

**CROSS
CHECK
MY HEART**

MIKAYLA CHRISTY

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First Edition

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While this is a contemporary sports romance with a HEA, there are mentions of being cheated on by an ex, mentions of coping with divorced parents, mentions of coping with the loss of family, physical assault, profanity and sexually explicit scenes (meaning this is not a closed door/fade-to-black romance)



To anyone who got out of a toxic relationship and is learning
what a healthy one looks like.



Thrive - Cassedee Pope

Quarter to Midnight - NIGHTBREAKERS

Kiss Me Like That - The Railers

Skin - Rihanna

Favorite Place - John Legend

Lonely - Diplo & the Jonas Brothers

Leave Before You Love Me - Marshmello & Jonas Brothers

Greenlight - Jonas Brothers

Rules - Dylan Scott

Keep On Keepin' on - Valley of Wolves

Sun Comes Up - Rudimental ft James Arthur

Body Say - Demi Lovato

One Margarita - Luke Bryan
Crossroads - I Prevail
2 Souls on Fire - Bebe Rexha
Really Don't Care - Demi Lovato
Put It All on Me - Ed Sheeran
Bad For Me (feat. Teddy Swims) - Meghan Trainor
Low - I Prevail
Rise Above It - I Prevail
Kiss Me - Ed Sheeran
Not Ready to Make Nice - The Chicks
The Difference - Tyler Rich
Shout Out to My Ex - Little Mix
Shook - Meghan Trainor

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“G et your fucking hands off her.” I barely recognize my voice as it reaches my ears. Someone stumbles into my back, from the low curse I assume it’s Landon, but it’s not something I can focus on.

My pulse quickens while everything else in me tenses. I’m moving before I even make the decision to do so.

When I came around the street corner and saw Lilly pressed against the building, my stomach dropped to the ground. She sags against the wall, flashing a fleeting smile in my direction before her wide-eyed gaze snaps back to the man holding her. Seeing that was enough to set everything in motion.

I know without looking over my shoulder that Grey and Landon are on my heels.

The pale, thinning man glances over his shoulder at us.

“This doesn’t concern you. Just a small disagreement between my girlfriend and I,” my teeth grind together painfully when he has the nerve to call her his girlfriend, my hands clench into fists as he throws us a cocky grin and an eye roll, “She’s just being dramatic.”

He turns back to Lilly, speaking low and threatening as if he’s conceited enough to think I’d actually walk away. Something nags in my brain, making me think this idiot is her ex-boyfriend, the one she left to get away from, which only causes heat to flush through my body.

“Don’t be difficult about this. Now, let’s go home.” He yanks her by the wrist, pulling her away from the wall. My eyes focus coolly on the spot where his hand is gripping her wrist, my blood pressure rises as a painful cry escapes Lilly’s lips. I step next to her, grabbing his arm and squeezing tightly, my voice even more scathing than I ever thought possible.

“Let. Her. Go.” I growl.

He pales as his mouth gapes open for a moment, but he stands his ground and keeps his hold on Lilly.

“Dude, I appreciate the tough macho guy routine, but we don’t need it here. My girl was just being a brat, bu—” I don’t think, I just react. He’s cut off by my fist meeting his face. The moment he called her a brat, there was no stopping me. I watch with satisfaction as he finally lets go of Lilly and falls to the ground. His eyes widen as he visibly trembles on the spot while he slowly reaches up to cup his cheek.

I take a step toward him, adrenaline rushing through my body as I stand over him. The sound of Greyson on the phone with the police barely registers and it isn’t until I hear her voice that I finally turn away.

The sight of Lilly staring at me wide-eyed as she relaxes against the building has me forgetting everything else and moving to her. My chest constricts as I see how pale she is, the desire to check her out and make sure she is okay overrides everything else.



“G et your ass moving. I’ve left you alone for a week and I can’t take it anymore.” With one last look at the city across the channel, I sigh as I make my way back inside, making sure to lock the door behind me.

The only reason I’m not over thinking or worrying that Paige must hate me for basically ghosting her, is because she’s my best friend. She knew that a week of solitude was exactly what I needed to cope, that it had nothing to do with her. I didn’t need to explain that my need to be alone, even after moving to a new city, wasn’t because I don’t like being social.

After fifteen years of friendship, we’ve each had a front row seat to all the highs and lows of life. Paige was by my side when my parents went to court for their divorce the first time... as well as the sixth. Just as I had refused to leave her side when her mom got sick and passed away.

Let's not forget that she was also by my side obsessing over the Jonas Brothers, Hannah Montana and, of course, every single Twilight movie release.

Sometimes, I swear Paige knows me better than I know myself, so she knew that this past week was simply one of those times that I had needed to be alone. I needed to process the shit storm that got me here. The fact that she helped me move into this condo and then left me to unpack is a shock of its own. Normally when I'm upset, she leaves me alone for a couple hours before showing up to try coping her way...which means going out to bars or clubs.

Only this time, things are different.

After double checking that the balcony door is locked, I head toward the sound of glasses clinking together. She firmly believes that every night out starts when you're getting ready, which means pre-drinks are always required.

I resign myself to the fact that my week of solitude and sulking is officially over. After hitting shuffle on my post-breakup playlist, I head to the fridge to warm up some leftover chicken and rice for us. Everyone knows not to start drinking on an empty stomach and I'll do anything possible to avoid having a hangover.

As "Thrive" by Cassadee Pope blasts through the Bluetooth speakers in the kitchen, I watch Paige pour more than one shot of tequila into a cup. There's no doubt in my mind that she's mixing that one for me.

"Seriously Lil, this place is fucking amaze-balls. I know how much you hate accepting help from your dad, and you *know* I understand and support your reasons why, but shit babe. I'm kind of glad you did." Even I can't help the small smile that spreads across my face as I glance around my new condo, all courtesy of my father.

For as much as it pained me to dial his number and ask him for help, I'm starting to agree with Paige. The more time I spend down here, the more grateful I become that I pushed my stubbornness aside.

Although I could have done without the fight that broke out between my mom, brothers, and I. Which was simply because I was choosing to move to Florida, and would be close to my dad. After that fight, I decided it was for the best that they didn't know I called my Dad for help. It wasn't worth the headache.

The thought of everything that I'm keeping from my family is enough to wipe the smile off my face. Absent-mindedly, I rub my chest to help alleviate the tightness forming.

This is the first time in my life that my family only knows the bare minimum and half-truths. According to them, I broke up with my boyfriend, Cam, because we wanted different things, and that I moved for a new job.

Which, in my defense, Cam and I *did* want different things. I wanted someone who is committed to me and our relationship. Meanwhile, he wanted someone at home to have his dinner waiting for him while he is out sticking his dick inside anyone who will let him.

Plus, the bit about getting a new job isn't exactly a lie either. I was hired by a publishing house, in a sense, as they are helping me publish the book I'm writing. It's not that I'm ashamed of the story I'm working on, hell, I felt nothing but pride when I sent my first ten chapters to my editor, Sam. There's still a chance that my work doesn't get published, so until I have something to show for it, they don't need to know.

I can't disappoint them if they don't know about it yet.

Lost in my thoughts, I go through the motions of splitting the food into bowls for us.

My mother always claims she is my biggest supporter, and I think this is the first time in my life that she wasn't the first person calling to help me fix a problem. Still, I couldn't seem to bring myself to tell her what Cam did and why I needed to leave. My whole family adores him. The last time my mom and I talked, she kept saying how I was letting go of "one of the good guys" and how I need to really think things through before I lose him for good.

Two days before I moved, she called me crying about how everything was changing because Cam turned down her invitation to family dinner. She hated the feeling of having to cut someone that she cares about out of her life because I don't know "what I want." So, I removed myself from the equation. I told them all, including Cam, not to change their lives or opinions on each other because of me and left without telling any of them what he did.

Mom and the boys were pissed when I told them I was leaving. They each tried to convince me to crash in their guest rooms or on their couch while Cam and I worked things out. As if a few days away would solve the problem. Hell, my mom even told me to send Cam to her house if I needed time away from him.

None of them would be okay with the fact that the main reason I called my dad and accepted his help was because I knew he could help give me the one thing I craved more than anything.

A fresh start.

The only two things he knows about my life is that Paige lives here, and that I have a job.

I don't have to worry about him trying to get me to open up about this mess of a breakup, and I definitely don't have to worry about him trying to convince me that I should take Cam back.

A small smile forms despite my distracted thoughts when I turn and find Paige dancing to the beat while mixing drinks. The tightness in my chest eases a bit as I silently appreciate my best friend before focusing on warming up dinner.

Two years ago, Paige accepted the position as the head of the editorial staff at SweetHearts Publishing Company and moved down to Tampa. My break-up was the motivator she needed to convince me to move down with her and submit my work. She offered her couch, but considering she lives with Sam, the editor who would be taking the lead on my book, I decided against it. That was when she suggested that I call my father.

I originally called to ask if he had any contacts for a decent place to live. Once he got past his initial shock that I was asking for help, he insisted I take the condo. He bought a house outside of Clearwater and forgot about the place.

Mom certainly would not be impressed if she knew that I gave into my dad's offer for a free place to live without much of a fight.

As Paige pours our drinks, I inspect the condo again, wondering if I did the right thing. The place came fully furnished, which I'm grateful for considering the only things I took from Cam's place were my clothes, a couple of pictures, and, of course, my books.

The thought of my little library in one of the guest bedrooms puts another smile on my face. My dad gave me free reign to do whatever I want with the place. If there was anything I didn't want, I just needed to set it aside and he would send someone to clear it. So, in an attempt to stop wallowing and thinking about everything, I rearranged the separate space that sits off the primary bedroom as an office for myself. After realizing how happy having my own workspace made me, I couldn't stop myself from moving on to one of the other bedrooms and turning it into my own personal library.

After I cleared the bed out, I lined two of the walls with bookshelves. They aren't full but that just means I can buy more.

I had texted my dad to let him know what I'd done, and true to his word, someone came around the same day to remove the furniture, leaving a giant, comfy round chair for the library. I'm pretty sure that was the first time he had gifted me something, and it left me feeling a bit off balance.

When I had called Paige to see if I was overthinking the chair, she reminded me that at this point, I'm living in his condo, rent free, while trying to figure my life out. Who the hell am I to turn down a chair that he probably had his assistant pick out anyway?

I shove my spiraling thoughts aside and focus back on Paige, who has yet to tell me exactly what her plans are for tonight.

“Are you going to fill me in on where we’re going?” I question as Paige takes a sip of her drink then rinses out the shaker she used before setting it in the sink. With her back to me, I immediately notice the way her back stiffens.

“Paige...” The fact that she’s hesitating to tell me her plans has a pit forming in my stomach. Sighing loudly, she turns to face me, her blue eyes pleading with me to hear her out.

“Okay, don’t be mad! Everyone at the office will be there and they always talk about how much fun it is and they keep trying to get me to go with them, but I don’t! Cause I would never want to upset you. But today Sam practically begged me to come with them, like he did those damn puppy dog eyes at me!” Paige stomps her foot like a child, causing me to giggle at the fact that Sam won her over so easily. The sound of my laugh pauses her tantrum, and she turns her pleading eyes back to me.

“I totally understand if, for once, you don’t listen to me and decide not to go out. But just know that I have this gut feeling that it would be a blast for both of us, regardless of where we would be.”

“Where the hell are you trying to take me?” The more she pleads her case, the more worried she makes me. She’s never once tried to talk me into going out, she usually just shows up, tells me what to wear and then drags me out the door. Which means wherever Sam convinced her to go tonight is somewhere she thinks would make me uncomfortable. Not many places do that to me.

Paige moves around my kitchen island and clasps her hands on my shoulders, forcing me to face her straight on. Before I can even say anything else, she’s rambling on.

“Lilly, you know our nights out are always a freaking blast, and I’ve never been wrong when following my gut feelings. Well, okay, maybe that time you left me in charge of picking a place to get sushi for movie night. *But* that was one time! This

could honestly be fun, and since you've been kind of talking with your dad, I figured that maybe we could dip our toes in the water and see what all the fuss is about."

The mention of my dad has me backing up a step while giving her a skeptical look.

"What does he have to do with a night out with your co-workers?"

She bites her bottom lip as she squares her shoulders, a stance I know means that she is prepared to do and say whatever it takes to get me to agree.

"We're going to a watch party outside the arena."



"Put those on." Paige demands as she strolls down the small hall into the bathroom. I once again marvel at the size of the condo. The main bedroom on its own is almost the size of my last apartment. There's a small hall that leads to the en-suite bathroom and two walk-in closets.

While I approach the bench in the closet I've taken over, I remind myself to be grateful that she didn't go too overboard with my outfit. I could have picked out the jean shorts and white V-neck shirt that has the Bobcat team logo in the center of the chest.

"I know how to dress myself." I mumble, picking a piece of lint off my arm. We both know that I'm just giving her a hard time. Since that one time we agreed to meet at the club, instead of getting ready together, she's been the one to pick my outfits. She scolded me for *months* because of my outfit choice. Although I still see nothing wrong with the skinny jeans and purple tank top that I wore.

"Lilly please. If I let you pick your outfit you would go wearing that." I frown at my favorite black tank top. I got it from a website that I came across a few months ago. This one

was from my newest order and says, “When I die, delete my kindle history.” I had laughed so hard that I hit purchase without even hesitating.

“What’s wrong with this?” She pauses her swipe of mascara, looking away from her own reflection to glance at me.

“Nothing is wrong with that tank top. Hell, I told you I want one for my birthday. But you can’t wear that to the game, especially considering how intense Bobcat fans are.” I sigh, knowing she’s right, and study the shirt she bought for me, set out with a pair of shorts that she claims makes my ass look like a peach.

“Fine. But you can’t stop me from wearing flip flops.” I stick my tongue out at her when she turns back to finish her make-up.

“Wouldn’t dream of it babe. Now hurry up and finish getting ready, we have to leave in an hour.” I laugh, but head to the bathroom counter to get ready anyway.

Considering we have basically grown up together, it’s no surprise that Paige and I have so much in common. If you compared us by our personalities alone, we could probably convince people that we’re actually related. But when it comes to our appearances, we have almost nothing in common. She has perfectly straight black hair that she complains can’t hold a curl, while I have light brown hair that almost passes for blonde in the sunlight that never seems to stay straight. She could pass for Selena Gomez’s long-lost sister with blue eyes.

Glancing at Paige in the mirror, I can’t seem to hold in the question I’ve been sitting on since she told me what our plans were for the night.

“Are you sure about this?” My voice is quiet, I force my eyes shut and take a deep breath. Her hand clasps around mine, I brace myself before meeting her knowing gaze.

“Hun, for starters, your dad has been a huge help these past few weeks. If I had asked you to go two months ago, you would have called me a fucking psycho for even considering

going to a hockey game. There's clearly some part of you that is ready to move on." I start shaking my head, but she pushes on. "Plus, you're not actually seeing him. Your dad is going to be *inside* the arena, doing his job alongside the team. We'll be outside, even if we hang out after the game wraps up. It's not like anyone that's part of the team leaves via the front doors. They have their own team exits." Pulling away from me and applying her favorite pink lip gloss, she continues.

"Also, let's face it, no one even knows what any of his kids look like because he's kept you all so separate from everything, so you don't have to worry about someone recognizing you. I'm sure about this Lil, we're going to have a night that we will never forget."

I release the breath I have been holding in and let her words sink in. Taking one last glance to make sure my hair is contained in my braid, I square my shoulders and change into the clothes Paige told me too.

"You're right. It's gonna be fun."



“Tell me again why you think it’s a good idea to be here.”
If I had known that Garrett’s plans involved tricking me into coming to this watch party for the first exhibition game, then I wouldn’t have let him through my front door today.

“Dude, you’re signing a contract on Monday and literally just moved here last week. Once you see and experience the ride or die atmosphere that Bobcat fans bring to each game, you’ll see that the trade agreement you’re about to sign is the best thing to happen!”

He grunts as I elbow him hard in the gut, reminding him to shut his trap. Glancing around and noticing that no one heard him helps my shoulders relax, but it doesn’t stop me from shooting the idiot a glare before I turn back to survey the crowd around me. They asked me to keep it hush hush until the Coach had scheduled a press conference and told the team.

Garrett and I met back in elementary school when he moved next door, and the rest was history. He's never played sports, but he has always been my biggest supporter and could probably tell you more about my hockey career than I ever could. He and my sister, Sarah, would come to every practice or game they could throughout high school, and that continued when I scored the full ride to play in college.

Thanks to a connection he had made during our senior year of college, Garrett launched a marketing and publishing company here in Tampa and has been down here for the past three years. I had never thought much about playing for anyone other than the Colorado Cougars, but this past season gave me the push I needed to get out of there. Sarah, Garrett, and my team were what kept me there.

Everything I had planned for my career changed last September thanks to an accident caused by the team captain. The accident that cost my sister her life.

Garrett must see that he is losing my focus and instantly shoves a beer in my hand, dragging me back to where we set up our chairs with an arm thrown over my shoulder. There's a live band playing on a stage, inserting puns about the team, and pumping everyone up for the game. When Garrett leans in to talk, he's not quiet but the speakers blasting the music make it impossible for anyone around us to listen in.

"You're never gonna have the chance to see fans from this side of the arena again. Once they make the announcement everyone is gonna know your face. Take advantage of being unknown and enjoy the night. You're surrounded by hardcore Bobcat fans. Plus, you and I haven't watched a game together in fuckin' years, man." He releases me from his hold as we stop at the chairs that we had spread out to save space for some of his coworkers, but Garrett turns directly toward me, clearly not finished with what he has to say.

"You've had a shit year man. Fuck, dude, before everything with Sarah you were doing the best you've ever done, but everything else..." He pauses, staring down at his feet for a moment before continuing. "When you waived your no-trade clause in your contract you could have been moved anywhere,

but you were picked up by Tampa!” He glances around to make sure no one is listening, but he must spot the co-workers he mentioned were meeting us because he smiles widely and waves. Turning his attention back to me with a happy shine to him that wasn’t there before.

“Life handed you a shit hand. You took some hits and some bits of you got chipped away, but you’re here. You’re alive and ready to start up next season at the top of your game. I have never let you down when it comes to a night out, you’re here for three reasons.”

He holds up his fingers, adding another to the mix as he lists his reasons.

“One, how many professional hockey players have you met that can say they have been to a watch party for their team? None that you know cause you all are always *inside* the arena. Yes, you could have easily gotten us tickets inside, and you know that they would happily place you in some fancy box seats or maybe even by the team, and while those are dope ass seats, there’s nothing like seeing the game from out here, undercover, with your fans.” His tone softens as he continues on.

“Two, you moved down here a week ago and have barely left your condo. Yeah, I know you go to the gym to keep up on workouts, so you don’t struggle when you have to jump right into pre-season practice and games. But we’re twenty-five, finally living in the same city together again and should be socializing with people our age.”

“Which brings me to reason number three.” He throws his arm over my shoulder again to turn me to face a group that I can only assume is his co-workers. Garrett has a stupid smirk on his face that used to drive girls crazy in college as he leans closer to me. Holding up a third finger, he whispers in my ear. “Women.”

I can’t help laughing as he lets me go and begins fumbling around me to help one of the women with the chair she brought.

“Paige! You made it this time!” She smiles brightly up at him as he moves to set her seat up next to his. When we got here thirty minutes ago, he was very specific about how we placed our chairs to save space for everyone else. Paige moves past me to where he is setting her up.

“I told you that I’d make it to one of the games! I even brought a friend with me.” She glances over to me before she focuses back on Garrett. Both of us know what she’s saying, her friend should be sitting next to her. He’s already nodding his head, not letting his smile drop as his attention stays on her.

Dude totally has a crush on her.

“That’s perfect! Dom, can you move down a bit more so we can fit one more chair between us?” I chuckle but turn to do as he asked. Garrett has always been a flirt and is not as innocent as his left dimple lets on, but he’s a romantic through and through. I strongly suspect that ninety percent of his future wedding is planned. He wears his heart on his sleeve, which has scared off a lot of women who aren’t ready for commitment. Yet, he doesn’t let it get him down, he says it’s for the best and he’s perfectly fine waiting until he can find someone who can handle every bit of him.

“I’m going to take a wild guess and say that you’re Lilly, the friend that Paige brings up every single day and somehow even more since your first draft got pushed through to Sam.” Garrett bumps me slightly as he helps set up a second chair between us and the sound of the most adorable giggle has me smiling before I finish turning around.

“Every single day, huh?”

While the other two from Garrett’s office move past us to set up on the other side of him, Lilly stays beside me, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt as she smiles teasingly at her friend.

Her hair is braided back, but a few stray curls are already falling out and framing her slightly freckled, tan face. My sister would be proud of me for being able to tell that she doesn’t have a lot of makeup on, only some of that mascara stuff that makes the green in her hazel eyes pop. The faint

dimples that have appeared as she smiles draws my attention to her lips, the way her bottom one sticks out has me thinking of how it would feel between my teeth. Considering Garrett and I are both just over six feet, it's no surprise that we have height on these girls. Lilly's head would probably sit right at my pecs if I were to hug her.

Paige's laugh draws me away from those thoughts, reminding me to not just stand here staring at her friend.

"Oh hush, like you don't talk about me just as much. Fifteen years of friendship means I can relate almost anything back to you." Paige pulls her straight black hair up into a messy bun as she turns toward me.

"I'm assuming you're the BFF that big guy over here talks about just as much as I talk about Lilly." Laughing, I offer my hand for Paige to shake.

"I'm Dominik, the *big guy's* oldest friend." The smirk of mischief that flashes over her face has me smiling at Garrett. I've known her for less than five minutes and I can already tell that she is exactly his type. Paige is the definition of a spitfire. Garrett glares at me over her head as Paige lets my hand go, laughing as she turns to Lilly.

"Come my little Lil, we need drinks." They go to move past me, but I stop them and glance at Garrett.

"Actually, Gare-bear and I were about to go grab some drinks anyway, what do you both like?"

Sarah had once told me about students on her campus getting roofied, and while it's unlikely for that to happen here, I can't squash the protectiveness that takes root. At least if we get the drinks, I know everyone is safe.

Garrett takes one look at me and nods as he moves to pass Paige and Lilly. He stops in his tracks as Paige throws her head back and laughs.

"Hold up. *Gare-bear!*?" As she loses herself in a fit of laughter, Lilly stands next to her, shaking her head in amusement at her friend's joy. Garrett doesn't even seem to care that I gave Paige a new name to use against him, he's too

busy watching her in clear adoration as she struggles to talk through her laughter.

“How have I never thought of that one?! It’s my new favorite, and I will no longer call you anything else.” He tries to glare at me, but it just causes me to join in on Paige’s laughing fit. Leaning toward Paige, but still watching Garrett, I make sure to raise my voice so he can hear me.

“I’ll fill you in on some of his favorite pet names and his hidden tickle spots later.”

“You two are trouble waiting to happen.” Garrett grumbles while Paige and I beam smiles at him in response.

“You have no one to blame but yourself. You dragged me here.” I sass back, earning a laugh from Lilly.

“Good to know I’m not the only one with a best friend who drags me places!” She exclaims.

“The things we do for our friends.” I say dramatically.

“We’re either the biggest push-overs ever or just suckers for pretty smiles.” Lilly shakes her head, a wide grin spreading across her face.

“Aw, dude, do you think I have a pretty smile?” Garrett bats his eyes and grins at me, causing me to roll my eyes and sigh as I turn toward Lilly.

“That’s going to go straight to his oversized ego.” My heart skips a beat as she laughs. The sound of her joy and the perfect smile on her face has me wanting to give her reasons to do both again.

Clearing my throat as that thought crosses through my mind, I nod back to Garrett and position myself to step away.

“So, what can we get you ladies to drink?”



“Damn it, this isn’t good.” Lilly turns to me with a raised eyebrow and amusement shining back at me as she questions my remark.

“The home team being up two to zero at the start of the final period isn’t good?” I chuckle.

“No, that’s fucking amazing. The team is killing. What isn’t good is that I’m going to have to tell Garrett that he was right.” I groan at the thought while Lilly giggles next to me.

“And what was he right about?”

“That I would have fun if I came tonight.” She glances at Paige, who is leaning over Garrett to talk to their coworkers. Either Lilly doesn’t notice the ridiculous smile that Garrett keeps fixed on her friend, or she’s choosing to keep her mouth shut about it.

When she looks back at me, she has a small, genuine smile on her face.

“If that’s the case then we’re both shit out of luck, and I’ll have to tell Paige she was right too.” She leans in and even though we’re surrounded by a bunch of people, the scent of coconut and something else hits my nose. “Maybe we just... don’t admit it to them? Let them think that it’s only been an okay night out?”

She bats her perfect lashes at me as she sticks out her bottom lip just a bit in a pout. With a face like that she could ask for my wallet, and I would hand it over without hesitating. That thought is immediately followed by curiosity about what her lips would taste like. She probably tastes like the sweet seltzer she’s been drinking all night.

Much to my earlier protests, I’m glad Garrett dragged me here. The set-up that the team has outside of the building is so much more than I would have anticipated.

There are booths set up along the sides that are selling food and drinks. The face painting stand is set up to the left with a long line of eager fans next to one of the photo backdrops. Multiple oversized screens are set up strategically, so that no matter where you are, you can see the game in all its glory.

The main screen that we all face is projected onto the side of the parking garage.

We're sitting in a long row, since I was too distracted by Paige and Lilly's arrival, I missed out on who the other two people are that sit to the left of Garrett. They did introduce themselves, but the band was playing, and the speakers drowned them out.

Once the game started it was easier to talk to the girls, but Paige is now distracted by Garrett and their coworkers, leaving Lilly and me to entertain ourselves, which I am perfectly okay with. Her laugh and smile are both contagious and addicting.

We nursed our first drink during the first two periods and the second period ending gives me the perfect opening to get up and stretch.

"Wanna go grab another drink? Or are you the lucky driver tonight?" I motion to her empty can. A smile spreads across her face as she tilts her head toward me.

"We didn't drive, my place is only a ten-minute walk."

"Same, which is why it was impossible to talk Garrett out of dragging me here tonight."

"Paige was the same way!" She leans over to talk to Paige before standing up and turning to me with an outstretched hand.

"Let's go get that drink!" Laughing at her enthusiasm, I reach for her hand. Not because I need help getting up. Simply because she offered it to me, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't curious about how her hand would feel against mine.

Spoiler alert: it's soft and small yet fits perfectly in mine.

After standing and reluctantly letting go of her hand, I motion for her to step ahead of me, letting her lead us to one of the beer stands. Not taking my eyes off the cans the guy is opening, I reach for my wallet and hand him my card as he passes Lilly her drink. As he swipes my card, she turns to me with the most adorable scowl.

“I was going to buy this round! You and Garrett got the last one.” I shake my head, a smile pulling at my lips as I hand her a second drink for Paige. Blushing, she lightly bumps into me with her shoulder.

“Even though I should have gotten this round, thank you.”

We get back to our chairs, it's then that I learn one guy, named Sam, shares an apartment with Paige. Based on the scowl that forms on his face, this is news to Garrett. The guy practically sweats romance. So, the fact that he clearly has a crush on Paige but is holding himself back has me wondering what's going on between them.

As Lilly passes one of the drinks to her friend, I overhear Sam trying to get Paige to walk home with him, claiming he doesn't like the idea of her walking home from Lilly's alone at night. The thought of Lilly leaving so soon had me ready to offer to walk her home myself, but before I could even think to say anything, Garrett offers to walk her home himself if she wants to stay.

Lilly stays silent while a blushing Paige agrees to stay. Based on the contemplative expression that Lilly has on, she's finally realizing that Garrett has a crush on her friend. I'm so lost in watching her that it completely throws me off when she turns her wary expression on me. She leans in so only I can hear.

“Just so you know, if he hurts her in any way, I won't hesitate to hurt him back.” She scowls up at me. It takes all of my self-control to not laugh at her. She's being serious, so I highly doubt that telling her how adorable she is would be the right thing to say.

As our friends watch the game, talking amongst themselves, I lean closer to Lilly, so I don't have to shout.

“Not that he ever would, my Gare-bear doesn't have a mean bone in his body, but *if* he does, I'll help you.”

She turns her full attention to me, I'm aware the third period is starting, but she holds me captive. The smile on her face as she looks at me catches my breath for a moment.

“*Your* Gare-bear. Well, aren’t you two just the most adorable couple. Does he have a cute pet-name for you as well?” Garrett laughs from behind her and answers for me.

“The day someone gives my Dominator some cute pet name, is the day that I go skinny dipping in the ocean.” The dumbass smirks at me before blowing a dramatic kiss my way. “I’m the cute one, he’s the serious one.”

Lilly’s adorable giggle pulls my attention back to her as my heart skips another beat. Everything she does has my focus constantly shifting back to her.

It’s been over nine months since I was last with a woman. There’s a group of people who refer to themselves as puck bunnies, who will do anything just to get noticed by a hockey player. Literally, they have no shame when it comes to getting a player’s attention. The biggest problem with dating one though? They’re not into the whole committing to one player at a time thing. While some players don’t seem to mind sharing women, I’m not one of them.

So, when I walked into the locker room to one of my teammate’s balls deep in the chick that I’d been seeing for a couple weeks, who had sworn she wasn’t that into hockey and clearly lied about being a bunny, I ended it and told myself that I was done with dating for a while.

One month later, Sarah had her accident.

Since then, I hadn’t even thought twice about women. This intense attraction to Lilly simply has to be my body catching up to the fact that it’s been so long.

My gaze is drawn to the blush spreading across her cheeks. The way she bites her bottom lip as she watches me with hooded eyes makes it hard to think of anything else as I, again, find myself wondering what her lips would taste and feel like.

“Dominator?” She’s clearly amused, so I shoot her a wink and a smirk that usually works well with making women swoon.

“Only nickname that rings true on all fronts of my life.”

Instead of swooning like I had expected, Lilly turns so her whole body is angled my way and laughs. It's not just one of those flirty, cute, and innocent giggles. Instead, it is a full body laugh, one that is nothing but pure joy and happiness. An uncontrollable smile spreads across my face in response.

“Does that line work on all the ladies?”

“In order for him to know the answer, Dom would have to actually socialize with the opposite sex.”

Two things stop me from turning to glare at Garrett.

First, a squeal from Paige has all of us spinning toward her. She's looking up at the sky but instantly scrambles and grabs all our phones from our hands or chair. Throwing them all in her purse before she zips it shut, covers it with her sweater, and shoves it under her chair. I'm about to ask her what that was for when I feel a drop of water hit my arm. I almost expect the two of them to be getting ready to run for cover, but instead, I find that they're both giggling and smiling at each other.

Just as the clouds above open up, drenching everyone here, the horns start blaring. Turning to look at the screen through the sudden downpour of rain, I catch the replay of two Bobcat players passing the puck back and forth before number seventeen shoots, scoring the team's third goal.

The rain seems to have hyped everyone here up even more as cheers and hollers surround us. The energy is contagious, even though my clothes are now fully soaked, I smile and cheer along. The team is killing it tonight, and they still have ten more minutes left in the final period.

The cheering increases as music starts to play, the bass pounding, increasing in tempo. I'm so caught up in the thrill of it that I join in and laugh as Garrett grabs my hand. Next thing I know I'm matching his idiotic dance moves in the rain, but it's not the music that has me playing along with his ridiculous antics. As Garrett dramatically shimmies his chest in my direction the sound of Lilly's laughter echoing in my mind is what encourages me to play along.

A couple minutes later with the rain still pouring down on us, we're all back standing in front of our chairs smiling. I honestly can't remember the last time that I smiled or laughed this much.

Lilly's shirt clings to her skin, showing off her perfect curves even more. It takes all my self-control to not let my eyes trail down the rest of her body. Most women that I have come across would be screaming and crying about being caught in the rain, but these two next to me seem to be on cloud nine.

Lilly hands my beer to me, apparently while I was caught up in making her laugh, she had enough logic to grab both our drinks and stop the rain from getting in.

"Better finish this before the rain makes it even more watery."

Our fingers brush as I reach to take my drink back, not really caring at all if the rain ruins it. My eyes snag on the strand of wet hair that has come loose and clings to her cheek, I gently tuck it behind her ear. I'm too caught up in her closeness, in the way her wet skin feels against my hand, to back away.

There's a distant voice in my head screaming to stop, but watching my fingers trail the side of her neck overrides it. The shadows from the rain clouds and the blue lights that are dancing across her face do nothing to hide the flush on Lilly's cheeks and neck.

I lean forward to set my beer in the cup holder and she leans into my touch, her chest pressing into mine as I stand straight. With my other hand now free, I watch her closely, checking for any signs that she wants me to stop. I wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her flush against me. Her gaze settles on my lips as her hand that still has her drink in it presses against my hip, while the other comes up to settle on my chest. There is no doubt that she can feel my heart racing beneath her palm. I wait until she's finally looking at me and raise an eyebrow waiting for her to answer my silent question.

Do you want me to kiss you?

Her eyes darken with desire as she nods her head. I watch her for a moment, making sure she won't want to change her mind. Clearly growing impatient, her hand moves from my chest to tangle in my hair at the nape of my neck as she lightly pulls me toward her.

The blaring horns, people cheering, and the music blasting all paled in comparison as I crush my lips to hers. At this moment, with the horn echoing through the air to signal the final goal, all I know is that one kiss is not enough. It should scare me how much I want her, but all I feel is invigorated and desperate for more as she presses into me.

With the rain beating down and the fans cheering all around us, I'm in my own world with only one thought on my mind as I hold Lilly impossibly close to me.

I need more of her.



Everything I knew about kissing was a lie. Back when I started dating Cam during my Freshman year of college, he told me that kissing or making out was something best left to movies or books. Literally, on our second date the guy went on for ten minutes about how girls want fireworks and all this fictional shit from the exchanging of saliva.

When put like that to an eighteen-year-old with a crush who wants to impress the new guy she's seeing... there's no surprise that I didn't think twice about kissing much afterwards.

I hadn't realized that, outside of a kiss on the cheek or a peck on the lips, I've never truly been kissed.

Until now.

Everything I had let myself believe for the past five years was complete and utter bullshit. Kissing Dom is literally like

fireworks and all that other fictional shit.

Hell, just remembering the way he looked at me as he tucked a strand of my wet hair behind my ear and waited until I gave permission for him to kiss me, made me feel more than anything Cam ever did. If all he did was hold me like this, the smile on his face would have almost been worth it.

Almost.

Dom leaves no space between us, his arm wrapped around my waist, holding me to him. His other hand slides down the side of my neck as he tilts my head back. When he runs his tongue along my bottom lip, there's no stopping the small moan that escapes. Without missing a beat, his tongue sweeps in, effectively wiping away all thoughts except for one.

This man's lips are made for kissing, and I want more.

I need more.

I've lost track of time, but slowly, the sound of everyone cheering around us begins to register in my mind. Do all kisses make you forget everything and everyone around you? Or is it just Dom's kisses?

I pull back, opening my eyes while I try to steady my breathing and rapid heart rate. Even soaked from the rain, he seems so calm and steady. If anything, the rain makes him even more attractive. His black hair is starting to slightly curl and fall out of place, it's not long, but it's enough to run your fingers through. Water drips from his hair and runs along his cheekbones, getting lost in his perfectly trimmed beard.

Dark blue eyes twinkle as he watches me with a picture-perfect smile spread across his face. He's watching me as if kissing me was the best decision he's made in a while.

And now I'm overthinking the way he is looking at me.

Needing to break the intense feeling of his gaze, I finally turn away and immediately find Paige. Which is something I regret instantly.

Paige has one hand clutching Garretts bicep as she gawks at us. Literally, her jaw is wide open as she stares at me and

Dom. The only thing stopping me from turning the shade of a tomato, is that Garrett is too caught up in watching Paige instead of us.

I glance back at Dom, flashing a sheepish smile before finally stepping out from his arms with the hope that doing so will clear the fog his kiss has left me in.

Fun fact: It doesn't.

My whole body is still very much aware of how it feels to be pressed against him.

I glance toward Paige again with wide eyes. She doesn't need to say anything for me to know I look slightly crazed and completely unsure about what just happened. Clearing my throat, I decide the best thing to do is to act like I'm not questioning everything I've been led to believe about kissing and intimacy.

It's just a kiss. One that I'm overthinking simply because he is the first man to kiss me since the breakup.

He's also the first person to ever kiss you like that.

No. It was just the heat of the moment caused by the excitement from the team winning and the fans cheering.

There is no way it meant anything more to him.

Needing to break the building tension from the fact that Paige and Dom are both watching my every move, I put on what I hope to be a brave facade and scan the crowd around us. At some point during our kiss, the rain stopped. People pour out from the arena, cheering and celebrating the team winning as they add to the slightly overwhelming mass of people lingering out front.

"Soooo...was that it for plans for the night? Do we go get drinks or do I get to head home and trade my soaked clothes for comfy sweats?" I choose to ignore the cough that Dom lets out in an attempt to cover his snicker.

Paige blinks a few times, gaping at me as if *she* was the one who just had the earth-shattering kiss and doesn't know how to move forward. Removing her grip from poor Garrett's arm,

no doubt leaving the imprint of her nails behind. She smiles brightly and shakes her head.

“Nope. Wet clothes will not be the excuse you use to crawl back into your hole.”

I pout while glancing down at my wet shirt, the white now turned see through, revealing glimpses of my lacey light blue bra beneath.

“Well excuse me for thinking you would want me to be comfortable.” I grumble.

She smirks as she glances at Dom, who I’m all too aware of as he stands behind me, before looking back at me with trouble dancing in her eyes.

“I’d say you’re more than comfortable.” She turns on her heel to face Garrett, effectively dismissing my question about going home. Not that I mind staying out later, I wouldn’t have gone out with Paige if I was expecting to be in bed before midnight.

“Do you guys want to grab a drink with us?”

Garrett glances at Dom before looking back to Paige with a wide smile.

“Count us in. Where did you have in mind?”

“There was a bar we passed on our way here that I wanted to try out...” I roll my eyes with a smile as I leave Paige to make the plans. Not that I will admit it out loud, but she was right. Tonight is exactly what I needed to get me out of moping around my condo and feeling sorry for myself.

Turning to pack up my chair, I try to ignore the weight of Dom’s stare on my back. I’m not ready to face him, what am I supposed to say? Am I even supposed to say anything? I’ve never been in this position before. Is there a proper way to handle kissing someone you just met?

I might not know much, but I do know that asking twenty questions about if that kiss meant anything or not would be a sure-fire way to scare him off. No, I saw enough guys in

college complaining over clingy girls. It's best to just act like it didn't happen.

Hoisting the strap of my chair bag onto my shoulder, I risk a glance toward Dom, I'm caught off guard by the intensity in his eyes as he watches me. His gaze doesn't waiver as I catch him staring. Instead, he flashes me a wide, confident grin that has me thinking he wants more of that kiss.

Don't be ridiculous. It was just a kiss. You're projecting your own emotions into one look from an attractive man.

Dom's smile falls slightly as he raises a brow, the question shining in his expression has me feeling as if he heard my inner monologue and doesn't quite agree.

Stop fucking projecting Lilly.

I smile brightly back at Dom, hoping to portray a look that says, "what just happened is totally normal" and turn back to link arms with Paige. Another drink is exactly what I need. The two seltzers I had throughout the game were enough to maintain the buzz, but it definitely was not enough to blame kissing a stranger on the alcohol.

"Enough talking, Paige, either lead the way to more drinks or else I'm taking charge and we will end up back at my place in sweatpants with pizza and my drink of choice." I wink at her as she groans.

"No. Just no. You're the only person I know who could drink tequila like it's fucking water. We're getting at least one proper drink, made by a bartender, before I allow you to go crawling back to your one true love." She meets Dom with a straight glare. "I swear she will never love anyone, including me, more than she loves tequila."

I shrug my shoulders and smile innocently at them both. "What can I say, I don't sleep alone when Patron is takin' me home."

It shocks the hell out of me when Dom is the one who responds.

"No one loves like tequila does." His eyes dance with mirth as he watches me.

“Oh god. There’s two of them.” Garrett gasps as he turns to Paige with a horrified expression on his face. “What did we do?”

I don’t hear what Paige responds with, I’m too busy smiling up at Dom.

“You like Miranda Lambert?” His smile falls slightly, turning almost sad.

“My sister used to love blasting her music in the mornings when she got ready for school, some of the songs have apparently stuck with me.”

“Your sister has good taste in music.” His smile falls completely as he clears his throat and finally looks away.

“Yeah.” Dom shakes his head, almost like he’s trying to shake away his thoughts before he turns back and reaches to take the chair from my shoulder.

“Who’s leading the way?” He speaks loud enough for everyone to hear, causing Paige to throw her hand up and take off, expecting us to follow.



Two hours later, after we finish our first round of drinks and my clothes have finally dried from the rain, I notice the dart board machines at the back of the bar. Excitement takes over as I turn to Paige, barely restraining myself as I wait for her to finish her conversation with Garrett. Dominik chuckles next to me, causing me to whip around and face him instead.

“What’s got you all excited?”

“That!” I grab his shoulder, turning him as I point to the dart boards. Between my love for darts and the alcohol coursing through me, the excitement has definitely turned up a couple notches more than normal. Dominik turns back to me, one

eyebrow raised in a silent question. I don't even think twice as I grab his hand and drag him along with me as I explain.

"Paige and I used to destroy everyone in college on dart nights." I shoot an innocent smile up at him as I stop next to a small, high-top table that sits in front of the dart boards.

He smirks at me, tugging my hand to pull me close, using his free hand to play with the ends of my braid before moving it off my shoulder.

"So, you wanna play?" I'm nodding before he finishes his question, still smiling up at him as I hear Paige squeal loudly from across the bar. I don't have to look to know that she is bee-lining her way over.

"Only if you and Gare-Bear think you can handle being beaten by us."

Dominik chuckles as he leans forward to whisper in my ear.

"I could handle anything you throw at me." The hair on my neck rises and a shiver courses through my body as he slowly pulls away. Clearing my throat, I turn to watch Paige make her way over as I take a moment to calm my racing heart. Having finished my third drink of the night a few moments ago, I decide that my next drink should definitely be water. Not because I'm drunk, but because this man is making every inch of my body heat up in ways I never thought possible and adding more alcohol won't help.

Paige crashes into my side, linking her arm with mine as she jumps up and down.

"Garrett is getting some change so we can play." I laugh, glancing over to Garrett as the bartender slides him some change.

"Does the poor guy know he's about to have his ass handed to him?" Paige grins back at me as she bounces on her toes.

"Nope!"

Garrett comes up behind us and passes Dominik a couple dollar bills and says he'll be right back.

“So, are we playing guys versus girls, or should we couple up?” Garrett questions when he returns with a couple glasses of water.

“It’s you and me Gare-Bear. Apparently, these girls know how to bring the heat.” Dominik’s heated gaze trails over me, not even trying to hide the fact that he is checking me out. My cheeks flush, but instead of looking away, I wait for him to finish checking me out and meet his heavy gaze. I don’t give myself a moment to think anything through as I pull my arm from Paige and take a step toward Dominik.

“I should warn you... I won’t hold back.” The smile he gives me has my heart rate spiking as he takes a backward step toward the dart board.

“I wouldn’t want you to, Sunshine.”

“We’ll see if you’re still saying that after the first round.”

As predicted, we beat the guys without even breaking a sweat. Before we start the next game, Paige decides she needs another drink, grabbing Garrett by the hand to drag him along with her. Shooting me a devilish smile and a wink before turning and shouting over her shoulder.

“You two can play a round against each other while we grab drinks.”

Knowing Paige, she’s going to take her sweet time at the bar and keep Garrett distracted. Rolling my eyes, I turn back toward Dominik who is already watching me. With his full attention on me, I fight the urge to look away and motion to the machine.

“Well?” Dom lets out a low laugh and steps toward me, forcing me to tilt my head back to keep my eyes on him.

“Think you can beat me without your other half by your side?” I cross my arms over my chest, not missing the way his gaze shoots to the exposed skin. Smirking, I quirk an eyebrow.

“Is that a challenge?” His chuckle is enough to have me tightening my thighs. Is it normal to get turned on by a freaking laugh?

“If you want it to be. A challenge would mean that the winner gets something at the end of the game.” My heart stutters. At this point, I’m just accepting the fact that I have a permanent blush on my face from this man. Sucking in a breath, without letting myself think twice, I nod.

“Deal.” After putting a couple bills into the machine and grabbing the darts, Dominik turns back with a smile.

“Ladies first.” I reach out to take the darts from him but before I can grab them, he gently closes his hand around mine. With the darts pressed lightly between our palms, I swallow my nerves and take a step forward, closing the small gap between us.

“And what are the prizes?” My voice sounds a bit breathy and so unlike *me*, but I ignore it as I hold his gaze. His eyes take in every inch of my face as he thinks it over. The careful consideration he’s putting into this throws me off, considering I had been expecting a quick and dirty response.

“If I win, I get to take you to dinner tomorrow.” I can only blink in response. *I wasn’t expecting that.* I nod slowly, watching him closely.

“Dinner?” He only nods in response, his eyes shining with amusement.

“Okay then... *if* you win this round, we can go to dinner tomorrow.”

“And if you win...”

“If I win...” I pause, unsure of what to say. I glance over at Paige, who is leaning against the bar turned toward Garrett but watching me. She smiles when she catches me looking at her and I find myself wondering what Paige would say.

“If I win, I get your number.” He lets out a surprised laugh but agrees by gently squeezing my hand before letting go and stepping back. Leaning an elbow against the table, he waves a hand for me to start.

Eventually, we both stop staying out of each other’s way. I notice that his touches start lingering when he passes the darts to me after each move. When he went to move past me a

couple of times, I would turn slightly so that his toned arms brush against my chest. It's silly, and something that I would have done with a high school crush. Last week I had convinced myself that because I had gone so long in my last relationship without craving physical touch, that I would be perfectly fine on my own.

Yet now, I'm aching for a ridiculously hot man to *graze* against me.

Dominik finishes his next turn and stalks up to me with the darts in his hand. He's been doing better without Paige and Garret on our team and manages to keep up with me. We chose a basic round of who gets to zero first, and if I concentrate now, I could beat him in this turn.

I step up to the small, faded tape line on the floor, only this time, Dominik doesn't return to the bartop table. Instead, he stays close enough that all I can focus on is the warmth radiating off him. I suck in a deep breath, attempting to ignore his presence as I pull my hand back to release the dart, Dominik closes the distance between us by stepping up behind me.

His touch is light as he sweeps my braid out of his way, causing goosebumps to break out along the skin he touches. My breath hitches as he leans forward to place a kiss on the side of my neck. Try as I might to keep my attention on the dart board, when he places another kiss on the crook between my neck and shoulder, I can't stop from tilting my head to give him more access. His hands wrap around my sides, one gripping onto my waist and holding me to him, while the other moves to spread out on my side, his deft fingers teasing along the bottom of my bra.

"Are you trying to distract me?" My voice comes out breathier than I had intended, but I'm too busy trying to keep what's left of my attention on the machine. Dominik chuckles as he presses himself into me, not even trying to hide the fact that he is very clearly turned on. My own desire surprises me as it pulses through me. He trails his nose along my shoulder and up my neck, stopping to nip my ear lobe before answering.

“Maybe I just couldn’t resist not touching you any longer.” I suck in a deep breath, focusing on the board and not letting myself overthink anything else as I release my first dart. The low curse he lets out when he pulls back to check out my shot causes me to laugh. Before he can try anything else, I’m releasing my next dart and hitting my mark. I just need to hit a three to win.

When I lift the dart up though, Dominik moves his hand to the small amount of exposed skin on my waist and traces the path along the top of my shorts. He runs his fingers along the front of my waist until he gets to the button before moving them in a trail back to my hip. Kissing behind my ear once more before he whispers in a hoarse voice.

“Or maybe I’m just hoping you’ll somehow miss this last shot just so I can take you to dinner and give me a chance to kiss you again.”

“So, if I win, you aren’t going to kiss me again?”

“I would kiss you again in a heartbeat if you asked.” I reach my free hand to tangle with his other hand that’s still resting on my ribs. Looking back at the dart board, I weigh my options. On one hand, I’m intrigued at the idea of dinner. However, on the other hand, it’s past midnight and ending this game would wrap up the night.

I don’t want this night to end. With that, a thought runs through my mind. I glance at him over my shoulder.

“I want to change my prize.”

“To what?” Bracing myself for rejection, I decide to push forward.

“If I win, we leave the bar and go to my place.”

“Deal.” He doesn’t step away, but he does move his hand back to rest on my hip and gives me the chance to actually focus.

I turn my attention back to the dart board, not dropping my free hand from where it rests on top of his, I let the dart go flying. He drops his head into the crook of my neck and groans.

“That is insanely sexy.”

“Paige and I were in a dart league back home, so we got really good.” I shrug lightly, as I lean back into his hold. Dominik huffs out a laugh.

“Dart League?” I turn to face him, forcing him to rest both hands on my hips. Placing my palms on his chest as I tilt my head back to meet his gaze. Seeing as how I’m just shy of five foot four, he towers over me. He is trying his hardest to hold back his laugh.

“Yes. A Dart League!” I give him a dramatic sigh. “Paige and I usually went to this bar, which was only a five-minute walk from our college campus up in Vermont, they had this offer for half off beer on Thursday nights, *but* you had to play darts. So, we jokingly signed up for dart night and ended up being a good team.” I beamed up at him as he slowly shakes his head with a small smirk on his face.

“I don’t know why I’m not more surprised by that.” His hands move from my hips, sliding back until they’re resting just above my ass.

“I won.” Biting the side of my lip, I watch him closely as his gaze drops to my lips.

“You did.” One of his hand’s snakes up, gently pulling my lip free and running his thumb along it before meeting my gaze again. His heated gaze is enough to have me squeezing my legs together, which is also something he doesn’t miss.

“We should check on Paige and Garrett before we go.” He nods but doesn’t let me go yet as he watches me closely before speaking up.

“Which prize do you want? My number or...” He trails off. Warmth spreads through my chest at the fact that he is offering me a chance to change my mind. Moving my hands to the top of his shoulders and pushing up onto my tiptoes, I lean into him until my mouth is only a couple inches away from his.

