjoying each other’s warmth.

“I’m sorry about today,” he finally said.

I felt a bubble of laughter in my chest because I didn’t even care what happened before. We were now in the after, and I was just so happy to be here with him. I cherished feeling wanted, and not just by anybody... but by Duke Callahan.

“And happy birthday, Kessel,” he added.

I closed my eyes and smiled against his chest, memorizing everything about this moment.

His fingers lightly brushed my hair behind my ear. “I love the new style by the way.”

I rolled my eyes and was about to make a smart remark, until I saw the look on his face. He looked at me like... he adored me. He kissed the top of my head, and something inside me cracked.

I reached up and smoothed his floppy hair. "I always loved how your hair would—"

"Get lighter in the summer," he chuckled. "I know. I remember. Thought of you every summer after that."

I smoothed his eyebrow and his face completely disarmed. He closed his eyes, enjoying my touch. I could see the little boy he used to be when he looked innocent like this.

He smiled and nudged my hand with his head, like he was a puppy who wanted me to continue touching him.

I laughed and happily obliged, running my nails through his hair.

He leaned toward me and started slowly kissing my neck. Goosebumps erupted on my skin, and I shivered.

"You cold?" He chuckled against my skin, making it tingle pleasantly. I nodded. I still had my damp bikini top and shorts on.

"Here, put this on." He wrapped his hockey zip-up around me, and his warmth and smell immediately enveloped me.

I turned to face him and touched the back of his neck. He leaned in to kiss me, and I smiled against his lips.

We would've probably continued to make out for the next hour if someone hadn't chosen that moment to start pounding on the bathroom door.

"Sorry to interrupt guys, but I really gotta go! I broke the seal!" TJ's voice sounded desperate.

Duke leaned back and groaned in annoyance. I immediately felt ten degrees colder and missed his

closeness.

He looked back down at me. “Maybe I’ll see you at Bullfrogs after this?”

It was too windy for fireworks tonight, so Max and Paige changed the game plan.

I grinned up at him and nodded, then stood on my tiptoes and whispered in his ear, “And maybe after, you can find my other tattoo.”

“No shit.” He bit his lip and looked at me like he was basically undressing me with his eyes. I loved that I was on the receiving end of that look.

I wagged my eyebrows at him and pranced out of the bathroom in front of him.

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25. Duke

After we exited the bathroom, it seemed like all the girls were starting to head out so they could shower and change before going to Bullfrogs. Most of the guys were pretty loud about their desire to forgo showering so they could stay and party for a bit more together before meeting their girls at the bar.

I was kind of hoping Claire would choose to stay here with me. She was never one to care all too much about her hair and makeup, besides, she looked perfect with her messy lake hair and I loved her bikini top more than any other shirt she could possibly pick out.

But, as we tried to inconspicuously slip down to the dock, we got intercepted by Addie, who wanted to head back to their apartment to change.

Claire shot me an apologetic look, but I just grinned and nodded for her to follow her sister. We'd have our time later; I was sure of it.

Leaving all us hockey guys unattended— even Paige had left— probably wasn't the best idea.

About five minutes after the girls left, TJ and a couple of the guys started heading over to Bullfrogs, but I passed on the ride, thinking I'd wander over with the rest of the group. Besides, I figured the girls would probably take at least a half hour, and I didn't wanna get there way before Claire...

But by the time we started up our sixth round of flip cup, my stomach started turning over with regret. Now I worried whether or not we were even going to make it to Bullfrogs. Each time I asked if we were still going, everyone around the flimsy, alcohol-soaked table just agreed that we'd eventually go... but no one was putting

any plans in motion, and I was itching to go. As much as I loved hanging with my buddies, especially because I hadn't seen some of them in a while, I wanted to see Claire more.

I scanned the backyard trying to find Max and some of the older guys. They must've been planning to get back to their wives somehow, right?

They were all standing in the dark lake doing keg stands to finish up the rest of the beer they bought for the party...

I stood there scratching my sunburned neck, contemplating what to do. The lawn was pretty lumpy when I navigated it earlier, but now that the sun was down and it was quickly getting dark out, there was no way of even seeing my way around. I swallowed my reservations and started to make my way down the hill toward them.

It only took me about ten strides before I absolutely ate it. My body pitched too far forward, and I was too intoxicated to save myself. I rolled when I hit the ground to lessen the blow, and I was able to save my foot from hitting the ground at least.

I laid flat on the grass and looked up at the darkening sky. I really regretted not leaving earlier.

The sound of everyone chirping me for falling filled my dizzy head while I patted my sweatpants pockets to search for my phone, only to find that it was missing. Thinking it must've flown out of my pants as I fell, I very carefully— so as not to bump my cast— started crawling around on the grass to feel for it.

My search was halted seconds later when Grey and Max each grabbed one of my arms and roughly picked me up. They both smelled about five sheets to the wind... just like all of us guys at this point in the night.

“I was looking for my phone,” I muttered. I spoke slower to avoid slurring my speech— that would only increase the chirps thrown my way.

“Anyone see rookie’s phone?!” Max yelled out.

An uneasiness settled in my chest as I studied all the guys. Everyone was trashed... There was no way anyone here could drive to Bullfrogs. On top of that, I was now without a phone... I was stranded here with no way of contacting Claire to warn her that I wouldn’t be making it to Bullfrog’s after all...

Some of the guys started adding empty drink boxes to the bonfire, making the flames dance high into the night sky, and everyone was making their way over to it.

I scrubbed a frustrated hand over my face. There’s not much I could do...

So, I sat my ass on a chair around the fire and drank myself stupid with the rest of the guys, trying to have a fun time, but knowing all the while that I’d have to make it up to her tomorrow.

And in the back of my mind, I was absolutely fucking bummed...

26. Claire

I looked at the clock next to my bed. The bright red numbers read 2am.

2am and he still hadn't called to apologize.

I kept my phone tucked close to my chest. A hopeful voice in my brain whispered, *But he could still call... right?*

But... even if he were to call and apologize, what possible excuse could he have for standing me up the way he did? For making me feel so completely stupid for getting all ready and sitting at the bar with an empty chair for him by my side for almost two hours?

Two full hours that allowed the feelings of loneliness and longing that I knew all too well to build back up inside me.

And I know a lot of the guys didn't end up showing up at Bullfrogs tonight, but some of them did. TJ did. Smitty did. Campbell did. And if he really wanted to, wouldn't he have shown up too?

As I laid there in my dark bedroom, I fought those inner thoughts that said I was never good enough to be chosen by him anyway, and that he was just having fun with me because he could, not because he truly thought all those things he said back in Max and Paige's bathroom.

I tried to replay that whole conversation back in my head. Was it just me who had been vulnerable? Had I steered the conversation too much? Had I forced it? Had I over romanticized the whole thing?

And it hurt...

To know that he hurt me again...

To know that *I let him* hurt me again...

Tears stung the back of my eyes, and this time, I let myself cry. I didn't want to cry anymore tears over stupid Duke Callahan and his stupid perfect biceps and warm hugs and swoopy hair and charming smile. But everything I'd ever wanted felt so close, but I still couldn't have it for some reason.

It felt like a sick joke.

Damnit, and that's where my brain went next—was he just trying to win a bet or something by flirting with me? By making out with me?

My phone buzzed and I immediately grabbed it up... just to see that it was a stupid email.

And that just made me mad.

The last time he left me hanging, I was just a teenager who could barely drive. How could I have made him answer for hurting me when he was multiple states away?

But this time? Shoot. This time he was messing with the wrong woman.

I shook my head. There would be no more crying.

I swallowed back my tears and instead of sleeping and hoping for a reply that would probably never come, I laid there brainstorming how I could absolutely crush Duke Callahan's heart the way he crushed mine.

And in the morning, I'd take action...

The next morning, I pep-talked myself to keep moving forward instead of turning around like a chicken shit.

He hurt me. I hurt him back, I repeated to myself.

This had been going on between the two of us ever since we were seven years old.

So, he may have won this battle... but I'd win the war.

And he'd rue this *fucking* day for making me feel so stupid.

My hands tightened on the wheel of my car, trying to harness all my frustration. I breathed through my nose slowly and evenly because there's no way I was going to let myself cry. No *fucking* way. Claire Kessel didn't cry over anyone— especially not a stupid boy.

But... a little part of me, the little girl inside, wanted to wallow in my self-pity. Because this was Duke... who I'd been secretly in love with my whole life... and he... He made me get all dressed up last night. I actually spent time on my hair, I actually asked my sister for help on what to wear, and I actually put on *fucking high heels* and *lip gloss*.

And the worst thing he did?

He made me excited.

Just so he could *fucking*—

“Claire!”

I slammed on the breaks, noticing the red light at the last second.

Shit. she must've been saying my name about ten times.

“Sorry, what?” I briefly glanced over at my older sister as traffic passed in front of us.

“Where are we going!?” she asked frantically with wide, stressed-out eyes.

I lifted my chin. “It's your fault you got into this car, now you're going wherever I choose. I did not ask you to come along, Addie,” I said in a warning tone.

She shook her head and looked at me completely exasperated. “You looked ready to murder or ready to

cry, and I've never seen you so upset, so yes, as your older sister, I definitely did have to come."

I turned up Taylor Swift's "Bad Blood," and when the light turned green, I slammed on the gas. Forward was the only way to go; it was the only way to feel better.

His subdivision came into sight then and I made a sharp left turn, causing Addie to let out a screech and grab the side handles of my car.

I whipped through the subdivision and grinded to a stop in front of their stupidly huge house at the end of their cul-de-sac.

Addie let out a sigh of relief but tensed again when she realized where I stopped. "What the hell are we doing here?" she asked in a low voice.

I promptly unbuckled my seatbelt and shoved my car door open. "Stealing Beau," I returned matter-of-factly while jumping down from my dad's truck.

I watched her face turn to panic as she tried to scramble out of her seatbelt. "Claire, are you out of your ever-loving mind? You cannot steal someone's dog!"

I ignored her voice and threw the car door shut. I had to get in and out and finish the job quickly.

I heard the passenger's side window roll down. "Claire, you can't—"

I whirled on her and gave her a hard stare to cut her off. "Yes, I can. He hurt me, Addie." I felt my voice almost crack, and my throat burned painfully. I forced myself to close my eyes. "Yes, I can," I repeated firmly, "because he crushed my heart, so I'm going to crush his."

She still looked worried, but my voice made her back down.

"I'll be back soon," I said as I turned on my heel.

I sneakily ran across their front yard, kinda hunching over in hopes that no one would see me.

Their backyard was guarded by a stupidly large brick fence, but eyeing it, I knew I'd be able to scale it.

I hoisted myself up and lifted my legs so that I was lying flat on top of the fence. The only problem was that because it was brick, there were no good spots for foot placements on the way down. I peeked over, then sucked in a resigned breath. I'd have to just throw myself over feet first.

I pushed off the wall as I jumped so I wouldn't risk slamming into it and making noise, but that made me tip too far backwards, and I landed on my back.

Oof. I laid in the grass and felt a sharp stab of pain in my lower stomach. I must've gotten the wind knocked out of me for a second. My stomach always dropped when I fell hard on the ice.

I was about to get up, but instead, found myself staring up at Sav's husband...

Shit.

I attempted to smile, but failed, and probably had some sort of grimace on my face.

He was a great looking guy if you liked the whole rugged look that she dug. He had messy fohawk hair, which he was maybe a little too old for now, and short beard that he kept nice and tidy. He was also ripped beyond belief. Overall, he was a hot dad.

I closed my eyes. "Pretend you don't see me, please?" I asked warily.

When I cracked open one eye again, he was still standing over me, but with a smirk on his face. "I come in peace. I don't want any part in your and Duke's war," he said. "I don't think we've ever been properly introduced. I'm Griff."

I knew who he was just like he knew who I was. Who needed proper introduction these days? I jumped right to the point. “You’re not gonna tell him I was here, are you?”

He looked down at me curiously and crossed his arms over his muscular chest. He was much thicker than Duke. “Why *are* you here?”

I eyed him warily. I did not think I’d have to explain myself here. But at least it was him and not Duke’s parents. He had a trustworthy air about him, not sure if it was his whole dad vibe or not. I cleared my throat. “Well, if you really want to know, I am stealing his beloved dog,” I said with determination in my voice.

Griff’s face broke into an amused grin. “Welp,” he said, clapping his hands together. “I think it’s almost time for me to read a story to the kids. I must’ve forgotten Beau out here,” he said to no one in particular. Then he whispered down to me, “Come through the front door.”

I shook my head stubbornly. I would not do that.

He cocked his head to the side like a teacher who was testing me. “Well, you can climb the fence again, but how is he going to?” He motioned to Beau. “Plus, you want to get the wind knocked out of you again?” His face pinched. “That looked painful. Your dad would kill me if he knew I didn’t let you through the front door.” He held a hand down to help me up. “You and Duke,” he said with a chuckle.

“What about us?” I asked defensively as I quickly brushed some grass off my body.

“To be honest, neither of you think very far ahead,” he said thoughtfully, scratching his head. “You are both very impulsive and have been ever since you were little kids. I imagine that’s why you like each other and why you hate each other.”

I was already mentally annoyed with myself for not thinking through how to escape with Beau, but it was more irritating to have him point it out. I did not want to sit here and be psychoanalyzed. I stuck my jaw at him. “You’re annoying, you know that?”

That just made his face crack into a big smile. “C’mon,” he said as he started moving toward their house.

As soon as I entered the kitchen, Sav’s face faltered before she quickly recovered and gave me a bright smile.

“Hi Claire!”

“Hey,” I grumbled. Great, she was just another person who now saw me during my covert operation.

Her eyebrows knitted together in confusion, and she brushed her short blonde hair behind her ears. “Staying for breakfast?”

“Nope,” Griff answered for me. “She is stealing our dog, babe,” he said while leaning down to kiss the top of her head.

Her eyebrows shot up with that one.

“Don’t ask. It has something to do with Duke,” he said with a smirk. He looped his strong arms around her waist and rested his chin on her head.

It was annoying seeing their touchy feely love when I couldn’t have it.

“No offense, your brother is a dickhead,” I added.

She pressed her lips together to stop from laughing. “Okay, well, I guess I could use the break from cleaning up after Beau’s shedding,” she said, completely ignoring my comment about her brother.

I nodded and snatched the leash sitting on the island counter before marching my way to their front door.

“He likes peanut butter!” Sav called out right as I was closing their door behind me.

On the way home, I stopped at the CVS down the street from our apartment for food for Beau.

While walking up to the checkout line, I took a little detour through the hair section and grabbed up a box of black dye. How pathetically cute to think I even considered going back to my roots. There was no way I'd give him that satisfaction. In fact, I wanted to remove all satisfaction from his life at the current moment.

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27. Claire

A couple hours later, Addie stood by the front door holding her suitcase as dad blared his car horn out by the driveway. He was driving her to a last round job interview in Detroit.