“If *you* want to, I would like my second prize.” He’s nodding before I even finish my sentence.

“What I want is to give you both prizes.” With that I don’t even think it through, I just kiss him. I had been wondering if kissing him again would be different. Would there be fireworks and everything else I had felt before?

The moment our lips touch, he takes over. His hand wraps around to the back of my neck, making me forget everything around us. He traces his tongue along my bottom lip, begging for entrance. Which I give him and don’t even fight the moan his tongue draws as he dives in.

The way his mouth moves against mine has me wondering what it would feel like if his mouth moved lower.

I break away, gasping to catch my breath as he continues to hold me to him while kissing along my jaw and down the side of my neck. He plants a gentle kiss on my lips one last time before pulling his head back to look at me. Swallowing deeply, I tilt my head toward the door.

Yeah... still fireworks.

“Should we tell the two creepers at the bar that we’re leaving, or do you wanna try your hand at another round of darts?” He shakes his head, gaze dipping down to my lips before he answers.

“I definitely don’t need to lose again tonight. Lead the way.” He kisses me once more before stepping back and taking my hand.

We find Garrett and Paige easily, my prediction of them being creepers at the bar was spot on. Paige watches me with trouble dancing in her eyes. Before I get a chance to say anything, she steps to the side with a wink.

Sitting on the bar behind her is four shots. I laugh, already knowing that ending a good night out with shots is one of her unbreakable musts.

She hands me one, then turns to offer one to Garrett and Dominik. The tiny glasses filled with the lemon drop makes me laugh as Paige turns to pick hers up while filling them in.

“If a night out is good, we end it on a fruity shot for good luck.”

“And if it wasn’t a good night?” Garrett questions her with a smile to which she wrinkles her nose.

“Fireball. That shits gross, so it matches the theme of crap.”

The guys laugh at that, and Dominik keeps his eyes on me while we all clink our glasses. His hungry gaze mixed with the tartness and alcohol, which is way more than a normal lemon drop shot should have, heats me to my core. Wiping a small drop from my chin, I clear my throat and turn to Paige. She’s already nodding her head, ready to burst with pure joy as she pulls me in for a hug.

“I’m heading out too. Garrett was just offering to walk me home, since we actually have some work to do tomorrow morning.” She states loud enough for both guys to hear before whispering in my ear. “Are you about to do what I think you’re gonna do?”

I pull back slightly, needing to see if she thinks this is a stupid idea. Giving a small nod and a smile I can’t control, as I respond in a low voice.

“We are going back to my place.” Paige does a small wiggle of excitement as she turns to grab her bag. She pulls out a piece of gum and a small foil packet. My eyes bulge as I meet her gaze.

“Don’t wanna risk him not having one.” She glances over at Dominik, who has his back to us as he talks to Garrett. “On second thought, here, take a couple.”

I nearly choke as she pulls out four more condoms and quickly hands them to me. Clearing her throat, she winks and says loud enough for them to hear this time.

“I expect a text when you get home safe. Now go while I close our tab.”

I turn while shaking my head and say goodbye to Garrett before catching Dominik’s gaze. I’m not surprised to find that he’s already watching me, his eyes darkened with desire. My breath stutters as heat floods my body.

When I move to pass Dominik, he matches my pace and settles a hand on my lower back. As I lead us toward my

apartment, I can't help but wonder if this is the right thing?

We are both clearly attracted to each other.

Hell, for over four fucking years I was convinced I was broken for never wanting to have sex with Cam. Last year, I thought that we weren't meant to be together, but immediately told myself that I had to stay with him. He acted like he loved me, so who else would put up with me being damaged?

Then Dominik comes along and is causing me to feel all warm and tingly just by simply kissing me. There is a huge part of me that needs to see how far this feeling goes. I've only ever had sex with Cam.

Maybe *that* was the problem.

Neither one of us speaks for the first couple minutes, which is perfectly fine as I internally hype myself up. By the time we're approaching the last street before turning the corner to my building, I pause to take his appearance in again.

Thanks to the khaki shorts he's wearing, it's easy to admire the muscles on his calves and wonder if his thighs are equally mouthwatering. His navy short sleeve shirt hugs all his muscles perfectly as it clings to his arms. Dominik works out, and not in the "I go to the gym and post a picture then leave fifteen minutes later" way.

Dominik takes a couple steps before he notices I stopped, and when he turns around to meet my gaze, every inch of me is ready for where things are heading. Pushing away any more comparisons or lingering doubts, I close the distance between us. Once I'm in front of him, I reach up to wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him. Without hesitation, he leans down and wraps me in his arms. As his tongue clashes with mine, I don't even have time to be embarrassed about the moan that escapes my lips. All my thoughts disappear and focus on the feel of his body pressed against mine.

I break the kiss to murmur that my apartment is around the corner, then he's on me again. He starts stumbling a couple steps, and after a minute, with a laugh, I pull away, straightening myself before taking his hand. He doesn't give

me space as we start walking again. Planting kisses on my shoulder and jaw as he fumbles behind me, causing me to wonder if he's even paid any attention to where we're walking.

Once we're through my building's front door though, my own restraint slips. I turn around and I'm instantly met with his mouth on mine, as if he knew exactly what I wanted. We stumble backwards as I half drag him toward the elevator to push the button. Dominik pushes me against the wall as we wait, kissing me until I almost miss the ding. Breaking away while slightly gasping to catch my breath, I move into the elevator, except he doesn't let me go.

Instead, he leans down, wrapping his hands under my ass before lifting me up. Without hesitation, my legs lock around his waist and I'm kissing him again. When he steps into the elevator, the doors instantly shut behind him, and I break away to quickly press my floor number. Dominik takes the opportunity to kiss along my neck some more until I'm left squirming and grinding against him. His cock presses against my center, and while some part of me wonders if I should be embarrassed, all I can focus on is wondering how his impressive length would feel inside me. Using the elevator wall for support, I grind myself against him and don't even try to muffle my moan.

The doors open and Dominik turns with me in his arms, heading down the hall blindly as he kisses me senseless.

"Third door on the right." I barely break the kiss to murmur against his lips. He squeezes my ass in response, but still doesn't pull away until he is pushing me against my door. I don't know how much time passes, but I break away with a gasp and let my legs finally untangle from his waist. Every inch of my body is hyper aware of him as he sets me down, hands sliding up my shirt and resting on my sides. His thumbs trace along my ribs as he leans down to kiss me again, only to miss when I turn in his hold. Not missing a beat, he slides his hand up to move my braid over my shoulder, and starts ravishing my neck.

I've never been more thankful for the fact that the door unlocks with a six-digit code so that I don't have to fumble for

a key. Once my door is open, Dominik wastes no time following me inside, shutting and locking it behind him. Throwing my small wallet and phone on the entrance table, I turn back to him.

We both just stare at each other, his eyes tracing over every inch of me as he licks his lips. When he meets my gaze again, there's nothing but pure desire written across his features, he clears his throat and breaks the silence.

"I want to make something clear." He speaks just as I take a single step toward him.

"And what would that be?" My voice is barely above a whisper.

"If what you want is to watch some shows and chat, maybe make out a bit more, I'm on board with that." My heart stutters at him, yet again, putting my comfort level first.

"And what if I had something else in mind?"

Taking in a deep breath and holding his stare, I walk toward him. Reaching for the hem of my shirt and pulling it off. As I drop it to the floor, I hold his stare. Nerves and excitement bubble through me as he finally moves toward me. Only when he's arm's length away does he stop.

"What do you want?"

My face heats as I meet his stare, wanting nothing more than for him to just take charge. I've never been good with dirty talk or even being touched in general. Yet the idea of Dominik having his way with my body has me pressing my thighs together, needing relief, but more so needing him to just touch me.

I open my mouth to say that, only no words actually come out. He must see the struggle on my face because he takes a small step forward, brushing his knuckle along my cheek. His eyes darken as he words everything I can't seem too.

"Do you want me to close the distance between us and peel off what remains of your clothes?" He peers down at me with darkened eyes. "Do you want me to pick you up, find your

bedroom and fuck you like I've been thinking about since the moment you let me kiss you at the game."

I'm nodding my head before he even finishes speaking, but he doesn't move.

"Words, Sunshine. Yes or no."

"Yes."



*Y*es. What little restraint I had been hanging onto snaps the second the approval leaves her mouth. Wrapping my arms around her waist, I pull her flush against me. Her smooth skin beneath my fingertips has me groaning. Using one hand to grip a handful of her ass and hold her to me, we stumble further into her place while still tangled together. Breaking our kiss, I pull back just enough to free her of the damn contraption that hides her chest from me. I've never been more grateful for that time when Garrett and I practiced unhooking bras back in high school. Otherwise, I would be ripping her bra and buying a new one.

If I wasn't already turned on, the sight of her exposed breasts would have gotten me there instantly. Her chest heaves between us, drawing my gaze to her hard nipples that are begging to be between my teeth. Lilly runs her tongue along her lips as she watches me. Before I even fully make the

decision, I'm tracing a hand up her spine while pulling her back into me again. She sucks in a deep breath as her eyes dance with anticipation.

The look on her face makes me grateful that I spelled out exactly what I wanted to do with her, because when I lean down to claim her lips again, I'm lost in her.

From the moment her lips touched mine at the game, nothing else mattered except for kissing her again. If she decided to just hang out, I would have been more than happy with that. There's something about this woman that has me craving whatever she'll give me.

We fumble our way further into her condo, not breaking our kiss or exploration of hands. I don't even fully take in my surroundings as I stop once we clear the hallway, where I reach between us and pop open the button on her skintight shorts. My hands stay on her hips as I pull back, needing to see every new inch of her that's being exposed. Teasing the skin just above her shorts, I trace my fingers along her hips, occasionally dipping a finger beneath the waistband. With only an inch of space between us, I lean in to kiss her jaw, then down her neck to her shoulder.

I continue a trail of downward kisses until I reach her breasts, where I take my time. While I lavish and worship every bit of her with my mouth, causing beautiful moans to escape her lips. The sounds she makes are almost enough to have me exploding in my shorts. I don't even know how much time I spend paying attention to each of her breasts before I continue downward. Crouching, I kiss her stomach then each of her hip bones, then finally meet her gaze.

Kneeling before her, I take in the most perfect view. She's staring down at me with wide, excited eyes while she bites her bottom lip. A flush takes over her skin, starting on her cheeks and spreading down her neck and chest. Each heavy breath she lets out brings my attention back to the sight of her breasts. They're the perfect handful, and I have to fight the urge to stand back up to pay more attention to them.

I focus back on getting her clothes off, tugging her shorts down, taking her underwear with them as I do. When I get to her ankles, Lilly rests a hand on my shoulder for support as she steps one foot free, then the other. It's only then that I finally break her heated stare.

For a moment, I contemplate saying "fuck this" to my plan of making it to her bedroom, the sight of her perfect naked body has me overwhelmed with the need to be inside of her. I want this to last longer than a quick fuck on her floor though.

Moving my hands to her hips, I slowly kiss my way up one of her legs from her knee and repeat the motion down her other leg. This time, when I kiss my way back up her thigh, and gently push them apart. Wrapping an arm under her thigh, I hike one of her legs over my shoulder and grab her ass to hold her to my face. The movement causes her to yelp in surprise and she reaches to grip my shoulder for balance. Her surprise turns into a moan as I dive right into her and run my tongue along her slit. Groaning as the taste of her hits my tongue.

She tightens her hold on my shoulder and pulls me forward. Lilly writhes above me, grinding down into my face as my tongue dives into her warm pussy. If all I get to do tonight is taste her as she comes undone on my tongue, I would walk away a happy man. With my free hand, I move my mouth away slightly and run two fingers along her wet heat, which earns me another moan. After a couple teasing passes along her entrance, I watch her from my spot between her thighs as I slowly push a finger into her warmth. Lilly gasps as her eyes close and mouth opens slightly.

As I pull back out, her pussy clamping around my finger and begging for more, she slowly nods her head. Keeping up my slow pace, on my next thrust in, I add a second finger. Curling them, I search for the spot inside that will have her coming undone. Lilly throws her head back with a loud gasp that turns into an approving moan on my next thrust. It's then that I pick up the pace. Her body begins to lightly tremble above me, hips moving in sync, encouraging me to move faster.

I focus back on watching my fingers thrust in and out of her. After a moment, my mouth finds her clit while I keep pumping. A whispered “Oh shit!” escapes her mouth as her hand moves to tangle into the hair on top of my head. I don’t even think she notices that she’s holding me to her, as if I would back away when every inch of her body is telling me that she’s about to cum.

“Dominik.” She moans my name, it’s hands down the sexiest sound I’ve ever heard. Needing to hear it again, I suck her clit into my mouth again. Within a couple more thrusts, she’s chanting my name as her pussy grips my fingers while she comes undone. I continue my motions as she cums on my hand, dragging out her orgasm for as long as possible. I admire her blissful expression for a moment longer before I start gentling my touch.

She untangles her fingers from my hair and looks down at me. Holding her gaze, I pull my fingers from her and suck them into my mouth, groaning in approval at the taste of her sweetness. The blush staining her cheeks deepens as she slowly starts to remove her leg from my shoulder. Squeezing her ass one last time, I let go and stand in front of her. Wrapping an arm around her waist, I pull her into me and lean forward to kiss her again. After a few moments, she grips the hem of my shirt and tugs it up.

“It seems unfair that I’m completely naked, and you’re still fully clothed.” She murmurs against my lips. Breaking away, I help her out and reach for the collar of my shirt to pull off over my head. Tossing it to the side lightly, I smirk down at her as she gapes at me.

“Never mind, it’s unfair that you’re so perfectly sculpted.” She reaches out and runs her hand over my abdomen and groans. My dick twitches against my zipper in response, something that I momentarily ignore. “Are you carved out of stone or some shit?”

Chuckling lightly, I let her trace along my muscles for a few seconds longer before I finally take back over. Bending down, I slide my hands under her thighs and pick her up. Her legs wrap around my waist as her body presses into mine and her

arms gently wrap around my neck. She smiles down at me, and my breath catches in my throat at the sight of her. The glow from the hallway makes her look angelic in the dim light. More curls have fallen free from her braid and her lips are slightly swollen from kissing.

She is wonderfully disheveled and it's the most beautiful sight I've ever seen.

"You're stunning." Still smiling, she shakes her head at me. I lean forward to kiss her shoulder and she tilts her head to the side, giving me more access to distract her with kisses on her neck. Without pulling away from her, I head down the small hallway, hoping that's where her bedroom is. Her palms grip my shoulder as she pulls back slightly to tell me where to go.

Once in her room, she bends forward to claim my lips. Just as she begins to squirm in my hold, I reach her bed. Setting her down, I have to reach behind me to untangle her legs from around my waist. A whimper escapes her lips as I place a hand on either side of her head and push back.

Part of me ached to close the distance between us, but the sight of Lilly beneath me is breathtaking. Her breasts on full display as they rise and fall with her heavy breathing, skin flushed with excitement and a desperate, almost hungry, look in her eyes. I don't realize I'm staring until she reaches a hand up to lightly cup my cheek, as her other hand reaches down between us toward my shorts.

That definitely breaks my trance.

Pushing back from the bed to stand up, I keep my eyes on her as I make quick work to remove my shorts and boxers. Before I toss them aside, I pull the condom out of my wallet, glancing at the date and hoping it hasn't expired since I last had sex. Luck is on my side, I must have put the condom in my wallet before shit hit the fan. When I'm completely bare, her eyes widen as she takes me in. Licking her lips and swallowing before she finds my gaze again.

"I was wrong earlier. What's *really* unfair is that you literally hit the perfect body jackpot. It probably shouldn't surprise me that you're, um, very well endowed." She glances

back down at me, licking her lips once more before she talks again. “You might, um, need to...” She trails off as she looks away, her brows furrow slightly as her cheeks flush in embarrassment.

Placing a knee on the bed, setting the condom down next to us, I hover back over her with my weight on one arm while I cup her cheek in my other as she keeps her gaze averted.

“I might need to... what?” Closing her eyes, she fumbles through what she’s trying to say.

“It’s been a long time since... I’ve only been...” Her head shakes slightly but her eyes stay closed. Stroking her cheek with my thumb, I wait for her to continue. After one more deep and heavy sigh, she answers me.

“You’re huge.” She says on an exhale, so fast I almost miss it.

Suddenly understanding her hesitation, I bend down to kiss her, not breaking away until she relaxes beneath me. Pulling back, I wait for her to finally open her eyes and look at me to answer.

“Do you want me to stop?” She shakes her head, wrapping her legs around my waist, pulling me to her. I move my hand from her face with a light chuckle and trace down her side all the way down to her knee. Holding her leg to my side, I lean down to claim her lips once more. When she grinds her hips this time, the feeling of her warmth against my cock has me groaning into our kiss.

When I finally stop kissing her, she’s panting below me. Keeping her pinned beneath me with my hips and her leg in my hand, I move to capture her nipple with my mouth. Her free leg falls off my back as she arches off the bed. I pull back just enough to slide my length slowly along her center again. At this point, I don’t know who I’m teasing more, myself or her.

After making sure to pay the same amount of attention to her other breast, I move to claim her lips again. This time,

Lilly breaks the kiss to peer up at me with hooded eyes as she squirms beneath me.

“Dominik.” Her tone is breathless and pleading as she moves a hand to my hip, nails digging into my ass as she pulls me into her.

“Yes, Sunshine?” I pepper her neckline with long and sloppy kisses. I know she wants more, can feel her soaked and ready beneath me. Yet I can’t help but wait to see if she’ll actually voice her desire. With that in mind, I slowly grind my length against her again. This time she groans and digs her nails in as she raises a hand to my neck and looks up at me.

“I need...” She swallows thickly as that beautiful blush deepens again. “Fuck me.”

Her plea is nothing but a whisper but it’s exactly what I wanted to hear.

Pushing my weight to my knees, I lean back and make quick work of opening the condom and rolling it on before focusing back on her. I sit up slightly but keep her knee held to my side. The view of her spread out, exposed and flushed before me has me almost ready to just dive right in. Except that I caught her mumbling, claiming it has been a long time. I might not be able to stop some of the discomfort, I have no issue going slow to make sure she enjoys every moment possible.

Now that my arm isn’t supporting my weight, I reach between us to her dripping pussy. With two fingers, I run them along her slit, gathering her wetness and lightly teasing her clit before moving back. When I trail back to her center, I slowly pump my fingers in, stopping at my first knuckle and pull out. On the next drawn-out pump, as she clamps around my fingers, I push in until I reach my middle knuckles and ease back out. I withdraw my fingers to the tip and pause for a moment to look up at her face. Which is something that earns me a grinding of her hips as she tries to keep me going.

Keeping my eyes on her face, I slowly push back in with no resistance. When my fingers are all the way in, I pick up my movements slightly. Still slowly fucking her with my fingers,

hooking them to find that spot inside that had her cumming on my face only moments ago. Once I find it, I don't let up. Lilly meets each of my thrusts as she moans out with "oh gods" and "please." Just as she starts shaking, I find her clit with my thumb and don't let up until she is coming undone by my hand, moaning my name again.

I wait until her shaking subsides a bit and she opens her eyes, giving me a breathless laugh and smiling at me. Only then do I slowly pull my fingers out and notch the head of my cock at her entrance. She nods eagerly when I look back up to her face for confirmation once more.

Pushing my hips forward slightly, her back arches off the bed and into me as I claim her lips once more. She tenses slightly, as I push in just past my tip, groaning as she already clamps around me. Holding still, I bend forward to kiss her cheek.

"Lilly, I need you to relax. I'm going to go slow, but say the word and I stop." She moans in response as I pull almost all the way out. I wait a couple heart beats as she relaxes with a deep exhale beneath me before pushing back in.

By the time I've worked myself fully into her I can feel the sweat dripping from my back as I hold myself still to let her adjust. After a moment, she opens her eyes, and nods her head.

"Dominik. Fuck me." I kiss her once more, and then do exactly as she requests. Picking up my pace a bit as I push back up to my knees, lifting her hips and finding a spot that has her eyes widening on a gasp. Worried I hurt her, I go to set her back down when she reaches to grip my arm that's still holding her leg to me.

"Don't you dare stop." Chuckling at her demand, I realize that the spot we had just found was new to her. Lifting her hips back up, I start moving again with her meeting my thrusts each time. I can tell she's close again as she starts fluttering around my cock, the feeling pulling a groan from me as I keep my focus on not exploding before she cums again. Lilly's eyes slide shut as she clutches my arm. Needing her to finish with

me, I pick up my pace, pounding into her as I reach between us and find her clit once more.

“Cum for me one more time, Sunshine.” Her head shakes in denial, but a few strokes over her sensitive bud is all it takes for her to explode as she clamps around my cock. With a few more shallow thrusts, I’m right there with her.

I collapse on top of her, making sure to keep my weight on my forearm. For a while, we both stay silent while we catch our breath. Once my heart rate slows down to a normal pace, I pull out of her with a groan. When she opens her eyes, a sleepy smile spreads across her face. I can’t stop myself from bending down to kiss her again. She laughs quietly when I pull back, brushing a couple stray curls from her forehead.

“Holy shit... that was...” She blinks a couple of times, laughing gently again and stares at me in a blissful haze. I kiss her cheek before pushing off of her completely and finishing her thought as I stand up.

“That was fucking amazing.” I point a finger at her as she goes to push herself up. “Don’t you dare move.”

Taking a shot in the dark, I head toward her bathroom with the lights still off. I dispose of the condom and find a couple washcloths to clean both of us up with. Making sure the washcloth is warm, I walk back into the bedroom to her laying exactly where I left her and clean her up. Only then does she move to sit up, smiling at me as she places a gentle kiss on my cheek.

“Do you have to go?” Lilly whispers, and I’m shaking my head before she finishes talking.

“That is completely up to you.” I respond calmly before she sucks her bottom lip between her teeth as she watches me.

“You can stay if you want.” I smile and go to lay on the bed with the intention of pulling her with me, but she evades my grasp.

“Hold on, I need to go...” She gestures for the bathroom, and I nod, turning toward the bed and pulling the blankets back for us. When she comes back, I don’t let her hesitate and

snatch her into bed with me. Tucking her into my side, where she stays all night long.



There's always this one moment in movies after the love interests get together for the first time, where they play some cute music as the camera pans, to show one of them adoringly watching the other sleep. That scene always has me rolling my eyes and scoffing at the ridiculousness. Movies make it seem like morning breath, full bladders, and those crusties that form in everyone's eyes don't exist.

The idea that anyone would look at someone right after waking up and watch them instead of getting up baffles me. Yet here I am, doing exactly that for the past thirty minutes. Somehow, I cannot bring myself to move. Right here, next to Lilly, I'm finally understanding that stupid movie moment more than I ever thought possible.

I'm a total sucker for cuddling after sex. It's just that once we wake up, I usually roll out of bed to take care of my morning routine and move on with my day.

Until this morning.

Lilly is beautiful. When I woke up still curled up with her, it shocked the hell out of me. Without even thinking it through, I had decided to stay where I was and simply pulled her closer. It shocked me even more when she turned toward me in her sleep, nuzzling her head into my chest, before letting out the most adorable little snore, and settled back down.

Now I've been laying here, being a total creep while watching her sleep. She's beautiful, peaceful, and content. Lilly looks perfect sleeping in my arms.

Dude, chill the fuck out.

A small chuckle escapes as I think about how Sarah used to tease me all the time growing up. She claimed that the reason I could never date casually is because I would get attached if given the smallest bit of affection. She was right, of course. Our parents raised us to own our emotions, so when I was a teenager and in college, it wasn't abnormal to be called overly emotional. However, as an adult on a professional hockey team, it was now more normal for my team to come to me asking for advice when dating or picking up girls. It used to make me proud that I was someone they could confide in.

Until Josh ruined it.

“You had better not be laughing at my insane bed head. That would be rude and result in you getting pushed out of this bed.”

Lilly's sleepy voice is muffled against my chest, and while she startled the shit out of me, she puts an instant halt to the spiral I was about to go down. Bringing my hand up from around her waist, I run it over her crazy curls and laugh while leaning down to kiss her forehead.

“Definitely not laughing at you, Sunshine.” Running my hand from her hair down along her back until it's settled on her hip.

She laughs, the sound and warmth of it spreading over my chest before she's stretching her body out and causing her breasts to push against me. My body wastes no time reacting

to the movement as the memory of her pressed beneath me last night flashes through my mind. I tighten my grip on her waist as I think about the sounds that she made.

With those thoughts taking over, I start moving my hand lower to grip her ass to pull her closer to me.

Her laugh slows and I catch the slight hitch in her next breath as she peers up at me, the sleep leaving her eyes as they begin to darken. Her gaze lowers to my lips and there is no stopping me from moving to capture hers. The feel of how perfectly her ass fits in the palm of my hand has me rolling us until I'm settled between her thighs, my hands moving to hold her closer to me. As I grind down into her, I'm met with the warmth of her bare skin beneath me.

Without breaking the kiss, I run my hand down her bare thigh and grip a hand around her knee, pulling it up to my hip. Breaking away from her lips, something that earns me a whimper of disapproval, I trail kisses along her jaw. She lets out a low moan as I continue down her throat and collar bone, until my face is hovering above the center of her chest. After teasing a path up along her hips, I cup one breasts in my hand while my mouth worships the other.

Lilly squirms and moans beneath me, her warm center grinds against my cock and pulls a deep groan from my chest. The need to be inside her hits me like a freight train. Pushing past my own desires and releasing her knee, I kiss and suck my way down her stomach. Tasting every inch of her perfect figure, not stopping until my mouth hovers over her pussy. Lilly shifts and lifts her hips, as if she's seeking me out, and a chuckle escapes my lips as I turn my head to kiss the inside of her thigh. A desperate moan escapes from her lips as I turn to kiss her other thigh, skimming my nose along her tempting center in a teasing motion on my way.

With my shoulders holding her legs open, I wrap my arms around her thighs and grip her hips to pull her closer, positioning her an inch from my face. Pausing, I take in the view above me.

Her tanned skin has a flush and a light shimmer of sweat coated over it. Perfect pink lips are parted slightly as she pants in anticipation. Her golden hair is fanned out around her, the braid she wore last night had fallen out at some point while we slept. I stay put, waiting until she finally opens her piercing hazel eyes.

“Dominik.” My name leaves her lips in a breathless plea and is without a doubt the best sound that I’ve ever heard.

I reward her with a slow teasing swipe of my tongue along the length of her pussy without breaking eye contact. The taste of her pulling another groan from me, knowing how easily I could become addicted to the sweet taste of her on my tongue. Before I allow myself to get lost in devouring her, I pull back slightly and move my hands to grip her ass.

“You are fucking beautiful.” She opens her lips to respond, and I cut her off with another swipe of my tongue, only this time I keep going. One of her hands moves to the top of my head, holding me in place as she attempts to grind her hips against me. I free one of my arms to wrap around her waist and hold her still, wanting to draw this out. Her moans and the taste of her on my tongue is enough to forget everything else. Needing to hear more from her, I use the hand that is not wrapped around her waist to give her ass a firm squeeze before letting it go to trace along her inner thigh.

Shifting slightly, I move to give her clit attention while teasing her entrance with two fingers. A desperate *please* escapes her lips and I give her what she is craving.

Slowly pumping in and out of her a few times before curling my fingers to find that spot that had her tumbling over the edge last night.

“Oh god.” Lilly moans as her legs begin to shake. “Please don’t st—” I disrupt her pleas with a thrust of my fingers and a flick of my tongue over her clit. I pull back slightly, using my thumb to add pressure while continuing the circles I was just doing with my tongue.

“I’m not stopping until you are cumming all over my tongue.”

Her grip on my hair tightens as I hit the spot that has her falling apart. Thighs shaking and trying to clamp shut on my shoulders, I lick and suck every bit of her orgasm. I gentle my touch as she starts to come down and catches her breath. When she finally has her breathing under control and opens her eyes, I slowly remove my fingers. Holding her gaze as I move them to my mouth to clean them off.

“Best fucking breakfast ever.”

Her legs relax and fall off my shoulder as she uses her grip on my hair, to guides me forward until I’m pressing her beneath me into the mattress and kissing her breathless. Breaking the kiss to let Lilly catch her breath again, I wrap my arms around her and roll us to the side, pulling her back into me.

“Good morning, beautiful.” A giggle escapes her as she relaxes into me, resting her elbow on my stomach while tracing circles on my chest.

“Hell of a good morning.” She huffs out. Brushing the curls from her face and kissing her forehead, I take a moment to relish in the warmth of her body beside me. I lean back a bit to study her face, noticing the slight flush that has taken over her cheeks. The need to know what she’s thinking about hits hard.

“What’s on your mind, Sunshine?” I don’t miss how her cheeks redden even more before she buries her face in my chest and gives me a muffled response.

“Nothing.”

“If it was truly nothing you wouldn’t be blushing like a tomato and hiding from me right now.” Groaning, she pulls away slightly to free her arm as she covers her face with her hands.

“Okay, yeah, it’s something but it doesn’t need to be said out loud.”

I grin at her.

“Well now I absolutely need to know.” Her head shakes in response.

“Nope. No.” Lilly peaks at me from between her fingers. “Absolutely not.”

Moving fast, I throw my leg over her and roll us so I’m back on top and gently pull her wrists away from her face to pin them above her head. A squeal spills from her lips as I hold myself above her.

“What were you thinking?” Before she can avoid my question, I lean forward to kiss her shoulder, then her neck and up to the spot just below her ear. I’m rewarded with a breathless moan and a slight shake of her head while she whispers back.

“It’s stupid. Nothing. It isn’t important.”

I push myself up again, capturing her eyes with mine.

“If you thought of something and it made you react like this, it is important.” I lean in to plant a light kiss on her lips. “If you truly don’t want to tell me because you’re uncomfortable, that’s perfectly fine. But I won’t dismiss your feelings.” Lilly stares up at me, eyes watering slightly as she takes in what I said.

I go to move off her and give her space, but she stops me as I release her wrists and tangles our fingers together, holding our joined hands above her head.

“I was thinking that I’ve never fooled around with anyone in the morning and that it’s apparently something I had been misinformed about for years. You keep blowing my mind with things that are probably not big deals and might be simple to you, but I’ve never done them before.” My head tilts as I take her in.

“What else did I blow your mind with?” Her blush spreads to her cheeks as she parts her lips, as if she wants to brush off answering me again but then decides against it.

“Kissing.”

“Kissing?” Lilly nods her head slowly before answering.

“Yeah, kissing. I uh... never thought it was something that could be enjoyed. That some things, like those, were over-

hyped and not worth the time.” Her gaze lands on my lips. “Until last night that is.”

Without hesitation, I capture her lips with my own. I run my tongue along her bottom lip before nipping it gently and earning a small gasp. One in which I take full advantage of as I deepen the kiss. I lose track of time until she rips her mouth away with a gasp. Peppering kisses along her jaw until I’m at the base of her ear.

“I could easily become addicted to tasting you on my tongue in the morning. Fuck, your kiss alone is addicting. So, whoever let you believe that these things weren’t worth the time,” I pause to place a kiss on her neck. “They don’t know what the fuck they’re missing out on.”

Lilly squirms beneath me, her warm center brushing against my cock. I had been ignoring it until now. Hell, I had even almost forgotten about it until she moved beneath me.

“If you keep squirming like that, we will not be leaving this bed anytime soon.”

She smirks as she stares up at me with a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

“What if I don’t want to leave this bed?”

Lilly moves before I can respond, releasing my hands she pushes us until she is straddled on top of me. Her curls hang over one shoulder as she smiles victoriously down at me while leaning forward to kiss me.

I grab onto her hips as she starts rubbing herself over the length of my cock and drawing a tortured moan from my own lips. Breaking the kiss and holding her still above me, I look up at her, ready to give her exactly what she wants.

The sound of her stomach rumbling, however, has me changing plans. With a chuckle, I wrap my arm around her waist. Holding her to me as I sit up but keep her in my lap.

“How about we get cleaned up and find some food before anything else.” Her head shakes slowly, watching me as she grinds her hips again. Tightening my hold on her waist, I run my other hand up her back to cup the nape of her neck.

Holding her to me and bringing her in for a long, slow kiss, before pulling away.

“Shower.” I lean in to kiss her jaw. “Food.” I tilt her head back to kiss her neck. “Orgasms.” Kissing her collarbone before I loosen my grip to let her look back down at me. She squirms in my lap, but nods in agreement as mischief dances in her eyes.



Lilly seemed to take the shower, food, orgasms, list as a suggestion and open for change. Technically she did listen to me. I had coaxed her out of bed and into the shower, where she let me wash every inch of her. Her body is literally perfection. Curved in all the right places and slightly toned.

When I had finished washing her hair and every other part of her body, it caught me off guard when she took the soap from my hand and started to return the favor. She cut my protests off with a kiss and continued washing me. The gleam in her eyes had me shutting up and letting her do as she wished.

Until she sank to her knees in front of me.

I had been hard for her since the moment I woke up. There was no hiding that fact, but I had been ignoring it until I could find her some food. When I put a hand on her shoulder to stop her, she glared up at me.

“I want to.” With those three words, I couldn’t say no. With that sexy determination on her face, she could have asked me for anything in the fucking world and I would have given it to her. I had just barely finished nodding my head as she took my cock in her hand and almost had me cumming from the touch alone.

Images of her licking and sucking the tip of my cock flash through my mind. The swirl of her tongue drew a curse from

my lips. Which only seemed to spur her on as she sucked me further into her mouth, her hand gripping and tugging along the length that she couldn't fit. She didn't let up until I was warning her that I was about to cum. Even then, she paused long enough to make eye contact with me and nod her head. When I came in her mouth, her hand holding my cock in place as she swallowed every drop, I swear I saw stars.

I had hauled her off her knees so fast, pulled her into a deep long kiss. If she hadn't broken the kiss as her stomach rumbled again, I probably would have fucked her right there in the giant shower. I made a mental note to test out this new found bounce back window that Lilly has apparently brought out in me later, if she gives me the chance.

Pushing the button on the coffee machine to start it brewing, I turn toward Lilly. Watching as she pulls out a pan, the reach causes her shirt to ride up and show off her stomach. Even though I just saw her naked less than ten minutes ago, I still find myself moving toward her, needing to touch her.

Standing behind her and towering over her, I reach around to take the pan from her while kissing her neck. Leaning into me with a contented sign, she glances over her shoulder at me.

"We need food." She pauses as she presses her ass back into me. "Actual food."

With a smirk and a kiss on her cheek, I gently push her out from in front of the oven. Letting my eyes slowly track down her form before trailing back to her face.

"Yes, which is why I'm going to make breakfast while you sit."

She looks around her apartment with a quirked eyebrow.

"Last I checked this was my kitchen." A chuckle escapes my lips at her response.

"I'm sure I can figure my way around it while you sit and rest those pretty thighs."

I'm rewarded with an eyeroll and a wide grin as she moves around her island to take a seat on a bar stool.

Finding enough food in her fridge and pantry to make us eggs, bacon, and toast, I move around the kitchen without thinking twice. We keep busy with talks about music and hobbies. The way she lights up when she talks about her library that she built herself in the spare bedroom holds me captive.

“Do you only enjoy reading or do you think you’ll eventually write your own?” I don’t miss her cheeks reddening a bit in response to my question. She pushes herself from her seat and moves to pull two coffee mugs from a cupboard as she answers.

“That’s actually one of the reasons I chose to move to Florida. Paige had her boss...well, Garrett, read over what I had written so far and he wanted more. I have ten more chapters to send over to one of the editors and then we’ll keep moving forward with publishing.”

She reaches to grab the creamer from the fridge.

“How do you like your coffee?”

“Just a bit of cream, nothing too crazy.” She smiles broadly at me.

“Me too.” I watch her as she prepares our mugs.

“So... you’re publishing a book?”

Lilly nods her head slowly, a weary expression taking over her face as she focuses on bringing the mugs to the island.

“Yeah, it’s my first time doing all of this so I’m still learning a lot. It’s nothing crazy. I mean there’s a good chance the book doesn’t sell well, or the publishers don’t like the final copy.”

I turn the burner off, readying her plate and turning toward her.

“It’s still amazing that you’re this far, I mean I don’t know much about publishing a book, but I can’t imagine it’s easy to get where you are right now. How long have you been working on this book?”

She watches me over the brim of her mug, eyebrows slightly drawn together as I walk around the island with our plates to sit down next to her.

“I started working on it a while back but put it on pause. Until Paige found out and basically hounded me to send it to her.” She smiles slightly. “I thought she was about to reach through her phone and somehow get it herself when I tried telling her no because it wasn’t ready.” Smiling, I realize I’m grateful to Paige for pushing her to do this.

“Paige was more than happy to take the first opportunity to drag my ass down here and be close to her again.”

“Have you known her for a long time?” She smiles brightly at me as she answers.

“Yeah, we’ve been friends for fifteen years. She’s basically family, and someone I desperately needed to balance out the chaos created by my brothers.” Lilly shakes her head, the mention of brothers has me craving more information about her and her life.

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Two.” She smiles fondly.

“Add Paige to the mix and your parents must have had a full house.”

I don’t miss her smile falling slightly.

“Yeah, my mom was definitely kept on her toes.” She scratches her forehead before shaking it off and changing the subject. “What about you? Any siblings?”

“Garrett is basically a brother to me, I’ve known him since third grade. By the time we reached fifth grade he had moved in. Shit hit the fan with his parents and the police got involved...” I trail off, thinking about how much my best friend had gone through in the first couple years we had met. “My mom had seen how close we had become and did what she had to do to make sure that I didn’t lose my only friend. Whenever she was asked what made her take him in, she would joke that she didn’t want to hear me complain about

losing my friend. But, we all knew that she had fallen in love with him after our second playdate.”

My chest tightens as I finally think about Sarah, and I give Lilly a sad smile.

“Up until nine months ago, I had a little sister.”

Her smile slips off her face and I focus on the eggs as the realization hits. That’s the first time I’ve said it out loud. I sip my coffee, needing something to keep my hands busy and help avoid facing the inevitable pity.

The feeling of a hand on my thigh has me sucking in a deep breath and bracing myself before finally turning to Lilly. Emotions tighten in my chest as I meet her gaze and find her bright eyes watching me. Worry lining her features as she reaches forward to caress my cheek.

“I can’t even imagine how you feel. Do you want to talk about her?” Swallowing is hard, but I manage to hold her gaze and shake my head. Giving me a nod of understanding, she leans in to kiss my cheek and sits back in her chair but leaves her hand on my thigh.

“What’s your favorite thing to do in the city? I’ve only been here for a couple weeks and feel like I know absolutely nothing about where I’m living.”

Appreciating her understanding to change the topic, I take another sip of coffee before answering.

“I actually just moved here last week. I’ve been a couple times to visit Garrett but...” I trail off realizing that I didn’t pay attention to where we went after leaving that last night. I can’t help the small laugh that escapes as I look back at her.

“Um, I just realized that I don’t know where we are. I just... blindly followed you home.” She smiles teasingly in response.

“Do you always follow strangers’ home?”

“No, this is a first for me.” She smiles brightly at me as she bites a piece of bacon.

“Well, we’re on Lightning Street.” I feel my eyes bug out of my head as I gape at her.

“Wait...” I study her condo, only this time I really take it in. My mouth gapes as I stutter, “How the hell did I miss this?”

Lilly glances around her place before glancing back at me, confusion lining her beautiful face.

“What did you miss exactly?” I shake my head as I start laughing, and nod toward the balcony.

“What floor are we on?” Her brows crunch together.

“The thirteenth... why?”

Striding toward her front door, noting our clothes from last night that are leaving a messy trail down the entryway, I unlock her front door. Laughing uncontrollably as I open her door to see my condo number staring back at me across the hall.

“What are you laughing at?” Lilly questions. In response, I hold my hand out toward her. Slowly she reaches for me, and I waste no time in leading her out of her condo and to my door.

“Dom, what are you doing?” She exclaims, tugging her t-shirt down to cover her ass as I put in my code and unlock my door.

“I know exactly where I am.” Forgetting about her shirt, she gapes at my now open door before looking back to me.

“You’re shitting me!” Then she’s laughing alongside me.

“Now I know why I didn’t think twice about moving around your kitchen.” I claim as I tug her into my condo. “Mine is literally the mirror image.”

Lilly shakes her head as she laughs at the fact that I live across the hall from her.

“You live here?” I nod in response.

It’s a good thing I wasn’t planning on this being the last time I saw Lilly. We’re both silent, smiling brightly as we walk through the small hallway and further into my place. Once we reach the open living room and kitchen area, I inspect my empty condo before turning back to her.

“My furniture gets delivered on Monday but for now I have the important things.” I shoot a wink her way as my eye trails down to the hem of her shirt. “Like a bed.”

“Well at least if you were planning on doing a walk of shame this morning, it’s not going to be a long one.”

“There are absolutely no shameful feelings about what I did to you last night.” Thoughts of her sprawled out on her bed last night have my cock twitching, wanting more of her. I’ve never craved someone like this, like two or three times isn’t going to be enough.

Not that I’d say that out loud seeing as how I literally just met her last night.

Lilly leans against my kitchen island, crossing her arms and once again causing my attention to snag on her thighs, as she grins seductively at me.

“We’re neighbors.” Stepping forward and bracing my arms around her to cage her between me and the island, I lean forward until our lips are an inch apart.

“It appears so.” Her eyes darken as she gazes at me, but her forehead crunches with worry lines as she tilts her head and whispers.

“Did you plan for last night to be a one-night stand?” I let go of the counter and bend down slightly, giving her a short kiss as I reach forward and grip under her ass to hoist her on the island. With her sitting on the edge, I press myself between her thighs and squeeze her ass.

“If I told you no, what would you say?” Lilly doesn’t break eye contact with me as she leans forward, pressing her chest into me before placing a soft kiss on my lips.

“If you said no, I would ask if you had plans today. If that answer was also no, I would ask how you felt about going back across the hall with me to binge watch *New Girl*, eat snacks all day and maybe have another couple orgasms.”

I smile back at her, wondering if she’s fucking real.

“It’s a good thing I don’t have any plans today because that sounds like fucking heaven.”



Throughout the weekend, Dom and I managed to binge watch the first two seasons of *New Girl*. When I had asked him to come home with me after the game Friday night, I hadn't really thought past the fact that I needed him in my bed. When I was with Cam, there was never a blatant desire to be intimate or physical.

During the last two years of our relationship, our sex life had become a routine. Almost like we were just checking a box off. At the beginning, it was fresh, new... almost exciting to make him happy in whatever way he needed. But the more time that passed, the more we fell into a pattern in all areas of our relationship.

Dominik is nothing like that.

He gave me his full attention as I talked about anything and everything all while asking genuine questions. Outside of my relationship with Paige, I had forgotten what it was like to

have someone give me their full attention. Occasionally topics that neither of us were ready to talk about, like his sister or my relationship with my dad, would come up but he took it in stride.

During one of our quiet cuddle sessions, I had spaced out and snatched up my laptop, my characters running wild in my mind telling me how to start the next chapter. Not wanting to forget it, I grabbed my laptop with the intention to type down a cliff notes version of my thoughts. Only once I started getting it out... I couldn't stop. I was six hundred words in when the realization of how hard I had just spaced out dawned on me. Dom hadn't even been fazed, he simply stayed watching the TV in comfortable silence, while running his fingers gently through my hair.

In my rush to work, I didn't even sit back on the couch next to him. Instead, I had plopped down in front of him on the floor with my back resting against his legs and went at it. He had looked so startled when I sat up straight, slamming my laptop shut and apologizing for working while he was here.

"Honestly, I hadn't even thought twice when you got up and came back to work like that. We were relaxing and your mind started figuring something out. That's fucking awesome." He spoke so calmly, so nonchalantly as he began running his hands through my hair again. For a long minute, I couldn't figure out how to respond.

Cam hated it when I tried to interrupt *our* time with meaningless nonsense, which of course didn't apply when he was busy texting or playing a game on his phone.

Dom and I had spent the next two hours sitting like that, me on the floor in front of him while he played with my hair or rubbed my back. By the time he had gently nudged me to ask if I wanted to eat dinner with him, I had finished two more chapters. Definitely needing a break from staring at my screen, we made dinner together in my kitchen. Everything about the last two days felt more normal than it probably should have. Having just met him, there probably should be more awkwardness but all our conversations flowed naturally. It was like we had known each other for longer than we have.

By the end of Sunday afternoon, having fooled around in *almost* every room of my condo, I was a little sad when he had to go and pick up some things for work tomorrow. It wasn't until he left, and I was straightening the living room up that I realized he never mentioned what he did for work.

I make a mental note to ask him whenever I see him next.

It's now eight o'clock at night and Dom has been gone for two hours, it feels weird to miss having him around. Not liking the quiet of being here alone while also not liking that I'm already missing someone I just met, so I decided to send Paige a text asking her if she's busy. It might be late, but she has always been up for impromptu sleepovers.

I'm straightening a throw blanket over the back of my couch when my phone starts ringing. Assuming it's Paige, I answer without looking at the screen.

"Can you bring ice cream on your way over?" My dad's chuckle has me stopping in my tracks.

"I mean, I hadn't planned on coming into the city tonight but if you absolutely need it, sure." His answer throws me off and causes me to stumble over my words in response.

"I uh, well I had assumed that um... I thought you were Paige calling me." He half-heartedly laughs in response.

"I figured as much."

"So... what's up?" I fidget with the edge of the blanket.

"I was calling to see if you would like to have dinner tomorrow." He pauses. "Or sometime this week to catch up."

His invitation throws me off. I've only seen him once when I first got into the city. We've never had dinner, just the two of us, and while I'm beyond grateful for everything he's doing to help me out with a place to live... I still feel awkward from this invitation.

"Umm...sure? Is everything okay?" Maybe he has bad news that should be told in person. It would be just my luck that he would get sick just as we reconnect.

His laugh has me hopeful that he's healthy though.

“Everything is good. I have a team announcement tomorrow that I’m really pumped for, so I was thinking we could celebrate and catch up if you were free.”

That was definitely not something I had been expecting, and while I know this dinner will start off awkwardly, I can appreciate the effort he is putting in.

“Uh...sure. I mean, yes. We can go to dinner tomorrow.”

“Perfect!” He sounds genuinely shocked and excited. “Since I’ll be on this side of the city, I can meet you after I’m finished with the press announcement. Unless you had somewhere else you had in mind.”

“I don’t know any of the good places, so you tell me where and when to meet you.”

“Ok! I’ll text you the details in the morning. See you tomorrow.”

Hanging up the phone, unsure of how to feel about having dinner with my dad I focus on Paige’s response and filling her in as I head to my bedroom.

Paige:

Can’t come over :(Have to be at work for a meeting at 8am.

Me:

Ew.

Me:

Dad just invited me to dinner. Weird, right?

Paige:

Kinda? Is he dying?

Me:

lol I had the same thought. I don’t think so though, I think he just... wants to spend time with me now that I’m here? Idk said he was excited about an announcement he has tomorrow.

Paige:

Call me after. I need to know all the details.

Paige:

How was your night with Dom???????

Me:

One night turned into the entire weekend. So... good ;)

As soon as I send the text, Paige is calling me for a video chat. Answering while I lay back in my bed, I fill her in on all the details from this weekend.



Three o'clock on Monday rolls around faster than expected. I had spent the morning finishing up the chapters that I needed to send to Sam for editing. Dad had sent me a text this morning for the restaurant to meet him at and asked if five o'clock was okay. Knowing it will take me nowhere near two hours to get ready, I move slowly while picking out my outfit and doing my little bit of makeup. I decided at the last minute to turn on the sports channel and watch whatever news my dad was so excited about releasing at the press conference.

My brothers had paid attention to sports news, so they kept up with his career after he left. I only followed along until I went to college. For the first few months of college, I hadn't thought twice about the fact that my school was focused around three sports. Football, Hockey, and Soccer.

The first time we went out to one of the main bars in town, Paige and I had started chatting it up with a couple hot guys. At the time, it hadn't occurred to me to not use my last name when introducing myself. So, when I had unknowingly introduced myself to the captain of the Hockey team as Lilly Matthews, he immediately asked if my dad was *the* Coach James Matthews. For the rest of the time we were there, it was all about *how freaking amazing* my dad is. One girl had even joined in the conversation, telling me that "*he's so fucking*

hot” and then stated she would do him. Which is *not* a statement anyone wants to hear when talking about her father.

So it wasn't that much of a shocker when I stopped telling people my last name during my freshman year of college. It also shouldn't be that much of a shocker that I avoid sports bars at all costs. Although, it didn't stop me from keeping track of my father's career on the down low.

I figure that since I'm living here, and since I had a blast at the watch party on Friday, catching up on the sports news won't upset me like it used to. I'm an adult and can appreciate the effort my dad is putting in, but I refuse to get my hopes up when it comes to having an actual relationship with him.

I find the channel and turn the volume up. If I listen in and happen to hear whatever it is he's excited about then that's great. If not, then I can ask him about it over dinner and claim to not know anything about the sports channel. It's not like he'll know the difference.

As I sift through my closet for an outfit, my thoughts drift to Dom again. We had exchanged numbers, but we hadn't talked since he left last night. I had almost messaged him after I got off the phone with Paige, but it was ten o'clock at night and I didn't want to distract him since he said he was starting at his new job today. Deciding to not overthink it and just go with the flow like we had all weekend, I send him a message.

Me:

Hope you had a good first day, Domy :)

Throwing my phone on the bench in the closet, I reach for a new black sundress that I have been waiting for a reason to wear. It's a simple dress with spaghetti straps that cross in the back, tight on the chest with a V-neck collar that flows until just above my knees. Throw in a simple pair of sandals and it's as dressy as I can get without needing advice from Paige.

Leaving the closet, I go to drape the dress on my bed, then move to go to the bathroom, the sight of my dad on the television makes me stop dead in my tracks.

Anytime I did check up on him, it was just news articles that had one to two pictures at most. So, seeing him on TV makes me pause. He looks like it's where he's meant to be, surrounded by reporters and his team standing off behind him in a show of support. Going through all of my teenage years without him around, I never understood how he could pick them over being with us. Seeing him now though, as people watch him and listen on bated breath while he talks, even I'm captured by what he's saying.

As he talks about the team's stats from last season and the lineup this year, I don't move from my spot standing in front of my TV.

“Now, for the exciting part of today. After circumstances changed and a last-minute trade agreement crossed my desk that I could not pass up. It is with great pleasure that we welcome Dominik Mikelson to the team as one of our new Defensemen.”

My arms fall to my side, heart falling to the pit of my stomach as I watch Dom on the TV walk across the stage to accept my dad's extended hand.



My heart hasn't stopped pounding as I pace my front entryway, waiting to hear any sign of Dom across the hallway. Emotions I don't fully understand have been running through me as I try to get a grip on the fact that my first ever one-night stand is, not only a hockey player, but plays for my dad's team.

I should have asked him what he did for work. Should have just sucked it up and texted him about it instead of trying to wait until whenever I saw him next.

The sound of someone in the hallway has me reaching forward to yank it open. Dom stands outside of his door, half turned in shock with a wide smile on his face as he takes me in.

"Holy shit. You look beautiful."

Stepping toward him and ignoring his compliment, I stop in front of him and glare up. Crossing my arms, I don't miss his gaze dropping to my exposed cleavage, but I force myself to stay focused realizing I came out here without a plan. Just knowing that I needed to talk to him.

His smile falls as he takes in my stance.

“What’s wrong?” I let out a low laugh at his question.

“What’s wrong is that you didn’t tell me what you do for work! *Who* you are!” I don’t know why I’m yelling, or even why I’m mad. I hardly know him so I shouldn’t be upset over the fact that I can’t keep seeing him. His brows scrunch together.

“Oh. Yeah, I guess it didn’t actually cross my mind over the weekend.”

“It...didn’t cross your mind that you’re a professional hockey player?” Exasperated, I turn and pace back toward my door before turning on my heel to pace back to him.

“Well, yeah, we were having such a good weekend and we never once spoke about sports, so I actually didn’t think about it. Which was refreshing.” He watches me as I pace back and forth in the hallway. “Is there something wrong with me playing hockey?”

I stop my pacing and study him. He’s in the suit that he wore while on TV with my dad, except he has the jacket draped over his arm and the white sleeves of his button up rolled up a few times. His hair has a bit of styling gel in it, parting it to the side with a strand falling free above his eyebrow. The stubble on his face is thick and I imagine how perfect it would be if he let it grow out.

Dominik is handsome and tempting.

He is also on my father’s hockey team.

I let loose a heavy sigh. After the beginning of freshman year of college, I had stopped voicing any connection to him and very rarely let anyone know my last name. Yet here I am, five years later, about to tell a man that I hardly know something that I have tried to avoid.

Closing my eyes, I suddenly realize that it's not the fact as to who my dad is that's bothering me. It's the fact that for the first time ever, I'm not pissed at him for it. I'm absolutely crushed by what he does because it means that Dom and I can't keep seeing each other.

Letting out one more calming breath and opening my eyes, I watch Dom as I answer.

"My last name is Matthews. I just watched my father, Coach James Matthews, announce you as his team's newest addition."

Dominik's face pales, his jaw dropping open, as he processes the new information.

"The problem with you playing hockey is that you just signed a contract with my father as your coach." He continues to stare at me, so I start rambling and continue my pacing between our doors.

"Who he is and what he does isn't something I talk about with someone I've just met. There's a lot more to why I don't that I won't bore you with, but my reasons for not bringing him up are simply because I didn't think it was appropriate to bring up daddy issues with a man I've just met an—" Dom steps toward me, towering before me and cutting my pacing off as he puts his hands on my shoulders to steady me.

"Take a breath, Sunshine." Staring into his blue eyes, I do as I'm told, earning a small smile from him.

"There ya go. It's okay. We literally just met two days ago, shit like this slips through the cracks. I'm sorry that it slipped my mind about how big of a role hockey is in my life. One of the reasons this weekend was so perfect for me was because for the first time in months I wasn't stressed thinking about a game, training, or the transfer. It was a much-needed weekend of just being me. That was because of you." One of his hands slips from my shoulder and down to my waist where he wraps an arm around me, pulling me close, while his other hand slides up my neck and cups my cheek.

“I’m sorry this didn’t come up sooner. I was actually going to pop over tonight to see if I could make you dinner and had planned to tell you about my day and the trade being officially announced.” He smiles sadly down at me.

When I decided to confront him in the hallway, I hadn’t thought what it would mean. All I had thought about was that since I’m the Coach’s daughter, we can’t keep seeing each other. Yet I find myself in awe of him as he talks and apologizes. Any time Cam and I had a disagreement he would go off the rails. Only when I finally apologized for *picking a fight* would the week long arguments end.

On the rare occasion I expressed that he upset me, he would end the conversation by telling me that he “*had no control over what I was feeling and to get over it.*” More than once I had told myself that we were not in a healthy relationship. He was emotionally manipulative and an ass ninety-eight percent of the time. However, it was that two percent of the time that he was kind and attentive that had me staying for as long as I did.

Not wanting to compare this to my relationship with Cam, I suck in a breath and look up at Dom. The moment he realized there was a miscommunication, or really lack of communication, he owned it and apologized.

“I’m sorry that I came at you right as you got home. I should have let myself cool down before dumping everything on you like that.” A small chuckle escapes me.

His smile brightens a bit as he holds me closer.

We both chuckle lightly as I let my forehead fall to his chest and hug him back. His hand moves to the back of my head as he holds me to him. Dom and I have only known each other for two days, there was no reason for me to be this upset. We had only hooked-up for the weekend, so we can just nip this in the bud and agree to be friendly neighbors.

Neighbors who have seen each other naked.

Reluctantly, I gently push against his chest and step out of his hold.

“Well... this sucks.”

Dom nods slowly, watching me closely while I fidget with the straps of my dress. At the sound of my phone ringing from my apartment, I remember my dinner plans with my dad. I glance over my shoulder toward the sound of the phone, I talk without turning to look back at him.

“That’s probably my dad letting me know he’s leaving the arena to meet me for dinner.”

He reaches forward, taking my hand and drawing my attention back at him.

“Are you going to tell him about meeting me?” I’m shaking my head before he even finishes his question.

“Definitely not. We have barely spoken over the past ten years, so filling him in on my weekend mess around with his new player is not something I will be telling him.”

Dom’s eyebrows scrunch together, but he nods.

“It’s probably best if he doesn’t know. I haven’t even had my first practice with the team yet. Fuck!” He turns to me in a panic. “My coach can’t know that I fucked his daughter.”

Cringing at the thought, I nod with a tight smile.

“He’s not going to know *anything* about this past weekend. We can tell Paige and Garrett to keep it under wraps and just act like it didn’t happen.”

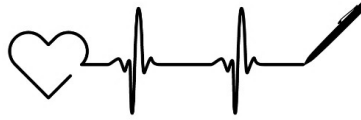
My phone rings again, reminding me I need to leave for dinner. Turning fully back to Dom, I’m about to tell him to just forget this all ever happened but stop short at his expression. He’s watching me closely with furrowed brows, a deep frown and his arms crossed, looking nowhere near finished with this conversation.

“Can we talk more when you get back from dinner?”

“Yes.” I hadn’t even fully thought my answer through before responding. There shouldn’t be much to actually talk about, but the idea of ending in a rush doesn’t sit right with me.

“Text me when you get back from dinner?”

“Okay.” Dom leans forward, cupping my cheek and kissing my forehead before turning to his condo. After locking up, I head out.



Dinner with my dad ends up not being as awkward as I expected it to be. He had picked a small Mexican restaurant that ended up only being an eight-minute walk from my condo and served giant size margaritas. There was some tension as we sat down and ordered our drinks. For a while, we just made small talk about the weather and some shops in the area.

The tequila from the margaritas definitely helps at getting us more at ease being around each other. Learning that he and I both shared a deep-rooted love for all things tequila was weird, in a good way. I had never thought twice about if he and I had any common ground.

Turns out we have a lot.

It did sting a bit when he had asked about my time in college and what I have been doing since graduating. I had almost shut him down. I didn't want to fill him in on experiences he missed because he was too busy working. But when I had looked up to change the conversation his expression stopped me in my tracks.

He seemed...defeated.

Unease swept over me as I wondered how he felt about being away from my brothers and I for so long. We might have kept up with some of his overall career and have watched enough news clips to know that James Matthews was one of the top hockey coaches. However, he doesn't know his own children, and while that was entirely his fault, a part of me couldn't help but feel bad for him.

Not in the mood for any more confrontation, or risk any fights, I answered his questions. The only other awkward moment came from him asking about Ian and Blake. I explained to him that it wasn't my place to tell him details that they might not be ready for him to know. He nodded in understanding and changed the subject to Paige and the publishing company she works for.

We paid the bill and were just sitting there while finishing our margaritas as he talked about his plans. The more he talks about everything he is responsible for this week, the more I understand why he had a poor work-life balance back when he started his career. Even now as we finish up dinner, it's like you can feel his desire to pull out his phone and keep working.

The margarita must have been made stronger than the ones back home because before I can even think it through, I ask the most awkward question I can think of...

"Are you dating anyone?"

Dad chokes on the sip of his margarita as he stumbles over what I asked, deciding not to take it back, I simply wait. He clears his throat and takes a sip of water before answering.

"No. I'm not dating anyone." A light blush takes over his cheeks as he avoids eye contact with me. His answer disappoints me, except I can't figure out why. Any time I had thought about him, I would picture him dating someone else, moving on with a new life, while he left us behind. It has always upset me. So, why am I *more* upset to find out he has no one?

I'm finishing the last sip of my drink when he turns the table back on me.

"What about you?"

Thoughts of Dominik going down on me in the shower run through my mind as my face flushes.

"Nope. No. Not seeing anyone." I rush through my words and try to think of anything that doesn't include what I had spent the weekend doing. "Which is good seeing as how I just

moved to a whole new state. Thank you, by the way, for letting me stay in the condo.”

He waves, dismissing the appreciation.

“I’m glad someone is using it. Up until you had called, I had pretty much forgotten about it since I bought my house a year ago. Some of the team is put up in that building as part of their contracts, so if you need anything and can’t get a hold of me, I can give you one or two contacts that are in the building. In case there’s an emergency.”

Mentally, I add *rambles when feeling awkward* to the list of things my dad and I have in common that I never knew about.

I laugh awkwardly, forcing myself to not ramble on as well.

“I should be okay, Paige lives like ten minutes away.” He nods but still pushes on.

“Well, if you change your mind, just let me know.”

After a few minutes we both gather our things to head out. When we get to the street, my dad pauses as he looks to where he parked his car. After a heavy sigh, he turns to me.

“Thank you for coming out with me tonight. I just...” He fiddles with his keys in his hand while he thinks over his words. “Thank you.”

I watch him for a moment, thinking over what to say.

“I appreciate you taking me out tonight, although I’m still waiting for some big shoe to drop and for you to say there’s something wrong.” I almost regret my words as he looks away. Maybe if he had been around, I would have actually apologized, but the truth of the matter is that he chose work over family. He sent child support, and we never went hungry thanks to what he sent our mother every month, but most of the time we would have preferred it if he was there.

After a tense moment of him staring off, he finally speaks.

“I should have been there for you and your brothers. This job, hell, being in the sports industry itself, takes up a lot of time and attention. You all suffered because of the choices I made. Your mom and I were so young when we got married,

had you guys, and on top of all of that I was building my career. At the time, I didn't think twice about it but seeing you, all grown up and successful..." He trails off for a moment, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. If you feel up to it, eventually, I would like to keep getting to know you. *If you want to.*"

I can only stare at him. As a teenager, I used to imagine what I would say to him if given the chance to confront him about him leaving us. The imaginary conversation was usually a lot of yelling on my end, calling him a dead-beat and many other endless names for choosing hockey over us. Looking at him now though, wanting to be a part of my life if I let him, hits a piece of me that longs for a dad. After clearing my throat and thinking my words over, I give him a small nod.

"I'd like that." Granted, there was still a lot we needed to talk through, but if he was willing to attempt to be a part of my life then I could meet him halfway.

He steps forward, smiling as if he's thinking about hugging me, and says goodbye.

Dinner with him hadn't been as hard as I had expected it to be. Unlike the conversation I knew was waiting for me back at the condo with Dom. Before I started seeing Cam, Paige and I had gone out to bars and parties hosted by the college sports teams quite frequently. Even though I tried to keep my last name to myself, there were some parties where it still came up. It was usually parties that the Hockey team attended. After one party at a frat house where some dude asked, very loudly, if I was that chick who's related to James Matthews. Except he didn't wait for me to confirm or deny, he just started talking non-stop about my dad. All I wanted was to become invisible.

Paige had found me being questioned by a couple guys, immediately told them to buzz off and dragged me out of there. Word spread about who my dad was between the teams and after a few more parties where people felt the need to interrogate me on my dad, I had made the decision to lay low and stop giving out my last name and avoid hockey players and all other athletes.

Which was why the watch party Friday night had been the first game I watched since freshman year, and why I didn't recognize Dominik as an athlete. Hell, I'd been too distracted by his intense looks and the way he made me feel to even think twice about why he was so built and perfectly toned.

Rounding the corner and heading toward my building, I shoot a text to Paige telling her to come over tomorrow night for pizza and drinks before dropping my phone in my purse. She had been working today during the press conference so there was no time to fill her in on Dom's job.

Stepping onto the elevator and pushing the button to head up to my floor, a bit of dread begins creeping into the pit of my stomach. This past weekend was one of the best ones I've had in a long time. Dom was right when he said this weekend had been a breath of fresh air. The stress from the breakup, moving and adjusting to a new city had prevented me from enjoying myself.

The chime of a text alert had me fishing my phone back out of my bag as the elevator approached my floor. I assumed it would be Paige, the only other people who text me are my brothers and mom, but even that is a rare occurrence considering they all prefer to call. So, seeing Cam's name has unease and anger coursing through me as the doors open for me to step off onto my floor.

Cameron:

I fucked up. Come home, we'll get over this.

There is no hesitation or thinking over a response. I simply delete the message and shove my phone away. Him saying that he fucked up was probably the closest thing to an *I'm sorry* that he will ever give, but it's not enough. I left the fucking state so that my ending our relationship after he cheated on me wouldn't be an inconvenience to his relationship with *my* family. There was only so much I could give in to but forgiving him and taking him back was not on that list at all.

I'm so wrapped up in my own spiral of thoughts that I don't notice Dominik waiting for me outside my door until I'm walking right into his toned chest. If it weren't for him

catching me around the waist, I probably would have fallen on my ass. He doesn't remove his hold on me even after he makes sure I'm steady on my feet. Tilting my head up to meet his concerned gaze, I let out an awkward laugh as I grip his biceps unsure of where else to put my hands.

"Sorry, guess I was a little too distracted. I didn't even see you." I motion to my door and raise an eyebrow in question. "How long have you been waiting out here?"

"Did something happen at dinner?" He asks, ignoring my question. It takes me longer than it should to figure out where his question came from, before I can answer he clarifies. "You said you were distracted, did something bad happen with your dad?"

There's no controlling the blatant shock that courses through me at his concern. Shaking my head, I finally release his arms and move to step back forcing him to reluctantly let me go.

"No. Dinner was actually really good." The way he still watched me closely made me fidget with my purse strap as I moved to open my door and felt the need to explain further.

"It's nothing, just a stupid text that had me lost in my thoughts instead of paying attention to where I was going." Pushing my door open, I turn back to him and repeat my question. "How long have you been waiting out here?"

He looks away, a faint blush appearing on his tanned skin as he grips the back of his neck. The muscles strain against the sleeves on his t-shirt, and he rubs his neck.

"Like five minutes. I figured since practice starts early tomorrow, that you and Coach wouldn't be out that much longer." Hearing him talk about my dad snaps me out of my appraisal of him. I clear my throat before turning into my condo, setting my purse on the table in the entryway and head to the kitchen to get a glass of water. Dom is silent as he follows me in, closing the door behind him. I stand with my back to him, clutching the sink for support as I voice what neither of us want to say.

“We can’t see each other again. At least, not like we saw each other this weekend.”



When I chose to wait for Lilly to get back from dinner so we could talk, I had expected her to say this. Regardless, it doesn't change the fact that those words cause a tightness in my chest. Even though I barely know her, after this weekend I wanted nothing more than to keep seeing her. There was still a lot that we didn't know about each other, but while she was with her dad all I could think about was how to find a way to keep seeing her.

Sarah would be busting my balls for feeling so much for someone I hardly know. Hell, she'd tease me for how much of a romantic sap I was being. But she would also be begging to meet Lilly ASAP.

Lilly stands across the kitchen with her back to me as I think over how to say what I'm thinking. I need to know if she's on the same page as me or if I'm looking too much into a weekend fling. The idea of ending this before having the

chance to explore whatever *this* is between us is what has me approaching her slowly.

Stepping up behind her, I pin her between my body and the counter, gently moving the hair off her shoulder to expose her neck. Bending forward, I inhale her light coconut and vanilla scent. Her breath hitches slightly as she begins breathing heavier. Leaning back against me, molding her body to mine, while I hold her by the hips and kiss just below her ear. She's still holding onto the counter as my name leaves her lips on a breathless moan.

Lilly was right in saying that we can't see each other. As of this morning, I work for her father. While some of the team was there for the press conference today, there was no official introduction. Plus, the only thing that Coach and the management team know about me is what they've learned from watching videos of me on the ice or the information gained from my stats. So, the potential that the first personal thing they learn about me is that I hooked up with the coach's daughter is not ideal.

Considering I already missed the first few weeks of practices and the first preseason game, I'm already going to have my work cut out for me to show the team my talent. Adding anything that will complicate that isn't something I should do.

However, now that she is in my arms again, the only thing I can focus on is how her body feels against mine, making it difficult to accept that.

Two days with her isn't enough.

Unable to resist, I place a gentle kiss on her neck while trying to figure out how to word what I want to say. Seeing as how we're neighbors, there is no way to fully avoid each other. The idea of an awkward "Hey, how are you?" in passing when I've seen her naked is not something I want.

There's still a lot to learn about Lilly. If we hadn't slept together right away this would be a whole different story, one where I wasn't craving more than just to touch her. Realizing

that I want more than to just have sex is what makes this truly difficult.

Even in the short time I've been around her it's clear as day that she's the type of person who is worth everything just to have in your life.

"Is the only reason that you're saying we can't see each other again because of who your dad is?" Lilly nods her head slowly against my chest as she sighs. Needing to see her, I gently turn her around but keep her between my body and the counter with my hands still on her hips. Leaning down until our foreheads are touching, I close my eyes and focus on her hand settling on my chest.

"Then we don't tell him." A sad quiet chuckle is all I get in response, but it urges me to continue. "I'm serious. While I don't know your dad yet and I also don't know your relationship with him, he doesn't need to know about this. He doesn't need to know that we hooked up. Or if we keep seeing each other." I can't stop, leaning back to watch her face as I ramble on.

"His focus and concerns about me only need to do with hockey and the team. Both of which have nothing to do with you. So, we could just keep them separate and keep getting to know each other."

Lilly still doesn't speak as I pause for a breath and watch her closely. Her hand is on my chest, tracing absent-minded patterns as she sucks her bottom lip into her mouth, watching me with pleading eyes. I just can't tell if she's pleading with me to keep talking or to shut up already.

Loosening my hold on her, I voice the thought that I pray is wrong.

"Unless *you* don't want to see me again, simply for the reason that you don't want to." She's shaking her head before I can finish my sentence. My heart skips a beat then pounds heavily in my chest. Which she can probably feel as she stops tracing patterns, but she keeps her hands pressed on me without pushing me away.

“Isn’t it a rule to not get involved with the coach’s daughter?”

“I mean not like a written rule. It’s more of a ‘things to avoid doing so shit doesn’t get awkward at practice’ kinda thing.” She laughs as a smile finally spreads across her face before it falls slightly, and she sighs. Letting her head fall forward heavily against my chest, I move one arm to wrap around her lower back, holding her to me while moving my other to rest on the back of her head. Her arms move so she’s finally hugging me back and mumbling into my chest.

“I don’t know what to do here.” I pull back just enough so that I can tip her chin up and look into her hazel eyes.

“Did you have fun this weekend with me?”

“Yes, but—” I silence her with a shake of my head, cutting her off with another question.

“Take my career and your dad out of the mix. If I had asked you on a date, would you have said yes?”

“Yeah.” Cupping her cheek in my hand, I lean forward until our lips are only a couple inches apart. I watch her closely as I ask one last question.

“Do you want me to kiss you?” Her eyes are locked on my lips as she answers in a whisper.

“Yes.”

Without wasting another second, I do just that. Eliminating the very little distance that was between us, I try to express everything I’m feeling in this one moment without words. Running my tongue along her bottom lip, swallowing the moan that escapes her, making sure to give her a teasing reminder of how good we were together. It takes all my strength to pull away, but I know that we need to actually talk before this can go any further. As much as I would love to show her exactly why she shouldn’t fight this, I need to make sure that she is on the same page.

The whimper that escapes her as I break the kiss is almost enough to try and save this conversation for later.

Almost.

“Do you want to be just neighbors?” I don’t dare move while I wait for her response. Lilly closes her eyes, shaking her head no, but refusing to look at me as she speaks quietly.

“No, I don’t. But there’s so much that we don’t know about each other. My relationship with my dad isn’t that simple. If he finds out that we hooked up...” She trails off, thinking over her response before finally opening her eyes. “I don’t know him well enough to predict how he would react. What I do know, is that him finding out you slept with his daughter would make things pretty fucking awkward though. Who you hooked up with this weekend shouldn’t affect your job.”

“Can I be blunt with you?” She nods hesitantly. “This past weekend was the happiest I have been in a long time. If we stop this right here and now, it’ll be like emotional blue balls. I’ve gotten this small glimpse of you, and that is enough to leave me wanting to know more. You’re passionate about your work, proud and protective of your friendship with Paige. You have the best sense of humor that I’ve seen in a while and have the most beautifully infectious laugh I’ve ever heard.” I pause, trailing my hand from her cheek to the side of her neck so that my thumb is caressing her pulse.

“And yeah, you have an amazing body. The sounds you make when you’re cumming from my touch are definitely the sexiest sounds that I’ve ever heard. But it would fucking suck if that’s all I get to know about you.”

Lilly stares up at me with wide eyes and a faint blush spreading over her cheeks. Swallowing thickly as she watches me closely, I can feel her gaining confidence as she stands in my arms. Her entire posture changes while she takes her time studying my expression. Before I kissed her, she was leaning into me as if she was resigned and defeated. Now though, as her eyes focus on my lips, she shifts closer to me, pressing her chest perfectly against mine, she’s nothing but confident in what she wants.

And I’m pretty confident that what she wants is *me*. She bites the side of her lower lip before bringing her eyes back up

to meet mine.

“So, what do you suggest we do?” I move my hand from her neck to trail down to her ribs, noting the lack of padding and wire that would be there if she had a bra on. Stifling a groan, I focus on answering her question.

“This is new. Fuck, we don’t even know what *this* is.” Keeping my hand just below her breast, I move to spread my other hand out just above her ass. “I suggest that we keep seeing each other and get to know each other more. We hang out when we can. If we’re both home and not busy we Netflix and Chill like we did this past weekend. I’m actually a really good fucking cook so I can wine and dine you from the comfort of our homes.” My hand moves slightly lower, resting on top of her perfect ass. “Closer to the beds.”

Unable to resist, I kiss her gently and quickly before continuing.

“We don’t need to tell anyone or make it public knowledge. And if it gets to that point, where we feel we need to or want to... we’ll handle it then.”

I move to kiss her neck again, needing more of her. Needing her to say yes.

She’s addicting, a shiver runs through her body as she tilts her head, giving me more access. Nipping and sucking while I kiss the path of her neck, I grip her ass in both my hands. Whispering into her ear before I move any further.

“Do you want that? Or should I stop and walk away now?” When she doesn’t answer I gently bite her ear drawing a moan from her. “Words, Sunshine. Yes or no.”

I pull my head back and Lilly holds me captive in her stare as she thinks over what I’m suggesting before she answers.

“Yes.”

Not wasting another second, I lean forward to lift her up. Her legs wrap around my waist as our mouths clash. She tastes like sugar which only motivates me to deepen the kiss. Over the weekend we had fumbled down the hallway back to her

room multiple times, something I'm grateful for now so that I don't have to stop kissing her.

Once in her bedroom, I beeline for her bed. Nothing but the need to taste her again coursing through me. She's fucking addicting.

Laying her onto the bed with her legs wrapped around my hips, I squeeze her ass before moving my grip behind her knees and gently tugging so she releases me. Laying below me with hooded eyes, she lets me manipulate her legs until she is spread before me. Her dress is bunched up on her hips, giving the perfect view to her black lacy underwear. Groaning, I kneel between her thighs while running my hands under her dress and pushing it up until her chest is on display and begging for attention.

Grinding myself into her center as I kiss down her collarbone to the center of her chest. The barrier of my gym shorts and her panties is the only thing stopping me from being inside of her. Loving the way she squirms beneath me as I continue to ravish her breasts. When I move to kiss a trail down her torso, I pause when she lets out a moan as she tries to clamp her thighs around me. Glancing up from the spot where her breast meets her ribs, I watch her reaction as I kiss the spot again, earning the same response.

"Do you like getting kissed right there, Sunshine?" She nods quickly while she attempts to move her hips. Giving the spot one last lingering kiss before continuing my path down her torso.

Shifting my weight off her and sitting back on my knees, I begin removing her panties. I meant to go slow and draw this out, only once they're pulled down to her knees and I look up at the sight of her, all patience is gone. I rip one side of them and spread her legs further with no restriction. I don't even bother pulling down the remaining pieces of them as all my attention focuses on her center. The moment my tongue licks along her pussy, nothing else matters except the taste of her in my mouth.

Wrapping one arm around her thigh and gripping her hip to hold her to me. A whimper escapes, I begin teasing her with two fingers at her entrance until a soft “please” escapes her on a moan. Moving my tongue to her clit as I pump my fingers in and out. Finding that spot inside her and not relenting any of my attention as my name escapes her lips.

“Dominik.” It’s the only warning I get before her release takes over. Humming in approval as I catch every bit of her on my tongue and gentling my touch as she catches her breath. When she opens her eyes and looks directly at me, I could cum from the sight alone.

A flush has spread across her cheeks as her darkened eyes seek mine. She reaches for me with nothing but desire in her eyes, then pulls me up and kisses me. As I settle my hips between her thighs again, one arm next to her head for support while the other gravitates to her breasts. Lilly reaches for the hem of my shirt, yanking it up in desperation. Deciding to give her a hand, I push myself off the bed to fully remove it. I toss it somewhere behind me and move to push my shorts down. The way she watches me with hungry eyes has my cock hardening more than I thought possible.

The moment I’m free of clothes, I move over her again. Kissing every inch, until I find her lips. When she starts grinding her hips along my length, earning a groan from somewhere in my chest at the feel of her wet and ready to take me. I pull back as she moves her hips more and the head of my cock notches at her entrance. Placing my hand on her hip to halt her movements and break the kiss, I gaze down at her.

“Hold on there, baby, I need to grab a condom.” The blush on her cheeks deepens as she shakes her head slowly, watching my face intently as she runs her hands along my ribs. Lifting one of her legs to wrap around me and hold me where I am.

“I’m on birth control and I’m clean. I haven’t been with anyone in a long time before you.” She swallows heavily and starts to let her leg drop from my waist. I stare back at her, processing what she’s saying. “Unless you feel more comfortable. Never mind. I shouldn’t have said that.”

I catch her leg and hold it to my hip, watching her blush deepen. No woman has ever suggested not using a condom nor have I ever been with someone where I felt comfortable enough to think twice about it.

Until right now.

Keeping my eyes on her, I watch her closely, needing to hear she has thought it through.

“I’m clean.” With that her leg tightens around me, trying to urge me into her but I hold still. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

That’s all I need. Giving into the weight of her leg pulling me into her, I push forward until I’m buried inside her. I drop my head to her shoulder as I still for a moment, letting her adjust to me and trying to not lose control.

“You feel so fucking good.” Kissing her collarbone before I push myself up needing to see her. Her head is pressed back into the mattress with an expression of pure bliss. Glancing down between us to where we’re joined, I’m mesmerized as I slowly pull out and push back in. The feeling of her clenching around my cock has my teeth grinding.

She fits around me so perfectly that going slow feels close to impossible. As I pull out of her again, I start thinking of one of my warmup routines on the ice to help keep me from exploding after three fucking pumps.

“Dom.” Tearing my gaze away from the sight of her taking me so perfectly, I look back at her face as I push into her, pulling a moan from her again. Slowly, she opens her eyes, I pause once I’m all the way in. Catching her breath, she reaches up to run her fingertips along my jaw as she smirks up at me.

“Stop holding back and fuck me like you want to.”

Fuck, that’s the hottest thing I’ve ever heard.

Chuckling lightly, I lean down to nip her ear and whisper back. “Anything for you Sunshine.” With that, my restraint snaps. I shift her leg from around my hip to my shoulder and pound into her without holding back. The sounds escaping her

perfect lips is all the approval needed as I reach between us. Using my thumb to rub her clit as she nods her head. When she begins to pulse around my cock, moaning my name again as she climaxes, there's no stopping my own release.

Both of us are breathing heavily as I collapse on the bed, pulling her on top of me. Brushing her hair away from her face while holding her to me, I kiss her forehead. When I go to run a hand down her back, my hand catches on her dress that's bunched up under her armpits, I can't help but chuckle.

"Sorry the dress didn't make it fully off." Her laugh vibrates through me as she shrugs a shoulder.

"That was totally worth the dress staying on." Tipping her head up by the chin, I gently kiss her lips as I roll us to the side. As I push myself off her to stand up, I kiss the spot below her breast again before giving her a pointed look.

"Stay right there." She nods her head as I move toward her bathroom to get a warm washcloth. After cleaning both of us up, I help her stand and finally remove her dress.

"Do you want me to stay or leave?" Over the weekend, we had passed out wrapped up in each other's arms after having sex. We've both had a long day though, so I don't want to assume that she would be okay with me spending the night with her again.

"I'd like for you to stay. Do you have practice tomorrow?"

"I do, but not until nine." I move around her, pushing the covers back before laying down and turning to pull her with me. I never thought of myself as a cuddler, but apparently, with Lilly, I am.

She yelps as she falls next to me, laughing as she adjusts herself to snuggle up against me. When she tilts her head back to smile at me, my breath catches for a moment.

Her hazel eyes shine as she watches me admire her. Dim freckles are scattered along her nose and cheeks, where one faint dimple is starting to show. I have a sudden urge to make her laugh as soon as possible to see if the dimple becomes

more defined. A few curls frame her face while the rest spreads out behind her on the pillow.

“You’re absolutely stunning.” I hadn’t even meant to say the words out loud, but I’m glad I did. She shakes her head, laughing lightly, “You’re high on endorphins.” Lilly goes to look away, but I bring a hand up to tuck one of the stray curls behind her ear and cup her cheek, forcing her to keep her eyes on me.

“Maybe so, but that doesn’t discredit the fact that you are fucking beautiful.” Her cheeks heat beneath my palm as I hold her gaze. When she finally nods her head in acceptance, I pull her face to mine, rewarding her with a kiss.

“Now, how tired are you, Sunshine?”



An hour and a half later, we’re both sitting up against the headboard. The TV was put on with the intention to snuggle and wind down to sleep, but it’s been nothing but background noise as we talk. There have been no awkward moments or pauses, and while we have asked the basic questions like; “*what’s your favorite color?*” or “*what’s your favorite dessert?*” We mostly talked about her career and the novel she’s writing.

Her editor sent her back ten chapters that she needs to work on tomorrow. I had asked questions about the process for publishing and how much longer she thinks it will take. The publishing world is intense, I never knew how much really went on behind the scenes to get a book onto a shelf. Not to mention the social media aspect behind it all.

While I do have accounts on the major platforms, being active on them is a whole different story.

“I bet your family is excited about your upcoming release.”

Her smile falls a bit. “They don’t actually know.”

I blink at her, my eyebrows furrowing. “Your family doesn’t know that you’re almost finished?” She shrugs, choosing to focus on the TV instead of me. When she speaks again, her voice is quieter.

“They don’t even know I’m writing a book at all. They just think I really love reading, which I do.” She shifts awkwardly, I don’t miss her glancing at me from the corner of her eye. I make sure to tread carefully when responding.

“If they don’t know you’re writing, why do they think you moved down here?” Lilly pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. Her hesitation has another question running through my mind. “Was the publishing company taking you on not the reason you moved down here?”

She sighs but shakes her head as she gives a quiet no.

“Can I ask why you moved down here then?”

She turns to me then, searching my face for an answer to something. Sighing, she nods her head slowly before turning to face the TV again as she tucks her knees to her chest. She doesn’t look at me as she answers.

“I just got out of a relationship, like two...no, three months ago. I ended it, but the more time that passes, the more I realize that the relationship was toxic as hell. *He* was toxic, and I didn’t start noticing until the end. Almost five years and I was oblivious.” She rubs her arms absentmindedly before continuing.

“My family loves him, like, they adore the ground he walks on. So, after shit hit the fan...they didn’t want to pick between us. My older brother, Ian, and my ex have been friends since the day they met. And my mom has thought of him like a third son.” She glances at me with a scowl. “She literally asked him when he was going to propose the first time she met him.” She sighs, resting her cheek on her knees so her face is tilted toward me but keeping her gaze past me. Her voice is quiet when she speaks again. It’s almost enough to suggest a subject change. However, something in my gut has me thinking that she needs to get this off her chest.

“My mom didn’t think it was fair for him to feel excluded or like he couldn’t come around anymore. So, I chose for them. I called Paige, and, of course, when she found out about what I’ve been working on, she told me I had to submit it. She convinced me to call my dad for the first time in nine years and to submit my work to SweetHeart Publishing. I moved down here two weeks later.” She finally looks at me with a sad smile.

“They think I moved down here to be dramatic and difficult.”

I can only blink in response as anger hits me full force. Typically, when I’m hit with intense emotions, I step back to clear my mind instead of responding in the heat of the moment. But I’m struggling to do that right now. Family is supposed to support you over everyone else. Yet hers is trying to push her back into a relationship so *they* aren’t inconvenienced.

She sighs, still watching me as she talks again.

“My family knows I’m living in Florida, but they think I’m living with Paige and that, eventually, I’ll realize that I made a mistake and will go back to Cam. I just can’t bring myself to tell them what he did, why I broke up with him, and just how damaged our relationship was. It’s like...if I tell them everything that happened leading up to the break-up, that they will be disappointed in me. But at the same time, it feels like I’m the one doing the wrong thing.”

Knowing the douchebag’s name just adds fuel to the fire, making him a real person that I want nothing more than to punch in the face. Unable to resist not touching her any longer, I put my arm around her and pull her to my side as I kiss her forehead.

“You removed yourself from a toxic environment. There is nothing wrong about that, if anything, it’s fucking brave. It takes a lot of strength to get out of a bad relationship.” Lilly tilts her head back, using my shoulder to prop her head up as she looks at me with watery eyes. “Calling Paige and your dad for help was the best thing you could have done.”

She inhales a ragged breath as I meet her stare, trying to reign in my anger, hoping that she instead sees how strong she's been. I'm in a weird spot where I want to ask about her ex to learn more about how he hurt her, and wanting to make her smile again. I also really want to ask about the comment she made about calling her dad for the first time in nine years.

"Paige seems like she's not one to hold back her opinions, what does she think of everything with your family?" I'm rewarded with a half-smile and a quiet chuckle before she answers.

"You would be right. Paige is not the kind of person to hold back on calling someone out for being a dick. If she knew the full extent of everything with Cam and my family, she would be on the next flight back to Vermont and raise Hell in a heartbeat." My chest aches as I realize what she's saying.

"Paige... doesn't know everything?"

She slowly shakes her head. "No. She thinks he only cheated and that my family doesn't know about that. But...this is actually the most I've said about any of this to anyone." She gives a sad laugh. "Which is weird since I hardly know you."

I squeeze her tighter, happy that she feels comfortable enough to talk to me, but also sad that she feels the need to keep things from anyone.

"We'll count this as the "getting to know each other" part of our secret relationship." This time her laugh sounds a bit lighter. I wait until she's looking at me again before asking one of the questions burning in my mind.

"You said Paige thinks he *only* cheated... what else did he do?" For a long moment, I think she's not going to answer me. Then she does, and the need to punch the fucker in the face only grows stronger.

"No one knows it wasn't just the one time he cheated. Last September was when I first learned he was cheating. When I confronted him about everything, he convinced me to stay. Made me believe that things were going to change, that *he*

would change.” She closes her eyes, taking a couple deep breaths before continuing.

“So, I trusted him. He was the only man I had been with; we were four years into our relationship, and at that point, I was convinced I was broken. That no one else would think I was good enough, especially considering I never wanted to have sex. I fucking thought there was something wrong with me because I didn’t enjoy doing *things* with him. But I was also convinced that he was the only one who would put up with me if I was defective. I stayed when he promised he would be better, that we would get past everything.”

“Things were good for a couple months after that. He was sweet, attentive, and the picture-perfect boyfriend until he just...stopped. It was like nothing I did or said was right, and everything that went wrong was *my* fault. Paige was actually the one who opened my eyes to the hole I was spiraling into without noticing. She came home for Christmas and asked if I lost weight. I laughed it off and chalked it up to the fact that she hadn’t seen me in months.” Lilly closes her eyes as a lone tear finally escapes and rolls down her cheek.

“Everything hit me at once. Cam had spent years emotionally manipulating and abusing me, and I didn’t even notice. I was bending over backwards, hurting, and putting myself down so that he could shine. But even then, I stayed because I was convinced he loved me in his own, twisted way.”

When she opens her eyes, they’re shining with anger. “Then I walked in on him fucking the neighbor on our couch and I was done. I would take being broken and alone over ever feeling that low again.”

“But you’re not broken.” I had meant that as a question, but as it came out, I realized how right I was. Garrett’s words from the game bounce around in my head, and I realize they fit her too.

“You’re not broken, you took some hits and some bits of you got chipped away, but you’re here. You are the sunshine that peeks through during the roughest part of the storm.”

Another tear escapes, I catch it with my thumb as I cup her cheek, leaning forward to kiss her as the need for her to accept what I've said hits me. We've only known each other for three days, yet it's enough time to start seeing how spectacular she is. Her family not being able to put her happiness above their own comfort and wants is bullshit. If she needs someone in her corner, supporting her move, then I can fucking be that person.

"How are you feeling about everything? You know, now that you've gotten away and had time to start clearing your head?" She scrunches her brows together at my question. I realize it's most likely because no one has actually asked how *she's* doing.

"I'm okay." I lift an eyebrow in response which earns me a curt chuckle. "*I'm* the one who ended the relationship. And I'm glad that I did, there's no part of me that regrets breaking up with Cam."

"Just because you made the choice to end things, doesn't mean you don't get to be upset or hurt. You said he cheated on you, multiple fucking times. That in and of itself is traumatizing enough. Add in his mind games and other toxic behavior?" I scoff. "He hurt you, repeatedly. But that pain doesn't take away from the fact that at one point, you cared for him. You're allowed to be upset over the loss of someone you thought you knew. Or maybe you really are okay and I'm projecting my thoughts." I shrug, focusing, back on the TV. I need a moment to breathe, to get my thoughts straight. The desire to punch a man whom I don't even know is insane considering I barely know Lilly.

After taking a few more deep, calming breaths, I finally look down at Lilly. She's still leaning on my shoulder, tracing circles on my chest absentmindedly. Her mindless patterns help calm my racing thoughts. It's not right that she's been forced to hide her emotions. Considering how close my family and I always were, I can't imagine any of them ever picking an ex-girlfriend over me.

Lilly reaches up to trace my jaw, watching me closely as she nods.

“You’re right. I’m not okay. Or maybe, at least, I wasn’t okay, but I’m starting to be. It almost seems kind of silly that I feel a bit lighter after oversharing with you.” Her eyes widen as her hand drops from my face to cover her mouth in horror.

“Oh. My. Gosh. Isn’t it like some major rule of dating to *not* talk about your past relationships right after meeting?” She groans, burying her face in her hands. I can only laugh, pulling her hands away to see her face.

“I think normal dating rules went out the window the moment we decided to keep seeing each other in secret.”

“Well then, I’m gonna need you to share something personal to even out the field.” She pauses but continues before I can answer. “But maybe next week. Learning my dad is your coach and my trauma dump seems like a lot for one night.”

“So, we just schedule weekly trauma dump sessions until everything is all out in the open?”

“Weekly trauma dump night with the hot neighbor sex friend has a much better ring to it than date night with the guy across the hall.”

I quirk an eyebrow at her and smirk. “You think I’m hot?”

This time when she laughs, it’s as if she’s lighter, and for some reason, that makes me happy.



Dom and I spent most of the night curled up, talking. After I unloaded about Cam, it felt like taking a breath of fresh air. Paige will flip a tit if she ever finds out that I talked about my ex while naked, in bed with a guy. Normally, I probably would flip out as well. Except it felt natural talking about things with Dominik.

Whenever we talk, he gives me his full attention. At one point, his phone went off with a text alert and he didn't even look at it. When I told him it was okay if he wanted to check the message, he simply shrugged and said, "if it's an emergency, they will call."

It was a new feeling to experience having someone's undivided attention. Well, someone that isn't Paige. Which was exactly why I avoided her and shut myself away last week. If I had told her that I was doing okay, much like Dom did last night, she would call bullshit. It's not that I'm trying to

keep what happened between Cam and I from her, it's my family's reaction.

Last night helped me realize something. I haven't told Paige about my family's reaction to the breakup because she would be disappointed in them. Much like I am. I thought we were closer than this as a family. That considering how dad left us all, we would all pick each other over everyone else. They're showing me how wrong I was about that, and that almost hurts more than the actual break up.

I had hoped that Dom would have been too caught up in the whole Cam thing to notice the comments I made about my dad not being around. At the same time, it wasn't actually that shocking that he didn't miss them. So, I gave him the cliff notes version.

I then asked if we could save the detailed Daddy issues for another time, and we spent the rest of the night talking about lighter topics. We told each other some drunken college and summer vacation stories. When he told me that he has never been to Cape Cod, I freaked out.

Being able to go from practically crying in his lap to laughing until tears of joy were spilling out was oddly comforting. After dinner with my dad, I was convinced there was no way we could see each other again. That is, until he tempted me with keeping us a secret.

Hanging out with him for the past three days felt like we had known each other longer. If we were talking, none of the conversations felt forced, but we could also sit in silence and not feel awkward. Hell, he didn't even mind when I spaced out and started working on my book again.

Add in the fact that Dominik is blowing my mind in bed. Yeah, convincing myself to keep seeing him wasn't actually difficult.

At some point last night, we had fallen asleep with me using his chest as a pillow and half my body draped across him. That's where I still am. Only now his arms are wrapped around me, holding me so I have nowhere to go. As my alarm starts going off, I move to push myself up to shut off the stupid

sound blaring from across the room, except he holds me tighter. Laughing, I reach up to kiss his cheek as he opens his eyes slightly, peeking down at me.

A sleepy smile spreads across his face as he holds me to him with one hand on my ass, the other tracing my bottom lip.

“Good morning, Sunshine.” Gently, he tilts my face up to kiss me. The kiss itself is short, but when he pulls back with a contented grin, he doesn’t let me go. Laughing lightly, while trying to ignore the fact that I have morning breath, I start trying to wiggle out of his grasp.

“You have to let me go so I can turn that alarm off.” He groans, squeezing my ass one more time before releasing me so I can roll off the bed. At one point, when we got up for water, I remembered to charge my phone and set an alarm. Even though I very rarely sleep past eight o’clock, I still set an alarm out of habit. Plus, I didn’t want Dom to be late to practice because of me. Especially since we didn’t fall asleep until sometime around two in the morning.

After silencing the alarm, I turn back toward the bed. Dominik had pulled the covers up over his face. I can’t stifle the giggle that escapes, causing him to pop his head out from a small opening in the blanket. He looks like a giant burrito, and the sight has me bursting out in laughter.

“Are you laughing at me, Sunshine?”

“Yes.” I squeak out, still laughing at the fact that this hunk of a hockey player looks hysterically adorable wrapped up like this. “You’re a Domorito!”

“Domorito?” His face scrunches with confusion. Calming myself from laughing, I try to nod seriously.

“Yes. A Domorito. Like a burrito but mixed with your name.” He shakes his head, but the movement is restricted due to the blanket he has wrapped around his face. Which, of course, sends me back into a laughing tizzy as I head back toward the bed.

“Domorito...” He trails off, watching me intently as I make my way back toward him. When I get close enough to the bed,

he reaches for me with the blanket in his hands and pulls me under the covers with him. He curls into me, running kisses over my shoulder while covering us both fully with the blanket. I don't miss how he inhales deeply when his nose reaches the base of my neck.

“Did you just...give me a nickname?”

I chuckle, curling back into his warmth. “Garrett said you don't have any nicknames outside of Dominator.” I turn slightly to eye his shadowed face. “Which I'm going to guess has to do with how you play on the ice.”

I feel him nod against my shoulder, I can even picture his dopey smirk as I turn back to cuddle against him. We should be getting up, but what's another five minutes in bed? When I'm settled with my back to his chest, he leans down to nip my ear lobe before he whispers...

“The ice isn't the only place I dominate.” He kisses that damn spot below my ear that causes my insides to tighten with need. Attempting to ignore the desire he's stirring in me, I chuckle.

“Something tells me that if I were to ever give in and call you Dominator, your head would explode from too much confidence.”

He tightens his arm around my waist. “I'm twenty-five years old, between Garrett, my sister and my teammates... that and Dom are the only nicknames that have ever fit.” He shrugs.

I shake my head, turning in his arms until I'm fully facing him. As I move, I pull the blanket down from our faces, breathing in the fresh, cool air.

“What about girlfriends? Surely they didn't call you Dominator.” His brows scrunch together a bit.

“Technically, you're right, but that's because I've only had two girlfriends. They both just called me Dom.” That damn smirk appears on his face. “Now the bunnies were more than happy to call me Dominator.”

My eyes roll as a smirk settles on my face. Paige told me all about the Puck Bunnies this past Friday. They're a group of people who practically stalk players in hopes of catching the eyes of the team. Paige described them as hockey dick obsessed and after spending three days with Dominik... I can see why.

The thought of someone trying to get Dom's attention has my chest tightening. It doesn't take me long to recognize it as jealousy. Which is silly considering we hardly know each other.

"Are we exclusive?" The question bubbles out before I even realize it. It wasn't something I meant to voice, but now that it's out there, I force myself to not regret it. If Dominik and I are not on the same page right from the start, then there's a higher chance of me getting hurt again. Which is honestly something I don't have the energy for.

We're both adults and should be able to talk about what we do and don't want. There's no point in trying to lie or fluff details about us to impress someone. I'm too tired to be anything other than myself and I deserve open, honest communication from here on out. If someone can't do those things, then I won't waste my time anymore. It's too draining.

Dominik watches me closely, brows furrowed slightly before answering.

"I would like it if we are." He traces absentminded circles on my hip as he keeps his eyes on me. "Do you want to be? I know you just broke up with your ex, so if you're in a different spot—" I cut him off.

"I'm not in a different spot. At least on the exclusivity. That I agree with." I place a gentle kiss on his cheek before swinging my legs off the bed and getting up. Mind set on making coffee, I head to the bathroom to freshen up. When I walk back into the bedroom, Dom looks up from his spot at the end of my bed. He found his shorts, but his shirt is still on the floor across the room. My cheeks flush at the memory of getting undressed in a rush last night.

I detour into my closet and throw on pajama shorts with an old “Doctor Who” t-shirt. Once dressed, getting coffee is the only solid thought running through my mind.

Coffee is required before everything else. Especially since it feels like I just triggered the “rules to being secret fuck buddies” conversation.

I go through the motions of grinding coffee beans and getting a pot brewing. Dom doesn’t say a word as he enters the kitchen behind me, opening my fridge before pulling out eggs and bacon. We fall back into the same routine we did the other morning. Neither of us talk as we make breakfast, there’s no awkwardness in the air as we move around each other. We don’t say anything until we’re sitting next to each other on my barstools, and I’ve had a couple sips of coffee.

Clearing my throat to get his attention, I choose to just dive right back in like we never stopped talking.

“I do want us to be exclusive, but you brought up a good point. Considering everything I’ve been through over the past couple months, I don’t think I’m ready to go right back into a serious relationship like that again. That has nothing to do with you. I just don’t feel the need to be rushing into anything.” He nods his head as I continue. “If it weren’t for the fact that you work for my dad, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. However, I think it would be best if we got a couple things out of the way.”

I internally cringe as I think of Paige. She would kill me for forcing the “what are we?” conversation so soon. Hell, I should probably be freaking out, but seeing as how he is working for my dad...

“We both agreed that we’re exclusive, so that’s one thing we got out of the way. And we had the birth control and clean convo last night.” My cheeks heat as I pause, thinking over what I need next. “I don’t know how close you are to your family, and you seemed close to Garrett... Are we telling anyone?”

Dom shifts slightly on his stool as he looks back toward his plate. Taking a sip of coffee before he answers me.

“Garrett and I don’t keep anything from each other.”

“Paige and I are the same way.” Nodding in agreement as I take a bite of bacon. “We clearly don’t want my dad to know, so I think it’s best if we keep our families out of this completely.”

When he doesn’t answer right away, I turn to him. As he stares across my kitchen, I notice how tense he is. His jaw is clenched, and his hands are tightened into fists. I think over my words and try to back track.

“I didn’t mean to upset you. If you’re that close with your family that you want them to know of me then by all means, go ahead. I just figured that the less people who know about us the better.”

He blinks, breaking his focus before turning back to me, looking defeated. Shaking his head, he runs his fingers through his hair.

“No. Telling only Garrett and Paige is perfectly fine.” When he doesn’t say anything more, I tread carefully.

“Then what’s wrong?” He picks his fork up and mindlessly pushes his eggs around for a few seconds before he answers.