“You sure you don’t mind that I’m leaving?” she asked with a hesitant expression. She opened the door and scolded dad to give her a minute before turning back to me.

I rolled my eyes. “I am fine, Addie. Don’t worry about me, you just go out there and nail that interview,” I told her while cutting into the steak I made for myself for lunch. I couldn’t really bring myself to eat much on account of how pissed off I still was though. I was anxiously waiting for Duke to realize what I’d done in retaliation... Beau leaned his furry chin on my knee to notify me that he was still waiting under the table for more food. I took pity on him and dropped another little piece of steak under the table. I was honestly grateful for his presence. He cushioned the blow of being alone.

“And you really don’t mind that dad comes too? I think he’s just afraid I’ll get the job and move out there, so he wants to spend more time with me,” she said with a little smirk.

That was definitely my dad’s motive. I waved this off though. “I’m totally good. But I won’t lie and say I’d be happy if you moved to Detroit though,” I warned.

She shrugged. “I probably won’t get it. I’m just throwing everything at the dart board and seeing what sticks.”

“You will get it,” I told her firmly. She had too little faith in herself. As soon as they saw her writing and realized just how high her sports IQ was, she’d be snatched up in

a second. She watched hockey with a keener eye than most scouts.

She shook her head like I was speaking nonsense—which I totally wasn’t— and looked around the apartment. “You sure you wanna stay here? You could go to dad’s after we leave. Then Beau would have the yard to play in?” Her voice went higher at the end of her sentence.

I gave Beau some pets under the table. She did have a point. “I’ll think about it.”

“And maybe eat your own food instead of giving it to Beau?” she said with an amused grin.

I poked my lunch with my fork. “Yeah... I just don’t have an appetite right now.”

Addie walked to the table and leaned down to give me a quick hug. “It’s just because your heart hurts. It’ll be okay, I promise,” she said with a sympathetic smile. “I have a feeling it’ll all work out. You just need to have some patience with him,” she said quietly.

I nodded, even though I did not agree. I couldn’t see how things would ever work out the way I wanted them to. I didn’t want to bum her out by admitting that though. She needed to be in a good headspace for Monday, not worrying about my relationship drama.

“Have a safe drive.” I stood to clear my plate. “And I think I will head over to dad’s and give Beau some space to run.”

Spending the night in my childhood bedroom sounded oddly comforting at the moment.

But she still stood there rooted to her spot in the kitchen.

“It’s okay,” I said with a laugh. “I won’t do anything crazy, promise. I already dyed my hair again,” I joked.

She nodded, like she was trying to convince herself that everything would be fine. She must’ve been really

nervous for her interview or something. She was never the best with nerves— she used to barf before every competition and ice show she skated in.

“I just have this weird feeling.” She shook her head, trying to dismiss it.

I placed my hands on her shoulders. “Everything will be fine,” I assured her. “Just focus on the interview.”

Dad honked his car horn again and she rolled her eyes.

We said our goodbyes, and I went to my room to pack an overnight bag. I simply grabbed the pile of clothes on my chair and dumped them into a duffle bag. I needed to wash them anyway and dad had a better washer and dryer than the one we had here at the apartment.

I didn't have to wonder what Duke thought about my retaliation for much longer. He made his presence known by pounding on my dad's front door about an hour after we got there.

My stomach churned angrily with nervous energy as I walked toward the front door. Beau followed on my heels, excitedly barking. “Traitor,” I mumbled down to him.

I looked through the little peep hole to see him standing there in the same sweatpants he had on last night with sunglasses and a hat turned backwards on. He usually had great posture that made him look confident and athletic, but the way he was currently slumped over his crutches told me he was probably hungover. I internally slapped myself over thinking that he still somehow managed to look good.

“C'mon Claire, I can see your car in the driveway. I know you're here!” he called out. “And I can hear *my* dog!”

His voice didn't necessarily sound angry... just tired. I twisted my lips in hesitation. Then reached to throw the door open.

I leaned against the oak door frame, trying to look nonchalant and like I didn't have a care in the world... A little voice in my head argued, *well, you already showed you cared by stealing his dog, dummy*, but I ignored that. "What do you want?" I demanded in a cold voice.

He looked at me like I had finally cracked. "What do you mean *what do I want*, Claire? You stole my dog," he said, taking his sunglasses off and pointing them at Beau.

Sensing that he was addressed, Beau ran up to him and snuggled his legs like he missed him oh so much. Duke leaned forward and gave him belly pets. I rolled my eyes at their dramatics. Beau was totally happy here with me until he showed up.

When Duke stood back up, he kept his eyes trained on Beau and his adam's apple bobbed up and down like he was swallowing down nerves... or maybe pride. "I just want to say that last night was a complete miscommunication. However, in my defense, I did say that I would *maybe* see you at—"

"Oh my God," I threw my hands up in annoyance. Of course he couldn't just take the blame and say sorry.

"Claire, I—" He stopped and blinked a couple times at me, taking in my newly dyed black hair. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. His lips pressed together into a deep frown.

"You did this because of me, huh?" he asked, but it wasn't a question. It was a statement. He already knew that's why I did it.

I crossed my arms over my chest and smirked up at him.

His eyes flashed, but I just lifted my chin in defiance, waiting for him to challenge me.

He snorted and shook his head. I thought he was going to turn and walk away, but he surprised me by pushing past me into the house.

“Where’s your dad’s stuff?” he grumbled.

I felt my face crack in confusion. I was still pissed at him, but my curiosity got the better part of me. “What stuff?”

“Bathroom stuff.” He looked back at me darkly and clenched his jaw. He was fuming now. And that pissed me the hell off.

“Why are *you* mad?!” I practically stomped my foot. “*I’m* mad at *you* right now!” I was the one who had to sit at the bar all alone feeling like a total loser while watching TJ make out with Ellie, and Smitty dance with Ashlee, and all the other couples having a grand old time, wondering why the hell I could never seem to have that.

He said nothing. Just shuffled toward the bathroom, opened the door, and slammed it shut in my face.

I was left standing in the hall, feeling the reverberation from the door.

A few seconds later, I heard a buzzing sound.

No... he wouldn't, not just because...

I gritted my teeth. *What a freaking baby!* I beat my fists against the bathroom door. “What are you trying to prove?!” I screamed. “Stop it, okay?!”

But the buzzing sound just kept on continuing.

He was just teasing me, I decided. I knew he was impulsive— I was too— but he wasn’t *that* impulsive. He was trying to get a rise out of me to see what I’d do. But it wouldn’t work.

I paced the living room trying to figure out how to handle this new development. I decided I needed to look unaffected.

I tried to calmly sit back on the couch with Beau and turn on TV, but anxiety was coursing through my chest.

Five minutes later, the door opened and I forced myself not to look at him. Looking would defeat my whole couldn't-care-less attitude.

"Claire," he said between clenched teeth. "Claire!" I flinched at the tone of his voice.

"What?!" I looked up at him now and realized he really was that impulsive. His brown floppy hair was buzzed off haphazardly and I swear to God tears welled up in my eyes because I was so damn *mad* at him.

"How does it feel?!" he asked with wide, hurt eyes. "Not very good when someone does something just to spite you, huh?"

I stood up and moved toward him quickly. I used both hands to push his chest with all my might. But he barely budged. His eyes just flamed as he stared down at me.

"You. Look. Like. An. Asshole!" I enunciated each word with a push.

"My phone is in that jacket I gave you. There's nowhere else it could be. That's why I couldn't call you. Go check!" He pointed to my room, like he was my dad, doling out a punishment. "If you could just stop being so... So—" he cut himself off and let out a frustrated growl.

"So *what*, Duke? Finish that sentence!" I dared him.

He was silent. He looked down at me with furious eyes as his nose flared.

I pushed past him and marched at a break-neck pace toward my room. His crutches clattered to the floor and he was loudly hopping after me, probably thinking that

would allow him to reach me faster, but I slammed my childhood bedroom door shut in his face.

“Maybe stop jumping to conclusions, Claire!” he yelled through the door. “I want to be with you!”

I fumbled through the pile of clothes I threw in my overnight bag earlier. *Yes, I brought the jacket. Yes, I brought it because I planned on sleeping in it. Yes, it smelled like him.*

My fingers felt a hard, sleek surface... *Shit.*

I marched back to the door, swung it open, and screamed, “Maybe try harder to communicate then! Because *I* just want to be with *you!*”

We were standing just inches apart, fuming at each other.

“Oh my God!” he roared exasperatingly at the ceiling.

“Oh my God!” I imitated him childishly.

“You are such a brat, Claire Kessel!” he yelled with wild eyes.

“No, you’re a—”

He snaked his arm around my body and pulled me into his chest and kissed me roughly on the lips.

I arched into him and let out a groan. I wanted this. I did. So so much. And maybe if we hooked up, then we could just forget everything that went wrong.

We could forget the fact that he was right and his cell phone was in that jacket pocket and that maybe I had overreacted.

When he broke the kiss, he looked at me with heavy lidded eyes and swollen lips. “We aren’t done discussing this,” he warned.

I trailed a nail down the side of his neck, and he let out a strangled noise. I loved having this power over him.

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28. Duke

“I’m serious, we can’t...” She kissed and sucked down the side of my neck, making me even harder than I already was. I was trying to focus, but she was making it very difficult to think straight. All I could see was her. All I could smell was her. All I could feel was her. I knew we were basically standing on the precipice of pleasure, but I needed to confirm this with her before we moved any further, or else we’d just continue this crazy cycle of hurting each other.

“Hmm?” She pulled back and looked at me with a mock-innocent look, but I saw right through it. She was never that innocent; she was always up to something, and damn did that make me want her even more.

“We can’t keep doing this. We need to retire our stupid games,” I told her. “Like waiting on each other, getting back at each other. If we’re gonna do this,” I pointed a finger between us, “we’re going to be normal boyfriend and girlfriend from here on out. Yeah?”

Her face flinched a bit when I said normal, but maybe I was just unfocused.

She grabbed the hem of my t-shirt and pushed it as high as she could, nudging me to take it off the rest of the way. I happily obliged.

She trailed a nail down my abs and looked at them appreciatively— thank God. I’d been working out like crazy just for her.

“What do you say?” I asked her. I was having a hard time keeping my hands off her. The desire to find her other hidden tattoo had been eating me alive since last night. But we needed this discussion more than anything.

She cocked her head to the side. “Agreed. I can think of a new game,” she said with a wicked smile.

And that’s when I knew I was a fucking goner.

“My turn,” I practically growled. I flipped us over so I was on top. I was careful to keep weight on my left knee and not my cast.

I pushed her arms up and trailed kisses down her bare stomach, making her squirm and causing goosebumps to erupt across her skin.

As I trailed lower, I sucked in and gave her a little love bite, and she let out a little yelp.

“Did you just bite me?!” she exclaimed.

“Depends,” I grinned up at her. “You like it?”

She paused, and I could see the wheels turning in her brain and her face flushing.

“Guess that’s a yes, Kessel,” I snickered. I didn’t wait for her response, just kept moving, making her lose herself in pleasure.

We laid on her bed, coming down together. Her limbs were tangled around me— her head resting on my chest, her arm draped across my waist, and her one leg overtop of both of mine, and I loved it. I could die right there a happy, fulfilled man.

The only thing that could’ve made it better was having a bigger bed. I felt a bit out of place on her tiny twin-sized mattress.

“I haven’t slept on a bed this small since I was in grade school,” I said with a laugh. My feet were practically hanging off the end of it. I had to scootch up so that my head rested against her wooden headboard.

She looked up at me with a smile. “Not my fault. Not all of us are over-sized humans, buddy boy.”

“Over-sized?!” I burst out.

“Yes,” she said matter-of-factly.

In a second, she knew what I was thinking, but she was too late. I reached her knee before she could pull it away. That was her ticklish spot. I started squeezing right above the kneecap and she collapsed against me in a giggle fit, trying to argue, but not being able to form words.

“Take it back! Take it back!” I demanded.

She continued to wriggle against me, trying to free herself from the lock I had on her knee.

“Careful! Careful! My foot!” I warned her.

“Okay! I surrender!” she called out.

I let go, then jokingly reached again, and she squished herself completely against me so I couldn’t reach her knees. Her boobs pushed up against my arm.

“I mean, I’m not complaining about this,” I said with a grin.

She rolled those hazel eyes of hers and went back to the position we had before with her limbs draped over top of me.

I breathed out a satisfied sigh, thinking of what transpired between us. “That was... that was...” Words kind of evaded me. Because that was the strongest connection I’d ever felt to another person. It felt like our souls were meant to be together. Like sure, I could be intimate with other girls, but it could not be like *that* with just anyone. It could only be this great with her.

She laughed against my arm. “Just like a normal girl, eh?”

My face cracked in confusion. I lifted my neck to get a better look at her face. “Huh?”

Her cheeks started to turn a cute shade of pink and she looked like she regretted speaking, but I wasn't going to let that one slide.

"Why did you say that?"

"It's nothing." She started to pull away from me, but I stopped her by rolling her fully on top of me. She folded her arms under her chin as she lay on my chest. I clasped my hands on top of her smooth back. It felt so natural to be with her.

"Not off the hook, Kessel. What did that mean?"

She narrowed her eyes at me, as if to ask '*for real?*' I just nodded for her to get on with it. I wasn't going to give in. I loved how we could communicate with just looks.

She blew out a breath. "Okay, well, *you* said I wasn't a normal girl," she said with a little shrug.

I snorted and dropped my head back on her headboard.

"It's stupid, I know," she quickly added.

I was the stupid one. I should've known more about how to talk to girls from growing up with Sav, but Sav always seemed to just know what Griff, Nick and I meant with our words. Maybe my sister was more fluent when it came to the guy world than the girl world herself, so it kind of depleted any potential advantage I could have had. "Yeah, I remember that..." I admitted.

She shrugged, and gave me a look that said, '*see what I mean?*'

"Don't give me that look, Kessel," I told her. I smoothed my hands up and down her arms. "I meant that you weren't normal because you were better. I swear," I said with a laugh. I placed a hand on her face and swiped my thumb under her pretty eye. "You were never normal in my eyes."

She studied my face, like she was trying to detect if I was telling the truth or not, but that was alright if she didn't fully believe me. I had time to show her how I really felt about her.

She moved to get up again, and I gave her a stern look and tried to stop her yet again, but this time she laughed. "I have to go to the bathroom, Duke."

"Oh, I'll allow it," I joked.

I watched her tiptoe to the door, thinking how completely crazy it was that I was here... thinking how absolutely pumped my younger self would feel about this.

A goofy grin slid onto my face. I was laying in Claire Kessel's tiny twin bed in her actual bedroom. I finally took the time to study everything. It looked exactly how I thought it would. The faint pink color of the walls, the old skate blades nailed to those walls, the hooks placed erratically around the room that looked like they were about to fall down from the weight of so many medals hung up on them. She had a shit load of gold and bronze ones, but not too many silver ones. She had a tack board overflowing with glossy pictures. From where I was, it looked like they were all old ones of her and Addie and various other rink girls through the years, except...