“Garrett is the only family I have left. So even if I wanted to tell them...” My heart breaks for him as he trails off. He told me about his sister, that had explained why singing Miranda Lambert had pained him. There are so many questions about what happened, but as I watch him, I recognize the need to change the subject. Reaching out, I place my hand on his forearm.

“I’m sorry. Do you want to talk about it?” I question in case I’m reading his expression wrong. Dominik looks at me, shaking his head slowly. I squeeze his arm one last time, nodding once before getting up to grab the pot of coffee, if only to give him a moment alone. When I come back and fill both our mugs, he flashes me a pained smile.

“We can save my family issues for next week’s trauma dump date night.” I chuckle at the fact that we’ve somehow

made that a thing. Checking the clock above the oven, I realize it's already eight thirty.

I've never been much of a morning person. Normally, I need a good hour to wake up and require complete silence the entire time. Yet this morning, it felt nice to wake up and talk with him.

"What time do you have to leave for work?" Dom glances over his shoulder to the clock. Shrugging before turning his focus back to his breakfast.

"It only takes ten minutes to walk to the arena, so I should probably leave here in a few to freshen up and grab my gear."

"Okay. Are there any other rules or ya know...something that we should talk about before we go any further?" He finishes up his last piece of bacon as he contemplates the answer. Standing and bringing his empty plate to the sink before he turns and leans against the counter to face me. Holding his hand up as he recaps what we have discussed so far, adding a finger each time he says one.

"The only people who know will be Garrett and Paige, other than that, we keep this private. Although I do think that if either of us start to feel like we want more than us behind a closed door, we need to let the other know." I nod in agreement.

"No hooking up with or dating other people. If either one of us meets someone, we need to be honest and just say it."

"We're both clean, and you're on birth control. I know last night we agreed to no condoms, but was that a heat of the moment thing or an every time thing?"

My face flushes, but I refuse to let myself shy away. This is an adult relationship, maybe not a boyfriend and girlfriend relationship, but two people agreeing to get to know each other both physically and emotionally. I avoided talking about sex with Cam for four years and look where that got me.

Unsatisfied and alone.

I refuse to be that same person who bent over backwards and ignored my needs.

“It wasn’t just the heat of the moment. As long as you’re comfortable with it, I’d like to not use a condom.”

“So that’s three guidelines to this... umm...” He cocks his head to the side, curiosity taking over his expression. “I don’t want to say relationship cause we’ve only known each other for five days. Neighbors sounds too impersonal. And saying we’re friends seems wrong since I’ve seen what you look like when you cum.”

Blushing at his bluntness, I lick my lips, gesturing between us.

“I mean, do we need to put a label on this?”

He studies me before shrugging his shoulders. “Not at all. You just got out of a relationship, we both just moved to a city that is completely new to us. Right now, I think knowing that neither of us are sleeping with other people while we get to know each other in secret. Add on the bonus that I get to keep seeing you naked.” He smiles as his gaze slowly traces over me. My thighs clench tightly together, which is something he doesn’t miss given by the way his tongue darts out and licks his bottom lip.

Not only does he listen to what I say, but he also notices how my body reacts to what he says or does. He seems to know exactly what my body needs before I do. Biting my lip, I realize that I’m most likely nowhere near Dom’s level of experience or confidence in the bedroom.

While we’re getting all this out in the open, I decide to tack on one more request before I can talk myself out of it.

“Considering the fact that we skipped a couple steps and you already know more shit than normal... I have one more thing to ask.”

Dom keeps his full attention on me as I take a breath and just blurt out what I’m thinking.

“I need to be more comfortable in the bedroom. Like when it comes to talking about sex and all that without being awkward. Now that I know I’m not broken, I realize that I never got used to talking about what I like and don’t like. Hell,

I didn't even know I could like anything." I look away, realizing that I've basically just asked someone I don't know to teach me how to be good at sex.

Dominik's silence has me second guessing myself. After a long moment I finally glance at him, ready to take it back.

My heart skips when I turn to find him staring at me. The desire in his eyes as he grips the counter has my knees feeling a bit wobbly. He holds me captive as he pushes off the counter and stalks toward me, not stopping until he is standing right in front of me. I tilt my head back to keep my gaze on his, resisting the urge to touch him as I wait for him to speak.

His hungry gaze drops as I wet my lips. When he finally finds words, he's still honed in on them.

"Are you asking me to be your sex educator?" I snort, needing to break some of the tension.

"I mean, when you put it like that, it sounds dirty." I move to step back, the air between us taking over my thoughts. He needs to be getting over to his apartment in the next couple minutes if he doesn't want to be late. So, getting turned on and distracting him should be avoided.

Except the moment I start to put distance between us, he's wrapping his arms around me. A gasp escapes as my palms fly up to his chest to help catch my balance, even though I'm certain he wouldn't let me fall. The expression on his face has me grateful I skipped putting panties on.

"Sunshine, if you need help learning what brings your body pleasure and how to talk dirty, then Hell. Fucking. Yes." To emphasize his point, he pulls me impossibly closer and claims my lips. Effectively wiping every thought from my mind. The only thing I can focus on is the way his mouth moves against mine, claiming me and warming every inch of my body.

I honestly can't tell you how long we stand in the middle of my kitchen, kissing until I'm forced to break away. Clutching his arms, I pull back slightly to look up at him which doesn't help with catching my breath.

“Well then. I-I uhh...” I clear my throat, gathering my thoughts before continuing. “Okay then. Are we forgetting anything?”

His smile widens as he slowly shakes his head.

“Okay, well, this is definitely the weirdest start to any neighbor-slash-friendship that I’ve ever had.” I laugh, trying to stay focused and not think about getting him back in bed.

Dom kisses my cheek as his chuckle vibrates through me. Leaning to the side to check the time, my eyes bulge when I see its eight forty-three.

“You’re going to be late!” He glances at the clock, shrugging as if the time doesn’t bug him.

“Nah. Just means I gotta go brush my teeth, grab my gear and hustle in the next seven minutes. Before that happens though.” He grabs my hand to pull me back into his chest while kissing me the moment I collide with him. I let him have his way, giving it right back as I melt into his hold before pulling away.

“That’s another minute wasted.” He places one more light kiss on my lip.

“There is no way in hell that a minute spent kissing you counts as wasted time.” This time he leans down, placing a gentle kiss on my forehead before backing away.

“I’ll talk to you later?” Knowing that I must have a stupid smile spread across my face, I nod slowly. Watching him head toward my bedroom as I stand there in a contented daze.

A minute later, he returns to my spot in the kitchen with a shirt on and phone in hand as he bends down to give me one last kiss.

Just before he heads down the hallway to leave my apartment he stops, turning to face me.

“Also, Domy? Definitely not the nickname that’s going to stick.” I laugh as he walks away with a smile. With everything that happened after the press conference. I had forgotten about the text I sent him yesterday.

A smile stays on my face as I force myself to focus on getting some work done.



While leaving Lilly's apartment was harder than I expected, somehow, I managed to show up to practice on time.

Yesterday morning, before the press conference was held, I met up with Marcus, the team manager, and Coach James. We had gone over some final details in my contract before he took me on a tour of the arena. We didn't get to see everything, but they showed me the most important areas.

Meeting room, locker room, Coach's office and, of course, the ice rink.

This wasn't my first-time setting foot in the Heart's Arena, however, walking through the doors now and knowing this is where *my* team plays? It's a whole different feeling. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous, but the excitement outweighs everything else.

I had been playing for the Colorado Cougars my entire career. I never thought much about transferring teams. When my first contract was signed, there was a no-trade agreement in place while Sarah was in school and starting college. I couldn't bring myself to risk moving away and leaving her alone. However, after Sarah died there was no reason for me to stay. I had tried, but when I showed up at practice two weeks after my sister's funeral, it became too much.

The man who was responsible for taking my sister from me was skating on the ice. The team captain, Josh, is the reason my sister is dead.

He had nothing more than a bruise on his cheek and a cut on his forehead. Hardly a scratch on him from the crash, while my sister was cold in the ground.

Josh tried approaching me, tried to say something, but I couldn't look away from his bruise. Worse injuries have happened during a game, yet the fatal car crash that took my sister from me had barely hurt him. When he stepped close enough, he tried to reach out and touch my shoulder with an apology pouring from his lips. I saw only red.

Punching him should have made me feel something. As he stumbled back and others came rushing over to help him up, I felt nothing. I walked away before he could try to say anything else. I went right up to my coach's office and told him I either needed to leave the sport or leave the team. Coach Owen simply nodded his head, pulled out my contract, and set to work helping get me out of there.

When he told me there were multiple offers made, I didn't know how to pick. Three teams put in trade offers, but when I saw the Bobcats on the list, my indecisiveness was cleared. There was one better offer from another team, but accepting the deal that put me in the same city as Garrett was a no brainer.

Now, as I turn down a hall that will lead me to the offices, I run my fingers through my hair. I had meant to show up to the arena dressed a bit nicer, but my faded blue jeans and white polo shirt were good enough in a time crunch. The rest of my

boxes are supposed to be arriving this week, so even if I had more time this morning, I probably still would have worn this.

Plus, the extra couple of kisses with Lilly were totally worth the time crunch. Not wanting to start thinking about her, I focus back on what I'm doing today. I'll be having my one-on-one with Coach James as well as meeting my new team.



When I sat down in the Coach's office, I was convinced it would be awkward. Considering I've spent the past four nights with his daughter, I had almost convinced myself that I wouldn't be able to face him. Yet we had fallen into conversation seamlessly. Coach asked about my career, as well as where I went to college.

I was a Colorado man through and through until now. While reminiscing pulled on more than one heart string, I never felt overwhelmed. I know that Coach James spoke with my old Coach during my transfer process. So, the chances that he knows about Sarah are high. Still, I couldn't bring myself to mention her.

We talked for a bit about his time with the Bobcats and his previous team up in Vermont. Coach James starts talking about the players, it's clear that he knows his team like the back of his hand. It's more than just knowing their stats or where they're strongest on the ice, he makes off handed comments about their personal lives along the way.

Could he talk about Lilly and her brothers the same way?

I shake the thought away, needing to keep her out of my thoughts as I sit in her father's office. If this is going to work, I need to keep hockey and Lilly completely separate.

Just as Coach was wrapping up his "goals for the team" speech, he's cut off by someone barreling into the office.

When I turn around, the man in the doorway has me biting back a smile.

The best way to describe the guy leaning against the door frame, sporting a crooked grin, would be to say he's a Shaun White look alike with more muscle, if possible. Holding two cups of coffee, he pushes the door further open with his foot.

"Mornin' Coach! Sorry I'm runnin' a bit late. That dang coffee place by my apartment had a line longer than Space Mountain." I can feel my brow lift in response as I look over my shoulder back at Coach. Based on this man's build, I'm going to assume he's one of my new teammates. He pushes himself off the door frame and stalks across the office. He doesn't spare me a glance as he steps next to me to set one of the coffees down in front of Coach. His wide smile and dimples make it seem like he's used to charming people and keeping the peace.

"They had that toasted mocha syrup that you loved so much last year so I grabbed ya one." Finally, he turns to me, that crooked smile spread across his face. "You must be our latest victim."

Standing so that I'm not forced to look up at him, I stick my hand out as I introduce myself.

"Dominik Mikelson." He takes my hand. Before I've even finished saying my name, he's pulling me against him, holding me in an awkward half hug while holding our hands between us as he gently pats my back with his coffee. Unsure of how to react, I shoot a sideways glance at Coach, who lets out a loud sigh.

"Landon, let the man go. It won't help if you scare him off before he meets the rest of the team." Coach pinches the bridge of his nose as he shakes his head with a small smile on his face.

The guy hugging me, Landon, apparently, laughs before finally letting me go. Taking a step back, my gaze bounces between him and Coach. Using his desk to help push him up, Coach stands and motions between the two of us.

“Dominik, this is Landon Sinclair. One of your fellow defensemen, and the team captain.”

My stomach knots at hearing Coach introduce Landon as the Team Captain, I take a breath, shifting on my feet as I nod and hope my smile isn't pained. When I signed my trade agreement and moved here, all I focused on was getting away from everything and everyone that reminded me of Sarah. Not in the sense that I want to forget her, just in the sense that it didn't take much to trigger me.

Clearing my throat, I realize that they're both staring at me. Landon's smile has fallen off as he studies me. Not wanting either of them to take it personally, I lift my head and hold Landon's stare.

“It's good to meet you, and to be here.” I glance at Coach for a moment, wondering how much he actually knows. These two people are the ones who have to be in tune with every single member of the team. If one person starts holding back or having issues with others, things start getting bumpy both on and off the ice.

When we're in a game we each need to be able to move without hesitation. Most times all we have is a quick glance around to see who's got your sides or open to pass too. So, if team members can't be on the same page off the ice, it raises the stakes when the timer is going. It was one of the biggest struggles we had on my last team.

Taking a deep breath while focusing on the wall behind Coach, I brace myself for the fact that, for the second time today, I'm bringing Sarah up.

“I'm not sure how much Coach Owen told you about why I agreed to open up for a transfer. When I left my last team, it was because I couldn't look at our captain without wanting to pummel him in the face.” Not wanting to see either of their reactions, I close my eyes. Lilly's face this morning as I told her about my loss pops in my mind. She was clearly sad for me, but for the first time, someone saw past the pity. Keeping my focus on the memory pushes me to say the words again.

“My sister died last September in a car crash caused by my team’s captain.” Opening my eyes, I hesitantly turn to face Landon. “What I’m sure just came across as pained or annoyed when you were introduced is not because of you. Just a bad association with your role on the team that, apparently, I’m still working through.”

Much like Lilly surprised me, these two don’t seem to miss a beat. Sympathy lines their expressions, but no pity. When Coach James speaks, I surprisingly have to hold back a smile as he unknowingly echoes his daughter’s question.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Knowing I’ve reached my limit for talking about the crash today, I slowly shake my head. Coach nods and turns to grab a couple folders to bring with us to the locker room. While he gathers his things, I turn to Landon.

When he walked in the door smiling widely a few minutes ago, I had been thrown off by the fact that he is so happy. Except now, as he watches me with a serious expression, I almost wish he would snap out of it and smile again. I can only hold his gaze while he searches for an answer to an unspoken question. After another long moment, he nods before shooting a glance at Coach.

He turns back to me, “If there’s anything ya need, just ask.” Before I can even nod or agree, it’s like watching a switch flip on as his smile streaks back onto his face. “Now, let’s get down to the locker room and introduce ya to the team before warmups.”

I scramble to grab my bag as Landon pulls me along with his arm around my shoulders. He rambles about how he’s planning to do something as a team this Saturday. I’m half listening, since whatever he picks is something I will be doing, while at the same time I memorize the layout of the arena. We pause briefly at the door of the gym and Landon starts talking about the team’s daily routines.

“As a team, we all work out together every day an hour before practice. We adopted a sort of buddy system. Each line works as a group to go through sets together and hold each

other accountable.” He finally drops his arm from my shoulder as he keeps walking toward the doors to the locker room. “Did Coach get a chance to tell you the plans for what line you’re on?”

“No...” I say hesitantly. Landon nods as he turns to face me. The smile on his face has me faltering in my step.

“You’re with my line.” I stop dead in my tracks.

Last week, I did my research on the team. I had watched a couple games, studied some of their rankings, but focused on the team number associated with the scores. I had wanted to avoid the news articles about them and their personal lives. Who they are as individuals is something I wanted to learn with unbiased thoughts as I met and interacted with them myself. So, I focused on how they played as part of a team.

But what I did learn was that the captain is number twenty-five, on the starting line. The line that sets the tone and feel on the ice. On my last team, Coach Owen and Josh never let the newbie on the starting line. They claimed they didn’t know them well enough, that they needed to be given time to find their groove with the team.

Yet here I stand, my first transfer, being told that I’m on the starting line next to the team captain. I can only bring myself to blink in response as I wait for him to shout that he’s just kidding.

Except, he doesn’t.

Landon pushes the locker room door open, the smell of sweaty gym clothes and air freshener that’s working overtime hits me full force as I snap myself out of my shock. The sound of laughter and yelling greets me as I follow him into the locker room.

Not to sound full of myself, but I know I’m good on the ice. The first hockey game I had ever played, I lost. I had stormed off and told my dad that I was done forever. He didn’t respond right away, instead, we drove around for an hour while I sulked in the backseat. When he finally stopped driving, we were at a diner in a town over. Neither of us spoke as we got a

table, but after ordering each of us a milkshake, he broke the silence. He started by asking about how warmups with the other kids went, then began asking about the other players. What I thought they did right and then what I thought they did wrong.

Then he started asking about how I played. He asked for a couple things that I was proud of from the game, then if there was anything I could have done better to improve the outcome of the game. By the time we finished our milkshakes, we had recapped the whole game. Though the team and I could have done better on a couple things, he helped me see that the other team was simply better that night. As he pulled out his wallet to pay, he waited until he had my full attention to speak.

“Even if you win, it doesn’t mean there’s nothing to learn. When you win, it means you have something to look back on and learn what works best. On the other hand, losing doesn’t mean you suck. And while it’s okay to be upset over not doing your best, it’s not okay to use that negativity as a reason to quit. When you’re full of negative emotions, that’s when you need to step away and process what you’re feeling. Once you can think with a clear head, that’s when you make your decisions.”

From that day on, that’s what I’ve played on repeat after every game. If my team loses, I step away for ten minutes, typically heading right for the shower. In that time, I do as dad said and process my emotions. Once I can think clearly, I usually find someone to go over the game with. Now if the team wins? There’s always adrenaline pumping through my veins and everyone gets caught in the high of the win. We still go over how the game was played, finding where we could improve, but that’s usually done the day after we’re done celebrating.

My attention is pulled back to the locker room as Landon claps me on the shoulder, pulling me with him. We round the corner and I brace myself as nerves finally take root in the pit of my stomach. Landon drops his hand, motioning for me to keep following him as he starts greeting a few players.

The room is a wide-open space with benches and lockers along three of the walls. Although the lockers are better described as wide cubicles. Each player gets a four-foot space with a couple hooks on the back and a single shelved cubby above that. On the remaining wall, that isn't lined with lockers, is a giant mural painted for the team. At the center of the dark red wall is a bobcat looking like it's tearing through the wall, painted with tans, whites and blacks. The blocked golden letters that read "TAMPA BAY" are painted above it, while "BOBCAT" is below.

I follow Landon straight back toward the far wall, where he sets his gym bag on the bench before turning back to me.

"You're gonna be right here." He motions to the space next to him that has two jerseys already hanging. A helmet and two gloves are in the cubby above while a brown box sits on the bench in front of it. I suck in a breath as I run my fingers along the jerseys. The one meant for home games is primarily darker red with a detailed bobcat in the center of the chest. From the shoulders down, the arms are the same red, while the cuff of the sleeve is golden yellow with thin black stripes framing it. The end of the torso is similar to the cuff, bringing the design together. My number, thirty-three, and Mikelson, are white on the back with thin black and gold stripes framing them. The jersey meant for away games is primarily white with the main stripes being red and the framing stripes are golden yellow. My number and last name on this jersey is black with a thin red stripe framing them.

"The box should be filled with merch for ya to either hand out or keep for yourself. There should also be some practice jerseys in there too." I spare a glance at him as I set my bag on the ground while giving a slow nod. Sarah used to love it whenever I got goody boxes and would raid through them, taking what she wanted before I ever had a chance to see.

Forcing my thoughts away from my sister again, I move the unopened box to the ground. Coach had told me earlier that he wanted me to do some warmups with the team before they hit the ice. While they're doing actual practice, I'm to stand on

the sidelines with him to observe. Tomorrow is when they'll throw me out there with them.

The thump of a gym bag landing on the bench has me turning to meet another teammate. His black hair is shaved close on the sides of his head and slightly longer on the top, looking ruffled like he's been running his hand through it. His bright brown eyes are wide with excitement as he bounces on his toes next to me. Glancing at the gear in front of him, it's safe to bet that this is the goalie.

"You must be Dominik!" He greets.

I laugh as I twist to offer a hand to shake. "That's me, you the goalie?" His head bobs up and down as he continues to bounce in place.

"Yeah, man, I'm Dean. Good to have ya here. You all settled into your place? Did they put you up or did you find your own place?" He doesn't even give me time to answer as he keeps talking. "I watched a couple of your games from last season, the few times we played against you were really fuckin' close games. It'll be cool to see how you fit in. You hittin' the ice with us today?"

"Yo Squirrel, take a breath." Landon laughs behind me, as I watch with an amused chuckle. I also make a note to never give the guy coffee.

"Shit. Sorry, man." He pauses as he looks over my shoulder. "Morning Cap! How's it going? How was dinner with your family last night?" Dean finally stops bouncing and turns to open his bag as Landon answers.

"It was good. Ma' made stuffed peppers and my sister made rhubarb pie." Dean groans as he sits next to me and starts pulling some gym clothes out of his bag.

"Dude. Please tell me you brought me a piece." Landon chuckles as he reaches into his bag and pulls out a plastic Tupperware container. Dean jumps up from his seat, throwing a fist dramatically in the air before reaching around me to take the container from Landon. "I could kiss you man."

“Please refrain from kissing anyone while in the locker room Dean.” Coach says by way of greeting as he enters. Everyone starts quieting down as he stands in front of the mural.

“Alright, couple things before we head to the gym.” Coach looks across the room at me. “First things first. As y’all saw yesterday, we signed Dominik Mikelson. He’ll be stepping right in as one of our defensemen and will be on the starting line.”

A couple of the guy’s murmur, but no one seems to be upset or shocked by my placement. I glance around the room, sharing slight head nods and smiles with a couple of the guys who make eye contact with me. My nerves begin to slowly ebb away.

Coach gives the team a moment to quiet down before talking again, congratulating the team on the win Friday night, he then goes over his goals for today’s practice. Every now and then, when he talks about specific players, Landon will lean in to point at who was mentioned. As Coach wraps up, one of the guys on the other side of Landon speaks up.

“Is new guy hittin’ the ice with us today?”

Coach answers as I’m shaking my head. “Not today. I want him on the sidelines observing alongside me.” I peer around Landon and am met with an impassive stare. He doesn’t seem pissed or upset, but he also isn’t oozing joy, like Dean and Landon. I watch Landon from the corner of my eye, but he doesn’t even seem to bat an eye as he smiles and nudges the statue next to him.

“Play nice, Grey.” Without breaking eye contact with me, Grey elbows Landon back.

“I’m always nice.” His flat tone suggests otherwise.

Coach wraps up a few more details before dismissing the team. As they leave, Dean and Landon squeeze my shoulder. Grey seems to watch me closely as he finishes getting his gear laced up. As a couple of guys introduce themselves on the way

out, I don't remember everyone's names, aside from Reid and Carter who are both Forwards in the starting line.

When it's down to a few guys across the room with Coach, Grey finally stands up next to me with his arms folded on his chest.

"I'm Greyson. The final Forward on the line you're jumpin' onto." I nod in greeting, sneaking a glance at Coach before turning back to Greyson.

"Dominik." He studies me for a moment longer before dropping his arms to grab his gloves and turns to walk toward the rink. Coach James stares at Grey as he walks away before turning back to me.

"Ready to go watch and learn?"

That earns a smile.



Watching the team practice was mesmerizing.

I've watched recaps and highlights of the Bobcats before. Teams usually sit-down multiple times a week together to go over highlights from past games. So, I know that I've watched and overanalyzed how this team plays before. Only, back then, it was to find gaps in lines or weak points in the team. Standing on the benches with Coach during practice was a whole new experience.

They all move so fluidly together. During warmups, the team synchronized to each other's movements without missing a beat. Then they started actual practice where the team split in half and went against each other. Throughout practice, Coach would point out how certain players moved together and yell out when they started slipping up. He paced the bench with the energy of a tiger in a cage, eyes focused on everything all at once.

By the time practice wrapped up, we were joined by the team manager, Marcus, and one of the Assistant Coaches, David. As the guys start coming off the ice, Coach James asks for the starting line to hang back. Landon and Dean skate over, jumping over the half wall before plopping down on either side of me. Reid and Carter are right behind them but stay on the ice, skating in small circles in front of the benches. Greyson comes up last, not giving away any emotions as he leans against the low wall beside Coach.

“I need you five to help make Dominik’s transition to the team seamless. Get to know each other, on and off the ice.” Dean sits up straight, leg bouncing where he sits next to me.

“Like... go to brunch and shit?” I glance at Landon at Dean’s question.

“Dude, I found this place last weekend that has fuckin’ amazing bacon.” Reid pipes up as he skates toward the bench.

“Is it that new place that opened up down the block from that killer Mexican place across the channel?” Carter questions, Reid nods.

These guys are talking like it’s absolutely normal for them to go to brunch. Sarah dragged me out a couple times, and, of course, I loved the breakfast. The idea of the six of us, all well over five foot eight and bulked out sitting in some tiny cafe eating brunch has me shaking my head, laughing.

“They have bottomless mimosas on Saturdays too.” Greyson adds as he meets my shocked expression with a shrug.

“Get brunch, Mexican, or go play video games. I don’t care, just get to know each other. Just help him ease into the team without bumps.” Coach James meets all our stares before finally leaving. Once he’s out of ear shot, I follow the guys to the locker room.

“Sorry you guys got stuck with new guy duty.”

Landon slings an arm over my shoulder, the height difference awkward since he’s walking with his skates on.

“It’s no biggie, a few of us usually hangout a couple times a week anyway and we like to do a team outing at least once a month. We normally hangout at one of our places, order pizza, and play games a couple times a week. Every now and then we go out when Reid finds a place close by for us to try out.” He squeezes me one last time before letting go.

“Did you get housing set up through the team?” Carter questions from behind me.

“Yeah, across the channel. It’s like a ten-minute walk from here.”

Carter nods, motioning to Greyson, Dean, and Landon ahead of us.

“Probably the same building as them.”

“Not you though?” I ask.

He shakes his head, smiling as he answers. “My wife and I just had a house built outside the city. Convinced Reid to do it too, so he lives a few doors down.” He elbows me lightly as he leans in and whispers, “Living thirty minutes away means these pigs don’t come over as much. And while nights after practice are fun, cleaning up after them is not.”

I chuckle lightly in response as we follow the others into the locker room. The vibration from my phone in my pocket surprises me. Typically, during practice, I leave it in my pants pocket and fold them into my gym bag. Garrett is the only one who usually calls or texts me, so when I pull my phone out as I stop in front of my locker, there’s no stopping the smile when I see Lilly’s name instead.

Lilly:

**Hope you had a good first day of practice with the team.
:)**

Me:

It was, didn’t get any action on the ice though.

Lilly:

Damn. It's a good thing you got action in bed last night then.

There's no stopping the laugh that escapes at her response.

Me:

I'll take action in bed with you over the ice any day.

Me:

How was your day?

Before I can read her response, Dean bumps his shoulder into mine and nods toward the phone in my hand.

"You got a girlfriend?"

I shrug in indifference. "Not yet. Just met her Friday."

"You've been here for what, a couple weeks? And yet you already met someone? Damn." Dean laughs as he starts pulling his clothes out and I take the opportunity to check Lilly's response.

Lilly:

Weirdly productive. I got a lot of writing done, cleaned, and baked some cookies.

Lilly:

I can't tell you the last time I baked anything.

Me:

What would a neighbor have to do to get one of those cookies?

Lilly:

I can think of a couple things ;)

Laughing, I tuck my phone back into my pocket and reach for my gym bag. The idea of getting home and possibly seeing Lilly again has me ready to bolt out the doors. As I lean forward to grab the box, Landon grabs my attention.

"Did the team put you in the Kings building across the channel?"

“Yeah. You?”

He nods. “Been there for four years now.” He slings his gym bag over his shoulder. “There’s a bar right next door that a few of us like to go to some nights if you wanna join.”

“That sounds good, man. Count me in.”



Over the next couple weeks, Dom and I fall into a routine without even noticing. He goes to practice while I put all my focus on finishing the next set of chapters for my editor. When he got home from his first couple practices, he knocked on my door claiming he “just wanted to say hi.” Each time I opened the door, one of us found an excuse for him to come inside and once he did, it was impossible to keep our hands off each other.

Sometimes the chemistry between us takes me by surprise. I’m still trying to get used to craving someone so much.

The past couple Friday’s, Dom has joined a few of his teammates out for beers, which has been perfect for planning time to catch up with Paige, or shockingly, my dad.

I even met up with my dad for coffee last week. It was nice to get to know him more. We only caught up for an hour, so the conversation never went deep and neither of us brought my

brothers up. When he asked me what I was doing for work, I shocked myself when I told him about my book. I wasn't sure about how I thought he was going to react, but he was genuinely excited and curious about what I was working on. He even asked about the company I was publishing through and more about Paige.

He had texted me this past weekend asking if I wanted to meet up for lunch after he was done with work on Wednesday. It took me a few hours to think it over, only because I know that the next time I see him, we will need to clear the air. If we are going to form a relationship, he needs to understand how much he hurt me. Even if it doesn't work out and he leaves again, I won't be able to say that I didn't try. We made plans to meet at the arena, then go from there, and I spent the past week figuring out what to say to him.

Now, as I round the corner onto the street toward the arena, I find myself nervous, wondering if I'm making the right decision.

Dominik knows that I'm meeting my dad today. When I told him my plans for lunch, he finally asked about my relationship with my dad. I had tried to breeze over things, simply saying that he wasn't around because he was always working, but Dominik didn't miss a beat. So, we had turned our Monday night dinner into a "trauma dump date night" and I filled him in on my parents' messy, four-year divorce and my dad leaving right after to move to Florida. He said it was weird because the man that he is getting to know as his coach sounds completely different from the man who left his three kids. I shrugged, repeating Paige's words about how people can sometimes change.

That doesn't mean that I'm not nervous as hell for today. I thought I was okay with not having my dad in my life. Even though I keep reminding myself not to get my hopes up, I stop myself from wondering if it's possible.

There is a small possibility I see Dominik, since the team has practice today. The chances of my dad introducing me to anyone on the team are slim to none. Especially considering he has never been photographed with, or even mentioned his

family before. Mom had once said that was so he could keep his “perfect coach” image. Now, after everything Dominik has told me about how crazy the press can be to get “inside scoops” on the teams, I wonder if what my mom had told us was true.

Walking up to the arena, I notice small groupings of people waiting around the edges of the parking lot. Most of them have cameras propped up, which I assume are waiting to catch pictures of the team as they leave. The sight of the camera crew has me stopping at the realization that the moment I walk into the arena, someone will be waiting to see who I leave with.

Maybe my dad will be too caught up with his work to go out for lunch or he knows another way out.

Or maybe I suck it up and let whatever happens, happen. The chances of my mom and brothers seeing a picture of me are slim, but if they do, I’ll just brace myself for that call. They know I’m in the same city as Dad, so it wouldn’t be that shocking I might get in contact with him.

There’s a security guard sitting at the door reading a book. When she notices me coming, she closes it and stands up. Crossing her arms, she watches me closely as I walk up the ramp. If I had to put money on it, I would bet that she’s spent her day turning away fans or anyone looking for a story. That, mixed with the humid heat today, would make anyone miserable.

“Hey, I’m Lilly, I’m supposed to be meeting Coach James.” At my introduction, her unreadable expression breaks into a wide smile.

“My Lanta! Look at you! James told me you were finally comin’ by. Shocked me enough that I almost passed out. Although that mighta’ been the heat.” I can’t stop the laugh that slips out. Clearly, she knows I’m the coach’s daughter, something that I was unsure he would mention to anyone here. She extends a hand out toward me. “I’m Shawna. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

I take her hand and smile politely back, but the fact that she knows who I am only makes me nauseous. He hasn't talked to my brothers or I in years, so the fact that Shawna knows he has kids, and who I am, has me wondering what he's told people.

Does he tell them he left us? That he missed all our big dances, first dates, and graduations? Or does he paint a picture for people he works with and act like he has the perfect little family waiting for him to come home?

A pit forms in my stomach at the last thought.

Shawna must see the slight mood change as her smile turns sympathetic. Lifting her other hand to clasp mine between her two, she waits to speak until I meet her gaze.

"I have been working at this arena for ten years. Your father started with this team a year after me. It might not be public knowledge that James has kids, but a couple of us who have worked beside him for this long know bits and pieces. He never tells much, but having you here is the happiest I've seen him in a long while."

I offer her a smile, unsure of what to say. If he came here a year after her, that means she has had nine years straight seeing him almost every day. My throat tightens over the fact that others have spent more time with him than I have. Clearing my throat, I gently pull my hand away and gesture to the door beside her.

"I better get in and see if he's gonna be ready to go." Shawna smiles brightly at me, swiping her badge in front of a sensor to open the door. "Of course, dear. You're gonna wanna go straight down this hall and take a right where you'll see some offices. Locker rooms are on the left, so stay away from those." She leans in and whispers, "Those guys might be amazing on the ice, but man do they let their gym bags stink up the place."

I laugh and thank her as I head inside. During High School, Ian and Blake both tried every possible sport, so sweaty gear was always stinking up the house. By the time I hit my

sophomore year, I'm pretty sure I became immune to the smell.

The long hallway walls are lined with team photos, starting with pictures in black and white of players on the ice, slowly transitioning into colored ones. When I get halfway down the hall, my eyes land on a picture that has me stopping where I am.

It's a picture in color, red, yellow, and white confetti falling around players who are all done up in gear swarming around a man on the ice. Some players hold their helmets in the air as they yell, others thrusting their hockey sticks up in the air, hugging each other. Two players in the center of the group hug a man, their sticks squished between them as one of the guys lifts the center man up. I can feel the tears forming as I take in my dad being caught up in the excitement.

I have never seen him that happy. The camera caught him cheering, one arm draped over the player holding him up while the other was in a fist and punching the air. My eyes glance down at the "team champions 2015" plaque.

The sound of guys laughing drags me from my thoughts. I turn away from the picture, ready to focus on finding my dad, my breath catches as my heart rate picks up.

Dominik stands in the middle of five other guys. The one on his right, a tall man with bright red curls and an infectious smile has his arm thrown over Dom's shoulder while he grins toward a man who is best described as tall, tan, and intimidating. He gives off all the grumpy vibes, but I notice the small smirk on his face as he shakes his head in response to the red head. On Dom's left is a guy who's practically jumping along next to them, reminding me of a toddler who was given too much sugar. The other two guys hang back from the group just a bit.

Dom is laughing, that dimple I love popping out on his right cheek. He elbows his friend in the stomach, grinning as he finally looks forward, his smile only grows as he spots me. The brooding man follows Dominik's gaze toward me and stops, causing the red head to turn back to check on him as he

pulls Dom to a stop. Bouncy man notices me, smiling crookedly as he stops and puts an arm out to stop the two behind him as well.

They could have gone around me, only one of them would have had to move out of my way. My palms start to sweat as they watch me for a moment, my gaze flicks to Dominik. Unsure of what to do, I step closer to the wall, hoping to get out of their way. Instead, the redhead speaks up.

“Well, hey there darlin’. You need help findin’ anyone?” He drops his arm from Dominik’s shoulder, Dom tenses as he watches the redhead step toward me. Squaring my shoulders, I move to continue down the hall to find my dad.

“No thanks. Shawna told me where to go.” The redhead doesn’t miss a beat, his smile staying perfectly in place. He seems like the kind of guy who’s friends with everyone, which also means he’s most likely a giant flirt.

“I’m Landon.” I slowly step closer, smiling politely in response. After a few steps, I pause, realizing they’re taking up the entire hallway. Before I can introduce myself, I’m cut off.

“Y’all better be behaving right now.” I straighten as my dad appears next to Dominik. Seeing them stand next to each other has my nerves going haywire, but I force myself to smile back.

He looks so at ease next to these bulked up guys, and while he’s not as tall or filled out as them, my dad is still an intimidating man. His questioning gaze bounces between the guys before meeting mine. I nod to his unanswered question, his smile widens even more.

“I’d like for y’all to meet my daughter, Lilly.” I laugh at the shocked expressions that cross over all their faces. Well, everyone except Dominik’s. Landon manages to wear his surprise better than the rest of them, but still takes a small step back.

The grump appears more impressed than shocked, but his expression stays difficult to read. The bouncy man smiles like a kid in a candy store as he watches the coach.

“Daughter? Man, that’s cool, she clearly gets her looks from you.” I choke on a laugh as Dom and my dad glare at the bouncer. The grump pinches the bridge of his nose, letting out an audible sigh while the other two take a step back. The grump elbows him in the gut before shooting a small apologetic smile my way.

“Excuse him. He has no filter sometimes.”

My dad shakes his head and finally chuckles as he turns back to me.

“Lilly, these are a couple of the guys on the team. Landon, the team captain. Dean is our goalie.” I raise an eyebrow at that, something my dad doesn’t miss. “Kid might be filled to the brim with energy, but the moment he’s on the ice...” He scratches his head as he tries to explain it. Dean shrugs and helps him out, shooting me a sly grin.

“When I’m on the ice, everything else fades away and I see nothing but the puck.” He shoots me a wink. “I enjoy finding things to focus on.”

I bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing. Dean’s either brave as shit or dumb as rocks for openly flirting with me in front of my dad. As I glance back toward my dad, I catch the scowl that sets on Dominik’s face. Dad ignores him and moves on, gesturing to the two guys who now lean against the wall behind Dean.

“Those two and this one here,” He jabs a thumb at the grump. “Are some of my forwards, Carter, Reid, and Greyson. And this is our new guy, Dominik.”

It’s an effort to acknowledge all of them, not just Dominik. My heart is racing and it’s finally dawning on me how weird it is to act like we don’t know each other. A blush stains my cheeks as I force thoughts of just how intimately I know Dominik away.

“I just need five more minutes and I’ll be ready.” I nod at my dad and move out of the way for the guys to pass. Landon is the first to turn back once my dad is gone.

“You look familiar?” He questions and I shrug, but Dom speaks up with a chuckle.

“Did you just miss the part where she was introduced as the Coach’s daughter?” Landon laughs but watches me like he’s trying to solve a puzzle. I raise an eyebrow while he mulls it over. As I shrug it off and walk past them to wait for my dad in the corner, I smile over my shoulder at Dom first then the rest of them.

“Nice to meet you guys. See ya around.”

With that, someone behind me snaps their fingers and lets out a loud “ah-ha!” When I glance back over my shoulder, Dean is leaning into Landon as if he just whispered something, and Landon is pointing a finger at me.

“You just moved into the Kings building across the channel last month.” My cheeks heat as I slowly nod my head and avoid Dom’s gaze. Greyson shows his first emotion that’s not scowling as he nods in realization.

“Yes, I did. My dad is letting me stay there for a bit.”

“I live down on the fifth floor, Dean and Grey live two floors up and fancy Dom here lives up on the thirteenth floor.” I smirk at that one, finally facing Dominik.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, floor neighbor.”

“Right back at ya.” Dominik says with a smile, both dimples on full display, as his gaze trails over me. In this moment, even as I blush, I’m grateful I chose a simple purple dress. It’s low cut, displaying just enough cleavage, while still being modest. It’s on the tighter side and falls just above my knees.

Dean steps next to him, throwing an arm over his shoulder as he watches me.

“Well, if you get bored and want some entertai—” Greyson steps toward him, cutting him off as he grabs Dean’s shirt to drag him down the hall to the exit.

“Dude, did you miss the fact that she’s Coach’s daughter? That means off limits.” He glances back at me, offering me a

small smile and a head nod. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

Dean’s protests echo behind them as he tries defending himself, causing Carter and Reid to laugh as they wave their goodbyes and follow them. While Landon is still distracted, laughing at the guy’s backs, Dominik turns back to me, shooting me a wink before he throws an arm around Landon’s shoulders.

“It was nice to meet you, Lilly. I’m sure we’ll see each other around.” I stifle a laugh as Landon’s goodbye is muffled by Dominik pulling him away to follow the others. I don’t stop smiling as I turn back to go wait for my dad. The encounter with these guys has helped lighten my nerves and I find myself even more ready to finally talk things through with my dad.



“How’d lunch with your dad go?” Paige asks by way of greeting when I let her in later that night. She texted me asking to go out, and since Dominik is getting together with the guys, I agreed.

She had come over for dinner last weekend, demanding all the details about what’s going on with Dominik. Aside from that, the two of us haven’t gone out since the watch party three weeks ago. We still text every day, but she’s been slammed at work. Such is the way life goes when you have to be an adult.

As Paige heads down the front hallway, she throws a duffle bag into the guest bedroom and heads toward the kitchen. I follow behind, deflecting her question for a minute.

“I take it we’re going somewhere close by if you’re planning on crashing here?” She smiles over her shoulder as she opens my liquor cabinet.

“There’s a bar that’s literally right next door, I saw a sign for margaritas and mai tais.” She states as I pass her two glasses.

“Should I make us a quick dinner or are we eating bar food?” She pauses, heavily contemplating my question before sighing.

“Yeah, let’s make something with rice, maybe some veggies too, I’ve been eating like shit the past two weeks.” I keep moving about, getting out supplies to make some basic chicken, broccoli, and rice as I study her.

“Eating like shit as in you’re eating all junk food? Or as like you’re so busy that you’re forgetting to eat?” Paige shrugs in response, pouring our drinks before cleaning up her small mess.

“A bit of both. Garrett and Sam help a lot during the week, making sure I at least have a filling dinner when we get stuck at the office real late.” She gathers her black hair in her hands, throwing it up in a messy bun before washing her hands and starts chopping the broccoli. “Not like what you’re thinking though.”

I nod in understanding, grateful that she has people at work who remind her to eat, even if they don’t realize how much they’re helping her. While I can get sucked into my work and forget to eat lunch, Paige gets so lost in her work that she’ll forget to eat all day. I make a note to see if she wants me to make her some of my protein muffins to take home with her tomorrow.

It isn’t until after we finish dinner and head to my bathroom to start getting ready, that she asks how things with my dad went. My breath heaves out of my lungs in a woosh while I grip the counter.

“It was good. We talked. Like we *really* talked. He knows he fucked up by choosing work over us, but after seeing him interact with a couple of the guys from his team for less than five minutes...” I pause, trying to find the words. I reach for my glass and take a sip of whatever sweet drink Paige made me. “He’s good at what he does, really good. His team clearly respects his leadership and from what Dominik tells me, they all adore him. It’s hard because the more I learn about him and his relationship with the team, the more I see that *this* is where

he's meant to be." I close my eyes, taking a deep breath before I continue.

"When he moved to Florida, mom told us that it no longer fit his schedule to see us. We all believed that because we already know how intense hockey seasons are. But earlier, I made a comment about how it hurt that he didn't accept any of the invitations to graduations or birthdays..." I open my eyes, finally facing Paige as the heaviness settles in my chest. "He never got any invitations. When I explained that mom told me she sent him the information, but he was too busy, he said he hasn't heard from mom in nine years." My teeth grind painfully together and scrape my fingers through my hair. Tears sting at the corner of my eyes.

"Wait. What are you saying?" Paige questions, her eyes wide. I pinch the bridge of my nose and suck in a deep breath.

"I'm saying that a few hours ago, my dad offered to show me proof that he sent emails and texts to mom every year until Ian, Blake, and I had all graduated high school. He tried setting up summer vacations or spring break trips for him to either come up and see us, or for him to pay for plane tickets for us to come see him." I can't stop the hysterical laugh that breaks free. "He even offered to buy plane tickets for you and friends of the boys to come with us so we wouldn't feel overwhelmed!"

The weight of everything hits me as I meet my best friend's concerned gaze. Swallowing thickly, my eyes still tearing up as I whisper.

"Mom kept us from him. She let us believe the absolute worst and none of us thought twice of asking her to talk to him ourselves. I'm saying that for nine years, I've hated the man because I thought he wanted nothing to do with his kids. And I think I was wrong."

Paige pulls me into her arms just as a tear escapes and rolls down my cheek. I hug her back for a moment before I bark out a laugh and pull away, wiping the tear off my face.

"Nope. I'm not doing this tonight. Tonight is going to be a fun night out with you. At some point, I will call my mother

and ask her about all of this and see what she has to say.” I nod, tucking everything from dinner with my dad back into a mental lockbox and shoving it away for now. “Processing mommy and daddy issues can be for future me to deal with.”

I swallow the rest of my drink in one long chug before turning back to Paige. After a deep breath, I force a smile on my face.

“Now, does this bar have music? Cause I’m in the mood to dance it out.”



“First rounds on me.” I say loudly to the guys as we walk into the bar. Since the bar is literally the building next to the condo that the team puts us in, most of us walked over.

Practice had run an hour late this morning, but not because we were doing bad. No, quite the opposite. We were all in sync with each other. None of us even noticed how long we’d been on the ice until Marcus stalked in and complained that Coach was late for a conference call. Coach swore, scrambling and muttering about how he couldn’t be late today of all days. I laughed with the other guys and told him to get going. When really, I knew it was because he had lunch plans with his daughter.

Once he was gone, we all got sucked back into practicing for another hour before going to review footage from our last exhibition game. Everyone was in such a good mood that we

decided to grab drinks. Even a couple guys that don't normally come out decided to tag along. Over the past couple weeks, I've gotten to know more of the team during practices and gym time.

There are still a few of them I don't know very well, but everyone has been welcoming.

From my experience on my last team, I had almost thought it was normal for teammates to butt heads daily, not everybody *clicks*. As long as they worked together on the ice, it didn't really matter. We all had the same goal, and that was to win.

That's different with the Bobcats though. These guys all openly care for each other, so do the coaches. There are smaller groupings within the team, guys that clearly hang out together more often, but that doesn't stop all of us from having a good time together.

It's refreshing to actually be around a group of adults who don't bicker like we're back in high school.

Dean holds the door, gesturing for me to go in ahead of him as he talks my ear off about some Oktoberfest coming up in a couple weeks. We have four more exhibition games over the next three weeks of pre-season, then a four-day break before our first official game. While none of us are used to having this long of a pre-season, we all refuse to complain, since the past two years had been put on and off hold due to the global pandemic. We're just glad to be getting back to normal games, even if it means the season isn't starting until the end of the month. Which, of course, means that Dean is now trying to convince us all to do something "fun" to kick off being back in the game.

Following behind me, Dean rambles on as we head into the bar. Landon and Greyson had left ahead of us to claim enough space to fit a bunch of hockey players. That was Landon and Grey's way of wanting to make sure the staff wouldn't be overwhelmed when a giant group of us came in unexpectedly. Since it was a Wednesday, I hadn't expected it to be that busy, but didn't point that out to them. If they felt that our presence

would overwhelm the staff, they would probably send us a message to meet at one of our condos.

As I take in the bar right now, I know I was right. There's a good handful of people scattered throughout the place, but it wasn't busy. The music was already playing at full blast, even though no one was on the small dance floor. There were a couple of people scattered along the bar and a few of the tables had small groups around them. Landon and Greyson claimed some of the booths across from the bar, furthest from the dance floor. No doubt the seating choice was made by Greyson, since it keeps everyone off to the side out of the way.

While he isn't as outgoing as everyone else, and tends to keep to himself unless asked, I'm starting to enjoy him. He doesn't talk a lot, but when he does, everyone around him listens. When we went out to our first brunch, just the six of us, he had sat at the table looking like a miserable human, scowling and grunting one word answers to everyone as he drank his mimosa, but mostly just observed and listened. Toward the end of the meal, a couple of the waitresses had come over to our table. They had shamelessly flirted, asked for pictures, and straight up fangirled over all of us. Greyson hadn't acknowledged any of them, just set some cash on top of his bill and walked out.

I used that as an opening to check on him. When I left the restaurant, he was leaning against Landon's car. I didn't say anything, simply shrugged and went to wait next to him. Since then, it's almost as if he finally accepted me to the group.

As we head over to the booths, a waitress appears with a couple pitchers of beer and some glasses. Landon smiles down at her, and I don't miss Greyson rolling his eyes as he pours himself a beer. One of the guys pats me on the shoulder, commenting on how he and a few others are going to get something a bit stronger. I dip my chin but accept the beer Grey offers me as I walk up to him.

Lilly and I hadn't said that we were going to see each other tonight, but I'd prefer to not get wasted in case I do get to see her. It was more difficult than imagined to act like I didn't know her when I saw her at the arena earlier. She looked

stunning in the summer dress, yet I couldn't help but imagine what she would look like in my jersey. My fantasy was wiped away when Coach came to get her for lunch.

This whole "seeing each other when we can, in secret" thing isn't that bad. Even after practices, when I'm physically and mentally drained, I still find myself knocking on her door when I get back to the building. The first time I had, it was only meant to say goodnight face to face. But when she invited me in to chat for a minute, wearing that sexy little pajama set, I said yes and ended up falling asleep in her bed with her in my arms.

That's how every night has been since. Okay, so most nights it's not as innocent as that. I'm addicted to everything about her. It's difficult to keep my hands, and mouth, off her.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I fire out a quick text message to Lilly.

Me:

Hope lunch with your dad went okay. You looked beautiful :)

I stick my phone back in my pocket and join in on a conversation with Reid and Grey.

A few hours later, I head toward the bar with the two empty pitchers of beer to refill. Landon ordered a few baskets of wings for everyone to share before it got too busy. Not that half the guys noticed as more teammates showed up. The bar still isn't overly packed, but there's a good crowd. A few couples have made their way to the dance floor, and a security guard has pulled out a stool to post up by the entrance. As I approach the bar, I nod to some of the guys at the end. The team has slowly started to spread out, claiming the whole left half of the bar for the Bobcats.

When we do go out, I don't take notice of who the guys flirt with. I definitely do not entertain any of the bunnies who tend to show up wherever we go. Greyson is usually the perfect one to keep me company when all the guys start drooling over women. Since his scowl is the perfect deterrent.

For some reason though, my attention is drawn to the two women that a few of my teammates are attempting to pick up tonight. My heart stalls in my chest and ice runs through my veins.

At the middle of the bar, three of my teammates stand in front of Lilly and Paige. I try to calm myself down, taking in a deep breath and forcing my gaze away from Lilly. Setting the empty pitchers down, I pull out my phone to open the message she had sent in response not long after mine.

Lilly:

It was good. Revelations of unknown mommy issues weren't though. Lol will explain later.

Lilly:

Going out to the bar next door with Paige, needed cheering up in the form of alcohol and dancing.

Well, shit.

Had I checked my phone earlier, I would have kept an eye out for her. Considering some of the guys met her back at the arena, I wouldn't have been able to do much though. I glance around, trying to find the five others who met Lilly earlier to see if they noticed her. Landon and Greyson have their backs to me as they listen to Dean. Reid and Carter are sitting in the booth behind them, talking with a couple other guys. None of them seem interested in the women here.

After asking the bartender to fill the pitchers up with a new seasonal beer, I try to keep myself calm as I head over toward Lilly. While I might not be able to actually make it known that she's with me, I sure as hell can make it known that she's Coach's daughter.

We agreed to not see other people, so I'm not worried about her hooking up with any of these guys. But just as I start to wonder if interrupting them is a dick move, Paige notices me over the shoulder of the guy closest to Lilly, and smirks. She elbows Lilly, who was barely even paying attention to the guy, Cory.

No. She was too busy swaying to the beat of the music in her seat as she sipped whatever cocktail she ordered. Most likely something with tequila.

Her eyes widen for a quick moment when she notices me, but quickly recovers with a polite smile. Not that it does anything to hide the excitement shining in her eyes as she takes me in. I place my hand on Cory's shoulder and insert myself into the small gathering around the girls with a smile. My chest tightens with an emotion I try to not focus on as Lilly checks me out over her drink. She's breathtaking. Her curly hair is in a bun on the top of her head and some curls have come loose to frame her face.

"Fancy seeing you twice in one day." I leave the ball in Lilly's court though. She smiles in response, a small blush forming on her cheeks, but she picks up on the opening I gave her. Before she responds though, Cory turns to me with a raised brow.

"You guys know each other?"

I nod, resisting the urge to scowl at him for not even giving Lilly a chance to answer. Lilly and Paige are watching me closely though, probably to make sure we both keep our cool and not give anything away. So, I smile at her, slightly nodding to let her answer. Clearing her throat, she only gives Cory a quick glance before looking back at me.

"I met him today when I stopped by the arena to meet my dad for lunch. But we also live in the same building, so I'm sure we've passed each other at some point without realizing." When Cory frowns, I have to fight the urge to laugh.

"Your dad works at the arena? Like...*the Hearts* arena?" Paige leans back in her chair, watching the scene in front of her with pure amusement on her face. As much as I would love to continue watching Lilly, I don't want to miss his expression when she lets him know *who* her dad is.

Nodding, she gives him a small smile.

"Yeah! He's worked there for like..." She glances over at Paige, and I can tell that Lilly is having fun dragging this out.

“Eight years?”

Paige, of course, plays right along without missing a beat.

“No, I think nine.” Paige nods her head, snapping her fingers in revelation. “Yeah, definitely nine years, because that was about the time of that fucking epic homecoming party.” I quirk an eyebrow, definitely filing that bit of information away to ask about later. Lilly nods enthusiastically, turning back to face Cory.

“She’s right. Nine years. His name is James Matthews. Do you work at the arena too?” Lilly bats her eyelashes innocently, as if she can’t tell that he’s very clearly on the team. It’s almost comical watching Cory’s face pale as he takes a not-so-subtle step back. The movement alone tells me that he was definitely flirting, and one hundred percent thinking he was going to get lucky tonight. He clears his throat before taking a sip of his drink. After a moment, he finally answers.

“Uh, yeah. I’m...uh...on the team.” I elbow him lightly in the ribs.

“He’s one of our defensemen. Fucking fast on the ice.” Cory nods at my statement and clears his throat. Now that he and the other guys know who Lilly is related to, they know to keep away. I don’t think they even realize that all three of them had gravitated toward Paige.

Which is something she doesn’t miss either as Paige smiles at them. Lilly has talked about her so much that I feel like even I can tell her smile means nothing but trouble. Cory turns his full attention to her and starts talking before anyone else can. I’ve got to give the man props for trying wherever he can.

I turn my attention back to Lilly, but before I can even say anything, someone throws an arm over my shoulder, pushing me aside a bit. I fight to hold back a groan as I see who joined us. Dean smiles brightly at Lilly, who is very clearly holding back her laugh.

“Lilly!” She smiles brightly up at him, and I find myself clenching my fist to avoid reaching out and pulling her to me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see the guys who met Lilly earlier all watching. They're also very clearly filling in the rest of the team about who Lilly is. I'm grateful that everyone will *know* that she is off limits. Yet there is a part of me that wishes she was still unknown. That way, if I talk to her, I could do it without eyes on us.

Also, there's that huge part of me that wants to block Lilly from the view of every guy in this bar. That's a feeling I shove back down.

"Hey there. It's Dean, right?" His smile widens as he nods enthusiastically at her. The bartender sets the two pitchers down, now full of beer, giving me an idea. Clapping a hand on Dean's back, I nod toward the beer.

"Mind helping me get these back to the table? I was gonna grab a pitcher of water for us as well." Lilly smirks but doesn't say anything as she turns to Paige, who has Cory hanging off her every word. I feel my brows crease, as I remember Garrett's very obvious crush on Paige.

"Oh right, yeah. Well, it was good to see you again, Lilly. Hopefully I'll see you around." He moves fast, grabbing the beers and turning to head back toward the guys. Yet I still can't help grinding my teeth at that. Lilly looks at me with a smirk and a raised eyebrow. I simply shrug in response.

She's a beautiful woman. I would be more surprised if she wasn't getting hit on. That doesn't mean that seeing other guys vying for her attention doesn't spike a bit of possessiveness in me.

Cory gets cut off mid-sentence as Paige lets out a loud squeal. She jumps out of her seat, not sparing a glance back as she reaches blindly for Lilly's hand and pulls her along. "Scream" by Usher plays and I chuckle, watching Paige twirl Lilly as they step onto the dance floor. Cory turns to set his drink on the bar and takes a step toward the dance floor, so I spare him the trouble.

"Might wanna wait and see if she comes back this way, dude. This seems like a "this is our song" moment for them." His brows crease, but he shakes his head.

“Dude, don’t get me wrong, her friend is hot. But shit, it’s a bummer that Lilly is Coach’s daughter. That is...” I tense, not saying a word as he watches the girls dance. He doesn’t spare me another glance as he moves to rejoin a couple other guys, leaving his sentence unfinished.

I glance at Lilly, resisting all urges to openly watch her as she moves her hips to the beat, before heading back to Landon at the booths with the guys. I pick one of the open chairs that gives me a view of the entire bar. Specifically, it’s the perfect spot to keep an eye on Lilly.

“Where’s the water, Dom?” *Shit*. I shrug it off, flashing a smile at Dean.

“Bartender seemed busy, figured I’d wait a bit, so I don’t bug her too much.” Landon looks toward the bar with a frown, watching as the bartender hands a group of guys a couple beers. Thankfully, it had picked up a bit, otherwise that bluff would not have been so believable.

Everyone starts breaking off into small groups again, and I half listen as Landon talks to Dean and Greyson about his sister moving back after being away for college. Not that I contribute much to the conversation since my attention keeps snagging back to Lilly.

“Temperature” by Sean Paul blasts and more people have started to fill the dance floor. Whoever selected the playlist tonight is having a good time picking from a throwback list. A couple guys linger at the side of the dance floor, watching, most likely waiting for an opening to dance with them. Yet Lilly and Paige are oblivious to the eyes on them as they dance with each other. I try not to make it obvious that I’m lost in the way Lilly moves. She’s still in that purple dress from earlier, that was made for her body. Even over the music, it’s almost as if I can hear her laugh like she’s next to me as she throws her head back and sways to the song.

I sip my beer, nodding in agreement to something that Dean says even though I’m not listening. All I can think about is what it would feel like to dance with Lilly. I could see myself walking up behind her, gripping her hips so our bodies would

mold into one. Lilly would reach up and behind her, tangling her fingers to the nape of my neck as her other hand intertwines with mine on her hip.

Thoughts of her grinding her ass into me has me shifting in my seat, discreetly adjusting myself as I try to shake thoughts of her from my head.

The need to touch her right now is almost all consuming.

I tense as some guys finally get the balls to approach them and have to force myself to stay put. That's when I notice that I'm not the only one watching them. Landon's voice trails off and I force my gaze to look at them. Landon and Dean are sitting next to each other at the edge of their seat, both watching with narrowed gazes as the two guys awkwardly dance near Paige and Lilly. Greyson is standing just behind them, leaning against the booth as he sips his beer, but even he is keeping an eye on the floor. Carter and Reid are sitting in the booth that Greyson is leaning against, and even though they haven't stopped their conversation, they're watching as well.

Smirking, I turn my full attention back to the dance floor. Since everyone else is openly watching Lilly and Paige, I don't even try to hide that I'm staring.

However, my smirk is gone faster than a toupee in a hurricane at what I see.

The girls have stopped dancing, and even from here I can see Lilly and Paige say no to the guys. I'm standing before I even realize it. Greyson sets his beer on the table with a scowl as he puts a hand on Dean's shoulder, pushing him back into his seat. He's on my heel within the next heartbeat, following me onto the dance floor.

I clench my fists as I watch one of the guys reach out to put a hand around Lilly's waist. We're close enough now that we can hear everything Lilly says as she attempts to twist out of the idiots' hold.

"What part of me saying no thank you, do you not understand?" The idiot has the nerve to chuckle and before he

can say anything else, I'm at Lilly's side. Prying his fingers off her hips, holding his hand tightly in my grip longer than necessary before dropping it. Resisting the urge to wrap my arm around Lilly and tuck her into my side. I glance to the side as Greyson stands next to Paige so that both girls are between us.

"Is there a problem here?" The idiot pales slightly but attempts to stand straighter as I stare down at him.

"Nah, man. Just a miscommunication." I quirk an eyebrow. Before I can respond, Lilly lets out a loud, sarcastic laugh.

"Miscommunication? You look plenty old enough to know and understand what the word *no* means." She crosses her arms, shaking her head at the guy and his friend. Paige must sense the brewing fight in Lilly, as she links their arms together and pulls toward the bar.

"Thanks for killing the vibe, assholes. Next time a girl says no, take it like a man and walk away." She smiles over at Greyson. "Can we get you guys a drink for having our backs?"

Greyson walks next to me, glaring down at the two morons. After a moment, he finally turns to Paige with a rare smile.

"The question should be, can we get you ladies a drink to make up for the fact that those morons give men a shitty rep?" I keep an eye on the two squirrely looking guys, who still haven't taken the hint to get lost, as Greyson follows Paige to the bar. Lilly captures my attention as she turns back to me.

"You coming, Dominik?" I nod, shooting one last glare at the idiots before turning to follow Lilly to the bar.

Paige leads the way, Greyson not far behind her, but my focus is on Lilly. As I approach, she watches me carefully. I pause a couple steps away and study her closely.

"Are you okay?" I keep my voice low, but she hears me.

"Yeah, he only touched my ass. I'm fine." I scowl, not liking that answer at all.

"It doesn't matter where he touched you. The fact is that he touched you without consent. That is *not* okay." She takes a

slow step toward me.

“You’re right. It’s not okay.” I seriously debate if I want to turn around, find the asshole and punch him in the face. Lilly must see that because she pushes on. “But I am fine. If you hadn’t come over, Paige would have handed his own ass to him.” A sexy, mischievous grin spreads across her face.

“You came over though.” She states and I’m mesmerized by her and can do nothing but nod, even as I feel the tension and anger easing back. “You had my back.”

“Of course I did.” Even if it hadn’t been Lilly on the dance floor, the idea of sitting back while someone else is made uncomfortable is baffling to me. If I can offer support in any way, I will.

Lilly shakes her head a couple of times, that sexy grin still on her face.

“No. You had my *back*. You could have easily pushed me behind you and gone all macho tough guy. Instead, you offered your support and followed my lead.” She reaches out, placing a hand on my bicep. To anyone around us, it would probably look like a simple gesture of appreciation. Only I’m close enough to watch her eyes as they darken with desire while she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. “I didn’t once feel small or helpless cause I knew you had my back. Thank you.”

“God, I want to kiss you.” I hadn’t meant to say the words.

Sparing a quick glance around, making sure that no one can hear us. My eye catches on the restroom sign at the back of the bar.

“Go catch up with Grey and Paige for a minute, then meet me at the bathroom.” Before she can protest, I turn away and head to check out the bathrooms.

Rounding the corner, I sigh in relief at the fact that the bar has three unisex bathrooms.

I need to kiss her.

Yeah, kissing her in the bathroom of a bar isn’t the best spot, but I’ll take what I can get and just be thankful that it

isn't dirty. I can make up for the poor setting later. All I can focus on is replacing the image of that idiot's arm around her with my own. I take a moment to peek into one of the bathrooms, grateful that it's clean. When thinking about a bar bathroom, you picture mildew in between all the tiles, paper towels and toilet paper all over the floor with the lingering smell of piss. These appear to have just been scrubbed down, no trash on the floors and the only smell is from the air freshener that's sitting on the back of the toilet.

Definitely makes me feel better about asking Lilly to meet me back here.

When Lilly finally rounds the corner a minute later, I barely give her a chance to look around. Reaching for her hand, I pull her into the bathroom with me, locking the door behind us.

Turning to her, neither of us say a word, until we both snap at the same time. My hand is tangled in her hair, my arm wraps around her waist, pulling her to me as I kiss her.

She's fucking intoxicating.

Without even thinking about it, I'm backing her up and lifting her onto the small countertop. Her legs wrap around my waist as she reaches up to pull me closer. I've never been more grateful for dresses than right now as I run my hands up her thighs, pushing her dress up a bit. When my hands slide up to the thick part of her thighs, I break off the kiss.

"We should stop." I bend down to kiss that spot beneath her ear that always makes her shiver. "Otherwise, I'm going to fuck you fast and hard, right here and now."

"What if that's exactly what I want?" Her breathless response has me gripping her thighs tighter. When she grinds her hips along my jean covered cock, I groan. Nipping her ear before I pull back to respond.

"If you want to be fucked in this bathroom, you know I won't say no." Tracing a finger along the top of her dress before hooking my finger in the strap to pull it down. I waste no time leaning down to capture her nipple in my mouth, sucking and flicking her hardened bud with my tongue before

moving to the other. Lilly is squirming as she grinds against me.

Moving her hand to my shoulders, she gives a light push, forcing me back.

“Dominik. I want it.” I bury my smile in her neck, placing a kiss there before tilting my head to whisper in her ear.

“What do you want, Sunshine?” She groans lightly, reaching down to grip my hips, pulling me forcefully into her. It’s hot as hell, but I want to hear her say it. Holding myself in place, I plant slow, teasing kisses down the length of her neck and shoulder, then back up. I know I shouldn’t draw this out too long in case anyone notices we’re both missing. If it weren’t for the fact that I agreed to make her more confident when it comes to saying what she wants, I would give in without needing to hear it.

But I also really love watching her blush as she tells me what to do to her. With a frustrated grunt, she tightens her legs around me and finally says it.

“I want you to fuck me, fast and hard. Right here, right now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As she pulls me back down to her, demanding a kiss, I push her dress up to her waist. Reaching under her dress and tracing along the sides of her underwear. As I run a finger down her cloth covered center, I swallow a groan.

“Baby, you’re soaked.” Lilly doesn’t bother responding, not that I expected her to. She just pushes herself against my hand, begging for me.

I push her panties aside and waste no time sinking my middle finger into her warmth. She moans into my mouth as I pull out and add another digit, pumping into her a few more times before she pulls away from our kiss. Fumbling, she reaches for my jeans and makes quick work of undoing them.

Within the next few breaths, I pull my fingers out and quickly move to replace them with my cock as I hold her

tightly by her perfect thighs. As my tip notches at her entrance, I take a moment to look her over.

She's flushed, with her dress pushed up, exposing every perfect inch of her as she attempts to move her hips and draw me into her. She's watching my cock at her entrance with hooded eyes as she bites her already puffy lips. A couple more curls have fallen out of her bun, but holy fuck. She is absolutely beautiful.

"Dominik." My name leaves her mouth in a breathless plea as she finally focuses on me. Holding her gaze, I slowly push the rest of my length into her. Her mouth drops open, so I take the chance to capture her lips for a deep kiss. Swallowing her moans and hoping that no one is waiting outside the door. If they are... there's no way they don't know what's going on in here.

After a pause for her to adjust to me, I give her exactly what she asked for. Fucking her hard against the counter, breaking the kiss to watch as her breast bounce from the force. Standing straight, I gently place my palm on the center of her chest and push her back just enough so her shoulders rest against the mirror. I hold her there for a moment, as I pound into her, she meets my thrusts. I reach down, twisting a nipple and groaning as she clenches around my cock.

I release her thigh with one final squeeze, reaching between us to tease and pinch her nipples.

"Quietly, Sunshine. Unless you want someone out there to hear you cum on my cock." Lilly flings her hand up to cover her mouth, not stopping her moans, but at least muffling them. Not that it bothers me, the sounds she makes only spur me on.

I can tell she's close as her thighs start to shake and her attempts to meet my thrusts become choppy. Picking up my pace, I hold myself back, wanting her to cum when I do. I reach between us to find her clit, and after a few strokes realize I'm not going to last much longer at all.

"Lilly. Cum." It's as if she was waiting for my permission as she finds her release. Her pussy gripping and pulsing around

my cock is all it takes to have me exploding after another few pumps.

I stay nestled between her thighs for a long moment as we both catch our breaths. Lilly is the first to break the silence.

“Note to self; bathroom fucks are awesome.”



“Don’t forget the sunscreen!”
“It’s already in the bag!”

That’s pretty much how my morning with Paige has been going as we get ready for a beach day. She yells for me to pack something, only for me to have already thought of it. If I left Paige in charge of getting us packed up to go anywhere, we would show up two hours late, missing a bunch of things. With that in mind, I started packing shortly after I woke up. Dominik had to get up early to meet some guys to work out before they went to brunch. He had been super quiet getting out of bed, but the loss of his warmth next to me still woke me up and I couldn’t fall back asleep.

The image of those tall, built men drinking mimosas, gossiping over fancy brunch foods while bonding has kept me giggling all morning.

Focusing back on the task, I run through my mental beach day list.

Towels and a giant beach blanket, check.

Sunscreen, check.

Bluetooth speaker, check.

Multiple water bottles and a couple cases of seltzers, check.

Beach umbrella to keep Paige's pale ass out of the sun as much as possible, check.

Sunglasses, hat, changes of clothes for both of us, check, check, and check.

We're spending the day with people from SweetHeart Publishing, Paige said that there were others put in charge of bringing snacks for the day. Even knowing that, I couldn't resist the urge to pack a couple bags of chips and granola bars.

"Are you almost ready?" I yell over my shoulder. Paige had been trying on a bunch of different bathing suits for the past thirty minutes. Picking mine had been much easier, considering I only own two. This one was my favorite though, it's a simple red bikini, but the top has a slight push up padding that makes my boobs look great. There's a small crisscross pattern holding the front together, the thin straps cross over in the back before tying together. The bottoms are even simpler, held together by two bows on my hips.

Paige comes into the kitchen with a bounce, her hands on her hips and a victorious smile on her face.

"This is definitely the winner."

"Holy fuck. Yeah, it is." The navy-blue one-piece swimsuit she has on shows off a surprising amount of skin. It dips into a low-cut V, the open sides are held together by three gold rings.

"Perfect, we're right on schedule."

"Don't sound too surprised. I occasionally can be on time." I scoff with a light laugh, because no, she can't, we both know that. "Whatever. Sam texted me, he'll be here in five to help us load everything into his car."

“And you’re positive that he doesn’t mind dropping me back off after?”

Paige waves a hand, dismissing my question as she digs through her purse to pull out a simple black dress cover up.

“Your place is literally a five-minute drive from ours.” She turns to me, shaking her hips and wiggling her eyebrows. “Plus, he doesn’t want to drink today so we have a DD.”

An hour and a half later, we’re set up, ready to enjoy the day. It was only eleven thirty in the morning, but with how quickly the beach is filling up, I’m glad Garrett came an hour ahead of us. Turns out I didn’t need my umbrella for Paige, because Garrett set up a giant pop-up beach shelter tent. The tent is tall enough for everyone to stand up straight under and has enough space in it to set up a few chairs, as well as keep the coolers in the shade.

As Paige greets a couple more of their co-workers, I turn to connect my phone to the Bluetooth speaker. Hitting shuffle on a Summer Vibes playlist, I set my phone back in the shade as Garrett shouts behind me.

“Dude, I can’t believe you guys actually came!” The voice that responds has me whipping around before I can stop myself.

“Sorry we’re late. Turns out that it’s actually very hard to convince athletes to not sit around playing video games all day.” Dominik grabs Garrett’s outstretched hand and pulls him in for one of those half hugs with a shoulder pat. Coming up behind Dom is his usual gang, which is what he refers to them when telling me about their bonding time, only now, they’re all shirtless. Landon, Dean, Greyson, Carter, and Reid come up behind him with arms full of another cooler, some chairs, and a couple bags.

Garrett smiles toward Dom’s teammates as he reaches to give Landon a hand.

“Listen, Dom knows I will encourage gaming just as much as the next guy, but every now and then, we gotta get out.” He extends his hand and introduces himself.

Landon sports his signature wide grin as they start going through introductions. When Sam notices the team, he immediately leaves Paige mid-conversation to meet them, to which she rolls her eyes before joining me. I resist the urge to stare at a shirtless Dominik and focus on turning to dig through the coolers to grab a drink. Paige's cough is the only warning I get before Dom's soothing voice speaks from right behind me.

"Well, this day is turning out better than I thought it would." I bite back a smile, glancing over my shoulder while still bent over the cooler. I catch him staring at my ass and don't even bother trying to hide my smile. Paige lets out a quiet laugh as she taps her foot to my calf. She keeps her voice low, so only we can hear.

"Drinks, Lilly. Preferably before the heat melts all the ice. Dominik, do you want one?" I roll my eyes but turn back to get some for the three of us. As I'm about to open my drink, I burst out laughing when the "Thong Song" by Sisqo starts playing and quickly move to change it. Paige is already one step ahead of me, laughing loudly while reaching for my phone to change it. Considering there's a family setting up a spot close by, we can at least make an attempt to be appropriate while we're sober.

"Um, Lilly... What the fuck?" Paige holds my phone, staring down at my screen like she's about to jump through it and strangle someone. Without thinking, I pass Dominik the drink in my hand and step toward Paige to find out what she saw. I'm about to take my phone from her when she turns the screen toward me and scowls. "Why the fuck is Cam texting you?"

My heart stops. I never told her about the last time he had texted me, and that I simply deleted it without thinking twice.

"Better question, who the fuck does he think he is threatening you?" I snatch my phone from her hand and shush her. It's bad enough Dominik is hearing all this, no doubt he'll be grilling me about it later, I do not need anyone else overhearing. She might not know the whole story like Dominik does, but she knows the gist of it all. Seeing her now,

arms crossed as she waits for me to fill her in, I'm suddenly glad we live in a different state than him. If we were still living back home, Paige would be in her car, going to do something very stupid that would get her in a lot of trouble.

I sigh before finally reading the message to see what she's talking about.

Cam:

You've had enough time to get over this. Come home now or I'll come and get you myself.

Instead of feeling fear, which is probably the logical emotion when your douche canoe of an ex-boyfriend sends a message like that, all I feel is anger.

I'm glaring at my phone as Dominik steps up beside me, I peek at him from the corner of my eye. He's watching me with concern on his face and while he could have easily read the message over my shoulder, he's keeping back just enough so that he's not reading the text without my permission. Considering he knows more about my relationship than Paige does, I don't even think twice about it as I angle my phone for him to see.

The way he clenches his jaw as he reads the message is the only emotion he shows. Part of me wants nothing more than to send a scathing and fowl worded message back to Cam in response, but instead, I take a deep breath. And then another.

When I chose to move away, I hadn't even told him I was leaving. I had told my family to keep getting together and not worry about picking sides, but I never said that to Cam. We hadn't actually spoken in weeks before I left, so I had assumed that my mom had told him. Based on his first message a few weeks ago, I was right.

Swiping my finger, I delete his message and roll my eyes at Paige.

"He's an idiot. You know Cam, he's used to getting his way, so it's probably pissing him off that I haven't responded to him." Paige's eyebrows shoot up.

"This isn't the first time he's messaged you?"

Shit.

I bite my lip, watching the ocean waves crashing behind her as I avoid looking at her or Dominik.

“A few weeks ago, yeah. Said he fucked up and wanted me to come home. But I just deleted it and honestly forgot about it.” I glance sideways at Dominik before turning back to her with a shrug. “I’ve been happy down here, keeping busy and enjoying life. It’s no surprise that it slipped my mind.”

Paige’s posture relaxes a bit when she sees I’m telling the truth, but she still watches me with concern. Dom stays where he is, listening but letting Paige take the lead on this.

“He knows you moved down here though.” She doesn’t phrase it as a question, especially when she knows just how much my family loves Cam. Nodding, I throw my phone back on top of the chair.

“Mom or Ian most likely told him.” I take a big sip of my drink, definitely needing the alcohol to help shake away the lingering anger at Cam for texting me. “He probably just had breakfast with them, and mom complained about me living so far away. He’ll get home and remember the neighbor or whoever is warming his bed and forget all about me again.”

Not completely convinced, she stays planted in front of me.

“Do either of them know where you’re staying?” I raise an eyebrow at her question, but answer nonetheless.

“I mean, they know I’m living in Florida. But they think I’m living with you. Considering Cam thinks of you as my rabid guard dog, he wouldn’t ever actually try to come here.” That finally brings a smile to her face, she’ll drop it. With a nod, Paige reaches for her drink and heads over to talk with Garrett.

I take a deep breath before turning to face Dominik finally. He’s staring toward the ocean, very clearly lost in thought. After a quick glance around to make sure no one is paying attention to us, I place a hand on his arm to get his attention. When he finally looks down at me, his expression is full of worry. I rub my thumb gently back and forth a couple times, hoping to soothe him as I smile up at him.

“I didn’t know Garrett invited you out today.” His eyebrows are drawn together and his mouth parts as if he still has something to say about Cam texting me. Squeezing his arm, I give him a subtle shake of my head and lower my voice so only he can hear. “Not here. You can ask me about it later when we’re alone.”

He gives a stiff nod before finally rolling his shoulders, forcing a smile.

“Yeah, Gare texted me last night about it. I didn’t think the guys would agree to come out today, so I hadn’t thought to mention it.” He winks at me as I drop my hand from his arm. “Figured it would be a good surprise.”

“It definitely was.” I state with a smile. His heated gaze roams down the length of me, the look alone causing warmth to spread through my entire body. We just had sex last night, yet every inch of me reacts as if it’s been months since he touched me. Clearing my throat, I glance around again with a small smile.

Our group is taking up a big section of the beach, and I now realize why Garrett thought to come ahead. Dominik’s team is fitting right in with the SweetHeart Publishing employees. Landon and Reid have started a game of Kan Jam with two of the women I haven’t had a chance to meet yet. I think Paige had said their names were Evalyn and Ava. Carter and Dean are helping a few others set up a beach net closer to the water for a game of volleyball. It doesn’t surprise me to see that Greyson is hanging back from the beach games, instead making his way toward Dominik and me.

“I can’t tell you the last time I was at a beach.” Greyson says with a shake of his head. He’s an attractive guy, they all are, but he has that whole *stay away* vibe to him. That only makes me more curious about him. Strictly in the sense that I get the feeling he doesn’t have someone to fall back on. I know the feeling.

Dominik laughs as he places a hand on my lower back, gently pushing forward so he can grab a drink for Grey from the cooler beside me.

“Not gonna lie, I’m shocked you didn’t find a way to ditch us after brunch.” He tosses Grey a beer. “Beaches and being around tourists don’t seem like your kind of... scene.”

It almost looks like the corner of Grey’s mouth twitches, hinting at a smile, before he covers it with his drink, shaking his head as he studies our group.

“It’s not. I’m just here for the free entertainment those doofuses will provide.” I turn just in time to see Landon jump up to catch the frisbee, only to miss and go tumbling sideways into Dean. They land hard in the sand, both laughing hysterically as Landon lays defeatedly on top of Dean for a long moment.

Without even realizing it, I find my gaze sliding back to Dominik. After grabbing his drink, he stayed close to me. Not touching, but close enough that if I were to drop an arm to my side, I could easily brush him with my fingers. He’s relaxed, laughing at the chaos around him as he and Greyson start talking about practice yesterday.

Just as I start to think about going to find Paige, she shows up with Garrett right behind her. While Garrett manages to jump right into conversation with the guys, Paige and I move off to the edge of the tent.

“Well, this group showing up is a pleasant surprise.”

“Everyone seems to be getting along though.” Paige elbows me, nodding in the direction of the Kan Jam game going on.

“Especially those two.” I watch as Landon hands the frisbee to Evalyn. She takes it, tucking some of her caramel hair behind her ear.

“Who is she again?”

“Evalyn Moore. She was brought on two years ago as a temp, but I refused to let her go. She’s brilliant. I was telling Garrett last week that she would be killer in my position if ever needed.” She rolls her eyes with a small smirk on her face. “Of course, that only triggered him to freak out and ask where I was going.”

“Have you thought about leaving?” She shakes her head, and I don’t miss how she glances at Garrett before continuing.

“No. I love my job. Yeah, there are some days that I feel like I want to be doing *more*, but I love the company and the work we do. I’m really excited for things that are in the works and you *know* I absolutely love the people I work with.” I nod, knowing she’s telling the truth. Especially considering that every one of her coworkers I have met are super nice.

Before either one of us can say anything more, Garrett yells for Paige just as Landon calls out mine and Dominik’s. Turning, he’s holding up the frisbee, literally batting his eyelashes at me.

“Play a round with us? Reid and Ava want to go in the water. You can be on Evalyn’s team!”

With a glance over my shoulder at Dom, who shrugs his shoulders and turns to grab two more drinks from the cooler, before coming over to me. In a low voice, so only I can hear, he hands me a new drink.

“Whatcha say, Sunshine? Think you can beat me?” Smirking, I raise an eyebrow as I move past him toward Landon.

“Did you not learn from the last time we played a game against each other?” He falls in step beside me, keeping his voice down as he responds confidently.

“What I learned from last time is that, even if I lose, I still win. Considering I get to reward you so thoroughly for winning.”

My cheeks flush as I focus on not tripping over my own two feet. I quickly answer him before we get into earshot of Landon and Evalyn.

“So, if I win, like I did last time, you’ll come back to my place again?”

“If you win, I will come back to your place and not let you go until you’re cumming on my face.” There’s no stopping me from stumbling at his words. Luckily, Dominik reacts fast and keeps me upright with an arm around my waist.

“And if you happen to win this time?” I ignore how breathless I sound. He squeezes my hip once before letting me go.

“If I happen to win, nothing changes. I’d want you in *my* bed and sitting on my face until you are unable to hold yourself up anymore.”

I can’t tell you if my body is on fire because of the sun and heat or because of Dominik and the words that he says.

“Deal.”



Over a month and a half has passed since Lilly and I agreed to keep seeing each other in secret. Even though my furniture arrived weeks ago, we spend most days at her place. There's just something more comforting about hers. I had originally thought we would see each other once a week, maybe twice if lucky. Yet without ever talking about it, we fell into a routine.

Training had been kicking my ass during the first week, regardless, I knew I wanted to see her. Her hair was thrown into a messy bun with a pen tucked into it. The smile that spread across her face, the pure joy that sparkled in her eyes was enough to steal my breath.

Lilly manages to leave me breathless more often than not. She'll turn to show me something, and the excitement she radiates is enough to have me smiling. One night, a few weeks ago, I had been sprawled across her couch and half paying

attention to a show while she sat on the floor typing away. Out of nowhere, she squealed out a triumphant “Oh my god! That’s it!” before darting away to the other room. She came back with a poster board full of post-it notes and a notebook that was full of her half cursive writing.

When I had asked her what she was doing, she started talking animatedly about how she worked out the end of the book *and* how she’s added two more books to turn it into a series. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and I wanted nothing more than to hear her talk all night long. Even if I couldn’t fully follow along and understand everything.

After that night, neither of us thought twice about showing up at the other’s door. Hell, after the third week of seeing her, it dawned on me that I was even sleeping better. Lilly was becoming a part of my daily routines, something I had never thought possible before. I had occasionally gone out with Garrett and Sarah but making time for dating was exhausting. When I went out with the team and met a woman to go home with, we would have a fun night, then went separate ways.

But with Lilly, it was effortless. Some nights we would plan secret stay-in date nights, which mostly consisted of us making dinner together before watching a movie while we ate dessert. Although, most times the movie turned into background noise while we fooled around. There wasn’t a room or surface in either of our places that we haven’t had sex on. Even after some of my long days, when I left the arena convinced I wouldn’t be able to move, she proved me wrong. All she has to do is look at me, and I’m ready to go.

As much as I love our planned secret date nights and impromptu chill nights, the need to change it up and get out of the condo takes over my thoughts.

Knocking on her door, I fidget with the papers in my hand, crossing my fingers that she’ll agree to what I have planned this weekend.

The team has been killing our pre-season games, we’ve won six of our seven exhibition games, and with how practice has been going this week, I’m confident we’ll win the final one

next week. We all know better than to let the winning streak go to our heads, which is why we continue pushing hard at practice. Yet when I saw we had a four-day weekend before our first official game of the season, I knew I wanted to do something with Lilly.

So while Lilly worked, I sat behind her, searching for places to go. I've never planned a weekend away with a woman before. At first, I wasn't sure about what to look for. Then I came across an ad for somewhere familiar and booked without hesitation. I did feel a little bad telling Dean that I wouldn't be able to hangout this weekend.

But now, standing in front of her door, waiting for her to answer, I'm nervous that she'll say no. Maybe she'll think that it's way too soon for a weekend away and start shutting me out.

I've almost convinced myself to put the tickets back in my condo and forget about the plans when Lilly opens her door.

"Hey RomDom!" Her nose scrunches. "Ew, nope. That's not the nickname for you either."

She doesn't even give me a second to respond, grabbing my free hand as she pulls me into her condo. I laugh as I follow behind her. Admiring the way her tiny bike shorts hug her ass and how her cropped sweater keeps giving me peaks of her midriff. You would think that since there are plenty of women who show up at games and after parties wearing a lot less clothes, that I wouldn't be so affected by a little bit of exposed skin.

Nope. Just the smallest bit of skin revealed from Lilly and I'm drooling like a teenage boy.

"Give me one minute to finish this phone call with my mom." I nod, following behind her like a damn puppy. Lilly walks back to the kitchen island, where her phone is set on the counter with her mom on speaker.

Her mom rambles on, not even noticing the fact that her daughter walked away from the conversation. When Lilly told me about her dinner with her dad and how she learned that her

mom was intentionally not letting him be in contact with his kids, I was mystified. I understand that her mother was probably hurt, she was going through a separation and was trying to cope. But the fact that her mother let her pain skew how her children saw their father, keeping them from him, is mind-blowing.

It's not my place to say anything about the situation though, so I simply held her as she unloaded her thoughts. My mom once told me that sometimes, people just need a safe place to say whatever is on their mind and not be judged. Sometimes we just need someone who will listen, and even if they don't understand the situation, they still support them. That's what I did for Lilly, what I keep doing for her because it makes me happy that she trusts me enough to confide in.

Of course, that means that listening to her mom talk now, I can't help but have a bit of a biased view of her. That woman hurt not only Lilly and her brothers, but also my coach.

Lilly moves toward her phone, unmuting the microphone and answering a question that I didn't hear. Setting my phone and the tickets face down on her countertop, I turn to see what she's making so that I can jump in and give her a hand. She's chopping some potatoes as she motions toward the bottle of wine on the counter.

"Cam mentioned that you're ignoring him." I stiffen at the comment as I pull out the corkscrew. Lilly stopped mid chop, gaping at the phone as her mom prattles on. "You know, the least you can do is be polite and respond to him. Even after everything you've been putting him through, he's here waiting to take you back. But seeing as how you're not finished with this promiscuous adventure you felt the need to take, the least you could do is answer his texts."

Setting the corkscrew down, I walk around the kitchen island toward Lilly. Gently taking the knife from her hand before setting it down as I put an arm around her waist. Her mom continues talking, each word making my blood boil.

"Cam has been nothing but supportive. He somehow still loves you, even after you chose to go do who knows what in

Florida. You don't even call me anymore! I should have known you going down there was a mistake. It's like once you moved down there, you forgot who your family is. Apparently, the apple didn't fall far from the tree."

"Excuse me?" Lilly asks as she blinks in disbelief. I pull her closer to me, the expression on her face makes me want to end the call before her mom can say anything more. She shakes her head slowly, but I can't tell if it's because she can see what I want to do or if she's answering her own unspoken question. Her mom scoffs on the other end of the phone.

"Your father left us to move to that damned state, chose to leave us all high and dry. So, it really shouldn't surprise me that history is repeating itself with you too."

Lilly blinks once. Then again before gaping at the phone in disbelief.

"You count sending countless emails, letters and phone calls that got declined as leaving us high and dry?" Her mom is silent for a moment.

"What are you talking about? You haven't sent me any emails or letters. Hell, you barely text me any —" Lilly cuts her off.

"I'm talking about dad."

"Your dad never —" She cuts her mom off again, and all I can do is continue holding Lilly close in hopes she takes it as a silent reminder that I'm here.

"He never what? Never tried to make it to graduations? He never tried to see us? What exactly did he never do, mom? Because according to his emails and the drawn-up lawsuit that he never filed, he tried to do a lot more than you let us believe." Her mom is silent as Lilly sucks in a deep breath. Without even noticing, she leans more of her weight into me, as if this conversation is physically draining her. When Lilly's mom finally responds, her voice is nothing more than a whisper.

"How do you... Who told you..." She stutters but no full sentences come out. Lilly takes another deep breath, leaning

her head against my chest as she picks her phone off the counter.

“Dad. He gave me a place to stay, free of charge. So, when he asked if I would meet him for dinner, and then lunch after that, I said yes. Figured that, since my mom raised me to not take advantage of people, the least I could do is meet him halfway since he’s giving me a place to stay. Imagine my surprise when he made a comment about how it hurt that we never wanted to see him.” Lilly pauses long enough to take a breath before she continues.

“Imagine my surprise when I found out that the only reason I have *hated* my own father for the past nine years, was because of lies. You told us that he didn’t want us, that work was more important than all of us. You let us believe that he probably had a string of mistresses or a whole new family that was better than us. When really, he only left you. He tried to see us, to be in our lives, but you wouldn’t let him!”

I run a hand along her back, feeling her shake beneath it, hating that she is dealing with this. When I asked if she wanted to confront her mom, she said it wasn’t a conversation to have over the phone. Lilly wanted to see her face-to-face to better understand what her mom had been thinking. But it’s as if hearing her mom imply that she’s down here to hoe it up and be like her father, like that’s a bad thing, was the final tipping point.

“Lilly, your dad left us all. He chose hockey over his family, and it was only a matter of time before one of those trashy women who hung around finally roped him in. I did what was best for us and kept him away.”

“You did what was best for you.” Lilly sighs, wrapping one arm around my waist, holding me to her. Not that I would think about letting her go right now. Her mom starts defending herself but Lilly cuts her off.

“We’re not talking about this right now, not over the phone. I’m not texting Cam back, both of you need to get it through your head that we’re done. I gotta go, I’ll call you when I’m ready to talk about this more.”

Lilly ends the call and drops her phone on the counter. She turns fully into me as she wraps both arms around me. I envelop her in a hug, holding her to my chest as she starts crying in my arms. After a minute, I bend down to pick her up.

Cradling her in my arms bridal style, I head toward her couch and sit down with her in my lap. Holding her to me as she takes her time, while I simply rub her back hoping to ease away the tension in her body. I can't imagine what she's going through, but I do know how to be here for her. Whether she wants to talk or simply cry about it now and circle back later, I'll make sure she knows I'm here when she needs me.

We stay curled together on the couch for a while longer before she finally relaxes fully against me. Tipping her head back, she gives me a sad smile that doesn't reach her puffy red eyes.

"I'm sorry, if I had known the conversation was going to take that turn, I wouldn't have kept her on the phone." I flash her a small smile.

"You have nothing to apologize for." Brushing a stray curl away before cupping her cheek in my palm, my eyes roam her face. "Are we talking about it or avoiding it?"

Lilly watches me closely, taking a long moment to think about it before finally shaking her head.

"I mean, you heard the conversation. She thinks I'm like my dad. That I just up and left so that I can hoe around." She lets out a humorless laugh. "I almost made a comment that *Cam* was the one who cheated, that it's *his* fault that I left in the first place. But if I'm realizing anything from all of this, it's that when her mind is set, she full heartedly believes she's right." Closing her eyes as she rests her head on my shoulder and lets out a heavy sigh. I stay quiet, letting her lead the conversation.

"You and I have talked about all of this. About her and what she kept from us or lied about when it comes to my dad. About the whole Cam situation and the fact that they all think he walks on water. Until I actually see my mom and brothers in person and we can sit down to talk about everything while she

has to face all of us...Nothing is going to change.” I hold her a little tighter.

“Well, if and when you want someone to talk or bitch to, I’m here.” She smiles up at me, this one more relaxed, less forced.

“I know we live in a state that everyone comes to for vacation, but I feel like I need a vacation after that conversation.”

My mind jumps to the tickets.

“Where would you want to go?” There’s no hesitation in her response.

“Definitely a beach. But not like the ones here, somewhere with that really blue and clear water. Somewhere quiet and calm.”

My heart races, but I push past that. I move her off my lap, setting her down on the couch while I go to grab the tickets. Taking a deep breath, I turn back and hand them to her. She sits up, eyes wide as she gapes at the tickets for a long minute before whipping around to face me.

I rub at my jaw, unable to take her silence anymore, I start rambling.

“I have four days off at the end of the week, since our first game is on Tuesday, and I had the thought that getting away somewhere would be fun. I know we can’t do anything public, especially with the season about to start and reporters picking up their stalking game. So, I found a remote bungalow down just outside of Key West. We can grab some groceries on the way or even find some small, local restaurants. But if you don’t want to, that’s totally cool. I’m sure I could get Garrett to go with me. Definitely would need to switch the rental so I don’t have to share a bed with him though.”

I snap my mouth shut and close my eyes. I definitely don’t need to keep talking when I have no filter. Lilly giggles and my eyes fly open to find her with her hand clasped over her mouth as she quite literally holds her laugh back. Even her hand covering her mouth can’t stop her from laughing.

“I’m sorry. It’s just,” A giggle escapes before she continues. “I had the image of you and Garrett sharing a bed, with rose petals and the romantic beach scenery.”

She breaks out in another fit of giggles and this time I laugh along with her.

“So, is that a yes to getting away?”

“It’s a Hell yes, Dom-Dom.” My nose scrunches while she sets off in another fit of laughter. Shaking my head, I pounce on her. Settling between her legs, my arms on either side of her head for support as I peer down at her.

“Now *that* nickname is definitely not sticking.”



“Oh my god.” Lilly squeals, rushing out the back door.

Those three words have been on loop from Lilly since the moment we walked into the rental ten minutes ago. Our flight was just over one hour long. We had lucked out and didn’t have to wait in line for the rental car and had time to kill. So, we stopped at a restaurant overlooking a harbor, then wandered around small shops. One shop we found was a small building hidden between two big typical tourist shops with generic tie-dye tees and hoodies. Yet, Lilly saw the small store and made a beeline for it. While she went about browsing through all the unique signs and mugs, my attention was caught by the jewelry case. I hadn’t even thought twice as I grabbed the cashier’s attention and bought the necklace. It’s a silver chain with a simple, yet detailed sun pendant.

When I asked Lilly to close her eyes, she hadn’t even asked why. She jolted slightly when the cool pendant touched her chest, but she still didn’t question what I was doing. She simply waited until I told her to open her eyes and when she lifted the sun pendant, she turned with a smile spread wide across her face and launched herself at me.

It was nice to be out and not have to act like we don't know each other. Even though we checked in later than we planned, the time spent today was worth it.

The rental is secluded at the end of a street and right out on the water. It's a small house, but between the open floor plan of the kitchen and living room and the light tones used throughout, it feels bigger. That and the fact that the living room is made up of windows surrounding a glass sliding door, highlighting the perfect view of the ocean. The back patio is covered with a pergola that has string lights woven through the top of it that sits over a hot tub, a firepit and a bench seat. There's also a chair set up on the beach and just beyond there is a long dock that goes out past the mangroves.

Just before Lilly steps onto the dock, she turns to check over her shoulder, smiling when she sees me following her. Without thinking about it, I take my phone out to snap a picture of her. The sunset sky is reflecting off the water, casting her in a glow of pinks and purples, the evening lighting causing the picture to only show her silhouette. I smile to myself and make it the background on my phone while I walk toward her.

I take another picture of her as I step onto the dock. She's standing at the end, smiling brightly over her shoulder at me. This time, her face is in full focus and she's fucking gorgeous.

Tucking my phone away, I step up behind her and wrap my arms around her waist. She melts right into me, letting out a sigh of contentment. We stand for a while in silence watching the sunset reflecting on the water.

"Thank you for this." She whispers. I hug her tighter, kissing the side of her temple. After a few moments, I move to sit at the end of the dock and settle with Lilly between my legs. We sit in a comfortable silence watching the sun dip further down the water.

I squeeze Lilly tighter to my chest before breaking the silence.

"My parents used to bring my sister and I here." She tenses slightly in my arms for a heartbeat before relaxing. Lilly stays silent, giving me the option to say more or not.

My family has come up multiple times in conversation. A few weeks ago, it would have been my mom's fiftieth birthday. It shocked the hell out of me at how easily I opened up to her about my parents' accident. They had been driving home from our cabin in the mountains when they hit a patch of black ice and the car spun out of control. It's been a long time since I talked about them, but talking to Lilly didn't make me feel how I expected. She asked what they were like, and I spent the rest of the night telling her about my parents, their love for each other and things we did as a family.

She knows that my sister died last year. Aside from that day in her kitchen when she'd asked if I wanted to talk more about how Sarah died, she hadn't questioned me about how it happened.

I stare back at the water and focus on the feeling of holding Lilly as I talk.

"I haven't been down here in six years. The winter that followed our last trip was when my parents had their accident. After that, Sarah and I both kept making excuses as to why we couldn't come. She was in college, and I was busy with hockey... There was always something in the way."

Her head falls back against my shoulder, I take a moment to gather my thoughts by dipping down to kiss her neck. A smug smile spreads across my face when she shivers in response. Tucking her closer to me, I force myself to focus.

"Sarah and I still hung out a lot. With Garrett, of course, up until he moved to Tampa. Those two have always been my biggest supporters when it comes to my hockey career. I swear, she never missed a single one of my games." I chuckle as I think about my sister covered from head to toe in merchandise with my name on it.

"We get these promo boxes at the start of every season. They usually have some shirts or hats with our names and team numbers. She loved the hoodies the most, even if they were from some sponsor, it didn't matter. Any time I brought one of those boxes home, it was like Christmas had come early." Lilly smiles and laughs lightly.

“Listen, I don’t blame her. Good, comfy shirts and hoodies are hard to come by.” I hesitate for a moment, turning the thought over in my head.

“I have a promo box that’s been sitting in the spare room. Take what you want.” Her eyes widen, reminding me of a deer in headlights. I give her a small smile and cut off any protests.

“Garrett already took a shirt from the box so that he could update his game day outfit, but the rest of the stuff is literally just collecting dust. We’ll go through it when we get back and see if there’s anything you like.” Unable to resist, I gently tip her head back and kiss her. Trying to show her that I am absolutely okay with her taking what she wants. When I finally pull away, she watches me closely before giving me a small nod.

“Besides, if Sarah were here, she’d be more pissed at me for not giving away whatever is in that box.”

“If you’re sure...” She trails off, studying me for a moment longer before turning her head back to the view in front of us. I know that she’s holding back on saying anything in case I decide that I’m done talking about this. We sit in silence, a huge part of me is waiting for the usual pain from the loss to take over. My chest and throat are tight, but the ache from those things isn’t as consuming as it was last year. Resting my chin on Lilly’s shoulder, I take a deep breath, letting the mix of coconut from her hair and the ocean breeze calm me.

“When Sarah first died, I was convinced that I would never be able to talk about her again. I had convinced myself that if I let myself talk about her, that the pain would consume me.”

“We don’t have to—”

“I want to.” I interrupt her by placing a kiss on her temple and squeezing her. Lilly leans back, placing a kiss on my cheek before settling back in my arms. Once she’s settled, I take a deep breath to brace myself.

“Sarah was my number one supporter. Her and Garrett used to bicker all the time about who was a bigger fan and would talk about my games and stats like it was a competition on

who knew more.” I smirk at the thought of them going back and forth, rehashing my plays. “Sarah always won. When Garrett moved, I thought she was going to burst because she was able to rub it in his face that she was there and not him.”

Lilly lets out a quiet laugh.

“It never bugged me that she was around all the time, I was so used to her being involved in every part of my life that it seemed almost natural for her to fit right in with my team. Anyway, one of the biggest struggles the Cougars have as a team, is that the majority of them don’t get along with each other off the ice. Any time a new player joined the team, they were typically left to fend for themselves. A few of us got along and called ourselves friends, but that’s putting it too nicely. We really just hung out after a good game for a drink and picking up chicks.”

“Anyway, when we did go out together, Sarah would tag along. So, it didn’t surprise me when she told me she was going on a date with Josh, my team captain.” I bury my head back into her neck for a moment before continuing.

“Okay, that’s a lie. It did surprise me a bit. Mostly because Josh is a complete asshole and the definition of a party boy. Sarah let me say my piece and give my “big brother warnings” but then pointed out that she was a grown woman who would make her own choices. It was easier to be there for her, to tag along if I could and make sure they had a sober driver and that neither of them were around drugs.”

My eyes close, and I know that if I stop now, Lilly wouldn’t push me to keep talking.

“There was one night, after a shitty game, that Josh wanted to go out. I was tired and pissed at myself for how I played and wanted to just go home. They went without me. I told her to call me if either of them got too drunk.”

I pause, peering down at her as she rests her head back on my shoulder, watching me closely. She knows where this story is going but while there’s tears lining her eyes, there’s no pity. That’s one of the things that killed me the most during her funeral, all the pity from everyone offering their condolences.