"Wait a sec..." I muttered to myself. I strained my eyes to look closer. I pushed off the bed and hopped toward the tack board and pulled the picture down to study it.

"No shit," I whispered. I stared at a picture of a group of little kids. Sitting front and center with our arms slung around each other were me and Claire. You could tell it was us from the tape across our hockey helmets that spelled out our names. You could also see the blond ringlets coming out of Claire's little helmet.

“From the kiddie camp.”

My neck snapped up to see her enter her room again. “I love this,” I said, pointing down to it. “Can you make a copy for me?”

An amused smile touched her lips. “You can have that one. My dad has a bunch. One from every summer.”

“No shit.” That was amazing. I wanted them all.

“Yeah. They’re kind of fun to look at. You can tell the years we were more friends and the years we couldn’t stand each other,” she said with a laugh.

“We always secretly liked each other though,” I said. At least, I always held a candle for her.

“True,” she bit her lip, and my heart kinda swelled hearing her confirm it too.

I laughed and shook my head, kind of overwhelmed by disbelief.

“What?” she inquired.

“I dreamed of this place,” I told her, gesturing to her room around us. “I feel very accomplished right now.” My face split into a shit-eating-grin. How many nights did I dream of riding my bike to her house and throwing rocks up at her window like some kinda fuckin Romeo?

“You did not,” she challenged, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

“Did too,” I said matter-of-factly. “I knew your favorite color was black, but for some reason I always pictured it pink. Can’t believe I was right about that.”

She looked around. “My dad painted it pink when he found out I was a girl... and even though I never liked pink, I thought that was sweet, so I never re-did it.”

I scrubbed a hand through my hair and paused. I forgot I buzzed it off.

She saw my face falter. She threw her head back and howled with laughter. “You hate it!” she yelled triumphantly. “You shot *yourself* in the foot!” she said, pointing an accusing finger at me.

I tried to school myself to keep a straight face. “That’s it,” I warned. I reached to grab her waist, but she was quicker. She ran and jumped up on her bed where I couldn’t reach her, cackling with laughter as she went.

I shook my head at her and clenched my jaw to stop myself from laughing, but I was having a hard time. She had a point. I didn’t plan on doing that when I walked in her house, but I was seeing red and just mad at her for doing something to herself because of my dumb actions... I just wanted to turn the tables on her.

She was jumping on the bed triumphantly like a gloating child.

“Okay, but now you see what I mean, right? I don’t want you to do anything to yourself just because of me.”

“Duke Michael Callahan, are you giving me a lecture on impulsivity?” She placed her hands on her hips. “Is this the same number 14 who the whole city of Detroit has a calm down sign for?”

She had a point. I struggled to keep a straight face. “Point taken, but what if I mess up again? Are you going to dye your hair blue?” I asked as I made my way to her bed.

“Maybe!” she said, still laughing. “And maybe I’d like that. You can’t tell me what to do, Duke!”

I placed my hands on her bed and dropped my head down, finally giving in to the laughing. “That is not the point I’m trying to make,” I said, looking up at her. “If you want to do it, fucking go for it, girl.” I shook my head and let out a deep sigh. “What am I gonna do with you, Kessel?”

She came closer and looped her arms around my neck. “Anything, everything,” she said dreamily.

And that sounded like a damn good plan to me.

I grabbed her waist, pulled her against my chest, and laid her back on her bed. I climbed over her trailed kisses up her neck, thanking God that it was finally our time.

We would’ve probably stayed cuddling in her bed for the rest of the day— me laying down flat with her sprawled out on top of me, but her stomach started making some weird noises.

“Someone’s hungry,” I said with a chuckle.

She scrunched her face. “Nah, not really actually.”

I looked at her skeptically. “Well, your stomach sounds hella hungry, girl. You still love take-out Chinese food as much as you used to?”

That made her cock her head to the side.

“Ah-ha, you are hungry,” I told her, reaching for my phone to place the order.

After hanging up, both of us slowly started getting dressed to pick it up together, but when she reached for her doorknob, she hesitated and looked back at me with a cringe.

I wiped a hand over my face, wondering if there was something on me. “What?”

“You can’t leave the house looking like that.”

My mouth dropped open. “Looking like what?!”

She covered her mouth to muffle her giggles, then completely doubled over.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh at the guy who was broken-hearted for a minute there,” I joked, and that just made

her laugh harder. “Okay, okay,” I rolled my eyes, “can you just fix it for me?”

She wiped tears from her eyes as her laughter finally subsided and she led me into the bathroom to fix it up.

She brought a chair into the bathroom and ordered me to sit, then twisted her lips as she moved my head around curiously.

“Have you ever done this before?” I asked her hesitantly.

She didn’t answer. She started chewing on her bottom lip, then she started.

It was going pretty well, except every time I thought she had finished, she just kept going.

And lemme tell ya– it ended up pretty damn short.

When she finally shut off the razor, she looked at me happily. “What do you think?”

“Uh...” I used a hand to brush it off a bit.

Her face fell.

“No, it’s good. Thank you,” I said. I honestly didn’t care what I looked like, so long as I got to be with her, but I couldn’t keep my face from faltering a bit.

She threw her arms around my neck from behind and looked at our reflection in the mirror. “Well / think it looks cute. Tough even. Shows off your sharp cheekbones,” she said, and then she licked my cheekbone.

I pulled back from her and wiped my face. “Did you just lick me?!”

“Depends,” she grinned. “Did you like it?”

She knew the tickle attack was coming this time, and she pulled away before I could grab her back. She practically cackled as she left the room, and I couldn’t help but laugh as I trailed after her.

When we got back with the food, I started laying it all out on the table, but she scooped every little white box that I put down back up into her arms, then walked down the hall toward her bedroom.

“Food is better in bed!” she called out, and I didn’t have to be told twice.

We had our little feast while watching a true-crime documentary on the small TV in her bedroom.

She didn’t eat much though, and I think she got a kick out of watching me eat her leftovers.

It was then that I noticed she was holding a hand to her lower stomach underneath the waistband of her lulu shorts. I wondered how long she’d been doing that, and I cursed at myself for not noticing earlier.

“You good?” I asked her, nodding to her hand.

Her face scrunched up. “Yeah. Probably just from drinking yesterday or my period coming or something,” she said, brushing it off. “Or the shorts I was wearing earlier were too tight. Sometimes that happens with my skating tights and it makes me feel sick to my stomach the rest of the day,” she explained. “I cut the band of my tights with scissors when that happens,” she said with a laugh.

“Jeez you just named off too many potential factors for my brain. Being a girl is crazy,” I said, trying to mentally file away this Claire-knowledge.

She snorted. “You’re tellin’ me. It could also be just because I’m just sore from... ya know.”

I maneuvered to see her face better. “Hooking up?” I asked her.

She nodded shyly.

“Shit babe, you need anything?”

She reached up to pat my cheek. “That’s sweet, but no. Besides, you can’t really drive anywhere anyways.”

I rolled my eyes. “I have people for that, Kessel.”

“Oh really, Mr. hockey hot shot.” Her eyebrows shot up, amused.

“Griff, Sav, Max, Grey, Reggie...” I continued to list off all the Ice League people who I could make do my bidding.

“Okay, okay. I’m fine though, promise,” she said confidently, before turning her attention back to the documentary. “This show is kinda freaking me out a little though.” Her shoulders scrunched up a bit. “Love true crime, but I never would’ve put this on if I was here alone. I’m going to hear every single sound tonight.”

“I got you babe,” I said, pulling her closer into me. “I’ll protect you.” Just being able to say that made me feel about ten feet tall.

“I don’t know,” she said, eyeing me warily.

My mouth dropped open. That was definitely a hit to my ego.

“What?!” she said defensively. “We’d be screwed,” her voice went high-pitched, trying to convey her innocence. “You’re sidelined right now.”

I shook my head. “Nope, I’d protect you.” I practically puffed out my chest to make a point.

She rolled her eyes.

“I would!” I argued. “You think you could protect the both of us? I’m practically a full foot taller than you, babe,” I pointed out. “And you’ve got impressive guns,” I said, squeezing her arm, “but no offense, I think mine are bigger now.”

She gave me another wary glance. “Maybe we should turn it off,” she said, then proceeded to laugh her

ass off at how offended I looked.

I shook my head and swiped the clicker from her to turn the volume up. "Nah, don't worry. I will protect you," I said firmly. I pushed a kiss into her hair as she laid back against my chest, and I thanked God I finally got to hold her.

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29. Duke

A noise woke me up... a pained noise...

I patted the comforter next to me, looking for Claire, and immediately panicked when my hand felt only empty bedding. I looked around her dark room. As my eyes adjusted, I found her further down the bed by my legs, doing a... yoga pose?

“Claire?” I cleared my dry throat and searched for my phone and water bottle on her nightstand.

She let out a little whimper.

That woke me right up. I quickly reached to stroke her back. “You okay, babe?”

She just grunted in response. I fumbled with my phone to turn on the flashlight.

It looked like she was in child’s pose and holding her lower stomach again.

“What’s wrong? I can’t help unless I know what’s wrong, baby,” I said in a gentle voice.

“It’s just hurting... really bad.” Her voice sounded much weaker and smaller than usual, and it immediately alerted me that something was seriously wrong.

I swallowed hard, trying to push down my own panic. “What hurts?”

She looked at me with worried eyes. “I think it’s my stomach?”

I nodded, trying to remain calm. “Show me where.”

She lifted up and put her hand on her lower abdomen. She had been holding below her belly button earlier, now it looked like the pain had traveled to her right side.

I cursed under my breath. My mind raced through what that could possibly mean. Was that still considered her stomach? Or more her girl parts? Shit. I had no fuckin' clue.

She whimpered again, and I was so not used to that sound coming from her.

"Fuck, babe. When did it start? Did I hurt you?" Panic rose in my chest, and I felt my heart pounding angrily against my chest.

"No," she winced. "Maybe? I don't know. What we did felt really good but also..."

"Also?" I pushed her to continue.

"It hurt. I don't know. It's been hurting for a couple days." She paused then added very quickly, "but it was fine 'til tonight. Then I woke up and it was really, really bad," her voice cracked.

"How bad? Like 1 to 10?" I asked grimly.

"Really bad, okay? I don't know, Duke." Her eyes welled up with tears, and that panicked me more than anything. Because of all the years I knew her, I never once saw her full-out cry. Even when she broke her collarbone back in high school in the weight room, all she ever did was tear up, but tears never streamed down her face like this. And this... this gutted me.

I untangled myself from the sheets as quickly as I could and hopped around my room looking for my shorts, t-shirt, and crutches.

"What... What are you doing?" She used the sleeve of her shirt to clean her tears away.

I threw my shirt over my head and quickly pulled it down. "We're going in."

"No, we're—" She lifted up a bit to look at me, but her face cracked in more pain.

I nodded solemnly. “Yeah, we are.”

I put a hand to her forehead. She was burning up. I tried to keep my voice even so I didn’t scare her as I said, “Claire...”

Her worried eyes met mine. “It’s probably just my period or something.”

“Is it time for that?”

“No, but—”

“We need to go in.”

“It’s fine! You’re just a stupid guy. You don’t know,” she grunted.

I blew out a sigh. “I’m going to ignore that because you’re in pain. But Claire, I do know you. I know when you can tough it out, and I know when you need medical attention. This is the latter of those two.”

“No, you don’t know-”

“Yes, I do!” My voice edged on hysteria then. “I know that you always tie your right skate up first. I know that when you look up in the rink rafters before a jump, you’re actually shooting up a little prayer, and I know that you turtle in on yourself when you’re feeling sad or hurt. You’re a tough girl. You wouldn’t be showing this much pain in front of me if you weren’t really feeling it. You and I *both* know that,” I deadpanned.

Her mouth clamped shut at that, but she didn’t move.

I felt my teeth grind in frustration. Why was I even discussing this with her? She was clearly out of her mind. She needed—

“Duke...” her voice sounded fully panicked now. Instead of finishing her sentence, she lurched forward and barfed all over her bed.

That could not be a good sign.

“Oh no,” she groaned and pushed her sweaty hair back.

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s get goin. C’mon.”

She sniffled a little before finally listening to me.

But as she walked toward her door, her legs went limp, and I lunged forward with my good leg to catch her body.

“Claire?” I patted her cheek. “C’mon, baby,” I urged, but her eyes didn’t open.

I hooked my left arm under her knees and used my right arm to cradle her back before hoisting her up. There’s no way I could use my crutches or just hop on one foot. I tested a little weight on my cast and grunted. It’d have to do.

A few steps later, I could hear and feel the plaster under my right foot starting to crack, but I pushed forward. I’d figure that out later.

As soon as we made it outside to the sidewalk and into the cool night air, Claire’s eyelids fluttered open, and she looked up at me with worried, unfocused eyes. “Your foot!”

I took a deep breath. This probably really wasn’t the smartest move, but I had no choice. “This is serious, Claire,” I told her.

That shut her up... but a second later, her eyes were misting and her lower lip quivered.

“Nope. My Claire doesn’t cry unless she’s going to lose. And you never lose. Ever. You’re my tough girl. Be tough.”

She closed her eyes tightly against a wave of pain. “I’m scared, Duke.”

And I knew how much it took for her to admit that to me.

“I know, baby. But it’ll be okay. I’ve got you. I’ll protect you.” I looked into her eyes and was taken back to when we were kids. “I pinky promise, babe.”

She tucked her head in close to my chest.

“On the bright side, I finally get to carry you,” I grunted. “Pissed me the hell off when TJ did it at the bar.”

That made her smile a little, until pain overtook her face again.

She was whimpering and crunching forward into a ball the entire drive to the hospital. I drove as quickly as I safely could and pulled up right to where the ambulances usually arrived.

Staff in scrubs came to yell at me until I shouted at them through the window what was going on.

Things moved fast then.

They opened the car door and transported her into the hospital on a stretcher. The sight of her being wheeled in cut at me.

I closed my eyes tightly and leaned my head against the wheel. I tried taking deep breaths, but they were coming in and out all choppy. I repeated to myself that she would be fine, but another voice argued that I didn’t know that. Hell, I didn’t even know what was wrong with her.

It took me a second to realize that questions were being shouted at me.

“Sir, look at me! When was the last time she ate?”

I turned to see a woman around my sister’s age staring at me. She was wearing scrubs and holding a clipboard.

I racked my brain to answer her question. “A little bit around 6 maybe? She didn’t have much of an appetite.”

Fuck. I should've pushed a little more, asked more questions. I was with her for all of one day and I already screwed shit up. I wasn't cut out to be a boyfriend.