They all stared at me as if I was one breath away from losing my shit completely.

Lilly looks at me as if she sees all these broken jagged pieces and knows it doesn't change who I am.

"I had texted her before I went to bed to see if they were okay or if they needed me to come drive them home. She said they were fine because Josh wasn't drinking. I should have known to question that. Before they started seeing each other, whenever Josh said he wasn't drinking, he most likely was finding other party favors."

Closing my eyes, I clear my throat and force myself to go on.

"On the drive home, Josh didn't even notice that the light was red. The other vehicle hit the passenger side head on and Sarah didn't even make it to the hospital."

Lilly turns in my lap, placing her legs on each side of my hips and wrapping herself around me. She nuzzles her face into my neck, holding me for a moment. She doesn't apologize or ask any questions, just holds me. She's the first one to break the silence though.

"That's why you switched teams." Not a question. I nod my head once.

"I tried going back to the Cougars. I took time off, but when I got to practice and saw him out on the ice, I lost it. How is it fair that the accident that killed my sister had only kept him off the ice for two weeks." I sigh.

"It had killed me to see him healthy and alive on the ice. He tried saying something to me, which of course I didn't want to hear, so I punched him. Then I turned around and walked right up to Coach's office and told him I quit."

Lilly pulls back, her eyebrows scrunched together as she asks,

"You quit?"

"Kinda. At that moment I couldn't picture playing anymore. I told him to either transfer me or I quit. Coach Owen didn't

tell me no, instead he nodded his head, pulled my contract out and set to work helping me get out of there.”

“Have you thought about quitting since you got here?”

“No. This team is exactly what I needed. The guys genuinely care about each other. On and off the ice. They push me to be a better player and person. It’s actually helping me remember why I fell in love with the sport to begin with.”

“How long have you been playing?”

“For as long as I can remember. My dad used to take Garrett, Sarah and I to the local ice rink to let us skate and that’s when I started playing. Which came in handy when I tried out for my school teams. I ended up getting a scholarship at the University of Denver. Now, I’ve been at the pro level for three years.”

“Did Garrett or your sister ever play?” A laugh slips out before I can stop it.

“Hell no. Sarah tried a couple times back in High School, but she had absolutely no coordination on the ice. Garrett can at least hold himself up, but usually when we went to the rink, he and Sarah were better at yelling from the sidelines. We eventually had her confident enough to do laps around the rink without needing to hold anyone’s hand. But her favorite thing to do was sit back and yell for me to do better.”

She smiles and it eases some of the ache in my chest. The fact that she can smile like this, after everything she has been through and is currently dealing with, makes me realize how lucky I am. Lilly is a reminder that just because I’ve been hurt, it doesn’t mean I won’t be happy again.

“You’re making it easy to remember the good memories. Talking about them isn’t what I thought it would be like. If you had asked me ten months ago to talk about Sarah, I would have stormed off. I was convinced that talking about them would hurt too much and that it wasn’t worth the hurt that followed the memories.” I reach up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

“The pain from losing them hasn’t gone away, I don’t think that it ever will. But it’s nice to remember the good times I had with them. But most days, it’s hard to fully accept that my life is moving on, to recognize that I’m not who I used to be.”

Lilly’s gaze lingers on my face for a moment before she speaks.

“Losing someone you love changes you. They take a piece of you with them when they go and sometimes all you can see are the scars that are left behind. But just because you’re no longer who you used to be with them in your life, it doesn’t make this new version of *you* any less worthy or deserving of happiness.”

She cups my cheeks gently in the palm of her hands, leaning forward to place a gentle kiss on my lips before pulling back. Only once my eyes clash with her shining gaze does she say anything.

“The boy they loved and raised is still a part of you. Just because you’re not who you were when they were here, doesn’t mean that the man you are now isn’t someone to be proud of.” She places another one of those light kisses on my cheek before whispering, “And for whatever it’s worth, I think you’re amazing.”



It was as if a weight had been lifted off Dominik's shoulders. After he opened up about his sister, we stayed out on the dock long after the sunset. We watched the stars take over the sky and he told me more about his sister and growing up in Colorado. It wasn't until my stomach interrupted us that we realized we forgot to eat dinner.

Thankfully, Dominik thought ahead and made us stop to grab a few groceries before checking in. We spent the rest of Friday night eating cereal at the kitchen counter, talking about anything and everything.

It's almost weird how easy talking to him is. I feel like for the first time outside of my relationship with Paige, I can say anything and not be judged.

Yesterday was absolute heaven that ended in both of us coming upstairs to shower together. We hadn't even fooled

around or bothered putting clothes on, simply kept talking until we curled up with each other in bed and passed out.

Neither one of us had planned to wake up early, in fact after our late night on the dock and midnight dinner, I had assumed we would both sleep in. Yet both our internal clocks were on the same wavelength. We got up and went out to explore before nine. I had searched for places to go that wouldn't be too busy right now.

Seeing as how we are still in Florida, it wouldn't be totally out there if someone noticed Dominik. He was confident that we'd be flying under the radar, safe out in public since the season doesn't "officially" start until Tuesday. But better to be cautious than have our picture flying around the internet.

I moved down here in such a rush that I never thought to look up things to do in the state prior to last week. When Dominik asked me to go away for the weekend, it finally gave me the perfect opportunity to research and make a list of things to do. Not only in the Florida Keys, but back in Tampa as well. Searching for activities and making a list was something that I've always done before trips, so I hadn't thought much about it until Dominik saw it on top of my notes with my laptop. He asked about some of the things that I jotted down and even sounded excited about them. But still, I woke up Saturday morning and a part of me hadn't expected him to remember any of those things.

Dominik constantly surprises me though.

He woke up, suggested we get breakfast before we spent the day out and asked where to go first. He didn't even complain about my dragging him around Key West, if anything, he was genuinely happy to follow me around to see typical tourist points.

After the nonstop moving and exploring that we did yesterday, we both agreed to just take it easy today and take full advantage of the rental. So, neither of us were in a rush to get out of bed this morning.

I've only been awake for a few minutes, and I can't decide if I'm ready to get up or not. Cuddling has never been one of

my favorite things. Until Dominik held me all night long that first night we slept together. Since then, anytime we spend the night together, I fall asleep in his arms. Considering I can't ever seem to stay still in my sleep, we usually don't wake up that way. Typically, I'm spread out like a starfish, but still touching him either with my legs tangled into his or my head resting on him instead of the pillow.

Some nights though, I wake up to realize we had stayed curled up with each other all night long. Which is how I am right now.

His arms drape protectively around me, holding me to him tightly so that there isn't a single inch between my back and his front. His face is buried into the nape of my neck, one hand pressed between my ribs and the mattress while the other is resting above our heads.

Trying to move gently, not wanting to wake him, I wiggle slightly. The only thing that does is cause his hand on my ribs to shift to my breast as he sleepily tugs me closer. Heat courses through my body, settling low in my stomach as his already hard cock presses against my ass. His thumb lazily traces over my nipple before cupping me in his palm. If it weren't for his steady breathing on my neck, I would assume he was awake and feeling me up. When he lazily grinds his hips into me, I know he won't be asleep for much longer.

I reach behind me, shifting my ass away from him so that I can grip his cock. My heart races as he hardens even more in my hand, and he lets out a sleepy groan. I pause, unsure if the groan was meant as encouragement or because I'm annoying him by waking him up. I'm about to release him when his hips snap forward, trapping my hand between us.

His lips graze my shoulder as he lazily kisses a path to that spot just below my ear.

"Were you pulling away because you decided you don't want to follow through with what your hand on my cock started or because you got in your head?" I swallow thickly, before whispering.

“I got in my head. I worried you might want more sleep and maybe didn’t want me touching you.”

“Waking up to you gripping my cock is hands down the best way to be woken up.” He nips my ear. “If your body is craving me, you have my permission to wake me up whenever and however you see fit.”

His hips ease back as he nudges my hand away when he pushes back against me his cock slips between my thighs. The tip of his cock brushes past my entrance without going in, drawing a whimper from my lips as he nestles his hips to me. My own hips move on their own accord, trying to get him to move.

His hand trails along my ribs, moving down my thigh until he reaches my knee and hikes it back over his muscular legs. He holds me there, his cock still resting against my throbbing heat as he kisses my shoulder again.

“Tell me what you want, Sunshine. You woke me up and I will gladly give you whatever you ask for.” He shifts slightly causing his cock to tease at my entrance before brushing past again. It’s impossible to think of anything else, my mind focused solely on the feeling of him against me. His hand traces back up my leg, dipping down to trace a path toward my pussy.

Keeping his touch teasing and feather light, he circles my clit a few times and my hips try to surge forward, seeking more. His other arm slips between me and the mattress, until his palm is spread out on my stomach and halts my movements. There’s no stopping the groan that escapes my throat, something that earns me another chuckle as he kisses my neck.

As his fingers move past my clit, pushing his cock away so he can run his fingers through my folds until he reaches my entrance. He stifles his groan by biting into my shoulder.

“You’re fucking soaked, Sunshine.” I can only nod as I wait on bated breath for him to push those glorious fingers into me. Which he does, but he barely puts the tip of a finger in before he pulls back out and teases my entrance.

“What do you want?” He repeats the movement, drawing a desperate whimper before the need for him takes over and has me forgetting everything else.

“I need you, inside of me, now, Dominik.” He kisses my neck again as he pushes his finger fully into my throbbing pussy. Pulling back out, he adds a second finger on the next thrust but stops moving when his fingers are seated fully in me. I try to move my hips, but he holds me still as his low, sleepy voice talks in my ear.

“This is what you wanted, I’m inside of you.” I turn my head and glare at him.

“Dominik, fuck me already.”

“As you wish.” He moves faster than I expected, seeing as how he was half asleep only minutes ago. Withdrawing his fingers, he wastes no time at replacing them with his cock. He thrusts into me from behind, causing all the air to fly out of my lungs.

With my face turned toward him, he wastes no time in capturing my mouth. His hold moves slightly until he’s holding me in place with a gentle but firm grip around my neck.

It’s impossible to focus on anything else when his other hand shifts from my stomach and moves down to my clit. Between his slow but forceful thrusts that keep hitting just the right spot, his mind-numbing kiss and now the assault on my oversensitive bud, I know that I won’t last much longer.

Which is something he can tell. He breaks away, moving to kiss and suck the crook of my neck.

“That’s it, Sunshine.” He breathes between kisses. His thrusts pick up slightly, setting a pace that has me hanging on the edge of my orgasm. It’s the light slap to my clit with his next thrust that has me shattering.

“Fuck, yes, I got you, baby.” He murmurs his praises as he coaxes me through my orgasm, gentling his touch but not stopping his slow thrusts into me. With my body tingling and

starting to come down from the high, I turn to question why he didn't cum but am silenced by the expression on his face.

He's watching me, pure adoration written across his perfect face, but the gleam shining in his eyes makes me think that he is nowhere near done. My pussy clenches around him in response, earning a smirk from him in return. Dominik moves before I can form a sentence.

Keeping his cock buried inside of me, he moves until I'm on my stomach, pinned between him and the mattress. Slowly, he pulls out of me, stopping when just the tip of him rests at my entrance. Holding his hips still, he places a kiss on my shoulder blade. When he finally speaks, his voice is low and gravelly, as he pushes himself in and back out.

"You're gonna cum again." I shake my head against the mattress as he shifts behind me, lifting my hips and forcing me to rest on my knees.

"I ca—" I hear the smack before I fully register it. Turning my head to gape at him over my shoulder, I have to stifle a moan at the sight. He's on his knees between my thighs, still buried deep inside of me as he rubs the spot that he just hit. His eyes don't leave my ass for a long moment before his heated gaze finally clashes with mine.

"Yes, you can." Dominik runs his hand up the curve of my back as he holds me to him by my hip with the other. I push myself up so that my elbows are supporting my torso, gripping the comforter in my fists as he slowly thrusts in and out a few times. His hand wraps around to find my nipple, pinching it as he picks up his pace.

I can't control the moan that escapes as he twists my nipple again and has my body gearing up to do exactly as he asks. He repeats the movement again, causing me to clench around his cock.

Pulling back, he sits back up and grabs my ass with both hands.

"Still think you can't cum again?" His words are followed with another slap to my ass, something my body loves more

than I thought possible. Groaning as I clench around his cock, he thrusts into me, and this time doesn't let up. Keeping a grip on my ass, he reaches around to strum his fingers over my sensitive clit.

"Dominik!" I squeak, whether it's in protest or demand I don't know. He doesn't let me think about anything though as his fingers continue to move toward my entrance as he slows his movements.

"You're so wet for me. So perfect." I can only watch as he pulls his hand away, covered in me. My face heats as he meets me gaze, holding my stare, he runs the tips of his fingers over the curve of my ass leaving goosebumps in their path. When he reaches my tight hole, his thrusts stop and his hips rest against me.

Watching me closely, he runs his wet fingers over me and my pussy clenches in anticipation. I've never given anal play a second thought, not because I'm against it, it's just never come up before. As Dominik puts pressure over my hole again, he licks his lips before speaking.

"One of these days, we're gonna talk about me taking you here."

The thought has me clenching with anticipation. I lick my lips, completely transfixed by the way he's staring down at me. He starts moving inside me again, keeping his thrusts torturously slow.

"Dominik." I plead.

"Tell me what you want from me, Sunshine." When I don't answer him right away, he pulls out and smacks my ass once more before yanking me back onto his cock and holding me still against him. I'm so desperate for another release that I don't even hesitate or feel awkward as I practically beg him.

"More. I need more. Harder. Faster. Both." I try to shift forward, placing more weight onto my forearms before attempting to slam back into him. "*Please.*"

Groaning, he places a hand between my shoulder blades, pushing my chest to the mattress. Grabbing my hip, he pulls

his cock out until he's resting at my entrance.

“Since you asked so beautifully.”

And then he does exactly that. Dominik slams back into me and proceeds to fuck me into the mattress. It doesn't take much since he already had me right on the edge. When he reaches around to find my clit, I don't even try to hold off my orgasm. The start of my release triggers Dominik's and heightens my own as he slams into me once more and cums with a curse followed by my name.

He crashes on top of me, pinning me to the mattress as he slowly removes himself. After a moment, he rolls over and tucks me into his side.

“Good morning, Beautiful.” I chuckle, placing a kiss on his chest and settling back into his side. I barely remember responding before I drift off and fall back asleep in his arms.



“Are you sure you don’t mind dropping it off? I can always see if Paige can grab it from you when she sees you next.”

“Sam, the office is only ten minutes away. Plus, it gives me a reason to leave the condo.” Yesterday, I completed the first full draft of my book. I had been sending him my book in groups of ten chapters, but now that it’s finished, he has to read it all the way through. Unfortunately, his laptop crashed and now he needs to decide if he is going to send it in for repairs or get a new one.

Lucky for him, I have an extra one that’s literally just sitting in my closet still in the original box. I bought it on sale for Cam before I found out that he was cheating. If I had thought about it sooner, I would have returned it, but who knows where the receipt ended up. Besides, now I can help someone out with it.

After Dominik and I got back from our mini vacation, I fell into a groove and flew through writing the end of my book. The closest I got to taking a break from working was the night of the first game of the season. I watched the Bobcats absolutely crush the other team from the comfort of my condo and when Dominik got home, we celebrated the win all night long.

Their next game is tomorrow, and he should be finishing up practice soon. I had asked him if he had any ‘night before a game’ routines that he likes to do, and it was one that I would happily do any time he wanted to. This morning, I dumped a mix of seasoned veggies, potatoes, and chicken into the crockpot, made a batch of snickerdoodle cookies, and figured out which of my streaming services had the Star Wars movies. Nothing says let’s get you hyped up and ready for a game like watching Anakin Skywalker give in to the dark side.

SweetHeart Publishing’s offices are so close, I should have more than enough time to pop over and make it back before he gets home.

“I seriously don’t mind.” Making my way toward the bedroom, excited to finally have an excuse to change out of pajamas. “I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

Not even bothering with makeup, I’m changed and out the door ten minutes later. After making sure my door is locked, I put my ID and credit card in one of the pockets. Okay so my sports bra paired with bike shorts that sit just above my belly button and stop mid-thigh really isn’t that different from pajamas. But they’re comfortable and make me feel semi-productive.

I make sure to pick one of my bags that Sam could keep to carry the laptop in. This short adventure out of my writing hole is exactly what I didn’t know I needed. The weather has been cooling down, which for Florida means that it’s in the high eighties instead of the high nineties. Being from Vermont, I thought that adjusting to the heat would be hard, but apparently, I am built for this kind of weather.

Sam and I chat for a few minutes, mostly it's just him thanking me profusely. On my way back, as I pass boutique shops, a cute bakery called Cal's Cafe and a second hand bookstore, I decide Paige and I need to come back to explore. My phone goes off in my pockets as I approach my street and I can't help the deep sigh that escapes.

My mom and brothers have been blowing up my phone with texts and calls since the conversation with mom. Cam even texted me again, but I didn't even waste time reading that one and just deleted it. However, I couldn't bring myself to do that with the ones from my family. Instead, I sent them a group text that I would call them back when I was ready to talk with a clear head and silenced their messages. There's no point in answering them right now. It's only going to end with us all upsetting or hurting each other more.

I know that I'll have to answer them soon, but there's nothing wrong with asking for a few more days to gather my thoughts.

Seeing a text notification from Dominik is a relief.

Dominik:

Practice got out early, we were crushing it.

Me:

Heck yeah, Domino! Still on for dinner and a movie marathon?

Me:

Dang it. That isn't the nickname either.

His next response comes through, but my name being called out stops me dead in my tracks before I can read it.

Leaning against the brick wall next to the front entrance of my building, a cocky smirk resting on his lips as he blatantly checks me out, is Cam. My heart races as I try to process the fact that he's here. Not just in the state, but that he knows where I live. He pushes off the building and makes his way over. Even as my mind attempts to process what the hell is happening, I notice that he looks... different.

I most definitely had rose-colored glasses on when we were together because seeing him now, I have no idea what I had found appealing. In the fog of racing thoughts, I can't help but compare him to Dominik.

Cam is taller than me by an inch or two. His black hair has filled in with a few more noticeable white hairs, making him appear much older than twenty-seven. He's always had bits of white in his hair, but at the time I didn't notice just how much. The facial hair he's attempted to grow out is sprinkled with that same salt and pepper. Perhaps, if it had grown in evenly, it *might* look good, but he has always struggled to fill in spots on his cheeks and right below his chin. One of the reasons I had always suggested he stay clean shaven was so no one thought he was a creep.

He must still be going to the gym because he's in decent shape, but that's about it. He doesn't fill out a shirt like Dominik does and he sure as hell wouldn't intimidate any of the guys on the team. I force thoughts of Dominik's body from my mind and finally find my words as Cam stops a few paces away.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I glance around, not liking that the street is quiet. The bar on the other side of my building has the front door propped open, but there aren't people coming and going since there's still a couple hours left in the workday. Shaking my head, I cut him off before he can answer.

"Better question, how the fuck did you find out where I live?" He takes a small step forward, watching me closely as he shoves his hands in his front pockets. I used to think he was so cute and innocent when he looked at me this way. However, as I watch him now, all I can think is that he's gearing up to spew out a bunch of bullshit.

"Everyone is worried about you. Your mom is freaking out that you haven't been responding to any of us. I came to convince you to come back with me." He reaches out, running a hand up and down my arm as he sticks out his bottom lip in an over dramatic pout.

I flinch at his touch and step back. Throughout our relationship, Cam was never a touchy, feely type of boyfriend. Very rarely did he hold my hand when we went out and I could probably count the number of times he kissed me in public on one hand. Thinking about it now, it was probably just his way of not announcing to all the single women that he was with me.

Shaking my head, I take another step back and cross my arms.

“First of all, I shouldn’t actually have to explain this but, me walking in on you balls deep in the neighbor and moving out two days later meant that I don’t want anything to do with you.” Before he can add anything, I continue and go to move around him, wanting nothing more than to head inside and end this conversation.

“Secondly, what’s going on between me and my family is none of your concern. We are not together anymore, so leave it alone.”

“And finally—” I’m cut off when he grabs my arm and pulls me back to face him. The sudden movement causes me to stumble and he has to grab both my arms to hold me upright. Once I’m standing straight, I expect him to let go. Unease courses through me when he doesn’t and instead turns us so he’s blocking the way to my building.

“Don’t say that. We can fix this.” I blink in disbelief. There’s no way that he is this delusional and believes that there is even a possibility that we’ll get back together. Shaking out of his hold and stepping away takes more effort than it should. It’s then that I realize that he moves us so that my back is to the building. The small distance I had made between us, he instantly closes, until there is barely a foot between us. My back isn’t against the wall, but from what I can see in my peripheral view, there’s not that much space.

Swallowing thickly, I lower my tone in hopes of placating him. He was never violent before, he always preferred to be manipulative with his words, but he never physically hurt me.

“Cam, no. We’ve both changed and want different things. It’s not just that, it’s also the fact that you hurt me, you broke my trust.” I try to sidestep and go around him, but he just follows my movement. Sighing, I close my eyes briefly and shake my head, fighting the urge to cry out in frustration.

“Look, I don’t know how you even found me here, but this is... beyond inappropriate. *You* cheated, Cam. Now, you need to leave. I’m sorry if my family is complaining to you about my choices, but you have no say in this.” Keeping my voice even and calm when all I want to do is yell at him to leave me the hell alone is draining. I’m tired of repeating myself to him and to my family. I push away the thought that I will need to call my mom to find out if she had anything to do with him showing up.

He runs his hand through his hair, annoyance taking over his features, as he sighs. As if *I’m* out of my mind.

“Lilly, this is stupid. You’ve had more than enough time to be overdramatic about all of this, now it’s time to come home. You’ve had your fun down here. Come home and we can act like this whole thing never happened.”

“Are you insane?” I scoff, slowly losing my patience with this whole situation. Considering that we were together for almost five years, I should have realized sooner that he’s not going to listen to anything I have to say. He views what he did to us as something that can be swept under the rug and forgotten about. He’s never going to listen to anything that I say because he thinks I’m just throwing a tantrum. Taking a deep breath, I move around him, bumping his shoulder as I go. I unlock my phone to call Dominik.

“Go home, Cam.”

Before I even have a chance to take another step, an arm wraps around my waist and I’m yanked back, dropping my phone as Cam pulls me back. My head bounces off the brick wall and I’m so focused on the pain radiating from the back of my head that it takes me a moment to process what’s happening.

When it finally catches up to me that he has me pinned between him and the building, I act on reflex. Placing both my palms on his chest and pushing him away, but he holds his ground with a grunt.

“Stop it, Lilly. You’re being ridiculous. It was just sex with those other girls, I got it out of my system and now we can be together.”

“Let me go. *Now.*”

I push him again, but he just grabs my wrists and pins them to my side. I go to knee him in the crotch, but he leans his weight against me, blocking the movement. Panic finally runs through my veins. Cam’s never been like this before, suddenly it’s like my mind has no idea what to do.

That whole fight or flight reflex should actually be called fight, flight, or freeze reflex. Apparently, my body reacts to danger by turning into a fucking statue.

“Lilly. You’re coming ho—”

“Get your fucking hands off of her.”

Relief pours over me as I turn my head toward the sound of Dominik’s voice.

If looks could kill, Cam would be six feet under. I’ve never seen Dominik so lethal, and while his murderous glare probably should scare me, all I feel is relief. I bite my tongue when I notice that he’s not alone, Greyson and Landon stand on both sides of him wearing equally pissed expressions.

Cam’s grip on my wrists tightens as he glances over his shoulder to address the guys.

“This doesn’t concern you. Just a small disagreement between my girlfriend and I.” I scowl at him at the use of the word girlfriend, which he misses as he gives them a cocky grin and an eye roll. “She’s just being dramatic.”

Cam turns back to me, thinking that these guys will actually listen to him and narrows his gaze. He starts talking again as if we’re still alone.

“Don’t be difficult about this. Now, let’s go home.” His grip on my wrist tightens again as he pushes himself off me and goes to pull me along with him. He doesn’t make it more than a step before Dominik is by my side. Grabbing the arm that Cam is holding me by and squeezing hard as he talks in a menacingly low voice that I didn’t know was possible.

“Let. Her. Go.” Cam’s face visibly pales but he chooses to stand his ground.

“Dude, I appreciate the tough macho guy routine, but we don’t need it here. My girl was just being a brat, bu—” He’s cut off by a fist to the face. Cam finally lets go of my wrist as he falls back, but I lose my balance and stumble back into the building again. When my head hits the brick this time, I don’t recover as quickly. The dull pain on the base of my skull flares and this time there’s no one to hold me up as I slide down the length of the wall.

Landon is by my side in the next moment, saying my name gently as he helps me sit against the building. I focus on Dominik, who is standing over Cam as if he’s considering going after him again, but Greyson has a hand on his shoulder holding him back.

“Are you okay?” I watch Dominik in a daze for a moment longer before reluctantly looking at Landon. He’s kneeling next to me, concern spread across his features as he hovers, but doesn’t touch me. I nod and glance back, not wanting to take my eyes off Dominik as he towers over Cam, but the pain that radiates across through my head has me flinching. Closing my eyes, I take a slow breath and try to swallow the nausea that’s rolling through me.

I’ve been lucky enough to have made it this long with no major injuries, so this is new to me. There’s also a huge part of me that is still trying to process the fact that I’m hurt because of Cam.

The sound of a female voice talking close by alerts me that someone else noticed what’s going on, but I keep my eyes closed. Exhaling, I mumble for Dominik to stop.

Cam is not worth him getting in a fight over.

Hands gently brush hair away from my eyes, and when I crack them open, his dark blue eyes are right in front of me. His gaze traces over my face as he tenderly moves his touch to check me over. There's no stopping the wince as he finds the spot that hurts like hell. I don't miss the anger that flashes across his face before he looks back over his shoulder.

"Shit." He murmurs with an exhale.

Slowly, I tilt my head to follow his gaze. Greyson stands just over Landon's shoulder, phone in his hand as he stares down the street. It takes me longer than necessary to realize that Cam is nowhere to be seen.

I place my hands on the pavement behind me, meaning to push myself up, but Dominik gently keeps me in place.

"You should stay still. Grayson called the cops. Plus, someone should look at your head."

"I'm fine." I peer up at Dominik, meaning to reassure him, but am cut short at the panic spread across his features. Keeping in mind that Landon and Greyson are both here, I give him a small smile. "Really, Dominik, I'm okay."

My head throbs as I sit myself a little bit straighter and it's then that I notice the blood on Dom's free hand. Curiously, I reach up to touch the back of my head.

"Motherfucker." I grumble. The bit of red on my hand explains why the throbbing hasn't lessened, that and the fact that my head met a brick wall twice. Sirens grow closer and I groan.

"I don't need to go to the hospital."

"Like hell you aren't. You're getting checked out." The tone in Dominik's voice leaves no room for arguments. I sigh but realize he's right. While I may have never had one, I do know that you're not supposed to mess with head injuries.

"What are the chances of me convincing you guys to not call my dad?" Greyson chuckles, but cuts it off with a cough, as Landon smiles sympathetically at me.

“I mean we won’t call him, but that’s only because a text was already sent.”

I sigh, and let my head drop to the side, resting it on Dominik’s shoulder. Closing my eyes, I brace myself for the amount of questions that I’m about to have to answer with a headache.



“**Y**ou okay, dude?” Landon asks as he leans forward in his seat, bracing his elbows on his knees. Slowly, I flex my fingers as much as possible while plopping into the seat next to Landon with a heavy sigh.

“Yeah. I only split a couple knuckles open, but they cleaned them out and bandaged them up.” Grey nods in response as he paces the length of the waiting room. It’s then that I notice how uncomfortable he is. A small bit of curiosity spikes as to why he doesn’t like them. Not that I blame him, hospitals sure as hell are not my favorite place to be either.

“Did you ask if you’ll be good to play tomorrow?” Landon pulls me from my thoughts. I nod and can’t help but smile a bit as I recall how the nurse was more worried than me about whether I would be able to play in the game or not. He rambled on for ten minutes as he told me how to take care of it, so it didn’t hurt as bad tomorrow. The guy also had no

shame in asking for a selfie with me so he could show off that he treated me.

“Yeah, I’m good to go. Just need to ice it tonight and bandage it up under my gloves.” I leave out the fact that he also had no hesitations on lecturing me about punching someone. I had shut him up real quick when I asked if he would prefer me to standby while someone gets hurt or threatened.

Never mind the fact that the someone was Lilly.

When I had come around the street corner and saw that douchebag pinning Lilly against the building, I saw red. It was bad enough that the little shit decided to touch her at all, so when he pinned her hands down as she tried to push him away, I reacted without thinking twice.

I’ve never been a violent person. Even on the ice, I could count the number of fights I’ve gotten into during a game on one hand. Outside of those couple of tame brawls during a game, the only other time I’ve intentionally hit someone was when I saw Josh after Sarah’s death.

While my hand was getting cleaned and wrapped, I thought over everything that had happened. Even without having had a moment of privacy with Lilly, my gut was telling me that the guy was her ex-boyfriend. There was also no doubt that given the chance, I wouldn’t think twice about hitting him again.

I stand by my actions.

Having Greyson and Landon with me helped my case when the police questioned us. The prick was hurting Lilly and from what I overheard, trying to get her to go somewhere with him. They wrote it down as me defending Lilly but took down all our numbers in case they needed it. Considering the idiot ran off like a scared cat, there was very little room to question who was in the wrong.

One of the cops had made the mistake of asking a question that made it sound like this was all Lilly’s fault and before I could speak up, Greyson beat me to it and was telling him off. Not once since joining the team has he ever raised his voice,

let alone yelled at anyone. But after listening to him call the cop out for trying to brush it off as a woman being dramatic, I'm glad that I've never been on the receiving end of his anger.

"If you guys wanna head out, I don't mind waiting alone for Coach to get here." Landon meets my gaze, clearly about to protest, but I nod to Greyson. Since I joined them, he hasn't stopped pacing the length of the small waiting room. It's not just that he is clearly uncomfortable, it's way more than that. Grey doesn't open up easily, so the fact that he looks ready to lose his shit, tells me all I need to know.

Thankfully, Landon notices the same thing and gives me a subtle nod before dramatically stretching in his chair.

"I mean if you're sure, dude. Could definitely use a hot shower and maybe actually go to bed early."

"Plus, it might make Lilly feel less overwhelmed if it's just one of us here when she gets out." Greyson says, striding over to the chair next to Landon to grab his bag.

"Exactly. I'll text you guys if I hear anything."

Grey doesn't wait any longer, offering me a nod as he heads out, Landon following right behind him with worry spread across his face. He pats my shoulder as he passes me, but hustles to catch up to Greyson.

Twenty minutes later, a nurse comes to take me to see Lilly. The moment she said my name, I was out of my chair before she even finished speaking. I saw Lilly right before she went to get checked out by a doctor, so logically I know she's okay. Aside from the cut on the back of her head and a headache. Yet I still couldn't stop thinking about all the "what ifs?"

What if she has a concussion?

What if she needed stitches or fractured her skull?

What if her head hit the wall harder than she said and there's a hematoma?

Yeah, the nurse had perfect timing because I was clearly about to spiral with completely irrational thoughts.

I walk into the room on bated breath, only when my eyes land on Lilly, do I begin to relax. She's sitting on the hospital bed, aside from looking completely exhausted, she's okay. Her hair is hanging forward over both shoulders in two messy braids, the straps of her sports bras are pushed to the sides as she massages her shoulders.

The smile that stretches across her face when she sees me in the doorway has my breath catching. Before I even make the decision, I'm crossing the room.

"Hey, Sunshine." Even if she seems fine, I need to ask. "You okay?"

Her smile falls and part of me wishes I could take back my question, but I need to know the answer. If only to stop my own spiraling thoughts. Before she gets the chance to answer, I reach out to cup her cheek in my hand. Her eyes close as she leans into my touch, letting out a heavy exhale. I gently lower myself to sit on the edge of her bed and reach for her with my free hand. It isn't until I go to squeeze her hand in mine that I remember my bandage.

There's no time to think about pulling away because Lilly already has my hand gently clasped between hers. As she sits up and scowls down at it, I use my now free hand to run along my jaw.

"You're hurt." It's not a question, if anything it sounds like she only said it to confirm it with herself. "When did this happen?"

Her eyes are pleading with me, and I know she is hoping that I'll say it's from practice. But I haven't lied to her before, there's no point in doing so now. Carefully, I turn my hand to awkwardly hold hers. When she tips her head back to meet my gaze, I flash a small smile in hopes to ease her worries.

"It's just a few cuts. Nothing major, just needed some antibiotic ointment and to keep it clean and covered tonight." Her eyes widen and swell up with tears threatening to escape. "Trust me, Lilly, I'm okay. The nurse even said I'm more than okay to play tomorrow. It's literally just a couple scrapes and they are one hundred percent worth it."

Her head shakes slowly side to side as she inspects my hand. A few curls have escaped the loose braids and start to tangle with the chain of her necklace. Carefully, I reach up and tuck them behind her ear before trailing my fingers along her jaw and gently tip her head back to look up at me.

“Are you okay, Sunshine?” One of those tears finally escapes as she nods.

“Physically, yeah.” Her voice is quiet, and she closes her eyes as I wipe her cheek clean. On her next breath, she sags against me, and I fold her into an embrace. She rests her forehead on my chest and arms wrap around my waist as she mumbles, “Thank you.”

I lean down to kiss her forehead, and that’s when I notice the bandage. It’s small and explains why her hair is in two braids. When the EMTs checked her out before loading her up, they said it was most likely a minor scrape and a possible concussion. However, even knowing that doesn’t make me feel any better. She was still hurt because of *him*.

“That man... Is he who I think he is?” Her nod is small against my chest, and she turns her head slightly to rest her cheek above my heart as she answers.

“If you’re thinking that was my ex, then yes. It was Cam.”

Fuck, I should have hit him harder.

Not just for today, but for everything she’s told me about him. Confusion tugs at me as I remember her saying she hasn’t answered his texts or talked to him at all since leaving him.

“I didn’t think he knew where you were?” I question. She huffs a laugh.

“Neither did I.” Worry tightens in my chest. “I don’t know, maybe one of our accounts is still linked together or something.”

I nod, not that she can see me, but keep quiet. After a moment longer, she straightens. Resting a hand on my knee as she forces a smile at me.

“The nurse was just going to check my CT results and as long as that’s okay, I should be discharged in the next hour.” She glances behind me toward the door. “Are Greyson and Landon still here?”

“No, I told them to head out and that I would update them when I saw you.” She relaxes a bit more as she sits back on the bed. Smirking, she shoots me a sidelong glance.

“What are the chances you text my dad and convince him to not come here?”

“I’d say those chances are very slim.” We both jolt at the sound of her father. I turn to find Coach in the doorway and stand up quickly, shoving my hands in my pockets and clearing my throat.

“Coach.” I say with a nod in his direction.

He acknowledges me but keeps his focus on Lilly as he makes his way to the other side of her bed. His eyebrows furrow once he notices the bandage.

“What happened?” Lilly sighs heavily before answering his question.

“I’m okay, it was just...” She glances at me, practically pleading for me to get her out of this situation. Normally, I probably would be able to. But right now, anything I can think to say would probably upset Coach as much as it does me. Giving Lilly a small smile, and shaking my head as I glance back up. He’s watching me now, as if he’s finally trying to figure out how I play into all of this.

I glance at Lilly once more, an eyebrow cocked in question. I have no problem filling him in, but I also need her to see that I won’t be fluffing it up. She just stares back up at me, eyes wide and pleading as if she can’t figure out how to tell him.

“Grey, Landon, and I were heading home after practice, the three of us live in the Kings building as well and when we came around the corner of the street, we saw a guy push Lilly against the building. I’m pretty sure that’s when her head hit the wall the first time...” I trail off for a moment, waiting for confirmation from Lilly. Which she gives with a small nod. I

have to hold back the anger that spikes again as I push forward. “So, we stepped in and told him to let her go. He didn’t and tried to get her to go with him.” I wait until Coach meets my stare.

“So, I punched him. He let her go, but she fell back and hit her head against the building again. All of us got distracted with making sure she was okay and none of us saw where he ran off too.” Coach glances down to my hand and motions toward the bandage.

“Is that from hitting him?” I give a single nod. “Are you good to play tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” He nods stiffly. “Where are Landon and Grey?”

“Sent them home a bit ago. Didn’t think we all needed to be crowding around Lilly when she got out.”

Coach comes around to stand next to me. Gripping my shoulder, he watches Lilly for a long moment before turning back to me.

“Thank you. For stepping in and standing by her side. I know she’s a big girl and can thank you guys herself, but it’s a relief to know that she has some people in the building looking out for her.”

“Of course, I would never be able to stand by if she was being hurt.” Coach turns toward Lilly, anger and tension rippling off him.

“The guy who attacked you, do you know him? Dom said he got away, but do we at least have a name or description?” I’ve only been around him for just over a month, but I’ve never seen him like this. Right now, not only does he look like someone ready to go on a hunt, but he is also clearly a father who is ready to protect his daughter.

Lilly sighs as she gazes out the window. Talking slowly, I give Lilly the chance to cut me off in case she doesn’t want him to know.

“Greyson and I gave descriptions to the police—”

“It was my ex-boyfriend.” Lilly cuts me off and finishes catching her dad up to speed. After a long pause, his gaze bounces between the two of us once before settling on me with an eyebrow quirked up in question.

“Are you two...” He trails off and my heart rate picks up. Luckily, Lilly gets her voice back and lets out a short laugh.

“We’re friends. He and the guys have been at the bar next door a few times that Paige and I went.” She lightly swats his arm to get his attention. “Plus, get this, his best friend, Garrett? He’s Paige’s boss.”

“What a small world.” He laughs, seeming to relax slightly from her answer. “That’s good to know that these boys are behaving around you. And good to see that you’re making friends.”

Friends. Well, I guess that’s better than him knowing I see her naked almost daily.

I shake off that thought, now is not the time to be thinking of Lilly naked. Instead, I listen as Lilly fills Coach in on the injury to her head. Just as she finishes up telling him that she’s waiting for the CT results, the nurse walks back in with some paperwork.

“For the most part, everything appears to be good. You do have a minor concussion. Have you ever had one before?” Lilly shakes her head, glancing at me before focusing back on the nurse as she goes over what she needs to do for the next forty-eight hours. The nurse looks between her dad and me, before focusing back on Lilly.

“Do you have anyone that can check on you every couple hours?” It’s on the tip of my tongue to volunteer myself, but Lilly is already answering.

“Yes, my friend Paige is going to spend a few days with me.” She must have called Paige when the nurse left her alone to come get me. The nurse nods and dives into discharge paperwork with her. Coach and I stand to the side, giving them space but both clearly listening to every word said. When she

finally leaves, Lilly swings her legs off the bed and slowly pushes herself up.

Every inch of me is humming with the need to go to her side, but with her dad here, I need to make sure I don't cross any lines.

"Did you drive here?" Coach asks me.

"No, Landon drove. I was gonna call for a car or something." He waves a hand, dismissing me.

"Nonsense, I'll drive you both back." He motions toward the paperwork in Lilly's hand. "While you go and finish up all that signing on dotted lines, I'll head down to pull the car up front and call to have some groceries delivered."

Before she could even try to protest, Coach is planting a gentle kiss on her forehead before heading out the door. After a long moment of silence, I turn toward Lilly to find her standing frozen, blinking at the door as if she's confused. After a cautious glance over my shoulder to make sure we are alone, I close the distance between us. It's not until I run my knuckles lightly over her cheek that she stares up at me with furrowed brows.

"Did he just...kiss my forehead?"

Ah. That's what this is.

"Yeah, he did, Sunshine." She blinks at me. "Are you okay with that?"

Lilly gawks at the door for a second before she nods.

"Yes. It's just...weird." Unable to resist, I pull her into my chest for a hug, her arms instantly wrapping around my waist.

"He cares about you." I murmur softly. She might not notice, but I don't miss how her arms tighten around me slightly.

"I didn't actually know how much I wanted him to care. But now that I know he does... Now that he's here and trying to be in my life, I feel like I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop."

She tilts her head back, resting her chin on my chest as her gaze clashes with mine.

“I feel like I’m waiting for him to realize that he made the right move all those years ago. When he moved down here and away from us. What if I’m not good enough to be his daughter?” A stray tear rolls down her cheek and I’m wiping it away before it even reaches her jaw. Pushing back slightly, I cup her face between my hands gently, giving her no choice but to look at me.

“You are worth everything and more. Anyone who can’t see how utterly spectacular you are, they’re the ones who aren’t worth it.”

Planting a kiss on her nose, I wipe away another tear as she nods her head.

“Now, we can talk more about how amazing you are later, ya know when you’re not concussed. For now, why don’t we get you back to your place before Paige gets there.” Lilly chuckles lightly as a faint blush finally touches her cheeks.

“Um...Paige isn’t coming over. She’s actually going to kill me when I do call her later, but I haven’t told her yet.” She breaks eye contact and stares straight ahead at my chest as she continues. “I assumed you would be sleeping over, but I couldn’t say that in front of my dad. But if I thought wrong—” I cut her off with a kiss.

“Sunshine, you can bet that with or without Paige at your place, I will be keeping my eyes and hands on you.”



“Just get it over with.” I mumble to myself. Not that saying it out loud does anything to make me move. I’ve been sitting at my kitchen island for the past half hour staring between my phone and the bill that I got in the mail from the hospital. It isn’t the remaining balance that’s the problem, I have enough put away in my savings from my time working during college. The problem is that I’m on my mom’s insurance. I know that she needs to hear from me that I had a trip to the hospital instead of finding out when she sees the insurance summary.

Yet I still can’t bring myself to pick up the phone to call her.

It’s been two weeks since Cam showed up out of the blue. I’ve gone over the entire situation countless times and for as much as I want to just forget about it and move on, there’s a few things that keep nagging at me.

For starters, I haven't heard from him since then. Not a single text or call and thankfully he hasn't shown up again. Which is probably better for Cam considering that I've barely been left alone since then. When I had finally called Paige to let her know what happened, I had to fight tooth and nail to convince her that she didn't have to come over. The only reason she didn't show up that night was because Dominik interjected that he wouldn't leave me alone.

That didn't stop her from showing up the next day with Garrett and more junk food than any of us could eat. Dominik only stayed for an hour before he had to get ready for his game. Which left us three to set up camp in my living room and cheer him and the Bobcats on. It wasn't until there was five minutes left in the game that I realized Paige managed to distract me from everything that happened. After the game, Garrett had taken on the role of cleaning up, demanding that Paige and I relax. Really, we both knew he was just being nice and gave the two of us the space to talk alone.

Apparently, Dominik had asked him to hang out and make sure I wasn't alone incase Cam decided to show back up. Briefly, I wondered if I should have been upset that Dom made that decision without talking to me. But I wasn't. He knew that I wouldn't ask for company so that I wouldn't inconvenience anyone, so he did it for me. Although I still told him that he should have included me in that decision and that he's clearly never seen Paige upset before. If he had, he wouldn't have felt the need to ask Garrett to come over. I'm still certain that if Cam had decided to show up, Paige would have scared him more than Garrett.

Having time to talk things through with Paige was something I didn't know I needed. Dominik and I had spent plenty of time going over it all, but since Paige knows Cam, she was able to understand some of my thoughts better. If anything, having time to catch up with Paige was the perfect opportunity to tell her everything that led to our breakup with a clear mind. She was pissed that I hadn't told her sooner, and for a moment, I was worried that she was going to be so angry with me that she would leave, but she wasn't. That's the thing about our relationship, we both know not to take it personally

when we don't talk about something right away. Paige simply hugged me as she told me how proud of me she was for finally leaving him.

Another reason I finally opened up to Paige, was because there's still two things that have been bugging me. One thing is that, even though he's a cheating asshole, he had never been physical or demanding like he was. The other is that I have no idea how Cam found out where I've been staying.

I shove away thoughts of the shitshow with Cam, hoping that no news is good news. Giving in and needing a distraction, I reach for my phone. After scrolling to find my mom's contact, I hit the call button before I can rethink it. She answers before the second ring finishes.

"Lilly! Oh my goodness. Finally!" She exclaims, shushing whoever is with her. Based on the cut off laughter, I can tell that at least one of my brothers is with her. The sound changes slightly, and I know she has me on speakerphone.

"Hey, how are you?" Of all the things I can think of to say, that's it.

"How am I?" She repeats back to me, as if my question was offensive. "How do you think I am!? I haven't heard from you in weeks, not a single call or text. Nothing. I've been worried sick about you!"

"I told you to give me time, mom. I wasn't in the right headspace to talk things through calmly. I was trying to avoid a fight."

"There was nothing for you to fight about!" She exclaims. "If anything, your brothers and I should be upset with you!"

"You should be upset with *me*?" I quietly question back.

"Yes! While you've been off gallivanting and doing God knows what down there, your brothers and I have been trying to hold Cam together for you. Do you know how tiresome it's been for us to keep avoiding questions about the two of you? To keep Cam hopeful that you'll get over this and come home?"

Unease prickles through me.

“I didn’t tell you to do that. If anything, I told you that we were done and there’s no way we would get back together.” She scoffs.

“You didn’t have to tell me to do anything. I’m your mother, it’s my job to make sure you don’t screw up your life. But if you keep shutting me out, I won’t be able to stop you from becoming like your father.”

I close my eyes. This wasn’t the conversation I had called to have with her, but I don’t see any way to get around it.

“From what I’ve seen, that wouldn’t be such a bad thing.” I mumble back in response.

For a long moment, there’s nothing but silence on the other end. It’s Blake that’s the first to speak.

“What do you mean, from what you’ve seen?” I pinch the bridge of my nose, resting my elbow on the countertop.

“I’m guessing that mom didn’t tell you why I’ve been avoiding all your calls. Let me guess, she simply said I’m being over dramatic and throwing a tantrum?” My question is met with more silence. After a slight shuffle sound, the next moment my phone rings with an alert for a video call. I let out a long exhale before accepting.

I’m met with both my brother’s faces in the center of the frame while my mom protests in the background. Seeing them now, all I notice is how much they look like our dad.

“Hi.” I attempt to smile.

“What do you mean?” Blake doesn’t even acknowledge my greeting. I huff out a humorless laugh.

“I haven’t been living with Paige. When I broke up with Cam and needed to get away, I called Dad.” Blake’s eyebrows furrow in confusion and Ian finally talks.

“I’m surprised he even answered.” Ignoring his jab, I continue.

“Originally, I was only calling to see if he knew of any affordable places to stay while I searched for a job. Instead, he offered me his condo that he bought when he moved down

here and hardly ever uses. I tried offering to pay rent or anything toward the bills, but he wouldn't take it, so when he asked me to go to dinner with him...I figured it was the least I could do."

"Wait, you've actually seen Dad?" Blake questions. It surprises me that neither of them are upset. While I know that they've kept up with Dad's career, anytime the subject of him has come up, neither of them have hidden their resentment for him. I thought for sure that they would be angry with me for calling him for help, especially when I didn't take them up on their offers to stay with them.

I give them a small smile.

"Yeah. I've seen him. We've actually had either lunch or dinner a good handful of times since I've been down here." I'm cut off by mom piping in.

"Which is just another mistake you've made this year!" I fight the urge to roll my eyes and continue talking to my brothers.

"Anyway, at one of our lunches he made a comment about how much it hurt him that none of us ever wanted to see him." Ian glances back at mom before he gapes back at me.

"*We* never wanted to see *him*?" I nod and tell my brothers how our dad had called and emailed mom to set up some sort of schedule to see us and mom either ignored him or told him that we didn't want to.

"He could be lying about that." Blake protests, but even he doesn't sound convinced. I massage the tension building in my shoulders and sigh.

"I thought that too, but he offered to show me proof. Not because he wants to prove mom wrong, but because he wanted me to see that he wasn't lying. I can send them to you guys, so you can see for yourselves, but he's not lying. He tried to see us after he moved. When he took this job, he was only leaving Mom. Not us." Ian shakes his head, but I suspect it's not in denial as he glares at Mom. Blake continues watching me, his head cocked to the side as he questions.

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner?” Ian whips his head back toward the camera. I clear my throat, but that doesn’t help any. When I answer him, my voice sounds small even to me.

“Honestly, I didn’t think you would believe me. I assumed you would believe mom. Plus, you guys have barely talked to me since I broke up with Cam and when you did talk to me it was to tell me to get back together with him. I’m sorry I didn’t try to tell you, but I didn’t know how to.”

“We’ve always told each other everything though. At least the important shit.”

I give him a small smile but shake my head slowly in disagreement. Blake contemplates it for a moment before he speaks.

“No. She stopped.” Blake thinks it over and all of us are quiet while he does. I know what he’s realizing, it’s the same thing I discovered shortly after moving down here. I can tell the moment he figures it out, because he turns to Ian with pure disappointment painted across his face.

“She stopped telling us things when she broke up with Cam.”

“Why?” Ian snaps, and I let out another humorless laugh.

“Because every time I spoke to any of you, I was being told how much I was fucking up my life. You guys have spent the past three months telling me to just “get over it” and get back with Cam. Hell, the last time I talked to Mom she was going on about how *lucky* I am that Cam is still waiting and loving me.” I start pacing the condo, needing to move as my heart pounds in my chest. It doesn’t help calm me any as I lose my remaining patience and spill everything.

“You guys want to know everything? Fine. About three months ago I walked in on Cam balls deep in some random woman on our living room couch. That’s why I left him.” I scoff, clutching the phone tighter. “For some fucked up reason, I felt guilty and didn’t want to ruin any of your relationships with him, so I removed myself. Every time you told me to get over it? You were telling me to get over the fact that he

cheated on me. Which, fun fact, wasn't just that once." My voice is raised as I'm close to yelling at this point. My brothers look like a mix of horrified and pissed while Mom remains silent for once. Not that I can find it in me to care as I continue spilling everything.

"So yes, I was so desperate to get away that I called Dad. He gave me a place to stay while I put myself back together, no questions asked. His only ask was that I get to know him a bit, but even if I chose not to let him in, he would still let me stay here. Anytime that he asked about something I didn't want to talk about, he moved on! Hell, he didn't even know about Cam until the asshole somehow figured out where I'm staying and put me in the hospital two weeks ago!" My heart drops and I stop pacing, coming to a stop at the kitchen counter.