"Focus on me," the doctor ordered. "You're helping her by answering questions right now." That finally pulled my eyes from the imaginary wake left by Claire back to her. "Did she sustain any trauma to the abdominal area recently?"

"Uhh..." I rubbed my forehead as I tried to think through the last couple days.

The fall in the lobby flashed in my mind. Her coming down on that douchebag's shoulder.

"Yes, yes," I nodded. "She's a pairs figure skater. Her stomach landed on her partner's shoulder... Could that have caused it?" I asked weakly.

"We won't know until we get in there."

I must've looked as panicked as I felt because she quickly added, "The way she was crunching forward and wouldn't let anyone press on her stomach, I'd bet it's an appendix issue. I'm not back there and I'm only a resident, but that's my guess."

I nodded. At least she gave me something to look up. It was some kind of answer.

"Good job bringing her in when you did," she said firmly.

That made me want to break down. Because I didn't do a good job. A good job would've been bringing her in last night.

"Is she... is she going to be okay?" I covered my mouth in case I fucking cried.

"They're great surgeons," she said. "A ruptured appendix is serious, but it's more common than you'd think."

I nodded. As soon as she walked away, I immediately pulled out my phone to look up just how common it was and everything I could possibly find on appendixes.

I sat there in the waiting room staring at my phone. It was four in the morning and my eyes burned, but I was wide awake and my whole body was still trembling.

God. I couldn't get over the pained noises she was making. I'd trade spots and take on all her pain in a second if I could... Because I felt so damn helpless right now.

I stared at my phone. Craig was probably sound asleep right now... I needed to wake him and tell him what was going on, but I didn't want to give the poor guy a heart attack. Maybe I should call Addie instead?

It would help if I knew exactly what to tell them and not just that I rushed her to the hospital and wasn't exactly sure what was wrong.

After researching appendix issues, it seemed pretty clear that the resident was right... but still...

I texted Craig first: *Hey, I know it's super late, but any chance you heard this or you're still up?*

I sat there another minute and was about to hit the call button, when a guy with scrubs walked in the waiting area and made eye contact with me. He ushered me over.

I stood and almost started to walk, but forgot at the last second that I probably shouldn't... And I didn't have any crutches here. I started to hop over to him, but he shook his head and decided to come take a seat next to me.

"Are you Craig Kessel?"

"No, but I'm—"

“I need to speak to a blood relative.”

My eyes must've fuckin lit up, because he backpedaled real quick.

“She's in the operating room right now,” he said.

My eyes darted around the room, what was I supposed to fucking do with that information?

“Craig Kessel is listed as her emergency contact, so we will be getting in contact with him.”

“Can I... can I call him first?” I asked. Having the hospital call would freak him out even more. If I called, I could gently rip off the bandaid.

He gave a swift nod and stalked off.

I forced my dry mouth to swallow and finally called up Craig.

His groggy voice answered. “Duke? It's four in the morning—”

“Yes, sir, I'm sorry for calling this early. It's just... It's just...” A vision of Claire in my arms crept into my mind and I stopped myself in case my voice cracked. I was on the fucking edge of bawling like a baby. “Claire, she, uh...”

“What? What happened?” He was fully awake now. “Duke, so help me God, you better tell me right—”

“I think it's her appendix,” I said quickly. “I drove her to the ER. I'm here now in the waiting room. She's in the operating room. They won't tell me much else. Stupid hospital policy. Can you please call and find out, then call me right back?” I said it all in a rush. Now I coached myself to take deep breaths.

“Yes. You're staying there for her right?” he asked urgently.

“Yes. I'll be waiting,” I told him.

“Thank you, Duke.”

The phone clicked off and I dropped my head into my hands.

This was all too much. The not knowing made it way past too much.

People in the waiting room probably thought I was overreacting, but I knew what it was like to lose someone before it was their time.

My whole body trembled as I thought of my buddy, my brother-in-law, Nick, and how he was taken too soon... how I stood at his funeral when he was only 26...

This. This was why I made myself stay away from serious relationships. Because it fucked with your head.

But... I always thought it would be me. I would be the one to dip or get hurt and hurt the other person... Because I always pictured myself as Nick, and I never ever wanted to hurt a girl the way Sav hurt after she lost him.

It never crossed my mind that I could be the one who lost the person they loved...

What if she hurt me?

No. I couldn't think like that...

She'll be fine, she'll be fine, she'll be fine.

Sometimes if I repeated things enough, I started to believe them. And I really needed to believe that she would be okay.

After researching on my phone, I realized appendix problems had timelines. Waiting too long could cause it to rupture... If I had only forced the issue with her when we were eating dinner, then maybe it wouldn't have been this bad...

It was my fault. I wasn't cut out for this.

I played NHL games, I played in an Olympics gold medal game, but I had never ever been this nervous.

I wrung my sweaty hands together. Maybe this was just a bad road to be playing with. I was testing the Callahan relationship luck.

And I needed to put a stop to it.

I needed to make sure she was alright and then slowly push her away... That would give me time to wrap my mind around saying goodbye.

She would have a fine life with someone else. Maybe they wouldn't understand her the way I did— no, they *couldn't* understand her the way I did, because with us, it was like looking in a mirror, and that was rare. The way we thought, the way we communicated, the way we acted on impulse, and the way we loved... it was all the same with us.

But it was too good to be true.

Someone else, some kind of boring finance guy, would get a kick out of her. And that lucky guy would have fun trying to understand her.

It would be a sacrifice I'd make for the both of us.

Because we were *too* in love honestly.

I didn't think that could be a problem, but it definitely was.

Because I wouldn't be able to function if anything happened to her.

I prayed that as long as she was alright, I'd stay away from her. And I begged that she'd be alright.

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30. Duke

Three hours later, I was finally allowed back to see her.

The surgery ended up being more complicated because it was a rupture after all, not a routine appendectomy. She'd most likely be here for a few days for monitoring.

I reached over and brushed her hair behind her ear.

"She's sedated. She won't wake for a while," the nurse at the foot of her bed said. "You're welcome to stay if you'd like."

I nodded as she backed out of the room. I reached to hold her small hand in mine. I'd be camping out here until Craig arrived, maybe even longer. I'd stay until I saw that she was alright with my own eyes, and I'd never ever leave her here alone.

The only problem was that my ankle was starting to kill...

I cursed softly to myself. I knew I had to get my ankle looked at. Hopefully I hadn't caused too much damage. If I did, I didn't really care, so long as Claire was alright.

I fished my wallet from my pocket and pulled out our team doc's business card.

He answered on the first ring. "Morning Duke, it's a bit early... uh, what can I do for you?"

My eyes darted to the clock on the wall, which now read 8am, and I cringed. I hadn't slept all night, so my internal clock was all fucked. "Sorry 'bout that... So, I might've walked on my foot."

He cleared his throat. "Uh... Why would you do that?"

I sighed. "I didn't really have a choice. My...err... friend..." I closed my eyes against the hurt. Last night I

would've confidently called her my girlfriend. Now I was scared to do that. "Her appendix ruptured. She was in a lot of pain and it was like 3am when it happened. There was no one else around to help. I might've picked her up, walked her to the car, and drove..."

"With the cast on?"

I covered my eyes and shook my head, trying to tamp down any sarcasm I was about to use. But really, I was a professional athlete, it's not like I couldn't manage to walk with a cast on. "Yeah, it might've cracked a bit on the bottom."

"Coach Petersen won't be—"

"Happy, I know," I sucked in a deep breath. He didn't have to tell me that. "Shit happens."

"Appendicitis is pretty serious. If you didn't get her to a hospital, she could've gone into septic shock, she could've—"

"I know," I harshly cut him off. I looked at Claire safely tucked in the bed. I did not need the reminder of what could've happened.

"Well, you're at the hospital in Northfield now? I can see who is working there and have an initial x-ray done to see if everything's alright. But we'll probably want you back here in Detroit so we can have a look and make an updated recovery plan."

I sighed. I should've known to expect that. "Thank you, but I'm not leaving until she wakes up."

He chuckled. "A friend you say? So long as you get it looked at right now and there's not too much damage that shouldn't be a problem."

I muttered a curse under my breath.

"Don't be too hard on yourself. You did the right thing," he added.

“Thanks,” I muttered.

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31. Claire

“Uh... some privacy please?” the nurse asked quietly as Duke crutched back into my hospital room. He was carrying a bag of chips between his teeth and his gray sweatpants sagged with the extra weight of a mountain dew bottle in his pocket.

The nurse, who currently had my gown pulled open to check on the incision sight, paused as Duke plopped into the chair beside my bed.

“Long as she’s okay with it, I’d like to stay.” He winked at me, but his face was serious.

“Oh... okay,” I said with a small, tight-lipped smile. I was kind of grateful he wanted to stay. I felt calmer with him by my side.

When it got to the part where the nurse was cleaning the incision sight, I hissed in pain, and he inconspicuously slipped his rough hand into mine to hold.

When she finished and started to leave, I had to bite my tongue not to say *‘finally.’* It felt like I’d been waiting all day for a moment of peace for just Duke and I.

As soon as the door shut behind her, I turned to face him. He had dark bags under his eyes, like he hadn’t slept in a week, and that made me love him even more if that were possible.

He gave me a tired smile. “How ya feeling?”

“Not bad actually. I’m a little afraid of what it’s going to feel like when the pain meds wear off though,” I admitted, gesturing to the IV’s still stuck in my arm.

He squeezed my hand. “You got this, babe. Toughest girl I know.” He held the bag of chips up. “You mind?” he asked sheepishly.

I wasn't allowed to eat yet, but I truly didn't mind, especially since I heard he hadn't left my side since he'd been allowed in here early this morning when I was still unconscious. He must've been starving. I nodded. "Go for it. And Duke..."

He searched my face anxiously. "You good? You need—"

"I'm good," I smiled, trying to calm him. "Thank you."

He leaned forward and kissed my forehead. I wished so badly to be able to go back to my bedroom and hide away from the world with him again. Cuddling with him yesterday had been like a dream come true for me... and I was hopelessly afraid our connection would end again just like it had the first time we'd gotten together.

"Wish we could go back to yesterday," I admitted. "Before all this." I gestured to my hospital gown in all its gross glory.

"Yeah... I'd like to not relive the scary parts," he said, popping a chip into his mouth. "But the other stuff?" His eyes smoldered over as he looked me up and down. "Hell ya."

I laughed at his over-the-top flirtiness, then sighed. "Not gonna lie, I am kinda embarrassed that all this happened after... ya know...?"

It was probably just a coincidence that the pain really started to kick in consistently right after we hooked up. Especially because the cause of it was probably from the lift that had gone wrong in the rink lobby a couple days ago.

He ran a hand over his buzzed hair and looked very tired all of a sudden. Short hair was actually kind of a look for him. He seemed older, tougher, less pretty boy, even though I did like him looking like a pretty boy as well.

“Yeah, I wish it wouldn’t have happened after our first time either,” he said with a thoughtful face. “I mean, I told them about the spill you took on Jackie boy’s shoulder and everything, but when I talked to the doctors later, I was as detailed as I could possibly be. Told ‘em how I grabbed your hips and was having you ride me like a cowgirl. So, it’s probably somewhere in your medical history that we made love,” he said with a goofy grin on his face.

“You are kidding me, Duke Michael Callahan,” I deadpanned.

He gave me a solemn nod. “Needed to make sure they had all the info so they could fix ya up. Didn’t want any more of it to be my fault.”

I looked at him curiously. “*None* of it was your fault.” But as I said it, he looked away from me, seemingly to hide emotion. His jaw throbbed, like he was grinding his teeth. I covered his rough hand with mine and he stared at it for a beat.

“Hard to feel like it’s not my fault.” He cringed. “Could’ve avoided the rupture if I would’ve taken you in earlier. Could’ve had little incisions instead of a bigger scar, and a quicker recovery.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Don’t say that. I’m the one who brushed you off. I don’t have a good gauge for pain. You helped me when I really needed you and I’m really grateful, Duke,” I told him earnestly.

“Now you admit you don’t have a good gauge for pain,” he said with a sarcastic told-you-so look. “Your dad’s on his way here by the way. I called him and filled him in on everything.”

“Everything?” I felt my face burn red. “My dad knows you were over in the middle of the night?”

His forehead creased. “Well, I couldn’t exactly lie to him, Claire.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess not... but you probably could’ve—”

His mouth dropped open and he was looking at me like I had a third head, so I shut up.

“Well...” I started to say what I was thinking, but a laugh bubbled up in my throat instead.

He rubbed a hand over his tired face. “Do I even want to know why you’re laughing?” he asked in a resigned voice.

“I’m just imagining how many big dick jokes you can make after all this.” I imitated a fake macho voice and said, “Yeah, fucked her so hard, her appendix burst.” I covered my mouth to muffle my giggles.

But instead of joining in with my laughter, his eyebrows pinched together and he looked pained. “It’s really not funny yet, Claire. I’m not sure this will ever be funny to me. You scared the shit out of me. You passed out in my arms, you...”

I patted his hand. “Everything’s fine,” I told him. “Except maybe...”

“What?” he looked at me hesitantly.

“Well, I know hooking up wasn’t the cause of it or anything, but I guess it isn’t that funny when you consider how I’m scared to do it again...” I trailed off.

He looked like he was going to throw up.

“Oh... you didn’t think about that yet, did you?” I asked.

“No,” he said firmly. “Only you, Claire Kessel, could make me afraid of hitting girl’s organs during sex.”

“I guess I’m not a normal girl,” I said sassily.

And that finally made him crack. He finally laughed. “Nope. That is one thing you are not.”

He stayed in my room for a while after that, telling funny hockey stories from over the years we were apart. The best one included his now famous shampoo prank, where he'd continually dump shampoo on rookies' heads over the stall while they showered. They had their eyes closed, so it usually took a very long time for them to figure out what was really going on. As he talked, I was so relaxed that I was beginning to struggle to stay awake when my door opened, and a doctor poked her head in.

"Duke Callahan?" she asked.

I cut my eyes to his. Why was he being called on by a doctor?

As soon as I looked at him, flashbacks of last night slammed into my brain.

"Your foot!" I slapped a hand to my head. I'd totally forgotten that he walked on his cast. "Why did you carry me?!" I whispered-yelled at him.

"I wanted to be your hero, duh," he said, shrugging off my concern with a lopsided grin. He stood on his good foot and leaned down to kiss my forehead again. "Don't stress about it. I'd do it again in a heartbeat," he whispered. "I'll be right back. Team doc wants some x-rays sent over."

I watched him head out the room feeling incredibly guilty, but also incredibly loved by him.

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32. Duke

Routine appendectomies usually only required a day or so in the hospital, but leave it to Claire to go above and beyond expectations. Because hers had ruptured and caused other complications that I didn't fully understand, she ended up having to stay in the hospital for five days.