Shit.

That wasn't how I wanted to tell them that. They're all silent long enough that I tap my screen to make sure the call didn't freeze. Ian is the first to break the silence.

"Cam did what?" His tone is menacing. Focusing on my kitchen counter, I play with the edges of the bill while I talk.

"He showed up a couple weeks ago trying to tell me that I had to come back with him. When I said no... he uh... I think he was going to try and take me with him. But a couple of the guys that live in the building were coming home from practice and helped me." I swallow thickly, thinking over what to say. "After they stepped in, Cam mouthed off and he had a good grip on me so when he was forced to let me go, I bashed my head pretty good from it." I leave out the bit that Dominik punching him in the face was the reason he let go. Dominik had felt so guilty it took me almost an hour to convince him that it wasn't his fault.

Ian turns away toward our Mom, and I don't have to see his face to know that he is livid.

"Did you know about this?"

Blake shifts the camera as he turns toward mom. They're in the kitchen at her house, my brothers watch her from across the table where my mom stands. Her eyes are wide as she shakes her head vehemently back and forth. Her focus stays on me as she answers, as if I had asked the question.

“Cam and I were talking about how much you've changed, and it felt like I would never get you back. He offered to talk to you, but you weren't answering his messages. I figured you two just needed to talk face to face and he said he would win you back and convince you to come back home.”

Ian scoffs at our mom, while Blake stares back at me with wide eyes. I stare at them while I process what she said. Finally, I can't hold back my question.

“You told Cam... How did you know where I was?” Her voice wobbles when she responds, but I can't find it in me to feel sorry for her right now.

“The last time we talked, you told me that your father gave you a place to stay. It was a long shot that the address he gave me shortly after he left us still belonged to him.” I can only blink at her in response as a cold feeling spreads through my chest. Luckily, Blake questions her instead.

“So, it's true? Dad tried to keep in touch with us?”

“If he wanted to be a part of your lives, he would have stayed. If I had let him see you guys, he would have strung the three of you along and then broken your hearts when he got too busy with work. I was only protecting you guys from getting hurt.”

Closing my eyes, I let her words sink in, while my brothers start talking over each other at her. My thoughts are racing from trying to keep up with the back and forth of the conversation between shit with Cam and our dad.

Not only is she the reason Cam showed up, but she also made the decision for our father not to be in our lives without telling us. Thinking over everything now, I realize that all my negative thoughts about our Dad, all stem from things she's

said. How she used to only talk about his bad qualities, or constantly state how he picked work over family.

“Dad?” The sound of Blake’s voice has me snapping my eyes open. He’s not focused on me though. Instead he’s leaning into the phone, his gaze locked on something behind me. As if that’s going to help better his view through the screen.

My heart drops, probably mush on the floor at this point, when I glance over my shoulder to find my dad and Dominik standing just outside my kitchen. Dom is standing slightly behind him, still in the hallway as my dad clears his throat. He glances over at Dominik, he hikes a thumb over his shoulder, pointing to the door.

“Practice got out early, so I figured I’d drive the guy’s home and swing by to check in on you.” He runs a hand through his hair, avoiding my gaze as he talks. “Dominik and I were finishing up our conversation in the hallway when we heard yelling.”

“We probably should have spoken up sooner...” He glances over his shoulder toward Dominik again and I can’t help the small laugh that escapes. They both look like they’re about to get scolded and are trying to find a way to get out of it.

“You’re fine, Dad.” I turn my attention back to the phone, I see my brothers and mom all standing still and staring at us. I clear my throat, tilting my head to the side and peeking back at my dad. “How much of that did you hear?”

He stares at the floor while he grips the back of his neck and clears his throat.

“Right around the part about where you were telling them when you first called me.” I nod, turning back to give my brothers a small smile.

“I know there’s still a lot that we need to talk about regarding Dad, and if you want you can call me later or you can even come down here sometime. But Mom?” She stares at me, wide eyed and panicked.

“This time when I tell you that I need space...Listen to me. Between you very loudly doubting all my life choices, picking Cam over me every single time, and everything with Dad... I have nothing nice to say to you at the moment. And you’re the one who taught me to not say anything at all in those moments.”

Whatever she was going to say is cut off as I hang up the phone. I take a moment to focus on willing away the tears that are threatening to spill over. The whole reason I never told them why I broke up with Cam was because of how much he meant to them. I had been trying to make sure that their relationships with him didn’t get messed up because of what happened between us.

It suddenly hits me that I never should have had to worry about that in the first place. Even if I never told them what had really happened between Cam and I, they should have supported me. Yeah, maybe if I had talked to my brothers instead of running away, they might have left me alone about breaking up with him. But shouldn’t my leaving him have spoken for itself?

Pushing thoughts of Cam away, I turn away from the counter. There’s a huge part of me that wants to walk over to Dominik and just fall into his arms. Considering my dad is standing right next to him, I stay put.

“I’m gonna...” Dominik trails off, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder toward the front door. Disappointment floods through me, but I bite my tongue and nod. With my dad here, and everything they just overheard, it wouldn’t make any sense for Dominik to be here. I wave a hand toward the kitchen as I step toward them.

“There’s wine, or something stronger, in the cupboard next to the fridge if you wanna pull something out while I walk Dominik out.” It’s a small hallway and not much of an actual reason to walk someone out, but I’m hoping my dad just takes it as me being overly polite. He claps Dominik on the shoulder and gives him one of those silent nods before making his way into the kitchen.

Dominik walks next to me toward my front door, which they had left open when they came in. Stepping out to the hall, I close the door behind us, leaving it open just a crack before turning to face Dom.

“Well, that was a shit show.” I joke, keeping my voice low. Dominik reaches out to push a bit of my hair out of my face before he leans down to place a gentle kiss on my forehead.

“Why don’t you go talk to your dad and text me when he leaves? I’ll start making something to eat.” I sigh, leaning into his chest and wrapping my arms around his waist.

“I’ll come over once he leaves and fill you in.” He hugs me back, squeezing me tightly before pulling back to peer down at me.

“If you wanna talk more once he leaves, we can. Or if you wanna just curl up, eat some food, and watch some more *New Girl*, we can do that. If you’re emotionally exhausted, don’t push yourself because you feel like you *have* to fill me in right away.” He kisses my forehead before starting to pull away. “I’m here for you, however you need me to be.”

If hearts could melt, mine would be in a puddle on the floor. Dominik has the tendency to see the messy, chaotic parts of me and somehow know exactly what I need. He doesn’t push me to open up before I’m ready to, but when I do, he’s never judged me. Dominik is someone who I could tell anything to and he would welcome every bit with open arms. My heart skips a beat at the thought that he has become someone important in my life. I know that we need to have a talk about what this is becoming, because somewhere over the past month, it’s turned into something more than just sex.

Swallowing thickly, I nod. After kissing him on the cheek, I square my shoulders and head back into my condo.

When I walk into the kitchen, my dad turns toward me and holds up a bottle of wine in one hand and the whiskey in the other. Laughing, I head over to my liquor cabinet and pull out the bottle of *Crown Royal Apple* that I keep hidden from Paige. Holding it up, I head toward the fridge.

“If I’m drinking whiskey, it’s gonna be this.” Pulling out the cranberry juice, I mix them together in two glasses and offer him one with a shrug.

“I’m sorry.” My dad doesn’t even give me a chance to ask him what he’s apologizing for as he continues. “I should have tried harder, fought for time with you and your brothers. Every time I talked to someone about the divorce and you guys, they all pointed out how hard it would be to win against your mother. Or that you guys would hate me if you were forced to come down here because of some court order. I thought paying the child support would be enough to show you that I was here for you three.”

He finally looks up at me from across the counter.

“I let others scare me into not fighting harder for my kids and, for that, I’m sorry.”

Swallowing thickly, I blink back tears. I’m so tired of crying, but lately I can’t help it. My dad is standing here, apologizing for something that wasn’t fully his fault. It’s understandable to see where he’s coming from, and I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a part of me that wished he would have tried harder. But the blame doesn’t solely rest on his shoulders.

Moving back around the island, I sit back down and think over what to say.

“When you first left, it wasn’t so bad. I can’t speak for Ian and Blake, but for me, at least, I didn’t notice anything different. I was busy with Paige.” I watch him with a smirk. “If anything, be grateful you missed the boy crazy teenage girl phase.”

That at least earns me a short laugh before I continue.

“Around the time of my first High School dance was the first time I remember you not being around. I had asked Mom if there was any way for you to make it to take pictures, but she said you couldn’t get the time off. When Christmas that year rolled around and once again, she said that you couldn’t get time... that’s when I remember being mad at you.”

Glancing at him, I wonder for a moment if I should stop talking. But then he turns to me with a sad smile and nods. After taking a sip of my drink, I continue.

“That following year, we all slowly stopped asking. When I asked if you were going to make it to my sixteenth birthday party, Mom had this huge breakdown about hockey being more important and how you made your choice. By the next Christmas, we all started to believe that you didn’t want us.” I motion to the seat next to me, offering him a place to sit.

“Add in the fact that we were angsty teenagers, it didn’t take much to upset us. So, as we got older, and you missed more birthdays, dances, and graduations... All we knew was what Mom told us. I think all three of us had just accepted you being gone.”

“But you called me.” He states, sitting next to me and I offer him a genuine smile.

“Everything was literally a shit show. Mom was begging me to get back with Cam. The boys had a really good friendship with him as well, so they were mad at me for hurting him. Paige was down here. I felt like there was nowhere else to go. So, I figured what’s the worst that could happen by calling you?” I take another sip to help clear the tightness in my throat.

“And, well, you heard the rest.” Nudging him with my shoulder, trying to joke about that so he knows I’m not upset. He stares at his drink as he finally talks.

“For the past nine years, my biggest regret has been the fact that I left you guys.” His voice is quiet as he toys with his watch.

“But you never came back.” I state sadly. He shakes his head as he stares blankly across the kitchen.

“When I took the job with the Bobcats, I signed a three-year contract. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be close to you guys, there was just no way to back out or change my agreement with the team.” Clearing his throat, he turns to me.

“Six years ago, when that contract was about to expire, I called your mother. I told her that I was considering transferring to a team closer, that I wanted to have a relationship with you and your brothers. She told me it would be a waste of my time, that you guys wanted nothing to do with me. I had made my own bed, I had to lay in it.” I close my eyes, but that does nothing to stop the tear from escaping.

“I assumed the bridges had been burned, and that she was right, you three were better without me.”

Biting my lip, I tilt my head back and blink rapidly, the ceiling blurring as I fight back tears. A part of me is upset about the decisions my mom made about him not being in our lives without telling us. He could have been in my life, but she chose to exile him for all of us.

A larger part of me is angry that, on top of that, she told us nothing but lies. She made it sound like the moment he took his job, he forgot about us. When he didn't. If I wasn't already pissed about the Cam situation, I would say screw it and call her right now to find out why.

I take a deep breath. The only thing that I can do right now is move forward.

“Unfortunately, we can't change anything. The most we can do now is get to know each other and whatever happens, happens. If you want to, that is.” A genuine smile finally spreads across his face.

“I would love that.”



Fucking hell. That's the only thought I've been able to manage since walking into the arena ten minutes ago.

I don't think I can be here.

Setting my bag down on the ground in front of my cubby, I force myself to take a deep breath. I try to focus my thoughts on just the game and putting on my gear for practice instead. This season has been my best one yet, both for myself personally and as a team. My speed and agility have been improving drastically thanks to Grey's extra help at practice and we've won five of our six games played in the regular season.

However, it wasn't until yesterday after we finished up practice and all got together to review footage from the teams we play this week, that I realized I'm not ready for *this* particular game.

This will be the first time I'm playing against my former team. While we watched a few games from last season, I couldn't bring myself to add anything useful. Some of the guys had asked me questions about certain plays, but for the most part everyone let me be. Whether that was thanks to Landon or Coach, who knew why I left the team, or just that they all realized that it was better to leave me alone, I didn't ask.

For a while last night, I thought that keeping to myself was for the best and that I was holding myself together. But when I got home, Lilly instantly knew something was wrong. She asked how she could help me and if it was anyone else, I probably would have brushed it off and gone off to be left alone. Except that it was *her* asking, and without even thinking twice, I told her what was getting to me.

All I had to say was who we were playing against, and no further explanation was needed. After I told her about how Sarah died and why I left Colorado, it felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. From that night on, it has felt like I could say or do anything, and she would never judge or pity me.

The more I get to know her and let her in, the more that the nickname I had given her when we first met makes sense. She is the sunshine in my darkest moments.

It's at this moment that I decide that thinking about Lilly is better than letting my mind wander and spiral about playing against my old team tonight. With my thoughts focused on her, I push off the bench and go through the motions of lacing up my skates. Aside from the day after her ex showed up, I've always been one of the first guys to the arena on game day. Today more than ever, I'm grateful for my routine of showering, stretching, cardio, then hitting the ice. Although, the past few games there's been the added step of cardio with Lilly before my shower.

Once my skates are secure on my feet, I put on the rest of my gear. Going through the motions on pure muscle memory, I grab my stick and helmet before heading out to the rink.

The arena is eerily quiet, which is just another reason I like to show up before everyone else. Knowing my time alone is limited, I don't waste any more of it, and get on the ice. After a few minutes of some solo warmup laps, I grab some pucks from their place at the benches. It's nothing but instinct to go through shots at the net and back around the ice with the puck. Having succeeded in my mission to not think about today's game, I'm so lost in my movements that it's not until another stick swipes the puck from in front of me that I know someone else is here.

Landon's smile is practically blinding as he skates away with the puck and hits it into the opposite net. Glancing at the clock, I realize a half hour has passed and that if Landon is here, the team is not far behind.

"You ready for today?" Landon asks as he skates around the net he just shot into. He plays it off as if he's just making small talk, but the glance he sends my way before focusing back on the puck tells me all I need to know. He and Coach James are the only two on the team who would think to ask about my headspace today. Making my way toward the benches to grab a drink of water, I think over his question.

Am I ready for today?

Last night, after I told Lilly who we are playing against today, she curled into my lap and simply hugged me. For a while, I just held her in my arms in silence, content to just get lost in my thoughts. Without making a conscious decision, I had started talking to her about my time with the Cougars. There were some good memories, and most of those were all thanks to Sarah. Those were the thoughts that I was grateful to remember, to talk about. By the end of the night, the feeling of complete dread had ebbed away.

Until I woke up this morning and had the thought that I would be seeing Josh on the ice. Since transferring, I hadn't even thought to check on how my old team was doing. I honestly have no idea what to expect. Which is exactly what has me on edge about today's game, unsure of how to answer Landon's question.

I hear him skate up behind me as I lean over the short wall, the sound of Dean's laugh from the tunnel to the locker room reaches my ears and I turn to Landon.

"Honestly? I have no idea." He stares toward the locker room for a drawn out moment before he responds.

"Do you think he'll say anything to you?" I don't need him to elaborate. I scrub my hand over my face and shrug.

"I hope not."

"I'm gonna suggest something, and I just want you to hear me out and think about it before you say no." His serious tone has me standing straight up and instinctively bracing myself. Landon watches me before nodding his head in the direction of the locker rooms. "Let a few of them know why today's game is messing with your head. I'm not saying sit down and spill every detail, but just let someone besides Coach and I in on the fact that you have personal issues with the Cougar's captain."

When I don't protest his suggestion right away, he continues.

"You know Coach and I will have your back if he does approach you, if any of them do, really. Outside of the game, none of them have a reason to talk to you. Selfishly though, it would be nice to know that if Coach and I are busy, someone else would have your back."

I think over his suggestion for a minute, unease rippling through me.

"I'm not saying you can't hold your own, I've seen you on and off the ice and I know you got this. But I also know that a few of these guys, Dean and Greyson especially, genuinely care about you and would have your back without a second thought. I think they deserve to know what they're backing you on."

If he had suggested this a month ago, I would have brushed him off without a second thought. Now though, I know he's right. Greyson and Landon had my back when Lilly's ex showed up, it was like a deeper level of friendship clicked into

place with these guys. That day after everything happened, before the game, Greyson had even pulled us aside to apologize and explain why he bolted out of the hospital. When he was talking to us about his past, I knew that when I was ready to tell them, they wouldn't look at me with pity. One of the reasons I needed to get away from Colorado after Sarah died was because everyone kept treating me as if I was two breaths away from either breaking down or exploding in anger.

Glancing over at Landon, I can't help but think about how drastically different from Josh he is.

Landon is the kind of person that walks into a room and will do what he can to make sure he leaves everyone better than he found them. He's always smiling, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't contagious. He knows what to say or do to make sure everyone is having a good time and very rarely complains about anything. But when shit hits the fan or things get serious, he manages to be the rock needed for everyone around.

With teams of this size, Josh used to tell everyone that it was unrealistic to expect any team captain to know everyone individually. Yet Landon manages to remember the most miniscule details about this entire team. I have no idea how he keeps up with everyone, but he does it all with a smile.

I make a mental note to spend more time with him. People like him have the tendency to shoulder a lot for others because they want to help, but that weight has to become too much at some point.

Sighing, I brace myself against the half wall as Dean, Greyson and Reid make their way onto the ice. Landon claps a hand on my shoulder as he turns to greet the guys, giving me an extra moment to gather my thoughts.

"Ha! You owe me five bucks, Grey. Told you Landon was the first one here."

I chuckle lightly, turning my head to smirk over my shoulder at Dean.

“Actually, I was here for a good forty-five minutes before Landon showed up.” Dean groans at my response, and Greyson gives a short and quiet laugh.

“Looks like you owe me, Squirrel.” Grey skates up next to me, not missing a thing as his gaze bounces between Landon and me. “What’s up?”

They’re all watching Landon, probably expecting him to admit he’s nervous for the game or something. He says nothing though as he glances at me. I fidget with my stick on the ice, unable to face any of them.

“Tonight’s game has me on edge and I don’t know if I’m ready for it.” After a long moment of silence, I finally lift my head to face them. Landon nods his head in encouragement while Dean and Reid stand in front of us, clearly confused as hell, but giving me the time to say what I need to. Greyson’s brows are furrowed slightly but other than that he remains passive. I stare past them toward the goal while I finally let them in.

“The day I told my old Coach that I was done with the Cougars was the day I punched the team captain in the face.”

Dean’s gaze darts between me and Landon, clearly trying to decipher what’s going on. Probably wondering if I would ever punch this team’s captain. From the corner of my eye, I don’t miss Grey’s jaw clenching, which I force myself to ignore as I push on.

“Right before the start of last season, my little sister started dating my team captain. That wasn’t what bugged me. I mean, yeah, the guy is a total douchebag, but once I said my piece about her seeing him, we were all good. The three of us were going out to parties and all that shit.” This time I close my eyes. “Long story short, Josh and my sister went to a party without me after a shitty game. He told both me and Sarah before we parted ways that he would be the sober one.” I force myself to breathe, hoping these guys don’t walk on eggshells around me after this.

“He didn’t stay sober, and that night he caused the car accident that killed my sister.”

All four of them are silent. I can't bring myself to open my eyes just yet, until Greyson speaks up first.

"This will be the first time you've seen him since leaving?" Holding his gaze, I give a single nod before bracing myself for the sympathy from Dean and Reid. My breath catches when I find that they're both glaring, visibly pissed. Words escape me as I nod, unsure of what I should actually say. Should I have just stuck to the *really* short version that I told Landon and Coach on my first day? Would saying "my sister died last year because of my Captain" have been better than giving them that much detail?

"Do you think he'll cause any problems?"

Landon had asked me the same thing and even after telling them everything, I don't have a definitive answer.

Grey nods, as if my silence was the answer he needed. Dean studies Landon and I before finally saying anything.

"What's his number?" My brows furrow at the question as I hesitantly answer. He nods and glances back at Landon, who's watching him with curiosity. Dean shrugs nonchalantly as he explains himself to everyone.

"Realistically, that guy has no reason to talk to Dom. It would be one thing if in the heat of the moment on the ice they collide once or get in close contact, but he has no reason to linger. So, if any of us see him hanging around Dom for longer than necessary in the game, then one of the four of us knows something is up." He glances at me. "You're okay to keep it strictly about the game, right?"

I nod. When I last saw Josh, the only reason I punched him in the face was because he had to go and open his mouth.

"Yeah," I choke out. "I can manage that." Dean nods and turns to face the others. I'm not used to seeing him and Landon so serious. They're the type of people who can always find some way to lighten a mood. Once you get to know them though, when they're being one hundred percent serious in a conversation, you know it's important.

When I catch Reid's eye, he nods in agreement. I rub at my padded chest as a tightness forms there. For the longest time, I've gotten used to only having Garrett, who can read me like an open book. The only reason I was even "close" to anyone on my last team, was because the prick had to start dating my sister.

Unease flows through me as I can't stop myself from wondering if I'm just as bad as Josh for continuing to see Lilly. I shake the thought away just as quickly as it came. Whatever this is between me and Lilly, is nothing like what Sarah had with Josh.

"Thanks guys." I murmur, thinking for the first time since yesterday that maybe I can handle this game with these guys at my back.

Over the next ten minutes, we're joined by more and more of the team. Everyone falls into warm-up drills, and the guys don't give me another second to think about seeing Josh in a few hours. It was the distraction I had come here for by myself, but it turns out all I needed was them.

With an hour until the team meets with the coaches for pregame meetings, the five of us are hanging out in the locker room. The lighthearted jokes and banter has me feeling better about the game. Greyson and Landon are sitting on each side of me, listening and laughing at some joke Dean is telling. My phone vibrates with a message on the bench between Greyson and me. Before I can snatch it up, Grey glances down. He's about to turn away when his gaze flies back to my phone before glancing up at me. He blinks once, his brow furrowing slightly, before glancing around.

"You seeing someone?" I nod stiffly. When I had made the picture of Lilly's silhouette my background weeks ago, I hadn't thought it through this far. Her face is hidden thanks to the lighting, yet I still can't stop my heart from skipping in nervousness.

The slight furrow of his brows as he glances at my phone again has me worried that he somehow knows it's Lilly. If he's

suspicious though, he keeps his mouth shut as he nods and gives a dismissive “nice.”

Landon elbows me and holds up his phone.

“Ari is here. I’m gonna go show her where her seat is, wanna come with?”

“You didn’t put her up in the box?” Carter questions with his brows raised. His wife, Allie, always sits up in the box that’s always reserved for partners or family of the team. Landon shakes his head, a smirk on his face.

“Nah, she loves being up close. She seems to think that if she’s closer to the ice, I’ll actually listen to whatever nonsense she’s yellin’ at me.” Dean pops up faster than Tigger before Landon finishes talking.

“Yeah, we got time to kill.” He clears his throat, as if trying to calm himself down. He runs a hand through his curls as he starts bouncing on the pads of his feet. “Arianna here alone?” Landon nods, typing out a response as he heads toward the locker room doors, Dean and I trail behind.

“Yeah, Ma and Pa couldn’t get off tonight. But Coach said that he got two tickets for Lilly next to her, and I think they’ll get along perfectly.” My heart skips and I focus on keeping my facial expressions neutral.

“Lilly’s coming to the game?” I ask, aiming for nonchalance. Landon glances at me as he nods, that wide smile spreading across his face. It’s a good thing Grey isn’t here because if he wasn’t suspicious before, he sure as hell would be after that.

“Yeah, apparently, she’s coming with that friend she brought to the beach. Coach is really excited. It’s the first time any of his kids are comin’ to a game.”

“Kids? Like... plural?” Dean questions. Landon’s smile falters a bit, and he chews his lip as we round a corner, coming toward the doors.

“Apparently, he has two more kids up in Vermont. Not that they’re technically kids, he said his oldest is a year older than me and the youngest is twenty-one.” Dean nods, his step

bouncing with the movement as he fusses with his hair again. I glance at Landon, wanting to see if he notices the way Dean keeps fidgeting more than normal but he's focused ahead, smiling at the glass doors we're approaching.

The moment they open, we're met with a very high-pitched squeal, and before I even process what's happening, a blur of red, yellow and white is hurdling at Landon. He catches her with ease and laughs as he twirls her around once before setting her down. Keeping an arm around her shoulder, he turns them to face us.

There's no doubt that these two are related. Her red hair has more curls than Landon, but everything else matches. They both have the same light green eyes, noses covered in freckles, and that contagious wide smile.

"Ari, you know Dean, but this is our team's newest addition, Do—" She cuts him off with a whack.

"I know who *he* is. Nice to meet you Dominik." She shoves some loose red curls from her face as she talks. Flashing her smile, I extend my hand but she's already turning away from me. The smile on her face when she sees Dean has me fighting back a knowing smile, but it's definitely not my place to say anything.

"Hi Dean!" There's no hesitancy as she throws her arms around his neck and pulls him in for a tight hug. Dean glances over her shoulder at Landon as he hugs Ari back. Landon's smile becomes tight as he watches his sister, but other than that he simply shakes his head and laughs.

"Will you be joining us for Thanksgiving this year Dean?" He lets her go and steps back next to me, but I don't miss the faint color spreading across his cheeks as he nods.

"Good, Ma would have been upset if you made other plans." The three of them ramble on about the Sinclair family, leaving me trailing slightly behind, wondering how I missed the fact that Dean was that close to Landon's family. Landon wraps an arm around her shoulders, leading them toward the seats. For a moment, I wonder if I should head back to the

locker room and let them catch up, when a familiar laugh hits my ears.

Turning my head to glance over my shoulder, I see Lilly walking toward us. Paige and Coach James are walking on either side of her, laughing. Someone yells for her dad and he falls behind her slightly.

My heart rate picks up as I take her in. She's wearing dark blue skinny jeans, her light brown curls are pulled back in a messy, but somehow put together bun, on the top of her head. The all-red shirt has the team's golden yellow Bobcat mascot with the effect that it's ripping through the shirt, claws extended and jaw open. However, it's when she turns around to face her dad and I see the back of her shirt that has satisfaction coursing through me.

There on the back of her shirt, in big bold black letters that are highlighted with the same golden yellow of the bobcat, is me. MIKELSON spreads across her shoulder blades, above my team number, thirty-three.

When we got back from our weekend getaway, it was easier than I thought it would be to show her the box of merch. I knew she had taken a bunch of things from it, but I hadn't thought twice about how the sight would make me feel.

Lilly turns back with a small smile spread across her face, one that grows wider when she sees me in front of her. The pure happiness that radiates off her has me wanting nothing more than to kiss her. I hadn't even noticed that I had fully stopped and turned toward her until Dean called my name. Clearing my throat, I glance over my shoulder at him and motion toward Coach. Landon stops, turning him and Arianna to face us as they chat to themselves.

Coach notices us then and I just barely catch the relief that flashes across his face. Lifting a hand, he motions to Paige and Lilly to head toward us. When they get closer, I notice Paige is wearing a similar shirt to the one Lilly has on. At least coming to a game like this, no one is really going to question what you're wearing, so long as you're supporting the team.

“What are you boys doin’ out here?” Coach questions as he stops in front of us. Thankfully though, he doesn’t seem pissed. Dean hiked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing toward Landon and his sister.

“Cap’s sister texted him that she was here. Dom and I followed like lost puppies to get some air that isn’t filled with the scent of dude sweat.” Coach chuckles and he turns toward Lilly and Paige.

“Girls, I believe you know the guys.” He lazily gestures to the three of us. Landon smiles brightly at them as he squeezes his sister’s shoulder.

“Hey ladies! Glad y’all could make it tonight. This is my sister, Arianna.” Arianna wiggles out of his arm and holds her hand out enthusiastically toward Lilly, who takes it with a smile.

“I’m Lilly, his daughter.” Coach’s head whips toward her, a warm smile mixed with shock spreads across his face. Lilly doesn’t notice though, as she continues. “This is my friend, Paige.”

“Actually, it’s a good thing we bumped into you guys.” Coach says, shaking out of his shock. He shifts on his feet, clasping his hands together as he glances between us and Lilly. “Marcus just called, he needs me to go over some things before the pre-game meeting. Are you okay if the guys take you to your seats?” Lilly nods in understanding, flashing him a gentle smile as she motions for him to go.

“Go do what you gotta do. I’ll see you tomorrow for lunch.” He pulls her in for a side hug and says something to her that none of us can hear. A flash of sadness crossed over her features, but she shakes it off just as quickly. Paige must have seen it too because she turns to the rest of our group and demands they lead the way.

Paige follows as Landon leads her and Arianna toward their seats with Dean trailing closely behind. I hang back slightly, making sure to keep enough distance between us, even though every bit of me is aching to touch her.

“You came to a hockey game.” I keep my voice low enough for only her to hear. Even with the space between us, having her here eases some of the tension I’ve been carrying around all day. Lilly smiles up at me, her eyes shining with emotion before she looks forward again.

“I figured it was time to finally see how my dad does at his job.” She spares me a quick side glance. Her cheeks flush slightly as she clears her throat.

“And?” She tries to hide her smile, shaking her head. When I don’t respond she lets out a dramatic huff.

“Fine. And I wanted to see you play. I was more than a little curious and I figured it might be nice to have a familiar face in the crowd tonight. Considering who you guys are playing against.” She fidgets with the hem of her shirt as she glances around. My throat tightens as I process what she said.

“You...wanted to be here for me?” She nods, chewing on her bottom lip as she sneaks a glance at me. She slows her pace a bit more when she realizes that we’re almost to their seats. She drops her hand to graze her knuckles across my hand as she faces her seat.

“This can’t be easy for you. And while I know you *could* do this on your own, I hoped I could show you that you’re not.” She shrugs, as if her words and actions were nothing. When really, her being here for me means everything.

Flexing my fingers, I graze the side of her hand.

“And you’re wearing my number.” That cute blush deepens.

“They were just laying around, figured I should put them to use.” I chuckle, leaning down slightly.

“You look hot as fuck with my name on you.” That earns me a whack on my bicep as she laughs in response. I clench my hands into fists, reminding myself once more to not haul her against me and kiss the shit out of her. I stop far enough away from the entrance to where her seats are, turning fully to her.

“Thank you for being here.” Her smile softens at my words and she glances toward the ice. “I don’t think anything will

happen, but if it does, it's calming to know that all I'll have to do is turn around to see you."

Paige yells her name, and I motion for her to go catch up.

"I'll see you after the game, Sunshine."



Slamming down onto the bench, I reach for my water bottle and push back the unease that's still going to war in my stomach. With fifteen minutes left in the game, I feel like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Like I have been this whole game, I glance over my shoulder, unable to keep my eyes off Lilly and some of the tension settles. Only, unlike all the other times where I've turned to find that she's already been watching me, her attention is on the person a few rows in front of her at the glass. Lilly has one hand covering her mouth, physically trying to hold back her laugh, while the other is reaching to the side to tap Paige's arm. Arianna and Paige are not as subtle about containing their laughter. I follow their line of sight and almost choke on my water.

Pressed against the glass facing the team benches is a woman with silver blonde hair in loose curls around her face, a

bobcat painted on one cheek and the number seventeen on the other. Bright red and yellow eyeshadow frames wide blue eyes that excitedly stare next to me as she waves and slaps one hand against the glass a few times before pointing to the sign above her head.

“Looks like you got an admirer.” Laughing, I nudge Greyson and motion to the woman. He turns slowly, reluctantly moving his attention away from the game. When he reads the sign that says, “I wish I only got two minutes for hooking.” Grey laughs with me, shaking his head. When the woman notices his attention on her, she screams and fumbles to turn the sign around. I hear the annoyed groan from Grey as we read “Greyson, I’d let you puck me!” Glancing at him, he shakes his head as his smile turns pained while he waves to the woman, making her freak out even more.

“Does she actually think that will work?” I laugh, turning my attention back to the game after one last glance at Lilly.

The next two minutes pass in the blink of an eye and I move on mostly muscle memory as I take the ice again. We’re winning three to two right now, but there’s still thirteen minutes for that to flip in the Cougars favor. I haven’t missed the fact that Josh has not once been on the ice at the same time as me. Whether that was Coach James or Coach Owen’s doing or just pure coincidence, I don’t know.

Being on the ice now, I try to focus on keeping the puck away from our net as one of the Cougar players skate toward Dean with the puck. With a side glance, I watch as Landon falls back slightly to adjust to the angle they’re coming down the ice at. Moving to fill in the gap comes by instinct as I notice the player with the puck heading toward Landon’s side of the rink. One of the reasons Coach had pushed for the six of us to hang out and bond was for this moment right here. None of us need to say anything out loud to know what move is about to go into effect.

The Cougar player gets closer to the net and passes it to the player on his left, only for Reid to intercept the shot. He moves quickly, dodging the forward that’s on his heel and passing the puck toward Carter. Without needing to say

anything, he watches as I wraparound the net to meet him. Passing me the puck in a sly move that the Cougar on his tail doesn't catch, I circle around and glance toward Greyson across the rink. Inhaling deeply, I hit the puck and set up a perfect tape to tape to his stick.

A blur of blue and red slams into me before I can even see if the puck made it to him to take the shot. The wind leaves my lungs as I'm smashed against the glass. When the weight of the person doesn't leave me immediately, I twist, shoving my stick between us to force them off me. Thinking whoever it is must have just been moving too fast and didn't slow down. I flex my shoulders and turn to see Grey taking the shot. Just as he hits the puck into the net, I'm shoved to the side and slammed against the glass again, where they hold me.

For a moment, I almost think it's Dean crashing into me to celebrate the goal. But when I turn my attention to say something to him, my blood runs cold.

Staring at me through the visor of his helmet, nostrils flaring as he glares at me, is Josh. Briefly, something akin to sorrow flashes across his features before the scowl sets back into place.

"What. The. Hell." That's all I can manage to choke out as he pins me in place. The sound of horns and screams become muffled as I turn, not wanting to give him my full attention as I shove him away. Blood pounds in my ears as I frantically look over his shoulder toward Dean. He's smiling and hugging Reid as they both turn toward me, their smiles immediately evaporating when they see who has me cornered. Josh shoves me against the wall again with his stick, forcing my attention back to him.

"I'm fucking talking to you!" My brows furrow as I scoff at him.

"Was me leaving the team not a clear enough statement that I don't want to talk to *you*." I shove him off me again, forcing myself up to my full height on my skates as I push off the wall. I pride myself on always keeping my head in the game, it's like a switch that I can turn on and put a barrier between

life problems and hockey. But considering I've already been on edge because of him, this shithead is really testing the strength of it right now. Shaking my head, I move to go around him. As I try to pass, he snatches my arm and I rip it away, turning to get into his face as I seethe.

“This is not the fucking time or place.” I'm borderline fuming, my blood thrumming as thoughts of Sarah start sneaking through my game day barrier. He doesn't let me skate away. Instead, he slams his stick into my skate and pulls my foot from under me. On my fall to the ice, I at least have enough thought to reach out and grab his jersey to pull him down with me.

Fuck this. If I'm going down, you're going down with me.

He lands on top of me with a grunt and shoves his hands into my shoulders, pinning me to the ice. I'm vaguely aware of a whistle blowing and from my peripheral I see my team and refs heading toward us. He glares down at me through his helmet, I instantly notice how much he's aged since I last saw him. The purple bags under his brown eyes and pale skin pulling tight on his cheeks make it seem like he hasn't slept or ate in months. I fight back the wave of pity that threatens to crush through me as I push against him.

Josh and I were always close in size and weight, but I note the extra work he's putting into holding me down.

“Maybe if you answered my texts or calls instead of blocking me, I wouldn't have to resort to this.” He presses one of his gloved hands closer to my neck hard as someone comes up behind him to rip him off me. Dean appears at my side, helping me stand as the ref and Reid hold him back.

“I just need you to hear me out! Damn it, Dominik, you have to—” Before I can even think my thoughts through, I'm ripping away from Dean and lunging between the ref and Reid. Gripping Josh's jersey and pulling him closer to me with their arms as a barrier between us. I'm barely aware of the fact that Reid and the ref are trying to elbow and push me away from him, instead, I let go and give the asshole all my pent-up anger.

“I don’t *have* to do shit. You are the reason Sarah is dead. You fucking told me that you were staying sober and that she would be safe with you!” I shove the ref away, noting that he doesn’t actually put up that much resistance to me moving him aside and giving me more room to get in Josh’s face. There’s no doubt he heard what I said and probably realized it might be better to let me say my piece before breaking us apart.

Reid calls my name, and I’m pretty sure Landon, Greyson, and Dean are somewhere behind me, but the prick got what he wanted.

My attention.

I twist on my skates, turning us both so that I have him slammed against the glass as I lower my voice so only he can hear.

“The only thing that I *have* to do is get through the pain and loss that *you* caused me. I owe you fucking *nothing*. You got my sister killed. How you cope with that is not up to me.” He opens his mouth to speak but I pull him toward me and use the momentum to slam him back to the wall before turning away. I note that no one from the Cougars came to try and help Josh out. A couple of them are close by, but they’re blocked by Landon, Greyson, Reid, and Dean.

The moment I face them, Greyson and Landon’s focus goes behind me, probably watching to make sure the dipshit doesn’t try anything again. Reid and Dean break apart, letting the two Cougars who did come over through. Skating toward the guys, I dip my chin at the players as we pass. They only nod, that fucking pitying expression stretched across their faces as they hurry to pull their Captain away.

As I move past, Grey and Landon take up my left side while Dean and Reid fall to my right. The anger and pain begins to simmer a fraction at the fact that these guys have my back. Greyson is the only one to speak as I meet Coach James’ stare.

“You good?” I nod once stiffly and rasp out a low “yeah.”

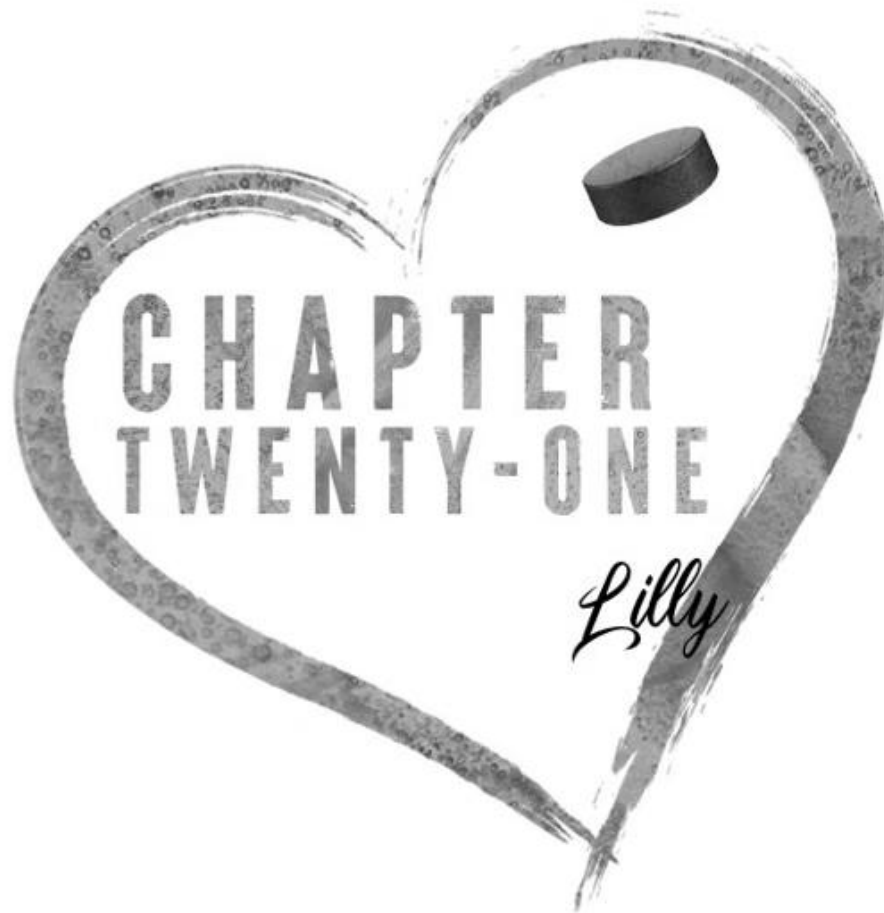
There’s probably going to be a penalty called at some point, and it wouldn’t be shocking if one was called against me. Not

that this was totally my fault. I had warned him that during a game was not the time or place to try and talk to me.

I break my stare-off with Coach to check out the scoreboard. Forcing a smile that I know doesn't reach my eyes, I elbow Greyson.

“Nice goal man.”

He shrugs off my compliment and the four of them stay silent, but by my side, as we approach the benches.



My heart races as I pace the length of my apartment once more. After the game ended, with the Bobcats winning five to two thanks to a goal scored in the last five minutes, I immediately sent a text message to Dominik telling him that I was here for whatever he needed.

Then needing to keep busy, I changed into one of my newest pajama shorts and cropped tank top sets before proceeding to clean and pace my entire place. I tried sitting down at one point to watch a movie, but I couldn't focus and wound-up pacing around again.

I had found out what Josh's team number was before the game, mostly out of curiosity since Dominik was on edge about playing against his old team. I hadn't actually thought anything would happen, especially on the ice during a game. Apparently, I was very wrong.

Much like it had been throughout the whole game, my attention had been split. Whether Dominik was on or off the ice, I couldn't help but keep an eye on him. He would keep looking over his shoulder whenever he got to the benches and each time, I would note the faint twitch of his lips when he found me already watching him.

Even when half of my attention was aware that Greyson was lining up to take a shot, I couldn't help but stay focused on Dom at the other side of the rink. In the moment when Josh body checked Dominik, all I wanted to do was find a way down to the ice and get to him. Completely irrational, since one, I don't know how to skate, and two, there's not much I could do against a hockey player.

Regardless of the fact that there was literally no way to get to him or help him during the game, Paige had silently reached down and held my hand tightly as we watched. While the whole incident lasted for only a minute, it felt like everything was playing in slow motion. Josh was given a penalty and kept off the ice for the rest of the game, and even though Dominik did not get a penalty against him, Dad kept him on the bench for the remaining ten minutes as well.

Even if I wanted to see him right after the game, there was no way I could. Since the Bobcats ended up getting one more goal in the final ten minutes and won five to two, I knew they were going to have some interviews and most likely some post-game meetings with the team to partake in. Considering the events that happened during the last period, it wouldn't surprise me if my dad asked Dominik and even some of the other guys to hang around longer. But that's also just my speculation, I actually have no clue what hockey teams are required to do after a game.

At the sound of a knock on my door, I turn on my heel and all but run to answer it. I at least have enough wits about me to look through the peephole and the moment I know for a fact that it's Dominik on the other side, I'm yanking the door open as fast as I can. He doesn't even get a chance to say anything before I launch myself at him. Wrapping my arms around his

neck and my legs around his hips, I close my eyes and inhale the scent of his body wash as I cling to him.

He lets out a grunt that turns into a chuckle as he wraps an arm around my waist while stepping into my condo and shutting the door.

“Hey, Sunshine.” His hands run up the length of my back before sliding back down until he’s supporting my weight on him by gripping me under my thighs. After a long moment of us just hugging at my front door, Dominik carries me into the kitchen and sets me down on the counter.

Reluctantly, I unwrap my arms from around his neck and rest my hands on top of his shoulders. Even with the advantage of being on the counter, he still towers over me, I tip my head back to see his face. Finally having the delayed thought that he might be hurt, I gasp as I try to unhook my legs from around his waist, but his hands move to grip me by the knees and hold me in place.

“Are you okay? I mean, physically are you okay?” My hands take on a mind of their own, gently tracing and tugging his shirt up as I check him over for injuries. He lets out a laugh that sounds more sad than anything as he takes my hands between his. Clasp them between his own, he brings them up to place a gentle kiss on my knuckles that quite literally melts my heart.

“I’m fine.” I huff out a humorless laugh at his response.

“Isn’t it universally known that when someone says, ‘I’m fine’ they are in fact, *not* fine.” That earns me a small twitch of his lips. The need to help him has been weighing heavily on me. Biting my bottom lip, I trace my fingers in circles over his shoulders. He leans into my touch, pressing his forehead to mine as we stay in silence.

“Why don’t you go put your bag in the bedroom while I make us some drinks?” When he doesn’t move or respond I can’t stop myself from rambling. “Or we can go lay down in my bed and watch a movie. Unless you want to have some space and go—”

He cuts me off with a slow and gentle kiss on my lips and while it's a relatively short one, I'm still left slightly breathless when he pulls away. This time, when I move to unwrap my legs from his waist, he lets them drop.

"Let me go get changed." He plants a kiss on my forehead before helping me off the counter and heading toward my bedroom.

I go through the motions of making us some drinks and head to the living room. Just as I'm about to set our drinks down on my coffee table, my eyes drift toward the glass door that leads to my balcony. Without hesitating, I change direction and move out to the balcony, leaving the door open behind me so Dominik knows where I went.

Since the weather has started to drop below the seventies, the balcony has been one of my favorite places to work. As long as I had a fuzzy blanket with me that is. The long bamboo framed couch has the comfiest gray cushions and outdoor pillows. Between the matching small table and the length of the couch, there's more than enough space to spread all my notes out around me while I work. Last week, I found some clearance solar-powered string lights and hung them up the moment I got home. The sight of them twinkling and lighting up the space puts a smile on my face.

Setting the drinks on the table, I walk over to the railing and lean my elbows on it. I'm so lost in my own thoughts as I stare out over the channel, that I don't hear Dominik join me on the balcony until he's stepping up behind me. With a sigh, I lean back into his embrace and run my hands back and forth over his arms. We stay silent for a while, he knows I'm here for whatever he needs and I don't mind waiting for him to figure out what that is.

I'm so lost in my thoughts wondering how I can help him without pushing him, that he practically startles me when he moves. He untangles his arms from around me and grips my hips in both his hands. Holding me in place, he pulls back just enough to lean down and kiss behind my ear. That freaking spot is my newly discovered trigger point, and he damn well knows it. Goosebumps sprinkle across my skin and tension

coils in the pit of my stomach as he repeats the kiss while moving one of his hands to tease along the top of my waistband.

I tilt my head to the side, giving him more access to kiss along my neck as I grind back into him. As if that was all he needed, his other hand leaves my hip and traces up under my tank top to twist and pinch my nipple before cupping my breast in his hand. The hand at the top of my shorts pushes beneath the waistline, staying over my underwear as he runs his fingers teasingly over my clit. My legs open slightly, offering his hand more room to work and just when he starts putting pressure into his movements my brain finally catches up to me.

“Dominik, we should go—” But he cuts me off as his fingers quickly shove my underwear to the side and runs his fingers along my entrance. My hands fly out to grip the railing and my thoughts scatter as he slowly works two fingers into me and starts working me to the edge of an orgasm. Blood pounds in my ears and all I can focus on is him. The smell of his mint shampoo fills my nose as the feel of his hands all over me work me into a frenzy.

The sound of laughter has my thoughts catching back up to me and my legs clamping shut, trapping his hand between my thighs. His fingers twitch inside of me, and his wrist attempts to push one of my thighs away.

“Open your legs, Sunshine.” I shake my head and before I can voice my thoughts on moving inside, he twists my nipple and nips at my neck. A gasp that sounds more like a moan is all I can manage as he does it again and groans. “If you keep gripping me like this, I’m going to explode in my pants without you even touching me.”

Without even thinking it through, my leg’s part back open for him and he kisses behind my ear and starts moving his fingers again in reward.

“We should go inside.” I somehow manage to get out on a whimper. He chuckles lightly in my ear and something inside me eases at the sound.

“Why would we move, when you look so perfect right where I have you?” He picks up the pace, curling his fingers as he searches for my g-spot he discovered our first night together. That damn fucking spot that I never knew I had that manages to send me over the edge every time he hits it.

“Someone could se—” My words turn into a moan as he finds it, pulling out before slamming back in and hitting it again. He doesn’t let up and at this point my concerns of someone seeing us might as well have been thrown over the balcony rail. I can feel my orgasm creeping up quickly as he leans down to gently bite my ear lobe and whisper hoarsely in my ear.

“Do you see anyone?” He doesn’t give me a chance to check or answer as he plunges back into me and continues. “No one can see us and even if someone looks up and somehow does, all they would see is your perfect silhouette against me.”

I know he’s right, considering I hadn’t turned on lights inside the condo except the kitchen one and the only light out here is the faint twinkles of the string lights. He must have known that’s all I needed to hear because in the next second I’m melting my full weight against him.

“That’s it, Sunshine. You look so perfect falling apart in my arms.” And that’s exactly what I do. His thumb moves to press circles on my clit as he strokes my g-spot, but it’s when he pinches and twists my nipples that my orgasm finally crashes through me. As he gentles his touch and slips his arm around my waist to support me, I try to catch my breath. When he slowly pulls his fingers from me, I can do nothing but watch as he brings his hand up to his mouth and sucks them clean.

Desire courses through me again and when I finally find the strength in my legs, I turn around to face him. Placing both hands on his chest, I push him back. He stumbles slightly but catches himself, smirking down at me as he walks backwards until his legs hit the couch. Once there, I move my hands to his shoulders and push him to sit down.

When he reaches to grab my hips and pull me on top of him, I knock his hands away. Holding his gaze, I reach down and push his knees apart. His already dark gaze turns molten as he watches me lower myself to kneel in front of him.

“Lilly.” His voice is low and shoots straight to my pussy, making me feel as if I didn’t *just* finish on his hand. He groans as I run my hands up his thighs, and I’m mesmerized as his eyes flutter closed. It isn’t until my hands trail to the waistband of his shorts, and I start tugging them down that his eyes snap open as he grasps my hands in his. I nod my head, watching him closely.

“Dominik.” He opens his mouth to protest, still gripping my hands, but doesn’t push me away. I push up to my feet and lean over to gently kiss him. As we break apart, a flush spreads across my cheeks and down my neck as I force myself to say what I want before he tells me too.

I bring my hand between us to grip his cock over his shorts and move my hand along his length. Leaning into him further, I turn my head to whisper in his ear.

“Please, Dominik. I want to suck your dick.”

Finally, he releases my hands, smirking at me, he leans back into the cushions and says, “I’m all yours, Sunshine.”

Before I can overthink anything, I kneel back down and reach for the waistband of his shorts. He lifts his hips enough to help me tug them down, once they’re below his knees he relaxes back into the couch while I make quick work of tugging them down until they’re pooling around his ankles. His muscular thighs rest on both sides of me, as he clenches his hands into fists beside him. I avoid his heated gaze in fear of psyching myself out and focus on his cock.

Wetting my lips, I grip him in my hand, using my thumb to swirl the beads of precum around. When he groans again, I lean down and slowly lick his length from base to tip. His thighs flex slightly against me as I repeat the motion once more, only this time circling my tongue around his head as I inhale deeply and take him into my mouth. When I pull back, I

keep my tongue pressed to the bottom of his cock, before taking him back in further.

I've never found going down on someone to be sexy, but as I suck Dominik's cock, twirling my tongue and hallowing my cheeks to see what earns me a reaction, I find myself insanely turned on. Wrapping my hand around the base of his cock with one hand, I pump up and down in tandem with my head. His hand tangles in the hair at the base of my neck, not controlling my movements, just moving with me.

I don't even notice that my other hand had drifted between my own thighs until I'm touching my clit and moaning around him. Getting lost in the sensation of my own movements as I play with myself and the taste and feel of Dominik in my mouth.

Just as the feelings of an orgasm begin to creep up, I hear Dom growl out "fucking hell" before he's tugging my head up and off his cock. Moving quickly, he helps me stand up before yanking my shorts and underwear down and pulling me toward him. Straddling him, I rest my hands on his shoulders and support my weight on my knees. He peers up at me, desire and something else dancing in his eyes.

"You could have finished in my mouth." He smiles up at me, tucking another curl behind my ear before shifting his hand to the nape of my neck again. Gently, he pulls my head down to meet him for a kiss. It's slow and as his tongue sweeps into my mouth, I melt into him.

Dominik kiss sets something inside me on fire and the next thing I know I'm pouring everything into it. If kisses could speak, mine would be saying, "*You are important. I'm here for you and I've got you and I care. I would do anything for you, I lov—*" No, it's too soon to be falling in love. I swallow those emotions as I pull back to peer down at him. Neither of us say a thing as we watch each other.

Gripping my hips, he lifts me up as he lines his cock up to my entrance. Holding my breath in anticipation, I keep my gaze on him. A faint smile dances across his lips and as I

slowly sink down onto him, my heart and mind are full of him as he whispers.

“I know.” With that he pulls me down onto him.

Once I’m seated flush on him, he holds me in place. My attempt to squirm and get moving is met with him tightening his hold on my hips and has me wondering if he’s about to leave a bruise. The thought of him leaving his mark on me has me clenching around his cock. With one hand, he cups my cheek in the palm of his hand and runs his thumb along my lips. I push myself up off his cock before slowly sinking back down. Holding his gaze, I repeat my slow pace, riding him.

His thumb traces over my lips for another moment before he runs his fingertips along my cheekbone. Gently, his hand wraps around my neck and I almost expect him to squeeze. Instead, he simply rests his hand with enough pressure to hold me in place while I sink back down on him. This time, as I rise back up, he uses the hand around my neck with a little bit of force to push me back until I’m sitting up. The moan that escapes me as I slip back down his length almost doesn’t sound like me, but I don’t think twice about it as I pick up my pace. The new angle is exactly what I need as heat tightens throughout me.

“Look at how perfect you are. Taking me so beautifully.” My only response is a gasp as he finds my nipple under my shirt and pinches. He groans out, “Fucking hell.”

“Dominik...” I trail off as he runs a thumb over my nipple, getting lost in the feel of his hands on me and the way his cock hits just the right spot when I sink down onto him has me unable to focus. I stop thinking, close my eyes as my head falls back and let my body move how it wants.

When a hand moves to my clit, I gasp and feel my movement start to get choppy as Dominik lifts his hips to thrust up into me.

“I’m gonna...” I pant out, trying to find the words. My eyes fight to stay close, but the need to see him keeps them fluttering open.

“That’s it, good girl. Cum.” With that, he flicks my clit, and I’m done. He pushes his hips up into me, drawing out my orgasm before he’s cumming with me.

I fall against his chest, the hand on my neck moving to wrap around my waist and hold me to him. We stay like that for a while, me draped over him and catching our breaths. When goosebumps start peppering across my skin, he turns to place a gentle kiss on my temple and finally breaks the silence.

“We should go get cleaned up.”

Considering everything we’ve done together, I know there’s nothing to be embarrassed about, yet I can’t control the blush that takes over. With a slightly painful sounding groan, he finally pulls out of me and stands, keeping me in his arms as he kicks his shorts off from his ankles.

Finally remembering that *I* should be comforting *him* after the shit that happened during his game, I try to slip out of his arm. Of course, that only causes him to adjust so that he’s carrying me bridal style inside and toward my bedroom. My blush deepens as I tuck my head under his chin.

“I was supposed to be comforting and supporting you.”

He chuckles lightly, turning on the lights in my bathroom and moving to set me on the counter before he moves toward the shower. After he turns it on, he turns around and stalks toward me. Removing his shirt and dropping it on the floor as he stops in front of me.

“I have never felt more comforted than I do when I’m with you.” He cups my face in both of his hands and kisses my forehead. “Besides, I was the one who couldn’t keep my hands off you for a single second longer. Especially after remembering how you looked with my name on you.” I giggle and reach up to wrap my arms around his neck.

“Note to self; next time I need to cheer you up, wear nothing but a jersey with your name on it.”

He nuzzles his face into my neck with a deep groan and a muffled, “Fuck yes.”



“Are you two almost ready?” Garrett yells from my kitchen. Paige barks out a loud laugh in response while I shake my head and focus back on my laptop. Sam had sent me edits back a few days ago, and I was trying to get through the last three pages. After Dominik’s game last week, I had been focused on making sure he was really okay. He had spent that whole night after the game holding me while he talked about what happened. Since that night on the balcony, we’ve spent even more time together, which I didn’t think was possible. It seems like he’s having an even harder time keeping his hands off me, not that I’m complaining about either of those things.

While he has absolutely no problem with me working when he’s around, focusing on edits is damn near impossible when his hands keep wandering. Which means that yesterday while he was at practice was the first time I could give my full

attention to Sam's suggestions. When he left for warmups today, I jumped right back into work. Now, with just under two hours before Dominik's next game, I am down to only three pages left to go over.

After Garrett had found out about the incident with Josh, he showed up the next day feeling guilty as hell that he wasn't there for Dominik. The three of us had spent the day snacking, drinking, and relaxing, we even convinced Paige to join us. That was when Garrett asked if we wanted to go to the game with him tonight.

So, I texted my dad, telling him how much fun I had at the last game and would love to go to another the next time he had spare tickets. He responded immediately that he would get me a ticket pass so I could go whenever I could. It wasn't a lie, I did have a lot of fun. I hadn't been to a hockey game in so long, that I forgot how energized and exciting they are. Plus, watching my dad in his element was something I had never experienced before.

Between Dominik and my dad's passes, we agreed to leave from my place and get to the arena an hour and a half before the game. Only now, I knew if I had just a little more time, I could get through the last of these notes.

Paige walks out of the bathroom, wearing black leggings and a new, long sleeve jersey she got from the arena gift shop during intermission of the last game. This one says "Sinclair" on the back with Landon's team number, twenty-five. She had claimed that if we were going to keep attending games, she would spread the support to all the team members and wear a different player each game. Which was just her roundabout way of confirming she has no self-control when it comes to shopping.

"You're not dressed?" I glance up at her from my laptop. She had stopped in the dead center of my bedroom to glare at me. I scowl down at my outfit.

"All I have to do is throw on my sweater and braid my hair." I only own a couple pairs of jeans, one of which I had thrown on before sitting back down to work. When we went to

the game last week, I had thought I would be fine in just one of the shirts I had taken from Dominik. Turns out I have adjusted to the Florida heat very well because I was freezing all night long.

“Still, Garrett sounds like he’s ready to go *now*.” She states, earning an eye roll and a smirk from me. Garrett is very much the type of person who likes being on time.

“I think I might—” I don’t even get the chance to finish my sentence because Paige cuts me off.

“You’re not bailing!” I level her with an annoyed glare.

“I’m not! I was simply going to say that I’ll meet you guys there in half an hour. I have like twenty more minutes of notes to go over, then I can send this back to Sam for final approval and be finished!” I can’t help the excitement that squeaks out. It’s been one of those goals that I had that never seemed possible before now. I started writing this a few years ago, but barely had time to work on it before these past few months. Cam always made it seem like an inconvenience that I would want to work on this when I had a day off, so the time dedicated to my book was far and few between.

Now though, with how close I am to publishing, all I feel is overwhelming giddiness.

Paige smiles at me, all traces of her readiness to fight me staying behind for a bit vanishes as she skips over to me while I push my laptop away. I turn just as she slams into me and traps me on the bed in a suffocating hug. Her voice is muffled by my shoulder as she speaks.

“I’m so flipping proud of you!” I laugh as I hug her back. After a moment, I gently push her away.

“But seriously, you and Garrett head to the arena, Dad put your name down too so you can get your ticket and I’ll be right behind you.” She pulls back, narrowing her eyes and sighs before pushing off me.

“Fine. But if you’re not there in thirty minutes like you said you would be, I will leave and drag you back with me. Even if that means you don’t finish until tomorrow.”

I smile and nod my head at her.

“My work will be getting done tonight *and* I’ll be right behind you. I promise.”

With a nod, she turns to leave. Her voice bounces off the walls as she tells Garrett they’re heading over before me. At the sound of my door shutting and Paige’s “don’t make me come back for you!” echoing through my condo, I focus on my work.

Exactly eighteen minutes later, I’m shoving my ID and credit card in the wallet slot of my new phone case, heading out the doors, and toward the elevators. The smile on my face feels as if it’s stuck on my face while I think about my work being published next month. Watching the numbers above the elevator rise to my floor, the sound of a door opening behind me has me quickly glancing over my shoulder. It isn’t until I turn back to the elevator that my brain catches up and has me whirling around toward the doors to the stairs.

My heart lodges in my throat as I gape at the fact that standing in front of the stairwell door is Cam. My teeth clench together painfully as my pulse quickens.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I grind out.

He steps toward me causing me to back away on reflex, this time, I step to the side, into the hallway, instead of leaving my back against the wall. Cam rolls his eyes before running them down by body, one of his brows raising in question as he stares at my sweater.

“Since when did you start supporting your dad’s team?” I glance at the elevator and see it’s only four floors away. Ignoring his question, I keep distance between us as I debate if I should go lock myself in my apartment and call Paige. The only thing making me hesitate is the fact that he might not actually know my exact condo number. My mom said she gave him dad’s address, but I didn’t think to ask if she gave away all the details to where I am.

“That’s none of your concern.” I scoff.

When the elevator dings its arrival and I step toward it, Cam follows my movement. Not wanting to be stuck in a ride down thirteen floors with him, I rack my brain on what to do. Just as the doors open, Cam pushes past me as he steps into the elevator and puts a hand over the sensor to keep it open. Shaking my head, I turn on my heel.

“Go home, Cam.” I toss my words over my shoulder, dismissing him as I hurry for the stairs. The sound of the elevator closing and his muffled curse as the door closes behind me has me breathing out a sigh of momentary relief. Of course, the thought that he’s just going to beat me to the ground floor and probably wait for me down there has me pulling out my phone to call the police. Even if he does the smart thing and disappears, they could still put it in the open case that he showed up again.

As I make my way down thirteen flights of stairs and fill the dispatcher in on what’s happening, I find myself continuously checking over my shoulder. Once they’re up to speed, I hang up the phone and fire off a text to Paige to let her know that I’m going to be late. Just not for the reason she thinks.

Paige:

What’s wrong? Should one of us come walk with you?

Me:

No, I’m fine. I’ll fill you in when I get there. Should be there before the first period ends. Have a drink ready for me!

By the time I make it down to the fourth floor, I find myself hoping he’ll be gone.

As I make it down another flight of stairs and to the next landing, my hope begins to dim when I hear the stairwell door slamming shut. It straight up evaporates when I turn to go down the next set of stairs and see Cam walking up to me. I glare at him and hold my phone up.

“I called the cops, Cam. Just leave me alone.” His steps falter and annoyance takes over his features before he recovers and closes the remaining distance between us. My options are

to either go around him and cross my fingers he doesn't try to grab me again, go back up the stairs or out onto the fourth floor and knock on someone's door.

Before I can make a decision, he's standing in front of me just a few steps down giving me a height advantage. Which is something he must notice and hate as he scowls up at me. I stifle my groan and cross my arms while I glare down at him.

"Don't look at me like that." He snaps out. Taking another step closer. "Just do everyone a favor, stop overreacting, and come home."

"Overreacting?" I let out a humorless laugh and don't give him a chance to talk again. "What exactly are you referring to? The part where I broke up with you because you were cheating on me? Oh, or maybe the part where I kept my mouth shut and didn't tell my family why we broke up?" I uncross one arm to rest on top of my elbow, dramatically tapping my finger on my temple. "No, wait. You're actually probably referring to the fact that I had the audacity to move away and realize that I'm better off without you in my life."

By the time I'm done with my overly sarcastic rant, Cam's face is red. I tuck a stray hair behind my ear before dropping my arms to my side, clenching my phone tightly in one hand.

"I don't know what you had hoped to accomplish by coming over here again, but do us both a favor and leave me alone."

I don't give him another chance to say anything. Holding my breath, I almost think he's going to let me go without any more issues. That is until I make it to the step below him and he reaches out to grab my arm. Stumbling, I reach out for something to hold me up and am forced to grip him.

"What the hell, Cam?" I find my balance and turn to scowl at him as I try to rip out of his grip. He tightens his hold, helping me stand up straight but doesn't let me go. With an eye roll, he tugs me toward him.

"Are you done with your rambling?" His voice drips with annoyance, I can only gape at him. How did I not notice

during our relationship that he was constantly belittling or dismissing all my thoughts and feelings. If anything, Cam and my mom are more similar than I ever thought. I attempt to pull away again, only this time, my foot slips on the step and I'm forced to use him for support again.

"Lilly, stop. Let's just go home, put this all behind us and everything can go back to the way it was."

"Back to the way... Cam, you're insane if you think I'm going anywhere with you. Especially after this." I let go of him, motioning to his hold on me. I force myself to sound apologetic. "Things can't go back to the way we were. We weren't happy together, if we had been, you never would have cheated."

I rack my brain trying to think of some way to calm him down and just get him to leave.

Maybe you should have had Paige or Garrett come back for you.

I shake off the thought, no use in worrying about what I could have or should have done. I did the only thing I could and called the police. So, if I can't get Cam to leave on his own, at least they're on their way.

Before I can think of anything else to say, Cam adjusts his grip on my arm and turns us to head down the stairs. When we get to the landing for the third floor, I take advantage of the wider area and plant my feet, forcing him to stop. He whips around, at this close angle, I notice even more how different he looks.

"Goddamnit, stop being so stubborn. Your mom was right, living down here is changing you. You're upsetting your family and me. Just get over yourself and let's go."

"What the hell are you on?" It's the only thing I can think of asking. Between the last time he showed up and right now, he's acting like a completely different person. Yes, he's a lying, cheating, self-absorbed asshole. But he was never like this. Not once was he ever physical or outright belittling. He's

always favored that “say something so sweet you almost don’t notice it’s an insult” kind of person.

This, right here, isn’t normal for him. However, thinking about how much I’ve changed over the last five months, it’s more than likely that he’s become someone completely different as well. The only difference is that I spent the past few months discovering who I am and what’s going to make me happy.

I’ve moved on.

I blink at the realization. The main reason I moved away was to do exactly that, but I had assumed that I would notice the moment it happened. Somewhere along the line, thoughts about Cam stopped hurting as much, and instead, became far and few between. When they did pop up, it was usually in a moment that I was about to work through something he did or said that hurt me without me realizing it before.

This time when I rip my arm from Cam’s grip, I break free. Trying to keep my voice steady and calming, I back away from him.

“Cam, stop. Fucking. Grabbing. Me. I’m not going back to Vermont with you. This is my home now, I have a life and a job. I have family, friends and a...” I cut myself off and go to move around him. I don’t owe him anything. He doesn’t deserve anything from me. He just needs to leave me the hell alone and let me live my life. Finished with the conversation, I decide it’s better to go wait for the police in the lobby or next door at the bar.

“And a... what? Are you seeing someone?” I’m stepping onto the second-floor landing when he finally speaks. I turn to glare at him and find him seething as he follows me down the stairs.

“That is none of your concern.” Moving to continue down the last flight of stairs, I bite my tongue when I hear him behind me. Before I can hurry down to the ground floor, he’s grabbing me again. I don’t even get a chance to lose my shit on him as he roughly pulls me back toward him and causes me to lose my balance. My foot misses the step as I try to find my

balance, only this time, Cam isn't ready for my additional weight.

In the blink of an eye, we're both tumbling down the concrete stairs. When I finally stop at the bottom, my head hits the floor with an audible thud. For a long moment, I can only lay there, attempting to blink away the dizziness as my brain catches up to the pain. There is definitely something wrong with one of my wrists, and I'm probably going to have a bruise on my hip.

When I finally go to turn my head, my movement is stopped by a cool but firm hand on my cheek. Standing above me, holding my head in place, is Evalyn.

"Shit. I definitely hit my head."

"I know, Hun, that's why I'm keeping you still." I close my eyes, half convinced that I landed harder than I thought if I'm seeing Eva. I haven't seen her since that day on the beach with the workers from SweetHeart Publishing, so clearly, I'm not seeing right. Yet, when I open my eyes, she's still hovering over me, glancing over her shoulder. When I follow her gaze, I see Cam laying a couple feet away as he holds his head and lets out a pitiful groan.

A sob catches in my throat as I tearfully stare back at Eva, the sound of sirens reaches my ears as she looks back down at me. She must see the question in my tear-filled eyes because she smiles at me sympathetically.

"Paige knows I work at the bar next door a few times a week and called me a few minutes ago. She asked if there was any way I could swing over and see if you were still here. Apparently, you didn't text her back." She glares back at Cam. "Now I see why."

I can feel a tear finally escape and roll down my cheek. Both at the pain from the fall and the mess of emotions from this entire situation. Eva turns slightly as the stairwell door opens to reveal two officers. The sight of them makes me groan as I realize that I'm about to have another hospital trip caused by Cam.

So much for a simple fun night at a hockey game.



“**Y**ou good?” Greyson nudges me as we sit on the benches after finishing our time on the ice. I nod, fighting the urge to look over my shoulder. We’re fifteen minutes into the first period, still sitting zero to zero, but that’s not what’s bothering me. It’s the fact that right before I hit the ice this past time, I couldn’t find Lilly.

Her, Garrett, and Paige are supposed to be in the same seats they had last time, which is a few rows back from the team benches. Even Arianna is here again, chatting with Paige. What I was trying to not focus on, is the fact that right before I sat on the bench, Garrett and I made eye contact for a quick moment. My heart dropped straight to my stomach at the concern on his face.

Shrugging in response to Grey, I try to keep up with the game. Reid and Landon are still on the ice with the other guys, running a really good play and setting up for the first goal of

the game. Sure enough, after a couple perfectly timed passes between the guys, and a bit of distraction by Reid, Landon slaps the puck into the top left corner of the net. Everyone on the benches all jump up and cheer, lining up over the half wall to meet the guys on the ice for a high-five. As I finish clapping Greyson on the back in celebration, I can't stop my eyes from drifting to the seats.

My heart stalls in my chest at what I see.

Paige is standing up with her phone pressed to her ear, worry and anger spread across her features as she turns to talk to Garrett. Whatever she says to him has his head whipping toward me, in that moment, I feel my heart bottom out, roll to the ice and get beaten by twelve hockey sticks.

Lilly.

His shoulders drop and his mouth opens like he's going to try and say something but can't figure out how. I glance at Paige and find her picking up her sweater before quickly slipping past the people in her row and jogging up the stairs toward the exit. Garrett follows behind her and once he's made it to the end of his row and to the stairs, he turns back toward me. Holding his phone up and pointing to it before he turns to follow after Paige.

At this moment, I absolutely hate the fact that I leave my phone in my gym bag during games. Glancing at Coach James, I contemplate for a moment if I should say anything to him, but quickly decide against it.

For the remaining five minutes of the period, my attention is completely shot. When I'm sent out next, I know it's about to become obvious that my head is no longer in the game. I hit the bench and ignore the glances from the coaches and Grey. How the hell am I supposed to focus on finishing the game if I can't even get through sixty seconds on the ice?

By the time the timer hits zero, I'm already off the bench and making my way toward the locker room. Someone calls my name but I'm too focused on getting to my phone. Something is wrong and there's no way I'll be able to get through the remaining hour and ten minutes without knowing.

Garrett's text doesn't do much to actually help calm me.

Gare-Bear:

Something happened, but she's okay. Eva is with her, we're going to meet them now.

Gare-Bear:

Focus on the game, we have Lilly. Just call me when you're done.

I let out a heavy sigh as Grey and Landon walk up behind me.

"Dude, what's wrong?" Landon nudges me, worry painted across his face and I rack my brain for something to tell them. I just shake my head as I finally tear my gaze away from my phone. Grey's brows furrow as we stare at each other.

"Something wrong with that girl you're seeing?" Landon's head whips toward Greyson before turning back to gape at me.

"You're seeing someone?" I nod stiffly, clenching my jaw as I debate on texting Garrett back. Even if I do, he'll probably just ignore my message until he knows the game is over. He only sent those two to calm me down and remind me to focus. Which normally wouldn't be a problem, but the thought that something is wrong with Lilly has all rationality flying out of the window.

Greyson shoots a quick sideways glance at Coach James before finding me again. I nod in subtle confirmation. He keeps his mouth shut and lets Landon do the talking.

"Fuck man, that's cool. She okay?" Landon questions as I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Don't know. I was told to focus on the game and call after." Landon nods, but before he can say anything more, Coach James is calling for our attention.

The next hour seems to take forever to pass. Normally, games fly, since we all get caught up in the high of the game. But not tonight. Not when I know that something is wrong with Lilly. It's a close game, we're still sitting tied one to one with five minutes left, yet I find myself not even caring who

scores next. I just know that I do not want this game to go into overtime. So, when Reid scores with fifty-four seconds left in the game, I'm letting out a breath of relief and gathering my shit.

By the time the horn goes off, signaling the end of the game and our win, I'm already heading to the locker room. I know that one of the coaches is going to yell at me for leaving before formalities, but all I'm thinking about is Lilly.

I make it to my bag and am hitting Garrett's name before I even notice that someone is following me. As the phone rings, I turn and find Greyson behind me. The expression on his face is all I need to know that he's here for support, not to give me shit for dating the coach's daughter.

"Did ya win?" Garrett half jokes by way of answering the phone.

"What happened?" I don't even bother with humoring his question. I've waited this long to ask, and I feel like I might explode if he doesn't tell me now. His sigh on the other end of the phone followed by the sound of a PA system has my nerves dancing.

"Garrett." I snap.

"She's okay. Well, actually, once she's been given pain meds, she'll be more than okay."

What the hell?

"What? What the fuck do you mean pain meds?" Tucking my phone between my shoulder pads and my ear, I sit on the bench and start hastily untying my skates. I'm slightly aware of Grey doing the same as he helps me clean our shit up as we remove our gear.

"Lilly wanted some extra time to finish up her edit changes for Sam, so she told Paige and I to leave for the game and she'd be right behind us. She said she would only be a half hour behind us."

"Garrett. As much as I want the details, right now I need you to tell me where Lilly is."

“We’re at the hospital. Listen man, you’re right, we can fill you in on the details when you get here. To make a long story short, her ex showed up as she was leaving.” I feel the blood drain from my face.

“Paige, Eva, and I are here with her now. But Paige asked if you could bring her dad though.”

“Bring her...dad? What do you expect me to say? ‘Hey man, your daughter is in the hospital, wanna share a ride? Oh, why am I going? Yeah, I fell in love with your daughter, so I sure as shit am not waiting around until she’s out.’ I’m sure that will go over wonderfully.”

Greyson chokes on a cough next to me as I realize what I just said. Garrett isn’t even remotely phased as he half-heartedly chuckles in my ear.

“I mean if you want to tell him you love her before telling her, then sure. But I was thinking maybe something along the lines of telling him I need you to drive my car home.”

“Well, shit, yeah that’s probably a better plan. Got it, we’ll be there soon.” I don’t wait for him to respond as I hang up and begin removing the rest of my gear. Greyson sits next to me, following suit. The sound of the team making their way down the tunnel hits my ears just as I finish changing.

“You know you’re gonna have to update me?” He questions. I nod stiffly. “And you’re gonna have to fill me in on how you and her...”

“Aw, you wanna gossip and talk about all the juicy details with me?” I chuckle half-heartedly. He shakes his head, a small smirk resting on his lips. With a shake of his head, he wipes a hand over his mouth.

“Apparently.”

“I didn’t plan this, or to feel like this. But... I don’t know, man. She snuck up on me and just cross checked my heart.” Standing up, I finish changing into gym shorts and a plain black shirt, cringing at the fact I need a shower, but also don’t want to be held up even longer.

Coach James walks in, eyes already on Greyson and I as he heads toward us while the rest of the team fills in the locker room. When he's almost in front of us, I throw my bag over my shoulder and motion toward the door that leads toward the offices.

"I need to talk to you about something." His brows crunch together, but he nods his head toward the door.

"Give me a minute." As he turns to hand his clipboard to Coach Marcus, I say goodbye to Greyson and let him know that I'll keep him updated.

When I make it out the door, I pace the hall while I wait for Coach. He doesn't get a chance to even open his office up before I'm speaking.

"Lilly's in the hospital." He turns on his heel faster than I would have thought possible.

"Excuse me?" He says quietly. I suck in a breath, needing to make sure I don't accidentally say the wrong thing.

"Paige and my friend Garrett were supposed to come to tonight's game with Lilly. I don't know what happened yet, Garrett and Paige don't have your number. So, he called me to come grab his car and you..." I trail off, hoping that just made sense as I fight the urge to leave him behind and go now. Coach stands frozen for a heartbeat before snapping into action.

"I'll meet you at the doors, give me a minute to tell Marcus I'm leaving and then we'll go."

He's heading back toward the locker room before I can say anything else, and I'm left pacing the hallway while I wait for him.

When we're in the car and heading to the hospital, I send a text to Garrett asking for room details to speed us up when we get there. Coach and I both remain silent the entire way there and it's not until we're walking in that he finally speaks.

"I'll go find out what room—" I cut him off and motion to the elevators.

“Already got that from Garrett.” Leading the way, I fight to stay calm and not show just how on edge I am. By the time the elevator doors open, I’m five seconds away from telling Coach that I’m with Lilly. The only thing that stops me is seeing Garrett and that girl from the beach day a while back as we step off the elevator. Tapping coach’s arm as he turns toward the nurse’s desk, I motion for him to follow me and head toward Garrett.

“Hey, you must be Mr. Matthews. I’m Garrett, Paige’s boss, and this guy’s bestie.” Garrett extends a hand out to him and glances at me from the corner of his eye while pointing his thumb at me.

“Please, call me James.” How he’s being so calm is beyond me, but he shifts his stance as he looks past Garrett.

“She’s right in there. They had to give Lilly some pain meds a bit ago and the nurse said she’d swing by in twenty minutes or so but for now, Paige is with her.” James nods and finally moves to go around him. It takes all of my self-control to not go barreling into the room after him.

Stepping toward the door, I keep my voice low.

“What happened?” It’s the girl from the beach, Eva, who answers.

“I don’t know his name, but her ex showed up as she was leaving.”

Mother. Fucker.

“I got there right after they both took a fall down the stairs.” Any remaining breath leaves my lungs, but she continues. “She’s mostly okay, but she’s a bit more banged up than the dude. He did take a good hit to the ground though.”

“Where is he?” I ask through clenched teeth. She tilts her head as she watches me with narrowed eyes.

“Something tells me it might be better if you don’t know that right now.”

Garrett laughs at that while I just blink back at her. She’s right. There’s all this pent-up anger at him for hurting Lilly,

both physically and mentally, that all I can think about is punching him in the face.

“Thanks for heading over to check on her, Eva. We all really appreciate it.” Garrett says and she smiles kindly up at him.

“I’m just glad I was workin’! Speaking of which, I gotta get back. I told the guy covering me I would only be gone for a couple of hours. You’ll keep me updated?” Garrett nods and walks her to the elevator. Just as I’m thinking over a reason to go in and check on Lilly, the sound of her giggling and happy voice trails out the door.

“Dominicky is here!?” She squeals and is followed by Paige shushing her. Not that it stops Lilly from loudly singing out, “Dommy Nick!!”

“Better go quiet her down there, Dommy.” I glare at Garrett before sucking in a breath as I head into the room.

I head into the room with the suspicion that Lilly on pain medicine is not going to have as much of a filter in front of her dad as she should.

Sure enough, the moment Lilly sees me, she’s giggling and no-so-quietly whispers to Paige, “Isn’t he built like a god?”

For the first time in my adult life, I feel my face heat. I try to keep my focus on Lilly, but can feel her dad staring at me. Clearing my throat, I make my way over to the side of her hospital bed that Paige is on.

“How ya doin’, Lilly?”

From what I can see, her wrist is in a cast and just below the cuff of her hospital gown sleeves are the peaking’s of a bruise. It’s the small bruise forming on her cheek that has me clenching my jaw. Her nose scrunches up as she glares at me, causing a bit of the tension to leave my body.

“Excuse you, that’s not what you call me.”

My eyes widen as Paige shakes with laughter next to me. Stealing my nerve, I glance up at Coach who has a brow raised in question as he watches Lilly.

“And, what, exactly, does Dominik call you?” He questions and she lets out another one of those adorable giggles and smiles beautifully at me.

“Sunshine.” I’m almost ready to play it off as a platonic nickname, but she cuts me off and whisper-yells while leaning toward him. “And good girl.”

The room is quiet for a minute, only interrupted when Lilly talks again as she adjusts herself to lay back on the bed. Her gaze stays on me the entire time she gets comfortable.

“You’ll stay?” Just like that my shoulders drop, and I gently move past Paige to brush some hair out of her face.

“Yeah, Sunshine. I’ll be here, get some rest.”

She smiles lazily as she starts to drift off. Deciding to break the silence building up in the room, I glance at Paige and ask.

“I think they gave her too high of a dose.”

Paige just shakes her head, smiling at me before looking at Coach.

“I’m gonna go grab some coffee with Garrett since she’s finally resting.”

His stare leaves me long enough to smile and thank her, before locking back on me. Stepping closer to Lilly, I’m grateful for the obstacle between us. I don’t think he would get physical, but at the same time, he’s intimidating as hell. Deciding it might be better to wait for him to speak first, I stay silent.

“So...you’re seeing my daughter?”



The first thing I notice as I wake up, is how sore my body feels, as well as the weight of something on my thigh.

The second thing I notice is that I'm in a hospital.

Again.

I slowly peel my eyes open and begin studying the room when my gaze lands on the clock. My heart stalls when I see that it's almost eleven. The last thing I remember is the nurse giving me some pain meds because they needed to set the broken bone in my wrist. Things start to get hazy around the time that I filled Paige in on everything that happened with Cam. She was fuming, but was almost hesitant to tell me that he was down the hall being treated.

After that, I think that I remember seeing my dad and...*shit.*

Sitting up too quickly, I'm met with a wave of dizziness and the weight on my leg moves. After waiting a moment for the

wave to pass, I look down to see what the weight on my thigh is. Dominik is in a chair that he pulled up to the side of my bed as he rests on top of me. I smile down at him as I reach out to run my fingers through his hair. The moment my hand touches him, Dominik sits up faster than I had expected.

“It’s a good thing I didn’t use my other hand.” He stares wide eyed at me, his mouth dropping open before he snaps into action. Standing up quickly, he checks me over.

“Shit. I’m so sorry, are you okay?”

“Physically? No. Emotionally? Also no, but at least you’re here.” I half laugh out and cringe. “So umm...I was a bit out of it.”

He ducks his head, chewing on his lower lip as he paces toward the door.

“What do you remember?” I tell him everything I could recall, up to where it gets hazy. “That’s where it starts getting jumbled and fuzzy. I remember you and my dad showing up, but nothing specific and then just nothing.”

When he doesn’t look at me right away, I start to worry.

“Did I do something wrong? Or say something offensive?” Dominik finally peeks up at me, but for the life of me I can’t read his expression. He reaches up to grip the back of his neck as he lets out a low laugh.

“No. I mean, no one is offended or hurt.”

“Dominik, what the hell happened then? Why does it feel like you’re walking on eggshells or something?” He sighs, moving to sit back in the chair next to me.

“Garrett texted me that you were okay, but after the game when I called him he told me to get your dad and come to the hospital.” I blink at him, waiting for him to continue. Clearing his throat, a faint blush surprisingly spreads across his cheeks.

“So I...uh...your dad and I came together. I used Garrett as my reason for coming to the hospital and let your dad be the one to go check on you once we got here.” The smirk he throws at me tells me all I need to know.

“I said something about us. Didn’t I?”

“Yeah, ya did.” Groaning, I fall back onto the bed only to flinch at the pain that courses through my body.

“My dad knows?” He takes my non-injured hand into his and strokes his thumb along my knuckles.

“Well, see I could have deflected and come up with something when you told Paige I’m built like a god and then told him that I call you Sunshine. But it was kind of hard to think of something when you told him that I call you good girl.”

My mouth dries and all I can do is shake my head as I gape at him. He just nods while fighting to hold back a smile. My voice is barely above a whisper when I finally talk.

“Was he mad at you?” That damn near perfect smile spreads across his face.

“Mad is a bit extreme. He wasn’t thrilled, but he understands why we kept it a secret. He said he’d swing by your place tomorrow when we get you home to check on you and talk if you’re up for it.” I can only blink at him as I process the fact that he’s not mad.

Dominik must see the disbelief spreading across my face as he gently lifts my hand to his and kisses it before saying, “He just wants you to be happy. Yeah, at first, he was a little pissed. He thought that this was just like a one-night stand where I took advantage of you. I thought for sure that he was going to kick my ass for a solid minute. But I simply told him the truth.”

“The truth?” The way he’s looking at me has my heart skipping a beat. When he answers me, his gaze doesn’t leave me. His unwavering attention holds me captive.

“I told him that while it might have started out with details he does not need to know, somewhere over the past few months... At some point, you turned into more than just the hot neighbor I wanted to keep seeing because of a fun weekend. You became the person that I wanted to talk to about my day and hear everything about yours. You’re the first

person I've been able to open up about my family, not just the bad shit but the good and happy memories that I forgot about because of the grief." I squeeze his hand gently.

"I've never felt like this with anyone before. You make me feel everything just by simply smiling in my direction. You're so freaking smart, witty, and on top of everything else, you care about everyone you meet. Even when you shouldn't, you still try to find ways to make sure no one suffers. You actually see everyone around you." I'm blinking quickly to hold back tears while he continues.

"It's not a moment that I can pinpoint, but somewhere over these past few months, you became someone I admire. After being around you, I find myself asking how I can learn from you and be someone you deserve to have in your life. I admire everything about you. I love the way you laugh, the way you think and how you manage to find joy wherever you can. I love you."

Those three words make my breath catch in my throat. The three words I have been forcing myself not to let form into a complete thought for fear that I would ruin things between us. But he said them, on top of so many other reasons to back up his words. As if he knew I would need to hear *why* first.

I choke on a sob while pulling my hand from his to cup his face in my palm and tug his face toward me. Just before our lips are about to touch, I pause long enough to whisper,

"I love you, too."



Dominik stayed the whole night by my side. Whether that's because he paid someone to look the other way while he stayed or because no one noticed, I didn't ask.

The nurse was going to get my discharge papers since I had no issues overnight. The biggest concern was that I hit my

head so soon after my concussion. But since I made it through the night with no issues, I get to go home. She was waiting for the police to see me to finish processing my paperwork, but it sounded as if it was more so she could interfere if needed. She definitely gave off ‘mama bear’ vibes.

I had just finished talking with the police, grateful that they let Dominik stay in the room and the nurse hovered at the door the whole time. It was easy enough to fill them in, the only thing that I was unsure how to answer was if I wanted to file charges against Cam. When I asked if I had to decide that now, they let me know that he was still checked in at the hospital as well.

Which is how I ended up standing outside his room trying to convince myself to go in. The officers and Dominik had assured me that the door would be open, and they would be right outside the entire time. I suck in a deep breath and give myself a mini pep talk before I finally open the door.

He’s sitting up in the center of the hospital bed with his head dropped and resting on his knees. There’s a part of me that wants to feel bad for him. It’s a very small part and I know it’s only because of the fact that at one point, I did love him. However, all the pain he’s caused me makes it easy to ignore that.

As the door hits the wall with an audible thud, Cam glances at me. He is about to drop his head back to his hands when his eyes snap to me. He looks rough, but from a quick glance at him, nothing appears broken.

No, apparently, I’m the one who gets all the bumps and bruises on top of the emotional pain.

“Lilly.” He says my name in disbelief and straightens up on the bed, swinging his legs over as if he’s going to stand up, I step back.

“There’s two police officers outside.” He sags back onto the bed and lets his head drop to hang between his shoulders.

“They asked me if I want to press charges against you and before I give them my answer, I needed to get something off

my chest.”

I wait for him to look back at me, needing for him to fully understand just how much he’s fucked up. Whether he actually *listens* to what I have to say is out of my control, but I need to get this off my chest.

“It took me a long time to realize just how deeply you hurt me. Not only because you cheated, but because of how you treated me right from the start. I was so caught up in your charm that I didn’t realize just how much you were trying to stifle and change who *I* was. Who I am. Even outside of you tearing down my confidence and self-worth. For almost five years, I thought there was something wrong with *me*, both mentally and physically. I thought my sex drive was low or broken, but it turns out, I just wasn’t attracted to *you*.”

He visibly flinches and opens his mouth to say something, but I hold my hand up to silence him.

“I only have one thing I want answered, and after that, I’m walking out to tell them to file the charges and continue moving on with my life. Without you.”

I take a breath, letting my shoulders drop on my exhale as I watch him.

“Why? Why try this hard and react this way? You didn’t care this much about me when we were together, so why dive off the deep end and turn into this...crazed caveman?” He shakes his head and focuses on a spot on the wall in front of him. I wait for a minute, crossing my arms before sighing in defeat at his silence. When I turn away and am halfway to the door, he finally speaks.

“I didn’t think losing you would affect my life like it did. When you first left, it didn’t hit me full force that you were gone. Until the first time I saw your mom. She comforted and supported me like she always has, and I realized what we had. Not just you and me, but I think I loved your family more than us. But how could I keep your family if I wasn’t with you? Eventually, they would find out what I did and they wouldn’t look at me the same.” He sighs.

“I got it in my head that if I got you to come back with me, things would go back to normal, and everything would be fine. I fucked up, things got out of hand, and all I could focus on was getting you home and moving on.”

Closing my eyes and shaking my head, I can only sigh in response.

“I did move on.” I whisper as I turn to leave.

Dominik is leaning against the wall outside of the door, his eyes instantly finding mine as I step out. Sparing a glance at the one police officer, I nod.

“You can file the charges, do you need anything else from me or can I go home?”

“Go home and get some rest, Miss Matthews. We have your number and will contact you if and when we need something more from you.”

With that I face Dominik and close the distance between us. Falling into his embrace as he wraps his arms around me. After placing a kiss on top of my head, he turns us toward the elevators.

“Let’s go home, Sunshine.”



“**K** eep your eyes closed, Sunshine.”

“They are, Dom.” Her over dramatic sigh has me biting back a smile as I step away from her while swatting her ass. She jumps with a slight squeal, but still listens and keeps her eyes closed.

Last month, Lilly realized that every so often I would need to come back to my place to grab clothes or wash my hockey gear. She pointed out how silly it was that we were taking up two condos when we could just share one. Since I was basically at her place twenty-four seven, she had a point, so we had the ‘moving in together’ talk. We made sure that we were both on the same page with where our relationship was going. I already knew that she was it for me and I had no problem telling her that. Once we realized we were on the same page, we decided it was easier for me to move in with her since I had a lot less stuff.

That was also the day I started searching for a ring. With the start of the new season in three months, the thought of proposing around that time feels right. It also gives things between Lilly and her mom a couple more months of being on good terms. After Lilly got out of the hospital, she wasn't going to tell her mom anything that happened with Cam in hopes of avoiding more tension. But we found out a couple days later that her dad didn't have that same restraint.

James had called her mom and told her off for how she handled not only Lilly's breakup with Cam, but also how she handled James leaving. Her dad came by and told her about the conversation, as well as the fact that her brothers had reached out wanting to set up a time to come see James and Lilly.

Meanwhile, Lilly waited another couple weeks before calling her mom. We were both surprised that she had let Lilly go so long without talking to her. But between James and her brothers, we assumed she finally got it through her head to give Lilly space before she pushed her too far. The two of them have talked weekly since then. It was very rough at first, but every time her mom started condescending her, Lilly would tell her to call her back when she was ready to treat her with decency. It's been getting better, I've even been on a couple video calls with them, so I'm hoping she doesn't slip up and push Lilly away again.

Cam has since been arrested and charged with a list of crimes against Lilly. He was sentenced to seven years imprisonment, followed by two years probation.

After letting the leasing team know that I no longer needed my condo, we've now spent the last couple hours moving my stuff across the hall. Now, it's time for a well-deserved break. Even though I don't have much left, I convinced Lilly to stop for a bit to do something fun since we have the space.

Since the rented furniture was picked up this morning, the space feels more open than normal. With a hand on each shoulder, I make her stand in front of the kitchen island facing the open and empty living room before going to pull out a package and set up what I bought.

After making sure her eyes are still closed once more, I move quickly toward the front hall closet and pull out the box that was delivered yesterday.

“Can I open them yet?”

“No!” At my answer, she huffs again. I hide the box behind my back while I double check.

“Keep them closed, I’ll tell you when to open them.” I turn to cross the living room to the far wall. I had, at least, thought ahead and pre-opened the package and put a nail in the wall yesterday when this came.

“How much longer?” Glancing over my shoulder, I see her twisting back and forth with impatience. I don’t answer, instead, I finish setting up and set the empty box aside. Once the space is clear, I grab the small baggy, and finally make my way back to her.

Keeping silent, I step behind her and place a hand on her hip to tug her flush against me. Sweeping her hair off her shoulder, she leans back into me without a moment of hesitation.

“Now.” I lean down and whisper in her ear. Her audible gasp and slight wiggle of joy is enough to tell me that she opened her eyes.

“You got a dartboard!!” She exclaims. I reach behind me to grab the bag of darts and wrap my arm around to hold them in front of her.

“I thought of a fun game to play.”

Her laugh is low and breathy as she takes three red darts from my hand.

“I thought by now you would have learned that I win when we play games.” She teases. Dragging my hand up her side, I rest my hand just below her breast and trail my thumb along the underside. She shivers at my touch, and in that moment, I know this ‘game’ is not going to be long at all.

“And I thought I explained to you, that even when I lose against you, I still win.” I remind her. She shakes her head as

she presses her hips back into me, breath catching when she notices just how turned on I already am.

“You do know that you don’t have to play games just to have sex with me, right?”

I nip at her ear as she tilts her head to the side, baring her neck in the perfect temptation. Placing a kiss below her jaw, I trace my hand under her breast and before spreading my palm out. I move my hand up until I’m holding her to me gently by her neck, breathing heavily as she lets her weight fall back into me.

“Yes, I do know that.” I whisper. Her free hand moves to rest on my thigh, and I resist the urge to throw my idea out the window and lay her out on the kitchen island for a midday snack. I tuck that idea away for another time and focus on the plan.

“But might as well put this dart board to use.” I let go of her and step to the side, making sure she is supporting her own weight again before fully letting her go. Facing her fully, my eyes trail over her slowly, letting my gaze linger on my favorite places. The short black gym shorts she’s wearing stop just below her perfect ass and are tempting me to kiss every inch of her thighs. The light blue, slightly see-through tank top, scoops down low, giving me the perfect view of her chest and dark blue sports bra that zippers in the front. Since we both took our shoes off when I suggested we take a break, getting her naked *should* be easy.

“Let’s make this simple.”

“Because you know I’ll win.” She cuts me off with a smirk. I reach out, wrapping my arm back around her and pulling her into me. Her chest presses against me and I adjust the darts in my other hand and bring one up to lightly drag the tip across her pushed-up cleavage.

“Because I’ve been thinking about getting you naked from the moment I opened my eyes this morning.” I state with a smile as her smirk fades, her mouth falls open slightly while her eyes drop to my lips. Leaning down, I pull her in for a kiss, her lips fitting perfectly against mine. She traces her tongue

along my bottom lip, and I break the kiss, somehow finding the strength to back away from her. Shaking my head, I hold up the darts.

“Easy rounds. We both throw one dart, whoever hits the lower number removes an article of clothing.” Lilly laughs next to me.

“I mean, if you wanted to be naked, we could have just gone back across the hall.” Ignoring her remark, I motion for her to step up to the carpet line and throw first.

With a smile and confidence in her step, she lines up her shot and lets the dart fly. From this distance she either hit a twenty or a five in the inner row, she turns to me with an exaggerated wave of her hand and a gleam in her eyes. I take her place and shoot. Once my dart lands, she skips toward the dart board, but stops just as she gets within arm’s reach. Walking up behind her and placing a gentle hand on her hip, I chuckle as I see why.

Her dart landed on the five, while mine hit a thirteen. Reaching out around her to snatch my dart, I kiss behind her ear.

“Tank top. Off.” She shivers in response, but turns to face me as she reaches for the hem of the top and pulls it over her head. I groan at the sight of her breasts being held tight. The zipper on the front of her sports bra is tempting me to reach out and release them. Clenching my hand into fists, I turn back to the kitchen and adjust myself.

Over the next few minutes, we exchange heated stares as more clothes come off while we take turns. I’m standing next to her in my black boxers that do nothing to hide just how turned on I am by her. While she taunts me in that damn sports bra and the perfect view of her cheeky dark blue underwear hugging her ass.

Just as she’s lining up to let her next dart fly, she glances at me, and I can’t contain my smirk as I stroke my dick over my boxers and groan. The dart leaves her hand as she turns her head to fully face me. Brows furrowing, she looks back to the board to see where her dart landed and scowls at me.

“That’s not fair.” I hold my hands up, feigning innocence.

“I didn’t touch you,” Winking at her, I step into her spot.
“Yet.”

My next throw lands on the sixteen while hers sits on the two at the border. Turning back to her, I lift a hand to motion for her to come closer with my pointer finger. She does and I don’t miss the way her breathing picks up.

Only when she’s standing in front of me do I break her gaze to see that damn sports bra. I wanted to draw this out, but the moment my fingers find the zipper, that goes out the window. As soon as her breasts are free and those perfect nipples point at me, all plans of this drawn-out strip tease are gone.

Dropping my darts on the floor, I reach one hand out to push the bra off of her shoulders while the other finds one of her full breasts like a magnet. The moment her bra is clear of her shoulders, I’m bending down to capture her nipple in my mouth. Her moans are the only encouragement I need as my tongue swirls around her nipple, and I worship her breast.

The next moan that escapes her is followed by the sound of her remaining darts hitting the floor. I switch to give the same attention to the other breast as her hand tangles in my hair, holding me to her.

Lilly stumbles slightly and I catch her with an arm around her waist. Kissing a path up her collar bone and the length of her neck before I reach down to pick her up. Using her hold on my hair, she tips my head back and kisses me while grinding herself against me. Groaning, I walk off memory alone while lost in her kiss until she’s pressed between the wall and me.

Breaking away for a breath, I wait until she opens her eyes. Smirking, I raise an eyebrow and wait. She doesn’t even hesitate.

“Fuck the game. You win. Now *fuck me*.”

“Yes ma’am.”

I adjust my hold to support her in one arm as I shove my boxers down to my ankles and kick them off. In the next moment, I’m not even bothering with removing her

underwear. Reaching between us, I push them to the side and run two fingers along her entrance.

“Fuck. You’re soaked, Sunshine.” A whimper escapes her mouth as I tease her before pushing my fingers into her slowly. “Are you ready for me?”

She’s damn near panting as she nods quickly.

“Yes. Fucking hell, Dominik.” She breathes out as she lets her head drop back against the wall. “*Fuck me right now.*”

Nipping at her jaw as I remove my fingers and line my cock up at her entrance.

Before I can even think about teasing her some more, she’s shifting her weight and dropping herself onto me. Holding her to me by her hips, I try to hold her still as she tries to move.

“Sunshine. If you keep doing that...” My words are cut off as she clenches around me and tangles her fingers back into my hair. My hips start moving without even thinking it through and the next thing I know I’m slamming into her. She doesn’t break my stare while I fuck her hard and fast against the wall.

I move my hands and let her slide down slightly, pulling her ass away but forcing her shoulder blades to stay against the wall. The new angle has her gasping and eyes fluttering closed as I slam back into her.

“Touch yourself, Sunshine.” She nods without opening her eyes and lets one of her hands fall between us to find her clit. I’m torn between watching her play with herself and not wanting to miss her expression as her orgasm builds. When I’m unable to hold back, I clench my teeth and grind out, “Lilly. Cum.”

When I slam back into her and hit that spot, she yells out my name as she cums with me.

We stay like that for a long moment before Lilly weakly lifts her head off the wall, to look at me with a lazy smile on her face.

“That dart board is getting hung up in our bedroom.” I smile back at her.

“As you wish, Sunshine.”



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Mikayla Christy lives in upstate New York- not anywhere close to the city- with her husband, two dogs and cat. Most often she can be found curled up under a mountain of fuzzy blankets and fur babies with a book/kindle in her hands.

Throughout grade school, Mikayla found her love for reading and collecting books. She would always be found shut away reading or wanting to go to the bookstore, until life got busy after graduation. Seven years later, after coming across a book recommendation on TikTok, she fell right back into the joys of reading. Only this time, they weren't YA.

Two years after, as she closes in on owning her own library, Mikayla finally found the courage to write her own story.



To keep up to date with Mikayla Christy, you can follow her on:

TikTok:

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Mikayla Christy