That was rough for a girl like Claire— hell, it'd be rough for me too. Neither of us liked to sit still that long. Craig was going out of his mind trying to keep her calm and in her bed, but I had an easier go of it. Every day after my shift at the rink was up, I'd head over to the hospital, and every day I'd hoist myself up into her hospital bed to lay next to her. We'd play rock, paper, scissors to see who got to choose what to watch, and after about a half hour of cuddling and giving her head massages— she loved when I played with her hair— she'd be peacefully snoozing against my chest.

I cherished these moments because I knew I was stealing time with her. I breathed in the scent of her hair and tried to memorize the feeling of her warm body wrapped around me, because... I loved it... And I knew I was going to lose it soon.

I tried to think of her as someone else's future significant other. Someone else's future wife. But I couldn't do it. I selfishly wanted her. I think I'd wanted her and thought of her as my future ever since we were little kids, and that was hard to change.

I wouldn't break things off with her until she was better, but I knew I had to do it...

It would hurt us both badly to begin with... But she'd get over me. She'd find someone else. She'd be *safe* with someone else.

And I'd always remember this summer as the one that harshly reminded me of why I was only a hook-up guy and not cut out for relationships.

The morning Claire was discharged, Griff drove me over to Craig's house so I could make sure she was doing alright. He waited in his car while I crutched up their walkway. He would be taking me to the airport right after I said goodbye to her. I put off getting checked out by the team doc and making an updated recovery plan for as long as I could. But I knew if I didn't get back to Detroit, my ass would get handed to me by Coach.

Unfortunately, when Craig answered the door, he put a finger to his lips in a shush motion... Apparently she had a pretty painful night because she was trying to wean off the more powerful pain meds and she hadn't slept much, so she'd been napping ever since they arrived home.

I made my way to her room as quietly as I could and cracked open the door.

My heart clenched at seeing her cuddled up in her twin bed. I wanted more than anything to climb in behind her and hold her against me... but I knew I couldn't...

My life in Detroit was waiting for me...

When my plane finally landed, I shot off a text to TJ letting him know, and he quickly replied that he was already on his way to the airport. He and Ellie had offered to drive me to my appointment.

After making my way through the freezing cold airport, I waited outside in the nice summer breeze for them.

As soon as his new Ford F-150 truck entered the pick-up lane in front of me, I slung my backpack over my

shoulder and started crutching toward the curb.

I flung open the backseat's door and I threw my crutches in first while muttering my thanks. I hopped around a bit on my good foot before I was able to hoist myself up into his pretty high backseat.

TJ and Ellie were both straining their necks to get a better look at me over their center console.

"What?" I snapped. I wasn't in the best of moods. I was actually pretty pissed about leaving Claire behind and knowing that our time together had run its course. She was at home recovering, she didn't need me anymore, and I couldn't delay ending things anymore...

"Yeesh, slow your roll, bud," TJ warned, cutting a look to Ellie. "It's just... in all the years I've known ya, I've never seen you without your pretty boy hair," he said with an amused smile on his face. "Is your helmet even going to fit?"

"Yeah, yeah," I grumbled. What could I say, this year was fucking me up pretty badly.

"It doesn't look bad!" Ellie said tightly. I shot her a *'get-real'* look. She was a terrible liar. She pushed her long auburn hair behind her ears. "It's just different for you! It's really giving young Channing Tatum."

"Yeah right," I said sarcastically. "Whatever. Tried some new things, turns out, I just got burned."

TJ laughed as he eased his truck into drive. "Well, the ladies of Detroit will be very sad that the flow is gone."

I shook my head. I no longer gave a shit about what "the ladies" thought. There would be no replacing Claire. If I couldn't give my heart to her, I wouldn't be giving it to anyone.

Ellie turned to look at me in the backseat, sensing that I was upset. "You wanna talk about it?" she asked

with a sympathetic smile.

“Nope,” I replied flatly.

Her face fell a little, but she nodded and turned back around.

I leaned my head against their car window and fell asleep while they drove me to the team doc’s office.

After about a million different X-ray’s and tests, it looked like the team of docs were finally satisfied and set on getting me out of the cast and into a walking boot. Apparently my little “hero stunt” as they called it, only pushed my recovery back by maybe a week or two, but even they admitted that guesstimating something like that was hard to tell.

All I cared to hear about was the term “walking boot.” My ears perked up every time I heard them say it. I’d be happy if I never saw another pair of crutches for the rest of my life.

When they finally sawed off the cast, the sight of my foot was pretty depressing. From my knee down had practically shriveled up from not using it... It was the first time I felt like the road to recovery might take more work than I originally anticipated.

The team doc must’ve sensed my thoughts, because he patted me on the shoulder and said, “It always looks like that, son. You’ll make a full recovery in no time.”

I swallowed hard and decided not to think too much about anything that was out of my control. It’s not like I could start building back those muscles in my current state anyway. Besides, at least those muscles would get a bit of stimulation by limping around.

“You got about three more weeks in the walking boot, then we can reassess. Good?” Doc asked.

I clasped my hands together. “Perfect. So I can get on skates at the end of August.”

I think he caught a bit too much excitement in my voice, because he regarded me with a hesitant face. “Now, I wouldn’t plan on skating in the preseason games, I’d just work on getting prepared for the regular season.”

I flashed him a grin as I hopped off the exam table onto my good foot. “You got it, Doc.” I’d placate him for now, but if I could be ready by the preseason, I’d definitely be skating in at least a couple of those games.

“And Coach wants to see you.” He pushed his glasses up. “He’s running a camp at the practice facility. I told him I’d relay the message.”

That made my mouth go dry.

I knew he’d chew me out over taking a risk with my foot. Whatever. I’d do it again in a heartbeat if I had to.

Guess I just had to get the lecture over with.

Our rink’s practice facility was a regular old rink in metro-Detroit that got tapped to be converted for our use in the offseason. During our regular season, we practiced more in our stadium, and this rink was mostly used by a AAA youth hockey organization.

Walking into the rink, I waved to the teenager manning the front desk, then made my way through the long hallway that led to a huge room which overlooked both sheets of ice. Figure skaters, specifically ice dancers, were using the red rink— the bleachers and zamboni for that side were red. Peering down into the west side rink— the blue side— were a bunch of teen hockey guys all kneeling around Coach, who was drawing plays on the glass above the boards with a fat dry-erase marker. There’s no way that marker was showing up very well because the glass was so foggy—

that always happened in rinks during the summer months. I chuckled to myself because Coach *loved* drawing with those dumb markers; he used 'em any chance he could get.

Campbell, TJ, and Ellie were also out there wearing Crewmen warm-up suits and whistles around their necks. The sight of them goofing off with each other struck me with a bit of bitterness. I was thankful for my job back at the Ice League working with Grey, but I had previously been set to work this camp with TJ and Ellie. Looked like they got Campbell to fill my spot... and Coach probably hated that. He was constantly annoyed with Campbell because he had a very hard time following his drills. Campbell messed up so often that we had a tally going in our locker room on the white board that read: "Number of practices since Chicken Noodle Soup got chewed out." That number was changed to zero very often, and the whole locker room would crack up about it. TJ made a whole show about changing the number, and Griff usually had to warn him to tone it down a bit... We lived to roast each other, but Griff's whole "dad mode" made him more sensitive these days. Damn, I missed the locker room vibe. I missed playing. I made a vow to myself right then to work my ass off as soon as I could. I'd rather eat my own shit than miss the first regular season game with my team.

Ellie caught sight of me up in the window and gave me a bright wave. I saluted her and started my trek down the side stairwell that led into the downstairs lobby.

They still had about fifteen minutes of practice left, so I plopped my ass on one of the rubber-covered metal picnic tables to give my foot a rest. It was feeling a bit sore from the sudden usage and no way did I want to take steps backwards.

Oof. *Steps backwards.*

Coach would be scared of that too... He'd probably want me to forget about returning to Northfield and stay in Detroit... I mean, this *was* the man who threatened to tie me to a guest bed in his house to make sure I took care of myself... He was not going to be happy. Jittery energy was coursing through my body as I tried to go over what I was about to say to him. I consciously pushed my hand down on my left thigh to stop it from bouncing so much.

In one way, staying in Detroit would be an easy way out of my relationship situation. But leaving again without giving Claire an in-person goodbye would be confirming everything she thought about me back when I was seventeen. And that wasn't an option. I needed to explain everything to her this time. I needed to try to make things as right as they could be between us...

I muttered a curse to myself. This was part of the problem. I was gearing up to talk to Coach, and now all I could think about was Claire.

Claire... passing out in my arms... being wheeled away on a stretcher... looking so small and hurt in that hospital bed.

Nope. I needed to stop this.

I rubbed my eyes in an effort to somehow wipe away the visions of her from this past week... but I couldn't. I was losing sleep every night *because* I couldn't stop my brain from bombarding me with a shit load of what-if scenarios. I needed to somehow pull myself together, but I just didn't know how.

My phone started ringing next to me, and Craig's number appeared.

My heart practically stopped.

I quickly answered, "She okay?"

"Uh, yeah," Craig responded, like it should've been obvious. I let out the breath I'd been holding. "That's not

really what I was calling about-”

“Okay, uh...” My throat felt like it was closing up. I pulled at the collar of my t-shirt. “I... I gotta go,” I choked out.

I dropped the phone by my feet and rubbed a hand over my forehead. I suddenly felt like the whole room was closing in on me, squishing me from all sides, not allowing me to breathe.

I saw skates walking toward me.

“Hey, ya alright, bud?”

I ignored TJ’s voice and kept my eyes on the rubber floor.

Ellie’s figure skates appeared next to his hockey ones. They must’ve left the practice a few minutes early. It sounded like they were arguing, but I couldn’t make out anything they were saying because I feared I was actually dying right there on the spot. My heart was beating way too fast and I had no clue how to stop it. I put a hand to my chest as I gasped for air. It suddenly felt like after almost twenty-five years of life, my lungs had forgotten how to work.

Suddenly TJ’s arms were around me... *hugging me...?*

I shoved him off me, a little harder than I meant to, and then he was on his butt on the floor looking back at me like I’d just betrayed him.

“I was giving you compression, buddy! Jeez!” he yelled out with wide eyes.

I dropped my head between my knees and heard Ellie reprimanding TJ with a harsh whisper.

The next thing I knew, she was kneeling in front of me, holding my cheeks, and forcing me to look at her.

“Focus on me,” she said firmly.

I searched her bright green eyes, lined in red from the cold rink, and the freckles dotting her cheeks and nose that were more prominent from the summer sun. Her long auburn hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun.

“You’re okay. Everything is okay,” she said in a soothing voice. “Nothing is wrong. You’re okay.” She rubbed my back in a very motherly way and repeated the mantra about five times. I closed my eyes, trying to internalize her words. “Everyone you know is okay. Breeeathe, Duke.”

She moved my arms so my hands touched the back of my head, and she pushed my elbows wide. “This opens your lungs, breathe with me,” she ordered. “In through your nose, make your stomach big, out through your mouth.”

After what felt like an hour, but was probably only five minutes, my body stopped violently trembling and I was able to breathe a little steadier.

TJ handed me a protein bar and Gatorade. I looked at him warily as I accepted them and noticed my hand was still shaking.

Ellie moved to sit beside me on the bench and she continued to rub my back.

“I’ll drop his ass if he makes fun of me for this,” I grumbled to her about TJ.

She gave me a sympathetic smile. “He won’t. He hugged you because that’s what I usually need. He doesn’t realize panic attacks come in different forms for people.”

I drew a sharp intake of air. “Panic attack?”

She nodded. “Never happened to you before, I take it?”

I nodded as I ripped open the protein bar wrapper with my teeth and spit out the plastic end.

She gave my shoulder a nudge. “What caused it? If you don’t mind me asking, of course,” she added quickly.

“Nothing. I’m good,” I said, trying to steady my hand as I unscrewed the Gatorade cap.

“Duke,” she said in a low voice, pulling my eyes to hers. “I’m just trying to help.”

I pressed my lips together in a firm line and spied TJ out of the corner of my eye. He was casually leaning against the wall, silently watching us.

Ellie must’ve tracked my thoughts, because she cleared her throat and addressed her fiancé. “Hey honey, you mind grabbing me a hot chocolate from upstairs? This concession stand has the best little marshmallows.” She flashed him a cutesy smile. “Please?”

He pushed off the wall, playfully rolling his eyes like he was annoyed with her request, but he loved doing any and all things for her. He was the definition of a golden retriever boyfriend and we all bagged on him for it. He was so whipped he even wore her new ponytails around his wrist so that they’d be the perfect level of stretchiness for her when she needed them. He walked toward us and leaned down to push a kiss into her hair before jogging to the stairs.

“Thanks,” I muttered as soon as he was out of sight.

She nodded. When the silence between us started to become a bit awkward, I realized what she was doing. She was waiting me out, wanting me to start talking.

And it worked.

The only problem was, once I started, I couldn’t stop... And soon she knew all the details of mine and

Claire's relationship and everything that had transpired between us over the past decade.

When I finally got to the end of us, I blew out a defeated breath. "I'm just... freaking out about the whole thing," I admitted.

She sighed. "Well, I'm not sure if you'll take my advice or not because you're very hard-headed—"

"Hey—" I started to complain, but she gave me a hard look that made me back down.

"Coaching gives me a pretty good perspective on y'all's mindsets," she smirked. "But anyways, I'm not sure if you'll take my advice or not, but for me, the panic attacks didn't really stop until I was in a more secure situation and I was given a bit of closure... but that's just me."

"So..." I searched her face for any clues. That was way too cryptic for me. "You're saying I should... break up with her?"

Her face cracked in confusion. "How did you get that from what I just said?"

I rubbed a hand over my face. I felt like I was back in school trying to answer a teacher's question correctly. "So, I should stay by her side at all times to make sure she's safe then?"

She squinted at me and cocked her head to the side. "You may need help that is beyond me."

I hung my head. "Well, I'm not really sure how to make the situation *more secure*," I told her using air quotes.

"Maybe you feel like she's going to be the one who leaves you—" she pursed her lips at me and held up a hand to stop me from talking, "*Not* because death, Duke. I did not say that," she said firmly. "What I mean is, maybe you're scared that you were finally vulnerable

with her and now if things don't work out between you two, you'll be crushed. So now you want to book it away from her. But maybe that's not what you actually need? Maybe you actually need a secure and loving relationship with her?"

"That all sounds great, but—

"Callahan!" Coach's voice boomed from the rink door. He was holding it open, waiting for me to join him in his little office connected to the practice rink.

Ellie gave me a sympathetic shrug before standing to leave. "Come over to our place for dinner if you want to talk more," she said.

She took long strides to meet up with TJ, who was waiting for her on the stairs.

"Tell Claire to give ya some compression, bud!" TJ called out with a wink.

I let out a groan.

Ellie sucker punched TJ in the gut, but he just started laughing. She pushed him to start walking away, and she mouthed *'I'm sorry'* over her shoulder at me.

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33. Claire

I gingerly walked to the living room after my nap. I was trying not to use my abdomen too much in fear of disrupting the stitches from healing. It's funny how you never think of how much you move your stomach until you shouldn't.

I sat down on the lumpy living room couch and grabbed up the clicker. I searched through the sports channels to find some old hockey games. Dad had told me that Duke went back to Detroit for his foot, and I prayed he wouldn't suffer any negative consequences from the night he brought me to the hospital.

As soon as I found a Crewman game from last season, I made myself comfortable. I had gotten used to seeing Duke every day, and now I missed him. Watching him play made me feel closer to him. And it felt nice to finally let myself enjoy watching hockey again.

After Duke left town seven years ago, I wanted nothing to do with hockey. I made myself hate it out of spite for him, but I always secretly missed watching it.

I was hoping that this year, things would be different. Games were more fun to watch when you had a personal interest in them and watching games in-person was top-tier. I was already looking forward to sitting in the home crowd section at the Crewman stadium to cheer him on.

I kept my phone next to me just in case he called or texted, but so far, he had been pretty quiet— just asking me if I was feeling alright in the morning, then not really engaging in conversation after that. A little part of me wondered if this was a bad sign, but I quickly brushed it off. We'd never texted before, so that was probably just his texting style...

34. Claire

By the end of the weekend, I was going crazy. I was sure of it. I was not meant to stay in the house for more than a day or so at a time. I was starting to view my childhood home as a prison. I watched everything on my mental list of shows to catch up on, I tried to read, I even tried to get into cooking to keep my mind busy. But nope. I needed to leave this house.

Especially because I overheard my dad on the phone last night talking about how Duke would be back at the rink in the morning...

It was just weird as hell that he hadn't told me that himself.

I had brushed off Duke's silence as him just not being into the whole texting thing, but now I feared something else was going on with him. Like why hadn't he stopped over here right after he landed last night? If things were the other way around, he'd be my first stop as soon as I arrived in Northfield. In my mind, I couldn't wait to see him again. So why this weirdness again? Hadn't we promised each other that things would be "normal" between us now? And wasn't it "normal" to tell your girlfriend that you were back after a long weekend away?

I forced myself to hold my tongue until I could speak to him directly. I wanted to hold up my side of being a "normal" girlfriend, but honestly, my patience was wearing thin.

So, not being able to leave the house *and* having anxiety over the whole Duke situation? That spelled out mental disaster for me.

On Monday morning, I decided to forgo my pain meds for the day so I could drive, and around 10am, I set out for the rink. I'd had enough of babying myself and I had to put my Duke questions to rest. The horrible

feeling in the pit of my stomach needed to be dissolved somehow... And maybe he'd be happy to see me and I'd realize that I was just overthinking the whole thing...

I was ordered to take it easy for at least three to four weeks after my surgery, and even at the end of that sentence, I was supposed to gradually ease into working out again.

But I needed to cut that short.

It's not like I was planning on going out and doing a full run-through of a program, but I did want to at least be up on my feet.

I would convince my dad to start letting me do some light work around the rink starting today. I'd blame it on mental health if I had to, because I was going insane not doing anything.

As soon as I walked in the rink, my dad's wary eyes met mine and he shook his head at me.

I tried to move confidently toward his office, but that was pretty difficult while I was still babying my right side and walking pretty slowly.

He let out a deep sigh. For some reason, I caused him to make that sound a lot.

"Did you just drive while on pain med—"

"Nope," I cut him off. "I skipped taking it today," I told him proudly.

He crossed his arms over his chest and looked at me dubiously. "And how's that working out for you?"

"I'm not in any pain," I lied. It was a tiny lie. I was only in a small amount of pain. Not enough to make me give up seeing Duke today. "Where's—"

"Workout room upstairs," he told me in a resigned voice.

I smiled my thanks and gingerly moved toward the stairs.

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35. Duke

A round of applause cut into my thoughts.

I carefully placed the medicine ball down and looked around to see what the commotion was about... then cursed under my breath.

The teen hockey guys working out up here were all clapping for Claire entering the weight room. Everyone had heard about what had happened and everyone was feeling bad she couldn't be here at the rink. She smiled politely at them, but the smile slid off her face when she saw me.

My first thought was that there was no way she should've been out of bed. She looked weak. Her skin was ghostly white, and she was moving very slowly with purposeful steps. She was wearing an old, cropped hoodie and baggy sweatpants that were rolled up multiple times at the waist so that they'd stay put on her hips— they were probably her only pair that didn't squeeze her where she was still sore. I could easily spot the bandages peeping out between her pants and hoodie.

It took all of me not to pick her up, take her home, and tuck her into her twin-sized bed. I'd crawl into the covers behind her and she'd be safe that way...

But that couldn't happen.

And I cursed Craig for letting her come here today. Not only because it wasn't safe yet, but because I was avoiding her. Plain and simple. That was the truth. I knew I had to face her one of these days, but I couldn't bear to even think about breaking up with her. So, I'd been keeping my distance, hoping for some kind of clarity on the situation. But now that she was here, it had to happen.

I leaned against the weight sets, waiting for her to walk the full length of the room. I looked in the mirror and schooled myself to lock up my emotions. They needed no part in this conversation.

“How are you feeling?” I asked her when she reached me.

She gave me a funny look. “Um... not bad.” She looked down at my walking boot. “Well, that’s good, right?”

I nodded and continued my next lift.

She waited patiently for me to finish.

“I’m kinda confused,” she said quietly. Her eyes searched around to make sure we couldn’t be overheard. “Are you mad at me because of your foot? I’m sorry. I feel guilty, okay?”

I felt my jaw grind in frustration and tried to avoid looking down at her. If I did, I knew I’d be the one feeling guilty and I’d probably break... and I couldn’t. This was already too hard.

“No. Don’t,” I said quietly.

“Don’t? Don’t what?” she asked hesitantly.

“Don’t feel guilty,” I grinded out before walking to another station.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest and moved slowly to follow me. “Then what is it? Why aren’t we talking? Why aren’t we dating now?” She laughed kinda dryly.

I continued to focus on the work out equipment, trying to make my brain work faster to find any sort of usable excuse.

“Was it... Was it bad for you or something? Like am I... not good at it?” she asked quietly.

That finally brought my eyes to her round, innocent ones, and it made me feel like a total dick.

“That’s definitely not it. Don’t doubt yourself in that area. Ever,” I told her firmly.

She shrugged and looked smaller and less confident than I’d ever seen her before, and I hated it. I hated that I did that to her.

I swallowed and closed my eyes tightly. “It’s because if I date you, then I know it’s over... And you’ll have to accept that it’s over too,” I confessed.

Her face cracked with confusion. “What do you mean?”

I sighed. “I mean, that’s it. We’re it for each other, Claire. There would be no going back. There would be no one else. So, once we date, that’s the next chapter of our lives. That’s the real deal. And I...”

“What?” she asked impatiently.

“I don’t know if I’m cut out for the real deal.”

She looked confused. Her eyes roamed the floor before looking back at me... Teary pools started building up on her lower eyelids, and my chest tightened.

“Then,” her voice cracked, and she swallowed before beginning again. Accusation slid into those hazel eyes. “Then what am I supposed to do, Duke?”

I had to look away. This hurt too badly. “I don’t know.” I knew that was a lame reply, but it was all I had. I sat down on the workout bench.

“No! Look at me,” she demanded in a stronger voice. She walked toward me and pointed her finger at my chest accusingly. “If you think that... If you think that we are meant to be together and we’re the real deal,” her voice was shaky now, “but you *don’t* want to be with me, then what do *I* do, Duke?”

She waited for a response from me, but I had nothing. A couple tiny tears broke free and she quickly swiped them off her face. It made me feel lower than low. It made me feel like the shittiest douchebag alive. I wanted to reach for her, hold her face, kiss away those tears, but I knew I had no business doing that. I swallowed the burning lump in my throat and dropped my head.

“Do you know how infuriating that is to hear?” She paused, waiting for me to look back up at her. “Why is letting someone love you such a bad thing?”

And that was too much for me. “Because, Claire,” I snapped. I stood, towering over her. “Because what if it breaks? I don’t want to break you!” I yelled down at her.

She stepped back, away from me, shocked that I’d raised my voice at her. And I immediately regretted it. I regretted the space between us, but I knew I had to put it there.

“You already fucking did, Duke.” She covered her mouth, trying to smother a sob before turning and walking away much quicker than she should’ve been moving.

All the guys in the weight room stared back at me in shock.

As soon as the door swung shut behind her, I threw an aggrieved punch at the padded wall.

“Fuck!” I roared.

I hated myself. I promised to protect her... but I was always the one hurting her.

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36. Duke

I stared up at my bedroom ceiling wondering how many times I laid here in this exact position dreaming to be with Claire. And now that I had finally gotten with her, I threw it all away.

Three more weeks.

I could make it three more weeks in Northfield without her, couldn't I?

But in the back of my mind, I wasn't so sure of that answer anymore. I wasn't so sure that I'd ever be okay to come back here again. Because she was everywhere. She was in all my memories of this place, and I knew it'd be too painful to be here without her.

From what I overheard at the rink she wasn't supposed to step foot on the ice for a few more weeks—doctor's orders. But could Craig really keep her away? Even if she couldn't skate, I had a feeling she'd be at the rink next week... and I couldn't face her. I couldn't face the look of disappointment on her face when she regarded me, or worse, the look of disgust.

Wasn't it enough that I hated myself for not being able to be with her? I guess I deserved her hate. I had promised her things and it was my fault I couldn't deliver. I was the coward who was afraid of loving her.

"Duke! Food!" Sav's voice carried up the stairs from the kitchen.

I didn't feel like eating, but I knew I had to. I couldn't afford to lose weight; I was supposed to be working on gaining more this offseason.

I slowly made my way down to the kitchen and got in line for steak and potatoes.

My parents were big into eating outside on the patio these days and I knew I wouldn't be able to wiggle out of that too easily. I just had to pretend to be in a good mood for as long as it took me to scarf down my food, then I could escape to my room again.

I started to follow a shirtless Johnny out the backdoor to the patio, when Griff's strong arm blocked my way.

I looked at him in question. "Dude, what the hell?"

He gave a head nod toward Sav, who was sitting at the table looking oddly professional. She had her reading glasses perched on her nose, her hair was straightened and parted down the middle, and she wore a nice white shirt without any traces of spit-up on it— a first in about a month. She motioned to the chair across from her.

"What is this, some kind of intervention?" I asked dryly.

Sav cocked her head to the side and picked up her iced coffee to swirl it around noisily like she always did. "If you'd like to call it that, sure."

I looked back to the patio and weighed my options. I definitely would've been able to out-run Griff before my injury, but with a walking boot on, I wasn't so sure.

"Not getting out of this, bud," Griff smirked. He could clearly tell what I was thinking.

I clenched my jaw and threw a kitchen chair out to sit my ass down. "Fine. What's up?"

She pursed her lips at me. "That is what we want to ask you," she pointed out.

I looked from her to Griff, who was still blocking the sliding glass door. "You guys are kidding me, right? Like this is a joke. Ha ha?"

She shook her head.

“What, so you’re some kind of therapist now and he’s your muscle?” I asked incredulously.

“Interesting,” she said haughtily. “He’s trying to get out of talking about it, isn’t he?” She looked to her husband for backup. He nodded solemnly. “You see, we thought that you had your heart broken. But then, it was funny to hear at the rink that *you* were actually the heartbreaker, *and* that you displayed the breakup pretty publicly. The thing is,” she gestured to me, “this is not the face of a ruthless heartbreaker. This is the face of a...” she snapped her fingers thinking of the word.

“A sad, sad, little man,” Griff said, shaking his head.

“I’m not little,” I furiously clapped back. “I bet-”

“Duke!” Sav cut in. “We are trying to ask you what the hell is going on so we can help. You’re heartbroken. Then I hear from Craig that Claire can’t even eat because she’s so upset. She’s trying to recover, Duke. What the hell did you do?”

I winced at my sister’s words. She couldn’t eat? That felt like a stab to the chest.

I sat there looking from my sister to Griff...

Then I finally spilled the whole thing.

When I got to the end of the story, Sav was shaking her head at me.

“You are a scaredy-cat,” she said disappointingly.

I pushed my chair back and stood up. I wouldn’t stay here if she was just going to make fun of me for my actions. “You’re a shitty therapist, Sav,” I muttered.

But Griff still stood in the doorway. He placed a hefty hand on my shoulder and forced me to sit back down. My jaw tightened. As soon as I recovered, I was definitely going to challenge him to a locker boxing match so I could beat his ass.

“You can’t be scared to love, Duke,” Sav said, reaching across the table to pat my hand. “I was afraid after what happened with Nick that you’d end up having some kind of emotional trauma, but you never showed it up until now.”

“Emotional trau—”

“Yes,” she powered on. “Your fear of being in a relationship with Claire goes directly back to that. And I feel horrible for the way that affected you, but I think I was so busy picking up the pieces of my life that I didn’t help you deal with the loss enough. Griff and I were both able to lean on each other a lot. We were able to talk about it with one another, and I’m pissed at my past self for not including you enough in those talks.”

I propped my elbows on the table and dropped my head in my hands. I was not going to cry. I was not going to lose it in front of my sister and brother-in-law. Nope. Not me. This wasn’t going to...

“Buddy, it’s okay,” Griff said, patting me on the back.

And that made me kind of lose it.

Sav got up and came around the table to hug my head into her stomach.

“What if something bad happens? What if—”

“Then wouldn’t it be worth it?” Sav placed her hands on my shoulders and lightly pushed me at an arm’s length away so she could make eye-contact with me. She was little but her grip was strong. “Wouldn’t the time that you did get to spend together be worth the hurt? *If* the hurt were to happen,” she clarified.

“I don’t know!” I said with wide eyes. That was the problem.

“It is!” She nodded. “It is worth it, Duke. Why do you think I chose to love again? I could have closed myself off to the rest of the world after Nick died, but I knew that

loving was worth the hurt. Look at Johnny and tell me loving Nick wasn't worth it. Look at Indie. If I didn't give it a go with Griff, she wouldn't even exist right now. So even if it doesn't work out, even if something bad does happen, the good is worth it. What you learn about yourself is worth it," she said firmly.

I groaned and dropped my head in my hands again.

"What?" she asked.

"Then I fucked up again."

She rubbed my back in her motherly way. She'd had that motherly touch since she was a teenager.

"Think she'll accept my apology?" I asked.

"Well, you won't know until you try."

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37. Duke

By the next morning, I'd mapped out everything I needed to tell her. I was planning on groveling. I had special black roses— her favorite color— in hand, and a letter I carefully wrote out to help fix the situation.

I first went to Craig's house where she was still staying, but her car wasn't out front and no one came to the door when I knocked.

At the rink, I searched for her in her dad's office, then Benny's. It was still only a couple weeks after her surgery, so I knew she was still restricted to light work, but I also knew she had to be here somewhere. She couldn't stay away from the rink.

When I popped my head into Benny's and didn't find her, I made my way up to the workout room.

I waved to Max leading a group of figure skaters in some weightlifting exercises, but after a quick scan, there was still no sign of her...

Until I swiveled around to head back downstairs.

My jaw immediately clamped shut and I felt my nose flare from anger.

There was the reason I couldn't find her.

She was the one place she wasn't supposed to be: On the fucking ice. And she wasn't simply skating... No, that would've been bad enough. Claire had to rebel above and beyond. Claire was out there throwing triple jumps.

I cursed under my breath and threw the roses and letter in the workout room trash can with a loud thud. I moved as quickly as I could to get down to the ice.

I waited with a breath held tight in my chest as she entered a jump. I wanted to scream at her to stop, but it

was too late for that. Doing that would only startle her, and I didn't want to make her fall.

I watched her effortlessly land the triple loop, then gently touch her abdomen with her fingers, like she was checking to make sure she didn't rip any stitches.

Panic coursed through my body as I envisioned her laying in the stupid hospital bed and all thoughts of apologizing went out the window.

"Are you kidding me, Claire?!" I yelled angrily across the ice.

She jumped a little, shocked at my voice, then slowly turned to look at me. Even from the middle of the blue line, I could see the stubbornness etched across her face. It felt like a time warp back to middle school when she was skipping class again, but this time, the repercussions of her rebellion could end up being so much worse than summer school.

I pointed an accusing finger at her. "You're not supposed to be out there. You're supposed to be resting for at least three to four weeks," I yelled. "You're not going to be happy until you pop your fucking stitches, are you?"

She arched an eyebrow at me and crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm fine. Why do you care anyway?" She snorted at me in disgust.

I placed my hands on the board's glass on either side of me to steady myself. A mixture of anxiety and anger settled in my chest, making me feel sick.

"Fuck this, Claire," I said, looking up at her. "I risked everything for you, and now you don't even care about yourself." I rubbed a hand over my forehead. "I had a panic attack, Claire. A *fucking panic attack*. Wanna know why?! Because I'm so fucking scared for you, okay? And everyone thought I was overreacting, but look at you

here, right now. How am I supposed to *not* worry about you?!”

I sat there waiting for a response, but she stayed silent. We just stared daggers at each other from twenty feet away.

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38. Claire

He was extremely mad.

But I was mad too.

“I came here to apologize, Claire. But screw this. I can’t be worried about you when you don’t even care about yourself. I can’t... You make me scared...” he choked out.

I felt my tough facade soften a bit, but not by much. Why was he coming here making me feel guilty when he was the one who cut me loose? We had no loyalty toward each other. I had no responsibility to protect his feelings. He made sure of that.

“Duke, *you* broke it off with *me*,” I yelled back at him. “You clearly don’t want to be with me, so why do you care so much?!”

That lit a fire in him. The veins in his neck bulged out as he yelled, “Because I do! I do want to be with you! I care because I *love you*, Claire! And I always will.”

A painful longing hit me in my chest with those words, and it took all of me to ignore them. Because that’s just it — they were just words to him. They didn’t carry any weight anymore because I knew he’d probably just contradict them in another hour.

I forced myself to laugh dryly at him. “Just stop. I’ve heard this before. How am I supposed to ever believe you?” I shook my head and skated to the boards to grab my water bottle, then gilded back toward him in the doorway to exit the rink.

He didn’t back away from where he stood, and I had to force myself past him. Being so close to him made my heart practically stop. Because I still wanted more than anything for him to pull me into a tight hug...

But that wasn't going to happen.

I forced myself to hold onto my anger toward him. He was the one yanking my chain and destroying my mental peace, and I couldn't do it anymore.

"You happy now? You got in my head," I spat at him as I walked to the lobby entrance. "I only fall if I'm worried about falling, so thanks a lot."

I wanted to walk away sassily with my hips sashaying, but my abdomen was still feeling tight and sore.

As soon as I pushed through the door to the lobby, I heard his voice murmur, "You're welcome."

I froze. Of course he needed the last word. Of fucking course. It was so tempting to turn around and lay into him, but what good would it do?

I pushed open the door and stalked into the lobby, leaving him behind.

I spent the rest of the day sitting in the front office grumpily punching skater's timecards, thanks to Duke. Because he told my dad that I skated, and my dad went nuclear yelling at me.

I expected Duke to have a smug look on his face as my dad chewed me out in front of everyone, but he didn't. He sat in the lobby with his hoodie pulled up over his buzz cut and he eyed me with a pained expression.

And then he wouldn't look at me the rest of the day.

The next morning, Duke was nowhere to be found. I inconspicuously searched for him through the day, but my pride stopped me from asking anyone where he was. I really should have worked up the courage to ask though, because secretly searching around for him gave me a twisted sense of deja-vu.

By the afternoon, I snooped on my dad's master schedule, which detailed all his employee's work hours. His name was still on the schedule for another three weeks, so I shouldn't have been so weirded out by his sudden absence. But in my defense, I felt like he'd given my heart some sort of whiplash. The entire summer he was always around. He was always there to walk out of the rink with me— whether I wanted him to or not, really. And now his absence felt jarring, maddening even.

I had to repeat to myself a stupid mantra that I was overreacting as I powered through the most mundane work tasks, which I was given thanks to Duke. My dad was still pissed at me for skating, but it's not like he could ground me or anything. Seeing as he was my boss too, he punished me in this way instead.

My problem though, was that every time I tried to complete one of these mundane tasks, kids kept stopping me... And it continued to happen all day long.

When I went to take out the lobby trash, a couple of U18 players grabbed it from me and started walking it back toward the dumpster for me.

"Uh... thanks?" I called out. They just nodded and kept moving.

When I started trying to re-rack the lighter weights in the workout room, a couple U16 players grabbed them from me and boxed me out so I couldn't even reach the rack.

"Uh... excuse me," I said with an edge to my voice.

But they wouldn't even make eye-contact with me, they just continued doing my job for me.

When I went to take the trash out of the weight room, another teen boy came up behind me and gently side-stepped me to take the trash bag away from my hand. He threw the bag over his shoulder and trotted off.

“That’s it!” I called out, making all the kids standing around look at me like I had a second head. “What the hell is going on?” I put my hands on my hips, waiting for an answer, but everyone kept their mouths shut and wouldn’t make eye contact with me.

Until I spotted Canyon. He was goofing off with Troy in the corner.

I came up behind him and grabbed his ear.

“Ow, ow, ow!” he called out. “Claire, what the heck!” he yelled down to me. It was still so weird to me that he’d grown taller than me.

“Tell me what the hell is going on right now, Canyon. Why won’t anyone let me work?” I demanded through gritted teeth.

“Okay, okay! I’ll tell you,” he whisper-yelled. His eyes scanned the room trying to make sure no one could hear him. I guess he decided people would eavesdrop, so he made a motion for me to follow him out to the stairwell that led down to the rink. His buddy Troy followed on our heels.

As soon as the door closed behind us, I faced the two tweens. “Why won’t anyone let me work?” I repeated.

“Callahan,” Canyon said with a shrug.

I squinted at him. “What about Callahan?”

He sighed and looked at Troy. Troy nodded. “Callahan told everyone not to let you work, *or else...*” his voice trailed off.

I slid my jaw to the side. “Or else what?”

“I don’t know. But no one really wants to know, ya know?” he gave me a look that said ‘duh.’

I huffed. “Who did he say this to?”

“All the guys here.” He shrugged again like it wasn’t a big deal. “You want word-for-word?”

I nodded.

His eyes went wide and he pointed his index finger at me. "So I can't get in trouble for swearing and you won't tell my mother?"

I rolled my eyes and nodded again.

He arched an eyebrow at me. "Okay. He specifically said- 'if Claire Kessel rips her fucking stitches working here, I will watch security tape and I will personally rip the head off of whoever let her fucking work.' And no one really wants to mess with an NHL guy, ya know? Can I go now?"

"You are dismissed," I said dryly.

Canyon and Troy went running down the stairs, laughing at some dumb boy joke that I didn't understand as they went.

So... He threatened them. Wow.

And now everyone was looking at me like I was some kind of delicate little doll.

I shook my head. Well, he better be prepared for this fight.

I slowly walked to the front office to find my dad.

"Where is he?" I demanded.

"Uh..." He was shuffling papers on his desk, avoiding eye contact with me.

I rolled my eyes. "Dad. Just tell me. Where is Duke?"

He sighed and dropped the papers in his hands before looking up at me with a wary glance. "He's leaving for Detroit, honey." He checked his watch. "I think his flight takes off at 5."

My heart dropped.

No.

Not again.

Tears stung the back of my eyes, threatening to come forward.

He was not allowed to run away again.

I immediately turned on my heel and started running, despite my dad shouting at me to stop.

But I didn't care. I needed to get to the airport.

He was supposed to be here for at least another month. We were supposed to be able to see each other and fight this out for another thirty days. We were supposed to figure out our shit and end up together by the end of this summer. This was our time. He and I both knew that.

I threw my car in reverse, and the thought of not being able to face him again made my vision go blurry.

I swiped away my tears before gassing it out of the parking lot. Now was not the time for crying, I reminded myself.

As I sped toward the highway, I think I slammed on my car horn and flipped the bird to the car behind me about six times. I tried to slow my thoughts and plan out how to confront Duke, but I was having a hard time.

I thought he was truly serious about his apology back at the beginning of summer. But now here he was, doing it again— leaving without saying goodbye.

And I honestly wanted to show up to the airport just to slap him in the face for that.

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39. Duke

I was sitting peacefully alone in the airport, waiting by my terminal with my eyes closed, when something smacked the back of my head, hard.

“Ow! What the-”

I touched the spot that just took the hit and pulled out my headphones. I twisted in my seat to see what the hell just came flying at me... and I spotted a snickers bar on the ground by my feet.

No...

My neck immediately snapped up to look behind me...

And there she was.

My heart pounded so hard in my chest I could feel the blood pumping in my ears.

Because you know how sometimes you have a feeling that what's about to happen will be an important moment in your life? That what's about to happen will change the course of your life *completely*?

I knew without a doubt that this was one of those moments.

She stood there in jogger sweatpants and her Ice League uniform hoodie with her dark hair piled on top of her hair in a messy bun. Her eye makeup was smudged, like she'd been crying.

“You're gonna need some luck, Duke Callahan.” She tried to keep her voice even, but I could hear a little hiccup at the end of her sentence.

Her lower lip quivered, her shoulders looked tense as all hell, and her hands were balled up in fists by her side.

I slowly stood up and started walking toward her.

And what started as a slow walk, turned into her running toward me.

Her small body slammed against mine into a tight hug. I could feel her tears soaking into my t-shirt, and I hated the fact that I made her cry... but I loved that fact all the same, because she was crying over not wanting me to leave. I furiously blinked my own eyes to stop them from being all leaky.

“Shit babe,” I whispered into her hair and touched her lower back. “Your stitches. You okay?”

She nodded against me and let out a deep, shaky sob.

“I’m sorry—” we both started to say at the same time.

“Me first,” I told her. I used my thumbs to smooth the tears away from under her shiny, hazel eyes. “On Monday, I went to the rink to apologize. I was scared, scared to be with you and lose you because of something out of our control. I’m impulsive and a risk taker with everything in life except for with you. With you, I played it so cautiously, which is so unlike me.” I let out a dry laugh. “And that’s been biting me in the ass. So Claire, I want to take this risk with you.”

She nodded, but her face cracked with more tears and she slapped me in the chest. “I’m still mad that you were going to leave without saying goodbye though.” The sadness in her voice broke me.

“Claire, no, no, no.” I smoothed more of her tears away. How was I making this girl who never ever cried suddenly cry all the time? I vowed right then to make it up to her. I’d try as hard as I could to keep her smiling all the time. “I wasn’t leaving, Claire. I’m flying back for an appointment with my team doctor. I’m coming right back,” I said with a laugh.

Her mouth dropped open. “My dad,” she said through gritted teeth. “Way to leave out key details, Craig. Wow!”

she yelled at the ceiling.

I laughed and pushed a kiss into her hair.

She breathed a deep sigh and used the sleeves of her sweatshirt to wipe her face. “Well, I feel dumb,” she said, trying to sniffle up her tears. “At least we got that all figured out?” She regarded me with a weak smile.

I nodded. “Now that you’re here, want to take a trip to Detroit with me?”

She looked a bit hesitant.

“You already bought a ticket to get back here, no? And you can’t exactly train right now anyway.”

She nodded sheepishly.

“Then let’s go.”

“I don’t have my stuff though,” she said doubtfully.

“Don’t need it,” I told her. “You can use my shit.”

Her face broke out in a giddy smile, and I loved it. I loved that I had a part in putting it there.

She reached up to throw her arms around me again.

“Careful,” I whispered into her hair. “Your stitches, babe. I’m still mad at you for skating when you weren’t supposed to.”

She pulled back from me and shot me an unimpressed look. “And I’m still mad at you for threatening the entire arena not to let me work,” she pointed out.

I dropped my head back and let out a frustrated laugh. This was going to be one hell of a difficult but crazy rewarding kind of life.

“Hey Duke,” she said, wrapping her arms around my waist. “Can we forget about being mad at each other and just be madly in love now?”

I reached down and pulled her chin up so I could look directly into her beautiful, glassy eyes. “Yes.” I grinned. “Pinky promise me that, girl.”

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Epilogue - January 2023

Duke

Although Claire wanted to find a skating partnership that would allow her to stay home and train at the Ice League, I think the situation she ended up with might've been a better fit. Her new partner, Andy, skated out of Toronto, which was only about a half hour drive from Detroit... which also happened to be where Addie landed an amazing sportswriting gig, and of course, where I lived.

At the end of the summer, she moved into an apartment with Addie a few blocks from where I lived, but I could usually convince her to sleep over at my place. I tried to make my apartment irresistible by keeping it stocked with her favorite wine and ice cream, and I'd give her long back massages whenever she laid down on my king-size mattress. Her place was fine to stay at, but we'd be squished together all night on her twin-sized bed, which I didn't really mind... but adding the no AC component to the mix was a bit of a struggle.

Having her around in September was also a huge advantage for both of us because we were both in recovery mode, meaning we were both pushing to make quick comebacks after our injuries. We understood the hard days— the mental toll it took from being knocked down and having to fight to physically get back to where we were before— and we were both ready and waiting with words of encouragement for the other whenever needed. Through September, we went to the gym together, the rink together (she critiqued my stride to get it back in excellent form, and I usually just clapped for her), and then we'd roll out our sore muscles together on my big, lumpy couch.

By October, she was training full-time with Andy in Toronto, and I was back in the Crewman lineup.

I loved that she was able to be in the stands for my first game back, and I loved feeling so strong again.

After leaving the ice with a hatrick and two assists to Griff that game, I was feeling on top of the world. I let out a celebratory yell as I walked off the ice, and I passed up my stick to a couple little fans who were hanging over the side of the railing, clapping for me.

Because Addie was a sportswriter, she was already in the hall by the locker room with a press pass around her neck. Her hair was smoothed back into a sleek low ponytail and she was decked out in a very professional pantsuit. Claire was standing beside her in some jogger sweatpants, basketball shoes, and one of my old hoodies that went way past her butt. Just the sight of her made a goofy grin slide onto my face.

I dropped my helmet and jogged on the skate-safe rubber path up to her. I immediately scooped her up and she wrapped her legs around my waist. I was constantly picking her up these days, just because I could. It actually got to the point where I loved when she was kinda bratty, because then I'd just toss her over my shoulder and throw her onto the bed... and then she was never able to stay in a bad mood for too long because she'd be struggling to keep a straight face.

She collapsed in giggles against my shoulder. "Great job," she whispered in my ear before pulling back to look at me.

"Thank you, babe. Couldn't have done it without ya," I said, kissing her smile.

But now, Claire and I had switched places. It was my turn to sit in the stands and support her.

It actually worked out perfectly. My team and I were spending a week in Cali to prepare for our roadie games on the weekend, and she was competing at the

Nationals competition hosted at the very same stadium through the week.

My team and I practically ran out of practice at a rink across town to get here on time to be able to watch her program.

And now we looked super out of place wearing our hockey gear in different levels of undress and taking up two full rows at the U.S. National Figure Skating Championships.

As soon as Claire took the ice with her partner for warm-ups, the guys all stood up and started cheering for her. Griff immediately started shushing them. They didn't understand that the figure skating crowd was much tamer than the hockey crowd and that old judges typically hated rowdiness.

I couldn't even help Griff explain the figure skating world to the guys because I was leaned forward with my elbows on my knees, zeroing in on my girl's every movement. I was honestly nervous as shit for her.

Claire always explained to me that she got second-hand nerves while sitting in the stands watching my games, but I never really understood what she meant up until that moment.

I held my breath every time they entered a jump.

Griff nudged my shoulder and an amused grin slid onto his face. "You can't be nervous now, it's just warm-ups. Save the nerves for the real program."

I nodded and pulled at the collar of my shirt. He knew what he was talking about when it came to skating because he watched my sister compete throughout her career. I watched Sav compete too, but I was just a kid at that time. Plus, this was my first time watching Claire compete in person, and I wanted her to think of me as a good luck charm the way I thought of her as mine— which

I knew was kinda ridiculous, but I couldn't help it. I was ridiculous when it came to her.

“What're you doin, bud?” Griff looked at my hand in my pocket strangely.

I took a deep breath and pulled the ring out of my pocket to show him. It was a gold band with a round diamond— simple and beautiful.

His eyes went wide. “Damn, okay. I understand the nerves a little more now.”

“Thank you,” I said dryly. I'd been carrying the ring around since before Christmas. We'd only been dating seriously for a few months at that time, but we'd known each other almost our entire lives. I knew she didn't want to settle down until after the 2026 competitive season because that was an Olympic year, and that was totally fine with me. But I figured giving her a ring that symbolized my love for her wasn't considered “settling down.” We didn't have to start having babies or anything just because we were engaged. I just wanted us to be an engaged couple instead of a regular couple, and I hoped she felt that way too.

Anyways, the ring had kinda become a nervous tick for me... like you remember when teachers told you to mess with a paperclip in your pocket when you were nervous during speeches in class? The ring became my paperclip... And I wasn't sure if I was actually going to pop the question today or not, but I wanted to be prepared at all times just in case the perfect moment presented itself.

When it was finally time for Claire and her partner to take the ice, the guys and I all clapped politely.

She didn't look my way; she kept her head straight forward. She tested her edges a bit, kicked out her knees a couple times, then simulated a check-out position.

She looked strong. She looked beautiful.

Her dress was maroon with gold beads and a flowy short skirt that appeared maroon but had layers underneath that were gold and only showed up when she jumped. Their long program was to the soundtrack of Romeo and Juliet, and she was perfectly dressed for the part of Juliet. Her partner Andy was in a white puffy pirate looking shirt and black tight pants.

A couple minutes later– the minutes felt way longer than 60 seconds each– she and her partner were in their starting position. They had their arms wrapped around each other and their faces were just inches apart. I could tell she was slightly shaking, and I hoped that was just from the cold, not from nerves.

I tried to drown out the guys around me starting to chirp quietly.

“Ooh baby!”

“Get a room, am I right?”

“This is kinda sexy. You guys think this is sexy?”

“Shut it, guys,” Griff said firmly.

“Ooooh!” they all quietly chorused.

Griff shook his head. “Duke’s gonna blow and ya’ll are gonna get us thrown out,” he warned.

But I was good. I was secure in our relationship. My legs were just bouncing because I was so nervous for her.

Thank the lord their program music started and everyone finally shut up...

Claire

We had it in the bag. I could feel it. We were so so close.

Keep your head in it, Kessel, I ordered myself.

We had one more jump to go— a throw triple loop— and then we were finished with the program, and we'd probably be in the lead. The only issue was that my legs were starting to feel like jell-o. No matter how many times you practiced a program run-through, you could never fully prepare your stamina for a competition day program... because your heart, brain, and muscles were just not functioning the same as usual on competition days.

I breathed steadily and pushed into our last stretch of footwork. I glided into the edge roll seamlessly, and I could feel Andy's hands go around my waist in preparation for the throw jump.

Okay, glide into position, knee bounce, tight back edge, launch up, pull in...

And...

Landed.

I could hear the crowd erupt. We just hit a clean program.

My smile was making my face hurt, but I couldn't help it. I was so incredibly happy. We finished out our last spiral sequence easily and did one last lift we could practically do in our sleep...

Then we stopped mid-ice, I twirled into him, and then laid sprawled out on his knee like I was dead— for the whole Juliet character thing.

The crowd erupted again, and I couldn't help but smile, even though I was still technically pretending to be a dead Juliet.

When Andy pulled me up out of our ending position, he lifted me into a hug.

"Great job. We nailed that," Andy whispered into my hair, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

"We really did," I confirmed.

I loved our partnership. We both respected each other as athletes and people, and we had great chemistry. It also helped that we were on the same page about our main goal: the 2026 Winter Olympics.

Andy took my hand and twirled me out to take a bow, and that's when I finally made eye contact with Duke. I could easily pick him out in the crowd because he was in the middle of a little sea of hockey men. He was standing up and cupping his hands around his mouth to yell. I blew him a kiss as I waved to the crowd.

"You see your man up there?" Andy whispered to me.

"Yeah," I couldn't help but let out a little giggle.

"That's nice he showed up with his friends," he said as we turned to bow in the opposite direction. It was custom to bow in all four directions when competing in large stadiums like this one.

I loved this little moment on the ice because it was the "after" part that you dreamt of for weeks leading up to the actual competition. I could practically feel all the nerves and adrenaline leaving my body, and I was already mentally planning my victory dinner. I'd ask Duke to take me somewhere with truffle fries and tasty cocktails.

"Yeah, it was nice of them to come." I bit my lip, trying to contain my giddiness as I looked up at Duke in the stands again. He shot me a wink, and we kept eye-contact as Andy and I glided off the ice holding hands. "I'm gonna marry that boy one day," I whispered.

Coming soon

**-Our Breakaway:
Ice League Book 5 (Addie's
story)
-Our Alumni Game**

**Turn the page for a sneak peek of
Our Breakaway: Ice League Book 5**

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Prologue

“I can’t do this!” Claire burst out. She 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 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 already almost out the church door.

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

“Stop, Claire. Focus for a second.” I looked straight into her bright freaked-out eyes and had to tamp 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. “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.”

Her eyes still looked wide and freaked out.

“Claire?!” Duke’s voice yelled out behind us.

I internally snickered at the sound of his voice. Of course these two wouldn’t just play by the book today. They *would* be the ones to need 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.

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

I pushed myself further between the door so she was fully out of sight before turning to eye her. “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, lemme see him,” she said as she roughly shoved 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.

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

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

“Hey, hey, hey! Not in the church!” I heard my dad call out. His long stride carried him over to the two of them and he promptly ripped Duke away from her. He shoved Duke forward toward the church doors, but he still had a dazed, loverboy 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,” he said breathlessly, still looking at her like she was an angel.

She grinned back at him and nodded.

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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.

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?” she continued on her tirade. “How about- *Oh, you got your masters? Oh, you landed your dream job?* Get with the times, old woman. She has an amazing job. Why don’t you 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 practically screamed, “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, and she 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 husbands that you despise. Ever think of that? Where is your dusty ass son by the way?”

I felt myself start to giggle at that. Aunt Batty’s son, James, really wasn’t what you’d call a catch... He was a

lazy, mid-thirty-year-old still living in his mother's basement wasting his life away playing video games all day. My dad gave him a pity job at the rink one summer and had to fire him because he just played on his phone 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 Batty. 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...

"*And* I think I need to be drunk for this garter toss," Claire added as she downed the contents of another flute glass.

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 the 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 and turned to order another beer from the bar. "I can't watch this."

I laughed at that 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 had tormented practically everyone in the rink when they were kids.

I chuckled wryly at that and turned back to the happy couple. Claire was most definitely tipsy because she threw her head back laughing at his antics. Knowing them, he was probably narrating the experience and making it even more funny 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," I said simply.

"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 chuckled. “Alright, I’m going to chat with her. Come save me in 15 minutes if I’m still talking.”

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

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

“Whatup Kessel?”

I turned to face a scruffy looking Max.

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.

I cleared my throat. “If you ask me about 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? You’ll have a shiner for weeks,” I told him sassily.

“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,” he said with a chuckle.

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 going to have to start searching for a new place to live seeing as she’ll be moving out.” I nodded back at Claire on the dance floor.

Max leaned his back against the bar to watch Duke and Claire slow dancing. “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. Let the two love birds have their own space and all that.”

Max squinted 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 drowning the rest of my whiskey coke.

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

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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, but there was no way I could continue to afford where Claire and I lived 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 had 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 working then boxing shit up and walking five blocks to move it all. Duke and Claire helped as much as they could, but I didn't want to be a bother. Besides, every time one of them came to help, they'd have ice packs wrapped around a part of their body 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. It felt like I'd 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 sports 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 hell 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 who was assigned the story's name 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.

“Jettensen!” 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 Jettensen. A feel-good, welcome back to Detroit piece. Let’s run it before the first regular season game.”

I grinded my teeth. 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 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 Jetersen. 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 down the street from the fire station— but that'd be a lie. The truth was that I kept thinking about facing Tyler in the morning.

By 5 a.m. I decided it didn't matter. I was placing way too much stress on the situation. 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.

I loved covering Detroit hockey. There was nothing else quite like it. The game day atmosphere was amazing, the fans were amazing, and on top of that, Duke, my brother-in-law, played for the team, which always gave me a bit of an inside scoop before stories were even pitched... But now that Tyler was playing here, I wondered if I'd even enjoy covering the team...

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 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 on 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 stats book. He explained to me once that he was sick a lot growing up, so he never got the chance to play sports. Even when he was healthier, he only reached around 5'7 in

height and was always on the skinny side. Pairing that with an overprotective mom meant that he never touched a field on his own, which only grew his obsession with sports. He spent his entire childhood just watching and analyzing ESPN, and you could tell after having one conversation with him.

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

The real reason, which I never ever admitted 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. Claire 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 usually completely missed meals by accident and worked until my stomach was angrily growling— something I knew I needed to change. My pantry currently had one box of Cheez-its in it and my fridge housed a single bottle of wine, compliments of Brandon when he heard I'd moved. Yeah, I was definitely going to miss living with Claire.

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 parted my hair down the middle and went with a sleek, half ponytail look, and I 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 practice at the 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, meaning the public was allowed to watch.

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.

I took a deep breath as I watched the elevator's electronic numbers go down, making my anxiety go way up.

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... six or seven 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...

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 anyway. 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 and 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 had 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 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 in 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 would 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 slide 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 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 and thicker than the last time I'd really talked to him. For some reason, I still pictured him as his 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... And 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... Jettensen!"

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 faint scar on his upper lip, the one he blamed on getting hit by a puck... Really, he tried to shotgun a beer for the first time at 14 but didn't know how to do it and got his lip stuck in the can. He came running to us and asking for help. I could 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 him 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 for next week's Sunday paper... I'm wondering if you'd have time to sit down for an interview?”

He smiled slowly and raised his eyebrows.

Fuck.

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

He licked his lips. “How badly do you need this interview of yours?” he asked with a boyish smile sliding 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— skinner with chestnut colored hair. He was quick on his feet; a total offensive guy. His brother, on the other hand, was a true Jetterson, which was synonymous with “goon player” around the town we grew up in. An enforcer was probably 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 his 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 and asking 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...

Talk to Casey fucking Jettensen.

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 the wall of my bedroom. Well, bedroom and living room. 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 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 there for days.

I stared at my phone.

What was Tyler’s angle here?

From my intense google searching earlier, I found that neither Jettensen brother had given a single quote to the press regarding anything other than game play. Nothing extra, nothing personal. So no one really 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 the last decade. 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...

We had that passionate, crazy connection that people sacrificed everything to find. At least I thought we did 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.

And I knew I'd always be searching for what I used to have... So, 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?

My professional life was all that mattered to me at the moment. I needed to make myself valuable enough so 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 *this*.

I pushed up from my seat at the table, but was a bit tipsier than I thought, and I accidentally knocked over the wine bottle. 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...

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3. Addie - 2010

I slowly sat down on the sidewalk curb and dropped the bloodied paper towel from the bathroom onto the concrete in front of me. I think my nosebleed had 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— and the concession stand.

I blew out a breath and closed my eyes against the headache that was mounting. I leaned back on my elbows and enjoyed the 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, suddenly 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.

“Jetterson, what the hell, 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, and 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.

He gazed at me intensely. “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.

“Wanna 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 dirty blond-ish scruff and half a tattoo sleeve on his right arm.

“Yeah, I’m talking to you.” His deep voice rumbled with a chuckle. “What do ya say? Pregame before the beer league 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 and spent all of your hours skating. My father, 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'?"

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. My dad 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 was the only one playing the 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 had 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 not to let my shoulders shake and to stop crying before anyone could see. I screwed my eyes shut tight, took in a deep breath, and let it out shakily. 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 and his words felt important. I chewed the inside of my cheek at

that. 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 actually 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 by 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, 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 strong for such a teeny thing," 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 blue eyes.

"Do you want," he asked very slowly with wide eyes, "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 turning nineteen this year, babe."

Damnit.

"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 back into his shoulder, probably to stop me from struggling. It worked, because that hurt my ribs pretty frickin bad.

“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 that led to the parking lot. “I have a lesson.”

“Screw 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 anyone else 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.”

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